

Berklee College of Music

Anthology of Non-Male Stories Through Electronic Music

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Technology, and Innovation

Supervisor: Elysha Zaide

By Alai Ormazabal

Valencia Campus, Spain

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Abstract

This creative project aims to create an album that explores the collective experience of being a non-male person through sonic landscapes and gathered testimonies. The idea comes from the desire to bring up situations involving microaggressions and toxic masculinity that every non-male lives. For this, the project wants to translate the feelings those situations create into sonic landscapes for the listener to enter the experience together with some reflections in testimonies as interludes. This idea is carried out by trying to find the middle ground between the sound design of a scene and a musical piece that would be delivered in the form of an LP. The musical elements in this project are produced electronically although not tied to a specific genre as the sounds are at the service of creating a scene portraying specific feelings.

Keywords: creative project, recording, composition, electronic production, LP, MIDI, storytelling, interviews.

1. Introduction

The aim of this project is to portray the vision of a young woman in a process of deconstruction of patriarchal and misogynistic values imposed by society and a traditional upbringing. This deconstruction, in part, was thanks to reading feminist essays like “*Quítame la Culpa*”¹ by Cristina Lizarraga filled with cards, anecdotes and testimonies of non-males suffering toxic masculinity, misogyny, toxic power dynamics with their partners or mental abuse. This type of readings lead the artist working on this project to reflect on the topic and come to the following conclusion: the more stories, everyday-life microaggression testimonies, and subtle abuses that we learn about, the sooner we see those red flags, the better we protect ourselves and the more informed we are to change or point out those habits and behaviors.

Thus, the objective is to contribute to society with more testimonies and put out one more compilation of personal experiences lived by the artist and closest non-male friends and family, but this time, sonically. This will be done creating sonic landscapes portraying situations in which many non-males have experienced a very varied range of experiences related to aggressions or misogyny, either from a suffering, processing or empowering point of view. Both the musical elements and the lyrics will suggest certain situations to create an immersive experience, with the objective of making other non-males and even males that haven't lived those experiences sympathize with those living them.

The relevance for this comes from the conclusion stated before: the more spaces we create for non-males to talk about their experiences, the more stories we will hear and, thus, the sooner and better we'll react to misogynistic and abusive comments, behaviors or even mindsets.

¹ Cristina Lizarraga. *Quítame la culpa*. Bilbao: Pikara online magazine, 2020.

2. Review of the State of the Art

Thinking of the album as a story, this project will create a cycle that could serve as a way of ordering all those feelings it will project. As Aristotle stated in his work of dramatic theory “Poetics”², every story has a beginning, a plot and an outcome. So, following the structure of a conventional story, this album will have a 3 stage process that will serve as a timeline. Those stages equivalent to beginning, plot and outcome are “trauma”, “vent” and “empower”. In the first stage or “trauma”, this emotional landscape will be portrayed from a suffering point of view. In the case of the second stage or “vent”, the focus will be in a processing mindset, portraying the moments in which the victims of these aggressions take time to render what has happened and confront the bad feelings. And lastly, in the third stage or “empower”, the overcoming of that trauma is portrayed, situations in which non-males feel fierce and combative against the patriarchal structures that make them suffer are portrayed. This storytelling structure for the album was inspired by Rosalia’s album “El Mal Querer”³ based on a medieval novel and making each song a chapter of the book.

Regarding the “trauma” stage, this part of the album will address situations in which non-males have felt fear, trauma or emotional block. This could entail from the fear of coming home alone to a moment when someone touches them in an invasive way at a party. This will be achieved creating aggressive and complex feelings in this part of the album through genres like alternative pop, experimental electronic sounds and IDM. For this, the musical references could be Arca’s industrial experimental sounds in songs like “Mequetrefe”⁴, FKA Twigs’ lyrical and dramatic vocal

² Aristotle. *Poetics*. 335 B.C.

³ Rosalia. *El Mal Querer*. Rosalia Vila, El Guincho, Antón Alvarez, Antonio Gallardo Molina, Nicolás Sanchez Ortega, Ferrán Echegaray, Rossy de Palma, Luis Troquel, Leticia Sala Bufill, Justin Timberlake, Timothy Mosley, Scott Storch. 2018. Sony Music. CD and Digital Platforms.

⁴ Arca. *Mequetrefe*. Arca. 2020. XL Recordings Ltd. CD and Digital Platforms.

melodies in songs like “Sad Day”⁵ or Grimes’ combination of punk sounds with heavy electronic sounds in songs like “Flesh Without Blood”⁶.

On the other hand, in the “vent” stage, songs that express the release of all that tension and trauma as well as the confrontation of very painful feelings will be created. The way to achieve that would be with dance music with chords progression that transmit a very nostalgic feeling. The best references for this would be electronic-pop sounds like Lorde’s most ethereal vocals and harmonies in songs like “Ribs”⁷, Robyn’s nostalgic lyricism in songs like “Dancing on my Own”⁸ and Lykke Li’s nostalgic synth sounds in songs like “I Follow Rivers”⁹.

