

Extended Essay in Music

How does Tanya Tagaq's stylistic development reflect her musical depiction of environmental issues?

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Introduction

This essay is primarily concerned with Tanya Tagaq (b. 1975), a Canadian Inuk throat singer, performer, and composer, and her musical evolution in relation to environmental issues. Her primary output is popular vocal music, including two of her most prominent albums *Animism* (2014) and *Retribution* (2016), made with contributions by violinist Jesse Zubot and percussionist Jean Martin, among others. Tagaq's work is intentionally political, frequently characterized by the exploration of environmentalist messages in a sort of musical activism. In this study, I will examine two tracks from *Animism* and *Retribution*, "Fracking," and "Retribution." These two recordings will be used as representative examples to compare and contrast the two albums, through the lens of Tagaq's evolving musical style. The purpose of this essay is to explore how Tagaq's musical evolution reflects discussions on environmental politics, by analyzing her choices in terms of vocal experimentation, instrumental storytelling, as well as use of global influences. Hence, I will answer the research question "How does Tanya Tagaq's stylistic development reflect her musical depiction of environmental issues?"

Approach

To proceed, I choose to follow an indigenous research paradigm based on relationality, or connections between people, places, and concepts. An indigenous research methodology "must be a process that adheres to relational accountability," characterized by features such as respect and responsibility (Wilson 2019). Collaborative relational dialogues have been found to be crucial in the field of ethnomusicology in Aboriginal Australia (Mackinlay and Barney 2017). Therefore, it is necessary to identify myself as a non-Indigenous researcher and to identify my relationship and education with music as primarily from a Western context,

positioning myself in a web of research relationships. Although I do not have a direct relationship with Tagaq or her community, I will seek to include her voice as well as that of other Inuk people, as they describe their own music. Also, based on my training, I will use Western music theory to analyze her recordings.

Background

Tanya Tagaq

Tagaq was born in the Inuit community Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, and had some exposure to katajjaq (Stevance 2010). She also felt connection to the landscape from a young age, especially to the animals of the tundra. She only learned katajjaq while away in university, while missing her home (Nelles 2015). Tagaq's use of katajjaq demonstrates a deep connection to her home environment, yet Tagaq has also transformed the custom into her own musical style. In terms of environmental views, Tagaq believes that "what we're doing" in terms of environmental destruction of the planet is "cancerous and evil" (Welsh 2016). In addition, she criticizes the desecration of indigenous lands in her work, for example by the oil industry. In the album *Retribution*, Tagaq aims to go further by discussing "the rape of the land" within her music, and its connection to feminist and indigenous issues (Tagaq 2021). In this essay, I argue that through examples "Fracking" and "Retribution," Tagaq's musical style deepens and broadens while reflecting a more complex and assertive environmentalist framework.

Katajjaq

In her work, Tagaq employs a traditional Inuk vocal technique known as katajjaq, a type of throat singing. Katajjaq is usually a game between two women, who create a dialogue of

unaccompanied rhythmic sounds from their throats. Both women hold each other by the arms, amplifying their sounds within the mouth of the other. They produce low grunts, growls, and cries at a fast pace until one player makes an rhythmic error, in which case the game ends in laughter (Stevance 2010).

A variety of sounds are produced within katajjaq, created by inhalation and exhalation, that span between voiced pitch and unvoiced pitch based on the vibration of vocal chords (Charron 1978). They are characterized by a sharp and short nature, as well as lack of harmonics (Stevance 2010). These sounds form motifs, with short patterns of rhythm and intonation trading back and forth between the two women, usually in imitation. During the game, the women improvise the katajjaq structure, creating new musical material based somewhat on previous vocal elements (Nattiez 1983).

Contrary to anthropologist Saladin D'Anglure's proposal of katajjaq as unifunctional semi-language, Katajjaq can be described as multifunctional, both as an entertainment source and as an open structure for participants to explore words and sounds in their environment (Stevance 2010). According to Inuksuk Mackay and Tiffany Ayalik, members of the katajjaq duo PISIQ, "with traditional throat singing...you're just inspired by the ordinary sounds around you in a day. So, chores, animals, emotions, you know, whatever you hear happening around you"(Warner 2021).

Analysis

Vocal Technique

The music within *Retribution* and *Animism* deliberately uses vocal techniques that connect the listener to Tagaq's view of the environment. Tagaq uses vocals to become the physical embodiment of the earth in "Fracking" and "Retribution." This practice connects to the multifunctional nature of kattajaq and its environmental origins, with Tagaq transforming it into her own style to specifically deal with the Earth's personification.

