

Listening to Gender: *A Response to Judith Halberstam*

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THE AURAL DIMENSIONS OF GENDER AND sexuality—voice and music—have haunted the margins of theory but have seldom factored as centrally as the visual. “Scopophilia”—the privileging of sight—has become a mainstay in theory, tied to physical morphology, namely, the presence or absence of the penis. This primary visual division of bodies into the “haves” and the “have-nots,” around which gender roles have been formed, has relegated the aural component of gender as something akin to a secondary sex characteristic.

Judith Butler has made some tantalizing references to sound and music. In *Bodies That Matter* she writes that “the process of signification is always material; signs work *by appearing* (visibly, aurally).”¹ “Aurally” seems thrown

in here as a gesture toward spoken language, but what she has most in mind (“signification is always material; signs work *by appearing*”) is clearly visual display. Then there is Butler’s clever invocation of Aretha Franklin and her recording of “Natural Woman” in the famous essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination”:

Well, consider the way in which heterosexuality naturalizes itself through setting up certain illusions of continuity between sex, gender, and desire. When Aretha Franklin sings, “you make me feel like a natural woman,” she seems at first to suggest that some natural potential of her biological sex is actualized by her participation in the cultural position of “woman” as object of heterosexual recognition. . . . Although Aretha appears to be all too glad to have her naturalness confirmed, she also seems fully and paradoxically mindful that that con-

1. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 68, emphasis in the original.

firmation is never guaranteed, that the effect of naturalness is only achieved as a consequence of that moment of heterosexual recognition. After all, Aretha sings, you make me feel *like* a natural woman, suggesting that this is a kind of metaphorical substitution, an act of imposture, a kind of sublime and momentary participation in an ontological illusion produced by the mundane operation of heterosexual drag.²

Here the pop song inadvertently articulates Butler's theory; it is theory *au naturel*, so to speak, a song that stumbles upon what Butler believes is a "truth" about the "untruth" of gender. Butler does not ask us to hear any meaning in the register or timbre of Aretha's voice or to think about the performance of the words or the interaction of Franklin with the female back-up vocalists. We are only meant to listen through Franklin's voice (as if transparent) to the message that Butler elaborates; that message is essentially to retrain ourselves to recognize a "natural woman" as a type of drag queen.

By contrast to Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam is one queer theorist working outside musicology who has taken music and voice seriously. In her book *Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* she discusses how queer subcultural music can sometimes function as an archive, bridging generations and blurring the typical polarity between academic and lay historians. Halberstam notes that this engagement of the lesbian feminist past by present-day "riot dykes" can occur in a variety of ways: through lyrical references that name-check key writers or theorists, through programming at concerts that juxtaposes older and newer acts, and through cover songs that pay tribute to rather than parody a classic number from the women's music back catalog.³ Halberstam argues that music

can create "queer genealogies" as well as alternative temporalities. One such queer temporality halts the march of time to heteronormative adulthood and family, lingering instead in adolescence, a time of social rebellion and experimentation. Another queer temporality accesses and reinvests in the past, forcing the present moment into a complex relationship "between the 'now' of performance and the 'then' of historical time."⁴ For this Halberstam has drawn on the concept of "temporal drag" advanced by Elizabeth Freeman, whose work offers a sly critique of the absence of history in Butler's theory. "Temporal drag" suggests that in some instances of gender performance we can point to "originals" that are indeed copied insofar as past identities and sensibilities are consciously revived. To say that the principal effect of a drag queen impersonating Marilyn Monroe is to call into question the integrity of Marilyn Monroe as the original not only diminishes the accomplishments of both actors but also denies the subversive and productive potential of such a performance in terms of time itself; that is, how "queer performance" exceeds time.

Halberstam's "Keeping Time with Lesbians on Ecstasy" expands her earlier contemplation of music and its queer subcultural work. Here she engages the cover song as an instance of "temporal drag" and a "queer act" and goes further to consider the ways queer musicians have used cover songs and what I call "cover voices" to create queer community that itself exceeds time.

The cover song, as Halberstam notes, is both a mundane and a queer aspect of popular music. Just as Butler understood everyday performances of gender as mundane drag (thus queering those everyday performances), we might, as I think Halberstam suggests, consider the act of covering a song as another type of queer mundanity, a drag of voice and melody and harmony and instrumental parts that forms an important part of most popular musicians' early years of learning and performing. But the cover song as

2. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 317.

