ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE AND INDIGENOUS IDENTITY IN NORTH AMERICAN
HEAVY METAL

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ABSTRACT

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Music and art can resist social structures that remain rooted in colonial power. The
research presented in this study investigates themes of anti-colonial resistance and indigenous
cultural identity expressed through heavy metal music by Native artists from several regions of
North America. This research relies on the analysis of commercially available recordings by
heavy metal bands, as well as album artwork, online media and the discourse surrounding the
work of the artists, examining the use of indigenous markers and practices of aesthetic
construction. An important methodological component of this project is ethnographic data
collection consisting of participant observation at performances in a variety of venues, as well as
semi-structured interviews with band members.

The primary objective of this project is to examine the work of a range of bands and
artists that identify themselves as Native or indigenous to establish a clear understanding of how
their music may or may not express anti-colonial resistance or cultural identity, and the extent to
which these expressions are communicated through sonic and visual markers or signifiers. This
study shows that indigenous identity cannot be easily categorized, and is expressed in diverse
ways within the scope of Native popular music. While some Native metal artists are inclined to
use sonic markers and aesthetic construction to proclaim their indigeneity in their music, others
prefer to avoid these devices and rely on other facets of their lives to affirm a Native identity.
While this study contributes to the body of scholarship regarding indigenous identity in
contemporary media, the interpretations and conclusions also benefit the broader disciplines of
popular culture, post-colonial studies, and the emerging field of metal studies by examining the self-representation of a marginalized group in a specific genre of popular music.
Dedicated with love and appreciation to Sara and Dorren.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my advisor, Dr. Jeremy Wallach, for all his guidance through this entire project and inspiring me to pursue the emerging field of metal studies, as well as the rest of my committee, Dr. Esther Clinton and Dr. Kristen Rudisill. Their advice to me was instrumental in focusing my goals and helping me achieve successful results for the project. I also want to thank the rest of the faculty in the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University for their support, as well as Dr. Kathy Meizel in the BGSU College of Musical Arts for her expertise in ethnomusicology, and Dr. Luis Moreno and Dr. Spintz Harrison in the BGSU Department of Ethnic Studies for their help on specific portions of this study. I owe a great deal of gratitude to all the bands who participated in this project, especially the band When Darkness Falls from the Pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico, who were so generous with their time providing thoughtful responses to my questions. Finally, I want to thank my wife Sara and my son Dorren for their never-ending love, support, and patience throughout the whole process of this project. I am truly indebted to them.
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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be indigenous to North America? As a non-Native researcher, I honestly cannot expect to find a definitive answer to that question, though I hope this study will contribute to further understanding of how the concept of indigeneity has been shaped by the colonial history of North America, and how that history continues to reverberate today, affecting contemporary cultural expressions such as popular music. One of my main research goals is to explore the range of interpretations of indigeneity through the relatively narrow lens of popular music, specifically heavy metal music. Clearly the experience of colonial oppression has impacted indigenous lives for generations, but music and art can be powerful expressions with which to resist the social structures that remain rooted in colonial power. Maintaining a strong identity and ties to community are important elements of cultural survival, and music in particular, as noted by American musicologist Robert Walser, “is intimately involved with crucial feelings of identity and notions of community” (1993, xii). However, there is no essential, consistent means for identity and resistance to be expressed in music, and each individual artist, in this study at least, articulates these themes in very different ways. Some engage with the history of colonialism explicitly through the lyrical themes in their songs, and striking imagery in their artwork, while resistance is more implicit in other artists’ work, more connected to their everyday lives and traditions in their communities. Indigenous identity may be reinforced through strong sonic and visual markers in some artists’ music, while others deemphasize signifiers of Native culture in their music, and maintain it through other aspects of their lives. I am also interested in how the tension between modernity and tradition play out in the sphere of
popular music, and how a genre such as heavy metal can be a means of negotiating that balance for indigenous people. While I recognize that notions of “traditional” and “modern” as applied in an academic sense to cultural expression may present a problem, especially when framed in opposition to one another, I must acknowledge that the discourse over this apparent binary is consistently reproduced, and most importantly, by Native musicians themselves.

The research that I present in this study will investigate themes of anti-colonial resistance and indigenous cultural identity, as expressed through heavy metal music produced by a range of artists from several regions of North America. Some of this research relies on the analysis of commercially available recordings by heavy metal artists and bands, as well as online media and the discourse surrounding the work of the artists. Many significant interpretations in this project are the result of ethnographic data collection consisting of observation of performances as well as semi-structured interviews with band members when available.

The primary objective of this project is to examine the work of a range of bands and artists that identify themselves as Native or indigenous to establish a clear understanding of how their music may or may not express anti-colonial resistance or cultural identity, and the extent to which these expressions are communicated through sonic and visual markers or signifiers. Some of the bands in this study readily identify themselves as Native American, and are open about the communities to which they have ties. Some artists do not identify directly with any recognized Native American community, but clearly identify with indigenous cultures in some form through their music and broader aesthetic expression. Several bands in fact strongly affiliate themselves with indigenous cultures of pre-colonial Mexico, and appear to subscribe to ideas promoted by a radical activist group in Southern California, known as the Mexica Movement. By examining the
various ways indigeneity is expressed through heavy metal in North America, I will show that indigenous identity cannot be easily categorized, and is expressed in diverse ways across a wide range of interpretations within the scope of Native popular music. While I expect this study to contribute to the body of scholarship regarding indigenous identity in contemporary media, I am confident my interpretations and conclusions will also benefit the broader disciplines of popular culture, post-colonial studies, and the emerging field of metal studies by examining the self-representation of a marginalized group in a specific genre of popular music.

Though early heavy metal bands occasionally drew upon Native American history and imagery, in songs such as “Run to the Hills” by Iron Maiden (1982), representation of Native culture was still framed by a non-Native narrative, often falling into the rigid stereotype of the “noble savage”¹ (Ellingson 2001), a product of what Renato Rosaldo calls “imperialist nostalgia”² (1989). Direct affiliation with traditional indigenous cultures has only recently emerged as a recurring theme among some metal bands in North America, as Native people themselves have appropriated heavy metal from dominant culture, along with every other form of popular music, and adapted it as a form of contemporary Native expression. This is analogous to a recent development in European heavy metal, with some bands drawing on ancient pre-Christian and Pagan cultures in their music, leading to the creation of a new subgenre often referred to as “folk metal,” which reflects the heritage of the artists who seek to reclaim a distinctive ethnic identity in an increasingly globalized world. Recently some of the bands who identify strongly with Native culture have been characterized as “pre-Hispanic” or “indigenous” metal in online forums and blogs specializing in heavy metal, which raises the question of whether these emerging themes represent a new genre, subgenre or scene, as these concepts have
been described in the academic study of popular music, and exploring the limits of these concepts is an ancillary goal of this project.

Methods

I have used an interdisciplinary approach in this project, drawing on the fields of cultural studies, semiotics, ethnomusicology, folklore and anthropology, though I have used two principal methods for collecting data to support my interpretations. The first is the analysis of music, lyrics, and other related materials including album artwork, videos, websites, social networks, magazine articles and other distributed media. Of course, the music of these artists provides the primary texts where I have searched for signifiers of indigeneity and Native identity as well as possible evidence of ideological position, especially as it may relate to resistance to colonial history and oppression of indigenous people. I have used lyrical analysis sparingly, as I recognize that lyrics can be intentionally ambiguous, and I have tried to use examples that clearly illustrate a point that I am trying to make in the analysis. Analysis of visual imagery from CD artwork, websites, t-shirts, and show flyers also proved to be an extremely fruitful approach to gain insight into the expressive practices of these artists.

In addition to signifiers and markers, I also examine the overall aesthetics that these artists try to create, which typically cross many platforms of their expression, from album artwork to website design to what they wear on stage. These elements can be seen as distinct practices, which work with the music to produce an aesthetic that can be read like any individual signifiers in the artists’ work. Practices of aesthetic construction specific to the genre of heavy metal, which vary between the subgenres that are represented in this study, and how they converge with indigenous aesthetics, form one of the main foci of this project. Indigenous aesthetics and their role in the construction of collective Native identity have been examined by
scholars across a range of contemporary media, especially in art and film, and I draw from
Steven Leuthold’s work in this field, especially as it relates to indigenous aesthetics and a sense
of place (1998, 183-202). Ancestral land and the trope of a close connection to nature that
indigenous people have are evocative markers, and appear in the music of some artists in this
study. However, more ambiguous aesthetics are also used by some of these bands, and one of the
challenges of this project was to examine these practices to see how they may contribute to
developing indigenous identity or constructing a position of resistance to colonialism or other
power structures.

Besides the analysis of primary texts produced by the artists identified in this study, the
second method that I utilized to gain an understanding of these artists’ expressive practices was
ethnography, especially participant observation at live shows and concerts in a variety of venues.
This has resulted in thick descriptions of these experiences in each chapter, which provide a
detailed context in which I base my observations. I also tried to gather data through interviews
with band members whenever possible, and the most successful example of this approach can be
found in Chapter Three. Participants in this study were heavy metal band members who were
recruited through my attendance at live concert events, or online through websites and social
networking sites related to the bands identified in the study. While it would have been interesting
to also include Native fans of heavy metal music, I determined that this would be beyond the
scope of this study at this time, though I may consider incorporating their perspectives in a future
expansion of the project.

I anticipated some difficulty in conducting interviews for this study, especially in the
process of recruiting potential participants at live shows, partially due to the logistics of
interviewing in a situation that includes very loud music. My strategy was to talk to at least one
member per band, tell him or her about the project, and give the artist my card so he or she
would hopefully remember me later when contacted for a phone or email interview. Through this
process, I hoped to lay the groundwork for possible interviews later, as well as shoot some video
and record my own observations of the experiences. Email interviews proved to be difficult,
since many of the bands I made initial contact with expressed interest in the project, but spent a
great deal of their time on the road, as many struggling bands do, and simply did not have the
time to participate. When I was unable to obtain consented interviews from band members
myself, I attempted to locate interviews that these individuals may have done through the
popular music press and blogosphere, and I have based some of my interpretations on these
published interviews.

Being a non-Native researcher, I understood that I would be approaching potential
participants in this study with an outsider status, though in a study of popular music, the line
between insider and outsider is more blurred than it would be in a study of traditional culture.
Though some of the fieldwork was done at the Gathering of Nations Powwow in Albuquerque,
New Mexico, an event primarily attended by Native people, it draws many non-Native visitors as
well, so it was not even clear there that I was an outsider. At the other live shows I attended, the
main consideration for insider/outsider status had less to do with ethnicity, and more to do with
being a metal fan, and in this regard I consider myself something of an insider. However,
negotiating outsider status as well as my own privilege as a white male was certainly something
that impacted my approach in the field, especially when conducting interviews with Native
people.

While I have years of experience working with Native people and communities through
my work in Native arts and culture museums in the American Southwest, I am always aware that
there are boundaries that should not be crossed in conversation with Native people and questions that should not be asked, and hopefully I have gained some sensitivity to these issues over the years that have benefited this project. One practice I was careful to avoid in this study was judging the authenticity of band members’ claims of indigeneity, and policing ethnicity to determine which artists to include in this study. Rather than make those determinations myself, I tried to limit the project to artists who self-identified as Native, and then explored through interviews and other discourse how they claimed indigeneity, whether it be through a community they belonged to or through self-discovery of cultural heritage. Indigeneity claims are a complicated issue, as I discuss below in the introductory section on identity, and they can be charged with emotion and prone to misinterpretation, so as an outside researcher I have tried to be careful about this issue, and not allow my own biases or assumptions about what constitutes an “authentic” Native person distort my interpretations of how indigeneity may be expressed through popular music. I have also used a similar approach to the discourse of authenticity surrounding indigenous identity as I identified which artists to include in this study based on their musical self-identification. While I avoided passing judgment on how artists may claim indigeneity, I also wanted to allow some flexibility for the bands in how they claim affiliation with the metal subculture and genre. While the discourses of authenticity in indigenous identity and metal identity are not completely analogous, I sought to handle them in the same way methodologically, by minimizing my own subjectivity and allowing the artists’ voices to provide the criteria which would justify their inclusion in this study.
Theoretical Framework

Resistance

While the notion of resistance can be a particularly ambiguous concept, and prone to over-interpretation, as it may be possible to find resistance to something in almost any cultural expression, I wanted to leave the concept flexible so I would be receptive to different iterations of resistance. While my expectation was that I would find resistance to a history of colonial oppression in the music of these artists, and indeed that was the case, the form that this took certainly was not homogeneous. The subject of resistance in the field of cultural studies has ranged greatly, whether it be Foucault’s notion of a “plurality of resistances” in which points of resistance exist in a field of power relationships (1990, 95-96), or resistance and its relationship to style and ritual as Hebdige and others in the Birmingham School envisioned it in their work on youth subcultures in the 1970s (Hebdige 1979; Hall and Jefferson et al 1976). These interpretations of resistance inform this study, though I remain particularly conscious of how resistance has been framed in the context of struggles for Native rights and indigenous sovereignty (Churchill 2002; Hill 2009), specific histories of indigenous resistance to colonial power (Liebmann 2012; Sando and Agoyo 2005), and the intersection of popular music and indigenous resistance, especially as observed through hip hop (Amsterdam 2013; Mitchell 2003; Marsh 2012).

I also draw from recent interpretations of resistance in ethnomusicology that recast everyday activities as active forms of resistance that may be just as effective as reactive expressions that rely on transgression to make a social impact (Lawrence 2011, 217). These ideas of active and reactive forms of resistance are analogous to what I call “explicit” and “implicit” resistance in this study, which refers largely to how resistance is expressed, and how the object
of resistance may or may not be specified through that expression. Finally, it is not enough to simply identify resistance, but also necessary to explore what is being resisted, whether it be resistance to modernity (as discussed in Chapter One), the history of colonial oppression which transcends modern political boundaries (as discussed in Chapter Two), or the very notion of Native music itself by de-emphasizing markers of indigenous identity (as discussed in Chapter Three).

Indigenous Identity

As previously mentioned, Native or indigenous identity is a notion that is fraught with complications and prone to oversimplification. While I have no intention of definitively clarifying this situation with this study, I hope to shed some light on how identity is expressed through popular music, which can lead to some broader interpretations of how indigenous people continue to meet the challenge of existing in a post-colonial society which may view them as either anachronistic or threatening to the dominant social order. I think the quote below from indigenous activist, musician and actor John Trudell in the documentary film Reel Injun from 2009, addresses the root problem with discussing “Native American” or “Indian” identity:

You go in our own communities, how many of us are fighting to protect our identity of being an Indian, and six hundred years ago, that word “Indian,” that sound, was never made in this hemisphere; that sound, that noise was never ever made, ever. We’re trying to protect that as an identity, see, so it affects all of us. It’s reached the point, evolutionarily speaking, we’re starting to not recognize ourselves as human beings. We’re too busy trying to protect the idea of a Native American or an Indian, but we’re not Indians and we’re not Native Americans. We’re older than both concepts, we’re the people, we’re the human beings. (Trudell in Diamond et al 2009)

The prospect that the concepts of “Indian” or “Native” (or “indigenous” for that matter) are colonial constructions and a direct result of the oppressive history of colonialism in the Americas is important to keep in mind for any project that intends to examine Native identity. However, the reality is, as Trudell alludes to above, Native identity is indeed something that
indigenous people are fighting for in their communities. The question of who is an Indian or Native (or Native American) is the cause of a significant amount of anxiety in Native communities, and it has become intertwined with issues of race and sovereignty over the years. However the issue has also been the focus of many Native scholars, who have examined Native identity in terms of stages of a process of development (Mihesuah 1999) to the complicity of settler states in fueling claims of indigenous legitimacy (Churchill 1999), and how it articulates with ethnicity and ethnic pluralism (Nagel 1996). For the purposes of this study, I recognize that Native identity is a contested concept, though I also view it as articulating with a broader, global notion of indigeneity, which also has issues surrounding its definition, specifically associated with marketing the term within a global media marketplace (Wilson and Stewart 2008, 5). While I often use the term “Native” in this study, I intentionally avoid the term “Indian,” primarily since it was apparent that “Native” was the preferred term by many of the participants in this study. I am also hesitant to use the term “Nativeness” at the risk of implying that there are some essential qualities that one can identify to determine “Native” from “non-Native,” especially since one of my stated goals of this project is to illustrate the shifting and subjective nature of indigenous identity. However, I think recent work by ethnomusicologist John-Carlos Perea is helpful in encouraging listeners to experience Native American music beyond a product or object through the concept of “soundings,” reframing the process of making music as a social activity which includes the collective efforts of musicians, their families and communities, as well as the listener (2014, 3-5). In this way we can view indigenous music as a collection of social practices, rather than a musical object imbued with ethnic adornments.

One of the most striking elements that can be expressed in music to affirm identity is language choice, and I have given some attention to this issue throughout this project when
was relevant. While it may seem obvious that singing in an indigenous language signifies a strong identification with indigeneity, since many of the bands in this study sing in English or Spanish, we cannot assume that the opposite must be true, since there are many other factors that complicate language and ideology, such as bilingualism and hybridity (Berger 2003, xiv), and the fact that artists from marginalized communities may be inclined to use a dominant language to simply reach a wider audience. While Tony Mitchell suggests that indigenous language in hip hop may be used as a form of “resistance vernacular” (2003, 12), the absence of indigenous language does not necessarily indicate that an artist is not expressing resistance through some other practice or expression, as I think will be clear in this study.

The issue of cultural appropriation cannot be ignored in any examination of indigenous representation in mass media, and while this is not a focus in this project, I have remained aware throughout the research that non-Native artists (or artists who do not specifically claim affiliation with an indigenous community) have used tropes and themes of Native culture in their music. While this issue clearly is relevant to a discussion of indigenous identity claims, I feel that addressing cultural appropriation fully would be beyond the scope of this project, so I have not engaged with it beyond the introduction. There is a great deal of literature available on Native representation in film and other mass media, though relatively little on popular music and this topic deserves more scholarly attention.

Past Research

The Study of Native Music

The study of the music of Native people in North America extends to the earliest days of the discipline of ethnomusicology. After Baker’s pioneering work in the 1880s, the emphasis among other early researchers such as Fewkes and Densmore was on the specificity of Native
culture, paralleling a trend in general American anthropology to attempt to document “disappearing” Native cultural practices in the face of growing American modernity (Scales 2012, 2). This converged with the establishment of the “culture area” concept, and North American Native cultures proved to be the perfect subject for researchers such as Herzog in the late 1920s to identify distinctive culture groups to focus their study (Nettl 2005, 332).

After many decades hosting ethnomusicologists and anthropologists in their communities, some Native people came to view researchers as intrusive and an extension of colonial power that could be more of a threat than a benefit to their cultural survival. In the 1980s and 1990s researchers began to focus on powwow music culture, typically regarded as a secular practice among Native people, and I believe that this turn in the field was a response to Native communities increasingly limiting access to outsiders, and a perception that a certain amount of trust had been damaged between academia and Native people, particularly over sacred and religious cultural objects and practices. I began my professional career working in museums in Santa Fe, New Mexico in the late 1980s, and I witnessed this trend firsthand, and the passage of the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990 was certainly a wake up call to anthropologists that times were changing.

Powwow Culture and Contemporary Native Popular Music

Though powwow culture remains today an important field of study in ethnomusicology, as Christopher Scales’ recent 2012 study of powwow music and the Native recording industry illustrates, there is also increasing attention on the Native popular music scene (Amsterdam 2013, Jacobsen 2009, Tahmahkera 2011, Teves 2011). In fact, contemporary powwow music arguably crosses over with this scene significantly, which can be observed at the Gathering of Nations Powwow in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the largest powwow in the country, where new
Native popular music has been playing a larger role in recent years, featuring performances of rock, country, reggae, hip hop and heavy metal. Much powwow music and Native popular music is framed as “Pan-Indian,” though the tension between universal Native culture and specific tribal traditions is a shifting dynamic that pervades the discourse of indigenous cultural studies. The ethnomusicological study of Native North America illustrates the fluctuation in the discipline in general between the pursuit of universals between cultures, to a kind of particularism that stresses the distinctive nature of individual cultures.

Scales questions the notion that powwow music is an expression of Native identity, and while he does not dispute that this may be the case in some instances, he applies Stuart Hall’s articulation theory to examine how this expression is achieved, and concludes that meaning or articulation “is never guaranteed and must be actively produced by all involved in the social production and consumption of powwow music” (2012, 9). While I do not assert that heavy metal is inherently an expression of Native or indigenous identity in this study, following Scales I intend to show how indigenous identity may articulate with heavy metal, and the surprising variation in the form of these articulations.

