

The Butch Throat: A Roundtable

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INTRODUCTION

This Field Notes offering has its origins in a 2010 blog post on *Junebug vs. Hurricane* on the Butch Throat, that, having lived the strange half-life of the internet, has been revived and enlivened as a Roundtable topic at the April 2018 Pop Conference. At the suggestion of the editors of JPMS, these contributions from the event now appear in print with revisions made after conversations with and among the panelists and other conference attendees.

“The Butch Throat” 2018 Roundtable is offered in unashamed appreciation for Wayne Koestenbaum’s now classic 1993 study of opera culture and voice training, *The Queen’s Throat*, a book so full of insight and lore on singing, voice, gender, and sexuality that its singular boldness has nearly smothered its critical echoes. Perhaps too easily dismissed because of its high-culture object—opera—and its campy obsessions of a stereotypical gay male fan, *The Queen’s Throat* is more than a collection of observations and headstrong reinterpretations of arcane voice training manuals. *The Queen’s Throat* is about learning to belong to the cult of the diva, a fandom made all the more alluring for being stigmatized. In Koestenbaum’s account, melancholy and loss pervade the opera queen’s quest for sounds no longer with us and for the divas who once were. Koestenbaum points out that both psychoanalysis and voice training take castration seriously and share a method, if not logic. The threat of castration promises that in losing you gain. This active, necessary loss is, in a way, formed like a throat: an internal passageway that is both for and around—an apparent lack from which a self or voice nevertheless issues. Moving between memories of his budding opera fandom, his incipient yet repressed homosexuality, and close readings of obsolete vocal training manuals and album covers, Koestenbaum teases out the paradoxes of the throat as a site of aurality and orality, of vocal and sexual production: “the throat is loath to speak about itself.”¹ But speak of, through, and for the throat we will. The throat,

1. Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 163.

and the butch throat in particular, offers new ways to hear the all-too-familiar tunes of identity and sexuality in popular culture.

What Roland Barthes calls the “grain” of the voice we might call the throat. Following Barthes through Koestenbaum, the grain of the voice is the trace of the body in the ephemeral aural performance. Barthes’ well-known concept of the grain of the voice insists on thinking about how a voice is produced and how it is heard. Borrowing from Julia Kristeva, Barthes distinguishes between pheno- and geno-song. Pheno-song is rational and literary, like notation or score. It is historical in a legal way, a document. Recording technology tended to consolidate adherence to a score and promote technical perfectionism—for Barthes the lamentable marks of pheno-song. What he values instead is the geno-song, the aural as the trace of the body, suggesting a focus on production rather than stabilizing outcomes. The grain of the voice is also a material quality to be experienced in the listener’s body, not just on the technical, audible surface of audibility. Because grain is apprehended in this relation between listener and voice, it is unstable by nature, constantly recalibrating desire against judgment, to produce a pleasure in listening that is embodied: vibratory and carnal. Like Koestenbaum striving to become the opera queen that he already is, one must learn what to listen for (listen beyond pheno-song). And though it may seem difficult to point to directly or finally, geno-song is more durable, more real in a material sense, than pheno-song for all its translatability. Despite its ephemerality and mystery, grain is for Barthes quite specific, we might even say, real; it is “the certitude of the body’s enjoyment”—of the performer’s body and also that of the listener.² *The Queen’s Throat*—the passage between and for the diva’s voice and her auditors—is all grain, and that’s what makes the book’s fundamental argument, that opera is gay and, more specifically, that “voice is a system equal to sexuality,”³ so bold and yet ineffable; so intuitively true despite and beyond its author’s handpicked archive and anecdotal method. *The Queen’s Throat* is a relation of pleasure that challenges reductive binaries of pain and pleasure, expert and fan. It can rescue an identity like opera queen from homophobic stereotype and the “shadow of the xerox machine,” instead proposing “homosexuality itself as a point of embarkation, an origin, a First Scene.”⁴ Yet *The Queen’s Throat*, despite, and in a way because of its ineluctable thesis, refuses to insist on the essence of this homosexuality preferring instead indirection and gesture: Koestenbaum, surely a diva in his own right, waves grandly, “Farewell, homosexuality, we never knew you.”⁵ This kind of campy, flagrant yet elusive knowingness about knowing, flowing through the throat, can only sing its truth as a swan song.

If the throat is a passageway through which we will direct new air and think of new voices and bodies, we’ll take an even further detour from both the high homosexual culture of opera and the heterosexual posturing of pop music to pay attention to the relatively hidden, unpopular, and even obsolete figure of the butch, which lives absolutely in the “shadow of the xerox machine,” derided as a faux masculinity, but even more so just

2. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 277.

3. Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*, 155.

4. *Ibid*, 179.

5. *Ibid*, 193.

in the shadows, for the most part forgotten and ignored. In emphasizing the aural (if not oral), this roundtable listens for butches in the “system of the voice.” Glasberg proposes post-lesbian folk singer Amy Ray as a butch-throat icon, rooted in and yet transcending the country music genre. Kessler recalls hearing the butch throat in her adolescent radio encounters with Tracy Chapman’s 1988 hit “Fast Car.” Taylor Black listens back through the warped bootlegged audiocassette of memory past Melissa Etheridge’s early 1990s cover of “Down To Zero,” for Joan Armatrading’s uncanny and unaccountable butch throat. Perhaps glimpsing the future of butch visibility, Mairead Sullivan looks the present moment in the eye to expose the drama of butch visibility in pop culture identity politics in Janelle Monáe’s April 2018 coming out in *Rolling Stone*.

Butch throat is a vocal confusion that clarifies. It is an aural mystery but not a masquerade, a passage from one social state to another through an absolute material platform. Its aim is hardly to fool or pass, but rather to elucidate the possibilities of pleasure: it does (and did) not have to be—it could only become. The butch throat, like grain, is never easily popular or approved. It’s minor, blues, punk, country, mezzo, contralto—a mixed, impure sound, inexpert, wily, sub-cultural. It is a singular voice, the opposite of a community or sub-cultural voice, like that of the hectoring lesbian comic or the cigarette-smoked bar dyke. The butch throat cannot be reduced to any category of lesbian. It does not require for its production the historical contexts of sexual identity and its injuries, alibis, and rights-seeking. It doesn’t even require a discrete homosexual desire. More than anything, it wants you to listen for it.

