

“kenats” by Lara Sarkissian: a Political Signature

**In this track,
sampling expresses
Armenianness and
challenges traditional
gender roles.**

Lara Sarkissian is a young multimedia artist, born in 1992 and based in San Francisco, California, and the surrounding Bay Area.¹ On her website, she presents herself as a sound artist, composer, and filmmaker engaged in broad cultural activities, from leading a label, network, and event series called Club Chai² to performing as a DJ under the pseudonym FOOZOL. She holds a bachelor’s degree in interdisciplinary studies from the University of California, Berkeley (2014). Sarkissian’s parents are of Armenian descent. Before immigrating to the U.S. in the late 1970s, they lived in Tehran, Iran. Accordingly, Sarkissian was raised in an Armenian diaspora community in the Bay Area. She not only reflected on this experience in her final thesis for her studies (titled *Diaspora Identity and Mobilization through Art Technologies and New Media*) but also does so through her visual and musical productions, in which she makes extensive use of sampling.

In her early years, Sarkissian played drums. She was taught by a friend and was part of a garage rock band for a short time. The band eventually dissolved because they could not find a place to rehearse. Sarkissian also had some formal piano tuition, with which

¹ Unless otherwise stated, this chapter is based on email conversations that took place between June 17, 2016 and March 14, 2018; one interview via Skype on September 9, 2016; fieldwork in Karlsruhe, Germany, between March 20 and April 5, 2018, including six longer interviews and two direct observation sessions; and one conversation in Berlin on April 6, 2018.

² Club Chai ceased its activity during the completion of this book in early 2021.

she did not continue. As she told me, this is something that children in the Armenian community are almost forced to do. She embarked on her path as an electronic music producer and sound artist only quite recently. While studying abroad—one semester at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark, in 2013—she attended a course on sound for film. This course motivated her to begin making her own sound productions beyond film. At the time of my research, Sarkissian was trying to make a living exclusively from her cultural and musical activities. As this was still not fully possible, she was reliant on part-time jobs, mostly administrative roles in the San Francisco film industry.

Sarkissian is another example of a 21st century laptop producer working in the field of experimental electronica. Her compositions explore the possibilities between ambient and club genres, processing a great range of samples from Armenian culture, drones, environmental sounds, and reminiscences of dance-oriented club beats. She still lives with her family and her typical producing environment is her home; her own (bed)room or the family's living room. She only recently started working with a booking agent, who takes care of her bookings for North America. Sarkissian herself manages her bookings in other regions of the world, as well as the release of her tracks. She publishes her compositions under her birth name on the online platforms SoundCloud and Bandcamp. Based on the likes she has received on SoundCloud, her listenership appears to be spread globally.

I discovered Sarkissian's music through a post of her track "kenats" on the music blog *Generation Bass*, which I was following while researching tracks for this study (DJ Umb 2016).³ Released in January 2016 on SoundCloud, "kenats" was the second track Sarkissian had ever published. In five years (as of July 2021) the track has reached almost 3,512 plays, 122 likes, and 10 reposts. In 2018, Sarkissian also uploaded the track to Bandcamp.

The track serves as an ideal case study for two main reasons. First, it is a characteristic example of Lara Sarkissian's sampling practice. Through sampling, she debates questions regarding gender, religion, social justice, and her own American Armenian identity. This sampling strategy is, by definition, political. However, compared with the previous case study, the perspective here is much more personal than active. Second, due to the track's brevity (1:55) and simple construction, it is possible to completely disassemble it in the analysis. As the case studies which follow illustrate, this is not always the case, and makes analysis much more feasible here.

While the present chapter will only focus on an analysis of "kenats," I will revisit the producer's sampling strategies in an interlude later in this book. There, I will expand the analysis in this

Through sampling, Sarkissian debates questions regarding gender, religion, social justice, and her own American Armenian identity.

³ By its own description, *Generation Bass* "focuses predominantly on introducing dance flavours from all over the globe" (Generation Bass 2018).

single-track case study with a reflection on a direct observation session of another of Sarkissian's sampling processes, and discuss how such an additional perspective can further deepen the analysis.

Background: Armenian Diaspora

The sociocultural context of the Armenian diaspora plays a crucial role in the analysis of both this case study and the sampling process discussed in Chapter 11. Armenians have lived in U.S. diaspora communities since at least the end of the 19th century. They arrived in several waves, one of the most substantial of which followed the Armenian genocide committed by Young Turk troops of the Ottoman empire in 1915. Today, between 460,000 (official census number) and 1.5 million (estimates) Armenian Americans live in the U.S., compared to an estimated population of 3 million people in Armenia (Wikipedia 2019b). California is home to the largest Armenian communities in the U.S., with “the largest single concentration of Armenians (...) outside of Armenia” in Los Angeles (Alexander 2008).

When discussing diaspora communities, we often refer to the depiction of a shared identity. Scholars have long discussed and critiqued this endeavor. As the notion of identity plays a role in the analysis which follows, it is worth taking a closer look at it—though this study does not provide a thorough exploration. It is helpful to rely here on a distinction made by Hratch Tchilingirian. In an essay on the question “What is ‘Armenian’ in Armenian identity?” he distinguishes between Armenian identity and the notion of Armenianness. The first describes the ascription of ethnic attributes. Tchilingirian compares Armenian identity to an “‘ethnic passport,’ which one possesses to be identified with a group or a country.” The second refers to “the cultural aspect.” It describes “what one does with that ethnic passport, how far and deep one travels into the ‘Armenian world’” (Tchilingirian 2018, 3).

According to Tchilingirian, the way in which Armenian diasporans express Armenianness today has changed from traditional to symbolic. Among the third or fourth post-genocide generation—Sarkissian belongs to the third—Armenian identity has become “a matter of choice” rather than a “matter of obligation,” as Tchilingirian explains:

Practicing one's Armenianness is not dependent only on participation in traditional community life, but there are myriad of other choices in today's ultra-connected world where symbolic ethnicity could be lived or experienced. (4)

Our case study of “kenats” will reveal sampling to be a strategy for living, experiencing, and expressing Armenianness.