While there are many individual academic studies in the published literature, there are few overviews that trace the history of Native popular music, and though it is not strictly an academic work, and more along the lines of music journalism, Dick Weissman’s 2010 book, *Talkin’ Bout a Revolution* has been a useful resource. Weissman gives a good overview of Native American music, and focuses particularly on Native protest music (2010, 46-51), including descriptions of some of Peter La Farge’s songs in the 1960s (2010, 34,47), the influence of the American Indian Movement several years later (2010, 35-39), and the contributions made by artists such as John Trudell (2010, 49-50). Though he briefly discusses
Native rock genres (2010, 41), it is interesting to note that he does not mention heavy metal as a genre to which Native people have contributed. However, it is clear that Native people were using popular music, especially rock and folk, to address social and environmental conditions before the inception of metal and punk, and this is confirmed in a recent book by John-Carlos Perea in which he aligns the history of Native popular music with the history of Native American activism and the Red Power Movement (2014, 74-90).

*Metal Studies*

Besides previous ethnomusicological work on Native cultures, I also draw from the emerging field of metal studies, which takes an interdisciplinary approach, and as the editors of the recent *Metal Rules the Globe* collected volume have observed, metal studies deploys “the methods of ethnography, social history, and musical and cultural analysis” (Wallach, Berger, and Greene 2011, 9). While the relationship between Native Americans and heavy metal has remained relatively unexplored before now, other scholars have examined metal bands which have incorporated indigenous elements into their music, such as Keith Harris’ study of the band Sepultura and its use of Xavante musicians on its 1996 album *Roots* (2000), as well as Idelber Avelar’s more recent work on Sepultura, which focused on the band’s relationship to Brazilian nationalism and identity (2011). The concept of scene and the discourse around it, though not limited to metal studies and applicable to almost any genre of popular music, has been useful in this study as well, and I have drawn specifically from work that metal scholars have done on scene, especially Kahn-Harris (2000, 2007, 2011) and Wallach & Levine (2011). Also, while I have not applied phenomenology in a strict sense in this study, Harris M. Berger’s analysis of the temporal practices of the heavy metal drummer (2000) as well as Berger’s larger work on heavy
metal, rock, and jazz (1999) have informed my approach, especially in Chapter Two where I examine how expressive practices constitute the experience of a live underground metal show.

Though metal studies has typically eschewed music expressions from punk, the genres have been cross-pollinating since the 1980s, and the generic boundaries have become increasingly blurred, especially in relation to some of the extreme and underground styles of metal. This cross-pollination has been described by Steve Waksman as “the metal/punk continuum” which he suggests allows for a greater understanding of the “interconnectedness” between metal and punk, something that can be observed through a simple history of the “metal/punk crossover” (2009, 7), and this relationship was a particular consideration for the analysis in Chapter One.

Chapter One examines the work of the Los Angeles-based punk/metal foursome Resistant Culture, whose music and lyrics directly address the question of indigenous cultural survival, as well as environmental and social issues. I attended one show where the band performed in Chicago in October 2013, and my analysis includes detailed description of that performance, as well as analysis of the band’s recordings, lyrics, artwork and merchandise. In Chapter Two I investigate another expression of metal and indigeneity originating from Los Angeles through the black metal collective known as the Black Twilight Circle. Though these artists do not affiliate with any recognized Native American group or community, they do identify with pre-Spanish colonial cultures in Mexico, through the Mexica movement that has grown out of broader Chicano/a identity movements in East Los Angeles. I attended one show that four bands from the Black Twilight Circle played in Grand Rapids, Michigan in June 2013, and that experience, as well as the bands’ recorded output, artwork, and rare interviews, form the core of source material for Chapter Two. Finally, in Chapter Three I describe my experiences at
the 30th Annual Gathering of Nations Powwow in Albuquerque, New Mexico in April 2013, where I observed several metal bands perform on the Stage 49 showcase of contemporary Native popular music, as well as a related show featuring Native metal bands at a smaller nightclub in Albuquerque the same weekend. One band in particular, When Darkness Falls from the Pueblo of Acoma in central New Mexico, generously granted me an extensive interview, and this exchange provides some of the most compelling insights into how heavy metal music, indigenous identity, and the ongoing struggle to resist injustices rooted in Euro-American colonial history are expressed in contemporary Native life.

Throughout this study, expressions of anti-colonial resistance and indigenous identity will emerge through the various artists’ work, and while some may be obvious, others are subtler and were only revealed through interviews with the artists themselves. While I initially approached anti-colonial resistance and indigenous identity as separate themes, I quickly realized that these two concepts converge and intertwine through all of the work of the artists in this study. However, the nature of how they are integrated varies, and some bands combine explicit proclamations of resistance with conspicuous indigenous signifiers. This is the case in Chapter One, where one band’s identity is built upon a foundation of indigenous resistance embedded in its musical and overall aesthetic practices.
CHAPTER ONE: EXPLICIT RESISTANCE AND INDIGENOUS IDENTITY
CONSTRUCTION IN “TRIBAL GRINDCRUST”

Overt expressions of outrage that confront the impact of European colonialism and imperialism on indigenous people in North America are not typically found in contemporary Native American music. However, as Native artists embrace the full range of popular music, such expressions are beginning to reveal themselves, whether they come in the form of hip-hop or in the more extreme genres of rock such as punk and heavy metal. Though punk has long had a reputation of utilizing its platform in an attempt to affect social and political change, to the point where that has arguably been its primary agenda, heavy metal artists have typically remained apolitical, choosing to channel the aggressive nature of their music to themes of personal power, or despair, in the darker subgenres of metal. While there are clearly exceptions to this convention, such as the metal bands Napalm Death or Cattle Decapitation, as well as punk bands such as Gang Green or Social Distortion, the dominant perception has been that metal remains apolitical while punks embrace a social or political agenda. The band Resistant Culture from Los Angeles draws from both musical traditions, playing a style self-described as “tribal grindcrust,” a reference to its indigenous perspective as well as the blend of extreme metal and punk influences in its music, specifically grindcore and crust punk, which I will detail further in this chapter. Composed of four members: a guitarist, singer, bass player and drummer, two of the members identify themselves as having indigenous heritage, including the singer and frontman for the band, Anthony Rezhawk. The band has aligned itself with a number of social, political and environmental causes, and has worked to position itself as a site of resistance, though this resistance is often broadly applied in its music, directed toward an ambiguous “industrial
system” (Cohen 2011). However, this broad approach to messaging in its music is strategic, and is complemented by a more specific approach in its activism. Resistant Culture is meant to provide a central point of solidarity for groups with disparate but related concerns, which can then focus their energies with singular passion and effect.

Using a musical style that emphasizes simplicity and sincerity to achieve maximum impact in delivering its message, Resistant Culture engages in practices that employ an aesthetic and constructs an identity that resists modernity in the form of industrial capitalism and the perceived negative consequences of Euro-American colonial expansion. Music is often cited as an exceptional means of communicating ideas and emotions, and ethnomusicologist John Blacking has suggested that music is “not a language that describes the way society seems to be, but a metaphorical expression of feelings associated with the way society really is. It is a reflection of and response to social forces, and particularly to the consequences of the division of labor” (1973, 104). Setting aside the Marxist tone at the end of Blacking’s statement, I think Blacking captures well the potential that music has for effecting social change, or at least raising issues in a way that energizes and inspires the performer’s audience. The name of the band itself, Resistant Culture, is a simple, self-evident statement which leaves little room for doubt concerning what the band is trying to communicate, since the band clearly protests different aspects of modernity and Western cultural hegemony, effectively saying as much in almost every song and in every image. In this chapter I explore how Resistant Culture employs indigenous markers in its music and art, and how the band fits within the greater sphere of the Native contemporary popular music scene. The indigenous perspective of Resistant Culture allows the band to perform resistance in a way that would be unconvincing if delivered by many other punk or metal bands with an activist agenda, since the voice of the oppressed is bound to the band’s
identity, giving its messages an authoritative sincerity that could be seen as otherwise monologic and moralizing.

Besides establishing a foundation of ethnicity from which to critique the history of colonial and imperial oppression, Resistant Culture also engages in significant identity construction through its music and imagery, both of which are equally important to its mission. Superficially at least, the indigenous identity that Resistant Culture constructs resembles “Pan-Indianism,” a term which has been used in the study of powwow culture to convey a “widely dispersed and shared set of cultural practices and ideologies” (Scales 2012, 290n4). However, Scales notes that the term is actively debated in Native communities, and in fact is “almost universally disliked” (2012, 291n4) among those involved in powwow due to a perception that it fails to account for distinctiveness between tribes, and assumes a loss of specific Native identity. Since the term is directly associated with powwow culture, and is clearly controversial among Native people, I avoid using it in this chapter and this study in general, especially since Resistant Culture never uses the term in any of its work. However, the identity that Resistant Culture claims does seek to find a universal indigeneity among Native people in North America, and typically does not search out tribal distinctiveness in the construction of indigenous identity.

The aggressive nature of heavy metal makes it a vibrant site for the examination of protest through music, and though there are many examples of metal artists sending social or political messages in their music, there has been a general aversion to affiliations with specific social or political movements or organizations. However, the cross-pollination between metal and punk over the years has disintegrated this barrier significantly, opening up the possibility that metal can become a site of explicit resistance and protest. While there was once a time when punk and metal bands and fans viewed each other with suspicion or derision, the borders
between the genres have become so blurred and intertwined that fans of each genre can feel comfortable engaging in multiple scenes, and punk and metal artists now frequently share the same stage. Resistant Culture, since it draws from both music traditions, provide an ideal opportunity to study this mode of expression, and while its music may draw a significant punk fan base, metalheads are also drawn to the intense ferocity of its music. The strategies of identity construction and the ways resistance is performed in Resistant Culture’s work also illustrate how contemporary Native musicians may negotiate the popular music industry, in this case maintaining a strong “DIY” (Do-It-Yourself) ethic, a tradition developed in punk and underground metal scenes.

In my analysis of Resistant Culture I have employed several methods to examine the different threads of expression in its work. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to conduct some ethnography of performance in October 2013, when the band played a show in Chicago at a mid-sized rock club near Chinatown called Reggie’s. Though I had been in contact with members of the band over the summer, and they had expressed interest in my project, after several weeks of unsuccessfully attempting to make contact with the band prior to the show in October, I arrived in Chicago without any firm plans for an interview. However, I was able to speak with the band’s manager briefly before the show, and he was open to the prospect of an interview, though at the time the band members were resting and unavailable before their set. After Resistant Culture played, I approached Anthony Rezhawk, the singer, lyricist and frontman for the band, and requested an interview, and though he was interested in my project, he stated he would rather have an informal conversation, so we talked for about twenty minutes about his background and approach to creating music, and this exchange informs the interpretations and observations in the remainder of this chapter. Later in this chapter, I also apply textual, musical
and cultural analysis to a sample of Resistant Culture’s music, website, lyrics, merchandise and artwork. In addition to the methods I described for this project in the introduction, I also draw from performance studies in this analysis, framing expressions of culture as a set of practices, which in this case are used to construct an identity of resistance. As folklorist Deborah A. Kapchan has suggested: “The notion of agency is implicit in performance” (1995, 479), and anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner has argued that agency is implicit in resistance (1995). I argue that this is especially the case in indigenous struggles for autonomy and sovereignty. Though part of Resistant Culture’s (and most artists and musician’s) repertoire includes shows in front of an audience, by using the concept of performance as it has been developed in cultural studies, I argue that performance is not limited to the band’s live shows, but also includes its recorded output, merchandise, videos, and even interviews that the band has given. Aesthetics can be an integral part of performance, and Resistant Culture has clearly paid careful attention to aesthetic construction in the different aspects of its creative expression.

As noted above, Resistant Culture play a style it describes as tribal grindcrust, the latter part of that term alluding to grindcore, a genre of extreme metal, described by Kahn-Harris as a “punk-influenced radicalization of death metal” (2007, 3-4) and crust punk (or simply “crust”), which is a hybrid influenced by earlier anarcho-punk bands such as Crass and Discharge and later hardcore punk, though crust also contains elements of death metal, especially the vocal style. Interestingly, both genres originate in the United Kingdom in the mid-1980s, and share similar stylistic traits of simple arrangements, very short songs (typically under two minutes) with fast tempos (often exceeding 150 beats per minute), highly distorted guitars, and lyrical themes of social and environmental activism. The guttural vocal style (also known as the death growl or “Cookie Monster” vocals) which originated in death metal are employed by vocalists
in both grindcore and crust, though crust vocalists will also use a variety of screaming and even clean-style punk singing. The vocals in Resistant Culture are almost exclusively of the death growl variety, though Rezhawk also uses some screaming punk vocals and even spoken word in certain songs. The generic conventions employed by Resistant Culture place it somewhere within Waksman’s “metal/punk continuum” (2009, 7), though at various times in its live show and recordings its music shifts towards one end or the other of that spectrum.

**Constructing Resistance at Reggie’s**

The show I attended on October 19, 2013 at Reggie’s in Chicago featured Resistant Culture as one of six bands on the bill that night, the last to play before the headlining act, Conflict, a pioneering anarcho-punk band that got its start in Britain in the 1980s. The club was located on the south side of Chicago in a relatively gentrified neighborhood, and featured a small bar and restaurant, adjacent to a larger room with a bar and stage, separated from the first by a small record shop. The performance space was typical of many rock clubs, with a stage just large enough for the standard rock set-up of drums, a few guitarists and a singer, elevated about four feet above a spacious dance floor. When I first arrived, there were less than fifty people milling about, which gave easy access to the considerable “merch” (merchandise) tables, representing all of the bands on the bill that night. Much of the crowd was there primarily to see Conflict, since its live appearances are relatively rare, and its influence on punk is tremendous. Most of the crowd exhibited strong signifiers of the anarcho-punk look, including many leather and denim jackets and vests displaying patches with the logos of current and classic anarcho-punk and metal bands, often also decorated with intricate arrays of metal studs. I noticed some dreadlocks, spiked hair and even a few spectacular mohawks, along with a few straight-edge skinhead-types. The crowd was mostly male, though the female contingent was slightly higher than the typical
metal show, and I think this was due to the punk influence on most of the bands, which had possibly resulted in a friendlier atmosphere for female fans, at least compared to the metal scene. In fact, two of the bands featured female members: the singer for Appalachian Terror Unit from West Virginia, and the guitarist for Resistant Culture. Though this may not seem like a large percentage relative to the overall number of musicians onstage at this show (approximately twenty-five spread over six bands), for a music genre notorious for being male-dominated, this was significant, especially since both women had prominent roles in the event.

Since anarcho-punks are well known for their identifications with social causes, I was not surprised to observe several homemade shirts and jacket patches with slogans related to veganism, animal welfare, and environmental awareness, though none specifically addressed indigenous rights issues. This show, and this entire Resistant Culture tour, was promoted as a benefit to support organizations that oppose breed-specific legislation across the country, and the flyer for the show featured an image of a pit bull behind bars, with a human hand and dog’s paw pressed together in unity, and the message “In Defense of Innocent Victims of Breed Specific Legislation…End BSL Now!” circling the image (Figure 1). Breed-specific legislation is generally directed at banning the ownership of pit bulls in certain cities, and has been criticized for targeting the pets of marginalized communities, and its critics have charged that it is a tool of gentrification and a way to further marginalize these communities. As described in the flyer for the show: “Breed specific legislation (BSL) is a law that bans or restricts certain types of dogs based on their appearance, usually because they are perceived as ‘dangerous’ breeds or types of dogs…they are regularly maligned by the media, feared and misunderstood by the public” (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Flyer for Resistant Culture show at Reggie’s, Chicago, October 19, 2013. (Source: Resistant Culture Facebook page, posted July 11, 2013)
Several times between sets, a few people from a local Chicago anti-BSL group took to
the stage to thank the crowd for coming, and attempted to explain why breed-specific legislation
is harmful, primarily from an animal welfare perspective. Apparently Katina Culture, the
guitarist from Resistant Culture, was also involved with this issue, since she spoke briefly
between songs about the importance of opposing this type of legislation. At one point one of the
activists stated that breed-specific legislation is “racial profiling at its best,” which came close to
framing the issue in social justice terms, as opposed to animal rights, but it seemed apparent to
everyone attending that the issue fit within a context of fighting against oppression of the
underclass, whomever those groups may be.

All of the bands that preceded Resistant Culture at this show performed a hybrid style of
metal and punk, though most edged toward one end of the spectrum, displaying either more punk
or more metal generic traits. Despite the general aggressive nature of the music, the loud, brash
sound, and purposefully offensive lyrical content of some bands, there was actually an almost
good-natured tone to the whole event, something I have noticed at some of the better punk shows
I have attended over the years. I felt a discernible collective intent to create a kind of community
through the course of the show, and though there was of course a “mosh pit” (an area in the
middle of the dance floor where extremely physical and full-contact dancing could be
performed), I witnessed no real violence or confrontations between audience members or the
bands. In fact, though there was about a four-foot vertical separation between the bands and the
audience, the distance between the two was almost non-existent; creating the kind of
participatory experience that has always been the supposed trademark of punk. Though this kind
of intimacy has not been as prevalent in metal, as punk has continued to influence underground
forms of metal the distance between performer and audience has increasingly dissolved. I
observed many fluctuations between metal and punk indicators at this show, but much of the
time the generic line was blurred to the point of irrelevance. I noted the distinct absence of the
“sign of the horns” hand gesture by fans or performers, which has been ubiquitous at any metal
show for many years, and this alone gave me the impression that this was primarily a punk show.
However, for several of the bands, those displaying musical markers more typical of metal,
including Resistant Culture, I observed the occasional use of “the claw” by fans and vocalists
especially. This gesture originates from the black metal subgenre, and is described by one
blogger as “a true and brutal expression of what metal is and should be to the true aficionado”
(Dillingham 2008). “The claw” consists of one or both outstretched hands, fingers turned upward
and extended as if holding something heavy, usually combined with a silent scream or grimace.
This is intended to evoke the despair or brutality that is the hallmark of black metal, and I
interpret this gesture as adapted in this context to communicate an understanding of the intensity
with which the bands were engaging with their music and the audience, since the “brutal” nature
of death metal, grindcore and crust is also highly valued.

By the time Resistant Culture took the stage, the club had filled to over two hundred
people, and the place felt packed. The band moved through its set with precision and efficiency,
with very little banter between songs, besides occasionally announcing the name of the next
song. Anthony Rezhawk was a commanding presence on stage, a stocky man in leather and
denim covered in metal studs and black and white band logo patches, his jet-black mohawk left
long and loose. His death growl vocals seem to emerge from deep within his body, adding to the
pummeling low end of the bass guitarist and drummer. Katina Culture moves easily on guitar
from the fast-tempo power chords of punk to the type of virtuosic solos associated with heavy
metal. Though there are some slower instrumental and almost ambient pieces on Resistant
Culture’s two commercially-available recordings, as well as considerable use of “traditional” or “indigenous” instruments, its live set at Reggie’s consisted entirely of straightforward punk and metal. In fact, there was very little that I observed in its live show that could be considered a marker of indigeneity, besides some Native-style singing on a few songs, and dancing by Anthony during at least one song that was reminiscent of powwow-style dancing.

**The Recordings and Artwork of Resistant Culture**

A complete track-by-track analysis of the recorded output of Resistant Culture is beyond the scope of this analysis, but some general observations on its two albums, *Welcome to Reality* (2006) and *All One Struggle* (2008) are worth noting to compare with its live show. Almost all of its songs are very short, often less than two minutes, and the band maintains the fast tempo characteristic of the metal/punk hybrid styles of grindcore and crust. The combination of power chords, driving bass, and extremely fast drumming creates an explosive dynamic, punctuated by Anthony’s guttural death growl vocals. The drummer alternates between the standard 4/4 fast tempo beat typical of punk and the “blast-beat” which is a percussive figure originating in grindcore, which Ross Hagen describes as resembling “a standard rock beat sped up to a frenetic tempo until the drums begin to bear an uncanny resemblance to a prolonged burst of machine-gun fire and become a sort of sonic blast” (2011, 186). Though there are relatively few guitar solos throughout both albums, and they are never showcased, Katina Culture has been characterized as a “classically trained guitarist” by the band (Cohen 2011). This comparison between classical and heavy metal performers is commonly made by musicians and scholars, most notably by Robert Walser (1993), though this virtuosity is rarely seen as important in punk, and in fact can sometimes be considered self-indulgent (Waksman 2009, 258). The fact that the solos are present in Resistant Culture’s music, and the band points out Katina’s classical
background, is important since this positions them in the sphere of metal, while the way the band deemphasizes the solos musically, by not making them the central element of its songs, suggests identification with a punk aesthetic.