E. GLASBERG

‘FINE WITH THE DARK’: AMY RAY IS THE BUTCH THROAT

Voice production is an area rich for testing out gender and sexuality rules. Training the voice is unnatural and subject to shifting taste and structural regimes. Proper vocal training forms the basis for normalizing the strict gendering of voice categories: an alto is never a tenor, for example, though their note range and even coloring or pitch may overlap. And yet, that very artificial vocal training would as easily contribute to the dismantling of the gendered voice. It does produce impure and mixed voices and performances, in fact, from falsetto and trouser roles, the castrato, the counter tenor, as well as a host of pop voices difficult to categorize. The training of gendered voices enhances and naturalizes social gender categories only because it is also a training for audibility, or for how the voice is heard as gendered. Voice itself, despite its uses as sex and sexuality’s “tell,” doesn’t so much secure the truth of the body as multiply it.

Amy Ray’s career began as one half of the Indigo Girls, with Emily Saliers. Over many successful years of lesbian folk-pop crossover fame with Saliers, Ray began gradually splitting off to return to her truer roots in country gospel music with *Stag* (2001), *Prom* (2005), *Didn’t It Feel Kinder* (2008), *Lung of Love* (2012), *Goodnight Tender* (2014). Divisions of self, romantic pairs, of community and nation are lyrical themes, but also the very method of her sound. “She’s Got to Be” (2008), a pop song with a deep groove appears

to be a love song. But sung with a self-divided falsetto, it sounds like something else altogether:

She's got to be with my always
To make sense of the skin I'm in.
It gets dangerous
And lonely to defend.
Marking time with every change
It's hard to love this woman in me.

There's always a lot going on in Ray's lyrics. Themes of self-identity and rejection, romance and division. This relation of embodiment, voice, and (self) identity does not neatly translate into romantic or even spiritual yearning. This "woman in me" might be a lover, a child, a fantasy, a spiritual principle, even the butch's repressed femininity. She sticks close, "like the skin I'm in" and yet seems impossible to merge with as one unity. Ray's vows to "... protect this love" will not resolve the split. Rather, she accepts its "anarchy," by which we could say polyvocality, the irreducibility of the butch throat: "it's got to be." Ray stretches out the syllables: an-ar-chy into a full line, marking time with a guitar riff as she swoops from falsetto back to chest on "got to be."

Amy Ray's butch throat is not Patti Smith's wonderful but still ventriloquized gender performance in "Gloria" (1977). No, Ray doesn't sound like a man. Close your eyes; there's no cover, no double take. Amy Ray is the butch throat. It's messier than ventriloquism, this voice cast without an original, fixed placement, sung for an audience more than willing to be misled, in fact an audience asking for it. Ray delivers. The butch voice is a contrapuntal anarchy, a sound summoned by an audience, borrowed from culture, and produced in a body in transit.

Ray's butch throat is not only or even primarily mournful. She enjoys, as she has sung in her more rock and roll phases, "being the boy"—the playful boy, the boy who gets the girl, and the broken boy, too. Sometimes she stands behind her electric guitar and delivers, drives forth her contralto from down in her chest, the covered place. This is not a natural voice. I know. I remember one summer vacation in the Catskills making the decision to break the shyness and order an ice cream cone. I pitched my untried adolescent voice low, threw it down that hole, tried to feel it supported by my solar plexus, the fundament of my social projection: "Chocolate cone, please." From that utterance on, that pitch stuck in my butch throat.

No one enjoys hearing their voice played back to them. It's way more disturbing than catching a glimpse of yourself unawares in a mirror. The discomfort probably stems not from judgment but more likely from misrecognition: we do not hear ourselves internally the way the sounds come back into our ears through recording technologies. This aural feedback or lag or harmonic disillusion rends our imagined wholeness. Amy Ray, unlike most other butches, spends much of her time working out the mechanics of her voice, its reproduction and circulation.

She is an expert of making herself whole through a butchly divided throat. The first time I listened to a video recording of a live performance of her butch-femme anthem off *Didn't It Feel Kinder*, "Stand And Deliver," I found myself holding my breath, sort of the

way you do at the ballpark when anyone gets up to sing the national anthem and you wonder if they can hit the highs and lows of that unlovely vocal obstacle course.

I find myself a breathless fan, listening to Amy Ray's acoustic solo version of the song, which gives life to her vocal range and contains—or composes—the delicacy necessary to belt out the prayer, to cast the spell, to produce the butch voice. Every time I listen, I wonder, is she going to make it to the end of this note, to the end of the phrase, or the song? In the video as on the official album release, Ray shifts at the end of the song to once again use falsetto, the quintessential male pop high voice, and a voice that Koestenbaum calls, summoning its etymological and categorical ruse, a “vocal detour.” I can't think of another female singer to use falsetto. Only Ray can occupy the contralto and bypass soprano, the female high voice, bypassing also the African-American infused gospel alto that had been Odetta's. Ray's depth and range is less spectacular than k.d. lang's virtuoso croon. It's less self-assured, less placed, more liable to break down and to strain. Her voice is anarchy, the pitched battle to internalize and vocalize a gender. Ray's butch-ly placed sound may overlap with some mezzo tonalities critiqued in opera queen lingo as “hooty,” “covered,” or “dark.” And yet in Ray there's also a boyish brightness or white gospel, plainsong clarity to her tone, if not emanating from its placement, then from its intention, its innocent and yearning qualities.

