This Track Contains Politics:
The Culture of Sampling in Experimental Electronica
Hannes Liechti

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This Track Contains Politics: The Culture of Sampling in Experimental Electronica investigates why producers of contemporary, digital, experimental electronic music choose to compose using samples. Based on a PhD, this is Hannes Liechti's first book and has been published by the Switzerland-based Norient (n.d.), founded by ethnomusicologist Thomas Burkhalter in 2002 as a network bringing together a global community of thinkers and artists concerned with music, sound and media cultures. Their emphasis is on "the changing geography of multi-layered modernities, far beyond old ideas of North versus South, West versus East" (Beyer, Burkhalter and Liechti 2015). It is therefore not surprising that the producers interviewed for this book cover politics including the genocide of Armenians and the exclusion of Africans in Argentinian history.

Hannes Liechti has been working with Norient these recent years as a journalist, curator and events producer. His role as an applied cultural producer needs to be considered as adding to the potential impact of this book, not just amongst researchers but also practitioners. Norient played an important role in convincing me to build on my creative practice to become a researcher as some years ago I had been commissioned to write an essay based on my own practice as a DJ/producer of cumbia (Iten 2013), as well as contributing with podcasts (Iten 2016), a playlist (Iten 2015) and a mixtape (Iten 2011). This has led me to follow their research outputs with great interest as an example of research and practice intersecting. The tension between artistic practice and theoretical analysis is the biggest challenge Liechti attempts to overcome in this book.

This Track Contains Politics was highly anticipated reading for me for several reasons. I'm both a researcher and DJ/producer, focused on electronic dance music, DJ- and sound system cultures and am therefore interested in how this book stimulates both my research and creative practice, for which sampling has been central.[1] Like Liechti, I am interested in methodologies which reflect the practice being analysed, which in my case I have proposed as the DJ-as-researcher approach (Iten 2022). Although a committed cultural producer, Liechti is external to the field he is examining, which he presents as a potential advantage "as it allows the researcher to ask simple questions and take novel positions" (80). Indeed, reading Liechti's book is making me reflect on my own practice, in which sampling has been

a driving force. His incessant questioning of "why" a particular sample and compositional approach has been chosen, has increased my appreciation of the sometimes hidden political intent behind seemingly aesthetic or conceptual decisions.

Liechti identifies most literature on sampling has mainly been concerned with copyright issues and/or the particular practice of analogue-era sampling in hip-hop.[2] There is therefore much need for new research on the ongoing relevance of sampling in today's digital era where the practice has become a ubiquitous and seemingly banal. *This Track Contains Politics* is focused on particular (political) intentions of a specific technique (sampling), in a niche creative field of (experimental electronica) music. Whilst this appears to be a narrow focus, Liechti's expansive review of the literature on sampling, politics as a cultural concept and electronic dance music—of which the academic understanding can include non-dance oriented experimental electronic music—shows the scope of his research is actually quite broad. In the first few pages of the book, a useful brief history of sampling is provided, concluding with the current state of sampling as an indispensable and ubiquitous practice (11–14). Liechti points out most of the literature on sampling at first largely fixated on its association with hip-hop and the subsequent demise of the technique becoming restricted due to copyright lawsuits (20–22). The ongoing relevance to producers and researchers in this era when sampling appears a banal part of music making, is argued by Liechti as achievable by focusing on the motivations and intent behind the sampling. This he explores as part of "the socio-political potential of sampling", which is also where the biggest gaps in research on sampling are to be found (15–22).

The are several theoretical advances proposed in this book. Firstly, *trackology* is introduced as a way of allowing the analytical focus to be on tracks—as opposed to songs—"as a tool for uncovering knowledge of the world" (77). The core interest of trackology according to Liechti, is the "search for traces within popular music", based on Michael Rappe's method of "music archaeology" (78). Traces could have been explored further as a concept. In my own PhD research for example, I have been applying Edouard Glissant's creolization theory which includes a conceptualization of traces as cultural memory passed on via music (2020). Instead, the weight of Liechti's theory is in the methodology. The ethnography is combined with a musical analysis of each of the five tracks. In order to apply a musicological approach to analyse tracks of experimental electronica largely composed by sampling, Liechti created "the fader of visibility (FOV)" model. This addresses the significance of the "visibility" (and invisibility) of the samples in the composition (101–107). Then in order to determine the motivations and intent behind the sampling, Liechti develops another model called the "spider of sampling reasons" model (109–143). This demonstrates in a neat diagram each producer's particular approach to sampling. Both models are then applied to analyse and compare the case studies which follow.

Each of the five case studies features one track by a different producer, all active in what Liechti discusses broadly as "the field of experimental electronica" (52–53). In the book's very useful Glossary, experimental electronica is defined as produced on laptops, mostly instrumental and with a sound that is "often abrasive, shaped by cuts, disruptions,

noises, and dissonances" (316). The five tracks selected for analysis engage with a diverse set of political issues: the Russian invasion of Ukraine's Donbas region; gender issues and the memory of genocide in the Armenian diaspora; recognition of Afro-Argentines in the history contemporary Argentina; and the taboo of zoophilia. Whilst the analysis is narrowed down to just five tracks, this broad range of political issues is also engaged with by Liechti, further illuminating the context of each individual producer's intent. These extra-musical perspectives have largely come from ethnographic fieldwork, which have produced some of the most illuminating passages in the book.

The methodological challenges and limitations encountered during the research of this book are outlined over several pages, revealing rare insight into not only the value of failure to future researchers but also the precarious conditions under which laptop producers of experimental electronica operate (69–75). Whilst Liechti admits a close look over the shoulders of the producers in the process of sampling was difficult to access, this did happen with one of his research participants. The results of this participant observation are featured in the penultimate chapter of the book, which Liechti calls an "interlude", serving as a great accompaniment to the conclusion which follows. The observations made of US-based producer Lara Sarkissian at work was facilitated by her being invited to participate in a residency at Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, curated by Norient. Liechti suggests more funded residencies like this are needed, in order to facilitate more focused observation of the practice of laptop producers (294–295).

Ultimately, I admired Liechti's tenacity in theorizing the playful and often random approaches of the producers he observed and interviewed. His theoretical rigour is balanced by his sensitive and nuanced voice, which is strongest when it becomes active, especially in the self-reflexive passages which reveal themselves when he addresses some of the problems encountered in trying to do fieldwork in the intimate work environments of "laptop producers", which Liechti prefers over the term of the "derogatory" term of "bedroom producer" (316). Liechti cites fellow musicologist-ethnographer Mark Butler (2006) several times, who also applied musicology theory to analyse the electronic dance music producers. I largely agreed with the critique that Butler's theorizing seemed more about "adding EDM to the music theorist's repertory" than "bringing music theory into EDM's varied and vibrant discourse" (Marshall 2009: 199). This tension is also present in Liechti's research. However, Butler went on to continue to further advance the study of EDM (2014) and I can imagine Liechti's commitment to both practice and research is putting him on a similarly inspired path.

NOTES

1   I have been a professional DJ/producer for twenty years and have toured the world with the project Cumbia Cosmonauts. I am currently completing a PhD at RMIT University, Melbourne, on digital cumbia and sound system culture, as well as working as a researcher with the Sonic Street Technologies research project, for University of Sydney and Goldsmiths University, London.

2   In terms of sampling in hip-hop, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (2004) by
    Joseph Schloss is a particularly useful work based on ethnographic research.

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