

**“WE ARE NOT A CONQUERED PEOPLE”:  
EXPRESSIONS OF RESISTANCE, RESURGENCE, AND RECLAMATION THROUGH  
ELECTRIC POW WOW**

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the work of Indigenous DJ collective A Tribe Called Red, namely their reimagining of the contemporary pow wow. Dubbed “Electric Pow Wow,” the event showcases urban Indigenous culture, centered around music that layers elements of hip hop and electronic dance music with samples of First Nations vocals and drumming. Born out of the “Indigenous music renaissance,” A Tribe Called Red stands among a new generation of artists who are working alongside resistance movements like Idle No More in order to push back against colonial narratives of erasure and illuminate the voices of Indigenous communities the world over. Prioritizing contemporary Indigenous perspectives, this study seeks to engage with core themes of identity, community, representation, and decolonization, and discusses the essential role of musicians and culture-bearers within these spheres. Through an examination of A Tribe Called Red’s live shows, music videos, and social/political presence, I investigate Electric Pow Wow as both a physical and virtual gathering place where Indigenous identities are reclaimed, articulated, strengthened, and celebrated within broader movements of decolonization in North America and around the globe.

## **Lay Summary**

In light of the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, conversations surrounding Indigenous sovereignty and resistance efforts are rightly becoming more prominent in the public consciousness. This thesis seeks to underscore how music and cultural practice can actively contribute to decolonization, while building crucial bridges between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Through a case study of First Nations DJ collective A Tribe Called Red, and their creation of “Electric Pow Wow,” I aim to demonstrate how Indigenous youth have adapted elements of cultural heritage to reimagine and reclaim their own identities in an increasingly urbanizing and globalizing world.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Deavyn West. Permission to use photographs and other visual material was obtained from the following content owners: A Tribe Called Red, Ernesto Yerena Montejano, Gilda Monreal, Pat Bolduc, Tanja Tiziana, John Major, Timothy Nguyen, and Jean-Philippe Marquis.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Lay Summary.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Dedication.....</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Prelude.....	1
1.2 Thesis Aim and Chapter Summaries.....	4
1.3 Methodology.....	5
1.4 Terminology.....	8
<b>CHAPTER TWO: THE POLITICS OF INDIGENEITY.....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 Reflections on Truth, Reconciliation, and Resistance.....	12
2.2 The Indigenous Music Renaissance.....	19
<b>CHAPTER THREE: A TRIBE CALLED RED &amp; ELECTRIC POW WOW.....</b>	<b>22</b>
3.1 Origins of Electric Pow Wow and Evolution of Musical Style.....	23
3.2 Building a Nation Without Borders.....	32
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: AESTHETICS AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICES.....</b>	<b>38</b>
4.1 Iconography.....	38
4.2 Videography.....	47
4.2.1 Reimagining the “Imagined Indian”.....	48
4.3 Dance and Regalia.....	52
4.3.1 Layering Hip Hop Modalities and Indigenous Expression.....	52
4.3.2 “The Good Medicine”: Healing Colonial Wounds.....	56
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>64</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1.1</b>	Reconciliation Pole Ceremony, April 1st, 2017 (Photos taken by the author).....	3
<b>Figure 1.2</b>	Walk for Reconciliation, September 24, 2017 (Photos taken by the author).....	3
<b>Figure 3.1</b>	Ian Campeau (DJ NDN), Dan General (DJ Shub), Ehren Thomas (Bear Witness) (Photo Credit: Pat Bolduc).....	25
<b>Figure 3.2</b>	Screenshots from “Woodcarver” music video.....	27
<b>Figure 3.3</b>	Screenshots from “Sisters” music video.....	29
<b>Figure 3.4</b>	DJ NDN, Zoolman and Bear Witness at Manifesto Festival, Toronto (Photo Credit: Tanja-Tiziana).....	32
<b>Figure 4.1</b>	A Tribe Called Red logos.....	39
<b>Figure 4.2</b>	Examples of Ernesto Montejano’s use of icons. From top left to bottom right: <i>Decolonize Wallstreet, Ganas o Muerte, Chavez, Our True History</i> .....	40
<b>Figure 4.3</b>	Montejano’s cover art for <i>Nation II Nation</i> (2013).....	41
<b>Figure 4.4</b>	Montejano’s rose and fire imagery: <i>Fight for Dignity, Fires of Knowledge</i> .....	43
<b>Figure 4.5</b>	The Great Seal of the Halluci Nation (Credit: Ernesto Montejano).....	44
<b>Figure 4.6</b>	Mural featured in “For You (The Light Pt. II)” (Credit: Fiya Bruxa, Nacho Nas, and Marcia Sol).....	45
<b>Figure 4.7</b>	From left to right: center of redesigned Halluci Nation Seal (credit: Fiya Bruxa), <i>meli witran mapu</i> (public domain), Ojibwe medicine wheel (public domain).....	46
<b>Figure 4.8</b>	The Halluci Nation Patch (Source: screenshot from “The Making of We Are the Halluci Nation” YouTube video.....	47
<b>Figure 4.9</b>	Electric Pow Wow live projection (Photo credit: Jean-Philippe Marquis).....	49
<b>Figure 4.10</b>	ATCR’s videos. From top right to bottom left: “Electric Pow Wow Drum”, “MoombahWow”, “NDNs from All Directions”, “Red Skin Girl”).....	51
<b>Figure 4.11</b>	Juxtaposing pop culture with reality (Photo credits: John Major, courtesy of Music Canada (right), Jean-Philippe Marquis (left)).....	51
<b>Figure 4.12</b>	Mixing hip hop clothing and regalia (Photo credit: Timothy Nguyen).....	55
<b>Figure 4.13</b>	Dancers gathering together (Photo credit: Timothy Nguyen Photography).....	60
<b>Figure 5.1</b>	Screenshots from “The Virus”.....	63

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Words can hardly express my gratitude to my family: my parents, Charles and Cynthia, who have always embodied and encouraged creativity, tenacity, and compassionate service; my siblings, Maurice and Raevyn, who by their example continuously inspire me to aim higher and work harder; my second family, Joni, Taylor, and Jordan, who have kept me grounded and in good humour; and to my partner Jacob, whose unwavering companionship, encouragement, insight, and profound willingness to hold space has kept me going through this journey. I am so grateful.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge and pay respect to Indigenous people past and present as the original owners and continual custodians of the traditional, ancestral, and unceded land on which I conducted this research — namely the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəʔəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Stó:lō (Stolo), and Səlílwətaʔ (Tseil-Waututh) Nations.

*This thesis is dedicated to those whose lives have been deeply and irrevocably impacted by the systemic violence of colonization; in particular, to the nearly 150,000 victims and survivors of the Canadian residential school system, as well as descendants and communities who continue to grapple with intergenerational trauma. It is also dedicated to all who continue to fight for decolonization, the protection of land and water, the revitalization of language, culture, and knowledge, and to those who are working to bring peace, healing, and strength to Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island.*

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back. — Louis Riel (Métis Leader), July 4, 1885

## 1.1 Prelude

This thesis examines contemporary movements in Indigenous resistance and music-making, more specifically the genre of Electric Pow Wow, created by First Nations DJ collective A Tribe Called Red (ATCR). My interest in this topic emerged shortly after I moved to Vancouver, British Columbia from the United States. Over the course of two years I witnessed, both directly and indirectly, conversations and events that pushed up against my own inherited narratives as a settler-descendant. These circumstances compelled me to look more closely and critically at the exigent state of affairs in North America in regards to the original inhabitants of this land, as well as how these dynamics influence and operate within current trends in music and cultural expression. Events that transpired in 2016 and 2017 in particular pulled back the veil and revealed episodes of tension, conflict, and, at times, abhorrent cruelty. In the same breath, these circumstances laid bare the ongoing resistance, resilience and pride of Indigenous communities in the face of persecution.

In 2016 we saw the rise of the #NoDAPL protests at *Íŋyaŋ Woslál Háŋ* (Standing Rock Reservation) in North Dakota. In response to the expedited construction of The Dakota Access Pipeline (which threatened the region's clean water supply and ancient burial grounds), thousands of activists and allies descended onto *Očhéthi Šakówinj* camp to show solidarity with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. I remember watching the news with horror as Water Protectors including men, women, children, and elders were sprayed with tear gas, shot with rubber bullets, doused with water cannons in freezing temperatures, and locked in cages at the hand of a heavily

militarized state police force. I also watched as steadfast peaceful protests continued to draw fierce support from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples throughout North America and around the globe, sparking a series of crucial dialogues surrounding Indigenous land rights, environmental protection, oil dependence, police brutality, and government overreach.

In 2017 I bore witness to the creation and installment of the Reconciliation Pole at the University of British Columbia. I had the great fortune of living adjacent to the carving site, and would frequently stop to observe the process and progress of Haida Master Carver and hereditary Chief 7idansuu (Jim Hart) in the months leading up to completion. On the day of installment, I watched as survivors of the Indian residential school system and their families hammered in coppers,<sup>1</sup> one by one, into the 800-year-old red cedar totem, symbolizing the thousands of Indigenous children who died while in forced attendance. That day hundreds of people of all ages and backgrounds took up ropes in the Haida tradition, and raised the pole, accompanied by blessings and song (see Figure 1.1). Later that year I was honored and humbled to march beside residential school survivors and nearly 50,000 allies at the Vancouver Walk for Reconciliation. We held space in solidarity with survivors and their families as they shared how they were, and still remain, devastated by the horrors of the residential school system. Under the banner of *'Namwayut* (Kwakwaka'wakw for “we are all one”), distinguished guests were honored in a blanketing ceremony, leaders spoke on the need for continued action, and musicians of all backgrounds were invited on stage to share in the process of community building and healing (see Figure 1.2).

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<sup>1</sup> Pieces of copper hammered into the shape of a shield; among the most valued items at Northwest Coast potlatches.

**Figure 1.1 Reconciliation Pole Ceremony, April 1st, 2017 (Photos taken by the author)**



**Figure 1.2 Walk for Reconciliation, September 24, 2017 (Photos taken by the author)**



In the midst of these circumstances I discovered the work of A Tribe Called Red, music that simultaneously captivated me as a listener and encapsulated these complex layers of cultural resilience, political urgency, and celebration of heritage that I had witnessed in the events of 2016 and 2017.

## 1.2 Thesis Aims and Chapter Summaries

This thesis will examine A Tribe Called Red's reimagining of the contemporary pow wow, dubbed "Electric Pow Wow." Showcasing urban Indigenous culture, the event centers around music which blends elements of hip hop and electronic dance music with samples of First Nations vocals and drumming. Born out of the "Indigenous music renaissance,"<sup>2</sup> A Tribe Called Red stands among a new generation of First Nations artists who are pushing back against colonial narratives of erasure and working alongside resistance movements like Idle No More to illuminate the voices of Indigenous communities the world over. Prioritizing contemporary Indigenous perspectives, this study seeks to engage with core themes of identity, community, representation, and decolonization, and discusses the essential role of musicians and culture-bearers within these spheres. Through an examination of A Tribe Called Red's live shows, music videos, and social/political presence, I investigate Electric Pow Wow as both a physical and virtual gathering place where Indigenous identities are reclaimed, articulated, strengthened, and celebrated within broader movements of decolonization in North America and around the globe.

Chapter Two sets the socio-political backdrop for this research, examining the contested relationship between the Canadian government and the Original Nations. Drawing upon contemporary Indigenous scholarship, I begin by discussing the history and perpetual legacy of settler-colonialism in Canada, as well as unpacking some of the problematic elements of the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I further explore how grassroots Indigenous movements such as Idle No More have emerged and been paralleled an "Indigenous music renaissance."

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<sup>2</sup> Jesse Kinos-Goodin, "A Tribe Called Red, Wab Kinew, Tanya Tagaq on the Indigenous Music Renaissance." *Canada Broadcasting Corporation*, August 18, 2014. <http://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/11181/a-tribe-called-red-wab-kinew-tanya-tagaq-on-the-in>

Chapter Three examines the origins of A Tribe Called Red and the Electric Pow Wow event. In addition to discussing the musical style that characterizes Electric Pow Wow, this chapter traces the development of the event and genre, from its beginnings at the Babylon Nightclub to its critical and commercial success both in North America and on the global stage. Additionally, I discuss how Electric Pow Wow has carved out space for urban Indigenous youth and fostered both a physical and virtual community for fans of all backgrounds.

In Chapter Four I explore the aesthetics of Electric Pow Wow, centered on the blending of diverse styles that draw upon Indigenous cultural heritage and urban sensibilities. This dichotomy of influences is interwoven in ATCR's conscious utilization of iconography, dance, regalia, and reappropriated pop culture media clips, which the group synthesizes into a dynamic, multi-sensorial experience. I argue that these aesthetic gestures reflect a powerful reconstruction and reclamation of identity, helping to reposition indigenous communities as the arbiters of their own representation in an increasingly globalized context.

In the final chapter I reiterate some of the key points in the study while exploring the broader implications of ATCR's work, both within the Indigenous community and in consideration of larger global issues.

