

Nicole Bussey

Dr. Matt Stahl and Dr. Norma Coates

Western USRI Program

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## **Non:wa**

### *Navigating Indigenous Modernity through Female Artists' Perspectives*

#### **Introduction**

My initial idea for this study was to research the experiences of Indigenous female music artists, with the goal of discovering the unique obstacles they encounter within their intersectional position in society. It is important to note that, historically, this field has been widely ignored by scholars, and it is only within the past four decades that there has been any thoughtful scholarly attention to this subject, concerning Indigenous female music makers. Part of my journey with this topic has been finding relevant literature, as it is not widely available, nor is it of large quantity. I urge readers to consider the evolving nature of this field, as scholars continue to learn more, and gain a cohesive understanding of a subject area that repeals the very colonial frameworks which are embedded in the practices of traditional scholarship.

My findings lead me to focus on a key concept used throughout prominent scholarly work in this field, which I will refer to as the *tradition vs. modern binary*. In our colonized society, there exists a continuously reproduced binary that separates Indigenous tradition from contemporary Indigenous experiences, rendering modern music incompatible with tradition, and therefore “inauthentic”, thus invalidating the voices of modern-day Indigenous artists.

I have divided my findings into four sections, each which represent concepts that are connected to one another, true to the cyclical ideologies they represent. I encourage readers to use this circular mentality when reading my work, as opposed to engaging with it in the linear order in which it appears.

For my accompanying research poster, I chose to represent my findings through use of a medicine wheel. The medicine wheel is a sacred symbol used in many Indigenous cultures. I felt the medicine wheel was very complimentary to my findings, as it teaches interconnectedness and viewing life through a circular mentality. Additionally, each segment of the medicine wheel represents multiple meanings at once, which directly embodies the idea that nothing can have a fixed meaning, a key philosophy in understanding my research.

I have attached each section of my research to a corresponding segment on the medicine wheel, which I feel best represents the respective topics. Moving in an untraditional counterclockwise direction, we start with the North direction (the white quadrant), which represents the end of the cycle, death, winter, completion. I have assigned this direction to “Caught between the Space of Two Worlds,” which focuses on the concept of the tradition vs. modern binary, which we must lay to rest. Dually, assigning this chapter to the North direction represents being caught between life and death, or modernity and tradition.

Next, we have the West direction (the black quadrant), which represents maturity, fall, harvest, sundown. I have assigned this quadrant to “The Buffalo, The Beatles, and Bach,” in which I discuss old scholarly perspectives of Indigenous musicking, through David W. Samuels’ analysis of the early 20th century research conducted by ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore. I assign this chapter to the West, to represent the end of an old way of thinking, to make space for a new generation of music makers and scholars alike.

Following the West, we have the South direction (the red quadrant). This direction represents summertime, adolescence, abundance, and growth. I have assigned “Another Kind of Tradition” to the South direction, to represent the broadening of analytical frameworks in this field, challenging the notion of tradition vs. modern, and how opening our minds to the inclusion of many unique experiences can prove most fruitful in our capacity to understand one another.

Finally, we have the East direction (the yellow quadrant), representing birth, spring, sunrise, and new life being brought into the world. I have assigned “Shouting from the Margins” to this direction, as it brings us back to present day experiences, focusing on the perspectives of modern Indigenous female artists, their own definitions of modernity, and how they use their voices to shout their truths from the margins. This also represents the dawn of a new era for both scholarship and musicians alike, of taking experiences from generations before us, learning from them, and bringing them back into the now, in new ways.

There is no “conclusion” to my findings, which I feel is essential in rejecting finality, accepting the possibility of new discovery and growth, and conveying the reciprocal flow between tradition and modernity. Instead, I intend for my findings to open a space for further exploration and provoke thoughtful questions for this intersectional group who have always lived along the edges. I hope my readers will recognize the importance of respecting the fluidity of identity, and, most crucially, that musical modernity has always been Indigenous, and Indigenous musicians have always been modern (Levine 11).

## What is Non:wa?

The Kanienkéha (Mohawk) concept of non:wa (now) refers to three modes of perception: the now of the past, the present, and the future (Ierihó:kwats Avery 199). This is a key concept in understanding how I intended to express the oppression within the tradition vs. modern binary.

Kanienkéhaka elder, Jan Kahehti:io Longboat, elaborates on this concept. “As Indigenous people, we don’t have a past, present, and future. All we have is now. *Oksa* is the first now, which means something just happened; non:wa is the second now, that means right at this moment, moving the energy of *oksa* forward. And if we don’t learn *oksa* and non:wa, we won’t have *onhwehn*, the third or next now” (qtd. In Ierihó:kwats Avery 199).

