

Godfre
Leung

Emancipation

There is a trademark of Mariah Carey's best songs where at around the three-quarter mark she pitches her vocal performance up, sometimes as high as an octave, and inverts the melody. From her early G-rated ballads to her self-reinvention as a hip-hop-influenced R&B singer beginning with the alternate Bad Boy mix of "Fantasy" in 1995, these improvised leads usually weave in and around the songs' choruses, which are usually recited by her backup singers, taking the uneasy position of simultaneously embellishing the chorus, while also suggesting a transcendence of its repetition.¹ One especially significant early example of these best Mariah Carey performances is the cover of the Jackson 5's "I'll Be There" from her 1992 MTV Unplugged television special, which was accompanied by the visual spectacle of Carey *working* to hit the unfathomably high highest notes that close out the song.

Arguably the last truly great Mariah Carey vocal workout of this kind was "We Belong Together," from her 2005 album **The Emancipation of Mimi**. On the studio recording, Carey holds the song's final syllable—the "-ther" of the song's eponymous refrain—for at least four extra bars, before her lead vocal fades out. By conceit, she is still holding that note. In her many televised performances of the single, which spent fourteen weeks at number one, the workout that begins in the rising last line of the penultimate chorus ends with Carey holding the last note for as long as she can. This is an athletic event as much as a musical performance; in a song whose lyrics feature disembodied voices speaking to the protagonist over the radio, the song ends with Carey's words *worked* to the point of physical exhaustion: a total unity of lyric, voice, and body.

Éclat

Mes disques sont un miroir
Dans lequel chacun peut me voir,
Je suis partout à la fois
Brisée en mille éclats de voix.

[My records are a mirror
In which everyone can see me
I am everywhere at once
Broken into a thousand shards of voice.]

—France Gall, "Poupée de cire, poupée de son"
[Singing Wax Doll]

In 1965, seventeen-year-old French singer France Gall caused waves at the Eurovision Song Contest by deviating from the usual ballad fare to sing an American beat music-inspired pop song. That song, written by Serge Gainsbourg, age thirty-seven, famously has Gall referring to herself as a puppet and alluding to the older male songwriter's ventriloquizing of her, a conceit that Gall either did not understand or, for the sake of the song's ironic tension, pretended not to have understood. In a watershed moment for European pop music, "Poupée de cire, poupée de son" introduced the post-chanson pop singer as a

cipher—perhaps necessarily a telegenic one—and posed Gall specifically as a blonde-haired wax doll with no knowledge of what she sings. This televisual spectacle staged a total disconnect between the lyrics of the song and the voice singing them, and also between the words sung and their emanating body, the latter rendered a mute circulating image. The words are Gainsbourg's, while the voice is Gall's; her body, it seems, is ours.

In his **Essay on the Origin of Languages**, Jean-Jacques Rousseau theorizes a prelapsarian time in which poetry, music, and speech were indistinguishable: "rhythm and sounds are born with syllables: all voices speak under the influence of passion, which adorns them with all their *éclat*."² The term *éclat* was left untranslated by John H. Moran, its meaning as ungraspable as the enigma it signifies. Passion, Rousseau suggests, added an extra-linguistic dimension to vocal communication that would become the irretrievable referent of formal music's musicality, and later also of lyric poetry's lyricism. Melody, Rousseau writes, communicates [*elle parle*], but does so extra-linguistically; by "imitating the inflections of the voice" and "the tones of languages, and the twists produced in every idiom," it "expresses pity, cries of sorrow or joy, threats, and groans."³ Here, we encounter a bifurcation of language resulting in two fallen forms, each circling the other: music imitates the tonalities and rhythms of disalienated language but can only articulate meaning "inarticulate[ly]," while speech, though articulate, lacks music's "vigor." In the balance is Rousseau's prelapsarian unity: not only that of poetry, music, and speech, but more importantly, subtending them a unity between "various particles of air set in motion by the sonorous *body*" and "certain stirrings of the *soul*."⁴

In 1967, two years after Gall's Eurovision victory, Jacques Derrida published his famous "deconstruction" of Rousseau's **Essay**, posing Rousseau's lost disalienated language in the sarcastic Biblical inversion: "In the beginning was the Song."⁵ In the present, however, what was for Derrida a misguided search for origins might instead be a site of emancipation. This is Italian Autonomist Franco "Bifo" Berardi's position as he looked to poetry as a model for resistance in the immediate wake of the worldwide political-economic protests of 2011. "Poetry," he writes, "is the language of nonexchangeability, the return of infinite hermeneutics, and the return of the sensuous body of language."⁶ Though he does not mention Rousseau's **Essay**, he implies a Rousseau-ian disalienation. The "return of the sensuous body of language," whose further result would be to "recompose the social and affective body," is for Berardi the promise of poetry in resistance to semiocapitalism, a regime of social and information production that he described elsewhere as the "new alienation" of "putting the soul to work."⁷

