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## VIEWS

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### THE ANTI-WAR VOICE OF BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE

**Abstract:** *Universal soldier* (1964), *Soldier Blue* (1970), and *The War Racket* (2017) represent some of Buffy Sainte-Marie's most prominent anti-war songwriting, where she demonstrates her poetic process as an artist and activist. Considering her anti-war utterance, I will analyze these selected songs and place them in Buffy Sainte-Marie's work as an activist and performer. Additionally, I intend to interpret her musical production through semiotics and hermeneutics that center her contemporary voice as an artist of First Nations descent. By charting the contemporary landscape of her work in both the 1960s to 1970s and the 2000s, I will seek relationships between the process of representation (of the feminine and indigenous identities) and assimilation (mainstream music and the media) within her anti-war utterance.

**Keywords:** Buffy Sainte-Marie, Anti-War Art and Performance, Protest Song, Transindigenous, Native American Representation, Feminine Representation, Native American Assimilation, Aesthetics and Poiesis.

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*she stomps in this country  
and everyone goes native now  
out to the streets  
with the smell of our fear on the wind  
perhaps we will all get killed soon*  
(Nathaniel Tarn, "For Buffy Sainte-Marie")

## Introduction

Canadian Cree singer/songwriter/activist/artist Buffy Sainte-Marie and her artistic corpus exist within the complex landscape of North American cultural economy. Sainte-Marie's variety of musical styles, modes of performance and musical production reveal an ingenuity that affords her a place of significance in the arts. At a time when this cultural economy privileged the homogeneity of male Anglo-European descendants, Buffy Sainte-Marie rose as an expressive and committed artist with an utterance that challenges the corporate priorities of said cultural economy, including its alignment with the military industrial complex.

Among the various expressions of musical performance emerging during the Second World War throughout the decade of the 1970s, folk revival and rock 'n' roll remain the most prominent styles of popular music of this period. Considering the phenomena of *synchronizing* and *publicizing* American cultural policies, the music historian David James positions these two complex musical performance expressions as chief among the cultural devices aligning with the project of American Imperial Capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the 1960s (and aligned with the cultural production of the Vietnam War era,) mass media often assigned political meaning to work that was only marginally committed to political transgression. The phenomena of cultural reception and ideological assignment is exemplified by the Vietnam American GI movement that

endowed such songs as The Rolling Stones' *2000 Light Years from Home*, the Animals' *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*, Porter Wagoner's *Green, Green Grass of Home*, The Box Tops' *The Letter*, and Peter, Paul and Mary's *Leaving on a Jet Plane* with meanings they could not have had elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David James, "The Vietnam War and American Music", *Social Text*, 23, Autumn–Winter 1989, 123.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 126–127.

It's important to nuance this historical synchronization between the two artistic projects of folk revival and rock 'n' roll. While folk revival artists explored sonic expressions of authenticity and simplicity which often tied these expressions to the artist's identities and political alliance, their rock 'n' roll counterparts were developing a more homogenous project where the domain of the technologies of digital production and market branding were essential devices.<sup>3</sup>

Within this scenario of musical production and political association, Sainte-Marie creates her work with a strong sense of synthesis. Women artists who produced protest performances emerged globally throughout the 1950s – 1970s and crystalized the influence of feminism as an aesthetic experience, especially on the American continent. Particularly, Sainte-Marie understands and synthesizes the different expectations of Native American cultural expressions existing in the mainstream media.

Lastly, Sainte-Marie's various transits between the United States and Canada, between her Cree and Mi'kmaq identities, and her free flow between folk revival and rock 'n' roll critically embody her artistic synthesis. In fact, Sainte-Marie resists the complex and sometimes exclusionary relationship between folk revival and rock 'n' roll during the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, her musical production exists in a uniquely synthesized space.

