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FROM ALBUMS TO MUSICKING ASSEMBLAGES: VIRTUAL STRUCTURES AND TOPOLOGICAL UNFOLDINGS IN TOYOMU’S “IMAGINING” OF KANYE WEST’S *THE LIFE OF PABLO*

Abstract: In 2016, Kanye West released his highly anticipated eighth album, *The Life of Pablo*, on a streaming platform Deezer, where it remained exclusively available for over a month. This prevented audiences from several countries, where the service has not yet launched, from accessing it. As a result, Japanese electronic music producer, Toyomu, created his own version of the album, without hearing the original. Browsing the internet, he tracked every sample and every lyric that West used, and assembled them into an original work, comprising an “imagining” of how *The Life of Pablo* could have sounded. His endeavor, while ingrained in the cultural logic of remix, goes beyond it, comprising a unique musical entity that eludes easy categorization. Therefore, the paper employs Manuel DeLanda’s assemblage theory to account for its specificity. This entails a shift from a relational and processual understanding of the musical album, already implied in West’s work, to mapping the topological structure of possibilities, defined by invariants and attractors, that hints at real but not actual vectors of its becoming. As such, Toyomu’s undertaking provides an opportunity to further rethink the concept of the musical album in a time when it was already decentered by the transition from material objects to digital data.

Keywords: Kanye West, Toyomu, hip hop, assemblage theory, digital music, remix

Introduction

The Life of Pablo was one of the most anticipated releases of 2016. The seventh album by the rapper and global celebrity, Kanye West, came with inflated expectations following his most experimental work, *Yeezus*, released three years prior. Consequently, there was an eagerness among his fanbase to find out what he would do

next. The album was released on the 14th of February, on a streaming platform Tidal, owned by another prominent rapper, Jay-Z, who purchased it a year earlier. The acquisition was accompanied by a marketing campaign that promoted Tidal as the first streaming platform controlled by artists and oriented toward their fair compensation. The above average subscription fees required to achieve this were supposed to be balanced out by a higher quality of streaming, employing lossless audio formats, and a selection of music releases exclusive to the platform. West's album was part of that strategy, remaining available on Tidal alone up till the first day of April. Consequently, if fans wanted to hear *The Life of Pablo* in the first forty seven days following its release, they had to subscribe to the platform.

However, not every person had such an opportunity, as Tidal remained unavailable in many countries. That was the case in Japan, the second largest music market in the world, but one where the development of streaming was sluggish.¹ The unattainability of West's latest opus, while the internet was booming with excitement and discussions about it, was certainly frustrating to Japanese fans of the artist. The necessity is the mother of invention, though, and one young producer from Kyoto, Toyomu, came up with a peculiar solution to the problem. He created his own version of the album, based on the information he could find on the internet. To that end, he tracked every sample and every lyric that West used on *The Life of Pablo*, and assembled them into a companion work that reflected how he thought the "original" album might sound. Entitled 印象III: なんとなく、パブロ (*Inshō III: Nantonaku Pablo*), literally translating as "Impression III: Somewhat Pablo," it was self-released on the artist's Bandcamp page on the 16th of March 2016, with an additional English title: *Imagining the Life of Pablo*. It featured eighteen tracks, just like on West's album, with titles referencing their counterparts in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. The music, however, was very different. Even with exactly the same samples and lyrics (albeit sometimes translated to Japanese), Toyomu's imagining is far removed from the actual sound of *The Life of Pablo*.

Riding on the wave of hype surrounding West's album, though, the album brought Toyomu international recognition. The online music media reported quite extensively about its release, framing it mostly as a sort of curiosity, feeding on the stereotype of "weird things" from Japan, but also expressed genuine praise for the ingenuity of its creator. Admittedly, *Imagining the Life of Pablo* is an unprecedented musical endeavor, one that could only happen in the age of digital media and networked culture. However, it exceeds even contemporary musical practices. Since it was made without hearing the "original" album, it is neither a cover, nor a remix. Yet it does retain a connection to West's work, both materially, featuring the same sound samples and lyrics, and conceptually, by enacting a "what if" scenario of how it could have

¹ N. Manabe, *Streaming Music in Japan: Corporate Cultures as Determinants of Listening Practice* [in:] R. Nowak, A. Whelan (eds.), *Networked Music Cultures: Contemporary Approaches, Emerging Issues*, Macmillan, London 2016.

sounded. This begs the question: what to make of it metaphysically? In other words, what kind of musical entity it is, and what can it tell us about the ontological status of an album in digital culture?