When considering the concept of non:wa, or the present now, as a mode of transporting the nows of the past towards the future, the harsh lines of what can be considered “modern” begin to blur. This is not to say that traditional elements are not valuable, but rather that they still hold those values in the present, even if they take a different form than before. Longboat provides us with a beautiful analogy in understanding how tradition and modernity are one and the same: When asked how she could be “traditional” while living in a nice house, retrieving water from her kitchen spigot, she replied that water is water and is no less precious, no less traditional, whether it comes from a spigot or from the river. “The concept of sacredness is never lessened by other means, so the fire is still sacred no matter who lights it or how they light it.” (qtd. in Ierihó:kwats Avery 200).

I encourage my readers to take with them this viewpoint while considering Indigenous music practices, and when encountering the artists’ perspectives featured in my research. If we can begin to consider all musical entities a sacred practice, and let go of preconceived notions of

authenticity, we can begin to decolonize our minds and begin to understand that Indigenous tradition is living and breathing and should not be dismissed as a relic of the past.

## **Caught Between the Space of Two Worlds**

### *The Tradition vs. Modern Binary*

The concept of a tradition vs. modern binary has been referenced by scholars when discussing the unique ways in which Indigenous artists are oppressed by colonial values. “Indigenous artists are frequently placed within the too-tidy binary of traditional versus modern, as if these two terms are mutually exclusive,” (Woloshyn 1). Through its rigid categorization, this binary works to oppress Indigenous peoples, tethering them to the past, in a world where present is central. This binary is reproduced through the perspectives of outsiders, which ties Indigenous peoples to a mere idea of tradition which is not accurate, nor productive.

While I am not suggesting we ignore the past, nor disengage in learning about historical evolutions of culture, the trouble comes when we associate tradition as frozen culture from time immemorial. Tradition is a fluid concept that allows practices to evolve, and new practices based on an Indigenous worldview to form (Woloshyn 2). It is especially crucial that we acknowledge the fluidity of tradition when we are discussing Indigenous peoples, who are the victims of cultural genocide, who must work to reclaim their cultural identity in a postcolonial society.

As Thomas King puts it, “In the settler's imagination, "modern" is outside Indigeneity. And modern accouterments cannot accompany an “authentic” Indigenous life (qtd. in Woloshyn 3). An outsiders’ definition of what constitutes as Indigenous authenticity can never be accurate, as it is not part of their embodied experience. It is imperative to approach ideas of modernity with the concept of non:wa, instead of separating past from present, traditional from modern.

The past is always present in the future and is embedded as part of modernity (Ikerihó:kwats Avery 218).

### **The Buffalo, The Beatles, and Bach**

*Reflecting on David W. Samuel's "The Oldest Songs They Remember"*

It is evident that the tradition vs. modern binary has been reproduced for decades, which is why I turn to David W. Samuel's chapter, "The Oldest Songs They Remember," where he discusses ethnomusicology's concept of modernity, through careful analysis of Francis Densmore's 1916 collection of Indigenous music. The method of her work was to visit North American Indian reservations and ask the oldest residents to record "the oldest songs they could remember" (Samuels 13). The idea here was to preserve traditional Indigenous music through retrieval of the oldest possible musical artifacts within Indigenous communities.

Although Densmore's objectives may have been earnest, her goal of accounting Native American music before it disappeared has its wrinkles (Samuels 13). Homi Bhabha explains that "hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable." (qtd. in Woloshyn 2). What Densmore is failing to recognize is that through associating age with authenticity, she is reproducing a binary in which "authentic" Indigeneity is a relic of the past, as opposed to a continuously evolving, and living, culture that exists through generations. By freezing their music in time, Densmore freezes those living Indigenous, and delegitimizes their own cultural identity by denying its fluidity.

Densmore exclaims, "The song that came right from the bear or the buffalo, is the song I am after" (qtd. in Samuels 14). The buffalo may be extinct, but does that mean it does not continue to exist? Is the buffalo no longer a symbolic form, through which we can derive meaning? Or, to take this metaphor further, how about the bear? Bears continue to live and

breathe, as I write this sentence. If one was to document their song today, would that be any less authentic, less worthy of preservation, than the "first" bear which taught its song, if such a bear exists. Just because something is not present in this moment, does not make it any less legitimate, and vice versa. If we can, instead of framing past, present, and future, as a linear diagram, in which we can only move forward, we must begin to see things in a circular pattern, all points equal, and all moments connected.

