

Interview with Saskatchewan Hip Hop Artist Eekwol (a.k.a. Lindsay Knight)

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Introduction

The following are excerpts from an interview I conducted with Saskatchewan hip hop artist Lindsay Knight (a.k.a. Eekwol) on June 18th, 2008 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where she currently resides with her partner and son. Although Eekwol and I had met on a number of occasions and had previously worked together, these excerpts are from our first ‘formal’ recorded interview.

Eekwol’s family is from the Muskoday First Nation, located south of Prince Albert in Saskatchewan. She grew up in Prince Albert and also lived in Saskatoon. She graduated from First Nations University of Canada in Regina and is currently finishing her Honours degree in Indigenous Studies at the University of Saskatchewan.



For Eekwol, hip hop is a way of life. The music, culture, politics, and ideology, more specifically those that are more commonly associated with ‘old school’ hip hop or its mythic origins, are what have always drawn Eekwol to hip hop, not to mention her skills as a killer emcee who can spit fire-like rhymes. Early on, Eekwol first recorded with the hip hop collective Innersoulflow, a group of eight young hip hop artists (seven men and Eekwol). In 2004 Eekwol released *Apprento*. For her first solo album Eekwol was nominated for and won Best Rap album at the 2005 Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards. Following on the success of *Apprento*, Eekwol along with her brother Mills released *The List* in 2007, an album that is at times fiercely political and challenging. Currently, Eekwol is working on her third solo album, which will have her rapping in her recently learned native language, Cree.

Eekwol’s music, performances, and hip hop politics are major themes and questions contextualized in my current research on Indigenous Hip Hop in western and northern Canada. My research in this area is shaped by the following questions: How does hip hop play an integral role in narrating colonialism (as experienced today) in Saskatchewan? How does hip hop as it is created, produced, and consumed by Indigenous youth challenge contemporary Canada to think about ‘Aboriginal’ politics in the now and the future, rather than think of colonialism as only relevant to the past? In what ways does hip hop contribute to the struggle for decolonization in Saskatchewan?

When taking up these questions, I have argued, “it is evident that Eekwol’s hip hop does not solely focus on the preservation of past traditions, but rather, she is attempting to explore the complex experiences of Indigenous youth living in Saskatchewan [...] Eekwol’s music is politically, socially, culturally, and ethically relevant to today.” The politics and poetics of Eekwol’s hip hop are what draw me to her work. Eekwol’s call to action, the contributions she makes to youth communities, her critiques of colonialism, and her political stance on hip hop culture demand close and careful attention.

In the following excerpts, Eekwol discusses some of what inspires her, how she explicitly and

implicitly questions what it means to be a woman rapping in a highly masculinized genre, and how for her, hip hop is one strategy (among others) on the road to decolonization.

Interview Excerpts

CM: What is your favourite literature? Do you have time to read fiction?

Eekwol: Yeah, I do. I do it in pockets. I'll read fiction for a couple months, and then I'll go back to the academic stuff. [...] I'm actually transitioning back to the academic stuff right now. But my ultimate favourite fictional author of all time is Louise Erdrich. She's so amazing.

CM: What is amazing about her?

Eekwol: Well, [...] she's half Ojibwa, so I can kind of relate to her in the half-breed¹ sense. [...] The way she writes is so poetic. She's from South Dakota [...] Her work doesn't scream "Indigenous," but it always has indigenous elements and it's subtle and it's so cool how she does it. She wrote a book called *Love Medicine* [1993]. It's amazing. I read it four times. And I don't read things twice—I don't like doing that, but with that book I did. [...] It's her word play, and as a lyricist you pick up on those little things. [...] She could be a rapper easily. [...]

CM: You always seem to have so much going on in your life and your music. And so, I start the interview by asking about literature because you are a lyricist and I want to know about all the places that you as a rapper draw or gather inspiration from, especially in regards to language. What else inspires you and the way that you create your raps?

Eekwol: Wow, well I guess there are a lot of obvious influences—my hip hop influences which are emcees. I was twelve or thirteen when I started listening to hip hop. I was amazed by the way [the emcees] could throw words together and create this imagery and tell these stories, and talk about issues. You know, the very first CD that I bought was Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* [1990]. [...] Obviously, the African-American movement, being that that's where hip hop originates from. You can feed off of [...] those social issues and the political issues. I guess I drew on that quite a bit. And underground hip hop - the kind that never made it to the main-

¹ Similar to hip hop artist Kinnie Starr, Eekwol reclaims the label of "half-breed," challenging its derogatory weight and with it the socio-political history that is bound to the term.

stream because of those issues and the discussions that went on within the lyrics. [...] Around here, you know, we didn't have much access, because Internet wasn't around. Ten, fifteen years ago it was limited. If one of us in the hip hop scene would go to Calgary or some place and pick up a cool underground tape, we'd dub it like 30 times. I still have a lot of my old dub mix tapes. [...]

