

Theory from Practice: First Nations Popular Music in Canada

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To claim agency in the emerging dominant is to *recognize* agency in others, not simply to comprehend otherness.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1995, 182)

The conference for which this article was written, on the theme of “border crossing” in relation to the study of music, provided an opportunity and a challenge to reflect on how the specific, localized work we do could relate more broadly to a revision of the study of musics. The conference organizers encouraged us to consider a series of theoretical texts in relation to our topics. Among these texts, I engage the “Introduction” to Rey Chow’s *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (1993). In particular, I endeavor to work with her distinction between “strategic” and “tactical” discourse. Referencing de Certeau’s theories of historiography, she uses “strategic” to define writing that transforms “the uncertainties of history into readable spaces” (1993, 16). De Certeau’s concern with the intelligibility of the past, with “the body of knowledge that utters a discourse and the mute body that nourishes it” (1975, 3) differs from mine, however, since, like most other ethnomusicologists, I work in contemporary communities where there is no mute body but a complex array of speakers and writers who try to render their histories and cultures meaningful.

The first part of this paper concerns various discursive perspectives on First Nations contemporary music in the mid-1990s, a time when a dramatic expansion of production and circulation of recordings occurred in Canada as in the United States. In particular, I consider the establishment of a Juno award¹ for the Best Music of Aboriginal Canada as a “border crossing” event that evoked several shifts in discursive strategy both within and outside the Native Canadian community. By exploring news media and interviews, the imagery of cassettes and CDs, and the style of acknowledgements used by artists, as well as aspects of musical style and arrangement, the interplay of strategic discourses becomes apparent. The first part of my paper, then, is “strategic” in that it concerns the struggle for intelligibility evident in the varied approaches to making this juncture in aboriginal² cultural history readable.

The second part of my paper is more “tactical,” an attempt, as Chow defines it, to “set up a discourse that cuts across some of our new ‘solidarities’” (1993, 25). I consider whether the strategies of meaning-making used by First Nations musicians and spokespersons might indeed offer more broadly applicable “theories” that are fundamentally rooted in concepts of historical cycles and relationship to the environment, including the global human community. I suggest that, by considering the social theory of these practices, the study of music might be productively framed in potentially new and useful ways.

¹ Canada’s equivalent of the U.S. Grammy awards for recorded music.

² “Aboriginal” is widely used in Canada in the way that “indigenous” is used in the U.S. to reference Native American communities and cultures. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people are officially recognized as the three groups of Aboriginal people in Canada.

In the mid-1990s, essentialism figured prominently in the identity politics surrounding contemporary aboriginal music. Non-Native media frequently asked what was inherently “aboriginal” about the music of Aboriginal Canada. First Nations, Inuit, or Métis respondents sometimes risked strategic essentialism (to borrow a phrase from Gayatri Spivak 1993, 3) in their responses. That is, in order to establish their legitimacy as a distinct cultural group, some argued that qualities of sound indexed their identity, risking of course that such qualities be reiterated as rigid stereotypes. Others clearly resisted questions that sought to elicit essentialist answers by observing the extraordinary stylistic and generic variety of aboriginal music. Musicians were similarly divided in their readiness to incorporate recognizable traditional sonic elements in contemporary work. At a point where the critique of “essence” had been vigorously articulated in feminist and post-colonial theory, I was drawn to understand why essentialist discourse (and anti-essentialist responses) had emerged so strongly at this juncture in First Nations cultural history. Diana Fuss’ distinction (1989, 20) between “lapsing into” essentialism and “deploying essentialism” proved useful. I agree that “the question we should be asking is not ‘is this text essentialist (and therefore bad)?’ but rather, ‘if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment?*’” (1989, ix). Furthermore, her acknowledgment that “essentialism can be powerfully displacing and disruptive” (ibid., 32) is an important consideration with regard to the Native American discourses³ which I will consider here and with regard to my use of them.

³ In the course of studying various streams of American Indian academic criticism, Robert Allen Warrior has observed that “Such a commitment to essentialized indigenous worldviews and consciousness, over the course of the dec-

In the intervening years between the first writing of the article (1995)⁴ and its publication, the Native American music industry has developed in many ways. New forms of legitimation, such as the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards and the Native American Music Awards, now recognize excellent work in dozens of different generic categories, countering the essentialist implications of a single award for the Best Music of Aboriginal Canada discussed below. While many creative uses of traditional musical sound elements continue to be used within new compositions, there has also been a substantial body of work that synthesizes styles in new ways. At the same time, the extensive Native American work in mainstream popular music genres, work that does not make reference to traditional styles or themes, has meant that Native American production is increasingly defined outside the boundaries of “world music.” While this has some advantages, it also means that this music is less visible and often less accessible, in record stores for instance, than in the mid-1990s. Furthermore, the awareness of intellectual property issues and appropriation by both Native and non-Native performers has developed substantially in recent years. Access to indigenous cultural knowledge is, to a much larger extent than in 1995,

ade [the 1980s], became a pervasive and almost requisite feature of American Indian critical writing” (1995, xvii). His study presents a number of Native writers who have contested “the dominating influence of essentialist understandings of Indian culture” (ibid.). Both positions are integral to his “recovery” of American Indian intellectual traditions. I read in this a recognition of the interdependency of essentialism and constructionism similar to that of Fuss cited earlier.

⁴ A number of ethnomusicological studies on the Innu duo Kashtin (Grenier and Morrison 1995) and on identity issues in Aboriginal popular music (Neuenfeldt 1995, Keillor 1995) emerged the same year that this piece was first written.

a central theme in discourses surrounding Native American music.⁵ So this article is already something of a period piece, a reflection on a moment that was, in itself, a watershed of sorts, one that provoked extensive discourse about the boundaries of identity as historical shifts are prone to do.

