

SOUNDWORK

Gyitwaalkt: A Dialogue on Tsimshian War and Metal

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“Gyitwaalkt” is the first song on Ancestral War Hymns (2009), an album recorded by the Indigenous black metal band Gyibaaw (2006-12). The band was musically and spiritually inspired by stories about a powerful Tsimshian wolf spirit (“Gyibaaw”) that visits unsuspecting people throughout Tsimshian territory. Gyibaaw-the-band was not well known in Northern British Columbia, and yet their music drew audiences from around the world and prefigured a “noise uprising” of popular Indigenous music across Canada.¹ One of us, SG, was the drummer and co-songwriter for Gyibaaw. He has served as a councillor for the Gitga’at First Nation and is now a doctoral candidate in archaeology at Simon Fraser University. The other, MR, is a settler and researcher for the Gitga’at First Nation. He will be a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Minnesota beginning in July 2018.

We first met in the winter of 2014, in Prince George. The idea of exploring the history of Gyibaaw came out of MR’s dissertation project about sound and BC’s North Coast. The following exchange, conducted over a series of phone calls between fall 2017 and winter 2018, retreads themes that emerged during that first meeting. For us, “Gyitwaalkt” – a song exploring Tsimshian “warrior-ness” through traditional language, hybrid instrumentation, and heavy reverb – illustrates Gyibaaw’s decolonizing ambitions as well as the tensions that defined the band during its short but influential career.

- MR and SG

¹ Gyibaaw band members learned of the Gyibaaw (sometimes spelled “Gibuu”) through Johnny Pahl, a Gitga’ata elder and family member.

Max: “Gyitwaalkt.” Let’s begin with the story behind this song.

Spencer: “Gyitwaalkt” means warrior in Sm’algyax. We wrote this song to portray the ceremonial fast of a warrior and the tapping into a spirit world. The act before they go into war. When I hear that I think of a warrior coming out of his fast, what we call *Surwilskuuks*. When you fast you go into the woods and you connect with the spirit world. Usually, it is through the separation of the physical body from the spiritual body, by rejecting food and water for instance. And in that process of fasting, you open up your spiritual body with the land that you reside in. The spiritual body of that land can then access you. You become an open vessel for spirits to work with.

Note how you can hear Jeremy whispering *naxnox* there [0:14-0:55]. *Naxnox* are the spiritual beings that sometimes possess us, sometimes give us answers, sometimes give us warnings.² They are spiritual entities that give us insight into how to live with the world. In our culture, after a fast there would have been a potlatch where the warriors would come back from the forest with *naxnox* powers. Sometimes the warriors would be preparing for a hunt, sometimes for war. In the context of this song, it is for war.

Max: The production qualities you choose support this too. In popular music, reverb is routinely applied to convey a sort of fusion between physical and metal space, as the historian Peter Doyle (2007) notes. It seems to me that your drums are carrying an important part of this theme too. The drums that begin the song suggest a typical metal approach. They articulate a “sludge” beat in 4/4 time, with the emphasis on the 3. But they are slower than most black metal. You subordinate them to the tempo of the traditional drums that come in at the end. Much like the guitars are tuned to the pan flute, the metal sounds follow from the traditionally Indigenous ones. By the completion of the piece [1:55-2:12] the traditional drums have faded entirely from the recording, and we have this steady count from a traditional drum. This seems to express some of the transformation you are talking about.

Spencer: As the drummer on “Gyitwaalkt” I was thinking of stories from a long time ago. The stories talk about a consistent beat when people were paddling the canoe. That beat would carry their war song. And

² *Naxnox* is discussed in Franz Boas (1917) *Tsimshian Mythology*; and Jay Miller (1997), *Tsimshian Culture: A Light through the Ages*.

they know how far they had travelled in the water by how many times they had sung it. They would measure distance through the song. So it was important for me to capture the steadiness of that beat in this track.

Listen to that kick drum [around 1:00]. I wanted to represent the transition from paddling to war to arriving at battle, actually seeing the enemy where you can imagine the heart is just racing and pounding. I've never been to war, but I am a hunter. I know that feeling when you are travelling for days and you find an animal, the pounding in your heart when you see that animal and you know you are about to take a life, the rapid pounding kicks represent that moment.

