

# *Some Notes on Karaoke*



Judith Hamann

Karaoke, in this conceptual move by musician Judith Hamann, is seen as a framework that can create authentic expressions of something that »needed to happen.« Like desire paths, karaoke is a means of collectively consolidating a performative and musical presence. Virtuosoic failure and utopian imagination are the result of karaoke happenings, as Hamann describes, drawing upon queer ontologies, the idea of »trace« as possibility, and, in particular, adopting a DIY-communal and amateur approach to music performance that goes beyond classical structures. Ultimately, karaoke is presented as a practice of becoming rendered – weaving together musical and inner memory. This simultaneous formation of karaoke into the realm of time-space is based on Hamann’s unique experience within the community of fellows during a residency at Akademie Schloss Solitude.

The first time I participated in group karaoke at Schloss Solitude, it was very much a spontaneous happening.

Relatively new arrivals to the residency, a small group of us arrived at a shared impulse one evening, steered by a clear collective feeling that *this* needed to happen. With only a laptop and projector set up in the corner of the Schloss's basement cafeteria and ambiance provided by the resident disco ball doing its (almost sad) spinning thing, the collective urge to sing, shout, scream, improvise dodgy harmonies to Fleetwood Mac, and move our bodies together somehow fell gloriously into place.

This evening marked many of the relational frames of our community of fellows for months to come, even as our technical setup incrementally became more sophisticated. It marked an episodic yet ongoing late-night community performance space that was both joyous and messy, embracing changeable temporal and temporary configurations of both musical material and humans, all unfolding within one of my most beloved performance modes: karaoke.

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Karaoke manifests in many formal configurations, depending largely on location and how the diasporic root systems of karaoke have taken form and how migrant communities engaged with karaoke have found their expression and broader cultural adaptations across social geographies. The historical tracings formulated by different social and cultural expressions and usage of karaoke as a form could easily comprise a lengthy discussion on its own: from the origins of public bar karaoke in much of the Global North, to the continuing dominance of private booth karaoke in east Asia (and to some extent Australia), while hybrid forms continue to be realized within Filipino and Vietnamese diasporic spaces, and community-driven and often anticolonial frames of orientation in karaoke performance cultures has been developed over several decades in East African cities like Kigali and Kampala.

My personal favorite form of karaoke, and the kind that I am mostly referring to when I use the term karaoke from here on, I tentatively term, »DIY communal karaoke.« This specific iteration sits somewhere between booth and public, a semi-public/semi-private configuration where a specific community (friends, colleagues, or in the above example, fellows) gathers to perform karaoke, often outside typical structural frames for the activity. Instead of a bar's karaoke night or the confines of booth protocol, this form leans into looser and more

temporary configurations, predominantly in less formal or even domestic spaces.

In this iteration of karaoke, the song library of choice draws on the broader collective internet pooling of YouTube karaoke videos rather than a curated list of song choices. The cultural archive of the karaoke song list, which more often than not reflects the dominance of Western popular music in the Global North, is in many senses a holdover from the era of the karaoke machine, as developed by Japanese musician Daisuke Inoue in 1971 (although the first formal patent for a »Sing Along System« was ultimately filed by Filipino inventor Roberto del Rosario in 1975), and the later laser and compact disc driven formats of the 1980s and 1990s.

Depending on YouTube as an infrastructure for what I intend to suggest is potentially an activity of structural critique, is not without conflict or complexity, particularly in terms of how we manipulate and are manipulated by monopolistic platforms. However, one thing it does do is open up the potential song choice space to increasingly de-Eurocentralized musical choices, via the diversification of language and musical lineage, and potentially allowing the capacity for forays into collage and experimentation. This also establishes an added dimension of play, for unexpected directions, configurations of performers, for two songs playing at once, monologues, for that version of The Cranberries »Zombie,« edited with every other beat missing, for sharing and discovering different positionalities in musical memory.

