An 'Electric Pow Wow': Indigenous American use of Music Videos to Discuss Identity and Reclaim Visual Sovereignty

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Introduction

DJ Shub's *Indomitable* music video begins with a montage of cityscapes – a crosswalk counting down assisted by drumbeats, traffic, skyscrapers; from the sea of grey one pedestrian comes into focus. Moving quickly, his long braids bounce as he jogs to his office. The scenes are interrupted by seconds of colorful dress and rhythmic dance. At the end of the day he leaves the office. The dance scenes becoming more frequent, symbols of his indigeneity become apparent – a flash of his feather tattoo as he changes, the headdress he packs into a suitcase as he heads into the countryside. Here, he is transformed – the world is full of colour, he is smiling, embraced by friends, surrounded by families, symbols of the nations in attendance (dress, dreamcatchers, crafts, t-shirts referencing reservation life, etc.) as chants in a native language mix with electronic sounds and beats. The day builds up to the pinnacle moment and the reason for his coming – to dance, still wearing his glasses, in his own regalia.

Over the last two decades as the internet has become increasingly accessible, contemporary Native American artists have been using audio-visual platforms like YouTube to create content that navigates and defines what it means to be Native American or a member of the First Nations. They particularly emphasize the reclaiming of their depiction in the media by self-representing and self-defining, challenging colonizing depictions of indigenous Americans as stoic, "other", or extinct. Further, rap and hip-hop serve as an ideal form of self-expression in this regard because, as Kyle Mays illustrates, the genre is a reflection of the "Black American experience in the U.S. … rooted in the dialect of oppression and resistance" (Mays, 2016, 197). This has obvious appeal for minority groups who are fighting to reclaim some form of sovereignty for themselves, something which the artist Red Hawk addresses in *Song of Survival* with the lyrics "Why do we emulate what's popular in a society that wasn't built for us or even with us in mind? Why do we participate in what's killing us?" Hip-Hop and alternative culture provides an outlet of expression grounded in resistance rather than oppression, providing tools and a common language of liberation for artists and audiences.

After watching a variety of music videos produced by indigenous North American artists, mostly First Nations rap, EDM, and hip-hop, I noticed repetitions of certain themes and features both lyrically and visually. This essay will attempt to illustrate how these contemporary indigenous artists use music videos to discuss their identity and reclaim visual and rhetorical sovereignty through politics, community, and the relationship between modern and traditional ways of life.

Background and Context

Genre, Medium, and Rhetorical Sovereignty

The language of rap and hip-hop is rooted in the Black American experience of systemic racial discrimination, slavery, and, ultimately, colonial and imperialist modes of oppression. The genre acts as a form of resistance, rebellion, and even exclusion against neo-colonial oppressors, operating as rhetorical sovereignty, "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit, to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse." (Lyons 2000, as referenced by Mays 2016). Black rap artists have exercised this ability to the fullest, infusing references, slang, and American Black Vernacular into lyrics like Gunna's "I used to sell yola, trap on Motorolla", which borders on incomprehensible to someone who doesn't understand the language used. "Yola" is slang for crack, "trap" generally refers to the inescapability of poverty in Black neighborhoods and the drug trade, while Motorolla phones are a practical choice for dealers as they are cheap and cannot be traced. This code-switching tactic allows the artist to address either his own community (or at least those with shared experiences) or a broader, general audience. In the indigenous American context, Snotty Nose Rez Kids' (SNRK) *I Can't Remember My Name* not only interweaves Ojibway words like "neechie" (which translates to "friend" or perhaps more accurately within the context, the slang "homie") but responds to terms used by Black rappers. Made memorable by Lil Pump in 2017, Gucci Gang is adapted and recontextualized by SNRK in the lyrics "neechie gang, neechie gang, neechie gang" which follows the same rhythmic repetition as the original song. This is useful both to re-emphasize their indigenous standing and also to draw parallels between Ojibway and other minority communities – a rhetorical sovereignty that is both indigenous and compatible with

Black American rhetoric. Similarly, the word "savage" has been taken up by Black communities as an empowering identification (Megan Thee Stallion's song *Savage* serves as a convenient example). This enabled SNRK to reclaim the use of "savage" for themselves, subverting the racially derogatory history with reference to indigenous Americans with lyrics "I'm a savage from back in the day."