I have so far used the term “diaspora” without further commentary. Historically, the term was applied to Jewish communities living

outside their homeland. There is evidence that it has also been used to describe Armenian dispersion for a long time (Slobin 2012, 96). However, as Mark Slobin points out, the meaning of diaspora substantially expanded towards the end of the 20th century. Now, it refers to all kinds of groups living outside their homelands. The concept of “home” has thereby provoked many critical debates. Scholars have highlighted that the homeland could be imagined or real, and that the “host country” becomes home as well. In *Music and the Armenian Diaspora*, Sylvia A. Alajaji writes of a “plurality of home(s)” experienced within diasporic communities (Alajaji 2015, 11). Tina Ramnarine, meanwhile, has examined the various relations between “home” and “diaspora” and suggested the inclusion of home within the diasporic space itself (Ramnarine 2007, 21). Lara Sarkissian’s understanding of the diaspora should be located somewhere between these two concepts. She uses the term vividly and depicts herself as “a diasporan” by simultaneously locating her home in the California Bay Area.

The genocide is one of the most significant reasons why the notion of the diaspora is still highly relevant for young American Armenians. Flora Keshgegian (2006, 101) has concluded that the Armenian diasporan identity is at least partially constituted “in relation to a past trauma.” She continues by analyzing the characteristic aspects and dynamics of a trauma, identifying them as “present in the lives of genocide survivors and diasporans” (103). This presence is further intensified by the ongoing refusal of the governments of Turkey, the U.S., and many other countries to call the actions of the Ottoman troops in 1915 genocide.⁴ “Pressing them to do so has been the Armenian diaspora’s rallying cause for decades,” writes Alajaji (2015, 5); a view shared by Keshgegian (2006, 108).

My conversations with Lara Sarkissian, who is of the third post-genocide generation, largely confirmed these analyses. The genocide, and particularly its denial, was repeatedly a topic of our interviews and informal conversations. She mentioned the then recently published documentary *The Architects of Denial* (2017), and we discussed the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed territory in Azerbaijan with a majority ethnic Armenian population, which is claimed as Armenian land (Keshgegian 2006, 103–8). Relating to Sarkissian’s sampling strategies, this topic will become particularly relevant in the interlude later. For now, I will focus on an analysis of the track “kenats.”

Our case study of “kenats” will reveal sampling to be a strategy for living, experiencing, and expressing Armenianness.

⁴ On April 24, 2021, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, the president of the United States, Joe Biden, officially referred to the events as genocide.

Sample Source

In “kenats,” Lara Sarkissian samples external, musical source material, consisting of a keyboard melody taken from a video accessed on YouTube (Warrakhjan 2011). The video is labeled “Armenian Keyboard pa2 X6 Hrach,” and was uploaded by the user howannes warrakhjan on February 20, 2011. As of February 2021, the video has 85,743 views, 35 comments, 229 likes, and 14 dislikes.⁵ It shows two fixed images of a middle-aged male keyboardist playing simultaneously on two keyboards: a KORG Pa2X PRO with his left hand and a Roland Fantom-X6 with his right. Both images contain date and time stamps, meaning we can assume that the pictures—or the original video—were recorded on February 20, 2011 (the day of the upload), at around 2:42 p.m., with a camcorder.

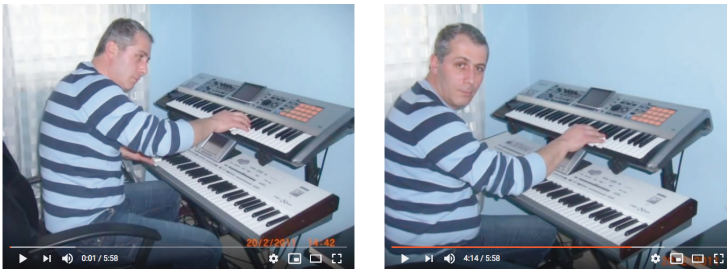


Figure 7.1: YouTube screenshots of the sample source of “kenats” (Warrakhjan 2011)

The second image, in which the keyboardist looks directly into the camera, appears in the second part of the video. The video’s audio track starts with a bourdon note, processed with some reverb, shortly joined by another layer of the same note for a fuller sound. This note underpins the video for its duration. It was likely played on the KORG Pa2X PRO, as suggested by other videos from the same uploader, in which the keyboardist’s playing technique becomes clearer, and by the characteristics of the keyboard itself, advertised by the manufacturer KORG as having functions (such as auto accompaniment) that support solo entertainers:

We’ve listened. The Pa2xpro easily fulfils virtually any wish keyboardists, entertainers, solo entertainers, and hobby musicians could have. The intuitive handling, never-ending performance, an interactivity and sound quality that cannot be found elsewhere, and countless useful functions speak for themselves—in the language of “music.” (...) The result is the most complete, musical—well, the best keyboard with auto accompaniment that has ever been built

⁵ In the course of this project, the views increased from 60,000 (October 2016) to 79,000 (June 2019), to almost 86,000 (July 2021). The comments increased from 31 (March 2018) to 37 (June 2019) and then decreased to 35 (July 2021).

by KORG: *the new KORG Pa2Xpro. (KORG 2018)*⁶

After a few beats the musician plays an agile melody with an improvisational character, most likely with his right hand—since the melody is played in a higher pitch range—on the Roland Fantom-X6. This intro ends at around 0:40, at which point the keyboardist triggers some percussion with an accompanying sound tapestry, again most likely on the KORG Pa2X PRO. The improvisation in the right hand lasts for about four minutes before both rhythm and accompanying pattern change and, after a short break, the improvisation starts once again. The music, and the recording itself, stop quite abruptly at 5:58.

Comparing the video's visual information with other uploads from the same musician, it seems likely that the video was recorded in the musician's apartment. Factors suggesting this include the visibly confined space as well as the keyboardist's casual clothing, which could indicate a private context. In contrast, another video (Warrakhjan 2015) shows the same keyboardist in a rehearsal context at a community hall. Considering the festively decorated venue, I suggest that this video shows ongoing preparations for a party—potentially a wedding—and that the musician acts as an entertainer for private parties.

The title of the video (Armenian Keyboard) and the name of the uploader (Howannes Warrakhjan) indicate the keyboardist's probable Armenian origins. We cannot know whether the musician lives in Armenia or in a diaspora community elsewhere in the world. The video title further includes the keyboardist's Armenian given name (Hrach), suggesting that the uploader and the keyboardist are not the same person. Finally, the video title (pa2 X6) refers to the keyboard models featured. This could indicate that the main aim of these videos is the presentation and demonstration of various keyboard models. This observation is supported by the music's improvisational character, the abrupt ending, the change of rhythm and accompanying patterns, and by similar melodic phrases appearing in other videos, played on different keyboards.⁷

6 Own translation. Original quote: "Wir haben zugehört. Das Pa2xpro erfüllt Keyboardern, Entertainern, Alleinunterhaltern und Hobbymusikern spielend jeden auch noch so ausgefallenen Wunsch. Die intuitive Bedienung, Leistung bis zum Abwinken, eine Interaktivität und Klangqualität, die man sonst nirgends findet und unzählige praktische Funktionen sprechen eine eindeutige Sprache – die Sprache ist 'Musik'. (...) Das Ergebnis ist das kompletteste, musikalischste, ja beste Begleitautomatik-Keyboard, welches KORG jemals gebaut hat: das neue KORG Pa2Xpro."