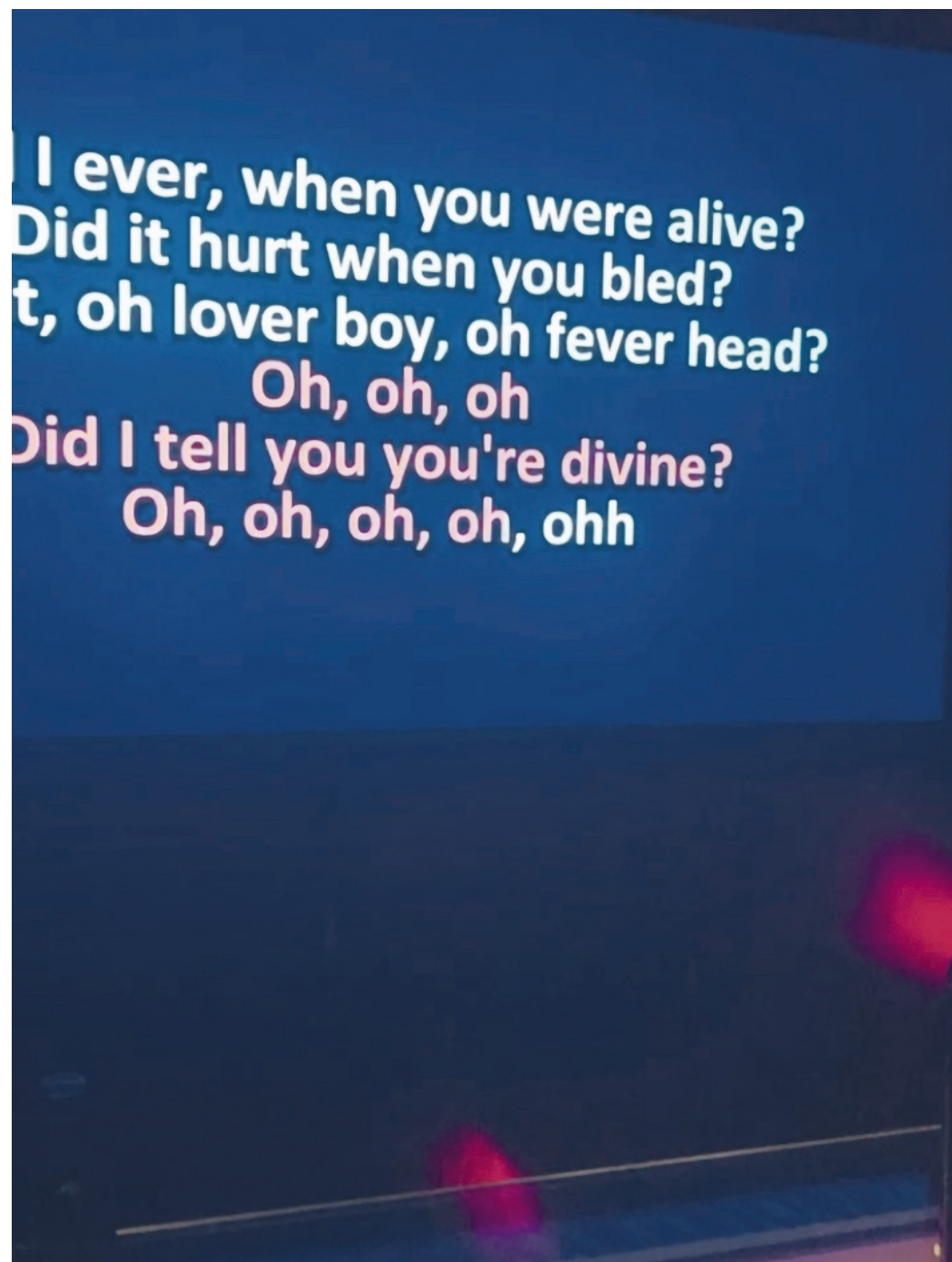
In this frame, karaoke also points toward an outline of something particular, something that creates a kind of silhouette of a potentiality: for utopian imagination, virtuosic failures, a reorientation of where troublesome creatures like »performance authenticity« might be located, for a collapsing of memory into different kinds of tracing.

