

GOTHIC NATURE



GOTHIC NATURE II

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Nylons, Bra Underwire, Calvin Klein Dress, Facial Mask, Necklace, Wax

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Soundtrack to Settler-Colonialism: Tanya Tagaq's Music as Creative Nonfiction Horror

Kateryna Barnes

ABSTRACT

Throughout her discography, avant-garde musician Tanya Tagaq modifies traditional Inuit throat singing with graphic and haunting imagery familiar to horror culture. In Tagaq's music, the seemingly supernatural is natural (as in the natural world). Evoking the grotesque and uncanny of the genre through nonverbal vocalisations like growls, gasps and shrieks or the few lyrics she does use, she gives voice to the nonhuman natural world. Mother Earth is sentient and she has a voice through Tagaq, and she is exacting revenge for the violence on her body and her children by reacting to climate change violently or by raising the alarm of the harms done by 'speaking' out. Tagaq brings ecohorror to her music, articulating clearly that the monstrous is not Nature-in-itself, but settler-colonial humanity.

Tagaq's music conveys the real-life trauma of settler-colonialism on Indigenous peoples and the land: genocide, missing and murdered Indigenous women, residential schools,¹ and ecological destruction. Tagaq's performances echo Margaret Atwood's (2013) sentiment that, 'White man's ways [...] are at best useless and at worst deadly' (p. 115). The motifs used by Tagaq symbolise 'la survivance'² of Indigenous peoples, Inuit culture notably; however, unlike Atwood's explanation that the fight for survival is against Canadian Nature, Tagaq believes the fight to survive is against the industry and society created by settler-colonialism.

¹ The residential school system was a genocidal Canadian government policy from the late 1800s to 1996, enacted by both the government and Christian church organizations. An estimated 150,000 Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families. The purpose of the schools was to force assimilation into White Canadian culture and to eliminate Indigenous languages and cultures. More information on the abuses of this system can be found at The University of British Columbia's Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at irshdc.ubc.ca.

² Defined by Gerald Vizenor (1999) as 'an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories' (vii).

In this paper I will analyse Tagaq's music through close reading informed by theory about death-avoidance and terror as detailed in Ernest Becker's landmark book, *The Denial of Death* (1973), as well as critical race theory paired with the politics of pain, horror, the uncanny, and disgust. This theoretical framework will establish Tagaq's musical work as creative nonfiction horror with special attention to the uncanny and grotesque affects of settler-colonialism. The analysis will situate her work into horror media by contrasting it with Margaret Atwood's established literary criticism, as well as accepted horror motifs and themes, specifically horror of the body, the North, and monsters. The value of situating Tagaq's music as creative nonfiction horror media is an act of decolonisation as the objects of terror and fear are not that of traditional, settler-made Canadian horror media. It is not the natural world that is horrific; it is the continued extractive violence of settler-colonialism on the natural world and Indigenous peoples. In particular, the analysis will focus on her songs 'Retribution' and 'Cold', as well as two covers that she performs: Iron Maiden's 'Run to the Hills' and Nirvana's 'Rape Me'.

When speaking about the cultural value of horror media, author Gabriela Damian Miravete (2018) aptly concluded that 'a good horror story reminds you that the sun may not rise', and that 'you can't run away from reality' (n.pg.). The reality that Damian Miravete speaks of is the ultimate fate: death. Eventually, mortality must be faced by each person, whether we choose it or not, and humans carry this existential knowledge. The acknowledgement of impending existential extinguishment conflicts with the animalistic self-preservation instinct, the biological imperative to keep living. Described as 'terror' in his Pulitzer-prize winning book *The Denial of Death* (1973), cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker describes Western society's fear of death this way 'in order to convey how all-consuming it is when we look it full in the face' (p. 15). This terror is a thematic mainstay of horror culture and media, playing on the settler-colonial fear that nothing is quite as terrifying as facing a gruesome and grotesque annihilation, even more so when the end of life is imminent. It is the highest point of tension in horror media—a change in music signals the oncoming fight-flight-freeze choice of the prey. Survival is not guaranteed. In the words of author and horror laureate Stephen King (1981), 'we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones'

(p. 13). The creation and consumption of horror media is an attempt to manage the fear that stems from the reality of death.

A residential school survivor, avant-garde musician Tanya Tagaq left home in Iqaluktuutiaq (Cambridge Bay, Nunavut) for art school in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Homesick, Tagaq started to teach herself katajjaq,³ a traditional, a capella musical competition where two women facing each other attempt to outlast the other, making sounds like sharp inhales and exhales, guttural growls, and soft wordless whispers, reminiscent of the sounds of the natural world (Nattiez, 2016: n.pg). Throughout her discography, Tagaq modifies traditional katajjaq with graphic and haunting imagery familiar to horror culture. Her music is filled with changing rhythms, like an increasing heart-rate with ratcheting tension. There are growls, gasps, shrieks, screams that vocalise rage, pain, and fear without using words. In particular, Tagaq's version is a solo act, an absence of harmony and collaboration. Whether intentional or not, it symbolises a missing presence—another voice from another woman. To perform and create music without that other voice is a political statement. While it may have stemmed only incidentally from Tagaq's solitary experience in Halifax as a lone Inuk woman, it productively allows for a creative freedom for Tagaq to stimulate political discourse on humanity's relationship with the natural world, as well as that of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada by provoking the question: where is the other woman?