As there is limited academic writing on the use of music videos within anthropology, for the sake of this argument music videos will be discussed as a cinematic artform understood through the more established writings on indigenous American film, art, and music more generally. Arguably, the music video medium would not be impactful or even comprehensible without the musical/lyrical composition for which it was created. In this view, the music video becomes a secondary and optional complementary addendum to the music itself. While this may be true in certain cases, many of the videos discussed are reframed by the visual component and discussions of indigeneity thus become unavoidable. Referring back to SNRK's *I Can't Remember My Name*, the video intercuts images of the artists in contemporary clothing with traditional dancers, oftentimes reflected in a broken mirror (fig.1). While the lyrics suggest indigenous struggles, and uses Ojibway words, it is not as prominent a feature as in other music videos where chanting and drums take on major roles.

Depictions of Indigenous Americans and Visual Sovereignty

In order to make sense of the importance of cinematographic choices featured in the music videos, a viewer must have some understanding of the depictions of indigenous Americans in the media. Firstly, it is critical to note that when indigenous people are represented, they are historicized more often that not. A 2017 study from the First Nations Developmental Institute reported 40% of their respondents (randomly selected members of the American public) did not believe indigenous Americans existed in present times (Nagle 2018). Monika Siebert (2018) summarizes some key features of these contemporary and historical representations by tracing the historical depictions of Pocahontas as handmaid to colonialism, convert, object, subject with agency, and to the categories indigenous Americans are allowed or encouraged to occupy by the dominant media – a caricature, the stoic Indian, the vanishing race, and the "protestant" (activist) Indian. All of these roles are part of the classic

"cowboys vs. Indians" stereotype, which revisionist interpretations illustrate "…how Indigenous peoples of the Plains have long been pitted—in nineteenth-century paintings and Hollywood films—against the White American cowboy to create an imbalanced and misleading binary." (McMaster 2018).

This context serves to highlight the importance of a reclamation of indigenous visual sovereignty, the right of a peoples to represent themselves (and by extension be seen by others) in the manner of their own choosing. In this context, music videos produced by and featuring indigenous persons enables them to frame themselves in a dignified and truthful manner but also, critically, to explore the diversity of identity and lived indigenous experience.

Audience

Extending from visual and rhetorical sovereignty, the discussion of audience becomes increasingly relevant. Merara Mita (a Maori director) argues that the purpose of indigenous film does not have to be for broader audiences and that indigenous artists should be able to create content relevant to their communities (Dowell 2006). Similar to the linguistic choices of Black rappers, it seems the majority of the music videos analyzed address their own communities rather than broader, specifically white, audiences. This coincides with a portion of Siebert's analysis of *The Shirt* (a video art project in which an indigenous woman is filmed within a variety of American landscapes while her shirt reads off a narrative of colonial oppression). Those familiar with indigenous art may recognize the woman as Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, a prominent artist famous for working with the politics of "the gaze". Siebert argues that the woman's sunglasses "…served as metaphors for demand for privacy, refusal of objectification and denial of access to eye-to-eye contact and the illusion of authenticity such personal contact implies, and thus to insider cultural knowledge…" (Siebert 2018: 220). Essentially, it is an error of ethno-centric thinking to assume that indigenous artists have put themselves on display for the rest of the world. The use of popular genres such as rap, hip-hop, and EDM cannot be generalized as a way of reaching wider audiences, gaining attention, or staying relevant. Equally, some indigenous artists may aspire to international fame and aesthetics made popular by the genres. For this argument, it is more important to focus on the specific audience for whom the message within the music is intended.

Activist "Medicine" and the Visual Language of Resistance

Indigenous song and dance have a long history of political statement and entanglement inherently because they are indigenous and subsequently set themselves apart from mainstream media. One of the most prominent figures in recent history is Buffy Sainte-Marie, who began her career with the peace movements of the 1960s, acting as both artist and advocate. In 2017 she released an album entitled *Medicine Songs*, a politically charged critique of unfolding political strife within the United States. Mays writes in relation to Tall Paul's Songs in a Prayer that it serves as mshkiki, or medicine, for Anishinaabeg people for is power to "…heal and uplift; it can reclaim and (re)map; above all hip-hop can be the tool through which indigenous people assert a form of cultural sovereignty" against colonial and neo-colonial forces (May 2002: 205). "Medicine" in this sense can be any means of social and cultural healing for communities affected by those forces. Further, the music video for Red Eagle's *Still Here* begins with an indigenous youth watching the history of oppression and violence of his people when his mother (presumably) returns home drunk in the middle of the day. A Black screen reflecting the increased likelihood of suicide in indigenous communities is shown and the boy goes to a cabinet and contemplates a bottle of pills before reaching for his headphones. Red Eagle can be heard saying "…my people could use more self-love, especially the youth. Anyways, here's some medicine." The running theme of music serving as a medicine for an indigenous audience is a crucial point. Not only does it indicate that indigenous artists are making music for their own people, but the struggles faced by indigenous people and the fight to overcome them make up a significant part of their cultural identity.

