

# **An interview with Tania Willard on *Beat Nation*, Indigenous curation and changing the world through art**

**Jarrett Martineau**

**Jarrett Martineau: First, many thanks from everyone at *Decolonization* for taking the time to participate in this interview! We are pleased to have you join us for this special issue on “Indigenous art, aesthetics and decolonial struggle.” Please introduce yourself and what nation you are from.**

Tania Willard: My name is Tania Willard, Secwepemc Nation... and mixed Euro-Canadian. At times other white people and family have asked why I don't define the other 'half' of me. For me it is political to uphold my Secwepemc heritage: first, as an attempt to address the purposeful erasure of Aboriginal story, place, culture, spirituality and land. I reassert my Secwepemc heritage, story, land and rights in recognition of the whole story of these Indigenous territories we call a country.

**You're the curator of *Beat Nation*, an exhibit that focuses on hip hop as Indigenous culture; can you tell us a bit**

**about your own creative and curatorial practice? What guides or informs the art you make and curate?**

*Beat Nation* has grown and become something less intimate than how it started and I have learned lessons in that. So, first of all, I never really set out to be a curator; I come to it as an artist and an activist, which I think is a well understood trajectory in Indian Country. We have amazing models and histories to see of all kinds of creative minds, philosophers, and leaders who sought creative ways to have their voices heard.

I went to art school at the University of Victoria, before Taiaiake Alfred and all of the Indigenous Governance programming there now. I think I was the only native student in Fine Arts at the time, or at least the only one who actively identified that way - and the Gustafsen Lake stand-off happened while I was at UVIC. I was active with things like Food Not Bombs and an anarchist,

youth-run info shop, so I was already politicized. But it was in this period that I started making prints and artwork outside of art school for political means. This is all to set the foundation for my approach to *Beat Nation*. After travelling through anarchist squats in Europe, I landed in Vancouver and after some time got back in touch with *Redwire Magazine*, who I had encountered before leaving Victoria and was really inspired by them. *Redwire* was largely born out of the *Native Youth Movement* and native youth stepping up and calling out the BC Treaty Process for not acknowledging our needs and futures and also negotiating away our rights. So, I got hooked up doing stuff with *Redwire* for years; we did a magazine distributed throughout Turtle Island that was native youth led and expressed our ideas, stories, politics, histories and more. We organized art shows - Tahltan artist and curator, Peter Morin, and I both had art backgrounds, so we went to demonstrations and conferences and did community engaged work. We hosted conferences and at times raised a stink. We were banned in schools for a while. We almost got sued... I think even years later, a news story ran in the right wing media (Sun News network) asking why the government funded us because, they alleged, we printed some illicit material around sabotage.

Anyway, so hip hop was all a part of this; *Native Youth Movement* folks were out at the Indian conferences using hip hop to talk amongst our communities about things like the BC Treaty Process, how it was not in the interest of our overall rights to the land and our children's futures, and all of that

encompassed a lot of other ideas. So, then, as part of the music and the politics of hip hop there was also a whole lot of fashion and art and ideas floating around out there that many different artists were working with. I had phased out of *Redwire* by this time; we had always run it as a youth project (I think I was almost 27) and it felt like we needed to have fresh young minds in there, so there was a turn over. *Redwire* was one of these projects where, at different times, it was not radical enough and, alternately, too radical, depending on who you were taking to. We were funded. I was good at writing grants and we were a unique project, I think, but there were lots of internal political disagreements and ideals and one of the most dominant was this idea that we shouldn't be funded by the government. Which definitely has its ins and outs but, anyway, I wanted to be more liberated, less political dogma; more experimental and conceptual ideas that were freed from fitting, even into a radicalized politics, were engaging to me. I was making art as an artist and still active in many ways within a social and cultural community; curating felt like a way to organize and present some of these ideas.