*First, a border crossing in First Nations
music ...*

That the mid-90s burgeoning of Native musicians in the commercial mainstream was self-consciously portrayed as a dramatic disjuncture—a border crossing—was perhaps nowhere more explicit than on the cassette liner to the recording *Children of the World: A Compilation of Some of Native Canada's Best* (1994):

Many exciting developments have occurred with aboriginal music in Canada in 1994: The creation of the Best Music of Aboriginal Canada Recordings Juno Award Category, which was presented for the first time at the 1994 Junos to First Nations Music founder Lawrence Martin; Kashtin's debut on Tristar/Sony in the US May of 1994; the aboriginal record label First Nations Music... signing with EMI Music Canada, and Susan Aglukark signing with EMI Worldwide and making the front cover of the prestigious music magazine *Billboard*.... 'From Pow Wow Rock to pure traditional music, and even stand-up comedy, recorded aboriginal talent is overflowing beyond the reserve and into the mainstream,' says Buffy Saint-Marie who championed the creation of the Aboriginal Juno category.

⁵ Several major publications have contributed to this ongoing dialogue, among them the British Columbia First Nations' *Protecting Knowledge* (1999) and Marie Battiste and James Youngblood Henderson's *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage* (n.d.) as well as several transnational anthologies including Claire Smith and Graeme K. Ward's *Indigenous Cultures in an Interconnected World* (2000) and George J. Sefa Dei et al., eds. *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts* (2000). *A Community Guide to Protecting Indigenous Knowledge* by Simon Brascoupe and Howard Mann can be found at: http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/pt/ra/ind/gui_e.html.

Other signs of overflow “beyond the reserve and into the mainstream” included marketing paraphernalia such as Sunshine Record’s entertainment magazine *Neechee Culture* which described itself as “the aboriginal *Rolling Stone* of the entertainment industry”; mainstream media recognition of new stars such as Susan Aglukark and Kashtin; the return-to-their-roots moves by successful artists, notably Robbie Robertson; bigger bands with diverse studio musicians, and so on. The statement on the *Children of the World* album, however, is significant in that it recognizes, on one hand, the fantastic diversity of recent musical production and, on the other, the implication of a distinctively separate music called (in the parlance of Canada’s awards for recorded music) “aboriginal music.”

An infrastructure for supporting and promoting aboriginal musicians rapidly developed at this time. The Toronto-based Aboriginal Music Project and the magazine *Aboriginal Voices* were two important components of this infrastructure. The Aboriginal Music Project contracted musicians to perform in many large audience venues including a high profile Aboriginal Music Series at Ontario Place in Toronto during the summer months; the Project also organized an annual Aboriginal Music Week, served as an advocate for Aboriginal artists (over 300 were on its roster in the mid-1990s), and sponsored workshops on copyright.

Around this time, I interviewed the director of the Aboriginal Music Project, Denise Bolduc, as well as several First Nations and Métis musicians and compiled a wide range of other media interviews. My questions focused on how various participants are mediating the border crossing negotiations, how they are positioning their choices of musical style and constructing their musical identities in relation to the tension between anti-essentialist diversity and solidarity as aboriginal musi-

cians. What was at stake at this particular juncture for different individuals and communities?

Choices of Musical Style and Genre

It is not surprising that many aboriginal musicians asserted their interest in a wide range of contemporary popular musical styles given that such anti-essentialist moves were both consonant with the hybridity of “world music”⁶ and also politically important gestures that resist cultural homogenization.⁷ Elaine Bomberry, for instance, who was instrumental in the founding of the Juno award as well as an artist’s agency, All Nations Talent Group, articulated this clearly in conjunction with a showcase of aboriginal artists that she organized in November 1995: “The objective of the showcases is to make people aware of the diversity and quality of native music that’s being produced in this country.... Right now there are native artists working in all types of popular music. There are native rock groups, punkers, hip hoppers, blues bands...” She makes the anti-essentialist argument even clearer by emphasizing the need to see Indians “as doctors or lawyers, even regular working guys, roles not de-

⁶ Note, for example, Brian Bergman’s assessment of Susan Aglukark: “The eclecticism of *This Child* has raised expectations in her record company that it could be Aglukark’s breakthrough album not only in southern Canada, but internationally as well” (1995, 66).

⁷ While some individual artists draw upon diverse styles—Pura Fe, for example, who copyrights songs in different styles under different company names, e.g., “Corns, Beans & Squash Music,” “Shanachie Music Works,” “Katenuaga Music”; or Buffy Sainte-Marie (see footnote 9)—many artists also collaborated on eclectic compilation discs. Examples produced or co-produced by Aboriginal-owned companies include the aforementioned *Children of the World* album; *Legends* (1994), *Till the Bars Break* (n.d.), and *The Inuit Artist World Showcase* (1995) as well as compilations emanating from mainstream institutions such as *Creation’s Journey* (1994) and *Heartbeat: Voices of First Nations Women* (1995).

fined by the fact of being native” (*Toronto Star*, 28 November 1995: E4). The director of the Aboriginal Music Project, Denise Bolduc, also voiced opposition to the ghettoization of native artists: “Just because they’re Native doesn’t mean necessarily they have to play a native flute or a native drum to incorporate aboriginal sound, you know.... Some of our artists, they don’t want to be known as an ‘aboriginal’ blues singer, an ‘aboriginal’ country singer. They want to be known as a country singer, a musician.”⁸ Other media examples are easy to find.⁹

The *reasons* indigenous musicians offer for their diverse style preferences are, on the other hand, more individualized and often contextually contingent. Some musicians point to the diversity of their own ethnocultural roots in relation to musical style choices. Métis singer-songwriter Lawrence Martin positions himself as a Cree musician in most media interviews but sometimes acknowledges his mixed Cree/Irish ancestry as a factor relating to his cultural pluralism. In a CBC interview with Vicky Gabereau, broadcast in October 1995, he identified himself as Cree, describing his life in the bush with his maternal grandparents, but when asked about his father’s side of the family he replied “[I wondered], why

⁸ Interview with the author, October 1995.