### **1.3 Methodology**

It was my objective to approach this research with reverence and recognition of the very privileged and precarious space that I occupy, not only as a descendent of settlers, but as a member of the academic community. I would be remiss to discuss issues of power, suppression, and agency in this study without acknowledging how these dynamics are at play within my own field.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (*Ngāti Awa/Ngāti Porou*) examines how the institution of academic research, particularly in the social sciences, has been “embedded in a global system of imperialism and power”<sup>3</sup> that has contributed to the dehumanization, exploitation, and subjugation of Indigenous communities. Even the word “research” itself continues to elicit suspicion and pain:

When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful.... The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world’s colonized peoples. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity.<sup>4</sup>

Smith goes on to discuss how research often disrupted communities, reduced the people within those community to objects of scrutiny, and extracted cultural knowledge and imagery for personal or institutional gain. Undoubtedly the most sinister and shameful reckoning to be faced within the research community is how the work was used to legitimize increasingly oppressive policies and practices that threatened the very existence of Indigenous communities.<sup>5</sup> Pushing back against the colonial roots of our field and reevaluating the ethicality and value of our practices has been a decades-long challenge, one that has had rippling impacts across the gamut of the social sciences.<sup>6</sup> As conversations surrounding privilege and power have more prevalently come into focus, scholars are faced with difficult questions about their roles and responsibilities, namely whether we should work to actively dismantle inequitable power structures within our field, or remain neutral and risk further perpetuating them. In my own work, I have continuously

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<sup>3</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), Foreword

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 1

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Controversial debates surrounding themes of authority, reflexivity, epistemology, and representation culminated in a “crisis of representation” that caused the canon of “human sciences” to radically reconsider the practices and implications of ethnographic research. Two texts in particular that illuminate and critique these issues are *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) and *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (1996).

grappled with these realities, trying to navigate and reconcile the contested terrain of research within the university parameters, while ultimately attempting to use my platform to challenge these institutions and behave as an ally and advocate for the communities I ethnographically engage with.

A primary goal in this study has been to prioritize Indigenous voices, particularly contemporary scholarship published within the last decade. In doing so, this ethnography seeks to examine this musical, social, and political culture in a way that gives precedence to how the actors within it see themselves and their experiences both historically and in the present. In this light, I do not consider myself to be the sole “author” of this work, but rather a “gatherer” of stories and experiences.

Over the course of one year, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the Greater Vancouver area at concerts, festivals, political demonstrations, and ceremonies. While these experiences of participant observation were invaluable and brought great insight to the research, much of the material that has informed this thesis has been gleaned from “virtual fieldwork.”<sup>7</sup> A core element of this research was predicated on understanding how the phenomenon of Electric Pow Wow has been translated to an online presence and has subsequently constructed a globalized virtual community. To ignore the vast amount of information obtainable through social media and other online resources would be to disregard a paramount dimension of the subject. Therefore this thesis has made considerable use of these sources in the process of story-gathering.

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<sup>7</sup> Discourses on online fieldwork can be found in Christine Hine’s *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) and Karen Ruhleder’s *The Virtual Ethnographer: Fieldwork in Distributed Electronic Environments* (2000).

## 1.4 Terminology

Critical reflection and careful implementation of names and terms is imperative, particularly in this context, as certain language is often loaded with problematic connotations or can represent damaging power dynamics. Words have been used throughout history to control, divide, and misrepresent marginalized peoples, however they can also be used to empower communities in reclaiming and asserting their identities. As names and terms are frequently revisited and amended, it is my goal to be as current, accurate, respectful, and clear as I can in the ways I identify the people and communities involved in this study.

Throughout this thesis, I use the term “Indigenous” both as a collective noun for the original inhabitants of Turtle Island (North America), and in a global context to refer broadly to ethnic groups who are the original, pre-colonial inhabitants of a given region. “Aboriginal” has also been historically employed in this way and is the legal term defined in Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution as “including Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples.”<sup>8</sup> However, for the purposes of this thesis I will not use this term, with the exception of direct quotes, as it has been rejected by a number of communities including the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs and the forty-two communities of the Anishinabek in Ontario.<sup>9</sup> The term “Indian” is widely considered to be outdated and disrespectful and will be used only in a historical or legal context (e.g. *Indian Act*; “Treaty/Status Indian”). Beginning in the 1970s, the term was generally replaced by “First Nations” which refers to the original inhabitants of North America and their descendants, who are neither ethnically Métis (peoples of Indigenous and European descent) nor Inuit (Indigenous

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<sup>8</sup> *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Part II of the *Constitution Act, 1982*, being Schedule B to the *Canada Act 1982* (U.K.), 1982, c. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Shaunna Grandish, “Ontario Chiefs Want to see the Term Aboriginal Abolished,” *Windspeaker Publication* 26, no. 5 (2008)

peoples primarily residing in the northernmost regions of North America). Following the example of Indigenous scholars like Tamara Starblanket, I will often use “Original Nations” or “Original Peoples.” Where applicable, specific nation names will be used; most importantly, I wish to honor the right of groups to self-identify and will therefore whenever possible refer to Original Nations by their self-determined appellation. In practice, nation endonyms will be prioritized, followed by the colonial exonym in parenthesis (e.g., “Nēhiyaw (Cree)”).

In closing, I want to address and unpack the umbrella terms “traditional” and “modern” as they are found repeatedly throughout research of this nature, yet are often entangled in conscious and subconscious value judgements. The word “traditional” is often charged with implications of purity, stasis, antiquity, and inferiority, while “modern” invokes progress, innovation, and power. In a 2008 interview, Samoan novelist and scholar Albert Wendt explained how this language can contribute to a derogatory misrepresentation of Indigenous culture:

I came to feel very uncomfortable with terms such as traditional.... Colonial scholars and researchers used them whenever they referred to us but not to their cultures. Such terms I concluded were part and parcel of the Euro-centric colonial vocabulary. Traditional inferred our cultures were/are so tradition-bound they were static and slow to change...that because they were slow to change and fixed in history they were “simple and easy to understand. Traditional also had implications about how we were viewed as people...because we were tradition bound, we behaved out of habit and past practice and [were] slow to adapt to other ways or change our own ways, that we didn’t want to think for ourselves, or were incapable of individual thinking and expression.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout history and across disciplines, there has been an implicit pressure on Indigenous artists to “stay in their lane” so to speak, for the sake of “authenticity” (another problematic

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<sup>10</sup> Albert Wendt, “Opinion: Why We Should Beware of the Word ‘Traditional,’” Interview by Sean Mallon. *Museum of New Zealand/Te Papa Tongarewa*. December 20, 2016. <https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2016/12/20/opinion-why-we-should-beware-of-the-word-traditional/>

colloquialism). For example, Jen Webb observes how this dynamic often manifests in Australian museums that feature Aboriginal artwork:

I have heard people express disappointment or even annoyance, for instance when viewing the work of some contemporary Aboriginal artists. “That’s not real Aboriginal art!” is the typical response, as though a “real” Aboriginal would only ever paint traditional works — though it is unlikely that they would insist white artists should all still paint like Michelangelo or, indeed, the cave painters of Lascaux.<sup>11</sup>

This thesis seeks to show how Indigenous artists like A Tribe Called Red use their work to interrogate the notion that culture, specifically Indigenous culture, is homogeneous, frozen, or boundaried. It further pushes back against the demarcation that categorizes pow wow, round dance, and ceremonial music as “traditional”/“indigenous”/“authentic” while rock, pop, punk, hip hop, and club music are decidedly “modern”/“non-indigenous.” As A Tribe Called Red’s Ian Campeau puts it: “Any music that an Indigenous person makes is Indigenous music.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jen Webb, “Negotiating Alterity: Indigenous and ‘Outsider’ Art,” *Third Text* 16, no. 2 (2010): 144

<sup>12</sup> Ian Campeau, “A Tribe Called Red, Wab Kinew, Tanya Tagaq on the Indigenous Music Renaissance,” interview by Jesse Kinos-Goodin, *Canada Broadcasting Corporation*, August 18, 2014, <http://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/11181/a-tribe-called-red-wab-kinew-tanya-tagaq-on-the-in>

## CHAPTER TWO: THE POLITICS OF INDIGENEITY

After what happened in the last hundred years, the simple fact that we are here today is a political statement. As First Nations People, everything we do is political. — A Tribe Called Red

This past year (2017) marked the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation. While many took part in festivities across the country, the commemoration prompted significant pushback from Indigenous leaders, activists, and allies who viewed the last 150 years as anything but worth celebrating. As Twitter hashtags like #Resist150, #Unsettle150, and #Canada150+ began to circulate, nationwide demonstrations called attention to the dark history and ongoing legacy of settler-colonialism in Canada and how it continues to impact Indigenous communities. According to the *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, even though “Aboriginal people’s living standards have improved in the past 50 years...they do not come close to those of non-Aboriginal people.... Aboriginal people endure ill health, run-down and overcrowded housing, polluted water, inadequate schools, poverty and family breakdown at rates found more often in developing countries than in Canada.” The report notes that not only are these conditions “inherently unjust,” but they also “imperil the future of Aboriginal communities and nations...and are largely the result of loss of their lands and resources, destruction of their economies and social institutions, and denial of their nationhood.”<sup>13</sup>

Amidst a time of escalated tensions and increased visibility of Indigenous-led campaigns against pipelines/fracking/oil sands, repeated calls to investigate the national crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and just two years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its 94 “calls to action,” many feel that exalting the birth of the Canadian nation-state is incongruous and regressive.

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<sup>13</sup> Canada, Georges Erasmus, and René Dussault. *Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*. Ottawa: The Commission, 1996.

While this chapter is in no way an exhaustive account of Canada's colonial history and neocolonial present, it does seek to investigate how current narratives of recognition and reconciliation fall short in addressing the depth of trauma inflicted upon Indigenous people past and present at the hands of the Canadian government. I further examine how contemporary Indigenous scholars and activists are holding Canada's feet to the fire, exposing necessary truths, and urging their communities to pursue resistance, self-determination, and cultural regeneration.

## 2.1 Reflections on Truth, Reconciliation, and Resistance

We assume that when "the truth comes out" it will prove that what happened was wrong or illegal and that therefore the system...will set things right. We believe that history is also about justice, that understanding history will enlighten our decisions about the future. *Wrong*. History is also about power. In fact, history is mostly about power. It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others.... In this sense, history is not important for indigenous peoples because a thousand accounts of the "truth" will not alter the "fact" that indigenous peoples are still marginal and do not possess the power to transform history into justice.<sup>14</sup>

On June 2, 2008 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was established as a component of the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*, the largest class action settlement in Canadian history. Through a five-year mandate, the TRC documented the stories of those who were impacted by the Indian residential school system, including former students, their families, and communities. An extension of the Indian Act,<sup>15</sup> residential schools were a network of government-funded, church-run institutions designed to assimilate Indigenous

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 35

<sup>15</sup> The *Indian Act*, passed in 1876 "created a legislated regulatory framework from laws that empowered displacement and assimilation. The *Indian Act* is still active legislation in Canada that affects a large number of Indigenous communities. Control over Indigenous political structures, lands, resources and economic development through today's *Indian Act* (1985) continues the unfinished policy of forced displacement and assimilation." (from the *Christian Aboriginal Infrastructure Development*)

children into the rapidly expanding Euro-Canadian settler state. On May 9, 1883, Canada's first Prime Minister John A. Macdonald stated in the House of Commons:

When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with its parents, who are savages, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training mode of thought are Indian. He is simply a savage who can read and write. It has been strongly impressed upon myself, as head of the Department, that Indian children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men.<sup>16</sup>

In an attempt to “kill the Indian in the child,” children as young as six years old were forcibly removed from their parents and communities and placed in schools often very far from home, where they were stripped of their Indigenous identities:

The assault on Aboriginal identity usually began the moment the child took the first step across the school's threshold. Braided hair (which often had spiritual significance) was cut, homemade traditional clothing was exchanged for a school uniform, Aboriginal names were replaced with Euro-Canadian ones (and a number), and the freedom of life in their own communities was foregone for the regimen of an institution in which every activity from morning to night was scheduled. Males and females, and siblings, were separated, and, with some exceptions, parental visits were discouraged and controlled.<sup>17</sup>

As part of the process of indoctrination, children were forbidden from speaking their languages or practicing their cultural and spiritual traditions. Punishment for breaking these rules was swift and severe. According to the TRC's findings, students were often “strapped and humiliated” and in some cases “handcuffed, manacled, beaten, locked in cellars and other makeshift jails, or displayed in stocks.”<sup>18</sup> In addition to physical abuse, children in many cases suffered psychological and sexual abuse at the hands of school employees. Due to severe underfunding, students endured appalling living conditions that included overcrowding, poor sanitation, malnourishment, and lack of medical care. In 1907 Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce released a report

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<sup>16</sup> House of Commons, *Debates*, 46 Vict. (May 9, 1883) 14: 1107-1108

<sup>17</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Canada. *The Survivors Speak* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015): VII

<sup>18</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Canada. *The Survivors Speak* (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015): VIII

detailing the staggering death rate in residential schools. Bryce found that due to subpar health standards, communicable diseases like tuberculosis killed on average 24% of the students in attendance; in some cases, the rate was as high as 75%. Bryce repeatedly urged Canadian officials to implement practical medical solutions, however, his appeals were quietly dismissed, and ultimately his position as Chief Medical Health Officer was terminated.<sup>19</sup>

In a letter to an Indian Agent in British Columbia, Duncan Campbell Scott (Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs) wrote:

It is readily acknowledged that Indian children lose their natural resistance to illness by habiting so closely in these schools, and that they die at a much higher rate than in their villages. But this alone does not justify a change in the policy of this Department, which is geared towards the final solution of our Indian problem.<sup>20</sup>

With full awareness of the dangerous conditions present in the schools, Scott went on to testify to a House of commons committee, arguing for an amendment to the *Indian Act* that would establish mandatory residential school attendance, stating: “I want to get rid of the Indian problem.... Our objective is to continue until there is not an Indian that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department.”<sup>21</sup>

The federal government estimates that at least 150,000 First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students passed through the residential school system over the course of nearly 150 years. Of these students, over 6,000<sup>22</sup> died due to their experience, a ratio of one in twenty-five, the same

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<sup>19</sup> The BC Teachers’ Federation: Educating for Truth and Reconciliation. *Project of Heart: Illuminating the Hidden History of Indian Residential Schools in BC*. Revised October, 10 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Department of Indian Affairs Superintendent D. C. Scott to B.C. Indian Agent-General Major D. McKay, 1910 April, DIA Archives, RG 10 series.

<sup>21</sup> National Archives of Canada, Record Group 10, volume 6810, file 470-2-3, volume 7, pp. 55 (L-3) and 63 (N-3).

