IASPM JOURNAL
ISSN 2079 - 3871

# Tanya Tagaq Covers Nirvana: "Rape Me" and a History of Settler Colonial Violence

Ryan Shuvera
King's University College at Western University
rshuvera@uwo.ca

## Abstract

In 2016 Tanya Tagaq – an Inuk artist from Cambridge Bay (Iqaluktuutiaq), Nunavut, known for her performances of a style of throat singing – released her fourth studio album, *Retribution*. *Retribution*'s final song is a cover of Nirvana's "Rape Me." Tagaq's version speaks to certain realities faced by Indigenous women living in settler colonial North America. She urges that the song be heard in a new way. Yet, as Tagaq's cover discloses another voice and world, it constantly calls back to Nirvana's version. The songs come together in conversation despite the geographical, cultural, and temporal differences between the performances. This paper examines Tagaq's performance of "Rape Me" as a world opening and unsettling force. I also analyze the exchange created through Tagaq's performance and what it might mean to enter the exchange as a listener and potential participant in the new worlds.

KEYWORDS: Cover songs, Settler Colonialism, Sexual Violence, Settler Listening, Tanya Tagaq, Nirvana.

Content Warning: This paper discusses the performance of two versions of a song called "Rape Me" and includes the word "rape" throughout.

## Introduction

On 9 September 1992, Nirvana played the MTV Video Music Awards and was prevented from playing their unreleased song "Rape Me". Cobain played the first few bars before the band played "Lithium" from their 1991 album *Nevermind*. Cobain wanted to play "Rape Me", but the MTV executives wanted a hit. Nirvana eventually complied when they learned that a friend working for the network would

ISSN 2079-3871 I DOI 10.5429/2079-3871(2021)v11i2.5en I www.iaspmjournal.net

be fired if they played “Rape Me” (Gaar 2006: 19). Nearly a year earlier in Seattle on 31 October 1991, Cobain introduced the song stating, “This song is about hairy, sweaty, macho, redneck men”. He pauses, catching some cheering audience members off guard. He then adds, “who rape” (Nirvana 2019: 0.7-0.16). “Rape Me” was not released until 1993 on the band’s final studio album, *In Utero,* but controversy and a disturbing aura surrounded its performance history.

Of note is another recording of “Rape Me” by Nirvana featured on the 2004-boxset *With The Lights Out*. The demo, recorded in October 1992, features “the wails of Cobain’s daughter, Frances Bean Cobain” at the beginning as Cobain starts singing the first exclamations of “Rape Me” (Gaar 2006: 20). This suggests that “Kurt held her on his lap as he cut his vocal” (ibid). The contrast between the lyrics, Cobain’s childcare duties, and the innocence of the child is striking. I note this story because of the gendered presence on this take. Frances was an infant during this recording and did not change or sing any lyrics, but her presence unsettles the recording, if only briefly.

I am interested in this presence because a similar, indeed, more striking contrast is created by Inuk artist Tanya Tagaq in her cover of “Rape Me” from her 2016-album *Retribution*. Tagaq, from Cambridge Bay (Iqaluktuutiaq), Nunavut, is known for her performances that bring together a style of throat singing and “Western cultural and musical codes” (Stévance 2017: 49). (1) The makeup of Tagaq’s music is undoubtedly complex. Indeed, as Sophie Stévance notes, “Tanya Tagaq is inspired by katajjaq techniques, but she moves beyond it to create her own music…tinged not with rebellion, but with flexibility and creativity” (2010: 88). (2) When characterizing her own music, Tagaq reflects on her positionality: “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” (as quoted in Woloshyn 2017). Tagaq’s unique and evolving sound reflects the realities of her life as an Inuk woman and mother.

I examine Tagaq’s cover of Nirvana’s “Rape Me”—a song that features an Inuk woman covering music produced by white men—as a deliberate confrontation with the acts and acceptance of rape and sexual and gendered violence against Indigenous women in particular. These acts of violence are one of the many “powerful tools of colonialism, settler colonialism, and capitalism” and are used to dispossess Indigenous peoples of their land and “prevent reclamation of those territories through mobilization” (Simpson 2017: 93). I consider this cover a direct response to the crisis addressed by the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in Canada. Further, by placing this song at the end of an album called *Retribution*, it serves as part of a refusal to accept reconciliation, as constructed by the settler state, as a legitimate process to address and protect Indigenous women and land from this violence. Tagaq’s cover addresses the tension of Nirvana’s version—understanding that men can be vulnerable to this violence too—but refuses a broad discussion of rape by asserting that Indigenous women face this violence at a much higher rate in settler colonial North America. (3) This declaration pulls the tensions expressed in Nirvana’s version in a different way, confronting the parts of settler states of mind that permit settler audiences to ignore or attempt to undercut the personal, communal, and cultural trauma of this violence against Indigenous women.

