Emotional Space: Performing the Resistive Possibilities of Torch Singing

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Torch songs are standards—musical forms and formulas that recount the pain and suffering of unrequited love. But torch songs are also sites—interpretive spaces waiting to be filled by a performance. As such, torch singing is at once a product and producer of action—a site for concerted connection, deliberation, and contention. The resistive possibilities of a song of unrequited love are generated in the singing, in how a performance of a standard creates new spaces, new movements, and new meanings.

Picture how in the expansive scan of narrative space connections between things are always partial. . . there is always something more to say, always an uncaptured excess that provokes further questions, new associations that just come, and fresh gaps in understanding.

—Stewart (1996, p. 32)

Space is not merely a container in which human action transpires but instead simultaneously a product and producer of action.

—Fuoss (1998, p. 109)

We must not deny the way aesthetics serves as the foundation for emerging visions. It is, for some of us, critical space that inspires and encourages artistic endeavor. The ways we interpret that space and inhabit it differ.

—hooks (1990, p. 112)

WAITING, POSSIBLE

I am writing. I am waiting. I am writing, which means I am waiting. I am at home, pausing between field trips to sit in front of my computer, drink coffee, listen to music, and wait for the words to come. I like wearing my pajamas most of the day. I believe I have better ideas when I’m wearing my bathrobe. I have long thought this, though I admit feeling a pang of pleasure when I read feminist pedagogy scholar Madeline Grumet’s (1995) tribute to her bathrobe as a costume for her writing self, her dramatis persona (p. 37). I take her words and refashion them to fit my own robed image: My robe is a red cocoon. After a while, words fly out of it. I do not like sitting and waiting, though that is part of wearing a robe all day and hoping for words to come. It is a part of what I do. I am a writer but not of songs. I am an ethnographer and a performer (I see the two as inextricably connected). I am a woman, feminist, heterosexual, thirty-five years old, White, independent, music lover—though I am a terrible singer, even out of my bathrobe and in the shower. I am not a deadhead or a riot grrrl or an opera queen. I am a . . . well, there’s not really a word for my kind. I rifle through jazz and blues and pop/rock sections, looking for my music. I cruise the vocalists. I listen to show tunes and soundtracks on the in-store headphones. I am after the ballads, the woman-done-wrong songs, the doormat lyrics, the weepy violins: “Mean to Me,” “My Man,” and “The Way We Were.” I love these songs, even though I know they’re bad for me—bad for women. I love them like the woman who loves the man who leaves her—who beats her too—what can I do? I carry a torch for these songs. I am a torcher.

I am telling you this story because I have long loved torch singers and because I believe that these women—these singers of suffering—are telling their listeners to look at them and to look at themselves and to see a different sort of understanding and set of possibilities. I also believe this story is another chapter in the tale of how artists and audiences use music as an everyday form of resistance, an evocation of how lived experience and politics intersect to “exercise some power over, or create some space within, the institutions and social relationships that dominate our lives” (Kelley, 1994, pp. 9-10). This story is a fiction and an autoethnography, an analysis and an argument, an irony and a literal rendition, a scrapbook and a fan letter. It is, above all, a torch song. And in myrobe, in writing, I believe I can sing.

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The first time I see Jackie Ray (pseudonym), she is a big, beautiful bird. She is a long-legged gazelle prancing daintily among the cocktail tables and scattered chairs in the dimly lit bar. Like the other patrons, I crane my neck to see her towering above me. Her lips are pursed, and her eyes dart wildly around the room. Audience members giggle and blush when she moves over them, pecking mischievously. Her head bobs and sways. Pink and purple down catches the air and hovers above our heads. Ray is a dancer, an actress, and a cabaret performer. She teeters deftly on stilts, transforming herself into a floating curiosity, and we eagerly follow her every move. After several turns through the crowd, Ray moves away from us and into the dressing room.

I get up and follow her on the pretense of looking for the restroom. The dressing room door is ajar, and I see Ray remove feathers and beads. I see her
exposed legs strapped into what seem to me—a woman afraid of heights—
heart stoppingly high stilts. I see her head bowed, her neck curled to the line
of the ceiling. I know I am trespassing here, watching Ray's backstage rituals,
looking into a scene that doesn't include me. I look away, ashamed at my
intrusion. I keep moving down the hall, into the dead end. I turn and walk
back toward the bar. When I pass the dressing room a second time, I can't
resist looking, but the door is closed.

Ray returns as the singer in Chanson, an ensemble that plays French cabaret
music—Edith Piaf, Josephine Baker, and Jacques Brel. I have driven two
hours on a weekend to see her sing, and she rewards me by choosing several
of my favorite Piaf numbers—"La Vie en Rose," "Bravo Pour le Clown," and
"La Foule." "La Foule" is also one of Ray's favorites. She loves the language
and beauty of the lyric, the dreamlike quality of the story. She loves how the
man and the woman find each other in the lines, "The crowd throws me into
his arms / Carried away by the crowd who pull us along, carry us along / Squeezed one into the other / we become one body / and flow effortlessly."

She has always wanted to sing this song. It fits her mood, her zest for liv-
ing, her voice. Only I don't know these things, at least not yet. I haven't
screwed up the courage to introduce myself to Ray, to ask if she wouldn't
mind talking about Piaf and torch singing. I haven't accepted an invitation
to drive to her house on a cloudy Thursday for an interview. I haven't been
invited into her kitchen for tea and conversation while she washes and dries
the dishes. I haven't watched Ray pull up a chair to sit and talk, only to push
and dance around it instead (see Figure 1).