<sup>22</sup> This is the number of documented deaths as determined by the TRC. The actual death toll is believed to be much higher.

rate of death as Canadian soldiers serving in the Second World War.<sup>23</sup> There are an estimated 80,000 former students living today whose unresolved trauma, coupled with the loss of language and culture and the systemic fracturing of communities, continues to have profoundly damaging mental, physical, spiritual, and socioeconomic impacts on the Indigenous population.<sup>24</sup> It is crucial to note that although the last residential school closed its doors in 1996, Indigenous children continue to be taken from their families and communities at an alarming and disproportionate rate and fostered or adopted out to primarily non-Indigenous families, further perpetuating the devastating cycle of family and community rupture and assimilation that the residential schools inflicted.<sup>25</sup>

On June 11, 2008, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an official apology on behalf of the Canadian government to victims and survivors of the Indian residential school system, describing it as a “sad chapter in our history.” While this was broadly considered a historic moment, and a first step in the process of healing, many were hesitant to accept the Prime Minister’s symbolic gesture. These feelings of skepticism were inflamed just a year later when Harper made the following statement at a G20 Summit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:

There are very few countries that can say for nearly 150 years they’ve had the same political system without any social breakdown, political upheaval or invasion. We are unique in that regard. *We also have no history of colonialism.* So we have all of the things that many people admire about the great powers, but none of the things that threaten or bother them about the great powers.<sup>26</sup> [emphasis added]

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<sup>23</sup> Daniel Schwartz, “Truth and Reconciliation Commission: By the Numbers,” *CBC News*, June 2, 2015. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/truth-and-reconciliation-commission-by-the-numbers-1.309185>

<sup>24</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. “Residential Schools.” Accessed November 16, 2017. <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=10>

<sup>25</sup> Jorge Barrera, “Indigenous Child Welfare Rates Creating ‘humanitarian crisis’ in Canada, says Federal minister.” *CBC News*, November 2, 2017

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Harper, quoted in Aaron Wherry’s “What He Was Talking About When He Talked About Colonialism.” *Macleans*. October 1, 2009. <https://www.macleans.ca/uncategorized/what-he-was-talking-about-when-he-talked-about-colonialism/>

The denial of Canada's colonialism, both overtly in this statement, and in the palpable omission of the word in the June apology, have not gone unnoticed by the Indigenous community. Nēhiyaw (Cree) scholar Tamara Starblanket describes this pattern and the whole of the TRC as "yet another brick in the elaborate wall of evasion and denial behind which the Canadian settler-state and the society it represents seek to conceal the reality of their genocide against the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island."<sup>27</sup> Her recent publication *Suffer the Little Children: Genocide, Indigenous Nations and the Canadian State* (2016) intends to serve as a "battering ram in which to hammer through the wall of denial."<sup>28</sup> Originally a Masters of law thesis, Starblanket's book cites international policy such as the United Nations *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (1948) in order to substantiate her claims against the Canadian nation-state. Article two of this document states that "[i]n the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a.) killing members of the group; (b.) causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c.) deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d.) imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;<sup>29</sup> (e.) forcibly transferring members of the group to another group."<sup>30</sup> From this framework, Starblanket ultimately argues that the TRC's insistence that Canada's actions amounted to "cultural

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<sup>27</sup> Tamara Starblanket, *Suffer the Little Children: Genocide, Indigenous Nations and the Canadian State* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2016), 28-29

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>29</sup> Canada's practice of coerced and forced sterilization has also been pointed to as an act of genocide against Indigenous peoples. At the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in Bogotá, Colombia, lawyer Alisa Lombard told commissioners that "there is evidence that the forced sterilization of Indigenous women has been a consistent practice in Canada since the 1930's into modern times."

<sup>30</sup> UN Commission on Human Rights, *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, 28 April 1999, E/CN.4/RES/1999/67

genocide” is a euphemistic attempt to minimize a lethal history, evade culpability, and to essentially “wip[e] the slate clean.”<sup>31</sup>

Glen Coulthard of the Yellowknives Dene First Nation echoes Starblanket’s sentiment in *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (2014). Coulthard argues that centering the discussion of reconciliation around a past, limited scope of wrongdoings enables Canada to strategically “allocat[e] the abuses of settler colonization to the dustbins of history, and/or purposefully disentangle processes of reconciliation from questions of settler-coloniality.”<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, this diminishes the continuing systemic presence of colonialism in Canada, namely the undermining of treaty obligations and the perpetual encroaching threat of capitalism to indigenous resources.<sup>33</sup> Coulthard proposes that Indigenous peoples’ “individual and collective resentment—expressed as an angry and vigilant unwillingness to forgive—ought to be seen as an affective indication that we care deeply about ourselves, about our land and cultural communities, and about the rights and obligations we hold as First Peoples.”<sup>34</sup>

Arguing in favour of Indigenous-led resistance efforts, Coulthard points to the Idle No More movement as a prime example of active decolonization. Catalyzed by Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, Jessica Gordon, and Sheelah McLean, Idle No More began as a grassroots campaign against Bill C-45, otherwise known as the *Jobs and Growth Act* which, according to Coulthard, “unilaterally undermines treaty rights” while “gutting environmental protection for lakes and rivers.”<sup>35</sup> Largely organized through social media, Idle No More uses methods ranging from “flash mob” style round-dancing and drumming to public panels and teach-ins as well as

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<sup>31</sup> Starblanket, *Suffer the Little Children*, 26

<sup>32</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 108

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-125

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 126

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 127

temporary traffic blockades in order to bring awareness to Indigenous issues and address Canada's ongoing tactics of colonization.<sup>36</sup> The movement has quickly become one of the largest Indigenous mass resistance efforts in Canadian history, seeking to "make visible what has often been untold."<sup>37</sup>

While the importance of active social and political movements such as Idle No More cannot be overstated, Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson believes that Indigenous resistance and resurgence extends beyond large-scale political mobilization, suggesting that it also requires a reclamation of "traditional cultures, knowledge systems and lifeways in the dynamic, fluid, compassionate, respectful context in which they were originally generated."<sup>38</sup> In *Dancing on our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (2011), Simpson discusses the Anishinabek concept of *biskaabiiyang*, a decolonizing methodology developed by researchers and Elders with the Seventh Generation Institute. *Biskaabiiyang*, meaning "returning to ourselves," is used to examine the impact of colonialism on Anishinabek communities and to further help those communities "pick up the things [they] were forced to leave behind."<sup>39</sup> Simpson stresses that that this process does not entail a literal "returning to the past" but instead involves "re-creating the cultural and political flourishing of the past to support the well-being of our contemporary citizens." Furthermore, it means "encouraging the self-determination of individuals within our national and community-based contexts" and "re-creating an artistic and intellectual renaissance within a larger political and cultural resurgence."<sup>40</sup> In the next section I discuss how this "renaissance" is taking place

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 128

<sup>37</sup> Idle No More, "The Story," Accessed December 10, 2017. <http://www.idlenomore.ca/story>

<sup>38</sup> Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011), 18

<sup>39</sup> Simpson, *Dancing on our Turtle's Back*, 50

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 51

within the Indigenous music community, led by young artists who are creating new modes of resistance and expressions of cultural sovereignty.

## 2.2 Indigenous Music Renaissance

When one lives in a society where people can no longer rely on the institutions to tell them the truth, the truth must come from culture and art. — John Trudell

According to Ojibwe musician, educator, and activist Wab Kinew, we are currently witnessing a “renaissance” of cultural expression among young artists that has guided a new era of Indigenous music-making. Viewing this resurgence as an indication of broader social change, Kinew believes that “there is an increasing sense [in the mainstream public] that it’s time to get the relationship right with Indigenous people.” He argues that because “artists and fans of art are usually among the more progressive voices” they are also the “leading edge of that transformation.”<sup>41</sup>

Carrying on the continuum of Indigenous artists who have influenced popular music for decades,<sup>42</sup> this new generation is carving out space in the contemporary mainstream music scene in a way that honors Indigenous cultural heritage, and communicates current social and political influences to an increasingly broadened audience. According to Mohawk/Tuscarora spoken-word artist Janet Rogers, these artists are “creating a brand new musical territory for the new Indigenous person to stand on and to claim and to play on and work on and dance on, and that’s not an easy thing to do in music, to create something that’s new.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Wab Kinew, “A Tribe Called Red, Wab Kinew, Tanya Tagaq on the Indigenous Music Renaissance.” *Canada Broadcasting Corporation*, August 18, 2014. <http://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/11181/a-tribe-called-red-wab-kinew-tanya-tagaq-on-the-in>

<sup>42</sup> A closer examination of Indigenous contributions to North American popular music can be found in *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop* (2016).

<sup>43</sup> Janet Rogers, “A Tribe Called Red, Wab Kinew, Tanya Tagaq on the Indigenous Music Renaissance”

This movement has significant implications for the artists involved, who view their work as a pathway of resistance and community-strengthening. Many are using their platforms to bring visibility to the urgent social and political issues that are plaguing Indigenous communities, and to help empower those communities to rebuild and heal. For Sto:lo singer-songwriter Inez Jasper that means calling attention to the crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women:

Our women are dying for no reason.... Awareness has a huge impact. I think an artist like myself can take on an issue like this and share it with a wider audience.... It's really important to embrace and reclaim our identities as human beings in a safe way. We have to know that we're worthy and that we have a place here.<sup>44</sup>

For Nataanii Means (Oglala Lakota, Navajo and Omaha) that means being a role model for at-risk Indigenous youth:

We have the highest rate of suicide in the country.... Kids don't feel like they can talk to anyone and they just give up. With my music, I'm trying to reach these kids.... If we don't reach these kids we lose our language, we lose our identity, we lose our way of life.<sup>45</sup>

For Sicangu Lakota rapper Frank Waln, music can effectively be used to reject colonial degradation and to further ignite self-determination in Indigenous communities:

As indigenous peoples all over the world, we've been dehumanized so much, and this music is a powerful tool to express our humanity. They're still trying to colonize our land, it's just happening in new ways. This land and our families are some of the few things we have left. Once I decided to embrace my gift and turn back to our ceremonies and culture, it saved me. No one's gonna come into the rez and save us, we have to do it ourselves."<sup>46</sup>

Inuk experimental throat singer Tanya Tagaq echoes this notion, believing that music and cultural expression is "a way to take this massive shame and pain and agony and process it into something that's better than any gold.... We've got possession of it and it's one of the most beautiful things I've seen in my life. So ya, revolution."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Inez Jasper, "Rebel Music | Native America: 7th Generation Rises," YouTube video, May 14, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-aRwprNai4A>

<sup>45</sup> Nataanii Means, "Rebel Music | Native America: 7th Generation Rises"

<sup>46</sup> Frank Waln, "Rebel Music | Native America: 7th Generation Rises"

<sup>47</sup> Tanya Tagaq "A Tribe Called Red, Wab Kinew, Tanya Tagaq on the Indigenous Music Renaissance."

These artists and others among them are rising to meet the need for Indigenous histories to be honored, for culture to be reclaimed and revitalized, and for stories to be shared. The significance of this movement has been felt not only in Indigenous communities, but in the mainstream as well. In 2014 Tagaq became the first Indigenous artist to take home the Polaris Music Prize for her album *Animism*. Just this year (2018), for the first time, the Juno Award for Group of the Year went to an Indigenous group: A Tribe Called Red. In the chapters to follow, I examine how A Tribe Called Red has taken up the torch of cultural revitalization, lifted the voices of Indigenous peoples on a global scale, and shown that despite relentless attempts made to undermine the existence of the Original Nations, they aren't going anywhere.

## CHAPTER THREE: A TRIBE CALLED RED & ELECTRIC POW WOW

Music and art in general is the one common thing that transcends race, class, gender...and having that accessibility to everybody, I think, is paramount, especially to getting a political message out there. — Ian Campeau

According to the 2016 Canadian Census, 867,415 Aboriginal people (over half the total Aboriginal population in Canada) lived in a metropolitan area. The mass influx of Indigenous people to urban areas is a fairly new phenomenon; over the span of ten years, the number of Aboriginal people living in cities increased by nearly sixty percent. According to David Newhouse, professor at the Chanie Wenjack School for Indigenous Studies, decades of public discourse have deemed Indigeneity as “incompatible” with urban life. Furthermore, the decision to migrate to a metropolitan area was viewed as a pathway to assimilation into the mainstream culture.<sup>48</sup> However, despite these narratives and expectations, Indigenous peoples residing in urban areas continue to find ways of rendering and retaining their identities and cultural connection by constructing their own communities within the urban landscape. In this way, despite the challenges Indigenous peoples face in urban environments,<sup>49</sup> many “see the city as an opportunity and renewal rather than a place of cultural erosion.”<sup>50</sup> In this chapter I discuss how A Tribe Called Red saw this very opportunity in Ottawa, and used their resources to provide a much-needed communal space for Indigenous youth in the area. Founding member Bear Witness believes that “to be Aboriginal in the city, in an urban environment, is something that’s been

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<sup>48</sup> Newhouse, David, “Introduction,” in *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples*, edited by David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters (Winnipeg: Policy Research Initiative, 2003), 6-7

<sup>49</sup> The Report on the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) cites “the stress of the unwelcoming city, confusion, the experience of racism and the inability to find employment” as some of the dynamics that make urban dwelling challenging for Indigenous people. Furthermore, urban institutions often “conflict with Aboriginal cultural values” and can “easily undermine a positive cultural identity”. (RCAP, Vol. 4, p. 52)

<sup>50</sup> David Newhouse, “The Invisible Infrastructure: Urban Aboriginal Institutions and Organizations,” in *Not Strangers in These Parts: Urban Aboriginal Peoples*, edited by David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters (Winnipeg: Policy Research Initiative, 2003), 251

largely overlooked, even by other Aboriginal people who...in the past didn't necessarily consider you 'part of the community' if you were living in the city. So we had to kind of find ways as urban aboriginal people to express what that meant, what it looked like, what it was."<sup>51</sup> This chapter examines how ATCR fostered urban Indigenous community-building through the creation of Electric Pow Wow, and further investigates how this genre evolved and expanded to connect both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people across the globe.

