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Traditional vs. Tagaq: Exploring the First Nations Relations in Canada Through Punk Inuk Throat Singer, Tanya Tagaq

Abstract

This research essay will be situated within the throat singing traditions of the Inuit First Nations people of Canada. As both Paula Conlon's entry in the Grove Music Reference and Elaine Keillor's book describe, Inuit throat singing began as a tradition for women and children to play as a game for when the men are away hunting. This tradition has evolved into quite a complex art form as Claude Charron describes in "Toward Transcription and Analysis of Inuit Throat-Games: Microstructure". In 2005, Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq released her first album which began her career of a solo throat singer with immense success. This research aims to explore and unpack the Canadian First Nations relations through Tagaq's music. Stephanie Stèveance discusses how Tagaq's virtuosic solo technique has advanced Inuit throat singing into higher regard in the art spheres of popular Canadian culture. Using recent album reviews and newspaper articles, this essay will explore the first nations relations in Canada through the Inuk "superstar" Tanya Tagaq.

Keywords

Ethnomusicology, Inuit, Throat-Singing, Tagaq, "Canadian Music"

Disciplines

Ethnomusicology | Music | Other Music

Comments

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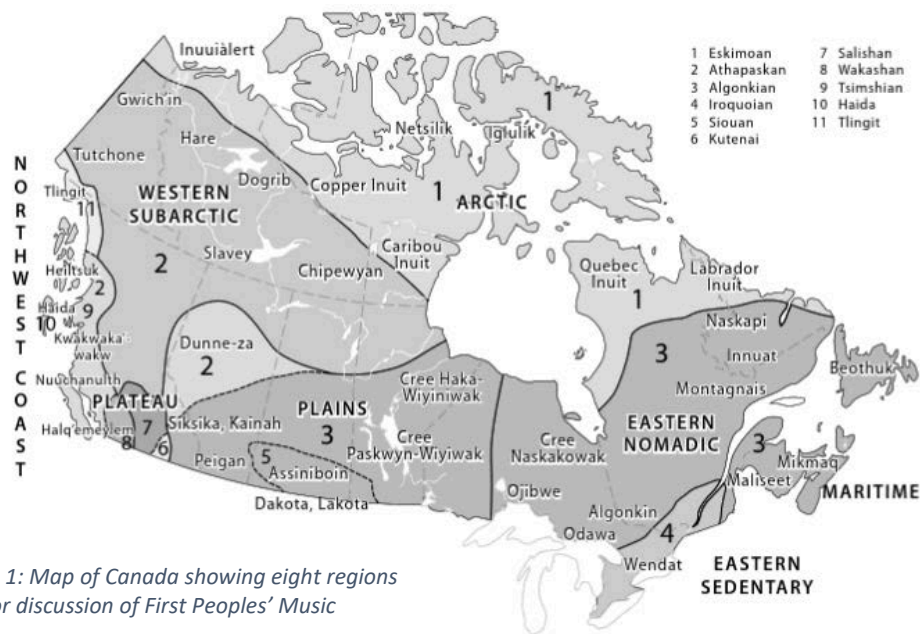
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Inuit throat games are a traditional art form of the Canadian Inuit of the greater circumpolar Inuit communities. This native traditional art form has evolved and has been sampled in Canadian pop and hip-hop songs, placed in the concert hall, and performed at celebratory Canadian political events. Tanya Tagaq, born in Nunavut, Canada¹, is one of leading forces in bringing Inuit throat singing to the forefront of both musical and political conversations. Tagaq's non-traditional solo style of throat singing style of singing has been criticized, among other reasons, because it contrasts with traditional Inuit throat singing, which is performed in a duo format. Tagaq, however, has used her music as a platform for activism, fighting for indigenous rights, environmental change, and feminist ideals. This political agenda places her in a role as an activist for the indigenous peoples' rights, women's rights and



environmental rights.

Throat singing is a type of music that is found in many places within the greater circumpolar region, encompassing parts of North America, Asia and Europe. In Canada, this

type of music, which is commonly referred to as more of a “game” than an art form, is primarily found in the Inuit cultures in the Arctic region of Canada, as shown on Figure 1¹. In this throat-game, which is referred to as *katajjaq* in native Inuit cultures, partners face each other and use their voices to imitate the landscape and sounds around them, simultaneously responding to and competing with one another². This game was originally *performed* by women, passing the time while the men were away hunting. However, some researchers have found the Inuit throat games being an important part of the hunting process, where the women staying at the village would perform these games as a “magical technique” to influence the animal spirit and some of nature’s elements to help bring success to the hunt³. Inuit throat singing is a long-standing tradition of the Canadian First peoples that carries a lot of cultural significance.