3. Judith Halberstam, *Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 180.

4. Halberstam, *Queer Time and Place*, 180.

a commercial product has a history; the cover songs (as opposed to "interpretations") emerged with the rise of mass-marketed recordings, when the temporal relationship between an "original" and a "copy" became indisputable and fraught. Back when the identity of a song had greater significance than that of the performer, record companies would release their own version of a current popular song in order to compete head to head in sales. Later, in the early years of rock 'n' roll, songs written and recorded first by African American musicians such as Joe Turner, Little Richard, and Ray Charles were rerecorded by white artists such as Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, and Pat Boone who bleached out the threatening blackness from the vocals and lyrics while appropriating the rhythmic vigor, melodic inventiveness, and market share. Although we may wish to trouble the concepts of "original" and "copy" on theoretical grounds, the history of the cover song teaches us that we ought not overlook the potential material consequences of such a temporal relation, especially when a socioeconomic power imbalance attaches to those positions.

Of course, Melissa Etheridge, k. d. lang, and the Indigo Girls are not hurting financially from the appropriation of their songs by Lesbians on Ecstasy, and therein lies a key to the queer work of the band's covers—the musical critique of the lesbian "mainstream." It is precisely the juxtaposition of the particular temporalities as well as the socioeconomic and sentimental representations of the "original" and the "copy" that animates Halberstam's readings of the cover songs by Lesbians on Ecstasy. We can fully appreciate LOE's songs only if we have some recall or understanding of the situation of the original recording and the ways in which the cover plays on that knowledge.

Given the mundane nature of the cover song, Halberstam asks the good question, "So what would make the cover queer, different, or alternative?" Rather than highlighting the oft-cited queer strategies of camp, irony, and parody (performative cultural modes historically associated with urban gay men), Halberstam wants

to understand LOE's songs as sincere at their core; indeed, she argues that the band "situates 'sincerity' at the heart of a lesbian aesthetic and rejects the association of all things queer with irony, camp, critical distance, and innovation." While I can appreciate her desire to stir up institutionalized conceptions of queer culture and to articulate a distinct lesbian aesthetic, in my opinion LOE is hilariously parodic and devastatingly ironic. Take the band's name, for example: Ecstasy is a club drug well known for artificially producing feelings of sociability, intimacy, sincerity, connectedness, and community. Lesbians are already stereotyped (or self-stereotyped) as earnest and sincere, as community oriented, and, being women identified, as connected to nature. Indeed, LOE's liner notes parody the language of those classic 1970s claims about lesbian identity:

The spirit of music, much like the spirit of sisterhood, is one of sharing and collaboration. LOE embody this spirit, bringing dance music and lesbian-ness into a single nurturing womb. Stealing liberally from the lesbo back catalogue, they reference and reconstruct the classics, so that they are ever-changing—like the cycles of the moon.

"Lesbians" on "Ecstasy" is thus a redundancy of sorts; but Ecstasy severs sincerity and community from identity, from nature, and, more importantly, from agency. LOE's objectives are clearly stated in the liner notes: "lesbian culture and the techno boys club rubbing up against each other like your neighborhood co-ed softball league." The musical concept of LOE is true to the drug: to impose a community on members who would not otherwise mingle.

Throwing together two or more divergent musical styles can create clever readings and altered meanings. Marilyn Manson famously transformed the Eurythmics' spare synthpop hit "Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)" into a creepy gothic metal ballad about sadomasochism. As Halberstam notes, LOE reworks k. d. lang's "Constant Craving" into an industrial

rave number that transforms the melodramatic torch song into a critique of consumer culture. LOE's song is a pastiche of several style references: the respelling as "Kündstant Krøving" plays on the fad in naming heavy metal bands with gratuitous umlauts (Mötely Crüe) and Germanic spellings (Kronos, Krypt Keeper, Katharsis) and may also refer to the "k" of k. d. lang. This nod to heavy metal is musically signified by a distorted electric guitar riff, a sonic emblem of rock machismo that plays off a pulsing drum machine beat and a syncopated keyboard riff that are vintage 1990 techno—the ubiquitous sound of gay dance clubs. The source song by k. d. lang was released in 1992 during a time of unprecedented lesbian visibility in the music industry. The pileup of "unlikely bedfellows" of past pop music, to my ear, creates the "thickly layered irony" described by band member Bernie Bankrupt. But the many music styles brought together here might best be heard in this context not as historical artifacts but rather as used goods—music and sentiment once heavily consumed but ultimately dated and dispensable. In "Kündstant Krøving" k. d. lang becomes a product that once shaped a niche market and colluded in the creation of fetishistic desires. At the end of the song the LOE vocalist recites a list of things that she craves:

I need a new pair of shoes
gimme gimme gimme gimme
everything brand new
I need a new haircut
a new pair of jeans

The irony is that the language of emotional yearning (sold to lesbians in musical form since 1970s women's music) is the same for crass materialism (sold to gay men in musical form since 1970s disco). Here sincerity and consumerism become indistinguishable.