To attempt to follow the great Romantic leaps of Berardi's poetics: the extralinguistic in poetry rescues the sensuousness of the word from semiotic production. This poetic, unremittable signifier serves as the model for his proposal of a "right to insolvency." However, the debt from which one must exert a right to be absolved here isn't only the financialized debt expressed in Berardi's unforgettable line, "German banks have stored Greek time," but also the demands placed upon the cognitive worker by semiocapitalist production and its deterritorialized 24/7 workday:



The social and affective body of the cognitive workers has been separated from their daily activity of production. The new alienation is based on this separation, on the virtualization of social relations. The new alienation takes the form of psychic suffering, panic, depression and a suicidal tide. This is the affective character of the first generation of people who have learned more words from a machine than from the mother.⁸

In the present, social media technologies have given recreational culture the same forms as the techno-cognitive and semiotic labor that Berardi describes above. We might therefore revisit France Gall's 1965 telegenesis through the lens of our current media ecology:

the body exceeds its role as a site of production and becomes a site of projection too, a synthesis of its own subject- and objecthood. It is the operative mechanism of celebrity culture, and is also in play when an artist performs within his or her own exhibition. In such cases the artist is not just the image-maker but an image herself, an icon holding in place the stream of relations and transactions that generate meaning and value in her work.⁹

Glitter

English synonyms for *éclat*: splinter, shard, sliver, burst, scandal, brightness, glare, radiance, bloom, glamour, glitter —Larousse.fr

It's as if their fame has come to define them. The difference with me, I hope, is that I never let that "Mariah Carey" thing overtake me, and I never think of myself as that other person. —Mariah Carey¹⁰

By now, the Mariah Carey story should be well known even to casual onlookers. As has been excessively detailed in interviews and articles since the late '90s, the singer's relationship with Sony Music mogul Tommy Mottola, which began when they were eighteen and thirty-nine, respectively, was a metaphorical cocoon that helped Carey achieve her early massive artistic and commercial success, while also coming to stifle her both creatively and personally as she matured as an artist and a person during her early twenties. The album **Butterfly**, released in 1997, the year of Carey and Mottola's divorce, was overt in its creative embrace of the hip-hop and R&B influences that Mottola had reportedly suppressed in Carey's musical output. Alongside her musical shift came the beginning of a new biographical narrative, one that has been continually rewritten in interviews, memoirs, and one spectacularly failed quasi-biopic hence. Alongside, for instance, J.D. Considine describing Carey as "having found her true voice" on **Butterfly** came Carey's addition of her multi-racial identity as a promotional talking point.¹¹ This is significant because she—and/or her "people"—previously had been content to alternately pass one way or the other, depending on the situation. Here, Carey's music, which on **Butterfly** alternately samples Mobb Deep's "Shook Ones, Pt. 2" and Elton John's "Someone Saved My Life Tonight," now reflected her identity; to put it more crudely, her new, "true" voice reflected her visualized body, itself now explicitly defined.

The logic of the trademark Mariah Carey vocal workout is also at play here: just as Carey's "real" body finds its "true" voice on **Butterfly**, the televised spectacle of Carey holding the last syllable of "We Belong Together" until her near-limitless breath is extinguished authenticates the lyrics, those words implied to be as deeply held in her soul as they are bounteously pushed out from her body. These rhetorical gestures of authenticity reveal little about Carey, but much about her career. After the spectacular commercial and critical failure of **Glitter**, the aforementioned fictionalized biopic that closely followed a widely reported nervous breakdown best remembered by a bizarre MTV Total Request Live walk-on, a comeback was necessary. Enter 2005's career do-or-die offering **The Emancipation of Mimi**, whose title Carey explained in an online communiqué to her fans:

"Mimi" is a very personal nickname only used by those closest to me...just one of those little things that I've kept for myself in an attempt to have some delineation between a public persona and a private life.

By naming the album **The Emancipation of Mimi** I am letting my guard down and inviting my fans to be that much closer to me. Most importantly, I am celebrating the fact that I've grown into a person and artist who no longer feels imprisoned by my insecurities or compelled to try and live up to someone else's vision of "Mariah Carey." I now feel I can honestly say "this is me, the real me, take it or leave it" For the first time in my life, I feel free and unashamed to be who I really am. And that's what the music of this album and it's [*sic.*] title reflect.¹²

Carey's self-fashioning and re-fashioning have taken her from the metamorphic rebirth of **Butterfly**—whose title track's narrator is not Carey but a fictional Motolla verbally releasing Carey from her Stockholm Syndrome—to **Glitter**, which writes Motolla out of her origin story, to yet another "real" Mariah in **Mimi**, and most recently, squarely in the age of reality television, Carey's most recent album of new songs, 2014's **Me. I Am Mariah... The Elusive Chanteuse**, whose title naturally lets the audience in on its staging of realness.