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I dream I am in a red theater after the music, the crowd gone, and the stage
empty. I play back an evening of torch songs, this time at a slower speed,
endless revolutions per minute. I savor each note, each twist and bend and
growl and running scale. In the spaces between notes, between bars, and between
words, I hear an opening, a gathering presence. I hear it in the haunting
reminders of the voices of Edith Piaf, Billie Holiday, Lena Horne, Barbra
Streisand, and k.d. lang, yes, but most forcefully in Sarah Vaughan's trilling
bravado. Vaughan's style—her range, her improvisation, her constant variation
of pitch and color and weight—calls attention to what previously had been
covered over by formulaic music and standard lyrical form (Friedwald,
1996, p. 276). A voice booms over the music, narrating and explaining what I
hear: Vaughan uses her voice to savor an emotional pulse in the music and
create a cathartic oneness between entertainer and audience (Friedwald,
1996, p. 276). Her voice has wings: luscious and tensile, disciplined and
nuanced. It is thick as cognac yet soars off the beaten path like an instrumen-
tal solo (Giddens, 1998, p. 301). She bathes in her own sound (Friedwald,
1996, p. 275). She creates a new way to sing and to think about singing (Friedwald,
1996, p. 276). She is caught in between so many terms, positions, structures:
jazz musician and pop star, recording artist and concert diva, commercial suc-
cess and musical creativity, self-indulgence and a desire to keep the music

Though I dream in the gaps and pauses and spaces between voice and
sound, moments tick by in the silences surrounded by each note—silences
that are taut, brimming with anticipation (Elam, 1997, p. 79). I blink. I wait for
the sound to return. I shift in my chair, teetering on the edge of my seat. I crane
my neck, trying to get a better picture of the stage. I fix my gaze on the singer's
eyes. I wonder if I really hear laughter in her voice, if I really hear the brittle
disappointment in her song. I look around and watch the lips of others,
silently mouthing the words. Are they hearing this too?

Vaughan releases another note, and her voice bends, dips low, and breaks,
opening wounds of feeling that bounce off every surface in the room. My eyes
fill with tears. I am called to the stage (Elam, 1997, p. 80). The sound vibrates,
moving in and out of range, a rhythmic dance of connection and separation
(Elam, 1997, p. 79). Lyrics drag behind rhythm and emotion, so by the time I
hear the words, they are filled with my own reverberations. The song remains
the same; its sounding is what induces excess, seepage, a permeation of exist-
ing boundaries, an emotional space (Elam, 1997, p. 80). I touch the table in front of me, the seat beneath me. I close my eyes and waver in and out of Vaughan’s voice, in and out of subject positions, in and out of recognition and rejection, agitation and celebration, difference. I am here, hearing and breathless with anticipation. I open my mouth to speak, but no sound comes out.

My eyes fly open. I sit up, unsure of where I am. I turn on the light. Oh, yes, the hotel, the fieldwork, the evening of torch singing. I look at my legs outlined by the thin sheets, at the clock on the bedside table. I get out of bed and pull a small composition book out of my bag. I write quickly, trying to record the frantic release of my dream:

Emotional space, the distance between the notes of a song or two lines of dialogue or two bars of music. . . . The silences are taut, full of anticipation. Emotional space can create anxio usness and tension—as well as a celebratory pleasure—for audience members. It impels us to participate in a performance and to connect with one another in the sounds of alienation, ecstacy, cultural divisions, and commonalities (Elam, 1997, pp. 79-80). Emotional space brings women’s private lives into public view, questioning any easy distinction between the two. In torch singing, the participatory and confrontational nature of cabaret is essential to emotional space—spectators become an implied community of listeners without forgetting or glossing over contradictions and antagonisms. Emotion and critique are not mutually exclusive. The critical potential of torch singing is better viewed as a space along continuum—from performance as political intervention with specific grievances and remedies in mind to an underground, covert, open-ended commentary on oppression. Emotional space complicates the binary opposition of subject positions, spectators and performers, emotion and intellect, literal meanings and critical interpretations, performance and reality, art and politics. Vaughan and the others make each note resonate with anticipation and infuse each syllable with emotion. They sing good-woman-got-down songs—personal and cultural and political low points—in the space and pause, fits and starts of desire. Audience and performer hear themselves in the music, but not in irredicible tones or characteristics or personalities. They are multiple points of view, a cacophony. They listen as much for the spaces between the notes as they do for the choice of sound, of tone. Their voices wait to see what happens.

I return the composition book to my bag. I shut off the light and curl down into the sheets. I close my eyes and wait for sleep.

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I buy the CD. I get on the mailing list. I follow Ray and Chanson through new arrangements and CD-release parties and late-night sing-alongs, and still I can’t seem to manage to ask my questions, to make my requests. Instead, I send Ray an e-mail explaining myself. She invites me to phone, to talk, and I leave several messages. And then, expecting to speak into the machine again, I call Ray one morning and am surprised by her breathy “Hello?”

Jackie Ray?
Yes?
This is Stacy Holman Jones. I sent you an e-mail? I called last week.

Oh, yes. You wanted to do an interview.
Right. I was hoping we could find a time in the next few weeks to . . .
I’m doing some gardening now, but I could do it in an hour or so.
Oh, well, I’m a few hours away. I’ll need to drive in to the city. Maybe some time . . .
Tomorrow?
Ah, sure, tomorrow would work. Sure.
Can you come around eleven?

I set the time and get directions to Ray’s house. And at eleven the next morning, I knock on her screen door. After several minutes, she answers, looking, well, surprised. I tell her I’m here for our interview. Oh yes, she says, come in. Ray clears a chair and a place at her kitchen table and invites me to sit. She asks if I mind if she cleans up the kitchen a bit while we talk. I say, “Sure, no, not at all.” She smiles and says, “Tell me again what you want to talk about?”

