

Karaoke Theory/Karaoke Therapy

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This article, an outcome of practice-based artistic research, concerns singing as a therapeutic performance and conveyor of knowledge. It arises from my project *fugitive radio*, which responds to the uptake of radio in contemporary art by pursuing experimental modes of “performance-radio.” Following a voicing event in Helsinki, a colleague suggested that singing had been “somehow civilized out of us”, prompting me to investigate connections between singing, therapy, and knowledge and in relation to the global phenomenon of karaoke singing.

My considerations are framed by ideas from neuroscientist and popular writer Daniel J. Levitin, who argues that the human brain evolved with song, and ethnomusicologist and voice therapist Anne Tarvainen, who encourages her clients to pursue unconventional methods of singing so as to experience their bodies in relation to power. Singing forms discussed include samba and *música popular brasileira*, Sámi yoiking, Estonia’s Singing Revolution, and Aboriginal “Songlines”, the latter being exemplar of how knowledge is kept in song. Thus, my text turns to consider how (Western) knowledge is subordinate to discourse and how artistic research fits into this schema with reference to the writing of curator and theorist Simon Sheikh. Its final movement follows the “ontological turn” in anthropology and philosophy to addresses how different practices of “worlding” arise as struggles in contemporary art and artistic research.

Keywords: karaoke, somaesthetics, yoik, Songlines, political ontology, anticolonialism.

Karaoke Theory/Karaoke Therapy

My current project, *fugitive radio*,¹ seeks to develop collectively realized modes of “performance-radio” using free and open-source tools. It is also a vehicle for (practice-based) artistic research. Besides conventional academic research, I employ “radio as method”² to emphasize the social aspects of experimental radio – as people entangled with technology. I produce the monthly podcast “fugitive frequency” alongside texts which are occasionally self-published as zines. *fugitive radio* is a nomadic project that was seeded in Brazil in 2018 and developed in Helsinki in 2020–21, with the not-only-media-arts association Pixelache,³ enabled by funding from Kone Foundation.

As a relatively mobile artist, researcher, and writer, I keep finding myself in karaoke situations. At “Art World”⁴ parties in Dhaka, Bangladesh, “Asian karaoke” themed house parties in Athens, Christmas-orphan get-togethers in rural Estonia, Silvester celebrations in Berlin, and Coronavirus lock-down singalongs on Zoom, I’ve joined together with friends and strangers to perform popular songs. From these encounters I’ve come to appreciate music I wouldn’t otherwise listen to and spent hours sifting through a cornucopia of karaoke backing tracks made available online. Having accumulated a small repertoire of *ohako* – songs that one immediately goes to in a karaoke session – I began to think of karaoke as a way of engaging with emotions in public. I set about investigating the therapeutic effects of singing popular songs, leading me to consider how songs convey knowledge.

Has singing been civilized out of us?

In May 2021 I co-organized a collective voicing event with the Suva Das at *Mymälä2 Gallery* Helsinki. *Under A Fooled Moon* was the “closing ceremony” for the Suva’s exhibition, *Untitled* (30 April–9 May), which I co-convened with artist/musician Timo Tuhkanen and artist/radio producer Sophea Lerner to explore live and distributed broadcast performances. Luring us out of our inhibitions with warm-up vocal exercises, Suva encouraged us to improvise: singing, humming, growling, even speaking in tongues

1 <https://fugitive-radio.net/>

2 See my post: Sumugan Sivanesan “Radio As Method”, *Kone Foundation: At The Well Blog*, May 31, 2021, <https://koneensaatio.fi/en/stories/radio-as-method/>.

3 <https://pixelache.ac>.

4 I’ve capitalized the first letters to name a globalized “imagined community” of arts professionals.



1. "Under A Fooled Moon", closing ceremony for Suva
 "Untitled", Myymälä2, 9 May 2021.
<https://www.mixcloud.com/fugitive-radio/suva-under-a-fooled-moon/>

or "gibberish", as he calls it. After documenting the event, the filmmaker and stand-up comedian Roxana Savdo suggested that singing is somewhat taboo in many Western cultures. She proposed that singing has "somehow been civilized out of us", which made me wonder about cultures who do sing – what do they know that we don't? What are we missing out on? What is the power of song?

In his 2006 book *This Is Your Brain on Music*, Daniel J. Levitin,⁵ a North American cognitive neuroscientist, author, musician, and sound engineer, notes that it is only relatively recently that a distinction was made between classes of music performers and music listeners, that is, those who are gifted, trained, and professionalized, and those who cannot, who are cast as audiences, admirers, and connoisseurs. As a neuroscientist, Levitin has researched how music alters our moods and brain chemistry, and he cites studies that demonstrate how music stimulates all areas of the brain. Indeed, in his 2008 book *The World in Six Songs*, he argues that the human brain evolved with song:

Before there was language, our brains did not have the full capacity to learn language, to speak or to represent it. As our brains developed both the physiological and cognitive flexibility to manipulate symbols, language emerged gradually, and the use of rudimentary verbalizations – grunts, calls, shrieks, and groans – further stimulated the growth potential for the types of neural structures that would support language in the broadest sense.⁶

- 5 Daniel J. Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession* (USA: Penguin Group, 2006), Introduction, ePub.
- 6 Daniel J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (USA: Penguin Group, 2008), Introduction, ePub.