In this paper, I will employ Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory² in order to scrutinize the nature of the relationship between West's and Toyomu's works, framing them in terms of topological unfoldings within and across musicking assemblages. While the notion of assemblage is already rife in popular music studies, both in its Deleuzian³ and Latourian⁴ incarnations, there has not been much engagement with DeLanda's rereading of the concept. This might be because it is theoretically dense, developing its ontology via engagement with hard sciences, like physics and mathematics, in addition to social and cultural theories.⁵ However, following DeLanda, I want to argue that only by going beyond the actualizations of assemblages as mediations of heterogeneous things, and engaging with their intensive morphogenesis and virtual structures of possibilities, we can properly make sense of Toyomu's musical undertaking.

Beyond Hip Hop: Toyomu's Musical Journey

The geopolitics of streaming has been presented by Toyomu as the main reason for creating his "imagined" version of *The Life of Pablo*. Using the hashtag #NoTIDAL-inJapan on his Bandcamp page, he attempted to stand up against cultural exclusion brought by corporate policies in the global music industry. While his advocacy did not elicit a significant change, with Tidal not being available in Japan up to this day, it provided an opportunity for the media to frame his creative effort as a unique way to bypass the sway of music platforms and take the power into his own hands. This counterhegemonic narrative was certainly appealing, but obscured a much more messy reality. A glimpse into Toyomu's musical journey shows that his rationale for creating *Imagining the Life of Pablo* was rather prosaic and market-oriented.

² M. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, Continuum, London 2006; idem, *Assemblage Theory*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2016.

³ E.g., N. Nesbitt, *Critique and Clinique: From Sounding Bodies to the Musical Event* [in:] N. Nesbitt, B. Hulse (eds.), *Sounding the Virtual: Gilles Deleuze and the Theory and Philosophy of Music*, Ashgate, Farnham 2010; P. Moisala, T. Leppänen, M. Tiainen, H. Väättäin (eds.), *Musical Encounters with Deleuze and Guattari*, Bloomsbury, New York 2017.

⁴ E.g., G. Born, *On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology, and Creativity*, "Twentieth-Century Music" 2005, no. 2/1, pp. 7–36; eadem, *Music and the Materialization of Identities*, "Journal of Material Culture" 2011, no. 16 (4), pp. 376–388; N. Prior, *Popular Music, Digital Technology and Society*, Sage, London 2018; idem, *STS Confronts the Vocaloid: Assemblage Thinking with Hatsune Miku* [in:] A. Hennion, Ch. Levaux (eds.), *Rethinking Music Through Science and Technology Studies*, Routledge, London 2021.

⁵ M. DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, Bloomsbury, London 2003.

From his teenage years, Toyomu's musical taste was, in fact, fashioned by hip hop. Before he became acquainted with electronic music, he used to listen to domestic hip hop artists, crediting the groups Rip Slyme and Orange Range as some of his earliest fascinations. However, the scope of his engagement was limited to Japanese artists. As he admitted in one interview: "until I went to college, I didn't listen to Western hip hop at all".⁶ Toyomu's interest in hip hop grew after he entered university and joined a music study group, prompting him to his first attempts at music making: "I've been listening to Japanese rap all the time, and it seemed interesting, so I thought I'd try to make it. At first, I bought a sampler and started to write songs from there".⁷ His initial thought was to be a rapper and a beatmaker, like one of his favorite artists, Kreva, but after comparing himself to local MCs, he came to the conclusion that he cannot match their level of skill and decided to focus on songwriting and producing music instead.

At the same time, he was frequenting the club Whoopee in the Gion neighborhood, where he expanded his musical horizons. As he reminisced, it "would do hip-hop events, but also have dubstep nights, minimal techno nights," allowing him to absorb new music, and, as a result, change his approach to music making.⁸ However, by Toyomu's own admission, Kyoto did not offer much in terms of electronic music events at the time. Consequently, he found a haven in the nearby Osaka, a city known for its vibrant independent music scene.⁹ In particular, the collective Innit founded by Masayuki Kubo, proved crucial to Toyomu's breakthrough. Since 2011 they organized a series of club events featuring a mix of live performers and DJs that were specifically set up for the sake of up-and-coming artists. Anyone who brought their own music was offered a discount and an opportunity to play their track during the night.¹⁰ Thus, the opportunity has arisen for Toyomu to present his early compositions for the community of artists and regulars who frequented the event. His acquaintance with Innit members also inspired him to start his own record label, Quantizer, and a series of similar events in his home town of Kyoto, both inclined more toward alternative offshoots of hip hop music.¹¹