Further to the horror motifs, Tagaq gives voice to Sila,⁴ the natural world as understood by the Inuit. As explained by Cherokee writer Thomas King (2012), the environment or Nature—more colloquially referred to as 'land' in English⁵—is a defining concept in Indigenous cultures:

'Land contains the languages, the stories, the stories and the histories of a people. It provides water, air, shelter and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and the songs. And land is home... For non-Natives, land is primarily a commodity,

³ Inuit throat singing.

⁴ Translates as 'climate or environment' in Inuktitut. Inuktitut Tusaalanga. *Inuktitut Tusaalanga glossary*. Inuit literature scholar Keavy Martin notes that a secondary translation exists: wisdom. Martin, Keavy. (2012) *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature* (p. 5). Generally, Sila is gendered as female.

⁵ Many Indigenous cultures have words in their own languages for this concept. For example, Anishnaabemowin has 'Aki'; Nehiyaw has 'askîy'; Kanien'kehá:ka has Onkwéhonwè:ne (more directly translated as 'homeland').

something that has value for what you can take from it' (p. 218).

In Tagaq's music, this understanding is reflected and furthered in her vocal performances in which she gives voice to Sila, the second woman 'missing' from Tagaq's katajjaq. Sila is sentient and she is exacting revenge for the violence inflicted on her body by reacting violently to climate change⁶ and her children (plants, animals, the Inuit) who have suffered at the hands of settler-colonialism by calling out the harm. Industrialised human society driven by settler-colonialism is the target of Sila's vengeance. It is not the horror of the body itself so much as the horror *inflicted upon* the body—the real-life trauma of settler-colonialism on Sila and Indigenous peoples: natural world and Indigenous peoples through genocide, residential schools, the Sixties Scoop,⁷ and the ongoing crises of missing and murdered indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people, and the over-representation of Indigenous children in government care and ecological destruction. For Tagaq, death-anxiety is not repressed, but it is faced head-on without any avoidance. The horrors she conveys are not made-up; they are real.

In this paper I will analyse Tagaq's music through close reading informed by theory about death-avoidance and terror, as detailed in Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death* in order to elucidate the monster of Tagaq's work—Western settler-colonialism, as well as by critical race theory paired with the politics of pain, horror, and disgust. This theoretical framework will establish Tagaq's musical work as creative nonfiction horror with special attention to the uncanny and grotesque affects⁸ of settler-colonialism. The analysis will situate her work into horror media by contrasting it with Margaret Atwood's established literary criticism, as well as accepted horror motifs and themes, specifically horror of the body, the North, and monsters. Understanding Tagaq's music as creative nonfiction horror media acknowledges Indigenised objects of terror and fear. It is not the natural world that is horrific; it is the continued extractive violence of settler-colonialism. In particular, the analysis will focus on her songs 'Retribution' and 'Cold', as well as two covers she performs: Iron Maiden's 'Run to the Hills' and Nirvana's 'Rape Me'.

⁶ Since Tagaq uses the metaphor of the earth being 'our mother', it's not an unreasonable extrapolation to include environmental degradation as part of horror of the body and bodily trauma.

⁷ Refers to the practices across Canada where provincial child welfare authorities where thousands of indigenous children were taken from their families and adopted out to White families in Canada and the USA.

⁸ The experience of feeling and emotion.

The goal is to demonstrate that the monster in Tagaq's work is not the sentient natural world or a fictional creature so much as it is settler-colonialism driven by death-avoidance, an ongoing process that fuels environmental degradation, rape, murder, and traumatising of the Inuit in particular. These acts of trauma, as well as their effects, are meant to show the audience that settler-colonialism is, as Atwood (2013) writes, 'at best useless and at worst deadly' (p. 115). Tagaq's music gives the natural world a voice to the horrors of settler-colonial actions and the uncanny⁹ terror the natural world will inflict on all of humanity in retribution.

