
In her 2011 book *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back*, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Simpson tells the story of Nishnaabe performance artist Rebecca Belmore’s piece during an exhibition entitled *Mapping Resistances* at the Peterborough Price Chopper. She exclaims: “During the performance, I felt powerful, free, and inspired. I felt proud of who I am. Belmore drew me into a decolonizing space … I was transported into a world that Belmore as the artist/storyteller had envisioned—a world where Nishnaabeg flourished and where justice prevailed, a world where my voice and my meanings mattered.”¹

Cris Derksen, a half-Cree, half-Mennonite classically-trained cellist released her third album *Orchestral Powwow* in 2015; it integrates newly composed chamber works with recordings of contemporary powwow drums to sonify Derksen’s mixed identity. This essay contextualizes the powwow as an intertribal event of embodied cultural resurgence and solidarity (Browner 2002; King 2012). I argue that Derksen’s symphonic-powwow hybrid sonifies processes of decolonization in which artists celebrate and normalize their Indigenous culture in ways that reflect their lived modern experiences (Simpson 2011). I demonstrate how such a musical hybridity dismantles colonialist binaries between tradition/modernity, Dead/Living Indians (King 2012), and authenticity/inauthenticity (Francis 1992; Crosby 2002). I also consider how we might view the collaboration through live performance of powwow drums and orchestral musicians (which Derksen admits “took a bit of finessing”) through a critique of “conciliation” vs. “reconciliation.”

Derksen’s story exemplifies the complications of both loss and privilege for many urban-based Indigenous individuals, particularly those who can easily pass as white. I speak first to the loss of culture and Indigenous identity often found in urban-based Indigenous communities. In Bonita Lawrence’s field work with Toronto-based individuals of Native heritage, she noticed a hierarchy: some people were “more Indian” than others. Due to social stigma, many Indigenous parents in the city had been silent on their Indigenous identity and aimed to disconnect their children from their Indigenous language, culture, and even family. The belief that urban-based Indigenous people are not “real” is established both externally, through a loss of Indian status, insults from those who are “more Indian,” and possibly white passing in non-Indigenous society, and internally as they often believe they cannot be “real” or authentic Indians because they didn’t grow up in an Indigenous community or speak an Indigenous language.

Derksen does not speak of an intentional silence about her Indigenous background, but she did explain to me that because she grew up with her Mennonite mother: “I grew up mostly in Edmonton. … My dad wasn’t really a part of my life. My dad is Native. He was the chief of my reserve. … He wasn’t really a part of my life until I was probably 19.” Because of this disconnection from her Indigenous family and community on the reserve, she didn’t come to learn much about her own Indigenous history until she was a young adult. And powwow was also not a part of her Indigenous identity until around the age of 18.

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3 Chelsea Vowel (2016, 28-30) provides a straightforward explanation of the racialized and gendered notions of Indigenous identity in the Indian Act.
The long and sordid history of Indigenous-Settler relations in Canada (and North America more broadly) relies on white Settler culture establishing and then reinforcing an image of the “imaginary Indian,” the Indian captured in the Romanticized paintings of the Noble Savage in the untamed frontier but still seen in film, television, and sesquicentennial celebrations. Here in Canada, events and parties across the country juxtapose innovation in science and technology alongside images of teepees and drum circles; that is, images of an Indigenous culture frozen in the past.

I am not suggesting that signs of tradition, such as teepees and drum circles are not a part of Indigenous culture today. In Thomas King’s *The Inconvenient Indian*, he contrasts the Dead Indian of the white Settler imagination with the Live Indian. He elaborates on what constitutes the Dead Indian: “dignified, noble, silent, suitably garbed.” In the Settler’s imagination, “modern” is outside Indigeneity. And modern accoutrements cannot accompany an “authentic” Indigenous life: “Live Indians living today cannot be genuine Indians.” But King highlights the powwow as a space in which Live Indians and Dead Indians “come together.” And he insists: “Live Indians dance at powwows. And when we dance, when we sing at the drum, when we perform ceremonies, we are not doing it for North America’s entertainment. Where North America sees Dead Indians come to life, we see our families and our relations. We do these things to remind ourselves who we are, to reminds ourselves where we come from, and to remind

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5 King, *The Inconvenient Indian*, 64.
ourselves of our relationship with the earth. Mostly, though, we do things because we enjoy them. And because they are important.”