As a settler scholar of Ukrainian and French heritage, I recognize that listening to this music and album involves engaging in a “practice of guest listening” (Robinson 2020: 53). This means that I enter a different “sound territory” while listening and cannot hear "specific assertions of Indigenous sovereignty" (2020: 53). My discussion is limited to my "practice of guest listening," but this is "not a lack that needs to be remedied" (2020: 53). The analysis is relevant for evolving discussions of settler listening experiences and responsibilities. Indeed, this analysis is part of a process of, as Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson notes, "becoming no longer sure what LISTENING is" (2020: 47).

## A Note on Terminology

I consider Tagaq's cover of "Rape Me" to be a kind of "disidentificatory performance," to borrow Jose Esteban Munoz's phrase (1999: 196). Stévance notes that for Tagaq, "the voice is thought of as having an acoustical potential for exploring beyond conventions and the hierarchy of values" (2010: 88). For Munoz, disidentificatory performances "disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality" and "uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world" (1999: 196). With both factors in mind, I experience Tagaq's cover performances as ways of pulling at parts of popular music history and using some parts to push beyond conventions and build alternative realities or a "new world" (1999: 196). I understand "new world" to mean the realities that result from the challenges to and potential shifts in settler states of mind based on these different ways of understanding, thinking, hearing, and listening to the world provoked by Tagaq's performances. To clarify, settler states of mind are the ideas, ideals, and ways of thinking involved in settler colonial identities—reinforced through physical acts and ways of speaking—that persuade and allow some non-Indigenous people to believe that they, through the violent authority of the settler state, are the rightful "owners" and beneficiaries of the land in North America.

It is also important to note that while I speak of settlers and, particularly, my settler listening experience in North America, I do so carefully with the awareness that there is a wide array of settler experiences in North America. As settler scholars Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker note, "there are many people caught between Settler and Indigenous identities, and [are] therefore subject to conflicting social treatment based on how they are subjectively perceived and/or claimed by other Settler or Indigenous people(s)" (2015: 17). I do not intend to close off the discussion to the various settler listening experiences outside of the experiences of settler's with European heritage. I recognize that are many different settler and Indigenous listening experiences, as well as many other listening experiences of people "living on the lands of Indigenous nations, but not doing so as settler colonizers or in a way recognizable to the Settler identity, and most importantly, not in opposition to indigeneity" (Lowman and Barker 2015: 17). All of these experiences are involved in the ongoing unsettling of settler colonial North America.

## Unpacking Nirvana

In 1993 Nirvana released their final studio album, *In Utero.* The album featured 12 tracks and was designed to expand their sound, or at least showcase the range of it, in contrast to what Cobain believed to be a more one-dimensional sound of their previous album, *Nevermind* (Azzerad 1992). The fourth track on *In Utero* is called "Rape Me." It was released as the second single split with "All Apologies" in December 1993. Written by Cobain, the song produces an uncomfortable listening experience for different reasons. On one level, the phrase structure of the chord progression is noticeably similar to "Smells Like Teen Spirit" though the chords themselves are different. The vocal melody is also different to the comparatively abrupt and repeatedly descending patterns of "Rape Me". Musically, it is essentially a dark parodic cover version of their biggest hit. It follows the same textural pattern in which clean guitar sounds are used during the verses and distorted guitar sounds are used during the chorus. The chord progression is largely the same throughout the song, with the changes in volume and distortion being the major variations between sections.

The song begins with this gesture to familiarity through the music before the declaration "rape me" enters at about eleven seconds into the song, followed by "rape me, my friend". The vocal dynamic follows the musical dynamic: the lyrics in the intro and verses are sung softly while the lyrics of the chorus are sung loudly, more aggressively, and often screamed. The softness of the initial declaration, however, does not subtract from the disorienting effects on listeners. Cobain's declaration is assertive, commanding that the perpetrator commit their act. It is difficult to ignore the commanding exclamation of the lyrics despite Cobain's fluctuation between a soft and loud delivery. Relating to the narrative, the commandment comes across as an attempt to reclaim what agency the victim can in the moment. In the song, Cobain takes the perspective of a victim who has accepted their fate by reaching the conclusion that the perpetrator, as someone willing to commit rape, if not of the song's narrator then of someone else, will ultimately face justice from the judgement of the world around them (Steinke 1993). The victim must imagine a moment of justice only by way of working through the inevitability of the experience. It is a deeply unsettling narrative.

Some critics allude to Cobain's frustration with media attention and an increasing lack of privacy as the basis for the lyrics of the song. This is superficial, especially in light of Cobain's own assertion that "Rape Me" is an anti-rape song (Gaar 2006: 57). It was also written during recording sessions for *Nevermind* in 1991 – prior to the band's massive popularity (56-57). Lyrically, the song relies heavily on the repetition of the phrases "rape me" and "I'm not the only one". "Rape me" is yelled seventeen consecutive times during the outro of the song. The only lyrical variation comes in the first verse in which Cobain says, "Hate me/Do it and do it again/Waste me/Rape me, my friend"; and in the bridge, "My favorite inside source/I'll kiss your open sores/Appreciate your concern/You're gonna stink and burn". In the first verse, Cobain sings with the same uncomfortably calm, yet demanding tone as the introduction. The lyrics also suggest the same resigned but defiant attitude, as the narrator acknowledges that the perpetrator will not be persuaded otherwise. When he arrives at the bridge, Cobain becomes sarcastically sympathetic to someone, before declaring that this person or people he is addressing will meet a deserving fate. (4)