“Is the body just a cage?” Ray asks in the bridge of “She's Got To Be.” Is the body a site for the production of gender and trouble? Of course it is. When Amy Ray switches to falsetto, she performs an aural gender trick beyond even the most complex of Strauss's late trouser roles because it is not only the context of the reception of the voice that changes, and not only how the voice is produced that creates the aural difference. Her falsetto is a new move in gender's voiced and performed history: a woman singing low, quoting a man singing high. And for this vocal production, the body does not, must not, transform. So, the body is not a cage, exactly. It is a throat, a passageway for air, a plexus of flesh and energy: contained anarchy. But this anarchy of self-division, uncertainty, deathly darkness of tone, or willful obscurity of the sub-cultural should not be mistaken neither for hopeless amorphous indefinability or for aural drag. Recalling that for Barthes, listening for the grain of the voice offers the “certitude . . . of the body's enjoyment,”⁶ I hear Ray's butch throat as a powerful and stabilizing erotic experience that makes sense beyond sense. And to hear in and through Ray's performance my own butch throat is to feel seen and known profoundly rather than merely categorically.

While there's so much in Ray's performance and composing career to discuss, perhaps the most salient and indeed shocking element is that I spent so many years *not* listening to her. Partly this is a function of my age—I'm at least 15 years too old to have been a fan in high school, even if I had ever gone anywhere near women's music festivals, which as a NYC punk sophisticate I most certainly did not. By the time I went to grad school I'd heard in the very corner of my ear of the Indigo Girls. But I wouldn't deign to listen. Until many years later, one of the contributors to this roundtable, Taylor Black, played me her solo material, songs she wrote and performed with bands she put together through the years. At first Ray's solo material distinguished itself from the more mainstream, soft

6. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 276.

Indigo Girls sound by going into rock territory, which was the music for me. But Amy Ray could write ballads, too, for her ever-stronger and more proficient contralto. As she developed her sound and her interests, Ray returned to her country and gospel roots. Her butch throat knows no genre. What it does require is grain, as *terroir*, a form of regionalism. For Ray that means creating her own label, Daemon records, and mining the Georgia soil, no matter the music industry demographics—or even the expectations of many of her loyal fans. On tour with Indigo Girls in September 2017, Ray introduced a new solo composition, confiding that she’s “making another country record.”⁷ It sounded half like an apology. The country ballad she performs alone on stage, accompanying herself on guitar, is called “Fine With the Dark,” lyrics that echo Ray’s smooth and by now natural sounding croon (a full band version of the song appears on Ray’s 2018 album, *Holler* (Daemon Records)). It’s as if she’s always sung in this low register. But surely there was a choice at some point to allow the grain to come through, to temper her powerful bluesy chest voice with a measured delivery more trained by the microphone. How Ray’s voice is produced, its internal anarchy and its development throughout her lifetime and in musical and aural history certainly matters, but only in relation with her listeners’ desire to be taken in, bewitched by the singular performance of her butch throat. “You can’t see the stars if there’s too much light,” she sings in the refrain. She knows we’re all fine with the dark of Ray’s butch throat: that invisible, imperceptible register of the throat where Ray pitches her voice and her tent—and she’s fine with being minor, even secondary. This is similar to the acceptance of loss required for the opera queen’s cult of Callas and further back, in Barthes’ listening for the grain of Charles Panzera’s baritone being stamped out by LP record standardization.

Amy Ray is the butch throat and as she develops her musical art, she knows it, ever self-aware and also aware of her audience of seeking, willful and even worshipful outcasts. In the song’s bridge Ray tries out a series of analogies for darkness and loss: “That great void is full of infinity/Black as the fear of endless possibility.” But the most irreducible, impossible and butch-throated metaphor is, “Black as the moonless woods of my unsung prayer.” “All those metaphors we learned in high school” don’t add up; there’s always something left out in the transfer, something remaining but also never said, something “unsung.” We have to accept and even invite the irreducible and the irrational along with those systems of language—and gender—that we are taught to rely upon. That nothing about our deepest held beliefs about our selves exactly makes sense or holds up to analysis is reflected in Koestenbaum’s luxurious admission, “[he] can only sing [his] homosexuality.”⁸ Where this musical acceptance of lost and the irrational leads Ray is to the dark of “my unsung prayer.” “Unsung identity” is the phrase I dashed out in my 2010 blog post to refer to the essence of the butch throat often perceived as warped or scratched. But this essence might be more fully described as suppressed, undeveloped, or out of range—to gesture to what Ray would understand as its necessary darkness.

As the final refrain of that 2017 performance of “Fine with the dark” captured on YouTube fades away and I strain—rather resentfully through repeated listenings—to hear

7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ao09Ny5VaW8>.

8. Koestenbaum, *The Queen’s Throat*, 159.

Ray amid the nattering young ladies half listening but fully engaged in their homo music scene, Ray says, “Thanks for listening to that.” Always the Southern gentleman, Ray’s politeness here can also be read as irony. We could all stand to listen more closely to Ray’s “unsung prayer.”

SARAH KESSLER

TRACY CHAPMAN’S BUTCH THROAT

So remember when we were driving, driving in your car
Speed so fast I felt like I was drunk
City lights lay out before us and your arm felt nice wrapped 'round my shoulder
And I had a feeling that I belonged
I had a feeling I could be someone
Be someone
Be someone⁹

Tracy Chapman’s voice may have been the voice of my pubescence. As a tween I was physically revolted by my increasing feminization and listened to “Fast Car” and “Talkin’ ’bout a Revolution” on repeat for hours on my Sony Boombox CD player, crouched on my bedroom floor, unconsciously processing the perplexity of gender. As Chapman’s resonant contralto filled my ears, singing of longing and escape, stasis and revolt, I was becoming someone who would soon be called feminine, and who would later be called femme, and though I was significantly opaque to myself, my body knew that I didn’t want to be either of those things. My throat, especially, knew it. A kind of Sartrean nausea—a physiological manifestation of existential dread—welled there, at the base of my throat, rising into near unbearability when I was enlisted into playing the part of a girl: into wearing the skirts girls wore, into speaking in the voice girls seemed to speak in, which was vertiginously high in pitch, and which incorporated cutesy flourishes I would, in adulthood, come to understand as endemic to a Philadelphian approximation of Valley Girl dialect. At the time I attended a small, mostly white, all girls’ school, where there were only several other Jews and even fewer people of color. Tracy Chapman’s voice was a respite from the upper middle class white girl’s voice I was predestined to ventriloquize.

