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Music Heals: Lyrical Consciousness, Volume 1

By Irene Gonzalez¹

1. Taboo, “Stand Up/Stand N Rock,” *Single*, 5:13
2. Lyla June “All Nations Rise,” *The People’s Knowledge*, 4:19
3. Quinto Sol, “Tierra Olvidada,” *Single*, 8:49
4. La Santa Cecilia, “ICE El Hielo,” *Treinta Días*, 4:30
5. Tupac, “Keep ya head up,” *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z...*, 4:24

Introduction

Lyrical Consciousness: Volume 1 is a mixtape that focuses on themes of resistance and love in communities of color. Through these topics, this collection of songs strives to provide a reflection on the struggles that Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) have undergone in the journey for freedom and self-determination. Music has always played a crucial role in the way that BIPOC communities process complex issues of race, class, and gender. Music has long been used as a form of healing, resistance, and unification. Throughout post-colonial times, music has served as a mechanism to oppose colonial structures and systems. Racism is still deeply embedded in systems and structures in the United States. People of color are negatively impacted by such institutions as for profit prisons, the police state, and many of the other remnants of settler colonialism that remain in place to this day.

This paper argues that music has been used as a tool of resistance, and analyzes the messages that are conveyed by the artists highlighted in this mixtape. This collection of songs

¹ The author, being also an editor, recused themselves from the editing process regarding this article. It received no special treatment and was required to conform to all standard requirements.

provides a unique perspective on how marginalized communities maneuver through society. Music can connect people to issues such as settler colonialism, environmental injustice, immigration policy, and the criminal justice system in the United States. This essay will examine music from select artists that deliver messages about cultural identity and social justice. It will investigate the messages these artists communicate in their music and how it reflects the struggles of their own communities. Through music, one can build a deep connection to these topics, both in recognizing the historic structures of inequality, and reflecting on how these issues continue to reinforce inequality today.

Indigenous Peoples are Sovereign Nations

When Europeans first touched down in the Americas in the fifteenth century and began colonizing the land, a genocide ensued that eliminated many Native American tribes. Colonization was a very strategic project that worked to erase any bit of native identity and culture.² Taking away agency from indigenous peoples is not simply a thing of the past, it is a struggle that native people deal with to this day. American society tends to group Native American people into the category of “minority.” Scholar David E. Wilkins argues in his book, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*, that Indigenous peoples are different from other ethnic groups in the United States because they are sovereign nations, not minorities. When using the term “minorities” towards indigenous peoples, it disregards the fact that indigenous peoples are the original inhabitants of the Americas.³ They are what remains of the tribal nations, bands, and pueblos that existed long before the formation of the United States.

² Gilio-Whitaker, Dina. *As Long As Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*. Beacon Press, 2019.

³ David E. Wilkins and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 38

Treaties are a vital aspect of the political relationship between native people and the United States. Relations between U.S and native nations are complex because “tribal rights are not based on or subject to U.S constitutional law and are therefore not protected by the constitution.”⁴ However, under Article 6 of the U.S constitution, it states that “treaties made, or which shall be made, under the Authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land; and the Judges in every State shall be bound thereby, any Thing in the Constitution or Laws of any state to the Contrary notwithstanding.”⁵ The deals procured between Indigenous people and the United States are therefore should be enforced and protected. Indigenous peoples are the original inhabitants of the Americas; they had been living and taking care of the land long before European settlers initiated their conquests. It is important to set the historical context of the relationship between Native nations and the U.S to understand the complexities of sovereignty, settler colonialism, and environmental injustice.

Environmental racism and injustice are important issues that emerge from settler colonialism. The Energy Transfer Partners Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), built in 2016 is an oil pipeline that cuts through the unceded territory of the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty. The Treaty laid out the boundaries of the Great Sioux Reservation that makes up much of present-day South Dakota, west of the Missouri River and the sacred Black Hill and the life-giving Missouri River.⁶ In 1874, General George A. Custer led an expedition into the Black Hills. Once gold was found, miners started moving into the Sioux hunting grounds and demanded protection from the U.S army. The United States then coerced a minority of Sioux Chiefs and headmen into signing an agreement in 1876 that ceded the Black Hills along with unceded lands outside the 1868 treaty’s

⁴ Wilkins and Stark, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*, 34

⁵ “Article VI,” Legal Information Institute (Legal Information Institute), <https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/articlevi>.

