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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Indigenous Hitmakerz in the Arctic: negotiating local needs with global ambitions within commercial music industries

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ABSTRACT

Although music by Inuit peoples is systematically relegated to the margins, recent artists from Nunavut have garnered limited commercial attention. Using a case study approach with critical political economy theoretical grounding, we focus on Hitmakerz, an independent record label based in the Arctic region of Nunavut. We analyze the ways independent music producers negotiate the commercial music system, specifically the symbolic and economic tensions, to promote Indigenous languages and counterhegemonic discourse. We argue that Hitmakerz has successfully negotiated local needs while pursuing global ambitions, strategically blending Inuktitut, colonial languages, pop, electronic, and rap for subversive purposes, and critiquing colonialism in digital forms produced in local environments and exported globally. Under limited conditions, Indigenous artists can exploit the marketplace to their advantage, as demonstrated by Hitmakerz.

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In 2018, *Sedna* (ᓄᓕᐱᓂᐅ), the sophomore album from the late Inuk artist Kelly Fraser was nominated for Best Indigenous Music Album of the year at the JUNOS, one of Canada's largest award shows. Named after the sea goddess of Inuit mythology, *Sedna* blends traditional melodies and throat singing with modern pop, electronica, and hip-hop. That year, the album also received a nomination for Best Pop Album at the Indigenous Music Awards (IMAs), which recognizes the diversity of Indigenous music making in Canada. The IMAs have been credited for raising the profiles of acclaimed Indigenous artists, including Buffy Sainte-Marie, Sadie Buck, and Susan Aglukark (Whelan, 2013).

Fraser's album is remarkable because of its creative blending as well as the prominent role of Inuktitut, a language with many dialects widely spoken in the Arctic region of Nunavut. The album addresses the impacts of colonization on Indigenous communities, while advocating for Indigenous rights. Identifying as an activist, Fraser has used commercial music to assert Inuit sovereignty, confront colonial policy, and maintain Inuktitut. "As the daughter of a residential school survivor, I believe that keeping our language stronger, will help my children, and their children, and so on," Fraser told Rosanna Deerchild of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Canada's flagship public radio network.

“So, we need to keep fighting to keep this communication alive. I wanted the young people to be inspired that we can use our language however we want” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2019).

Sedna’s nominations were a boon to Fraser and to her label Hitmakerz, which specializes in mixing Inuit music with contemporary pop, hip-hop, and electronica. Founded by Thor Simonsen in 2016, the Iqaluit-based label represents local artists who blend traditional and contemporary musical styles, including Angela Amarualik, Aocelyn, and Joey Nowyuk.

According to Scales (2013), Indigenous musicians in North America had long “toiled in increasing obscurity” (p. 83), having historically been marginalized in the global music industries, particularly those who choose to perform in local dialects. In recent years, however, there has been increasing industry recognition of Indigenous artists. In what has become known in industry circles as Canada’s “Indigenous Renaissance,” several Indigenous artists, including Jeremy Dutcher, Tanya Tagaq, and Colombian-Canadian Lido Pimienta have all been awarded some of Canada’s most prestigious prizes (Johnson, 2018).

The relative success of Hitmakerz suggests that, under limited conditions, Indigenous artists can exploit the system of differences. Focusing on Hitmakerz, we explore the specific strategies and industry practices used by Inuit artists entering a highly competitive marketplace to produce commercially viable music that can revitalize Indigenous languages and promote counterhegemonic discourses. Here, we adopt Sterne’s (2014) call to employ the term “music industries” rather than “music industry,” to account for the polymorphous set of relationships that exist between various enterprises that include record production, music publishing, artist management, concert promotion, and recording services. From this perspective, labels like Hitmakerz are not simply recording and promoting the music of Indigenous artists, they are helping them acquire a disparate set of skills that will allow them to navigate multiple, sometimes overlapping, businesses.

Concurrently, we examine the limitations of the commercial framework, which exerts pressures to convert Indigenous music into a product recognizable to Western audiences. As demonstrated by Fraser’s former nomination for Best Indigenous Music Album, music of Indigenous artists has been collapsed into a singular category of Indigenous music.¹ Furthermore, there are market pressures on artists to rearticulate locally produced music to have mass appeal despite the resource constraints they face.