Though the guitar solos are not a central focus in Resistant Culture’s songs, the use of indigenous instruments is clearly intended to suggest an aura of ethnicity that is unmistakable as Native American. However, these indigenous markers are not used on every song, and in fact only five or six out of the seventeen tracks on each of the band’s albums feature some sort of indigenous marker. While markers of indigeneity may take many different forms throughout this study, in reference to Resistant Culture in this chapter I recognize these markers primarily through the use of an indigenous instrument, such as a rattle or flute, or Native-style singing or chanting. The band describes its indigenous instruments in this excerpt from an interview with the underground music blog, BlowTheScene.com:

As far as our Indigenous instruments, we use a gourd rattle made from a home grown gourd from the Yuma, Arizona area. We also use four different Indigenous flutes in four different keys. Each of these flutes were hand-made and are from different regions of Turtle Island (the American continent). We also use a donated Pow-Wow drum that’s made from a cottonwood tree and elk skin. (Resistant Culture in Cohen 2011)

Resistant Culture usually plays these instruments in a bridge in the middle of a song, or combined with Native-style singing when the guitar drops out, creating a sort of meditative space within an otherwise aggressive metal/punk song. However, the band uses these instruments sparingly, and it never feels forced or contrived, as it deftly weaves this instrumentation into the fabric of the song. This creates the effect of a “naturalness” of these instruments in this context, fully embedded and not tacked on in an intro or outro.

On both albums, there are several songs the band characterizes in the liner notes as “Dark Medicine instrumentals,” which are essentially short interludes where the band can experiment
with an entirely different style of music, resulting in ambient soundscapes which feature wind samples, animal calls such as wolves, ravens and owls, and even synth sounds, including strings. The indigenous instruments such as rattles and flutes are played here as well, along with acoustic guitars, and in several songs the bands uses spoken word and samples to emphasize a particular point. I quote the following from the song “The Return” from All One Struggle, since I think it reveals a sort of prophesy from the band of a hopeful post-colonial indigenous experience:

All the powers of empire are built on the faith of the people. As our crops fail and enemies prevail, people will no longer believe. And when the people lose faith, the rulers lose power, and when the power vanishes, the people will abandon the great cities and go back to the ways of nature. (Resistant Culture “The Return” All One Struggle 2008)

The other most obvious indigenous marker in Resistant Culture’s music is the Native-style singing that Anthony performs on several songs on each album, which I also witnessed in the band’s live show. These are also fully embedded in its songs, arranged to blend seamlessly with the other vocal elements, and in one song Anthony delivers this style of singing in his death metal growl (“Warning, Civilization Ahead” All One Struggle 2008). The use of these musical markers clearly demonstrates that Resistant Culture is claiming an indigenous identity through its music, though tribal specificity remains ambiguous, and in fact the band often aligns itself with the same kind if universal Native identity that has been fostered in powwow culture. In its song “Mending the Hoop” for example, Resistant Culture’s rhetoric even suggests a global indigenism, indicting colonialism in all its forms:

All four directions
All walks of life
All tribal nations
And civilizations
The circle was broken
With illusions and lies
The global family
Cut with a knife
(Resistant Culture “Mending the Hoop” All One Struggle 2008)
Canadian ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond has noted that many Native artists choose not to present sonic markers of aboriginality, in order to argue that their music is not one but many genres (2005, 210). I suggest this may be why Resistant Culture chooses to perform fewer indigenous markers in a live context as it does in its recordings, since its live audiences often consist of mostly non-Native people. However, in its recordings it is clear that sonic markers are a powerful tool for Resistant Culture to affirm its indigenous identity in a more controlled medium.

Resistant Culture is prolific in its production of supplementary texts that support its general message and image, and though the band only has two recordings released, it sells a wide selection of shirts, posters, patches, stickers, and buttons at its shows, on its website, and in the liner notes of its CDs. This is not a simple haphazard mass of merchandise accumulated through years of releases and tours, but a carefully curated collection of images, many of which are not intended to sell a specific album, but are parts contributing to a greater construction of protest and identity. In the liner notes of Resistant Culture’s two CD releases, on the backside of the printed lyrics for the songs, two full panels are devoted to merchandise, and a more cynical analysis would see this as purely commercial marketing technique to generate additional revenue for the band. However, I argue that these pieces of merchandise play a pivotal role in developing a cohesive identity for Resistant Culture. The band addressed the importance of merchandising to its mission in this interview:

Resistant Culture is not just a name of a band. The name itself represents the struggle to survive within civilization. It’s a statement that transcends just music and it provides context for our artwork. We often sell shirts to people who aren’t even punk/crust fans but want to represent the name and art in their communities (cultural gatherings, pow-wows, etc.). (Resistant Culture in Profane Existence, date unknown)
The band clearly understands the importance of unified messaging in maximizing its impact, so dismissing this practice as crass commercialism would be a missed opportunity, since merchandising can be a fascinating window into how artists shape their identity. One of the most compelling images that appears on the band’s posters, shirts and patches is what it calls “Tribal Woman” (Figure 2), which is set in white ink on a black background, like all its imagery, and depicts an indigenous woman holding some sort of weapon in one hand and her child (who appears to be breastfeeding) in the other. The woman has a look of calm defiance on her face, and she exudes the type of stoic beauty that is often romantically associated with indigenous people. Next to her are the words “Tribal Autonomy,” accompanied by a symbol adapted from the familiar anarchy symbol of a capital “A” inside of a circle, though stylized sharpened sticks have replaced the lines, forming a “T” and an “A” presumably to signify tribal autonomy.

Figure 2. Resistant Culture “Tribal Woman” poster. (Photograph by author 2014)
Another image in Resistant Culture’s catalog portrays a Native man with a mohawk left long and loose, tattooed with the “tribal autonomy” symbol and the band’s logo, and patches on his pants, one with the capital “E” inside a circle, widely interpreted among anarcho-punks to mean “equality” (Figure 3). The words “Return to the Ways of Nature” appear below the man, who is kneeling and using a bow drill to start a fire. Behind him are cut power lines swinging in the wind and two ravens flying in front of a full moon, while next to him corn plants are growing, as well as three peyote button cacti. The image in general reflects the theme of the song “The Return” (see above), which predicts industrial collapse, but rather than a post-apocalyptic future, the song and image advocate for reclaiming lost skills and a closer connection to nature as a survival strategy.

Figure 3. Resistant Culture “Return to the Ways of Nature” poster. (Photograph by author 2014)
Aesthetic Construction and Scene

The aesthetics of Resistant Culture’s work is extremely important to the formation of the band’s identity and its ability to frame itself as a site of resistance. Kahn-Harris suggests that aesthetic construction is one “process of internal discursive construction” that metal musicians utilize to make a scene visible, both externally and to internal participants, and it is a critical element of scene construction (Kahn-Harris 2007, 100). While Kahn-Harris addresses the concept of scene specifically, which implies an affiliation of multiple artists or bands, I believe the practice of aesthetic construction is just as valuable on an individual level, and the choice of imagery and style that Resistant Culture employs, such as the stark black and white color scheme, the stencil-like font historically used by other anarcho-punk bands, and the indigenous visual indicators, are as crucial to constructing the band’s identity as its musical practices. These practices contribute to positioning the band in a network of scenes, and though more detailed ethnographic data would clearly reveal what scenes Resistant Culture may or may not participate in, I believe I can make some observations based on the direct associations the band has made with other bands, especially those Resistant Culture has shared members with. For instance, an earlier incarnation of the band from 2004 included the legendary metal guitarist Jesse Pintado, who can be heard on the album “Welcome to Reality” (Resistant Culture 2014). Pintado, who died in 2006, was previously a member of two groundbreaking grindcore bands, Terrorizer and Napalm Death, and the story goes that he coined the term “grindcore” in 1983 (Encyclopaedia Metallum 2013a). Before he died, Pintado actually reformed Terrorizer with Anthony Rezhawk and original drummer Pete Sandoval, and Resistant Culture’s Katina Culture has since stepped in to play guitar after Pintado’s death (Encyclopaedia Metallum 2014a). While these details may simply seem like interesting trivia meaningful to only the most ardent fans, they actually tie the
band into a far-reaching global metal scene extending its influence beyond the local scene in Los Angeles, since the relationship with Pintado and his reputation with Terrorizer and history with Napalm Death, a very popular British band, has had the potential to garner widespread exposure for Resistant Culture (Childers 2010). The importance of the local scene in Los Angeles should not be minimized however, since Terrorizer essentially ushered in the grindcore scene in Los Angeles in the mid-1980s. Pintado continues to be recognized as a pioneer, evidenced by a tribute show in his honor in Los Angeles in September 2013, which featured Resistant Culture, and other prominent Los Angeles grindcore bands such as Repulsion and Nausea, as well as Mexican grindcore band Anarchus, who all came together to celebrate the legacy of “The Grindfather” (Brave Words and Bloody Knuckles 2013). Resistant Culture is therefore effectively participating in both global and local grindcore scenes, demonstrating the construction of scenes on what Kahn-Harris calls “place-based” as well as “genre-based” scales, though he warns that this can not be viewed with a simple “Russian dolls” model, where increasingly smaller scenes are located within larger ones on a geographic scale (2007, 99). Kahn-Harris asserts that “scenes cross-cut and overlap each other” (2007, 99) and I think that this is illustrated well in the case of the intertwined relationships between Resistant Culture, Terrorizer and Pintado’s connection to Napalm Death, and local Los Angeles metal bands. While these relationships are important in cementing the bonds which hold together translocal and transnational scenes, a shared aesthetic, which includes the music but also an ideological viewpoint of resistance in this case, also is crucial to maintaining cohesive bonds within a network of scenes.

Wallach and Levine have suggested a framework for identifying and analyzing scene formation that includes a set of criteria they describe as “six generalizations,” and the fourth
generalization suggests that metal scenes do not patrol their ideological boundaries with the same fervor as punk scenes (2011, 124). Taking this into consideration, I argue that the grindcore scenes that Resistant Culture articulates with more resembles a punk scene, since an ideology and aesthetic of resistance plays a vital role in maintaining the boundaries of these scenes. Resistant Culture appears to share more in common aesthetically and ideologically with other grindcore bands locally in Los Angeles and on a global scale than it does with other metal bands that may have Native members or which emphasize indigenous rights or identity, which I did not find any evidence for in my research for this analysis. While Resistant Culture maintains an aesthetic based on indigeneity, the practices it employs which keep it connected to the network of scenes described above are equally important to the band’s construction of identity.

Active Forms of Resistance and Social Unity

There is a particular irony in studying an expression of anti-colonial resistance using methods rooted in disciplines such as anthropology and ethnomusicology, which arguably have strong ties to European colonialism themselves, though they are not alone in academia in that regard.4 Interestingly, Resistant Culture rarely uses the words “colonialism” or “imperialism” in its work, choosing instead to focus on critiquing the industrial systems of modernity, though the systems it opposes have developed directly from colonial and imperial processes. These processes are represented in its music and artwork in the form of modern industrial systems, as factory smokestacks, power lines, and concrete. While I acknowledge that conflating systems of colonialism and imperialism with each other and industrial systems is simplistic and does not adequately address the differences between these processes,5 in terms of Resistant Culture’s work they all result in the same circumstances of oppression, and the band has the same prescription to alleviate that oppression, which is to reject modernity and “return to the ways of nature.”
Though this may seem like an ambiguous form of resistance, this approach actually allows for multiple strategies of resistance, from taking to the streets in direct action and protest, to lifestyle changes that the band acknowledges are important, like organic gardening, midwifery, and wilderness skills (Cohen 2011). Such quotidian activities can be seen as “active” forms of resistance, which ethnomusicologist Sidra Lawrence suggests is just as powerful and holds the same transgressive potential as “reacting to and against others” (2011, 217). Obviously, Resistant Culture also engages in reactive forms of resistance and protest, but by allowing consideration for both active and reactive strategies, rather than diluting their potential impact, I suggest that this broad acceptance of individual forms of resistance creates a more dialogic relationship between the band and its audience. The band’s apparently idealistic approach to resistance may run the risk of effacing the realities of the divisions between social groups, as well as possibly concealing the detrimental effects of deindustrialization, yet in this interview with the Grind and Punishment blog in 2010 the band acknowledges these social divisions while promoting unity between these groups:

The illusion of separateness makes it easy for people to ignore the voices of different ethnicities, species, genders, etc., while at a deeper level of being, we’re all connected and we all require the same clean air, food, water, etc. to survive on this Earth. Our intention is to promote the idea that in order to survive in this toxic world, we don't all have to become homogeneous and lose our identities and subscribe to a single ideology or carry the same flag, rather as Subcomandante Marcos said, we'd like to see “a world where many worlds fit.” In other words, we can recognize and respect our differences, but work together when/where ever possible to create a better future. By recognizing that all struggles for liberation, autonomy, self-determination, justice, rights, etc. are one, we can foster an attitude of solidarity that will strengthen all movements. (Resistant Culture in Childers 2010)

This sentiment reveals a naivety that the band is unapologetic for, as it remains committed to a mission that celebrates difference while striving for a unity between disparate social groups that may share in an ideology of resistance against the forces of colonial and imperial oppression.
Musical Simplicity and Resistance to Modernity

The impact of musical simplicity is critical to understanding how Resistant Culture creates and reinforces an identity, and this tension between simplicity and complexity can be difficult for artists to successfully negotiate. Blacking explored this issue of musical complexity and its effectiveness, ultimately determining that “the simplicity or complexity of the music is ultimately irrelevant… It is the human content of the humanly organized sound that ‘sends’ people” (Blacking 1973, 33-34). References to classical training aside, Resistant Culture is undoubtedly performing a musical style that is not complex, and this fits within its aesthetic, where complexity would imply progress, which suggests modernity, and the band specifically opposes modern social systems as sources of oppression to indigenous people. Resistant Culture combines a simple sonic formula that relies on blunt force with its lyrics and visual artwork valorizing a return to a pre-industrial culture that focuses on unified human needs, rather than modern technological advances. The ideology of the band effectively equates colonialism with modernity, and targets this body as a force to be resisted and ultimately dismantled. An aesthetic of simplicity can most easily be expressed through an indigenous identity, though this runs the risk of furthering the trope of the “noble savage,” which tends to essentialize Native culture, and has a long history within the colonial discourse of indigenous cultures (Ellingson 2001). However, by claiming an indigenous identity through the cultural heritage of its band members, Resistant Culture may deflect some of that criticism, and though authenticity can be a tenuous concept, it does seem to apply here in describing how the band can be effective in using Native culture to promote its activist agenda.

I view resistance not as a separate issue from identity in Resistant Culture’s work, but as integrated within its identity, and performing resistance is effectively performing identity for the
band. By tying indigeneity to its identity, the band is claiming agency through performance, channeling outrage at a whole range of cultural and environmental injustices through an aggressive musical expression while focusing this social protest through the lens of a struggle for indigenous rights. Martin Stokes has observed that music performance is “increasingly seen as a space in which meanings are generated, not simply ‘reflected,’” and ethnic markers are “the negotiated products of multiple, labile, and historically constituted processes of difference making” (2001). It is this type of production of difference that Resistant Culture engages, connecting indigenous identity and resistance to cultural survival, using a broad approach to identity construction, seeking common ground with all indigenous groups to further the process of decolonization.
CHAPTER TWO: COLLECTIVE MEXICA INDIGENEITY AND EXPLICIT ANTI-COLONIAL RESISTANCE IN THE BLACK TWILIGHT CIRCLE

Though it may be tempting to equate “indigenous identity” with “Native American identity” in the context of North American Native popular music, one of the goals of this project is to demonstrate the wide range of interpretations of the concept of indigeneity, and to show that there is not one single Native or indigenous identity, at least in the field of Native popular music. In fact, one interpretation of indigenous identity has its roots south of the United States border, identifying with pre-Spanish colonial cultures in present-day Central America, although the locus for this identity movement as it relates to this study is in Southern California. In this chapter I will describe how the Mexica identity movement has inspired a collective of metal musicians in Los Angeles, and how the practices of this collective have formed its identity and shaped its striking expressions of anti-colonial resistance. I will examine the music, lyrics, and associated artwork of the Black Twilight Circle collective, as well as statements from rare interviews that its members have given, before I present a detailed analysis of a live performance by four bands that I observed in the summer of 2013.

The Mexica Movement

The Mexica movement has grown out of broader Chicano/a identity movements in the Mexican-American communities in East Los Angeles, though members of the Mexica movement differ significantly in their perceptions of the Chicano/a experience. While many Chicano/a activists embrace hybridity and their shared Spanish colonial history, the Mexica movement rejects any and all associations with European culture, asserting that all indigenous people in North, Central, and South America share a common pre-colonial kinship which ultimately binds them together in explicit resistance to dominant Euro-American hegemony and its ethnocentric
notions of what constitutes indigeneity. Rhetoric and terminology are extremely important to the movement, and in fact, corrective language may be the most powerful tool the movement uses to construct an alternative indigenous identity. Rather than arguing the accuracy of the movement’s usage of these terms, for the sake of consistency in this analysis, I will use them with the understanding that some may question their legitimacy. What is important to understand is that members of the Mexica movement, and, as I will illustrate, a collective of metal bands in Southern California, take this ideology very seriously, and are unquestionably committed to the educational, inspirational, and often radical, goals of the movement.

First, examining the name of the movement itself: “Mexica” is often used as an alternative term for “Aztec,” though the terms are not quite synonymous, since the Mexica were a smaller group of what is colloquially known as the Aztec. The Mexica coexisted with other groups in the Basin of Mexico, settling in Lake Texcoco where they built their cities, including the island capital of Tenochtitlan in 1325 A.D. (Markman and Markman 1994, 19). They have remained the focus of many scholars, and, in all likelihood, the Mexica movement, predominantly because “they were the most powerful indigenous people at the beginning of the sixteenth century” and they “bore the brunt of the invasion and the administrative and political center of New Spain was established in their capital” (López Austin and López Luján 2001, 191). Since the Mexica dominated the region at the initial onset of Spanish colonialism, the Spanish recorded a great deal about their culture, and though the Spanish destroyed many indigenous accounts of Mexica history, some still survive (León-Portilla 1962) in addition to historical accounts preserved in the archaeological record. While the origins of the term “Mexica” are clear, it increasingly has come to refer to a contemporary indigenous identity movement, which is the focus in this discussion.
The Mexica movement also considers terms such as “Central America” as remnants of European colonialism, preferring the Nahuatl term “Anahuac” to indicate the continuous ancestral territory of all indigenous people in what is now called “the Americas” (Marti and Kurath 1964, 2, 15). The concept of Anahuac has come to inspire the theological foundation of the Mexica movement, using the pantheon of pre-colonial Mexica deities and myths as the basis for a general indigenous cosmology (Tezcatlipoca 2010). The movement challenges other terminology, such as “Latino,” “Hispanic” and “Indian” as “racist and Eurocentric” (Mexica Movement 2014a), and suggests the preferred term “Nican Tlaca” to include all pre-colonial indigenous peoples of the Americas (Anahuac).

In this analysis I use the term “the movement” to refer to the greater Mexica identity movement, though I use the term “Mexica Movement” in reference to a specific organization based in Southern California, which describes itself as “the Nican Tlaca (Indigenous) rights educational organization for the people of Anahuac” (Mexica Movement 2014b). In fact, this organization makes it very clear that: “There is only one organization that is called the Mexica Movement” (Tezcatlipoca 2009), and distances itself from others claiming to be part of a wider Mexica movement. One essay on the Mexica Movement website, a sort of manifesto authored by Olin Tezcatlipoca, warns of New Age groups appropriating Mexica theology, ritual, and dances, and though Tezcatlipoca does not make specific accusations, clearly there has been some conflict with other groups, which members of the Mexica Movement feel have dishonored their culture, asserting that “New Age theatrics are a sacrilege upon our theology and a treason to our Mexica, Lakota, and other Nican Tlaca heritage” (Tezcatlipoca 2009).