⁶ “Standing Rock Sioux Tribe,” January 11, 2017. <https://www.standingrock.org/content/history>.

permanent reservation.⁷ This agreement violated a provision in the 1868 treaty which stated that any future land cession must “be signed by three-fourths of the adult members of the Sioux Nation.” Congress later passed The Agreement of 1877, also known as the Act of February 28, 1877, which removed the Sacred Black Hills region from the Great Sioux Reservation. The United States never obtained the consent of three-fourths of the Sioux which is mandated under Article 12 of the 1868 treaty.⁸ Under these grounds, the DAPL infringed on the sovereignty of the Sioux Nation. Furthermore, the risk of an oil spill in these sacred waters puts the water source that the Dakota and Lakota peoples of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe depend on at risk. It is interesting to note that the original route of the pipeline was planned to run through a waterway north of Bismarck, North Dakota, a town inhabited by primarily white people, but the final route went directly under Lake Oahe, which is the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's main source of drinking water.⁹ These measures are an act of environmental racism as the DAPL was rerouted due to political concern expressed by the citizens of Bismarck so that the predominantly white residents would not be affected.

The song “Stand up/Stand N Rock” stands in opposition to the construction of the North Dakota Access Pipeline. It is a song that fights for land that rightfully belongs to the Standing Rock Sioux tribe. The song was a group effort by Taboo of the Black Eyed Peas, and the Magnificent 7, a group of Indigenous artists from across North America. The authenticity of the song is unique as native artists united to make a song as a way to express their right to self-determination. Being able to reclaim and be proud of one’s Indigenous ancestry through music is a form of resistance. The lyrics, “Stand up with the First Nations/A people that been

⁷ Jeffrey Ostler, and Nick Estes. “The Supreme Law of the Land: Standing Rock and the Dakota Access Pipeline,” University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 14

⁸ Ibid. 14

⁹ Catherine Thorbecke, “Why a Previously Proposed Route for the Dakota Access Pipeline Was Rejected.” ABC News. ABC News Network, November 3, 2016.

living' here for thousands of years” reinforces the idea of unification of all native tribes across the United States that resist the federal government’s effort to undermine tribal sovereignty.¹⁰ The music video shows real footage of native people rejecting the construction of the pipeline by singing, dancing, and drumming at protests against the construction of the DAPL. This opposition led police officers to respond with violence by blasting Standing Rock protesters with water canons and rubber bullets.¹¹ The words, “As history is on a sad repeat, is it liberty, or are we just acting free?/As our land depletes from these hands of greed” speak to the injustice that occurred at Standing Rock, and how this injustice fits into a larger story of the injustices that happen over and over again to indigenous peoples around the world.¹² Native people and native lands are vulnerable due to the inherent systems of oppression, and are a prime target for environmental injustice because of the lack of protection in the law. For these reasons, it is critical to have indigenous voices present when conducting discourse in climate and environmental justice and to respect treaties that protect sovereign native land. Standing Rock represents the magnitude of how colonial figures and systems do not respect treaty agreements. The song “Stand up/ Stand N Rock” reflects the feeling among native people that tribal sovereignty has been undermined by the U.S Federal Government. The Lakota phrase “Mni Wiconi,” meaning “Water is Life,” continues to be shouted by the voices of indigenous peoples on the frontlines, fighting to protect the sacred waters of Standing Rock.