Tusâtsialaugit¹⁰: Unipkaaqtuat¹¹ and life alongside the Qallunaat¹²

The monster of Tagaq's horror-themed music is settler-colonialism, a beast driven by gluttony, death-avoidance, and a superiority complex. In his book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), Cherokee literary theorist Daniel Heath Justice explains that while Indigenous traditional stories caution against human destructiveness and greed, reminding readers that humans are dependent on the natural world for survival, these themes are not present in the Western-colonial narrative (pp. 39-40). Instead, many Eurocentric practices reinforce hierarchies established in Abrahamic traditions. More simply, the roots of settler-colonialism's origin story are European Christianity, a faith based upon being saved from eternal death and a human superiority over the natural world. Heath Justice critiques this worldview:

'[...] when the creeds of this socio-religious tradition insist that "man was made in his own image", it's no great leap to see how an exclusionary god of the heavens is used as a divine model and mandate for narrower hierarchical definitions [...] Yet for all the bluster and self-justifying rhetoric of the social hierarchs, the insistence

⁹ In this paper, the strange and unsettling aspects of uncanny can be defined using Thacker's (2010) 'world-in-itself' concept, where he argues that 'the world often "bites back", resists, or ignores our attempts to mold it into the world-for-us' (p. 9), citing natural disasters or climate change or extinction as examples of the world's autonomy and agency.

¹⁰ Translates as 'listen properly'. Surak, Silpa. *UKâlalautta Inuttitut/Let's speak Inuttitut*.

¹¹ Translates as 'traditional stories'. Martin. p. 42.

¹² Translates as 'non-Inuit', usually in reference to European-settlers and their descendants.

on these firm boundaries is far from a sign of confidence. If anything, it is clear evidence of a fundamental insecurity' (pp. 40-41).

In other words, death-anxiety is a deep-rooted complex of settler-colonialism, motivating a lot of settler-colonial practices and beliefs. This is the psychological profile of the monster in Tagaq's work.

To further understand the villainous force in Tagaq's work, a closer look at the nature of death-avoidance and anxiety in settler society is warranted, and how it is represented in horror media provides an extensive case study. Even though the audience of horror media knows that at some point all humans die, the will to outlast and outlive the immediate threats drives the plot and builds suspense. The survival instinct is a buffer against the death-related anxiety that people face in the real world, but it also exists as a reminder of unavoidable death. It suppresses the fear of impending death, all the while acknowledging that death comes for each person. Becker describes this as 'an impossible paradox: the ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning of our instinct of self-preservation, as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life' (p. 15). It is this unconscious fear of permanent extinguishment that drives self-preservation, but it is the simultaneous repression of the anxiety of death that creates the tension central to horror media. In this way, horror media becomes a sacrificial offering to death anxiety-ridden brains.

To adapt and reconcile the psychological anguish stemming from this reality, the affect of this fear is repressed, creating a simmering pot of anxiety. Research based on the work of Ernest Becker, Terror Management Theory (as detailed by Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon, 1986), explains that humanity's self-preservation instinct is in conflict with the inevitability of death, with the details of the forthcoming death remaining somewhat uncertain. As such, the terror that Becker describes lingers below the affective surface, and is kept there by cultural beliefs or symbols imbuing a sense of value and meaning to life, the 'management' aspect of Terror Management Theory (TMT). The management of this terror allows humanity to wear a 'civilised' façade that is more culturally-acceptable in Western society; the affect of fear becomes a power source, akin to a battery, for the existential dread that motivates human action. Literary scholar Sianne Ngai (2005) explains that the aesthetics of these negative emotions, be it anxiety or disgust, are

‘dysphoric affects [that] often seem to be the psychic fuel on which capitalist society runs’ (p. 3). In other words, the repression of these feelings enable us to masquerade as productive, well-adjusted members of society. Tagaq, conversely, seeks to remove the mask by putting those ‘ugly feelings’ as described by Ngai at the forefront, using katajjaq with horror media as praxis.

In his book *Danse Macabre* (1981), Stephen King theorises that horror media plays a role in this terror management. He writes that the consumption of horror media helps alleviate the stress of existential terror. Using the example of American anxiety over the Sputnik I launch during the Cold War, he writes:

‘For a moment—just for a moment—the paradoxical trick has worked. We have taken horror in hand and used it to destroy itself, a trick akin to pulling one’s self up by one’s own bootstraps. For a little while the deeper fear—the reality of the Russian Sputnik and what it means—has been excised. It will grow back again, but that is for later. For now, the worst has been faced and it wasn’t so bad after all. There was that magic moment of reintegration and safety at the end, that same feeling that comes when the roller coaster stops at the end of its run and you get off with your best girl, both of you whole and unhurt.

I believe it’s this feeling of reintegration, arising from a field specializing in death, fear, and monstrosity, that make the danse macabre so rewarding and magical...’
(p. 14).

In other words, horror media helps manage the feelings of terror, relegating them below the affective surface. The question becomes, what happens when you cannot get off the roller coaster, or ‘what becomes of the human animal when the management aspect of TMT is disrupted?’ How does the human animal react to the dissolution of the calm façade repressing the reality of everyone’s impending death? Becker would point out that repression ‘is not simply a negative force opposing life energies; it lives on life energies and uses them creatively’ (p. 17); more simply put, it takes creativity to block out one’s inevitable death.

