

Halluci Nation Research Proposal

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose a research study focused on analyzing the backgrounds and life circumstances of non-Indigenous fans of Halluci Nation, a popular Ottawa-based Indigenous DJ collective known for their unique fusion music combining Indigenous traditional music and contemporary club beats, to make connections with said individuals' personal interpretations of the music, and ultimately, discover the potential and limits of publicly accessible art to inspire activism, and obtain a deeper understanding of how non-Indigenous audiences of Indigenous cultural productions interpret the work they consume.

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In 2021, among many Canadians, it can be said that the desire to move forward with efforts of reconciliation has reached new heights. With the tragic discovery of the remains of 215 Indigenous children beneath the Kamloops Indian Residential School in May, and the National Inquiry formally recognizing the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women as a genocide two years prior, there is new level of awareness within the public consciousness of the inhumane treatment that Indigenous communities have been facing for centuries. Furthermore, with the window of time that the world has left to mitigate the worst consequences of climate change steadily decreasing, the need to learn from the Indigenous perspective on environmental sustainability is greater than ever before. One of the ways Indigenous communities have been finding notable success in pursuing activism regarding such topics to settler audiences has been through the manifestation of publicly accessible art. The work of Ottawa-based DJ collective Halluci Nation serves as one significant recent example.

Currently made up of Tim Hill, a member of the Mohawk Nation of the Six Nations of the Grand River, and Ehren Thomas, a member of the Cayuga First Nation, and formerly including Jon Deck and Dan General, also both members of the Cayuga First Nation, Halluci Nation's unique blend of Powwow sounds and traditional Indigenous music combined with contemporary electronica beats has amassed an audience of Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals alike, despite having initially been created with the intention of appealing solely to the former group (Contributor, 2021). Recognizing the potential to use their growing platform to pursue activism, the group has used their music to bring awareness to such issues

prevalent among their communities such as the aforementioned genocide of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, and the construction of the Coastal Gaslink pipeline (Payne, 2021). However, despite their efforts and commitment to spreading their message of “inclusivity, empathy and acceptance amongst all races and genders in the name of social justice” (Contributor, 2021, para. 6), instances of non-Indigenous fans demonstrating their support and interest in ways that do not align with this message, such as through donning stereotyped “Indian headdresses” and redface to concerts, have occurred (Contributor, 2021). For this reason, I am looking to research how non-Indigenous Halluci Nation fans come to learn about the group, how they interpret the music, and to what extent the music has influenced their understanding of issues faced by Indigenous communities in Canada. I will also document any tangible actions these fans may have taken to help issues in Indigenous communities as a result of what they’ve learned from the music. Such a study could bring insight into the potential and limits of publicly accessible art to inspire activism and provide a deeper understanding of how non-Indigenous audiences of Indigenous cultural productions interpret the work they consume.

Literature Review

In *Glyphing decolonial love through urban flash mobbing and Walking with our Sisters* (Recollet, 2015), Recollet discusses some ways that Indigenous communities have created intentional disruptions within physical settler spaces to present art that brings awareness of issues in the Indigenous community as part of the Idle No More Movement, such as a 2012 round dance protest that blocked traffic at the Yonge and Dundas intersection in Toronto to make space for the protestors’ message within the “thoroughfares of the

colonial capital” (137). As the performance shared some similarities to that of a Western style flash mob, similar to the way the Halluci Nation’s music contains influences of contemporary electronica, it is possible that some of the settler audience understood the performance for what it was intended to be: the creation of “a socially/culturally constructed space with potential alliance building capacity for settler peoples...”(138) that also “...provides opportunities for settlers to reflect upon their own difference and the privileges afforded to them within society” (138). However, while such predictions can be made, the opinion of settlers who witnessed this protest were ultimately not present within the article. For this reason, recording the interpretations and opinions of Halluci Nation’s non-Indigenous fanbase may bring new understandings and information about how this population consumes and understands the work of Indigenous artists.

Halluci Nation’s art relates to both Gaztambide-Fernandez’s theory of art education as a process of learning (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013) and Kuttner’s proposal to use art education as part of a process of developing his definition of cultural citizenship (Kuttner, 2015). To explain, since its initial formation, the group has undergone significant changes in their intentions and style of artistic output. Originally created solely for the purpose of entertaining members of the Indigenous community, the group has articulated that, after realizing that they were gaining a wide and diverse audience that contained a significant quantity of non-Indigenous fans, they have since shifted their focus to creating work and staging performances that explicitly serve their social activist goals (Contributor, 2021). This development in intention reflects Gaztambide-Fernandez’s “cultural production” approach to art education, where the practice of art is part of a constant process of the artist producing and redefining the cultural space they share with their community around them through physical

and interactive manifestations of their creativity (2013). Simultaneously, the conscious intention to use art for social activism embodies Kuttner's recommendation to focus on "cultural citizenship" in art education as setting such a goal reflects "making claims for rights that may or may not be recognized by a society or state" (2015, p. 72), while also being "broadly concerned with the development and and recognition of cultural diversity...and full cultural and political participation..." (72). These attributes reveal the potential of the group's work to serve as a conduit through which to educate both fans of their music and students in the music classroom in 2021 on subjects of Indigenous rights, social inequities in their society, the environment, and, additionally, the importance of intersectional art education. This quality, alongside the fact that a significant portion of their fans are not from Indigenous communities, make their audience an ideal subject of study.