Tezcatlipoca’s reference to “theatrics” may be directed at the Danza Azteca movement, groups of artists who reinterpret pre-Contact Mexica culture, using historical knowledge of
Mexica sacred-ceremonial dance practices in an effort to reestablish cultural identity in Chicano/a communities in the United States. In her 2012 dissertation, Jennie Marie Luna examines the socio-cultural roots of Danza, and characterizes Danza as the embodiment of both a physical and political act, demonstrating “the profound links between Danza and Xicano/o identity, which have been utilized as an apparatus for decolonization, social justice, and liberation for the Xicano/o community” (Luna 2012, 3). Luna, a danzante (Danza practitioner) herself, traces the transnational history of the Danza Azteca tradition from its roots in 1960s indigenous “revivalism” in Mexico City to its migration to Southern California (Luna 2012, 5). The same emphasis on terminology that is so important to the Mexica Movement is also apparent in Danza, and it is clear that they share an ideology that embraces an indigenous history, rejecting any influence of Spanish colonialism. For instance, Luna alternately uses the terms “Xicano/o” and “MeXicano/o” in place of “Chicana/o,” in an effort to blur the distinction between groups in Mexico and the United States, effacing political borders which serve to divide people who identify as indigenous on the same continent (2012, 4n6). Luna also uses “Danza Mexica” in place of “Danza Azteca,” suggesting that the term “Aztec” has been created by non-indigenous scholars, and “Mexica” is “how the dance tradition and ceremonies are identified from within the Danza circles” (2012, 2n2). Elisa Diana Huerta suggests that Benedict Anderson’s 1983 concept of “imagined communities” (2006) is a useful means of approaching Danza Azteca, especially considering “transnational imaginings are central to many danzantes’ understanding of belonging,” and the narratives created in Danza Azteca (2009, 14-15). The connection between cultural performance and transnational imagining which is central to Anderson’s concept can be applied to the Mexica movement as a whole.
Though I have no reason to believe that Tezcatlipoca refers to Danza groups in his condemnation of “New Age” appropriation of Mexica dance practices, and in fact, the rhetoric and goals of the Mexica Movement and Danza Mexica seem well-aligned, it should be understood that there is likely some conflict within the greater Mexica movement concerning how Mexica indigenous identity is expressed. In fact, another Mexica identity group, the Nican Tlaca University of Cemanahuac, features a “Statement of Disassociation from Other Organizations” prominently on their website, which lists the Mexica Movement and Danza Azteca specifically, as well as a host of others, that they are not affiliated with, and do not endorse (Nican Tlaca University of Cemanahuac 2013). This attitude is understandable since this ideology is essentially composed of “invented traditions,” a concept developed by Hobsbawm (1983) to describe a set of practices of a symbolic nature which reinforce certain ideals and imply continuity with the past, usually in the service of the construction of national identity. Though these practices may be corroborated by historical research, there is room for disagreement over how they can be interpreted in a modern context, and it would be surprising not to see different groups contesting each other’s interpretation of ancient traditions, many of the links to which have long been destroyed through Spanish colonial domination. Popular belief has long held that Spanish missionaries, who were a part of the genocidal agenda of conquest and colonial expansion, recorded much of what we know about Mexica and other indigenous cultures in Mesoamerica at the time of Spanish contact. While there is apparent irony that the revitalization of indigenous culture and identity is partially dependent on the work of members of the church which sought to destroy indigenous religious practices, it should be noted that first-person indigenous accounts have always been available to scholars, as Miguel León-Portilla demonstrated in his 1962 book, Broken Spears.
While Olin Tezcatlipoca seems to maintain the most public face of the Mexica Movement, and in fact is listed as a “director” along with Nelyollotl Toltecatl and Jesse Rivera on one of their linked webpages (Mexica Movement 2014c), generally the organization maintains an anonymous profile, with no individual contributors mentioned on the lengthy homepage (Mexica Movement 2014a). This is a purposeful practice, to de-emphasize the role of the individual in the movement, and thus develop a strong collective voice. Though the goals of any movement or collective are achieved through the efforts of individuals, a more cohesive collective identity can be maintained by minimizing attention on the individual, lest individual accomplishments overshadow the goals of the movement as a whole. Also, it can be very difficult to estimate how many individuals constitute a movement or organization if the collective remains relatively anonymous, so a movement can be portrayed as larger than it may actually be, especially through online propaganda. Finally, if an organization or movement has a subversive agenda, and is perceived as threatening to the dominant order (as the Mexica movement could be), anonymity and a decentralized organizational structure, as has been practiced by those in the radical environmental movement, are powerful tools in protecting the movement from infiltration and disruption.

Worship Black Twilight

The term “collective” has become something of an overused term in the landscape of contemporary popular music, especially in the context of underground punk, metal and indie rock scenes. It has become fashionable for either the music press or the artists themselves to slap the label “collective” on any loosely affiliated group of artists, in an attempt to emphasize independence from the mainstream music industry, and accumulate subcultural capital. It is rare to come across a group of artists who truly embody the spirit and ideals of collectivism, but this
can be found in the Black Twilight Circle. Based in Los Angeles, the Black Twilight Circle describes itself on its website as: “a group of predominantly Mexican/Guatemalan underground musicians & their bands located throughout southern california [sic]” (Crepusculo Negro 2013a). An associated record label called Crepusculo Negro (“black twilight“ in Spanish) functions as both the primary online presence for the Black Twilight Circle and the means of releasing the output of affiliated artists, and its descriptive subheading on the website reads “Indigenous Record Label” (Figure 4).

![Crepusculo Negro](https://example.com/crepusculo-negro.png)

**Figure 4.** Header on Crepusculo Negro website. (Source: Crepusculo Negro 2014)

Cassettes are the medium of choice for most Crepusculo Negro releases, though the label has a few releases on vinyl, and maintains a Bandcamp page where it makes most of its artist’s releases streamable and cheaply available for download. Though a precise date of when the Black Twilight Circle originated is unclear; the label has existed since 2008, its first release by Volahn, *Dimensiónes del Trance Kósmico*. Volahn is the pseudonym of Eduardo Ramírez (Encyclopaedia Metallum 2014b), one of the founding members of the Black Twilight Circle. Most members of the collective use pseudonyms, and Ramírez appears to be the only member who regularly uses his real name, though he typically uses “Volahn” even when he is credited on other artists’ recordings. On the whole, the Black Twilight Circle actively preserves an aura of shadowy mystery, refusing to do most interviews and providing almost no specific information about individual artists. Volahn/Ramírez is the unofficial spokesperson and one of the most
prolific artists in the collective, as he not only releases work under the name Volahn, but is also a member of at least five other bands within the collective (Encyclopaedia Metallum 2014b). In 2009 the label featured six different artists on its second release, a label compilation titled *Worship Black Twilight*. The 2013 release of the second label compilation, *Tliltic Tlapoyauak* (“black twilight” in Nahuatl) was a double-cassette set featuring tracks by sixteen different artists (Figure 5), and as of February 2014, there were fourteen different artists listed on the Crepusculo Negro website, suggesting significant growth in the collective over the course of six years.

![Figure 5](image)

**Figure 5.** Promotional flyer for *Tliltic Tlapoyauak* release. (Source: Crepusculo Negro 2013b)

I did not discover formal links between the Black Twilight Circle and the Mexica movement in the course of my research, though some links to Mexica movement websites were
once available from the Crepusculo Negro website and were deleted in an apparent update sometime during the winter of 2013. However, there is sufficient Aztec/Mexica mythology and imagery woven into the Black Twilight Circle’s music and overall aesthetic to draw some strong conclusions about the ideological leanings of the collective. Statements that members of the collective, especially Volahn/ Eduardo Ramírez, have made in rare interviews also give an indication of the influence the Mexica movement has on the Black Twilight Circle’s vision. In his only published interview to date, Volahn/Ramírez tells of this influence, clearly referencing the revolutionary indigenous vision of the Mexica movement:

My earliest memories are exploring the ruins of Tecpán in Guatemala and being taught my culture by the elders in my family. Even at a young age, I had a strong spiritual connection with my culture. There's nothing that compares with living in LA — it's the survival of the fittest. Being brown in LA is hard, especially dealing with cops and immigration. Settlers on the land of my ancestors want to govern my life. Fuck white occupation of my sacred land! We are to be governed by our own people. I'm an indigenous revolutionary for my people and our struggle, and we're the true representatives of our culture today. (Volahn in Duncan Brown 2011)

Though it is unclear whether the interviewer drew his own conclusions, or it was communicated from Volahn/Ramírez himself, in the same interview, the author writes: “the collective takes its inspiration from pre-hispanic [sic] cultures and, in solidarity with the Mexica movement, they reject terms like "latino" [sic] and "native American"[sic], and instead call themselves "Nican Tlaca" (Duncan-Brown 2011). Allegiance to this ideology can be readily observed in the name of the collective’s most recent American tour, dubbed the “Anahuac Tour” on flyers, a reference to the Nahuatl term described above, roughly meaning “the Americas,” though in this case the tour was limited to the United States. In addition to adopting the rhetoric of the Mexica movement, some bands in the Black Twilight Circle incorporate specific names from various Mesoamerican cultures in its band names and pseudonyms. Blue Hummingbird on the Left (BHL), for instance, is the English translation for the Mexica/Aztec god, Huitzilopochtli, often referred to as the
Mexica/Aztec god or war, or god of the sun (Markman and Markman 1994, 175-176). Left-handed and symbolized by the color blue and the cardinal direction South (León-Portilla 1990, 33), Huitzilopochtli is considered “the patron deity” of the Mexica/Aztecs, elevated to “the highest rank in the ancient Nahuatl pantheon” (León-Portilla 1990, 161) and is an integral figure in the Mexica/Aztec migration myth (Markman and Markman 1994, 292-301). Since BHL pays homage to the sacred and spiritual aspects of Mexica culture in its lyrics, I interpret that its use of the English translation of the deity’s name, rather than the original Nahuatl, is the band’s attempt to avoid blasphemy, and this may also be why the band often simply uses the acronym “BHL.”

The members of the band use pseudonyms drawn from Nahuatl names and historic figures, such as the singer, who goes by “Tlacaelel,” referencing the Mexica political leader from the fifteenth century who León-Portilla refers to without hyperbole as “the creator of the mystico-militaristic conception of the Aztecs as ‘people of the Sun’” (1990, 158).