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A host of ideas are outlined in writer José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* that I return to often, especially when I'm trying to think/with karaoke. Foremost is his linking of failure and virtuosity within a queer utopian aesthetic frame. Muñoz casts failure as a non-normative yet generative space, one intrinsic to queerness in the sense that both activities are doing *something else* outside of normative social and temporal structures.<sup>1</sup>

His exploration charts different modalities of failure within queer performance spaces: that of non-mastery, amateurism, a brilliant »off-ness,«<sup>2</sup> of a failure to be





All images courtesy Judith Hamann

normal or to »succeed« in terms of melodic or choreographic execution, as well as forms of refusal, dissent, or escape.

In considering this list, does not karaoke also potentially carry within it modalities of both failure and virtuosity, a likeness to virtuosic failure?

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The literal translation of *karaoke* to English from Japanese is »empty orchestra.«<sup>3</sup>

As a musician trained within the frame of Euro-classical heritage music, I have been stewing on this as a prompt to consider what karaoke has personally opened for me in terms of undoing and unlearning mastery or disciplinary thinking around performance.

If I think about the ways in which music and performance can be emptied, hollowed out, or drained, I do not perceive that location as falling within the space of collective karaoke practice. The medium's beautiful flexibility rests not in its often lovingly rendered MIDI transcriptions heard in the backing tracks (which of course in some sense is *emptied* of a potential human responsiveness) but in its potential for radical reinterpretation.

Instead, I find karaoke to be an embodied critique of the form of emptying that is often played out in Euro-classical music performance: the disappearance of the performer's corporeal being, the implicit demand for performer transparency in order to not obscure the primacy of the work object of the score or ideal performance. Within karaoke, I find the location of the performer vibrant, alive, and operating on multiple relational levels, to music, memory, individual, collective, and broader musical and social knowledge systems.

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The best karaoke carries within it an absolute commitment to a kind of anti-perfection, a devoted amateurism. From my perspective, the deepest magic of karaoke often occurs in its moments of slippage and deviation: when a performer realizes they have no idea how the verse of a song goes; when they step completely outside of the melodic frame of the original and follow their own version, own key, own rhythm; a kind of sideways reinvention that comes from a failure to adhere to an ideal, to the concept of the »original,« or to a »right way.«

What occurs in these moments of failure, as I interpret it, is something simultaneously wildly generative and creative. We experience familiar musical structures

being undone and made anew. The musical object as the *original* or ideal rendering becomes largely irrelevant and is replaced by a new point of orientation.

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If »success« under late capitalism is often defined as deeply connected to winning, gain, and profit, then its contrasting relief could be read as something like failure, or loss. Part of the thrill of karaoke is its entanglement with failure, that it demarcates a space in which we can safely lose. What might it mean to spend time playing and partying in this space? How might the pleasure of karaoke help us imagine what failure within certain structures reveals or uncovers about the very nature of said structure?

In a recent conversation with friend and performer leo, we discussed the idea that certain codes cannot see themselves, that a structure cannot perceive itself, specifically in terms of Euro-classical heritage forms of music making. Maybe I love karaoke so much because it helps me see the flickering edges of a structure around *music performance* that more often than not relies on its invisibility.

I mean this in the sense of not only existing structures of fidelity, accuracy, correctness, and fixed outcome around performance and musicmaking but also ways to imagine how it could be constructed otherwise. Here I find the utopian a recurring thought, that karaoke might represent a possibility of reaching toward a kind of collective futurity, a horizon that is not yet here.