I recognize the limitations of choosing the terminology Native American throughout this paper considering Buffy Sainte-Marie's diverse identities – both indigenous and feminine. In no way do I wish to limit her historiography or draw a narrower circle around her influence. However, purposefully using the Native American terminology implies commitment to a project wherein Sainte-Marie herself has become a sponsor and contributor to the Pan-Indianism Movement. Additionally, this research paper cannot address Sainte-Marie's essential work of advocacy and activism for arts and education, for Native American rights, for Women Rights, among other invaluable traits within her work.<sup>4</sup> The scope of these initiatives deserves a dedicated space and exploration that this manuscript cannot address.

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, James critiques the capitalist motivations to rock 'n' roll and situates the style historically between counter-culture rhetoric and corporate market priorities. David James, *op. cit.*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Diamond's ethnographic work situates Buffy Sainte-Marie as an influential mentor to many younger Native American women musicians (consider interviews and narratives found in Diamond's article). Beverly Diamond, "Native American Contemporary Music: The Women", *The World of Music: Readings in Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2002.

## Poiesis

Buffy Sainte-Marie belongs to a broader community of protest singer-songwriters throughout the latitude of the American continent. This community of protest singer-songwriters include – but is not limited to: Violeta Parra in Chile, Zélia Barbosa in Brazil, and Victoria Santa Cruz in Peru. Performance and songwriting provide the signposts to this landscape of cultural expressions across the continent.

The emergence of women songwriters and especially those who create protest pieces indicate a greater manifestation of women as proprietors and articulators of political voice. Sainte-Marie produces her work in the complex intersection of individual expression and identity assertion, especially within the corporate expectations that developed during the American cultural economy in the 1970s.

Predominantly, beyond the temporal-geographical-feminine dimensions of this community of protest singer-songwriters, Buffy Sainte-Marie belongs to a long line of Native American artists who aspired to produce social transformation through their artistic work. This community of Native American artists include Chief Kiutus Tecumseh (1896–1966), a notable example of a singer who

often chastise the federal government, for example, in its pessimism toward Native intellectual ability, which largely prohibited opportunities for Native people to seek higher education.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the concept of poiesis will be deployed to argue the meaning-making of Sainte-Marie's anti-war utterance. Metaphysics, politics, and intersectionality find great resonance within the motivation of Sainte-Marie's compositional and poetic processes.

In his 1953 piece *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger begins with the everyday account of technology according to which technology is the vast array of instruments, machines, artefacts and devices that we human beings invent, build, and then exploit. (...) In this context poiesis is to be understood as a process of gathering together and fashioning natural materials in such a way that the human project in which they figure is in a deep harmony with, indeed *reveals*—or as Heidegger sometimes says when discussing poiesis, *brings forth*—the essence of those materials and any natural environment in which they are set. (...) Poiesis,

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<sup>5</sup> John W. Troutman, "Indian Blues: The Indigenization of American Popular Music", *World Literature Today*, Vol. 83, No. 3, May–June 2009, 46.

then, is a process of revealing. Poietic events are acts of unconcealment—one is tempted to coin the ugly neologism *truth-ing*—in which entities are allowed to show themselves. (...) Heidegger holds that the self-organized unfolding of the natural world, the unaided blossoming of nature, is *itself* a process of poiesis.<sup>6</sup>

All Sainte-Marie's songs comprise the material – acoustic, literary – and im-material artifacts of the bringing forth of her utterance. Her anti-war utterance exists within a material reality that inhabits stylistic forms – albeit commercial – that reveal the truth about their historical time and probe the critique of the politics of war and peace.