When I first heard “Fast Car” emanating from the fake wood-paneled digital clock radio by my bedside, I reflexively racialized the voice’s soulful timbre, and thus its singer, as black. Gender was more elusive to my identificatory ear, which, for all its concern with sexing the singer’s body, entirely failed to hear the song’s protagonist state her occupation: “I work in the market as a checkout girl,” she tells us mid-way through the narrative, the singular act of gendering to which either the “I” or the “You” of the song’s central couple is subjected. Although I didn’t or couldn’t hear the “girl” in “Fast Car,” at some point a DJ named the artist, and suddenly the voice belonged to a woman. I bought the album and she was on the cover, her hair short and dreadlocked, eyes cast down,

9. Lyrics from Chapman’s “Fast Car.”

face neutral. I listened to Chapman's deep voice and imagined us driving, driving in her car—I was the "I" and she was the "You" in my version of the story. Or was it the other way around?

At the all girls' school there was a teacher with short, ash-blond hair and a deep voice. Ms. B was what I would later call butch. One time, in class, she asked us all to lie down on the floor and close our eyes, at which point she proceeded to play us a selection from Paul Simon's *Graceland*. "Listen," she said softly, in her low voice. "Just listen. We're so used to treating music like background noise. How often do you actually listen?" I can't for the life of me remember the sound of the music. I only remember what Ms. B said, and even more so how she said it, the way her words glided into my ears, the sense of relief that washed over me as her butch voice all too fleetingly took the place of my own inner monologue. After that, when I felt nauseous, I'd picture the two of us driving "somewhere," perhaps "cross the border and into the city." Ms. B gave me "a feeling that I belonged." At home, when I professed my love for Ms. B, my mother replied, "It's normal to have crushes on your teachers," in a wavering voice, sounding ill at ease.

The butch voices of my young adulthood, Tracy Chapman and my teacher's different but equally "wondrous contralto[s] from the uncertain center[s] of . . . unsung identit[ies]" (Glasberg) served as conduits to the butch voices of my nascent queer adulthood—voices like Joan Armatrading's, for example, the hearing of which seemed to endow the eager listener with a certain queer cultural knowledge. For to recognize a voice as butch, to experience the emanation of a throat as butch, is to acknowledge the voice's durability, its wiliness, its petulance, its all-too-frequent, even downright resistant, lack of cooperation with the stable categories of gender, race, and sexuality that voice is daily enlisted to reproduce. "Voice is a system equal to sexuality," writes Wayne Koestenbaum, "as punishing, as pleasure-giving; as elective, as ineluctable" (155). To hear a voice as butch throws a wrench, however small, into the gears of these joint systems, in part because it is not to hear this voice as "Voice Male," the term that immediately popped up when I searched "tracy chapman fast car lyrics" as I prepared to write this talk. Without my having posed the question of the singer's gender or vocal range, Chapman's voice was gendered "male" (and apparently the internet goddesses sensed my disapproval because a few days later the same search no longer yielded such a description).¹⁰ To hear a voice as butch is, at least for me, to hear with desire, rather than straining to discern that voice's "correct" relation to gender. For it is in fact the butch voice's "contrapuntal" relation to gender (to use another Glasberg-ism), its refusal to confirm the gender of the body—of the throat—that produces it by *sounding otherwise*, that makes it so hot in the first place.

My initial encounters with the butch voices of Tracy Chapman and my elementary school teacher were shaped by what I call the "cultural politics of synchronization," according to which certain voice-body pairings are persistently read as synchronous while others

10. Actually, I (an admitted Luddite) later learned from the inimitable Cathy Davidson that the internet goddesses initially gendered Chapman's voice "male" precisely because I myself had recently input gendered search terms for talking about Tracy Chapman's voice. Thus, not only did my searches reveal the many already existent characterizations of Chapman's voice as male and masculine; the search engine itself gendered Chapman's voice based on its acquired sense of my desires and expectations.

are regarded as asynchronous, ill-fitting, uncanny (Kessler 61–109). The assumptions we make about which voices are supposed to synch up with which bodies reflect how racialization, gendering, and sexualization are, as Alexander G. Weheliye has crucially argued, audio as well as visual processes (40). Indeed, as Nina Eidsheim writes on the racialization of timbre, “no single type of sensing takes place in isolation” (9). Thus when Chapman’s voice—whose timbre I had mechanically located along an established racial continuum—was “officially” gendered female, and when, following that, I began associating the woman pictured on the cover of her eponymous album with that voice, or, better yet, watching her music videos, which synchronized that voice to a short-haired, earring-clad butch (“Fast Car”) and later to a long-haired, dress-wearing butch (“Give Me One Reason”), I felt something new even though I’d never before heard the term “butch” and didn’t have the terminology to describe what I was hearing, seeing, sensing; a new sense and sensibility that I brought back to her voice as it streamed through my headphones while I sat on the bedroom floor, now, known but unbeknownst to me, a butch voice. A voice that synched up with a body in a way that both defied unconscious expectations and created new ones, like the voice of Ms. B, who would also sometimes wear a dress, and whose wearing of the dress while opening our ears to unexamined sounds with her deep, quiet voice was a titillating reminder that all was not as it seemed—or perhaps just a manifest indicator of how queer things actually were.

While the domain of popular music can be prime territory for challenging the dominant cultural politics of synchronization, it is also ground zero for audio-visualizing these politics in action. A recent listicle on VH1’s news site titled “Dude Sounds Like a Lady: 10 Artists Who Sound Like the Opposite Sex” furnishes Tracy Chapman as its number one gender offender, claiming—as if the discovery of Chapman’s cis-femininity were as nationally flabbergasting as the assassination of JFK—“Everyone remembers where they were when they learned ‘Fast Car’ was sung by a woman” (Donovan). Amidst targeting other deep-voiced woman singers, such as Nico, Nina Simone, and Kim Carnes, for stunning “gender reveals,” the roster includes another salient group of vocal deviants: high-voiced boys, namely Justin Bieber, who at the age of fifteen “could conceivably [have been] misconstrue[d] . . . as a young girl” by “[a]n unfamiliar listener” (Donovan). Reading this, I wondered: has the now grown-up Bieber, whose lesbionic aesthetic is the self-reflexive butt of many a queer joke—see the Lesbians Who Look Like Justin Bieber Tumblr if you don’t know what I’m talking about—not always aspired to have a butch voice? Do his fresh-faced fans in their own way feel the indeterminate tingles I experienced upon hearing the butch voices of my pubescence? What would Chapman say about Bieber’s recent acoustic cover of “Fast Car,” performed in BBC Radio 1’s Live Lounge, in which the young singer’s dulcet tones ever so slightly muffle his complete botching of the song’s lyrics?¹¹ Call me old school or just call me old, but I can’t hear Bieber’s mush-mouthed mimicry without longing for Chapman’s full-throated lyricism—for hers and the rest of the polyphonic butch voices that made my teenage heart beat fast enough that it could fly away.

11. Visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWdKwYKUe1M> to witness this.

BUTCH MINUS ZERO NO LIMIT

For my part in this discussion of the butch throat, I would like to perform some critical listening. As I was thinking about our roundtable, I kept asking myself, “How do you recognize the sound of the butch throat?” We know that butchness has a look that can be identified on the surface, by sight—but what about by sound? For guidance, of course, I turned to Jack Halberstam’s work on the subject of butchness, female masculinity, and queer musical expression. In my search—re-reading *Female Masculinity* (1998) and *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005)—I found evidence of butchness that more often than not registered on the level of the visual. This is fair enough, since neither of these texts sets out to anatomize the grain of the butch voice. Yet Halberstam’s reliance on visuality does reach an impasse in the *Queer Time and Place* chapter, titled “What’s That Smell?: Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives,” that constructs a genealogy of queer, and particularly lesbian, musical production. Along the way, Halberstam seems always to stop short of representing what it is he hears (as opposed to sees).

In this chapter, Halberstam turns our attention to Ferron’s song, “Shadows on a Dime,” as a kind of political model of queer temporality. The song in question is long and winding, resembling—sonically and lyrically—a dream state in which its main character travels across the continent, alone and unknown. Halberstam’s sketch is already rich, drawing on the power of Ferron’s lyrical work to characterize the sensation of belatedness embedded in this particular butch experience. In his reading back of the song to readers, Halberstam holds onto its refrain—“We move forward fast by holding back,” to suggest the braided structure of what he calls “an altered understanding of temporal movement and generational interaction.”¹² Ferron herself is a pit stop along Halberstam’s envisioning of history as a road that connects twentieth century queerness back to its identitarian roots. Connecting then contemporary, and now defunct and even somewhat antique, queer musical groups like the Butchies, Tribe 8 and Le Tigre to their lesbian forbears even further back down that twisted road, Halberstam forges what he calls “a project of subcultural historiography” that forces us to “look at the silences, the gaps, and the ruptures in the spaces of performance” so that “we use them to tell disorderly narratives” (187). Traveling on this road called time are historical—which is to say, lesbian—figures that Halberstam casts as musical pioneers who still lurk in the shadows, “who still need to find a place in the winding, twisting story of queer subcultural lives.” He names these figures “the Ferrons and Phrancis, but also the Joan Armatradings” (187).

The Joan Armatradings? One of these things is, to be sure, not like the others.

I will return to this problem of categorization, but before I do, I ought to address the conceptual issue leading up to it: that of time. For Halberstam’s chapter on lesbian, and then queer, music, time is registered visually—as a road—as always embedded within the subcultural text, as forever visible. Halberstam’s greatest talent as a critic and writer is for *seeing*, in this case seeing queer historiography in this obscure Ferron track as a shadow

12. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005).

cast onto the wall. The problem for this reader, who has never been what you might call a “visual learner,” is that I sometimes have a hard time parsing allegorical meanings on my own. In focusing on time as allegorized as a road with “stops” at iconic musicians, Halberstam builds a vision of lesbian music history that cannot take into full consideration the structure of musical sound, much less the grain of the voice (or throat, in this case).

While the metaphor of the road is a useful way to imagine or analogize time, I am inclined to accept time as a more formless, mysterious concept. Time is, after all, immaterial, an idea. Its powers to affect are too expansive and foundational for any object or metaphor to sum up or represent. Time—like voice—is a concept that has the capacity to frame our experience of life. If this seems difficult to grasp, it is because time—or musical/lyrical timing—is self-referential. Thus, musical time loses some of its clarity or power when it is reduced to allegorical concepts of history, narrative, past and future. Time is much more musical than generational history, even the recursively complex tradition of lesbian singers Halberstam sketches out; it is, to quote Liz Grosz, irreducible “to other terms and frames of explanation.”¹³ This is an evolutionary process, rooted in the earth and distinguished by “the various temporal rhythms and processes that mark the living being.”¹⁴ Time is, Grosz continues, “in principle outside, before, and beyond matter.”¹⁵ It is and is not the same thing as past, present, future. Time is not a conclusion that we ought to draw—or cast like a shadow—on the wall.

This is, I will admit, a very esoteric way to deal with the problem of Joan Armatrading, who is, like time itself, irreducible and resistant to critical paraphrase. The same could and should be said of Ferron and Phranc, but, with all due respect to those artists, this is especially true of Armatrading, who I would like to argue we think of as queer—but only inasmuch as she exists musically in a state of disambiguation. She is the great butch pop star that never was. Butch throat zero.

I have been listening to Joan Armatrading for a long time and have, for the most part, felt alone in my journey: not because Armatrading is unloved or ignored, but because, I think, my own introduction to her was itself a bit improbable. Explaining my own Joan Armatrading story means taking you back to my sixth-grade musical tastes. You see, at that time, I was very, very into Melissa Etheridge. This was 1993 or 1994, around the time of her big *Yes I Am* album. I was starting middle school and very interested in getting adolescence out of the way. One way that I endeavored to prove my independence of mind and my readiness for adulthood was in cultivating my musical tastes. And for whatever reason, this meant immersing myself in Melissa Etheridge. Once I had collected all of her official releases, I tried to get my hands on as many bootlegs as were available. They say that hoarding is a sign of homosexuality—a kind of anality—and this was certainly true in my case. By the time I entered the sixth grade, I had already dragged my poor, suffering (but, at that point, tolerant) parents to two Melissa Etheridge concerts, joined the official fan club—the Melissa Etheridge Information Network—purchased the requisite T-shirts

13. Elizabeth Grosz, *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 244.

14. *Ibid.*, 244–245.

