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"Be a man!"

Embodied Auto-Narratives of the Effeminate Body in Opera

ABSTRACT

This autoethnographic article adopts Rosemarie Anderson's (2001) notion of embodied writing to ruminate on the bodily violence done to the effeminate body by hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and femophobia. Specifically, this text seeks to underscore how the socio-culture discourse to "be a man" bears negative consequences for the effeminate body from childhood to adulthood and from the schoolyard to the opera stage. Masculinity and queer theories, alongside the theories of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Audre Lorde, are interwoven with the auto-narratives and serve as theoretical lenses through which the author widens his narratives beyond the self, situating his experiences within historical and theoretical contexts to contribute to the scholarship around masculinity and opera. At the end of this text, the author suggests that by creating Lordeian connections, new expressions of masculinity might be sought, which could pave the way for new futures within opera.

Keywords: masculinity, queer studies, opera, embodied writing

"BE A MAN!" – this is an imperative that many of us have encountered. But what does it actually mean to "be a man"? And what happens when one is unable to "be a man"? In this text, I ruminate on these questions by exploring what may be understood as two very distinct bodies – the schoolboy and the adult operatic baritone. In doing so, I invite you, the reader, to understand that to "be a man", which I define as the

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socio-cultural norms of manhood that shape the notion of an authentic man, and which are predicted on hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005), heteronormativity and femophobia, is a violent discourse that permeates various spatial and temporal fields. To demonstrate how ideals of manhood both operate within adolescent schools and are woven into the fabric of conventional opera culture, I employ embodied autoethnography (Anderson 2001) to reveal the body performance failures that occurred when my effeminate body encountered the "be a man" discourse operating within the schoolyard and in opera spaces. By adopting queer and masculinity theories, I offer a critical gaze into my past failures to make salient how to "be a man" bears negative and violent consequences to the effeminate man.

A primary ambition of this article is to explore how opera practice has cohered to form a voice-body-gender framework that unreflectively perpetuates the "be a man" discourse, inflicting violence and erasure onto effeminate singers. This text appeals to opera to reconsider its regimes of truth and to attend to difference. Consequently, I align myself with those within the opera community who advocate for difference (Bull et al. 2023) by addressing the scholarly gap in research attending to the lives of effeminate cis-gendered men in opera. By drawing on the theories of Gilles Deleuze with Felix Guattari and Audre Lorde, I offer a new approach to opera practice – one that seeks to embrace difference and foster self-affirmation in opera spaces. Ergo, I act as a "wounded healer" (Anderson 2004, 313) to find a new understanding of myself and the lives of those men and singers who do not adhere easily to the gender roles and bodily performance assigned to them. I search for a new queer utopia which "burn[s] with anticipation and promise…[for] a collective futurity" (Muñoz 2009, 26), not only for effeminate singers but for all who seek residence on the stage.

Autoethnography

I write as a classically trained baritone who was educated in one of the world's leading conservatoires, as a queer musico(socio)logist, and as a gay, effeminate man who was once a proto-gay, effeminate boy. As

assemblage, I view these sides of me, these past and present fragmented selves, as entangled (Spry 2006). By embracing this liminal position, I embark on an autoethnographic journey, a "rigorous self-reflection... in order to identify and interrogate the intersections between the self and social life" (Adams et al. 2017, 1). A primary goal of this journey is to reflect on how "social institutions [...] are not 'neutral' but serve to cement the existing hegemony" (Mayo 2008, 240) – a point that resonates with my own experiences. My autoethnographic reflections, thus, ponder on the well-being and conditions of singers. I/we, singer(s), have for too long been regarded as objects for the audience's fetishization, subjected to the audience's gaze, acting as conduits for their "erotic contemplation" (Abel 2019, 39) of perceived sexual fluidity and transgression. These contemplations that desire singers to act as icons on constant display, as pornographic bodies to match the audience's insatiable desire for fantasy (Abel 2019, 38–39). But where does that leave us, singers?

This article responds to what I perceive as a lack of care for the singer and, specifically, a lack of attention to male bodies (Henson 2007, 5) and the low male voice (Hadlock 2012, 261). As many opera narratives predicate themselves on the representation and interplay of masculine and feminine forces in which bodily gender behaviour acts as a foundation (Clément 2000; Biddle 2013; Hadlock 2015; Jarman 2017), I employ autoethnography to situate the singer's body as the site of care beyond the perspective of the audience and textual musicology. Finally, I venture to examine the effeminate singer's place in conventional opera, distinct from the myriads of gender possibilities that can be found via the aesthetics and technologies of post-operatic works (Novak 2017).

