

International Relations of 'A Tribe Called Red'

Written by Ajay Parasram

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AJAY PARASRAM, JUL 25 2017

Today's many territorial contestations across Turtle Island (and beyond) is symptomatic of one of the most important issues in IR — the coloniality of modern territory. Territory is always contested and IR hasn't always done the best job of historicizing it. I'm not talking about the drawing of international borders, but the ontological leaps of faith that are necessary to think about territory in a uni-versal and Eurocentric way. Instead, I'm looking at genealogies of territory as predicated on multiple ontological starting points, which create essential differences that the colonial encounter has sought to erase. Insisting that territory has multiple ontological starting points means that it cannot be uni-versal, but is instead pluri-versal in practice. The limited ability of modern /colonial IR to recognize and study the "international" beyond a Eurocentric genealogy of territory is a blinder on our discipline and an impediment to decolonization.

The colonial conception of land, ownership and sovereignty follows the Lockean idea that land begins as the commons, and becomes owned when rendered more productive through labour. Juxtaposed with an ontology of land that sees it as relational, as is common across much of Turtle Island, it is clear that these two ontological premises are destined to conflict. The colonial ontology of land relies on a separation of nature and human that makes understanding territory in pluri-versal terms impossible. The story of contemporary state formation that we take for granted is a story of uni-versal territory, empire, and the making of the modern colonial international system, but its universality is imaginary and jealously enforced.

In this post, I urge scholars and students of IR to put down their books and pick up their headphones to experience what a decolonial IR might look and sound like through the art, beats, and practice of the Turtle Island-based electric-pow-wow superstars, A Tribe Called Red. After all, as Russel Means famously said, the hegemony of the written over the spoken "is one of the white world's ways of destroying the cultures of non-European peoples."

This multi-national group with roots in Algonquin territory plays monthly electric pow-wow shows in Ottawa, but I first encountered DJ NDN, Bear Witness, and DJ Shrub in 2011, at an outdoor show on a balmy -40 degree evening. After witnessing their provocations live, I considered the IR of ATCR as one way to clearly enact pluri-versal practices of territorial politics.

In their first, self-titled album, I hear a sense of national rehabilitation that Fanon would be proud of. Tracks like "Look At This" and "Red Skin Girl" (collaboration with Northern Cree) are celebratory and healing, while "Woodcarver" blends news coverage from the police shooting and killing of an Indigenous carver in the streets of Seattle in a powerful critique of police violence. We see in this album a vivid depiction of life in spite of colonial violence, the cultivation of pride and strength in living traditions and walking in more than one world.

The second album, *Nation to Nation*, cultivates inter-national collaborations across Turtle Island that de-link from the colonial boundary-making of Canada. In "Sisters," ATCR collaborates with Northern Voice and the music video that emerges from this partnership paints a gorgeous portrait of life in the North; one that is rarely visible within the uni-versal gaze of the modern Canadian state. A key objective of the group has been to celebrate self-representation, which they do rather explicitly in tracks like "Tanto's Revenge" (with Chippewa Travellers) and "Suplex" (with Northern Voice), both of which challenge modern representations of indigenous people in pop-culture and sport.

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I read their most recent album, *Halluci Nation*, as an openly decolonial contribution. The introduction (featuring John Trudell and Northern Voice) to the album juxtaposes the “A-lie-Nation” with the “Halluci Nation,” whose DNA “is of Earth and Sky, past and future.” Refusing to dwell in either the past or the future, the Halluci Nation is comprised of people who fall outside of the boundary of uni-versal modernity. The album quite literally begins with the line, “We are the tribe that they cannot see,” which articulates the inability of the modern, colonial gaze to perceive the lived realities of peoples who are not only modern.

For example, “The Virus,” a collaboration with Chippewa Travellers and Saul Williams, offers a metaphor of colonialism and capitalism as a viral infection that manifests in different forms: “the bear, the elk, the elephant, the deer, the antelope, the mineral, the iron, the copper, the coltan, the rubber, the coffee, the cotton, the sugar,” all of which are colonial exports. Coffee, sugar, rubber, and coltan are not products within Turtle Island, and this extends the reach of the Halluci Nation to the globally colonized. I read this as a de-territorialization of colonial boundary-making into the politics of this album. The virus also includes “the people,” which is an explicit criticism of the ways of the A-lie-Nation, those who are complicit with the ongoing colonization of all these global nations. This conception of nation, situated in a dystopian near future, shatters the racial determinism of “nation” and presents a decolonial option in the form of the Halluci Nation.

Building on the international nature of relations, the album track “R.E.D.” includes the voices and bodies of racialized Muslims, featuring Yasiin Bey and Yassin “Narcy” Alsalam. In this powerful song and video, we see further globalization of ATCR’s politics, where the drum now integrates politically significant “others” engaged in the practice of Islam. During this track’s recording, the federal Canadian election was being fought on promises of nation-to-nation relationships, resource extraction, threats of niqab bans, fear-mongering concerning Syrian refugees, and a proposed hotline to report “barbaric cultural practices.” To extend solidarity to racialized Muslims and articulate a vision for renewed national construction built on respect for land and ceremony is a powerful enactment of a decolonial option.

The boundaries of the Halluci Nation transcend modern political borders and forge a new national identity in which the shared characteristics appear to be respect for land and ceremony. Bey says, “What I forgot is better than whatever they remember,” encouraging listeners to cultivate deep relations and de-link from hegemonic structures such as modern and uni-versal nationalism.

ATCR’s cultivation of relations through their collaborations in *Nation to Nation* enables a kind of decolonial globalization by extending the ethic of nation-to-nation relation-building to other colonized peoples, bringing them under the great seal of the *Halluci Nation*. Taken together, we can see in these three albums the rehabilitation of pluriversal ontologies that operate beyond the limit of the colonial nation of Canada.

In the IR of ATCR, we see a living and vibrant decolonial tradition that goes far beyond the idea of the “inclusion” of others within a uni-versal Canadian territory. It offers a resurgent, always present, ontologically distinct politics that has manifested in different ways across Turtle Island for thousands of years.

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