

Adjusting the Drum/Adjusting to the Drum: Translation and Adaptation in A Tribe Called Red's Powwow Step

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Introduction

A Tribe Called Red (ATCR) are an aboriginal producer/DJ crew made up of DJ NDN (Ian Campeau), Bear Witness (Thomas Ehren Ramon) and Zoolman (Tim Hill) (Bio).¹ They have amassed a large following in the electronic dance music (EDM) scene and urban club culture in Canada, the United States and Europe by mixing traditional powwow vocals and drumming with rhythms from a range of EDM genres, including dubstep, moombathon and dancehall (EPK). *The New York Times* described their music, which ATCR first called electric powwow (and later renamed powwow step), as "a simple but effective hybrid of the more urgent end of electronic music with powwow music. [...] The hypnotic qualities of both make a slick pair" (Caramanica, 2013).

A Tribe Called Red created their first electric powwow in 2007 in Ottawa to showcase "aboriginal pop in the city for other aboriginals in the city," (Decouflet, 2012). At the time, DJ NDN and Bear Witness, Ottawa-area DJs, had noticed that Ottawa's increasingly popular "culturally specific" DJ nights (Colhoun, 2015) didn't include an "equivalent for indigenous kids" (Caramanica, 2013). ATCR's first club night was a hit and morphed into a monthly party (Rice, 2013). The group has since become a recording act and have released two albums and three EPs.² Their first album was listed as one of the

¹ Former members include Dee Jay Fram (Jon Limoges) and DJ Shub (Dan General).

² 2011: *Moombah Hip Moombah Hop* (EP); 2012: *A Tribe Called Red* (album); 2013: *Nation II Nation* (album), *Trapline* (EP); 2015: *Suplex* (EP) (A Tribe Called Red, Wikipedia).

Abstract

A Tribe Called Red (ATCR) are an aboriginal producer/DJ crew who mix traditional powwow vocals and drumming with electronic dance music (EDM) rhythms to create powwow step. Through their concerts – which often showcase aboriginal talent and culture on stage and can include visuals that recontextualize depictions of stereotypical views of North American aboriginals in pop culture –, ATCR have amassed a large following in the EDM scene and urban club culture in Canada, the United States and Europe. This article examines the ways in which a network of interconnected translational acts of space, time, representation, music and intent are at work in the processes involved in bringing powwow into the dance club scene, with the goal of determining whether powwow step is an adaptation of the powwow, and what this qualification entails for translation itself.

top-10 albums of 2012 by *The Washington Post* (Richards, 2012), and in 2014 they won a Juno Award for Breakthrough Group of the Year for the album *Nation II Nation*. They have performed at festivals, venues, galleries and on reservations. Bear Witness's visuals accompany the music and are a big proponent of ATCR sets, serving to recontextualize depictions of stereotypical views of North American aboriginals in film, TV and pop culture. They also often showcase aboriginal talent and culture on stage during their shows.³

This article will explore the various forms of translation in the production of powwow step. Borrowing from Jenny Williams' (2013, 8) inclusive definition of translation in which "every text that claims to be based in any way on a previous text is simply a translation," and Blundell's analysis of powwows as cultural texts "in which powwows' expressive forms bear the imprint of the broader contexts in which they are produced" (1993), I will examine the ways in which a network of interconnected translational acts of space, time, representation, music and intent are at work in the processes involved in bringing powwow into the dance club scene. This paper will examine these translational acts with the goal of

³ See, for example, their performance of "NDN Stakes" with hoop dancer James Jones at the 2013 Polaris Music Prize Gala:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsK9Sd9956U&nohtml5=False>

determining whether powwow step is an adaptation of the powwow, and what this qualification would entail for translation itself.

Powwows: Heterogeneity of Origins and the Negotiation of Meaning Creation

Powwows emerged from the Grass Dances of Omaha in the 1840s (Browner, 2000). They began developing a more formalized shape towards the end of the nineteenth century with the forced confinement of North American aboriginals onto reservations in the Great Plains (Hoefnagels, 2012).⁴ For aboriginals living under Canadian rule, powwow history is also connected with government edicts and genocidal legislations such as the *Indian Act*. In the late 19th century, potlatches and dances "associated with religious rituals" were banned by the Canadian Government (Keillor, 108). While aboriginals were part of the first Calgary Stampede performances in 1912, for the most part the government "wanted to present a history in which the West had been empty before the arrival of settlers" (Keillor, 108). This is typical of the confusing demands the Canadian government has consistently placed on aboriginal peoples: that they sometimes be "on display" and, the rest of the time, be invisible. In 1914, an amendment to the Indian Act made it illegal for Aboriginals to take part in dances, rodeos or public exhibitions that were not on reserves without the permission of the Government or Indian agent (Keillor, 108). This amendment, which included powwows in its scope, was upheld until 1951, when anti-potlatch and anti-dance legislations were retracted (Keillor, 108).