Since the majority of my traumas and discomforts were bodily, I draw from Rosemarie Anderson's notion of autoethnographic embodied writing, which entails writing from the "inside-out" to elucidate the experiences of the "lived body" (Anderson 2001, 2) – those tactile and fleshy encounters that my body senses and remembers and from which it discloses the tensions of my being when my gender performance collides with the "be a man" discourse. Using my body as my source of knowl-

edge (Yoo 2021, 725), I push the histories and traces of my past into my present body, including my past shames and wounds (Lepecki 2010, 37), to create trans-temporal auto-narratives. These auto-narratives are not objective reports nor subjective standpoints, but (non-)fictions that carry within them the contracted experiences of many "not-me"s (Pollock 1998, 88). These "not-me"s include not just my other multiple selves, both past and present, but also other singers who were and are around me. As I theorize from locations of pain (hooks 1994, 74), my auto-narratives serve as a "discourse from the margins of dominant culture" (Spry 2001, 710), calling out to you, the reader, and to others, to become a collective "we" (Spry 2006, 340) – a "we" that journeys through my experiences which have transmuted through and into writing, and that conjoins with your experiences to trouble and stir you into political action (Jones & Adams 2016, 198).

Examining the binaries

I am certain that I am neither "born a sissy" nor is my effeminate self dictated by socio-discourse alone. I am also aware that I cannot fully account for how my effeminacy was constituted and is constituting. Judith Butler reminds me that an account of the self always begins in the middle, that parts of my life's emergence are always veiled to me (Butler 2005, 39–40). With these viewpoints in mind, I embrace the Deleuzo-Guattarian view that the self is an entanglement, a "body populated by multiplicities" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 30). In this vein, I understand the effeminate self as a bricolage of the social, semiotic, cultural, biological, psychological, technological and somatic that bypasses a nature/nurture binary understanding of gender. The effeminate self is therefore always in relation and morphing with relation to these singularities, not ontologically fixed but always in process – not the sissy *is*, but the sissy *becoming* (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). However, autoethnography allows me to adopt a "fictional I" (Braidotti 2011, 158–159) that stands in for the multiplicities of my being that forms a fictional sense of a unified identity.

I am aware that this text might risk perpetuating another binary, that

of a clean-cut effeminate/non-effeminate world, which concomitantly risks essentializing society and the opera milieu as oppressive, and effeminate men as solely disenfranchised individuals. Surely, it can't be that bad? Though there has arguably been much progress in the recognition of people's sexual and gender identities and expressions in many societies, present-day opera is still largely characterized by narrow gender norms. As much as there is an increased visibility of LGBTQ+ singers (Pentreath 2022), this visibility is coupled with a culture and practice that still struggles to attend to difference, and which continues to alarm social justice advocates (Bull et al. 2023). Additionally, though post-operatic productions exist that rupture the voice and its bodily apparatus through machine technologies, thus expanding the gender possibilities of the voice and the body by rendering them as multi-gendered, cyber-human entities (Novak 2017), conventional opera is still the dominant space in which bodies of difference must operate in. This is especially so since the opera industry is financially circumscribed by their core audience base, a big part of which is partial to familiar and standard operas (Vincent 2023). Additionally, opera pedagogy and education mainly do not prepare singers for repertoire outside the traditional canon (Potter & Sorrell 2012, 215) and continue to adopt normative and gender-conservative approaches to the canon, thereby narrowing the acceptable range of gender and vocal performances (see McGinnis 2010).

While there is a growing body of literature that addresses the well-being and needs of gender and sexuality non-normative singers (see for example Manternach 2017a; Manternach 2017b; Sauerland 2022), attention to the experiences of effeminate opera singers more specifically has been scarce. Of particular note among very few studies in this vein, is the autoethnographic work of Miroslav Manovski (2014) and the ethnographic study of gay singers by Liora Gvion (2019). Both authors do highlight how effeminate cis-male opera singers are corseted by opera's "be a man" discourse, and how their success is predicated on the successful performance of hegemonic masculinity. I aim to further extend their discussions by making salient how the historical development of opera culture and pedagogy ossified certain male paradigms

for the cis-male body, and in particular, the male baritone, and that such a paradigm unreflexively imposes a corporeal translation onto the contemporary cis-male effeminate body. I contend that such corporeal translation is violent and unjust to the effeminate body since "our experiences are absent from public discourse, [and so] discourse relegates us to less-than-human status, unless we translate" (Hess 2016, 95). Correspondingly, I wish to underscore how this violence is beyond overt physical abuse, but sinks deep into the body and performs acts of soul murder by "attempt[ing] to eradicate or compromise the separate identity of another person" (Shengold 1989, 2). Ergo, "the stakes of perceived sissydom are [still] enormous" (Kimmel 1994, 9) since the road to embrace body difference is paved with multiple obstacles.