### 3.1 Origins of Electric Pow Wow and Evolution of Musical Style

A Tribe Called Red's<sup>52</sup> beginnings can be traced to the Ottawa, Ontario club scene and the collaboration of founding members Ian Campeau ("DJ NDN"), who is a member of the Nbisiing Anishinaabe (Nippising First Nation), and Ehren Thomas ("Bear Witness"), who is Gayogohó:no' (Cayuga from the Six Nations Reserve). While working together at Babylon Nightclub, DJ NDN and Bear Witness began to notice a trend of culturally-specific dance parties, such as "Korean Night" or "Jamaican Night," yet there was no equivalent for the First Nations community. As a response to this gap, the two set out to create a space for local Indigenous youth to gather, dance, and enjoy themselves, and began hosting dance parties twice a month under the banner of "Electric Pow Wow" in 2008. Dedicated to showcasing local Indigenous talent, Electric Pow Wow captured the spirit of the conventional pow wow as a way for Indigenous people to "come together to celebrate their culture through music and dance."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ehren Thomas, "MicroFilm: A Tribe Called Red" Interview by Guillaume Decouflet. *Cluster Mag*. May 19, 2011. <https://vimeo.com/23970949>

<sup>52</sup> Many will catch the nod to Queens-based hip-hop group A Tribe Called Quest, however, the group credits inspiration for its name to a pow wow practice in which drum groups call themselves by their nations (i.e., A Tribe Called Mi'kmaq). They chose the name "Red" as it is the representational colour of Indigenous people on the medicine wheel. (Interview in *Noisey*)

<sup>53</sup> Tara Browner, *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow Wow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), I

The event immediately attracted local Indigenous youth; according to Bear Witness, “Indigenous people are used to being invisible, keeping our heads down. So when people started freaking out across the dance floor, we knew we were on to something.”<sup>54</sup>

While the two were hosting Electric Pow Wow Night at Babylon, they began experimenting with music mixes as well. According to Bear Witness, the origin of the Electric Pow Wow sound was almost serendipitous. In an interview with *CBC* he describes the moment that the two created their first track “Bravestep”:

The production style that was happening was kind of a “run-and-gun” sort of situation. The way that Electric Pow Wow came to be was: Ian and I, in the early days, before we were getting ready for one of our first really big shows [West Fest in Ottawa]...we’re actually having a rehearsal, and in it Ian was playing me a grass dance song, and he was like “I really want to do something with this.” I was like “what’s the bpm?” “Well, it’s at 140.” And this is like the height of dubstep; dubstep’s always about 140 bpm. I looked through my tracks for something with no vocals on it, and got this instrumental song called “The General” by Jahdan Blakkamoore.... I threw it under that loop that Ian was playing of the grass dance song and it just clicked. It was like a magic “aha!” moment.<sup>55</sup>

For DJ NDN, the transition from grass dance to dubstep was a natural one:

Thinking back on it now, it seemed to be the easiest transition from traditional music. Traditional music is also dance orientated. So that’s what we did, mashed up dance music with dance music. Making that bridge, I think it was really important, not only for non-indigenous people to experience or hear pow-wow music for – many of them – the first time, but on the other side, a lot of indigenous youths hearing electronic music for the first time – who never really had access to that sort of thing. I like being that bridge.<sup>56</sup>

This new sound and the growing popularity of Electric Pow Wow Night resonated heavily with local Indigenous youth and eventually word began to spread outside of Ottawa. DJ NDN says that “soon, there were people from rural communities — reserves that were super-isolated up

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<sup>54</sup> Ehren Thomas, “A Tribe Called Red’s Electric Powwow Puts Indigenous Culture Centre Stage,” interview by Damaris Colhoun, *The Guardian*. July 28, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/28/electric-powwow-tribe-called-red>

<sup>55</sup> Ehren Thomas, “A Tribe Called Red Retraces the Birth of its Sound,” Interview with Jesse Kinosh-Goodin, *Canada Broadcasting Corporation*, November 16, 2016, <http://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/17598/a-tribe-called-red-origin-of-electric-powwow>

<sup>56</sup> Ian Campeau, “Interview with A Tribe Called Red’s Ian ‘DJ NDN’ Campeau,” Interview by Hannah Many Guns. *First Nations Drums*. March 29, 2017. <http://www.firstnationsdrum.com/2017/03/a-interview-with-a-tribe-called-reds-ian-dj-ndn-campeau/>

**Figure 3.1 Ian Campeau (DJ NDN), Dan General (DJ Shub), Ehren Thomas (Bear Witness) (Photo Credit: Pat Bolduc)**



north — who were coming to Ottawa for school and never felt comfortable going out”<sup>57</sup> but were able to find a community within Electric Pow Wow. The music also caught the attention of award-winning turntablist Dan General (“DJ Shub”) who is Kanien’keha’ka (Mohawk of the Six Nations of the Grand River). After attending an Electric Pow Wow, General was immediately inspired to write “Electric Pow Wow Drum.” After sending the track to DJ NDN, DJ Shub was officially asked to join the group, and “Electric Pow Wow Drum” became the first track on their debut album *A Tribe Called Red* which was released in 2012 as a free download. Expanding upon the original “Bravestep” experiment, their self-titled album remixes samples of First Nations vocals and drumming, using entire melodies or short, repeated fragments. According to DJ NDN, respectful use of the source material is a priority for A Tribe Called Red:

We want people to dance, so we use songs that are meant for people to dance to. We won’t use sacred songs, such as “honour” or “grand entry” songs, which aren’t even allowed to be recorded. We have way too much respect for the tradition to do that.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Ian Campeau, “A Tribe Called Red - Reclaiming the Beat,” interview in *Roots & Blues*. May 31, 2013. <https://www.rootsandblues.ca/atribecalledred/>

<sup>58</sup> Ian Campeau, “A Tribe Called Red: Powwow Step and Social Commentary for the Masses.” interview with Adrienne K. March, *Native Appropriations*, March 27, 2012. <http://nativeappropriations.com/2012/03/a-tribe-called-red-powwow-step-and-social-commentary-for-the-masses.html>

The album also showcases the diversity of the trio's production skills and interests, incorporating a broad spectrum of musical influences including hip hop, dubstep, and dance hall, as well as fusion genres like Moombahton,<sup>59</sup> heard in the track "MoombahWow."

Many of the tracks, such as "Look at This" and "Red Skin Girl," are vibrant and celebratory, while the track "Woodcarver" delivers biting social commentary, critiquing police brutality and its disproportionate impact on the Indigenous community.<sup>60</sup> In a haunting and powerful tribute to the late seventh-generation woodcarver, John T. Williams (Nuu-chah-nulth First Nation), the track and accompanying music video<sup>61</sup> samples footage from a lethal encounter between Williams and Seattle police officer Ian Burke (as shown in Figure 3.2), as well as news coverage that followed the aftermath of the shooting. In the track we hear the voice of Officer Burke who, mistaking Williams' wood carving knife for a weapon, calls out to him, ordering him to "put the knife down." Within seconds, five gunshots are fired and the track shifts to a news report that states: "The family of a woodcarver shot to death by a Seattle police officer says that an autopsy report shows that he was not facing the officer." The track abruptly shifts in mood, from a somber, slow, somewhat vague accompaniment of a single guitar, to a quick-pulsed dubstep track, as Burke's voice and gunshots become rhythmically entwined with distorted bass lines and repeated samples of a single high-pitched cry. The unceasing loop of these elements, layered with commentary from those who knew Williams, creates a tension and disorientation that sinks into the listener. It feels heavy, constant, inescapable, serving as a powerful sonic reminder of this painful and all-too-common experience in the Indigenous community.

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<sup>59</sup> Moombahton is a fusion genre of Dutch house music and reggaeton. Its origins are largely credited to American DJ and producer Dave Nada.

<sup>60</sup> According to data collected between 1999 and 2015 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Native Americans are killed in police encounters at a higher rate than any other racial or ethnic group (12% higher than African-Americans and three times the rate of Caucasians.)

<sup>61</sup> A Tribe Called Red, "Woodcarver (Official Video)." YouTube video, March 30, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx4JLPBMUx0>

**Figure 3.2** Screenshots from “Woodcarver” music video



The album closes with the track “General Generations,” which was the result of a collaboration with Nolan Warden who at the time was a PhD candidate in UCLA’s ethnomusicology department. The project involved the use of archival wax cylinder recordings from the Frank G. Speck collection (1933-34) at Indiana University’s Archives of Traditional Music. These recordings were particularly appropriate due to the shared family name of ATCR member Dan General and the recordings’ collaborator, Gayogohó:’no’ (Cayuga) chief Alexander J. General (Deskáheh). The track is a fitting end to the album in that it brings to life, nearly eighty years later, a voice that might not have otherwise been heard by today’s audiences, showing that despite experiences of violence and attempted erasure, Indigenous artists are continuing to cultivate and celebrate their heritage and move forward in these living traditions with resilience and fluidity. Despite the fact that *A Tribe Called Red* was released without a record label, the album was long-listed for the Polaris Music Prize and was even included on the *Washington Post*’s list of top 10 albums of 2012.

Quickly following up the success of their first album, ATCR’s sophomore album, *Nation II Nation*, was released just one year later (2013) and featured a collaboration with Tribal Spirit Music, a record label that specializes in recording contemporary pow wow drum groups from a

diverse array of nations. According to the label, “Aboriginal Nations were called together by the sound of the drum. Powwows were gatherings of people to trade, share and celebrate.... The modern powwow culture is vibrant and alive in the Aboriginal community.”<sup>62</sup> With full access to the Tribal Spirit catalogue, ATCR featured the following drum groups: Chippewa Travellers (Anishinaabe), Eastern Eagle (Mi’kmaq), Sitting Bear (Ojibwe), Smoketrail (Ojibwe), Sheldon Sundown (Seneca), Black Bear (Atikamekw), and Northern Voice (Atikamekw).

One of the highlights on the album is the track “Sisters” which is a remix of Northern Voice’s a cappella recording of “C Kisakitin Mama” (from the album *Dance of the Moon* (2013)). The track is distinct in that it showcases the female vocalists of Northern Voice; According to ATCR, this is “groundbreaking” as “female pow wow back-vocals haven’t been put at the forefront like this ever before.”<sup>63</sup> The accompanying music video,<sup>64</sup> featuring three young First Nations women (Sarain Carson-Fox, Kawennáhere Devery Jacobs, and Aria Evans), reads as a de-stereotyping and decolonizing of Indigenous women, signifying that they are “like everyone else, regular contemporary people who are connected, fashion conscious and going to the club on weekends.”<sup>65</sup> The video maintains an upbeat, almost carefree atmosphere, showing the three women dancing their way through various stops along the way to Electric Pow Wow, and waving the Idle No More flag out of their car’s sunroof (shown in Figure 3.3).

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<sup>62</sup> Tribal Spirit Music, “ATCR,” Accessed January 12, 2018. <https://tribalspiritmusic.com/artists/a-tribe-called-red/>

<sup>63</sup> Matias Muñoz, “New Video: ‘Sisters’ by A Tribe Called Red,” *Ottawa Showbox*, April 15, 2014. <http://www.ottawashowbox.com/2014/04/new-video-sisters-tribe-called-red/>

<sup>64</sup> A Tribe Called Red, “Sisters ft Northern Voice (Official Video),” YouTube video. April 9, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbrvwaVXJ48>

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

**Figure 3.3** Screenshots from “Sisters” music video



Nēhiyaw (Cree) scholar Karyn Recollet sees tremendous significance in this staging, particularly in light of the crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women:

In this revisionist storytelling project, the video ignites a shift wherein spaces considered unsafe — as in the forested areas beside highways, and small town bars — are seemingly transformed into sites wherein Indigenous girls and women can feel free to dance and move, as opposed to just spatial geographies where women and girls’ bodies are recovered, or seen last by passerby before going “missing.”<sup>66</sup>

The video’s expression of freedom and celebration of Indigenous femininity, culminating in the euphoric participation at Electric Pow Wow, stands in stark contrast to national narratives of fear and the often one-dimensional characterizations of Indigenous women.