Somaesthetics/Somatechnics

As I was developing *fugitive radio* in Finland, I came across the ethnomusicologist, musician and therapist Anne Tarvainen, who works with singers (amateur and professional) who experience difficulty vocalizing due to illness, trauma or physical capacity. She expands on the work of the North American philosopher Richard Shusterman, who has been developing the interdisciplinary and transcultural field of “somaesthetics” since the 1990s, which combines words derived from Greek: *soma* for body and *aesthetics* for perception. Shusterman, who is also a practitioner of Feldenkrais physical therapy, emphasizes that our experiences of the world are always embodied and that our bodies are our indispensable “tool of tools.” Thus, improving bodily perception, performance and presentation comprises an “art of living” that benefits a person’s quality of life.⁷

Tarvainen is developing a branch of this field as “vocal somaesthetics” in conjunction with a form of vocal therapy she names *Voicefulness*.⁸ Concerned with the bodily and experiential aspects of vocalizing and listening, Tarvainen⁹ encourages her clients to use their voices to become aware of their bodies rather than adhering to established music conventions or submitting to performance pressures.¹⁰ Such unorthodox singing is a means of “sounding out” and transforming the body. It is a way of *doing* the body that is attentive to the field of relations in which it is enmeshed. It is singing as somatechnics.¹¹

So, if singing feels good, makes us smarter and alerts us to power relations, should we be karaoking every day?

7 Richard Shusterman, *Thinking Through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3–5.

8 <https://www.voicefulness.fi/>.

9 Anne Tarvainen, “Singing, Listening, Proprioceiving: Some Reflections on Vocal Somaesthetics”, in *Aesthetic Experience and Somaesthetics*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 136.

10 Tarvainen cited in Ndéla Faye, “Different Routes: The power of singing”, *Kone Foundation: Different Routes*, September 4, 2021, <https://koneensaatio.fi/en/different-routes/>.

11 “Somatechnics” is a field of studies concerned with the inextricability of bodies, technologies and power founded by the scholars Joseph Pugliese, Nikki Sullivan, Samantha Murray and Susan Stryker. See Nikki Sullivan and Samantha Murray, “Editorial” *Somatechnics: Journal of Bodies—Technologies—Power* 1, no. 1 (March, 2011): v–vii, <https://doi.org/10.3366/soma.2011.0001>.

A Technological Mash-up

Karaoke is a form of musical entertainment that emerged in Japan in 1970s. It is a compound word that translates as “empty orchestra”: *kara-ppo* “empty” + *ōkesutora* “orchestra.” The first karaoke machine, the Juke-8 invented by Daisuke Inoue in 1971, was “a technological mash-up”¹² assembled from parts stripped from a bass guitar amplifier, a coin-operated vending machine and a car stereo 8-track cassette player. In the 1980s karaoke machines developed alongside video technologies, moving from tape to disc and gaining popularity in South East Asia, notably China and the Philippines. Significantly, Inoue never patented his machines, which in hindsight he thinks would have hindered the uptake of karaoke.¹³ The Filipino inventor Roberto del Rosario, who developed a similar “sing-along system” in 1975, was the first to patent a karaoke machine in 1983 and in the 1990s went on to successfully sue Japanese manufacturers for patent infringement.¹⁴ As we know, karaoke has since spread around the world, becoming the global phenomenon it is today, and I’ve made note of several karaoke bars and events during my time in Finland.

The advent of MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) instruments and computing gave rise to some remarkable music arrangements of popular songs by karaoke companies and enthusiasts alike. Recent developments in software and signal processing, specifically “Fourier transform” tools, have made it relatively easy to dampen the lead vocals in conventional pop music recordings.¹⁵ Now deep learning technologies are powering sophisticated web-based sound separation programs.¹⁶ In the post-internet era marked by the ubiquitous sharing and manipulating of digital media across numerous consumer devices, one can simply type in the name of

12 Brian Rafferty, *Don’t Stop Believing: How Karaoke Conquered the World and Changed My Life* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2008), 99.

13 Daisuke Inoue and Robert Scott, “Voice Hero: The Inventor of Karaoke Speaks”, *The Appendix*, 3 December, 2013, <http://theappendix.net/issues/2013/10/voice-hero-the-inventor-of-karaoke-speaks>.