Powwows, then, have a heterogeneity of origins (Blundell, 1993). Since the end of World War II, they have spread throughout North American, including Canada. Each powwow is unique and

⁴ See Tara Browner (2000), who traces the powwow back to the Omaha Dances of the 1840s and discusses the four historical eras of powwows; Valda Blundell (1993), who gives a good overview of the history of powwows, including changes in their purpose and performances; and Elaine Keillor (1995), who includes a detailed timeline of Canadian government legislation regarding powwows, potlatches and dances associated with religious rituals.

incorporates both local and pan-aboriginal expressive forms. Tulk writes of the powwow as a space for meaning creation, "neither intertribal nor local but a process of negotiation of two simultaneous modes of cultural expression" (2012, 84). Each powwow, rooted in its location and part of the cultural expanse of North America, both reflects the early powwows of the Great Plains, and negotiates its own expressive forms, influenced by a particular time and place – creating a "sense of nation-specific identity while fostering participation in a broader Indigenous community" (Tulk, 2012, 84).

Translation Through Space: Powwow in the Urban Dance Club Environment

Blundell (1993) writes that "[e]ach year brings a new array of innovative powwow forms." Translating the powwow into the electro dance club environment is, then, just one of the ways that aboriginal groups have adapted the powwow to fit a particular environment. Other adaptations of powwow practices in the past 70 years or so include, and are not limited to, the introduction of the contemporary powwow and its competitive dances; the emergence of new dances, including Jingle Dancing and Grass Dancing in the 1980s (Blundell, 1993); the shifting of the system of powwow song circulation and song-sharing protocol since recording technologies were made widely available, and commercial powwow music could be heard (and learnt) by anyone with access to a stereo (Hoefnagels, 2002); and the participation of women in drums, begun after World War II, but still not widespread throughout the powwow circuit today.⁵ Variations to the Grand Entry have been made over the decades, including, for example, the post-Oka Crisis powwow in

⁵ ATCR sample all types of drums: all-male, all-female, as well as mixed groups. Hoefnagel argues that the marginalization of women in powwow music is a form of internal colonialism, "meaning that Native men have internalized non-Native patriarchal views as a means of negotiating their own displacement through colonization. [...] Related to internal colonialism is the assertion that the government-imposed Indian Act created imbalance and restrictive gender expectations in First Nations communities" (2012, 117).

Kahnawake, in which veterans carried flag staffs but no flags (Blundell, 1993).

Powwows are "sites where aboriginal peoples (re)construct expressive cultural forms that reflect, and allow them to reflect upon, the nature of their aboriginal identities within the changing conditions of the contemporary world" (Blundell, 1993). With Powwow step, ATCR reflect upon the aspects of their aboriginal identities which are shaped by the urban environments in which they live. Bear Witness says: "Up until now the discussion about aboriginal people has been mainly restricted to what goes on in the communities, what goes on in the reservations, and to be aboriginal in the city in an urban environment has been largely overlooked, even by other aboriginal people" (Decouflet, 2012). Aboriginals are moving to cities at an increasing rate (Rice, 2013), and so more and more Aboriginals are identifying with powwow step.

The powwow songs that are sampled by ATCR have been chosen from among the entire powwow map, including songs from the Plains, Northern songs and Southern songs: "You can hear the different styles as you go across Canada. We kinda wanted to use it all" (Decouflet, 2012). For ATCR, the only borders are the ones that divide each second in the beats-per-minute factor that influences sample selection in all electro dance music. DJ NDN, who sang in a drum group as a child, explains the song selection process: "The first track that we did, the powwow step track, it was a question of tempo." ATCR's pan-powwow song selection echoes the diversity of the urban aboriginal population within which the group's members live. Even the group's name was chosen because it speaks for the collection of nations that make up its members: Anishinaabe, Cayuga and Mohawk.