Warriors of Love

Lyla June Johnston is an Indigenous public speaker, artist, scholar, and community

¹⁰ Taboo “Stand Up / Stand N Rock #NoDAPL” recorded at Jukasa Media Group produced by Printz Board, released December 4, 2016

¹¹ Sue Skalicky and Monica Davey, “Tension between Police and Standing Rock Protesters Reaches Boiling Point,” The New York Times (The New York Times, October 28, 2016),

¹² Taboo “Stand Up / Stand N Rock #NoDAPL”

organizer of Diné (Navajo) and Tsétsêhéstâhese (Cheyenne) descent. Her mission is to empower indigenous youth and promote love through her music. Singing is a form of prayer for many indigenous peoples, as it is for Lyla June. Johnston's song "All Nations Rise" illuminates native resistance through native existence itself. This song was chosen because it presents the harsh realities faced by native people at the hands of colonizers. In her song, Johnston sings, "I remember the days when our prayers were illegal" which is a reference to missionization, in which Native Americans were forced to assimilate to Christianity.¹³ This often meant that native people could not speak, sing, worship, or write in their traditional languages. By doing this, the colonial institution of the Mission worked to erase native identity by creating a social hierarchy that subjugated native populations.¹⁴ In the line, "I remember the days when being Indian was lethal," Lyla June addresses the extent to which native identity and pride were considered dangerous and threatening to the colonial order.¹⁵ Being native made someone a target of racialized abuse, and those who resisted colonial regimes, borders, language, and structures were vulnerable to state sanctioned violence. Native women in particular were frequently subjected to rape, murder, and other forms of violence by European military and missionary personnel.¹⁶

Lyla June's voice delivers the words, "Yeah, we had a rough past but get ready for the sequel."¹⁷ She acknowledges that Indigenous people have faced countless obstacles over the course of history, however, they continue to persist through all of the attacks made against them. She fosters a feeling of unification when she sings "Rise up, all you warriors of love/All you

¹³ Lyla June "All Nations Rise" The People's Knowledge. released August 22, 1989

¹⁴ Dr. Antonio de la Cova, "16 Racial Classifications of 18th Century Latin America Castas Paintings," Castas racial classifications, accessed November 7, 2021, <https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/race.htm>.

¹⁵ Lyla June "All Nations Rise"

¹⁶ Castañeda, Antonia I. "Chapter 2. Sexual Violence in the Politics and Policies of Conquest: Amerindian Women and the Spanish Conquest of Alta California" In *Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones: From the Ancient World to the Era of Human Rights* edited by Elizabeth D. Heineman, 39-55. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

¹⁷ Lyla June "All Nations Rise"

answers to the prayers/Of our ancestors from above.”¹⁸ These lyrics are a call to action for change, resiliency, and strength. The song is unique because it includes a verse in Spanish to honor indigenous people from Central and South America who are divided by arbitrary borders. Indigenous peoples from Latin America are commonly left out of the conversations happening in the United States about colonization, but this song binds *all* native peoples.

La Tierra Olvidada

Quinto Sol is a reggae band from East Los Angeles, California. At its core, Quinto Sol is a Roots Reggae group that experiments with a mixture of Latin influences such as cumbia, rumba, and son. They create and use music as a tool to build awareness of socio-political and economic issues their community faces. They take inspiration from the everyday lives and struggles of indigenous communities. The song “Tierra Olvidada” or ‘Forgotten Land’ is a song about acknowledging the land of one’s ancestors, written by the band’s lead singer Mizraim Leal, also known as “Limon,”.

The song starts with the statement, “My people have been stripped of our core/You have denied us our true historical and cultural identity in hopes that we lose knowledge of self and go savage and turn against one another.”¹⁹ These lyrics represent the resentment colonized people feel at having the knowledge of their ancestral roots stolen from them. As colonization persisted, society shifted to identify geographic areas by their settler names rather than the original name given by the indigenous population that resided on those lands. Quinto Sol voices the words, “How does an Indígena brown brother like me learn Spanish and not know my original tongue, my original tribe, my original culture.”²⁰ The frustrations of today's native community are reflected in these lyrics. The erasure of native culture by colonial powers forced the assimilation

¹⁸ Lyla June “All Nations Rise”

¹⁹ Pazculturayamor, “Quinto sol- Tierra Olvidada,” Youtube (Youtube, September 16, 2008)

²⁰ Ibid.

of indigenous people, forcing their ancestors to speak the language of their oppressors. These lyrics address the way people in a post-colonial society have been conditioned to forget their ancestral roots. Limon questions: why is it that we learn Spanish and English? Languages forced upon native people by their oppressors.

