

Songs of Resistance: A Comparative Study of Colonial Violence in Indian Sunset and Run to the Hills

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Abstract

Artists have used popular music as a means to depict and critique the violent pasts of colonialism. The production of Western culture through songs like Run to the Hills and Indian Sunset has had an enormous effect on the memory of colonized people. Yet even though both songs are well known in contemporary culture, the vast majority of postcolonial studies have ignored them entirely, which leaves us with a glaring gap in our understanding of how lyrics from modern-day songs play a role in the process of politically determining how to remember things that happened historically. This study aims to fill the gap by looking at the way that each song portrays colonial military violence and anti-colonial resistance efforts. It adds to the conversation around both representation and military violence against the locals by analyzing the lyrics and narrative structure of each of the songs, as well as how their creators framed their meaning ideologically. The two songs illustrate the oppressive nature of settler colonialism and different means of resistance from indigenous people. Run to the Hills constructs a narrative valorizing the Native Cree (the most honorable of the indigenous people) through use of aggressive, intense music in combination with ironic inversion to expose colonial settler hypocrisy and systemic colonial violence. Indian Sunset appropriate the use of Apache's traditional methods of resisting colonialism and consists of a melancholy, reflective view that connects with indigenous people's collective memory and voice. By undertaking this kind of comparative analysis, the study examines the way in which popular music subverts historical narratives imposed by empires, exposes the historical oppression of Indigenous peoples, and generates a dialog around ongoing decolonial cultural development.

Keywords: Run to the Hills, Indian Sunset, Postcolonial, Resistance, Colonial Violence

Introduction

Storytelling has served as an ideological battlefield where identities, memories, and political meanings are continuously negotiated throughout colonial histories. The colonial encounter, in other words, requires a reinvention of the colonized, the deliberate destruction of the past—what Césaire calls “thingification” (Kelley 9). As a result, artistic representation of colonialism becomes a crucial site for what Gayatri Spivak refers to as worlding, or the creation of knowledge to legitimize imperial dominance. Aalgaard observes, “insomuch as it helps to orient minds and bodies in the world, intervening in or reinforcing the normative terms by which the world is ordered and arranged, musical storytelling—like any production of knowledge—is a fundamentally political practice” (Aalgaard 12). However, lyrical representation in

postcolonialism either speaks for the colonized or lets the native speak for themselves. For such a representation Ashcroft et al. asserts, “the rereading and the rewriting of the European historical and fictional record is a vital and inescapable task at the heart of the post-colonial enterprise” (Ashcroft 221). In linguistic terms representation simply is a metonymy and a metaphor. Hall asserts, “you won’t expect ‘correct’ answers to my questions, for there are none. They are a matter of interpretation and judgement. I pose them to drive home the point about the complexity and ambivalences of representation as a practice, and to suggest how and why attempting to dismantle or subvert a racialized regime of representation is an extremely difficult exercise, about which — like so much else in representation — there can be no absolute guarantees” (Hall 267). Colonialism, as Loomba argues, reshapes, often violently, physical territories, social terrains as well as human identities (Loomba 185). The North American landscape illustrates this process vividly: what European settlers misrecognized as “empty” wilderness was, as Buell reminds us, what the first European settlers of North America saw as primordial or “empty” space, and what their descendants persist in thinking of as “wilderness,” had been somebody’s else’s place since the first humans arrived millennia before – and much longer than that, if we allow nonhumans to count as “somebodies” (Buell 67). Popular music becomes an important but understudied archive of colonial memory. Iron Maiden’s *Run to the Hills* and Elton John’s *Indian Sunset* despite their widespread cultural influence have received little scholarly attention within postcolonial studies creating a gap in our knowledge of how Western musical narratives depict Indigenous suffering, resistance, and survival. Addressing this gap, the current study poses the following questions: How do *Indian Sunset* and *Run to the Hills* express or misrepresent Indigenous resistance, and how do they depict colonial violence? The study argues that although both songs address the brutality of settler colonialism, they represent Indigenous resistance using distinctly different narrative, ideological, and artistic techniques, demonstrating how popular music engages in the larger politics of historical representation. Through a comparative postcolonial analysis, the paper demonstrates how popular music can both challenge imperial narratives and participate in the ongoing cultural work of decolonization.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative analytical framework grounded in postcolonial cultural theory as propounded by Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K Bhabha. A comparative analysis using the analytical method of explication de texte advocated by Gustav Lanson will be applied. The two selected lyrics i.e. Elton John’s *Indian Sunset* and Iron Maiden’s *Run to the Hills* are examined for their claimed postcolonial theme.