At least that is what I thought when grunt gallery asked me to curate. Most of the early work was online curation, including the original [beatnation.org](http://beatnation.org), which I did before being accepted for a Canada Council for the Arts aboriginal curatorial residency with grunt gallery. So, in some ways, the original *Beat Nation* was somewhat before I started curating... kind of. Anyway, Glenn at the [grunt] gallery had asked Skeena Reece and I to co-curate this idea around native youth and

hip hop. Skeena was an amazing performer, involved in hip hop herself, and an activist. She had recently started a Native youth art collective at *Knowledgable Aboriginal Youth Advocates* (another UMACY funded program like *Redwire* and involving similar people).

I am giving you a lot of backstory here (laughs). But it is the more holistic version of things. Skeena and I set about doing this for the website. And because it was coming from artists we knew and worked with and the hip hop movement, music was a part of that and it had to be part of the art - we were purposeful about that. Skeena later became an artist - I saw her performance in the Sydney Biennale in Australia and she blew me away - and her work was really important to *Beat Nation* as an exhibition.

I trusted Kathleen [Ritter, Associate Curator at the *Vancouver Art Gallery* (VAG)] and we worked well together, I gave space and she gave space and we negotiated *Beat Nation* into what it was at the VAG. We pushed for certain works like Duane Linklater's "Tautology" [2011], other works fell into place and they just had all these conversations with each other in some ways; the works had a way of storytelling with each other. Working at the VAG was new to me, I never intended *Beat Nation* to be a big show or a tour; it grew into that in ways I couldn't have predicted.

I have lots of questions about what it means to bring political work into institutions but I am also aware of the chasms that are left when the work is not there or those politics

are not articulated. One of the behind-the-scenes negotiations was around sponsorship. I didn't feel I could hold the ideas in the show together if I felt compromised by sponsorship from major resource extraction projects, since almost all of those kinds of projects are contested within Indian Country. People have different views on that, and I am not steadfast one way, but for this work and for me it wouldn't have worked.

In other ways I think I didn't do enough, as much as possible. I was involved in the tour but in reality a touring exhibition and its logistics have these entire systems and processes. And, at times I let myself say, 'hopefully the show can speak for itself' because, you know, I can't be there to define and program and babysit everything. And thank goodness there were so many people who got it and stepped up in ways that were supportive and in solidarity with the exhibition and my ideas. And, other times, it was merely another art show, part of many that a gallery produces. So I am left with both amazing experiences and lots of questions about art and its effectiveness when it comes to social justice, politics, curating. And I haven't figured it out yet... so that propels me in my own process of unwinding and rewinding to find meaning.

I approach curatorial work with curiosity; I let passion and a sense of justice lead me, and I let myself open up to other ideas and mediums. And I try to do my best to keep to those ideas while negotiating all the many bureaucratic and logistical things curators do.

**Is there a word for art in your language?**

There are a few; there is a word for drawing that has the same root as writing. And then, I have to check on this but someone had said, the word for creating something like an object/art form was related to the word for birth... I'm going to ask my language mentors to clarify that in Secwepemcstín! I think the whole 'no word for art' is a bit bogus – we all had/have creative practices with whole bodies of language and knowledge around them, so I think it is more around the confusion of the English word for art and what that means to us.

**What are Indigenous aesthetics? And how does this figure in your work?**

I don't think you can really define them; they are as varied as each individual, in each distinct Nation, and then maybe even more so than that. But at some point I think they are informed by the experience of being informed by your family roots/heritage; even if that is an expression of a loss of those, it somehow embodies the work. This is different, I think, then saying it is identity-based; it certainly does not have to look like someone Native made it, but at some point I think in Indigenous aesthetics you can draw a parallel with some ancestral knowledges, philosophy, connection, loss, cultural practice, customs, contemporary context. So, there is Indigenous aesthetics, but defining it narrows it; you know it when you see it, or you know it when you feel it, I think. Without being too dreamy about it, art is often a communication with a different part of our brain – we absorb it and its

possibilities differently than reading, or hearing a talk. It is very experiential, in some ways, even less direct than music. I think it functions on a much more esoteric level.

