

Liz Przybylski, **Sonic Sovereignty: Hip Hop, Indigeneity, and Shifting Popular Music Mainstreams**, New York: New York University Press, 2023, 318 pp., \$89.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by

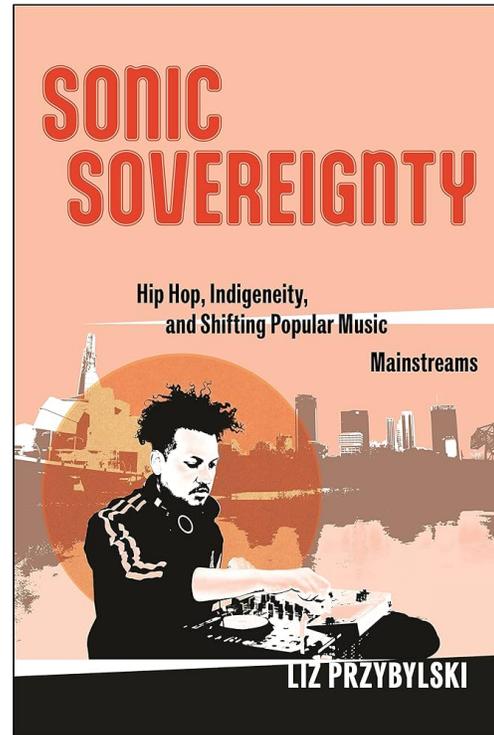
Ian Sinnett

George Mason University

The numerous discourses around decolonization have been especially rich and generative for decades. Conceptions of decolonial projects often revolve around the decolonization of land and resources, governing institutions, education, and various media and cultural “canons.” Within the social sciences and humanities, a vital task has often been theorizing the ways in which hegemonic, typically White supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal systems can be countered, with one particularly ripe avenue for this theorizing being within the realm of popular music. Music has often been considered a significant means of resistance, whether thinking about how music and social activism have historically been intertwined, how the physical site of a musical performance can be a utopian space in which hierarchies are made horizontal, or the ways in which music acts as a means of narrating historic struggle and bringing cultural history and earlier activist movements into the present. Liz Przybylski’s book, **Sonic Sovereignty: Hip**

**Hop, Indigeneity, and Shifting Popular Music Mainstreams**, adds a unique, insightful contribution to the ever-growing conversation of popular cultural decolonization and the roles that popular music can play in larger decolonial projects. With an emphasis on Canadian Indigenous hip hop spanning from 2008 to 2018, Przybylski sharply interrogates how Indigenous hip hop music can be a powerful counterhegemonic tool and how this form of hip hop can aid in attaining what she dubs “sonic sovereignty.”

In *Sonic Sovereignty*, through a multipronged methodological approach that includes critical ethnography, theories of sound, and musical analysis, Liz Przybylski offers a unique investigation into how popular music and hip hop, specifically, operate as a powerful instrument for decolonial struggle, particularly for global Indigenous populations. “Sonic sovereignty,” she explains, is “an embodied practice of Indigenous self-determination through musical expression” (p. 42). By interrogating the effects of various components like lyrics, formal composition, communal response, and the affective resonances of sound waves, Przybylski lays out how this form of hip hop can have powerful counterhegemonic impacts on an audience. The sonic realm, for Przybylski, acts as a place in which assertions of agency, self-determination, cultural currency, and subjectivity can be communicated in myriad ways, aiding in struggles for sovereignty. However, the author complicates typical notions of sovereignty, referring to questions of cultural sovereignty in tandem with struggles for heightened citizenship and political rights. She articulates that conceptions of sovereignty include not only land and spatial rights but also cultural agency, meaning the ability to represent one’s cultural history,



traditions, and relevance outside of and counter to the hegemonic discourses of the oppressor. Sonic sovereignty is a particularly powerful tool in this regard, as it can help to establish forms of extant cultural relevancy. In other words, when facing historical and present-day physical and cultural genocide, Indigenous peoples throughout Canada (and elsewhere) creatively employ the use of hip hop and meld it with various traditional Indigenous aesthetics—visual and sonic—to challenge the hegemonic discourses that so often relegate Indigenous traditions, communities, culture, and ostensibly their very ontology, to the past. In doing so, Indigenous hip hop artists, and the radio stations and streaming platforms that highlight them, display the currency of Indigenous culture. It asserts that Indigeneity writ large is not something that *was* but rather something that *is*, something that lives in the present and is always growing and evolving.