Two notable studies that analyze the reactions to artistic productions of specific audiences include *Participation as 'repressive myth': a case study of the Interactive Themba Theatre Organisation in South Africa* (Chinyowa, 2015), and *Between the frames: youth spectatorship and theatre as curated, 'unruly' pedagogical space* (Gallagher and Wessels, 2013). In the former, Chinyowa discusses some of the unsuccessful results of the Themba HIV/AIDS interactive theatre project run by the non-governmental organization Interactive Themba Theatre. Intended to serve as an education project to spread awareness and knowledge of AIDS and safe sexual practices to high school drop-outs in the Alexandra and Toweto townships located in Johannesburg, South Africa, the project failed to imbue its intended lessons into a significant portion of its intended audience. In lieu of being encouraged to converse freely about the subject matter described in the productions, at the end of plays, audiences were expected to respond to questions posed by the cast with specific,

pre-anticipated answers. Two attributes of the production are highlighted as notable reasons this style of art education failed to sufficiently relay its intended messages. One was the assumption that the audiences would make certain anticipated connotations of morality and wisdom to the events portrayed in the pieces, despite said group not having had any input in the creation of the pieces themselves. Already possessing different, deep-rooted associations with the events presented in the productions that had been shaped by their experiences with the society and culture they grew up in, the adolescent audience did not make the expected connotations with the experiences portrayed in the pieces. Recognizing this result, in researching the audience of Halluci Nation, it will be valuable for me to ask questions to non-Indigenous fans that reveal how their socialization may have impacted their opinion of Indigenous cultural productions, and, by extension, their interpretation of Halluci Nation's music. The other attribute that negatively impacted the Themba HIV/AIDS project was certain audience groupings that blocked opportunity for participation among the adolescent audience. This reality was made particularly evident during one instance when a teacher answered the questions posed by the cast without permitting opportunity for diverse, possibly nuanced responses from the adolescent audience, or allowing for evidence of understanding among the group as a whole to manifest. This occurrence suggests the importance of considering how the mix of people in audiences at Halluci Nation concerts, and possibly online spaces, might impact individuals' internalizations regarding the cultural productions they are experiencing.

The focus on considering the role of audience mixes in relaying ideas through theatrical productions is also discussed by Gallagher and Wessels (2013) in their analysis of *The Middle Place*, a Verbatim play created and produced by a new Canadian theatre company

called Project: Humanity, while also extending into considering how the cultural connotations of a location that a production takes place can also impact how effectively its intended lessons are communicated. Though the play was intended primarily for the purpose of educating the general public on the experiences and personal perspectives of youth in housed shelters, local youth in housed shelters were also given free tickets to come to the production. Through post-show interviews, it was revealed that many of the sheltered youth felt seen and represented by the content in the show. However, there were a few instances during which the youth did not grasp the intended message, and left before the production had completed and revealed its thesis. In one notably reactive instance, two adolescents revealed that, as they had not been provided context for what sort of play the dramatic production was to be about when given their free tickets, they inferred, upon viewing the production's opening that focused on negative stereotypes faced by sheltered youth, that it was malicious in its aim. Gallagher and Wessels also inferred that the disrespectful way the adolescents, both young women of colour, had been treated by the staff at the theatre, one that was largely frequented by white, middle-class adults, had played a role in fueling this stance. For this reason, in my research, it will be valuable to consider how the physical spaces and cultural contexts in which Halluci Nation's music is played impacts its audiences' perceptions of the content they are hearing and viewing.

Proposed Method

For this qualitative research project, I will be interviewing various non-Indigenous fans of Halluci Nation. My goal will be to determine how first impressions of the band, and the individuals' environments, and educational and cultural histories have impacted how they

interpret the messages present in Halluci Nation's music. I will also determine how being a fan has impacted their opinion of Indigenous identity and communities, as well as if they have been influenced to show support in fighting Indigenous issues in minor and significant ways.

Participants

I will aim to interview at least 25 non-Indigenous fans of Halluci Nation, aged at least 16 or over. I will choose 16 as the minimum years of age for this project as, in the province of Ontario, as of 2021, that is the age most High School students are after completing grade 10, the year they are required to learn about the history of residential schools through the mandatory Canadian History since World War I credit (Ontario, 2018). Twenty of these fans will include those residing within Ontario and in other Canadian provinces. At least 5 fans will include those that reside outside of North America, but I will interview up to 10 if there should happen to be more overseas fans with whom I am able to organize an interview within the allotted time of conducting the research.