In her assessment of sincerity and the queerness of cover songs Halberstam focuses on the transformation of the voice, offering readings that resist or counter expected reception. The warm crooning vocals of k. d. lang—traditionally

a marker of intimacy—become for Halberstam a slick betrayal of the potential political edge of lang's cover versions and even her own songs, while the electronically distorted and strident vocal of LOE's "Kündstant Krøving"—a sound that itself resists our identification—becomes the more sincere expression of "lesbo" culture. But what is this "lesbo" culture? My guess is the "forever young" urban queer/dyke-identified subculture, not the middle-aged, middle-class, small-town or rural lesbian-identified subculture. These other lesbians might hear more than simply "dyke drama" in k. d. lang's stylish take on the torch song or her smoking-themed album of cover songs cleverly titled *Drag* or, indeed, her many country-and-western songs. These lesbians might hear irony and parody, triumph, romance or simply take a pure pleasure in the (lesbian) voice.

Can any vocal performance lay claim to "sincerity"? The voice itself is most often used and received as a vehicle for language, which, as Butler and many others have argued, thoroughly indoctrinates us into ideologies of gender, race, and class. I noted at the beginning of this essay that the aural component of gender operates as a secondary sex characteristic in theory. In reality, the voice becomes more primary in the determination of gender. With the increasing number of individuals living as transsexual, the secondary sex characteristics—the absence or presence of breasts or facial hair, soft or sculpted muscles, heavier or lighter brows and jaw lines—have become central. Gender has been degenerated. This is also the effect of drag, as Butler's work has shown. Although genitals may pose less of a problem for transsexual individuals hoping to pass as one normative gender or the other, retraining *the voice*, in register, timbre, and subtle gender-coded mannerisms, is by many accounts one of the most difficult hurdles to overcome, especially for MTF transsexuals (testosterone taken by FTM transsexuals physically changes the vocal chords, producing a lower-pitched voice, although training in speech mannerisms is still recommended). Most MTFs spend a year or two in voice therapy. Even then,

as one therapist noted, the goal is not a feminine voice but "an ambiguous voice that, when combined with walk, hair, and wardrobe, creates a total female package."⁵

Thus, the speaking voice—especially the female voice—resists being covered. The words she says may not be her own, they may be culturally predetermined and rehearsed, but the sound of those words bears an indelible stamp. The singing voice, however, seems to open the doors of gender with the opening of the throat. From thinking about the transformation of the lesbian voice in LOE's cover of k. d. lang, Halberstam next considers the falsetto voice of Sylvester, which she argues "deliberately marks him as having and indeed cultivating the voice of woman." Thus, Sylvester's falsetto is, for Halberstam, fundamentally a cover of the female voice, which creates a connection to women and, like the cover songs of LOE, establishes queer communities, friendships, and genealogies. Other falsettists—Prince, Maxwell—may join this queer community when they cover women's songs.

Halberstam focuses on the particular quality of Sylvester's falsetto, but, rather than debate its "natural" or "unnatural" aspects, I want to ask another, more basic set of questions: Must the singing voice play by the same rules as the speaking voice?⁶ Must it bear the indelible mark of a binary gender system? Could the singing

voice perhaps offer an escape from that system? I recently heard a performance by the Orlando Consort that interspersed readings with sung Renaissance polyphony. The singing voice of the countertenor, Robert Harre-Jones, hovered in a range well above the comfort level of my own singing voice, yet his voice in recitation was below that of the baritone of the group. After Harre-Jones's first recitation I overheard one audience member remark, "I was wondering what he would sound like. His voice is lower than you'd think." Well, the truth is that he has (at least) two voices, and both—or neither—can be indisputably called "male." The "femininity" of the singing voice calls into question the "masculinity" of the speaking voice, and in turn the "masculinity" of the speaking voice calls into question the "femininity" of the singing voice. Similarly, during his live performances Sylvester would momentarily sing in a deep rich baritone and then quip in a high tenor speaking voice, "You see, I can be butch too, when I want to be." Sylvester used his singing voice, then, to confound the gender binary from either pole, and he did so in a way more akin to the function of drag as theorized by Butler than transsexual identification; that is, his vocal breaks sound the moments when gender itself breaks down, when expectations of an alignment between voice and gender are thwarted, and we begin to wonder whether the categories "male" and "female" can even be applied.⁷