Max: It seems to me that distortion is one sonic aspect of Gyibaaw that really suggests its decolonizing impulse. And here I am thinking of the guitars, and all the messy reverb, but also of some critical Indigenous ideas. Jodi Byrd (2011), for instance, argues that “representational logics” of Indigeneity function through forms of distortion, around alternations of the expected. And Jarrett Martineau (2015) similarly emphasizes notions of distortion. Does this make sense to you?

Spencer: If you are saying there's a connection between the distortion of our sounds and anger, I think that's a valid connection. When Jeremy and I wrote this music, we were angry at the Church, Canada, and the history of the colonization of our peoples. And we wanted to learn more about it and express our anger about it. And music was one way.

And I think this gets back to the discussion of warriors. Gyibaaw shifted expectations of black metal language. A lot of black metal bands look on wolves like snakes or villains, and then revere this connection as they are the “bad guys” in the Bible. Black metal jargon often takes the “bad guy” in the Christian world – a demon or a snake – and dramatizes it. This pissed me off because it wasn't about dramatization for us; we have a legitimate relation to the Gyibaaw. By actually using our ancient language and speaking to the *naxnox* in this way, we found an incredible ability to express sentiments about our homeland, spirituality, and our warrior culture.

Max: What I think makes the song successful as a way of exploring transcendence are the spectral features. The heavy application of reverb and overall sound quality lend your music as sort of sheen, or veil. It proposes a blurring between the contemporary – in this case black metal – with elements from the past, but elements which do not appear

with fixed forms. A perfect example of this is Jeremy's whispering voice [0:45-1:35]. You don't know where the voice begins and ends, you don't know where the voice becomes the guitar. There's this persistent fusion of one into the other. Does that make sense to you?

Spencer: Yeah. When we were writing this music, we were in a space where the creation of music was a serious spiritual process. And the sound, and what sounds can capture, is an important part of that. When we produced *Ancestral War Hymns*, we wanted to go to an old village site in our territory and just record that place for hours – the nature of that place. We wanted to then overlap that entire recording with the album songs. Because the voice of our land is so integral to music that they should exist together. We always felt the album was incomplete without that.

Leanne Simpson's new book *As We Have Always Done* (2017) has some ideas that really make sense here. She describes resurgence as a process mediated by spiritual forces. She also describes Indigenous nationhood as not only a feeling that radiates outwards across the land but inwards at the same time. I think both these ideas begin to capture the flows of energy and spirituality I am talking about. But how do you make sense of these ideas as a non-Indigenous person?

Max: If I am honest, I make sense of it mostly in terms of failure, or at least a sense of what I don't know, or feel, even if I do have a sense of the spiritual. And this is not an easy position for me because I want to "get it," but what I simultaneously often feel is the need to have a "critical" disposition in the research, which usually equates to being objective and not "feelingful." So, I feel both the limits of my education and the difficulty of ignoring my education when you speak in a certain way about spirituality.

But I'm also thinking of this failure in a sonic register and I am finding this helpful. One concept that I have been appreciating, and one that I am hoping to take into the next project in writing about Gyibaaw, is resonance. I like Ronald Radano's (2003) notion of resonance as "the sounding after an unlocatable origin." That's how I hear Gyibaaw – as a resonance that does not produce forms of shared meaning that might be explored in terms of communicative rationality, but instead, as a sound that remains fundamentally mysterious and suggestive rather than operational as a hermeneutic bridge.

Spencer: The anthropologist Marius Barbeau (1951) has tried to describe Indigenous spiritual connections to place in the context of musical performance. But there's a salvage ethnography idea here, of assuming that culture is static. That you can't harness *naxnox* unless you are doing it in the old ways. Connecting that to Gyibaaw, we had a conscious feeling of being let down by our listeners, who were aware of our new forms of making connection. Because in Western music there's this overlooking of the spiritual. I don't want to generalize. But often, the spiritual aspect to this kind of music is unfelt, and I think that goes more generally to a Western idea of music as entertainment, and not practice.

Max: I want to ask you a more detailed question about this resonant sound. What does it mean that the black metal sound is blurry and distorted in Gyibaaw? Does that sound – a contribution to what I am calling resonance – make it possible to explore Indigenous themes in a particular way?