In 2015, he travelled to Los Angeles where he spent some time absorbing the city's experimental hip hop scene, in particular the artists associated with Flying

⁶ Quoted in K. Miki, *Interview: Toyomu*, "TimeOut," 5.01.2017, <https://www.timeout.com/tokyo/music/interview-toyomu> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

⁷ Quoted in T. Hosaka, *Interview / Toyomu*, "Spincoaster," 25.11.2016, <https://spincoaster.com/interview-toyomu> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

⁸ Quoted in P. Michel, *Toyomu Imagines Life after Kanye*, "The Japan Times," 20.11.2016, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2016/11/20/music/toyomu-imagines-life-kanye/> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

⁹ I. Martin, *Quit Your Band! Musical Notes from the Japanese Underground*, Awai Books, New York 2016.

¹⁰ P. Michel, *At Innit's Osaka Parties It's Bring Your Own Beats*, "The Japan Times," 10.11.2011, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2011/11/10/music/at-innits-osaka-parties-its-bring-your-own-beats/> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

¹¹ P. Michel, *Toyomu Imagines...*, op. cit.

Lotus-run label, Brainfeeder.¹² After returning to Japan, he felt motivated to further develop his career and set on a challenge to release a new work on Bandcamp each month for a year.¹³ This gave rise to the *Inshō* series, of which *Imagining the Life of Pablo* was the third installment. Toyomu's idea was to present his own take on other artists' music, offering reworks of whole albums, because he thought that they will better stick out among the overabundance of music in digital culture. As he said, "people won't pay attention if it's just single tracks. It's that simple. Single tracks get buried with everything else. I'm constantly thinking of ways to have my stuff not get buried".¹⁴

This pragmatic approach also informed his choice of the first source material. Gen Hoshino was the guitarist of instrumental band Sakerock, and in late 2015 he released his fourth solo work called *Yellow Dancer*. The album went platinum, occupying top spots at both Oricon and Billboard charts in Japan. Toyomu wanted to piggyback on its success and thus quickly followed its release with his 印象I: 黄色の踊り (*Inshō I: Kiiro no odori*, meaning "yellow dance") in January 2016. From the artwork, depicting a melted figure found on the cover of Hoshino's album, to the music, which turns the sunny orchestral pop of the original into a woozy, glitch-ridden electronica, it performs a radical deconstruction of the work. However, when Hoshino's record label, Victor Entertainment, found out about the release they were not too pleased with it, and demanded that Toyomu remove his version from Bandcamp, citing copyright infringement and threatening him with a lawsuit.

The episode has not deterred him from continuing the series, though. After an EP, 印象II: プラグインソウル (*Inshō II: Puragu in sōro* or *Plug-in Soul Music*), which featured rearrangements of five tracks by different artists, he decided to tackle another famous album in its entirety, creating his version of West's latest release. The choice, again, was deliberate: "*The Life Of Pablo* on its own was just so hyped," reminisced Toyomu. "Everybody was listening to [the album], and everybody was making memes about it. West became an icon that everybody enjoyed, and it was a unifying thing".¹⁵ And this time his strategy worked out, bringing him wider recognition. A music blog, Pigeons and Planes, was first to notice the album and publish a story about it, followed by other English-language online media. The viral success of *Imagining the Life of Pablo* provided a break that Toyomu needed to jumpstart his career. Although he was probably more recognized abroad than in Japan, he nevertheless was taken in by the Tokyo-based indie music distributor and record company, Traffic Inc., which released his new EP with original material, *Zekkei*, in 2016, and his official debut album, *Toyomu*, in 2018.¹⁶

¹² T. Hosaka, *Interview...*, op. cit.

¹³ M. Hisataakaa, *Imagining the Life of Pablo*, "Vinyl7Records Blog", 15.04.2016, <https://www.vinyl7-blog.net/blog/2016/04/imagining-the-life-of-pablo.html> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

¹⁴ Quoted in K. Miki, *Interview...*, op. cit.

¹⁵ Quoted in P. Michel, *Toyomu Imagines...*, op. cit.

¹⁶ Toyomu did self-release two albums before the *Inshō* series: *Janitor* in 2013 and *Subcon* in 2015.