Though there is little variation in the lyrics, Cobain conveys a complex narrative through the song. (5) Listeners can hear and feel the strength and anguish in the narrator's repetitive declarations to the perpetrator. The play between a sense of calm, urgency, fear, and confidence built throughout the lyrics and Cobain's variation in expression conveys an emotionally complex process. The narrator is reassuring themselves and listeners of their strength as they call out the perpetrator. Notably, the perpetrator's voice and perspective are absent from the song – though their presence is felt nonetheless – and the narrator is the one heard asserting control through the increasingly intense vocalizations. The song navigates a cautiously hopeful sentiment as it paints a deeply dispiriting picture.

One reading of Nirvana's version of "Rape Me" suggests that perhaps Cobain overextended feelings of empathy, resulting in the aestheticization of sexual violence. (6) Turning rape into a metaphor for "media violation" would undo any of the anti-rape sentiment asserted by Cobain. That is, Cobain's potential third-person narration as a white heterosexual male – despite its intentions – risks clouding the reality and severity of the issue: women are much more likely to be raped than men. The risk taken by Cobain is that his voice – potentially the only voice other white heterosexual males might associate with having authority – might disorient white, male, heterosexual listeners from the pain and fear of this reality. The danger is that such listeners may disregard the push to empathize and feel responsibility as easily as they disregard the consent of potential sexual partners.

A deeper reading of the initial recording affords more room to Cobain's thought process and challenges the media metaphor reading. The song is not denying the reality that women are more likely to be raped than men, but there is a sense that he is re-asserting the possibility of being raped as a man and – in a complex manner – suggesting that the overwhelmingly male fan base confront this reality and recognize the vulnerability that women feel. For Cobain as the songwriter, part of this confrontation involves finding a way to convey a recognition of the emotional processes and strength required to live with this possibility. For listeners, particularly heterosexual men, this confrontation involves recognizing how the presence and threat of sexual violence structures social relations. This song serves as one of the few public attempts to talk about what unpacking this reality might mean for men as victims, as vulnerable to this possibility, and as the primary perpetrators. Further, this complicates a simplistic reading of Tagaq's cover as a version that saves or validates the song simply by way of her gender or race. Rather, Tagaq's version opens a conversation with Nirvana's and opens new worlds for listeners to learn to participate in.

## Tanya Tagaq and the Crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in Canada

Tagaq first started practicing throat singing as a teenager after she moved to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. She later studied at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax and is an accomplished visual artist. Tagaq released her first full-length studio album, Sinaa, in 2005. The album was produced by Tagaq, Juan Hernandez, and internationally recognized Icelandic experimental artist Björk. Tagaq's second album, Auk/Blood (ᐊᐅᒃ), was released in 2008. Animism is Tagaq's third studio album and was released in 2014. The album received significant and widespread attention from music critics and fans around the world.

Animism won the 2014 Polaris Music Prize, an annual award given to the album considered the best recording by a Canadian artist, based solely on artistic merit. That is, it is judged without considering factors such as album sales, record label notoriety, or touring success. For the gala, Tagaq chose to perform "Uja" and "Umingmak"—two songs from Animism. (7) During her performance she moved about in the centre of the stage with a spotlight on her, while her violinist (Zubot) stood on the far right (when facing the stage from the audience) and the percussionist (Martin) played on the far left. An improvisatory choir sang behind Tagaq and Zubot. The visual elements for this performance were simple, but profound. (8) On four separate screens above the stage and behind Tagaq were photos of Emanuel Vigeland's mausoleum in Oslo, Norway. (9) On another screen just above and to the left of Tagaq, the names of 1,200 MMIWG scrolled upward on a screen. (10) The live element of this performance is lost when the performance is viewed online, but it remains an emotionally impactful performance and is difficult to watch repeatedly. It is a significant moment in Tagaq's performance history because it asks audience members to bear witness to the names of MMIWG without speaking a single name.

