

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Welcome to the Tundra”: Tanya Tagaq's creative and communicative agency as political strategy

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Abstract

Indigenous artists are frequently placed within the too-tidy binary of traditional vs. modern. Indigenous culture is considered frozen and, thus, incompatible with modernity. This article examines the Inuk avant-garde vocalist Tanya Tagaq (b. 1975), whose creative and communicate outputs demonstrate a larger political project of undermining mainstream representational practices regarding Indigenous identity (particularly in Canada) and presenting Indigenous-centered sounds and perspectives. While Tagaq has constructed an artistic identity that challenges the simple binaries of past/present and traditional/modern, mainstream media often relies on representational practices straight from the Settler colonialist playbook. This article illustrates how she makes her agency clear in both her artistic output and in her social media activity on Twitter. I examine media coverage of Indigenous artists and Tagaq in particular and then dismantle the self/other and modern/traditional binaries with reference to her two latest albums—*_Animism_* and *_Retribution_*—and two Twitter “wars” in which Tagaq's celebrity status incites both reactive and active critique of Indigenous—and specifically Inuit—representation in Canada. She, in turn, presents her own narrative as a deliberate strategy of cultural and political self-determination.

1 | LIVING INDIANS

Problem was, Live Indians didn't die out. They were supposed to, but they didn't. Since North America already had the Dead Indian, Live Indians were neither needed nor wanted. They were irrelevant, and as the nineteenth century rolled into the twentieth century, Live Indians were forgotten, safely stored away on reservations and reserves or scattered in the rural backwaters and cityscapes of Canada and the United States. Out of sight, out of mind. Out of mind, out of sight. (King, 2012, p. 61)

Indigenous artists are frequently placed within the too-tidy binary of traditional versus modern, as if these two terms are mutually exclusive. Reinforcing this binary when talking about music seems to suggest that somehow it is remarkable that a traditional musical practice could be modernized in any way. Indigenous culture is considered

frozen and, thus, incompatible with modernity. When innovations are perceived, the results can be demonized as cultural transgressions, romanticized, blamed on the influence of urban culture—where no true Indigenous culture exists (Peters & Andersen, 2013, p. 1)—or used as evidence that Indigenous culture no longer exists at all (Bruyneel, 2007, p. 7; Vowel, 2016, pp. 75, 165–167). The implications of this belief are tremendous, considering many land claims require one to show an unbroken cultural existence (Povinelli, 1999).

This article examines the Inuk avant-garde vocalist Tanya Tagaq (b. 1975), whose creative and communicative outputs demonstrate a larger political project of undermining mainstream representational practices regarding Indigenous identity (particularly in Canada) and presenting Indigenous-centered sounds and perspectives. While Tagaq has constructed an artistic identity that challenges the simple binaries of past/present and traditional/modern, mainstream media often relies on representational practices straight from the settler colonialist playbook. Artistic and personal agency is significant for an Inuk woman, twice marginalized due to her ethnicity and gender, an intersection all the more troubling with the high number of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls in Canada. This article illustrates how she makes her agency clear in both her artistic output and in her social media activity on Twitter. I examine media coverage of Indigenous artists and Tagaq in particular and then dismantle the modern/traditional binary with reference to her two latest albums—*Animism* (2014) and *Retribution* (2016)—and two Twitter “wars” in which Tagaq’s celebrity status incites both reactive and active critique of Indigenous—and specifically Inuit—representation in Canada.

A legacy of the settler colonialist project is the perception that “... the colonized are ... temporally constrained—whether referred to as primitive or traditional—and therefore incapable of modern agency and independence” (Bruyneel, 2007, p. 2). Through her creative and communicative outputs, Tagaq challenges this perception. For Tagaq, her creative and communicative agency is a matter of survival for herself, her children, and her community.

2 | THE TROUBLE WITH “TRADITION”

Social media, DNA ancestry advertisements, and casual conversations abound with claims to “Native ancestry.” An identity once hidden by Indigenous peoples due to fierce social condemnation (Fitzgerald, 2007; Lawrence, 2004) and erased by over a century of residential school programming (Miller, 1996; Regan, 2010; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) has now become social caché—and a too-common “move to innocence” regarding North America’s dark colonial past (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 10–13). Such claims reinforce the belief that the only “Indians” are, as Thomas King puts it, “Dead Indians,” or people from some distant past with whom we can have a genetic connection but nothing else. But this lack of distinction between ancestry and identity ignores the centrality of lived experience within community as markers of Indigeneity (Grande, San Pedro, & Windchief, 2015; TallBear, 2013; Vowel, 2016).

Furthermore, a notion that Indigenous peoples are only of the past reinforces homogeneous and frozen conceptions of Indigenous culture. Homi Bhabha insists that “hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable” (1995, p. 156), as are the traditions such cultures practice. “Tradition” is a rather slippery term, and to be otherwise could mean falling into the trap of claiming “tradition” as frozen culture from time immemorial. Tradition is a fluid concept that allows existing practices to evolve and new practices based on an Indigenous worldview to form. Exactly who decides what fits in an Indigenous worldview is complicated, especially as settler colonialism sought to assimilate—and eliminate—Indigenous peoples, leaving trauma, dislocation, and cultural genocide in its wake. A fluid understanding of tradition does not avoid tensions as Indigenous communities and scholars consider the boundaries between innovation/recontextualization versus violation. Cherokee scholar Eva Marie Garroutte explains that a narrow understanding of “tradition” can lead to monolithic perceptions of Indigenous peoples (even by Indigenous peoples): all “real Indians” and their traditions are the same. And if they are not, then they are “degenerate and inauthentic” traditions (2003, p. 67). She emphasizes cultural heterogeneity, even within one nation, such as Cherokee. Different communities will have different traditions. Nonetheless, guardianship over “tradition” remains highly contextualized within the systems of governance and cultural stewardship of individual nations and communities, sometimes with a distinction between what is a “tradition” for the Indigenous community members and what is framed as “tradition” for non-Indigenous observers and participants.