Though lyrical analysis can be misleading and offers only a glimpse into the ideology of an artist, a sample of some lyrics from Volahn will illustrate a sense of the Mesoamerican indigenous cultural references in the collective:

```
En las montañas de Chimaltenango
Mi familia continuan la tradicion
De mis antepasados
En la Selva - Con mi gente
Recuerdos de Tecpan
Las aguas de Atitlán
Siempre en mis pensamientos
En la Selva - Con mi gente
Orgullo de mi cultura indígena
La lucha continúa aquí
En la Selva - Con mi gente
Estoy libre - Bajo las estrellas
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English translation:
In the mountains of Chimaltenango
My family continues the traditions
Of my ancestors
In the Forest - With my people
Memories of Tecpan
The waters of Atitlan
Always in my thoughts
In the Forest - With my people
Proud of my indigenous culture
The fight continues here
In the Forest - With my people
I am free - Under the stars
(Volahn “Tecpán” *Disequilibrium of the Ecliptic Plane* Crepusculo Negro 2012. Lyrics from Encyclopaedia Metallum 2013c)

It should be noted that the imagery and historical references used by bands in the Black Twilight Circle are not limited to Mexica/Aztec culture, since some bands, such as Muknal and Kuxan Suum, use Mayan language and imagery, though typically individual bands do not mix cultural references. This is consistent with the concepts of Anahuac and Nican Tlaca however, both of which envision all indigenous peoples in the Americas as one connected group, though it is interesting to note that few of the Black Twilight Circle bands use what would typically be considered “Native American” imagery or markers, borrowed from groups such as the Navajo (Diné) or Lakota. However, one band, Shataan, in which Volahn is a member, does reference Native American culture, as evidenced by some of the songs on its album *War Cry Lament* (Crepusculo Negro, 2011), such as “Trail of Tears” and especially the song “They Who Died for the Ghost Dance”:

Doya Ah Shondua - Bela Gana
Doya Ashondua - Bela Gana
No good white man
Destroyed the people
Do Ya Ah Shondua
Shame on the Christians
Warriors died - People forget
Bodies collect - No one cries
Arrows fly - Bullets pierce
Wovokka - They lied
Wovokka - They died
Wovokka - No salvation
for the people
(Shataan, “They Who Died for the Ghost Dance,” from War Cry Lament, Crepusculo Negro, 2011, lyrics from Encyclopaedia Metallum 2012)

The name “Wovokka” is almost certainly a reference to Wovoka, also known as Jack Wilson, the Northern Paiute religious leader who reinvented the Ghost Dance movement at the end of the nineteenth century (Hittman 1997), which spread and was adopted by different Native groups, though it has become primarily associated with the Lakota. The phrase “bela gana” is likely a Diné (Navajo) phrase meaning “white man,” though it is typically spelled *bilagáana* (Dr. Spintz Harrison, personal communication, February 5, 2014). While I was unable to locate a translation for the phrase “doya ah shondua,” I speculate that the band is likely pairing it with the phrase “bela gana” to match the following line in English: “No good white man.” At any rate, it is significant that this band draws from Native American history and languages, deviating from the Black Twilight Circle convention of claiming identity through pre-colonial Mesoamerican cultures. Mixing Diné (Navajo) language elements with Paiute and Lakota historical references through the figure of Wovoka implies an intertribal or universal indigenous identity, which is consistent with how both the Black Twilight Circle and the Mexica movement perceive the concept of Anahuac and indigenous identity in North America.

“Mexica War Tribe”

In Chapter One I discussed how important aesthetics are to the formation of Resistant Culture’s identity as a site of resistance, and the aesthetic practices of the Black Twilight Circle are no less relevant. As discussed in the previous section, Black Twilight Circle aesthetics are bound to the rhetorical use of indigenous names, terms, and images, effectively creating an identity constituted from a set of consistent practices. The collective also maintains a consistent aesthetic of secrecy and obscurity, concealing band member identities with pseudonyms,
providing very little information about the bands, and conducting almost no interviews with
the music press. Another crucial element to the Black Twilight Circle’s identity is an aesthetic of
militancy, inspired by Mexica warrior imagery and ideology, from which the Mexica Movement
also borrows heavily from to create their identity, venerating historical figures such as Emiliano
Zapata and Cuauhtémoc (Mexica Movement 2014a). While the trope of the “ancient warrior” is
not new to heavy metal, as observers of sub-genres such as “Viking metal” will no doubt
recognize, and the trope of mysticism is also common to the genre, until recently it has been rare
in heavy metal for non-European cultures to be depicted in such a way. This has not escaped the
attention of the music press, as one reviewer of Shataan’s War Cry Lament commented that “it’s
interesting to hear a black metal release that avoids the typical mythic archetypes of Northern
European folklore” (O’Connor 2011). This type of Mexica warrior imagery can best be seen in
some of Blue Hummingbird on the Left’s music and artwork, and in fact, its entry on the
Encyclopaedia Metallum website lists its lyrical themes as “Mexican Nationalism /
Huitzilopochtli War Culture” (2013b). The band underscores its militant approach to Mexica
identity in no uncertain terms in the graphics for a t-shirt it made available in November 2013
that features two crossed macuahuitl, Aztec wooden swords that would have been inset with
obsidian blades along the edges, and a feather-fringed shield or yaochimalli (Hassig 1988, 82-
87). The back of the shirt is emblazoned with the phrase, “Mexica War Tribe” in a Gothic
Blackletter script that has become conventional for black metal (Figure 6). The shield and
swords on the front are decorated with Aztec designs, including a large block stepped design
reminiscent of a stylized swastika. While I hesitate to infer too much from this design, since
there has been a trend in recent years of groups trying to reclaim the pre-Nazi usage of the
swastika, especially as it originated among indigenous cultures worldwide, it is notable that it is used here in the context of Mexica nationalism.

Figure 6. Blue Hummingbird on the Left t-shirt design. (Source: Blue Hummingbird on the Left Facebook page 2013)

Finally, the lyrics to BHL’s most recent song “Storm” punctuate its militant stance on Mexica indigenous identity:

In the distance, I hear an echo
A thunderous roar
Blue skies turn grey, clouds hide the Sun’s rays
Conch shell sounds for war

Swiftly, we move as one, forming the first wave
Like angry water against jagged rocks we clash
Waves dispersed, coordinated by our lord of rain
We storm under cover of piercing rain

Drums sound like thunder
Bolts strike at conquered terrain
Resistance will be greeted with an end

Under Mexica Reign…
(Blue Hummingbird on the Left “Storm” Tlitic Tlapoyauak Crepusculo Negro 2013)

Whether the Black Twilight Circle promotes actual violence or figurative violence is unclear, though comments Volahn made in the interview with the now-defunct The Boston Phoenix newspaper in 2011 sheds light on at least his view of armed resistance.

My ancestors’ blood was given long ago to bless my struggle today. I believe in violence as a means of liberation. Atrocities are still happening to the indigenous people of Mexico and Guatemala, and my art is for them and those who fight foreign occupation of our land. (Volahn, in Duncan Brown, 2011)

Volahn’s comments in the interview sparked a subsequent falling out with Naeth, a member of Ashdautas, one of the earliest bands in the Black Twilight Circle, in which Volahn shared membership. Naeth announced that he was breaking up Ashdautas as a response to Volahn’s comments, and The Boston Phoenix published Naeth’s comments to various message boards regarding the interview in a follow up story, which included statements like the following:

Ashdautas has nothing to do with that pathetic bullshit spouted from the mouth of Edward/Volahn [in the Boston Phoenix interview]. I have ended Ashdautas as I and our other members can not be aligned with a person who is a lying, delusional, pseudo racist, wanna be brown power attention whore who grew up and still lives in the whitest part of the entirety of Orange County, CA. (Naeth in Carioli 2011)

The same follow up story in The Boston Phoenix also included a clarification that Volahn had sent after the interview was published but prior to Naeth’s comments, which included:

It must be understood that not all Black Twilight bands are indigenous based, other bands in the circle have nothing to do with indigenous culture/struggle and it should be known that the Black Twilight Circle is not a political group at all. It must be noted that the collective is not anti-white. We support the struggle of all indigenous people. Not everyone in the circle is brown and it must be said to show support to our brothers of different races. (Volahn in Carioli 2011)

Clearly there is a discourse surrounding racism associated with the Black Twilight Circle, though whether the collective harbors true racist ideology or this is simply an inherent misperception
that is common to ethnic minority identity movements, that they are somehow “anti-white” by expressing pride in their own culture, can only be explored through more detailed interviews with members of the collective. While these were unavailable to me for this study, the clarifications that Volahn supplied to *The Boston Phoenix* after the interview shows some reflexivity on his part, and understanding of how his comments could be perceived. The Mexica Movement also seems to be highly self-aware of charges of racism and includes non-violence statements on its website (Mexica Movement 2014d), as well as clarifications that though they advocate for the repatriation of white Americans back to Europe, they acknowledge that some may be helpful to the movement’s struggle to address the injustices caused by European colonialism (Mexica Movement 2014e).

**Anahuac Tour and Grand Rapids “Live Ritual”**

I first took note of the Black Twilight Circle when I stumbled across its website while searching for “indigenous metal,” since, as noted above, Crepusculo Negro self-identifies as an “indigenous record label.” While there was a significant amount of information about the label and artists on its website, I was immediately struck by the effort the collective made to maintain an aura of shadowy obscurity. I was used to a certain level of caliginosity in researching other black metal bands, who revel in esoteric pseudonyms, grainy and blurry black and white photography, and stark lo-fi production values, but the Black Twilight Circle maintain this aesthetic juxtaposed with imagery of Aztec priests and pyramids, performing sacrificial rites against a vaguely mystical background. Once I delved into the collective’s music, I discovered a surprising range of sonic texture to match the mysterious imagery, including the expected black and death metal, but also veering into ambient and folk territory. Upon viewing the few photos and videos available on the website, I was drawn into a menacing world of underground metal,
with corpse paint replaced by war paint and I knew that the only way to truly experience the Black Twilight Circle would be in a live setting. Judging by the old flyers for “live rituals” (what the collective called its live shows) I knew that these bands rarely toured, and shows outside of the West Coast were even more infrequent.

My opportunity to witness a Black Twilight Circle live ritual came in June 2013, when the collective announced its “Anahuac Tour” concurrent with the release of the label compilation, *Tlitic Tlapoyauac*. The tour schedule posted on its website noted a show in Grand Rapids, Michigan, about a three hour drive from where I was living, at a venue called “The Bunker.” After some internet searching, I discovered that “The Bunker” was a basement performance/hang out space below a restaurant in Grand Rapids called “CVLT PIZZA∆,” a pizza place specializing in locally-sourced ingredients, and offering vegan and gluten-free options. The spelling of the restaurant immediately struck me as significant, since one convention of black metal that has developed over the years is the reference to bands or music being “kvlt” or “trve,” meaning they adhere to the some code of purity for black metal fans, and the “u” in each word is typically replaced with a “v.” After some additional research on social media, I began to get the impression that The Bunker was less of a formal performance venue, and more of a place for the staff of CVLT PIZZA∆ and their friends to hang out after work. In reality, this was more or less the case; though The Bunker regularly promoted shows through social media, these events were not more widely publicized outside of the Grand Rapids area. It quickly became apparent that attending this show was not going to be a simple process of buying a ticket and showing up. I called CVLT PIZZA∆ to verify that there was indeed a venue called The Bunker in the basement, and to confirm the scheduled Black Twilight Circle show, and the person on the phone seemed to have no idea what I was talking about (or feigned ignorance), but suggested I talk to the owner of
the restaurant and gave me his email address. I contacted the owner, and in his reply, before he would acknowledge my question, he asked me to name five obscure metal bands and something about them. When I replied with this information, the owner sent me a very friendly message with information about the show, directions to CVLT PIZZA, and his cell phone number, in case I got lost or had questions. Clearly, I needed to demonstrate some level of subcultural capital before I could gain access to the scene that surrounded CVLT PIZZA.

I arrived in Grand Rapids several hours before the show, and called the owner, who was already at CVLT PIZZA preparing to open for the evening. When I arrived at the restaurant, it was almost empty besides the owner and a few of his friends at the counter. The restaurant upstairs was small, just big enough for the pizza ovens, some additional kitchen space, and a few tables and pinball machines. I noticed some band members bringing equipment in the backdoor and down to The Bunker in the basement, so I wandered down the stairs and got my first glimpse of The Bunker. Once my eyes adjusted to the dim light, the first thing I noticed was a custom wooden half-pipe skateboard ramp in one corner, which took almost half the floor space in The Bunker. Its open end was topped with black chain link fencing, to protect a small sitting area with two couches and a coffee table, adjacent to a short bar at the far end of the room. The bands’ equipment was set up across from the skateboard ramp, though really only a few feet in front of it. The ceiling hung very low, so low that the skateboard ramp had been built to extend only a few feet off the floor. The walls were covered with murals and graffiti, depicting many skulls and stylized images of pizza, in line with the esoteric imagery that the restaurant was cultivating.

I talked briefly with one band member about a possible interview, and he told me they were busy setting up and otherwise preparing for the show, and to talk to them later, so I decided
to order a pizza (which was, indeed, very good), and observe the scene unfolding before me. People started to trickle in for the show, and the crowd included a diverse mix of metalheads, punks, and indie rockers, judging by a cursory evaluation of fashion elements, and was primarily young, white, and male, though at least a quarter of the audience was female. As the start of the show approached, I realized my opportunity for an interview was diminishing, since once the equipment was set up and the bands did a quick sound check, they disappeared, and only reemerged immediately before the show started. Four bands in the Black Twilight Circle were on the bill for this show, and the Anahuac Tour as a whole: Bilirubin, Arizmenda, Blue Hummingbird on the Left (BHL), and Volahn. As the distorted sound of Bilirubin opening its set drifted up into the restaurant, I descended the stairs into almost pitch darkness. The stifling heat and humidity of a warm Midwest summer night seemed to condense in The Bunker, tempered only by one fan blowing out towards the audience from behind the band. As The Bunker began to slowly fill with people, I realized that there would be very few good vantage points to watch the bands, and eventually settled for standing on the wooden skateboard ramp for most of the show. By the time the second band, Blue Hummingbird on the Left, came on, the basement room was almost at capacity, which was not more than fifty people, but still packed tightly together. While most club shows have a distinct “merch” area to sell t-shirts and recordings, in The Bunker the only space available was the sitting area between the bar and the skateboard ramp, and between sets one band member would sell some of the collective’s cassettes.

By the third band, Arizmenda, I began noticing some of the same musicians from each band, though often playing a different instrument. Though there were a few musicians who only played in one of the bands, I counted eight musicians total, spread over four bands that night. The one constant presence in each band was Eduardo Ramirez, who easily moved from drums to
guitar from set to set, finishing the night playing guitar and singing in his own semi-
eponymous band, Volahn. Though there is distinct imagery evoked in the Black Twilight
Circle’s aesthetic, drawn from vibrant ancient cultures of pre-colonial Mesoamerica, the
members themselves exhibit very few markers of indigenous culture. In fact, typical stylistic
elements of black metal are the norm: long hair, black t-shirts with band logos, black jeans, and
the occasional bullet-belt and metal-studded jean vest with hand-sewn logo patches. In other
photos and videos I had seen of Volahn and BHL, band members had painted their faces, not in
the corpse paint endemic to black metal, but with designs clearly meant to evoke Mexica war
paint. However, at the show in The Bunker that night, the bands eschewed any face paint
whatsoever, and I can only speculate that this practice is reserved for special “live rituals.”

There was no stage in The Bunker, so the bands played in a corner, on the same level as
the audience, and for most of the show there was almost no separation between band and
audience. The bands had no lights to speak of, at least nothing that would be considered part of a
“rock show,” except one cheap clip-on halogen work light pointed at the wall, and a few candles
placed precariously on the amps. Since it was so dark, it was often hard to tell where the singers
were, as they merged with the other black-clad figures of the audience members standing in the
front. The singer for Arizmenda spent much of its set writhing on the floor, at times on the
skateboard ramp at our feet, a good ten feet away from the rest of his band. The sound was
deafening, and I immediately regretted leaving my earplugs at home, since the small box-like
space of The Bunker reduced the bands’ sound to a monotonous roar, and distinguishing
individual instruments became impossible. The bands did not help alleviate this by reducing the
levels of amplification, and in fact, seemed to get louder with each successive band. Black metal
as a genre is known for low-production values, and the music is marked by a rhythmic structure
with guitar and drums that allows the artists to create a chaotic “swirling and indistinct atmosphere” (Hagen 2011, 184-186), and in The Bunker that night, the bands of the Black Twilight Circle used the venue to fully achieve this effect. By the time Volahn ended the show with its set, the crowd seemed restless and ready to emerge from The Bunker, and in fact, when I got to the top of the stairs and stepped outside, there were a few dozen people smoking and drinking and hanging around the back of CVLT PIZZA, and it seemed like many of these people had not ventured down into The Bunker and were there primarily to socialize. Consistent with their attitude during the performance, the band members did not engage with the crowd outside after the show, and went to work quickly breaking down their gear and loading their van. Though the members politely declined my request for an interview, I did get to speak briefly with the singer for Blue Hummingbird on the Left, mostly about the band’s plans for recording its next album. However, I felt satisfied with the observations I had made and fortunate to have experienced a Black Twilight Circle live ritual, so facing a long drive home, I headed to my car with the reverberations from The Bunker still ringing in my ears.

**The Sound of Black Twilight**

While a full musicological analysis of even a sample of music spawned from the Black Twilight Circle is beyond the scope of this study, it is worth noting the range of variation among some of the bands in the collective. Though death and black metal are the primary styles that anchor the Black Twilight Circle sound, the collective uses some sonic markers that differentiate it from the thousands of other bands that work within these conventions. Acoustic instrumentation is a common addition to some black metal and folk metal music, and the use of classical guitar by Volahn, such as on “Caliz del Purgamiento” (“goblet of purging” in English), the last track on *Dimensiónes del Trance Kósmico*. This gives the song an almost flamenco feel,
which is ironic since flamenco is a Spanish tradition, though this could be viewed as an appropriation of the colonizer’s culture. This track also includes recordings of wolf howls, another sonic marker that has become popular with American black metal musicians, especially those on the west coast.

The guitarists in both Volahn and Shataan make use of the Fender Stratocaster, which is an unusual guitar in black metal, and they both drench it in reverb, eliciting the twang of 1960s surf rock. This sound evokes the band’s roots in Southern California, and contributes to a certain sense of place that these bands have. Retaining the raw grit of black metal, these guitarists add brightness to the compositions that stands out from past and contemporary examples of black metal. Ramírez especially favors distinct solos in his guitar technique, providing an apparent level of virtuosity that is also not typical of black metal. Robert Walser has described a dialectic of oppression and freedom in heavy metal between the rhythm instruments and the vocals or guitar solos (1993, 53-54), and this dialectic does not generally seem to apply to black metal. Black metal provides a great deal of oppression, leading to a claustrophobic effect, but never really delivers on the freedom, though Volahn may resist this interpretation, and while his guitar solos may not be considered virtuosic, they do break with black metal conventions in providing some moments of release. However, due to the murky lo-fi production quality on the recordings, and the even muddier live sound I witnessed at the Grand Rapids show, these solos become buried in the mix, effectively merging with the drums and other guitars to lessen their virtuosic character. While Blue Hummingbird on the Left incorporates indigenous instrumentation, such as flute, into its recorded sound, in the context of the show in Grand Rapids that I attended the band adhered to the standard guitar/bass/drums/vocals setup, as did the other bands, and though
there was some variation in technique from one musician to the next, this practice resulted in a homogenous sound over the course of the night.

Constituting a Collective

In Harris Berger’s 2000 phenomenological analysis of the heavy metal drummer, he examines the temporal practices that drummers use to organize the perception of the listening subjects. Berger emphasizes that phenomenology refers to the constitution, rather than the construction of practices, in developing the lived experiences of subjects (2000, 128). Rather than examining the temporal practices that the Black Twilight Circle may use to constitute perception, I feel that it is more relevant in this case to examine the spatial practices that the collective uses to create perception for the subject as well as its identity as a collective, and not simply a collection of individual artists. In Berger’s larger phenomenological work on heavy metal, rock, and jazz in 1999, he suggests that each musical culture “doesn’t merely possess norms of audience response; it also possesses a unique social organization or attention in the event – a culturally specific style of partially sharing experiences between audience and performer” (1999, 43). At the Black Twilight Circle “live ritual” that I attended in Grand Rapids, the social organization of the participants, the shared experience and collective perception of that experience were directly influenced by the practices of the performers and the audience. Berger notes, however, that “music is just one element, albeit a crucial one, in the participant’s constitution of meanings in the event” (1999, 44), and at the Black Twilight Circle show the bands’ use of space in The Bunker had an equally significant effect on the experience for participants. As described above, the performance space in The Bunker was very small and constrictive, allowing for almost no separation between audience and bands, which is not unusual for underground metal or punk shows, or other genres of popular music such as indie
rock or folk. However, a performance by a folk artist in similarly sized space like a café would typically foster an experience of intimacy between performer and artist, and though close proximity was used by the Black Twilight Circle to maximize the impact of performance, the overall experience could not be described as intimate. Black metal is often described as sounding claustrophobic, and as my companion to the show commented, our experience in The Bunker was exactly what he expected from a black metal show: a dark, tiny, cramped space and way too loud. Even within the extreme confines of The Bunker, the bands were able to maintain an air of distance from their audience, consistent with the aura of obscurity that is inherent in the collective’s aesthetic, and the extremely dim lighting intensified this effect. There was almost no banter or talking between songs and any interactions I observed between band members and the audience between sets was limited to transactions at the merch table. There was no back stage in The Bunker, so members of the bands who were not playing became part of the audience, but this did not seem to inspire any greater connection between the two sets of participants. One of the most noticeable habits of the majority of the musicians (besides the drummer) at this Black Twilight Circle show was the practice of playing with their backs to the audience most of the time. This does not simply represent a reluctance to engage with the audience, but the bands’ rejection of that sort of connection, and contributed to an almost antagonistic and hostile environment, which is arguably entirely within the aesthetic conventions of black metal.

One other interpretation of the musicians playing with their backs to the audience is that it may have been an attempt to de-emphasize the individual components of each band, resisting the “cult of personality” that is often associated with rock music, and heavy metal in particular. I interpret this as consistent with other practices of the Black Twilight Circle, which shifts the focus from individual performers to the collective as a whole. The most striking practice at the
Black Twilight Circle show I attended was musicians switching instruments from set to set, so effectively the four bands that performed that night consisted of the same eight musicians. While this practice may have simply been a practical means to translate the bands’ music to a live setting, since some of these bands (Volahn in particular) technically consist of only one member, I believe this practice of instrument-switching and sharing band members is integral to the Black Twilight Circle’s ideology and collective identity, and is as important to the constitution of identity as any of the collective’s imagery. By minimizing the importance of the individual and elevating the collective to a higher status, the artists appear to be abdicating their own individual identities for a greater cause. Black metal may be the perfect genre to achieve this goal, since these bands typically eschew sharp definition between instruments, and “blur the parts together to create an atmospheric wash of sound” (Hagen 2011, 187), suppressing the individual in favor of creating a collective voice, which ultimately may have more subversive and threatening potential. Benjamin Hedge Olson (2008) has written about the conflict between individualism and collective identity in Scandinavian black metal, though I think this tension is inherent in the genre and apparent in expressions of American black metal as well. However, the Black Twilight Circle seems to be actively dissolving the individual through its practices, from the Crepusculo Negro website and the label’s releases, which feature minimal information regarding band members, to the experience of the live ritual described above, asserting the identity of the collective at the expense of individual bands and artists.