⁹ Buffy Sainte-Marie has been a particularly articulate exponent of stylistic diversity. In an interview with Jean Stawarz for *The Runner*, for example, she stated: “I come out on stage and play a guitar and then I play something that involves electronic music and other musicians. Then I’ll play a mouthbow. It’s not as though I’ve adopted the latest toy technology and turned in my guitar. Nothing can ever take the place of the fire. I’m an artist and I use everything” (1994, 34). In *Aboriginal Voices* (1995, 15), Waboose cites Susan Aglukark as saying: “Give us choice and it will bring us back to what is naturally within us.” The emphasis on diversity by such high profile artists clearly has widespread influence.

am I playing this diddly diddly music? Now I know it's from my father. I thought 'what's this Cree guy doing playing this Celtic music'." Similarly, Jani Lauzon, whose family includes Kutenai First Nation, French, and Finnish descendants, regards her music as an attempt to encompass her own diversity:

I went as a child growing up off reserve and yet going to a Catholic school which was 95% native feeling quite displaced and not belonging quite anywhere, to a period in my teens and early 20s when I didn't really put a thought to who I was or where I was from, to a period in my late 20s where I jumped into a need to explore my native roots and a lot of that came from that yearning to find a connection spiritually to something that helps me make sense of my gifts and my task.... I will always be connected to my Native roots and also, the more I discover what those are because my father was Métis, a combination of the French roots as well. But I do feel now that I would like to encompass myself as a whole person and not necessarily just a portion of who I am.¹⁰

Other artists connect their wide-ranging musical style choices to the goal of positively influencing a younger generation. Bolduc included the rap group "Without Reservation" in her Ontario Place series in 1995 as part of a youth outreach initiative, explaining that this aspect of their programming was controversial and elicited complaint: "But rap music is so a part of young kids and that was the whole other issue behind it, to open up that door to aboriginal youth. [To say] 'hey, these guys are doing it. You can too. You can make it too.' But that [complainant] never recognized that relation between rap music and youth which was a big part of our outreach in that area."¹¹

Jerry Alfred, a Yukon musician from the Northern Tutchone First Nation, whose eclectic second album

¹⁰ Interview with the author, October 1995.

¹¹ Interview with the author, October 1995.

Nedaa (1996) uses an ensemble which includes Cajun accordion and West African *kora*, describes his song-writing in similar terms:

The new songs that I write are about the old theory, the old life, the old law and this kind of thing that gets forgotten. The values they contain, these are values that we carry with us. But none of the young kids know. I had to put it into the form of [popular] song to pass the message out to them.¹²

In the mid-90s, when musicians chose to combine traditional and contemporary elements either within a song or in adjacent songs on a single album, they tended to differentiate styles in a stark manner, again insisting on eclecticism. The extent to which styles are coherently integrated or kept uncomfortably disjunct is an issue that is rarely differentiated in debates about hybrid popular musics. These debates that have at times dismissed combinations of traditional and contemporary popular idioms as merely “safe statements of authenticity” (Feld 1994, 270-71), pointed to an emerging aesthetic of pastiche (Erlmann 1993), or, alternatively, argued for sociopolitical agency through sonic alliance (Lipsitz 1996; Mitchell 1998; and Neuenfeldt 1998). In every recording project, I contend that the agency of musicians is connected to the choices they make regarding the disjuncture or coherence of style elements.

Dramatic and unexpected juxtapositions, often exploited for their humorous capacity, are a striking feature of First Nations theatre, film, and literature as well as music of the 1990s. Cree writer Thomas King constructs a dialogue between Coyote, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and the Lone Ranger; Seventh Fire—a band which brings together Native American and Jamaican

¹² Interview by Daniel Janke, August 1993, in conjunction with the Canadian Musical Pathways Project (Beverley Diamond, project director).

members—jolts us with images of plastic souvenirs and Mother Earth in the dub refrain of “High Tech Tipi Trauma Mama”; Shingoose (stage name of Curtis Jonnie) incorporates an alarm clock in “Indian Time” and so on. Here the funny or even absurd coexistences of modernity are heightened by the starkness of the juxtapositions.

Such contrasts can equally bear serious messages as two further examples will illustrate. In one version of her song “Bush Lady,” from the 1985 LP with the same name, the award-winning Abenaki film-maker and musician Alanis Obomsawin uses atonal music played by a chamber ensemble to mark her anguished emotions when confronted with the savagery of sexist stereotypes and the confusion of the city. Here, The Native/non-Native contrast intersects with other dichotomies: aggressive urban male/victimized rural woman and contrapuntal atonality/ speech accompanied by a steady frame drum beat. The reference to aboriginal drumming deliberately plays with a stereotypic gesture, deliberately producing it to convey fear, starkly essentializing it as different.

In a second example, the Toronto-based female duo Syren combines a lively pop song “Let Them Live” with the Eagle Heart drum performing the AIM song¹³—itself a sort of anthem of native solidarity. Furthermore, the cry-like descending opening phrase, of the pop song borrows, not note for note but recognizably close, the AIM tune to the words “we stand on holy ground,” and the powwow drum re-enters as the lyrics allude to the Ghost Dance: “you see these bones are gonna rise one day/And bless the earth in a sacred way.” The pop song

¹³AIM stands for American Indian Movement.

mirrors the traditional and cross-references its message.¹⁴ The stylistic confrontations index historical ones. That many First Nations artists, writers and musicians choose the “uncomfortable disjuncture” end of the spectrum in incorporating divergent styles is even more striking in these two instances because care is taken to make these very disjunctures the site of messages about continuity.