While still practiced in traditional Inuit communities, this tradition has evolved and taken form in different ways throughout the years, one of the most notable being through the artist Tanya Tagaq. Tagaq is a Canadian Inuk singer from Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, the most recently formed province of Canada⁴. Tagaq released her first album in 2005 and has continued to perform and create in many different environments. Tagaq has since released four more albums and collaborated with artists from diverse genres, including Buffy Saint Marie, A Tribe Called Red, July Talk, Indian Agent. Tagaq has also collaborated with the Kronos String Quartet and

¹ Elaine Keillor, “Figure 2.1” in *Music in Canada: Capturing Landscape and Diversity*, 16

²Sophie Stevance, “Analysis of the Inuit katajjaq in popular culture: The Canadian throat-singer superstar Tanya Tagaq,” *Itamar; Revista de investigación musical-Territorios para el arte* 3, (2010): 81

³ Sophie Stevance, “Analysis of the Inuit katajjaq in popular culture: The Canadian throat-singer superstar Tanya Tagaq,” *Itamar; Revista de investigación musical-Territorios para el arte* 3, (2010): 82

⁴ Susan Bevan Gall and Margaret K. Antone, “Nunavut,” *Worldmark Encyclopedia of U.S. and Canadian Environmental Issues*, (2012), 597

the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, successfully bringing this style of Inuit throat-singing not only into the popular sphere of music, but also into the classical sphere of music.

As with any form of traditional music being brought into popular spheres and public conversation, one might question the artist's background in search of means to accuse her of cultural appropriation. However, there is little published that criticizes Tagaq for her style of throat-singing as a form of appropriation. This is due in part to Tagaq herself being born in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, in th part of the province where 86% of the population identifies as Aboriginal North America.⁵ Nunavut is home to the largest Inuit population out of any of the provinces of Canada. When Tagaq went to Nova Scotia College of Art and Design to study singing⁶, she became home sick and her mother sent her recordings of traditional Inuit throat singing to remind Tagaq of home⁷. It was from these recordings that Tagaq learned herself how to throat sing and therefore explains why she performs solo in contrast to the traditional paired performance style. Tagaq herself does not identify as a throat singer⁸. In an interview addressing her critics, Tagaq states, "I have never, ever said that what I'm doing is traditional throat singing. This is not traditional This is contemporary...Our show is contemporary, and I just do whatever I feel like and it can get really freaky."⁹ Tagaq's soloistic style of performance allows her to be

⁵Nunavut: Population, (2019), CultureGrams Online Edition. ProQuest, Retrieved from <https://online.culturegrams.com/provinces/section.php?pid=10&hid=23481&oid=27>

⁶ Ben Rayner, "Tanya Tagaq addresses her art, and her critics, at Nunavut Music Week" Last modified September 29, 2017. <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/music/2017/09/29/tanya-tagat-addresses-her-art-and-her-critics-at-nunavut-music-week.html>

⁷ "From Throat Singing to Beatboxing, These Singers' Vocal Techniques Exude Feminism". *FASHION Magazine*. March 24, 2017 Friday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5N59-XD01-JCMN-Y3YB-00000-00&context=1516831>.

⁸ John Schaefer, "Polar Protest Music From Inuk Singer & Activist Tanya Tagaq" last modified April 6, 2017, <https://www.newsounds.org/story/inuk-throat-singer-tanya-tagat-in-studio/>

⁹ Ben Rayner, "Tanya Tagaq closes out Iqaluit music fest with delayed, defiant, 'really freaky' show," Toronto Star Newspapers, updated October 2, 2017 <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/music/2017/10/02/tanya-tagat-closes-out-iqaluit-music-fest-with-delayed-defiant-really-freaky-show.html>

more fluid her collaborations and individual creations. In not being bound by the constraints of traditional throat singing, Tagaq has more freedom in how she presents her art.

