

McKinney, Cait. "There is thunder in our hearts." In *Michèle Pearson Clarke: Muscle Memory* (Hamilton ON: Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2022).

There is thunder in our hearts
Cait McKinney

To croon is to sing in a sentimental manner, usually about falling in love or having your heart broken or being home for Christmas. The style means something specific in musicology. It originally referred to male performers of the early radio era who sang in soft, light voices embellished by the electric recording process. As a style, crooning is about incongruity: a gentle, high-octave warble that sounds like it "shouldn't come from a man." An image search for crooning turns up pictures of Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, and Bruno Mars. But a history of crooning would be incomplete without k.d. lang's cover of Roy Orbison's "Crying" on MTV Unplugged (1993) or Whoopi Goldberg singing "You Got It" to Mary-Louise Parker dying of AIDS in *Boys on the Side* (1995). These are also moments of crooning as gendered incongruity, but here the surprise is butches singing sad songs publicly, with feeling.

Sentimentality is often denied to masculine (masc) women and non-binary people who are pressured to divest from conventionally feminine displays of emotion. We learn to blend in, or look tough and unflappable, which is not conducive to singing for an audience. Ann Cvetkovich argues that, given this culture of stoic comportment, representations of butch feeling push us to rethink what vulnerability means: It is "not a sign of disempowerment but a privilege that is often unavailable and harder to achieve than the conventional stereotype of women as sentimental would have it."¹ This pursuit of elicit butch feeling occupies much lesbian art and literary history. Jess, the protagonist of Leslie Feinberg's semiautobiographical *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) spends most of the novel striving toward this hard-to-achieve vulnerability. They wonder aloud to their butch co-conspirator Frankie about the sound this release would make: "'Frankie, I've got no words for the feelings that are tearing me apart. What would our words sound like?' I looked up at the sky. 'Like thunder, maybe.'"²

Thunder isn't necessarily loud, in fact, it's often experienced as distant rumbling. But thunder always interrupts, announcing a larger shift in the weather. Michèle Pearson Clarke's *Quantum Choir* (2022) brings this thunder in the form of an amateur crooning session that is more about the work it took to get in front of the camera than the performance itself. The four-channel video installation is a meditation on becoming vulnerable as a fundamentally gendered and gendering experience in which the viewer is asked to bear witness and to reciprocate with something like care.

When Clarke invited me to write about *Quantum Choir*, she described it as work about "the spectrum of queer female masculinity," which evokes terms I love that people don't seem to use much anymore: butch, stud, bull-dyke. Some folks think these concepts are distinct from trans identities, while others (my non-binary, butch self included) locate them along the spectrum of trans-masculine identity. Gender is complicated and fundamentally relational, even though it is experienced as personal most of the time. Regardless, for me, trans studies offers the richest accounts of how gender works within a larger social system of surveillance, attention and reciprocity.

¹ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 69.

² Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel* (New York: Alyson Books, 1993), 275.

In *Trans Care* (2020), Hil Malatino draws on the work of McKenzie Wark and Andrea Long Chu to talk about gender as a gift we give the other. He writes: “One asks for it [gender], one relies on the other to grant it, to confer the desired recognition. We may attempt to exert some minimal agency as supplicants—semaphore certain visual, auditory, and linguistic cues—but we are in no way in control of the exchange, can in no way determine the outcome.”³ Malatino names a fundamental tension: there are the styles and gestures we put out to the world to communicate gender, which are never guaranteed, and then there is the recognition that others can provide us in response, or not. This is not just a theory about gender but a description of the everyday calculations made while being in relation with others in bodies that are not gendered according to the script. How safe is that bathroom? Do I look good in this shirt? We become experts at weights and measures.

One asks for it, one relies on the other to grant it: this describes what it feels like to ask for something you need very badly, and to wait to see if you will receive it. At stake is an attachment to a scene of recognition that might either affirm or fundamentally unmoor one’s sense of self. The lag can feel like an instant or forever. It is constant, unrelenting, and makes it hard to just be unselfconscious in one’s gestures. Within this economy of waiting and supplication, *Quantum Choir* asks what it means to *let loose*. And not just to let loose all of a sudden, with abandon, but to work hard, over time, to strain and mold the voice and the body in preparation for a mode of gendered expression the audience is rarely called on to witness and reciprocate.

Warming Up

Quantum Choir is twelve and a half minutes long and nearly eight of those minutes are spent watching the choir getting ready to sing. The four singers run through a series of exercises they learned from a voice teacher, designed to warm up the vocal cords, lips, mouth, and diaphragm. Like sports, singing relies on heating up the muscles so they become elastic and pliant, in order to perform at one’s peak and avoid strain. Athletes, like singers, have established routines for getting warm. In soccer, warm-ups can include elevating the heart rate with cardio, dynamic stretching and other mobility exercises, and ball dribbling to sharpen the reflexes. Unlike singing alone or in a choir, team sports are outlets where masc women can thrive, as long as their identities and physiologies stay within the contours of their leagues’ or governing bodies’ definitions of being “cis-enough.” Viewers of *Quantum Choir* navigate a gallery floor strewn with soccer balls and fluorescent yellow agility cones used for training. These objects refer to a different context of skill and public spectacle, recalling the athletic fields on which each of these singers feels more at home. As a sculptural video work, the installation is an invitation to look, but there are obstacles along the way: we have to work for it too.