His own music, however, never attained the same level of buzz as *Imagining the Life of Pablo* did. This might be because all other entries in the *Inshō* series fall within the scope of conventional musical remix, an initially controversial practice that, with time, has become ubiquitous and normalized in digital music culture.¹⁷ Consequently, Toyomu's remakes do not really stand out from a plenitude of analogous works in contemporary electronic music. However, *Imagining the Life of Pablo* is somewhat different, as it was created without hearing the original album. This begs the question: can it be considered a remix at all? In a way, it might seem closer to attempts at reconstructing music from before the advent of recording technologies, as it entails recreating how something sounded by piecing together available information about how it was made. Unlike such endeavors, however, *Imagining the Life of Pablo* was not created in accordance with the imperative of fidelity; rather, it retained remix's cultural logic of playful and promiscuous reconfigurations that deliberately exceed the authority of "the original".¹⁸ Its relation to West's album, is thus ambiguous, confirming and neglecting its existence at the same time. This makes it into a one-of-a-kind work, providing us with the opportunity to think anew about what a popular music album can become.

The Making of *Imagining the Life of Pablo*

Imagining the Life of Pablo was self-released by Toyomu on the 16th of March. It was a result of a creative process that in its entirety took less than a month. The first ideas appeared around the beginning of March, two weeks after the premiere of West's album. He then took some time browsing the internet in order to retrieve as much information about *The Life of Pablo* as possible. He mainly used two websites: WhoSampled and Genius. Both are examples of the so-called "peer production" model, whereby a large number of users, often scattered throughout the world, self-organize and collaborate on the realization of a shared project.¹⁹ As such, these sites comprise extensive and regularly updated databases, providing information on, respectively, the samples and the lyrics used in popular music songs. According to Toyomu, the first entries on *The Life of Pablo* appeared on these sites within days of the album's premiere. He studied them, and when he felt that he retrieved all the pieces, he assembled his version of the album in four to five days.

In creating *Imagining the Life of Pablo*, Toyomu often went by his gut feeling about what West could have done on the album. An important source of clues was the

¹⁷ A. Waysdorf, *Remix in the Age of Ubiquitous Remix*, "Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies" 2021, vol. 27 (4), pp. 1129–1144.

¹⁸ D. Gunkel, *Rethinking the Digital Remix: Mashups and the Metaphysics of Sound Recording*, "Popular Music and Society" 2008, vol. 31 (4), pp. 489–510.

¹⁹ Y. Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2006.

emotional tone of the lyrics: “A big factor was Kanye’s feelings, whether he’s angry or happy. It’s decided on each song’s tempo and atmosphere”.²⁰ He also included the same samples, sourced from WhoSampled and ranging from fragments of songs by other artists to snippets of sermons and Instagram posts, as well as computer game sounds.²¹ The use of online databases precipitates the uncanny moments of coincidence between both albums. However, sometimes Toyomu proceeded by a much more loose chain of associations. For example, he knew that West produced the song *I Still Love H.E.R.* by the Japanese hip hop crew Teriyaki Boyz, so he decided to play a sample of the track on his version of *I Love Kanye*, which was renamed to *I Still Love K.A.N.Y.E.*²² The similarity between the titles, therefore, prompted him to deliberately incorporate something that was not originally part of *The Life of Pablo*, but still retained some relation to West’s work. The sound of his version of *Famous*, in turn, imitates the rhythm patterns characteristic of Swizz Beats’s music, because of the misconception he had about the rappers involvement in the song. Toyomu thought that Swizz Beats co-produced it and only later found out that he merely performed a few verses on it. Thus, he realized that his prediction when making the album was, as he put it, “brilliantly wrong”.²³

Two of the songs featured on *The Life of Pablo – 30 Hours* and *No More Parties in LA* – were initially posted on Soundcloud, allowing Toyomu to listen to them even before he decided to take on the whole album. However, his versions of them still sound quite different to West’s. This suggests that fidelity was never a primary objective for Toyomu. In fact, in one interview, he admitted that on the album “there are also places where I thought «I want to do this!»”, rather than guess the sound of the original.²⁴ Toyomu was familiar with West’s oeuvre and particularly fond of *Yeezus*, saying that he was influenced by its experimentalism, which he compared to the “spirit of punk”.²⁵ Consequently, this is how he imagined *The Life of Pablo* should sound like. His predilection for other offbeat instances of the genre also played its part. In particular, he mentioned one specific musical undertaking: “I made the tracks with the intention of creating hip hop with bizarre samples. For example, there’s Madlib’s alter ego project, Quasimoto. That was the sort of feeling I was going for. Quasimoto’s stuff uses an SP-303 [sampler] with ultra-simple sequence functions, which gives tons of freedom for note division. That’s why I didn’t

²⁰ Quoted in R. Tasker, *Talking with Toyomu, The Producer Who Imagined “The Life of Pablo” for a Tidal-Less Japan*, “Genius,” 8.04.2016, <https://genius.com/a/talking-with-toyomu-the-producer-who-imagined-the-life-of-pablo-for-a-tidal-less-japan> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

²¹ M. Heal, *Every Sample on Kanye’s “The Life of Pablo”*, “Genius,” 16.02.2016, <https://genius.com/a/every-sample-on-kanye-s-the-life-of-pablo> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

²² R. Tasker, *Talking with...*, op. cit.