Still Here goes on to address other issues facing indigenous communities, in particular the stereotype of the stoic Indian. Using closely cropped portrait shots the video calls to mind Edward Curtis' photographs of stoic, "disappearing race" native Americans. Unlike Curtis' photographs however, the subjects, dressed in contemporary clothing, break into laughter after a few seconds, disproving both stereotypes. These images reflect not only the visual sovereignty of indigenous peoples made possible through the music video medium but also lay the groundwork for a contemporary, indigenous visual language of resistance. Certain themes arise in a call-and-response fashion throughout the videos, suggesting that the videos are themselves a

conversation between artists within the indigenous community across the borders and boundaries of nationhood. These discussions extend to the video comments where indigenous Americans share support, pride, or experiences of indigeneity. For example, a short clip in Still Here, seemingly taken from a news broadcast, depicts tensions over the racial and cultural implications of "Chief Wahoo," the mascot for the Cleveland Indians baseball team. Drezus responds to this issue in *Get Up!* using a Canadian mascot, Chief Wannawin, by engaging in a tense eye to eye standoff with the mascot to the lyrics "I'm doing this for real, you just playin' Mr. Dress Up" (fig.2). The iconography of the raised clenched fist, a long-standing symbol of resistance and rebellion, has also become an established feature of the activist indigenous music video. "The clenched fist first became a spontaneous gesture of protest, discontent, and readiness to fight during the strike wave of the 1880's [across Europe]" before it became associated with movements like the Black Panthers (Korff and Peterson 1992: 77). Indigenous music videos engage with this visual language of protest by featuring it prominently in Drezus' *Red Winter* and *Get Up!*, Red Eagle's *Song of Survival*, and SNRK's *I Can't Remember My Name* to name a few.

Kinship Structures and Community

Another widespread feature of indigenous music videos is central emphasis on kinship and community within discussions of identity and sovereignty. Many of the videos feature the artists' families, neighborhood events (BBQs, parties, dancing), and members of their tribes or reservations (figs. 3&4). Anastasia Lapsui (Nenet) is quoted in reference to her work as a screenwriter 'I just take a slice of life, of my life or the life of my neighbors, I write it up and a film comes out. We the nomadic people live collectively, and our films are born collectively as well.' (Dowell; 2006: 380). Lapsui's sentiment is likely shared by other indigenous artists who understand their identity and experience as a collective one. Vergunst and Vermehren interpret sociality as an on-going social action, an "…experience of immersion in a shared world of meaning and understanding…" rather than fixed social structures (2012: 128) In this way, the inherent sociality of the music, video, production process, and artist's identity is expressed in its inclusion of kin and community.

Tattoos also serve to draw attention to important aspects of the individual's identity. In Drezus' *War*

Path, similarity is drawn between the temporary war paint worn and the permanence of their tattoos. Numerous times the camera focuses in on tattoos worn by Drezus' tribesmen – for example the word "family" elegantly written onto the forearm of a man in a car which re-emphasizes the importance of family and tribe within the indigenous identity (fig.5). Drezus' tattoos serve to inform us about his totemic and spiritual associations. At the beginning of the video is his bicep tattoo of Piapot, a chief whose spirit a wise woman had sensed in him during his troubled youth. After overcoming his struggles with drugs, alcohol, and mental health, Drezus turned to the figure of Piapot (fig. 6), who turned from horse thief to respected chief, as a guide for his life. With his arm flexed, it indicates from where Drezus draws his strength – from a character of his own history, told through indigenous story telling. The second is of a large chest piece of an eagle to which he raps "forever reppin' my clan/The eagle's an old man, watchin' over my plans", claiming his totemic association to the Eagle (fig.7).

Using Meyer Fortes' (1972) understanding of totems as "quasi-kinship" in native American communities to maintain social orders, Drezus' continued representation of the Eagle totem identifies both his "kinship" and keeps alive traditional social orders and indigenous thinking despite social restructuring by colonial powers.

Indigenous Motion: Moving Between Worlds

The final overarching theme of indigenous music videos that will be discussed is the relationship between modern and traditional life as it is lived and embodied by the indigenous American. In multiple videos, such as in *Prayers in a Song* and *Still Here*, the artist is filmed rapping on a highway overpass. As with most videos, scenes cut back and forth between the indigenous community and native symbols to the urban world in which many native peoples live. The artist, especially in the case of Tall Paul who switches between Anishinaabeg and English, walks across a bridge, moving between these two worlds and embodying both simultaneously. For a people who are often only represented as a relic of the past, historicized and erased from modernity, this act of visual and rhetorical sovereignty demands that the viewer acknowledges the place and existence of the indigenous American within the viewer's own society.