Traditional cultural practices are important to Indigenous communities. But the mainstream narratives invoking the concept of “tradition” are often created by non-Indigenous voices, and they reinforce an atemporal, and, consequently imaginary, past. Commonly “traditional” is contrasted with “contemporary,” which is based on the assumption that tradition is something ancient. While there is a temporal component to tradition, with the sharing across and between generations of practices based on knowledge and beliefs that emerge from an Indigenous worldview, there is no magic formula for calculating when a practice is old enough to become “tradition.” An ancient origin story of a tradition has its usefulness, but it can be ultimately devastating to Indigenous individuals and communities such as those who must reclaim a cultural identity and related practices due to violent erasure (Garrouette, 2003) and urban-based Indigenous communities whose daily lives seem to be disconnected from notions of Indigenous traditions but who are, in fact, a distinct and vital Indigenous group with clear traditions (Peters & Andersen, 2013).

In the settler’s imagination, “modern” is outside Indigeneity. And modern accoutrements cannot accompany an “authentic” Indigenous life (King, 2012). In Daniel Francis’s *Imaginary Indians* (1992), he argues that the only concept of “Indians” was the fantasy of a precontact Indian, often the Noble Savage. In addressing the Canadian context in particular, Francis explains:

Canadians did not expect Indians to adapt to the modern world. Their only hope was to assimilate, to become White, to cease to be Indians. In this view, a modern Indian is a contradiction in terms: Whites could not imagine such a thing. Any Indian was by definition a traditional Indian, a relic of the past. The only image of the Indian presented to non-Natives was therefore an historical one. The image could not be modernized (p. 59).

Narrow understandings of what Indigeneity looks like means that everyday Indigenous peoples fight for visibility and acceptance, both within their own communities and within society more broadly.

I apply Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel’s (2016) frustration with the myth of authenticity (p. 165–167) to Indigenous musical practices here. What does “traditional” even mean in this context? A musical practice that has existed for a long time (Where is the arbitrary line between the past and present/modern?) Or is perceived to be a longstanding musical practice? Is it a practice that seems to belong more to the community than to individuals profiting within the capitalist music industry? Those distinctions do not hold up as soon as one looks at a musical practice such as the powwow drum. While this music is considered “traditional,” drum groups continue to write new songs, styles change as influences circulate, and the powwow recording industry is thriving, not to mention that the powwow is a relatively recent tradition (Hoefnagals & Diamond, 2012; Scales, 2012). The concept of “tradition” remains important (see King, 2012, p. 66), but assumptions that traditions must be ancient, pure, and unchanging are unsound. Traditions can evolve and emerge as Indigenous worldviews are recontextualized in modern life. In *Aboriginal Music in Contemporary Canada*, Anna Hoefnagals and Beverley Diamond emphasize that for many Indigenous musicians and their communities “tradition” is not oppositional to “contemporary” or “modernity.” Indeed, “[they] might see new forms or styles as adding new layers of meaning, referencing both the contemporary and older memories simultaneously” (2012, p. 27).

From Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, Tanya Tagaq Gillis is an Inuk avant-garde vocalist whose career was initially launched when she toured in 2001 with Icelandic artist Björk and appeared on the track “Ancestors” on Björk’s 2004 album *Medúlla*. She further solidified her international status by working with the Kronos Quartet, a relationship which they renewed in 2016 for Kronos’s “Fifty for the Future”: Tagaq is one of 50 composers commissioned to create a work as part of the Kronos Learning Repertoire¹; they premiered the work in Toronto in May 2016. Tagaq was not raised learning *katajjaq* (traditional Inuit throat singing), but she tells the story of her mother sending her tapes when she studied in Halifax (Stanley, 2015). Tagaq began to practice the sounds alone, and thus began her idiosyncratic vocal approach (Stévance, 2010, 2015, 2017), which is influenced by but distinct from traditional games (Diamond, 2008), though she has learned many traditional vocal games and has performed them.² Sophie Stévance’s work on Tagaq avoids the binary of traditional/modern by framing her artistic practice as “blending ... the *katajjaq* tradition and Western cultural and musical codes” (2017, p. 49), creating a transcultural musical signature.

By contrast, media coverage of Tagaq’s music focuses on the binary between the traditional and the modern, noting that she combines *katajjaq* with contemporary improvisational approaches and sounds. For example, a 2014 article highlighted “Tanya Tagaq’s innovative mixture of traditional and modern musical techniques” (Pettigrew, 2014). These

two words frequently emerge: tradition and modern, as if somehow they are incongruous, and their mere simultaneity demonstrates a remarkable innovation. The title of Allison Grogan's article "Inuk Throat Singers gives Traditional Music New Life" (2014) seems to suggest that *katajjaq* was a dead and forgotten musical practice before Tagaq. Indeed, the practice had been banned and almost forgotten in some Inuit communities (Nattiez, 2006). Tagaq did not learn Inuit vocal games from practitioners in her community—there were none. But other Inuk women, such as the Kettler sisters, had been reviving the traditional practice for years before Tagaq. Tagaq explains frequently in concerts and in interviews that she does not intend to misrepresent her music as traditional Inuit vocal games or to replace them, and she encourages people to seek out *katajjaq*.

My aim here is articulate how mainstream media uses the concept of "tradition" to represent Tagaq as an Indigenous artist in contrast to how Tagaq constructs a relationship to "tradition" in order to emphasize her agency. Hoefnagals and Diamond explain: "The ongoing development of 'traditional' music often reflects local, and sometimes very personal, understandings of what is meant by 'tradition'" (2012, p. 27–28). Tagaq intentionally frames her creative output in relation to *katajjaq*, a practice referred to as "tradition" by its Inuit practitioners and communities because the practice has persisted across generations and reflects an Inuit worldview.

