

Artist's Statement – Tsimka Martin

Grabbing Spree

My name is Tsimka Martin and I am a Tla-o-qui-aht First Nations member. Tla-o-qui-aht is a nation of people who live in the southern part of Clayoquot Sound. This area is on the west coast of Vancouver Island. It is a lush, green, temperate region in which Tla-o-qui-aht have lived since time immemorial.

Our traditional territory encompasses lakes, rivers, mountains, islands, beaches, inlets and ocean. In our cultural teachings, we have a responsibility to care for this place, which goes back generations.

First Nations across the continent have been subjected to intense colonization. A big part of colonization are the introduced attitudes about what is acceptable behavior towards the place we call home.

Colonial corporations, such as mine companies, have been on the move, exploiting and polluting areas in reckless disregard for the well being of the ecology of places and the lives of those who reside there. A colonial belief is that there will always be somewhere else to go and exploit. The reality is that the collective damage to the earth is making our planet a more hostile environment in which to live than before the industrialization movement.

I feel a strong responsibility to work to protect my home territory specifically. I also feel responsible beyond my home territory, but because of my upbringing and inherent rights in my home area, I focus here. The connection of a First Nations culture to the land is inseparable. Tla-o-qui-aht culture and language evolved out of this area we know to be home.

A few years ago I was invited to join a group called First Nations Women Advocating Responsible Mining (FNWARM) who come together for meetings. The women are from various First Nations communities. They decided to gather together around the topic of mining. We are all fighting the irresponsibility of the industry in our respective homelands.

There are connections and shared experiences that make it useful to come together as FNWARM. The mining industry is regulated by the provinces of Canada. Canada is a colonial institution which has colonized in all of FNWARM members' home territories, making it useful to share stories and approaches to the mining industry. In FNWARM, we see the need for mine reform, around the free entry/staking a claim system. Also around the need to implement United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People with clauses like "Free Prior and informed Consent". I did a lot of learning in these meetings from the other FNWARM members and their experiences with the companies. The vigor with which they stand up for the land and water is inspiring. The approach and ongoing relations with the companies is often maddening; and it leaves me with a sense of wanting to elevate the issue.

For me, creatively packaging some things I had learned and putting it into a rap was one way to do this. Making a video to go with the messages of the rap was my attempt to make the song and its message reach more people.

Mixing our Tla-o-qui-aht style of chant and drum with the rap felt like a natural thing. Rap as an art form has a long history. One big piece of that history is its development by African-American people as a voice of the oppressed. Another piece of rap history is its roots tracing back to Africa, where there is also a connection to griots, who are West African historians, musicians, poets, and storytellers. There is an ability in rap to say a lot in an engaging way.

The use of the medicine woman mask in the video also felt like a natural fit. It was carved by Levi Martin who is an important Tla-o-qui-aht community leader and elder. He was happy to allow us to bring the mask to life in this way. In our culture, “medicine” includes more than a substance that you would put in or on your body to heal. It includes laughter, emotional support and processing, cultural support, spiritual ceremony, as well as physical medicines. In the video, the medicine woman is having emotional reactions to what is being said and supporting the message of a great need for change in the mining sector and beyond with the way minerals are used in this world.

In the video we are also barefoot on the beach. Being barefoot for me fosters a closer connection to the earth.