Animism opens with a cover of "Caribou," a song by American (Boston, MA) alternative rock band the Pixies. From my position and "practice of guest listening" (Robinson 2020: 53), I hear Tagaq's version of the song revealing elements of her life growing up with the animal. It is an homage to the caribou and a sonic restructuring of the articulation of this relationship. In the Pixies's (1987) version, the narrator identifies with the animal and rejects the "cement" and "streets" of cities. There appears to be admiration for the Pixies in the cover. Tagaq picks up the surrealism of the Pixies and adds her own element to it with additional throat singing in the background. Tagaq opts to centre the string and percussion work of her bandmates over the guitar patterns of the Pixies's recording. This produces a softer atmosphere to start, seemingly easing the listener in and drawing attention to the soft beauty of the caribou. She slows the song down, sings softly in English, and mirrors the pop vocalizations of the Pixies's recording, which turns the first half of the song into something more like a lullaby. The song gradually swells however, toward its notable howl of the word "repent." Tagaq skips the first section where the Pixies growl "repent" and saves all of the guttural energy for the last minute and a half of the song. The dominant growl of "repent" sounds like a human or animal screaming in severe pain or near death. It makes the listener tighten their core muscles and adjust their body's position in discomfort. It is frightening. Tagaq utters "repent" underneath, returning to a sound that resembles her style of throat singing, reminding the listener that "It is the most primitive side of katajjaq that interest her, the one close to the growl, the cry, the animal itself that she will insert into a creative context" (Stévance 2010: 87). While the Pixies identify with the caribou as an expression of the violence of mass concrete development, Tagaq appears to identify with the caribou as a victim of colonization as exemplified through the violence of hunting laws, land rights violations, and the denial of northern sovereignty which involves a close relationship with the caribou for many Inuit. (11) The song still allows for an identification with the animal, but it complicates this identification, and becomes more of an homage to the caribou coupled with a deathly howl against the violence of settler colonialism.

Tagaq's fourth studio album *Retribution* is comprised of ten songs and, as Alexa Woloshyn notes, is "more aggressive than her previous albums" (2017). It includes collaborations with her bandmates Jesse Zubot (lead violinist and producer) and Jean Martin (percussionist), and other artists including Tuvan throat singer Raddick Tulush, traditional Inuk singer Ruben Komangapik, Canadian hip hop artist Shad, Inuk artist Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory, and her youngest daughter, Inuuja, who is featured on the opening track "Ajaaja." On Tagaq's website, direct statements about the intentions for *Retribution* are included: "This album is about rape. Rape of women, rape of the land, rape of children, despoiling of traditional lands without consent. Hence the cover version of Nirvana's song 'Rape Me.' It's at least a hundred times more chilling than the original" (tanyatagaq.com). As Woloshyn suggests, the final 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"" (2017). Indeed, the cover serves as a direct response to the crisis addressed by the Inquiry into MMIWG in Canada.

In the fall of 2014, the Canadian government had yet to respond to the ongoing crisis of MMIWG. This is despite the fact that a number of reports had been released, calling for an end to violence against Indigenous women in Canada. This includes a 2004-Amnesty International Report called *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada* and, nearly ten years after that in 2013, a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report titled *Those Who Take Us Away: Abusive Policing and Failures in Protection of Indigenous Women and Girls in Northern British Columbia, Canada*. The second report draws attention to the severely strained relationship between the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Indigenous women and girls who live in Northern British Columbia. It explains how "police have failed to protect this population from violence, but more significantly, it documents cases in which the police have been the chief *perpetrators* of this violence" (Sliwinski 2018: 189, emphasis in original). That is, members of an authoritative arm of the settler state were repeatedly committing horrific acts of violence against a particular segment of the population and the government was unwilling to take responsibility and act.

Other organizations including the Native Women's Association of Canada have been working to document and bring the crisis to the attention of the government and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. In 2016, the Canadian government decided, after public outcry and scrutiny, to launch the National Inquiry into MMIWG. (12) After some time and setbacks, the commissioners released a final report in 2019. The report reiterated that "thousands of Indigenous women, girls, 2SLGBTQQIA" have died under settler colonial rule (Reclaiming Power and Place 2019). Further, the commissioners emphasized in the report that "despite different circumstances and backgrounds, what connects all these deaths is colonial violence, racism and oppression… this amounts to genocide" (2019).

The significance of the National Inquiry, in one sense, is for non-Indigenous peoples to acknowledge that these are not isolated cases relating to a few troubled areas of the country and a few corrupt police officers. The charge of "genocide" means that it is a matter concerning human life. It cannot be framed as just an Indigenous women's issue, an Indigenous issue, or just a policing issue. The charge of genocide means that this is targeted violence, through malicious actions or neglect, and that everyone is responsible for the death and continued violence committed against Indigenous women. It is a national crisis that reveals the depth and force of settler colonialism through the country's history and continued existence. As the Inquiry's commissioners state in the final report:

> Colonial violence, as well as racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia against Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people, has become embedded in everyday life – whether this is through interpersonal forms of violence, through institutions like the health care system and the justice system, or in the laws, policies and structures of Canadian society (Reclaiming Power and Place 2019).

Indeed, the many reports situate "this contemporary sexual violence within a historical context" (Sliwinski 2018: 10). That is, they unpack how these cases are tied to the history of settler colonialism and settler colonial violence.

## Tanya Tagaq Unsettles Nirvana

*Retribution* addresses the many forms of settler colonial violence. Tagaq growls deeply at the burning, drilling, and destruction of the earth on the title track (Woloshyn 2017). She ties together the rape of the land and Indigenous women clearly with the Nirvana cover. On Tagaq's website there is a description of the cover as "at least a hundred times more chilling than the original" alongside an open challenge to listeners which states, "We defy you to listen to this album without weeping, without shuddering, without feeling its intense power and immediacy. This is dramatic, relevant, stunning music. 'Retribution will be swift'" (tanyatagaq.com/about). Indeed, the musical structure of Tagaq's version of "Rape Me" is significantly altered. I hear feedback from what is presumably Zubot's electric violin at the beginning. Martin sets a deep and steady drum beat which feels like it shifts back and forth between the front and back of the sonic profile throughout the song. The song moves at a slower pace than Nirvana's version and Tagaq sings with a whisper that remains assertive despite its softness. This contrasts Cobain's increasingly intense screams of the title phrase, yet she still manages to carry forward the confrontational feel of the lyrics. The title phrase is still a demand.