Thus the powwow gathering is an authentic site for modern (or “Live”) Indigenous peoples because it is an act of agency now that emphasizes community and a visioning according to Indigenous knowledge and practice. However, it is also where non-Indigenous spectators witness what is for them the only “authentic” Indian. But this is, as Daniel Francis calls it, an “imaginary Indian.” He exclaims: “The Indian is the invention of the European.” Furthermore: “The Indian began as a White man's mistake, and became a White man's fantasy. Through the prism of White hopes, fears and prejudices, indigenous Americans would be seen to have lost contact with reality and to have become 'Indians'; that is, anything non-Natives wanted them to be.”

Evelyn Peters and Chris Andersen’s Indigenous in the City seeks to challenge long-held attitudes by both Indigenous and Settler communities about the “urban Aboriginal.” Andersen argues that the “urban Aboriginal” has a distinct identity from northern, rural, or reserve Indigenous communities, based on a number of geographic, economic, social, and political elements. Urban Indigenous communities are “highly intra-multicultural,” and as such, can make community-formation difficult but necessary. Communities negotiate the tensions between

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6 King, The Inconvenient Indian, 66.
8 Francis, The Imaginary Indian, 5.
10 Andersen, Indigenous in the City, 54.
cultural specificity and pan-Indigeneity on an on-going basis, often mediated through institutions like Friendship Centers.

Powwows highlight talents in music, dance, and craftsmanship, but the focus of the powwow is the drum circle, with the drum providing the beat for the singers and dancers. The strong, steady drum beat and high, tense male Northern style singing in particular are sounds now easily identified by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ears as powwow music.

Jay T. Johnson emphasizes the importance of the powwow for urban Indigenous communities as it creates a temporary bounded Indigenous place, what Simpson would call a “decolonized and decolonizing space” in which Indigenous knowledge and culture/practice can flourish. The powwow can facilitate intertribal solidarity and it allows Indigenous peoples to experience a reprieve from an otherwise alienating urban setting. Simpson speaks about storytelling in her community more broadly, stating that “Storytelling is at its core decolonizing” as Indigenous culture and knowledge are centered through “remembering, visioning and creating.” Storytelling here can refer to more than simply spoken word: it can include music. For Simpson, the importance lies in “the physical act of gathering [which] reinforces the web of relationships that stitch our communities together.”

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12 Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back*, 95.


14 Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back*, 33.

15 Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back*, 33.

16 Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back*, 34.
happens in this performance gathering is “an individual and collective experience, with the goal of lifting the burden of colonialism by visioning new realities.” Such gatherings eliminate the settler culture as dominant and authoritative, even as settlers are permitted to observe and participate. But there are restrictions. Powwows can achieve what David Garneau explains can be “primary sites of resistance”: “the perpetual, active refusal of complete engagement: to speak with one’s own in one’s own way; to refuse translation and full explanations; to create trade goods that imitate core culture without violating it; to not be a Native informant.” For example, pictures are not allowed during certain parts of the ceremony, people are instructed not to touch the drum, and dancers in regalia have the freedom to decline photographs. In addition, the powwow holds layers of meaning understood only for those for whom they are intended. A powwow is a site of conciliation, as non-Indigenous viewers are guests in this temporary bounded Indigenous place.

Derksen’s *Orchestral Powwow* project draws on the significance of the powwow as a physical act of gathering designed for Indigenous communities while allowing guests to view and share in Indigenous-managed ways.

Derksen has performed with a number of genre-defying musicians including Tanya Tagaq, Buffy Sainte-Marie, and Kinnie Star. She frequently performs with drummer Jesse Baird and Anishinaabe hoop dancer Nimkii Osawamick. She incorporates elements of her Indigenous identity, such as the song “Pow_Wow_Wow” whose futuristic video features a fancy shawl dancer. But she engaged with her Indigenous identity and musical heritage more intensely in the

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17 David Garneau - “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation,” *West Coast Line* #74 46, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 32. Keep in mind: “When Aboriginal folks (anyone, really) know they are being surveyed by non-members the nature of their ways of being and becoming alters. Whether the onlookers are conscious agents of colonization or not their shaping gaze can trigger a Reserve response; an inhibition or a conformation to Settler expectations.” (33).
monumental *Orchestral Powwow*, which involved working with recordings of contemporary powwow drum groups and composing chamber symphonies around those recordings. Tribal Spirit’s catalogue was offered to her, as they have done with A Tribe Called Red. She also worked directly with Chippewa Travellers.\(^{18}\)