In an interview with NPR's Talia Schlanger, Tagaq explains: "This [*katajjaq*] is part of a root of what I do but it isn't traditional. Not even close. ... I don't adhere to the rules of traditional throat singing. ... I don't like following rules." Tagaq has intentionally positioned herself in relation to *katajjaq*, what Stévançe calls "a strategy of agency, an act of protest at the crossroads of Inuit values and stereotypes of the pop scene" (2017, p. 54). Her creative practice clearly references the Inuit cultural practice of *katajjaq*, but she also obviously rejects certain elements, thereby signaling her uniqueness—her creative agency. Stévançe argues that this process grants Tagaq her autonomy (2017, p. 55). Such autonomy is politically significant for an Inuk woman in Canada, where food insecurity and suicides are rampant in northern communities and Indigenous women are more likely to experience multiple forms of violence, including being six times more likely to be victims of homicide than non-Indigenous women (Brennan, 2011; Brownridge, 2003). Thus, the political project of challenging mainstream narratives about Inuit cultural identity and presenting her own narrative manifests in both her creative and communicative output—a deliberate strategy of cultural and political self-determination.

While the media frames Tagaq's positionality as a modern Inuk woman in ways that often reinforce stereotypes about Indigenous peoples, she uses her creative and communicative acts to defy this framing and craft her own much more nuanced and empowered message. Her creative practice demonstrates that cultures are broad enough to contain diverse musical practices, including traditional Inuit vocal games (i.e., *katajjait*), Tagaq's avant-garde vocal approach, and the throat-boxing of Nelson Tagoona, among others. Tagaq herself exclaims: "I'm the product of an English man and an Inuk woman. I'm a product of colonization, a product of the land, of raving in my twenties. So I don't have to fall into any one category, and I think that's what happened with music as well." Tagaq's musical practice demonstrates the limits of the easy binaries of traditional/modern and past/present. Indeed, as Thomas King insists: "All Native people living in North America today are Live Indians" (2012, p. 61). These Living Indians keep failing to match the image of the Dead Indian, the authentic Indian, who surely does not have television or wear skinny jeans. And nothing will reconcile the Living Indian to the white settler's belief about authentic Indians, that is, the Dead Indian. King explains: "In order to maintain the cult and sanctity of the Dead Indian, North America has decided that Live Indians living today cannot be genuine Indians. ... Live Indians are fallen Indians, modern, contemporary copies, not authentic at all, Indians by biological association only" (2012, p. 65).

Tagaq's creative output refuses to be anything but a careful construction of her identity as a contemporary Inuk woman, and as such as her work becomes a site of agency and autonomy from which to protest against the division of past/present, tradition/modernity. This active construction of her identity is an inherently political resistance against cultural erasure, invisibility, and misunderstanding. Tagaq is an utterly unique vocalist who calls upon pop practices to transgress *katajjaq* cultural codes, *katajjaq* and other avant-garde vocal techniques to violate Western pop music ideals (Stévançe, 2017), and punk culture to defiantly reject criticisms from either direction. For example, in our interview, she described critical community elders as "possessive arse wipes" (T. Tagaq, personal communication, April 17, 2011). Her artistic practice continues to transform.

Tagaq's first studio album *Sinaa* (2005) includes known *katajjait* ("Qimiruluapik," "Seamless"), a traditional Inuit song ("Qiujaviiit"), and many other vocal-focused tracks, with layers of Tagaq's improvised vocalizations and some Basque txalaparta. *Sinaa* creates a delicate contrapuntal musical world centered around the wide capacity of Tagaq's vocalizations. The subsequent four albums (three studio, one live) transform sonically due to her collaborations with improvisers Jesse Zubot (violin) and Jean Martin (drums). *Auk/Blood* (2008) also includes many other collaborators such as Cree-Mennonite cellist Cris Derksen, rapper Buck 65, and beat-boxer Shamik Bilgi. This album's tone is one of erotic desperation, depicted most obviously in the lyrics, vocal utterances, and climactic builds of "Want" and "Hunger." The album's first track "Fox-Tiriganiak" anticipates the focus of *Animism*.

The title of Tagaq's third studio album *Animism* denotes a belief that animals and other living things on earth have a soul, and, thus, the album tracks refer to animals (e.g., "Rabbit") and animal behaviors (e.g., "Howl," "Fight," and "Flight"). This belief is fundamental to her understanding of Inuit seal hunting. She takes on environmental issues with the album's last track, "Fracking." The song opens with a long painful moan, which slowly descends into her throat, as piercing violin layers build the tension. At times it sounds like she is choking, as the vocal sounds descend further and further. The strings crescendo as Tagaq sobs, growls, and chokes. Suddenly the tension stops, as Tagaq's sweetly and softly closes out the album.

Tagaq picks up on this environmental focus on *Retribution*. In a time when "reconciliation" is a hot term in Canada, following The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, it is revealing that Tagaq chose to focus on "retribution." Several tracks on this album demonstrate Tagaq's creative practice as a construction of different musical and cultural codes. "Aorta" is particularly effective at juxtaposing the vocal sounds of *katajjajq*, a punk aesthetic, and pop song conventions due to its steady drum pattern and sense of song structure, despite the lack of any repeating sections and minimal lyrics. "Aorta" establishes a dark and aggressive soundscape with its vocal layers, industrial noises (by Jesse Zubot), moderate and heavy drum pattern (120 bpm), and what sounds like an electric guitar.³ The song opens with a striking guttural cry with heavy reverb, each one followed by a higher octave echo that resembles a bird call. Mid-range and higher range sustained pitches surrounded the voice, which articulates its cry in a steady pulse that will soon be picked up by the drums (0:13). The drop of the drum beat is accompanied by new higher vocalizations while the opening cry continues beneath. This initial beat is only a warm-up to the drop of the full, heavy drum pattern at 0:28. The dark, industrial feel is created by the "electric guitar" and a low, vibrating distorted sound. When Tagaq's low, rhythmic growls suddenly emerge front and center in the mix (0:44), the song sounds like it has arrived at something resembling a verse. This section is followed by an instrumental break (1:17); new growl sounds (1:25) anticipate the arrival of another section—what could be considered a kind of second "verse," although the vocal material is not repeated.