I tell her torch singing and Piaf, and we’re off, talking about Edith and French chansons and American torch songs. I ask her about the connections among these forms, and she pulls her hands out of the dish soap and dries them on a towel as she talks:

I love, love the torch songs, but . . . I’m not into those victim messages that are so heavy in English torch songs. . . . My life does not revolve around men. It may feel like it at times, but I highly resent that. In my own relationship if that’s happening, then I’m not really happy with it. So I got into the French music. . . . The lyrics and the stories are highly engaging, they’re poetic, they’re very interesting, they’re about very full people. . . . “If you love me, I can laugh at all of it.” That’s a richer message . . . than “I really loved you, and in the end, if you die, I’m going to die too.” (J. Ray, personal communication, June 2000)

She offers me tea—licorice or black orange. Absently, I ask for orange. I am playing Ray’s words over in my head and thinking about the poetics of torch singing, about how a performance can create beauty and complexity even when the lyrics aren’t rich or evocative or interesting. How the beauty and complexity of torch singing are a call, a sounding that directs our attention toward what is absent. I ask her to tell me about how she connects with audiences, singing French songs to English speakers. She says,

Piaf would pick a very few gestures that became the song. . . . Some of that came actually from her own nerves about performing and that she had to do something with her hands. . . . But it was also to pick one thing that was very evocative in the song that people could come deeply inside with. I’m singing in French where most people do not understand what I’m saying. . . . I want images that people can understand what the words are, that they can get some idea of what I’m saying in a very spare way. And there’s a lot of times where I’m very still so that they have to just get it from my voice. But partly what my gestures are about how to get to that deep place, something that’s very essential.

I ask about the deep place, the something essential and inside. She stops. She thinks. I stop. I think—about how music can make a livable space for criti-
cal voices, about how bell hooks (1990) said aesthetic practice serves as a foundation for emerging visions and a shared sense of agency, empowerment (pp. 111-112). Ray sighs. She brushes crumbs from the countertop and into the sink. She says,

There’s a certain amount of what you’d expect in a more populist cabaret, cafe type of situation. . . . I want people to want to sing and dance and love more deeply. . . . I want people to be vitalized. . . . What I would like people to feel is more alive. There’s no question that I go for that. I have people who say, “Oh, it just opened up this whole side of me. . . . and it was just this incredible flash.” . . . I feel like I’ve done something if people are crying or laughing or anything like that. . . . So there is this . . . response that I’m going for that way. And that people get that, there’s no question.

I smile. I nod. I say, I think I understand. Ray excuses herself and disappears into the back of the house. I check the tape in the recorder. I make a few notes on the unused pad I brought to the interview.

Shared agency is created in the opening—the flash of participating in the performance, a dialogue—and shattering any possibility of and need for closed and stable discourse (Pollock, 1998, p. 23). It is a sounding—a call for charged participation within the simultaneous push and pull of center and margin, identification and difference (Pollock, 1998, p. 23). The singer and the speaker who express agency—acts of claiming rights and access to music and to language and action—are alive to possibility (Pollock, 1998, p. 23). I wonder whether shared agency is people getting this.

When she returns to the kitchen, I ask Ray how she elicits the response she’s going for from her audiences. She smiles. She pulls out a chair, but she does not sit down. Instead, she leans over the back and stretches and bends, warming up. She says,

There isn’t the fourth wall of musical theater. There isn’t the fourth wall of the opera. You’re much more [saying] . . . “I’m telling you a story; I realize you are out there in the audience.” And that’s a very different thing than . . . other art forms. I kind of have a certain formula, even though I change my program constantly. You have to have a ballad at a certain point, you have to have an English song at a certain point before you lose an audience, where they’re just going, “My mind’s bursting, I’ve had too much French.” . . . It’s usually fourth or fifth. . . . There’s always an English song then. And always a ballad the third song in. . . . I actually am not all that fond of “La Vie en Rose,” but it’s a necessary [song] to sing well. It’s also the one I wait [to do]. . . . People stay because they want . . . to hear “La Vie en Rose.” So you wait a little bit. So there’s a theatricality of waiting.

I think about form and formulas. The torch song is a formula, a standard structure designed for mass production and consistently popular appeal. But torch singing isn’t formulaic. It takes a voice—the “noisy conjunction of multiple, competing voices”—to give the text of a torch song liveness and liveliness (Pollock, 1998, p. 23). Torch singing is a storytelling marked by palpitating vulnerability, a witnessing made by someone who has been there and back. Torch singing is the theatricality of waiting to see what happens when audiences engage with a text, a performance, and a story. Ray asks if I have any more questions. I say,

No, yes, I have just one. Which songs are your favorites? Why?

No reason, just curious.

I’ve always loved “T’es Beau.” There’s humor in it; there’s deep passion; it’s one of the more sweet songs; there’s something so kind and loving . . . I love “my hand trembles, touching you.”

She touches my hand as she says this. I say,

Yes. The song draws you into a space of desire . . . and possibility. It does.

I stand and thank her. She gives me a card announcing Chanson’s next engagement, set for next Friday. I say that I’ll come. I thank her again. She smiles and holds the screen door for me as I move through the doorway and down the stairs. When I reach the sidewalk, I look back, wanting to thank her again, but the door is closed.

SPACES OF ENGAGEMENT

Traffic is at a standstill. I should have known better—driving into the city on a Friday afternoon could take hours. I decide to go straight to the cafe where Ray is playing. I can check into the hotel after the show. When I enter the small cafe, I see Ray in a corner of the room, listening to the musicians play the sound check. She crosses the floor and moves in behind the microphone. She covers one ear and sings a few bars. She turns to look at the violinist and the guitarist, and all three nod. She turns around again and looks right at me. She smiles and walks toward my table. She bends down and whispers in my ear. “Glad you could come. I lost my voice a few days ago and it’s barely back, so I’m saving it.” I nod. I smile. She says, “Enjoy the show.”