The northern Canadian landscape plays a rather peculiar role in the intersection of horror media and nationalistic identity, particularly for settler-Canadians. Despite having a combined population smaller than the British Columbian city of Kelowna, the land covered by the Canadian Territories plays a leading role in portraying Canada as the ‘True North, strong and free’, as sung in the Canadian national anthem. Polar bears grace the two-dollar coins. Inuksuks, wayfaring landmarks created by the Inuit, are easily found all around Canada. Elementary school-aged children learn to recite Robert Service’s ‘The Cremation of Sam McGee’, the grisly and gothic tale of a prospector who seemingly survives his own post-mortem immolation in the Yukon wilderness.

The Canadian psyche’s attachment to this repetitive iconography is prolific enough for author Margaret Atwood to have enough content to write two books of literary criticism on this topic: *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (2013) and *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (1995). In *Survival*, Atwood postulates that Canadian media conceptualises the North as a cruel female deity (p. 60) and an unrelenting force that likes to kill off characters by freezing them (p. 66). She takes this characterisation further in *Strange Things*, writing:

‘[...] popular lore and popular literature established early that the North was uncanny, awe-inspiring in almost a religious way, hostile to White men, but alluring; that it would lead you on and do you in; that it would drive you crazy, and finally claim you for its own’ (1995: p. 19).

This portrait Atwood paints of the North is a distinctly settler-colonial understanding. Any appeal of the North is simply ‘Northern fetishism’ (p. 49), and Indigenous perspectives are not represented. In fact, Indigenous peoples are entirely absent from most of Atwood’s (2013) analysis, save for existing as ‘instruments of Nature the Monster, torturing and killing White victims’ (p. 123), or as victims themselves. Indigenous peoples have no agency. In contrast, Heath Justice (2018) explains that ‘The story of Indigenous deficiency seems to me an externalization of settler-colonial guilt and shame, and is all the more powerful because of the broader society’s refusal to take real responsibility for the story’s devastating effects’ (p. 4). Instead, Atwood (1995)

focuses on the concept of White Canadians ‘going native’ or what she calls ‘The Grey Owl Syndrome’ (p. 35). As such, the perspective and insight of Indigenous peoples is completely ignored by one of Canadian literature and literary criticism’s biggest names, in an act of erasure.

Absent from Atwood’s analysis of the Canadian North are the Inuit. Living on the northern edge of the continent, between the Arctic Ocean and the tundra, it is a culture adapted to an extreme, and sometimes unforgiving environment. Temperatures routinely remain below freezing most months of the year. Polar bears still frequent human settlements in search of food—be it in the form of garbage, animal, or human. The permafrost prevents most plant growth from taking root, save for some hardy shrubs. Sunlight is in short supply in the winter and on some days it may not rise at all.

The understanding of this extreme environment is key to Inuit culture, and is reflected in their traditional stories. In *Life Writings and Oral Traditions: Inuit Myths* (2001), author Dale Blake explains that many of the stories told to Inuit children do not have happy endings because ‘it was a fact that tragedies did occur in the harsh northern lands, and children might be better prepared for them through listening to myths’ (p. xii.) In these stories no gruesome, gothic, or uncanny details are spared, and death is not avoided: an elderly woman kills and skins her daughter to woo the young hero Kiviok; a young couple take refuge from a storm with, unbeknownst to them, a cannibal who sucks the brains out of their newborn child; fleeing her abusive husband, a woman transforms into a narwal; a parasite tricks a grief-stricken woman into nurturing it as if it were her own child, while it drains the life from her. Unlike the literature Atwood surveyed, the common theme with this collection in particular is the focus on the dark side of *humanity*, not of the natural world. In this way, the stories act upon the audience’s emotions of empathy for the horror, pain, suffering, and terror experienced by the characters. Scholar Sara Ahmed (2015) explains that these kind of narratives enable ‘the reader to enter into a relationship with the other, premised on generosity rather than indifference’ (p. 21). This generosity, however, depends on the audience seeing the being in pain as relatable, feeling, and animate. In the case of Tagaq’s work, she aims to disrupt a settler-colonial audience’s ambivalence towards the pain felt by the natural world, a pain that is caused by settler-colonialism itself.

Tagaq brings the aforementioned narratives and perspectives to her music. Sila is not a cruel force of villainy. In line with the tales from Blake's book, it is humanity—in particular settler-colonialism—that comes to kill.