CM: How would you respond to the argument that hip hop outside the U.S. is predominantly about mimicry?

Eekwol: Obviously life is mimicry from the day we are born. We learn through mimicry. [...] Everything comes from somewhere, right? A lot of times we have outside influences but we end up utilizing them in our own way. I think that's what is happening with hip hop, with different cultures within the culture of hip hop. [...] Individuals are putting it out and the ones that are getting the attention are doing it from an original place. Otherwise, they wouldn't be getting that attention. And it's the ones that *aren't* doing it from an original place that are the hundreds and thousands of rappers out there [...] People know it's not original, it isn't new.

But you do get the original ones that are drawing on their own backgrounds when creating hip hop. It sounds different from something coming out of the Bronx. As long as you continue to have respect for where it comes from [...] and I always push that, everywhere I go. It's always one of the first things I say about hip hop, "I do hip hop but I know where it comes from." It doesn't come from my history, my background. But I can relate to it because of its oral history, the oral storytelling traditions and stuff like that.

CM: In your hip hop I hear lots of things that connect the music to a particular place, signifiers that make it sound different from other hip hop I've listened to before. For example, Mark Longjohn is singing on your first CD [2004] and here you have integrated round dance singing. There are often times you and Mills [...] use different, although often digitally generated, kinds of sounds and instruments that one doesn't necessarily think of when listening to hip hop. And there are also more obvious signifiers of a local place, for example when you use the Cree language sometimes. [...] I think about these things in relation to the local because in listening to your hip hop it seems to connect more to this place. What I mean is that it doesn't sound like a mimicry of American hip hop styles, rather it's connected more to a contemporary global language of hip hop.

Eekwol: Yeah, definitely. [...]

CM: How has technology changed how you create or how you think about hip hop?

Eekwol: Well, people say nowadays there's no 'real' hip hop anymore and all these younger generations have no idea what 'real' hip hop is. But I like to argue against that because for me, it comes from passion, it comes from within and either you're good at it or you're not. Technology has always been advancing and I don't think the argument is fair to these young kids. Yeah sure, they can make a beat a lot easier than my brother could've made a beat ten years ago, but they're still using the talents and the passion that comes with hip hop. [...] There is something about the hip hop culture that just draws you in.

CM: What is it?

Eekwol: It's indescribable. [...] To this day I can't describe what it is. But I love it and I know I'll love it for the rest of my life because it caught me and I'm in love with it. That's why there are so many songs out there that are talking about hip hop as almost like a being. "Why I love hip hop" is an old K-OS song. [...]

CM: It feels alive?

Eekwol: Yeah, it's a living spirit. That's another way that I can relate hip hop with my Cree culture—our drum is considered a spirit. There are all types of protocols that go around respecting the drum and I'm sure it's the same thing with other cultures too. You recognize and respect that spirit and you don't ask, like you don't really know why, or where, or how, but you just know it's there and you have to respect it. [...]

CM: In Canada, we have a strange relationship to hip hop culture. [...] It's almost as though there are pockets of really intense hip hop, and then nothing [...] but then you come out to western Canada and hip hop is really happening. There are the artists, there are hip hop arts-based projects happening in community centres, or hip hop workshops, and hip hop is now in the schools. It seems to be such an important element here in a way that I didn't necessarily see in Ontario. Why do you think there is such an intense relationship with hip hop especially with Indigenous youth? Is it because of people like you as role models? Is there something about the culture that allows for stronger identifications? What do you think?

Eekwol: I don't know. No, I wouldn't give myself that kind of credit. I think it does come from the mainstream, the commercial. And you know a lot of

times it's really negative, but in the same way, it's relatable. It's all relatable. When I was a teenager I listened to Tupac. That's what I loved: Tupac. I related. [...] It's a relatable genre because a lot of the people who are doing hip hop are in the same sort of social struggle. Whether or not they recognize it, or are doing anything to change it.

So, I feel more my role when I see kids, inner city kids, whether they're indigenous or not, is promoting and doing positive for the underground conscious hip hop.

Hip hop is effective with young people because it's a genre that they love. I also have that notion in the back of my mind that our ancestral history runs through our blood and our spirits and I think that a lot of the times, youth relate to that kind of storytelling [in hip hop] because of our storytelling traditions. And even though there's a huge gap between the teen years and, you know, thirty-somethings and older, they have it in their ancestral knowledge and maybe it comes out, and maybe that's an attraction that they don't even know about. I like to think that. That's kind of far-fetched, but I do. [...]