14 Mary Bellis, “Biography of Roberto del Rosario, Inventor of a Karaoke Machine”, *ThoughtCo*, 8 August, 2020, <https://www.thoughtco.com/roberto-del-rosario-inventor-1991725>.

15 See Bryan Pardo, Fatemeh Pishdadian, and Prem Seetharaman, “Music/Voice separation using the 2D fourier transform”, *IEEE Workshop on Applications of Signal Processing to Audio and Acoustics (WASPAA)*, 15–18 October, New York, 2017, <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/8169990/>.

16 For example see: <https://www.lalal.ai/> and <https://aivocalremover.com/>.



2. “Some karaoke bars in Finland” (2022), digital photomontage: Sumugan Sivanesan.

their desired song “+ karaoke” into a search engine and likely find something suitable to sing along to. It seems karaoke continues to function as a democratizer of music, making it relatively easy and socially acceptable for lay people to sing popular songs, regardless of talent or training.

Singing Medicine

Free People’s Medical Clinic (2014) was a social sculpture organized by artist Simone Leigh in collaboration with Weeksville Heritage Centre for Creative Time’s program *Funk, God, Jazz, and Medicine: Black Radical Brooklyn*.¹⁷ For one month Leigh’s clinic was installed in the Stuyvesant Mansion, the former home of Dr. Josephine English, the first African-American gynecologist to establish a private practice in New York State. A video documentary of the piece includes an excerpt of a talk by Guyana-born herbalist Karen Rose who says:

17 <https://creativetime.org/projects/black-radical-brooklyn/>

... remember that medicine wasn't always written down for us... A lot of times medicine – especially in African-American communities or Indigenous-African-American communities – medicine was sung... We weren't allowed to write and read, so we sang to each other what medicine did and that's how medicine was passed on. The songs themselves are medicine, as is the earth that was sung about.¹⁸

Rose's comments provoked me to consider how community and ecology contribute to a person's sense of wellbeing and how an individual's "health" is also social and relational.

While I have no direct experience of the traditional vocal music of Sámi people, yoiking is relevant to this study initiated in Finland. With reference to ancient rock art, the Norwegian musician, ethnomusicologist and curator Ola Graff suggests that yoiking is a continuous, albeit changing, singing tradition of more than 6,000 years. Written sources suggest that yoiking and drumming comprised religious ceremonies that facilitated communication between "man and spiritual forces" and Graff proposes that non-verbal singing, as an emotive and fundamental form of communication, could be more powerful than the spoken word. He notes that such pre-Christian practices perceived as "sorcery" were mercilessly suppressed in the 1600s by the Dano-Norwegian authorities, which led to their gradual loss.¹⁹

Graff describes yoiking as an "instantly recognizable" vocal tone that nevertheless varies amongst communities. It has a "reference function" of naming and describing someone or something. For example, when a person receives a yoik, its melody is solely for them and thus becomes their "name in musical form."²⁰ Receiving a yoik marks one as an individual and also locates one as part of a community, conferring cultural belonging.

One does not yoik at or to someone or a thing, they simply "yoik" it, and as Graff explains, when someone yoiks a friend, it is a greeting that affirms friendship. Yoikers may use words, but according to Graff they are not necessary, and he describes the form as a "tone painting" that mimics the attributes of a person or thing. Indeed, some yoikers regard it as a "direct

18 Simone Leigh, *Free People's Medical Clinic* (2014), <https://vimeo.com/117195615>.

19 Ola Graff, "Yoik – The Traditional Folk Music of the Sámi People", in *Sámi Stories*, ed. Marit Anne Hauan (Stamsund: Orkana Akademisk, 2014), 67.

20 *Ibid.*, 70–71.

communication with the innermost being of the object or subject being yoiked.”²¹ There are also yoiks for animals, mountains, lakes, rivers and places. According to master yoiker and legal scholar Ánde Somby, one particular form of yoik can “call into existence” something that is not obviously present. For example, a person can “see” a wolf when it is evoked in melody.²²

As a means of producing collective and cultural belonging, Graff suggests that yoiking has an educational and therapeutic potential. A recent pilot study to which he contributed sought to investigate how yoiking promotes health and well-being in Sámi individuals and communities. Despite colonizers’ efforts to eradicate Sámi practices, yoik has survived over centuries and the authors hypothesize that there must be some benefit to it. Compared to other Indigenous people of the Arctic, public health indicators show few significant differences between Sámi populations and the “majority public”, leading the authors to propose that yoik plays a role in health and resilience.²³

Like many other Indigenous groups, Sámi people suffer from collective intergenerational trauma due to colonization and policies of assimilation, such as the removal of children, forced relocation, and theft of land. Despite significant advances since the establishment of the Sámi parliament in 1989, Sámi people face ongoing discrimination and violence in Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia – states that occupy their territory, Sámpí. The pilot study cites reports that demonstrate how participation in traditional and cultural activities brings significant mental health benefits to Sámi youth, making specific mention of the personal yoik. They emphasize how yoiking helps maintain individuals’ health as “an important marker of social and cultural belonging and an instrument for emotion management.” It is also a significant factor determining “socio-cultural resilience” for the Sámi population overall.²⁴

21 Soile Hämäläinen, Frauke Musial, Anita Salamonsen, Ola Graff and Torjer A. Olsen, “Sami Yoik, Sami History, Sami Health: A Narrative Review”, *International Journal of Circumpolar Health* 77, no. 1 (2018): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22423982.2018.1454784>.