Chadwick Allen provides scholastic leadership when he uses the term “trans-indigenous” to understand identities and expressions of indigenous origin.<sup>7</sup>

The point is not to displace the necessary, invigorating study of specific traditions and contexts but rather to complement these by augmenting and expanding broader, globally Indigenous fields of inquiry. The point is to invite specific studies into different kinds of conversations, and to acknowledge the mobility and multiple interactions of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and texts.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout his work in “Trans-Indigenous,” Allen establishes methodologies of semiotic literary criticism that inhabits the multi-lingual expressions of global Indigenous arts practices. More notably, Allen provides an intersectional analysis between the acoustic elements and linguistic components of contemporary Indigenous artistic production, the evocative potential of ancestral connections, and the potency of meaning-making while inhabiting trans-identities<sup>9/10</sup>

Buffy Sainte-Marie's music and performance cannot be delineated exclusively through methodologies of Indigenous literary analysis. Neither can her music be solely understood through lenses of popular music analysis. Her music and performance are syncretic in the most potent sense of the process. My methodological argument of creative synthesis as potency in Sainte-Ma-

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Wheeler, “Martin Heidegger,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, November 2, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/#Rel>.

<sup>7</sup> Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 153–179.

<sup>10</sup> In his “Visual and Aural Empathy” section, Allen contextualizes the rap track “Tangata Whenua” by the Māori hip-hop group Upper Hutt Posse within the broader context of contemporary Māori arts practices. (*Ibid.*, 153–157).

rie's work is supported by Christopher A. Scales in his analysis of indigenous music in the mainstream, relating the historical political struggles of Native Americans to their place in the markets of musical production.<sup>11</sup>

### Death and War as Discourse

Throughout the late 60s and early 70s, folk revival and rock 'n' roll embraced the endemic war theme of death. This thematic emphasis is present in Buffy Sainte-Marie's work and belongs in a community of songs from this period that critiqued war violence through lyrical narratives of violence and oppression. For example, *Universal Soldier* (1964)<sup>12</sup> introduces collective responsibility in the enterprise of war, from elected officials and propaganda consumption to blind obedience and the unanswerable results:

And he knows he shouldn't kill  
And he knows he always will  
Kill you for me, my friend, and me for you  
(...)  
His orders come from far away no more  
They come from here and there and you and me  
And brothers, can't you see?  
This is not the way we put the end to war

Sainte-Marie's guitar strumming functions both as accompaniment and interjection within the performance texture. Sometimes the strumming underlines the vocal rhythm in an almost homophonic rendering, at other times it simply stops the lyrics by overwhelming the texture with large barre chords.

Lastly, this piece of melodic writing is more closely related to the traditional Native music across North America, privileging the descending contour of the texture.<sup>13</sup> This descending contour is also found in the harmonic

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher A. Scales, "The North American Aboriginal Recording Industry", *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 126, No. 499, [University of Illinois Press, American Folklore Society], 2013, 82–83.

<sup>12</sup> Considering this performance on YouTube, we notice her deployment of phrasing that probe and accuse the listener, especially the direct address to the public: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zNUnwUSZmQ> (date and context for performance unknown).

<sup>13</sup> Elaine Keillor, "Indigenous Music as a Compositional Source: Parallels and Contrasts in Canadian and American Music", in: Timothy J. McGee (Ed.), *Taking a Stand: Essays in Honour of John Beckwith*, University of Toronto Press, 1995, 194; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctvcv5cc4.15>.

ostinato (E F#/C# B G#m) of the piece, with parallel motion between the melody and the bassline.<sup>14</sup> The tense vocal timbre ascertains the confrontational nature of this piece, directly addressing the audience who are responsible for the support and validation of this universal soldier, who kills on our behalf (Example 1).

**Example 1:** Excerpt from the beginning of *Universal Soldier*, transcribed by author.

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the song 'Universal Soldier'. The notation is in 4/4 time, key of D major (two sharps). The melody is on a treble clef staff. The lyrics are 'He's five foot two — and he's six feet four, (...)' with a pink oval highlighting the melody. Above the staff, a blue box contains the chord progression: E, F#/C#, B, G#m.