This question of lost identity is also explored by Gloria Anzaldua in her celebrated book *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldua uses a metaphor in order to accentuate the feeling of lost cultural identity, saying “the dentist is cleaning out my roots.”²¹ She uses the example of a dentist visit to create the image of the calculated erasure of native culture. Due to the forced language conformity put forth by colonial frameworks, Indigenous languages became secondary and obsolete in many cases. However, many Indigenous peoples in the present remain resilient and resist said colonial powers by re-learning their native tongues and expressing themselves through music. This resonates when Quinto Sol says “Conoce tus raíces y viva tu cultura” which translates to ‘recognize your roots and live your culture.’²² “Tierra Olvidada” reminds listeners that there should be a constant acknowledgment of the fact that nearly everyone in the Americas resides on native land. By acknowledging the Indigenous peoples who first inhabited the land, a conversation can be had about how historic colonial structures continue to affect our society today.

Racism in U.S immigration Policy

Racial anxieties surrounding immigration are deeply ingrained in American policy and law enforcement. La Santa Cecilia’s song “ICE El Hielo” calls on the issues surrounding Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE), and their treatment of migrants. According to their website, the mission of ICE is supposedly to protect America from cross-border crime and illegal

²¹ Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands: La Frontera*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012). 74

²² Pazculturayamor, “Quinto sol- Tierra Olvidada,” Youtube (Youtube, September 16, 2008)

immigration that threaten national security and public safety. However, statistics show another story. A study done by Pew Research regarding the number of immigrants who have been deported between 2001 and 2018 showed that 60% of the immigrants deported were not convicted of a crime.²³ According to the study, criminal status is based on prior criminal conviction and removals by the U.S Department of Homeland Security. Of the 337,000 immigrants deported in 2018, some 44% had criminal convictions and 56% were not convicted of a crime.²⁴ A majority of people deported by ICE are not convicted of a crime.

“Crimmigration” is a concept used to describe the combined force of immigration enforcement and law enforcement.²⁵ An example of this concept in action is Arizona’s SB 1070, the Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act. SB 1070, is a policy that allows law enforcement officials to stop anyone who looks like an immigrant and ascertain immigration status.²⁶ This law enables law enforcement to detain and arrest individuals who cannot provide proof of legal status in the United States, making it one of the strictest anti-immigration laws in the country.²⁷ Furthermore, the policy gives law enforcement officials an unprecedented amount of power in enforcing immigration law, enabling them to terrorize communities with no checks.

Laws like SB 1070 target and disproportionately affect communities of color. The message of La Santa Cecilia’s song emphasizes the terror that undocumented members of the Latine community faces at the hands of ICE in their everyday lives. She sings, “el Hielo anda suelto por esas calles/Nunca se sabe cuando nos va tocar” which translates to “ICE is on the

²³ “U.S. Deportations of Immigrants Slightly up in 2018.” Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, August 19, 2020.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵ Yolanda, Vasquez. "Constructing crimmigration: Latino subordination in a post-racial world." *Immigr. & Nat'lity L. Rev.* 36 (2015): 609.

²⁶ Alissa R. Ackerman & Rich Furman (2013) The criminalization of immigration and the privatization of the immigration detention: implications for justice, *Contemporary Justice Review*, 16:2, 254

²⁷ “Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act of 2010,” Legal Information Institute (Legal Information Institute), accessed November 19, 2021,

streets, we don't know when it will touch us.”²⁸ Undocumented people often go through their daily lives with the worry that they will be caught in an ICE raid and face deportation. This anxiety can especially be seen in kids affected by this. The lyrics, “Lloran los niños lloran a la salida/Lloran al ver que no llegará mama” or “Kids cry, they cry on the way out/They cry that mom might not come home” capture the feeling of trauma many children face in light of harsh immigration policies— living in fear that their undocumented family members could be deported at any moment.²⁹ The intensity and violence of a child having to see their own parents be taken by ICE is very traumatizing. ICE confrontations have been known to escalate to violence and demonstrate a pointed disregard of immigrant’s rights and circumstances.