She exclaims: “It brings together both parts of who I am as a Half-Cree, Half- Mennonite Classically Trained Cellist. What excites me most about this project is bringing our Aboriginal music to the center of the European model and we as aboriginal artists lead the way with our drums and our heart beat to create new forms of music.”\(^{19}\) In our interview, Derksen confessed a frustration with serving on arts grant committees and seeing so-called Indigenous projects for orchestras being written by non-Indigenous individuals. Her revelation was that “We can do Indigenous classical music but that promotes and showcases Indigenous folks in the center of the piece. It’s time for us to reclaim our own art and how we present it to other folks, even in the classical context. Even though it’s a colonial construct, we can still speak for ourselves.”

Derksen realizes that she is playing a settler instrument and that the chamber orchestra pieces come from the Western art music tradition. The adoption of an instrument from another culture is not problematic *per se*. But the instrument is from a culture that deemed Indigenous peoples to lack civilization and instituted violent policies and actions of erasure of Indigenous culture and communities. Settler colonialism did not allow its own cultural practices and those of the Indigenous communities in North American to thrive simultaneously. This is an impossibility as settler colonialism is built on the belief that its systems of governance, religion, and culture

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\(^{18}\) Chippewa Travellers are an Aniishinaabeg family drum group originally from Chippewas of Nawash, which is a First Nation on unceded territory in the Bruce Peninsula.

are superior and that it is right and good to “kill the Indian, save the man.” As a result, Indigenous cultural practices were often banned, including dancing.

However, the Western art music tradition is a part of Derksen’s identity. She grew up with her Mennonite mother, with minimal interactions with her Cree father. She took up the instrument as part of a school music program, a privilege of her urban upbringing, despite growing up in a working class family. She explains: “I am an urban Indigenous human, mostly grew up in the cities. Hence, I can play the cello. If I grew on the rez, there’s not really cello lessons there. You don’t get the opportunities or the education that you do in the cities.”

Thus, the merging of Derksen’s classical musical background and the powwow tradition highlights the simultaneous loss and privilege of many urban-based Indigenous individuals. Derksen had to work hard to to learn about the musical traditions of her Cree relatives. In our interview, Derksen explained: “I started going to powwows with friends when I was around 18, 19. … It wasn’t really a part of my life growing up. And our reserve up there [in northern Alberta where I spent the summers with family] doesn’t have a drum group. … When you finally learn about your own history, and how you are and where you came from. That’s when things came up for me.” She identifies learning about powwow as it was part of how she became “woke.”

In an interview with CBC’s Unreserved host Rosanna Deerchild, Derksen exclaimed: “Powwow music is so strong, so strong in the beat and so strong in the singing. … That power comes from our ancestors.” She confessed to me that it took a long time for her to be ready: she

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was referring not only to her compositional and arranging chops, but also to an intimacy with the powwow tradition and how this project would reflect her own Indigenous identity.

The *Orchestral Powwow* project signifies for Derksen a desire to integrate these two aspects of a tradition. Neither should be erased. Yet, the power dynamic centers the powwow tradition to avoid merely reasserting the dominance of Western art music as more sophisticated—music that can raise “folk” music to a higher level by referencing it within a Western voice. Here, though, the drum is the focus, and the powwow song comes first. The orchestral parts fit around the powwow recordings, and must submit to it, in terms of mode, tempo, and form. The album works artistically as the two traditions seem to play off each other, drawing on each other to create a particular mood. Some songs also maintain a level of tension between the two sound worlds as they do not align perfectly.

The form of powwow songs is fairly standardized with four push-ups, each beginning with a lead and seconds call and response. Derksen explained to me: “because all the other stuff that I do is so loop-based, I tried to expand that for me and not just immediately come back to the main line when the powwow group did. I tried to do more like a linear thing as supposed to such a round thing. Themes definitely come back but they don’t come back at the same time as the powwow did.”

The opening track of the album “Rounddance” features Northern Voice’s “Be Thankful,” a round dance performed with hand drum. This piece, like most of the album, is in G minor because of the general tuning of the drum. The cello opens the song on G (to establish the tonal center), with horn, tuba, and lead voice entering next, followed by the echo of the seconds and more and more instrumental layers. The sound of the hand drums does not emerge into until
around 90 seconds in, with the drum group’s second push-up. This lack of emphasized beat allows the focus instead to be on the polyphonic lines, of both voices and instruments. Derksen’s piece adds a fifth push-up, when the original recording has only four. This allows Derksen to accommodate the orchestral arc, which ends as it began: solo cello. [play clip].