At this point, I invite you into my auto-narratives – accounts of my failure to "be a man". Interwoven with my auto-narratives are critical reflections that engage with perspectives from masculinity studies, queer theory, and gender studies, as well as literature attending to opera history and pedagogy. My auto-narratives are set within a boy-baritone dyad to allow each narrative pair to resonate across each other. Notably, the third and last dyad inverts the boy-opera singer set, since I will employ my boyhood narrative to offer a new approach, a hope to close my narratives of failure.

I

Boy: Here comes the sissy

"Here comes the sissy! Here comes the fag!!"

I heard the sharp but almost gleeful tone penetrate my ears as I walked across the schoolyard. My face immediately flushed with shame. My eyes frantically darted around, looking for an avenue of escape. My stomach churned as I felt the familiar sense of humiliation, like a cancerous growth, spread across my body.

"Look at this homo…eww!!!…don't you dare come near me!"

My body closed in; my arms wrapped themselves across my chest in the act of self protection. My body has been made small – made small by shame and fear. These daily taunts, these rituals of torture, had made me aware of my "otherness".

I felt that my body was out of place in the school – that it was not the same kind of body as the other boys. Certainly, my body was never accepted by the other boys on the soccer field or in adolescent wrestling matches along the corridors. Their rejection made ever evident by their verbal derisions.

"Oh my god… look how she walks! Stop swishing around like that! It's so girly! Do you even have a dick! You must be a homo!!"

I passed these boys in silence. My lips curled into themselves, daring not to speak, daring not to provoke their hate. I grew conscious of my deportment – how my hips swayed from side-to-side, how my shoulders seemed to move with rounded gestures. I registered the boys piercing, cold stares. Their searing gazes of judgment.

My effeminate body signified to the boys in the schoolyard that I was *the* homosexual. I carried the gender inversion discourse of the nineteenth century (Foucault 1978) and the present-day representations of the homosexual in the media (Boney 1996). I was not a man. Afterall, I had failed to expel my femininity – failed to prove that I was indeed heterosexual through some form of masculine display that aligned itself with the parallel development of masculinity and heterosexuality vis-à-vis homosexuality (Connell 1992). Being called a "sissy" and a "fag" was denigrating my visible markers of my supposed homosexuality and my body's supposed inefficacy and weakness. My "sissy" body seemed to lack the physical and, thus, social qualities attributed to the authentic man and to his ability to dominate others – other boys and, more importantly, in the context of heteronormative discourse, girls (Kimmel 1994; Pascoe 2007). My "sissy" body was, thus, rendered distant from the other jostling and soccer-playing boys, distant from the athletic and militarized bodies which epitomized the masculine hero (Mosse 1996). As such, my body was devalued and rendered abject.

Baritone: You are *ruining* the entire scene!!!

I had noted the fury in the conductor's eyes and was now called to the back of the stage, awaiting the full impact of that fury. As the conductor closed in on me, my heart pounded faster and faster.

"You really need to learn to be a man! ...you are ruining the entire scene!!!"

I nodded my head in submission as my face flushed with embarrassment. My eyes started to gather tears. "Be a man!". Those familiar words gripped my mind. A gnawing sensation that I had been familiar with since my school days began to course through me. Much akin to Olivia Laing's description of how the trauma from her school years still lingered in her body (Laing 2012, 244), the tensions and violence of my childhood, entangled with a sense of shame and gender dissonance, had resurfaced viscerally.

A cold shiver tingled along my skin. I suddenly felt ashamed. I felt small again. My mind, in a quick but poignant flash, brought back the memories of the schoolyard.

"Your voice is fine. But don't you know you're a baritone?! You really look like a pansy!"

My face reddened further with shame. My body felt this shame's weight bear down on it as it stood stiff and immobile in its place. My arms now hung dumbly from my sides as my legs became taut with anxiety.