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Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of the »trace,« Muñoz outlines a particular form of performance *potentiality* which, rather than aiming for an end or a totality, lives within the in-between space of its »means,« a play on the adage »means to an end.« This positioning places the emphasis on the activity of the performance itself: its process rather than its outcome, completeness, or rendering as a finished work object. Muñoz connects this in-between space to the values of amateurism and populism, as he argues, a means to »interrupt aesthetics and politics that aspire towards totality.«<sup>4</sup>

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In karaoke, I am intrigued by the sense that authenticity is no longer aligned with the precision of replication of an



ideal work object (the original rendering of the song), nor with the norm or straight (as in normative, linear) time version of a sense of self. The kind of authenticity cultivated here is that of alignment with the utopian, but also with perhaps parts of ourselves that are often hidden or lost, or that which we might long for or desire. Karaoke is an example of a performance activity and space that enacts such utopian ideals through its potential for play: with voice, identity, gender, relationships, memory, and positionality.

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Memory has an interesting and almost prismatic function in karaoke, and I mean this spatial metaphor in the sense of a multiplicity that is at once almost contradictory, yet holds together a larger configuration.

I'm thinking about memory as trace or tracing, not just in terms of something past, but the way it might form a kind of »desire path«<sup>5</sup> through the vibrant present of a karaoke session, while simultaneously reaching for the threads of nostalgia to access not just melody contours and rhythms, lyrics and harmony but also all the stored interior sensations bound to them. Like a kind of utopian phantom, these traces find us in the present moment of karaoke, and for all its collisions, remake a collective topography, creating new contours to follow toward speculative horizons.

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I'm interested in the desire path as a particular kind of collective tracing, a desire for a *way* because its activity is not necessarily located at an *end*, either. Its creation resides within the process, in kinship – recalling Muñoz's casting of »means.« I love the desire path's almost *gestalt*, intuitive collective thinking based on action and iteration: that a form of collective decision-making might, over many many footfalls, in a temporary unsettled treading down space, creating a channel for a new »way« to resist

more rigid structures. There is something here in the collective reiteration of a specific performance location and orientation, the ongoing episodic form I attempted to sketch in the opening of these notes, that, for me, bears a resemblance to the phenomena of the desire path. Beyond the generative frame of resisting ideas like fidelity and accuracy in strictly musical terms, I suspect that how we gather, and how we party, also enacts something more substantial over time, as a kind of collective mark making, a concretization of the ephemerality of performance, party, and pleasure, into a specific materiality: a kind of practice or rehearsal for other forms of solidarity and resistance.

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Karaoke is a reminder that, for me, musical memory and human memory are intertwined, a kind of miraculous data retrieval mechanism that accesses things I thought I had lost. A song has a way of hitting some sort of soft spot, like a point in the bodily/memory system that may not have been pressed on for a long time. There are different layers at play, remembering how the song goes, for starters, the retrieval of some old, almost muscular memory of a tune, connecting with a flicker, a flash of some memory of the radio blasting with the car windows wound down on a road trip, of a mass of dancing bodies at a teenage party, for singing in a friend's kitchen, for old heartbreak, old lust, old rooms, old friends, old homes where the sunlight scorched instead of merely shining.

It is also a way to emblazon new memories and new communities: a secret sonic tattoo – as in both the rhythm, the beating of it all, as in the mark making.

At its best, karaoke frames a kind of poetics of memory, a nod to »what was and what could be« and at the same time holding »what is.« Here, karaoke collapses straight time into an alternative temporal scale in which nostalgia and imagined horizons intersect in a moment of real-time performance activity, into brilliant, virtuosic failure.

**Judith Hamann** is a composer/performer born in Narrm/Melbourne and currently based in Berlin. In recent research, Hamann examines the acts of shaking and humming as formal and intimate encounters; interrogates collapse as a generative imaginary surface; and considers the »de-mastering« of bodies, both human and nonhuman, in settler-colonial heritage instrumental practice and pedagogy.

1 José Esteban Muñoz: *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York 2009, pp. 172–74.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 174.

3 As I understand, it is an abbreviation of

(orchestra) in play here, which apparently in turn borrows from the French »sabotage« and a factor in why it is only written with katakana.

4 Muñoz, p.100.

5 Desire paths refer to the phenomenon of an unofficial path created by repeated use.