

OPPOSITION AND ANTI-COLONIALISM IN HEAVY METAL MUSIC

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*“Stepping on your throat / Reminisce the facts / Justice is what we’ll have”
—Ethereal Tomb, “Death of the Indian”*

A portrait of heavy metal music in North America is incomplete without considering its political and anti-colonial appeal in Indigenous communities. Across Canada and the United States, there are active metal music scenes where Indigenous creators are voicing their resistance to settler-colonialism (Flock 2019; Montgomery 2018). This trend can be explained; the globalization of metal music, its system of values and its advocative communities reveals the role metal plays in upholding Indigenous resistance theory and political refusal of the colonial state. This paper argues that the shared oppositional aims of heavy metal and Indigenous decolonial activism, when brought together, become their own, powerful form of anti-colonialism.

Between heavy metal and Indigenous resistance, the concept of ‘opposition’ is key. Opposition to the dominating forces of a society is what brings the two bodies of research together. Indigenous resistance theorists describe their opposition to the settler-colonial state and its politics of recognition, which attempts to destroy Indigenous sovereignty and police their history and identity (Simpson, “Indigenous resurgence” 22; Coulthard 36). Heavy

metal scholars, on the other hand, delineate metal’s oppositional code – subversive interpretations of dominant ideologies (Oxford Reference) – to challenge hegemony (Mayer & Timberlake 28) and its desire to be inflammatory or reactive to a society (Rafalovich & Schneider 131). Indigenous resistance theory and heavy metal music work hand-in-hand to combat the colonial body governance through the shared goal of subverting the state and the state desire to “control” (Grant 177). In the 21st century, this “metal resistance” became a true phenomenon across Indigenous communities (Montgomery 2018; Vincentelli 2023; Tapia & Mendoza 151; Garcia & Gama 172). When Indigenous musicians make metal music, they can further the anti-recognition work of Indigenous scholars and activists while embodying the radical anti-establishment stance of heavy metal, turning two seemingly distant communities into one powerful anti-colonial force.

Oppositional ideas underlie both anti-colonial work and heavy metal music. Anti-colonialism resists the settler-colonial states of Canada and the United States. The same holds true for

metal music. These nation-states are understood as oppressive or counter to both their Indigenous populations and heavy metal communities. In the Indigenous context, settler-colonial states employ what historian Patrick Wolfe calls the “logic of elimination:” institutional violence enacted against Indigenous peoples to entirely remove their presence from the land (Ostler & Shoemaker 362). Therefore, by resisting these elimination efforts and claiming their sovereignty, Indigenous peoples oppose the state. Heavy metal music can be a structure well-suited for anti-colonial work; the genre itself is “a form of resistance towards a ruling class that [is] dominantly influenced by western cultural hegemony” (Tapia & Mendoza 146), leading to its growing popularity amongst Indigenous musicians in the past thirty years. By examining the role that ‘opposition’ plays in both of these communities, the connection between the two can be drawn. Predominantly, it is metal music’s oppositional code that connects it to anti-colonial resistance.

Recent anti-colonial efforts and literature from Indigenous communities focus on outright opposition to colonial states. In Glen Coulthard’s book *Red Skin, White Masks*, the idea of rejecting settler-colonial governance is held much higher than “reconciliation” which exists mostly for the benefit of the state. Rejection starts with opposing what is referred to as the “politics of recognition.” Coulthard defines this as a reliance on recognition: the empowered state grants recognition to reliant minorities (30). In this case, Indigenous people are made to depend on the Canadian or American state (30-31). This relationship is one of domination and subordination, because the state continues to be in control of how Indigenous people can govern them-

selves and how settler society views them (Simpson, “I See Your Light: 175). If Indigenous people are reliant on recognition, they are submitting to the state as something which can govern them (Coulthard 31). The state has to push recognition politics in order for this to happen; as seen in recent attempts at “reconciliation,” such as Stephen Harper’s 2008 apology for residential schools, the Canadian state places the recognition of Indigenous existence and suffering at the forefront (CBC Archives 2018). Coulthard argues that this is what maintains the colonial relationship between the two parties: the state remains dominant and Indigenous nations are reliant on the state’s acknowledgement of its destructive policies (31). Instead, Indigenous people must “turn away” from the colonial power and oppose their attempts at prolonging Indigenous dependency on settlers (Coulthard 31). Indigenous scholar Leanne Simpson expands upon this by discussing the need for “refusal” politics. Indigenous communities must refuse the existence of the hegemonic colonial state and “resurge” against it in ways that centre Indigenous practices (Simpson, “I See Your Light” 176).