We exist in a colonized society that places much weight on the "first" instance of any socially reproduced phenomena. Whether it be a child's first day of school, a first birthday, or a first kiss. The irony of this thinking is that in fact, many of these "firsts" are by no means unique - most of us have experienced a first birthday, for example. However, this does not make these milestones any less significant to the individual; along with being the initial instance of a routine occurrence, the mere universality of these events is an element of their value.

But what happens when we apply this same emphasis on the primary instances to an entire culture, and entire population? If only the first songs matter, then what becomes of every song thereafter?

It is important to note that the idea of a dying musical culture that cannot be retrieved, nor reproduced in any significant way, is not present in Western music. Rock critics praise The Beatles for creating musical masterpieces, influenced by masterpieces of J.S. Bach, as much as musicologists praise Bach himself. It could be hypothesized that part of this asymmetry is because much Indigenous musical traditions are passed down aurally, as opposed to through the standardized written notation of Western music. However, this idea just works to support the rigid barriers that place colonial western music as the primary form of musical experience.

In Densmore's 1916 study, she compares the performance of an older and younger Chippewa singer, writing “the younger singer has slightly changed the rhythm so as to avoid the irregularity in the measure lengths,” concluding that “the song had lost its native character and musical interest” (qtd. in Samuels 14). To whose definition, or ‘standard’ of nativeness is Densmore measuring this young singer against? By adhering to her own, outside definition of what counts as an authentic expression of indigeneity, Densmore is engaging in what Nick Couldry may refer to as a “voice-denying rationality” (10). This is the idea that one's voice is undermined when society deems that it need not be considered, since a higher value, or rationality, trumps them. By deeming tradition incompatible with modernity, and further, dismissing the new songs’ value as music, Densmore ultimately undermines the voice of this young Indigenous singer, reproducing the binary that continues to oppress Indigenous artists today.

### **Another Kind of Tradition**

#### *Modernity in Native Classical Music*

While I was conducting my research for this study, I stumbled upon an important distinction, or perhaps, another fold in the problematic concept of Indigenous tradition versus modernity. Although there are obvious expectations as to how Indigenous tradition can, or should be “modernized”, what about when we add another ingredient - something that is neither modern, nor traditional - Native classical music? Native classical music is defined by Kanienkéha composer Dawn Ierihó:kwats Avery as “music composed by Native musicians, scored in part for Western orchestral instruments and for performance in concert settings” (198). The distinction here is that Native classical music is closely connected to Western music theory, performance, and composition.



From first glance, it may seem that Native classical music is inherently oppressive, as it employs the colonial frameworks of western classical notation. However, this is not always the case, nor is that something we should necessarily view as oppressive. “No one has a pure worldview that is 100% Indigenous or Eurocentric; rather, everyone has an integrated mind, a fluxing and ambidextrous consciousness, a pre colonized consciousness that flows into a colonized consciousness and back again” (Little Bear 85). This idea of a fluctuating consciousness explains how one can draw on their cumulative life experiences to give accounts of voice, or in this case, musical works. Native classical musicians draw on both Native and non-Native compositional techniques in their music.

Ierihó:kwats Avery suggests that Native Classical music exists on a continuum of contemporary musical expression, which ranges from Avant-garde experimental works that may not be fully notated, to compositions more similar to that of western classical music. Regardless of how closely they might resemble western classical music on paper, Native classical composers can draw from their own unique worldview when creating. As Anishinaabe composer Barbara Croall explains, “Even though I’ve had some degree of Western training, which I respect and have found enriching, I come from a very strongly intuitive way of thinking and creating. I don’t think methodically about what I’m doing, I realize after the piece is done. For Aboriginal people, when you create something, it first comes from the heart, from your feelings and emotions,” (qtd in Ierihó:kwats Avery 199). This relates directly to the idea of the integrated mind, as artists may draw on their multitude of experiences and worldviews without discrimination.

Another obvious critique of Native classical music, is that it is upholding the scholastic standard of western classical music as the only significant form of music. However, according to Mohican composer Brent Michael Davis, “It’s teaching Western music though, not Native, in

order to expand the palette of techniques by which Native students can express their own Nativeness (using Western-European techniques and written music)” (qtd. in Ierihó:kwats Avery 205). Holding Indigenous artists to an expectation to sound “Indigenous,” is just as oppressive as the historical denial of Indigenous music as relevant, compared to western classical standards. It is integral to our acceptance of each other's unique identities, that we allow space for Native musicians to choose which musical styles they engage with, instead of merely shifting from one oppressive expectation to another. “Rather than assimilating ourselves into musical modernism, we are exploring and choosing educational, compositional, and performance practices and refusing Western racial imaginary of what Indigenous music should sound like,” (Ierihó:kwats Avery 205).