The first set includes Piaf’s “Les Amour,” which Ray introduces by telling a story about lovers in Paris doing whatever they want. She confesses that when she and her lover are in Paris, they like to shop for clothes at second-hand stores. She points to the red and strappy and very high heels on her feet. She raises up on her toes and pirouettes and laughs into the microphone. She sings Josephine Baker’s “So Easy to Love” in English, the fourth song in the set, as promised. During “T’es Beau”’s tango-inspired instrumental, she comes off the stage and invites an audience member to dance. She laces her fingers into his, and they spin around the tables closest to the stage while the onlookers clap and cheer.
At the set break, I leave our table and look for the restroom. It is a small space, no bigger than a closet, and I run my hand along the wall looking for the light switch. I find the light and flip the switch. I close the door and slide the bolt into the hinge. On the back of the door, a filmy black dress hangs regally on a papered hanger. It is short sleeved, crepe, with a sweetheart neckline and tiny rhinestone buttons down the front. I look at the yellowed French boutique label and know that this is one of Ray's secondhand Parisian treasures.

I run my hand along the fabric. I take the hanger from the nail and press the dress to my waist. I turn and look at myself in the mirror, trying on the dress and an afternoon of searching through vintage fabrics for just the right thing to take home and on stage. I turn and watch my reflection. The dress lifts and floats around my legs as I spin. I imagine dust dancing in the sunlight streaming through storefront windows. I see myself peering around dressing room curtains, saying to my lover, "Do you like this one? What do you think?" I see myself in the dress, sitting at a tiny table in a candlelit restaurant sipping champagne. I see myself singing along, shouting "Bravo! Bravo!"

I return the hanger to the nail in the restroom door. I look again at myself in the mirror, at my plain T-shirt and jeans. I can see the dress behind me, waiting for Ray to put it on before the next set. It is a costume—hers and mine—and also the dress of a woman neither of us knows. I think too about how music—Ray's and mine and the women neither of us knows—is a costume, a space of engagement.

**en*gage*ment (en gaj'ment), n. 1. the act of engaging or the state of being engaged. 2. An appointment or arrangement. 3. Betrothal: They announced their engagement. 4. A pledge; an obligation or agreement. 5. Employment, or a period or post of employment, esp. in the performing arts. 6. An encounter, conflict, or battle. 7. Mech. The act or state of interlocking. [1615-25; ENGAGE + MENT] (p. 644)

An engagement is an act, a state, an appointment, an arrangement, an ancient promise to be true, a condition of employment, an interlocking conflict, or an encounter. An engagement asks that we try something on, that we tie the knot, that we make contact, that we examine the connections, that we don't look away.

I splash water on my face and watch my eyes in the mirror. I see the dress behind me, waiting for a body. It is a flimsy imitation of haute couture, a hand-me-down, a scavenged identity. I think about how music can be a put on, a passing pleasure, a moment of separation and transcendence.

**tran*scend*ence (tran sen'dens), n. the quality or state of being transcendent. (p. 2099)

**tran*scend*ent (tran sen'dent), adj. 1. going beyond ordinary limits; surpassing; exceeding. 2. Superior or supreme. 3. Theol. (of the Deity) transcending the

I turn away from the mirror and look at the dress again, waiting for a purpose, an occasion. It waits on the back of the door, as it waited in the vintage clothing store and in the closets of its other owners, to be chosen. It waits while its wearer undresses or emerges fresh from the shower, sticky with talc. It waits to be worn. It is a standard form waiting to be filled—with flesh, with heartbeat, with admiring glances, with movement and meaning and music. Its bearer might feel superior or supreme; she might try to transcend the universe, time, experience, barriers, and oppressions. She might want to hear separation and the collapse of difference in her music. She might want to take solace in a song, a narrative on women's universal suffering. She might want to lose herself in a lyric that pictures a vicarious existence and concerted critique a faraway concern—ideas for other places and other dresses. Its bearer might also feel humble, obligated to make good on the promise of encounter, of conflict, and of disparate experiences, relationships, and structures. She might want to hear irony and double entendre and countermelodies in her music. She might want to use a song as an invitation to imagine and demand another sort of relationship, another set of meanings, a new kind of form—one deeply inside history and alive with "unforeseen pleasures" (Gordon, 1997, p. 207).

I touch the dress again, embarrassed at the designs I have on it. It is a standard form, and there's no guarantee that its wearer will inhabit it with a critical consciousness or a resistant message or a political performance. And there's no guarantee that I'd recognize an oppositional style or a flair for protest even if she did. I cannot read or speak or interpret "on" such a dress. I can only speak "in it, in its fashion" (Barthes, 1975, p. 22). I check the lock and slip the dress off the hanger. I kick off my shoes and pull my T-shirt over my head. I hear a knock at the door. I hear Jackie Ray saying, "Hello? Are you almost finished in there? I need to change."

I pull the T-shirt back over my head. I scramble into my shoes and shove the dress onto the hanger. I open the door, breathless and pink cheeked. I say,

Hi, sorry.

[She smiles. She whispers.] No problem. The ladies is doubling as my dressing room. Did you see it? The black dress on the back of the door? Yes. It's beautiful.

I got it in Paris years ago. Very Piaf, don't you think?

Yes, very Piaf.

I squeeze out the door and past her. She smiles again. She steps into the tiny space and closes the door behind her.

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I return to my table. I turn over the page of notebook paper that I've been using to record song titles and introductions and audience responses and write about engagement and transcendence in performance and music and politics.

Chandra Mohanty (n.d.) describes a politics of transcendence as a strategy that proposes separation and collapses difference in the name of community; a strategy that assumes women are unified by a common experience of oppression without asking how they might be located in history, a strategy that announces women's collective vision and recommends we transcend engagement, agency, struggle.