Another means of highlighting contrasts between so-called “tradition” and so-called “modernity” is by drawing attention to technological manipulation in songs that are the most “traditional.” Buffy Sainte-Marie has been a pioneer in this regard. For example, in the powwow song, “Darling Don’t Cry” recorded with the Red Bull Drum (Saskatchewan) on her latest album (*Up Where We Belong*, 1996), the gradual transformation of the traditional drum sound in the digital post-production is easily audible. Similarly, Jani Lauzon’s powwow-influenced “Wabakii Bezbig” is an interesting case in point. This song contrasts stylistically with the blues that dominate her first album *Blue Voice, New Voice* (1994). Furthermore, it is the only song that is re-mixed (once on each side); hence, to me, it is evocative of other politically complex remixes. For example, the non-aboriginal sound engineer of the Australian aboriginal band Yothu Yindi claimed authorship on the album *Tribal Voice* only after his remix

¹⁴The acoustic space (foregrounding the pop song) asserts that the thing one hears not first but second is the primary element, a principle often reiterated by elders. The cassette design corroborates this by putting a sacred drawing on the inside tucked under the flap of the cardboard insert.

brought their first album mainstream success. Lauzon,¹⁵ however, described the remixing in less political terms:

It [the remix] came out of just playing around in the studio; it worked the other way around originally. The idea was to have the full band with the flute, with the voices, with the drum and that was the initial idea. But when we started to mix and we were playing around with just the drum sound, my producer Ken Whitely said, 'Wow, this is really, there's such beautiful energy in the simplicity of this. Let's do a mix with just the voice and the drum.' And it was just so powerful that we kept it. But I really wanted the other one as well, that was the original idea. Actually the song originally was supposed to be just band and flute. Then it evolved to having the vocables and then it evolved from there. So it went through quite a journey.¹⁶

The metaphor of sound's "journey" enables her to conceptualize the process—with its inevitable changes of direction—as part of the product. Implicitly, both Sainte-Marie's work and Lauzon's embrace not just the simultaneity of the modern and the traditional but the continuity of one through the other, in a manner something like the aforementioned songs by Obomsawin and Syren.

This discursive strategy in the music itself also nuances verbal discourse, particularly in response to pressures to define aboriginal music in essentialist terms. Denise Bolduc, for instance, hears the "heartbeat" of the drum in contemporary music, drawing a parallel to the history of African American musical transformations, and emphasizes the changes in the journey of one contemporary musician:

¹⁵ It is important to emphasize that artists whose words are quoted in this article insist that they speak only for themselves and are not "representative" of a monolithic Native perspective. Any connections drawn in this paper between their words is intended to point to a tradition of "framing" ideas, images and aural gestures. The ideas, images, and aural gestures themselves are individual, complex and multiple.

¹⁶ Interview with the author, October 1995.

I really believe [Aboriginal musicians will change] just like the Black performers; it started with hillbilly music, and look where it's at now. They still have their roots, right from the very beginning, in all of their music. It's just a different form of it. And I really believe that with Aboriginal music, that whole encompassing of the traditional powwow, the heartbeat, the drumbeat, I can hear it in a lot of the newer musics. And I think it's really interesting because it's connecting the artists to their roots in a lot of ways. Like even Vern Cheechoo, his first album has changed a lot to his new material. I'm waiting and waiting for him to get his new album out because it's not as country heavy...it's got that spirit in it, that movement. You know. Aboriginal sound in there. And it's really beautiful stuff.¹⁷

She also refers to shared experiences among communities, rather than simply the sonic materials.

I don't know how to explain the aboriginal sound.... If you go to the powwow circuit, it's something you can feel inside. It's something that you feel inside rather than something that you can go, 'Well, you know, I can hear that powwow drum in the background. So I guess that's aboriginal sound.'¹⁸

By the mid-90s, then, both the music and the verbal discourse surrounding it often emphasized the relationships between modern experience and memories of socially shared histories; the "journey" of a song's sound was often invoked as a metaphor, and messages of continuity were often embedded in radically diverse and disjunct gestures. Other ways in which these themes emerged between the 1970s and the 1990s are evident in the imagery of the products.

Packaging Decisions

Between the 1970s and 1990s, three starkly different styles of album design developed and, to some extent, coexisted. These were recordings produced by the Cana-

¹⁷ Interview with the author, October 1995.

¹⁸ Ibid.

dian Broadcasting Corporation, recordings of powwow music that circulated primarily within First Nations communities, and post-1990 recordings of both traditional and contemporary music that were oriented to broader, intercultural markets.

According to one producer whom I interviewed in the 1970s, the commercial recordings of that decade produced primarily by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation were not only made in light of Canada's protectionist broadcast policy requiring 30% Canadian content, but also in response to pressure from European radio for Native American music recordings. Hence, the earliest LPs of Native music made in Canada were clearly not oriented to local communities but to foreign broadcasters. A series of albums issued by the CBC in collaboration with Boots Records further conveyed schizmogogenesis¹⁹ in the cover designs, each with the CBC logo carved in ice as a backdrop for a photograph of the musicians cut out from their local photographic context. The nationalist agenda was transparent.

Strategies for becoming less reliant on government subsidies for cultural projects developed during the 1980s and 1990s.²⁰ The goal of commercial, mainstream success contrasts starkly to earlier governmentally con-

¹⁹ Defined by Feld 1994, 270-71, after Murray Schafer, as the separation of sounds from their sources, histories, and social contexts.