'Cold' (2016)

*'The loss of ice cover will catapult our climate
Into an uncharted, apocalyptic era of rapid heating
There will be no stopping it'* (Tagaq 2016, n.pg)

Tagaq's simply titled song opens with the eerily-highlighted sounds of footsteps crunching in the snow, cracking the ice, and then her voice matter-of-factly describing the application of thermodynamics to the ice, as understood and described by Western scientists. Energy is not created or destroyed. It is converted and it changes form—a metamorphosis. This is basic physics as taught in elementary school. As she says: 'there will be no stopping it'. Tagaq's katajjaq voice enters the track, symbolic of the traditional knowledge entering the scientific discussion, and the undulating voice grows stronger and more powerful. Paired with rising cello, drumming that speeds up the tempo, and increased volume of cracking ice, the ambience of the song has a chilling affect and creates a rising tension, building up to Tagaq's horrific reveal that 'human civilisation as we know it will no longer exist 'Cause Gaia likes it cold', a heavy prediction delivered with an uncanny softness in her voice (the relationship between 'Gaia' and 'Sila' is discussed momentarily). This declaration is simply-stated, a stark contrast to the dark, heavy music and atmospheric cacophony consisting of cracking and breaking ice, resonant bass-heavy cello with high notes sharply interspersed, deep, slow drumming, and low guttural growls from Tagaq. The result is unnerving and tension-inducing, not unlike a good horror film score. The final layer of complexity that Tagaq adds to the equation is the concept of a sentient Sila who is out for revenge for the abuse through climate change.

The traditional Inuit worldview conceptualises their environment as living, not unlike the song-referenced Gaia; in particular, Sila is the name given to the climate or environment, and it is

understood that Sila is sentient. Iñupiat¹³ elders Fannie (Kuutuuq) Akpik and Jana (Pausauraq) Harcharek explain:

‘Sila is the weather. It is also the atmosphere. Here’s the nuna, or the land, and it’s anything from the land into the moon, the sun, the stars. That’s all Sila. Sila has a soul in the same way we do as people in the same way animals do’ (Never Alone 2014).

By understanding Sila to be as conscious and alive as humans and other animals, this perspective establishes that Sila can feel. In the case of Tagaq’s music, Sila feels pain from settler-colonialism against her own body and that of her human and animal children. Pain, Ahmed (2015) explains, ‘demands that I attend to my embodied experience’ and she further suggests that pain is the affect of a wound, which is ‘where the surface of another entity has impressed upon the body, an impression that is felt and seen as the violence of negation’ (p. 27). With this in mind, the Inuit traditional worldview demands respect for Sila, as she is key to their survival. This is antithetical to the settler-colonial praxis of extractive industry where the environment is harnessed for economic output. It is also contrary to Atwood’s perspective of the natural world as a murderous, seductive, female deity. Instead, traditional Inuit life lives in relation to Sila, recognising that her health and survival are imperative to their own.

In this song Tagaq transliterates Sila as Gaia, the Greek deity who personifies the Earth and the primal mother of all life on the planet. While the traditional Greek mythology of Gaia does not address climate change,¹⁴ it does address her rebellious, vengeful nature (Powell, 2017: pp. 39-42). Abused by her male consort and father of the Titans, Uranus, Gaia and her son, Cronos, carry out a plan to castrate Uranus, deposing him of his power and exacting revenge for his harm. This mirrors Tagaq’s interpretation of Sila where she is not the instigator of violence, a stark contrast to the literature Atwood analyses. In common, however, is the realisation that humanity cannot

¹³ The Iñupiat people are Inuit peoples whose homeland is in modern Alaska.

¹⁴ See: Lovelock, J. E. (1972) Gaia as Seen Through the Atmosphere. *Atmospheric Environment*. 6 (8), pp. 579–580. Available from: doi:10.1016/0004-6981(72)90076-5.

control a being more powerful than themselves. Becker explains this terror-inducing lack of control from a Western perspective:

‘[...] we don’t want to admit that we are fundamentally dishonest about reality, that we do not really control our own lives. We don’t want to admit that we do not stand alone, that we always rely on something that transcends us’ (p. 55).

More simply, we are not immune to the consequences of our actions against a power greater than ourselves.

The monsters in the horror story of ‘Cold’ are death-anxious humans driven by settler-colonialism who feed the violence of climate change, something Tagaq demonstrates by embodying Sila and giving her a voice which is both literal and ambient. She becomes an uncanny emissary, almost as if she is ‘possessed’, giving voice to the aforementioned missing woman in Tagaq’s *katajjaq*. The pain that Sila experiences, as conveyed by Tagaq, has the power to make one aware of bodily limits—be it human or planetary. Ahmed (2015) explains that ‘pain is hence bound up with how we inhabit the world, how we live in relationship to the surfaces, bodies and objects that make up our dwelling places. Our question becomes not so much what *is* pain, but what does pain *do*’ (p. 27). In this way, Tagaq uses the affective power of horror and pain to disrupt humanity’s terror management as a call-to-action against the harm of settler-colonialism. If humanity chooses to ignore the Tagaq’s rallying cry and instead continues on a path of ecological destruction, we cannot stop Sila’s revenge.