Fracking

In "Fracking," Tagaq deals with the titular subject matter, a process by which fluid is injected at high pressure underground to allow for trapped oil and gas to be collected (Lallanilla 2018). The track opens with a burbling groan, soft and sustained, which rises in pitch (0:00-0:19). This is interrupted by a sharp and breathy gasp (0:19), returning to a high groan with slight quavering ornamentation. The pattern of groans separated by intentional breathing spaces (0:19, 0:38, 1:02) forms the works' two opening minutes, creating an unsettled ambience through a tense and trembling vocal line. This exposition allows Tagaq to draw the listener into a painful exploration of the Earth's reaction to fracking, replete with sounds of bubbling fluid. In this way, Tagaq is able to represent the Earth musically, embodying the sounds and experience of fracking.

The often downwards inflection of the sustained groans creates a flowing sense of sadness, similar to the flowing of tears, with the frail ornamentation seeming desperate and broken. The "sharp, sobbing inhalations" also add to the impression of crying (Boerchers 2019). The heavy application of reverb in the track also extends Tagaq's voice into more heightened expressions of suffering, amplifying her to more giant proportions as she represents an entity

as big as the earth. Tagaq's use of vocal technique allows her to represent emotion, effectively embodying the environmental trauma of the earth during oil drilling.

Eventually the groan, in a straining amplification, disintegrates into shorter outbursts of sound, ragged and laboured with high and indefinitely pitched overtones. (1:56-2:11). Low and thick growls follow (2:11-2:30), dissolving into wispy and unvoiced sounds (2:30-2:45), and finally whimpering cries (2:45-3:02). These harsher sounds add a feeling of anger, developing the emotional connotation of the work and further reflecting on the experience of the Earth. The wide intervals between vocal figures and increase in dynamics from piano towards fortissimo support the works' emotional arc. At 2:59 Tagaq reaches a vocal climax, reaching an frenzied yet soft whistle high above the tessitura of the rest of the piece and descends into a lower, almost multiphonic moan (3:02). The climactic contrast fittingly feels like a moment of wild insanity, driven by the pain and tension of the Earth being drilled into in the preceding three minutes. The vocal intensity lessens suddenly with a disorienting subito piano, and Tagaq continually repeating a sweet tone (3:16-4:00). Tagaq's style of throat singing allows for a range of expressive dynamics, pitches, and timbres, exhibited in "Fracking" as she journeys through the Earth's emotional anguish. A musical storyline is created through an array of sounds, representing protest against extractive industry based on their desecration of the environment (Galloway 2020).

"Fracking" makes use of Tagaq's nonhuman sound, due to her interpretation of katajjaq, from which she derives interest in "instinct and raw emotion" (Bernard 2007). Tagaq's usual lack of words or recognizable specific pitches within her style, and the organic way in which her vocal lines ebb and flow contribute to a raw and primal sound. According to her: "I will hear something and it becomes an idea or a feeling or a concept and it comes out of my mouth

almost involuntarily” (Kembrey 2018). This nonhuman connection has been a continual feature of Tagaq’s work as it seeks to bridge the divide between humans and nature (Boechers 2019). Tagaq clearly describes this rooted philosophy: “Humans have really made a big error in thinking we are above everything...it’s us who belong to the earth” (Tagaq to Ghomeshi 2014). This intention to connect to nature can be seen in Tagaq’s reflection on the Earth, using music as a vehicle to construct a narrative of pain, similar to the programmatic functionality of an orchestral tone poem.

“Fracking” is also characterised by an ambient sound, through free time signature and lack of harmonic base. Tagaq’s free style allows the audience to focus on the music’s emotional connotation, rather than structural or melodic features, creating a visceral musical storyline. In addition, her untethering from traditional rhythmic and motivic-based katajjaq structure allows her to explore different sounds in expressive ways over the course of the piece. However, although these stylistic choices are effective in allowing Tagaq freedom to explore a direct representation of the Earth, they are limited by a lack of rhythmic propulsion or structured development of musical material in the piece. Hence, a more passive and descriptive musical story is presented about the environment.

Retribution

In “Retribution,” the title track of Tagaq’s 2016 album, she departs from the style of “Fracking” to present the Earth as aggressive and wrathful. In her words, “So, I kind of started thinking...at some point [the Earth] is going to go, ‘Enough of you’ And what would she be saying if she could warn us”(Boerchers 2019).