Representations of colonial violence

Linguistically, representation can be understood as both metonymy and metaphor. About the two notions of representation in postcolonial perspective according to Maggio is either to speak for or to silently let them speak for themselves. As Maggio explains, “The Western approach to the subaltern is either to speak for or to silently let them speak for themselves. Both strategies silence the subaltern because they ignore the positional relations of the dominant to the subaltern” (Maggio 422). Here, the subaltern refers to the oppressed Native, and is talking about the dominant narratives of the Eurocentric worlding. Zhou on the other hand, expresses that representation is a signifying practice. Zhou argues, “Representation actually points to a relationship between the real world and its symbolic embodiment—to re-present the real in the world of experience (such as men, objects, or events) via language, symbols, or signs. It is a kind of

“signifying practice” in a particular context; an examination of how visual meaning is produced and received” (Zhou 195).

The lyric of the song Indian Sunset sung by Elton John, was written by Bernie Taupin, Higgins describes Taupin’s British imagination below inspired by Native American narratives, the ballad singer Marty Robbins, and Taupin’s firsthand account during his visit to America:

With all of his already fertile British imagination creating wonderfully evocative stories of the Old West and other Stateside things he read about in books or heard in songs by Marty Robbins and the like, actually seeing what was going on in the US gave the Lincolnshire lyricist a much deeper appreciation of the plight of Native Americans (Higgins).

His creativity were fantasized by the resistance of Native Leader Geronimo, who was killed by the European settlers. Brown gives a detailed account of the events: “In 1894 Geronimo brought the surviving exiles to Fort Sill. When he died there in 1909, still a prisoner of war, he was buried in the Apache cemetery” (Brown 384).

I heard from passing renegades
Geronimo was dead
He'd been laying down his weapons
When they filled him full of lead
(Taupin)

The verse above is controversial and problematic, considering Brown’s account, as it represents a patriot as a renegade and versifies that the cause of Geronimo’s death was being shot full of bullets while surrendering. Since the beginning, Europeans have consistently tried to misrepresent the veracity about their atrocities and extraction of wealth from different regions of the world.

Iron Maiden’s lyric Run to the Hills, was written by the Band’s bass guitar player Steve Harris. In an interview with Rolling Stone, Harris explains:

We’ve always been fascinated with Western movies and books. I was interested in a lot of things but I had never been to America at that point. I just used to read a lot of books by an author [of Western novels] called Louis L’Amour and I got inspired. The first few lines of the song were definitely inspired by reading those types of books. Back then, you’d get what you could from movies, and I ended up realizing later what I thought was America was really just Arizona: people with cacti and dry areas and stuff like that [laughs] (Harris, qtd. in Grow).

The song represents the violence inflicted by the European settlers upon the Native Americans, after discovery and forced them to seek refuge in the hills. Discovery does not simply mean finding a new, Thus ‘discovery’ in the postcolonial sense is a tragic term for it refers to the depopulation and deculturation of these regions and their subsequent resettlement by the white races (Nayar 51). The comment in the magazine that Harris made about is the representations from movies that the America is still full of barren lands. Where he dramatized the worldings in the verse below:

Soldier blue in the barren wastes
Hunting and killing’s a game
Raping the women and wasting the men
The only good Indians are tame
Selling them whiskey and taking their gold
Enslaving the young and destroying the old
(Harris)