A politics of engagement and location, on the other hand, means recognizing the fragmented, discontinuous nature of experience as it happens in time and space and history; it means claiming a particular, peculiar, territorial notion of agency; it means working for a collective vision and striving to change relationships structures in the temporality of struggle (Mohanty, n.d., pp. 36, 39-40).

Performance can be an occasion to momentarily transcend differences in search of a common understanding. Performance can also be a space of dialogue where different voices, experiences, and positions can question, debate, and challenge each other (Conquergood, 1985, p. 9). Performance might also be a means for creating an oppositional consciousness that is voiced outside of the concert hall or living room—in the voting booth, at the company picnic, on the assembly floor, in the supermarket checkout line.

Like performance, music itself is more or less "political"—it is a space that shifts and moves along a trajectory from labor songs and protest songs designed to move audiences to political action . . . to ballads and love songs designed to evoke a heightened sense of experience. Music is a representation of an ideology and the dissection and exposition of that ideology.

The radical possibilities in music and performance are immanently practical, not black and white, easy to interpret as apolitical or resistive. I wonder if it is to stay open, to avoid assigning superiority or significance or certain meaning to either the transcendent or the engaging and to listen instead for both the transcendent and the engaging. Maybe it isn't that torch singing makes room for something to be done, but that torch singing does something to make room—a space, a gap, an opening for the power of stories. Maybe.

The musicians begin warming up, and I look toward the stage. Ray is there, behind the microphone in the black dress. She welcomes us back for the last set and thanks us for being such a wonderful audience, so alive and vibrant. She begins with "La Vie en Rose" because we have been waiting to hear it. I shift in my seat. I lean in and ready myself for this familiar reward.

**GIVING PAUSE**

I close my eyes and listen, though I don't imagine myself in Piaf's dress or in Paris or a life in pink. Instead, I see Katie rushing to cross a busy New York street. She is late for her shift to collect signatures and distribute leaflets urging her government to ban the bomb. She is in charge, informed, and loud. She is Jewish, political, and proud.

Katie looks up from her work—her cause, her passion—and sees Hubbell (once her work, her cause, and her passion) emerge from a car across the street. He is beautiful, intractable, all American.

Hubbell waves. Katie rushes to cross the busy New York street. They kiss, then embrace. A beautiful, perhaps intractable, and certainly all-American woman moves into the scene. She is Hubbell's fiancée. Katie, Hubbell, and the fiancée make small talk and empty promises to meet for drinks, then say good-bye. Katie returns to her work to ban the bomb.

But this isn't the end. Now Hubbell crosses the busy New York street. He tells Katie that she never gives up. She says that she only gives up when she is absolutely forced to. They kiss, embrace, and say good-bye.

Hubbell returns to his fiancée. Katie returns, once again, to her work. Streisand sings. "Memories."

I cry each time I see the final scene between Katie and Hubbell in *The Way We Were* (Stark & Pollack, 1974). I have to see only that last scene, hear only those last sounds: "Memories." I cry for Katie and Hubbell, for the way they tried but just couldn't make their relationship work. I cry for Katie's refusal to give up on her causes or her heart. I cry for how she feels forced to choose between her passion and her love.

I have long loved *The Way We Were* (Stark & Pollack, 1974), in spite of its swooning melodrama—or perhaps because of it. I feel the harsh choices and tensions and disappointments of the movie, even though it is missing a crucial scene—the one in which Hubbell comes home from his work as a Hollywood screenwriter and tells Katie the studio is going to fire him because he has a subversive wife. He means that Katie is too involved in protesting the blacklist of Hollywood actors and screenwriters in the era of McCarthyism. They are sitting down to dinner and wine in their Malibu beach house. Waves crash in the background. Katie is pregnant and glamorous, with red, red lipstick and a cause.

Katie says,

So if I close my eyes and let those fascists get away with destroying people's lives all in the name of patriotism you won't have a subversive wife?

Katie, nothing is going to change.

If I sit by and shut up and play the good girl you won't have a subversive wife?

[Hubbell raises his eyebrows, but says nothing.]

If we get a divorce, you won't have a subversive wife?

[Hubbell looks away.]

If let them cut this scene and simply say, "Isn't it funny how decisions are forced on you, willfully," the audience won't have to watch another boring political debate at the end of the movie?\(^5\)

[Hubbell gets up from the couch. He turns his back on Katie and looks out the French doors at the ocean.]

If I ask only that you stay with me until the baby is born, the audience will remain alert and engaged with the story, even though it doesn't make sense?

[Hubbell nods, but he does not look at Katie.]
And when I see you in front of the Plaza Hotel and say that I was forced to give up on you, the audience will think it’s because I talked too much or because you didn’t like my perfume, my family, my pot roast . . . and not because I couldn’t betray my friends or my beliefs, even for you?
[Hubbell opens the door and steps onto the sand.]
And the audience will think that when I sing “Memories” it means that I’d rather have you than my own political consciousness and beliefs?
[Hubbell walks toward the water.]
The sound of the ocean rushes into the room, almost drowning out Katie’s speech. She has to yell to be heard over the waves.] So the audience will think that you didn’t have a subservient wife after all?

The audience never missed the scene where politics and love collide and choices are made. But I miss this scene when I watch The Way We Were. I miss it because this scene asks whether politics and emotion are an either/or proposition. It asks what spaces of critique are opened up when people are articulate in their criticism and agitated to act, as Katie was? It asks what happens when people are silenced, when crucial scenes are cut out of the film—right there on the positive print with a razor blade—and they are left to speak, instead, inside a sentimental song while the credits roll?16 I wonder why, when people are moved to act out politically—for example, during the labor protests of the 1930s or the civil rights movement and feminism’s second wave in the 1960s and 1970s—music is a powerful form for overt protest.17 I wonder why, when people are silenced or even complacent or content, music is space for marking time, of enduring, rather than resisting.18 I wonder if it isn’t so clear, if it depends.