22 Somby cited in Merlyn Driver, “Sámi Joik: Music and Imagination in Arctic Norway” (undergraduate dissertation, University of St Andrews, 2012), 20. https://www.academia.edu/26725656/S%C3%A1mi_Joik_Music_and_Imagination_in_Arctic_Norway.

23 Hämäläinen, Musial, Salamonsen, Graff, and Olsen, “Sami Yoik, Sami History, Sami Health”, 1.

24 Ibid., 5–6.

Daisuke Inoue, who was awarded an Ig Nobel Prize from Harvard University in 2004 for his karaoke invention, is also aware of a link between singing and health. He recalls:

I've heard many stories about people who had been mentally sick – mostly sinking into nervous depression – until karaoke came along. I received letters from a number of people saying that karaoke machines were being placed in hospitals as a rehabilitation tool and helping people get better. One of my close friends was cured from his depression when he started singing karaoke. Even today, you can find a number of clinics and hospitals with karaoke machines.²⁵

Singing resistance

Having belted out some power ballads and crooned some smooth serenades, I began to wonder if such camp displays of emotion imply a vulnerability that somehow translates across culture, privilege and other differences. Can a performance of humility remind us of our shared precariousness? As Judith Butler insists, life is always interdependent.²⁶ My friend and collaborator, Irina Mutt, often asserts that there is power in vulnerability – perhaps because suffering often arises from structural inequalities and demands a collective response? Thus, failure is not proof of a flawed individual, but rather proves the failure of a system or structure that can only be overcome collectively.

When preparing my performative presentation for the 2021 X-disciplinary Congress on Artistic Research and Related Matters hosted by the Vilnius Academy of Arts, I was curious to learn of the Singing Revolution. The phrase was coined by Estonian journalist and activist Heinz Valk in 1988, following a spontaneous mass singing demonstration at the Tallinn Song Festival Grounds in Estonia that drew hundreds of thousands of people to protest Soviet occupation. Guntis Šmidchens a professor of Baltic Studies who authored the definitive book on this subject, *The Power of Song* (2014),²⁷ emphasizes that these defiant actions extend a long history of singing as resistance in the region. He recalls the Latvian poet Auseklis

25 Inoue and Scott, "Voice Hero".

26 Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 24.

27 Guntis Šmidchens, *The Power of Song: Nonviolent National Culture in the Baltic Singing Revolution* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

(Mikus Krogzemis), who wrote in 1873 of choirs gathering to oppose the tsardom of Russia:

That nation does not stain steel swords and spears with the precious blood of people. Peace is its stately, proud flag; a shield of songs which repels the spear.²⁸

During the Singing Revolution, regular non-violent singing demonstrations took place across the Baltic until Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia achieved independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Here songs galvanized people around mutual interests and were weaponized against an oppressive regime, as singing patriotic songs encouraged people to stand fast and act collectively against authorities, shaping a social body.

In Brazil, where *fugitive radio* was conceived, samba, MPB (*música popular brasileira*), *tropicália*, funk and many other “folk” music forms keep the peoples’ history of a nation that has endured several dictatorships and where many are illiterate. Sometimes their pointed lyrics are veiled in metaphor, sometimes not. “*Apesar de você amanhã há de ser outro dia* (In spite of you, tomorrow will be another a day)”, sang Chico Buarque in 1970, and the song resounded again during the Bolsanaro presidency (2019–2022). In a country where it seemed to me that every gathering, event, and working week wound up as a samba party, music (and dance) is how people “speak.” My language teacher advised me that lyrics of popular songs contain the phrases people use and shape the lilt and tone of their voices, in a tongue that I’m told was modernized according to “how it feels in the mouth.” Indeed, karaoke is how I am attempting to learn Brazilian Portuguese.

There are similarities between a *roda de samba*, where people come together to sing and dance to songs of resistance that have passed down through generations, and a karaoke party, where people come together to sing songs that recall their own histories and experiences. When people identify with songs, they build a temporary sense of community and belonging. As singing has a social and therapeutic function, it could improve a person’s quality of life, affirm their sense belonging, and even facilitate collective liberation.

28 Šmidchens cited in Nancy Joseph, “When Songs Trumped Rifles”, *Perspectives: University of Washington, College of Arts and Sciences*, April 12, 2013, <https://artsci.washington.edu/news/2013-12/when-songs-trumped-rifles>.