²³ Quoted in M. Hisataakaa, *Imagining...*, op. cit.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Quoted in S. Geffen, *Meet The Producer Behind The Bizarro-World Version of Kanye West’s “The Life of Pablo”*, MTV, 8.04.2016, <https://www.mtv.com/news/bvgzy1/bizarro-world-life-of-pablo-toyomu> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

use a four beat structure”.²⁶ In this sense, *Imagining the Life of Pablo* goes beyond a mere attempt to reenact West’s album, becoming more of a statement on the genre itself: “I’d like to talk about hip hop through the whole of this album [...]. Though tradition is necessary, of course, the culture’s gonna be in decline if we only lean on classics. I’d like hip hop to give a fresh power and would like to remind everyone this culture is based on experimentalism”.²⁷

There is a lot, then, that went into the creation of the album. Beyond original samples and lyrics from *The Life of Pablo*, Toyomu also employed fragments of music by other artists that he associated with West’s work, as well as his own ideas and normative expectations about hip hop that he accrued throughout years of being a fan of the genre. Furthermore, the very premise of making *Imagining the Life of Pablo* was reliant on the infrastructure of the internet. As one reviewer put it: “Ironically, the same digital forces that kept [Toyomu] from hearing the album proved key to his reinterpretation”.²⁸ Indeed, without digital infrastructures, he would have never been able to assemble such a detailed record of every sample and lyric featured on West’s album. In a way, then, *Imagining the Life of Pablo* makes audible this underlying networked dynamic that encompasses a reconfigurable set of relationships between routers, servers, wires, interfaces, protocols, etc.²⁹ However, it also includes the often invisible work of the multitude that lays the foundations of sites like WhoSampled and Genius, and was inscribed in the very musical DNA of the album.

Bringing music online has been said to displace the album as the prevalent unit of music consumption, dissolving it into transient and effervescent streams or flexible and configurable playlists.³⁰ However, as Johansson et al. argue, albums are still salient on music platforms with artists pages organized around discographies and album covers appearing as icons throughout their interfaces. At the same time, the meanings attached to the album as a cultural form have gravitated toward a more distributed, open, and adjustable whole than in pre-internet times.³¹ This is well exemplified by *The Life of Pablo* itself since the album was conceived by West as a “living breathing changing creative expression” to be modified and refined with no finished end-prod-

²⁶ Quoted in K. Miki, *Interview...*, op. cit.

²⁷ Quoted in R. Tasker, *Talking with...*, op. cit.

²⁸ Z. Camp, 印象III: なんとなく、パブロ (*Imagining “The Life of Pablo”*), “Pitchfork,” 19.04.2016, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/21831-iii-imagining-the-life-of-pablo/> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

²⁹ A. Galloway, E. Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2007.

³⁰ E.g., J. Anderson, *Stream Capture: Returning Control of Digital Music to the Users*, “Harvard Journal of Law and Technology” 2011, vol. 25 (1), pp. 160–177; A.N. Hagen, *The Playlist Experience: Personal Playlists in Music Streaming Services*, “Popular Music and Society” 2015, vol. 38 (5), pp. 625–645; J.W. Morris, *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2015; M. Scherzinger, *The Political Economy of Streaming* [in:] N. Cook, M. Ingalls, D. Trippett (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019.