We ground our study in critical political economy, which calls for attention to the relationship between the symbolic and economic aspects of cultural production (Hardy, 2014, p. 15). This symbolic dimension affords the opportunity to understand Hitmakerz’ implicit and explicit anticolonial efforts. Anticolonialism interrupts settler colonialism through resurgent and symbolic efforts such as language reclamation or redressing discrimination (Patel, 2016, p. 7), and decolonialism concerns the material terrain of Indigenous land and life (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 21). Therefore, research in this area must attend to the ways media organizations are funded, structured, and regulated (Hardy, 2014, p. 8). Yet, there is a need to understand how music is “a means of envisioning futures and dreaming new worlds into being, an embedded, critical part of decolonial practice” (Martineau, 2015, p. 243).

We focus on music production in Nunavut for two reasons. First, the region's geographic isolation and arctic environments mean that artists must overcome spatial barriers to participate in local and global music marketplaces. At the same time, the geographic isolation of Nunavut has slowed the *total* encroachment of English or French (Allen, 2007), with Inuktitut widely spoken with over 100,000 fluent speakers. This requires artists to negotiate the hybridization of Western language and sounds to reach target audiences (de Kloet, 2005).

Indigeneity and the music industries

To understand how Hitmakerz is situated within music industries, we first trace the historical and appropriative politics of Indigenous music. After the advent of recorded music in the late 1800s, the reception of Indigenous music was fundamentally impacted by Western practices of appropriation, othering, and primitivism (Said, 1978; Ziff & Rao, 1997). At the end of the nineteenth century, composers and popular songwriters of European backgrounds began integrating motifs of Indigenous music, just as these communities were being devastated by colonization. Scholars working within the incipient discipline of ethnomusicology also began to categorize Indigenous music using European frameworks (McNutt, 1984, p. 62).

As an object of public consumption, designating Indigenous music as exotic or traditional became further entrenched. As Corona (2017) argues, the process by which music labels and music journalists categorize music reflects racial politics: artists and cultural producers from minority groups often obtain visibility by appearing as essentially dissimilar to mainstream (white) rock. Edgar (2014) argues that racial bordering in music industries can be a form of colonization by “resist[ing] and limit[ing] society’s oppressed” (p. 168). By distinguishing Indigenous music from *music*, record executives continued to reify relationships between the colonizing and colonized (Feld, 2000).

However, technological, social, and economic advents have disrupted the music marketplace and impacted Indigenous artists. There has been a proliferation of online streaming platforms, which have opened up new distribution channels for Indigenous music. Because these platforms are not spatially bounded, there are greater opportunities to cultivate markets that transcend region and nation state. At the same time, streaming platforms have reified existing hierarchies, tightening the power of the biggest companies, often resulting in less payouts for artists, and impacting the visibility of Independent Canadian musicians (deWaard et al., 2022).

Through the marketplace, marginalized groups have an opportunity to assert voices that are often silenced (Rudrow, 2020). During the American Indian Movement in the 1970s, Indigenous music received heightened attention (Nagel, 1996). Black power music, including hyperpoliticized rap, strategically intervened in popular music during the same period (Watkins, 2001). As Lipsitz (1994) argues, transnational capitalism operates flexibly around the globe, giving rise to local forms of popular resistance and counterhegemonic organizing. Commercial music, however, travels relatively freely and facilitates communication, consciousness-raising, and exploration of new identities (Lipsitz, 1994, pp. 29, 37).

Yet, the conversion of Indigenous music, first into a national project and then into a transnational product, requires various forms of erasure, including the collapsing of

music of differing communities (Feld, 2000, p. 151). Then, to reach a mass audience, there are pressures to stress universality over locality; as a result, Indigenous artists often negotiate or exclude aspects that are deemed appropriate for consumers (e.g. lyrics containing sacred stories).

Music produced in Nunavut raises unique considerations as corporate exploitation and state policies have done much to destroy traditional Inuit ecologies. However, the advent of digital media raised possibilities for new forms of cultural expression (Lehr et al., 2007). Improvements in digital technologies revolutionized Inuit music so that it transcends regions and local markets.

To analyze the specific strategies employed by Indigenous musicians to negotiate local needs with commercial mandates, we draw on critical political economy and anticolonial approaches. Political economic theorists attend to how commercial music is funded, organized, and regulated (Golding & Murdock, 1991). To account for Canada's national context, we also draw on the research of Garafalo (1991), deWaard et al. (2022), and Sutherland (2021), who have studied the role of state and private actors in fostering a distinctly Canadian music scene. Simultaneously, ideology is embedded within industry practices that indelibly shape the production, distribution, and promotion of music. White supremacy, for example, exists within music industries, and by using anticolonial approaches, the structures of settler coloniality can be detected, named, and countered (Patel, 2016).

