

Sappho Was Not a Poet: The Sonoric Character of Poetry and Its Emancipatory Potential

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Abstract: The name Sappho represents a cornerstone of lesbian cultures – though mostly for white lesbian communities. Sappho is commonly known as “the first lesbian poet”. But, a correction is in place as far as our need to categorise artists on the basis of their medium of expression is concerned: Sappho was a composer. The article focuses on a great abyss which has developed through a disregard for the unpreservable historical artefacts, and which places poetry (as a separate artistic category) at the basis of lesbian cultures, even though poetry is inseparable from its sonority, e.g. music (as a category which does not discriminate between the verboentric and semiotically unstable audible constructs). Through sound and music theories, seminal thoughts by lesbian theoreticians and examples of poetry by writers from both Yugoslav and global contexts, I point to the nuclear character of sound in the context of sexual difference and lesbian subjectivation, as thematized in literature. In addition, by stressing the inseparability of poetry and sonority, the sonoric character of poetry will be shown as a primary constituent of lesbian communities as potent political bodies.

Keywords: lesbian poetry, sound, sonority, emancipation

“Now I will sing this beautifully / to delight my companions,” Sappho declares (Sappho, Rayer and Lardinois 83). Or, to be precise, she *composes*. And we ought to be precise in order to capture the history of lesbian cultures of a certain space in what it is, not in what was left of it.

In the end, it all comes down to language, to the dominant categorizations. The earliest known beginnings of lesbian literatures in Europe seem to be in the so-called *East* – with Sappho, who is often said to be *the first lesbian poet*, and as such represents a basic reference for White lesbian cultures. In their book *The Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* (1979), Monique Wittig in Sande Zeig devote an entire page to Sappho.

It comes as no surprise that the page is blank; for we know little. But broad conclusions are made on the basis of material knowledge and history, on the artefacts available for examination. These exclude what is intangible and evasive – namely, sonority –, thereby reducing history through visual bias.

What has *remained* as a historical artefact is what makes Sappho “solely” a poet. However, once we apply a more comprehensive methodological approach to lesbian histories, once we include in our examination of lesbian histories precisely what has rendered lesbianism non-existing – invisibility *and* inaudibility –, we discern that Sappho was *a composer, a sound artist*, and her *sapphic stanza* a rhythmical invention, as well as a reference point – not for readers, but for *listeners*. Her art is first and foremost *sonic*.

The same goes for all the history of poetry, of *lyricism* as an artistic practice. Lyricism has its etymological root in the Greek word *lyrikus*, which signifies that which refers to the lyre (gr. *lura*) as a *musical* instrument. Lyricism is a *sonoric performance* which takes place when thought is given specific sound attributes (intonation, amplitude, tempo, rhythm, timbre). Especially where literacy is scarce, when no compositional signs and codes exist, poetry exists where there is or is not a reader, but where there certainly is a *listener*. A step further: all poetry is in its core sonoric, and it occurs in a performance: be it on stage or within the reader herself, who equips what is read with sonoric conventions (or subversions), and therefore does not interpret fragments, but a wholesome sound composition.

Sappho’s works were intended for a *sound performance* using a lyre, which will *delight her companions*. That we are talking about art, exhibited in its inherent, however arbitrarily interpreted sonority, is crucial, as the subject’s right to be audible (recognized as heard, as existing) is a ground point for the construction of social hierarchies. In several Slavic languages, *the right to vote* is *the right (to produce) a voice* (e. g. *pravo glasa*). In those languages, the word for a poem or song is the same (e. g. *pesem, pjesma, pesma*).

In order to recognize the frontal presence of sonority in earliest known poetries a feminist perspective is required. Such that does not seek presence in bare materiality, but rather recognizes it as *possible* there where it seems to be absent. The same approach applies to sonorities. The inseparability of poetry and sonority (“music”, if you will) was common at least until the 14th century. Maria V. Caldwell writes that there were many women poets-composers who worked under the patronage of aristocratic women. They seem to have composed mostly monophonic compositions (poems), as polyphony required master technical studies which were not available to them, but were “increasingly the art of clerics” (Caldwell, 42). And yet, there were women sound creators, such as *trobairitz* among the noble women, and *jouglersesses* among the lower class. Some travelled in a typically male attire, carried their instruments, darkened their faces with herbs and dyed their hair in order to pass as male minstrels. They mostly created within courtly love narratives, but – quoting Caldwell – “necessarily had to transform that tradition to stay

within its limits” (ibid.), meaning that they did not appropriate the position of a troubadour appraising his beloved one, but remained in the role of objects of desire. But not all of them. Bieris de Romans, a troubadour from the 13th century, neglected all socially acceptable behaviour of her time (or any other, for that matter) in her poem “Na Maria, pretz e fina valors” she writes and *sounds* from her position of a woman, and her *subject* (not object) of desire is also a woman. She sings praise to Maria, who causes her to *sigh*, she speaks of her incredible *intelligence* and *refined beauty*, asks her not to ever *give her heart to a lying suitor*. That poem is a *canto* – a poem meant to be sung, audible, listened at.

In the local area, we can also find an example of a troubadour composition with implicit lesbian narration – with the somewhat overlooked, or rather overheard author Ana Gale, who lived in the first half of the 20th century (1909–1949) not far from Ljubljana (now in Slovenia). At the college of education she became close with her classmate Anica Pizzulini, and in 1927 wrote a troubadour epic poem *To a girl*. *The Troubadour songs*. The work, dedicated to Pizzulini, speaks of a troubadour’s travels, his search for closeness, which he at last finds with his *lover* at the Ljubljana Castle, where Anica Pazzulini actually resided. What she as a troubadour and her poetic-sonic composition bring is a public expression and social existence of specific identities, standpoints, difference; those works are not merely *somewhere*, not in *a room of one’s own*, but resonate in the very core of society. Through the biographical examination of the poet-composer and through *listening* to her poetry a whole sonoric, that is *social* space changes – as an immanently *sonic* space it becomes open for a settlement of a lesbian desire.