It was the dress rehearsal for the conservatoire's opera scenes. I was playing the male lead from a nineteenth century opera, a character renowned for his rotundness and male chauvinism. As a tall and slim man in my twenties, I was keenly aware that a realistic portrayal of the fat and old man was nigh impossible. Yet, it seemed that neither the fat suit nor the white powder on my hair were the entities that broke the suspension of belief for the conductor. What broke the illusion for him was clearly my corporeal femininity. "Really go work on it! Be a baritone! Be a man!" huffed the conductor as he walked away. Though I had grown into manhood, in the biological sense, my corporeal femininity, my visible lack of manliness never truly left me. In the darkness of the side stage, my lack of masculine comportment was called out as a professional failure, a failure that was intertwined with my personhood. Afterall,

being the "pansy" was the flaw in my being, a flaw which I had carried from my childhood years, and which now affected my inept contribution to the opera scene. I had failed to "be a man".

I had failed to inherit the "ways of inhabiting and extending into space" (Ahmed 2006, 86) as a male baritone. Indeed, the male baritone paradigm is a modular space that occupies a distinct location within opera's voice-body-gender matrix – the *Fach* system. The *Fach* system cohered in nineteenth-century Germany, from which the singing voice began to be differentiated and classified vis-à-vis specific dramatic roles and orchestral instrumentations (Behrendt 2022, 14). This distinction of voices was further concretized over the course of the twentieth century, with the advent of recording (Potter & Sorrell 2012, 215), and as the academic codification of voices tied it to the various types, narratives and histories of operas (Cotton 2007, 59–63).

Furthermore, the *Fach* system became a tool of gender interpellation towards the body and the voice. Annette Schlichter (2011), drawing on Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity (1999), notes that a singer's corporeal and sonic materialities are invested with gender signification through citation. Along with the body, the "voice can be understood as [a] culturally framed physical accomplishment rather than a biological fixed expression of gender" (Schlichter 2011, 43). Certainly, the operatic masculine male voice is crafted by vocal pedagogy through citation. Since the seventeenth century, vocal pedagogues have made a distinction between "the full quality and rich harmonic structure of [the] chest voice [… and] the thinner harmonic structure of the falsetto register" (Stark 2008, 35) possessed by the cis-male singer, rendering the latter voice as unnatural or "false" (Stark 2008). Thus, by eschewing the falsetto, the cis-male chest voice was continually crafted, propagated and ratified as the most natural and normative gender timbre for men in opera. Conversely, the falsetto, having been condemned by vocal theorists, became associated with gender inversion and homosexuality in wider society (Wood 2006). (It must be noted that counter-tenor falsettists, who assumed the roles left behind by the androgynous castrati,

only became popular and viable from the mid-twentieth century. [See Potter & Sorell 2012, 228].)

Alongside the voice's gender performativity, a binary gender dramatic schema arose in the nineteenth century which pivoted the masculine physical displays and masculine chest voices of male singers against the exaggerated femininity of the operatic women (Jarman 2017, 144). A contributing factor in the development of this binary schema was the social realism aesthetic of the nineteenth century operatic stage (Biddle 2013), as well as the shift to a binary understanding of sexes alongside a growing need to represent the binary polarities found in nineteenth century middle-class family life (Jarman 2013). Thus, the visible, biological male body became strictly aligned with his masculine chest voice, rejecting the sonic and corporeal gender-crossings of the castrati to ossify masculine and heterosexual representations.

The *Fach* system, emerging out of this "consistently conservative" (Biddle 2013, 199) gender milieu, thus, became the interpretative schema that ensured a unified visual and sonic narrative. As Kandis Cook and Nicholas Till argue more bluntly about conventional dramatic narrative: "everything is sucked into that wretched narrative explanation – everything has to be working to convey the story – each moment has to confirm the previous" (2002, n.p.). And though *regietheater* (director's theatre) is a regular practice that allows directors to change staged visual elements, pulling conventional opera's visual narratives away from sonic ones (Levin 2007), the voice-body-gender grid of the *Fach* system still acts as the insidious foundation that undermines efforts for radical change (Clément 2000). Ergo, the *Fach* system, through its historicization and prevalence, pressured my body "to live a certain kind of life" (Ahmed 2006, 17), a certain form of sonic and corporeal manhood.