Researching Hitmakerz

We utilize an illustrative case study approach, productive for studying phenomena in situated, real-world contexts and bringing awareness to issues on edges of popular culture (Yin, 2017). However, case study methods alone are inappropriate to account for complexities of Indigenous music. Thus, we also turn to principles of decolonizing methodologies, particularly attentiveness to Indigenous ways of being and knowing (Smith, 2012). First, we introduce ourselves as a protocol of responsibility in acknowledging ties to this research. Ashley is a citizen of the Coquille Nation involved in language revitalization projects and researched Native appropriations in music industries (Cordes & Merskin, 2019). Chris researches language ideology and potentials to promote marginalized communities within frameworks of commercial cultural production (Chávez, 2021). Through mentoring, advocacy, and allyship we are connected to several Indigenous communities. We acknowledge that we are not Inuit from Nunavut but are invested in global and local discussions of Indigenous languages.

To better understand the experiences and motivations of the Indigenous artists and producers that call Nunavut their ancestral homeland, we sought out perspectives through interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted by Zoom and audio recording from February 12 to May 18, 2021. We interviewed eight people: five artists that are associated with Hitmakerz (all of whom are featured on an album titled *Ajungi*), a Juno award-winning Inuk artist, and two music professionals involved in supporting and producing Inuktitut music. These interviews resulted in 124 pages of transcriptions. We triangulated findings by systematically including popular press about Hitmakerz, analyses of their songs, and descriptions of community workshops that Hitmakerz holds.

Overcoming barriers to entry

The Arctic region of Nunavut lies at the periphery of the Canadian music scene, which itself lies at the periphery of global music production. According to deWaard et al. (2022), the Canadian record industry is beholden to much larger American recording industries. The influence of American-based labels has been profound, making it difficult to cultivate a music scene that can be considered distinctly Canadian.

To overcome these inequities, national and local governments have provided funding to subsidize production, distribution, and promotion of Canadian music. As Sutherland (2021) asserts, Canada has one of the most extensive systems of any country for art funding, yet Indigenous artists have largely not benefited from these policies. For Nunavut's Inuit artists, their marginalization has been exacerbated by the region's geographic isolation. Nunavut is the northernmost region of the Canadian Arctic, which spans almost 810,000 square miles, and accounts for one-fifth of Canada's landmass. A 1,452 miles distance separates Nunavut's capital city Iqaluit and Toronto, which remains the cultural hub of Canadian music industries.

This is not to say that a vibrant scene has not developed in Nunavut. Aakuluk Music, Nunavut's first record label, was launched in 2016, the same year that Hitmakerz was established, and represents local artists that include Northern Haze, the Jerry Cans, and Aasiva. In 2017, the label hosted Nunavut Music Week and provided a platform for local artists including Kelly Fraser, rapper Mister, electropop vocalist Riit, and throat singers Cynthia Pitsiulak and Charlotte Qamaniq. As Cannady (2021) argues, festivals can serve an important role in bridging the periphery and the center.

Hitmakerz is distinctive because Simonsen has positioned the label as both a music enterprise and a cultural resource, allowing him to access multiple revenue streams. Simonsen, who is an ally who speaks Inuktitut, has described the production of commercial music along Indigenous language revitalization efforts adding, "culturally I think music can play an even more important role in strengthening language and keeping traditional songs, stories, and ways of making music alive" (Waterman, 2020).

Simultaneously, Hitmakerz was established to cultivate and represent aspiring Inuit musicians. In their words, they want to "empower artists to build sustainable, long-term careers in music." Hitmakerz offers workshops, which are designed to give artists the creative, production, and business skills to generate a music career. These workshops include creative training, which includes singing and instrument lessons, vocal production, arrangement, and mixing and mastering of tracks. They also teach a variety of business-related skills including marketing, website design, social media, grant-writing, bookkeeping, accounting, contracts, and legal. The label also offers distribution services, including an online platform that enables artists to sell merchandise.

Here, Simonsen demonstrates a clear understanding that music production is not simply talent, but that artists need a diverse skillset to navigate a complex ecosystem that includes distinct businesses that are related to music. During an interview with *The Voice*, Hitmakerz co-founder Simonsen argued that local music can benefit the community. "From a purely economic perspective, music can create local entrepreneurship (selling music) that in turn creates a viable, sustainable economic resource, and a great alternative to current exports like mining and fishing" (Waterman, 2020).

