The Deer with 3: Expressing Indigeneity Through Experimental Hip Hop

Creative work

TALON BAZILLE “SHOOTS THE ENEMY” DUCHENEAUX

United States
Little Rabbit, sat at the feet of a tree, 
started watching life pass and kept the focus high. 
Little Rabbit sat and watched life breathe, 
started watching all these moving things move by.

And when the land's sick, 
you can't even manage. 
Not with any kind of magic Peter Pan wish. 
Sometimes we vanish 
just to stay advantaged. 
Well, there's a reason just to be. 
He's looking freer 
as the sands sift.

As the sands sift, we all know that time passes by. 
Rabbits die. People die. Land somehow stays and revives. 
Sometimes it's cleansed, with 
no more dens. 
No more clubs or gas emissions. 
Rabbit hopping out the crib, 
but only for a quick glance of it all, 
enough to last for a Fall. 
[hunting] Season opens up to orange jackets 
blasting each and all. 
And the saddened fact is he might just kill us all. 
So how do we "evolve"?

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The sands sift.
The [hunting] man gets
lifted by disintegrating speckles.
The deer just standing, and that's it.
Three antlers at the top,
eating black, muddied crop
with a chunk that's bit right off.
Ribs that show a beating heart still.
Still.
Still you hear the 'thump, thump' and it's real.
This cannot be real.
She looks like she can't feel,
still she grazes with grace.
The orange jacket retreats
and blends back into plain[s].

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As someone who creates art, I am consistently dissecting and reattaching stretches of my brain, heart, and spirit while I conceptualize my work. A big part of each is who I am as a Dakota, Lakhota, Nakoda, and overall Indigenous person living in this country. The history that I come from isn’t simply a history to me, and its tangibility to my being is as clear to me as my own heartbeat. Therefore, much of my content involves some amount of subtle symbolism and/or more forthright statements of opinion that revolve around
my own Indigenous experience. Music for me is a safe-haven, where much of the colonized norm and rule throughout society finally does not apply. In it, I can voice my own stories and write my own journalism within the poetry of my lyrics in ways that would otherwise be laughed at or mocked inside fields of journalism. In it, I can recall historic facts, and poetically deliver these truths in a way that aims to make audiences feel the history that I refer to in each song (as opposed to just learning about it). As I also aim to provide oppressed peoples with a soundtrack of reality and hope, expressing the struggle is my overall intention with each release, such as my most recent album, ‘Mastincala’ (which is a Lakhota term for rabbit).

When initially conceptualizing the album, I knew that I wanted to take a narrative approach that would have audiences sonically traverse through a trippy, unsettling, yet fun ride. With this in mind, my overall goal was to tell a story about my Indigenous experience through the lens of a rabbit. Paralleling both plights, I wanted to show audiences a fantastical world that had both elements of wonder and terror as a way of demonstrating these realities. When speaking about the idea behind the Mastincala concept with Tani Gordon, the artist who would later contribute artwork for the cover, she strongly recommended that I watch and understand the film ‘Donnie Darko’. Along with some of the unsettling aesthetic, I took heavy inspiration from the atmosphere of apocalypse. Towards the end of Mastincala, this inspiration is more prevalent, as the narrative shifts toward a world crumbling due to egocentrism, greed, and selfishness. I attempted to make other songs in the album foreboding and ominous in order to raise senses of dread that would later be taken advantage of in the closing song, ‘The Deer With 3’, which also features the voice of Gordon.

‘The Deer With 3’ ends the Mastincala Album project, drawing many of its themes from Donnie Darko’s apocalypse element, the idea of earth renewal and nature/life’s resiliency. Gordon added some vocal samples of herself for atmosphere. The song goes on to tell a story of an image I had in my head after hearing of the ‘zombie-deer’ disease that went around. I had noticed that all photos, videos, media on this disease showed the deer walking around unphased by their own ailments. While this had a great deal to do with their brains’ reactions to the disease, it rang to me as a true symbol of the strength
The Deer with 3

and power of natural life on this earth. When you compare that strength to the cowardice of the oppressor, there is no misunderstanding, fear, or hopelessness any longer—the oppressed will always endure. The beaten deer will always graze while hunter’s orange colors will always eventually fade into the trees behind them. At the end, a sample is used from Powwow Highway that highlights the power of remembering ‘old tales’ from our history, culture, and storytelling. Through those stories we can help understand our present circumstances and how to overcome current hardships and atrocities.

While I attempted to foreground apocalyptic themes for the ending of this project, I did not wish for it to indicate an end to all things. In my own belief, gathering what I’ve been taught growing up, the Earth can never truly end—only the people living off of it. Throughout the narrative of the lyrics in this final song, I contrast two spirits, the first being the hunter and the second a hunted deer with three antlers (implying deformity). Both of these characters face environmental devastation in different ways. For the deer, I had been visualizing recent publicized cases of one specific disease that had been affecting venison. This disease, known as ‘chronic wasting disease’ or more eccentrically referred to as ‘the zombie deer’ disease, essentially makes these animals dead, yet alive. In watching one video in particular, I saw a doe walking fearlessly throughout nature with ripped and decayed flesh all over her body, even her ribs were showing. It was so odd to witness, because the deer had not seemed phased by this at all. It made me think of how humans might react to such a plague, with fear, agony, and fright. To me, it shows just how strong and elegant plant and animal life is compared to that of human life. Lakhota belief would argue that some of this elegant strength is lost from humans due to the increase of greed and parasitic treatments of the Earth. In the end, the world and those who live with it (as opposed to off of it), are those who are more taken care of than anybody in the world. Thus, this project comes to a close with the deeply inherent value shared amongst all Indigenous peoples, no amount of money in the world can compare to what the world has to offer.

At the end of the day, I release my music with the complete understanding that some people will not understand my art at all. If I am lucky, one person will relate and enjoy my work, and that’s okay with me. This medium of hip hop for
me is my way of cathartically releasing my opinions and thoughts on politics, social justice, mental health, and more. Therapeutically speaking, it is how I express my Indigenous experience without being policed or governed by the laws of written English or Eurocentric academia. Through releasing these songs, it is my hope that they reach the ears of those in the bowels of oppression, searching for the right soundtrack to help them crawl out of the various disparities in anywhere from the reservation, to the ghetto, to the third world countries constantly being invaded by tyrannical structures interested only in power and self-gain. With every album I make, I am hoping to contribute to the soundtrack of true, non-exploitative decolonization. They are creative expressions of sovereignty.

TALON BAZILLE SHOOTSHEENEMY-DUCHENEAX is a rap artist and poet from the Crow Creek Dakota and Cheyenne River Lakota tribes in South Dakota, part of the Oceti Sakowin (7 Council Fires). An alum of the University of Pennsylvania, Bazille’s work has gone from rez to city to rez, reflecting the amalgamation of his own experiences and views of the world through music, primarily hip hop. Bazille is also the head of ‘Wonahun Was’te’ Studios/Records’ which in Lakota means ‘Bringing good things, through healing sounds of song.’ The studio provides free access to community members and allies with conceptualizing, creating, recording, engineering, and distributing music, storytelling, and poetry. Currently, in collaboration with Collective Influence, Panoramic Dreams, and First Peoples Fund, Bazille is releasing the ‘Traveling the Multiverse with Iktomi’ three-part album series which began releasing late-2020 on all platforms.