‘Run to the Hills’ (2018)

Tagaq’s rendition of Iron Maiden’s song would be unrecognisable if not for the lyrics remaining the same in her version. There is no upbeat tempo or classic heavy metal guitar. Instead of an energetic rock song, Tagaq’s version is much slower, allowing the audience to feel the weight of the lyrics and music. A steady tempo of drumming with discordant strings emphasise the narration of the violence of colonisation from the perspectives of both the Indigenous peoples and the European settlers: neither side shy away from the terror of genocide. Teaming up with Fucked

Up's Damian Abraham (known for his vocal growl), Tagaq shares the vocals—one of the few occasions where Tagaq is not the solo vocalist. She starts the song by softly singing the first verse, with Abraham kicking off the harsher vocals that describe a cavalry running down innocent people. He growls like a hungry beast that revels in 'beating them at their own game' of survival on the land. Tagaq later joins in with vocals that emulate screaming in pain at the line 'Murder for freedom, the stab in the back' as if she were the murder victim herself. For the chorus she brings in her solo katajjaq, an act of Indigenous resilience despite the genocide, and those vocals return each time the chorus plays, through what would be a bridge, and finally closing out the song. The three sets of vocals emphasise rhythm over melody, a statement of contrast and conflict as opposed to complementary harmony. In spite of the violence, Indigenous people and their cultures still live and thrive. The voice, embodied by Tagaq, is not silenced, despite the violence of settler-colonialism.

Like many other Indigenous peoples within the state of Canada, the social impacts of colonisation on the Inuit are vast. Residential schools destroyed cultural and linguistic ties many children had to their families. Inuit naming conventions were not conducive to the colonial government's record keeping, so the Canadian government tagged Inuit with disc numbers, not unlike dog tags. The Inuit were subject to forced migration and settlement in the far north, to function as human flag poles during the Cold War. In a paper utilising the work of a cultural anthropologist, it would be remiss to not acknowledge the harm perpetuated by the discipline of anthropology and the anthropologists who treated the Inuit as strange curiosities as opposed to a vibrant and unique culture. One such story was shared by medical anthropologist Christopher Fletcher (2009) from his experience researching Inuit medical knowledge. He went to Nunavik (Northern Québec) to interview community elders in order to learn their wisdom and community-specific health practices. When meeting with an elder, before Fletcher was able to ask her about her knowledge of medicine, she started the conversation by asking him (much to his horror) if she needed to take her clothes off for him to get 'accurate measurements' of her features. Her childhood experience was with anthropologists who measured Inuit bodily features, an antiquated practice used by anthropologists to promote White supremacy by demonstrating that non-White features were inferior. This was the stark opposite of Fletcher's intended research, but the recent history affected his ability to build connections and do his research.

To this day, the effects of these acts of settler-colonialism reverberate through poverty, violence, and death. In 2005 it was estimated that 30% of Inuit children had experienced hunger because their families had run out of food, or money to purchase food (Prosser, 2011). Suicide rates among the Inuit are approximately 10 times higher than in the general population of Canada (Chachamovich, Eduardo, et al., 2015) and violence against Inuit women is 14 times the national average (Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada, n.d.). Data collected by anthropologists prior to the Canadian government's involvement in the lives of the Inuit, starting in 1939, suggest that these statistics are a relatively recent development (Kral, 2016) and have been attributed to the trauma of colonisation.

The song's message is clear—destructive settler-colonial violence will continue to kill and maim unless one flees. There needs to be distance for survival, and death-anxiety engages the flight instinct. While Ngai's analysis of Freud, Heidegger and other classic European philosophers suggests that anxiety exists to veer away from embodiments of negativity in the classic male mind (p. 247), Becker takes this point much further. On death-anxiety he writes:

'I don't believe that the complex symbol of death is ever absent, no matter how much vitality and inner sustainment a person has. Even more, if we say that these powers make repression easy and natural, we are only saying the half of it. Actually, they get their very power from repression' (p. 53).

More simply, the fear of death becomes stronger *because of* the repression. While her reimagination of this classic metal song directly engages with genocide of Indigenous peoples, Tagaq refuses to turn away from the horror. She forces the audience to listen to the terror exacted upon Indigenous peoples by settler-colonialism and engage with their subsequent anxiety. She refuses to give settler-colonialism any more power than it already tries to exert.