Although “Sisters” and several other tracks like “Bread and Cheese,” “NDN Stakes,” and “Sweet Milk Pop” serve as primarily high-energy dance music, the album as a whole has a distinctly political tone. The CD’s liner notes feature images of each member’s Certificate of Indian Status with the statement: “After what happened in the last hundred years, the simple fact we are here today is a political statement. As First Nations people everything we do is political.” According to DJ NDN, the name itself is a multilayered commentary on the Indigenous experience in North America:

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<sup>66</sup> Karyn Recollet, “For Sisters,” in *Me Artsy*, edited by Drew Hayden Taylor (Madiera Park: Douglas & McIntyre, 2015), 131

...in A Tribe Called Red itself, I'm Ojibwe, Anishinaabe. The other two guys, Dan and Bear are both Cayuga. Our languages alone are as different as English and Chinese. Historically, we're enemies. So together, in forming this group, that's a nation-to-nation relationship. Then you go a little more macro, and go federally, then you've got a nation-to-nation relationship from the settler nations to the First Nations, and how that relationship needs to start happening. That conversation needs to start happening.<sup>67</sup>

Bear Witness adds that *Nation II Nation* “came out of Idle No More times, and us wanting to push that conversation — that Indigenous people are a sovereign nation that needs to have a conversation with the settler nations of North America.”<sup>68</sup> This connection was solidified by the album's lead single, “The Road” (featuring Black Bear's “Calling the Dancers”), which was dedicated to the Idle No More protests as well as the hunger strike carried out by Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence.<sup>69</sup>

*Nation II Nation* went on to be shortlisted for the 2013 Polaris Music Prize and was nominated for Electronic Album of the Year at the Juno Awards. In a bold gesture, ATCR decided not to submit for the “Aboriginal Album of Year” category at the Juno Awards. In an interview with CBC News, DJ NDN said: “We felt we wanted to compete for an award because of our music and not our ethnicity.”<sup>70</sup> In doing so they made history as the first Indigenous group to win a Juno outside of the Aboriginal music category, taking home the award for “Breakthrough Group of the Year.” This revolutionary win was steeped in meaning for the Indigenous community. In his acceptance speech, DJ NDN said: “To native youth everywhere on

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<sup>67</sup> Ian Campeau, “Beats Against Colonialism: A Tribe Called Red,” interview by Sheldon Birnie, *Canadian Dimension* 47, no.5 (2013): 30-31

<sup>68</sup> Ehren Thomas, “The Halluci Nation Is Real.” Exclaim!,” interview by David Dacks, September 21, 2016, [https://exclaim.ca/music/article/a\\_tribe\\_called\\_red-the\\_halluci\\_nation\\_is\\_real](https://exclaim.ca/music/article/a_tribe_called_red-the_halluci_nation_is_real)

<sup>69</sup> Spence began her hunger strike in December of 2012 in an attempt to secure a meeting with Prime Minister Harper and bring public attention to First Nations issues. The strike ended after six weeks when members of the Assembly of First Nations as well as the Liberal and New Democrat caucuses agreed to sign a 13-point declaration of commitment to addressing Indigenous issues. (CBC)

<sup>70</sup> Ian Campeau, “Do the Junos Still Need an Aboriginal Category?” interview by Angela Sterritt, *CBC News*. April 1, 2014. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/do-the-junos-still-need-an-aboriginal-category-1.253560>

Turtle Island, know that this moment, right now, is proof that whatever goals you strive for in life, they're completely attainable, so aim high.”

Shortly after the group's historic win at the Juno Awards, DJ Shub left the group and was replaced by DJ and producer Tim “Zoolman” Hill, who happened to be from the same First Nation community as his predecessor (Mohawk of the Six Nations). The group's change in membership set the tone for different approaches to musical style and process, allowing for the group to “stretch [their] legs a little further.” Bear Witness said of the transition: “We made amazing dance music with Shub, now we're making something more than that. [Zoolman] is a natural musician in the truest, most traditional sense. He grew up in the longhouse, he grew up singing social songs — he's a traditional singer. He knows how to write traditional songs in the same way that Black Bear knows, getting inspiration from dreams.”<sup>71</sup> DJ NDN agreed, noting that “[i]t's one thing to be able to make club bangers, but to make progressions into the song is another thing.... So Zoolman coming from his very trained background...really changed the game.”<sup>72</sup> This pivot in membership, and the resulting expansion in musical capabilities, drove ATCR to begin work on what proved to be their most ambitious album to date, *We Are the Halluci Nation* (2016).

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<sup>71</sup> Ehren Thomas, “The Halluci Nation Is Real.” Exclaim!,” interview with David Dacks, September 21, 2016. [https://exclaim.ca/music/article/a\\_tribe\\_called\\_red-the\\_halluci\\_nation\\_is\\_real](https://exclaim.ca/music/article/a_tribe_called_red-the_halluci_nation_is_real)

<sup>72</sup> Ian Campeau, “Enter A Tribe Called Red's Halluci Nation,” interview by Del Cowie, *CBC*, September 26, 2016. <http://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/12695/a-tribe-called-red-we-are-the-halluci-nation>

**Figure 3.4 DJ NDN, Zoolman and Bear Witness at Manifesto Festival, Toronto (Photo Credit: Tanja-Tiziana)**



## 3.2 Building a Nation Without Borders

A Tribe Called Red's third studio album was released in September of 2016 under the Pirates Blend record label. *We Are the Halluci Nation* drew wide critical acclaim, peaking at No. 7 on *Billboard's* Top Dance/Electronic Albums chart. It was also shortlisted for the 2017 Polaris Prize, named "Album of the Year" at the Independent Music Awards, and ATCR received the "Jack Richardson Producer of the Year" award at the Junos. By far the most conceptual work in ATCR's discography, the album's premise stems from an interaction the group had with the late Santee Dakota activist, musician, and former American Indian Movement leader John Trudell.

Tim Hill describes the encounter that started it all:

We played a show in Santa Fe and John said some beautiful things about us before we got on stage. That was crazy to us, we were huge fans of his. He suggested we should do something together. What he didn't know was that we have a wish list of people we'd most like to work with, and he was on it! Here was a real life superhero of ours wanting to work with us. [After a recording session in San Francisco] he then emailed us and said "I threw in another poem for you." It was "We Are The Halluci Nation." When we heard it, we looked at each other and went, "This is the one." That poem helped make the ideas for this record a lot bigger.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Tim Hill, "A Tribe Called Red: Growth by Collaboration," interview with Kerry Doole, *Socan Magazine: Words & Music*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.socanmagazine.ca/features/a-tribe->

In Trudell's poem he envisions a conceptual nation called the "Halluci Nation":

*We are the tribe that they cannot see  
We live on an industrial reservation  
We are the Halluci Nation  
We have been called the Indians  
We have been called Native American  
We have been called hostile  
We have been called Pagan  
We have been called militant  
We have been called many names  
We are the Halluci Nation*

*We are the human beings  
The callers of names cannot see us,  
But we can see them  
We are the Halluci Nation  
Our DNA is of earth and sky  
Our DNA is of past and future  
We are the Halluci Nation  
We are the evolution, the continuation  
Hallucination  
The Halluci Nation  
We are the Halluci Nation  
We are the Halluci Nation<sup>74</sup>*

These words, performed by Trudell himself, are the very first thing we hear on the album. Shortly after recording the poem, it was announced that Trudell was in the last stages of terminal cancer; he passed away on December 8, 2015. Tim Hill reminisces that "[i]t was amazing that our hero could drop so much knowledge and wisdom on us. We're happy we're able to share his vision with the rest of the world."<sup>75</sup>

Drawing from this premise, ATCR constructed an album that addresses the broad global impacts of colonialism while contesting the notion of nationhood as determined by race, religion,

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called-red-growth-by-collaboration/

<sup>74</sup> John Trudell, *We Are the Halluci Nation* (permission to use obtained from ATCR management team)

<sup>75</sup> Tim Hill, "A Tribe Called Red: Growth by Collaboration," interview with Kerry Doole

or borders. Instead, the Halluci Nation represents a decolonial globalization, seeking to establish an inclusive far-reaching community of “like-minded people.”<sup>76</sup> When asked about what the Halluci Nation means to him, Bear Witness explains:

In our sort of fantasy-reality that John Trudell helped us lay out, in the future the Halluci Nation is a group that breaks off from society to return to natural ways of life. And it’s not just Indigenous people. It was a movement led by Indigenous people, but is something that is open to anyone who is willing to join and be a part of helping figure stuff out.... It’s kind of a rallying point for people who want to see change in this world, who see that we’re coming to a point, a tipping-point as far as consciousness and way ways that we treat ourselves, each other and the planet.<sup>77</sup>

In order to realize this conviction, ATCR brought together a spectrum of artists from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and geographical backgrounds including: Inuk experimental vocalist Tanya Tagaq, Anishinaabe singer-songwriter Leonard Sumner, Toronto-based Colombian singer Lido Pimienta, Aboriginal Australian beatmakers OKA, Swedish-Sami joik-singer Maxida Märak, African-American singer/slam poet Saul Williams, African-American rapper Yasiin Bey (“Mos Def”), Iraqi-Canadian rapper and MC Narcy, Tuscarora singer Jennifer Kreisberg, and Canadian novelist Joseph Boyden, as well as previous collaborators Northern Voice, Black Bear, and the Chippewa Travelers.

By far ATCR’s most in-depth, hands-on effort, the musical process of this album deviated from the first two in that the trio actually recorded with collaborating artists in the studio, rather than sampling already existing tracks.<sup>78</sup> This direct contact enabled more complex compositions to emerge from the creative process. Perhaps the most aurally and conceptually compelling example of this is found in the practice of layering multiple artists together, interweaving diverse styles into one cohesive track. An excellent example of this is found in the

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<sup>76</sup> Ian Campeau, “What the Halluci Nation Means to Us,” YouTube video, September 20, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cqj9HAQsyM>

<sup>77</sup> Ehren Thomas, “What the Halluci Nation Means to Us”

<sup>78</sup> Kerry Doole, “A Tribe Called Red: Growth by Collaboration,” *Socan Magazine: Words & Music*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.socanmagazine.ca/features/a-tribe-called-red-growth-by-collaboration/>

penultimate song on the album, “ALie Nation.” In this track, John Trudell can be heard describing the Halluci Nation, juxtaposed with their foil, the ALie Nation. The members of the Halluci Nation “see the spiritual in the natural through sense and feeling / Everything is related / All the things of earth and in the sky have spirit / Everything is sacred.” Conversely, the ALie Nation, “The subjects and the citizens / See the material religions through trauma and numb / Nothing is related / All things of the earth and in the sky / have energy to be exploited / Even themselves, mining their spirits into souls sold.”<sup>79</sup> Underpinning Trudell’s words we hear the persistent heartbeat of Northern Voice’s drumming, Lido Pimienta’s ethereal vocals, and the track climaxes with the intensity of Tanya Tagaq’s *katajjaq* (throat singing). These layers invoke a tension that directly contradicts the tranquility heard in the opening track, reflecting the urgent existential threat the ALie Nation’s ideals (exploitation of resources, stripping of spirituality) pose to those who identify with the spirit of the Halluci Nation (sacredness and interconnectedness of all things).

*We Are the Halluci Nation* aptly builds upon ATCR’s earlier discography, taking the “nation-to-nation” ethos and further extending it to other colonized peoples around the globe. In an interview with *AJ+*, the group explains the significance of making these connections with other Indigenous people:

**Zoolman:** We all share the same colonial trauma.

**Bear Witness:** We’re in our own land and we’re homesick because our own land isn’t ours anymore, it doesn’t reflect us anymore.

**DJ NDN:** Meeting these Indigenous people in colonial countries like Australia and having this connection in oppression almost made it feel less lonely.

**Bear Witness:** And once you start making those connections with Indigenous people the world over, you find yourself in a global community all of a sudden.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> John Trudell, *ALie Nation* (permission to use obtained by ATCR’s management team)

<sup>80</sup> *AJ+*. “Meet A Tribe Called Red.” Video. June 3, 2017.

<https://www.facebook.com/ajplusenglish/videos/973260989482075/>

In addition to bringing people together into the conceptual Halluci Nation, A Tribe Called Red has fostered this sense of cross-cultural community by taking Electric Pow Wow on the road, from Canada to the U.S., Mexico, Europe, and Australia, performing at high-profile festivals such as Coachella, Bonnaroo, AfroPunk, Osheaga, and New Orleans Jazz Fest, to name a few.<sup>81</sup> Although the expansion of their audience was an ideal development for the group, Bear Witness describes his initial hesitation with performing abroad:

We started having mixed feelings about what it means to be bringing our music to Europe. Obviously we're not going to be playing for aboriginal crowds at all out there, so are people going to get it or are we just going to get a bunch of hipsters in headdresses? What's gonna happen? And even on a more personal level, like what does it mean there? It obviously means something different than it does here.... What kind of settled all those feelings for us is when we started getting all these Twitter messages from people all over Canada who were saying "Alright guys, get out there, tell 'em who we are, represent us, you're our ambassadors, go out and do it!" So when we had that behind us, again, when we have the community get behind us and say, "Yes. Go, do this, we need you to do this, we're behind you." It's super important.<sup>82</sup>

As demonstrated in this quote, social media has played a significant role in the process of community-building and creating a sense of belonging among ATCR's fan base. According to DJ NDN, the rise of social networking has also had an impact on the visibility of Indigenous issues and the ways in which people engage with political movements:

100 per cent, it's about Twitter and Facebook — being connected like that and being able to share information. You can get a round dance flash mob organized in a day, and that kind of connectivity has never been there before.<sup>83</sup>

Campeau also believes that social media subverts colonial attempts to silence Indigenous people:

My reserve, Nipissing, was out of walking distance to the nearest town," Campeau said. "That was on purpose. It kept us out of sight and out of mind. Twitter changed everything by helping to close that gap. It's giving us a platform.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> A Tribe Called Red, "Biography," Accessed February 20, 2018. <http://atribecalledred.com/>

<sup>82</sup> Ehren Thomas, "Listen to A Tribe Called Red's New Record, 'Nation II Nation'" interview by Nigel Irwin, *Noisey*, April 30, 2013, [https://noisey.vice.com/en\\_us/article/rddjkr/listen-to-a-tribe-called-reds-new-record-nation-ii-nation](https://noisey.vice.com/en_us/article/rddjkr/listen-to-a-tribe-called-reds-new-record-nation-ii-nation)]

<sup>83</sup> Ian Campeau, "A Tribe Called Red." interview by Benjamin Boles, *NOW Toronto*, February 7, 2013. <https://nowtoronto.com/music/cover-story-a-tribe-called-red/>

<sup>84</sup> Ian Campeau, "A Tribe Called Red's Electric Powwow Puts Indigenous Culture Centre Stage," interview by Damaris Colhoun, *The Guardian*, July 28, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/28/electric-powwow-tribe-called-red>

Even though ATCR has been thrust into the global spotlight through social media and world tours, they've made it a point to return to their roots by doing an annual "Rez Tour," a series of free concerts, town halls, and youth-oriented workshops that take place on First Nations reserves across Ontario. In this way, they are bringing the same experience of Electric Pow Wow to Indigenous communities, particularly youth who might not otherwise get to hear them play live, giving them "the space to be comfortable and welcome to enjoy themselves, to have fun."<sup>85</sup> According to Bear Witness, "playing for youth...is one of the most rewarding things. There was this real sense when I was growing up of being invisible."<sup>86</sup> Electric Pow Wow serves as a way to combat Indigenous feelings of invisibility, providing a platform for self-determined expression:

We need this music within popular culture that defines us. Because it's time now for us to come out and finally have the opportunity to depict ourselves, to show ourselves in a way that we want to be seen. There's this history of Indigenous people being portrayed always by the outsider, always looking in. We're here to represent Indigenous people in the realest way, that we've never had a chance to show before.<sup>87</sup>

In the following chapter I discuss how A Tribe Called Red uses visual imagery and aesthetic gestures in Electric Pow Wow in order to further subvert the "outsider gaze" and reclaim agency over their representation as Indigenous peoples.

