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Inuit Throat Singing Competitions: Playing with throat, voice, body, and sexuality

Inuit throat singing is one of the few forms of its kind that is specifically performed by women and in a competition form. In the competition, two singers stand in front of each other and perform repetitive rhythmic patterns inhaling and exhaling with a sonic drone-like sound, inhaling and exhaling, until one loses her breath or concentration. There are many forms that this throat singing takes on, and it is not just in one specific part of the world. Some parts of Tibet and Mongolia, as well as South Africa, but most notably in remote parts of Canada where Inuit communities are the most prominent nowadays. In the competition, the two singers, or players we could call them, put their hands on each-other's shoulders to create a resonance chamber. The game isn't simply a competition, it also unites two singers to each other as they are creating one sound together, trying to fill the gaps of each other's silences. While listening to throat singing, it is hard to distinguish which sounds are which as the sounds fluctuate and each singer can be the 'leader' of the pattern, making the other one shift in tempo.

Anthropologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez has written through the specific lens of Inuit throat-singing, and he explains "within the Inuit social practice, this complex symbolic form has one predominant characteristic: it is a game. The principle behind performing katajjaq is as follows: it is played by two women; they repeat a brief motif at staggered intervals, until one of the women is forced to stop, having either run out of breath or tripped over her own tongue. There is a winner and a loser." The game or competition aspect of this singing is one I will continue further

analysis on, as well as the duality of performance between two women playing. Because it is a game, and not just a musical performance, it is composed of many layers- both musical and social. There is also a sexual aspect of these sounds which can be recognized, but is maybe not the most important and relevant part of this game. Furthermore, the role of women in playing and making these harsh sounds is an aspect that can be further analyzed.

There is first a question of whether or not these can be considered songs, or if they are simply game. The instrument-less breathing is not entirely translatable into musical form, and it is not written or composed, even if the sounds can be transcribed into musical notation. Though the use of the throat and voice is similar to singing, it is only recently that it has been taken into performance form, as it was mostly between the two girls/women that the singing game would occur. Throat singing plays with body and voice, as singers are exchanging a rhythm and pattern into each other. The game relies on both of their abilities to maintain the endurance of the fast-paced panting. The game aspect might undermine the fact that it is singing, players are applauded because of how well they maintain the rules of the game, or how quickly they can coordinate with the other player, creating the pattern and rhythmic humming. Though this is also the reason it is considered singing, the voice is the only instrument produced by the body, and to create rhythmic sound patterns with it is by definition, to sing. Inuit throat singing competitions are in-between song and game, between performance and 'real life'.

In the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's book on play, he describes "play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life. It is rather a stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. Every child knows perfectly well that he is 'only pretending', or that it was 'only for fun'." The game does not need to be taken seriously, and it was originally created to pass time 'while men hunted', or something of the sort. Because it is in-between game

and song, play and performance, it does not necessitate a narration or any form of semantic, verbal, language aspects. Singing for playing or playing as singing in the specific throat singing style, can be free of traditional song and language structures that narrative songs have. Huizinga also sees no obligations in any games, and a certain freedom to playing. There are fluid lines between seriousness and play, there are rules, but they do not fit inside the strict boundaries of society as such. The rules in games are defined by their repetitions, the learned rules that all players understand and apply to the playing, and they are a part of the fun of playing. The players in play communities are part of the voluntary activity that is happening. "Play can be deferred or suspended at any time. It is never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty. It is never a task. It is done at leisure, during 'free time'. Only when play is a recognized cultural function- a rite, a ceremony- it is bound up with notions of obligation and duty." The 'only pretend' quality of play makes it unattached to the 'necessities' of other tasks. While trying to maintain the rhythm and not loose concentration in breathing patterns, players of throat singing are a part of this back and forth play, non-ritualistic and mostly free of set rules and boundaries. The only 'duty' seems to be to maintain rhythm and coordination with the other player/singer. But even when the game is over, and one person has "lost", there is no real loss. Because of the less serious form of this singing, there is no written notation to follow. So, losing the game becomes more casual and permissible and less grounded in the rules of the game and rather in the fun of the singing and playing with this other person. And when one loses the game, it is simply because she couldn't follow or there was a break in the unity of breathing and singing. So, it is not entirely a loss, and can be taken lightly and laughter can ensue from it. One loses when one starts to laugh, so the playfulness of laughter is what interrupts the playing and losing can be part of the playing, too. In an article by Suzanne Cusick on music and sexuality, she writes about the Indigo Girls and the

duality in their performance, as they are “singing as equal contributors, to the texture while apparently acquiescing to cultural norms by singing in tune”. In throat singing, one player loses if she doesn’t maintain the breathing pattern, but there is no tune or texture set in place.

If in throat-singing, the two players use each other as resonance chambers, they are also technically singing and playing together, as one. How ritualistic is throat singing? Is it mostly game or does it have a religious, sacred component? Jean-Jacques Nattiez provides some information on this, and says that “inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count”. This relates to Huizinga’s paragraph on playing as outside of ‘ordinary life’, wherein the rules of the game are no longer the ones we use in real life. Rituals and religious sacred spheres also use these same aspects. In a religious ritual, there exist new rules and ways of being or existing. They do not hold the same standards as ordinary life. Nattiez continues by telling us that “men kill the game, women perform the games in order to influence the spirits. Female throat-games would be a kind of survival music”. Surviving or passing the time, throat singing therefore necessitates some form of collaboration rather than competition. Both religion and games are between play and performance, but if it’s a song is it taken seriously or is music taken more seriously than game? What are the differences between singing and performing?