'Rape Me' (2016)

Eerie and haunting, Tagaq's version of Nirvana's anti-rape missive stays true to the original intent of the song, wherein singer-songwriter and frontman Kurt Cobain focuses on the strength and resilience of the defiant victim (Steinke, 1993: n.pg). Traumatized and tortured, the feminine victim remains powerful. Tagaq starts with a sharp violin that borders on discordant. A slow, methodical bass drum beats and slowly gets louder. Tagaq's vocals are soft and gentle as she sings, with whispers of words like 'kill me' interspersed throughout the background. The juxtaposition of the two main features, Tagaq's vocals and Cobain's lyrics, is meant to disturb and be an affective experience. As Ngai explains, anxiety is an outward trajectory 'prior to its being projected or displaced onto others' (p. 211), meaning that it exists before it manifests outside the body. Rape is a violent and grotesque act. By slowing the tempo of the song to allow focus on the lyrics, Tagaq seeks to disrupt the repression of the anxiety from this horrible act. She explains, 'Why sugarcoat it? This album is about rape. Rape of women, rape of the land, rape of children, despoiling of traditional lands without consent, hence the cover version of Nirvana's song "Rape Me"' (Tanyatagaq.com, n.d.). While the fusing of industrial environmental degradation with sexual assault of women by ecofeminist theory and art (think the common term 'the rape of nature') is not new, Tagaq situates this comparison in a distinctly Inuit context.

For the Inuit in particular, the effects of climate change are terrifying. The Inuit have developed survival skills for living in this environment and its climate, and this knowledge is passed down by elders. This knowledge and way of life is at risk in a changing environment. Cloud and wind patterns inform weather prediction, which impacts hunting and travelling on the ice. When the weather patterns become unfamiliar, or the ice melts, it puts the lives of hunters and fishers at risk. The melting ice also encourages polar bears to hunt and scavenge for food in human settlements more frequently than ever before, as there the ground is more sturdy and food is more plentiful. As a result of anthropogenic climate change, the Inuit are subject to harm from a society and way of life outside of their own traditions.

The song can also be interpreted to be more specifically about violence against women. In the final report from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, abuse survivors detail horrific tales of sexual assault. In particular, they cite the Qikiqtani Truth Commission's previous investigation into Inuit-specific narratives of government colonial

harm, wherein the final report states that members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) used their positions of power to abuse Inuit women (Qikiqtani Inuit Association, 2014: p. 38). One story was shared by Arviat-area Elder and residential school survivor Rhoda Akpaliapik Karetak:

‘Some RCMP officers used to beat and rape us women. They took us into another room and locked the door. I was beaten and raped but had no one to turn to. We didn’t know they weren’t supposed to act like that. Even if we had been informed of our rights, as Inuit we couldn’t speak up’ (p. 43).

Karetak’s story directly connects colonisation with rape. RCMP officers are a symbol of colonisation, an enforcing limb of government policies such as residential schools and forced relocation, and a vestige of the North-West Mounted Police, which was founded in response to the Cypress Hills Massacre¹⁵ and was a leading force against the Métis’ second rebellion.

Tagaq’s choice to cover Nirvana’s song allows a pointed critique of settler-colonialism’s White saviour complex. Referring to the abuser as ‘my friend’, Tagaq highlights the duplicity of supposed allies whose actions are violent. Becker explains that ‘the individual has to repress *globally*, from the entire spectrum of his experience, if he wants to feel a warm sense of inner value and basic security’ (p. 18) and it is clear that Tagaq insists on doing the opposite. She sees settler-colonialism as a monster from which there is no safety. Still, she chooses defiance as opposed to remaining a bystander or allowing herself to be victimised. By disrupting the affective surface holding back the anxiety, Tagaq invites her audience to self-reflect on their own complicity in the violence of colonialism: the genocide, the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and climate change.

‘Retribution’ (2016)

*‘Our mother grows angry
Retribution will be swift’* (Tagaq, 2016: n.pg)

¹⁵ Approximately 20 Nakoda people were killed in this battle, according to Canadian Government sources.

On the title track of her 2016 album *Retribution* Tagaq merges her take on traditional Inuit throat singing with spoken-word poetry in English. The words she chooses are harsh, aggressive, and remarkably graphic. Tagaq herself describes this album and song as ‘not dinner party ambience music’ (tanyatagaq.com, n.d.). There is a sense of urgency with the uptick of the tempo and the increasing discordance layered with tension-inducing cello and ferocious and almost wolf-like growls. The music video reflects the tone set by the music, with shaking videography of a lone Inuk woman sitting among wolf pelts, setting a fire in the centre before her, painting her face and arms with a black, tar-like substance and red paint—providing intriguing parallels to European tales such as Little Red. The video jumps to the tundra landscape, moves south past the timberline and into an industrial setting with Tagaq in a black gown joining the aforementioned Inuk woman in a ritual and dance, in otherwise vacant warehouse space. The entire video is jarring and cacophonous, emphasising the affect of the uncanny and the strange in the music. In the lyrics, Tagaq accuses the oil industry in particular of horrific environmental devastation, analogising it to rape, murder, and desecration. She describes Sila, or Mother Earth’s rage for the violence inflicted upon her, whispering ‘*we squander her soil and suck out her sweet black blood to burn it*’. Extracting that blood is a form of mutilation, dismemberment, and then the evidence is burned beyond recognition. The motivations are simple—greed and a desire to assuage a deeply-rooted death anxiety.