7 I cannot verify whether the sampled video's image and audio stem from the same situation. On the other hand, I cannot find any indication that this is not the case.

Sample Processing

In “kenats,” Lara Sarkissian uses the introduction of the video in full, from around 0:03 to 0:44. She found the sample while browsing YouTube, most probably by typing the keywords “Armenian” and “Keyboard” into the search bar. In the track’s Live folder, which she later shared with me, she had saved three audio files with similar titles, all beginning with “Armenian Keyboard.” These files’ date displays show that all of them were converted from YouTube on the same date—January 18, 2016, between 9:56 and 10:32 a.m. The file that she processed in the new composition has the most recent date. The track is structured into an intro, followed by the main part (sixteen bars), then by an outro. The sample is presented in full in the intro. Subsequently, Sarkissian processed four different sample-clips of the original source.

The first sample-clip (S1 in the figures below) consists of only a double note in the keyboard melody, taken from the end of the full-length sample. Tracing the sample-clip in the Live project file and trying to rebuild it, I found that Sarkissian had cut a tiny clip (of less than half a second) out of her original selection to make the sample-clip fit into the composition. I indicate this erased micro-clip with dotted lines in Figure 7.3. Sarkissian looped sample-clip 1 as a rhythmic pattern, with a total of sixteen repetitions, if one considers the end of the full-length sample in the first bar as its first appearance. Sample-clips number 3 and 4 cut out two further parts of the full-length sample—both with a length of around 4.5 seconds, and both of which are repeated once in the new composition. Sample-clip number 4 is around 10.5 seconds long and functions as the track’s outro.

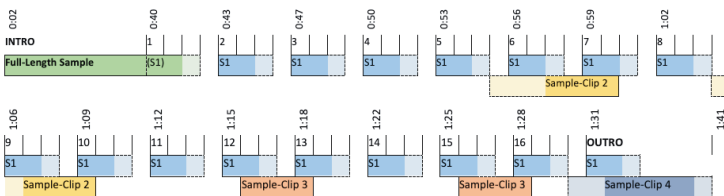


Figure 7.2: Sample arrangement in “kenats”

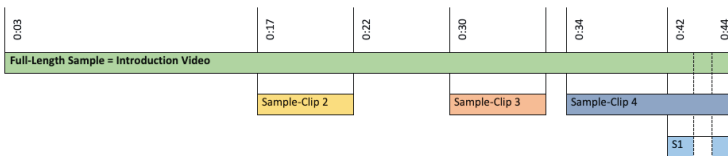


Figure 7.3: Sample chopping in “kenats”

Figure 7.2 illustrates the arrangement of all sample-clips in the composition, while Figure 7.3 demonstrates the chopping of the sample into smaller clips. The second figure especially highlights that, after the full-length presentation of the sample in the introduction, sample-clips 2–4 form a fragmented repetition of the entire sample. Furthermore, the dotted lines in the first figure indicate when the audio clips in Live extend beyond what is heard or recognized in the final mix.

This track is not quantized. Hence, these figures only approximately represent the positions of the elements in relation to the suggested rhythmic grid. Such a mode of display is still logical since Sarkissian imagined a fixed meter when producing the track. Rather than consistently following this meter in the composition, though, she tried to develop her own groove⁸ functioning outside of a fixed meter. This compositional strategy is shown by the various tempos that can be identified in the track. It starts with the tempo of the sample itself (around 80 beats per minute).⁹ In the section between 0:30 and 0:40, short percussive stresses (at around 63 bpm) announce the start of the main beat, which comes from a dhol drum sample (at around 74 bpm). In the Live file, the global bpm value is set to 133.33, and does not seem to be significant for the composition.

The constant mixing of tempos is one of Sarkissian's key compositional techniques, as she explained in an interview with the music blog *Tiny Mix Tapes*, relating her compositional approach to visual imagination: "I usually work with having a visual scene in my mind and building with the action, feelings, and plot from that. A clash of tempos and textures just like a visual would feel" (Sarkissian in Iadarola 2016).

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This visual approach to composition becomes obvious when we consider the arrangement of the sample-clips in Live. Sarkissian used Live's arrangement view, in which all samples are displayed chronologically as they appear in the track. There, she copied, cut, and pasted the clips as follows:

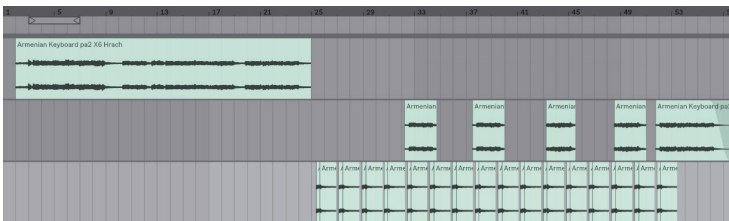


Figure 7.4: Sample arrangement in "kenats" (screenshot from Live)

⁸ I follow a definition of "groove" by Mark Butler (2006, 326): in its second meaning, he defines groove as "the way in which the rhythmic essence of a piece of music flows or unfolds."

⁹ It is not possible to firmly establish the sample's tempo because it is an improvisation that does not follow a stable pulse. In contrast, the percussion accompaniment from the keyboard, starting at around 0:46 in the source video, is clearly at 120 bpm.

Sarkissian arranged the sample-clips one after the other, fitting them into the felt rhythm—which explains why she had to cut out a tiny bit of sample-clip 1. Sample-clips 2 and 4 seamlessly follow the preceding instances of sample-clip 1, but neither is audible before the start of the next repetition of sample-clip 1. There are two possible explanations here: either Sarkissian placed these clips as they were, or she placed a shorter clip at the position from which it should be heard, and then subsequently enlarged the excerpt to bridge the gap between the two repetitions of sample-clip 1. In any case, the appearance of the Live project on the screen plays an important role in Sarkissian’s production process. (This is especially clear in another of her sampling tactics that I will describe in the interlude chapter later.) In our conversations, she repeatedly emphasized this visual approach. Sometimes, she even chooses a particular audio clip without having listened to it, based on looking at its waveform: “Sometimes, visually things make sense to me before the sound does. I’m like ‘Oh, this clip looks like it would fit in with these other clips. Let’s see how it sounds!’”