Refusal of the colonial state is more than an abstract concept; Indigenous communities do this by governing their own nations as if the settler-state surrounding them does not exist. Author of *Mohawk Interruptus*, Audra Simpson, exemplifies this in her description of Mohawk nationhood: “[T]he Mohawks of Kahnawà:ke refuse...the ‘gifts’ of American and Canadian citizenship; they insist upon the integrity of Haudenosaunee governance” (7). The Mohawk nation becomes the embodiment of oppositional politics in their refusal of

the settler-colonial state. The nation subverts statist expectations of submission to authority, and exercises their sovereignty such as through issuing passports to its members (Hill 2015). Canada and the U.S. do not recognize these documents as valid, but other states do, so Mohawk individuals continue to travel with them (Hill 2015). Directly confronting the colonial state and acting in exact contrast with its expectations, such as by ignoring its legal documents and creating others, is key. The Mohawk nation has a history of acting in contrast with state wishes; in 1990, the Mohawk peoples resisted the expansion of a golf course onto their land near Oka, Quebec. (Kanehsatake 1993). Acting in opposition to the city of Oka, the nation set up blockades and initiated a standoff with the Canadian military for seventy-eight days (Kanehsatake 1993). This type of opposition is anti-establishment in nature, since it rejects the settler establishments that try to claim jurisdiction in Indigenous territory. The settler colonial state consistently acts in ways that perpetuate colonialism, such as attempts at land expansion; this creates uneven power dynamics by picking and choosing when to acknowledge Indigenous suffering, like with residential schools, and rejects Indigenous sovereignty through the rejection of Mohawk passports, the only way for Indigenous people to resist is to oppose the state itself. This happens in the opposition of the politics of recognition. In both their commitment to following their own sovereignty and by recognizing the meaninglessness of being recognized by the colonial state, the Mohawk nation acts as a powerful anti-hegemonic force. Relating back to Coulthard's stance on recognition, it is evident that the Oka government can

recognize land as belonging to the Mohawk nation and infringe upon that land all the same. This means that in this case, Indigenous nations would be reliant on the state for recognition of their land, without even the guarantee of sovereignty over it. This example goes further than just being a relationship of dependence; as stated by Coulthard and Leanne Simpson, the continuation of the "postcolonial" relationship between Indigenous people and the state is congenitally one of domination and subordination. Via opposition, this relationship is dismantled. Should Indigenous people oppose, reject and refuse the politics of the state, the colonial relationship ceases to exist. However, this requires constant opposition; the Mohawk nation living outside of the control of the colonial Canada and United States is an example of this ongoing resistance. The Mohawks do not only oppose individual acts, such as the construction of the golf course or citizenships, but oppose the entire state colonial structure. Simpson describes this every-day opposition as key to Indigenous resurgent movements (Simpson, "Indigenous resurgence" 24). Consequently, the only way to resist colonialism is through an existential opposition.

The oppressed refuse power structures in order to survive, but many others who feel disenfranchised also find it alluring to refuse mainstream society in their everyday lives, especially youth (Rafalovich & Schneider 131). As a result, inherently oppositional communities, like those of heavy metal, are born. Metal music can be described as non-political by scholars (Epp 93), but as illustrated by expert Deena Weinstein, metal music is more accurately understood as transcending

any particular culture or politics, instead connecting people “trans-culturally” via its belief structure (46). This belief structure is one of extremism, transgression and nihilism, but not explicitly of one particular political leaning (Mayer & Timberlake 29). Metal music may be identifiable from these concepts, but the specific messages can take any form, from the neo-Nazi ideology of Norway’s National Socialist black metal to the pro-vegan sentiments in American powerviolence music. What connects all of metal’s various agendas together is opposition to mainstream ideas. Scholars Adam Rafalovich and Andreas Schneider describe this opposition as “a denial of culturally-constructed codes of conduct and their concomitant systems of morality” (135). This is a predominant feature in any heavy metal song. Accordingly, the genre itself is an expression of opposition to the mainstream (Tapia & Mendoza 145). Individuals turn to metal music as a way of acting out against what they feel is a repressive system, and pick up on a transgressive ethos so that they may oppose society’s morals.