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<sup>85</sup> Ehren Thomas, "The Rez Tour Recap," YouTube video, November 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbTGCWuwlyY>

<sup>86</sup> Ehren Thomas, "Meet A Tribe Called Red." AJ+ Video. June 3, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/ajplusenglish/videos/973260989482075/>

<sup>87</sup> Ehren Thomas, "The Making of We are the Halluci Nation (Album Creation Behind the Scenes)." YouTube video. March 10, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dcd0wBaWQY>

## CHAPTER FOUR: AESTHETICS AND PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

When your culture becomes banned, when your culture becomes illegal, it becomes very precious...it becomes something that you have to hang on to. — Bear Witness

In this chapter I explore how A Tribe Called Red layers diverse aesthetic modes in order to celebrate cultural heritage, while reflecting the experiences and tastes of Indigenous youth, particularly those living in urban areas. Bear Witness, who believes that “culture and tradition are living, growing and changing things” contends that “we learn to understand our past to guide us into the future.”<sup>88</sup> This sentiment is crystalized in A Tribe Called Red’s compelling use of iconography, videography, dance, and regalia. These aesthetic gestures also serve as visual markers of community-formation, decolonization of urban spaces, communal healing, and cross-cultural bridge-building.

### 4.1 Iconography

A Tribe Called Red’s use of iconography demonstrates a layering of aesthetic influences through the reinterpretation and reconstruction of Indigenous imagery. To begin with, the artwork from their self-titled debut album shows feathers arranged around a pair of DJ headphones, suggesting a headdress. In a similar vein, the group’s dreamcatcher logo is actually comprised of a vinyl record with dangling microphones (Figure 4.1).

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<sup>88</sup> Ehren Thomas, “A Tribe Called Red: Powwow Step and Social Commentary for the Masses” Interview by Adrienne K. March, *Native Appropriations*, March 27, 2012. <http://nativeappropriations.com/2012/03/a-tribe-called-red-powwow-step-and-social-commentary-for-the-masses.htm>

**Figure 4.1 A Tribe Called Red logos**



Their logo was further developed in the cover art for their second album *Nation II Nation* in 2013, designed by Ernesto Yerena Montejano. Pulling inspiration from his Chicano and Yaqui heritage, Montejano’s work centers around struggles faced by immigrant and Indigenous communities, and promotes solidarity, resistance, and the embracing of cultural traditions and knowledge.<sup>89</sup>

One of the main reasons I love to create art is because I get to express these anxieties of [loss], while at the same time reclaiming and healing what has been lost.... When I don’t make art for a while I completely feel trapped with anger and frustration towards the state of the world. When I express myself I feel liberated...I know a lot of folks who are answering to the call of their ancestors’ wishes to reclaim and restore indigenous ideals and traditions. Everyone answers to that call in their own way.<sup>90</sup>

Throughout the canon of his work, Montejano makes frequent use of specific icons, almost like an encoded signature. Among these are the rose, the raised fist, the anatomical heart, the arrowhead, fire, and animals such as the bison, bear, turtle, butterfly, and hummingbird.

<sup>89</sup> Ernesto Yerena Montejano, “Ernesto Yerena Montejano Interview,” interview by Kristin Farr. *Juxtapoz*, November 2012.

<sup>90</sup> Ernesto Yerena Montejano, “Blog.” Hecho Con Ganas. <http://www.hechoconganas.com/> (Accessed January 15, 2018).

Figure 4.2 Examples of Ernesto Montejano's use of icons. From top left to bottom right: *Decolonize Wallstreet*, *Ganas o Muerte*, *Chavez*, *Our True History*



Figure 4.3 Montejano's cover art for *Nation II Nation* (2013)



Some of these symbols can also be found on the cover for *Nation II Nation* (Figure 4.3), three of which I want to address: the fist, the rose, and the fire. The raised fist (shown in Figure 4.3 halfway up either side) has long been a universal icon of civil unrest, solidarity, and strength, particularly with regard to resistance movements of marginalized groups, including the Red Power movement.<sup>91</sup> On the bottom left and right corners of the album cover we find the rose symbol. This is perhaps Montejano's most frequently-utilized icon, and is even integrated into the logo for his publishing project *Hechos Con Ganas*, which produces silkscreen prints that

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<sup>91</sup> Also known as the American Indian Movement (AIM). From *Red Power: The American Indians' Fight for Freedom*: "The occupation of Alcatraz Island by Indians of All Tribes from 1969 to 1971 marked the beginning of the decade long Indian activist movement." Pivotal moments in the movement include a seventy-one day siege at Wounded Knee (1973) and the "Longest Walk" march (1978).

highlight political and social causes. Montejano calls this symbol the “dignity rose.”<sup>92</sup> Another common marker found throughout Montejano’s work is fire (underneath the fists in Figure 4.3). According to the artist, “fire represents knowledge — knowledge from the heart.”<sup>93</sup>

The symbols of fire and the rose also bear kindred significance within Anishinaabe teachings. Ojibwe Elder Lillian Pitawanakwat, *Ninkii BinessMijissi Kwe* (Thunderbird Eagle Woman) of the Whitefish River First Nation, discusses the meanings of these two symbols in relation to the center of the Ojibwe Medicine Wheel:

Each of us carries a fire within. Whether it’s through the knowledge we have, or through our experiences and associations, we are responsible for maintaining that fire.... We have many teachings on the value of nurturance. When I was a child my father told us about the Rose Story. He said the Creator asked the flower people, “Who among you will bring a reminder to the two-legged about the essence of life?”... All of the flowers offered their help. At the very end the rose said, “Let me remind them with my essence, so that in times of sadness, and in times of joy, they will remember how to be kind to themselves.” So the Creator, the Master Gardener, took a seed of the rose and planted it in Mother Earth.... And so life is like a rose. The thorns are our life’s journey; without them we would lack the hard won teachings that we need to in order to grow. Life’s experiences make us who we are. And like the rose, we too decay and die many times in a lifetime only to come back to fruition again and again, after reflection, meditation, awareness, acceptance and surrender. My father told us the rose is both life and it’s gifts. So when I am making my own Medicine Wheel, I put the rose here in the centre as a reminder of my own life’s journey and it’s gifts.”<sup>94</sup>

Together, these themes of dignity, knowledge, nurturance, rebirth, and resistance — symbolized by the rose, fire, and fist — help to characterize A Tribe Called Red’s sophomore album, *Nation II Nation*.

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<sup>92</sup> Ernesto Yerena Montejano, “Ernesto Yerena Montejano Interview,” interview by Kristin Farr. *Juxtapoz*, November 2012.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Lillian Pitawanakwat, “Ojibwe/Potawatomi (Anishinaabe) Teaching” Four Directions Teachings, <http://www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/transcripts/ojibwe.html> (Accessed March 20, 2018).

Figure 4.4 Montejano's rose and fire imagery. Left: *Fight for Dignity*. Right: *Fires of Knowledge*



In 2016 Montejano was again commissioned to design the seal for the cover of *We Are the Halluci Nation* (Figure 4.5). Drawing from Trudell's eponymous poem, the seal along the bottom of its inner circle bears the words: "Our DNA is earth & sky." Conversely, it is the last track on the album that inspires the mirroring phrase along the top of the circle: "500 years and still drumming." In the album's epilogue, Canadian author Joseph Boyden provides a spoken word poem from the perspective of "Jack," who is calling from the "Alien Nation Correction Facility." In the call he desperately tries to reach "Charlie," whom we understand to be Chanie "Charlie" Wenjack, an Ojibwe boy who in 1966 escaped from Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School, only to perish on the railroad tracks along a 650 kilometer journey home.<sup>95</sup> In the final track of the album, "SOON," Jack says to Charlie:

You stamped the world before you left it. You're part of the Great Seal that can't be broken. Can you hear it Charlie? Like a strong heart pumping, that's the sound of 500 years and all of us still drumming.

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<sup>95</sup> 2016 marked the 50th anniversary of Chanie Wenjack's tragic death. In the same year, Joseph Boyden also published the novella *Wenjack* and Gord Downie released his fifth and final album *The Secret Path*, both of which paid tribute to Chanie's story and honored his memory.

**Figure 4.5 The Great Seal of the Halluci Nation (Credit: Ernesto Montejano)**



The character of the Halluci Nation is reflected in the seal not only through words, but through symbolic gestures. The center of the seal shows a turtle (earth) with outstretched wings (sky), invoking Turtle Island, which comes from the Anishinaabe creation story of North America. In this case, the entire globe is placed upon its back, conveying the global unity and shared humanity of the Halluci Nation.

In 2017 The seal was adapted in the music video for the song “For You (The Light, Pt. II Ft. Lido Pimienta)” by Gilda Monreal (“Fiya Bruxa”), whose work seeks to “celebrate[] the beauty, dignity and perseverance of those who have, or continue to overcome adversity.”<sup>96</sup> The daughter of first-generation Chilean immigrants, Monreal views her street art as a “hybrid” of South American muralism and hip hop graffiti and often speaks of the value of this artform as a “tool for social change and community empowerment.”<sup>97</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Fiya Bruxa. “Home.” Accessed May 23, 2018. <https://www.fiyabruxa.com/>

<sup>97</sup> Gilda Monreal, “Portrait | Fiya Bruxa,” Interview by Sydney Allen-Ash, *Portrait.co*, May 4, 2016. <http://www.thisisportrait.co/portraits/fiya-bruxa>

**Figure 4.6 Mural featured in “For You (The Light Pt. II)” (Credit: Fiya Bruxa, Nacho Nas, and Marcia Sol)**

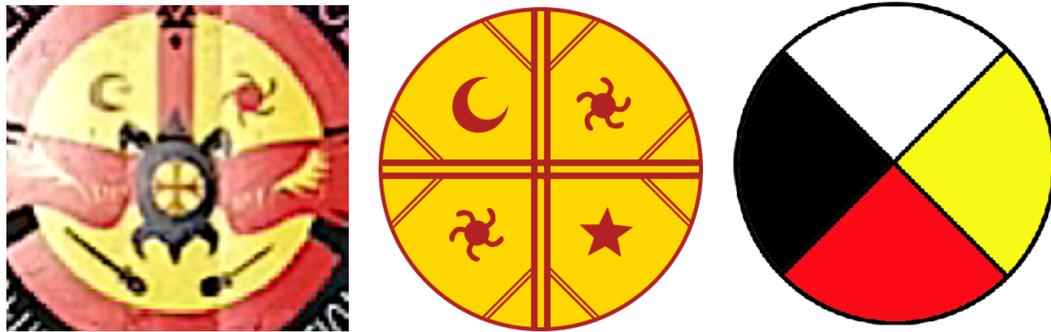


As the video was filmed in Santiago, Chile, Monreal worked with Chilean artists Nacho Nas and Marcia Sol to transform the seal as part of a mural (Figure 4.6) that incorporated elements of South American Indigenous heritage. In the mural, we find reference to the Andean earth goddess *Pachamama*, who is often a focal point of both Monreal’s work as well as that of her sister, who goes by the artist name “Shalak Attack”. A statement for their collaborative work “The Beloved Mural” declares that “[w]e are one with Pachamama. We must respect her strength, wisdom and balance. Nature’s spirit is stronger [than] our destructive nature. Together WE will overcome.”<sup>98</sup> The design at the center of the seal invokes the *cultrun*, a ceremonial drum used by the Mapuche people of south-central Chile. According to Ana Mariella Bacigalupo, the *cultrun* is typically painted with “a cross that divides the drum’s face into quarters and represents the *meli witrán mapu*, or fourfold division of the world.”<sup>99</sup> The four sections signify “the four corners of the Mapuche earth, or *mapu*, the four seasons, the four

<sup>98</sup> ShALaK aTtAcK. “The Beloved Mural: ‘Inspire. Love.’” Accessed June 24, 2018. <http://shalak.blogspot.com/2006/10/my-paintings.html>

<sup>99</sup> Ana Mariella Bacigalupo, *Shamans of the Foye Tree: Gender, Power, and Healing Among Chilean Mapuche* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 52.

**Figure 4.7** From left to right: center of redesigned Halluci Nation Seal (credit: Fiya Bruxa), *meli witran mapu* (public domain), Ojibwe medicine wheel (public domain)



winds, the four celestial bodies.”<sup>100</sup> This symbolism also mirrors the Ojibwe medicine wheel which White Earth Elder Mary R. Favorite says represents “Four directions, four races of people, four cycles of life, four seasons, four winds and four quarters of the moon.”<sup>101</sup> Figure 4.7 shows the center of the redesigned Halluci Nation seal next to the *meli witran mapu* and the Ojibwe medicine wheel.

Much of the character of the original Halluci Nation seal is still present in the redesign, including the winged turtle, the arrowheads, and the drum mallets. Additionally, the words *tierra* and *cielo*, Spanish for “earth” and “sky,” are a call back to Trudell’s original poem. The utilization of the seal in this way, allowing for the integration of different Indigenous cultural symbolism, further demonstrates the potential for community empowerment and creative transnational interconnectedness under the banner of the Halluci Nation.