→ Chapter 11

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In summary, the editing process focused on cutting and arranging the sample. Beyond this, Sarkissian faded out sample-clip 5 and pulled the volume of all clips up to 10.0 decibels, without using any further effects. It is clear that the sample is the undisputed central element of the track. “The sample gave me the outline,” she stated. Sarkissian produced the track in a short period of time: only one week passed between downloading the sample (January 18, 2016) and uploading the final track on SoundCloud.¹⁰

Sample Visibility and Reasons for Sampling

(a) Reasons for Sampling

I have identified aspects from all four approaches of the SSR in “kenats.” In the category of contextual sampling, I consider—in order of significance—the personal, active, and narrative perspectives to be crucial.

Let me begin with the personal perspective. In all of her tracks, Lara Sarkissian samples fragments of Armenian culture such as poetry, clips from documentaries, and sounds from YouTube. She gained the corresponding knowledge not only by growing up in a family of Armenian descent, but also by engaging in various activities

¹⁰ Sarkissian probably uploaded the track one week later, on January 25, 2016. While the Live file itself displays January 18, 2016 as its creation date, all the files in Live’s “Samples” folder display January 25. Therefore, it is possible that she exported the file on that day. SoundCloud records January 2016 as the date of upload, without mentioning the exact day.

within the Armenian community. She has volunteered in the worldwide Armenian cultural organization Hamazkayin, is close to one of the four Armenian churches in the Bay Area—the Armenian Apostolic Church—and attended an Armenian elementary school for ten years. There, she learned about Armenian history, music, and literature. Subjects such as history, arts, and religion were taught in Armenian, while others were in English. She still speaks Armenian at home, although, as she told me, this has been getting more and more mixed with English in recent years. This shows that Sarkissian is deeply rooted in the Armenian community. She uses her music as a vehicle to express her Armenianness.

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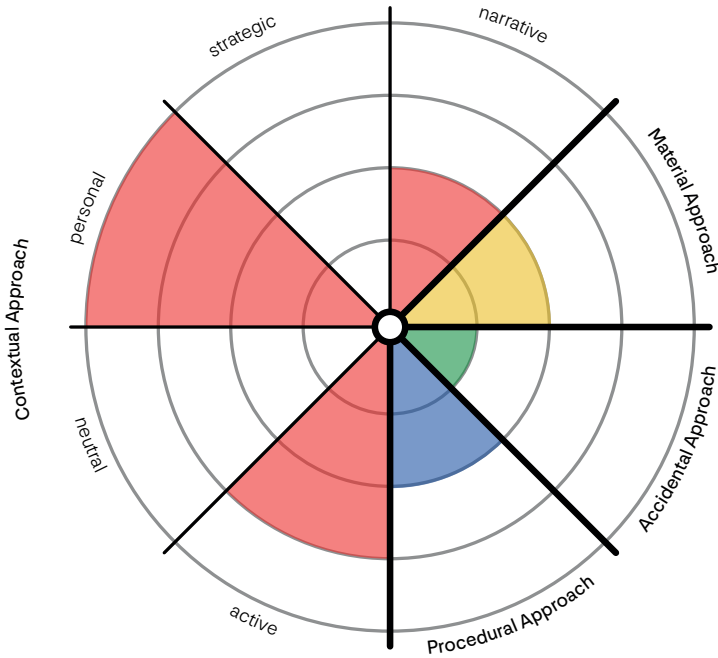


Figure 7.5: SSR: reasons for sampling in “kenats”

In comparison with other tracks by the same producer, the keyboard sound in “kenats” is a distinctive feature here. (Sarkissian samples keyboard sounds in other tracks as well, but never so obviously.) The question arises as to whether this keyboard sound has a particular meaning for the producer. Sarkissian explained to me that, indeed, the idea was to work with a particular sound:

It’s a very Middle Eastern thing. I’m familiar with it through Armenian events. Community events, festivals, and bazaars that we have. At weddings, you always have to hire... even if it’s a live band, that keyboard guy is there. Not the same guy, but you know. They have their drums programmed, these Armenian drum sounds, no melodies and all that. (...) I knew all these dads and uncles who just go online, post these videos—because my brother used to watch these. He’s very good at playing keyboard by ear,

and he used to play things like this for fun.

Sarkissian is familiar with these sounds. They remind her of family and community parties. This close connection between her own biography and the track became particularly obvious when she was describing how she came up with its title. The keyboard sound triggered further, very concrete, and perhaps also nostalgic memories:

As I was making “kenats” though, I had this image that started getting in my mind. I hadn’t even named it yet, but that intro keyboard sound... It’s kind of dragged out and slow, then it starts going faster, and I had an image in my mind of my uncle. Like my uncle in Armenia making a toast. “Kenats” means toast. I just pictured this scene that I had: like the family gather around a table, and he’s giving this very important, funny toast. It’s very epic, and then, after that, it breaks. It’s like a dinner scene, and laughing, and the camera is moving around the table. It’s funny that the first person I thought of was my uncle. He’s such a huge character. Funny, smart, a very big character.

The family table is also referenced in the track’s cover photo uploaded on SoundCloud. The photo shows a typical Armenian dinner table. Sarkissian recalls how she accessed the picture: “I remember, I did a Google search and I think I just typed in like ‘Armenian dinner table’ or ‘food’ and I was trying to find dinner table pics.”

→ Figure 7.6



Figure 7.6: Cover photo “kenats” (Sarkissian 2016)

This brings us to the narrative sampling perspective. The sample is used here to tell a particular story, and to create the atmosphere of such an Armenian dinner table. This approach to musical composition is shaped by the producer’s experience shooting films, as she explained in an interview online:

I used to film and shoot a lot and make my own short films – that’s why the music I produce has a narrative and a cinematic feel. It’s really visual for me, so I think about colours and stories and conversations in my editing process. I think

about the physical environment you're stepping into. About distance and, if you're a character in this scene – what's flowing around you? What do you hear outside of the space you're in? Where is a voice coming from? (Nicolov 2018)

The active perspective describes another larger group of contextual sampling reasons behind “kenats.” First, there is a general aspect. One of Lara Sarkissian’s principal artistic aims is the “hybridization of non-Western sounds with contemporary Western culture,” as we can read in the self-description on her website (Sarkissian 2018). By “contemporary Western culture” she mostly means electronic popular music and club culture. As we have seen in relation to the personal perspective, Sarkissian uses sampling to “explore her own identity” (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, 131), or to share her narrative, as she would put it. The description of Club Chai—the label and network co-founded by Sarkissian—makes clear that this is a central artistic motivation for her at the same time as it is a political one:

Club Chai is a label, event series, radio show and curatorial project founded by 8ULENTINA and FOOZOL in Oakland, California. Club Chai centers diasporic narratives, women, and trans artists, DJs and producers and hybridizes non-Western sounds with club music. (Club Chai 2018)

The intention to use music as a platform to share minoritarian positions is evident in “kenats.” The sampling of a keyboard sound from a male Armenian solo entertainer relates to a critical perspective on gender roles, as Sarkissian explained:

In general, it is men who play this instrument in Armenian music and I thought it would be interesting to take what is known to be a very masculine sound and make an edit with it as a woman, yet still have it to be something that's aggressive.