3. “fugitive radio: Karaoke Theory, Pixelache Helsinki Festival #BURN ____ 2021, Oodi Central Library, 11 June. Photo: Antti Ahonen.

Resisting epistemologies

Song differs from what constitutes knowledge in the dominant Western epistemology as arguments, theories and concepts developed according to its particular rationale. With reference to vocal somaesthetics, it could be argued that music and singing release experience and knowledge held in the body, and even beyond. In so-called Australia, where I was raised, for over 65,000 years Aboriginal people have kept knowledge in “Songlines.” Detailed information about land, ecology, astronomy and much more is held within “Country”, sites of significance where knowledge is embedded and encoded in story, performance and visual arts. Country is the master archive, humans are the documents and song is a means to access this archive, explains curator and researcher Margo Neale.²⁹

Aboriginal Songlines are embodied knowledge systems that are not restricted to books and a classroom and are rather attached to place. Marveling at how Aboriginal people are able to remember so much detailed information, science writer Lynne Kelly recalls how an Indigenous elder explained that even when away from Country he could sing it and

29 Margo Neale and Lynne Kelly, *Songlines: The Power and Promise* (Victoria: Thames & Hudson and National Museum of Australia, 2020), Chapter 4, ePub.

thus walk around it in his imagination. “Country was always part of him”, Kelly reflects.³⁰ Songlines reveal how everything is interconnected and that everything is alive. It is a knowledge of relations.

Neale also explains that such knowledge is tiered and protected. Some Songlines, such as versions of the Seven Sisters Songline – a creation story – are open. However, others are restricted by age, gender, family lineage and custodial responsibilities. As Neale elaborates, Songlines are a subjective system in which “the custodians of the knowledge have a strong responsibility to keep it alive” and often for the “Aboriginal archivist” it becomes their “life’s purpose.”³¹ Obviously, such songs that are not open to interpretation are not suitable for karaoke.

Academization

To crudely summarize the meandering connections between song, knowledge and karaoke I’ve raised above: Levitin³² and Graff³³ propose that music is a form of communication that is more fundamental than language alone. Tarvainen³⁴ offers that singing has a therapeutic function, as a means to improve bodily perception and understand the power relations in which one is embedded, while Graff and his colleagues³⁵ also emphasize the social and therapeutic functions of Sámi yoiking as a marker of identity, belonging, and resistance. Indeed, Šmidchens³⁶ observes how songs have been weaponized against oppressors. Neale and Kelly³⁷ assert that Aboriginal knowledge conveyed via song must remain precise to communicate specific information about Country across the ages. While for Levitin and numerous other popular writers, pop songs, often described as capturing “the feeling of an era”, are a means of circulating ideas, experiences and emotions around the world, across cultures and over generations.

30 Neale and Kelly, *Songlines: The Power and Promise*, Chapter 1.

31 *Ibid.*, Chapter 3.

32 Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature*; Levitin, *This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*.

33 Graff, “Yoik – The Traditional Folk Music of the Sámi People”.

34 Tarvainen, “Singing, Listening, Proprioceiving: Some Reflections on Vocal Somaesthetics”, 120–142.

35 Hämäläinen, Musial, Salamonsen, Graff, and Olsen, “Sami Yoik, Sami History, Sami Health: A Narrative Review”.

36 Cited in Joseph, “When Songs Trumped Rifles”.

37 Neale and Kelly, *Songlines: The Power and Promise*.

With reference to somaesthetics I propose that karaoke, as a mode of “doing the body” and accessing knowledge held in the body – being both individual and social – is in itself a mode of knowledge. This in turn problematizes a notion of knowledge as being held in books and only accessible via academic learning, which I will elaborate on below.

Discussing artistic research as an extension of dematerialized and expanded Western art practices in the 1960s and 1970s that sought to liberate art from the commodity form, curator and theorist Simon Sheikh³⁸ draws upon Michel Foucault to argue that knowledge is subordinate to discourse. Describing artistic research as “an interdisciplinary approach where almost anything can be considered an art object in the appropriate context”, he distinguishes such practices of “thinking” from knowledge, which in turn imply (emancipatory) “networks of indiscipline.” He argues:

The field of art has become – in short – a field of possibilities, of exchange and comparative analysis. It has become a field for alternatives, proposals and models, and can, crucially, act as a cross field, an intermediary between different fields, modes of perception and thinking, as well as between very different positions and subjectivities. Art thus has a very privileged, if impermanent, but crucial position and potential in contemporary society. But crucial in its very slippage, in that it cannot hold its ground as a discipline or institutional place.

While noting the liberatory impulses of artistic thinking that “cannot hold its ground as a discipline or institutional place”, Sheikh also observes the “institutional re-inscription and validation of such practices as artistic research” that are commodified into the knowledge economies in which art academies operate. To think from another position, while an artist may pursue a mode of research/practice that may seem unconventional – antidisiplinary or postdisciplinary – to be recognized as art, it must be contextualized and thus inscribed into the relevant discourse. Arguably, we should be attentive to the contours of this discourse as the force of recognition could itself be understood as violence.