Spencer: Let me put it this way. I have been in ceremonies where medicine people play a song on a tin bucket as opposed to a drum – to some this may not be ideal. People would love to have a perfect sounding drum in that scenario. But in the moment, this tin bucket was the only thing present and spirits react to it regardless: they join in, they talk, they dance, they don't judge material as much as we do in the physical world. It is all about the spiritual connection and its strength at the moment of playing. If you were to tell that medicine person, "No, stop, let's go find you a perfect sounding drum" – it would have taken away from all of that. So quality is important. But it is not about looking for the best quality sound, it is about looking for a sound that represents our spirituality, our culture, our warfare, and our warrior culture the best possible way in that moment. In this case, the spiritual power or energy in the act of musical ritual is more important than sound quality.

Max: So maybe sounds can become more powerful for expressing attachments to Indigenous lands and waters by not pretending to desire a sort of sonic perfection or the clearest transmission. You could get the best drum, but that wouldn't boost the spiritual component in any necessarily equivalent way.

Spencer: Right. That makes sense.

Max: “Gyitwaalkt” also brings up the question of the warrior in the contemporary moment. I know you are a big advocate of that movie, *Once Were Warriors* (1994; dir. Lee Tamahori). It’s a pretty brutal depiction of Maori life under colonization, and the kinds of lateral violence colonization facilitates. I wonder about how your song explores this politics of representation question. The question of what it means to be warriors. The song seems to be about revalorizing the concept of warrior, what comes to be debased under colonial conditions or made into an expression of senseless violence. There’s also this refusal to accept the “ecological Indian” narrative here.³ Warrior culture was prominent in Tsimshian life. So, for me at least, “Gyitwaalkt” is about warrior-ness, an idea which informs the contemporary political status of Indigenous peoples as well as historical ones.

Spencer: This has to do with the drastic changes that Indigenous people have seen in the last one hundred years, or beginning in the late 1800s, perhaps. Social roles have been transformed and imposed on us. Five hundred years ago, it was regular for a warrior to fight his battle in a war canoe. What training does the warrior of today need? How does our training change with our place in the process of decolonization? To me those are relevant questions to ask, and I ask myself those questions regularly.

Max: Many contemporary Indigenous writers emphasize the importance of personal and creative acts to these questions.

Spencer: For Gyibaaw, one aspect of decolonization is to engage with this question through current forms of music, contemporary music because, after all, we are dealing with contemporary Indigenous struggles. In some ways, black metal is a form of protest, refusal, and dismantling of colonial acts because it is rooted in the rejection of colonial religions and the ideals that come with those religions. Black metal emphasizes the strength of knowing oneself and grounding your thought in personal, cultural, and mystical truth. However, it is sad that this is often mixed up in our current colonial context of white patriarchy.

We were writing this music during the height of our fight against Enbridge Northern Gateway Pipeline. We were really passionate about

³ See, for example, S. Krech *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History* (1999); and P. Raibmon, *Authentic Indians* (2005). Our discussion is inspired by Nadasdy’s useful meta-commentary on the Indigeneity-environmentalism relationship. See Nadasdy (2005).

protecting who we were as a people tied to land. Our music was fuelling a sense of warrior identity that came with the need to fight Enbridge. But this spirit is true and present whether the fight is against the destruction of Indigenous territory or simply the colonial status quo. Finding yourself and knowing what role you have to take in society is a big part of it all. At the time, we saw our role as musicians, and we used that to express what we needed to about the need for Indigenous warriors.

Max: Perhaps like the folks at the Unist'ot'en Camp?

Spencer: Yeah. I remember when we heard about the Unist'ot'en Camp and how real that was, the Indigenous law that they practised. That totally represented the kind of warrior-ness we want to explore in our music.

Max: Can you say more about that “warrior-ness”?

Spencer: If we are to explore the “warrior” persona through music, I think it is key to recognize that our music tells a story of social context. Throughout colonization, traditional Tsimshian societal roles have continued, but they appear in different ways. The role of the warrior is to give hope to our people in times of struggle, often to protect, but also to oppose or create change through that struggle. In our current political environment, we can oppose colonization in many ways, one of these ways is through music. For Gyibaaw, this meant using music to take on that role of warrior or decolonizer. If we can influence audiences about political struggles we face, and they respect our message, then music becomes a constructive place for social change.

Max: So for you, decolonial music is more about political practices or orientations than it is specific genre types. Is that right?