However, no two men on the opera stage are ever alike. Indeed, the baritone paradigm operated within a hierarchy of masculinity that was underscored by the *Fach* system. Firstly, the system utilized the range and weight of the voice to organize the voice into an age stratum, placing lighter and higher voices at the top (McGinnis 2010, 13). Staged

age and binary genders have long been intertwined in theatre history, conferring different representations of authority. Chief among them are the aged patriarchs and matriarchs whose gender archetypes inform how they tussle with encroaching socio-political decline and usurping youths (Mangan 2013). Correspondingly, the age stratum dictates the displays of masculinity within an opera narrative (Clément 2000; Forshaw 2013), with the baritone voice occupying a middling zone between the youthful (and thus often depicted as either wide-eyed or agential) tenor and the aged bass (who often stands in as the Law of the Father). Thus, the baritone, centred between two other masculine paradigms, could encompass the romantic lead, the brother/best friend and/or the villain. Nevertheless, in each case, the baritone still signified the man, albeit he was an ever-morphing chimera without any fixed qualities or traits. From this perspective, what was required of me at the conservatoire was not that I embody a singular male character that would encompass all the traits of manhood, but rather that I censure my effeminacy. After all, as much as the baritone is defined by a fluid variety of gender traits, he is primarily established by his relationship to his Other – by what he must not possess. Effeminacy, thus, became the excess Other that I had to dispose of. Indeed, I am reminded by Deleuze and Guattari that "anything that exceeds the excess of the signifier or passes beneath it will be marked with a negative value" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 116).

Certainly, my effeminate body produced excesses that exceeded the baritone paradigm. My body's perceived feminine behaviours and attitudes, perceived feminine gestures and comportment, signified to many an ineffectual masculinity. And just like in the schoolyard, my ineffectual masculinity called into question my heterosexuality. No matter how masculine my voice sounded, my visual body, when scrutinized against the *Fach* system's interpretative schema, caused a corporeal–sonic dissonance that broke the suspension of belief for people.

II

Boy: This will teach you to be a man

"Aaargh!!!!"

My throat opened with a scream as my mind desperately tried to make sense of the searing pain emanating from my legs. I felt the dry burn in my throat. My cheeks flushed as blood coursed underneath my face and warm tears wetted my eyes. Looking down, I registered the raw redness of my thighs – how they looked so much like uncooked slabs of meat. Pain moved up from these red patches, traveling through and into my stomach, arms, and hands as my entire body contracted and stiffened in the act of futile self-defense. As my eyes filled with anxiety, witnessing the wooden branch, my assailant's weapon of choice, swinging again towards me, electrical impulses coursed through my being – I flinched! And as I felt the wood meet the softness of my skin, as the blistering pain dispersed away from the point of contact between hard material and my flesh, my chest contracted and my viscera in this moment of danger violently pushed out another primal scream –

"Aaargh!!!!"

"This will teach you how to be a man!" barked a senior at me. His hard, merciless yet gleeful tone resonated across the schoolyard.

"Ha! Maybe one day if you finally learn to walk properly… you could be a real man", chuckled my assailant.

It was recess. Unlike the other boys who found the break an opportune moment to let loose and have fun, this interval for me was always a time of trials – trials of my manhood. I had tried to hide from my would-be assailant, but as always, I was caught. Having been arrested, a public trial, a corrective lesson, would commence. Curious boys would stand staring, unperturbed or mildly amused at my predicament.

It was through violence that I was learning how to "be a man". Through punches, kicks and branches, I was taught how a man should act and

move. Through suspicious and unkind gazes, through schoolyard taunts and jeers, I came to know of my effeminate body. Indeed, the boys taught me that my body – no, my being – was abject and that it needed censure and correction. How I came to understand my manhood was thus through injury (Real 2002, 49).

My body was being disciplined and punished through physical violence, name-calling and public trials of shame. The boys of my primary school were acting as "gender police" (Kimmel 2008, 55), punishing my effeminate body due to its lack of conformity with the masculine frame. The boys were trying to fix me, to literally make me walk along the same lines as them (Ahmed 2006, 14–15), pressing me to conform to their masculine world so as to establish their own normativity, their own sense of comfort.

Baritone: Straight lines…straight lines

My arm stretched out to pick up the cup. "Straight lines…straight lines. And watch the wrist." As movement travelled from my shoulders to my hands, the muscles across the entire limb hardened with tension. "Relax!", I screamed to myself in my mind. But as my hands grasped the handle of the cup and moved towards my face, the stiff twisting sinews of my elbow signalled to me the artificiality and mechanicalistic nature of my gesture.

"Now try walking around the room…that's it… imagine that you have something really big in-between your legs…watch those hips!"

My feet met the floor with great weight as my thighs flared out. I walked around the room with a widened stance, with my conscious will holding my hips firmly perpendicular to the floor. "Watch the hips. Do not sway one bit! ... Come on! Be a man!" I thought to myself.