I hear Streisand’s voice forget what’s too painful to remember, and I think that what happened to the razored scene too political for the audience to sit through. She chooses to remember the laughter instead, and I think about how I choose to remember the laughter in a torch singer’s voice, along with the disappointment. I think of Katie, shouting at Hubbell that people are their principles! In the very next scene, she stands by her car, a sporty convertible. She is talking to her radical friend, Paula, who says, “What’s more important?” She means love or politics.

Katie says, “He is.” She means Hubbell.
“That’s your choice, Katie. That’s your choice.” She means that Katie must choose.

Katie gets in the car and starts the engine. She speeds away, determined to stand by her man instead of her principles. But of course that’s not what happens. It’s not clear who leaves whom or whether love wins out over politics or politics over love. It depends on which movie you see, on which scenes you remember or rewrite, on which story you hear, on how you shift the gears of that sporty convertible.

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I don’t know how to drive a manual transmission car. I am self-conscious about this. I sometimes joke that I am the only adult woman in America who does not know how to drive a stick shift, though I have tried to learn several times. I will climb into my lover’s car, and he will be calm and encouraging and helpful as I grind the gears and move us along in jolts and hesitations. I will kill the engine, several times. I will sigh and try again. I will squeal the tires and get frustrated, mad. I will whine, “There are too many things to do at once.” I will shout, “I’ve got enough to learn without learning this!” I will beg to quit, to go home. My lover will be firm, but soon he will give in to my demands.

When I get into my own automatic transmission car, I am thankful for each smooth transition. I worry when the engine hesitates, when it seems to be racing ahead without shifting gears. I worry that my transmission will fail, and I will be stuck, unable to move. I turn up the radio so I don’t have to listen to these pauses and delays.

Gear shifting is a metaphor for varying critical perspectives and political projects, a metaphor for different standpoints. The gears represent points of contact among forms of oppositional ideologies, and the usefulness of being able to move in and out of these positions depending on our goals and abilities to speak and act out in public. Gear shifting represents how subjectivity and representation move and change, as well as how political projects move change based on these shifting subjectivities and representations. Drawing on the mobility of gear shifting, Chela Sandoval (1991) described a “topography” of consciousness in opposition, from the Greek word topes or place (p. 11). These places are “oppositional ideological forms” or “modes” that subordinated people occupy in their efforts to resist domination (pp. 11-12).

We could engage an “equal rights” mode and charge that differences in status are only matters of appearance—that there is an essential equality of all individuals. On the basis of this equality, we could demand legitimation within existing social structures (Sandoval, 1991, p. 12).

We could take a “revolutionary” tack and proudly claim our differences from those in power. We can call for a “social transformation that will accommodate and legitimate those differences, by force if necessary” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 12). We could work to break with, rather than assimilate to, the existing social order (Sandoval, 1991, p. 12).

We could assume a “supremacist” position and assert difference as a mark of our superiority to those in power. We can also claim that our superior social and psychological existence allows us to provide society with a “higher ethical and moral vision” and that we would make more effective leaders than those currently in power (Sandoval, 1991, p. 13).

We could adopt a “separatist” attitude, which like the equality tactic, recognizes how difference has created “inferior” categories of people. However, rather than working for equality within existing structures, striving for revo-
olutionary transformation of those structures, or trying to establish our own leadership of society, we could seek to “protect and nurture the differences... through complete separation from the dominant social order” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 13).

These modes and tactics are not mutually exclusive—no one gear is the final answer (Sandoval, 1991, p. 14). They are not hierarchical, one better or less dangerous or more effective than another (Sandoval, 1991, p. 12). They are not easily engaged but instead require a concerted effort—a commitment to taking a position at any given moment. They are a source of mobility, allowing movement between and through oppositional ideologies, even when you grind the gears. Gear shifting animates Mohanty’s call for a politics of engagement and particular agency based on time, place, and history in its capacity to reinvent subjectivity depending on the “kinds of oppression to be confronted” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 14).20 Gear shifting is an interpretative and practically strategic response to the contradictions of difference within any radical, political performance. Those who learn to shift—to move in varying speeds and forces—create a fifth gear, a tactical, “differential consciousness” that “permits the driver to select, engage, and disengage gears in a system for the transmission of power” (Sandoval, 1991, p. 14).

Even though I never learned to shift the gears of a car, I have learned how to listen. I can hear when the motor is ready—when it is revving—for change. I can also hear how gear shifting operates in torch singing. Sandoval (1991) said that differential consciousness functions in and through social, cultural, and political hierarchies, locations, and systems of value (p. 14). The mode of consciousness chosen at any given moment is a tactical move, fraught with effort and open to possibilities. Torch singing also functions within these differentials, enacting the “recovery, revenge, and reparation” of a failed romance, a recording industry, a star’s discourse, a dominant ideology (p. 14). I hear the gears engage when I read about Vaughan and Horne’s demands for racial equality in ticket sales and admissions to their live performances and their own compensation (Gourse, 1994, pp. 56, 103; Haskins, 1984, pp. 95, 98). I hear Vaughan and Horne protest that differences in status are arbitrary and demand that their work and their fans be treated equitably within the existing structures of recording contracts and concert venues, not to mention their struggles to gain legitimacy within the larger social structures of African American politics, race relations, and human relationships. I hear them engage a fight for equality. As Horne said, “I don’t run away from controversy” (quoted in Haskins, 1984, p. 208).