To gain a foothold in a highly competitive media marketplace, independent artists must overcome the spatial barriers, including the costs associated with recording and distributing music, and promoting that music through tours, and marketing. The Inuit artists we spoke to overcame some of these obstacles through proficient use of mobile communications technologies. They described recording music and videos on their iPhones and iPads and then sharing content on social media. The capacity for mobile devices to also help artists overcome Nunavut spatial barriers was evident during the production of *Ajungi*, an album produced by Hitmakerz. Simonsen began the process by posting an open call on Facebook to send demos. Prospective collaborators were able to record their submissions on smartphones, which allowed Simonsen and his collaborators to easily review the music.

After making selections, Hitmakerz invested in transporting a select number of musicians from their home communities to Iqaluit. As the capital city, Iqaluit could serve as a centralized location to draw in talent from across the region. Producing music in Nunavut can be a particular challenge. Surrounded by tundra and the sea, there are few roads, which means that travel between cities is largely by air (Curtis, 2013). The region's isolation means that travel within Nunavut is expensive (Census Canada, 2016). This is exacerbated by the lack of major music venues to play in the region, which restricts the visibility of aspiring artists who must tour beyond their communities to showcase their music. During an interview with *The Voice*, Simonsen explained that travel expenses for an individual cost more than \$4,000 (Waterman, 2020).

To record music, Simonsen created a makeshift recording studio in his mother's house in Iqaluit. Shauna Seeteenak, an Inuk hip-hop and rap artist featured on the album, described Simonsen's ability to create music with limited resources:

We recorded the album at his mother's house. Yeah, at first I was involved with the *Ajungi* album. Thor really liked my voice and wanted to work with me more. So, he suggested that I sign up for funding for me to be able to have an album done. So, I did that and he helped me throughout the process. He recorded my vocals, and he did the mixing and the instrumentals, and he had help from other people to have an album done (February 18, 2021).

The goal is to record high-quality music as efficiently as possible. As Aasiva, an Inuk musician who blends indie folk music with Inuktitut and Inuit throat singing, told us, "anything can be a studio if you have the right equipment" (February 18, 2021). In fact, Aasiva met Simonsen when she was trying to buy sealskin pelts at a local store and overheard Simonsen recording in an improvised studio in the back.

Another strategy has been to access funding at the national and local levels. Among the sponsors listed on Hitmakerz website are Canada Council for the Arts, Digital Skills for Youth Program, the Government of Nunavut, Inuit Training Corporation. But a notable sponsor is the Foundation Assisting Canadian Talent on Recordings (FACTOR), a private foundation that administers state funding for cultivating and supporting Canada's music industries. As Sutherland (2021) notes, FACTOR's mission has shifted with the election of Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party of Canada in 2015. Recently, FACTOR has followed the federal government's lead in cultivating a more diverse and inclusive conception of Canadian identity, with an emphasis on Indigenous peoples.

Despite these funding opportunities, several of the musicians mentioned that they needed to negotiate their career goals and pursue supplemental income because their careers as artists were not lucrative enough. Many demonstrated a deftness in grant writing to fill some gaps. With Inuktitut designated as vulnerable (Endangered Languages Project, “Inuktitut”), Nunavut’s Language Preservation Act provides grants to support local efforts to maintain cultures and languages. The Department of Culture and Heritage at the Government of Nunavut offers small business funding to help them comply with language legislation. Peter Kalm, the host of an Estonian radio show and long-term supporter of Inuit artists through his work at Open Broadcaster Company, described some of the funding opportunities:

I know they [various state organizations] have given money for publicists, for albums, for, you know, funding travel for concerts. The government of Nunavut has given grants. There’s also the Canada Council for the Arts. I know that Kelly Fraser did receive funding from them (February 24, 2021).

Aasiva also described the importance of funding. “I know that there are so many Indigenous people who have all these incredible ideas,” she told us. “But sometimes they may not know how to write up a proposal” (February 18, 2021). Aasiva recounted the arduous process of seeking funding for her workshop, Uke’Cray, in which she teaches ukulele:

We had tried for two years before my proposal was approved. So, we had tried different funding agencies within our territory. Thankfully I had someone who was very experienced in writing proposals [Simonsen], so they were able to help me out with that. Finally, after two years, the regional organization believed in my idea (February 18, 2021).

Aasiva received funding from the Qikiqtani Inuit Association and other government funding opportunities. But acquiring economic resources is only one step. As a grant-funded enterprise, Aasiva also needed to perform the additional labor of substantiating impacts of her work, including documenting the number of workshop participants, and collecting receipts, so that she could generate activity and financial reports at the end of the program.