38 Simon Sheikh, “Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research”, *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Spring, 2009), <https://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/sheikh.html>.

I've accomplished a Doctorate of Creative Arts and I have benefited from academia's opening to practice-based methodologies.³⁹ Yet in my efforts to address karaoke as a widespread contemporary cultural phenomenon in my artistic research practice, I've been frustrated in my attempts to write about it for a journal of artistic research, concerned with the provocation "To research or not to research in the postdisciplinary academy", which enforces the academic form. To paraphrase Suva Das, this strikes me as an "academonization" of art, as I am flummoxed in my attempts to shoehorn an experimental, situated, and process-based practice into academia's "scientific" logic and crafted rhetoric. It makes me wonder about the kinds of sensitivities, nuances, and the very issues that fall to the wayside as artists seek to professionalize in academic institutions. As an anticolonial artist, I can't help but think about power relations: Who are we performing to in our attempts to conform to academic standards? Is it necessary to uphold the authority of these institutions and their formats to validate our practices? What epistemic violence is being done by reproducing such knowledge systems? What are effective modes of resistance?

To approach this dilemma from another angle, let's consider the so-called "ontological turn", or different practices of "worlding" and meaning-making that could be considered a marker of "The Contemporary" as a globalized and decolonizing art historical epoch. The contemporary art-industrial complex has swelled with the globalization of biennales, art fairs and summits, post-graduate programs and a range of niche-focused journals and publications. In such an expansive Art World different histories and understandings of what art is come into play – and arguably jostle for position. For some time, it seems, Western art has been descending from its pedestal, discarding its mantle as *the* subject-forming secular aesthetic experience.⁴⁰ Contemporary aesthetic appreciation is not only concerned with the skill, innovation, charisma, media manipulation, and conceptual "genius" of the individual artist, but rather regards how different understandings of art (and by extension the world) are brought into relation. I don't think this indicates a dissolution of "power/knowledge", to use Foucault's

39 I graduated in 2015 from the now defunct Transforming Cultures research centre, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney.

40 See Boris Groys, "On Art Activism", *e-flux Journal*, no. 56 (June, 2014), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60343/on-art-activism/>.

neologism to describe how power makes objects of knowledge and conversely how knowledge gives rise to power.⁴¹ Indeed, to raise Foucault now we must acknowledge the recent allegations of pedophilia leveled at the philosopher at the onset of his career in Tunisia in the 1960s, and how his exertion of power over colonized subjects inevitably shaped his thoughts. Tunisian academic and writer Haythem Geusmi argues that European institutions' reluctance to re-appraise Foucault's work is symptomatic of their "long history of viewing the (neo)colonial subject as a disposable body."⁴² This dispute demonstrates that even if power now consolidates from more varied sources and courses across different routes, well-endowed Western institutions still overdetermine discourses and trends.

For another example, we might note how varied art practices from around the world converge every five years at Documenta in Kassel, Germany, which for its most recent edition in 2022 was curated by the Jakarta-based collective ruangrupa.⁴³ Contemporary pluriversalism and trends of de-globalization indicate different histories, skills, aesthetics and intentions that propel art-making. The controversy surrounding pro-Palestinian sentiments in Germany, the conflation of BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction) strategies and postcolonial discourses with anti-Semitism, the actual presence of anti-Semitic imagery at "documenta fifteen" and the subsequent removal of offending and ambiguous works are exemplars of whose logics, contexts and concerns are deemed legitimate in long struggles for justice, reparations and land.⁴⁴ When expanding out from this drama, it's possible to grasp how contesting practices of worlding are fundamental to

41 Michel Foucault, trans. Gordon et al, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

42 Haythem Guesmi, "Reckoning with Foucault's alleged sexual abuse of boys in Tunisia", *Aljazeera*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/4/16/reckoning-with-foucaults-sexual-abuse-of-boys-in-tunisia>.

43 Notably karaoke sessions were a regular and popular feature of documenta fifteen, 2022, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/calendar/open-house-and-karaoke/>

44 For examples of these controversies see:

Marion Detjen, "What Kind of Science Is this?: On the documenta fifteen 'Expert Panel'", *e-flux Notes*, September 23, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/492996/what-kind-of-science-is-this-on-the-documenta-fifteen-expert-panel>.

Anselm Franke, "Anselm Franke on the Future of documenta: 'We're witnessing old structures not wanting to die'", *e-flux Notes*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/493372/anselm-franke-on-the-future-of-documenta-we-re-witnessing-old-structures-not-wanting-to-die>.

determining the future of the planet.⁴⁵ These frictions bring to my mind what anthropologist Mario Blaser names political ontology,⁴⁶ whereby Indigenous ontologies offer knowledges that confront and often counter Western discourses and formats that many of us – including myself – have been trained in.