In contrast to the death-anxiety, Tagaq’s katajjaq symbolises the survivance of Indigenous peoples, and Inuit culture notably; however, unlike Atwood’s explanation that the fight for survival is against Canada’s natural environment, Tagaq believes the fight to survive is against the industry and society created by settler-colonialism. She explains that her album *Retribution* is:

‘[...] a portrait of a violent world in crisis, hovering on the brink of destruction... it’s about rejecting the toxic, militaristic masculinity that’s taken over the world since the rise of Western industrial capitalism, and is rapidly destroying human life support systems through climate change and pollution’ (tanyatagaq.com, n.d.).

For Tagaq, death-anxiety cannot be repressed; it is faced head-on without any avoidance and acknowledgement of an impending death overrides the management of the terror.

In this song, greed and death-anxiety in settler-colonialism are inextricably intertwined and one cannot be separated from the other. By whispering ‘*Money has spent us. Left us in small boxes, dark rooms, bright screens, empty tombs. Left investing our time in hollow philosophies. To placate the fear of our bodies returning back into our mother*’ she directly connects consumer culture to death-avoidance. Competition, resource accumulation, and a greed for power brought the Western settlers to colonise what is now called North America, and these aforementioned motives continue to drive capitalism. The desire to accumulate and consume without end is a direct denial of the fact that, at some point, one can no longer consume or accumulate. One is no longer a participant in the capitalist machine as a cadaver. All that remains post-mortem will be the future archaeological remnants of humanity’s capitalist obsession with acquisition where landfills, pollution, and industrially-driven environmental degradation are what remains.¹⁶ Becker describes this dis-corporeal paradox as ‘the experiential burden’ of humans, explaining that the body is a foreign landscape to humans (p. 51). Further, he writes:

‘[Man] doesn’t know who he is, why he was born, what he is doing on the planet, what he is supposed to do, what he can expect. His own existence is incomprehensible to him, a miracle just like the rest of creation, closer to him, right near his pounding heart, but for that reason all the more strange’ (p. 51).

Embracing the strange and uncanny, as well as acknowledging a forthcoming existential annihilation, Tagaq speaks for another body and being—Sila. Sila is the second voice in Tagaq’s performance, the harmony. Sila is alive and cognisant, but in this horror story she’s not the monster: humans are. Animating this voice, Tagaq warns that ‘*the retribution will be swift*’. While Tagaq does not articulate what that revenge will look like in this song, her message is clear: it is time for humans to face the music and consequences for their gruesome violence against a sentient being. The prior question about the absence of the second woman is answered—she is Sila. Like Gaia in ‘Cold’, Sila seeks vengeance for the violence inflicted upon her.

¹⁶ Further reading on this subject can be found in: (1) Moore, J. (2017) The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*. 3 (44), 594-630. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>; and (2) Farrier, D. (2019) *Anthropocene Poetics: Deep Time, Sacrifice Zones, and Extinction*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Conclusion

Tanya Tagaq's songs 'Retribution' and 'Cold', as well as her covers of Iron Maiden's 'Run to the Hills' and Nirvana's 'Rape Me', function as creative non-fiction horror media about settler-colonialism. Theorisation of death-anxiety and avoidance by Ernest Becker provides a useful lens for analysis of the modern socio-political climate of settler-colonialism and climate change, both of which negatively affect the Inuit disproportionately. Tagaq uses horror motifs of the uncanny, horror of the body, terror, violence, and the gruesome to communicate and embody the harm perpetuated by settler-colonialism and one of its main tools of violence: capitalism. Driven by death-anxiety, settler-colonialism and capitalism pursue progress through mutilation, rape, and murder of Sila, a case Tagaq evidences in her music. King asserts that if horror media is a 'rehearsal for death, then its strict moralities make it also a reaffirmation of life and good will' (pg. 409), or more simply, a way to assuage death-anxiety. In contrast, Tagaq uses horror, the uncanny and the gothic to force those complicit in settler-colonialism and environmental destruction to confront an uncomfortable truth—the monster is humanity, not the natural world, and it is out of control.

BIOGRAPHY

Kateryna Barnes is a digital humanities scholar at the University of Alberta. Her interest in horror started when her father started lending her his well-worn paperbacks when she was twelve, which got her in trouble at school for bringing in 'inappropriate reading material'. Her research explores decolonising digital space, settler-colonialism as horror culture, and the educative potential of flawed simulacra. Her dual Indigenous-settler heritage comprises displaced Kanien'kehá:ka of Akwesasne, Scottish immigrants, and Ukrainian refugees.

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