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An Examination of *Bad Indian*.

‘I’m not a very *good* Indian...

Maybe even a *bad* Indian.’ (Deal 0:00-0:03)

This is how the song *Bad Indian*, written by Pyramid Lake Pauite Artist-Activist Gregg Deal (Deal) and performed and released by the band *Dead Pioneers* as a single in 2021, begins. The piece uses conversational rhetorical techniques to deliver its message: that the warped cultural expectations placed on American Indian identity by modern society makes the day-to-day lives of Indigenous people a de-facto countercultural movement. The opening lines kick off by planting an unspoken question in the listener’s mind: What makes an Indian ‘good’ or ‘bad?’ The answer, the song’s thesis, is left until the end, after the argument is made. The audience is thus left to contemplate the song’s content and compare the author’s position to the conclusions they drew themselves while listening.

Why would an author advocate a position before declaring one?

Accessibility.

With any potentially divisive commentary, there is a chance that the audience will disengage from the text prior to its conclusion. A protest song, by definition, engages with divisive subject material and has two audiences: those who are ideologically aligned with the author, and those who aren’t - whether by actively holding opinions opposing the author’s viewpoint, or by being passively unengaged from the presented issue. Put another way, one audience is directly impacted by the issue the song protests, and the other audience consists of

people who aren't. Those who've been there, and those who haven't. In the case of *Bad Indian* these two audiences are the broad categories of 'Indians' and 'Anybody Else.' I will be using the terms 'Native,' 'Indigenous' and 'Indian' interchangeably for the sake of broader understanding.

To be effective, a protest song must engage both audiences by supporting its like-minded audience and present a rhetorical argument for the author's viewpoint to the rest of the audience without alienating either.

Gregg makes his case in *Bad Indian* in the style of a beat poem; a spoken word piece backed by music. The rhetorical body of the song boils down to Gregg Deal speaking his personal truth.

Musically, the song separates itself from the Native American protest music of the previous generation by not overtly invoking traditional instruments or style. This is important to understand because the *style* of music chosen thematically supports one of the song's messages: that Gregg is not trying to *appear* 'Indian,' he simply *is* Indian.

For context: In the 1970's, Native bands like Xit released concept albums which featured bells and traditional drums accompanied by more mainstream rock-and-roll instruments to build a music style with indigenous flair. This was a way to express Native identity when the ideas of visibility and building a unified American Indian community was popular. Demonstrations like the Occupation of Alcatraz Island were often done under multi-tribal banners like the 'Indians of All Tribes' group. Many protest songs, even if they featured Native language, (Xit had multiple songs sung partially in Navajo) avoided naming specific tribes to keep the message generally relatable to all tribal nations.

*Bad Indian* was written by children of the 80's and 90's, and the music reflects this. Its drone consists of only two notes from an electric bass and a drumbeat played in a continuous, looping rhythm straight out of early 1990's punk-grunge. A former music major I consulted

remarked that the 4:4-time signature the drone maintains with a syncopation of the first beat is common musical shorthand for ‘Native’ in film soundtracks, drawing from circle-drum traditions, but the average listener is unlikely to know this. (Shamo)

The melody comes out only between verses to bridge disconnected trains of thought. Its intensity grows and diminishes with the emotional strength of appeal made by the lyrics. The drone instead slowly and constantly grows louder until the final verse, when it reaches a point of being in competition with the vocals, threatening to drown them out if the song were to continue. This complements the intensity of the final pathos appeal made to the listening audience, invoking the sense that the emotion behind the performer’s words have been simmering just below the surface of his composed demeanor all along.