²⁰ The history of government patronage of aboriginal music merits a detailed exploration in this regard. Current moves toward autonomy are at the moment idealistic given the importance of continuing subsidies for both print media and radio as well as Cultural Centres, at least three of which have programs for extensive cassette and video production and marketing. Nevertheless, a 1994 initiative was indicative: *The Runner: Native Magazine for Communicative Arts* (1, no. 2: 2) boasted that they publish without government funds and "hope to maintain that stature." That magazine became *Aboriginal Voices* which sustained unsubsidized publication into the first decade of the twenty-first century.

trolled production of aboriginal music in Canada which envisaged local markets and marginality, while appropriating First Nation or Inuit imagery in representations of national identity. The musical successes in and around 1994, then, exploded a colonial paradigm in which many individuals and institutions in non-Native Canada had situated aboriginal music, along with ritual performance, as vestigial.²¹

In contrast, the majority of cassettes, especially powwow tapes of the 1980s and 1990s produced by businesses that were partially Native run, such as Sunshine Records, or by indigenous cultural centers (e.g., the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre or the Ojibwe Cree Cultural Centre in Ontario), use a group photo of the musicians, usually in blue jeans, T-shirts and baseball caps, arrayed like a sports team with their large bass drum turned on its side, center front. Tapes of the 1990s often feature more people than could possibly be accommodated around one drum—children hold the drum on the album *Cree Spirit*, a baby and other relatives of two singers are shown on *Blacklodge Singers*, participants in the Mother Earth Spiritual Camp appear on *Red Shadow Singers*. Not intended to catch outsiders' attention like celebrity photos, these are like family album shots, inviting recognition if not of individuals, at least of life-

²¹ In a dichotomization of the aural and the visual which has a certain resonance with de Certeau's (1988, 235-7), art historian Ruth Phillips (1993, 234) has recently argued, at a retrospective of Native Canadian art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, that active and extensive government support for Native visual art was part of a narrative in which the ancient mythic and ritual world was no longer enacted in performance but wrought in stone, paint, etc. and cast in saleable images. The emergence of a vibrant music scene which borrows liberally from both traditional and contemporary popular practices dispels this "narrative" of the perceived loss of orally transmitted culture.

ways or places.²² The intimacy of the family album style contrasts with the mainstream news media's depiction of the powwow drum as a generic image of confrontational Indianness useful for stories about political protest.

In and around 1994 the "ordinary" look and sometimes even the human face of album imagery are found much less frequently. The Quebec duo, Kashtin,²³ is a case in point. Their first multinational release with Sony, *Akua Tuta*, is rich with images: one of several photos of the performers casts them as *bons vivants*; another has Claude McKenzie's head thrown back as if in agony; two others show the duo seated against a bare stone wall as if in prison. Symbols abound: an image of the four directions inside a circle, looking more like a Celtic cross than an Innu design, is on the cover; inside the liner notes we see hands joined in an aboriginal handshake, a lonely tree on rocky terrain, sand sifting through fingers, sparse grass in a barren field—all are shot with stylized lighting and unusual camera angles, either very close or very distant. Compare Rykodisc's *Honor the Earth Powwow* tape with a painted dancer in motion on the cover but underneath a silhouetted traditional dancer who appears again on the back as a cut-out, an absence in a photo of a

²²A number of recent albums continue the group photo tradition. Cree owned Hughboy Records, for example, released *The Best Cree Fiddle Players of James Bay* in 1993 with a group photo on the back CD liner and individual biographies are included. J. Hubert Francis' *Reverence* (Sunshine, 1993) insets a group photo over an abstract design.

²³In comparison, Kashtin's first, self-produced album prior to their involvement with Montreal producer Claude Ranger shows the duo with their friends in their home community. Their self-titled album, their first commercial success, also included photographs of the duo, no longer featuring casual jeans, but urbanized dress and attitude—a long overcoat with upturned collar, a vest over a white shirt, and intense facial expressions.

sunset over a lake.²⁴ The romanticized emphasis on slightly mystical poses, forlorn landscapes, and abstract, multivalent symbols could easily be read as new age exotification by transnational recording companies. However, contemporaneous releases by Native-run companies used similar image styles. First Nations Music's album *Legends*, for example, has a stalwart figure of an eagle embracing a carved human head against a peculiar purple sky. Lauzon's *Blue Voice, New Voice* has a striking reproduction of blue lightning. Images suggesting the spiritual or the mystical were often selected. It seems that intimate images of family and community expressing personal relationships, and even the visual identity of artists, have been altered or forfeited.²⁵ While this is undoubtedly true in some cases, there are instances in which the imagery is chosen because of a private relationship between the musicians and the artists whose work is used. The lightning painting on Lauzon's album, for instance, was done by an artist whose work was personally meaningful for her. The traces of social relationships may not be apparent in the imagery itself but, known only to a small circle of friends, personal relationships nonetheless underpin many choices.

Meanings that are less transparent parallel a few instances where the *placement* of information is noteworthy. Both the Mosquito Singers (Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre, 1993) and The Hawk River Singers (Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre, 1993) put their group photos on the inside of the cassette liner where they will

²⁴Similarly, EMI's release of *Robbie Robertson and the Red Road Ensemble* depicts a young Native male, eyes cast upward, with strange rock outcroppings and pools of light overlaid.

²⁵ Comparing *Arctic Rose* and *This Child*, one might observe both an increasingly glamorous Susan Aglukark and a more overtly generic "Indian" look (she is Inuit) with a beaded headband tassel that does not resemble Inuit craftwork.

be discovered only by those who buy the tape, not casual record store browsers. Syren tucks a sacred drawing under the short flap of the cassette liner and 7th Fire places their acknowledgements in the same, easy to miss, position on their 1994 album, *The Cheque is in the Mail*. As I examine these albums, I recall an Anishnabe teaching that it is not the first thing you see, but what you have to search for, that is often the most important information.