³¹ S. Johansson, A. Werner, P. Åker, G. Goldenzwaig, *Streaming Music: Practices, Media, Cultures*, Routledge, London 2018.

uct down the road.³² The album premiered at New York’s Madison Square Garden on 11th February 2016. When it appeared on Tidal three days later, it was already modified, with parts of the record re-edited and even featuring a lyric referencing the event at Madison Square Garden. Since then, West made a series of more or less prominent changes to song titles and lyrics, the tracklist, and the sound of the album, altering instrumentation, production, and vocals. For instance, he put back Vic Mensa and Sia on an extended cut of *Wolves*, while at the same time separating Frank Ocean’s part of the song into a stand-alone interlude called *Frank’s Track*. He also changed a fragment of the lyrics on *Famous*, and revised the mix on several tracks. In fact, only four songs out of the original eighteen were left with no audible changes.³³

Consequently, a seemingly self-evident observation that Toyomu’s album sounds different to West’s gets precarious and problematic, as there is no unified sound that could provide a ground for comparison. *Imagining the Life of Pablo* was assembled from the same parts, but is not reducible to any previous manifestation of the album. At the same time, it cannot be classified as just another version, like the one’s produced by West, as it is more “meta” than that, comprising an album about an album that further problematizes its metaphysical status. This necessitates not only more processual and relational but also more topological approach to understanding it.

Musical Albums as Topological Structures

The concept of assemblage has been used in the study of popular music to demonstrate how its emergence is contingent on a multiplicity of mediations that occur across social contexts.³⁴ In particular, assemblage thinking can show how music is enmeshed with and co-constituted by technologies, which becomes even more relevant within “digital formations”.³⁵ This undoubtedly bears upon Toyomu’s undertaking as well, bringing our attention to a chain of mediations leading from West’s album through the internet architecture and informational flows therein to the emergence of *Imagining the Life of Pablo* itself. However, to better capture the specificity of the album, I want to employ the concept of assemblages as a way to reconceive the very idea of musical works, framing them not only as mediated by pre-existing objects, but also as comprising “reservoirs of forces and intensities,” which transforms them

³² K. West, “Ima fix wolves”, Twitter, 14.02.2016, <https://twitter.com/Westwest/status/698971890581401600> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

³³ See: J. Kennedy, *Deconstructed: Tracing the Evolution of Kanye West’s “The Life of Pablo”*, “Genius,” 24.05.2016, <https://genius.com/a/deconstructed-tracing-the-evolution-of-kanye-west-s-the-life-of-pablo> (accessed: 27.09.2022); S. Maicki, *Here Are All the Changes Made to Kanye West’s “The Life of Pablo” So Far*, “Complex,” 1.04.2016, <https://www.complex.com/music/2016/04/kanye-west-the-life-of-pablo-changes> (accessed: 27.09.2022).

³⁴ G. Born, *On Musical...*, op. cit.; G. Born, A. Barry, *Music, Mediation Theories and Actor-Network Theory*, “Contemporary Music Review” 2018, no. 37, pp. 5–6.

³⁵ N. Prior, *Popular Music...*, op. cit., p. 4.

into “dynamic systems characterized by metastability, transductive powers, and unpredictable future reconfigurations”.³⁶

DeLanda’s rethinking of the concept of assemblage provides one of the most consistent and systematic attempts to lay down sound theoretical foundations for its analytical use. For him, being a part of the assemblage only involves the exercise of the components’ capacities, and does not define its identity. Consequently, the relations do not exhaust the things that relate. This is because unlike properties, which characterize more or less enduring states and are, therefore, limited and always actual, capacities are directly relational, meaning that they may remain unexercised in a particular arrangement³⁷. This entails that a component may be detached from one assemblage and plugged into another where it will enter new relationships by drawing on a different set of its capacities. For instance, a popular song that was part of an entertainment-assemblage can be employed in a military-assemblage. Therein, it enters a new set of relations which change its capacities, from bringing joy to the listeners to causing pain as a form of torture.³⁸ However, its identity, defined by a set of relatively durable properties, remains intact.

While capacities do depend on the component’s properties they cannot be reduced to them, as they also pertain to the properties of other interacting components.³⁹ There is, then, a dynamic of affecting and being affected that operates within assemblages. In this sense, they are more than a mere aggregation of parts. Assemblages play an active role in the establishing and maintaining the interactions between the components by selecting or discarding some of their capacities. As such, they act as a source of limitations and opportunities. At the same time, they do not transcend their parts, because if the components stop interacting the whole itself ceases to exist.⁴⁰ Consequently, assemblages must exist alongside their parts on the same ontological plane. They constitute differently scaled individual singularities that can directly interact with one another. To put it differently, the component parts that are assembled together to form the whole are themselves understood as assemblages, meaning that “at all times we are dealing with assemblages of assemblages”.⁴¹

For DeLanda, then, the concept of an assemblage pertains both to the arrangement of concrete elements and the processes of affecting and being affected that take place in-between them. In fact, these processes are primary and morphogenetic, leading to the formation of entities with emergent properties or their transformation.⁴² This

³⁶ P. de Assis, *Logic of Experimentation: Rethinking Music Performance through Artistic Research*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 2018, p. 100.

