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## Navigating Reconciliation and Retribution in the Work of Laakkuluk Williamson-Bathory

Laakkuluk Williamson-Bathory is an Inuk performance artist based in Iqaluit, Nunavut. Her practice responds to intersections of gender and race as they come into conversation with the conditions of life perpetuated by the ongoing reality of settler colonialism in Nunavut and across Canada. Her work explores the profound human connections that are informed by the natural environment within communities as well as her identity as a mother and a storyteller. In developing her practice, Bathory states that she has been concerned with the ways in which people, both Inuit and non-Inuit, may come to understand her work as an individual exploration of identity, culture, politics, ugliness and beauty – not simply a pageantry of ‘Inuit art’ (“Episode 46: Interview”). By communicating both the beauty and the wrath of “self-realization in the face of de-colonization,” Bathory examines how “patriarchy, gender, and colonialism have shaped the scope of experiences of Indigenous women as knowers and producers of knowledge” rooted in the human and spiritual realms (Hernandez-Avila xvi). Her unique performance style casts a contemporary light on her traditional roots through her insertion of Inuit culture, such as Uajaerneq mask dancing and throat singing, into contemporary realms of media and art consumption as a way to bridge the existence and experiences of her community with mainstream Canadian settler society.

Before engaging with Bathory’s work specifically, I’d like to reveal the perspective that I am writing from and also speak on the legacy of Indigenous women in the arts throughout the pre- and post-colonial eras. Because I am writing from the perspective of a young, white woman educated primarily within the Western, Eurocentric paradigm, I can only go so far with my analysis before coming to a place where I may not have the authority to speak definitively. However, I do intend to de-center my own risk of misunderstanding and instead focus on the ways in which Bathory’s work is intertwined with contemporary Canadian initiatives toward reconciliation and de-colonization. Importantly, there are many intersecting structures in place that must be taken into consideration in the analysis of how reconciliation and retribution may be accomplished, and where problems of representation and history may still persist. I hope to make meaningful connections between the Inuit relationship to the land and its reflection in prominent cultural art forms and to problematize the way that the task of healing has been overlaid onto this tradition of expression. While Indigenous women artists often receive recognition for their work as articulations of cultural healing, it is important to acknowledge the contemporary voices that intend to express themselves outside of the paradigm of reconciliation. Bathory is an excellent example of how contemporary Indigenous artists can meaningfully engage with their identity in ways that do not privilege the Western system of art-making or appreciation and that take deep root in their individual communities and traditions.

The significance of Bathory's choice to perform traditional Inuit methods of cultural expression speaks to the movement that many contemporary Indigenous women artists have taken towards "[exploring] pre-contact art traditions and styles developed during early colonialism and reservation confinement" as a method of social criticism and new experimentation (Farris 95). For Bathory, the performance of Uajaerneq mask dancing has become "a vehicle for primal, personal, and political expression" that grounds her both physically and metaphorically in the Earth around her (Berman). As a hyper-sexualized and improvised act meant to be both frightening and humorous, it pushes boundaries regarding sexuality and gender and, as an experience, is "simultaneously freeing, alienating, exploratory, and purposeful" ("Episode 46: Interview"). Most importantly, the pre- and post-colonial context of this type of performance, which was suppressed by Western missionaries almost to the point of disappearance throughout the colonial era, speaks to the rebellion and reclaiming of Indigenous knowledges and traditions globally as legitimate and meaningful.

The first project I would like to consider is Bathory's collaboration with Maria Hupfield, entitled "From the Moon to the Belly." In partnership with FUSE Magazine, the work is comprised of seven digitally collaged postcards that depict Bathory in full Uajaerneq mask against a backdrop of contemporary landmarks from Western metropolitan centers.



"Humour, Sexuality, and Fear," Laakkuluk Williamson-Bathory, digital collage postcard, 2012

The familiar format of the postcard functions as a "device for socio-cultural exchange," and the additional online publication extends that reach across further, non-physical borders ("#callresponse"). The assertion of Indigenous people beyond (settler-colonial) attempts at parody or reproduction is intended to provoke a profound (re-)consideration of the politics within the current issues of Indigenous land rights, alienation, and belonging. Bathory therefore imaginatively and unapologetically inserts herself into a mainstream public discourse and environment that has failed to acknowledge Indigenous presences as daily presences. Her work thus fuses the past, present, and future as a means to deconstruct both how Indigenous women are represented in popular culture and the way that landscape is bound up with memory and ideology.