For the world is *for hearing*, as Jacques Attali wrote (2009); sound is a navigator of social dynamics. If some situations, people, images can be avoided, sounds cannot. They can be a means of terror, dehumanization and annihilation. Or a means of resistance against oppression. As I already elaborated in *Med njima je glasba: Glasba v konstrukciji lezbične scene* (2017): When an oppressed and marginalized group or individuals recognize sounds not to be a given, but that they are created from a vital organism and constitutive of social space and its dynamics, when they realize that sonorities are not only destructive means of silencing through loudness of power, but that they can be used precisely to resist destructive sonorities, then the effect of a certain sonority can be emancipatory. Innovative (non-dominant) sonorities allow for an exit from the dominant systems of expression and interpretation; they can expand or surpass, reject and even terminate a connection with the dominant semiotic frame, or even dismiss a semiotic frame as such.

Consider women of lament in Ancient Greece. They were professional sound artists, and their role a loud, prolonged expression of woe, a performative praxis of a body-machine, which – while performing – is not in a productive function, and yet it produces something. Of course, one should not fail to notice that the role of women in lamentation was to address the *dead*, not the *living*. However, it was still a sonoric expression of a mourning poem, a composition of emotion, which was, in its *sonic performance*, also

an *interpretation*. Similar practices can be found in Balkan cultures. There are *narikače* and *tužbaljke*, *jaukalje*, *plakavice* and *bugarilje*. Just as with Greek lamentations, we are again dealing with women *composers*, who create *with* and *within* their audibilities, their voices – voices as such, vowels as such, this is a sonoric expression of thought, and that expression is both long and grand, for the pain is also enormous and unstoppable. Most of all, it is *unspeakable*. However, it does sound, especially in a sense that for its performance it is neither possible nor desired to use established or dominant discourses, but it is, on the other hand, needed to use a discourse which interrupts the destructive reality (namely, death or termination of any sort).

In time, loudness was replaced with silence – mostly through religious commands regarding gender difference. With methods of silencing it was precisely sounding that became the ultimate tactic for emancipation. One need only to think of the strategies of African American women and lesbians used to escape absolute annihilation: consider slave poetry; consider Audre Lorde’s “silence will not protect you”; consider the art of the African American blues artist Gladys Bentley, who expressed her lesbian identity not specifically through *writing* about her lesbian desire, but by *sounding* it in *blues*; consider *spoken word* by Jayne Cortez, the works by Alice Dunbar Nelson, who addresses her subject directly, by her name, and says: “You! Inez! / ... / Red mouth; flower soft / ... / You! Stirring the depths of passionate desire!” (Dunbar Nelson 85). She calls her, she shouts, passion is loud and *that* is the content of desire, which – as lesbian history shows – can exist in sonority even when it seems invisible. It should also not be overlooked that one of the first releases of the lesbian-feminist record label Olivia Records was an album of poetry; performed and recorded in 1976 by Pat Parker and Judy Grahn, it allowed the latter to declare: “[Y]es ... that is how resistance sounds.” Pat Parker recorded “My lover is a woman” for the mentioned album, in which she says: “i never think of / my families’ voices – / never hear my sisters say – / bulldaggers, queers, – / ... it’s ok with us / but don’t tell mama / it’d break her heart/.” She must hide from the parents’ *ears*. That is precisely why the poet needs to *sound* the words where lesbianism is meant to be inexistent. Her poem is a loud constructive appeal, arising from “the awareness that no discourse is adequate here or that our reigning discourses have produced an impasse,” to quote Judith Butler (215). The inadequate, oppressive discourse needs to change. She – the lesbian poet, the lesbian sound artist – needs to offer her own discourse, for silence is for her equally unacceptable. Her poem is not (only) (to be) read, but to be made with and in sound, through which the individual is (self-)interpellated, subjectivated, emancipated; and, through that process of being sonically present she can start to form a collective, which might become a vital political body.

All this is not to be dealt with in some metaphysical sense, but through the basic character of sound: its apparent becoming and at the same time departing, where departing does not mean leaving, but rather constant presence. Sound as an inextinguishable social mass, and space itself. As Salome Voegelin explains: “Sound ... is the permanence of

production that uses the permanence of the monument and discards it by gliding over its form to produce its own formless shape.” (169) Therefore, what is needed – as a suggestion from a lesbian-feminist perspective – is an intense extension of the definition of poetry in a way that, when thematizing women and lesbian poets, we recognize poetry as sonority, and sole sonority of a piece as already subversive. What is in becoming is perhaps an “invisible” presence, ever more invisible with the departure of a body, which still became a body – a sounding, active, and disruptive body – precisely through sounding.

In that sense, the history of lesbian cultures and literatures requires a teleological approach, often disregarded in literary theory and philology as well. Through *singing to delight her companions*, Sappho *de facto* created a social and socializational structure of a space. Her poem – her *composition* – created a lesbian by placing her in a social or societal space. To be precise: she did not create lesbian subjects (including herself) only through writing, but primarily through an instalment of sound- and sounding content in social space, populated with those who in her image and sound expression of a lesbian desire recognized their own, thereby starting to become lesbian.

Sappho’s poems did not survive in material terms by the survival of the papyrus fragments and translations, but because they – as a whole, as a sound composition only partly preservable in written text – are engraved in the architecture of the social space through their sonority. In that sense, the history of the artistic expression of lesbian desire needs a radical redefinition; such that finds presence not solely in tangible materiality, but in the core of all that is society – in sound. In order to delight our companions.

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