**Collective and Scene**

Although the Black Twilight Circle may appear somewhat unique in representing a true musical collective, this model is not without precedent within the black metal global scene. In the earliest days of the “second wave” of black metal, centered primarily in Norway, the scene
was organized around what is now commonly referred to as the “Black Metal Inner Circle,”
which included members of the bands Emperor, Mayhem, and Burzum, and coalesced around a
record shop in Oslo run by Mayhem guitarist Euronymous. While the criminal and nefarious
activities, including numerous church arsons and the slaying of Euronymous at the hands of the
sole member of Burzum, Varg Vikernes, in 1993, have been well-documented in Moynihan and
Søderlind’s 1998 book, *Lords of Chaos*, interest has mostly remained focused on the
sensationalistic tabloid-like aspects of the events, especially on Vikernes, who distributed his
racist writings while he served time in a Norwegian prison. However, the early Norwegian black
metal scene has garnered some attention from scholars, who have examined the “Inner Circle”
for its transgressive nature (Kahn-Harris 2007, 2011), its ideology, mythology and ritual (Hagen
2011), as well as identity (Olson 2008). Regardless of the group’s politics and notorious history,
it does represent a model of collectivism in black metal, though its unsustainable practices likely
led to an early dissolution.

At nearly the same time as the scene in Norway in the early 1990s, a similar group of
black metal artists coalesced in France, and though its activities have not drawn nearly the
attention from the press as its contemporaries in Norway, the “Black Legion” or Les Légions
Noires remains highly influential to the genre. Bands such as Mütiilation, Torgeist and Vlad
Tepes formed the core of a “self-contained and extremely territorial cabal” that grew to almost
twenty individual projects by the end of the 1990s, and were prolific in terms of releases (Birk
2012, 16). Similar to the Black Twilight Circle, Les Légions Noires embraced an aura of
mystique and menace, and while styles within the circle varied considerably, they retained a
remarkably cohesive identity, also eschewing individualism. As Meyhna'ch, the man behind
Mütiilation, noted about Les Légions Noires’ legacy: “Our personalities are not lovable; our
goals are not the ones people would like to see come true. If you have to remember something, remember what we did – who we were is not that important” (Birk 2012, 21).

Unquestionably, the Black Twilight Circle, though its musical style and blend of Aztec/Mexica imagery with iconic black metal conventions such as upside-down crosses and Gothic Blackletter script on stark black and white images, allow it to be categorized in the genre of black metal, this is hardly notable and illuminates little about the social dynamics of the collective. The concept of scene has arguably been a more useful tool than that of genre in recent popular music studies, though most of the Black Twilight Circle’s practices suggest a complete rejection of any greater scene outside the boundaries of the collective. While there are some signs of connections with bands outside of the Black Twilight Circle, such as the blackened crust band Bone Awl from New York, and the band Yaotl Mictlan from Utah, the collective’s emphasis has been on growing the collective, and besides the falling out with Ashdautas described above, it seems to be successful.

While I acknowledge that there are distinctions between collectives and scenes, primarily that collectives have more rigid and insular boundaries and are less fluid and porous than scenes, the two concepts have similarities, and in some ways I view the practices of the Black Twilight Circle as attempts to create its own scene, one in which it can assert a high level of control. Kahn-Harris suggests that we can assume that “all musical and music-related activity takes place within a scene or scenes” (2007, 21), which may answer the question of how much control bands may have in their inclusion in a scene. It seems unlikely that a group of artists can simply opt out of participation in at least the most ambiguous of scenes that they might be associated with, since Berger notes that “participants’ practices aggregate in complex ways and constitute scenes whose structure – while always a product of the participant’s actions – is not always of their own
choosing” (1999, 74). Many artists view the concepts of genre and scene as “pigeonholing” or simple labeling, which they may, understandably, find restrictive. Yet once artists’ work is disseminated to the public, I believe they relinquish some of that control, and listeners will associate them with a scene, whether they like it or not.

It is clear to me that a collective does not fit within the parameters of Anderson’s notion of an “imagined community” (2006), since collectives are typically well-defined, and small enough that most members know each other, simply making them “communities.” However, Anderson’s concept may apply to some scenes, especially since the term “scene” embodies a certain ambiguity that makes it flexible in several contexts (Kahn-Harris 2007, 21-22). Many musical scenes are transnational or transregional in nature, and encompass a wide array of smaller communities, sharing some characteristics with each other, yet differing in other ways. As discussed earlier in this chapter, both the Mexica Movement and Danza Azteca qualify as imagined communities, and while the Black Twilight Circle may not on its own, we may start to see a picture of concentric circles of communities and imagined communities, where the presence of a greater shared ideology, in this case Mexica indigenous identity, places it within a greater imagined community. In this way, the Black Twilight Circle collective acts as a cohesive unit, and maintains one smaller circle (just as its name suggests) within the larger circle of Mexica collective identity, which also includes Danza Azteca, which otherwise does not articulate directly with the Black Twilight Circle. As for other music scenes that the Black Twilight Circle may converge with, on the surface it contrasts strongly with the contemporary East Los Angeles music scene. Viesca suggests that the contemporary East Los Angeles scene makes an attempt at gender equity by respecting both male and female artists (2004, 729-730), and certainly the Danza Azteca movement should be noted as gender inclusive, and in fact it
could be seen as dominated by female performers (Luna 2012). In some ways the Black Twilight Circle aligns more with previous generations of Chicano nationalism and cultural expression, which have been noted for emphasizing masculine Chicano ideals (Viesca 2004, 729), since female artists are effectively non-existent in the Black Twilight Circle. The music of the Black Twilight Circle, and for that matter, contemporary Chicano/a hip hop, also differs from expressions of Mexica indigenous identity in Danza Azteca, since metal and hip hop artists are apparently embracing hybridity, at least in their musical styles, by fusing indigenous instruments with modern music styles, while Danza practitioners seek to recreate cultural forms from an ancient past, in a preservationist model which approaches reenactment. However, I see a common thread throughout all the practices covered in this discussion, including the Black Twilight Circle, since they all contribute to the process of decolonization, seeking to “reaffirm an ethnic origin and identity that precedes the nation-state” (Viesca 2004, 726). This reaffirmation of indigenous identity also counters perceptions of Mexican and Central American immigrants as “illegal” since one cannot be trespassing illegally on one’s own ancestral land (Viesca 2004, 729). While Kahn-Harris argues that black metal should be viewed as a set of transgressive practices (2011, 214), I argue that while the Black Twilight Circle may have transgressive qualities, ultimately its practices are acts of resistance, specifically directed at oppression by the colonial dominant culture. While the band Resistant Culture does many benefits for specific, and often esoteric, social organizations and causes, it represents a more unfocused approach to resistance of colonial oppression than the Black Twilight Circle, whose ideology is intertwined with their aesthetics and practices and can be linked directly to a specific social movement.
CHAPTER THREE: DE-EMPHASIS OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY AND IMPLICIT RESISTANCE BY NATIVE METAL BANDS DURING THE ANNUAL GATHERING OF NATIONS POWWOW

In the previous chapters, I discussed two different expressions of indigenous identity by contemporary metal bands, as well as how these bands explicitly perform resistance, though they differ in the objects of their resistance. While Resistant Culture confronts modernity and the implications of European colonialism, the Black Twilight Circle directly resists the history of colonialism in the Americas by embracing a radical conception of indigeneity. In this next chapter, I will describe my observations at several performances by Native metal bands at the 2013 Gathering of Nations Powwow in Albuquerque, New Mexico, as well as a smaller show at a local nightclub that provided a different context in which to experience Native metal. I will show how one band in particular, When Darkness Falls from the Pueblo of Acoma in central New Mexico, has strong ties to its community and its own tribal identity and resists the very notion of “Native music” itself through more subtle themes of indigenous empowerment in its music practice, generally without the pronounced use of sonic or visual markers of indigeneity. However, the apparent de-emphasis of indigenous identity in the music of these bands by no means indicates a lack of awareness of their Native heritage. On the contrary, some of these musicians point to their roots in a Native community as their primary means of maintaining stability and balance in their lives, and their commitment to traditional and religious practices within that community, while not made obvious through the use of signifiers in their music, always retains priority over any aspirations they may have as a band. Again, as has been noted throughout this study, Native or indigenous “identity” is a notion that is fraught with
complications and prone to oversimplification. In this study, I hope to shed some light on how indigenous identity is articulated through the expression of heavy metal, and in this chapter I explore deeper how these articulations may run beneath the surface of observable practices. Just as identity may be articulated in many different ways through artistic expression, resistance may also take many forms, and though indigenous artists may not direct overt protest through language or imagery at the oppressive history of European colonialism, the choices they make in how they represent themselves may be interpreted as acts of agency, implicitly in direct defiance of dominant culture and the expectations of what constitutes “Native” music. The survival of Native religion and language, and the preservation of sovereignty on at least a portion of their ancestral land, may be the most resistant acts for indigenous peoples, and their presence in contemporary popular culture, on their own terms, is an important practice in affirming a strong collective identity.

“North America’s Biggest Powwow”

Every spring thousands of Native people come from all over North America and beyond to celebrate indigenous culture at the Gathering of Nations (GON) Powwow in Albuquerque, New Mexico, held in the cavernous basketball arena nicknamed “The Pit” on the University of New Mexico campus. Promoted as “North America’s Biggest Powwow” (Gathering of Nations Powwow 2014), the GON has played a significant role in increasing the popularity of powwow culture across Indian Country, and become a major event for singers, drummers, and dancers on the national competitive powwow circuit. In recent years, the GON has also spawned various events the same weekend in association with the GON, including the Miss Indian World Pageant, and Stage 49\(^{10}\), a showcase for contemporary Native popular music artists spanning the genres of rock, reggae, hip hop, and most relevant for this study, heavy metal. The massive Gathering of
Nations is one of several “mega-powwows” that emerged in the 1980s in the United States, featuring large cash prizes for dance and drum contests, and has become a major tourist draw in Albuquerque for Native and non-Native people alike. The GON was founded in 1983 by Derek Mathews, a sound engineer from Chicago who had relocated to New Mexico to study theater at the College of Santa Fe (New Mexico Music Commission 2014). After a short career producing film and television in Albuquerque and Los Angeles, Mathews launched his first powwow in a small gymnasium on the University of Albuquerque campus that held less than five hundred people (Gathering of Nations Powwow 2013, 15). While attendance numbers for the 2012 GON varied anywhere from 40,000 to over 100,000 for the four-day event, depending on the source, clearly the GON has developed into a major attraction for tourists as well as locals, with an estimated economic boost to the Albuquerque economy of 18 to 30 million dollars (Schmidt 2012). The issue of the commodification of Native culture is unavoidable when numbers like these are in play, and the GON has had its critics, though the GON is maintained as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization (Gathering of Nations Powwow 2014). Merchandising is a major element of the GON, and official souvenirs related to the event are readily available at multiple booths situated around The Pit, where visitors can stock up on apparel and other items emblazoned with the GON logo. Individual vendors are another component of the GON, and these booths line the crowded aisles surrounding the arena, selling t-shirts, ball caps, powwow music CDs, jewelry, “dream catchers” and thousands of other “Indian” curios and souvenirs. The retail opportunities for GON attendees continues outside into the “Indian Trader’s Market,” a large tented area adjacent to the arena and a ring of food vendors, which keep the crowd fueled with roasted corn, fry bread, New Mexican food and other cuisine more typical of a state fair. Other criticisms that I have encountered in informal conversations over the years have generally been directed at the
high cost of attending the GON, the escalating entry fees for dancers, and the ethnicity of founder Derek Mathews, who is presumed to be non-Native, though his wife, Rita Mathews, is an enrolled member of the Santa Clara Pueblo, and also sits on the board of directors (Schmidt 2012). However, the perception that it is an event run by non-Natives seems to persist on social media, which I informally observed in the weeks leading up to the 2013 GON, but any shadow of potential exploitation surrounding the event certainly has not deterred thousands of Native dancers, drummers and spectators from attending every year.

While powwow music culture is not the focus of this study, it has been a major topic of research for scholars of Native American music for several decades, as discussed in the introduction, and most recently by ethnomusicologist Christopher Scales, who has examined how powwow music intersects with the recording industry, and how Native identity is negotiated through powwow culture (2012). I allude to this work here only as background for this study, since several of the performances I examine were done within the context of the Gathering of Nations Powwow. While many other factors influence how indigenous identity is constructed or constituted by Native artists, the choice of where a band performs is one critical factor in how its music will be perceived by an audience. For instance, in the context of a “mega-powwow” like the Gathering of Nations, an aesthetics and ideology of intertribal Native identity is implied, whereas performances in an urban bar or club, or a community center in the band’s own community, can be interpreted quite differently. Though the band may not alter its performance in any perceptible way based on the venue, the experience of the audience is ultimately formed by many factors beyond the performance delivered by the band, and the context in which the experience is lived is arguably a major defining value in the lasting impression of that experience.
Showcasing Contemporary Native Music on Stage 49

In April of 2013 I traveled to Albuquerque for the 30th Annual GON Powwow with the hopes of experiencing for myself the extent to which Native metal bands were represented in the context of other Native popular music performances, and to meet and talk with some of these bands to get their thoughts on being Native and playing metal. Stage 49 has become a major showcase for musicians to break into the emerging Native popular music market, and over the years it has broadened the scope of genres that have been represented in the schedule. The lineup for the Stage 49 at the 2013 GON included several metal bands, which I was able to easily identify through the promotional photos on the GON website. This was confirmed in the official program for the 2013 GON, which also included the following promotional statement about Stage 49:

Over the two days of the Gathering of Nations Powwow, Stage 49 becomes a full premier production stage featuring traditional and contemporary artists in various genres like rock, blues, reggae, hip hop, country, jam bands, and much more. Stage 49 is instrumental in launching new Native talent while showcasing established performers we all know. (Gathering of Nations Powwow 2013, 9)

Interestingly, metal is not singled out specifically as one of the “various genres,” though two bands in the schedule are listed as “Rock/Metal,” while only one blues band and one country band appear. While this may seem a little like splitting hairs, it may also reveal some hesitancy on the part of the GON organizers to acknowledge the involvement of metal bands in the event, since the genre still enjoys a place on the fringes of mainstream acceptance in popular music.

The schedule for the Stage 49 performances outside the arena ran almost concurrently with the powwow events inside The Pit, though a few groups were booked for a performance in each venue, including several flute musicians and a couple of blues combos. As noted in the program, traditional and contemporary artists were booked at the 2013 GON, and this included a
group of Maori singers from New Zealand, Te Awaroa O Kahu, which was featured both inside on the powwow floor, as well as on Stage 49. Notably, in the schedule in the GON program, it was only one of two groups listed as “traditional” under genre (Gathering of Nations Powwow 2013, 8-9), and clearly presented itself as such, without any obvious blending with non-indigenous musical styles. The group consisted of approximately twenty adults and seven children, all dressed in traditional Maori clothing and adorned with Tā moko, the facial tattoos characteristic of the Maori and other Polynesian indigenous groups. Besides Te Awaroa O Kahu, the other group billed as “traditional” in the Stage 49 area was a Danza Azteca group, Tenochtitlan Aztec Dancers from Mexico (Gathering of Nations Powwow 2013, 8), and in Chapter 2 I explored how the ideology behind Danza Azteca and the Mexica Movement converge with a broad interpretation of indigenous identity. While the inclusion of international groups performing traditional music in the context of otherwise exclusively contemporary music styles on Stage 49 is notable, I am hesitant to interpret this as meaningful beyond the GON organizers’ desire to offer the groups as much performance time as possible over the weekend, since they traveled from such a far distance. However, I think their inclusion in the GON is significant in illustrating an acknowledgement and recognition of a globalized indigeneity that is shared between groups internationally, as well as an implied solidarity over a mutual post-colonial experience.

The general aesthetic of the GON accentuates the use of vibrant color, as seen in the dancers’ regalia and the GON logos and marketing material, and for years the official GON t-shirt has been often exclusively available in a tie-dye design. This connection with 1960s hippie culture was repeated again in the 2014 GON graphics on their website, which featured roses and a circled lightning bolt, signifiers often associated with the Grateful Dead and Deadheads (Figure
7). For many years reggae has also had a dominating presence on the Stage 49 schedule, reflecting an affinity for the genre that Native people have had for some time, at least locally amongst Pueblo people (Bienvenu 2013). While hip hop, metal, and other genres have increased in popularity in recent years in the sphere of Native popular music, there were several reggae bands in prime slots on the 2013 Stage 49 schedule (Gathering of Nations Powwow 2013, 8-9), including the band Native Roots, an Albuquerque-based band with long ties to the GON.

![Gathering of Nations Powwow website homepage](source: Gathering of Nations Powwow 2014)

Though the GON officially begins with the Miss Indian World competition on Thursday, which in 2013 was held at the Hard Rock Hotel & Casino south of Albuquerque, the powwow events typically start on Friday, and conclude Saturday evening. I arrived at The Pit midday on Saturday, missing some of the morning competitions, but in time to catch some of the afternoon
powwow events before the bands got going on Stage 49. It was a mild but clear late-April sunny day in Albuquerque, and the parking lots surrounding The Pit were already packed. I finally parked my rental car in a dusty dirt lot a short walk from the arena, and found the will-call trailer to pick up my wrist band for the two-day event. People were milling about the entrance before they made their way inside the arena, pausing to watch the large video screen outside that was simulcasting the events from the powwow floor. Once inside, there was a vibrant hum of activity permeating the whole arena, with dancers and their families rushing to get ready for their event, mingling with non-Native tourists and Native people wandering the hallways circling the pit, browsing the nearly-unbroken string of vendors’ booths. The sound of drumming and singing filled the arena, and there was a palpable feeling of celebration in the air. In places it was difficult to navigate the main aisles of the arena, due to the sheer number of people, and after taking one loop around the arena, I decided to find a seat in the stands.

The stands were filled by midday Friday, though it was easy to find a seat almost anywhere in The Pit. The audience was composed of almost equal parts spectators and participants, and many dancers sat, dressed in their regalia, with their families in the stands to watch other contests when they were not competing. Powwow regalia are often intentionally flashy and extremely colorful, so many dancers waiting and watching from the stands created a permeable boundary between the events on the floor and the audience. Near the floor on one side of the arena there was an elevated stage, adorned with the GON graphics and logo, where the judges, dignitaries, and GON organizers sat, and where the emcee for the powwow announced the winners, the next event, and conducted short interviews. Around the other three edges of the floor were different drum groups, who would take turns playing for the dancers. While the dynamics and technical logistics of the GON powwow itself were fascinating, and it was
tempting to sit and enjoy the music and dancing in the cool interior of The Pit, I was anxious to see what was happening on Stage 49, so after watching a few dances I headed out the west exit of The Pit to assess the situation outside.

The Pit is south of the main campus of the University of New Mexico and sits high up on a mesa between the Rio Grande Valley and the mountains east of Albuquerque. Exiting The Pit, blinking in the intensity of the afternoon sun, I entered the Stage 49 area almost immediately, which consisted of a small set of aluminum bleachers facing the stage, separated by about fifty feet of open area for standing (or moshing), and hemmed in on one side by a merch tent. The stage itself rose about five feet from the ground, though the whole structure stood about thirty feet, including the lighting apparatus and a stage backdrop featuring the GON and Stage 49 logos. The modern, high-production structure of Stage 49 contrasted sharply with the panoramic view behind the Stage 49, looking west past the Rio Grande and the ancient volcanoes of the West Mesa, coincidentally in the direction of the Pueblo of Acoma, the home of one of the metal bands I was waiting to see that night. The bands were between sets, so I went and bought myself an Indian taco (fry bread smothered in meat, beans, chile and cheese), and returned to join the handful of people in the metal bleachers as the next band started. Sihasin, the project of brother and sister Clayson and Jeneda Benally, two members from the well-known Diné (Navajo) punk band Blackfire (their brother Klee was on a hiatus from the band), played an interesting set of minimalist bass-and-drum punk. I wandered around after its set to check out the merch tent and mix with the crowd to get a feel for what constituted the audience at Stage 49. Attendees outside the arena closely mirrored those inside; evenly mixed between male and female, as well as young and old, though I noticed groups of teens and younger kids hanging out in groups outside more than I did inside The Pit. Since the range of genres represented on Stage 49 is so great, I did not
expect to notice any of the visual indicators that one would expect at a smaller, more genre-focused event. I did take note when I observed metalheads in the crowd, and there were probably a couple dozen spread throughout, mostly male, usually in groups of two to five, sporting the familiar metalhead uniform of long hair, jeans, and black t-shirts with various band logos. However, it was clearly not a homogenous crowd of obvious metal fans, and I wondered how some of the metal bands would be received.

After a rousing and upbeat set by popular local reggae band Native Roots, which drew fans who were obviously familiar with the band’s music, the first metal band of the night took the stage: Testify, a four-piece band from Coolidge, New Mexico, near the Navajo Nation. Any apprehensions I may have had about how metal was going to go over with the audience were relieved in the first few minutes of Testify’s set, and there was minimal discordance in the transition from the peaceful vibe of Native Roots’ reggae to the brutal assault of Testify’s thrash/metalcore sound. Though there was some shift in the dynamic of the crowd, and I noticed some of the older fans wander off once Testify began, and some younger Native metalheads began to appear, there was generally little substantial difference between audiences from one band to the next, though it grew in size steadily through the night. Within the first minute in Testify’s first song, a small group of teenage men began some light, friendly moshing, though were unable to encourage anyone to join them, and the urge soon faded. The whole band was clad in black shirts and jeans, mostly with long hair except the bass player, and the drummer wore a straw Panama hat, which seemed out of place with the rest of its aesthetic. I could not help but notice that the drummer looked about twenty years older than the rest of the band, who looked like they were in their early twenties, and I later discovered that his name was Edmund Yazzie, and he was the father of Darius Yazzie, the lead guitarist and singer of the band.
Testify’s sound has clearly been influenced by Metallica and other thrash metal from the 1980s, and Darius sang with clean vocals and took frequent solos to display the virtuosity that is a hallmark of the genre. However, the band also incorporated “death growl” vocals by the bass player, Sebastian, as well as Darius, and this blend showed the influence of more contemporary styles, specifically metalcore, which includes this use of contrasting vocal styles in more recent iterations of the genre.

Darius Yazzie repeatedly tried to engage the crowd, which was still sparse in the late afternoon sun, though more people wandered over with their dinner from the adjacent food vendors as Testify worked its way through its set. Before its last song, Darius thanked the audience and the GON organizers for the opportunity to play, and “supporting Native musicians throughout the nation,” noting also that it does not matter “if it’s reggae, country, metal, we’re all one color and we need to support each other.” This statement illustrates the feeling of unity that most of the bands performing on Stage 49 were communicating over the two-day event, and while Testify did not perform its indigeneity through musical or visual markers, the band clearly identifies with a broader alliance of Native musicians who share a common indigenous heritage, crossing generic musical borders. When the band was done, I bought its latest CD in the merch tent, titled *Codes of Honor*, a self-released collection of ten songs which closely mirrored the band’s set on Stage 49, besides two acoustic versions which the band did not play live. Testify’s sound on *Codes of Honor* reaffirms its affinity for 1980s thrash metal, and rarely breaks from the conventions of the genre, aside from the influence of contemporary metalcore. Lyrically, most of the band’s songs articulate personal struggle and contemplation, though one song, “Soldiers of Christ,” seems to reveal a more specific religious agenda. Indeed, the lyrics to the song itself leave little question as to the sincere intent of the song:
Without him you cannot win
You must believe and be without sin
Only through him there’s victory
Soldiers of Christ, take your sword and fight
Soldiers of Christ, fighting for what’s right
Fighting for what’s right!
One, two, FIGHT ON!
(Testify “Soldiers of Christ” Codes of Honor self-released 2011)

In fact, the first thing I noticed when I bought Codes of Honor was the cover graphics, which include a large cross flanked by two angelic wings on the cover, in stark black and white.

Combined with the religious overtones of the band’s name, it would be easy to assume that Testify is a Christian metal band, yet I hesitate to make this interpretation. None of the other songs on Codes of Honor include such overt expressions of Christian faith, there are no mentions of God or Jesus in the “thank you” section of the band’s CD (where one might typically find clues to a religious agenda), and none of the band’s comments to the crowd at the GON included references to Christianity. Since the band never responded to my requests for an interview, I was unable to get a first-person account of how the band views the role of religion in its music. While any claims of syncretic appropriation of Christianity would be premature without additional input from the band itself, and indeed the idea of syncretism has been debated in the discourse of Native American spirituality (Smith 2000, 146-147), I think it is fair to conclude that non-Native religious belief plays a noticeable role in Testify’s music, though the extent to which this forms its identity remains ambiguous.

As Testify began to pack up its instruments, the sun dipped lower in the western sky behind Stage 49 and a distinct shift began to occur in the atmosphere of the event, as day attendees of the powwow began to head home and those remaining settled in for night time celebrating. The light in New Mexico is particularly striking at that time of day, no matter the time of year, casting a twilight afterglow that does not seem to exist anywhere else. So it seems
apropos that the next band on the schedule was named When Darkness Falls, a six-piece metal outfit from the Pueblo of Acoma, which is located about an hour west from Albuquerque. When Darkness Falls was a large band, both in number and size of its members; six large Native men in their thirties and forties with an imposing physical presence. The band featured two vocalists, two guitarists, a bass player and a drummer, and launched into its first song with a fierceness that the crowd was craving, and responded to enthusiastically. The two singers, Turtle and Zack, split the vocal duties, though Turtle took most of the verses, and sung in both a clean melodic style as well as a death growl, while Zach stuck primarily to the latter on the choruses. This technique is indicative of contemporary metalcore, and the band also made use of the “breakdown” typical of the genre, which encourages moshing. While a full mosh pit never quite developed during the band’s set, several small groups of teenagers periodically broke into some affable moshing, though it was better described as rough-housing between friends. One of the most striking scenes I witnessed of the entire GON however, was when one young Native woman, dressed in full powwow regalia, either coming from her scheduled contest or killing time before it, began moshing with a group of friends at the front of the stage about halfway through When Darkness Falls’ set. She was clearly having a blast, as were her friends, and there seemed to be no self-consciousness that she was dressed so differently from those around her. In fact, an apparent juxtaposition between tradition and modernity was revealed in the contrast throughout the GON between dancers in their regalia and others in street clothes, an amalgamation of performer and audience created by the lack of any “back stage” area at the GON. However, since powwow culture, especially at mega-powwows like the GON, are increasingly seen by Native people as non-traditional, and certainly not religious or ceremonial, events, it then is completely
understandable that there was no incongruity in the dancer’s mind about moshing to some metal in her powwow regalia.

The sun had fully set by the time When Darkness Falls finished, and the band headed to the merch tent to chat and take photos with fans. I had hoped to talk to the band at this point, but it was fully engaged with its fans, though I did meet the band’s manager, Calvin, and we made tentative plans for an interview the following night. The band would be playing a show at Hooligans Tavern on the northeast side of Albuquerque, at a show planned to coincide with the GON billed as a “Rock and Metal Round Dance,” featuring some other Native bands who had not been invited to play Stage 49. I stayed to watch the band following When Darkness Falls, a hip hop/reggae group called Walatowa Massive from the Pueblo of Jemez in northern New Mexico, which featured two MCs, a DJ, and two artists creating paintings live to the beats. The group had a strong agenda of protest, its songs addressing indigenous rights and environmental issues, while merging a Native aesthetic with a roots reggae social consciousness. It also got the crowd dancing, which had grown to fill the small grandstands and the open area in front of the stage, though the powwow events inside the arena continued through midnight. The energy and vibrancy in the cool evening air was tempting, but I knew the next day was going to be a long one, so I packed it in for the night.

The most popular event on the schedule each day at every GON, and most powwows in general, is the grand entry, when all the dancers involved are invited to participate on the powwow floor, and it is truly a spectacular sight. Since I had missed the grand entry on Friday, I wanted to witness it on Saturday, before I took in any of the Stage 49 performances. The temperature seemed to rise unseasonably in Albuquerque on Saturday, even in April for the high desert, and the hot sun outside made the darkness and cool air inside the arena inviting. I
alternated throughout the day between the powwow events inside and watching performances on Stage 49, which ranged from country to comedy acts, the Maori group, Te Awaroa O Kahu from New Zealand, more hip hop and reggae, and another set from Sihasin. Several other rock bands were on the schedule, including the band Until Chaos, a local rock band from Albuquerque whose tribal affiliation in the GON program was listed as “Zuni/Kewa” (the Pueblo of Zuni is located about two hours west of Albuquerque, and Kewa Pueblo, formerly known as Santo Domingo Pueblo, is south of Santa Fe). However, when I spoke with the bass player after the band’s set, he informed me that none of the band members were Native. Its listing on the GON program and inclusion in the event was curious, but rather than risk the perception that I was policing ethnicity, I did not question the band about this. Though the band was billed as simply a rock band, it’s music exhibited some traits of mid-1990s nü-metal, but since the band did not seem to self-identify as a Native band, I decided not to pursue an interview and have not included an analysis of its performance at GON in this study.

An Alternative Showcase at Hooligans Tavern

While the Gathering of Nations was clearly the main event for the weekend for many Native people in Albuquerque, the GON also spawned other events on its periphery, and this included a small show billed as the “Rock and Metal Round Dance” at Hooligans, a small nightclub in a strip mall in a mixed residential and retail area of Albuquerque. I knew about the show prior to my arrival in Albuquerque by following When Darkness Falls on social media, and was looking forward to the opportunity to experience this band in a different context from the GON, as well as a few other bands I had not seen. The name of the event is an appropriation of the powwow term “Round dance” which typically refers to a variety of social dances with a specific triple meter beat structure, often including English lyrics and humorous themes (Scales
While the musicological reference of the Round dance was clearly not the intention in using this term, the fact that it refers to a social dance is significant, tying the Hooligans show in with the GON powwow, as well as creating a catchy alliterative name for the event. The flyer for the show featured an image by Virgil Ortiz, a renowned potter and graphic artist from Cochiti Pueblo, of an x-ray of a skull, blindfolded, with feathers embedded in the top in a representation of a stylized Mohawk (Figure 8).

The flyer was clearly an attempt to frame this show as a demonstration of the edgier fringes of Native popular music, possibly as a counterpoint to the more mainstream showcase of Stage 49 at GON. While the Hooligans show apparently defied the hegemony of Stage 49 and its
more marketable version of Native popular music, it also demonstrated convergence with the GON, since it capitalized on the high profile of the GON and the huge influx of Native people to Albuquerque to draw attendees to the show.

The show started at 8:00PM, so I drove directly from The Pit to Hooligans to meet up with some friends from Santa Fe who I had convinced to go to the show. The first band had not started yet when I arrived, but the MC for the event, Ernie Tsosie, one-half of the well-known comedy duo James and Ernie from the Navajo Nation, was warming up the small crowd with his particular brand of jokes about reservation life, as well as some barbs playfully directed at the spectacle of the GON. Hooligans was exactly what I expected from a small nightclub far from the hip clubs in downtown Albuquerque, with pool tables, a bar and a small seating area with a few tables facing the small stage, which rose about two feet above the floor, separated by a tiny dance floor. There was only a handful of people when I arrived, and soon Ernie introduced the Miracle Dolls, a band from Chino, California featuring two Hidatsa (a tribe from the northern Plains) sisters on bass and guitar, who play a stripped-down indie pop reminiscent of mid-1990s alternative rock. By the time the Miracle Dolls finished, the crowd had thickened at Hooligans, and while I did not conduct a proper demographic survey, my impression was there were primarily Native people in attendance at this show, and I actually saw relatively fewer non-Native people at Hooligans than I did at the GON. The audience also seemed to be primarily made up of metalheads, in contrast to the crowd at the Stage 49 performances, which included music fans from many different genres, though only two bands on the bill at Hooligans could strictly be considered metal bands. The Jir Project Band from the Pueblo of Cochiti south of Santa Fe played a set of solid electric blues, but it felt like the crowd was listless, anticipating the two metal bands at the top of the bill. When Darkness Falls came on that assessment was
confirmed, since the small group in front of the stage immediately started a small mosh pit, more enthusiastic than anything I had seen at the GON over the last two days, yet with the same friendly approach, where it never seemed like anyone was really going to get hurt. The contrast between When Darkness Falls on the open stage at the GON and in the small confines of Hooligans was stark, and it seemed like the whole band could hardly be contained in the small club. Its music was unchanged from its set on Stage 49 the night before, yet the constricted space and lower-quality sound production in Hooligans served to accentuate the more brutal elements of its music, while the larger stage and panoramic backdrop at the GON highlighted its more melodic attributes. I found When Darkness Falls’ manager, Calvin, after its set, and he arranged an interview for me with the members outside the back door of the club, and though I was hesitant to miss the next band, Ethnic De Generation from the Navajo Nation, I quickly gathered my gear and followed Calvin outside, grateful to finally have the chance to talk with the band.

When I walked out the back door of Hooligans into a broad alley behind the club, I was immediately met by all six members of When Darkness Falls gathered around the bed of a pickup truck smoking cigarettes and hanging out. As mentioned above, the members of the band are all big guys, and though they have an imposing presence onstage, this was magnified in our face-to-face encounter, since my agenda was unknown to them at that point. However, after a few minutes of talking about my project and metal in general, the band was friendly and open regarding my questions, quickly dissipating the somewhat intimidating first impression. While the whole band participated in the interview, most of the responses came from three members: Turtle, one of the singers and the main lyricists for the band; Jay, the bass player, and Bucky, the drummer. The band answered my questions for forty-five minutes, and these responses inform the interpretations in the remaining sections of this chapter.
Positivity, Humor, and Confronting Stereotypes

One theme that is common to both When Darkness Falls and Testify is the importance of a positive message in their music, combined with how they engage with other members of their communities. Positivity is not typically prioritized as a desirable quality in heavy metal, though there are of course exceptions, and the perception among many fans (as well as outsiders to the genre) is that metal is concerned with the darker elements of the human condition. This can certainly be seen in some of the music in Resistant Culture and the Black Twilight Circle, as discussed in the previous chapters, though arguably these bands use dark themes in an exercise of empowerment, ultimately resulting in a positive message. When Darkness Falls, however, is more forthright in advocating an unabashed positive message, and acknowledged that this may break with some fans’ assumptions, as well as those of other Native metal bands:

*Bucky:* Metal music has always been, y’know, I guess, linked to bad things, death, whatever. I’m sure there’s a lot of people doing a lot of positive stuff, definitely we’re one of those bands, puts the positive into the metal music.

*Jay:* But those hardcore Native guys that are about death, y’know they look at our music as kind of like, pansy-type shit. Y’know we don’t even care about that, but unfortunately, y’know some of the bands that we play with are like that, they don’t really respect the music because they don’t understand it, they’re just all about death and chaos and stuff like that.

*Turtle:* With metal, what people don’t really understand, and what we’re actually trying to make people see, is that the stories that you hear from Black Sabbath, and those hardcore bands, they’re actually feelings, they’re speaking the truth about what people go through, what they been through as a child or adults, y’know, same as with us here. So that’s why it pretty much gets a bad rep, is that people don’t understand, y’know that there is truth. Everybody wants to hear the good, but metal is definitely the one that brings out the truth, and people hate hearing the truth. (Interview with When Darkness Falls, April 27, 2013)

Lauren Jessica Amsterdam notes a similar response in her study of Native hip hop artists, who understand that dominant society expects them to be drunk and poor thugs, yet their positive approach to music counters and challenges these assumptions, which Amsterdam argues are
embedded in the settler state’s notion of indigeneity (2013, 65). Part of this positive agenda that Amsterdam documents in her study, and is apparent in the quote from Turtle above, is the importance of telling stories and educating people, and these artists see this as a positive role that they can play in their communities. Storytelling, of course, has a long tradition in most Native cultures, and it plays a pivotal role in cultural survival, and has been acknowledged as a powerful strategy for decolonization and resistance to colonial oppression (Chi’XapKaid 2005, 127-137).

When Turtle said that “metal…brings out the truth, and people hate hearing the truth,” he acknowledged that there are some difficult things in life that need to be confronted, and the band sees music as a way to address those problems. In an exchange I had with the members about the band’s name (which they clarified was not derived from the Killswitch Engage song title, but from the lyrics to the Slayer song, “War Ensemble”), Bucky and Turtle addressed the significance of the name:

_Bucky_: Everyone had their own feeling for what that...band name meant, and a lot of the lyrics that Turtle does write, it’s always positive stuff, in our music, all the songs are positive. So it came to “What happens when darkness falls?” y’know...in this day and age, this world is so fucked up, and it’s kinda where he [Turtle] draws a lot of his inspiration for lyric writing is to make it positive. We’re trying to make it positive in other people’s lives...so, what happens when darkness falls? There’s a whole new life, something brand new, something positive.

_Turtle_: We all sat around and said y’know “what happens after all this chaos and shit ends, y’know, where do we go from there?” Somebody had quoted a long, long fuckin’ time ago, I don’t know who it was, but they said, this world cannot survive, it can’t even be in existence, without music, and basically that’s how I felt about it...if you want to reach somebody, if you want to get them to believe in what you’re doing, the best way to do it is through music. (Interview with When Darkness Falls, April 27, 2013)

For When Darkness Falls, it is less important that it align ideologically with other Native bands, as Jay alludes to above, than it is to stay true to a positive message, which translates into it having an impact in its community at Acoma. While the prospect of being a role model for
Native youth by playing metal music may seem overly idealistic, for this band it is a reality that has played out in its community, as Turtle told in a story about his participation in a workshop in his community:

*Turtle:* A lot of the youth back at home really look up to the band. Nowadays even our tribal officials in our hometown, y’know, before they never really used music as a way to better themselves or to go get a degree in it. Y’know when I was attending this seminar, one of the tribal leaders there, me being there, he saw me and he goes, “If you want to go out and rap, or you guys want to pursue music, that’s another form of doing it. We have a band here at Acoma that’s doing the greatest thing.” Basically with them looking up to us, it makes you feel good about yourself, and that’s what we’re trying to be, the bigger person, role models. (Interview with When Darkness Falls, April 27, 2013)

Positivity also plays a role in how Testify frame its music, as evidenced in its self-described bio on its Reverbnation website:

Testify is a promising positive hard rock/metal band hailing from southeastern Navajo reservation. Combining thought-provoking lyrics with melodic metalcore influences, Testify is committed to inspiring Native youth and young adults to be proud of their heritage and to promoting positive social change. (Testify 2014)

While this obviously may be related to the religious motivations that Testify has, as previously discussed, this statement clearly reveals a broader agenda, similar to that of When Darkness Falls, which places an emphasis on reaching out to Native youth. In both cases, these bands rely primarily on their communities knowing who they are, rather than displaying indigenous markers in their music that identify them as Native. To be a role model, and to inspire Native youth, the youth must first identify with these artists, and it is sufficient to simply be a Native person playing in a metal band, and onstage at events like the Gathering of Nations, there is no need to explicitly signify themselves as Native, since that association is articulated through context, rather than sonic cues.
The positivity that When Darkness Falls promotes extends beyond its own community however, and beyond Native people even, as Turtle explained in the intention behind writing the song “The Prayer,” which the band had yet to record at the time of the interview:

*AJT*: Being from a Native community, does that come out in your music in lyrics or in themes in your music?
*Turtle*: Basically, these guys wrote cool fuckin’ riffs to a song that we all hold dearly to our hearts, and basically it is called “The Prayer,” and we usually play it after really big shows because everybody y’know thinks “When Darkness Falls, yeah, death and chaos” and everything like that, but basically, with that song, being Native American y’know we’re always taught to not pray just for the wellbeing of ourselves, but everybody else. So basically within that song...it’s a prayer from us, being said to the audience, said to everybody there. So that plays a big part in who we are, so not just only for ourselves to improve, but for everybody else there to gain from it. (Interview with When Darkness Falls, April 27, 2013)

Here Turtle acknowledges that pursuing a positive message is “a big part of who we are,” confirming positivity as part of the band’s identity, while also referencing how they were taught as Native people, which suggests that social conscience and selflessness were not traits that the band members chose to incorporate once they formed a band, but qualities that they were raised with in their communities.

A powerful tool in promoting a positive message can be humor, which I noted in abundance throughout the GON weekend, from the MCs onstage at both the Stage 49 and Hooligans, to the interview with When Darkness Falls. Vine Deloria Jr, famously addressed Indian humor in his 1969 book, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, asserting that it was a critical element for the survival of Native people, and a way to negotiate social problems within indigenous communities (1969, 149). In my interview with When Darkness Falls, even when we were discussing serious issues, the band imbued its response with a great deal of humor, usually directed at themselves (often referencing their physical stature and propensity for eating), such as
in this discussion of whether “heavy metal” still exists as a genre. The band agrees that it does, but adds:

_Roe:_ Well plus too, we’re heavy (laughter).  
_Bucky:_ We’re a heavyset band!  
_Zack:_ It’s like yesterday at the GON somebody came up and said: “Oh man, you guys are heavy,” and I’m like, “Yeah, we are!” (laughter).  
(Interview with When Darkness Falls, April 27, 2013)

Deloria Jr. suggests this kind of self-deprecating humor, especially among Native men, “served to highlight their true virtues and gain them a place of influence in tribal policy-making circles” (1969, 149). Rather than the image of the hard-drinking rock band, the members of When Darkness Falls present themselves as heavy eaters, yet are quick to mention that they take pride in their generosity in cooking for other bands, inviting them out to Acoma to play and not being able to pay them, but feed them really well, and bringing food for their engineers and producers in the studio. In this way, food and hospitality signify sincerity and good faith for the band, which contributes to the positive image that it seeks to create. Food also can be seen as a marker for the band’s Pueblo identity, since the Pueblos in northern Rio Grande are well known for opening to the public on annual feast days, when visitors, Native and non-Native alike, are invited to come to the Pueblo and observe the dances and partake in the festivities, which of course include great quantities of food. This is one of those subtle ways that a band like When Darkness Falls expresses its identity, and while it is not easily observable through its music or performance, in conversation with the members it is clear that, while they may joke about it, food is not a trivial matter, and plays a major role in forging social bonds, which is critical to maintaining any community.
Indigenous Identity and the Significance of Military Service

The apparent inconsistency with the high rate of enlistment by Native Americans in the United States armed services relative to the general populace is a complex issue, but it is important to understand how it articulates with indigenous identity, and not discount its importance to Native communities. Recognition of veterans is common to many collective expressions of Native culture, and it has become traditional at powwows to honor veterans in the grand entry (Robinson and Lucas 2008, 5) as well as in special dances, which I noted in the schedule for the 2013 GON on both Friday and Saturday, honoring the Code Talkers and Marine Corps respectively (Gathering of Nations Powwow 2013, 5). In fact, there was also a full-page ad in the GON program, for the Marines, with a vintage World War II-era photograph featuring two Navajo Code Talkers (Gathering of Nations Powwow 2013, 22). In Tom Holm’s history of Native American veterans of the Vietnam War, he notes that Native vets are still under-acknowledged, at least outside of their own communities, and I have little reason to believe that has changed much in the last twenty years (1996, 11). Therefore, it was not surprising to me to find songs on both CDs by Testify and When Darkness Falls honoring Native veterans, and Testify dedicated this same song, the title track to Codes of Honor, to the Navajo Code Talkers when it played the song live on Stage 49. In the liner notes of its CD, the song is followed by the dedication, “In Memory of Cpl. Joe Silversmith (Navajo Code Talker, 297th Platoon –USMC)” (Testify 2011). Understandably, since the members of Testify are from the Navajo Nation, the Code Talkers have a special meaning to them, and are a source of pride for the Diné as a whole.

The song by When Darkness Falls called “Band of Brothers” from its CD, The Power (2013), also honors Native veterans, though it is not specifically directed at a group like the Code Talkers, or even inspired by specific individuals, as I learned in a follow up interview with the
drummer, Bucky (February 22, 2014). Rather, Bucky told me that all the members have had family in the military, so the song is honoring their service in general, and the band collectively honored each branch of the military in the song by chanting “Oohrah,” a familiar battle cry usually used in the Marines, after each branch is called out in the song (When Darkness Falls 2013). Interestingly, however, some of the lyrics suggest making a distinction between honoring service and blind patriotism and allegiance to a particular flag:

My brothers now and forever
We stand so proud
Not for the colors
But for the brave and free
(When Darkness Falls “Band of Brothers” The Power self-released 2013)

Indeed, as Northern Cheyenne Vietnam veteran Windy Shoulderblade notes in Robinson and Lucas’ 2008 book on Native Americans in the military:

Most American Indians don’t view their military service as something simply patriotic. It’s something deeper than that, passed down from generation to generation. It was our fathers – our grandfathers. The warrior status was always an achievement for Indian men. They have always gone to face the enemy when it was their turn. (Shoulderblade in Robinson and Lucas 2008, 7)

Holm documents this same “warrior status” as a series of “warrior traditions” (1996, 26-65), and points to them as the key to understanding the motivation behind Native men enlisting in the United States military (1996, 20-21), an institution that just a few generations earlier was at war with indigenous people. Rather than viewing enlistment as a patriotic duty, Holm concludes from the results of a survey of Native American Vietnam War veterans released by the Veteran’s Administration in the mid-1980s that “they enlisted or accepted induction because they were patriots in the tribal sense of the word. To them, military service was part of an honorable family and /or tribal tradition” (Holm 1996, 118). For a group that had been oppressed and marginalized, military service was seen as a means of reclaiming power and respect, not to better
assimilate into mainstream American culture, but to strengthen their own traditional communities. Robinson and Lucas note that these communities have their own ways of honoring and welcoming back these warriors, as well as beginning the healing process, and acknowledge that war is “a natural part of life’s struggles to protect tribal values” (2008, 72). I view the songs by Testify and When Darkness Falls as gestures within this complex process of honoring and acknowledging the sacrifices Native veterans have made for their communities, consistent with the values that constitute these bands’ identities.

The Power of Place