In the creation and circulation of this type of imagery, Bathory highlights the importance of performance, juxtaposition, and translation as key techniques within her practice. By centering the image of the Indigenous woman in her digital collages, both visually and ideologically, she alludes to a future of Indigenous visibility that has not yet arrived. She encourages the viewer to sit with this incommensurability and meditate on the strength and intensity of her self-representations. Yet, even in a metropolis city so densely populated with life, there is nothing and nowhere to ground herself in the way that Uaajeernej mask dancing demands. Bathory's crouching and her clear invitation for engagement is met with visual signs of apathy, as the people around her keep their heads down and fail to acknowledge her. Operating as a haunting metaphor for the lack of mainstream awareness of Indigenous histories and hardship, "From the Moon to the Belly" acknowledges the need to make room for the traditions and recognize the survival of Indigenous peoples in our contemporary lives.

A continuation of this line of thinking occurs throughout Bathory's involvement in a collaborative project titled #callresponse. As both a title and a hashtag, it grew out of discussions about the importance of Indigenous feminisms in contemporary conversations regarding how healing and reconciliation should be approached in Canada. This has ultimately become the primary motivation of The Canada Council for the Arts Reconciliation Project, which is "invested in the power of art and imagination to inspire and promote artistic collaborations that invoke past and future dialogues between Indigenous and non-Indigenous presences in Canada ("{Re}Conciliation"). By uniting multiple platforms, ranging from site specific work to the gallery and online spaces, #callresponse connects geographically diverse spaces in conversation with the ways in which the traumatic wounds of settler colonialism have unequally impacted the Indigenous woman ("#callresponse"). The project intends to incite discussions between individuals, communities, territories, and institutions around the world by connecting and centering the work of five artists from across the Canadian nation-state: Christi Belcourt, Maria Hupfield, Ursula Johnson, Tania Willard, and Bathory.

Bathory's contribution to the project is a short film entitled "Timiga, Nunalu, Sikulu" (translated as "My body, the land, and the ice"). Shot in Iqaluit, Nunavut, it layers multiple moments, places, sounds, and narratives within one mesmerizing cut, depicting details of the Arctic tundra and soundscape that speak to the daily experiences of Inuit peoples. Anchored within this environment is Bathory's bare figure, centered and languid on the ice, inviting Rubenesque allusions to the Western tradition of the nude painting of the female form ("#callresponse"). As the camera pans across the contours of her body, there is a conflation of skin and landscape, and the connection of the Indigenous woman to the environment is made clear. However, before we are able to arrive at any concrete visual analysis, Bathory twists her head to face the viewer, her sharp gaze piercing the camera and interrupting any placid atmosphere of voyeuristic study. In full Uaajeernej masking, Bathory gnashes her teeth and dismantles the gaze of the viewer, forcing them to confront their own manner of visual consumption ("#callresponse"). Bathory vigorously rejects one of the most fundamental



"Timiga, Nunalu, Sikulu," Laakkuluk Williamson-Bathory, film still, 2016

notions of colonial aestheticism, interrupting the reading of a nude woman amidst a tranquil landscape, and instead presents herself as a powerful force in an environment that is itself deeply alive.

By making a video that is in dialogue with the contemporary experiences of Indigenous women, Bathory takes control over the representations of her body and the harsh environment that is a part of her Inuk heritage. This reframes the Indigenous person outside of the paradigm of oppression or helplessness and restores her strength through a depiction of her embrace of the surrounding ecosystem of life. The Inuit peoples inhabit one of the most extreme climates imaginable, and a large aspect of Inuit survival has involved developing ways to live in tandem with this environment, rather than resisting it. Today, these strategies have changed but remain nonetheless. The need to find ways of re-connecting with the land has resurfaced within the discourse of de-colonization and reconciliation, but the methodology for this transition has not yet been pinpointed. In an interview for the Broken Boxes podcast, Bathory mentions that a good place to begin this process is actually through disconnection ("Episode 46: Interview"). Because so much of Inuit life exists outside of the realm of social media and commercialized forces, the impulse to stay "connected" becomes far less important than it is in mainstream Western society. By distancing oneself from the pressures of consumption and the "need for more," there is room for a more embodied awareness of the external world that is anchored in immediate sensory experience ("Episode 46: Interview"). Thus, if the opportunity exists, Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) peoples may cultivate meaningful ways of relating to their contemporary lived experience and past traditions by disconnecting from social pressures of the oppressive settler culture and re-connecting with the land.

Bathory's short film is but one attempt to get outside of an overbearing Western ideology in order to restructure power relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. However, it is important to remain critical of the implications of using art as a way of healing the trauma of colonization to a broader, mainstream public. We must be aware of the burdens we place on the artists who take it upon themselves to produce such politically-engaged work and aware too of the ways in which the arts may be instrumentalized to serve

broader neo-liberal socio-political ends that have the potential to become an industry in themselves, thus complicating the process of healing by de-centralizing the presences and experiences of Indigenous people. We must also be wary of this “settler move to innocence,” which problematically attempts to reconcile and re-center settler guilt and complicity within the task of reconciliation (Tuck and Yang 3). We must not be afraid to question the motivations behind the sponsoring of a project such as #callresponse by the Canada Council for the Arts Reconciliation Project and make sure that the voices and experiences of Indigenous women remain central to the project and do not get co-opted or subsumed within a larger enterprise that takes their struggle for granted.