³⁷ M. DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory...*, op. cit., p. 73.

³⁸ S. Cusick, *Music as torture / Music as weapon*, “Trans. Revista Transcultural de Música” 2006, no. 10, <https://www.sibetrans.com/trans/article/152/music-as-torture-music-as-weapon>.

³⁹ M. DeLanda, *A New Philosophy...*, op. cit., p. 11.

⁴⁰ Idem, *Deleuze: History and Science*, Atropos, New York 2010, pp. 68–69.

⁴¹ Idem, *Assemblage Theory...*, op. cit., p. 3.

⁴² See: M. DeLanda, *Intensive Science...*, op. cit.

involves the relay and conversion of energy which is governed by gradients of intensity. As such, assemblages are continuously becoming-other, passing from one actualization to the next as they are traversed by flows of energy, matter, and information.⁴³ Consequently, besides their actual image pertaining to the current state of an assemblage, including all the activities that are taking place in the here-and-now, we can also speak of their virtual image related to a topological structure laying out the possible states that an assemblage can have. While mapping the entirety of this virtual space would be unattainable, as there are simply too many imaginable variants, some of them occur with higher probability than others. We can, therefore, delineate the diagram of an assemblage as a combination of transformations and topological invariants, also called attractors.⁴⁴

This approach to assemblages, while theoretically laden, can offer a new way of understanding musical works, reconceiving them as “highly complex, historically constructed multiplicities defined by *virtual structures*, *intensive processes*, and *actual things*”.⁴⁵ As such, they are comprised of potentially infinite array of components and can undergo divergent actualizations, manifesting “in different modes, to different audiences, and at different times”.⁴⁶ This account presupposes a continuum of intensity – what Cox calls the sonic flux – which becomes segmented into more or less stable forms as certain capacities are exercised within concrete assemblages.⁴⁷ That is why, instead of works or albums, it might be better to speak of “musicking assemblages,” employing Small’s term⁴⁸ that attempts to think music more interactionally, while, at the same time, removing its anthropocentric bent by incorporating it into assemblage thinking.

This is crucial in relation to digital music in particular, as it can be too easily associated with an oversimplified concept of assemblages due to its underlying logic of remix. This often entails conceiving sampling in terms of removing a sonic component from one work and plugging it into another, just like in assemblages. However, digital sampling does not operate on sound itself; rather, it is “a type of computer synthesis in which sound is rendered into data, data that in turn comprise instructions for reconstructing that sound”.⁴⁹ As such, it comprises a series of transductive processes, whereby one type of energy changes into another.⁵⁰ This necessarily involves the use

⁴³ See: Idem, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, Zone Books, New York 1997.

⁴⁴ Idem, *Assemblage Theory...*, op. cit., p. 113.

⁴⁵ P. de Assis, *Musical Works as Assemblages*, “La Deleuziana” 2019, no. 10, p. 272.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Ch. Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2018.

⁴⁸ Ch. Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown 1999.

⁴⁹ M. Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2004, p. 138.

⁵⁰ J. Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, Duke University Press, Durham 2003, p. 22.

of digital technologies to record, store, and reproduce sound.⁵¹ Therefore, instead of conceiving digital music as an assemblage in and of itself, it is better to speak of musicking assemblages that contain both material and expressive components: sounds, meanings, bodies, devices, etc., as well as the intensive dynamic of affecting and being affected between each and every one of them, including interactions between the parts and the whole.

Recognizing that, we can see how assemblage thinking can help us to better understand the metaphysical status of *Imagining the Life of Pablo* as a topological unfolding of West's album. The immanent multiscalarity implied by the concept allows us to acknowledge the connection between both works, while not reducing the former to the latter, in any version that the latter exists in. Rather, it can be outlined as a flexible topological map with invariants provided by the use of the same samples and lyrics that generated potential for creating zones of indiscernibility, where the sound of both works may become uncannily close, as well as transformations resulting from recombining those components and adding new ones, which afforded different intensive dynamic that involved exercising different sets of capacities from the elements involved. Furthermore, the process of formation of *Imagining the Life of Pablo* was governed by multiple basins of attraction, including West's previous work, principally *Yeezus*, Madlib's Quasimoto project, and other works mentioned by Toyomu. In a way, all these pulled the formation of the album towards their respective aesthetics, affecting its trajectory of becoming.