15. *Ibid.*, 245.

(one of which I decided to wear on my first day at a new school . . . this was not a good idea) and became an active participant in the fan network, trading cassette tape bootlegs with other Etheridge fans (all women my mother's age or worse).

One of the first cassettes I received in the mail contained a recording of a very early Etheridge show from the mid-80's, years ahead of her first self-titled album, when she had been the weekend entertainment at the Que Sera Sera, a famous lesbian nightclub in Long Beach, California, that is, when last I checked, still operating. The set in question contained mostly covers sung to an intermittently attentive crowd, over the sound of glasses breaking, women talking and at least one brief scuffle between what sounded to me like butches arguing over a barstool. Between songs, Etheridge spoke about a Joan Armatrading concert she'd recently attended, and I recall stopping the tape, trying to figure out the spelling of this name I was hearing for the first time. One cover stood out for me then, of a song that years later is still my favorite in Armatrading's very wide, satisfying oeuvre: "Down to Zero."

I would, over the next few years, outgrow my Etheridge habit, only to begin my search for signs of Joan Armatrading. After listening deeply to this tape I would spend my remaining adolescent years collecting her music and—what would prove to be more challenging—trying to find someone who knew who she was. My first Armatrading album was the compilation *Track Record*; I checked it out from my local library and never returned it. I listened to it over and over again, transfixed by her warm contralto, which moves so easily out of her chest to her head and back again. I figured she was gay—Lord knows, Melissa Etheridge was (my classmates told me so—everyone but me seemed clued in that *Yes I Am* was, of course, Etheridge's coming out record). Armatrading was, I suppose, gay by musical association. Sounded that way to me. But her songs were not like Etheridge's—not all of them, anyway. While a good number of Armatrading songs address a non-descript lover or love interest, just as many in her catalog speak directly to and about men. Her song "Tall in the Saddle," for example, addresses a "he." Yet I never heard this song as in any way heterosexual and I think it is Armatrading's voice—her butch throat—that makes it possible for her to take up heterosexual romantic syntax and still emerge with her strange kind of homosexuality intact. The song is slow, and has an awkward yet plodding sense of musical time. Armatrading begins her crooning against the backdrop of her band's slow groove.

Say what you will
You can't take the stars at night
Take your love
But that doesn't stop my life

She continues, in her groove, listing the crimes committed by the song's antagonist, a guy she describes as "brave and strong//A brother to his brothers//Brave and strong." The experience of her warm, deep contralto seems to both underscore and undermine the confused admiration and accusation in her lyrics. "Tall in the Saddle" becomes even stranger as, later, rather than returning to its original structure of verse-refrain, it soars away, toward something else. What began as a slow-burning heterosexual torch song becomes a cosmic, butch spaghetti western. Whether Armatrading and her lover gun each other down or end their blood feud in passionate kisses is unknowable.

Armatrading is a queer figure in the history of late twentieth century popular music: queer, in this case, as in singular, contrary, even a bit strange. While her audience is, in my estimation, disproportionately represented by lesbians and her records tend to be in collections next to artists from the women's music circuit of the 70s–80s (to return to and in some way validate Halberstam's genealogy), Armatrading songs do not work in the same ways as songs by the Phrancis or the Ferrons (nor the Cris Williamsons and the Holly Nears). This has very much to do with a list of things that Armatrading is not, as a songwriter, chiefly: that is, confessional or political. She does not perform on the women's music festival circuit, she writes love songs in the grammar of heterosexuality. And yet this normally discriminating largely lesbian audience sticks by her.

Beyond even her pop idol inscrutability, Armatrading has thrived in spite of her characteristic shyness, her lack of musical conviviality. She neither performs nor records cover songs and has very rarely contributed with her peers in the music industry. I have heard her asseverate, in numerous interviews, that she never listens to any popular music, or to any music at all, that the only knowledge she has of what's happening in the world of music she gets from the snippets of the radio that she hears walking down the street. Even her biggest pop hit, "Love and Affection," lacks a traditional verse-chorus structure. Her compositions, it seems, are as strange *sui generis* and capacious as her voice. This is interesting to me because it helps explain her musical style, which has always seemed so hard to place. As a musician, songwriter and butch, Joan Armatrading walks alone.

"Me, Myself I"

I sit here by myself
And you know I love it
You know I don't want someone
To come pay a visit

I want to be by myself
I came in this world alone
Me Myself I
Me Myself I

If Armatrading is queer, it is because of her musical singularity, her very charming and improbable pop asociality. While she seems to have always been accepted as a part of the world of gay and lesbian music, Armatrading's homosexuality is nowhere to be found in the content of her lyrics. As a butch, it would be too easy to say that her performance of gender is something strictly relegated to her look, as something communicated on the surface of things or in terms of social/historical era. No, for Armatrading, butchness (or queerness) is her *style*: the part of her personality that comes naturally to her and that she cannot help but reiterate and reproduce.

But what exactly is it in Armatrading that is butch? That, in her throat, sounds butch? I'm afraid that I do not have an easy answer. I can only return to and gather up my initial problems: is queerness, or butchness, anything other than a look? In reviewing a queer artist like Armatrading and searching for symptoms are we, like Halberstam, stuck with the things we can see (album art, lyrical content)? Are we, as Barthes laments in his essay,

“The Grain of the Voice,” “condemned to the adjective, reduced to either the predictable or the ineffable?”¹⁶ Surely being butch means more than being a butch in drag.

I have more questions than answers. And this has a lot to do with Armatrading herself and that voice of hers that seems, at turns, to welcome and evade representation. Hers is a queerness that is achieved without confession or identification; she is a butch singer-songwriter who is not a butch, a lesbian, gay. Joan Armatrading is Butch Zero.