### **Shouting from the Margins**

#### *Hearing the Voices of Indigenous Female Artists*

Throughout my study, I came to the realization that although critique of the tradition vs. modern binary is a useful tool for identifying significant ways in which Indigenous artists are oppressed by colonial concepts of modernity, the conversation becomes much more multidimensional and complex, when we consider outside influences that affect one’s embodied voice. In many ways, my focus on the tradition vs. modern binary, was putting into practice the very limitations of analytical categorization that I am protesting. For many of the artists I studied, while their Indigenous culture is part of their multifaceted identity, there are other significant parts of their beings which are simultaneously exclusive, yet still connected, to their identity as Indigenous women. Says Tanya Tagaq, “I’m a product of colonization, a product of the land, of raving in my twenties. So, I don’t have to fall into any one category, and I think that’s what happened with music as well.” (qtd. in Woloshyn 4).

As Indigenous female music makers, these women are caught in an intricate grid of marginalization and are constrained by colonial practices on all sides. For these artists, their careers do not involve finding where they fit within the industry's institutional framework but creating an entirely new space within the margins. As Métis multidisciplinary artist Jani Lauzon says, in reference to the start of her career in the industry, "I realized there was no place for me, and I would have to carve out a space for myself" (ENTNTSMontreal, 00:00:36).

For some, perhaps there is more power by rejecting labels altogether. In an interview conducted by Beverly Diamond, artist Lucie Idlout says she "really hates to be coined as an Inuk singer-songwriter" (400). "[Because] all I'm doing is I'm writing about life, and life as I experience it and life as I understand and feel...I think definitely there are very strong stereotypes about, not just northern music, but what First Nations and Inuit music are supposed to be." (qtd. in Diamond 400). Not only does Idlout wish to reject being labeled an Inuk artist, but she does not incorporate any traditional elements into her music, stating "I don't see why I should have to, for that matter" (Diamond 400). An outsider may pose the question, if there is no label, no reproduction of "traditional" indigenous elements, then where is the indigeneity in her music? Regardless of labels or symbols, Lucie Idlout's experiences as an Inuit woman are no less valid, nor any less an intrinsic part of her own identity, or musical creativity. It is with this understanding that we must acknowledge that one's embodied voice is a complex entity, one that cannot be reduced to simple categorization, nor should it be cut down to fit a pre-existing container of what it means to be Indigenous.

Several artists find music an appropriate medium to convey the "double consciousness" of their lives, at once facing two or more cultures, past and present (Diamond 399). Métis artist Jani Lauzon says, "We feel those sharp edges all the time. We find ourselves trying to go back

constantly now to the elders to find the old stories, to reconnect with the old ways, and yet we have to bring those old ways and we have to apply them to a modern way of living because that is what we are faced with now. So we're constantly, in our daily lives, dealing with that, and it doesn't surprise [me] that it reflects its way into our music. (qtd. in Diamond 399)

Although many of the artists I studied did incorporate “traditional” Indigenous music elements into their work, not all of them did (such as Lucie Idlout), or perhaps utilized certain aspects, or reinvented the ways in which they used them. Notably, Tanya Tagaq references the Inuit cultural practice of *katajjaq* in her music, however, she does not limit herself to the rules of tradition. “I don't adhere to the rules of traditional throat singing...I don't like following rules” (qtd in Woloshyn 4). As Beverly Diamond points out, “The extent to which “tradition” resonates in their work is highly variable. Rather, their stories are complex products of the discursive interaction of colonial history, community (re)invigoration, corporate maneuvering, and individual agency” (390). Instead of assessing the validity of one's voice in relation to some presumed index of “authenticity” (Diamond 390), we must instead embrace their voices as an embodied process, which may serve to tell their own unique stories.

In a 2014 interview with QTV, Tanya Tagaq says “I like to live in a world that's not supposed to be...or, it's just there already as it is, it doesn't have to be anything” (00:03:42). It is with this openness that I encourage my readers to move into this space of the unknown, to break free of what we have been taught, reject the constraints of rigid social structures, and open our minds to the perspectives of others, with the humility of our own humanness.

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