It may be simplistic to reduce all indigenous resistance to struggles over land, seemingly minimizing attempts to preserve cultural traditions such as language and religion. However, I think it is safe to say that many of the battles Native people in North America have been fighting since Columbus landed have been directly connected to threats to their ancestral lands, and certainly many high-profile cases of indigenous resistance to governmental or commercial intrusion on tribal land have helped form the public perception of Native resistance (Churchill 2002, Hill 2009). While many tribes endured forced relocation at the hands of the United States government, the Pueblo communities in the Southwest have largely remained on their ancestral lands, surviving the Spanish invasion in the sixteenth century through the present day. This is not to say that there was not extreme upheaval and conflict during the Spanish colonial period, or that Pueblo people have not endured other types of relocation, such as the Indian boarding school program in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or land disputes with the United States government pitting the Diné (Navajo) against the Hopi, or Taos Pueblo’s efforts to reclaim sacred Blue Lake in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. However, the fact remains that Pueblo people and their culture survive today through the struggles of their ancestors, and their
connection to their ancestral land is a powerful testament to how entwined the land is with their identity. There is no more compelling example of this than the Pueblo of Acoma, the home for all members of the band When Darkness Falls.

Acoma is located about an hour west of Albuquerque, off the old Route 66, long since replaced by Interstate 40. It is a remote area, made even more remote by the location of the old village of Acoma, referred to as Sky City, which sits perched on top of a three hundred and sixty five foot mesa surrounded by a wide valley, and accessed by one road and an ancient trail cut into the side of the mesa. Today, only about thirty year-round residents inhabit the old village of Acoma (Lawlor 2006, 134), which still lacks running water or electricity, while most tribal members have long since relocated to surrounding villages such as McCartys and Acomita, or moved to Albuquerque as the pueblo’s population has outgrown its ability to provide employment for all its members (Minge 2002, 83). However, the pueblo runs tours of the village for visitors, and on feast days Old Acoma comes alive with dances and music, and many Acoma families still maintain a house on the mesa to use for these occasions (Lawlor 2006, 135).

The mesa and the village of Old Acoma is an iconic presence for its people, and a reminder of how Acoma has endured and what it has overcome. Its presence cannot be ignored, while its power speaks for itself. This may be why When Darkness Falls chose to use the image of the mesa on the front cover of its CD, *The Power* (2013), though it can barely be discerned in the darkness, as viewed from below, one lone building illuminated only by several bolts of lightning in the sky. The image on the back of the CD depicts another massive sandstone formation, Enchanted Mesa (or Katzima in Keres, the language of Acoma), located a few miles from Acoma Mesa, and believed to have once been occupied by the Acoma people (Minge 2002, 2). Neither of these images is labeled on the CD, and it was only through my follow up
conversations with Bucky that I was able to confirm what they were (Interview February 22, 2013). As a non-Native outsider to Acoma, it is impossible for me to fully describe the meaning these places have for contemporary Acoma people, but clearly they are a source of strength, and that significance is conveyed on the band’s CD and in its music. There may be no greater signifier for Pueblo people than places that they consider sacred, and for indigenous people in general, place may be the most vital element to an indigenous aesthetic. As Stephen Leuthold has noted in his study of indigenous aesthetics: “A profound sense of place, which grows out of the linkage between the spiritual and the natural, is at the center of indigenous aesthetics” (1998, 183). While this sense of place is not immediately apparent through the music of When Darkness Falls, or in its live performance, in these two simple images on its CD, which are so subtle and subdued it is easy to miss them, the members of the band establish their connection to their home and their source of balance and stability in their lives. When I asked them about the significance of their Native community in their music, they responded with the following:

_AJIT_: So how much influence does that (being Native) have on your music, being from a Native community?
_Bucky_: Definitely a lot. We are very tied into our religious and spiritual beliefs. Definitely, there are times where the band needs to take a break, we will definitely take a break, and I mean, if we have to turn down a big show because of it, we have no problem doin’ it.
_Turtle_: And we have, we have turned down really big shows, and it’s just basically because of our belief, you know, and that’s stronger than anything.
_Jay_: Because we still really strongly participate in our religious faith, I mean us being all tied together, we all participate together, so, it kind of feels weird if one person is going to carry it on. All of us, all participate.
_Turtle_: And also, it basically keeps us from thinking that we’re rock stars, thinking that we’re better than anybody, y’know, we’re not. It basically keeps us humble...
_Bucky_: And grounded.
_Roe_: And our moms. (laughter)
_(unknown):_ So instead of our heads getting’ big, we get big here! (points to stomach, more laughter)
_Turtle_: Our stomachs get bigger!
(unknown): Yeah, our moms take care of us. (laughter)
(Interview with When Darkness Falls, April 27, 2013)

Again, the band members’ humor tempers an otherwise serious discussion, but does not detract from the sincerity with which they convey their relationship to their community, their religion, and their families. An important point to understand about this band is that all the members grew up together in the same place, and the band is composed of several brothers and cousins, and these family bonds and shared past experiences are elements that help create the collective identity for the band.

**Implicit Resistance and the Enduring Influence of the Pueblo Revolt**

To fully understand how Pueblo people relate to a dominant contemporary society shaped by colonial oppression, it is necessary to recognize the impact events in their history have had on their culture, which still have reverberations today and likely continue to affect their artistic expression. The Pueblo Revolt of 1680, when the Pueblos of the northern Rio Grande rose up to challenge Spanish colonial rule, and succeeded in reclaiming political and social power in New Mexico for twelve years, had a lasting legacy for Pueblo culture, and it is difficult to overemphasize its importance in shaping modern Pueblo life (Sando and Agoyo 2005; Liebmann 2012; Preucel 2002). Though the dominant discourse of the Pueblo Revolt is that it was a brief uprising that was ultimately futile in defeating the Spanish (Sayre 2005), when the Spanish returned to “reconquer” New Mexico in 1692 under Don Diego de Vargas, it was under different terms, not the least of which was more flexibility on the part of the Spanish for the Pueblos to practice their own religion (Sando 2005, 51; Liebmann 2012, 209), and as Pueblo scholar Alfonso Ortiz has noted, the revolt is “to be understood first and foremost as a religious restoration” (2005, 4). Pueblo people are understandably protective of this religious freedom, since it was so hard won, and every individual in each Pueblo knows what information can be
shared with outsiders, and what should be closely guarded (Suina 2005, 79). This restraint can be interpreted as a sort of closing-off to the outside world, but another interpretation is that this is the very means by which Pueblo culture has resisted complete assimilation (or cultural annihilation).

In Mary Lawlor’s analysis of the practices and rhetoric of tour guides at Acoma, as well as the casino run by the tribe, she notes the restraint of her tour guide in what information he reveals during the tour of the village of Old Acoma and the boundaries that are set by the guide (2006, 136-138). However, she concludes that these boundaries are “crucial to the articulation of community and identity” and are part of a well-organized plan to preserve the traditions of the Pueblo, while remaining at least partially open to the public (2006, 138). She describes these practices as “nonconfrontational modes of resistance” (2006, 145), using distance to maintain a safe relationship with the colonizing culture, while continuing a program of resistance which honors the legacy of the Pueblo Revolt. Lawlor compares the narratives of colonial history that are reproduced on tours of Acoma to De Certeau’s observations of how indigenous people subverted Spanish colonial domination by adopting rules and norms that produced superficial assimilation, while avoiding complete hegemony (2006, 153-154). This strategy to maintain sovereignty and promote cultural survival extends to the tribe’s casino as well, which outwardly exhibits vaguely “Indian” markers, yet includes nothing that is specifically Pueblo and makes no effort to educate the public about the Acoma culture. Any information provided to the public is done so through the tightly controlled tours and the Pueblo’s museum, which work in tandem to sustain an agenda of self-representation, which serves to preserve the Pueblo’s identity.

While I am not suggesting that the band When Darkness Falls is intentionally participating in this same program of self-representation that Lawlor observed at Acoma, the
band members have all been raised in this community, and have been instilled with the values that the community has worked hard to nurture. The band members did acknowledge how important their community and religious traditions were to them in our interview, so I feel confident with an interpretation that their music is a similar expression that articulates with the outside world, just as the tour guides and casino do. Essentially, for many Pueblo people the very fact that they still inhabit their ancestral land, still speak their Native language, still practice their religion, is resistance itself. As Amsterdam suggests, affirmed by one of the DJs in her study, “corporeal existence is cultural resistance” (2013, 56), and this is how resistance is implicit in any expression by a Native artist.

**De-emphasizing Indigeneity**

Unlike bands described in previous chapters of this study, When Darkness Falls does not use readily observable markers of indigeneity in its music, and the visual clues to its Native heritage are extremely subtle in the artwork on its CD. By not emphasizing indigenous identity overtly in its music, the band essentially effaces “Nativeness” from its image. However, rather than demonstrating assimilation in its work, I argue that not exploiting its Native identity could be seen as itself an act of resistance, by not affirming the dominant culture’s expectation of what Native American popular music should look and sound like. As I noted in Chapter One, ethnomusicologist Beverley Diamond has suggested that many Native recording artists choose not to include sonic markers of indigeneity in their music in an effort to avoid limiting their music to one genre (2005, 120-121). The ambivalence that the marketplace has towards Native music may actually decrease the incentive for Native musicians to include these markers in their music. Artists that choose to include indigenous markers in their music may find themselves stuck with the “world music” label, rather than pop or rock, where they would likely attract a
larger fan base. Deemphasizing indigeneity may also counter stereotypes of what constitutes
“Native music,” and Diamond encountered this sentiment from some artists in her study of the
Yukon music scene (2001). In a genre like metal, musicians may simply want to avoid those
stereotypes and be judged on their merit as a metal band, rather than a Native metal band.
Diamond notes this strategy is different from some indigenous groups in other countries, such as
the Saami in Norway, where artists are eligible for government funding if they include
“traditional” elements in their music (Diamond 2005, 121, n8), though this is antithetical to the
competing ideology that embracing popular music may encourage and affect change (Jones-
Bamman 2001, 191). Also, by including indigenous markers in their music and merging Native
cultural traditions with contemporary Western music, bands may risk being seen as
“untraditional,” and therefore “inadequate and insufficient” by the standards of the dominant
settler colonial culture (Amsterdam 2013, 64). By keeping their traditional life separate from
their music, bands may avoid this perception, as well as possible criticism from older, more
conservative Native people who may not see heavy metal as a viable expression of Native
identity.

Leaving the meaning of indigenous identity open-ended, intentionally or not, bands like
When Darkness Falls demonstrate the strength of their identity, in which indigenous markers
may be used or not, but in the end they are not a critical element to their identity or the survival
of their culture. What is critical, as evidenced in the interview, is the band members’ life at home
at Acoma, and their participation in the social and religious practices of the community. As a
non-Native scholar, I am comfortable with the ambiguity of indefinite conclusions concerning
expressions of indigenous identity, since this avoids forcing the hegemony of settler colonialism
inherent in academic analysis on the cultural expressions made by Native people. Ironically, the
ambiguity of Pueblo or even vaguely Native markers in When Darkness Falls’ music is what makes it possibly the perfect expression of Acoma identity, and the cover of its CD, *The Power*, illustrates this well. The Pueblo is present in the image, yet the mesa looms in the shadows, representative of a sovereign indigenous identity that maintains a secure distance, simultaneously reflecting and resisting a history of brutal colonial oppression, while revealing the minimum to satisfy the gaze of that same colonial culture.
CONCLUSION

In the previous chapters I have illustrated several different ways indigenous identity is expressed through heavy metal music, though by no means is this meant to imply that these are the only ways. There is no essential indigeneity that can be reduced to a set of markers or an ideology, and I have argued that the potential for Native musicians to express indigenous identity through popular music remains almost limitless. My intention in this study was to illustrate this potential with the diversity of the examples I have used, and to try to make the point that though the concept of indigeneity and terms such as “Indian” and “Native American” are the results of Euro-American colonialism and a history of oppression and marginalization, Native people today are engaging with contemporary art forms to explore what that identity may mean to them in an ever-changing social and political landscape. It is worth considering the question of whether the concept of identity is even cross-culturally valid, since it may reflect a fixation on individual expression in Western Euro-American culture that signifies continued processes of colonial domination over indigenous people. However, the response from the artists in this study to the question of indigenous identity is to frame their music and artwork as collective expression, rather than focusing on individual voices. In my interview with When Darkness Falls, though three or four members responded to most of the questions, all of the band members remained present through the whole interview, and they insisted that any decisions that affected the band’s future were made as a group. Similarly, Resistant Culture makes a point to respond in all its interviews as a band, with no one member taking credit for any specific response, and the construction of a collective identity is clearly a high priority for the Black Twilight Circle, as I illustrated in Chapter Two. While some Native artists resist modern structures inherited from a history of colonialism, and may explicitly identify these structures and institutions, some may
express this resistance through more subdued, but no less powerful, practices. Some Native
artists use strong sonic and visual markers in their work to express this resistance, while others
perform resistance through other areas in their lives, through their domestic life, participation in
their communities, and through their very existence. While I hesitate to suggest that resistance is
inherent within indigenous identity, I have been struck in this study by how much the two seem
to converge in the various examples of artistic expression by Native heavy metal musicians that I
have examined.

In Chapter One I examined the band Resistant Culture from Los Angeles, showing how
its use of indigenous markers in its music and artwork support an aesthetic and ideology in which
resistance to colonial power, in the form of modernity, is inextricable from the band’s identity.
This identity is carefully constructed through an idealized notion of a return to nature, in which
everyday practices can be framed as acts of resistance, and the intentional musical simplicity of
grindcore, which positions the band in a network of both local and global scenes. In Chapter Two
I illustrated a very different perception of indigenous identity, though expressed by a group of
bands also from Los Angeles, in the Black Twilight Circle collective. This collective claims
indigeneity through a broader interpretation of pre-colonial indigenous territory, aligning
themselves with the Mexica movement which re-imagines Chicana/o identity through a rejection
of European colonial influence. The Black Twilight Circle engages in a set of practices that
constitute an identity based on a brutal sonic experience and vivid imagery from pre-Spanish
colonial cultures, minimizing the role of the individual to bolster the strength of the collective.
Finally, in Chapter Three I explored the articulation of powwow culture and contemporary
Native popular music through the showcase at the Gathering of Nations Powwow in
Albuquerque, New Mexico, as well as an alternative show that both resisted and converged with
the GON “mega-powwow” experience. I described how several bands construct an indigenous identity through their music based on positivity and humor and recognition of warrior traditions by honoring Native veterans. Members of one band in particular, When Darkness Falls from the Pueblo of Acoma, express powerful yet subtle themes of indigeneity and resistance through their music, but also especially through a strong commitment to their community and traditions at home. A sense of place plays a crucial role in the band’s identity, and the history of resistance embedded in the Pueblo since Spanish contact continues to have an impact on the cultural expressions of the Acoma people, even as artists embrace non-Native popular music styles such as heavy metal.

**Modernity and Tradition**

While the different expressions of indigenous identity and resistance that I have described in the previous chapters converge and deviate in a variety of ways throughout this study, there is a common thread that I think is worth considering in conclusion. This is the tension that exists between modernity and tradition in the lives of Native people, and how this tension is negotiated in the cultural expressions of the bands in this study. Scales (2012) has examined the modernity/tradition binary in the context of powwow music, and though his observations are specific to this music culture, I think they benefit some of my interpretations in this study. Scales suggests “one of the central challenges for colonized indigenous peoples in North America is how to make sense of and mediate between the discourses of modernity and tradition” and he even questions the validity of these terms in an academic sense (2012, 259). Scales also reminds us that the concepts of modernity and tradition did not originate with indigenous people and are a product of social and political responses to colonialism (2012, 259), which is reminiscent of John Trudell’s comments in the introduction to this study, in which he observed that the concepts of
the “Indian” and “Native” and the struggle to define these identities were foisted upon indigenous people as a result of colonial oppression. However, since the discourse of modernity and tradition is reproduced in multiple contexts, including among Native people themselves, it is worth considering how these notions are framed in this study. Both Resistant Culture and the bands of the Black Twilight Circle appear to maintain a separation between tradition and modernity, despite the fact that they all use modern music styles of non-indigenous origins fused with traditional instrumentation and singing styles, and generally demonize modernity throughout their music, while valorizing a return to pre-colonial indigenous life ways. There is an apparent contradiction in this vision of modernity and tradition, which frames the traditional as opposite to the world of the modern, while embracing modern technology to deliver the bands’ messages.

Scales notes that the adoption of discourses such as modernity and tradition by Native people possibly hinders the process of decolonization (2012, 260), yet I do not see Resistant Culture or the Black Twilight Circle adopting this discourse in the same way that it has been constructed by academics. I do not interpret the use of modern technology and music styles and the simultaneous valorization of the traditional as hypocritical or even contradictory. Rather, I view these as examples of how Native artists are re-imagining contemporary indigenous identities, in which both the traditional and modern can coexist, and in fact, must coexist in the struggle for cultural survival and resistance to complete assimilation.

In the case of When Darkness Falls, a strategy for the coexistence of the traditional and the modern takes a different form, since the band does not typically address traditional themes in its music, engaging in these activities at home in the members’ community. However, in my interview with the band, it was clear that each member continues to negotiate the daily realities
of this modern/traditional binary, as some of the members told me that they have had to
cancel tours that conflicted with their traditional responsibilities at Acoma (When Darkness Falls
interview April 27, 2013). This negotiation between the modern world and traditional life is not
unique to the members of When Darkness Falls, as Lawlor (2006) observed through the tour
guide and casino practices at Acoma discussed in Chapter Three, and I can say with some
confidence that this delicate balance is something that all indigenous people who live with the
legacy of colonialism and participate in the structures of contemporary society likely have to
negotiate throughout their lives.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

While the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted for this study was very gratifying and
contributed valuable insight into the expressive practices of these bands, I think future research
may include a larger representative sample of the bands that identify as Native or indigenous in
some respect. The bands that I did include in the study showed great diversity in terms of their
approach to indigenous identity and anti-colonial resistance, yet in the course of my research, I
discovered many other bands that would be interesting to incorporate into a broader project. As I
noted in the introduction, I decided to focus on band members and the artists who perform this
music, and not Native fans, and I believe that a study of Native metalheads would warrant a full
project on its own. Finally, looking at non-Native participants in scenes that cater primarily
toward a Native audience, such as at the Gathering of Nations Powwow, would possibly reveal
how ethnicity articulates with the practices of these metal bands, and whether playing audiences
composed primarily of non-Native people, such as the Black Twilight Circle show in Grand
Rapids or the Resistant Culture show in Chicago, alters how indigenous artists perform their
identity or express an ideology of resistance.
In the introduction to this study I rhetorically asked the question of what it means to be indigenous in North America, and though I still contend that as a non-Native observer, I can only offer a partial assessment in response, I have demonstrated the wide diversity of forms that indigeneity may take through the relatively narrow lens of heavy metal music. While some Native artists are inclined to use sonic and visual markers and aesthetic constructions to proclaim indigeneity in their music, others prefer to avoid these devices and choose other facets of their lives to affirm a Native identity. I believe that some of these findings can be interpreted to apply to other forms of contemporary media where Native artists are active participants, and may provide insight into how indigenous people develop strategies to negotiate a globalized media structure that still too often essentializes indigenous people and reduces them to stereotypes.

Though the daily struggle to overcome the history of colonial domination is still a reality for many indigenous people in North America, some Native artists have turned to music and art as an expression of survival and celebration of their history, as well as a site for resisting pervasive systems of oppression.
NOTES

1. The trope of the “noble savage” has been employed rhetorically in literature and more recently in contemporary media as a stereotype to romanticize and exoticize indigenous people, emphasizing their closeness to nature and perceived purity as a culture, while maintaining their “otherness” to Western culture. See Ter Ellingson’s book, *The Myth of the Noble Savage* (2001) for a complete critical history of the term and concept.

2. “Imperialist nostalgia” has been described by Renato Rosaldo as a yearning for a traditional culture as it may have existed prior to the process of colonial domination, or a “mourning for what one has destroyed” (1989). This impulse has contributed to the stereotyping of indigenous people, using tropes such as the “noble savage” described about to create a romantic image of Native culture that envisions it suspended in a permanent idealized past.

3. While heavy metal bands in the United States and Europe have generally remained apolitical relative to local punk scenes, it should be noted that many metal bands in other parts of the world, especially in Latin America and South America, have maintained a strong political agenda.

4. See Mihesuah et al 1998 for a collection of essays on how Native representation can be better addressed in academia, as well as issues with methods and data collection, and how scholars can avoid the problematic practices of past research. See also Smith (1999) for discussions specifically related to methodology and indigenous people.

5. While the history of colonialism in the United States is fairly straightforward, the processes of imperialism are more ambiguous, especially as it impacts American post-colonial and indigenous studies. The parameters of “empire” in the United States, when it began and how it is still expressed, as well as how it articulates with American colonial history, is an ongoing discourse that is well beyond the scope of this project. See Jodi A. Byrd’s book, *Transit of Empire* (2011) for a comprehensive discussion of this topic.

6. See Jack Forbes’ *Aztecas del Norte* (1973) for some of the earliest discussions of the emergence of Aztec identity from the Chicano/a movement of the 1960s. Though Forbes never uses the term “Mexica” these claims of indigeneity through Aztec identity are the roots of the Mexica Movement. See also James Lockhart’s *We People Here* (1993) on the Nahuatl origins of the term “Mexica,” and Gary Tomlinson’s *The Singing of the New World* (2007) for discussions on Mexica music, religion, and worldview.

7. See James Lockhart’s *We People Here* (1993) and *The Nahuas After the Conquest* (1992) for more discussion on the origins of the term “Nican Tlaca,” and the intricacies of how it translates in Nahuatl.
While I did not change any of the Spanish words or phrasing listed here in the lyrics, I did add some punctuation that was missing in the version I obtained from *Encyclopaedia Metallum*.

See Michael Hittman’s *Wovoka and the Ghost Dance* (1997) for a complete history of the emergence of Wovoka and discussion of the significance of the messianic movement surrounding this enigmatic figure.

“49” is slang in powwow culture for the after party (ICTMN Staff 2013).
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Bucky (from When Darkness Falls), February 22, 2014, phone.
APPENDIX: HSRB APPROVAL LETTER

DATE: April 17, 2013
TO: Anthony Thibodeau
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board
PROJECT TITLE: [444169-2] Anti-colonial Indigenous Resistance and Cultural Identity in Heavy Metal in the Americas
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: April 17, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE: March 24, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 2

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 50 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on March 24, 2014. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.