Harris's comment may be advocating the British's so-called civilizing mission and occupation, rebuking the Spanish while representing the most brutal holocaust of the natives in the video representation of the song. About Spanish's occupation Todorov asserts, "the Spaniards committed the most unheard-of cruelties; they cut off hands, arms, and legs, and women's breasts and they threw the Indians into deep lakes, and stabbed the children because they could not walk as fast as their mothers" (Todorov 142). Such rebuttal can be seen in many of the European narratives. However, the British, they justified their violence against Indigenous women. The cultural romanticization of Columbus's imperialist legacy includes a romanticization of Rape (Hooks 238).

Thematic and Lyrical Comparison

1. Text Type, Structure, and Tone

Etymologically, "Lyric" means literally "accompanied by the lyre," and implies poetry that is sung, not spoken (Barnstone XVI). The lyric of Indian Sunset is a dramatic monologue where the speaker is a Native American patriot who describes events from his point of view. Each stanza of the song, which is organized like a narrative, represents different aspects of the patriot's emotional journey, from awakening to learning that his comrades have been defeated, to recalling his traditions, contemplating escape, and finally accepting death. The lyric is written in free verse and it does not follow a fixed stanza length, metre, and rhyme scheme. The narrative progression of the lyric is rich in imagery. The tone is mournful and elegiac, defiant, nostalgic and tragic.

The lyric of Run to the Hills is a narrative lyric poem which uses different narrative perspectives to dramatize historical events. Verse one represents a Native American subverting colonization, and resistance. From the perspective of a white soldier, verse two represents violent atrocities to the Native, and continued exploitation by the colonizer in verse three too. The repeated chorus "Run to the Hills, run for your life" represents narrow escape. To represent the intensity of struggle, the lyric poem uses pithy lines and parallel structures. There's no specific rhyme scheme but rather their singing stresses rhythm and repetition. Condemning colonial violence, the tone is accusatory and outraged, chaotic and frantic, and rebukes the brutalities of the colonizers showing sympathy to the Native. The irony of the lyric is that the colonization dehumanized the colonized and normalized violence.

Poetic Devices

The lyric Indian Sunset is rich in imagery, such as the "smell of wood smoke," "painted tepee," and "buffaloes graze in clover fields," to evoke the patriot's profound nationalism, and looting of the domesticated animals. The symbolism of the yellow moon represents the colonizers, the red sun represents defeat, and the hills of gold, which represents colonial greed, further strengthens the lyric. Metaphors like "reading the writing of the smoke" and "breast-fed on the sound of drums" illustrate the story of settler's military passed down through generations. The use of subtle alliteration and assonance in the lyrics creates an additional impact on the overall rhythm and emotional impact of the song, as exemplified by the phrases "painted pony," "prairie rose," and "buffalo graze in clover fields." These instances of sound manipulation, as well as the use of contrasting imagery between the tranquil beauty of nature and the violent intrusion represented by the "sound of guns," "bullet hole," and other harsh sounds in the refrain of the lyrics, serve to heighten the sense of tragedy underlying the lyrics while inviting the listener to empathize with the Apache people. Additionally, the use of personification in the use of the term "moon" and "sun" to

represent the powers that be on the earth and beyond that are responsible for determining the future of the Apache offer additional layers of emotional and symbolic meaning to the lyrics.

The lyric Run to the Hills has rich imagery of colonial violence represented by the phrase such as, “killed our tribes,” “raping the women,” “destroying the old.” And of harsh battle scene represented by “dust clouds,” and “barren wastes.” It also has a contrasting dual perspective of Native American suffering vs. settler aggression, Victim’s voice vs. oppressor’s voice. This dual narrative also heightens the critique of colonialism. The lyric has repetition, “Run to the Hills, run for your lives” represents as a thematic and emotional anchor, conveying fear, survival, and desperation. The hills symbolize refuge, and safety. Plains symbolize both the homeland and the battleground violently taken over. The Soldier Blue represents U.S. Army infantry soldiers. Alliteration includes “barren wastes” and “galloping hard,” which emphasize rhythm and urgency. The irony of the lyric is the lines from the soldier’s perspective “murder for freedom,” “the only good Indians are tame” which expose the hypocrisy of colonial “civilizing missions.” The lyric also use hyperbole in the line “many came, too much for Cree,” which helps to intensify horror and convey overwhelming violence on the Native Cree. The lyric does not employ grandiloquent words; rather, they use simple, direct, forceful verbs like killed, enslaving, raping, wasting, to represent brutality.