It's big in Armenian culture. It's like, especially someone like the dad to be playing the keyboards. It's a very masculine thing to be playing the keys, you don't see women doing it. So, I think it's also cool, as a woman, taking these sounds and giving my own spin to it.

For Sarkissian, these keyboard sounds are distinctively masculine. Browsing similar videos on YouTube, one does indeed see only men playing. Moreover, in the quotation above, Sarkissian describes giving her “own spin” to the sample, and making it “something that’s aggressive.” This refers to her editing process. I have described above her technique of chopping the sample as a first element of the editing process. Another element involves layering with other samples in the track, such as the sound of an explosion, ambient noises,

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The sampling of a keyboard sound from a male Armenian solo entertainer relates to a critical perspective on gender roles.

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or breaking glass. Both elements contribute to a rough sound aesthetic, described by the producer as “aggressive,” or elsewhere as “experimental and industrial”:

In general, I love using samples from these keyboards and it's something that's often used in Armenian music (club, pop, traditional, etc), but I wanted to give it an experimental and industrial edit. This sound, we're familiar with hearing at family gatherings, parties, weddings, etc, but use it in a non-traditional way.

The notion of the “traditional” expressed here should not be equated with the rich folk music repertoire that has been passed down for generations in Armenia and that was collected by the Armenian priest and musicologist Komitas (1869–1935). Sarkissian’s use of “traditional” points to music played in what she regards as “traditional” contexts, such as weddings and family parties. Hence popular music, such as these keyboard sounds, can also be played in traditional contexts.¹¹ Transferring these sounds from one particular context (for example a wedding in Armenia) to another (experimental electronica in the U.S.)—which is explicitly both stylistically and geographically distant—means transforming a sound from the traditional into the non-traditional. It means using these sounds in a way for which they were not originally intended.

On another level, Sarkissian’s use of the term “tradition” might reflect her understanding of Armenian culture in general. For her, Armenian culture means tradition. Everything that she considers “Armenian” belongs to Armenian culture. Hence, these popular wedding sounds, while not considered traditional by others, are part of this culture and thus traditional. Through sampling, finally, Sarkissian not only labels these sounds as Armenian, but also archives them. This is a main driving force behind her sampling practice, and contributes to the active perspective as well. The following quotations illustrate this urge to archive:

I often find myself getting lost in Armenian music YouTube videos and since I'm geographically far, I use it as a way of archiving and accessing sounds I've grown up on, from Armenian school or from family.

I'm making new archives. I'm referencing or sampling really traditional or old things in our main culture, or even in religion. I'm trying to create contemporary archives and discussions around it.

In the second quotation, Sarkissian refers back to the traditional, this time understood in a conventional sense. In summary,

¹¹ These keyboard sounds could be partially considered a particular form of the Armenian popular music genre *rabiz* (Garbis 2006; Leupold 2018). In the knowledge production that I have access to, this is a highly understudied field. As mentioned in the transition to this chapter, a further, well-informed perspective is required at this point to enhance the analysis.

Through sampling, Sarkissian not only labels these sounds as Armenian, but also archives them.

with the transformation from the traditional to the non-traditional, Sarkissian points to the artistic aim of hybridization discussed earlier, while at the same time performing a transformation of gender roles: the male keyboardist is edited, chopped, and finally manipulated by a woman. “kenats” challenges traditional gender roles in a particular Armenian musical context, thus becoming a political commentary. The sampled keyboard sound is essential to this critique. Sampling the playing of one of these male solo entertainers allows Sarkissian to materially work with these sounds. Because she is a woman, the whole process is loaded with new significance. Sarkissian appropriates these sounds, and, figuratively, it is her, as a woman, who plays the keyboard.

However, I do not consider the active perspective to be the primary sampling perspective behind this track, so have not completely filled out the respective section in the SSR. Sarkissian never mentioned this aspect as a first answer when we discussed the track. Moreover, I cannot find any indications in her presentation of the track online pointing toward the transformation of gender roles. This does not mean that this aspect is not important. It rather illustrates that there is no intention to communicate it to a broader audience. The message is there to be read if someone has all the necessary knowledge.

In conclusion, politics are present, but are not the primary focus. This observation corresponds with Sarkissian’s general relationship to political activism. In 2018, when the interview took place, she considered her activities with Club Chai her main tool of political engagement:

I would say everything is political and I mean the fact that I went to an Armenian school in America is a political thing. (...) And then protests, a lot of protests that we would do yearly during genocide commemoration time. But anyways, I would say now my political involvement is very much in Club Chai and what we’re doing with that: being able to create space for a lot of folks who don’t have access to music or don’t meet other people within it, who have the same identities and backgrounds or whatnot. I’d say that’s the most political thing right now.

**Politics are present,
but are not the
primary focus.**

After this elaborate discussion of the contextual approach, I want to address the other approaches displayed in the SSR. The reasons for sampling this particular sound that might fall under the material approach are much more challenging to articulate. Sarkissian mentioned that she was “obsessed with that sound” when hearing it on YouTube. Obviously, this is a very vague indication and could relate to extra-musical associations as well.

However, I assume that there are considerable musical or, we could say, aesthetic reasons as to why she finally chose the sample. On some occasions, she referred to the changing tempo of

the introduction as a concrete element that she liked: “It’s kind of dragged out and slow, then it starts going faster.” Elsewhere, she briefly mentioned that, at that time of production, she had a new sample pack with a dhol drum that she wanted to use, and that she considered these keyboard sounds to match it perfectly. Here, too, the tempo of the sample was essential: “I was like ‘it would be really cool to have this really fast track now that I have the dhol drum pack.’ So, I wanted to pair with that.” Another aspect is the absence of percussion in the introduction of the source video:

It’s so hard to find this. Whenever I find keyboard samples, I always look for parts that don’t have the drum track in it. Because I don’t want to put that in. It sounds crunchingly bad. (...) I think that last one that I’d picked, there’s more options in the beginning and in the outro.