Butterfly

"Butterfly," the title track of Carey's 1997 album, begins like any of her early '90s prom ballads. Actually, its glacial tempo and tame melody mark it as clearly inferior to her previous smash hits in that genre: "Hero" and "One Sweet Day." Like the worst dentist office fare, the first half of "Butterfly" plods along in the most conventional way: verse, chorus, verse, chorus, with bridge and chorus (x2) inevitably to follow. But Mariah Carey is more than Michael Bolton or Vanessa Williams, and "Butterfly" also follows the Mariah Carey template, shifting vocal registers during the bridge and going stratospheric in the final two choruses. The workout in "Butterfly" is perhaps the most impressive recorded vocal performance in Carey's career, and, judging by her tendency to lip-synch the song during live performances, also the most technically challenging song in her repertoire. Music critic Bob Stanley described the most popular pop music of the era leading up to "Butterfly"—undeniably Carey and Whitney Houston's unprecedented domination of the Billboard charts in the first half of the '90s—as a shift toward vocal performance as "acrobatic skill," with "Melisma, multiple notes on a single syllable, [becoming] the new guitar solo."¹³ In this line of thinking, the bridge and final two choruses in "Butterfly" (2:28 to 4:03) are the Jimmy Page-in-"Stairway to Heaven" of adult-contemporary pop-R&B.

But the Pageian technical skill of Carey's performance in "Butterfly" isn't what makes the song interesting, at least not totally. Neither are the lyrics. On paper, the chorus reads:

Spread your wings and prepare to fly
For you will become a butterfly
Fly abandonedly into the sun
If you should return to me
We truly were meant to be
So spread your wings and fly, butterfly.

In the song's second chorus, after that last "butterfly," Carey's lead vocal, which had cooed in and around the chorus in her "whisper voice," comes to the front of the mix, accompanied by an extra layer of reverb on the first syllable: "I can't pretend these tears aren't over flowing steadily." The "I," sung with the force of Carey's inimitable belt and held for the last four beats of the chorus, is performed as one long voluptuous, untranscribable, melismatic syllable. However, in concert with the added reverb, that melisma causes irruptive collisions between notes and echoes of previous notes, simultaneously suggesting a destabilizing of the lead vocal's singularity while also approximating a vibrato, though one clearly aided by machine. Meanwhile, the backup vocals that had carried the chorus have shifted to a supporting role to Carey's now assertive lead vocal, announcing



itself through lyric poetry's classic—proleptic—declaration of presence: “I.”

The second line of the bridge—“I can't prevent this hurt from almost overtaking me”—repeats the melody of the first line, but without the long, voluptuous “I.” That “I” returns in the third line: “But I ...” (held for five beats). Reverb is applied unevenly to the second half of that line, the “wet”-ness of each note corresponding to how forcefully Carey sings it, peaking at the last syllable: “... will *stand* and say *good-bye*.” In that “bye,” Carey's voice vibrates on the note for two and a half beats, while the song's thickest treatment of reverb exaggerates Carey's vibrato to the point that it suggests a dissolving of the voice.

Melodically, the “I” and “bye” of this last line mark successively high landing notes, to be surpassed yet again by that of the first half of the bridge's last line: “For you'll never be mine ...” After these three peaks, the melody falls almost an octave to begin a huge, scale-like climb to a yet higher one: “... until you know the way it feels to *fly*.” The last line of the bridge actually extends into a reprise of the chorus, that “fly” landing enjambed on the reprise's first note. On that first note of this third chorus, all of the instruments clear out as the backup singers reenter the song a capella. The last syllable of the bridge—the “fly” carried over to the chorus—lasts for an incredible four bars. Eleven beats into that extended syllable, we reach the exhaustion of Mariah Carey-the-virtuoso singer who sold more records in the '90s than any other human being. For a brief second (3:12–3:13), we hear two simultaneous Carey leads melodically fluttering in tandem but not in unison: one the end of a distinct improvisation, the other the beginning of a new one. Again, reverb plays a role: if the “wet”-ness of the “bye” in the previous line suggested the disintegration of the voice, the “wet”-ness of the two voices, each refracted into a multitude of other voices by echo effect, is something like the disintegration of Mariah Carey-the-subject, *brisée en mille éclats de voix*.

Me. I Am Mariah.

Most likely, this effect began as a solution to a practical problem: how to hold a syllable for a full four bars, beyond, that is, the capabilities of even the world's most well-conditioned human voice. My best guess: while mixing the two vocal tracks to create the illusion of one long continuous breath, a hand must have slipped and someone must have heard that mis-splice and decided that it sounded better that way. And to the overlap of those two vocal takes, the addition of extreme reverb to render the multiple into a multiplicity.