Tagaq opens with a repeated high, upwards-inflected cry, reminiscent of a call to battle, immediately drawing the listener in and setting an unsettling and apprehensive tone (0:00-0:32). The next section is a heavily enunciated and frighteningly calm spoken word, set over a background rhythm of Tagaq's throat singing in a quarter eighth-eighth pattern (0:32-2:00). The spoken word relays an environmental message about the vengeance of the non-human world on wasteful humanity, a theme which is embodied by the belligerent music. In that way, the music represents impending environmental dystopia, caused by climate change. The tense and percussive nature of the accompanying throat singing emphasises the urgency of the words, reinforcing them rhythmically by aligning on stressed beats, and building momentum. Therefore, the momentum of rhythmic vocalisations further supports the presentation of environmental themes. In using words, Tagaq breaks her usual style with a more direct address to the audience, diversifying her approach to communication about the environment. The first two minutes provide a dark introduction to the main section of the work, six minutes of uninterrupted throat singing.

Continuing into the next section is an uncompromised rhythmic drive which characterizes Tagaq's idiosyncratic improvised vocal performance. Tagaq fits various sounds into a pulsating beat, including resonant cries (2:00-2:20), scratchy low huhs, and piercing buzzing (2:30-3:10), slowly expanding her repertoire to include bright yelps (3:20), and belted whoops (3:25-3:55). The beat continues with *l'istesso tempo* from 4/4 into 6/8 meter (3:58), creating jarring contrast and enhancing the strong and active nature of the track through a polyrhythmic groove. Despite differences in beat division, Tagaq still adheres her vocal lines to the same pulse, allowing her expressions of the Earth's rage to intensify further through the meter change. Hence, the section is characterized by a growth of tension due to Tagaq's varied and unstoppable vocal sounds.

The force of Tagaq's messages of environmental destruction is exacerbated by the use of echo effects that aggrandize and broaden Tagaq's vocals by repeating her voice at delayed time intervals. Electronic processing such as these effects on Tagaq's voice is more present in the mix in "Retribution," compared to the subtler reverb of "Fracking." Tagaq's voice devolves into growly call and response at the four minute mark, and she begins singing over a multitrack choral ensemble, consisting of the layering of her own voice (4:00-6:00). This choral figure is repeated on the beat, adding to the rhythmic backing and intensity of the piece. Both the echo effects and layering are new stylistic choices which grant a heightened power and depth to Tagaq's vision of the Earth, as her voice is expanded from an individual line to a broader role.

Frantic and strained high cries, bubbling and heady noises, high-pitched whistle tones, and entrances of the introductory war cry motive combine into varied and active texture (6:00-6:50). Finally, Tagaq introduces a final vocal build, culminating in a series of high-pitched, trembling screams (7:33-7:47). The final seconds of the song fade out in a panned echo of the introductory cry. Hence, Tagaq's vocal style is more diverse and complicated in *Retribution*, with a greater range of sounds. The song develops over a more substantial eight minutes, first using words, then exploring a wide field of pitch and timbre. Tagaq not only uses a variety of nontraditional throat singing through various noises, but also ties back to the repetitive motivic and rhythmic style of *katajjaq*. In fact, the growth towards a wider range of vocal experimentation is key for Tagaq's vocal style, as treating *katajjaq* with "flexibility and creativity" and aiming to explore acoustic potential are central to her artistic process (Stevance 2010). In addition, the rhythmic vocal nature and rapid articulation "give the track a sense of aggression and portray the Earth as active and assertive" (Boerchers

2019). The departure from a single voice (as in “Fracking”) to a unified overlay of Tagaq’s vocals also strengthens the work’s aggressive and impactful nature. The final build to sustained screams is a harrowing conclusion, and a much more extreme climax than that of “Fracking,” representing the power of the environmental consequences of climate change.

Thematically, while “Fracking” was a description of environmental pain, “Retribution” transforms that pain into a forceful and angry message. This is seen in the two songs’ differing emotional implications, exhibited by the ambient musical atmosphere of “Fracking” compared to the forward rhythmic propulsion within the vocals of “Retribution.” Normally, Tagaq follows a more free form, improvisatory approach (Boechers 2019), but in *Retribution*, in a recorded music context, she deliberately shifts in style to include structural organisation, with repeated vocal figures and motifs resurfacing (i.e. the war cry, the rhythmic accompaniment *katajjaq*, and the choral track layering). This creates cohesion within the piece and burgeoning power from which Tagaq is able not just to describe the Earth, but to interpret the Earth’s anger in an active manner.