Negotiating local needs with global ambitions

Meeting local needs

We found that producers of Hitmakerz demonstrate a keen awareness of the mechanisms of commercial music industries. While cultivating a product meant for global export, Simonsen and his collaborators’ knowledge of music production, marketing, and fundraising, enables Hitmakerz to pursue the goal of preserving languages and cultures. These artists are in the continual position of negotiating very local needs with global ambitions. This became evident in artist discussions of audience and their ideal listener. For local needs, many stated their goal was to create music for members of their community, often concealing meanings, omitting the names of community members they lost by suicide that they sing about, or using Inuktitut phrases that render their meanings less legible. Martineau (2015) has called this practice “opacity,” a subversive method of recuperating decolonial goals while still entertaining. Susan Aglukark, a Juno award winning

artist who gained notoriety in the 1990s, was named as an inspiration by many Hitmakerz artists because she primarily creates music for other Inuit peoples, stating:

I have a responsibility first to my own people. And so, I have to honor that before I honor the one who doesn't understand my language because they're not Inuit ... if a song comes to me in Inuktitut, I will write it and record it in Inuktitut ... This is who we are. Take it or leave it (May 18, 2021).

Here, she is describing her response to the gravitational pull toward music that accommodates a broader audience. During our interview with Aasiva, she described the relationship between music, language regeneration, and anticolonial discourses:

The reason I started recording my album was because I wanted our language preserved in a sense. I'm also a throat singer. So, I wanted that aspect included into my music ... When I started recording, my first album was to encourage Inuit to start singing and also kind of exposing the world to music (February 18, 2021).

Aasiva demonstrates a clear awareness that the threat to Inuktitut was a direct result of colonization. She also shared that it can be difficult to interrupt dominance of English. However, her efforts to preserve Inuktitut are impacting a younger generation:

There's so much competition these days. English is everywhere. English is in our workplaces, at our schools, on TV, music. So, I was looking at my younger cousins; I wanted to write songs in Inuktitut to help encourage them to speak Inuktitut whenever they can ... I've had many parents approach me and thank me for singing in Inuktitut because their children are speaking Inuktitut at home now (February 18, 2021).

Truth-telling as form of therapy

Hitmakerz uses songs to subvert the imperial gaze and truth-tell about their experiences with colonialism. They imagine futurities in the Arctic that are freer from the violence they sing about. Therefore, artists meet a local need to confront traumas resulting from colonization, including policies that supported abusive residential school systems, economic disenfranchisement, and the discouragement of Indigenous language use. They shared a belief that music can critique colonialism while reclaiming Inuit identity. Consider the following testimony from Seeteenak:

Us Inuit have had like a very hard past, and there's still living intergenerational trauma that has been being passed on for generations ... So I find myself resilient because of all the hardships that I went through. And I decided to make that the theme of my album because a lot of the songs in that album talk about how I made it through this or how I made it through that and how I'm still surviving today (February 18, 2021).

Aglukark related when she shared, "I would be third generation colonized, which means I carry three generations of trauma ..." She goes on to describe the ways music can help Inuit communities persevere:

So accidentally stumbling into an opportunity, i.e. the music industry, song, writing and singing, but the arts as a whole, and it becoming, you know, kind of therapy, if you will ... English, being a second language, and I would say for the first 10, 12 years, and to a degree now, where I find myself emotionally exhausted because of the work we're doing, I defer to my language (May 18, 2021).

She has also negotiated the music industries to meet her community's needs and started the Arctic Rose Foundation supporting Northern Indigenous youth both economically and emotionally through the arts.

A consistent theme during the interviews is that music is a form of healing. Seeteenak, currently in the process of completing an album titled *Therapy Session*, uses music to convey resiliency. Angela Amarualik, originally from Igloolik and the most well-known artist associated with Hitmakerz, is titling her upcoming album *Uvannik*, which means “by myself,” and is a response to making music alone after she had an influential mentor associated with Hitmakerz who is now gone. The songs will be happier and center love, family, culture, and land. Similarly, Aasiva's album, *Niriunniq*, deals with hope, in the face of adversity and the connection to Nunavut's natural environments.

Themes of trauma and healing are evident in the *Ajungi* album. *Ajungi* means people who are capable, and the album discusses mental health and colonialism. Holistically, *Ajungi* spreads messages of hope. Simonsen shared,

It's no secret that the Inuit and Indigenous communities are facing incredible challenges, both mental, economic, and cultural. Mental health issues are a big part of daily life in Nunavut, and I think the fact that so many of the songs are about mental health is simply a reflection of the people and the times (Waterman, 2020).