Instead, Tagaq vocalizes recognizable phonemes, resembling an almost pseudo-language. A sudden break at 1:47 followed by a drop at 1:49 suggests an arrival at the "chorus," with Tagaq uttering short repetitive throaty phrases before shifting (2:07) to the only lyrics of the song—"kill or die"—vocalized with an affected timbre and a sustained high vocal tone offering a contrast to the aggressive vocals. Tagaq returns to a regular pattern of growls (2:26) at a slower rhythmic pace, creating a half-time feel; this clearly sounds like a new section, though, without lyrics and repeating music, it defies a label. This vocal layer above the drum pattern continues as new vocal layers are introduced (starting around 3:00)—a kind of vocal virtuosity builds to the climax. The momentum stops suddenly at 3:25 when the drums stop, leaving only a distorted vocal fry centered in the mix until it suddenly cuts out and leaves only silence. "Aorta" references *katajjajq* in some of the vocal sounds and Western pop music in the steady drum beat and song structure, but with a unique vocal virtuosity and alarming sound world befitting the album's theme. While this description of "Aorta" demonstrates that *Retribution* is unsurprisingly more aggressive than her previous albums, it ends with Tagaq's heartbreakingly sweet vocals on the cover of Kurt Cobain's "Rape Me." The song's appropriateness lies not only with Tagaq's own painful past with sexual abuse but with her broader message of "I'm not the only one." This statement resonates both with the environmental message of the album as well as with Tagaq's fierce outrage over the significant numbers of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls in Canada.⁴

Tagaq's music references diverse musical codes (i.e., *katajjajq*, Western pop music, punk, and experimental music) through the perspective of a contemporary, living Inuk woman whose home is impacted by climate change and whose community continues to suffer from the legacy of colonialism. But her creative output is only part of a larger political

project that also uses social media to undermine stereotypes of Inuit culture and Indigenous identity more broadly and present her own narrative of a modern Inuk woman. The intersection of her creative and communicative outputs is striking in two examples of Twitter “wars”: #sealfie and *of the North*.

3 | “WHAT WE EAT”: #SEALFIE AS INUIT SURVIVAL

Twitter is a real-time, multifarious social medium that boasts over 300 million monthly active users. It is a virtual space, but it has proven essential for building communities beyond typical in-person geographical limitations, organizing events and protests, spreading news not covered in mainstream media, and hosting conversations about diverse topics from a variety of viewpoints. Twitter’s hashtags create what Michele Zappavigna calls ambient affiliative networks (2012): anyone who is interested in a particular hashtag can search for related posts and add their own post to the network by including the hashtag. Twitter’s primary function is not political, but many posts from Tagaq and other Indigenous artists and scholars engage directly with political issues and mobilize Indigenous Twitter users and allies in political critique of the legacy of settler colonialism in Canada.

Twitter allows an Indigenous artist like Tagaq to share her personal and professional lives, which cannot be separated from her identity as an Inuk woman, and which she intentionally does *not* avoid addressing. In both her creative output and public communications, Tagaq often engages in potentially controversial and/or politically charged topics. By necessity of the spotlight of celebrity, she has become a cultural ambassador, not only of music, but also of Inuit ways of life, including seal hunting and environment issues. Her thoughts on hunting and the interconnectedness of humans and other living things are clear in the 2010 short film “Tungijug (What We Eat),” in which Tagaq is both hunter and hunted, wolf and caribou, and seal and human. Clips from this film were used as promotion for *Animism*. In the final clip, Tagaq takes a piece from insight the freshly killed seal and eats it.⁵

The Inuit community has fought hard for seal hunting rights, in response to bans on seal hunting from Greenpeace and PETA. Both organizations have explained that this ban applies to commercial seal hunting, not Indigenous hunting rights, but Inuit seal hunters and Indigenous activists have argued that calls to ban commercial sealing and the international sale of seal products negatively affects Inuit hunters and the viability of sustainability in the Arctic. Inuk filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril addresses the misconceptions and real-life consequences of the seal ban in her award-winning documentary “Angry Inuk” (2016), which features music by Tagaq. Protest against seal hunting persists.

Tagaq’s #sealfie story begins at the Oscars. On March 2, 2014, Ellen DeGeneres hosted the Academy Awards and tweeted what was to become a famous selfie, with Bradley Cooper, Jennifer Lawrence, Brad Pitt, Julia Roberts, Kevin Spacey, Meryl Streep, and Lupita Nyong’o, among others. Due to the massive publicity of this photo—which was taken on a Samsung Galaxy Note 3—Samsung donated \$1 for every retweet to the charity of DeGeneres’s choice. The total came to \$3 million, which she split between St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), an organization actively opposing Canada’s seal hunt and to which DeGeneres has been a strong supporter. DeGeneres and her now-wife Portia de Rossi were awarded The HSUS’s Wyler Award which is “bestowed on a celebrity or public figures who has made news on behalf of animals.” Though certainly not the first time that public figures have opposed the seal hunt, this was one of the most publicized in recent memory, and it sparked a strong reaction from the Northern and Eastern communities in Canada, particularly after a video response to DeGeneres that Inuk teenager Killaq Enuaraq Strauss posted to YouTube on March 23, 2014.⁶ In this video, Strauss confesses she is a huge Ellen fan and is, thus, “a little bit insulted, and hurt, and disappointed” that DeGeneres chose to support an organization opposed to seal hunting. Strauss tries to undo some of the pervasive misunderstandings related to seal hunting and Inuit culture.