"Don't swing those arms now…imagine that you have two tennis balls in each armpit."

My sternum reached forward as my chest widened out. My arms now stiffly lifted away from my chest. My whole body strained to keep this new bodily frame as joints stiffened and contracted. As the fibres of my body contorted in this dance of manhood,

they twitched to signal the alienness of these movements on my being. As my outer flesh moulded itself into a new manhood, every fibre of my body creaked with resistance.

I had approached a drama teacher for lessons, seeking to align my body – in gesture, posture and deportment – towards the baritone ideal. My goal was to materialize the "appropriate" corporeal masculinity, to embody a man with "a certain feel to the skin, certain muscular shapes and tensions, certain postures and ways of moving" (Connell 2020, 1637). This goal became my obsession. I spent hours in the practice room, repeatedly practicing my new "masculine" enactments. I was hoping to achieve a gender performativity that would "congeal over time to produce appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler 1999, 43–44). I was so willing to accept the painful contortions and manipulations of my body (Ahmed 2006, 91) so as to achieve a place on the stage.

In my yearning to become the baritone, I began to self-monitor and correct my body posture and gestures, always anticipating the critical glances or comments that could be made by people around me. As a singer, performing in a "field of visibility" (Foucault 1975, 202), the possibility for criticism, those unprovable gazes, were enough for me to subject my body to the "be a man" regime. I undertook the masculine gender regime as my professional responsibility, as something I had to do to correct my inferior gender performance and be considered a professional singer. "Be a man" – these words from my childhood, these words of hate, now became my own words: "Come on! Be a man!" I had acknowledged within myself my inferiority. The external jeers of hate that once emanated in the schoolyard now morphed into internal derisions. I became convinced of my place in the hierarchy of masculinities, and "convinced of my own unfitness" (Freire 2015, 63). This example further illustrates how the normatively gendered body-shaping regimes that have commonly shaped operatic culture (see McGinnis 2010; Eidsheim 2017) serve to discipline singers' self-perceptions and self-presentations. I, who was once as a child, physically disciplined and wounded for my gender nonadherence, was now, as an adult, subjugating myself, willingly, to a new form of bodily discipline and violence.

III

Baritone: You're just too gay to be on the stage

"Thank you. That's enough."

My body immediately deflated as my ears registered the fading resonance of my voice, which lingered in the air. I knew I had failed yet again. Another audition…another failure.

My body scuffled out of the room. "What went wrong?", I thought to myself. "Did I not practice the aria hard enough? Was my voice not secure at that top note?" These doubts circled in my mind.

"You have a great voice. It's rich and deep. But you're just too gay to be on the stage."

One of the panellists found me in the corridor. His voice was curt. His eyes were firmly cold.

My body wrenched. I felt the fibres and sinews of my body, those muscles that for years had tried desperately to uphold my masculine persona, ached and twitched. The frosty remark from the panellist had clearly disarmed my bodily defences, my masculine front. I felt caught. My effeminacy had been uncovered! No matter how hard I had tried to master it, I had failed to do so again.

As I walked out of the audition building, a wave of weariness surged through my body. The muscles in my limbs loosened, my back slumped forward. I was tired. Tired of hearing again that I failed to be a man. Tired of my approximation of the baritone paradigm never being good enough. "Do you even have a dick! You must be a homo!!" These schoolyard jeers had now transformed into the sardonic comment "You're just too gay to be on the stage." I was tired of hoping to reach across the masculine gap between me and the baritone, tired of twisting and straightening my body to edge myself vainly closer to a male paradigm to achieve career success. "Hadn't I tried so many times to be a man?!" I would ask myself. "Was this really the only man I'd ever be allowed to be in opera? Is there no redemption for my effeminacy?"

A few days after the audition, I heard that Eric, a baritone friend of mine, got the part that I had auditioned for. "Of course he did", I thought to myself, "after all, he is such a dude's dude."

Perhaps Eric, and many other "dude's dudes" are able to achieve professional success, at least in part, due to their passing through a space that has already incorporated their bodies (Ahmed 2006, 135) – bodies whose comportment and demeanor are easily placed into the binary gender and sexual schema of conventional opera culture, and thus, do not trouble the space around them. Indeed, "there is real power in remaining unmarked" (Phelan 1993, 6). This power is buttressed by opera culture's gender normative genealogy – the *Fach* system, the comings and goings of germane masculine bodies on the stage, and the plethora of recordings that etched themselves deeply onto the skin of vocal culture, creating lines that "become signs of the past, as well as orientations toward the future" (Ahmed 2006, 18).