Of the two other YouTube downloads saved in the Live project folder as potential alternatives, the first also starts without drums, but percussion comes in after 30 seconds, while the second file features percussion throughout. In the third file, Sarkissian found a long introduction—around 40 seconds—without any percussion, and thus had “more options” to work with. Moreover, the sound quality of the third file is much better than the others.

In conclusion, the material reasons why Sarkissian chose this and no other Armenian keyboard sample are most probably a combination of the following, alongside further, untraceable factors: aesthetic appeal; the absence of percussion; sound quality; special musical characteristics such as tempo; and the sample matching with a recently acquired sample pack.

Regarding the procedural approach, the aspect of access played a role. Gaining access to instruments is one of the main motives behind Sarkissian’s general approach to sampling:

I guess, the reason why I sample is because I wanna use these traditional instruments that are used a lot in Armenian music that I don’t have around me. So, it’s instruments like the kanoun, kamancha, duduk that I as a diasporan—I’m living in San Francisco—I’m not close to anyone that plays these instruments, so I’m able to find it on YouTube, I’m able to find it through my mum’s CDs and whatnot.

Living in the diaspora makes it difficult for Sarkissian to access traditional Armenian instruments. The additional desire for instrumentalists who could play them further indicates that the producer herself cannot play them. But sampling allows Sarkissian to use these instruments and to incorporate them into her own sound. Obviously, a keyboard is not a traditional instrument in the sense stated above. Accordingly, in the case of “kenats,” it is not about access to the particular instrument, but about access to a particular style of playing. Still, I assume that in the large Armenian community in the

It is not about access to an instrument, but about access to a particular style of playing.

Bay Area, there might be a few instrumentalists who could play the keyboard in the desired style. Nevertheless, the aspect of access might still be relevant, as one must have a good relationship with a musician to ask them for recordings that will be used as samples. Geographical proximity is not enough. Sarkissian finally mentioned that a friend of hers recently got one of the keyboard models used by solo entertainers, and that she wants to start making her own sounds with it in the future.

A final aspect captured by the SSR will only be mentioned briefly: the accidental approach. Chance comes into this sampling process via the source platform of the sample. Sarkissian's choice of sample was not least influenced by YouTube's recommendation algorithms. One can find almost endless footage when searching for the terms "Armenian Keyboard" on the platform. Which footage is displayed at the top of the list—and is thus more likely to be found—depends on the relevancy algorithms of the video platform. These algorithms consider factors such as a video's overall popularity, or the average time spent viewing it.

Sarkissian's choice of sample was not least influenced by YouTube's recommendation algorithms.

Consequently, for this sampling process, the question of which videos other people with the same search query have watched before is most relevant. These other people have essentially determined what Lara Sarkissian would go on to sample in "kenats." In a time when sampling material is more and more accessed through platforms such as YouTube, it would be interesting for further studies to examine whether or not these algorithms are affecting contemporary music, and if so, to what extent.¹²

(b) Attitude

The second stage of this analysis now focuses on the producer's attitude towards the sampled material. As mentioned before, Sarkissian spoke about an "obsession" that she felt when she first heard the keyboard sound. She told me that she immediately "loved" it. At the same time, she admitted that "people of my age would think it's unusual to use that sound in modern electronic music." I assume that these sounds provoke ambivalent reactions in Armenian listeners. Potential reactions could range from considering such a recontextualization as unusual (as Sarkissian stated previously) to an elitist view of it as "low culture" music, such as David Leupold (2008) describes in relation to the Armenian popular music genre *rabiz*, in which similar sounds and melodies are used.¹¹ Sarkissian's report that her brother plays similar sounds "for fun," always interrupting himself shortly into his performance, further indicates that such sounds might not be taken seriously by certain listeners.

¹² Research on algorithms and music has so far solely focused on the algorithmic generation of music.

Although Sarkissian stresses her own fascination with these sounds, it remains open to what degree she might share a similar view. Sampling in this case thus contains a tension of musical taste: even if the producer personally likes these sounds, she is aware of the critical distance that others feel towards them. She thus samples them because of or despite this distance—I imagine the latter being the case for the present analysis. Taking this thought a step further, sampling these sounds can be interpreted as a statement of musical taste: the producer considers these sounds aesthetically pleasing, or simply valuable.

Similar to the previous case study of COOL FOR YOU, a tension of distance is also inherent in this sampling strategy. On the one hand, Sarkissian considers the keyboard sound to be something from her own culture, the Armenian culture. This is how she legitimizes the use of her samples in general: “I don’t feel as much as an outsider when I am sampling it, using it, or listening to it.” On the other hand, the musical style in question is quite distant from her. These sounds are usually played by men from another generation, and probably also from another social class (Leupold 2008). Moreover, she does not listen to this music regularly, but only occasionally at family parties. A study of reception could finally add another layer to this debate, if we assume that these sounds are potentially perceived as exotic by Western listeners without any Armenian (or Middle Eastern) background.

In conclusion, the relationship between the producer and the sampled material in this example is shaped not only by a tension of musical taste (the producer loves the sound, others do not) but also a tension of distance (the sound is both one’s own and external).

→ Chapter 6

(c) Visibility

The final stage in this section is the application of the FOV. First of all, the two faders positioned at the highest level indicate that the sample is both completely audible and fully recognizable. The sample is however not textually signaled (fader 2), meaning there is no clear indication in the track that the keyboard melody has been sampled. Without knowing the production process behind “kenats,” one could assume that Sarkissian had played and recorded the sample herself and subsequently cut and layered it. (In fact, one is more likely to hear other sounds in the track, such as the ambient noises, as samples.) I consider this form of “transparent mediation” (Brøvig-Hanssen 2010, 159) to be essential: by presenting the sample in the first instance without any cuts and manipulations and in full length, Sarkissian creates the suggestion of having played the keyboard on her own. This is necessary for her to later accomplish the appropriation of the masculine keyboard sound.