The social media reaction against DeGeneres’s selfie began pouring in as people posted pictures of themselves wearing seal or on a seal hunt, along with the hashtag #sealfie. Some “sealfies” were group shots designed to imitate the original Oscar selfie. Twitter has played an important role in Indigenous activism in Canada, most notably through #idlenomore, the name of which was first used in a tweet on November 4, 2012 as Indigenous individuals and groups

across Canada were eager to find ways to discuss and decry Bill C-45 (Kino-nda-niimi Collective, 2014). This hashtag was and is still used to publicize and organize events.

On March 28, 2014, Tagaq joined the #sealfie efforts and posted an old photo of her infant daughter lying next to a dead seal. Hundreds of Twitter users incorporated the #sealfie hashtag, mostly in support of the Indigenous seal hunt, but Tagaq's celebrity status singled out her tweet, and accelerated the reach and response to both the #sealfie movement overall and her specific tweet. With a speed only witnessed on social media like Twitter, Tagaq began receiving hateful messages, some with death threats, other suggesting that her children be taken away from her by social services, and still others offering an image of Tagaq's baby being killed by a seal hunter. Tagaq retweeted the violent messages, as well as those that responded with shock and support. Here are some of the tweets that were against Tagaq's #sealfie:

@PricelessBiach: Wow ... Pretty SICK 2 take a pic of a baby laying next 2 a bludgeoned baby seal then actually POST it 4 all 2 see [angry face emoji] (March 29, 2014 at 2:39 p.m.).⁷

@straysneedlove: @PricelessBiach @queenbitched That's actually abusive to the child. Nothing like putting your baby next to a dead body for fun (March 30, 2014 at 4:20 a.m.).⁸

@mikedowson222: @SherryLeeB @PricelessBiach She should have the baby taken off her. She isn't a fit mother, she's obviously inbred, lacking intelligence (March 30, 2014).⁹

By April 2, Canadian news outlets were covering the Twitter drama that had unfolded due to Tagaq's choice to participate on social media in a way that called upon her maternal and cultural identities. In fact, it was her choice to support and advocate for a traditional cultural practice that resulted in an aggressive interrogation of her mothering ability. Such criticism is only one recent example in a long history of settler culture deeming the Inuit unfit parents (Vowel, 2016, p. 117–118, 182).

The #sealfie backlash soon overshadowed the promotion of *Animism*, but she then used the momentum to turn the message back to Inuit sovereignty and environmental issues, such as sustainability. Tagaq's message that "You can love animals and survive off them" was quoted alongside her Twitter handle and #Animism, emphasizing the role of the album and her as an artist as cultural representatives. When she later won the prestigious Polaris Music Prize in 2014 for *Animism*, she used the opportunity to reinforce her message about Inuit seal hunting rights: "People should wear and eat seal as much as possible because if you imagine an Indigenous culture thriving and surviving on a sustainable resource (points to seal fur wrist cuff). Wearing seal and eating it. It's delicious, and there's lots of them, and fuck PETA."¹⁰

Twitter allows Tagaq to share her perspective as an Inuk woman and mother, which is significant given the oppression of both women and Indigenous peoples in a white male-dominated settler society. By transforming the reactions to her #sealfie post into an opportunity to reinforce her broader artistic practice (specifically, *Animism*) and political project, Tagaq expresses her agency and disrupts simple binaries, unravelling those placed on Indigenous peoples as either past or present, traditional or modern, savage or civilized, and so on. Speaking about traditional Inuit culture and knowledge through a 21st-century online app, insisting on Inuit sovereignty and self-determination today, and highlighting the creative work of an Inuk artist clearly linked but not restricted to a traditional musical practice: such communicative acts prove that Indigenous culture is neither frozen in some atemporal past nor lost when seen in a modern guise. With *Animism* and her #sealfie story, Tagaq exposes the ongoing temporal and spatial erasure of colonialism and replaces it with her own narrative, expressed in both sound and word.

Tagaq's #sealfie backlash initially required a reactive response, which she then transformed for her own ends. In the next Twitter story, Tagaq initiates a critical discussion, wielding her celebrity status to amplify her message, boost the posts of her allies, and apply significant pressure to both an independent filmmaker and film festival.

4 | RETRIBUTION WILL BE SWIFT

For Tagaq's latest album *Retribution*, she continued to work with Zubot and Martin. Live collaborations with the improvisation Element Choir have now been translated to the studio on this album. The album also includes Tuvan throat singer

Radik Tyulyush, with whom she performed live in Toronto in March 2015. This album's dedication is "to those we have lost to suicide," a text written over an ominous burning landscape. This imagery refers to the environmental theme of the album, namely that "Gaia likes it cold" but humans have hastened earth's destruction. The title track exclaims: "Our mother grows angry. Retribution will be swift." The lyrics blame the worship of money as to why "we squander her soil and suck out her sweet black blood to burn it." The music represents the looming apocalypse, especially on "Nacreous," "Sulfur," and "Summoning." *Retribution* contains the sounds of an Inuk artist insisting on recognition *now*, for herself and for her people—as a people still alive and thriving despite deliberate attempts to annihilate their bodies and erase their culture. Tagaq's album contains semblances of what we consider "traditional" (i.e., Inuit vocal game sounds, evocations of the North, and messages of environmentalism). But *Retribution* does not allow the listener to imagine safe images of an "imaginary Indian," or in this case, an imaginary Eskimo,¹¹ such as Nanook in the infamous 1922 "documentary."

Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* is a troubling artifact, as it used staged events to reinforce stereotypes of Inuit peoples as premodern (still unaware of guns, modern clothing, or gramophone technology—Inuit culture as frozen and timeless) and exotically immoral, with Nanook's two women. Neither of these women were Nanook's (his real name is Allakariallak) wives; they were director Robert Flaherty's mistresses. The character Nyla was played by Maggie Nujarluktuk, who gave birth to Flaherty's illegitimate and unacknowledged son Josephie a few months after his departure (McGrath, 2008). The film reinforces the Inuit as exotic Other: charming, intriguing, innocent, and premodern; a culture that should be set apart. Indeed, the government took steps to further isolate Inuit communities through the High Arctic Relocation of the 1950s; this was in essence a forced move of an Inuit community into two locations 2,000 km north of their home in Inukjuak (on Quebec's Ungava Peninsula) to secure Canada's claim to the Arctic and protect the "innocence" of the Inuit (Marcus, 1992; McGrath, 2008).