Acknowledgement Decisions

As Feld has observed, “the construction of signs of collaboration” (1994, 270) provide access to issues of intercultural mediation. Additionally, for First Nations musicians, acknowledgements are sites where various family and community connections can be articulated. Certainly by the mid-1990s, with the potential for substantial financial returns, the acknowledgement of musical collaborators and production teams became predictably more precise. At the same time, acknowledgements were more often used to demonstrate respect for teachers, elders, and community support, or even to indicate that one had the right to record material that might be the property of a family or group according to customary law. In interviews, musicians often point to the different authorial practices of their community. In an interview with York University researcher Daniel Janke, Yukon singer-songwriter Jerry Alfred²⁶ discussed such issues with regard to his Nation, the Northern Tutchone:²⁷

Basically, a lot of the old songs I learned. At a lot of these gatherings like potlatches I'd listen to them. They say you can't sing another

²⁶ Winner of the 1996 Juno for the Best Music of Aboriginal Canada for his song “Etsi Shon” on *Jerry Alfred and the Medicine Beat* (1995).

²⁷ Interview by Daniel Janke, August 1993, in conjunction with the Canadian Musical Pathways Project (Beverley Diamond, project director).

person's song. You get bad luck. So I try not to do too much of anybody's songs. [Q.: Does anybody ever give you permission to sing their song?] Oh ya. A lot of people come up to me now. Some of them say 'This is my grandmother's song. I don't want that song to get lost. You have the best voice. I just want you to sing that song. Can you sing that song for the family?' They would tell me those kinds of things. But I try not to do other people's songs. For the Northern Tutchone Council, I had to go out and get permission from people to sing songs that belong to the band or to people here, because the N.T.C. is holding the copyright for the people here.

Even in the case of powwow music, a genre that has traditionally been readily shared, the appropriateness of "borrowing" songs for commercial use is viewed variously by different artists. Buffy Sainte-Marie has again been an important model; she has sought permission and shared authorship credit with powwow drums including the Red Bull Singers on her latest album *Up Where We Belong* (1996).

Lawrence Martin goes still further to make explicit the process by which his community legitimized his recording activity. His Juno-award-winning album *Wapistan* (1993) refers to a powwow in Timmins, Ontario, which Lawrence helped to organize and was the first such event recorded for a province-wide television audience. The liner notes quote Chief Barney Batiste of the Matachewan band who presented Lawrence with a feather symbolizing "our traditions, and the message you helped bring to young people and elders alike" and named him "the Electronic Warrior."

Martin's CD is exceptional in its explicitness about community support for the artist's recording activity. More often, the acknowledgements are more general, expressing gratitude to home communities or the broader Native community. Acknowledgements on powwow tapes often connect to the renewal of spiritual traditions; for example, Northern Wind dedicates a tape to "all jin-

gle dress dancers”; the youthful Cree Spirit mention “their fathers who were all at one time members of a drum group”; and Free Spirit (a Micmac drum from the Maritimes) dedicates its cassette “to the memory of Tom Paul who returned the drum traditions to our Nations and to all our Mi’Kmaq elders for keeping the traditions alive in their hearts.” The practice of acknowledging community support is sufficiently consistent that by the mid 1990s, it might even be parodied. With characteristic good humor, 7th Fire thanks “All my Relations, Past, Present and Future, all the kids, all the mutants” as well as their “enemies.” Contemporary singer-songwriters often use similar styles of acknowledgement, some offering solidarity in political struggles (both blues singer Murray Porter, on the album *1492 [who found who?]*, and Syren, on *Let Them Live*, pay tribute to the Lubicon Cree in their struggle over land claims and oil rights in Western Canada). Susan Aglukark and the artists on the *Children of the World* album appeal to the next generation, the latter by recording messages to “Stay in school” in seven languages. Each of these emphasizes connections within and beyond the community, among generations, and beyond the performers, like the cover photos on pre-1994 pow-wow cassettes. Indeed, acknowledgements may have partially replaced album images as a space where community is honored and social relationships articulated.

A Watershed Event: the 1994 Juno Awards

Issues of acknowledgment became increasingly significant as the events surrounding the 1994 Juno award played themselves out. The pressure to offer essentialist explanations of “aboriginal sound” intensified surround-

ing the recognition of a category called “music of aboriginal Canada.”²⁸ Furthermore, the Junos themselves are laden with the baggage of Canadian nationalism; consequently, the aboriginal community had to negotiate this form of cultural legitimation carefully to avoid perceptions of the award as a symbol of Canadian nationhood. To make matters more complex, there was also a scandal. Sazacha Red Sky (a white woman born Nancy Nash) was nominated for her rendition of “The Prayer Song” on her album *Red Sky Rising*. Days before the award ceremony, however, she was accused by Chief Leonard George of stealing family property.²⁹ She alleged that the song was given to her by the actor Dan George (some reports add that the gift was after his death in a dream). However, the George family threatened a court injunction against awarding the Juno. The nominating committee negotiated with the Canadian Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences who issued a statement that the award would be made provided “all references to the song in the Juno telecast (either title or use of the music)” be withdrawn. The issue of community control of the right to perform traditional music in public, then, became central.

Particularly relevant to the struggle to make sense of the incident was the different framing of responses.

²⁸ Musicians mostly resisted. In a Toronto *Globe and Mail* article by Kate Taylor (1993), which circulated more widely when it was reprinted a year later in *Neechee Culture*, Buffy Sainte-Marie directly opposed an essentialist racination of the musical category by saying “It’s not just somebody with a tan and a guitar” but she then distinguished style features “references to Native issues, distinctive instrumental elements” such as the drum and a steady beat and the use of aboriginal languages. In the same article, the Cree singer Shingoose denied stylistic essentialism: “What makes me different, if I am different? It’s conceptual, rather than sound.”

²⁹ He called the song “a sacred hymn she wrongfully expropriated for commercial gain” (*Toronto Star*, 20 March 1994).