Metal music does not exist in a vacuum; it directly opposes the dominating group of the society in which it is created (Rafalovich & Schneider 137). This generally takes the form of opposing the dominating state (Tapia & Mendoza 151; Garcia & Gama 171). Metal music, unlike many globalized goods, is diffused in a “decentralized” manner, meaning not only can it take on the politics of whoever wishes to wield its oppositional power, but it does not serve the interests of a particular state or perpetuate uneven power dynamics between nations (Mayer & Timberlake 30). Metal positions itself as a “countercultural entity” that necessarily goes against the prevailing culture

(Calvo 161). Consequently, metal music becomes an ideal mechanism for resistance against hegemonic states. Metal music also aims to be directly empowering to the individual (Epp 96). Since it appeals to those who feel ostracized from their societies, it looks to create an alternative community where these individuals are empowered (Rowe 113). This can become apparent within regimes that operate with authoritarian practices, such as those in Turkey and Egypt. Metal music from these countries target policies that infringe upon individual liberties, such as the restriction of alcohol consumption and the mandating of dress code in public (Epp 97). For instance, the Egyptian group Massive Scar Era criticize the heavy involvement of police in civilian life in their song “Freedom” (Epp 95). These metal songs take direct aim at the government for imposing its power on the people but are more focused on the implications of state-interference with the individual rather than the policies themselves. This anti-establishment attitude morphs to fit a local context. Heavy metal is an empty structure capable of containing various and varying politics; this is referred to as heavy metal’s “ideoscape” (Mayer & Timberlake 45). The ability to shift and change regarding these loose political ideologies but strong oppositional beliefs has resulted in its near perfect alignment with the goals of anti-colonial resistance movements.

The relationship between Indigenous resistance theory and the heavy metal ethos exists in the thriving heavy metal community of North America; this subculture is comprised of Indigenous people working to combat colonialism (Flock 2019; Montgomery 2018). Metal is referred to as a “reactionary” genre (Rafalovich & Schneider 131) because it

often springs up in communities facing hardship (Rowe 116; Tapia & Mendoza 151; Mendoza et al. 200). Rafalovich and Schneider conclude that metal music embodies a dialogue of criticism to the relationship between established culture and groups that feel “coerced” into following it (140). The same can be said of the relationship between settler-colonial states and Indigenous groups. As a result of the assimilation project of colonial governments, Indigenous people face the decision to either conform or risk further violent interference (Coulthard 4). Nevertheless, for those who wish to fight colonialism, resistance efforts have to be empowered and assertive in the face of the dominant power. If not, these efforts can be ignored, as is the case with resistance to some Canadian pipeline projects where protests go unnoticed until blockades are set up (Amnesty International 2022). This assertive discourse can come in the form of heavy metal. Since metal music exists to be transgressive, it empowers listeners and creators to feel “less controlled” by the dominating forces in society, and validates feelings of disenfranchisement and creates a sense of ‘visibility’ (Grant 177-178). When metal music’s oppositional power is invoked by Indigenous musicians, there are concrete impacts. On the Indigenization movement of the heavy music scene in Bolivia, the socio-political messages and Indigenous symbols embedded in the music reflected the problems that the country was facing (Tapia & Mendoza 143). The group LLaWaR, meaning Andean Shouts Wipalas At Rebirth (Llantos Andidos Wipalas A Renacer), embraced Indigenous identity as defense against Bolivia’s Western neoliberal system (Tapia & Mendoza 151-152). Bands like

LLaWaR wanted to contribute to the political discourse in the country and effectively became a part of the academic and activist movement against neoliberalism (Tapia & Mendoza 152). The same occurs with Indigenous metal in North America. The resurgent organizing described by Leanne Simpson necessitates the use of Indigenous practices as everyday forms of resistance, and Indigenous heavy metal music makes use of these pieces of culture. When Ottawa’s Biipiigwan makes use of Ojibwe war whistles in their sludge metal songs about colonial power dynamics, or Arizona’s Diné band Morbithory embrace the Navajo language in their lyrics, there is an intrinsic refusal to accept assimilation and let one’s culture be lost (Montgomery 2018). By creating metal music that reflects Indigenous culture, these songs become their own form of resurgence against the settler-state that seeks to eliminate this culture in all its forms.