The presence of electric guitars is minimized compared to Nirvana's version, with clean notes picked softly and faintly to support Tagaq's vocals. Beyond some of the lyrics, the clean guitar in what is the verse in Nirvana's version is the most connected aspect of the two songs. When the guitar noticeably enters the song (around the 1m37s mark), the guitarist appears to struggle to find the notes to play which I hear as an homage to Cobain's sometimes seemingly disinterested playing style. Tagaq's vocals enter around the same mark. The shift in gender of the vocalist, although not the only significant difference, is an important factor to note. Tagaq adds "kill" and "beat"—which are not in Nirvana's version—to "rape" and "hate" to emphasize the range of violence committed against Indigenous women, girls, and land. Tagaq also forgoes the lyrics in the bridge and opts for a slower fade out to the song instead of the repeating screams.

There are also multiple vocal tracks repeating the key phrases underneath Tagaq's main vocals. This is part of the shifting narrative in my listening experience. The song is not necessarily an attempt to reach out and create a path of identification for listeners. The many voices gesture towards the wide-reaching and detrimental effects of rape on a community. Tagaq alludes to this violence against the community because it brings forth a key narrative shift: rape is part of the structures of settler colonialism. This shift gives the song a new force as the final moment of an unfolding narrative that declares, "Retribution will be swift"—as she states directly on the title track. The song serves as a powerful conclusion to an album that challenges the "starving orientation" (Robinson 2020: 2) of settlers concerning resource extraction and the destruction of the earth, and the negligence of settlers concerning violence against Indigenous women and girls.

Tagaq's version of Nirvana's "Rape Me" reveals certain realities and experiences faced as an Indigenous woman living through settler colonial North America and challenges the acceptance and perpetuation of the violence committed against Indigenous women. Her version is also a process and performance of cross-cultural recognition. She listened closely to Nirvana's version and pulls at some of the tension of the initial version. She suggests that Cobain's commands be heard in a new way—as voices, represented by the whispers of the multiple vocal tracks, urging listeners to take responsibility for the sexual violence ignored in communities across the land. She maintains the defiance, but performs a different perspective as the commanding voice, that is underwritten with an assertion of retribution. This is a command to listen and hear the Indigenous women already victimized and left vulnerable and recognize that this violence and history cannot be dealt with alongside other forms of violence. It must be addressed as a unique situation with this particular history in view at all times. Her command maintains the defiance of Cobain's performance, but it carries with it the life-affirming exclamation present throughout her album. Colonization is a failed project and "retribution will be swift."

Tagaq's covers are deliberate selections. "Caribou," "Rape Me," and, most recently, "Run To The Hills," are songs of a life—perhaps hers and perhaps not just hers. As a settler listener, I hear these songs as performances of a specific life itself and a critique of settler colonial states of mind. Their presence is fluid as they appear to exist in a liminal space between shifting realities. I also sense that they are part of a process of pushing settler listeners outside established listening experiences and states of mind. Tagaq has extended "Caribou" and "Rape Me," by nearly two minutes each, pulling listeners outside of their established listening experiences associated with the rock recordings of these songs. This push and pull is part of challenging "conventions and the hierarchy of values" (Stévance 2010: 88) of settler colonial states of mind. The listening experience is uncomfortable because the performances are saying something as they are the continued unfolding of a life—that is, alive. This unfolding takes on an immediate presence where it feels like the performances are somehow responding to my discomfort and not relenting. Yet, I know these are recordings or videos in some cases.

I must also note that the expressions of life that I perceive and witness are not the same as what another listener, particularly Inuit listeners, or other Indigenous listeners might hear (Robinson 2020: 64). As much as some listeners, myself included, might admire the surrealism, intensity, self-reflection, and empathy of the initial recordings, I feel Tagaq refusing a Euro-western reading of these covers through sonic or "sensory blockades" (2020: 72). My body responds to the notes, voices, and soundscape that I perceive as a range of feelings of comfort and discomfort, but I cannot articulate every sensation, nor do I believe that I can feel or hear every sonic cue. These songs are not aesthetic products that can be read as simply producing pleasure or serving as entertainment. The uneasiness felt when listening to Tagaq's whisper-like vocals on "Rape Me" and the repeated underlying whispers of "beat" and "kill" are part of how Tagaq prevents a purely entertaining experience. These songs command "a distinct kind of labor—an affectively charged mode of thinking that involves something more than reason or aesthetic appraisal" (Sliwinski 2018: 2). They do something as it were—that is, reveal elements of a life and offer pieces for alternative realities. (13) This "creative negation," in the words of Jarrett Martineau, refuses settler colonial structures as it turns "toward Indigenous alternatives and potentialities" (2015a: 43).