The *Universal Soldier* exists alongside other contemporary expressions of military mythology, revealing a spectrum of perspectives, from covert nihilism to overt patriotism. The Doors' *The Unknown Soldier* (1968) narrates the death of a symbolic patriotic martyr, faceless though not timeless since it is historically placed within the Vietnam War years. The Doors distill this soldier's memory and make the society that watches his violent news an accomplice. Another expression of military mythology much more conservative is Barry Saddler and Robin Moore's *The Ballad of the Green Berets* (1965) which expresses the cultural expectation of the familial bond in patriotism, fearfully bearing out Sainte-Marie's *Universal Soldier*, reinforcing the expectation of the continuity of patriotic service within families and the ultimately sacrificial giving for country.

### Ecopoetics and War as Discourse

*Soldier Blue* (1970)<sup>15</sup> is the title song of Ralph Nelson's American Revisionist Western Film of the same title. In *Soldier Blue*, Sainte-Marie offers socio-ecological imagery that celebrates the connection between humans and land, personifying North America as the 'Her' who is living and giving for all. The soldier blue persona is confronted with this reality of generosity and abundance, opposed to his desire to kill and guard and conquer.

<sup>14</sup> See graphic on Example 1.

<sup>15</sup> For this portion of my analysis, I consider the film soundtrack presented here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJlr5y429BY>.

Soldier Blue, Soldier Blue, Soldier Blue,  
Can't you see that there's another way to love her?

The associations between country, land, and pan-nationality are present in these lyrics, making a long historical arc that positions Native Americans of the past side-by-side with the contemporary warrior who defends national interests. Country is redefined from the modern concept of the nation state (political unit) to a more ancestral concept of land (ecological unit).

Further connections are made between the soldier who works for country and the native who nurtures and cares for country. Service to country is an ecological experience of connection and stewardship, sharply opposed to the images of military service to country hailed during war years. These juxtapositions of the soldier blue and the 'we' Native personas in the lyrics support the broader critique of the Vietnam War.

*Soldier Blue* is unapologetically a rock 'n' roll song, with rising modulations (including many internal modulations) and the use of strong, developing rhythmical patterns that frame the various sections of the composition. Sainte-Marie's vocal style of deep and rapid vibrato permeates the performance, with intense crescendos and choral interventions throughout the musical texture.

Later in the composition there is the use of vocables between Sainte-Marie's solo and the layered choral texture. Vocables as a performance resource, though present in many Native American songs,<sup>16</sup> is closely associated here with the soulful stylizations of the vocal line in its melodic and timber qualities.

This song is not alone in Sainte-Marie's expressions of poetic politics present throughout her work in the 1960s and 1970s, reinforcing her character of a Native American Revisionist. Some examples include: *Now That the Buffalo's Gone* (1964), *My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying* (1966), *Native North American Child* (1972), *She'll Be Coming Round the Mountain* (1973).

### Technology and War as Discourse

*The War Racket* (2017)<sup>17</sup> appears in Sainte-Marie's latest album *Medicine Songs* and contribute to a collection of new recordings of several of her pro-

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<sup>16</sup> David P. McAllester, "New Perspectives in Native American Music", *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 20, No. 1-2, 1982, 434; <https://www.jstor.org/stable/942422>

<sup>17</sup> The official video production for *The War Racket* incorporates rich visual elements: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzG\\_4e8yGew](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzG_4e8yGew).



test songs across her 60-year-old career. New renditions of *My Country 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying*, *America the Beautiful*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, *Now that the Buffalo's Gone*, *Working for the Government*, *Soldier Blue*, and *Universal Soldier* make this album an important revue of her corpus of political utterance.

Technology is a matter of personal expression and public advocacy for Sainte-Marie. She has been a strong advocate for technological development in First Nations communities.<sup>18</sup> She has incorporated digital synthesis and electric instruments from the very inception of her music production career. This use of technology has, in fact, drawn criticism from her folk revival contemporaries, while approximating her work to an aesthetic that was more in line with the rock 'n' roll of the 1970s.