My effeminate body stuck out in this paradigm, and could not easily move along opera culture's social skin (Ahmed 2006, 18) to find professional success. This immobility is due to the all but non-presence of effeminate bodies on the opera stage, leaving no memory or trace of the effeminate singer. Yes, there certainly were queer bodies on the conventional, operatic stage – trouser roles and castrati, each equally subjected to scrutiny by the heteronormative gaze, each eroticized for their gender and sexual ambiguity (André 2006; Abel 2019). But male effeminacy on the opera stage itself bears a history of erasure. As Parkorn Wangpaiboonkit (2020) notes, as the binary-sex logic gained ascendence within nineteenth-century operatic circles, there was growing condemnation of any signs of effeminacy. Firstly, *musicos* (cis-females singing male roles) were condemned for being ineffectual in playing male characters, with their visual presentations and bodily conducts cited as grounds for the attack (Wangpaiboonkit 2020, 3). Secondly, as high vocal range male character roles became increasingly occupied by cis-male singers in the nineteenth century, the need to sever male character roles from their androgynous, castrati past meant that a milieu

was created in which all male singers, regardless of vocal range, were themselves up to gender scrutiny, with the success of their performances predicated on their ability to avoid signs of effeminacy in their build, manners and comportment (Hadlock 2015; Wangpaiboonkit 2020). Heather Hadlock illustrates this through the example of a nineteenth-century critic's scathing review of the tenor Giovanni David:

> David has reappeared [in Milan], this time in the guise of Alexander. But the conqueror of all empires is only recognizable by his helmet and hauberk […] these swoons, lazy gestures, and mannered movements are not for the temper of that fierce spirit. (Gazzetta di Milano 1826, 1431–1432, as cited by Hadlock 2015, 208)

This critic's words read as a prototype of the criticism that I had received: "you're just too gay to be on stage". The twentieth century did not give further relief to effeminacy, since, when non-hegemonic masculine men were presented on the opera stages, they were typically "the specter of abnormality and monstrosity" (McClary 2013, 45). With the development of the male masculinity in conventional opera seemingly leaving no room for the effeminate, how could effeminate bodies ever claim residence on the stage?

Queer failure

"Must this all end with hopelessness then?" you may be asking. Certainly, the narratives throughout this article have been about body performance failures. But did I not promise that I would bring some hope? Indeed, as José Muñoz remind us, "failure and hopelessness seem strange topics for a [text] about utopia and hope" (Muñoz 2009, 176).

I take on Muñoz's advocacy of a queer utopia by recognizing my body performance failures as queer failures. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam views queer failures as illegible to dominant discourse and, thus, as potential sources of liberation (2011, 10). Indeed, my effeminate body was not legible vis-à-vis the "be a man" discourse that operated within opera culture and was rendered impotent. It was through my

body's illegibility that I crafted this text as a "counterhegemonic discourse of losing" (Halberstam 2011, 12), creating a threshold for possible liberation by opening conversations around heteronormative and hegemonic masculine standards and restrictions within opera culture. From this threshold, I now wish to "yield a vision of co-existence that does not require making others' life-worlds extinct or provisional" (Mahmood 2005, 199, as cited in Halberstam 2011, 12). Finding inspiration in Paolo Freire's assertion that "looking at the past… [is] a means of understanding more clearly what and who [we] are so that [we] can more wisely build the future" (Freire 2015, 84), I once again search my past to yield this vision of co-existence.

Boy: A hero lies in you

And then a hero comes along
With the strength to carry on
…
And you'll finally see the truth
That a hero lies in you

(Carey & Afanasieff 1993)

Adrenaline and endorphins tingled throughout my body as my chest swelled with confidence. At 13 years old, I was in the living room of my childhood home. My throat continued to open, swelling up with vitality as I belted out the stratospheric notes of Mariah Carey's "Hero". I felt my entire body enveloped in the resonance of my voice. My voice vibrated through my skull, chest bones, and stomach. In that moment, I felt free – liberated from the tears and sores of my flesh. As my voice resonated through my body, I felt its waves on my skin, assuaging the feelings of shame and fear that lingered over the wounds of my body.