## Reconciliation Unsettled

Indigenous writers and theorists regularly note that efforts towards "reconciliation", as a discourse of settler colonial Canadians, continue a settler colonial project of working to assimilate or eradicate Indigenous peoples (Coulthard 2014; Garneau 2016; Robinson 2012; Simpson 2011, 2017). Specifically, Métis scholar and artist David Garneau's use of the term 'conciliation' in contrast to 'reconciliation' is worth noting here. Garneau argues that the current use of reconciliation "presses into our minds a false understanding of our past and constricts our collective sense of the future" (2016: 30). In other words, in the Canadian context, there is no "previously existing harmonious relationship" to return to and "reconciliation" cannot be a reparative project with the singular goal of addressing the violence and traumas brought about in and by residential schools (2016: 30). Conciliation, on the other hand, "is an ongoing process, a seeking rather than the restoration of an imagined agreement" (2016: 31). It acknowledges the continual work needed to recognize sovereignty, difference, and the agreements which guide sovereign nations. Tagaq also rejects reconciliation, but does so "in favor of "retribution" and gives voice to the anger and pain of Gaia—Mother Earth" (Woloshyn 2017). Notably, both artists refuse to challenge leaders of the settler state to reframe the discourse of reconciliation because this masks the larger issue: that the settler state continues to dictate the terms, limits, and processes of what they have called reconciliation and what they believe to be Indigenous sovereignty.

Tagaq's cover of Nirvana's "Rape Me" resists the move to reframe discourses of reconciliation in settler colonial terms. In more concrete terms, the song asserts and names the death and trauma that has and continues to occur under settler colonial systems. Rape of Indigenous women is one of the many "powerful tools of colonialism, settler colonialism, and capitalism" (Simpson 2017: 93). *Retribution* also names a possible future that challenges and potentially scares settler listeners. It denies settler colonial reconciliation as a future and "does not allow the listener to imagine safe images" of imaginary Inuit, First Nations, or Métis people (Woloshyn 2017). It challenges settler audiences to reimagine their relationship to systems of power where Indigenous nations are the leaders responsible to the land and are sovereign voices. For questions of conciliation, this means that settler listeners must recognize that the terms of a future on Anishinabek, Haudenosaunee, Niitsitapi, or nκhiyawak land for example, must be set by Indigenous nations (Lowman and Barker 2015: 112; and Simpson 2019: 228-231).

These challenges (potentially experienced as confusion, discomfort, tension, and fear) should encourage settler listeners to linger in the music and linger in uncertainty. (14) This experience of lingering in the music and the performance as a movement of sound and sensation can move listeners away from particular conventions toward others. As Fred Moten describes, as "you move through a soundscape you get moved by and enter another scene" (2003: 229). When I linger with Cobain's voice and Nirvana's music there are feelings of admiration, sadness, frustration, and joy. When I linger with the music of Aretha Franklin and Otis Redding during their performances of "Respect," I experience feelings of elation, wonder, some confusion, and satisfaction in the way Aretha rewrote the narrative of "Respect" through a feminist lens and made it her own song. When I linger with Tagaq's music and her cover of Nirvana's "Rape Me" in particular, I acknowledge the gendered shift that takes place when Tagaq's voice enters instead of Cobain's and I experience a range of feelings as outlined in this article: respect for her creativity and courage, sadness as the song addresses the reality of MMIWG, supportive of her confrontation with the apathy of the settler state toward sexual violence against Indigenous women, anxiety over what a sense of retribution means, and encouragement to challenge settler colonial structures and states of mind.

As I leave the "sound territory" (Robinson 2020: 53) of Tagaq's cover for now, pieces of the song will unquestionably linger with me. These pieces will replay in my mind and I will feel the sensations again with some distance. While the song sits with me, I will have to listen in different ways, through my body and memory. As Tagaq's version of "Rape Me" eventually fades from my immediate attention this time however, I will have to learn to listen differently once again, as a guest to the songs of other Inuit, First Nations, and Métis women, and as a returning guest to the music of Tagaq.

## Endnotes

1. Tagaq often notes in interviews and before performances that her style of throat singing is not a traditional style. Though it has roots in an Inuit throat singing tradition (katajjaq), she addresses audiences and interviewers by stating that her performances push and pull these techniques well beyond their roots. She says she has also faced criticism from members of her community who feel that her performances are an inappropriate "desecration" of traditions (Raynor 2017; and Stévance 2017 and 2010).

2. See also (Stévance 2017: 54-55) and (Woloshyn 2017).

3. According to Shana Conroy and Adam Cotter's (2017) report discussed in Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, Indigenous people are three times more likely to experience sexual violence. For a more detailed discussion of the rates of which Indigenous women face sexual violence and the patterns of self-reported sexual violence in Canada (Conroy and Cotter 2017; Reclaiming Power and Place 2019).