One would think that performing music which is authentic to Gregg and his bandmates would make that music ‘Indian’ by reasoning that the individual determines their own identity. But this is the central paradox *Bad Indian* explores: that in modern society, Indians aren’t always the ones determining what is or is not ‘Indian.’ So much so that non-native people are comfortable arguing with native people about non-universal facets of Native culture like the idea of having a ‘true’ name, colloquially called an ‘Indian Name.’ Even politically, the song explicitly reminds us that “...There’s this other thing where the term ‘Indian’ has a legal precedent in treaties, and so-called founding documents written by so-called founding fathers.” (Deal, 1:51-2:02)

Lyrically, *Bad Indian* forgoes metaphor to deliver all three primary types of rhetorical appeal through personal anecdotes. Rather than attacking the existence of societally accepted racism, *Bad Indian* acknowledges the mundane manifestations of this racism, and how they

affect him personally. Small things, annoyances, like being compared to stereotypes and caricature native depictions perpetuated by pop culture- as described in the first verse.

“My cheekbones aren’t high enough, I don’t have enough beadwork or turquoise.” (Deal, 0:04-0:10)

Being held to unfounded expectations is a running theme in the song, which goes on later to allude to ‘Pidgin’ English being a stereotype perpetuated in the 2013 film *The Lone Ranger*.

In each verse the singer shares an experience in a natural, conversational way, then makes a rhetorical appeal. All three types of rhetorical appeal appear corresponding to appropriate situations:

The myth of the ‘Cherokee Princess’ is handled with a *logos* argument, a factual refutation:

“When someone tells me that their great-great grandmother was a Cherokee princess

I immediately want to dismantle what they’re saying,  
after I roll my eyes.

Because there are no Cherokee Princesses,  
there are no Native American monarchies”

And then I’m a bad Indian for wanting to dismantle their blood myths” (Deal 2:39-2:57)

Ethos appeals, which establish the singer’s credibility and contextualize his opinions, are made by sharing information about himself, as with the lines “People don’t know how to say the name of my tribe, and that makes me tired.” (Deal 0:57-1:02) and “I *can’t* and *won’t* say prayers in Paiute, mostly because I’m not fluent, but I think everyone should hear our words.” (Deal 1:02-1:09)

Pathos appeals are made through subtext. Through the song, Gregg speaks about interactions with other members of his tribe, strangers, teachers, people of various walks of life. By not choosing to direct its message to any one group, the lyrics invite listeners to empathize naturally. If someone sees themselves reflected in the antagonists of the situations the song describes, it might open their eyes to the detrimental effects of these interactions can have. Take for example the line “I know you want me to raise my hand and say ‘How,’ but you don’t want me to do that,” (Deal 4:24-4:28) Which alludes to an old presumption about Native greeting customs. It seems to directly address the listener. but this is the only example of second-person perspective in the song, so the line reads as an apostrophe, or a remark made to an absent recipient rather than the actual audience. Like a theater soliloquy, this expression of frustration is directed *past* the listener, but for their benefit as it informs them that “HOA is a Lakota greeting, but it’s spelled... differently. Not the same as HOW...are you doing. That information sharing makes me...” (Deal 4:28-4:38) But the thought is cut short by a repetition of the lyrical through line, the singer reiterating that he is “...a bad Indian.” (Deal 4:38-4:39)

While the lyrics of *Bad Indian* describe the results of cultural genocide in America, this isn’t directly addressed until the final verse, in which the singer recounts the experience of being maligned and uses a list of common racial slurs to impart the feelings of vitriol that accompany such maltreatment. The strongest appeal to emotion is made with the final lines:

“And I would be **justified** in punching him

I would be **justified** in cursing him out

I would be **justified** in calling him racist-

But that would make me a bad Indian,

which contradicts that old saying,  
You know the one,  
'The only *good* Indian is a *dead* Indian-'

But I'm a *Bad* Indian.

And I'm here."

(Deal, 5:43-5:55)

The old saying is a paraphrase of comments made by Theodore Roosevelt in 1886 (Klein), which has become emblematic of the era of cultural erasure. For Gregg Deal and the *Dead Pioneers*, the era isn't over, because daily life is filled with examples of Roosevelt's mentality clinging stubbornly on. Merely living protests that. From the perspective of *Bad Indian*, every Indian is a 'Bad' Indian... and in this case, it's better to be bad.

Appendix:

Transcript of 'Bad Indian' Lyrics

***Bad Indian***

Performed by ***Dead Pioneers***.