**What makes Indigenous art political? Does, or should, Indigenous art have a responsibility to engage political struggle in form/content/practice/process?**

Indigenous art is political because Indigenous people make it. Indigenous art should not have a 'responsibility' to engage in political struggle, it should have an opportunity or invitation or availability, but not an obligation. Indigenous people are already dying, fighting, struggling, learning, working – I don't think we need to limit ourselves. That said, depending on your experiences, your Nation, your family, teachings, and spirituality, you may be expected to carry your voice forward in a way that advances political struggle. I feel 'responsibility' in lots of ways; my community struggles like other smaller, rural ones. We also have outstanding talent and showing that, or creating a context to show that, becomes a political act, when so much of dominant culture is based on erasure, or what exists as a platform for Aboriginal people is already so weighted and constructed that there is only so much expression and freedom to those spaces.

**What responsibilities do Indigenous artists carry in their work and practice that are unique to Indigenous people?**

Well, that is a bit of an epic question! 'Indigenous artists' is just too diverse a

category. I can only speak to my experience and this isn't a definition of what I think that needs to be. I suppose one of the strongest struggles is negotiating spaces and places where you can be free to be who you are, without 'teaching' others or 'schooling' them or 'preaching' or being 'stereotyped' - all those isms get pretty heavy at times. So that affects a lot of Indigenous artists I think. For me, this idea of battling a never-ending tide, where you always have to unpack and relearn and reframe the way dominant histories and experience are told. It is creating space to not feel conflicted in who you are, but I don't think that is necessarily unique to Indigenous people.

We have to dislocate the ways we operate with this idea of homogeneity as an equalizing method. You may, as an Indigenous person, carry unique knowledges, languages, and practices and how you deal with those as an artist will be different than from a non-Indigenous artist. But it will also likely be different from another Indigenous artist, if you are from different nations, etc.

**What has the response been to *Beat Nation* as the exhibit has traveled beyond Vancouver? Why do you think it has attracted such a huge audience?**

I can't say I entirely know. For me, when Kathleen pitched the idea to bring *Beat Nation* to the VAG, it just felt right. It gave me chills and I followed that; I had reservations about the institutional space and many other things but I wanted to see these artists work in this space. I believed in what their work had to say and that it could bring

down barriers. I was passionate about it, Kathleen was passionate about it, and as we worked on it what I hope comes through is a deep respect and excitement about the work.

**Many Indigenous artists in *Beat Nation* and beyond have used hip hop and remix aesthetics in their work to respond to the legacy of colonialism and to the appropriation and misrepresentation of Indigenous cultures. What is the connection to hip hop culture and remix aesthetics that makes this appealing? Are there underlying affinities between Indigenous cultural production and hip hop/Black cultural production?**

I used to work powwow's selling fruit for my auntie; one year a break dance crew came through the Kamloops Powwow, I was bowled over seeing them - and this was like more than 15 years ago now. Hip hop has been Indigenized for a long time... but back then most of the kids on the rez were still wearing metal shirts - it was metal, I would say, that in advance of hip hop expressed a sense of discontent with the way things were and expressed working class or poor people's ideals. But metal was pretty white. And when hip hop came it was real for people. I mean, hip hop has just made such deep inroads. It was basically storytelling, but in a way that allowed it to be used by young people to express their stories - not just traditional stories, but also traditional stories. It held such power as a medium because there was so much possibility there.

I think sometimes artists are working with remix culture, other times it is unmixing,

unravelling to find a clearer essence, excavating the cityscape to reveal Indigenous presence, singing in your language, telling your story.

**Following this line of thought, what is the future of remix culture or, I guess, what comes after remix?**

Re-mastering? (laughs) I don't think about art in some kind of linear way like, 'we had this art movement and then this one and now we are heading to this one.' Cultural and artistic expression form these interesting textures that weave all around us, sometimes encasing us, holding us, tying us, sometimes folding, embracing and carrying us.