They take their political/personal obligations seriously and actively participate in Indigenous truth-telling (Simpson, 2011). In the song “Inuurama (I Am a Person),” Ehski uses his language and English rap to convey his youth marked by substance abuse, boredom, and of being a survivor of colonization: “I drank my life, then smoked it away, to forget my problems, I do it every day, I used to sniff [propane] to get rid of boredom ... went to prison, dealing with stresses” (Hitmakerz [feat. Ekski], 2019). In “Letter to myself,” Shauna Seeteenak sings,

I saw my counselor ... He ain't never had to go through it, so can he understand intergenerational trauma does then? If only people could step in my shoes and walk a mile, can't never forget the slap marks when I was child. It's a shitty feeling when it creeps in the deep end (Hitmakerz [feat. Shauna Seeteenak], 2019).

Manic Range and Jbrenton share their experiences with bullying and suicidal thoughts in their song, “Childhood”:

Now I grew up I was going through a lot, battle through depression having suicidal thoughts. Always got beaten up and it never really stopped, maybe that's the reason I was drinking, I was taking shots. Look at me now, I've been sober for a long time, I have lost a lot of people from the death of suicide.

Experiences shared in these songs reflect Duran and Duran's (1995) conceptualization of postcolonial stress that Indigenous peoples can face when coping with colonization. Additionally, the local social justice efforts of Hitmakerz artists make their lyrics material and actionable. Fraser is featured in a video to increase pride in youth in her community (CBC News, 2018). Amarualik is a role model in her community and took her service obligations seriously as Miss Igloolik in 2018. Part of the proceeds from the *Ajungi* album is also donated to the Kamatsiaqtut Nunavut Helpline, a 24-hour hotline for mental health. As it aims to achieve goals of Indigenous empowerment and linguistic revitalization through music, Hitmakerz embodies an activist agenda that faces

noteworthy economic challenges, creative constraints, and the complex social and environmental conditions of Nunavut.

Engaging with counterhegemonic discourses means also delinking pain by sharing a more positive, healthy Indigenous future that communities desire. As Tuck (2019) shares, “desire, yes, accounts for the loss and despair, but also the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities” (p. 417). In the song, “Adventure Waits” by Aocelyn, a similarly upbeat message is shared:

We’re living life to the fullest, dreams come true when it’s within your reach, have faith and believe, and turn it into reality ...

In “Sapingillunga,” by Amarualik, this desire is expressed as she repeatedly sings, “Don’t ever give up on your dream” in Inuktitut and English. Including Indigenous joy, adventure, club, and party music on *Ajungi* suggests that some songs can meet commercial needs and counter the idea that Indigenous music always needs to address pain and suffering, while still sometimes addressing trauma in an agentic manner on other songs.

Legitimizations

Amarualik has followed in Fraser’s footsteps by successfully converting music that reflects local needs, language, and traditions, into a commodity with mass appeal. During an interview with *Canadian Beats*, Amarualik described the experience,

I’m from Igloolik, Nunavut and I play Ukulele, throatsing, and sing in Inuktitut to preserve my language. I began writing songs when I was sixteen, sharing my voice and songs on social media. In 2017, Hitmakerz came to Igloolik, to host workshops on songwriting and music production. I was one of the participants, and now I am an artist and instructor at Hitmakerz! It feels good to be able to be an inspiration for the next generation of Inuit artists (Melanson, 2019).

Amarualik has become a new face of Hitmakerz. Her first album is produced almost exclusively in Inuktitut, and, like Fraser, she has found some success in the larger music marketplace. In 2018, Amarualik was nominated for three IMAs, winning the award for Best Inuit, Indigenous language, or Francophone Album.

One of the markers of success in music industries is inclusion in the industries’ many awards shows (Watson & Anand, 2006), one of the culture industry’s “circuits of legitimation” (English, 2002, p. 111). These shows not only provide peer validation, but also have tremendous influence on sales. Award shows of music industries can play a role in determining which of the ever-increasing number of genres being created is recognized as merit worthy.

Indigenous peoples have typically had to build opportunities to showcase their music of many genres; a hybrid negation of award shows in their own way. To legitimize their industries, the Indigenous Music Awards, Native American Music Awards, National Indigenous Music Awards, and Indspire were created to elevate Indigenous artists’ exposure and their cultural capital on local, national, and international stages. Radio shows that have a mission in reflecting cultural diversity in Canada such as CBC Radio Unreserved and Indigenous Sounds have carved out important spaces for their music to play. Hitmakerz fits squarely within this strategy and circumstance, a label made to fill a gap for Inuit peoples because the mainstream industries lack equitable opportunities.