While we have seen trends of de-skilling and the valorization of the amateur and marginal in attempts to democratize (professionalized) Western art, I am interested in how art, as a knowledge/power/thinking practice, shapes a person's approach to being in the world. What I'm attempting to articulate is not the autonomy of art or the dichotomy of art and life, nor is it the re-absorption of art into a singular universal paradigm of life. Rather I am proposing art as a means to change behavior, to seek other ways of living, of making meaning and thus worlding. I am interested in an "art of living" that develops in and in excess of professionalized arts sectors, including academia.

Jenni Laiti, a Sámi *duojár* who combines art and activism, distinguishes *duodji* from art, summarizing it as "an artistic way of living" based on Indigenous knowledge developed over "many millennia of tested and lived observations, experiments and errors, successes and failures."⁴⁷ She writes:

The concept of art based on individualism, whiteness, heteropatriarchy, the aesthetic value of the work, etc. is still alive and continues to influence us in the background as the norm against which other ways of making and understanding art have been defined. The prevailing norm has been too narrow for *duodji*, like for many other fields of art. Art, however, is not a monolith. There have always been different concepts of art and different art worlds.⁴⁸

45 See Marisol de la Cadena, "Uncommoning Nature: Stories from the Anthro-Not-Seen", in *Anthropos and the Material*, eds. Penny Harvey, Christian Krohn-Hansen & Knut G. Nustad (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

46 Mario Blaser, "Political Ontology", *Cultural Studies* 23, no. 5 (2009): 873–896, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380903208023>.

47 Jenni Laiti, "Art Is Free When We Are Free", *Kone Foundation: Long Reads*, April 13, 2021, <https://koneensaatio.fi/en/tarinat-ja-julkaisut/art-is-free-when-we-are-free/>.

48 Ibid.

Following Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Sylvia Wynter and others schooled in the Black Radical Tradition,⁴⁹ philosopher and artist Denise Ferreira da Silva⁵⁰ insists that decolonization demands the end of the world as we know it, emphasizing the violence of slavery, patriarchy and colonialism that underpins modern Western epistemology. This confers a certain responsibility on artists engaged in bringing about this end to identify and undo this ongoing violence. As Laiti asserts: “It is an artist’s duty to fight for justice and build worlds where we can exist and live as whole people.”⁵¹ As such, pursuing an art life doesn’t necessitate validating the Art World, when the possibility of different and better worlds are at stake.

Coda

It was Irina Mutt who coined the phrase “karaoke theory” as we discussed how people in the Art World – an “imagined community” to appropriate Benedict Anderson’s term⁵² – tend to cite the same on-trend scholars often without having deeply engaged with their work. This requires time and the capacity for study that is not possible for many precarious art workers juggling their practice with professional demands, family and paid employment.

If you have read this far, you may have deduced that this text is itself a work of karaoke theory. It is a self-reflexive, performative, arguably cathartic and thus therapeutic text, tracing a range of interests, encounters and modes of thinking that animated *fugitive radio* as it developed in Finland. It employs academic methods, drawing on the work of scholars, artists and activists who have attempted to deconstruct and dismantle the violence of Western deterministic rationalist thought. This is a logic that, as Denise Ferreira da Silva posits, approaches the world as a “Workshop of Time”⁵³ that

- 49 A term coined by Cedric Robinson to describe “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality”. See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 171.
- 50 Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World”, *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 81–97.
- 51 Laiti, “Art Is Free When We Are Free”.
- 52 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
- 53 Ferreira da Silva, “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics”, 89.

is to be subordinated to the will of the individual – a species of thought that produced slavery, colonialism and myriad forms of racial capitalism, and that continues on in extractivist practices that destroy the life-worlds of those who refuse to submit to it. As such, this text arrives as an attempt to call out such modes of thinking as they encroach on the means by which contemporary artists seek to professionalize.

My practice does not distinguish between art and research. To use Simon Sheikh's⁵⁴ tentative definitions, I tend to approach research as an artistic practice in which academic forms of research into histories, concepts and arguments in discourse entwine with practice-based concerns, such as negotiating with collaborators, institutions and authorities, conceptualizing and devising events, researching, learning and troubleshooting technology. In this text I've also come around to, as Sheikh puts it, "question[ing] the role of (dematerialized) artistic production within the knowledge economy of current cognitive capital."

As someone involved with socially-engaged art, my pursuits often interact with communities whose practices may seem vernacular, enthusiast, or otherwise "non-professional." As such, I do not restrict what constitutes knowledge as the written word that is formatted in a way that signposts how it is positioned within discourse. Indeed, I am often engaging with knowledges that are non-literate and performative, such as oral histories and "urban" or "folk" musics. These knowledges are not necessarily founded hermetically but are realized collectively, as a "play of expression."⁵⁵ Socializing the process is what makes *fugitive radio* relevant and meaningful in the world(s) that it collaboratively pursues. As artist Simone Leigh and Sámi *duojár* Jenni Laiti have more credibly demonstrated, this is an art in itself.