Design

Each participant will be asked the following questions:

- How old are you?

- Where do you live? Have you always lived here? If not, where?
- How did you come to learn about Halluci Nation's Music?
- What was your first reaction when you first heard Halluci Nation's music?
- What do you like about Halluci Nation's music?
- Have you ever gone to a Halluci Nation Concert? Where? What was the experience like? What did you think of the atmosphere you felt and the visuals you saw? Who was in the audience?
- What is your primary mode of listening to Halluci Nation's music? Do you listen to Halluci Nation's music online? If so, through which platforms?
- What are some of your favourite Halluci Nation songs? What is your interpretation of these songs? If any of them have lyrics, what do you think the lyrics are saying?
- How much did you know about Indigenous cultures prior to listening to Halluci Nation? Did you learn about Indigenous history through your school experience at all?
- How much do you know about Idle no More movement and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women genocide?
- What do you think of people who come to Halluci Nation concerts wearing "Indian headdress" costumes or red paint on their skin?
- In what ways has becoming a Halluci Nation's fan impacted how you understand Indigenous issues? Has it led you to demonstrate support for these issues in any tangible ways (i.e, providing donations, etc.)?

Depending on the answers given, I will sometimes ask for clarification should I see the potential to gain more information that might relate to the individuals' interpretations of Halluci Nation's work.

Procedure

I will seek out fans to interview by contacting various accounts of Halluci Nation fans found in the comments and subscriber list of Halluci Nation's Youtube page, the group's most active social media platform, and by advertising my research project through my personal Facebook account. I will also try recruiting individuals for my research in person by attending 1-3 Halluci Nation concerts. When and where possible, I will try to conduct in-person interviews, however, all other interviews will be held via phone, through the Zoom application online, or a similar communication technology application that is accessible for the individual being interviewed. All individuals being interviewed will be given a contract detailing the nature of the research and how what they share might be used in the thesis I write. The interviews will be recorded so that I may be able to refer to them later, and all individuals mentioned in the completed research essay will be referred to via a pseudonym only.

Once I have completed the interviews, I intend to analyze all of the recordings to determine how the circumstances of the interviewed individuals' lives might relate to how they interpret and enjoy Halluci Nation's music. Inquiry questions that will inform my thesis will include:

- Based on the interviews completed with non-Indigenous fans of Halluci Nation, is it possible for art to convey a consistent message while also remaining accessible to a wide audience? And if so, how?
- Should art be created with the anticipation that audience members of different cultural identities and backgrounds will interpret it differently, even if certain viewers are not the target audiences?

As a settler with no relation or cultural ties to any Indigenous community, it would not be appropriate for me to conduct research on a cultural production that is produced by members of said cultural group without their awareness, input, and above all, consent. It is for this reason that, before the research should take place, I will contact Halluci Nation via email to ask the group directly for permission to conduct the study, and, should they provide it, ask if they have any advice on who else I might contact to gain any further necessary permission. I will also ask if they have any further advice on conducting said research in a way that remains respectful to their communities. The email will contain a detailed description of my research plan. Next, after having contacted anyone the group may have suggested to me to, I will also contact an elder from the Mohawk Nation of the Six Nations of the Grand River and the Cayuga nation with a similar email to ask for their opinion on my research plan as well. It is only once this procedure and approval process has taken place will I begin the study.

Results

I hypothesize that my results will be extremely mixed, and will depend greatly on the educational backgrounds of the individuals interviewed, with those that have had a more

robust education on topics such as Indigenous culture and history possessing a greater understanding of the activist intentions behind Halluci Nation's work. Similar to the adolescents Chinyowa (2015) described not absorbing the intended messages of the Themba HIV AIDs production due to having been socialized to associate the events presented with different meanings than those assigned by the playwright, I believe individuals who do not have a robust and nuanced educational background in Indigenous culture or history and that have not learned about the problematic nature of stereotypical images of Indigenous people depicted in American cartoons and sports team logos will be significantly more likely to make the error of wearing Indigenous headdresses to concerts, possibly under the impression that such costumes are supportive and not offensive.

Discussion

Overall, I feel that this research plan is an effective way to gather information about how non-Indigenous fans of Indigenous cultural productions consume said work in a non-invasive way. A limitation that is possible but not likely, is the opinion of parents and guardians of any participants under 18. As I do not intend to mention any identification details about said participants beyond their age and city, I do not feel there is a safety concern, but, in order to avoid threats to the existence of my research, I may have to forfeit information that I have learned about the adolescent children of any people who may take issue with me having this information following any interviews I may conduct with them.

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