Discussion

The fact that both Elton John (Bernie Taupin) and Iron Maiden (Steve Harris) are non-Indigenous and are not people of color creates a very important political aspect of this analysis, as it is very relevant to the postcolonial discussion about cultural representation and who has cultural authority to represent someone. Their way of being an artist raises the question of whether or not they are artistically engaged in speaking for those who are marginalized, or if they are inadvertently providing another layer to the symbolic silencing of those who are marginalized, as theorists like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and J. Maggio have argued.

The lyrics Indian Sunset (Elton John/Taupin) utilizes an Indigenous perspective, using a sorrowful first-person Native voice as a means of expressing an emotional reaction to Indigenous History in a lamenting manner. Although this technique may generate sympathy or guilt for Indigenous People, it does have some potential to create cultural appropriation through the use of the well-known trope of “the vanishing Indian.” Additionally, framing the song in a negative light, as being centered on Geronimo’s death, loss, and inevitability, diverts attention away from cultural resilience to emotional cathartic reactions created by settler-inspired sympathies, guilt, or nostalgia. Thus, this song may serve to reinforce colonial memory as being a closure; rather than an ongoing experience of survival, sovereignty, and resistance.

In contrast, Iron Maiden chooses not to use an Indigenous first-person narrative voice but instead draws on a confrontational and accusatory tone to articulate the extent of the violence inflicted upon Indigenous peoples by colonialism. As a result, shifting perspectives and stark lyrical critique lead the listener to perceive Run to the Hills less as an elegiac tribute and more as a political indictment of colonial oppression. Because righteous rage is expressed without the sentimental qualities that accompany other forms of remembrance, this song takes a position that expresses solidarity in a way that establishes itself as an act of cultural critique, rather than imaginative ownership. However, while hyperbolic language and an emphasis on violence may contribute to the flattening of Cree history into a spectacle of trauma, the complexities of Cree history as well as the continuity of Cree culture will likely remain unaddressed and unexplored. Therefore, both songs aim to disrupt the imperial narrative, but they each possess an array of ethical implications and differing methodologies. Indian Sunset creates a speculative Indigenous

subjectivity that is susceptible to both appropriation and romanticization; Run to the Hills uses the colonizer's voice to critique the colonial project from within. Together, both songs illustrate the complexities that exist in the interventions made by non-Indigenous artists into the conversations surrounding Indigenous memory, representation and resistance.

Conclusion

This study's comparison of Iron Maiden's Run to the Hills and Elton John's Indian Sunset demonstrates that popular music can function as a meaningful, though often overlooked, archive for negotiating colonial memory and representation. While both songs challenge imperial histories, they do so through contrasting strategies. Run to the Hills uses an aggressive dual narrative and heavy metal intensity to expose colonial violence, offering a solidarity-based critique that foregrounds Indigenous resistance rather than settler sentiment. In contrast, Indian Sunset adopts a melancholic first-person Indigenous voice that, while attempting empathy, risks reproducing the trope of the "vanished Indian" and recenters outsider emotion, highlighting the ethical tensions of non-Indigenous representation. This contrast underscores the political complexities of artistic intervention in colonial narratives and illustrates how genre, voice, and authorship shape the decolonizing potential of music. Future research should examine Indigenous reception of such songs and extend analysis to other musical genres addressing colonial trauma, to further develop music as a framework for decolonial cultural inquiry.

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