

Songs of Rest: An Intervention in the Complex Genre of the Lullaby

Holly Pester

Abstract This essay is the product of thinking, researching and singing lullabies. As a practitioner-researcher in Hubbub, Holly Pester led a series of workshops that experimentally and collaboratively explored lullabies through conversation and improvised song. This led to an expanded project where Holly invited artists and musicians to collaborate on a collection of new lullabies, created through friendship and improvisation. The thoughts and provocations within this chapter represent the politics and ideas that have motivated this project.

Keywords Care · Creative criticism · Lullaby · Narrative · Protest song · Reproductive work

1.

Who is the traditional singer of lullabies? We instinctively want to say mothers and to consider the lullaby in terms of the intimate bond between mother and child. But the practice of lulling the baby to sleep in a family or community unit falls along distinct lines of labour relations and cultures of social reproduction. Lullaby singers are those who nurse, heal, craft and care, those who ‘invisibly’ produce the

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economy,ⁱ infrastructure and ecology of the home. Who is the traditional singer of lullabies? The mother, the sister, the maidservant, the nanny, the wet nurse and colonized bodies of imperial systems; commoning women, those whose work is turned into capitalized care and that in turn supports work outside the home and global economies. This is the starting point from which I have been thinking about lullabies: before their form, sound and style, I've considered the contingent politics of the lullaby and how the principles of care, from a socio-historical standpoint, and from within the cult of the family, are carried through in their singing.

My mother could not give me a boy as good as you

2.

The sound of lullaby is the cry of reproductive work. The lullaby is the mother's (the sister's, the maidservant's, the nanny's) work song. Like any shanty or marching chant the rhythms of her body and the tempo of the song – rocking and jiggling the baby into slumber – co-ordinate the act of material effort (in the scene of supposedly immaterial labour). Here, as with washing, cooking, loving, sympathizing, comforting and breast-feeding, the woman's body performs as a resource to soothe and oil the mechanics of capital.ⁱⁱ This is care work shown for what it is, sweating, muscular movement-task.

How long have we been not at work, in rest space?

3.

What narratives are sung in a lullaby? The scenarios range across universes, realities and times: baby-stealing fairies, cursed soldiers, murder ballads, angered house demons, father-killing hyenas, sunken ships. But the imperatives to sleep are expressed through certain identifiable categories. They can be defined as: shush, there is work to do and tasks that need to be completed, things that need to happen and can't until you are asleep; if you don't sleep I will curse you, this is my threat, this lullaby is my spell; hush now, imagine this radically different space and hear this surreal story that bears no familiarity to our lives. It is not a question of the baby understanding these narratives or even comprehending the need

ⁱ See Chap. 20.

ⁱⁱ See Chap. 16.

for it to sleep, but it is the singer's (cultural) compulsion to voice their anxieties, frustrations, fears and dreams. The song ritualistically blesses/curses the social relations and economic conditions of the family.

I can't begin to tell you, how tired I am

4.

The comfort of the lullaby is not just its cradling rocking back and forth with the hushing tones of the voice. It is the comforting of the 'social factory' where everyone is where they should be (*Father's gone a-hunting*), the divisions of labour are being met (*Mother's gone a-milking*), and the order of production (*Sister's gone a-silking*) and the cogs of capital (*Brother's gone to buy a skin*) are melodically soothed.

Small life rooms, small life rooms, small life rooms

5.

While these systems of labour coalesce in the song, what gets produced by the work of the song itself is a slumbering baby. In other words, what gets produced by this work song is a state of inactivity. The lullaby, therefore, is a complex of labour relations and affection as well as a dynamic of work and non-work, effort and rest. The lullaby is dependent on the work of one body for the rest of another. Within the dynamic of the cradle song, one resisting body transforms into stillness, muscles calm, bones relaxed. The other body, resisting tiredness, works at calming the active and vigorous form. It is a focused task, tiring and difficult, and one of the last of the day. From this dialectic of effort and slumber at play in the lullaby, we might say that it produces an 'other' to work rather than its opposite.ⁱⁱⁱ The other to work being a form of active resistance to work logic that in itself requires effort, while the opposite is a ceasing of work and effort. From this reclaimed perspective we might also see the potential in lullabies to problematize the principle of work as productivity.

Tonight you might feel your feet multiply

6.

So if there is something that provokes non-work in the lullaby, can it be harnessed as a protest song? Can a lullaby sing in resistance to work and

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Chap. 17.

can it be a song of people subjected to the technologies and ideologies of capitalism? (The 8-hour day, the 7-day week, the market's appropriation of bodies for the production of its workforce.) And are there commonalities and solidarities that the lullaby can sing to other forms of night labour – beyond the excesses of the working day, to the bodies that toil outside that frame – and to other forms of care?

Rainbows and horses, these are my causes, little bear

7.

If we relocate the lullaby, seeding it outside the mainstream family scene, what are the possibilities for it to become a song of radical care? First we should ask: Through the act of lullabying, what other agencies, critical of existing forms of social reproduction, can play out? Can we use the lullaby to sing out an economy of care that is (genuinely) outside, or other to, the systems that resource labour and reproduce social conditions?

When you come home signing, I'll come home singing

8.

While the lullaby is a conduit to slumber, we might find a form or practice of lullaby that is not for soporific effect, but which gifts permission to stop, to become other-to-work. The lullaby might affectively perform a common rest. If a lullaby sounds out the material labour of care, makes its flesh and breath felt, then it can also sound out the halting, obscuring, decentering, dismantling of work, as an active resistance.^{iv}

split, shift, split, shift, split, shift, work

9.

Who cares?

Children and young carers, those caring for the elderly (unsettling and reversing the affect flow of the lullaby).

Friends (the alternative to family, the alternative economy).

Animals (humans for animals, animals for humans, animals for animals).

Those engaged in the restitution of mental illness, care workers, aid givers, and sanctuary and shelter workers.

^{iv} See Chap. 21.

Lovers (the sexual, affective, emotional labour of being a lover).

Political allies (solidarity and community, struggle).

Migrant domestic workers (those whose care work is dependent on their disenfranchisement).

What do the lullabies of these relationships sound like? What narratives are coded into them?

Low low low low low low low ... go on

10.

The ultimate anticapitalist, antifamily lullaby is Woody Guthrie's 'Hobo's Lullaby'.¹ We find out that it isn't actually the song that's the lullaby, but the sound of the boxcar where the hobo sleeps. It is the mechanical sound of the margins, beyond the home, work conditions and fixed labour roles. This is a lullaby of movement – the struggle for comfort, the comfort of the struggle. The condition of the hobo's body, soothed by the train carriage, itself a cog of moving capital, is as much produced by socio-economic conditions as it is extrinsic to them. This paradoxical slumber is an other to work. The work of being a hobo ('I know the police cause you trouble, they cause trouble everywhere') is other to systematized labour. This lullaby acknowledges the violence and pain of this condition as it sings its radical potential.

NOTE

1. Written by Goebel Reeves.

FURTHER READING

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