Global ambitions

To varying degrees, the artists demonstrated an awareness of possibilities to enter the marketplace as a niche product. But there was also an openness to expanding potential listener bases. Consider the following testimony from Marc Meriläinen, a music producer who draws from his Finnish and Ojibway traditions. He also worked closely with Fraser with his label Meriläinen Music Inc. According to Meriläinen:

Our target audience is simple—anyone who wants to listen to good music. Although a little more complicated than that. As we utilize different statistics and demographical information to reach target audiences. It really all depends on the artist and their music. We try to make a custom plan for everyone (March 12, 2021).

Meriläinen's description of audience aligns with marketplace logic, in which quantitative data are used to structure resources to reach the most appropriate market. But how one conceptualizes the audience will, in turn, shape the relationship between language, counterhegemonic discourses, and musical expression. If musicians define their audience as smaller in-group members proficient in Inuktitut, there is motivation to produce an album entirely in Inuktitut. However, if the audience includes both in-group and out-group members, the artist typically must employ language in ways that will not isolate listeners.

Simonsen has been vocal regarding global ambitions for Hitmakerz. "We wanted to create a holistic album that would be palatable to a global audience" (Krewen, 2020). Here, by aiming to transcend niche audiences and access mainstream music platforms, Simonsen is attempting to accomplish what few Indigenous music projects have done.

To balance these goals, both the producers and artists had to attend to the issue of language in their negotiation of hybridity. The use of Inuktitut can be seen by the existing industry as a liability because it is currently incomprehensible to a potential global audience. To have global appeal, cultural producers are incentivized to appeal to what Straubhaar calls a "cultural-linguistic market" (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 271), geographically dispersed but culturally and linguistically linked. From the Canadian perspective, the colonial languages of English and French offer the promise of reaching larger markets globally, but it requires the artists to negotiate their goals.

Hitmakerz artists have employed several strategies for making the songs comprehensible to English and French speakers, including the translation of lyrics, code-mixing, and singing in English. *Ajungi* has songs, such as "Sapingillunga," which have some Inuktitut that is sung and then translated into English, and most songs are entirely in English or contain minimal Indigenous language integration. Amarualik told us, "I noticed that non-Inuktitut speakers who are friends of Inuit, they support Inuit music a lot so it's always nice when they can understand" (May 16, 2021).

Many Hitmakerz artists have further integrated musical influences from outside the community. For example, Aasiva went on to describe the way she includes throat singing with beatboxing:

All of my songs are in Inuktitut and we're also incorporating elements of throat singing and beatboxing, so that's been popular in the last decade, I would say very modern. So that's something I'm really excited to kind of help expose that to the world. So instead of using

a drum kit, I had asked Mr. Lee to come on to the album and do some beatboxing instead (February 18, 2021).

The practice of borrowing from Western music has led to some critique. Before her passing, Fraser shared on social media: “I face a ton of lateral violence and criticism and hate ... I’m just trying to make our language and culture stronger” (Sinclair, 2019). Fraser’s mother said in a statement, “Kelly suffered from PTSD for many years as a result of childhood traumas, racism, and persistent cyber-bullying ... She was actively seeking help and spoke openly about her personal challenges online and through her journey” (Woo, 2019). While most of the artists we spoke to believed that their musical and linguistic innovation was well-received by their communities, this hybridity is not embraced by all. Other Hitmakerz artists, like Aocelyn, have experienced similar bullying. Kalm stated:

And she [Fraser] did have her critics, you know, like in every culture. You get the purists who think that you should stick to only very traditional music. And some people thought that she shouldn’t be singing pop music or country music in Inuktitut ... You get that with every community (February 24, 2021).

According to Seeteenank, Inuit music needs to be “showcased” more, and understanding postcolonial histories of Inuit music could lead to local and global audiences appreciating different genres for their nuance.

Subversion within the commercial system

We conclude by tethering Hitmakerz’ strategies of subversion and hybrid negotiations of the music industry to illustrate what the label and artists add to current understandings of Indigenous music in commercial systems. Much of the literature on commercial Indigenous music has largely characterized Indigenous musicians as passive agents of globalizing forces. However, subversion, or the process of resistance through cultural texts constrained by dominant systems, has long been employed by Indigenous musicians in an inherently political manner. Their methods of subversion shared in this article include linguistic negotiation and preservation, opacity, Indigenous truth telling, and making music an explicit form of healing from postcolonial traumas. Our interviews suggest that artists associated with Hitmakerz have been able to exploit the system of difference to their advantage to gain footholds in music industries and compete for recognition. Hitmakerz is clear about priorities, to support Inuit artists and strengthen Inuit cultures (Hitmakerz, 2020). Simonsen and his collaborators provide knowledge of music production, marketing, and fundraising. These artists, in turn, use that knowledge to create music that preserves language and culture in spite of dominant mainstream industry trends. While Hitmakerz has done transformative work, Kalm indicated that cofounder Kelly Fraser wanted a strong political message, more control, and a change in her musical style on her final album. She no longer worked with Hitmakerz for her final album *Decolonize* and instead worked with Marc Meriläinen and Izaak Wapachee. One song, *Get It*, was ultimately released and the rest will depend on a resolution of her estate.