Mainstream media sought to locate the problem in the definition of what was native or non-native and in the legal issue of copyright. In the *Toronto Star* (20 March 1994), an article about the controversy was placed beside the headline "Mohawks defend bid to banish non-natives." It stated that the committee "will take steps next year to ensure all the copyrights are checked."

Native spokespersons, however, addressed the process by which the community could give or not give anyone the right to perform music in a new context, rather than on birthright. One consultant suggested that in the following year (1995), every nominee should get a letter of endorsement from his/her community before their nomination would go forward. Perhaps more to the point because it is entirely consistent with the form of legitimation explained on his *Wapistan*, award-winner Lawrence Martin carried the feather on stage when the award was announced, asserting that, for the award to bear significance, the process of community support had to be recognized.

Furthermore, like several of the songs described earlier, Martin's performance of the story and song "Wawatay" confirmed yet another array of musical continuities in its very disjunctures. Birds, whistling, ancestral spirits, and northern lights are all linked in his spoken and sung narration of the origin of the Northern Lights. Specific environmental sounds are incorporated.³⁰ Following the story there are radical musical shifts including a powwow drum and a metallic guitar intro to a

³⁰ At least one recent tape by Eagleheart states that environmental sound is the source for Native music. Synthesized thunder on this same tape is audibly related to the honor beats of the big drum. The natural sounds on some other albums, e.g., the use of various pre-recorded sources in the "Overture" of Kashin's *Innu*, seem less localized and less specifically tied to individual songs.

rock song that never materializes. On the other hand, Martin's minimally produced vocal style and acoustic guitar accompaniment rely on a folk arrangement and country and western vocal timbre. Again, the unity of the message is conveyed via diverse, starkly juxtaposed references and expressive modes (across species, across speech and various musical styles, across generations).

From Practice to Theory: An Alternative to the Theorizing of "Border Crossing"

The style choices and discursive strategies of First Nations musicians and arts spokespersons referenced here were underpinned by some similar assumptions. The stylistic disjunctures of the music itself, like the unexpected juxtaposition of images and characters in contemporary Native American theatre and literature, insist on the simultaneity of the traditional and the modern. Traditional elements, historical references, and deep-rooted values all recycle in new forms, via new technological mediations, framed by new contexts. Furthermore, for some artists, the starkness of the disjunctures may be the very best place to put forward messages about continuity and cultural resilience. The variety of sonic references are less often described as sonic "alliances"³¹ than traces of a personal or communal journey, accumulations of relationships that may have been at once oppressive, enlightening, and often quite humorous. That is, the relationships are not defined in terms of political agency but as social

³¹ The metaphor of alliance has been used in a number of studies of hybrid music. An important instance for indigenous studies is the anthology edited by Philip Hayward (1998).

experiences that informed political awareness.³² Another continuity is the recognition of family and community support, via family album photos in certain phases of commodity production and via acknowledgements in others. At times, these acknowledgements become means of explaining local systems of control over cultural knowledge and means of granting permission to artists to take local music into the public domain.

These common discursive elements are reminiscent of the widely used intertribal salutation “All My Relations” which asserts a number of shared assumptions:

- that all living entities, past present and future, are related;
- that humans need to attend to the environment for signs of this relatedness;
- that the direct, immediate relationships to other living beings are to be carefully cherished and celebrated;
- that within these circles of relatedness, one’s identity is so secure that diverse expressive practices are not threatening but are, indeed, the very marks of on-goingness.

My presentation of these concepts, reduced as they must be in the context of this paper, veers close to cultural essentialism. On the contrary, I suggest that concepts such as “All My Relations” are “foundations of discursivity”

³² Exceptions from the mid-90s include the overtly political alliance of Native Americans and Caribbeans on the album *Til the Bars Break* (n.d.). It is the author’s impression that the language of “alliance” became more widely used by the end of the decade.

(Foucault 1984, 114).³³ Often differently taught in different Nations or families, refined, debated, applied, and contested in different contexts, these images/metaphors serve as bases for viewing history, for situating humans within the environment, for defining Selfhood and Otherness.³⁴

I have struggled to understand the implications of this concept for the future study of music. Various academic discourses on the hybridity of world music, both those that are wary of cultural greyout and those that celebrate agency, tend to focus on *borders between* past/present, authentic/commercial, traditional/contemporary. On the other hand, many of the discourses of aboriginal artists and cultural spokespersons tend to emphasize the *wholeness within*, the total history and fundamental social or spiritual relationships that underlie musical production of whatever sort. For many years I felt that it sounded vague and superficial to write this.

Even after extensively working at understanding the frameworks used by my consultants, a moment in my interview with Denise Bolduc illustrated the way in which my own lingering indebtedness to the concept of linearity and “borders” contrasted with hers. In relation to the Aboriginal Music Project, I asked Denise to comment on how the project dealt with so many constituen-

³³ In his exploration of the concept of “authorship,” Foucault refers to “founders of discursivity” as authors whose work has produced something beyond their own words and concepts: namely, “the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts” (1984, 114). I appropriate and slightly twist his discussion to suggest that even in a context where authorship is not the issue, there are similar “fields of discursivity” which generate significant other texts.

³⁴ A more extensive discussion of the ways in which these concepts and images serve as a basis for discourse about music and dance is found in Diamond et al. 1994.

cies and how they saw the boundaries between music/dance/theatre/speech:

Denise: Connections...Our mandate is the development and support of aboriginal music and aboriginal artists who are involved in the music industry. Now that encompasses composers; it encompasses storytelling, which is speech as well. It encompasses theatre in the sense of a traditional dance troupe that does theatre as well as dance with traditional music. Theatre is a whole new area that I'm looking into being involved in because of my connections with Native Earth [Performing Arts company], working in sound design. My whole thing is learning more about traditional music for myself, you know, and the protocol behind it all and how that would encompass my work as a designer for native theatre...Also I have a huge interest in technicians and producers. So those are other areas that we want to support...

