



Complicating Critique

SHORT
ESSAY

by [Vika Kirchenbauer](#)

When, in 2015, artist, writer and music producer Vika Kirchenbauer started developing a body of work based on sampling the choral tradition of Sacred Harp, her initial interest was of a historical nature: to research and critique the role of music within projects of colonization. Soon, however, the producer came to understand that practices such as «sampling as critique» are invariably marked by contradictory attachments to their sources and therefore require a more complex analysis.

Sacred Harp is a religious choral tradition from the U.S. South, its tunes first formally compiled in book form in 1844 (Franklin and King 1844). The spreading of Sacred Harp corresponds with the expansion of white settlers towards the West – a movement fundamentally reliant on slave labor – and the violent land seizures from indigenous Americans (Steel and Hulan 2010, 16). Even though there existed Black Sacred Harp music as practiced by Christianized and enslaved African Americans, the sacred choral music was nevertheless primarily labeled as «white spirituals» (Miller 2010, 9–11). Stephen A. Marini traces the earliest roots of Sacred Harp to the «country

parish music» of early 18th century England (Marini 2011, 77), which again implicates this musical tradition in a historical context of imperialism and colonialism.

My artistic research interest originally centered on the ways in which music and harmonies were utilized in projects of colonization and Christianization as a means of domination. In my view, the musical history of the Western world cannot be dissected without taking into consideration colonialism, music's role in supporting ideologies of supremacy through cultural means, and the relations of influence and appropriation it engaged in with non-Western kinds of musical expression during this centuries-long history.

Critique as an Affect World¹

Since my earliest intention was to deploy sampling as a means of critique, it is important to reflect upon how a critical stance is generally characterized within different fields of Western academia and artistic creation. Almost self-evidently, critique is understood to be marked by dispassion and detachment, by disembodied analytical distance (Felski 2015, 3, 18, 46); it presumes an idea of a suspicious critic of clear vision seeking to excavate hidden meaning from a position of level-headedness and unemotionality. Yet critical detachment is not an absence of mood, but rather a manifestation of it (ibid., 21), offering its own specific pleasures (Felski 2011, 216).

Ironically, the affect worlds provided to the critical practitioner through such self-understandings as rational, distant, and superior are themselves historically involved in shaping a Western hegemonic constitution of the world as such. They reflect values of European Enlightenment that, like music, were utilized as a cultural means within projects of subjugation. The affective complications of a critical stance are further highlighted by additional, at times contradictory, attachments that the critic establishes to their object, as becomes apparent during instances of aesthetic engagement such as sampling.

Distance as Imposed by the Tunes

In order to clarify these problems with critique's ostensibly detached position at the example of my concrete sampling practice, it is first necessary to note a few aesthetic specificities of Sacred Harp. Sacred Harp is a form of choral singing that presumes no audience, but only participants who arrange themselves in a square facing each other as they sing – the exclusionary practice of building community becoming radically visible through the exclusion of outsiders not only from participation, but also from consumption. Taking its name from the idea that God unite the individuals into one single instrument by playing the singers' vocal cords like a harp (Anon. 1940, 127), within Sacred Harp, to sing well is considered less

significant than to sing passionately, to resonate heavily with God's invisible hand. It is practiced by non-professionals as a form of communal worship, not as a display of musical skill (Marini 2003, 84). This approach towards singing results, perhaps contradictingly so, in an astonishing amount of individual distinction between the choir's singers that is rather uncharacteristic to other forms of choral practice.

Following the logics of Sacred Harp as a worship practice that does not usually admit an outside listener, my sample sources would not exist had a particular convention of singers not agreed to an ethnomusicologist's field recordings. Between the ethnographic motivation to preserve or make accessible and Sacred Harp's opposing approach towards being-in-the-moment as closed community, there lies a paradox concerning temporality and admittance. The recordings I utilize are intended both for me and not for me at the same time. There exists a distance imposed *by* the tunes that their being recorded appears to negate.

Familiar Dissonances

When indeed working with the material there emerges a twofold affective relationship with it. As I critically approach a tune I intend to sample from, I may want to smash it into pieces and create from those ruins a re-arranged harmony that both highlights the original tune's entanglement within colonial and racist violence, but also does justice to my aesthetic judgment concerning the kind of contemporary electronic music I wish to produce. I become engaged with the material's strangely familiar internal dissonances, contradictions, and incoherencies. In listening to hours of this material over the years I cannot but establish an affective relationship with the individual parts of the choir that is not purely antagonistic, but at times more challenging.

Ultimately – and as is inevitable when sampling – I work *with* the material and impossibly only against it. As I approach the material and while spending time with it, it becomes less stable, less easy to grasp. I may develop warm feelings towards certain individuals with particularly shrill voices, whose courage and carelessness to be so passionately off-key I admire. As I listen closely to the roughly 60-year-old material I hear people chatting before the tunes start, and they too seem familiar. And finally, I – from the perspective of a white European producer – must notice that I don't stand above or outside the sample in a critically detached manner, but that my subjectivity is deeply embedded and implicated in its violent musical history.

→ footnotes

1. The term «affect world» is used after Lauren Berlant; in that affect and emotion lead the way for belonging ahead of the modes of rational or deliberative thought. She describes affect worlds as «worlds to which

people are bound (...) by affective projections of a constantly negotiated common interestedness» (Berlant 2011, 226).

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This article is part of Norient's online publication Sampling Politics Today, published in 2020 as part of the research project «Glocal Sounds – Re-Working and Re-Coding Place References» (No. 162797), funded by the [Swiss National Science Foundation \(SNSF\)](#) and supported by the [Bern University of the Arts HKB](#).

Bibliographic Record: Kirchenbauer, Vika. 2020. «Complicating Critique». In Sampling Politics Today, edited by Hannes Liechti, Thomas Burkhalter, and Philipp Rhensius (Norient Sound Series 1). Bern: Norient. DOI: 10.56513/nftg6449-18.

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→ published on september 24, 2020

→ last updated on april 09, 2024

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