Perhaps the most significant development of the seal is its fabrication into a patch (Figure 4.8) that is often worn by A Tribe Called Red as well as their fans, creating a visual marker for those who identify with and wish to take part in the collective fellowship of the Halluci Nation:

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Mary R Favorite, “The Ojibwe Medicine Wheel.” Anishinaabemowin. Accessed May 4, 2018. [http://anishinaabemodaa.com/lessons?lesson\\_id=51](http://anishinaabemodaa.com/lessons?lesson_id=51)

**Figure 4.8 The Halluci Nation Patch (Source: screenshot from “The Making of We Are the Halluci Nation” YouTube video**



We go to communities now and we see kids come running out in jean vests with our logo on the back, and so I think we've been able to start creating some of those social icons that young indigenous people can call their own and connect to.<sup>102</sup>

Among the other icons created by A Tribe Called Red, The Great Seal of the Halluci Nation has become a crucial element of the group's artistic and social presence. The evolution and dissemination of the seal demonstrates how aesthetic gestures can assist in fostering a cross-cultural community and sense of belonging.

## 4.2 Videography

In a live setting, Electric Pow Wow creates an opportunity for multiple sensory modalities to be layered and experienced. The use of video installations adds another aesthetic layer, one that subverts the colonial gaze and repositions Indigenous peoples as the creators and regulators of their own narrative.

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<sup>102</sup> Ehren Thomas, "Meet A Tribe Called Red." AJ+, Video, June 3, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/ajplusenglish/videos/973260989482075/>

### 4.2.1 Reimagining the “Imagined Indian”

In what could be taken as an act of reappropriation, A Tribe Called Red samples clips from film, cartoons, and other media that center around depictions of Indigenous people, then deconstructs and “remixes” them in a captivating visual dialogue of social commentary. The reductive portrayal of Indigenous peoples in popular culture has been well-critiqued in documentaries such as *Imagining Indians* (1992), *Reel Injun* (2009),<sup>103</sup> and *Inventing the Indian* (2012). These films illustrate how movies, television, cartoons, literature, and other media have frequently depicted Indigenous people as oversimplified, derogatory, or romanticized caricatures: “noble savage,” “Indian princess,” “barbaric warrior,” “wise shaman,” “drunken Indian,” “casino-rich,” etc.

Cherokee and Greek novelist Thomas King notes that “as a series of entertainments, Native history is an imaginative cobbling together of fears and loathings, romances and reverences, facts and fantasies into a cycle of creative performances, in Technicolor and 3-D, with accompanying soft drinks, candy, and popcorn.”<sup>104</sup> While these depictions were touted in Hollywood as innocuous entertainment, they also subtly perpetuated colonial power structures, further reinforcing misconceptions that continue to strain the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

In live shows and music videos, A Tribe Called Red unpacks and reconstructs these images, ultimately re-presenting them on their own terms (Figure 4.9). Bear Witness, who is responsible for the group’s multimedia work, explains how this is an important act of agency:

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<sup>103</sup> This film also calls attention to the “Renaissance of Native Cinema” which involves Indigenous filmmakers offering more complex, nuanced and humanizing depictions of their culture and people. Notable examples include: *Dance Me Outside* (1994), *Smoke Signals* (1998), *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001), and *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006)

<sup>104</sup> Thomas King, *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* (Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2013), 19

**Figure 4.9 Electric Pow Wow live projection (Photo credit: Jean-Philippe Marquis)**



Reclaim, repurpose and reuse. I like to look past the automatic reaction to say these images are racist or stereotypes (which they are) and flip it around. We make these images our own. Taking away the power they have to harm us and reclaim it for ourselves.<sup>105</sup>

Bear samples clips from sources that span decades, from silent films and Spaghetti Westerns to recent cinema, animations, and television shows, demonstrating that the “imagined Indian” is still deeply entrenched in popular culture. This is an especially teachable moment for non-Indigenous audience members, who would most likely acknowledge the troubling depictions of Indigenous peoples in “Old Hollywood,” but are perhaps less likely to recognize these problematic dynamics in more recent pop culture that they have vested familiarity with and nostalgic connection to. Through methods of digital manipulation such as color distortion, mirroring, and repetition, Bear Witness further “unsettles” these depictions, flipping the script, and implicitly “punching up” at those who created them. In this way, he disentangles these images from their colonial origins, allowing audience members to engage with them in an entirely new way. Examples of this technique can be found in the music videos for “Electric Pow

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<sup>105</sup> Adrienne K March, “A Tribe Called Red: Powwow Step and Social Commentary for the Masses.” *Native Appropriations*, March 27, 2012. <http://nativeappropriations.com/2012/03/a-tribe-called-red-powwow-step-and-social-commentary-for-the-masses.html>

Wow Drum,” “MoombahWow,” “NDNs From All Directions,” and “Red Skin Girl” (shown in figure 4.10).

This technique of reappropriation is particularly effective when considering how the clichéd images are juxtaposed with and physically placed behind other aesthetic and kinesthetic layers of Electric Pow, which present Indigenous people in reality, in the here and now (Figure 4.11). According to Bear Witness, “we’re always being looked at through the lens of colonialism, and we’re never portraying ourselves. We’re starting to take control of that, but it’s really just beginning.”<sup>106</sup> While on the one hand, Electric Pow Wow serves to probe and rupture colonial myths of Indigeneity, Bear Witness is adamant that fans are free to choose how they engage with the event, and emphasizes its overarching purpose to entertain:

If you don’t like what we do with electronic music but you like what we’re saying? Great. If you just want to come to our parties and just dance and not interact with the other side of what we do, I’m perfectly happy with that too.... I want to make good dance music, I want people to come and have a good time. I don’t want people to just come and think about colonization and oppression and genocide. So if you just want to come and have a good time, that’s why those images on the screen aren’t just racist images and images of genocide or something. They’re bright coloured loops of things that can be really funny. We want to enjoy ourselves too.<sup>107</sup>

Ultimately there is a certain freedom and approachability to these events, allowing for a multitude of experiences and takeaways. In one light, Electric Pow Wow provokes and unsettles its audience, holding a mirror up to expose uncomfortable truths; in the same breath, it constructs an energized, exuberant shared space for fans, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to connect and enjoy themselves.

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<sup>106</sup> Benjamin Boles, “A Tribe Called Red.” *NOW Toronto*, February 7, 2013. <https://nowtoronto.com/music/cover-story-a-tribe-called-red/>

<sup>107</sup> Ehren Thomas, “Enter A Tribe Called Red’s Halluci Nation,” interview by Del Cowie, *Canada Broadcasting Corporation*, September 26, 2016. <http://www.cbcmusic.ca/posts/12695/a-tribe-called-red-we-are-the-halluci-nation>

Figure 4.10 Screenshots from ATCR’s videos. From top right to bottom left: “Electric Pow Wow Drum”, “MoombahWow”, “NDNs from All Directions”, “Red Skin Girl”)



Figure 4.11 Juxtaposing pop culture with reality (Photo credits: John Major, courtesy of Music Canada (right), Jean-Philippe Marquis (left))



## 4.3 Dance and Regalia

Like the conventional pow wow, dance is a focal-point of Electric Pow Wow, one that invites a diversity of styles, ethnicities, and modes of dress into the same shared space. In this section, I will examine the interplay between Indigenous and hip hop aesthetics, and discuss how dance can actively decolonize a space and assist in the communal healing of its participants.

### 4.3.1 Layering Hip Hop Modalities and Indigenous Expression

In “Medicine Beats and Ancestral Rhymes,” artist Tania Willard (Secwepemc Nation) observes how First Nations artists have “indigenized” hip hop in order to articulate their own experiences. She notes that the “roots of hip hop are there but they have been ghost-danced by young Native artists who use hip hop culture’s artistic forms and combine them with aboriginal story, experience and aesthetics.”<sup>108</sup> This dynamic plays out in Electric Pow Wow, most prominently on the dance floor. A Tribe Called Red often features several rotating dancers throughout performances, however three First Nations dancers have consistently performed with the group, each showcasing their own distinctive fusion of hip hop and Indigenous dance.

James Jones (Tallcree First Nation) is a hoop dancer, ranked among the top in the world.<sup>109</sup> Starting off as a b-boy,<sup>110</sup> Jones found himself exposed to traditional ceremonies and culture through a group of First Nations breakers in Edmonton, who were pow wow dancers as well.<sup>111</sup> Matthew Wood, who also goes by “Creasian” (reflecting his Indigenous and

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<sup>108</sup> Tania Willard, “Medicine Beats and Ancestral Rhymes,” *Beat Nation: Hip-Hop as Indigenous Culture*. Retrieved from [www.beatnation.org](http://www.beatnation.org) (2009)

<sup>109</sup> James Jones, “James Jones Bio,” Accessed February 25, 2018. <http://www.jonesdancer.com/bio-2/>

<sup>110</sup> “B-boying/girling” also known as “breaking” is a style of hip hop dance that originated in the 1970s in the Bronx, NY. It consists of four main types of movement: “toprock,” “downrock,” “power moves,” and “freezes.”

<sup>111</sup> James Jones, “Q&A: James Jones Talks Unique Style of Dancing and What He Learned from So You Think You Can Dance Canada,” Interview by Shawn Conner, *Vancouver Sun*,

Vietnamese heritage), is a b-boy, grass dancer, DJ, and beatmaker. Around age five he was introduced by his mother to round dances and pow wows and, at the same time, began seeing breakers at his local roller rink where he “caught the bug.”<sup>112</sup> Angela Miracle Gladue (a.k.a. Lunacee) is of Nēhiyaw (Cree) and Greek descent and is a member of the Frog Lake First Nation. At age six, she began learning Fancy Shawl and Métis dance through an elementary school cultural dance program and later on became interested in breaking, noting that although there were few b-girls in her area, there was a large concentration of First Nations b-boys in Edmonton for her to look to for inspiration.<sup>113</sup>

Karyn Recollet suggests that the integration of b-boying and b-girling within Indigenous communities emerged out of “struggle and a need for a movement that would both represent and inspire social change.”<sup>114</sup> Indigenous youth who lived in urban areas often resonated with “experiences of social dislocation and erasure,”<sup>115</sup> similar to that of the African-American community from which hip hop originated. The art form has long been an empowering and cathartic outlet for creative expression, in that it cogently reflects and responds to the experiences of urban life and of marginalized groups.

In an interview with *Storyhive*, Luncee acknowledges this link between hip hop and First Nations culture, and further identifies how the parallels extend beyond that of shared experiences of oppression and dispossession:

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February 24, 2016. <http://www.vancouversun.com/life/james+jones+talks+unique+style+dancing+what+learned+from+think+dance+canada/11741299/story.html>

<sup>112</sup> Matthew Wood, “Meet A Tribe Called Red’s Secret Weapon: The Pow Wow Dancers Electrifying Their Shows.” YouTube video. November 16, 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/exhibitionists/meet-a-tribe-called-red-s-secret-weapon-the-pow-ow-dancers-electrifying-their-shows-1.4405217>

<sup>113</sup> Angela Gladue, “Meet A Tribe Called Red’s Secret Weapon.”

<sup>114</sup> Karyn Recollet, “Dancing ‘Between the Break Beats’: Contemporary Indigenous Thought and Cultural Expression Through Hip-Hop,” In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, edited by Melissa Blanco Borelli (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 412.

<sup>115</sup> Recollet, “Dancing ‘Between the Break Beats,’” 413-14.

...the beautiful thing about hip hop is these kids created different elements; same thing with First Nations culture. We have our drum which is like the turntables, we got the emcee in hip hop which is like storytelling in my culture, passing on knowledge. The pow wows, just like we have the cyphers and the jams with b-boys.... Writing on walls for centuries, like graffiti in hip hop. It's cool to see those similarities and then pass on that knowledge.<sup>116</sup>

In the context of Electric Pow Wow, this intersection between hip hop and First Nations aesthetics is vibrantly showcased in the clothing and regalia worn by performers. Dancers often make outfit changes throughout the concert, at times dressed in hip hop streetwear, and in the next track in full regalia, sometimes donning a combination of both (Figure 4.12). The wearing of regalia in this setting makes a crucial statement that directly contradicts the narrative of cities as “place of loss” for Indigenous people who “fear losing themselves, or feel torn between worlds.”<sup>117</sup> During Electric Pow Wow, participants do not compromise their Indigenous identities and cultural markers, but instead fully embrace and present them as an integral part of their experience. For Lunacee, “regalia represents our spirit. We’re dressing up our spirit when we’re wearing it...costume is what you wear when you’re trying to be someone else. Regalia is what we wear when we’re being exactly who we are.”<sup>118</sup>

Glenn Alteen, producer for *Beat Nation*,<sup>119</sup> notes that there has been some pushback from older generations in the Indigenous community, who fear that the influence from mainstream pop culture signifies a break from tradition or potential movement toward cultural assimilation. Alteen believes that, in fact, the opposite is taking place:

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<sup>116</sup> Angela Gladue, “The Creatives - Angela Gladue,” YouTube video, August 10, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrsYSGOSkHY>

<sup>117</sup> Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. “Highlights from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.” Accessed May 16, 2018. <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100014597/1100100014637#chp3>

<sup>118</sup> Angela Gladue, “Meet A Tribe Called Red’s Secret Weapon: The Pow Wow Dancers Electrifying Their Shows.” YouTube video. November 16, 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/exhibitionists/meet-a-tribe-called-red-s-secret-weapon-the-pow-wow-dancers-electrifying-their-shows-1.4405217>

<sup>119</sup> *Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture* is a “website that focuses on the development of hip hop culture within Aboriginal youth communities and its influence on cultural production.”