Consequently, it would be more appropriate to speak of a nested set of musicking assemblages that partially overlap, but also diverge in significant ways. In particular, the composition of bodies and technologies constitutes a deflective factor, with voice providing the most striking example. West's rapping often features audible breaths and grunts that signal the presence of what Barthes has termed "the grain of the voice," referring to the bodily, physiological aspect of vocal production.⁵² Furthermore, West's sudden raises of pitch provide one of his sonic signatures, a unique mark that characterizes his vocal delivery, often parodied by impressionists on satirical shows, like *Saturday Night Live*. These aspects remained unreproducible for Toyomu, who used an in-built text-to-speech conversion tool on Macintosh throughout *Imagining the Life of Pablo*, generating a computerized voice that he further modulated with Ableton.⁵³ As a result, West's embodied expression and flow are replaced with monotonous and dispassionate synthesized voice. Furthermore, sometimes there is no difference between the parts rapped by West and guest artists, blending their voices into a uniform, grainless hybrid. This strips the voice of its cultural connotations as a marker of human individuality, instead conceiving it as a stream of data

⁵¹ P. Harkins, *Digital Sampling: The Design and Use of Music Technologies*, Routledge, New York 2020.

⁵² R. Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice* [in:] idem, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. S. Heath, Fontana Press, London 1977; see also: F. Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011.

⁵³ S. Geffen, *Meet the Producer...*, op. cit.

that can be entered into the machine and computationally processed to produce an output signal.

This proved to be the most controversial aspect of Toyomu's album, with many finding it too dreadful to merit further listening. On the other hand, West himself often relied on a synthesized and distorted manipulation of his voice that made him sound not quite human. In fact, the cyborgization of the voice by turning it into malleable digital data, has become one of the staples of contemporary popular music.⁵⁴ Consequently, Toyomu's treatment of the voice on *Imagining the Life of Pablo* should be read as a modulation in intensity, a quantitative change that leads to qualitative one. This effect, however, is contingent on the nesting of musicking assemblages, that is, a specific distribution of invariants and transformations that connects both albums within a topological structure of possibilities. *Imagining the Life of Pablo* deliberately invokes West's vocal expression, featuring his personal lyrics, but performed in a voice that is anonymous and machinic, as if the artists was forcibly assimilated by technology.

Conclusion

In contrast to claims that "the very concept of the music album became digitally de-ontologized"⁵⁵, this paper attempted to re-ontologize it by drawing on DeLanda's assemblage theory. Using the example of *Imagining the Life of Pablo*, a work assembled from samples and lyrics of West's album but rearranged and combined with other components, it argued that it can be conceived as a topological unfolding prompted by multiple attractors operating throughout musicking assemblages. While Toyomu's album is not the only one that can be understood in this way, its unique relation to West's album and its embeddedness in digital infrastructures make these concepts particularly vivid and urgent, as they allow to capture its specificity.

Reconceiving the album in this way entails taking popular music seriously as a mode of "sonic thinking" that produces knowledge not *about* the world, but *of* and *in* the world, intervening directly in its becoming.⁵⁶ In fact, both West's and Toyomu's artistic endeavors offer two parallel problematizations of the idea of the musical album, exploring tensions and inconsistencies latent within it. However, these are not articulated in concepts but performed directly through sound. West's *The Life of Pablo* challenged the reification of musical works into static "objects" with fixed properties, instead enacting the album as a stream of digital data that can undergo constant modulations. As such, it highlights how the work comprises a set of divergent actu-

⁵⁴ N. Prior, *On Vocal Assemblages: From Edison to Miku*, "Contemporary Music Review" 2017, no. 37, pp. 488–506.

⁵⁵ M. Scherzinger, *The Political Economy...*, op. cit., p. 280.

⁵⁶ B. Herzogenrath, *Sonic Thinking – An Introduction* [in:] idem (ed.), *Sonic Thinking: A Media Philosophical Approach*, Bloomsbury, New York 2017, p. 1.

alizations without one unified, final sound. Toyomu's imagining, in turn, revealed the topological structure of possibilities of West's album by selecting some of its raw materials, recombining them with each other as well as with additional components, and solidifying all the parts into a new, larger-scale whole with emergent properties. Consequently, it hints at real but not actual vectors of becoming that can deflect its sound, bringing our attention to the virtual diagram that does not coincide with or resemble any of its actualizations, but has the capacity to bring them about. It is in this sense that I approached *Imagining the Life of Pablo* as a medium of insight that materializes the knowledge of musicking assemblages.

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