I hear the gears disconnect then reengage in how Piaf sings songs of the resistance, in how Horne sings civil rights anthems, in how Holiday pauses to sing the antilyrical “Strange Fruit” at the end of every set (Clarke, 1994, pp. 164-165; Haskins, 1984, p. 158; Lange, 1981, p. 90). Their critics and biographers are not convinced that these women sing to break with the existing social order (Clarke, 1994, p. 165; Crosland, 1987, p. 198; Haskins, 1984, p. 154). But their voices call attention to difference and provide a backbeat for other efforts to create social change (see Denning, 1997, p. 334, on Horne and Holiday). When singing these songs becomes uncomfortable and inconvenient and bad for business, Piaf and Horne and Holiday keep them in the lineup because the oppressions that inspired the music haven’t changed or disappeared (Holiday, 1992, p. 84).


I hear another shift in how k.d. lang sees her coming out as a moment for creating a separate space of intimacy with the women in her audience (Udovitch, 1995, p. 337). She believes women have “to realize that we’re different, and we have to find some way of making that difference known inside ourselves” (Lemon, 1993, p. 38). A stage is a location of power and empowerment, and lang holds out hope that her art can transcend her sexuality—that her voice can be more than a sexual preference, located in time and space and history—and still retain a desirous charge (Lemon, 1993, p. 42).

Reading and watching and listening to these women, I hear the gears shift. My listening moves in and through modes of consciousness, and what I hear at any given moment is a tactical move. In some positions, a political critique is clear and deliberate and direct—music is a form of opposition and political action (Mattern, 1998, pp. 26-28). In others, I hear strains of community building and boundary marking. Music is a site, an opening, a space for deliberation and connection and contention (Mattern, 1998, pp. 29-30). And sometimes—between and among notes and lines and fixed positions—I hear everything at once. I guess I am still learning.

I am learning in my listening and writing and playing to shift in and through these various voices, histories, positions, and oppositional ideologies. I am also learning that fits and starts and stalls and reversals are part of the story. I am beginning to understand that my inability to create smooth transitions or to come to a complete stop or solution is part of the effort of writing, waiting for words to come. I am learning that I don’t have to write everything at once—to contain what we see and hear and feel in my fieldwork. Instead, I am writing to make room, to create a space for what happens in between note and line, emotion and intellect, thought and action.

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I open my eyes as Ray sings the last lines of “La Vie en Rose.” I scold myself for not paying attention, for hearing Streisand’s voice and picturing Katie and the scenes from _The Way We Were_ instead. I remember that Katie wanted to move to France and study French cookery while Hubbell finished his novel. Maybe that’s why I let myself get carried away from here—from the fieldwork and the black dress and the songs of Piaf—and into a story about cut scenes and convertibles. I look around the room, at an audience pulsed with the reverberations of “La Vie en Rose.” I look at the empty page in front of me, at the empty chairs around me.

I see the spaces there, simple forms that are open, possible, waiting to be filled. The page, the chair, the dress, the convertible, the torch song are not simply containers but also products and producers of action (Fuoss, 1998, p. 109). They are invitations into a space of interpretation, into a lyrical place that gives pause. Pause for what? Pause for whom? Pause for trying on a text and a performance. Pause for emotional space, for filling in my own meanings and understandings. Pause for reciprocal conversations that create shared knowledges, momentary identifications, and new visions out of found objects and received forms. Pause to shift gears, to disengage and reengage standpoints, positions, and purposes. Pause to consider the “density and force” of musical politics (Stewart, 1996, p. 6).

I want to pause here. I want to pause to say that the possibilities for a musical politics of torch singing are not fixed in form or in purpose. These possibilities shift and change—one moment the music, the performance, the audience might seek equality, the next an engaged revolution. One moment we might sing supreme connections, the next sound a transcendent separation. These shifts and changes do not rely on a homogeneous, comfortable pluralism; they depend on history and context and opportunity. They are as abruptly subtle for audience members as they are for performers. Indeed, they can’t happen without a performance.

The resistive possibilities of a song of unrequited love are generated in the singing—in how a performance of a standard creates new spaces, new movements, and new meanings—and in the actions that singers and listeners take to choose an inflection, an interpretation, a mode of consciousness, a position. These actions are hard to hear and difficult to interpret completely or conclusively (Scott, 1990, p. xii). They rely on a tone, an unseemly note or trill, a spectral feeling of an “ungraspable ‘something more,’” an inking of “things are not as they seem” (Scott, 1990, p. 20; Stewart, 1996, p. 6).

The challenge is to tell the story of listening and hearing and making music—however partial, however peculiar—in volupitous, evocative, nervous detail (Stewart, 1996, p. 7). The challenge isn’t getting the story right but getting it “differently contoured and nuanced” (Richardson, 1994, p. 521). Torch singing is not an end, a blueprint for thinking and acting, but a constant beginning again—a search, an argument, an unfinished longing. The very effort to imagine it, then, is itself a continuous effort to reopen stories and spaces of cultural critique that are just as continuously being slammed shut with every new “solution” to the problem of music and performance and resistance (Stewart, 1996, p. 6).

The door to the cafe opens, and the night air rushes in around my legs. I look at the stage and I hear Ray’s finale, a rousing and frenetic “Bravo Pour le Clown.” In Ray’s version, the clown goes a little wild, a little crazy, a little drunk with the applause and each successive Bravo! Bravo! from the crowd. I sing and shout and clap with the rest of the audience. I follow along, getting a little wild, a little crazy, a little drunk with the music, deeply inside.

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I hear a sound, a knock, a presence. I sit up in bed and search the hotel room, squinting while my eyes adjust to the sunlight streaming through the window. I can’t see what’s changed, though I know something is different. I get out of bed and pull on my red bathrobe. I shuffle to the window and look down at early morning movements of shopkeepers and day workers and hotel guests. I turn away from the daylight, determined to get back into bed and back to sleep. I look across the room and see that the door is ajar. So that’s what I heard. I move to push it shut and feel a cool breeze wash over my legs. I decide to leave the door open and climb back into bed, bathrobe and all.