I want to return to Halberstam's larger point about cover songs and cover voices as a mode of sincere performance that creates queer identifications and community across historical moments. Popular music aesthetics relies on an identification of the voice of the singer with the "voice" of the song; that is, we assume or willfully believe

5. See the transcript of the National Public Radio broadcast "Profile: Voice Therapy Designed to Make Transgender People Sound More Feminine," *All Things Considered* (broadcast April 13, 2001), 3. To get an idea of the difficulty and the process, see also the web pages <http://www.translife.net/voice.html>, accessed February 14, 2007, and the online article "Feminine Voice Techniques," *Second Edition*, October 1997, <http://www.looking-glass.greenend.org.uk/voice.html>, accessed February 14, 2007.

6. I disagree with Jake Austen's assessment of Sylvester's voice as well as his partition of falsetto voices into "natural" or "unnatural." All singing voices are developed with an ear for musical styles. Sylvester's style of singing blends the falsetto of African American Motown crooners with a notable raspy or gritty quality that comes from blues, rhythm and blues, and gospel. In his youth Sylvester was a gospel prodigy and later performed classic blues and recorded with a rhythm-and-blues outfit called the Hot Band.

7. See my discussion of Sylvester in *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 184–94. Although Sylvester dressed in drag or draglike disco fashions, sexually he was a top. This came out both in interviews with the *Advocate* and in discussion at the conference "Sylvester, the Life and Work of a Musical Icon," New York University, October 2004.

in the sincerity of the expression, its authenticity. Identifying the authentic "voice" of the song is made more complicated when the songwriter and singer are different persons. But just as cover songs are mundane in pop music, so, too, is this division of labor between song writing and song singing. This is another type of mundane drag in pop music through which gender and sexuality can be confounded by voice. Burt Bacharach wrote with the voice of Dionne Warwick in his head; Phil Spector wrote countless girl group songs addressing men. But what happens when a songwriter "reclaims" his or her song from its original envoicing? Halberstam offers the example of Prince, who covers his own song "Nothing Compares to You," first recorded and made famous by Sinéad O'Connor. In so doing, Halberstam suggests, Prince seems to concede that, indeed, "nothing compares" to the female voice that he first "envisioned" (language fails here) singing his melody and words. Instead of competition, what emerges is a line of affiliation that ties male voices to female voices and creates queer sentiments across time and space.

There is another example that strengthens Halberstam's point, though one more "homo" than queer, tying female voices to female voices across racial boundaries. In 1971, four years after the release of Aretha Franklin's "definitive" version, Carole King recorded the song "(You Make Me Feel like a) Natural Woman," which she had cowritten with Gerry Goffin and Jerry Wexler.⁸ Although a successful Brill

8. In the partnership with Goffin, King was largely responsible for writing the music, while her then-husband wrote the lyrics to girl group classics such as "Will You Still Love

Building songwriter since the early 1960s, creating hits for girl groups such as the Shirelles, the Cookies, and the Chiffons, King had a hard time breaking into the industry as a singer in her own right. After the commercial failure of her first solo album in 1970, King tried a second, this time weaving together new songs with well-known covers of her own songs made famous by other singers. The aptly named *Tapestry* became a landmark album, ironically one of the first in the singer-songwriter genre, where the song and the singer are considered inseparable. But what is really inseparable in this case is King's voice newly emerging from the community of past voices—mostly African American women—who first sang her songs. Sylvester sang Patti LaBelle's "You Are My Friend" with Izora Rhodes-Armstead and Martha Wash as a vehicle for queer friendship—a display of nonreproductive heterosexual affiliations; Carole King's covers, by contrast, present reproductive homosexual affiliations in that her songs enabled the voices and careers of female performers who in turn enabled her voice, her career, by the distant and not-so-distant past circulation of their "original" performances. King, in covering "Natural Woman," could very well have been singing to Aretha Franklin: "You make me feel like a natural woman"—you, whose voice paved the way for my voice to be heard. Thus, the cover song can redirect the terms of self-identification from heterosexual visual recognition to homosexual vocal genealogies.

Me Tomorrow." Wexler apparently came up with the title for "(You Make Me Feel like a) Natural Woman," and King and Goffin wrote a song to fit.