CM: Is there a relationship between hip hop and a movement towards decolonization? Do you have a sense that maybe there's movement around a process of decolonization or strategies towards decolonization? Is there a relationship? Is hip hop where it's going to happen? Is this where that conversation is starting to take place?

Eekwol: I think so. It's one aspect, definitely. And music is just one aspect of the whole big picture of decolonizing, right? I can only speak for myself, but I do try to use hip hop as a tool to try to comprehend exactly what needs to happen to decolonize, to decolonize myself and to try to talk about it, to try to get, get that discourse going. And then, like you said before, hip hop is so global that I think it's a tool in a lot of different places too [...] It's not for everybody, but definitely for me and a lot of the other artists I know and work with. It is sort of foundational for us because we happen to be musicians, but there's also the people that are the activists in different ways, and a lot of times it's the young people, people who are in their thirties, twenties, and teens that are starting to do this type of thing. It may be music or not so much, maybe just ceremonies, the resurgence of the ceremonies and the desire to learn and relearn the ceremonies and revitalize the language. That's starting to happen quite a bit. [...]

CM: You often get asked about being a woman rapper and what it's like. Because of your skills on the mic, it almost seems to be represented as incredible

because you're a woman with mad skills. But from previous conversations we've had, I know you want to re-assert the idea that you're just a rapper without necessarily focusing on the fact that you're a woman rapper. [...] At the same time, I've also heard you describe hip hop as a lonely place, because there are so few women who rap.

Eekwol: You're right. It's totally there. There's no getting around it. But when I write lyrics, I'm not consciously thinking from a woman's perspective. I'm not trying to say "I am woman, hear me roar" type of thing. [...] To me the issues don't necessarily have to include gender. [The song] "Let's Move" for example [from *The List*, 2007], we all have to move and my music is always reflecting all of us. We can all do this; we can all work together. Or the stories reflect people, not men and women, unless it is specifically linked to that story. So, one of my more recent songs is the "man" song that stems from a more personal place. There are a lot of guys that rap about their girlfriend or their mom. You know, that's where that comes from, that personal place. I am a woman and that's what I'm talking about. But at the same time, if guys are rapping about a woman, people aren't saying, you know, that's a guy rapping.

CM: Because that's the norm.

Eekwol: Exactly. So, it's definitely there and it doesn't help that there's very few women. Yeah, it is lonely, because there are really very few and it's just cool that I have a little cousin who's taking that on. You know, to say "taking that on", it's like, why does it have to be that? She loves the music. She loves to create lyrics. She loves to put them to a beat. Why does she have to also take *that* on? It's not really fair. [...] When I was younger I was in a group with seven other guys, Inner Soul Flow, and I honestly didn't feel that attitude with them either. I was really kind of just one of them, you know? We'd just sit there and build lyrics and if they weren't feeling my lyrics they'd be, "well, maybe we'll try this."

CM: When I talk to some of the guys they seem to kind of idolize you a little. When some of them talk about you there's a respect and there's admiration and there's almost an adoration I hear in how they talk about you.

Eekwol: Oh, yeah? That's cool.

CM: It seems as though it's more of a sense of a family unit almost.

Eekwol: For sure. I think the ones that you talk to, I consider them as brothers. They're the good ones.

They're the ones that I grew up with and they were very honest with me and I was honest with them. They respected my input into the music too. And I get that a lot, too, with other artists.

I get endless requests from all over to drop a verse. I used to find that very, "Oh, right on." But then I started realizing a lot of the times I'd be doing it for free. Now I've got this huge stack of CDs that I'm on. But then I started realizing [...] my novelty status of being a female emcee, a lot of times that's the only reason they want me to be on. When I started coming to that realization, I was like, oh, okay. And at the same time there are those ones that just wanted to get in my pants. And those ones are, they're quite common too. You know, they want to produce a track for me. [...] But the way they talk to me is like no way that anyone else would. You know what I mean? Like, it happens in the workplace all the time. This one kid, he had amazing beats. [...] He said we have to collaborate. I said, yeah, I'm feeling your beats. So we were conversing back and forth he sent me a couple of beats, just like a typical business relationship. And all of a sudden he says, so when are you going to come to my studio? And I said, well I have a studio that I can easily record in and he said well here's some pictures of my studio. And he sends me these pictures and he's standing there and he's just like wearing his shorts. It's funny now, but I was really offended. Like, are you sending this to all of your homies too? [...]

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