And for the “empower” stage, as the name explains, the end of the album will have a feeling of strength as a healing process to all the negative feelings created by those situations mentioned in the beginning of the album. In this part feelings like strength or fierceness will be transmitted. For this, energetic dance and house sounds would be the method of bringing those feelings to the listener. Azealia Banks’ punchy house rhythms and basses in songs like “Anna Wintour”¹⁰ would be a reference as well as Crystal Waters’ dance sounds in songs like “Gypsy Woman”¹¹, Jessie Ware’s

⁵ FKA Twigs. *Sad Day*. FKA Twigs, Lewis Roberts, Benny Blanco, Magnus Hoiberg, Nicolas Jaar, Skrillex, Noah Goldstein. 2019. Young Turks. CD and Digital Platforms.

⁶ Grimes. *Flesh and Blood*. Claire Boucher. 2015. 4AD. CD and Digital Platforms.

⁷ Lorde. *Ribs*. Ella Yelich-O’Connor, Joel Little. 2013. UMG. CD and Digital.

⁸ Robyn. *Dancing on My Own*. Robyn, Patrick Berger. 2010. Konichiwa. CD and Digital.

⁹ Lykke Li. *I Follow Rivers*. Lykke Li, Björn Yttling, Rick Nowels. 2011. LL Recordings, EMI, Atlantic. CD and Digital.

¹⁰ Azealia Banks. *Anna Wintour*. Azealia Banks, Eugenio Sanchez, Dorian Strickland, Kevin James, Shug. 2018. eOne, Chaos & Glory. CD and Digital.

¹¹ Crystal Waters. *Gypsy Woman*. Neal Conway, Crystal Waters, Nathaniel S. Hardy Jr. 1991. Mercury. CD.

melodies in songs like “Spotlight”¹² or Peggy Gou’s energetic house percussion in songs like “Han Jan”¹³.

Influences



Figure 1. Genre influence map.

¹² Jessie Ware. *Spotlight*. Jessie Ware, James Ford, Danny Parker, Shungudzo Kuyimba. 2020. Virgin EMI. CD and Digital Platforms.

¹³ Peggy Gou. *Han Jan*. Peggy Gou. 2018. Ninja Tune. CD and Digital Platforms.

3. Description

As said before, this project's aim is to tell a story through six songs and four interludes containing testimonies. The full length of the project is produced electronically and the reason for this is to create sonic landscapes using electronic sound design as the tool to serve this purpose. But even doing it all electronically, many different techniques such as sampling, the use of foley, or using synths like Serum, Vital or Gladiator have been used.

So with the idea of combining a powerful narrative with sonic landscapes created through sound design, the whole concept was developed in the following way:

For the album to be a story, with its beginning, plot and end, a narrative order was created. This narrative order starts from a traumatic experience, going through the emotional blockage and release to end up with a feeling of empowerment. And the sound design of each song serves the feelings the author wanted to portray for each part of the process. The testimonies were also ordered in a way for them to follow the storytelling basis of the project.

The album starts with "Prelude: Sola", that contains a conversation over fears and uncomfortable situations a non-male experiences when going out. For expressing that, the last song, which is a house/clubbing song, is played in the background, filtered to situate the conversation outside the club.

This is followed by a song that portrays the fear of going back home alone at night. The song is called "Back Home" and it contains a wide variety of foley used for portraying the streets at night and many dissonant synth sounds to create unease and a scary atmosphere.

After that goes "Prelude I: Ten Cuidado", a reflection on the reasons why the fear exists when going back home and how helpless non-males are even if they take care of themselves.

Then it moves on to “Stasis”, a song that reflects emotional blockage and letting out the tears of those feelings moving on to “Inude”. “Stasis” makes use of foley to portray dripping tears and huge choirs as an illusion of the voices inside a head easing the fear. This is followed by “Inude”, a weird and dissonant song that culminates with a celestial pad and a choir that concludes with a key phrase: “silence doesn’t count if it’s breaking you inside”.

After this, the next interlude, “Interlude II: Veneno” explains the necessity of finding all the bad feelings and trauma caused by external people and getting them out of your system in order to move on.

That is why the following song, “Bad Dream” mixes airy synths and nostalgic chords with very powerful techno inspired rhythms to portray the venting process.

After the venting process comes the empowerment, and it is portrayed in a testimony that talks about the same issues as the prelude and it is called “Interlude III: Fantasía”. It talks about being a non-male and going out to parties, but this time, the situation is analyzed from a less vulnerable position, expressing annoyance rather than fear.

That is why the last song, “En El Club”, concludes the journey with fun sounds and house music rhythms with lyrics that talk about going out, dancing and not wanting to be bothered.