The other artists also demonstrate a keen awareness of the mechanisms by which many commercial music industries operate and have developed clear strategies to

negotiate and overcome barriers to entry. This has created new possibilities to meet community needs by preserving Inuktitut while engaging in counterhegemonic discourses. Most evident is the preservation of Inuktitut, as Aasiva has pointed to younger children picking up the language because of listening to her music. There are also archives of these songs online that have embedded language translations, which is a form of preservation.

At the same time, the music produced by Hitmakerz artists reflects hybridity associated with globalization. This kind of musical blending is not new. As Lehr et al. (2007) argue, Inuit peoples have long created unique music that reflects relationships with the Arctic and interactions with Europeans in the seventeenth century introduced new musical genres to Inuit peoples. What has changed, however, is the speed, ease, and scale that this kind of musical exchange is occurring. This hybridity is characteristic of globalization; a mixing that suits global markets. As a field of cultural production, commercial music is highly subject to economic pressures.

There are incentives to cultivate music that will have an appeal beyond Nunavut, especially since the political economic forces of the music industries in Canada largely leave Indigenous musician unable to fully support themselves through their artistic work alone. They, again, partially financially remedy this with grants that require additional labor dynamics that listeners, behind the scenes listening through platforms like Spotify and Soundcloud, for example, are likely unaware of. Currently, these grant funding opportunities, workshops that promote literacies and competencies in the industries held by Hitmakerz, and allyship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and producers, are crucial at a time when industry concentration is pronounced and tends to promote the same limited superstar artists in Canada, Nunavut, and across the globe (deWaard et al., 2022). Compounding this issue is that many Indigenous radio stations in Canada still tend to play folk, country, and classic rock, often leaving less airtime for Indigenous artists that perform in rap, punk, metal, dance, and other types of music.

Artists and labels who sponsor them are also motivated to build audiences that extend beyond Inuit that speak Inuktitut through hybrid sound dynamics. Aasiva describes the process in which language is reduced to a sound:

I have received feedback, “I have no idea what you’re saying, but your language is so beautiful, and I really wish I could understand what you’re saying. And, also, I’ve never heard Inuit. I’ve never heard this language before. What are you speaking?” So, there’s a lot of curiosity that comes from people who will have never listened to music before being exposed to enough to do for the first time. And it’s incredible to share that moment of connection where we both kind of have curiosity with, like, with music, you know (February 18, 2021).

Some expressed an unanticipated comfort reducing language to a sound. According to Hitmakerz artist Stuart Quiyak, lyrical comprehension is non-essential if the listener enjoys the sound:

I mean, I’ve noticed with people that listen to whatever songs that sound good. I mean, they have Spanish music and I talked to them. I’m like I used Spanish and they’re like, no, it just sounds cool. So, I guess I’m hoping for that kind of impact (March 5, 2021).

This kind of curiosity provides moments of sharing, as the artists suggest, but also has a long legacy in external exoticization by listeners. Audiences of “world music” and “world

beat,” for example, which had a heyday in the 1980s, *curiously* consumed trip-hop songs that featured samples of more “traditional” Native music across the globe (Scales, 2013). During this time, Indigenous artists gained notoriety by participating in an industry marked by appropriation. Now Hitmakerz is negotiating those established norms of the industry, while also rendering their music overtly anticolonial on their own terms.

When we spoke with Aglukark, she distinguished art from commerce, stating “if you want to be a celebrity, that’s a completely different machine than being an artist” (May 18, 2021). Here, Aglukark, reflects ongoing debates about the nature of cultural production. Art, it is argued, is pure, free of economic considerations, while commercial products are deemed vacuous, driven by profit motive rather than artistic merit. The findings of our research suggest that Indigenous music can be impactful with aims of language preservation, subversion, and conscious hybridity, and can be, under certain conditions, profitable.

Note

1. The problem is flattening Indigenous music into a homogenous segregated genre. However, using the term Indigenous music as an overarching framework to discuss music made by Indigenous musicians, with rich and productive differences, is acceptable (Scales, 2013).

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