Because the film perpetuates stereotypes and presents the Inuit through an outsider's perspective—from 1922—Tagaq wanted contemporary audiences to re-evaluate the film, for both its beauty and problems, and to demonstrate expressive and cultural agency over its images. Derek Charke (with whom she had worked on 2007's *Tundra Songs* composed for Kronos Quartet and Tagaq) composed a soundtrack for playback, while Tagaq, Martin, and Zubot improvised live to accompany the film at the 2012 Toronto International Film Festival. She continues to tour with the film. When I saw a performance in March 2015, Tagaq confessed both anger and love toward this film, as it does portray the beauty of the land and the resiliency of her people. But she warned us that her anger at certain scenes would be clear from her improvisation.

Tagaq's *Nanook of the North* project centers an Inuk voice and seeks to highlight the troubling stereotypes that emerge when outsiders tell the stories of a historically misrepresented and oppressed people group. Thus, when non-Indigenous (and self-proclaimed "white") Quebec filmmaker Dominic Gagnon released *of the North*, it was unfortunate that again, Inuit were being portrayed through an outsider's perspective, with the final result reinforcing troubling stereotypes. Filmmaker Dominic Gagnon thought he was serving the Inuit people (though he has never been to the North) by bringing their own modern stories to a broader audience, in direct contrast to past representations of the North as an untouched land of tradition, devoid of modern accoutrements; in fact, the title directly refers to Flaherty's film. Like Gagnon's previous films, *of the North* consists entirely of found footage, in this case 500 hours of YouTube footage supposedly created by and uploaded by inhabitants of Canada's most northern region. He edited together footage of oil rigs, drinking, vomiting, seal hunting, and a close-up of a vagina, among other clips.

The 74-minute film was initially well-received; only after it screened on November 17, 2015 at the Rencontres Internationales du documentaire de Montréal did Gagnon's *of the North* gain negative press, particularly in Canada. A friend told Tagaq about the disturbing film, and after Tagaq watched it, she posted a series of tweets criticizing the film and calling out RIDM for its programming decision, demanding to speak to the director and jury for the festival.

@RIDM I'm disgusted by your choice to screen *Of The North*. He had no permission to use my music. I would like to talk to your jury. (Nov 24/15 @4:54 p.m.)¹²

@RIDM I would also like to have a meeting with your director. This is unacceptable. (Nov 24/15 @4:57 p.m.)¹³

.@RIDM chose to show a painful and racist film that uses my music without consent. I did not give permission to the filmmaker. (Nov 24/15 @5:01 p.m.)¹⁴

Tagaq considered the film to be racist not only for presenting Inuit drunk and incompetent, but also for its sexually explicit content, including juxtaposing a clip of a dog's anus with one of a woman's vagina. Twitter allowed Tagaq to circumvent conventional modes of media to which marginalized groups typically have limited access (Atton, 2002). Tagaq did not have to call her local paper or radio station, or even attempt an email to the CBC. Tagaq could post her outrage directly on Twitter, where an audience of self-selected individuals were waiting to hear what she had to say,¹⁵ and many more individuals and organizations would be brought into the conversation through hashtags, creating ambient affiliative networks.

Initially Tagaq's tweets encouraged other Indigenous artists and scholars to reply and retweet in support, including Anishinaabeg duo Digging Roots, Indigenous DJ-producer collective A Tribe Called Red, Métis scholar Chelsea Vowel, and Inuk filmmaker Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, all of whom have their own extensive networks of Twitter followers. While it is important to avoid homogenizing Indigenous peoples, the importance of intertribal, or pan-Indigenous, solidarity cannot be overstated. Tagaq's celebrity status means that her tweets have relatively strong visibility, making it more likely that other Twitter users will see and engage, including those to whom she directs her comments: in this case, the film festival. In less than half an hour after Tagaq's initial tweet, RIDM responded.

Of Tagaq's initial two charges against the film—first, that Gagnon used her music without permission, second, that the film is racist—the former received the most attention initially. Copyright infringement is a more clear-cut issue and one that is much more easily rectified than charges of racism: remove the music or pay the agreed royalties to include it.

But in this series of tweets, Tagaq invoked her status as both an artist *and* as an Inuk (specially an Inuk *woman*). These are constituent parts of her public and private identity that she frequently invokes in the public forum of social media. With her attack on *of the North*, she saw the violations as intertwined, particularly with the inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Children:¹⁶

@craig_burley @RIDM it's very unnerving that given the horrible stats with #MMIW that they would screen this film. (Nov 24/15 @5:08 p.m.)¹⁷

.@RIDM he also used @iskell music without permission. Using our music to stigmatize and discredit our culture. I'm disgusted. (Nov 24/15 @ 5:34 p.m.)¹⁸

.@cbcradioq @CBCMusic @CBC_Aboriginal I'm deeply offended by the unauthorized use of my music in a racist film approved by @RIDM jurors. (Nov 24/15 @ 6:15 p.m.)¹⁹

The Indigenous community, and specifically Inuit community, gathered in support in the Twittersphere. And in less than 24 hours, CBC News was covering the story (Nakonechny, 2015). Gagnon could not ignore the criticism, and he released a statement in which he stated: "Now I am being bashed because I am a man and I am white. I am only a young man who lives on his own, in his own studio and I don't see where the privilege comes." (Barrera, 2015). Tagaq tweeted her response to his statement: "The 'artist' of the film issues a statement that he is being attacked for being a young, white male. Welcome to the tundra." (November 26, 2015 at 1:09 p.m.)