Spencer: Indigenous people engage different political issues through sound. In some instances, it for us meant standing up in a room full of bigotry and hate saying, “Hey, this is who we are and we are protecting this way of life.” In other cases, it meant delivering these same messages on radio to wider audiences, even though this type of sound was not conventional. And again, in other instances, it was about using mainstream music, but choosing to not speak in a mainstream language.

Choosing to use Indigenous tongues that survived attempted genocide is decolonization through audio politics.

From Tsimshian Secret Societies⁴ and dance groups, to Tsimshian brass bands in the late 1800s, to my grandfather Johnny Pahl teaching Jeremy and I about Country and Western, music has been a lifeline to Indigenous people. It is important to mention that music is a social, spiritual, and emotional tool that has been handed down to us for generations. It may not look or sound the way it once did, but the connection to sound and its influence in Tsimshian socio-politics has always stayed strong. You and I are discussing a powerful form of expression. This does not mean that we as Indigenous people always share or make the music to the public or to non-Indigenous peoples. Some songs must remain protected.

Max: And maybe the very way knowledge is protected changes over time – to avoid colonial capture, I mean. There is an idea of Indigenous aesthetics as always changing, even as it remains grounded, but embodying a “fugitive” creative disposition. This is an idea Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes (2014) explore.

But my question then is, why did Gyibaaw choose black metal when they did? I try to point out in my research that a lot of young Indigenous artists today have taken to black metal to express themselves. And as you say, it’s a dangerous linkage. There are long-standing connections between black metal and white ethno-nationalism, neo-Nazism, patriarchy. Even where the fascist elements are downplayed, the black metal scene remains patently sexist. “Gyitwaalkt” would have been performed in some pretty messed up social spaces, where the ideas of battle-readiness and warriors you explore might have pointed to things you didn’t want association with. Did this militate against the values you vested in the music?

Spencer: In many cases, the black metal scene represents the epitome of sexism, patriarchy, and colonization. So yeah, we saw that every night. But this aspect of the music scene speaks to larger society, because at the end of the day, black metal is still rooted within the racist, sexist, pop culture of a colonial society. And that was definitely true in western Canada and specifically British Columbia where we played countless shows. And you wrote about this in your dissertation, about the times we had white supremacists in Edmonton come up to us and praise us for being authentic, and the other times when white supremacists

⁴ Reference to secret societies can be found in Boas (1917, 546–58).

wouldn't do sound check for us because of what we represented! Across Canada, there are a number of black metal bands still into violent ethno-nationalist warfare. That's a different kind of warrior than the kind we were interested in exploring.

But as mentioned earlier, on some level black metal also has roots in decolonization. So much lyrical content and self-expression coming from extreme metal genres is rooted in culture and identity. For example, Indigenous bands such as Resistant Culture, Sarcofago, Illapa, Volahn. These bands tap into legitimate social values grounded in their territories. I think there are local differences in terms of the stories being explored, the connections to certain animals and spirits, language, and the social struggles. But also a lot of similarities about being Indigenous under colonialism and playing this music.

This reminds me of one question I want to ask you though, and perhaps reading your chapter has helped me answer it a little bit. Whenever I played a show with Gyibaaw, I used to ask myself: Did I do something, or did we do something as a band, that made people stop and think about colonization? So, my question to you is: How did we do that for you?

Max: That's big. I'm not sure. But in writing about Gyibaaw, I was trying to make a point about musical opacity – about opacity as a way of thinking about knowledge and politics. I think that's part of it. Music can be a rich site for forging *appreciations* – which is not the same thing as knowing or possessing. And I think a big part of appreciating a piece like “Gytwaalkt” as a settler is learning to appreciate *not* having been the addressee. “Gytwaalkt” deepens my appreciation about the North Coast and my place as a visitor there, which is kind of wonderful because it's also just really cool black metal.

Spencer: I remember the first time we were playing the Rickshaw here in Vancouver. It was with Wolves in The Throne Room. Jeremy opened our set by recognizing Coast Salish Territory, and then we broke into a song: “The War Was Fought on Our Land.” Even though we were not on Tsimshian Territory, it was important for us to express this Indigenous truth. To be able to relate to the act of colonization and defending Indigenous territory. I had hoped that people heard and understood that. The next day the *Georgia Straight* wrote about that show and they mentioned the rarity of that, and the appreciation people in the crowd had with Jeremy's gesture.⁵ That was huge for us.

⁵ See: <https://www.straight.com/article-367863/vancouver/wolves-throne-room-rip-it-rickshaw>.

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