

Tanya Tagaq Leaves Little Unsaid on 'Tongues'

by Safiya Hopfe

Contributor

JANUARY 19 2022

Inuk musician, author, painter, activist and mother Tanya Tagaq was not raised on the several-thousand-year-old art of throat singing. After moving at the age of five to Ikaluktutiak (Cambridge Bay), an extremely remote town in the northern reaches of Nunavut, Tagaq found herself in a community where assimilation to a Christian English-speaking way of life was an entrenched priority. Although listening to records was a constant during her upbringing, it was not until her 20s that Tagaq began reclaiming this vocal tradition. Much to the bewilderment of her roommates, she began experimenting in the shower. In an eventual fluke, some of Björk's friends heard her improvise at the Great Northern Arts Festival, which she was attending to showcase her visual art. A couple of years later, Tagaq and Björk were touring together and collaborating.

Tagaq's platform grew dramatically when she took home the 2014 Polaris Music Prize for *Animism*, an uninhibited sonic experiment which wove the earthy tradition of Inuk throat-singing into a tapestry of eerie harmonies and violent rhythms. Since then, the messages embedded in Tagaq's varied artistic expressions have only grown clearer. In her Polaris Gala performance, she sang before a scrolling list of the missing and murdered Indigenous women to whom she had dedicated her album. *Retribution*, released in 2016 at a pivotal moment of reckoning across so-called Canada, saw Tagaq sing, scream and whisper about colonialism's inevitable repercussions. In her 2018 novel-memoir *Split Tooth*, poetic truth dissolved into mythical horror as she painted a portrait of Indigenous life in the harsh North.

On her latest full-length record, aptly titled *Tongues*, Tagaq is more explicit than ever. "You can't have my tongue," she repeats again and again on the title track, emphasizing the resilience of Indigenous voices despite all that has attempted to silence them. "I don't want your shame," she

continues. "It doesn't belong to me." On "Colonizer," breathy grunts and mutterings of "Oh, you're guilty" melt into cacophonous distortions, emulating the rage of the battered earth itself.

Tongues, produced by Saul Williams and mixed by Gonjasufi, employs steady synthetic rhythms and lucid electronic soundscapes to amplify Tagaq's poetic prowess. On "Teeth Agape" and "I Forgive Me," she speaks with unflinching clarity — against eerily unembellished backdrops — of the wisdom and agony of survival, sliding subtly in and out of throat singing. In "Do Not Fear Love," a hypnotic ode to the durability of the emotional body despite trauma, ambient humming haunts gnawingly honest prose. Tagaq speaks to her oppressors — "eat your morals," she spits.

But above all, she speaks to and for Indigenous children who have been scarred by the same violence which has scarred her. "We were entered too young," she sings, saying that the past has "birthed the bricks" which build her bones. "They can't protect themselves." Tagaq's testimonials are raw and soaked in grief, but in every verse of mourning is a reclamation of personal power.

Tagaq's talent as a throat singer and capacity to weave meaning through chaos is as breathtaking as ever. That said, Tongues demonstrates that her musical toolkit is only growing with the refinement of her message. In some ways, this means embracing simplicity. If her former work has been marked by the seismic intensity of rage and crisis, Tagaq's latest record encapsulates the power of the pulse heard in the aftermath of the storm. After all, disaster has already struck, and sometimes healing is a quiet process.

When Tagaq swaps swirling pandemonium for crystalline repetition and shoegaze-y ambience, no intensity is lost. The heart of Tagaq's power as an artist is in her voice, and not just due to her mastery of vocal variation. Her enunciation of concise poetry over understated rhythms is an aural experience which transcends the craft of spoken word. As she speaks her truth, she does so without stuttering, hesitating only to come up — deftly and deliberately — for air.

At a time when "reconciliation" is the word on so many lips, Tagaq's verses leave no room for settler guilt or empty bureaucratic gestures. Tongues zooms in on the ugly details of colonial violence, and makes one thing, above all else, achingly clear: healing is not optional. It is the only way forward.