As the story developed, Twitter and mainstream media documented it. The conversation on Twitter resulted in Inuk radio producer Stephen Agluvak Puskas²⁰ starting a petition to remove the film from the Museum of the Moving Image festival in January 2016 and all future film festivals; the petition currently has 1506 signatures. The screening at the Museum went ahead. He also followed up with all of the videos Gagnon used (he credits them at the end of the film), and calculated that 28% of the film used footage not in the Canadian north, but rather Russia and Alaska. He contacted the individuals who posted the videos to YouTube, and many requested that their videos be removed from Gagnon's film because he had never contacted them. Gagnon began replacing with black the clips that people requested he remove. The film is now 74 minutes of a black screen.²¹

Pressure has remained on Gagnon and RIDM. RIDM first apologized in a statement released on November 26, 2015.²² The statement apologizes for people's reactions and for not bringing in Inuit to the conversation, but it does not accept the charge that the film is racist and reinforces stereotypes. Arnaquq-Baril was also infuriated by the film. In a CBC interview, she explained: "Violent, wandering drunks that neglect their children and don't care for the lives of animals: that's the image I took away from the film" (Nakonechny, 2015). RIDM defended the programming choice

by first recognizing that the film is a difficult watch and then justifying this as a means of “[perceiving] our own colonial past and the present reality of the Inuit people” (Nakonechny, 2015). Arnaquq-Baril disagreed: “I completely reject the idea that it’s generated quality discussion. . . . All we get the chance for people to hear is, ‘we’re not all drunks, really.’” (Nakonechny, 2016). RIDM released a new apology on November 17, 2016, following a protest of artists slated to perform at RIDM that same day.²³ This time RIDM apologized both for programming the film and for its initial reactions to criticisms.²⁴

The criticisms against *of the North* were many, and they emerged from the belief that the film exhibited legal, moral, and aesthetic violations. These violations are complicated as they point to potentially irreconcilable differences between Canadian (or other nations’) copyright law and Indigenous law. Even a concept of “Indigenous law” is complicated with the large number of Indigenous communities in North America; while many share fundamental beliefs and philosophies, they each have a protocol regarding authorship, ownership, and dissemination. The charges against the film are as follows: (1) unauthorized use of copyrighted material; (2) stereotyped (often negative) representations of Inuit individuals and communities—particularly of women—based on selected video clips and editing choices; (3) use of YouTube videos without the permissions of those who filmed or who are in the videos, regardless of legal copyright considerations; (4) deceptive use of videos not from the Canadian north; and (5) lack of consultation or first-hand experience with Inuit individuals or communities. In real time in social media and mainstream media, the complexity of the criticisms emerged. Social media and interviews allowed Tagaq, other Indigenous individuals, and allies to express diverse perspectives about the film. Tagaq’s initial criticisms were the first two charges identified above. Arnaquq-Baril was more concerned with the second and fifth. And Puskas’s investigative work was concerned with the third and fourth charges. This real-time, virtual conversation about *of the North* on Twitter offered a space for each of them to share critiques and offer support. And their messages were amplified because of Tagaq’s celebrity status.

Twitter allows users increased access to individuals and organizations out of their sociocultural and geographic reach (as long as they are not blocked). In addition, the hierarchy of the real world that typically limits access of marginalized groups to mainstream media is bypassed. Nevertheless, status gained from more mainstream media still matters: it is still artists, actors, politicians, and journalists from known media organizations who have the most Twitter followers and whose tweets will gain the most exposure and response. Tagaq is a leading artistic and Indigenous figure in Canada, and the mainstream media pays attention to this, especially with the Twitter rallying of her supporters, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. While Tagaq’s Twitter activity has social power that brings the notice of mainstream media, mainstream media still crafts narratives that can reinforce stereotypes, which continue to harm the marginalized groups to which she belongs as an Inuk woman. Her celebrity status makes her a target for both positive and negative reactions. But then she is able to reinforce her own narrative through the careful construction of her identity on Twitter, what David P. Marshall calls “a kind of ritual of the performance of the self” (2010, p. 40), and in her creative work.

5 | CREATIVE AND COMMUNICATIVE RESONANCES

The simultaneity of Tagaq’s #sealfie attacks and promotion of *Animism* produced an opportunity for the artist to reinforce a message regarding the Inuit seal hunt and sustainability in the North and fight back against a portrayal of Inuit culture as savage. Tagaq expressed her political message and demonstrated agency as an Inuk woman to an increasing audience of listeners and Twitter followers, especially after her Polaris Prize win. What we hear in this album is a carefully constructed sonic identity that rejects the simple binaries of past/present and tradition/modernity by drawing on *katajjaq*, Western popular music, and avant-garde approaches. Her music evokes the North, but not the North of the settler imagination. This is an image constructed on her terms; she refuses to merely affirm the settler fantasy or reinforce one-dimensional stereotypes of Inuit.

Her own *Nanook of the North* project and *Retribution* sought to further reclaim the portrayal of Canada’s remote North and its inhabitants and to confront the legacy of settler colonialism for Northern communities, including but

not limited to dramatic changes in the environment due to climate change and the subsequent challenges for sustainability (Watt-Cloutier, 2015). Gagnon's *of the North* and Tagaq's *Retribution* do share a goal: to reject the stereotype of the North as pristine and untouched—literally frozen in time. But Tagaq's Twitter criticism emphasizes the importance of centering Inuit voices regarding Inuit experiences. She and her allies used Twitter to reject the narratives of outsiders with no relationship or accountability to the land and its inhabitants. With the release of *Retribution* in the subsequent year, Tagaq then reclaimed the narrative through her sonic depiction of a vengeful Mother Earth (Gaia).