Przybylski focuses on several aspects of Indigenous sonic sovereignty throughout the book, from the ethnographically focused discussions with Indigenous hip hop artists themselves and the radio stations that play them to the conceptual analysis of soundwaves and sonics. This combined approach has several benefits. First, the ethnographic approach represents the firsthand accounts of Indigenous hip hop culture and artists and how this form of hip hop is interwoven with the continuing struggles of Indigenous populations globally. The strengths of Przybylski's ethnographic approach shine brightest when she artfully narrates firsthand accounts of Indigenous hip hop performances. Through these experiences, she enunciates the multifaceted impact these performances have on the audience by depicting not only the music and its affective resonances within herself but also how the music helps create strong communal bonds among the audience and between the audience and artist. Additionally, Przybylski offers a critical historical perspective through this ethnographic approach that expounds the rise of Indigenous hip hop in Canada and how Indigenous hip hop is complexly interwoven with global Indigenous rights movements. These lyrics often explicitly cite demands for land back, urge for governmental reparations for the atrocities committed in residential schools, and shed light on the epidemic of missing Indigenous women throughout Canada while linking these lyrics to the sonic aesthetics of their beats and to visual examples of Indigenous iconography. By often emphasizing the voices of Indigenous womxn (the pronoun Przybylski often uses), Przybylski is relaying this history and the scene's cultural politics through firsthand account. By doing so, she is setting aside her own authoritative voice to center these often marginalized voices, thus elevating their own perspectives and stories. This helps to relay these artists' calls for sonic sovereignty for which they are struggling through their music and storytelling.

Furthermore, Przybylski's interviews of radio deejays, radio station executives, and hip hop artists display the complexities of playing Indigenous hip hop on the radio. She finds that, although there has been progress in presenting more Indigenous hip hop on Canadian radio—partially aided by Canada's policy that a certain percentage of music on the radio be of Canadian origin—there has always been a push and pull between these artists and what gets played on the radio. With the aid of the Winnipeg radio station *Streetz*, and its deejay, Miss Melissa, there was a marked increase in the amount of Canadian Indigenous hip hop played on the radio in 2008, a trend that continued for several years afterward. However, this frequency was eventually pared down due to pressures for increased listenership from the top. Despite this, Przybylski is keen to point out that, although there have been continual struggles for radio airtime, the very presentation of Indigenous hip hop as a viable musical form for radio play helps to counteract discourses that locate Indigenous culture solely in the past, helping to communicate its extant relevancy.

While ethnography is a central component of the book, Przybylski also demonstrates striking conceptual analysis of sonic resonance and the ways in which different sonic forms themselves can work to aid in struggles for sovereignty. In this way, the text also contributes to the continually growing field of sound studies. For Przybylski, music's power lies not only in the ways in which it calls for sovereignty, the narration of struggle and continuing subjugation, and the linkages to historic and current activist movements are overtly communicated through lyrics. In addition to lyrics and explicit messaging, she argues that the embodied materiality of soundwaves and the ways in which these sound waves affectively resonate within an audience are as, if not more, powerful than the explicitly semantic nature of lyrics. In a particularly striking passage, Przybylski explains how sound waves create literal, physical connections between people, linking folks together in overtly imperceptible ways. She explains that, through the act of "listening" (as opposed to the mechanical act of "hearing"), "sonic sovereignty is invoked through [the] building of relationships on both ends of the soundwaves . . . listening builds the archive of the body: the listener can transform as she listens; she becomes a witness and changes through witnessing" (p. 237). This transformation, she goes on to explain, is not solely limited to the individual. Rather, due to the links between audience and performer and among audience members, there is a complex matrix of transformation. The sonic sovereignty that is communicated by the artist is embodied in the audience through performance, and this embodiment is shared and communicated among one another and back to the artist. This serves as one poignant example of how sonic sovereignty operates not only on the linguistic level or solely on the immediately perceivable plane. It functions on myriad levels, the conscious and the subconscious, the semantic and the affective, the individual and the communal.

Liz Przybylski's *Sonic Sovereignty* is a remarkably exciting text that employs a multipronged interdisciplinary methodology that emphasizes how musical expression can act as a powerful decolonial force and is one that I wholly recommend. Through her emphasis on Indigenous hip hop, Przybylski deftly contributes an innovative perspective to several fields, including Indigenous Studies, popular music and hip hop studies, postcolonial studies, and sound studies, and would be of particular interest for scholars working within these fields.