Before moving forward, I would like to unpack the term “settler move to innocence,” as it appears in Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s article “Decolonization is not a Metaphor.” They argue that the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted into education and other social sciences, and this easy absorption, adoption and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation that problematically centers white guilt rather than Indigenous healing and the re-inhabitation of the land that was stolen from Indigenous ancestors (Tuck and Yang 5). Because settler colonialism is an amalgamation of what Tuck and Yang deem “external colonialism” and “internal colonialism,” the process of de-colonization in settler societies faces different challenges from those that arise in other histories of colonization.

External colonialism speaks to the process of the extraction of natural resources as well as people from Indigenous nations to “build the wealth, privilege, and appetites of colonizers” (Tuck and Yang 4). This applies to aspects of the fur trade and the slave trade that objectify animals and human beings and that understand the colony as a barren landscape that is available specifically to satisfy settler interests. Comparatively, internal colonialism considers the ways in which structures of segregation, surveillance, and criminalization impact the systemic management and oppression of Indigenous peoples within the “domestic” sphere (Tuck and Yang 4). This speaks to the traumatic history of the reservation system, which worked to essentially imprison Indigenous nations, and the residential school systems, which aimed to brainwash Indigenous children and sever ties with their Indigenous heritage and traditions. Because the colonizers do not actually leave in the case of settler colonialism and because it operates simultaneously through internal and external colonial modes, the conditions for actual de-colonization cannot begin to occur (Tuck and Yang 5). In continuation of this argument, Yang and Tuck explain how “Indigeneity prompts multiple forms of settler anxiety, even if only because the presence of Indigenous peoples – who make a priori claims to land and ways of being – is a constant reminder that the settler colonial project is incomplete” (Tuck and Yang 9). For this reason, settler colonialism is itself a structure, rather than an event.

Thus, because decolonization is, by definition, the withdrawal of the colonizing power structures and the repatriation of Indigenous lands to the nations who were there first, anything apart from that set of conditions is not, actually, de-colonization at all. The easy adoption of decolonization into larger frameworks of social justice discourse effectively transforms it into a metaphor that renders the process an activity of the mind that may be “solved” by art, academics, and “critical methodologies.” These ideas blur the distinction between ally and apathy, and may ultimately be understood as “settler moves to innocence” because they are strategies that attempt to relieve settlers of feelings of guilt or responsibility

without requiring them to give up land, power or privilege (Tuck and Yang 10). The desire to resolve the process of decolonization in this way may thus be understood as relentless as the desire to disappear the Indigenous presence entirely; it is a desire to not have to deal with the “[Indian] problem” anymore (Tuck and Yang 9). Tuck and Yang confront this view, asserting that “no phraseology can be a substitute for reality” because “critical consciousness does not translate into action that disrupts settler colonialism” if it remains within the realm of metaphors and gestures. Complete Indigenous decolonization within the Canadian nation-state therefore cannot exist within the same paradigm that perpetuates settler futurity, and, until those structures are reconciled, there will be discomfort for settlers and uprising from Indigenous peoples.

I would argue that it is out of this discomfort and need for uprising that Tanya Tagaq’s “Retribution” music video emerges as an expression of intense feminine strength and feelings of vengeance toward the mistreatment of Indigenous women and Mother Earth. The video begins with Bathory preparing herself for an uajaerneq mask dance, while Tagaq recites a spoken word poem:

Our mother grows angry  
Retribution will be swift  
We squander her soil and suck out her sweet black blood to burn it  
We turn money into God and salivate over opportunities to crumple and crinkle our souls  
for that paper, that gold  
Money has spent us  
Left us in smog  
Locks is dark, room is bright, screams empty to us  
Left investing time, hollow philosophies  
To placate the fear of our bodies returning back into our mother  
Demand awakening  
The path we have taken has rotted  
Ignite, stand upright, conduct yourself like lightning because  
The retribution will be swift

Tagaq, who is also an Inuk woman Indigenous to Nunavut, has received international recognition for her throat singing, traditionally called Katajjaq, that has become inseparable from her activism and works as a “vehicle for primal, personal, and political expression” (Berman). Her acceptance of the Polaris Prize for Best Canadian Album in 2014 exploded the global profile of this Inuit craft and the boundaries of the practice itself. Originally executed as an interactive and friendly competition between two women in the community, Katajjaq performances involve the production of heaving, gnarled, guttural sounds from the throat in responsive, rhythmic patterns. Tagaq adapts this practice into an individual act wherein she alternates her voice between a “panicked yelp and an esophagus-shredding grunt” amidst vocal narration and kinetic movement (Berman). At once exquisite and unnerving, Katajjaq bears many similarities to Uajaerneq performances since both are inherently embodied dramatic responses rooted in the harsh climate and way of life that Inuit people have subsumed into their cultural repository.