**Figure 4.12 Mixing hip hop clothing and regalia (Photo credit: Timothy Nguyen)**



These artists are not turning away from the traditions as much as searching for new ways into them. Hip hop is giving youth new tools to rediscover First Nations culture. What is most striking about this work is how much of it embraces the traditional within its development. In many ways, the greatest achievement of Haida master carver Bill Reid was in taking the carving tradition from wood, silver and argillite into other sculptural media. The artists in Beat Nation do the same thing in their media of spray paint, live mix video, turntables, and beat boxes. There is a strong sense of activism present in the work and recognition of the responsibility the artists hold towards their communities.<sup>120</sup>

For Tania Willard, Indigenous artistry, no matter the form, is always firmly rooted in community and connected to ancestry:

Like the beats of our sacred drums, we echo our ancestors in the expression of culture regardless of medium, whether electronic beats or skins, natural pigments or neon spray cans, beads or bling, break dancing or round dancing. We do it as an expression of who we are, as indigenous peoples.<sup>121</sup>

For Indigenous youth, especially those in urban areas, hip hop acts as both a medium to express their particular interests and experiences, while in many cases providing a catalyst into rediscovering and finding connection with their heritage. For A Tribe Called Red, Electric Pow

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<sup>120</sup> Glenn Alteen, "About Beat Nation," Beat Nation: Hip Hop as Indigenous Culture, Accessed February 10, 2018, <http://www.beatnation.org/index.html>

<sup>121</sup> Williard, Tania. "Medicine Beats and Ancestral Rhymes." Beat Nation: Hip-Hop as Indigenous Culture. Accessed February 10, 2018. [www.beatnation.org/curatorial-statements.html](http://www.beatnation.org/curatorial-statements.html)

Wow offers a “modern getaway into urban and contemporary Indigenous culture and experience, celebrating all its layers and complexity.”<sup>122</sup>

### 4.3.2 “The Good Medicine”: Healing Colonial Wounds

Beyond expressing the experiences of urban indigeneity, dance within the context of Electric Pow Wow is a crucial part of decolonizing the communal space and asserting cultural agency. The process of colonization sought to regulate, denigrate, and assimilate Indigenous communities by prohibiting cultural expression; Electric Pow Wow, with its vibrant and celebratory display of Indigenous imagery, regalia, and dance, acts as a strong counter to Canada’s long history of oppressive and assimilationist legislation.

As part of the *Indian Act* of 1876, the Canadian government outlawed several aspects of First Nations culture, including language and spiritual practice, as well as ceremonies such as the potlatch and pow wow. In light of this, public displays of dancing or regalia were criminalized. In 1915, Duncan Campbell Scott (Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian affairs) sent the following memo to his Indian Agents and Inspectors:

It is observed with alarm that the holding of dances by Indians on their reserves is on the increase, and that those practices tend to disorganize the efforts which the Department is putting forth to make them self-supporting. I have, therefore, to direct you to use your utmost endeavours to dissuade the Indians from excessive indulgence in the practice of dancing. You should suppress any dances which cause waste of time, interfere with the occupations of the Indians, unsettle them for serious work, injure their health or encourage them in sloth and idleness. It is realized that reasonable amusement and recreation should be enjoyed by Indians, but they should not be allowed to dissipate their energies and abandon themselves to demoralizing amusements. By the use of tact and firmness, you can attain control and keep it, and this obstacle to continued progress will then disappear.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> A Tribe Called Red. “Biography.” Accessed February 20, 2018. <http://atribecalledred.com/>

<sup>123</sup> RG10, Volume 3826, file 60,51101 Part 1

These policies were especially sinister, when considering how they were coupled with the Indian residential school system, which forcibly removed entire generations of Indigenous children from their communities and cultural identities. By methodically stripping communities of their right to engage in and transmit their cultural practices, it subsequently interfered with their ability to heal the trauma inflicted upon them and to effectively rebuild. According to James Jones, “The big residential school movement took away a lot of our traditional values. Our people had to venture out to get them back, and take it upon themselves to learn that traditional knowledge.”<sup>124</sup> For Lunacee, dance is the thread that keeps her connected to her heritage: “The reason I continue to pow wow dance today and fancy shawl dance is because it’s the only thing I really have left in my culture. I didn’t grow up speaking my language or learning anything else because of my family being in residential school.”<sup>125</sup> In light of this history and this experience, she practices dance as a profound form of resistance and space-making:

My dance is a political expression because it wasn’t that long ago that these dances were outlawed and our culture was outlawed. Being Indigenous was illegal. So for me it’s really important to represent these dances outward and in the world, on stages and in spaces where we once weren’t welcome. But now, having a platform where people like A Tribe Called Red are really expressing our culture in a really good way. I feel honored to be a part of that.<sup>126</sup>

Karyn Recollet frames these types of practices as “embodied sovereignty,” asserting that “we feel colonialism within our bodies.” Furthermore, “we work with—and through—that rupture as part of our process of claiming Indigenous territories in urban spaces.<sup>127</sup> The physical act of dancing, wearing regalia, and taking up public space is a historically rebellious one, and it is this

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<sup>124</sup> James Jones, “Q&A: James Jones”

<sup>125</sup> Angela Gladue, “The Creatives - Angela Gladue,” YouTube video, August 10, 2016.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrsYSGOSkHY>

<sup>126</sup> Angela Gladue, “Angela: The Secret Weapon | House of Strombo,” YouTube video. April 13, 2017.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdsM1hxnXXc>

<sup>127</sup> Karyn Recollet. “For Sisters” in *Me Artsy*, edited by Drew Hayden Taylor, 124. (Mадiera Park: Douglas & McIntyre, 2015), 124

element of Electric Pow Wow that holds the greatest potential for active decolonization and healing.

Each dancer with A Tribe Called Red places an emphasis on dance as a catalyst for healing and a way of passing on teachings. Lunacee says: “I’m a firm believer in sharing everything I’ve been taught and everything I’ve been given because it doesn’t belong to me, it’s not mine. It was here long before I was and it’s gonna be here after I’m gone. So it’s important for me to be a part of giving that and sharing it with other people.”<sup>128</sup> For Jones, “the hoops represent healing. Hoop dancers were known more as spiritual healers of the community. When you’re doing movements with the hoop, it tells a story but also shares teachings that have been handed down to us. You can really tell a story with those teachings.”<sup>129</sup> Creeasian echoes this sentiment: “Many of us have different teachings...for me, I feel like the dance that we do, the good medicine, should be brought everywhere, even places like clubs.”<sup>130</sup>

In Electric Pow Wow, the potential for healing and understanding is also manifested cross-culturally on the dance floor and in the audience’s engagement with the performers and with each other. At various points throughout the event, dancers of different performance backgrounds and ethnicities are invited onto the stage, juxtaposing their distinct dance styles alongside each other in a shared space (Figure 4.14). Toward the end of the performance, dancers

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<sup>128</sup> Angela Gladue, “Angela: The Secret Weapon | House of Strombo,” YouTube video. April 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdsM1hxnXXc>

<sup>129</sup> James Jones, “Q&A: James Jones Talks Unique Style of Dancing and What He Learned from So You Think You Can Dance Canada.” Interview by Shawn Conner. *Vancouver Sun*. February 24, 2016. <http://www.vancouversun.com/life/james+jones+talks+unique+style+dancing+what+learned+from+think+dance+canada/11741299/story.html>

<sup>130</sup> Matthew Wood, “Meet A Tribe Called Red’s Secret Weapon: The Pow Wow Dancers Electrifying Their Shows.” YouTube video. November 16, 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/arts/exhibitionists/meet-a-tribe-called-red-s-secret-weapon-the-pow-ow-dancers-electrifying-their-shows-1.4405217>

will gather together in the middle of the stage in a cypher,<sup>131</sup> taking turns to showcase their skills, met with ample encouragement from each other and the audience. For Creeasian, this practice has the potential to transcend the differences between those involved:

[The cypher] takes over and you start speaking whatever language you speak, whether its dance, music, art. Doesn't matter from what direction you come, what religion you believe in, or color of skin, we are all the same people when you get in the cypher. We are destroying barriers and stereotypes.<sup>132</sup>

This experience, which ripples through the audience as well, creates a situation in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous performers and attendees can share space and collective movement. Stó:lō scholar Dylan Robinson contends that entering shared space is “the first step in the potential negotiation of different perspectives and sharing of experience.”<sup>133</sup> Furthermore, experiences such as these foster “intimacy and empathy...[providing] opportunities for alliance building, affirming indigenous social relationships, or allowing settler audiences to feel positively transformed in spite of the need for further political redress and restitution.”<sup>134</sup> Bear Witness echoes this sentiment, recognizing that “if non-indigenous communities can come to our shows and listen to our music and feel it the same way that we all do, we’re beginning to create a common ground. It’s a non-verbal space, but a common ground just the same.”<sup>135</sup> Wab Kinew believes that Electric Pow Wow is “a real formative experience for a lot of people. It’s healing, and has the ability to change the way our society thinks.”<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> A gathering of hip hop artists (rappers, beatboxers, break-dancers, graffiti artists, etc.) and spectators who form a circle to engage in freestyle expression and competition.

<sup>132</sup> Edmonton Arts Council, 2014 (para. 1)

<sup>133</sup> Dylan Robinson, *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 11

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ehren Thomas, “A Tribe Called Red, Wab Kinew, Tanya Tagaq on the Indigenous Music Renaissance.”

<sup>136</sup> Wab Kinew, “A Tribe Called Red, Wab Kinew, Tanya Tagaq on the Indigenous Music Renaissance.”

**Figure 4.13 Dancers gathering together (Photo credit: Timothy Nguyen Photography)**



The display of aesthetic gestures in Electric Pow Wow plays a crucial role in pushing back against a long history of discrimination faced by Indigenous communities, while building bridges between diverse communities today. Through the layering of iconography, videography, dance, and regalia in live performances and music videos, A Tribe Called Red works to showcase Indigenous talent, decolonize urban spaces, foster cross-cultural connection and empathy, and ultimately reclaim the right of Indigenous peoples to represent themselves the way they want to be seen.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

In this study I have sought to demonstrate how A Tribe Called Red's Electric Pow Wow creates a vibrant and vital decolonized space for members of the Indigenous community while simultaneously fostering cross-cultural/transnational dialogue and community-building. Through an examination of recent Indigenous scholarship on colonization, decolonization, reconciliation, and resistance I discussed how the conditions that engendered movements like Idle No More further ignited a reemergence of Indigenous artists and culture-bearers seeking to revitalize and celebrate Indigenous culture. In the context of this Indigenous music renaissance, A Tribe Called Red has been embraced as one of many torchbearers of cultural renewal, reflecting the complex and evolving tastes and identities of Indigenous communities, particularly those in urban areas.

In my survey of Electric Pow Wow, both as an event and a genre, I suggest that the arc of A Tribe Called Red's creative output, as well as their presence on social media, reveals a gradual and very intentional expansion of their audience and a desire to create a new discourse on indigeneity, as well as a shared global community, irrespective of borders, race, religion, or status. By analyzing ATCR's use of iconography, videography, dance, and regalia, I investigated how musical and aesthetic gestures can be used to affirm and celebrate culture, community, and identity, reject stereotypes, speak truth to power, and heal shared colonial trauma. By creating an opportunity for shared experience within the context of a dance, Electric Pow Wow generates an approachable meeting ground for Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to begin navigating their relationships.

The enthusiastic embrace of A Tribe Called Red by mainstream audiences and the growing intensity of the Indigenous music renaissance reflects a larger paradigm shift, a movement toward recognizing and repairing damage caused to Indigenous communities.

According to Ehren Thomas, “Everything was taken from the Indigenous people of North and South America.... A lot of things have been hidden, and a lot of things have been kept just within our own communities, and I’ve always been told that there was going to come a time where we had to share those things again. I really feel like we’re coming to that time.”<sup>137</sup> Tim Hill suggests that “maybe this is just the beginning. Now that some of us have pushed in, the rest of us are just gonna flood everything. Maybe it won’t be so rare anymore.”<sup>138</sup>

Sitting at the junction of entertainment and active decolonization, Electric Pow Wow is a celebration of culture, community, and, perhaps most importantly, survival. Every drum beat and dance step is a reaffirmation of Indigenous culture and a testament to how the culture has not only endured, but continues to thrive with each subsequent generation. The Halluci Nation resolutely challenges narratives of Indigenous erasure while also standing in radical opposition to recent global inflammations of xenophobia and inclinations toward nationalism and isolationism.

Bear Witness observes:

We’ve come to a place where we’re on the brink of either catastrophically missing the point or finding that understanding.... From where I see the world, we’re at that tipping point, and it’s as scary as it is beautiful, ‘cause I see people every day who are learning to truly love and treat each other like humans again. And the other side is terrifying. It’s never been a scarier time and it’s never been a more hopeful time. We’re doing our small part to tip those scales.<sup>139</sup>

This notion is exemplified in the music video for A Tribe Called Red’s “The Virus,” featuring Saul Williams and the Chippewa Travelers (Figure 5.1).

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<sup>137</sup> AJ+ “Meet A Tribe Called Red.” Video. June 3, 2017.

<https://www.facebook.com/ajplusenglish/videos/973260989482075/>

<sup>138</sup> Tim Hill, “A Tribe Called Red - The Rez Tour Recap.” YouTube video, 05:19. Published November 22, 2015. <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=FbTGcWuwlyY>

<sup>139</sup> Dacks, David. “The Halluci Nation Is Real.” Exclaim!, September 21, 2016.

[https://exclaim.ca/music/article/a\\_tribe\\_called\\_red-the\\_halluci\\_nation\\_is\\_real](https://exclaim.ca/music/article/a_tribe_called_red-the_halluci_nation_is_real)

**Figure 5.1 Screenshots from “The Virus”**



Accompanied by the words of John Trudell, the video depicts a group of “refugees” who are welcomed to safety by the Halluci Nation. As slam poet Saul Williams steps forward to recite a harrowing reflection on colonialism, footage of Indigenous protests past and present, including Standing Rock, are juxtaposed with the diverse members of the Halluci Nation, gathered around its Great Seal in celebratory dance, backed by the members of A Tribe Called Red. Amidst these images of political urgency, exuberant cultural pride, and cross-cultural space-sharing is a crystallization of A Tribe Called Red’s mission, as Saul Williams aptly declares:

**“We are not a conquered people.”**

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