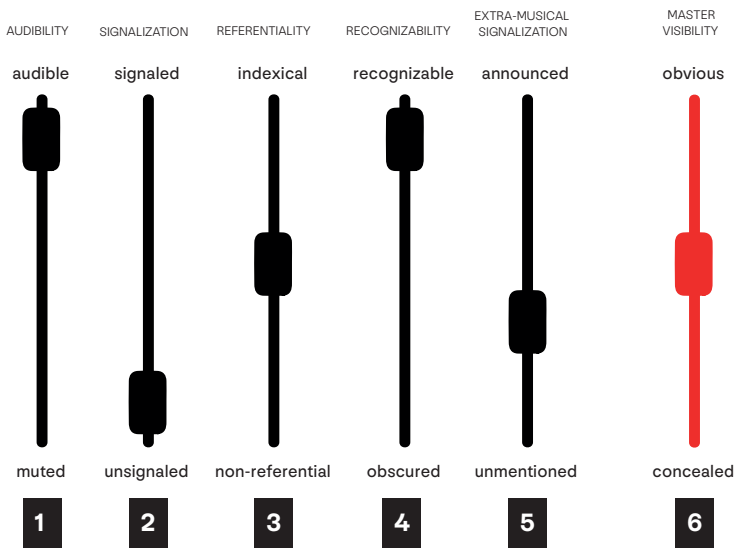


Figure 7.7: FOV: sample visibility in “kenats”

I have positioned fader 3, indicating referentiality, at the middle of the scale. From the producer’s perspective, the sample does not refer to a particular context, such as a musician or a melody (hard references), but it does refer to a musical style in general: the sound of Armenian solo entertainers (soft reference).

By contrast, the sample is contextually signaled on several occasions: the track’s title and cover photo both point to the scenario of the family party. Nevertheless, this signalization is far away from a clear indication or a direct quotation of the sample and/or its source. Sarkissian does not acknowledge the exact source in the descriptions below the track on SoundCloud (as she has for other tracks). Even listeners who are familiar with the traditions referred to might find it challenging to recognize the connections between title, cover photo, and sample. And the discussion of gender roles in Armenian musical cultures is not signaled at all. Still, all these clues could, in combination with information on the producer’s descent and her sampling concerns (Armenian sounds), at least partly signal the sample. Accordingly, I have positioned the last controller in the lower third of the scale.

In conclusion, I consider the overall visibility of the keyboard sample in “kenats” to be between the two ends of the scale. Although the sample is audible and recognizable, the context of the sample remains concealed to a certain degree. The general sampling motives behind “kenats” touch on all three general fields introduced before: this sampling process was shaped by inspiration (the sound inspired the producer and triggered associations), content (she was fascinated by the playing style and musical culture of Armenian solo entertainers), and, to a lesser extent, communication (various political messages). Communication might be a general sampling motive, but the act of communication is not carried through, as this analysis of visibility has illustrated.

Conclusion and Prospect

Ever since I started producing, I've made a lot of one-offs which I'd quickly upload to my SoundCloud because I'm impulsive. (Sarkissian in Nicolov 2018)

Clearly, the track “kenats” is just such a “one-off.” The track is only 1:55 long and was produced in a comparably short period of time without any advanced editing steps. What can we draw from an analysis of such an “impulsive” production, and from a close reading of reasons for sampling in particular? Quite a lot, as I have shown. The analysis of the sampling practice applied to the keyboard sound revealed a rich and complex combination of motives, motivations, and intentions. Sarkissian’s sampling strategy is shaped by all approaches of the SSR, particularly the contextual. Within the latter approach, three perspectives appeared relevant. (1) Through the personal perspective, she explores her own identity and expresses Armenianness. (2) The active perspective is represented by a range of more or less buried political attitudes and messages. (3) Sarkissian used the sample to craft a story set around the family table during an Armenian dinner (narrative perspective). Other factors that played a role are particular aesthetic features (material approach), the access to a particular style of playing (procedural approach), and aspects of chance related to YouTube’s search algorithms (accidental approach).

Significantly shaped by the personal perspective, Sarkissian’s track reveals a sampling strategy that is not political in the first instance. The sampling of the keyboard sound in “kenats” primarily illustrates the producer’s personal relationship to the processed material. This relationship is not direct; the references made are soft rather than hard. What is referred to here is not the sampled YouTube video in particular, but the keyboard sound of Armenian solo entertainers in general. In uncovering Sarkissian’s reasons for sampling, it nevertheless becomes clear that the track can be seen as a critical and thus political commentary on gender roles in a particular Armenian musical culture. The track bears the signature of a politically aware and engaged artist, although it was not the producer’s aim to proactively communicate a political message.

In concluding this chapter, I want to recapitulate three aspects: the first highlights why sampling as a method is essential in this case; the second sheds light on how the lived experience of the producer is buried in the track (or rather, what kind of seismographic substance we can access through the track); and the third addresses the implications of the producer’s attitude towards the sampled material.

The track bears the signature of a politically aware and engaged artist, although it was not the producer’s aim to proactively communicate a political message.

(a) The Significance of Sampling

This case study has shown how Lara Sarkissian relied on the particular characteristics of sampling in making the track “kenats.” In short, she used sampling as a strategy for appropriating a gendered sound. By chopping it up and layering it with further experimental sounds and noises, she made the sampling material her own. She added her own touch to it, and in so doing literally played the “male” keyboard as a woman. The striking presentation of the sample at the beginning of the track, in full-length and without further manipulation, completes the act of appropriation. By leaving the sample at its most audible and recognizable here, Sarkissian created the impression that she herself was the keyboardist. She played with the characteristics of sampling as a production technique, blurring the line between sampling as a tool of reference and sampling as a tool of simulation—to name two of the fundamental sampling characteristics that have been described by, for example, Pelleter and Lepa (2007).

Sarkissian used sampling as a strategy for appropriating a gendered sound.

Moreover, “kenats” challenges theoretical approaches to sampling, such as the conception of it as a syntagmatic practice put forward by Serge Lacasse (2007). Since a particular style of playing is referred to, a transformation of a style is involved (paradigmatic), as opposed to the mere focus on subject or content (syntagmatic). Following Lacasse, this example can be called a hypertextual practice, as the new track is built on the hypotext (the sample) as a foundation.

The analysis of this track has finally illustrated the central question on the subject of sampling: where the producer positions themselves in relation to the sample. Put simply, we must always ask what kind of power relations are at play. In this case study, sampling has allowed the producer to invert conventional power structures of gender.

Sampling has allowed the producer to invert conventional power structures of gender.

(b) A Diasporan Perspective

A close reading of this track and the sampling process behind it reveals the lived experience of the producer. “kenats” reflects in particular on the tension between social groups in which Sarkissian circulates, notably between the Armenian community and people outside it. This hybrid condition is, as I have shown, a central driver of Sarkissian’s artistic work. Sampling allows her to express both her Armenianness and her Americanness by celebrating a clash between non-Western (the keyboard melody) and contemporary

Western (experimental electronica) elements.¹³ It is not that home has become part of the multilocal space of the diaspora, as suggested by Ramnarine (2007), but rather the diaspora has become one part of what the producer calls home. The condition of the diaspora is further reflected in the sampling of traditional instruments. Living at a geographical remove from particular musical cultures hinders the producer's access to these instruments. In "kenats," sampling allows for the use of instruments such as the dhol drum, and the implementation of particular playing techniques (on the keyboard).