NOTES

1. Grumet’s (1995) bathrobe is green. She wrote, “It is a green cocoon. After a while words fly out of it” (p. 37).
2. This phrase is part of Reinnelt’s (1998) description of Walter Benjamin’s notion of utopia. She wrote, “The work of utopia is precisely to offer a horizon of possibility, a negative or empty space, an imaginary no-where, as a provocation to desire” (p. 294).
3. Stewart (1996) wrote,

   Imagine how narrator and audience find themselves in the space of a doubled, haunting epistemology that comes of speaking from within the object spoken of. How they find themselves both subject and object of story, both inside and outside storied events, simultaneously seduced and watchful, firmly placed in the immanence of remembered scenes and unfolding events. (p. 34)

4. Speaking of the irony invested in the “great American songs,” jazz musician Patricia Barber noted, “The form as it has been established demands a certain twist of lyric or perspective or poetry” (Seiz, 2000, par. 32).
5. Gourse (1994) wrote that Vaughan’s accompanists “often mentioned they felt as if eons were passing between each note” (p. 90).
6. Richards (1995) wrote that the central principle of emotional space is “the juxtaposition in performance of radical differences, oftentimes understood as binary oppositions, that generate deep emotional responses from those assembled, challenging them to imagine some interpretive resolution” (p. 72).
7. Reinholt (1998) noted, "Spectators are, at the least, an implied community for the time of performance—even if riven with antagonisms and contradictions that make community a weak signifier" (p. 286).

8. Colloran and Spencer (1998) wrote, "Political" theater exists on a continuum, from theater as an action of political intervention taken on behalf of a designated population and having a specific political agenda; to theater that offers itself as a public forum through plays with overtly political content; to theater whose politics are covertly, or unwittingly, on display, inviting an actively critical stance from its audiences. (p. 2)

9. Stewart (1996) wrote,

The "space on the side of the road"... becomes a space in which people literally "find themselves" caught in space and time and watching to see what happens, and yet it also makes them irreducible subjects encountering a world. It places the storyteller on the same plane with the story and produces not meanings per se but points of view, voices, and tropes. It implies both the contingency of subject positions and the reversibility of things, the ability to turn time back on itself and to reinscribe events in distinct voices. (p. 36)

10. Scarry (1999) asserted that beauty and justice form a symmetrical relationship that models a just and symmetrical relationship among individuals. When justice is absent, or invisible, beauty-aesthetic practice becomes "pressing, active, insistent, calling out for, directing our attention toward, what is absent... beauty is a call" (p. 109).

11. Stewart (1996) described the space on the side of the road and the stories told there as a scene that palpitates with vulnerability. Uncertainty and challenge, painful memory and self-parody, eccentric characters and unearthly voices all point to a world in which there is more to things than meets the eye and people are marked by events and drawn out of themselves..... They are opening stories that place the speaker in relation to others and the world and demonstrate an authority to speak as one who has "been there" and been impacted or changed. (p. 37)

12. My language is drawn from Mohanty's (n.d.) description and critique of a "politics of transcendence," which she asserted collapses difference to transcend barriers and oppression between and among women based on race, class, gender, and sexual practice. A politics of transcendence constitutes the experience of women (as a unified category) "outside real politics or history" (p. 36). Women are unified—an individual woman can identify with women as a category—by recognizing their common experience of oppression. However, this homogenizing unification negates any specific, historically located notion of experience and creates a utopian vision of collective political action (while running the risk of undercutting struggle all together). As Mohanty put it, "Ultimately in this reductive utopian vision, men participate in politics while women can only hope to transcend them" (p. 38).

13. Mohanty (n.d., pp. 39-40) contrasted a politics of transcendence with a politics of "engagement" and "location," which means working within existing racial, class, sexual, and gender relationships and structures in ways that recognize the differences among individuals and the particular meanings of these differences within various historical moments while still striving to change these relationships/structures.

14. Edwards (1997, p. 339) recounted how the crucial scene—a scene screenwriter Arthur Laurents believed was "the entire motivation for Kat’ie’s leaving Hubbell"—was cut from the film following a sneak preview at the Northpoint Theater in San Francisco. The scene presented here is my own construction based on Hubbell’s line, "The studio says they are going to fire me because I have a subversive wife," and Katie’s reply, "So if we get a divorce and you don’t have a subversive wife" (Stark & Pollack, 1974).

15. Edwards (1997) wrote that producer Ray Stark decided the audience was bored during the six-minute scene" (p. 339).

16. Edwards (1997) quoted director Sydney Pollack, who cut the scene following the preview. He said, "I didn’t even have the negative with me. I just made the cut with a razor blade on the positive print before previewing it the next night" (pp. 339, 342).

17. See Denning’s (1997) work, which traces the connections between music and the labor movement; Brian Ward’s (1998) exploration of the relationship between rhythm and blues and the civil rights movement; and Cynthia Lott’s (1992) consideration of the role of women’s music in the radical and cultural feminist movements.


19. Sandoval (1991, pp. 11, 12-14) discussed how various oppositional subject positions have been enacted by U.S. Third World feminists. She clearly asserted, however, that her "topography of consciousness... identifies nothing more and nothing less than the modes the subordinated of the United States (of any gender, race, or class) claim as politicized and oppositional stances in resistance to domination" (p. 14).

20. Where Mohanty (n.d., pp. 41) was critical of a politics of transcendence, Sandoval’s (1991) topology suggests that separation—which shares many of the characteristics of a politics of transcendence as described by Mohanty—is a potentially useful strategy for feminist solidarity and struggle in particular instances, contexts, histories, and situations.

21. Stewart (1996) wrote,

Imagine how an interpretive space, a cultural epistemology, can be culled into a lyric image that gives pause, how it is these lyric images—that seem to matter most, how this low point in action could become the high point of cultural practice: the place from which big meanings emerge. (p. 34)

REFERENCES


Jones / EMOTIONAL SPACE


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