I don't know much about math and I intend to keep it that way, but, in my understanding, zero is the only number that is and isn't a number. It can represent nothing. And it cannot be multiplied or divided. More to the point, adding to or subtracting from zero is a calculation that nevertheless does not seem to affect the surface outcome of a numerical calculation. Something has happened, but nothing seems to change.

“Down to Zero” was the second single off of Armatrading's 1976 self-titled album, following her hit “Love and Affection.” Even today, she tends to open her shows with this song, which is about loss and love, the journey from something to nothing. It is an untimely kind of anthem for Armatrading—the butch who won't be abstracted and multiplied into any Joan Armatradings of the future. If the song is evidence of the butch throat at work, it is because it gestures to a particular experience of being or feeling butch. The song sounds beautiful and sad, rich and deep; it is anchored by its own attachment to mourning and beauty, information that Armatrading's voice conveys more clearly on the level of affect and sensation. The song has words, but words are not necessary for it do its work. Her voice has the power to alter the direction of a phrase, like the pedal steel, which enters in the middle of the song, and which drips and croons and falls down at your feet.

“Down to Zero”

Oh remember who walked the warm
Sands beside you
Moored to your heel
Let the waves come rushing in
She'll take the worry
From your head
But then again
She put trouble in your heart instead
Then you'll fall
Down to the ground down to the ground.

The butch throat, it seems, is identifiable as a result of its ability to convey the sensation of butch love and loss, which seem to walk hand in hand through any butch composition. Our own panelist Glasberg understood this, in an essay from 2010 on this very subject of anthems that sing the song of “a lonely striving butch who never feels good enough”:

Not good enough for womanhood in general, and certainly not good enough for any woman. You can talk about pride and self-knowing, and you can even be really successful with getting men's wives to sit on your lap (it's easy, actually). But there's a

16. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 180; “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.” 188.

part of every deep-in-the-bone butch that can never believe any (real) woman would have her. That's the butch's throat, the wondrous contralto from the uncertain center of an unsung identity.

Perhaps what we're coming up against here is that butchness, if it is in fact a condition that exists somewhere deeper than the skin, might be primarily a kind of consciousness of loss—of losses that cannot be calculated, reduced to social forms of loss (or desire for reparation), of losses that don't add up and cannot be counter-balanced by gains: a gender that constantly finds itself in falling down to zero. The butch throat is not just an affectation; it is the sound of Armatrading singing “oh the heartache//you'll find//can bring more pain//than a blistering sun//but oh when you fall//oh when you fall//fall at my door.”

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THE BUTCH THROAT, COMING OUT

I must begin my brief comments with an admission: I love pop music. This is a love that I feel, or fear, is a dirty little secret, a certain indulgence, given my own coming of age in the lesbian spaces of coffee house open mic nights, passing bootleg copies of ani difranco shows on surreptitiously recorded microcassettes. Which is to say, I am not a scholar of pop music. I am, however, a scholar of the lesbian, perhaps, even, the “pop” lesbian. My current book project asks after the ongoing anxiety about the death of the lesbian, an anxiety that is marked through an articulated loss of a specific kind of lesbian culture as well as the perceived decline of lesbian as an object of study in institutionalized women's and gender studies. It is from this vantage that I come to thinking about the butch throat. The comments I put forth here are really quite tentative. I am not submitting an argument but rather offering a few points of reflection in the wake of Janelle Monáe's recent coming out in the pages of *Rolling Stone*. Of course, Monáe's coming out narrative coincides with her recently released album, and its accompanying “emotion” picture *Dirty Computer*. In these comments, I read Monáe's *Rolling Stone* cover (image 1) with and against k.d. lang's 1993 *Vanity Fair* cover (image 2).

I want to use these two artists to think about the specificity of butch. What is the butch's relationship to sexuality? To body? How might the throat be a place to think through these questions? I'll admit, I am going to try to be a bit playful with the throat. Following Wayne Kostenbaum, I want to talk more about how we might think of the throat materially. Might the throat be a way to offset or pivot away from anality as a central concern of queer theory? The throat, like the anus, is a non-sex specific orifice. The throat is also the imagined site of the production of the voice. The voice is often the betrayer of imagined sex against the backdrop of a body that may tell otherwise. Put more clearly, the voice can often be the last site of not-passing and thus of eliciting the violent responses to gender transgressions. The voice, both literally and symbolically, is also the instrument or tool of our own outing, the ways in which we are enjoined to make truth claims on our genders and sexualities. Or, perhaps we might start with a specter of death launched at the butch throat. The butch is often heralded as the canary



in the coal mine for the death of the lesbian. I bring each of these potentials to bear in these brief comments.

In 1993 k.d. lang, whose album *Ingénue* with its break out hit “Constant Craving” had been climbing the pop charts, was featured, along with Cindy Crawford, on the cover of *Vanity Fair*.¹⁷ In the cover image, lang is propped in a barber chair, sporting a pinstripe suit,

17. Leslie Bennetts, “K.d. Lang’s Edge,” *Vanity Fair*, August 1993, <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/1993/08/kd-lang-cover-story>.



tie loosened (image 1). She is mustachioed with shaving cream, which also covers her neck and chin. Behind her is Cindy Crawford wearing a one-piece black bathing suit. In Crawford's hand is a straight razor held tight against lang's jugular. Lang's head is propped back, nuzzled in Crawford breasts. Both have their eyes closed. Crawford's mouth is open and her head is tipped backed in orgasmic delight. Lang's close-lipped smile presents a kind of cocky assuredness, a reveling in her own masculinity and vulnerability. Razor poised at

lang's neck, Crawford's orgasm threatens the potential for a slip of the hand, a cut to the throat, the butch's throat.

This cover story, however, is not lang's coming out story. Indeed, lang does not need to come out. Rather, her juxtaposition with the super model Crawford already names her queerness, her lesbian sexuality; her butch swagger forecloses the need for any direct proclamation. Of note, it takes the author of the article, Leslie Bennetts, almost half of her word allotment to get to the subject of lang's lesbian narrative. Rather, Bennetts invites the readers to worry with her about the question of lang's "womanly" body. Lang's butchness is framed as impossible to escape, out of sync with the skirts and garish cowgirl aesthetic of her early career in country music. Her bridge to pop stardom is made possible not in spite of her butch marking but, as Bennetts frames it, because of these butch markings. In other words, country music had no place for a butch in a dress, but pop music's emphasis on voice and lyric might just accommodate and soften lang's butch presentation.