However, this does not yet tell us anything about the tension between the Armenian community and groups outside it. This tension becomes clear when we consider Sarkissian's audience, which differs from the Armenian community:

My main audience isn't specifically Armenian, and I don't know if it's because they're not familiar with my work or approach. I think experimenting with Armenian music in this way in electronic music is still new and just now becoming familiar to people.¹⁴

On one side there is the Armenian community (or diaspora), which provides the backbone of Sarkissian's sampling material and her knowledge of it. Members of these communities do not listen to Sarkissian's tracks—or at least not in large numbers. On the other side is her audience, which for the most part comes from outside of this community. This separation might serve as an explanation as to why Sarkissian does not promote the political message behind "kenats" more explicitly. Most people who hear this track are not aware of the significance of its sounds. If Sarkissian had composed the same track in another context (e.g. in Armenia or in another diaspora community), she might have chosen another sampling strategy, as people might have been more receptive to her critique of traditional gender roles.

Regardless, this thought experiment shows that a producer's surroundings influence their choice of sampling strategies. Hence, this sampling strategy could be read as a characteristic artistic expression of a producer living in a diaspora community. "kenats" clearly speaks from a diasporan perspective.

The diaspora has become one part of what the producer calls home.

¹³ The establishment of a distinction between "Western" and "non-Western" must be understood as a form of "strategic essentialism," a concept coined by postcolonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2013, 96–98). The distinction reflects the producer's lived surrounding(s), where these terms have their significance, and the differences between the two worlds are real and experienced.

¹⁴ After reading a draft of this chapter, Sarkissian mentioned that the share of Armenian listeners of her music has grown substantially since the release of her debut EP *DISRUPTION* in December 2018. She believes that this is because the EP was released under her real name, Lara Sarkissian, where previously she was more active under her alias FOOZOOOL (although she always released her tracks on SoundCloud as Lara Sarkissian): "Obviously, Lara Sarkissian was recognized as a signifier of an Armenian artist. (...) It was such a sudden shift (day/night)."

(c) Creating a Personal Canon of Culture

“kenats” can finally be read as a versatile play with contexts and musical tastes. The source context—popular music played at Armenian weddings and other family parties—is at a significant distance from experimental electronica, the context of transformation. Sarkissian describes this process as a transformation from the “traditional” to the “non-traditional.” In this case, there is no intersection between the two spheres. Furthermore, many Armenian listeners might have a critical stance towards the keyboard sounds sampled.

When Sarkissian samples the sound of an Armenian solo entertainer, she is stating that these musicians are part of Armenian culture. Taken alongside sampling material found in her other tracks, the keyboard sample sits next to major names of classical Armenian culture, such as poets Paruyr Sevak and Silva Kaputikyan, and the singer Ofelya Hambardzumyan. Sarkissian does not place the keyboard sounds on the same level: in contrast to her usual practice, she does not openly state her sampling sources for “kenats.” Nevertheless, I would argue that Sarkissian uses sampling as a tool for the creation of a personal canon of Armenian culture. This corresponds to the general motive of using sampling as a tool for archiving.

One question remains: how can we know if the processing of these keyboard sounds is a serious appropriation, and not intended to be ironic? On this point, we can do little more than believe the producer—and I see no reason not to do so. I would even argue that this question is less important than it may seem. Keeping in mind the previous discussion of Sarkissian’s audience, I would argue that Sarkissian knew that people would not be able to decode the track’s layers of meaning. In such a situation, irony would lose much of its communicative power. In fact, it would be an endeavor that risks considerable misunderstanding.

It must fall to further studies to take over at this point and focus on the perspectives of reception. It would be interesting to examine how these sounds are perceived by an audience that is unfamiliar with the sampled sound material and its layers of meaning. Are these sounds mainly perceived as “Middle Eastern” and thus exoticized? Is the political message behind “kenats” heard? From a critical perspective we might even ask: to what extent do such tracks fit the needs of certain segments of (Western) music markets? And how does that (re)influence the production process of producers such as Sarkissian?



I want to close this study with a short methodical reflection on the interests and motives behind Sarkissian’s participation in it. I discussed this question with the producer. In her answer, she emphasized a

Sarkissian uses sampling as a tool for the creation of a personal canon of Armenian culture.

desire for representation. She felt that she wanted to make visible a particular minoritarian position, that of a (female) Armenian artist:

Part of it comes from a representation thing as well. No one asks an Armenian person in this field. (...) I don't hear, or I don't see, other Armenians ever being questioned for these things, or even having a place within this field or this type of music or anything. (...) It's sharing your narrative. That's what it is.

This answer corresponds to her previously cited aim to create spaces for minorities through the Club Chai network. In conclusion, Sarkissian was especially interested in talking to me about how she produces music because she wanted to take this opportunity to share her own perspective. I consider this interest to have had little influence on my own analysis. Primarily because it was me who selected the track “kenats” as a case study and not Sarkissian. She pointed to the political content of “kenats” only after I had asked her about the track.

However, there is more to this desire to be heard. In an online interview, the producer expanded on this motive while discussing the sampling of traditional Armenian instruments:

Although these instruments have been shared among many cultures, Armenian work and narratives aren't referenced or credited much in conversations about these instruments, especially in the mainstream. That's a result of periods of systematic genocide from empires in the Middle East – like the Ottoman Empire – and being removed from conversations over time. These events in history and the backstories have shaped how Armenian music sounds, its approaches and the intentions behind instrument use. It's so important that we have more Armenian voices and artists in conversation about these sounds. (Sarkissian in Nicolov 2018)

With regard to the present case study, I do not consider this argument primary, because I was not examining the sampling of a traditional instrument. However, it highlights two things: first, the presence of the collective trauma of the genocide and its denial in Armenian communities and how this affects popular music practice. Second, Sarkissian's awareness and sensitivity regarding questions of representation and social justice. This awareness is behind the political signature that we can decode in this track, and has thus significantly shaped its production.

Questions of representation, awareness, and social justice will continue to be significant in the next case study. There, I will examine a sampling strategy that is, again, partially visible and partially hidden. The case study on the track “Libres” by Moro will reveal a strategy that politicizes environmental sound material that is not connected to a particular context, and thus “non-contextual.”