4. Innovative Aspects

It is true that the topic of abuses, micro aggressions and misogyny have been treated by feminists in many artistic forms and disciplines. And the elements of this project separately (interviews, electronic music, storytelling) are not innovative on their own. But the combination of such a powerful message and a very varied delivery, through testimonies that give it a documentary-like feeling and realness, a big combination of musical genres as an inspiration and the creation of sonic landscapes, with a coherent storytelling that gives the album a narrative order makes it a very interesting and compelling project. Also, innovative audio and visual technologies were incorporated throughout the project, using virtual synths for the sound design, audio reactive visuals with programming or a variation of plugins on foley and vocals.

5. New Skills Acquired

The skills acquired in the experience at Berklee have definitely been very notable. The author had a very clear concept in terms of content and storytelling but the translation of all of it into music was the complicated part. This is where Berklee played a huge role.

Before coming to Berklee, the author's producing process consisted mainly of sampling. Not knowing how to make sounds from scratch or mould sounds to the author's liking created the feeling of hitting a wall. The author also tried mixing songs before but didn't have enough knowledge and practice to do it in a successful way.

So the author's objective during this project was to acquire all of these skills and learning about sound design, creating sonic landscapes and also taking the challenge of mixing the entire project alone. All of that took the author's electronic music production skills to a whole other level.

6. Challenges, both expected & unanticipated

Regarding the challenges faced on this project, there are two main types: narrative challenges and technical challenges.

Regarding the narrative challenges, the most complex thing for it to work was definitely combining all the elements in a narrative way that made sense and felt organic. The interviews were done months before starting the project with the idea of creating an artistic work around the topic but with no specific direction. And finding a way in which to order all that material with the opinions and experiences the author wanted to express and the many possible ideas was the biggest challenge in the beginning. Some songs were even made without having the whole storyline built. But once an organic narrative order was set, it all flowed really well.

As for the technical challenges, mixing was definitely the biggest one. Some of the projects for the songs ended up being very large projects with around ninety tracks as a result of working on them for months and with the author not being a skilled mixer, it was a very big challenge. But a challenge faced with help from teachers and from which a lot of learning has been done.

7. Future Ramifications

Regarding the following steps of the project, there is a video translation of the work. A seven minute version of the instrumental of the album was created, to support all the testimonies included in the interludes on top of it. This short audio version of the album is the spine for a short film created by the author, Alai Ormazabal, and cinematographer Pablo Reverter. The whole concept for the video was created by both of them, directed by both of them and filmed in Barcelona de 15th and 16th of may 2021.

The whole team for the shooting was composed by the following list of people:

- **Directors:** Alai Ormazabal and Pablo Reverter.
- **DOP:** Pablo Reverter
- **Producer:** Alai Ormazabal
- **Camera operators:** Omar Admirable, Mikhail L. Kuznetsov and Miguel Fernandez
- **Lighting:** Manel Ruiz
- **Production Design:** Lucía Vazquez and Paula Haro
- **Editing:** Mikhail L. Kuznetsov
- **Models:** Jihane Benassar, Nami, Álex Royo, Nina Emocional, Ami, Jey Martin and Claudia Jara.

The editing for the short film will be concluded at the same time as of the mastering of the music in order to be released in the same campaign.

8. Conclusions

The result of the project is a portrayal of the idea from which it was originated: to create a sonic compilation of non-male stories and experiences to contribute to society with more voices raised talking about the matters of micro aggressions, abuse, psychological manipulation and toxic masculinity. The aim is to create more spaces in the world to expose these experiences and stories safe and openly and this project achieves it sonically.

Appendix

Table 1. Timeline

Task / Week Beginning	01.04	01.11	01.18	01.25	02.01	02.08	02.15	02.22	03.01	03.08	03.15	03.22	03.29	04.05	04.12	04.19	04.26	05.03	05.10	05.17	05.24	05.31	06.07	06.14	06.21	06.28	
Writing and composition	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow																							
Producing					Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange	Orange													
Vocal recording (overdubs)														Green	Green	Green											
Mixing																		Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	Blue	
Mastering																										Pink	

Table 2. Budget

ITEM	PROPOSED	REAL
MATERIALS (disposables)		
Hard Drives	100 €	30 €
EQUIPMENT		
HARDWARE		
MICS (rental) 10 days	335 €	0 €
INTERPHASE (purchase)	700 €	0 €
COMPUTER (purchase)	2000 €	0 €
SOFTWARE		
ABLETON	300 €	0 €
PERSONNEL		
RECORDING ENGINEER	1500 €	0 €
MIX ENGINEER	1000 €	0 €
MASTERING ENGINEER	1000 €	0 €

STUDIO		
BERKLEE	3000 €	0 €
HOME	150 €	0 €
CATERING		
MEALS	300 €	300 €
OVERHEAD		
RENT	400 €	400 €
POWER	50 €	50 €
WATER	20 €	20 €
GAS	30 €	30 €
INTERNET	40 €	40 €
PHONE	30 €	30 €
FEES		
FEE	600 €	0 €
TOTALS	11.555 €	900 €

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