Translation Through Time: Recontextualizing Outlawed Songs

In 2011, ATCR were contacted by Nolan Ward, an ethnomusicologist at UCLA who offered to help them accessing archival ethnomusicological field recordings (Warden, 2011).⁶ Up until that

⁶ Nolan Warden's 2011 article in *Ethnomusicology Review* explains the process by which ATCR were given access to the Speck & General

point, ATCR had only sampled commercial recordings of drums in their sets and on their albums. It was, after all, all they had access to. *Nation II Nation*, the group's second album, for example, sampled tracks exclusively from drum groups on Tribal Spirit, an independent record label in Quebec, and consent was secured for each song that was sampled (Rice, 2013). From an initial selection of recordings that Warden sent the group, ATCR choose the 1933-1934 recordings of the Six Nations Reserve in Brantford, Ontario – Cayuga songs from a midwinter ceremonial (Warden, 2011). The wax-cylinder recordings were made by University of Pennsylvania linguistic anthropologist Frank G. Speck (a former student of Franz Boas), and Cayuga Chief Alexander J. General (Deskáheh). The 38 wax cylinders, two hours' worth of music, had made their way to Indiana University's Archives of Traditional Music. They had previously been recorded onto reel-to-reel tape to preserve the songs, and were converted to digital audio for use by ATCR (Warden, 2011). This act of translating powwow songs from the past into a present context also brings with it what Moll refers to as "the presence of ancestry" (2011, 383). In this case, the presence of ancestry is underlined by the fact that DJ Shub aka Dan General, who was still a member of ATCR when they received the music, is also from Six Nations and has the same last name as Cayuga Chief Alexander J General (Warden, 2011).

The intro to ATCR's track "General Generations," starts with the voice of the archive's indexer explaining "Archives of traditional music cylinder project," followed by four bars of a sample of the 85-year old recording before the beat drops on the song. Speck & General's recordings were made before the amendment to the Indian Act, when off-reserve powwows were illegal. By sampling and remixing the recordings, ATCR have taken "a piece of indigenous history that was outlawed and suppressed" (Colhoun, 2015), and dropped it into a different environment, one with its own cultural, political and geographic context, but which is still dealing with the ramifications of the cultural and political context at the time of the

recordings. He takes a lot of credit for his involvement in the project, which he refers to as a "collaboration." While he did reach out to ATCR to let them know about the recordings, and got them digital copies of the wax-cylinder field recordings, is "collaborator" too strong a word?

field recordings. The recordings are being pulled forward and replaced on the continuum of the processes of powwow production. This new context changes the recordings – not just in the way that they have been digitized, cut up into little pieces and sampled by ATCR, but also in the way we interpret or read them – but at the same time, the recordings remain unchanged in that they document particular songs performed by particular people in particular ways, and this cannot be altered – the presence of ancestry.

Access, target and goal are important issues when discussing field recordings such as Speck & General's. Who had – and still has – access to these types of recordings, who is their target audience and why were they made? Hoefnagels writes about the extensive collection of field recordings of aboriginal music in North America that was made in the early 1900s by anthropologists, which were "stored for academic inquiry, remaining inaccessible to the source Native cultures and communities until the 1980s and 90s" (Hoefnagels, 129). Among other motivations, the recordings were made as academic exercises (and thus perhaps to further someone's academic career), as well as to serve as agents of preservation. Preservation implies safeguarding, protecting something from harm or loss, conserving something in an "original" state. Regarding the target audience, in general these types of recordings were made for academia, public shows, or even personal recording (Hoefnagels, 2002), more often than not archived in libraries and essentially made invisible (or inaudible) to all but a select few. By sampling and mixing these recordings with EDM, ATCR are refiguring their original access, target and goals by giving them a new audience, one that is public and made up of anyone who wants to listen, Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals alike. This changes the purpose of the recordings, too, for they are now part of the continuum of negotiations that make up powwow's aesthetic forms, and also part of aboriginal nation- and identity-building. The invisible is made visible – or the inaudible is made audible – with a refiguring of access, target and goals that are no longer just about preservation and academia.