*The War Racket* is a poignant piece of accompanied spoken word containing Sainte-Marie's most harsh and direct critique of the military industrial complex. In the lyrics she names all major actors – political and financial – of the latest war enterprise in the Middle East: Saddam, Bush, bin Laden. Her direct address deploys the use of pejoratives such as slick, snakes, bullies, creeps, worms, thugs, and thieves. The urgency and abandon with which she calls out the war enterprise in its historical inception, political motivation, and monetary gain, reveals the utterance of an artist who is sincerely tired of the same apparatus of violence.

The use of technology as aesthetic discourse is not a novelty in Sainte-Marie's work: she was the first artist to use vocals processed through a Buchla 100 synthesizer and the first to make an album using pre-surround-sound quadraphonic technology.<sup>19</sup> These technological innovations appeared in her 1969 electro-folk-rock epic *Illuminations*. The intersection of spirituality and political critique of spiritual symbology were also present in her technological inception.

There are various timbers of digital synthesizers as well as wide distortions from the guitars in *The War Racket*. The impatient and repetitive rhythms of the loops reveal an underlying of linear persistence, resonating throughout the history of wars, regardless of the alignment with capitalist, imperial, or religious motives. Sainte-Marie again deploys rhythmic breaks to underline the spoken word, adding emphasis and urgency to her message.

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<sup>18</sup> Beverley Diamond, op. cit., 394.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Raine, "Power in the Songs BUFFY SAINTE-MARIE", *Canadian Musician*, 43.1, 2021, 36.

## Conclusion

Buffy Sainte-Marie offers an utterance of anti-war songs that is rich in bilingual and bicultural meanings. Her artistic experience reveals great ingenuity in navigating the expectations of mainstream media and the cultural economy of her early career. There were moments of division and development that reveal an artist who is interested in conversing between musical styles and sometimes disregards stylistic continuity altogether.<sup>20</sup>

Her bilingual meanings advance her position as an artist of commercial and political strength expressing a variety of stylistic languages and deploying devices from all her identities.

Indigenous bilanguaging – thinking and writing between languages, engaging the politics of their asymmetry within (post)colonial relations – can be more overt than either (...) single heteronym or (...) repetition.<sup>21</sup>

Also, Sainte-Marie's bicultural meanings contribute to a connection between the Pan-Indigenous movement of peace and unity while critiquing the historical violence against all human kinship. Acknowledging and decrying the violence of war is a project of all humans, regardless of cultural identities. Buffy Sainte-Marie understands her role in this project and uses her artistic utterance in a courageous and innovative way.

Starting in the late 1960s, the FBI blacklisted Sainte-Marie, including prohibiting several of her protest songs from being broadcast over US radio, yet Sainte-Marie would not discover this insidious intervention until the 1980s. For almost twenty years, her pacifist, anti-war messages, as well as her songs and work that raised awareness of the genocide and continued exploration of North America's Indigenous peoples, were hindered by the US government.<sup>22</sup>

While stylistic continuity may not be a constant in Buffy Sainte-Marie's creative output, her critique of oppression and violence are certainly tenants in her work.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>21</sup> Chadwick Allen, *op. cit.*, 163.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Raine, *op. cit.*, 35–36.

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### Land Acknowledgement

I write to you from the unceded land of the Comanche, Hueco, Tawakoni, and Wichita peoples. I acknowledge that the institution for which I work, the institution where I am currently pursuing doctoral studies, and the community of faith with which I worship were collectively founded on the exclusion and eradication of many peoples, including those on whose land these institutions are located. This acknowledgement demonstrates my commitment to begin the process of dismantling the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism and work towards God's justice for all people. Considering the digital format of this article, I encourage my public to consider their own relationship to the land and land ancestors where they are.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Buffy Sainte-Marie exemplifies a variety of Land Acknowledgements in her performances and award recognitions, including during the JUNO 2021 awards when she weaved a lamentation for the more than 1,300 students discovered at former sites of Canada's residential schools earlier in 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVtmdki4Pf4>. Additionally, Sainte-Marie provides a humorous critique to formal land acknowledgements ridden with legal language in her commentary to the JUNO 2017 awards first televised land acknowledgement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyRubg5Tfko>.