The importance of dance in indigenous culture cannot be downplayed. *Indomitable*, clearly presents dance as the purest freedom of expression

and pinnacle moment for the central character. Dance is used by indigenous Americans as an expression of heritage and ancestry, deeply rooted in indigenous spirituality and prayer. Native Hope, a blog which aims to support Native American communities, explains the word pau-wau (pow wow) originally referred to healing ceremonies. In this way we can understand dance to be "medicine" in the same sense Mays argues rap and hip-hop serve the native community.

Recollet (2014) argues that break dance, like hip-hop, is rooted in the language of Black American resistance to systematic violence. Her analysis focuses on how break dance has been taken up by native communities as a modern means of "indigenous motion", something which colonialism restrained by the taking of land, drawing of borders, and forced exile of indigenous communities. She also highlights the expression of native thought in break dance such as "eagle step", a move that emulates the motion of a hovering eagle, which corresponds to the creation of traditional dance moves. In the same way that rap becomes a modern form of chant, modern dance, in particular breakdancing, features alongside traditional dance as its new form within the community. Again, the theme is repeated across many videos, but the connection is most clearly drawn in Red Eagle's *Song of Survival*. Here, two scenes stand out. In one, a break dancer is featured in contemporary clothes flanked by two traditional dancers in traditional dance. In the second, a woman in traditional dance performs a series of steps before passing her headdress to Red Eagle and transitioning into a breakdance. The evolution of indigenous American dance is headed towards that of urban street dance, but it retains its indigeneity through both the identity of the performer and the dance steps used, which Recollet argues are hidden languages which can subvert dominate narratives (2014: 5)

Conclusion

While it is impossible to reduce an entire world of music down to a simple set of out-sider observations, I hope this essay may serve to illustrate the importance of some contemporary music and accompanying videos produced by indigenous North American communities. Subaltern peoples everywhere are engaged in anti-colonial forms of resistance, fighting to reclaim their identities. The use of music videos on platforms like YouTube help these nations reclaim rhetorical and visual sovereignty and engage both their own people and broader audiences in discussions

of media representation, colonial struggles, and the future they will build for themselves. It is this aspect that makes the music video "medicine" to communities that bridge the divide between modern and traditional ways of living. The result is what Recollet credits A Tribe Called Red, a First Nations music group which rose to popularity in 2013-16, for highlighting – "an urban identity…expressed as an "electric pow wow" weaving in and out of these [dominant] representations through layers of samples and re-mixes of invented Indians." (2014 p. 14). This said, indigenous artists should not be confined within the parameters of indigeneity. They are inherently artists and while an understanding of the messages behind their work can further appreciation for the complexity of their productions, their content can be enjoyed simply for what it is – art.

NOTES

Figure 1: Snotty Nose Rez Kids, *I Can't Remember My Name*

Figure 2: Drezus, *Get Up!*

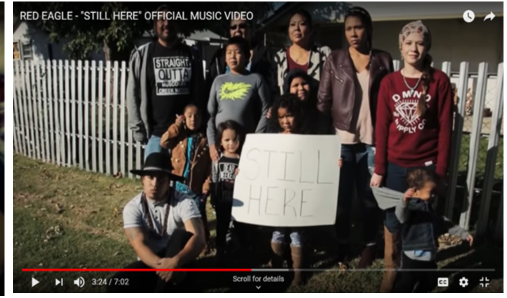

Figure 3: Red Eagle, *Still Here*

Figure 4: Drezus, *War Path*

Figure 5: Drezus, *War Path*

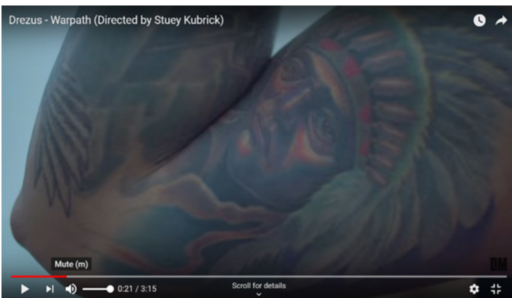

Figure 6: Drezus, *War Path*

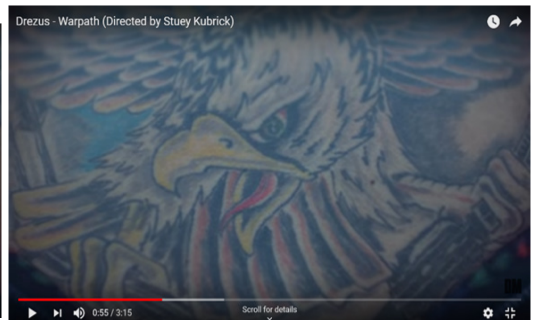

Figure 7: Drezus, *War Path*

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