4. As Gaar notes in In Utero, Cobain "conceded the "favorite inside source" line, added to the bridge later, was intended as a direct jab at the media (among the album's thank-yous was a listing for "Our favorite inside sources across the globe")." This might suggest a double meaning for the bridge section, but Cobain asserts it is primarily an anti-rape narrative (Gaar 2006: 57).

5. Cobain recorded an acoustic demo version of "Rape Me" in 1992. This version, featuring only Cobain on vocals and acoustic guitar, tells a similar but seemingly more personal narrative. Despite being quite opaque, the narrative in this version reinforces a sense that the song is intended as a blunt discussion of rape (Nirvana 2004).

6. In an attempt to get countries that initially banned the album due to this song and other content deemed profane and obscene, Nirvana's manager, John Silva, wrote a letter explaining the use of the term "rape" along the same lines that media speculation already believed. He said that Cobain used "rape" as an analogy articulating the violation felt as a major celebrity. This ultimately added to the confusion and controversy. As outlined above, the lyrics were largely written before Nirvana's massive increase in fame. Cobain also continued to insist that the song was an "anti-rape" song. Nevertheless, it is clear why the "media violation" reading of the song persists (Garr 2006: 57-58).

7. In an article or The Walrus Drew Nelles notes, "although the Polaris credits stated that the band was performing "Uja" and "Umingmak," they had never found the time to replicate the songs from Animisim, and had practiced with the choir only briefly, during sound check" (Nelles 2015).

8. Tagaq has also performed live musical accompaniment to screenings of Nanook of the North, a 1922 silent film by American Robert Flaherty which depicts Nanook (an Inuk man) and his family in northern Québec. Tagaq was commissioned by the Toronto International Film Festival in 2012 to create live accompaniment to the film. She has performed this accompaniment around the world including in Toronto, Halifax, New York City, and Hobart, Tasmania.

9. Tagaq took the photos on a trip to Norway (Nelles 2015).

10. This estimated number only covers Canadian cases over a 30 year period, from 1984 to 2014, the year of her Animism Polaris performance.

11. For more on Inuit hunting as an act of sovereignty and the shifting realties for Inuit hunters (Tester and Irniq 2008; and (Stuckenberger 2009).

12. The Inquiry faced some criticism from a number of people, including one of the top commissioners and other committee members, some of whom resigned over issues with the way the Inquiry was carried out (Galloway and Thanh Ha 2017).

13. Lindsay Knight has an important discussion about the distinction between how some Indigenous artists understand music as a part of many elements of life and a Euro-western understanding that designates music as a distinct category of art, not directly related to a colonial understanding of life or existence itself (Knight 2013).

14. "As Baldwin knows…to receive the blessing of this substance—to see and hear and touch and smell and taste it; to receive the gift that does not cohere but exists in its abounding of its own internal space; to receive and in so doing to acknowledge the fact of the whole as a kind of distance: this is what it is to linger in the music" (Moten 2003: 192).

## References

### *Bibliography*

Amnesty International. 2004. *Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada*.

Azzerad, M. 1992. Nirvana: Inside the Heart and Mind of Kurt Cobain. *Rolling Stone*,16 April. Accessed from: https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/nirvana-inside-the-heart-and-mind-of-kurt-cobain-19920416.

Beaulne-Stuebing, L. 2016. A Conversation with Tanya Tagaq. *Ottawa Beat*, 21 November. Accessed at: http://ottawabeat.com/interviews/conversation-tanya-tagaq/.

Conroy, S., and Cotter, A. 2017. "Self-reported sexual assault in Canada, 2014." Juristat: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

Coulthard, G. 2014. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Dobkin, M. 2004. *I Never Loved a Man the Way I loved You: Aretha Franklin, Respect, and the Making of a Soul Music Masterpiece*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin.

Galloway, G and Thahn Ha, T. 2017. Indigenous women's group pulls support from missing and murdered inquiry as commissioner resigns. *The Globe and Mail*, 11 July. Accessed at: https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/mmiw-commissioner-marilyn-poitras-resigns-in-another-blow-to-inquiry/article35653097/.

Garneau, D. 2016. Imagined Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation. In D. Robinson and K. Martin Eds. *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Kitchener, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press: 21-41.

Gaar, G. G. 2006. *In Utero*. New York: Continuum.

Hann, M. 2016. Why Nirvana's In Bloom is Busting Out All Over. *The Guardian*, 5 April. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/apr/05/nirvana-in-bloom-nevermind-ezra-furman-sturgill-simpson.

Hearn, J. 2004. "From Hegemonic Masculinity to the Hegemony of Men" in *Feminist Theory*. Vol. 5. No. 1: 49-72.

Human Rights Watch. –

2015. *Those who Take Us Away: Abusive Policing and Failures in Protection of Indigenous Women and Girls in Northern British Columbia*, Canada.

Accessed at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/02/13/those-who-take-usaway/abusive-policing-and-failures-protection-indigenous-women.

2017. *Submission to the Government of Canada on Police Abuse of Indigenous Women in Saskatchewan and Failure to Protect Indigenous Women from Violence*. Accessed at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/19/submission-governmentcanada-police-abuse-indigenous-women-saskatchewan-and-failures.