Black Voices

When acknowledging the way music has been used as a tool to confront and resist oppressive structures, it is important to illuminate Black voices and experiences. “Keep Ya Head Up” is a widely known song by Tupac Amaru Shakur. Tupac, also known as “2pac” was an outspoken and highly influential rapper, who died at the age of 25. He was an icon to many people inside and outside the hip-hop community. This song is addressed to Black women, the message being for them to keep their heads up regardless of all the societal factors that hold them down. He starts his first verse with “Some say the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice/I say the darker the flesh, then the deeper the roots” which highlights the beauty and cultural importance of Black women, who are often overlooked in pop culture.³⁰ He uses a common metaphoric comparison to the process of ripening fruit, in which the darker the berry is, the

²⁸ La Santa Cecilia “Ice El Hielo” Universal Music Latino y Arju Productions, Inc., Treinta Días 2013

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Tupac Amaru Shakur, “Keep Ya Head Up” recorded 1992 Interscope Records, Track 11, Released October 28, 1993

sweeter it is going to taste. He encourages his community to be proud of who they are and where their ancestral roots lie.

While U.S welfare policies uplift the white middle class, they largely exclude and discriminate against Black families.³¹ Whites are more likely to receive welfare than Black families who are widely denied. His song speaks in support of Black women for their strength and perseverance when he says, “I give a holler to my sisters on welfare/Tupac cares, if don't nobody else care.”³² This sends a message to all working class Black women that their struggles are not made in vain and there are people who empathize with their circumstances.

Communities that are predominantly Black are more policed than white neighborhoods.³³ The constant surveillance of law enforcement affects the lives of young Black men and women by forcing them to live in a constant state of vulnerability and fear, based on people’s perception of the color of their skin. Scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies.”³⁴ Racial projects like residential segregation are deeply connected to the way that communities of color are barred from social mobility, lacking resources, educational opportunities, and affordable housing. Tupac addresses this issue when he says, “We ain't meant to survive, 'cause it's a setup” to emphasize the struggles of people in poverty, living under systems that were built on the oppression of Black people.³⁵ He openly expresses his frustration at what it means to be a Black man in

³¹ Marguerite Ward, “How Decades of US Welfare Policies Lifted up the White Middle Class and Largely Excluded Black Americans,” Business Insider (Business Insider, August 11, 2020), <https://www.businessinsider.com/welfare-policy-created-white-wealth-largely-leaving-black-americans-behind-2020-8>.

³²Tupac Amaru Shakur, “Keep Ya Head Up”

³³ Vitale, Alex S. 2017. *The end of policing*.

³⁴ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

³⁵ Tupac Amaru Shakur, “Keep Ya Head Up”

America. He vocalizes how the law and the system work together to perpetuate a cycle of poverty and racial violence against communities of color. Tupac closes his last verse with “I know you're fed up ladies, but keep your head up.”³⁶ The tone in which he raps this last line is expressed with exasperation and despondency; a reflection of not only what Tupac feels, it is also real history that discontents.

Conclusion

Music is a universal language that all cultures find importance in. Artists have the power to shape the way that youth of color feel. Music can make them feel visible in a society designed to make them feel invisible. This mixtape strives to encourage its listeners to be consciously aware of the historical and real world problems that people of color face and often express through their music. The intention is to demonstrate how artists of color respond to settler colonialism and racial exclusion. It begins by introducing that Native Americans are members of sovereign nations that have a right to self-determination and self-governance. The Standing Rock Pipeline, and the subsequent protests are addressed, highlighting environmental injustices that indigenous people around the world face. The purpose of this mixtape is to uplift independent artists like Lyla June whose mission is to empower indigenous youth and spread love through music. This collection also discusses the need to recognize that America was founded on native land. Through music, artists can bring attention to U.S immigration policies that have a pattern of being racially exclusive. Lastly, this essay critiques the systematic racism perpetuated in the United States by centering Black voices. Analyzing music through a critical race lens provides an opportunity to understand what it reveals about the experiences of oppressed people in the United States. Music has long been a way for people of color to bring

³⁶ Tupac Amaru Shakur, “Keep Ya Head Up”

socio-political awareness to the issues they identify with within their own communities. Music brings together marginalized communities and builds a means of resistance, in which love and connection form the foundation.

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