“Retribution” directly addresses the ways in which capitalist and patriarchal structures have shaped the experiences of Indigenous women over time and employs anti-colonial modes of performance to draw attention to that traumatic history. By characterizing the Earth as not only alive, but our Mother, Tagaq represents the destructive treatment of our environment as a cannibalistic devouring of a living being. This radical form of social criticism speaks to the way that place and landscape are closely bound up with personal and collective identity in Inuit cultures. As both Tagaq and Bathory plug themselves into the Earth throughout their respective intersecting performances, they bring a sense of embodiment to the anger and outrage of our Mother Earth as “we squander her soil” and “suck out her sweet black blood” to burn as oil (*Retribution*). This violation of the environment is intimately intertwined with capitalist systems of production that disassociate human relationships from the ecosystem and re-center our values toward the efficient manufacturing and consumption of material possessions. Tagaq goes on to highlight the inherent imbalance of this equation, as we “turn money into God,” while “money [spends] us” (*Retribution*). By conflating the mistreatment of the environment with the lack of respect for Indigenous women and associated systems of knowledge, “Retribution” calls to attention the imbalances of power that work against the healing of environmental and residual colonial trauma, which ultimately stem from a “fear of our bodies returning back to our mother” (*Retribution*).



“Retribution,” Tanya Tagaq and Laakkuluk Williamson-Bathory, film still, 2016

Thus, while “Retribution” is forceful in its call to action to discard the “hollow philosophies” of our current paradigm, it is not hopeful. Rather, it is a portrait of a violent world in crisis. The question of “returning back to our mother” is not so much a matter of probability, but an inevitability. The blatant ignorance of this fact has polluted Western discourse and brainwashed the majority of the mainstream population into patriarchal compliance. In “Retribution,” Tagaq and Bathory forcefully and unapologetically take their power back in a way that may be unsettling to watch for the settler audience. That, I would argue, is the intention.

“Retribution” thus emerges at a point when Canada has just begun to reckon with its historic, government-sanctioned mistreatment of the country’s Indigenous population — “a long-simmering, long-suppressed topic that’s now become an explosive flashpoint in the



national conversation” (Presley). While the path toward reconciliation has been a slow-going, ineffective, and frustratingly bureaucratic process, Tagaq warns both at the beginning and end of her spoken word piece that “retribution will be swift.” This marks a sharp ideological shift in her approach to Indigenous healing: namely, that she is running out of patience waiting for action to be taken. It is retribution that she yearns for, not reconciliation: two words importantly separated by their disposition toward the opposing party. Tagaq and Bathory are not interested in restoring any “friendly relations” with the Canadian government because that relationship never existed to begin with. Rather, they are interested in addressing Canada’s under-the-rug history of cultural and corporeal genocide, as well as the current issues that continue to affect their communities disproportionately, such as the national epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and the ongoing tyranny of the oil industry drilling pipelines into sacred territory. Furthermore, the Inuit peoples live on the cutting edge of the global climate emergency, witnessing the death of the entire Arctic ecosystem while confined to government-sanctioned domains. Ultimately, the message rings loud and clear: reconciliation is not the same as de-colonization, and de-colonization requires retribution.

The significance of an ongoing and multifaceted narrative of Indigenous rights and recommendations for reconciliation (at the least) is the connecting thread between Bathory’s “From the Moon to the Belly,” “Timiga, Nunalu, Sikulu,” and “Retribution.” As challenging works of contemporary art, I believe they transcend the discourse of healing and operate as forceful assertions of power and vengeance that visually comment on the oppression that both Indigenous women and the environment face. Because of the unique complexities of settler colonialism, Indigenous women face an impossible burden if given the task to “heal” the wounds that continue to disenfranchise the Indigenous populations of this country, in part because they continue to persist to devastating degrees, despite efforts toward “de-colonization.” Bathory’s strength as an artist and an Indigenous woman lies in her deep and localized connection to her community and an ability to disconnect from an overbearing Western ideology by grounding herself in the traditional modes of expression passed down by her ancestors. It is here that her power manifests – through history, through trauma – as a profound way to move forward into an uncertain, but ultimately empowered future.

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