Bev: You took my series in a different direction. Rather than all those boundaries you're looking at the whole circle [of people] that music encompasses.

Denise: Well, the circle is a big part of the aboriginal livelihood. The four directions, you know. As an individual I like to include all the elements. I think it's really important, because as a community, you need all of that.

She quickly reconfigured my linear series (music/dance/theatre/speech) into one center ("musicians") around which the connections to these various expressive domains radiated, and another ("music production") which was seen as requiring collaboration of composers, performers, technicians and others. Denise proceeded to show me circular drawings (some relating to the administrative structure of the AMP, some to the process for carrying out projects); the images help her to carry out the work of the AMP in a manner which draws upon the strength of the teachings of the four directions. In each case, she drew upon a teaching clearly identified as aboriginal—hence, a constructed essentialism, as it were—in

order to imagine a network of relationships not as a series of borders, but as a whole in motion.

In his complex and provocative chapter on "Ethno-Graphy" in *The Writing of History*, which situates the practice of ethnography in relation to the history of colonialism and the colonialism of our histories, Michel de Certeau has contended that "[Ethnographic] writing is immunized against both any alterity that might transform it and whatever dares resist it" (1988, 216). I suggest that a reason for this—a tactic to get beyond Certeau's rather pessimistic pronouncement—is our reluctance to recognize alternative critical theory in systems rooted in oral tradition or reliant on images or sensory data other than words. We have objectified such concepts as "data" and intertextual "metaphor"; we have engaged them as "discourse" or explored their impact as "mediation," but we have rarely acknowledged such concepts as critical theory. The First Nations concepts presented here constitute a discursive field with wider currency, and may even constitute "an alterity which might transform" musicology, or at least facilitate a number of the border crossings addressed in this volume.

I suggest that "All My Relations" indexes a paradigm which, like "border crossings," has exciting connotations of motion, interaction, and encounter; its shape, however, is different. While "crossings" may be multiple, "border" is an image which is usually uttered in the singular, but in symbolic space we are dealing with multiple, simultaneous borders as well as many crossings in several directions. Furthermore, the singularity of the "border" as an image makes it hard to think about inter-generational, inter-cultural, and even inter-species relationships within the same frame of reference. Border crossing as a concept does not demand (perhaps it invites, but it certainly doesn't demand) that we address

either “intent” or “responsibility.” In fact, discussions of responsibility rather than agency are, I think, one of the striking absences in the discourse of critical theory.³⁵ The imagery of the aboriginal concepts presented here, on the other hand, has an individual at the center, supported by and responsible to layer upon layer of relationships.

“Relations,” “journeys,” and “cycles” have had little currency as intellectual constructs.³⁶ Are they too like pop psychology, too feminized, too every day, too “new age,” too indigenous? For different individuals, classism, sexism, and racism are implicated as part of the “immunization” to which de Certeau refers. It may also be the two-way responsibility, to the past as well as the future, which holds us back. After all, many ethnomusicologists reject the paternal and colonial legacies of our discipline and define our professional responsibility with reference to the future. Anything else seems unthinkable. How then do we engage concepts that argue for a non-linear history that reverberates in both past and future? I will conclude with a couple of examples of directions an answer could take.

³⁵It may be indicative that, for me at least, I more often think of leaving than entering a space when the border image is evoked. There are exceptions to my statement about critical attention to responsibility, of course. Lorraine Code’s “Responsibility and Rhetoric” (1995) is a recent one which has particularly influenced my thinking.

³⁶ On one level, this is a naive statement. The discourse of “border crossing” itself is integrally concerned with “relationship.” Furthermore, while I am aware of the theorizing of relationship which has emerged in particular from feminism and post-colonial theory (e.g., on the situatedness and contingency of any performance of identity, on the complicity of scholars and artists in constructions of nationalism and imperialism, or on the dialogic emergence of “culture”), my suggestion is that the nuances of any culturally specific discourse also open up new ways of thinking about self and environment, social interaction, and history.

Within a circle with “music research” at its center, concepts of journeys, relations, and cycles as critical underpinnings would encourage us to think openly about our responsibility to different audiences/readerships, possibly in a manner analogous to Bolduc’s concern for the various domains of the arts with which musicians come into contact, or possibly in a manner which addressed access to our writing. In this system, for example, an ethnomusicologist applying for tenure might have to demonstrate that one article or other research product was well received in the community where the research was conducted, another was published in a venue with a broad distribution, and yet another was respected by a community of academic peers.

Although the implications for the analysis of sound structures are more complex, “relations” as a critical issue could also serve here as a foundation. By what means are readers/listeners invited in or kept out of an analytic reading?³⁷ “Journey” as a critical issue might, furthermore, bring to the center of the study of music connections between past, present, and future in very different ways than the Western tradition of “history” has done. What sources of memory are drawn upon or rejected? Whose memory? To what end? Scholars such as Hennion have studied the trajectories of specific musical works and unfolded the various mediations of different times and places. Would the image of “cycles” shift such explorations in useful ways? What would these be?

³⁷ In this paper, for example, to have described Syren’s “descending cry using the AIM tune” as a pentatonic passage descending over the interval of a 12th might have engaged musicians by its greater precision but would have backed away from the evocative in a way which I find increasingly irresponsible. No one can disagree with “a passage extending over the interval of a 12th”; everyone can argue with “a descending cry.” Its vulnerability makes relationship possible.

The subtleties of metaphor and mental imagery that emerged in relation to First Nations music of the mid-1990s were, of course, not divorced from other discourses of world music, but were nevertheless culturally specific. In that specificity (as in any discursive tradition), very deep concepts about sound and society become thinkable while others become unthinkable. In that specificity could lie an alterity that could transform some of our academic practices.

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