Single Released April 2021.

Lyrics by Gregg Deal

Link to youtube upload of the song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6tdSH4yoM8>

"I'm not a very good Indian.

Maybe even a bad Indian.

My cheekbones aren't high enough

I don't have enough beadwork

Or turquoise.

I do my best to celebrate November like a month long birthday for Indians.

For those of you who don't know, which is probably most of you,

It's National Native American Heritage Month,

And unfortunately celebrating feels like I'm celebrating my birthday by myself.

No one seems to know it's even happening

Even with the Facebook notices.

But I'm a bad Indian.

My favorite movie genre is westerns.

My last name isn't a sentence.

I'm not patient.

I am stoic,

Usually only when I'm mad

Or just thinking really hard.

People don't know how to pronounce the name of my Tribe

and that makes me tired.

I can't and won't say prayers in Paiute

Mostly because I'm not fluent-

But I tell everyone they should hear our words, and

It reminds me, there was this one time when a teacher used to ask me things that I didn't know

Or that she didn't know,

Assuming that I would know,

only to see disappointment when I didn't know,

and shame on me for not knowing

but she didn't know either!

'cause I'm a bad Indian.

I use the word "Indian" liberally,

and I mean, I get it, it's not correct.

That dude that sailed the ocean blue mistakenly called us that because he thought he was in

India-

Of course he wasn't.

But there is this other thing were the word "Indian" actually has a legal precedent

in treaties,

and so-called founding documents,  
written by so-called founding fathers.

I get criticized by my own people for using the word "Indian,"  
Without anybody really realizing that any word, used to lump us into a single group, is incorrect.  
I was told to speak in a language that everybody would understand.

I'm a bad Indian.

I don't speak good pidgin English,  
I mean, certainly not as good as Johnny Depp in the movie that one time.  
When someone tells me that their great-great grandmother was a Cherokee princess  
I immediately want to dismantle what they're saying,  
after I roll my eyes.  
Because there are no Cherokee Princesses  
There are no Native American monarchies  
And then I'm a bad Indian for wanting to dismantle their blood myths  
when you are the one who taught me to dismantle in the first place,  
Something that I learned through my genetic memory and through my personal memory,  
and I'm just a bad Indian.

There was a woman once who asked me what my "Indian" name was.

I said, "It's Gregg."

And she was so disappointed!

She was like, "NO! No! It has to be Red Eagle, or Two Rivers-"

"Or 'Grey Skull?'" I said.

"YES! Wait, is that real?!"

"No, no" I said, without her realizing my brief but generationally relevant He-Man joke

The kind of joke that would tell her that, while Indian,

I'm also having an American experience too.

And finally I said to her "How about 'Walking Eagle?'"

She said, "Yes! Yes! But is that true?"

I said, "Yes, it's totally true!"

I didn't have the heart to tell her that the only time an eagle walks is when it's too full of shit to  
fly.

Because I'm a bad Indian.

I don't know how to ride a horse

Or string a bow and arrow.

I know you want me to raise my hand and say "HOW,"

but you don't want me to tell you that-

HOA is a Lakota greeting but it's spelled differently.

Not the same as

HOW...are you doing.

That information sharing makes me a bad Indian.

How dare I inform your misinformed idea of my own identity,

On my homelands?!

The nerve!

Bad Indian

Now I want to set the stage, for this one.

This one time ,a man walked into my space

asked me questions about my things

I tell him

When he suddenly interrupts me

As only a white man can,

with all the euro-swagger of a man whose people were so sure of their place in the universe,

their place in the world,

Their place in the eyes of God

“You speak real good for a

Native American.

An Indian

A savage

A pagan

A prairie n\*\*\*er

A godless heathen.”

And I would be justified in punching him

I would be justified in cursing him out

I would be justified in calling him racist

But that would make me a bad Indian

Which contradicts that old saying,

You know the one:

The only *good* Indian is a *dead* Indian

But I'm a bad Indian.

And I'm here."

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