Any musical performance is a form of play, as it is using body and voice to explore a ‘pretend’ version of oneself. It is outside the realm of conventional being and existing, while still maintaining something authentic. Inuit throat singing exists in the duality of performance and play, floating in between both play and seriousness, song and game. Throat singing originates from a technique, but the singer or player is free to use it in any shape, and go in any direction they want as long as it fits in the rules of the throat singing game. Huizinga reminds us on the

possible religious component, that “among the Inuit, this vocal technique is used in the context of games, without, apparently, any religious connotation today”. The transition from religious to game highlights the playfulness of it. Playing is less serious than religion, and has a liberating aspect to it.

Huizinga also sees playfulness as related to sex and the non-necessities but instinctual aspects that both playing, music, and sex have. “The expression of it satisfies all kinds of communal ideals. It thus has its place in a sphere superior to the strictly biological processes of nutrition, reproduction and self-preservation. This assertion is apparently contradicted by the fact that play, or rather sexual display, is predominant in animal life precisely at the mating-season. But would it be too absurd to assign a place outside the purely physiological, to the singing, cooing and strutting of birds just as we do to human play?” The heavy breathing, groaning, humming, can be seen as animalistic and sexual as well as playful. The sounds produced are almost orgasmic, as they are quick inhaling/exhaling sounds produced by women, but is that expecting female sounds to be immediately orgasmic? Sexuality is recognized through panting and breathing, but also playing. Since the playfulness is immediately associated in the Inuit throat singing, sexuality is second-handedly associated. Through Huizinga, we can see sex as play, and Inuit throat singing as playing with body, throat, and voice. The throat is the organ that produces sounds that the entire body experiences, both pain and pleasure. Is it unfair to call it sexual if it is a game between two girls and to assume a sexuality that might not be present? The voice, through its mechanism the throat, is both sexual and powerful. All the sounds that the voice makes, its cracks, its breath, its power and fragility, makes throat singing an especially complicated use of the whole body to create sound. To return to the possibility of a religious context, there is often a sacredness to sex, one that is often noticed in cultures that perform

rituals and prayers. Religion also therefore carries this playfulness, as it is not a necessity for humans to be religious. It is a part of the playful, but somehow rule-driven parts of human life. As throat-singing, it composes a set of rules outside the 'ordinary' life, but that the players included know and apply to their experience.

Cusick describes the throat of a woman through myths as "a sexual orifice that could produce beautiful, dangerous sounds so ravishing and seductive as to threaten both the woman's reputation for sexual continence and the proper social order." In terms of religious singing, and out of body experience often happens when performing something outside of this ordinary life. The voice can transcend regular boundaries of sound and body, and this happens more particularly in religious contexts. Cusick elaborates, "when we think of breathing, we focus on what enters the body as its fuel, not on what exists as abject refuse." The inhaling exhaling of Inuit throat singing is technically an exaggerated breathing technique, but that includes vocal sounds. How much identity is a part of the performance/ game? When one is having an out of body experience, there is not much self-included, unless the out of body becomes a self exposed. In a competition, and a performance as well, the non-self gets heightened as games are not personal. Playing with breathing is part of performing, becoming a part of the new rules that are outside of life. The throat transcends its normal boundaries and becomes this sexual organ. It also transcends the normal boundaries of body, and defines new sounds for the throat and voice.

Wayne Koestenbaum brings an operatic perspective on voice and loudness: "When I speak too much or too loudly, I lose my voice: and at all times I speak from my throat, not my diaphragm." His essay on opera queens and queerness reveals the workings of a voice in this perspective. "The grandiosity of operatic utterance is a wild compensation for the listener's silence. Our ability to speak of ourselves has been foreshortened; we turn to opera, because we

need to breathe, to regain a right we imagine is godgiven - the right to open.” Opera is one of the few Western song forms that is loud and dramatic and requires out of body efforts.

Koestenbaum’s ‘loss of voice’ is similar to losing the throat singing game, or any game. Losing itself is a part of most games, and requires it to happen for another win. Losing can also be related to failing. In Halberstam’s *Queer Failure*, he states “failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures.” Constructing a game requires an openness to lose and fail. Two women against each other presupposes the opportunity to fail. If Koestenbaum’s speaks from his throat when he loses his voice, what does that say when applied to throat singing? Is throat singing already a “failure”?

Outside the realm of traditional throat singers, one of the most popular and solo Inuit throat singers is Tanya Tagaq. Tanya developed a solo form of this, unrelated to the competition, ritual aspects of it. She performs as a pop/punk singer and uses the traditional throat singing techniques to actually make songs and albums. This is no longer a game, it is music. Tanya’s album “Animism” is both an homage to her culture, and to the animalistic other-wordly sounds that she can produce. She is no longer simply a woman, she is this loud aggressive throat singer, using her throat to transcend boundaries, to lose the regular social rules of singers. Her song titles are both in Inuit language and in English, the English ones often alluding to a certain violence. Most notably in violent themes are her songs “Rape me”, “Fight”, “Fracking”, or “Growl”, “Blood”, “Burst”, “Hunger”. The list could continue with one worded aggressive words. Though she uses instruments, it is mostly her voice that growls through and dominates the sound. The

titles become the single language in the songs, and they evoke the entire few minutes of throat singing.

Since there aren't words it is seen as animalistic, 'primitive'. The associations with Inuit throat singing as these adjectives are ones that associate origin and sound and assume based on location that there is an 'exotic' nature to it. This happens with a lot of western anthropological views on non-western 'traditional' sounds. Inuit throat singing competitions are more than a game. They become a place of refuge from traditional gender and song boundaries. It is a game where both people can win. It unites and transforms, for an audience and for the throat.

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