Tagaq's work has been much more than just a way to connect with her Inuit heritage but has become a way to fight for indigenous peoples' rights, primarily through her collaborations with other artists. In 2016, Tagaq was featured on the song "ALie Nation" produced by A Tribe Called Red. This group is described as, "based in modern hip-hop, traditional pow wow drums and vocals, blended with edgy electronic music production styles"¹⁰. In the song "ALie Nation", Tagaq's vocals are used in the background along with traditional pow wow music of the Northern Plains Natives as the lyrics describe the plights of the native people of Canada. Tagaq's role is important in this work because it aids in the exploration of the native Canadian identity. The blend of multiple styles of traditional native Northern American music exemplifies the diverse identity of Canadian First Peoples are. Tagaq's throat-singing allows her to step forward and be a part of a movement for indigenous people's rights.

Tagaq's collaboration with A Tribe Called Red is also important in that they are a group that often comments on the pipeline projects run by the Canadian national government. In 2016, the Canadian government launched the Trans Mountain Expansion Project, with the promise of \$4.5 billion in government revenues and 15,000 new jobs. This proposed pipeline crosses over many indigenous communities in southwest Canada and the official government release paints a picture of "mutual benefit agreements"¹¹. However, this project has not officially launched due to disagreements between the Canadian government, environmentalists concerned about the

¹⁰ "Press Kit," A Tribe Called Red, <http://atribecalledred.com/bio/>

¹¹ *Natural Resources Canada*, s.v. "Trans Mountain Expansion Project," last modified February 9, 2019, <https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/energy/resources/19142>

pipeline's effect on marine life, and Canadian indigenous peoples.¹² A Tribe Called Red continues to perform their music that exemplifies the protest against the pipeline projects. Tagaq's choice to collaborate with this group allows her to be a part of an important protest movement in the indigenous peoples communities of Canada.

Tagaq continues to bring indigenous people's rights to the forefront of the popular conversation through her collaboration with Buffy Sainte Marie, a Cree singer-songwriter specializing in a self-defined genre of "activist" songs.¹³ Sainte Marie also won a Polaris music prize in 2015, a year after Tagaq had won hers which is how the collaboration between the two singers was created. The resulting piece is called "You Got to Run", which was inspired by the story of George Attla, the winner of the first ever Iditarod dogsled race.¹⁴ However, Sainte Marie discloses in interviews later that the song is more than just a story about a dogsled racer, but helps to spread a message of strength, which Sainte Marie has directed towards the Indigenous peoples communities where the youth suicide rate is startlingly high.¹⁵ Tagaq's collaboration with Sainte Marie has sent a strong message to the First Nations people of Canada. It is in these

¹² *Huffington Post*, s.v. "Federal Government Extends Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Deadline to June," last modified April 18, 2019, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2019/04/18/trans-mountain-deadline-extended_a_23713888/?utm_hp_ref=ca-homepage

¹³ grockingham@thespec.com. "ROCKINGHAM: Buffy Sainte-Marie singing songs of protest, empowerment ... and dog sled racing". *thespec.com*. November 15, 2017 Wednesday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5PYS-B7F1-F105-62J0-00000-00&context=1516831>.

¹⁴ Aaron Brophy, *Polaris Music Prize*, s.v. "Buffy Sainte-Maire and Tanya Tagaq Team Up For Polaris Collaboration Session," last modified February 21, 2017, retrieved from <https://polarismusicprize.ca/blog/buffy-sainte-marie-and-tanya-tagat-team-up-for-polaris-collaboration-session/>

¹⁵ Samuel Freeman. "Focused approach vital to addressing indigenous youth health". *The Star Phoenix (Saskatoon, Saskatchewan)*. December 28, 2016 Wednesday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5MGX-DBT1-DY2T-036C-00000-00&context=1516831>.

purposeful collaborations that Tagaq continues to set herself apart from the typical music artist in modern day Canada.

Tagaq not only participates in fighting against the injustices against Canadian First Nations Peoples, but also brings this traditional Inuit art form into the classical sphere of music. In March of 2019, Tanya Tagaq performed with the National Arts Centre Orchestra led by musical director Alexander Shelley. Tagaq's collaboration was described as "a passionate outpouring of sorrow inspired by the loss of Canada's missing and murdered Indigenous women"¹⁶. This performance with the NAC Orchestra is important for a couple interrelated reasons. One being obvious in that Tagaq and Shelley's unapologetic inspiration and depiction of the harsh realities faced by the indigenous women of Canada. Thai News Service reports that acts of violence against indigenous women are twice as much as the national average¹⁷. Tagaq's collaboration with the NAC allows in her to step forward and fight against the injustices she must face through herself. Tagaq's collaboration with the NAC Orchestra also allows her to bring her political agenda to the upper-class audience of the symphony orchestra, which often includes politicians and law makers from the Canadian government. Through Tagaq's collaborations, she is able to let her voice be heard by a diverse audience spanning from listeners of the electropop music of A Tribe Called Red to the listeners of classical music like that of the Nation Arts Centre Orchestra.