[show opening transcription, and point out the interplay between the cello and vocal parts].

“East Winging It,” by contrast, begins with the drum beat of Black Bear, and the instrumental writing reinforces the quick 152 beats per minute below the solo cello in Eb major and C minor. [play clip]

In Daniel Francis’s *Imaginary Indians*, he argues that the only concept of “Indians” was the fantasy of a pre-contact 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.

Narrow understandings of what Indigeneity looks like—and sounds likes—means that everyday Indigenous peoples fight for visibility and acceptance, both within their own communities and within society more broadly. And it is at the heart of the decolonization process. One of the “settler moves to innocence” in Tuck and Yang’s article is “Settler nativism” in which a claim to a long-lost Indigenous ancestor means one can “mark themselves as blameless in the attempted

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21 Northern Voice are a drum group from the Atikamekw territory of Wemotaci in Quebec.

22 Black bear are an Atikamekw drum group from Manawan in Quebec.

23 Francis, *The Imaginary Indian*, 59.
eradications of Indigenous peoples.” Social media, DNA ancestry advertisements, and casual conversations abound with claims to “Native ancestry.” 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. We are all Native! And yet this means fewer and fewer (until none) can claim “authentic” Indigeneity, thus giving us all equal claims to the land.

“Decolonization is not a metaphor.” As “decolonization” has gained widespread usage (including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s December 2016 declaration that federal laws and policies need to be reviewed to “decolonize” Canada), Indigenous scholars in particular have reiterated this title and central argument to Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s foundational essay. Tuck and Yang go on to explain: “When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future.” Decolonization is unsettling. For Tuck and Yang, decolonization requires “the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always been differently understood and enacted.” How can decolonization be sonified if “decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just


25 Tuck and Yang, “Decolonization.”


symbolically”? Does sonification render “decolonization” a metaphor, and, thus, not real
decolonization? Curator and author cheyanne turions speaks to the potentiality of such “aesthetic
gestures”:

Given the recent proliferation with which the term “decolonial” circulates in the art
world, it would seem that artists and curators are fully convinced that their aesthetic
gestures can have this particular kind of social consequence. To be explicit, I count
myself among these cultural workers: I believe that aesthetic forms make important
contributions to the broad project of decolonization, a belief that hinges on the conviction
that exhibition spaces are civic spaces, and that artistic and curatorial practices are
political gestures.29

Decolonization is sonified through the music of Cris Derksen’s *Orchestral Powwow*. This
is not a metaphor, though music exists in many ways on the level of metaphor, principally in the
way that we describe or discuss music. Or how we could suggest that the collaboration in
*Orchestral Powwow* is a metaphor for social harmony: if we could simply “work together,” our
society could make beautiful music. But music itself is direct: not metaphorical. It sonifies
agency, language, and identity. And specifically, *Orchestral Powwow* is the working out—by
which I refer to both the daily acts of labor in composing and arranging and her own internal
work—of Derksen’s mixed identity, a process of recognizing both loss and privilege. Everyday
acts of resurgence engage the decolonization process. Jeff Corntassel explains: “It is in these
everyday actions where the scope of the struggle for decolonization is reclaimed and re-
envisioned by Indigenous peoples. Decolonizing praxis comes from moving beyond political
awareness and/or symbolic gestures to everyday practices of resurgence.”30 The musical

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30 Jeff Corntassel, “Re-envisioning resurgence: Indigenous pathways to decolonization and sustainable self-
practices of Indigenous artists are not “symbolic gestures.” They are the sonification of identity, sovereignty, and self-determination that creates, to use Simpson’s words again, “a world where [their] voice[s] and [their] meanings matter…”31

In Garneau’s work on decolonial theory in Canada, he questions the frequent use of “reconciliation” rather than “conciliation,” the former suggesting “repair to a previously harmonious relationship.”32 Such a vision is a fantasy: the numbered theories were Nation-to-Nation conciliations only in theory, and many unceded territories and treaty-less regions exist. Garneau also points to the frequent use of the word “reconciliation” within Catholicism, as what happens when one is penitent and asks for forgiveness of sin. Garneau explains: “Colonialism is not a singular historical event but an ongoing legacy—the colonizer has not left. The “sin” cannot be expiated. There is no Redeemer in this situation. An apology and cash payments will not remove the stain. The essence of a conciliation project is individual transformation: living with this history and, hopefully, engaging in perpetual conciliation.”33