Tagaq has worked hard to establish a celebrated oeuvre and has acquired power and influence in mainstream settler culture, including media that is often inaccessible for Indigenous voices. Her albums present an evolving artist with a nuanced identity relating to her context as an Inuk woman and mother: she expresses her sexuality in word and sound; she rejects “reconciliation” in favor of “retribution” and gives voice to the anger and pain of Gaia—Mother Earth; and she reminds her listeners of the violence far more common for Indigenous than non-Indigenous women in Canada. These powerful sonic messages, though, are passively consumed by listeners through personal playback devices. On social media, Tagaq rejects passivity and actively engages with individuals and organizations.

Tagaq has shown that she has significant social power due to her success in the music industry. She continues to apply this social power on Twitter, such as the recent public shaming of the band Eskimeaux, which now goes by Ó following a series of critical tweets and then productive conversations (Lorusso, 2017). *Retribution* will be swift when Tagaq sees an injustice or misrepresentation that violates her bigger political project regarding Inuit culture and self-determination, Indigenous sovereignty, and equality and justice for women. While her creative output embodies the tension of multiple musical and cultural codes and her communicative output on Twitter ranges from the mundane to the promotional to the overtly political, Tagaq integrates them in an identity and strategy for the larger political project of undermining mainstream representational practices regarding Indigenous identity (particularly in Canada) and presenting alternative sounds and perspectives. Tagaq exposes the limits of the modern/traditional binary as she is clearly a *living* artist in our contemporary times and has ties to an Indigenous past that may or may not look and sound like we settlers recognize as “traditional” (or sometimes her Inuit community itself will accept). When Tagaq's voice—both in her music and through her social media—is heard, stereotypes will be challenged, settler colonialist narratives will be undermined, and Inuit sovereignty will be celebrated. “Welcome to the tundra.”

ENDNOTES

¹ As per the mandate of Fifty for the Future, the score for Tagaq's piece *Sivunittini* (The Future Children) is available for free online, in addition to rehearsal instructions: <http://kronosquartet.org/fifty-for-the-future/composers/tanya-tagaq>.

² *Katajjait* (sing. *katajjaq*) are vocal games found throughout the central Arctic regions of Canada, namely Northern Quebec and South Baffin Island. The tradition is considered as follows: two women who stand in close proximity and “sing” back and forth in an intricate call-and-answer, with rhythmic patterns that consist of voiced and unvoiced, pitched and nonpitched, and high and low sounds during inhalation and exhalation (Nattiez, 1983).

³ This instrument is not cited in the album notes, so some other sound source creates this impression. In addition to the typical instrumentation (Tagaq on vocals; Martin on drums; Zubot on violin), “Aorta” indicates Martin on metal, Zubot on bass and industrial noises, and Orville Zubot on low octave harmonica.

⁴ *Animism* was dedicated to “Loretta Saunders and all of the missing and murdered Aboriginal women of Canada.” At her Polaris Music Prize Gala 2014 performance, Tagaq had the names of these 1,200 women scrolling behind her.

⁵ The full short film expands the narrative of the hunt, and includes an extended shot of Tagaq (who had recently portrayed the wounded and dying caribou) laying naked on the snow, with a bloody piece of meat on her chest, which she intimately caresses as the blood pours down her body. In the last scene, Tagaq sits alongside the dead seal with a hunter who works expertly on the seal with his knife. The point-of-view shifts to Tagaq and we see her perspective looking down into the open abdomen of the seal, entrails in full view. She gently outlines the incision, and then the shot changes to her eating a piece from the seal's belly. Retrieved from <http://www.isuma.tv/tungjuq/tungjuq720p>.

⁶ Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRPEz57_I_M.

⁷ Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/PricelessBiach/status/450024369990164480>.

- ⁸ Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/straysneedlove/status/450231057636282368>.
- ⁹ This Twitter handle has since disappeared from Twitter. The VICE article "Tanya Tagaq's Cute Sealife Pissed Off A Lot of Idiots" includes this tweet (https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/tanya-tagaqs-cute-sealife-pissed-off-a-lot-of-idiots).
- ¹⁰ Here is the video link for the entire Polaris Music Prize Gala 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zseAB5pm5vQ>; her acceptance speech starts at 3:47:18.
- ¹¹ I use this outdated and largely offensive term deliberately, as it refers to the conception of the inhabitants of the North through the eyes of white settler culture, an image that has repeatedly shown itself to be racist and essentialist, and a vehicle for colonization.
- ¹² Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tagaq/status/669318285721272320>.
- ¹³ Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tagaq/status/669318847732850689>.
- ¹⁴ Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tagaq/status/669319850217598977>.
- ¹⁵ Tagaq has 19.1 thousand followers on Twitter; she follows only 1,619, an imbalance typical of celebrities on social media.
- ¹⁶ See Amnesty International's "No More Stolen Sisters" for more information: <http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/campaigns/no-more-stolen-sisters>.
- ¹⁷ Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tagaq/status/669321612102119424>.
- ¹⁸ Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tagaq/status/669328205740949504>.
- ¹⁹ Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/tagaq/status/669338662795141120>.
- ²⁰ Born in Yellowknife, NWT, Puskas is a Montreal-based producer of the Inuktitut-language radio show Nipivut.
- ²¹ The Rendezvous du cinéma québécois festival pulled the film from its 2016 line-up. Gagnon also decided not to screen the film on March 7 in Montreal, but rather participate in a discussion about the film; he did not show up. See Curtis, C. (2016, March 8). Director yanks controversial film about Inuit from film festival. *Montreal Gazette*. Retrieved from <http://montrealgazette.com/news/director-yanks-controversial-film-of-inuk-people-from-film-festival>.
- ²² Read the full press release here: http://www.ridm.qc.ca/uploads/document/_en_cmq_ridm_of_the_north.pdf.
- ²³ Read the full artists' statement here: <https://dochub.com/siv-merr/Bpnlr/to-ridm-from-tanya-tagaq-sivani-dj-heathers-lungbutter-the-submissives?dt=bsfhur1zcuq9i3q0>.
- ²⁴ Read the full press release here: <http://www.ridm.qc.ca/en/of-the-north-the-ridm-apologizes>.

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