The secret of lang that is revealed within *Vanity Fair*, at least for those readers who had not yet seen *Salmonberries*, is her female body.¹⁸ The author can't seem to understand why lang's audience finds her so attractive. She is quick to note that the cover was lang's idea as though only the butch could conceive of this. She wonders how it is that straight—married, no less—men can be found screaming "we love you k.d.!" at her shows. Bennetts notes: "It takes a while to realize that there is a quintessentially womanly body inside those clothes."¹⁹ She continues to prod lang about why she chooses to cover up and seems to delight in a show a few days after the interview where lang returns for the encore, a see-through white shirt billowing just so to reveal a black bra underneath. Breasts too are revealed as lang's secret, and ultimately, the truth to her sex.

Lang's *Vanity Fair* cover, often lauded as one of the early "coming out" cover stories, contrasts with Monáe's recent *Rolling Stone* cover. When Monáe comes out in *Rolling Stone* she is Janelle, her true and authentic self. She is no longer Cindy Mayweather, the pompadoured archandroid whose forbidden love sparks the rebellion in Metropolis. Though Cindi and Anthony's love is, perhaps, imagined as heterosexual, it is also coded as queer in the android-human pairing. What's more, Monáe herself—or Monáe's public performance of Cindi Mayweather—claims to date only androids. By coming out, announcing her secret, Monáe is now Janelle, "a pansexual free ass motherfucker."²⁰

Mayweather/Monáe for the past decade has been hailed as a queer icon through her stylized androgyny, specifically in her black and white tuxedos. As Monica Miller notes, Monáe's tuxedo is a uniform. It cites both the histories of black performers and black dandyism but also her own working-class roots, marked by jobs coded through uniform. For Monáe, according to Miller, "her look does not fight her sound . . . instead they complement each other, calculated to work together to respond to the currency and

18. *Salmonberries* is a 1991 movie drama starring lang as an androgynous and "male-passing" miner in the Alaskan outback. The film's dramatic apex shows lang's character in a long shot, completely nude, revealing her "female" body.

19. Bennetts, "August 1993."

20. Brittany Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself," *Rolling Stone*, May 17, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/janelle-monae-frees-herself-629204/>.

exploitation of black women's bodies in R&B and hip-hop marketplaces."²¹ Miller goes on to note that in response to questions about her aesthetic Monáe has responded, "My approach to the tuxedo attire was asking. . . . 'Am I attracted to that girl?' . . . For her the answer is obviously, definitely, yes."²² While such readings might suggest that Monáe's tuxedo, her andro-soft-butchness, makes her sexuality clear, it is actually precisely this andro look that seems to open her up to questions of her sexuality.

Those who have watched the emotion picture which dramatizes *Dirty Computer* will note Monáe's shedding of the black and white uniform. This shedding is also a central theme of the *Rolling Stone* article. Indeed, Monáe, or Jane 57821 if you will, is markedly less clothed in the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture. Rather, she brings more color to her sartorial palette: a mauve suit in "django jane" and pink pussy pants in "pynk."

The story of Jane 57821, Monáe's character in the new picture, is a story of love and sex. Or, more aptly, it is a story of the sterilization of love and sex. Though, it is the meeting of her love and sex objects that sparks the rebellion. In the *Rolling Stone* piece *Dirty Computer* is now also Monáe, finally free to be her true self. The distancing from Cindi is, on the one hand, a distancing from the andro-icon who has called into question Monáe's queerness for the past decade. No longer butch, she is finally free to be queer. Now that she has voiced herself, she is herself.

I bring these moments together primarily because I want to talk about *Dirty Computer*. Even more so, however, I am struck by the production of surprise and welcome for Monáe from the queer community in the days following the *Rolling Stone* publication. Has Monáe not always been queer? An androgyne-android icon? Did we not all hear the queer echoing the queen on *Electric Lady* (where Monáe, not Mayweather, is central)? Indeed, in *Rolling Stone*, she concedes that the queer was initially meant to be more central.

I am less interested in naming Monáe as butch and more in the voicing of queerness in the "coming out" mandate. In *The Queen's Throat*, Kostenbaum notes: "Sexuality, whether homo or hetero, does not arrive only once, in that moment of revelation and proclamation that we call 'coming out.' Our body is always coming out. Every time is the first time . . . but coming out is only one version of the vocalization underlying sexuality itself."²³ On the one hand, we have lang whose queerness is evident in her butch stylings and in the discovery of her truly female—i.e. breasted—body. On the other hand, we have Monáe who is finally queer! The answer to her butch stylings is named in her own coming out. I do want to recognize a difference between the androgyne and the butch, but where that difference is remains somewhat slippery. I do not want to fuel a panic that Monáe's coming out as pansexual is another nail in the coffin of lesbian and butch identity or representation. After all, bisexuals can still be butches (or, at least play them on TV, à la Sara Ramirez). But I do think there are some fun and interesting continuities and discontinuities across these two

21. Monica L. Miller, "All Hail the Q.U.E.E.N. Janelle Monáe and a Tale of the Tux," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 37, no. 1 (December 31, 2015): 66.

22. Miller, 66.

23. Wayne Koestenbaum and Tony Kushner, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 2001), 174.

voicings of butch sexuality. For lang, her butch body announces itself in its failure to do femininity, a failure that cannot even be reclaimed with her feminine voice. For Monáe, the queer world has finally welcomed her as always having been one of its own.

Returning to the butch throat and lang's dance with death against the edge of Crawford's razor that threatens to cut her throat but also, perhaps, her tongue. This is not a tongue that she needs to speak her truth, that is, to come out, but one she just might need to fuck Crawford. Vocalizing her sex and her sexuality while moving away from her butch stylings, Monáe names her pynk: "pynk like the tongue that goes down . . . pink like the lips around your, maybe . . . pynk, where it's deepest inside . . . pynk like the secrets we hide." Pynk like the throat of the butch? ■

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