The goals of Indigenous communities are not all the same; their cultures, practices and the ways they have been impacted by colonialism are all different. This is where structurally “apolitical” heavy metal can be instrumentalized. Indigenous heavy metal groups are free to create music tailored to their own communities’ needs and objectives while drawing on metal music’s innately subversive capabilities. For instance, heavy metal from the Mohawk nation in the Adirondacks includes Blackbird, a creator of black metal music empowering Indigenous people in their connection to land and nature (Vincentelli 2023), whereas Cree doom metal group Ethereal Tomb writes about the ongoing Indigenous genocide

in Canada in their song “Death of the Indian,” or about land degradation in “When the Rivers Dry” (Maure 2023). Despite their different goals, musicians choose heavy metal to communicate their message because of the genre’s inherent anti-hegemonic, necessarily political, and individually liberating ideologies. The decentralized diffusion of metal and its blank canvas “ideoscape” permits artists to take advantage of the oppositional overtones of the genre while still communicating their own ideas. As a result, Indigenous metal bands are able to oppose Coulthard’s “politics of recognition.” Settler states’ goals in reconciliation rely on Indigenous subordination and dependence on the colonists’ granting of permission to exist (Coulthard 31). This enforces the assimilation of Indigenous people into settler-colonial culture and governance, and perpetuates a colonial power imbalance. Metal music exists explicitly to resist this dynamic of domination. Since metal is both largely rejected by and functions to reject the mainstream (Mayer & Timberlake 33), by participating in the genre, Indigenous people are actively opposing the mainstream. If the colonial mainstream’s goal is assimilation, then Indigenous metal rejects assimilation (Ostler & Shoemaker 362). Indigenous metal musicians are aware of metal’s power-disrupting ability and play with the discomfort levels of the audience in both a sonic and lyrical capacity. The abrasiveness of metal causes discomfort and forces reflection, creating a greater awareness of the struggles for sovereignty. The music and consequently those who make the music both exist outside of and oppose what the dominating state will “recognize,” and the heavy metal community persists subversive to state control. Ultimately,

the oppositional substructure of metal provides an ideal base for Indigenous artists to resist the colonial gaze by making society uncomfortable, and thus being noticed without entering colonial “legal” channels.

The “unsettling” nature of heavy metal disturbs more than just the unaccustomed listener; it can unsettle the foundation of settler-colonial society. Forces of opposition aim to make the prevailing order uncomfortable, something which is true of both the oppositional force of Indigenous anti-colonial resistance and heavy metal music. Countering the continuation of colonialism requires interruption, rejection and opposition to the power relationship. It is critical to oppose the colonial relationship outside of the colonial structures themselves; therefore, the ideoscape of heavy metal becomes a space for the injection of various cultural elements and messages that can reach the ears of the state without accepting its legal systems and “recognizing” its governance. Furthermore, metal opposition becomes radical when it refuses to operate within the constraints of a colonial society. This radicalization allows for the extreme and sometimes violent calls for community action and land restitution. Toronto’s Cree hardcore band 2 The Bone, in their song “Serve and Project,” illustrate their radical opposition to the colonial police structure that violently targets Indigenous people: “We will never accept taking it out on us” (2 The Bone 1:57). In these rallying anthems and appeals to the “we,” the broader Indigenous activist community, Indigenous anti-colonial metal transforms from a theoretically appropriate space for a dialogue of Indigenous resistance to a tangible method of community org-

anizing. Indigenous heavy metal is not only a part of the story of metal music, it is a very real way to create solidarity and put theory into action. After all is said and the song is done, the demand for justice remains.

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