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54 Sheikh, "Objects of Study or Commodification of Knowledge? Remarks on Artistic Research."

55 Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics", 91.

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Santrauka

Karaokės teorija / Karaokės terapija

Sumuganas Sivanesanas

Reikšminiai žodžiai: karaokė, somaestetika, *yoik*, dainos tekstas, politinė ontologija, antikolonializmas.

Šis hibridinis straipsnis paremtas praktiniu tyrimu apie „įbalsinimą“ ir dainavimą kaip terapinį performansą. Jį inspiravo mano 2020 m. pradėtas ir iki šiol tebevykdomas projektas *bėglių radijas*. Tai kolektyviai kuriamas eksperimentinis „performansų radijas“, atspindintis radijo naudojimą šiuolaikiniame mene.

Vis pakliūvu į situacijas, kuriose su meno pasaulio atstovais tenka dainuoti karaokę, tad ėmiau mąstyti apie karaokę kaip apie būdą viešai reikšti emocijas, tirti terapinį dainavimo poveikį bei dainas traktuoti kaip žinių talpyklas.

Kognityvinių mokslų tyrėjas, autorius, muzikas ir garso inžinierius Danielis J. Levitinas pažymi (2008, 2006), kad skirtis tarp muzikos atlikėjų ir muzikos klausytojų grupių imta daryti palyginti neseniai. Neuromoksliniuose tyrimuose apie tai, kaip muzika keičia mūsų nuotaiką ir smegenų biochemiją, Levitinas teigia, jog žmogaus smegenų raida susijusi su dainavimo praktika.

Etnomuzikologė, muzikė ir terapeutė Anne'ė Tervainen dirba su dainininkais, kuriems sunku vokalizuoti garsus dėl ligos, traumos ar fizinių trūkumų. Ji remiasi filosofu Richardo Shustermano tarpdisciplininėmis ir transkultūrinėmis studijomis „somaestetikos“ srityje, kurias jis vysto nuo XX amžiaus 10-ojo dešimtmečio. Shustermanas teigia, jog pasaulio patyrimas yra visad įkūnytas, todėl įgalindami kūniškuosius jautimus, o taip pat atlikimo bei prezentavimo techniką, praktikuojame „gyvenimo meną“ ir šitaip geriname gyvenimo kokybę.

Šiam tyrimui aktuali samių *yoik* dainavimo technika susiformavo Suomijoje. Kolektyvinio ir kultūrinio identiteto formavimąsi tyrinėjanti etnomuzikologė Ola Graff teigia, jog *yoik* dainavimo technika turi edukacinį ir terapinį potencialą. Nepaisant bandymų išgyvendinti samių kultūrinės praktikas, *yoik* išliko keletą šimtmečių. Graff teigimu, ši technika stiprina sveikatą ir ištvermę.

Aborigenų kultūroje dainavimas naudojamas kaip įkūnytų žinių sistema, kuri neapsiriboja vien knygomis ir klasėmis. Ji siūlo alternatyvą vakarietiškosios epistemologijos žinijai, įskaitant ir akademinės žinias. Kuratorė akademikė Margo Neale bei populiarinio mokslo autorė Lynne Kelly aptaria (2020), kaip ši dainavimu grįsta sistema aktyvuoja savotišką „atminties kodą“, leidžiantį aborigenų kultūros žmonėms įsiminti ir atkurti smulkiausias kraštovaizdžio, ekologijos, astronomijos ir tarpusavio santykių niuansus. Aborigenų pasaulėvaizdyje šis dainavimo principas leidžia suprasti visa ko susietumą ir gyvumą.

Straipsnyje taip pat aktyvuojama antikolonijinė potekstė čiabuvių kultūrose naudojamų žinių kontekste bei aptariamas meniniame tyrime (galimai) pasireiškiantis epistemologinis smurtas, kylantis iš pačios akademinės terpės, kuri linkusi savaip legimitizuoti ir profesionalizuoti eksperimentines praktikas. Čia pasitelkiamas kuratoriaus ir teoretiko Simono Sheikho darbas apie meninį tyrimą kaip tarpdisciplininį „mąstymą“ ir jo vaidmenį žinių ekonomikoje, kurioje operuoja meno akademijos. Straipsnis užbaigiamas aptariant meną ir aktyvizmą derinančios samių *duodji* technikos meistrės Jenni'ės Laiti ir filosofės Denise'ės Ferreira'os da Silva'os darbus. Jos abi kritikuoja modernioje vakarietiškoje epistemologijoje besireiškiantį normatyvinį smurtą.