For eight minutes the choir members hiss and trill and take deep breaths and hum until they are warm enough to sing. These gestures recall the labour that brought each person to this scene: deciding to participate, training with a vocal coach, learning the song, practicing with a choreographer, showing up to the shoot, singing in front of Clarke and the crew. This is as much a part of *Quantum Choir* as the realized work we see in the gallery. Clarke’s decision to make a work that is personal and uncomfortable and place herself in it—an ongoing theme in the artist’s practice—adds to this sense of the project as hard work and a generous gift.

³ Hil Malatino, *Trans Care* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 36.

The warm-up feels earnest and joyful, but the singers are also nervous. As they transition into singing the opening lines of John Grant's "Queen of Denmark," another layer of effort emerges in the form of vocal strain. Clarke chose this song because she's loved it for a long time, but the song's range is vast. The verses are low, comfortable for a baritone or tenor, while the chorus jumps an octave into a range that's more suited to a typical "female" voice. I cannot sing "Queen of Denmark" well and would never choose it for a karaoke event at which I wanted to impress someone. All voices are self-consciously crafted in relation to gendered expectations: think, for example, of the vocal fry and upspeak for which queer people and women are often derided.⁴ Singing below range places palpable strain on these voices, a metonym for the maintenance work and comportment involved in doing gender within difficult conditions.

Catharsis

In *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* (2019), Karen Tongson offers a careful, queer biography of the 1970s crooner (and self-described tomboy) via her own memories of growing up in Southern California and the Philippines, where Carpenter is hugely popular. Carpenter, who appears on the surface to be the pinnacle of basic, suburban '70s whiteness, is Tongson's namesake. In the book, Tongson relates her own stories of growing up sideways in relation to music, performance, whiteness, and gender. She describes joining the marching band, during her first year of high school, instead of the choir that she really wanted to be in: "I never thought I could sing, because I didn't think I was pretty enough and my voice felt too low. Those two failings, at least in my fragile teen psyche, kept my face pressed up against the glass of the choir room (which shared an adjoining set of practice rooms with the marching band), even though deep within my soul, and at the seat of my diaphragm, I desperately wanted—needed—to sing. Until my junior year, I emoted the only way I knew how: by wailing melodiously on the alto saxophone..."⁵ I saw Tongson launch this book in Los Angeles, at Dynasty Handbag's monthly *Weirdo Night* at the Zebulon café. Tongson stood at a microphone on an empty stage and read from the book, the way writers usually do. But then the lights dimmed and the instrumental track from The Carpenters' 1971 hit "Superstar" began to play. The opening oboe glissando was followed by Tongson's voice: "Long ago, and oh so far away..." We were, all of us, rooting for Tongson to be good, and she was, but it didn't matter: the crooning shared in this room full of weirdos and gender troublemakers was bigger than critique.

The singers in *Quantum Choir* are not good at singing; they are capable amateurs with the desire to get something off their chests and the resolve to risk vulnerability and endure tremendous discomfort to do so. Singing feels good, sometimes *because* it feels so bad—that's why we do it in the shower, or after a break-up to sad songs on Spotify. These singers are hypervisible as they exert their feelings. They aren't wallflowers, even as they stand in front of backdrops made of flowers. The intensity that comes along with letting go is apparent during the warm-up exercises, when a singer's composure is broken by uncontrollable laughter, or at the end of the song, when Clarke gives herself over to the tears she has been holding onto. Joyful moments of unselfconsciousness feel raw because they are so rare, happening

⁴ Alexandra Werier, "Changing Voices: A study of transfeminine vocality" (Master's thesis, SFU, 2021) <https://summit.sfu.ca/item/21190>.

⁵ Karen Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 55.

sometimes in sex, sports, or nightlife.⁶ Leave me alone, but also look at me: this is the paradox of queer-masc embodiment that Clarke also explores in the self-portrait series, *The Animal Seems to be Moving* (2018–), shown in the adjacent gallery. The slide between wanting validation from the world and repudiating that recognition is belted out, laid bare in the song's last crescendo: "Don't know what to want from this world / I really don't know what to want from this world / I don't know what it is you wanna want from me / You really have no right to want anything from me at all."

Quantum Choir takes up Clarke's broader fascination with repair as work and process, as seen in her labour-intensive, technically demanding engagement with learning analog photography and using it to represent Blackness otherwise in *A Welcome Weight on My Body* (2018), or in the palpable reluctance and electricity with which broken-up lesbians hold hands in *It's Good to Be Needed* (2013). Repair and healing are not the same thing. Healing is a passive practice. We can work on healing to be sure—in therapy, or by resting—but it's partly about time and getting out of the way of ourselves. Repair on the other hand takes work: it is an active stance that starts with assessing damage and your capacities for making something function again. Repair is vulnerable-making and without guarantees.

It matters that a choir takes on this repair work together, not just because there's strength in numbers but because choirs are sacred. They are a dedicated, shared practice that become bigger than their component parts through the commitment and belief that each participant gifts to the endeavor, and to each other. These singers were filmed separately and then synchronized in editing during a COVID-19 moment in which digital platforms, like Zoom, have notoriously failed to capture singing in sync. In this isolating context, Clarke's work to digitally stitch these singers together is all the more reparative. Through it all, whatever the world throws us, we persist, interrupt, and rumble on.

[Author's bio]

Cait McKinney is assistant professor of communication at Simon Fraser University, the author of *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Duke, 2020), and co-editor of *Inside Killjoy's Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings* (UBC and AGYU, 2019).

⁶ Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, and Ramón Rivera-Servera, "Introduction," in *Queer Nightlife*, eds. Kemi Adeyemi, Kareem Khubchandani, and Ramón Rivera-Servera (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 2.