*Orchestral Powwow* is not *Going Home Star, Tundra Songs*, or *Inuit Games*. It is the sonic merging of Western art music and First Nations powwow music, but its creator is an Indigenous woman working with a living drum group. And Derksen was intentional about creating a new kind of relationality between the two worlds. She explained to me:

> You could say it’s my own form of reconciliation… . It’s something that I can bring forward and show the colonial construct—that there are ways we can work together that are respectful of everyone. And I think that’s the maybe the most important part, especially within classical music. … classical music … there’s a hierarchy. There are

31 Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle’s Back*, 97.


33 Garneau, “Imaginary Spaces,” 38.
people that go over you. You have a conductor that stands over you, you have your principal people that is above you, there’s always a way to push you down. You have to follow exactly all of these different rules. And I think that this is way that we can introduce and respect Indigenous artists and their work without having that thing that pushes people down.

How we might view the collaboration through live performance of powwow drums and orchestral musicians (which Derksen admits “took a bit of finessing”) through a critique of “conciliation” vs. “reconciliation”? Does the project perpetuate the fiction that “equanimity is the status quo between Aboriginal people and Canada”34? Or does it reject settler culture as dominant and Indigenous cultural practices as only a way to reinvigorate Western aesthetic practices? How might a critique of “conciliation” vs. “reconciliation” map onto musical practices and work?

One main point of “finessing” was mode, as the drum tuning naturally makes everything sound in G minor, but Derksen needed more tonal variety. Most of the pieces are in G minor, but one piece is in C minor and another in D minor. Pieces also variously emphasize a lowered or raised seventh. In her interview with Dearchild, Derksen explains that she also had to train Chippewa Travellers to start and end exactly as they had in the recordings. She states that orchestral players are used to following a beat, so it’s an easy transition to following the powwow drum beat. This was an interview before the first live performance. When she and I talked, Orchestral Powwow had many performances under its belt, and she elaborated:

The Chippewa Travellers are amazing. They only on stage once didn’t do what is on the recording. The challenges is always me bringing in… Sometimes I bring them in a half beat. … How many beats is it until we actually start? Do we listen to the voice? Or do we count the beats? That’s always been the biggest challenge. And I’m slowly starting to understand how to bring people in and exactly where. But it does. It’s very satisfactory when we all end exactly together.

34 Garneau, “Imaginary Spaces,” 35.
The orchestral compositions seem to have accommodated powwow’s musical world much more than the other way around. The orchestral musicians, who changed when the album toured to different cities, entered Indigenous space as guests; they had to learn to follow the powwow drum. Turions declares: “‘Decolonization’ implies revolution. It instigates a shifting terrain of social relationality that, when applied to cultural production, assumes a connection between what has been and what is to come, encouraged and enacted through aesthetic forms.”[^35] But such a “shifting terrain of social relationality” is not inevitable with Indigenous aesthetic practices. Garneau cautions us as Tuck and Yang do: “art is not healing in itself.” Or “Decolonization is not a metaphor.” Garneau states: “Art is not healing in itself, but can be in relation. Art is a stimulant and a balm when taken internally, but dangerous if mistaken for experience.”[^36] He further explains: “there is a profound difference between reading signs and being engaged by a symbol. Sharing in a discourse about the histories, responsibility, and transformation among artworks and with other human beings is a corrective to the colonial desire for settlement.”[^37] (24).

Transformation is possible. Certainly for Derksen, this has been an important project in claiming her own Indigenous voice and culture. Tuck and Yang characterize the quest for “reconciliation” in Canada as “a desire to not have to deal with this (Indian) problem anymore.”[^38] *Orchestral Powwow* does not lead to assimilation. The “Indian” is not erased by or subsumed in the Western culture. This project centers Indigenous vision and culture. And it insists on a vibrant,

[^35]: Turions, “Decolonization.”
[^37]: Garneau, “Imaginary Spaces” (2012), 38.
contemporary Indigenous existence allows Indigenous artists and listeners to exist in a
decolonizing space that celebrates and normalizes their Indigenous culture in ways that reflect
their lived modern experiences: in Derksen’s case, as a half-Cree-half-Mennonite urban-based
woman.

Bibliography