With this sense of freedom, my body moved as me – uncensored, unchained from society's expectations. My arms, shoulders, and hips moved in an unchoreographed dance, each finding their movements alongside the music, forming a sort of synergized per-

formance. In that moment, I was neither sissy nor man, neither homo nor straight – I was just me! And yet, I was more than me. For as I sang, I felt my inner hero coming through and out of my body. I sensed my hero awakening within and through my voice, merging with the words and the melody of the song. And in the midst of all this, I felt a stronger, newer hero-me emerging. This hero-me was not some man I did not know. This hero-me, which morphed from Mariah's hero to one in me and, then, to another! – emerging as an excess of me. This "me" pulsated through my voice and body – a "me" which encapsulated a sense of being me, a sense of self-worth, but also a sense of going beyond me.

Perhaps it seems strange to revisit a childhood memory that invokes notions of the hero. After all, is not my struggle with the "be a man" discourse a struggle against heroic masculinity, which in the context of opera, predicates itself on a unified corporeal and sonic masculine entity (Jarman 2013)? However, I turn to Slavoj Žižek's definition of the hero as one who "suspends the validity of existing explicit moral norms in the name of a higher ethics of life" (Žižek 1994, 67). With this, I view my hero as the boy-me in the above narrative. This boy has shown himself to defy the existing hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative norms that surround his body. And by his singing and dancing, he encompasses a higher ethics of life by eschewing the forces that seek to compartmentalize his body.

What then is this higher ethics? The ethics of the authentic self? No! For I agree with Philip Auslander's reading of Derrida that "nothing can legitimately claim to possess a stable, autonomous identity" (2002, 53) and that "the self is not an autonomous foundation for acting, but is produced by the performance it supposedly grounds" (2002, 54). However, rather than viewing this Derridean *différance* (which will ever side-step away from a supposed point of sovereign origin to create differences in themselves) as an obstacle on the path of self-affirmation, I embrace the Deleuzo-Guattarian "*difference in itself* – [since it] is *not* understood as fundamentally negative or oppositional, but as relational" (Cisney 2018, 240, emphasis in original) as the form of self-affirmation. Thus, the boy-me came into a sense-of-self and beyond-a-sense-of-self through

the physical, sonic, emotional, psychological relationships between my body, voice and the music forged in the acts of singing and dancing. I turn to Audre Lorde to view these acts as ethical since they emerged

> between the beginnings of [my] sense of self and the chaos of [my] strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves. (2019, 44)

As such, the relational act of creation constitutes an ethical sense-of-self since it seeks to "make connection with our similarities and our differences" (Lorde 2019, 48) across the medium of music and body rather than having "our lives […] limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's" (Lorde 2019, 47). I view this sense-of-self akin to Deleuzo-Guattarian desire – the engendering passion of the body through fulfilling only in and of itself (Deleuze & Guattari 2000, 27), beyond the needs of the ego and dominant structures.

Conclusion: "Make connection[s]…"

Opera practice arguably has much to gain from heeding Lorde's suggestion to "make connection[s] with our similarities and our differences" (2019, 48). I believe that it is precisely through this ethos that opera might embrace the effeminate body. By approaching the singer as a complex assemblage and a site of possibilities, we need not strive to pull him towards fixed points of masculinity to determine reproduction (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 372). We need not subjugate and entrap bodies through modelling archetypes around singers and requiring them to produce specific significations. Such an act narrows "one's capacity to feel, sense, process and sustain the impact with the complex materiality of the outside" (Braidotti 2006, 145) and leads to a "soul murder" (Yep 2003, 22). Instead, we can explore what might occur if we travel along the differences of the singer's body, tapping into that which

is "relational rather than essential" (Cisney 2018, 218). What happens, then, if we take a male singer's "feminine" walk and amalgamate it with Don Giovanni? Could the "intensive in-betweenness" (Massumi 2002, 57) between the body and the character surface a new leading baritone which might trouble the meaning of the opera as a whole?

By eschewing our pre-conceived notions of what the male baritone should or should not be, along with the heteronormative and hegemonic masculinity discourses that surround the male baritone, perhaps we can turn our attention towards body differences themselves. This attention to the body is not the paradoxical move of focusing on the body in order to de-focus it, but rather to consider how the body present, especially a body of difference, might become a legitimate "[actor] in history, as well as repositories of history" (Shapiro 2009, 194). The effeminate body, then, finds residence in opera culture despite its history of erasure, connecting with the past to provide inclinations to produce something new. Such a process takes courage – we will never know what emerges. Yet, this dynamic process embraces difference and allows it to claim residence on the stage. Bodies that span across categories such as gender, class and race can then be embraced, valued and seen on the opera stage. Perhaps then, opera can edge closer towards a queer utopia, towards a space of "collective potentiality" (Muñoz 2009, 189) which yields a new co-existence.

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