As I write this, two months ahead of her still-untitled fourth album, media outlets from **The Fader** to **Vulture** to **Entertainment Weekly** are falling over themselves trying to describe what makes Claire Boucher, who performs under the name Grimes, the “voice of her generation.” These attempts almost unanimously share a fascination with Boucher's life, lived on the internet, and many also with Grimes, the avatar-like product of internet life. For instance, artist Asher Penn, writing in **Artforum**, periodizes Grimes as the exemplary figure of cultural omnivorousness at the tail end of net neutrality.¹⁴ For her part, Boucher—who claims to have undergone media training to learn “how to stop saying stupid things so I stop having all these constant dramas” but “didn't really learn anything”—is having a lot of difficulty reconciling her social media persona with the demands of the stardom that may be awaiting her.¹⁵ In February of 2013, she wrote, in response to Jenn Pelly of **Pitchfork**, “my Tumblr is not a news source. I'm debating whether or not I should delete this shit. I will decide in the next 5 minutes. My specific problem is that I don't like it when what I say on here is taken out of context and posted elsewhere. It's not a story and its [sic.] not an official statement.”¹⁶

The world wants very badly for Grimes to be the millennial Björk, though Boucher has repeatedly voiced a quite different desire: to be Mariah Carey. I first encountered Grimes in the basement of the Drake Hotel in Toronto in January of 2011, as the opening act to a friend's concert. She had recently released her sophomore album, **Halfaxa**, which to my ears still resonates more with our age than her

follow-up, 2012's critical darling, **Visions**. At its best moments, that early Grimes, dwarfed behind her table of machines, built her complex, multi-layered vocal soundscapes in real time, adding, subtracting, and sequencing live vocals, which were then looped, in the way a live DJ mixes records and samples. Grimes was hardly alone in working in this way—Julianna Barwick is another solo live vocal looper who came to prominence in the spring of 2011, and Marnie Stern had done the same with guitar instead of voice half a decade earlier. But what was remarkable about the early Grimes was the spectacle of Boucher juggling all of those fragments of her voice, her face simultaneously suggesting an out-of-body experience and fear that at any moment the entire song could fall apart. This was every bit the virtuoso performance that Carey's classic workouts were, only Grimes's feat was one of concentration, not physical prowess. It has been said that the condition of being a contemporary artist is also to be one's own PR manager, though we would doubtlessly now amend that title to *social media* manager. But this condition can also be a formal one. Lyric in the age of semicapitalism, then: to manage a thousand *éclats* of voice.

1 Because Carey sings all of the backup vocals on her recordings, her backup singers are technically her. But idiomatically, they are other people.

2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, **Essay on the Origin of Languages**, trans. John H. Moran, in **On the Origin of Language** (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 50. Emphasis added. In the original French: “. . . la cadence et les sons naissent avec les syllabes: la passion fait parler tous les organes et pare la voix de tout leur éclat.”

3 *Ibid.*, 57.

4 *Ibid.*, 56-57. Emphases added. “Certain stirrings of the soul” is my own translation; in the original: “certains mouvements de l'âme.” Rousseau's other stake is lyric poetry, which for him proleptically attempts to resolve the distance between music and speech.

5 My translation. The original French: “A l'origine il y a le chant.” Jacques Derrida, **De la grammatologie** (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 280.

6 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, **The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance** (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2012), 139-140.

7 Berardi, **The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy**, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2009), 24.

8 Berardi, **Uprising**, 84, 141.

9 Caroline Busta, “Body Doubles,” in **Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Human Figure in Semicapitalism**, eds. Isabelle Graw, Daniel Birnbaum, and Nikolaus Hirsch (Berlin: Sternberg, 2011), 45. Emphasis in the original.

10 Kevin Sessums, “The Emancipation of Mariah,” in **Allure** (September 2005): 243.

11 J. D. Considine, “Catching Her Breath,” in **Baltimore Sun** (October 12, 1997). Later in the article, Considine goes out of his way point out: “Carey's mother is Irish-American, while her father is of African and Venezuelan ancestry, and she spent much of her childhood being excluded because she was neither white nor black.”

12 Mariah Carey, “Mariah's Message to Fans about **The Emancipation of Mimi**,” in MariahCarey.com (November 18, 2004). Punctuation preserved from the original.

13 Bob Stanley, **Yeah Yeah Yeah: The Story of Pop Music from Bill Haley to Beyoncé** (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2014), 542.

14 Asher Penn, “Eclectic Youth,” in **Artforum** 53:3 (November 2014): 175.

15 Quoted in Carrie Battan, “Why Everyone Should be Waiting for Grimes's Next Album,” in **New York Times Magazine** (September 12, 2014).

16 Originally posted on ActuallyGrimes.tumblr.com (February 6, 2013, since deleted).