Knight, L. 2013. *Resistance in Indigenous Music: A Continuum of Sound*. MA thesis. University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

Lowman, E.B. and Barker, A.J. 2015. *Settler: Identity and Colonialism in 21st Century Canada*. Halifax, NS and Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood Publishing.

Martineau, J. 2015. *Creative Combat: Indigenous Art, Resurgence, and Decolonization*. PhD. University of Victoria, Victoria.

Moten, F. 2003. *In the Break: The aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Munoz, J. 1999. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. 2019. Reclaiming Power and Place: *The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*. Accessed at: https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/.

Nelles, D. 2015. “Howl” from *The Walrus*. Published January 15th, 2015, updated August 23rd, 2017. Accessed at: https://thewalrus.ca/howl/

Raynor, B. 2017. Tanya Tagaq addresses her art, and her critics, at Nunavut Music Week. *Toronto Star*, 29 September. Accessed at: https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/music/2017/09/29/tanya-tagaq-addresses-her-art-and-her-critics-at-nunavut-music-week.html.

Robinson, D. –

2012. Listening to the Politics of Aesthetics: Contemporary Encounters between First Nations/Inuit and Early Music Traditions. In A. Anna Hoefnagels and Beverley Diamond Eds. *Aboriginal Music in Contemporary Canada*: Echoes and Exchanges. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press: 222-248.

2020. *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Simpson, L. —

2011. *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*. Winnipeg, MB: Arbeiter Ring Press.

2017. *As We Have Always Done*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Sliwinski, S. 2018. Sexual Violence in the Field of Vision. In S. Ristovska and M. Price Eds., *Visual Imagery and Human Rights Practice*. London: Palgrave: 185-202. Accessed at: http://works.bepress.com/sharon_sliwinski/34/.

Steinke, D. 1993. Smashing Their Heads On That Punk Rock. *Spin*, October. Accessed at: https://www.spin.com/2013/09/nirvana-cover-story-1993-smashing-their-heads-on-the-punk-rock/.

Steinskog, E. 2010. “Queering Cohen: Cover Versions as Subversions of Identity” in Play It Again: Cover Songs in Popular Music. Ed. by George Plasketes. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010. Pg. 139-154.

Stévance, S. –

2017. “From throat singing to transcultural expression: Tanya Tagaq's Katajjaq musical signature” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender*. Ed. S. Hawkins. Abingdon, England: Routledge: 48–62.

2010. “Analysis of the Inuit katajjaq in popular culture the Canadian throat-singer superstar Tanya Tagaq” in *Itamar, revista de investigación musical*: *Territorios para el arte*, Vol. 3: 79–85.

Stuckenberger, A. N. 2009. “Anthropologists Engaging in Climate Change Education and Outreach: Curating. Thin Ice-Inuit Traditions within a Changing Environment” in *Anthropology and Climate Change : From Encounters to Actions*. Eds., Susan A. Crate and Mark Nuttall. Left Coast Press.

Tester, F.J. and Irniq, P. 2008. “Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: Social History, Politics and the Practice of Resistance.” *Arctic*. Vol. 61: 48-61.

Woloshyn A. 2017. “Welcome to the Tundra”: Tanya Tagaq's creative and communicative agency as political strategy” in *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. Vol. 29. No. 4. doi: 10.1111/jpms.12254.

## *Web Sources*

Tagaq, T. About. TanyaTagaq.com. Accessed at: http://tanyatagaq.com/about/.

## *Discography*

A Tribe Called Red/The Halluci Nation—

2012. *A Tribe Called Red*, self-released, Canada.
2013. *Nation II Nation,* self-released, Canada.
2015. *Suplex*, EP, self-Released, Canada.
2016. *We Are the Halluci Nation*, Radicalized Records, 16 September Canada.
2021. *One More Saturday Night*, self-released, 30 July, Canada.

Cobain, Kurt. 1992. Liner notes from *Incesticide*, Geffen Records, USA.

Nirvana —

1991. *Nevermind*, Geffen Records, 24 September, United States of America.
1992. *Incesticide,* Geffen Records, 15 December, United States of America.
1993. *In Utero*, Geffen Records, 13 September, United States of America.
2004. *With The Lights Out*. DGC, 23 November, United States of America.

Pixies —

1987. *Come On Pilgrim*, 4AD, 28 September, United States of America.
1989. *Doolittle,* 4AD, 18 April, United States of America.

Tagaq, Tanya —

2005. *Sinaa*, Six Shooter Records, Canada.
2008. *Auk/Blood*, Six Shooter Records, Canada.
2011. *anuraaqtuq*, Les Disques Victo, Canada.
2014. *Animism*, 27 May, Six Shooter Records, Canada.
2016. *Retribution*, 21 October, Six Shooter Records, Canada.
2021. *Colonizer*, single, Six Shooter Records, Canada.

## *Videography*

Nirvana. 2019. *Nirvana - Rape Me* (Live At The Paramount, Seattle / 1991) [Online video]. Available from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ly1lWkRwm6g. Accessed 30 October 2018.