¹⁶ "Review: NAC Orchestra joins forces with Tanya Tagaq in powerful, emotional collab". *Postmedia Breaking News*. March 7, 2019 Thursday.
<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5VKB-XJ41-JDK3-903M-00000-00&context=1516831>.

¹⁷ States News Service. "SUBMISSION TO THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA ON POLICE ABUSE OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN SASKATCHEWAN AND FAILURES TO PROTECT INDIGENOUS WOMEN FROM VIOLENCE". *States News Service*. June 19, 2017 Monday.
<https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5NTW-0VD1-JCBF-S416-00000-00&context=1516831>.

Tagaq's own work is even more so apparent in its political agenda, focusing primarily in the environmental issues surrounding Canada's northernmost territories. Tagaq's albums have been increasingly subversive in nature, with the latest album *Retribution*, being released with a note from Tagaq stating, "This album is about rape. Rape of women, rape of land, rape of children, despoiling of traditional lands without consent"¹⁸. Tagaq's unapologetic political agenda with her music confirms her individual sense of identity as an Inuit activist, using the traditional art form of Inuit throat singing as her platform.

What is most important about Tagaq's work is that she is not just creating a problem for the sake of being a controversial artist. Tagaq's motivation and inspiration for creating subversive art comes directly from the current political state of Canada. One of the most pressing socio-political issues in present-day Canada is the violence against indigenous women. In 2016, \$40 million from the Government of Canada's budget was allocated towards the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, or MMIWG, a "important step towards...a renewed sense of trust between the Government of Canada and Indigenous peoples in Canada"¹⁹. This inquiry was designed to be at least a two-year long endeavor to work towards fully understanding and unpack the issues which Aboriginal people face in Canada. It was created in response to many reports and overviews that highlighted the harsh realities of Canada's violence against indigenous people crisis. One of the most prominent of these reports was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action released in 2015, urging the

¹⁸ "Tanya Tagaq pushes environmental message". *therecord.com*. October 20, 2016 Thursday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5M0K-HCT1-F197-5008-00000-00&context=1516831>.

¹⁹ *Government of Canada*. "Background on the Inquiry," last modified April 22, 2016, retrieved from <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1449240606362/1534528865114>.

federal government to make inquiries into the violence against aboriginal women and girls²⁰.

These reports are the beginnings to important investigative work and government action to aid in the protection of the indigenous women of Canada. Tagaq's subversive art form aids in bringing these heavy political issues to the forefront of the popular sphere.

Not only does Tagaq's style of singing impact the message of her music, but also creates a platform for Tagaq to tackle issues of feminism in popular music. Tagaq's live performances have been self-described as "really freaky"²¹ but it is in this avant-garde style that Tagaq achieves her most important task as an artist, she offers an alternative definition to femininity. The mainstream definition of femininity has been crafted into one focused on a delicate, demure, and soft appearance and demeanor. Tagaq combats this mainstream portrayal with a much more aggressive, visceral, and physical performance aesthetic. Tagaq's art is not anti-femininity, but rather, it provides a different definition of the term. Tagaq states, "I think every culture has a different definition of what femininity is. Women have to be really, really strong up north to be respected."²² Tagaq's relentless avant-garde style of performance exudes feminism and places Tagaq in the role of a strong female artist.

Tanya Tagaq has done important work illuminating the current sociopolitical issues of Canada. Tagaq's story and career is inspiring to younger members of the indigenous communities as she shows ones way of reinventing native traditions for the 21st century. In her

²⁰ *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, s.v. "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action," last modified 2015, retrieved from http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

²¹ "Tanya Tagaq pushes environmental message". *therecord.com*. October 20, 2016 Thursday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5M0K-HCT1-F197-5008-00000-00&context=1516831>.

²² "From Throat Singing to Beatboxing, These Singers' Vocal Techniques Exude Feminism". *FASHION Magazine*. March 24, 2017 Friday. <https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5N59-XD01-JCMN-Y3YB-00000-00&context=1516831>.

work, Tagaq has and will continue to provide critical and subversive commentary on the current state of Canada's indigenous peoples affairs.

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