“Retribution” also has deeper thematic connections, in the spoken text referencing the Inuit death and birth cycles and defining the Earth’s retribution as a circular path returning to environmental balance. In the music, this can be seen by the concluding resurfacing of the introductory “battle cry.” In addition, Tagaq presents an ecofeminist portrayal of the Earth as an active and powerful woman, as outlined by the spoken word (“Our mother grows angry”) and the intensely rhythmic music (Boechers 2019), an additional political statement. *Retribution* is a vision of environmental degradation as an impending and wrathful apocalypse, with Tagaq’s non-human *katajjaq* style reaching new heights of complexity in experimentation and aggression, similar to the extended explorations she pursues throughout

the whole album. Vocal stylistic development clearly takes place between the two albums, along with Tagaq's thematically deepening depiction of the Earth and its environment.

Use of Instrumentation

Instrumentation, as part of Tagaq's style, supports and extends Tagaq's vocal development through *Animism* and *Retribution*, and in doing so also supports the distribution of environmental message. Again taking the examples of "Fracking" and "Retribution," unique electronic and acoustic sounds are created that respond to and build on Tagaq's vocals.

Electronics

In terms of electronic sounds, "Fracking" features a synthetic bass that enters at about 00:30 and underpins the uneasy, atmospheric music for the rest of the track. In the beginning, the bass is an ominous, dark sound that contextualizes the pain of the vocals. In the middle, the bass is layered with distorted noise, adding to the dynamic climax of the work and mirroring the vocal progression. In the final section, the bass is panned between sides, adding to disorientation and discomfort for the listener (Boerchers 2019); although other researchers claim the final section as more of a calm, healing moment (Galloway 2020), the unsteady bass leaves an uncomfortable aftertaste regardless. The subtle role of the bass to unsettle creates a troubled background for the Earth's distress, fitting in with Tagaq's emotional use of style in "Fracking."

"Retribution," on the other hand, similar to the vocals, features a more pointed and varied ensemble of electronic sounds. For example, in the beginning, high rings and synth arpeggios anticipate Tagaq's later rhythm, and later there are dissonant and blaring glissandos (6:20-6:39) and a final low bass entrance underpinning Tagaq's screams (7:40-7:47).

Electronics function to build tension, such as the arpeggios, and to add to the chaos and violent sound of Earth's personification through assertive dissonance. Electronics are more specific and distinctive as they support Tagaq's environmental storytelling.

Acoustic

On the acoustic level, "Fracking" contains the violinist Jesse Zubot's layered work, beginning with thin, high notes that echo Tagaq's moans (1:00). The dissonant notes begin moving in stepwise motion (1:43) and resolving downward by step against each other in a manner that almost evokes a contrapuntal suspension (1:49). Although specific notes resolve against each other, dissonance is maintained between the entire high cluster of tones, creating an uneasy mood and supporting the painful environmental experience conveyed through the vocals. Retaining this tension, the sound begins to rise in frequency, gaining energy from the use of rapid tremolos. At 3:15, mirroring the shift of vocal mood, there is a sudden drop in dynamics, and the violin plays vapid scratches and harmonics, along with *sul tasto* high lines.

The use of violin is an effective choice in terms of instrumentation, because due to a range of extended techniques and articulation it can imitate the scratches and nuanced sounds of Tagaq, through the storyline of the track. In addition, the high and strange sounds it produces connect to the nonhuman feel and discomfort of the work, providing a stark backdrop to environmental pain. On the other hand, the violin does not directly support and connect rhythmically to Tagaq's vocals, instead existing on a parallel plane. It adds to the ambient atmosphere and emotional content of the piece, creating a backdrop that follows Tagaq's narrative style.