**Why is Indigenous art so relevant and "popular" in the current moment? Why now? Will it last?**

You know, I think it always has been. We are creative people and we have dynamic ways of being in the world and maybe the landscape would look very different if artistic and cultural ways weren't so subject to a hierarchy of capitalism. I would hope that maybe the wider society around us is ready to start looking at ways of unravelling and remaking and remixing the histories of racism and oppression in this country...or what we call this country, this huge expanse of distinct Indigenous territories.

**How important is self-representation (speaking to and for ourselves) in Indigenous art vs. speaking to non-Indigenous audiences? What role does audience play in your work?**

A complicated one.

**Is the 'traditional vs. contemporary' or 'two worlds' binary that is often associated with Indigenous art still a relevant consideration or distinction?**

In terms of 'two worlds', which is to say segregation, I think a lot of people dismiss that idea these days as limiting. But I live back on my rez, in a fairly rural area, in an area of resource extraction, and that is still pretty real to me. And likely to others in even more remote communities etc. 'Traditional vs contemporary,' I never sit well with - contemporary is just a series of interventions and adaptations that become cemented from tradition; it is this cycle, and continuum, not a trajectory. Beadwork with glass beads is actually pretty contemporary, based on existing aesthetics and materials, and people are working in many different ways with this medium right now. I mean, painting and drawing can be considered traditional in a European art context too, but they are simultaneously current and contemporary and it doesn't confuse us. I think we can see different mediums and ways in which artists work with them in reference to both traditions, and contemporary contexts, and maybe customs.

**Is art-making a form of decolonization? How, or perhaps when, is art decolonizing? Are there works, artists, or projects that you see successfully accomplishing this?**

I think art can give voice to decolonization and it can be part of a process of

decolonizing, but I don't think it itself is only, or exactly, a form of decolonization. There are problems with art functioning as a form of social justice. I think art can be an initiator, an instigator, and inspiration but it needs to be a part of a community and other ways that are building and challenging existing ways with inspired revolutionary methods. Art can't be separate from community for it to be decolonizing. I think of it like ceremonial ways, where something might work on you without you even knowing it. I think every artist in *Beat Nation* is doing this in diverse ways, and then we are all also not doing it. There still needs to be people at the blockade, in the conference

rooms, at the daycares; we can't think about artists as set apart from our community and struggle. We are all involved and hopefully support each other with the skills that we feel healthy and good about sharing, sharing what we can to make ourselves stronger together.

I have too lofty goals. People ask what I wanted *Beat Nation* to do and, really, as hilariously naive as it is, I want it to change the world. I want inequality to be lifted, I want our ways and languages back, I want it all, and I hope that the work I do in some ways – in both clear and strategic ways and in mysterious ways – does that.

**Tania Willard**, Secwepemc Nation, works within the shifting ideas of contemporary and traditional as it relates to cultural arts and production, often working with bodies of knowledge and skills that are conceptually linked to her interest in intersections between Aboriginal and other cultures. Willard has worked as an artist in residence with gallery gachet in Vancouver's Downtown East Side, the Banff Centre's visual arts residency, fiction and Trading Post and was a curator in residence with grunt gallery. Willard's recent curatorial work includes [Beat Nation: Art Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture](#), featuring 27 contemporary Aboriginal artists.

**Jarrett Martineau** is Cree/Dene from Frog Lake First Nation in Alberta and a Ph.D. Candidate in Indigenous Governance at the University of Victoria. His research examines contemporary Indigenous political communication at the critical intersections of media, technology, art, aesthetics, music, and performance. His dissertation focuses on the role of art and creativity in Indigenous struggles for nationhood and decolonization. He is the co-founder and Creative Producer of *Revolutions Per Minute (RPM.fm)*, a global new music platform to promote Indigenous music culture and an organizer with the Indigenous Nationhood Movement. He is currently a 2013-14 Fulbright visiting scholar at Columbia University and CUNY's Center for Place, Culture and Politics.