Renegotiation of Song Transmission

There are numerous factors at play in powwow song transmission and song circulation. Traditionally, it has been a matter of oral transmission, with music and lyrics (if applicable) as well as song meaning being important aspects of a song's transmission (Hoefnagels 2002). Gabriel Desrosiers, member of the Northern Wind drum group and Ojibwa singer, dancer and composer, explains: "You have old traditional songs that are passed on that have significant meaning for people in their lives. Maybe it was a song of hope. Or maybe it was a song about the death of a special individual that would otherwise be forgotten. These songs keep on surviving and get passed on. And that's important. That's an important thing to know about a song" (2012, 91). The system of song circulation and transmission has changed dramatically since recording technologies have become widespread. While song-sharing protocols have relaxed, they have also become more complicated (Hoefnagels, 2002). Many songs have a particular meanings and should be performed in the right context, with the right dance. But today, songs can be learned from recordings without ever meeting the song-maker(s). Desrosiers explains: "My belief is, record your own compositions and just leave the old traditional songs alone. Let them get passed on another way. Traditional songs that belong in ceremonies or belong in the longhouse or roundhouse, leave them there. Leave them at the drum" (2012, 104). In general, current protocol for song circulation includes that drums groups may perform songs released on a recording, but they should not re-record what are known as borrowed songs (Hoefnagels, 2002). ATCR's powwow step complicates the issue of consent with regards to song transmission. From whom do they need permission to sample the Speck & General field recordings? The group did get permission from Indiana University to download the archives, but although the university holds the recordings, to whom do the songs belong? If there is no one alive to teach the meaning of a song, should it still be performed? Furthermore, is the kind of song sampling that ATCR do considered song transmission? Does a performer have to use his or her vocal chords to "sing" it, or do musicians such as ATCR change our notions of performance and singing? How does this affect the oral tradition of song transmission? Desrosiers suggests the

following about archival recordings: "You're preserving something about the importance of that song. You're preserving how it used to be. That song might have changed through time. Maybe that's what's happened to some old traditional songs. We don't know that" (2012, 104). If, as Desrosiers believes, the "real" value of the song resides in the song, ATCR are bringing these songs, along with their "real" values and meanings, into the present.

Translation of Representation: Confronting Racist Imagery

An essential element of ATCR's powwow step involves their use of videos that display racist imagery and/or stereotypes of aboriginals in film, TV and pop culture. During their performance at the block party for the opening of New York's Whitney Museum in May 2015 (LaSota, 2015), a scene from *Back to the Future 3* was projected onto a giant screen during the set. In the scene, Michael J. Fox's character is being chased in his DeLorean by mounted warriors. Projecting this scene is a form of parody – what the *New York Times* referred to as "repurposing samples from discriminatory film portrayals" (Caramanica, 2013) – as a way of decolonizing the racist imagery. The videos serve to confront peoples' ideas of what aboriginals look like and how they behave. According to Blundell, this type of parody has long been a practice at powwows, at which stereotypes are challenged "not by hiding the existence of such stereotypes from powwow viewers, but by incorporating many of the signs that construct them into dance and apparel forms, in some cases in highly parodic ways" (Blundell, 1993). The *Back to the Future* clip might remind viewers of when they first saw the movie, and they might be confronted by the realization that when they first saw the movie they weren't aware that they were looking at stereotypes or racist imagery. ATCR don't even have to look to the past to find racist depictions of aboriginals, for today's pop culture is ripe with stereotypes and racism: think Johnny Depp's depiction of Tonto from the 2013 remake of *The Lone Ranger*, which also gets some screen time through ATCR.

Conclusion

On their website, ATCR refer to their music as "the soundtrack to a contemporary evolution of the powwow" (Bio). I am reluctant to use the term "evolution" because it is associated with the idea of developing into something better or more advanced. What to call powwow step, then? I have been equally reluctant to use the term "adaptation" because I assumed an adaptation could only be of an "original" and I was uncomfortable with the potential hierarchical implications in that dichotomy. Powwow step is different from other powwows, but not necessarily more so than all powwows are from each other. Blundell writes of the post-Oka powwow at Kahnawake as "a text that can be located in the ongoing (historical) process of powwow producing" (1993). Not only can ATCR's powwow step be regarded in the same way, but so can every powwow, for each plays a part in the continuous practice of powwow producing. One of the definitions for "adapt" in the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* is "become adjusted to new conditions," and for "adaptation": "a thing made by adapting something else," as well as "*Biol.* The process by which an organism or species becomes suited to its environment." There's no mention of "original." Each powwow is a reaction to its environment, an adaptation to its environment. There is no hierarchy but rather a multiplicity of versions, each based on the other, negotiating with its surroundings to create meaning.

ATCR's powwow step is an adaptation, then, but so too are all powwows. Let's return to Jenny Williams' definition of translation from the introduction of this article: "every text that claims to be based in any way on a previous text is simply a translation" (2013, 8). We have seen with Blundell (1993) that a powwow can be read as a text. In this case, it can be argued that any powwow that claims to be based in any way on a previous powwow is a translation. As we have established that all powwows are adaptations, based on previous powwow(s), adjusting to a particular environment, then it stands to reason that all translations are adaptations.

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