While the violin in “Fracking” plays more into background sound, the instrumental role in “Retribution” is more central, with a full band playing and improvising with Tagaq. The drumbeat is constant and groovy, driving and building off of the rhythm that Tagaq provides. It continually intensifies, through the meter change at 3:58, followed by a slow addition of cymbals, crashes and dynamic level for the remainder of the song. The violin plays percussive and folksy strokes, becoming more dissonant and sharply articulated by the end (i.e. repeated m9s at 5:50-5:55 and M7s at 7:28-7:32). Similar to “Fracking,” instruments play into the emotional and dynamic arc of the track. However, “Retribution”’s sound is active, with its groove, dissonance, and sharp *marcato* articulation, and calls the audience to listen in, clearly confronting them with visions of environmental wrath. Reviews describe the extreme texture as “blizzardy chaos” and “murderous fury” (Weingarten 2016). Rather than separate background and vocal lines, the band organically riffs off each other, creating a powerful and bombastic unity. The harmonic base of the instrumentals also ties them together in a way not seen in “Fracking;” the instruments follow Western notes, leading to the repetition of common tones between instruments. These harmonic connections tie the instruments together and add to their shared intensity, although there is still no definite tonality. Instrumental style evolves into a more unified and powerful element, propelled by rhythmic force.

The development of the electronic and acoustic style into a more forward force reflects and supports the thematic and vocal shift in Tagaq’s interpretation of the environment. The textural difference in terms of accompaniment evolves greatly, with “Fracking” consisting of thin texture around ambient vocals, while “Retribution” exhibits more complex and broad texture in order to increase the sheer power of the work. “Fracking” and “Retribution” are exemplary of the entire albums in this respect, as they show the shift to more active and

diverse sounds, creating heightened environmental messages such as the anticipation of environmental doom.

Global Influences

The third central element of Tagaq's style that changes between the two albums is the musical influences and genres she presents, and how they connect to global and place-based music.

In "Retribution," Tagaq explores a rock feel with the use of drums and bass guitar, standard instruments of the genre, with idiomatic blaring chords (i.e. 7:30) and energetic rhythm. In addition its distorted electronics also evoke electronica. In contrast, "Fracking" was less recognizably connected to a popular music genre, more being based on ambient and contemporary sounds. "Fracking" was orchestrated for the purpose of highlighting the musical representation of the drilling process. On the other hand, "Retribution" more readily connects to diverse contemporary genres, with Tagaq maintaining her own signature style of Inuit throat singing, for the purpose of conveying the broader topic of the Earth's retribution.

Music often reflects the place and environment around it. Place can be looked at as a complex ensemble "of material objects, people, and systems of social relationships" (Hudson 2001). Music, a vital cultural artefact, is deeply linked to place (Hudson 2006). Music's relationship to place has also been affected by increasing globalisation, or the increase in global interconnectedness and integration. In a globalized world, music can be marketed to international audiences and can connect to both the local and the global.

Tagaq's use of influences can be described as transcultural (Stevance 2017), with her style blending customs of different spaces. Her use of katajjaq is place-based, as katajjaq functions

as a reflection of its environment and as a specific tradition tied to Inuit Canada. She also includes a globalised mixture of different genres within her music, drawing on rock and electronic music, and creating a unique sound through cultural and technological interchange. The duality between global and place-based music mirrors the similar dichotomy within environmental themes, such as the globalized nature of climate change versus specific issues of indigenous connection to the land and severe ice melt in Inuit Canada (Willox et. al 2012). In incorporating transculturalism within her musical style, Tagaq strengthens and enhances musical relationships to complex environmental themes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Tanya Tagaq's style develops significantly between the albums of *Animism* and *Retribution* in the areas of increasingly structured and experimental vocal technique, active instrumentation, and globalised contemporary influences, as seen in the tracks "Fracking" and "Retribution." This is parallel to a deepening reflection on the environment including stronger and more urgent messages as well as transcultural implications. Due to length, my musical analysis has been limited to only two pieces that represent much broader albums, with only a brief discussion of the interconnected sociopolitical issues and environmental themes within Tagaq's work. Despite these limitations, the evolution of Tagaq's style is still apparent, as well as its strong connection to the depiction of environmental issues. Tagaq's style can be described by its use of katajjaq to produce flexible, raw, and emotional sounds that connect often to global and environmental material. In *Animism*, exemplified by the track "Fracking," Tagaq effectively presents environmental themes such as the degradation of the earth through descriptive and ambient vocal and instrumental material, with a descriptive focus. In *Retribution*, represented by the title track, Tagaq more clearly and aggressively

pushes environmental messages in an urgent interpretation of the Earth's wrath, connecting directly with diverse sounds, genres, and political themes in a deliberately powerful piece. Tagaq expands her style to include new elements, yet maintains an even more assertive musical focus, a clear example of how music can contribute to an intensified environmental activism.

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