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### **k.d. lang's second coming out: Buddhism, iconicity, and the expressive body**

#### **ABSTRACT**

*Canadian singer k.d. lang is considered an icon by many: a Canadian icon, a lesbian icon, a country music icon and a pop icon. One can trace confluences between lang's Buddhist ethos in recent years and Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's conception of expressive selfhood, one characterized by authenticity, inwardness and the centrality of expression for articulating identity. Both lang's iconicity and Taylor's language about expressive selfhood underscore the importance of voice, understood in both figurative and literal terms. This essay concludes that vocality is in some instances an indispensable element of iconicity and a crucial means of understanding an icon's enduring appeal in popular culture.*

#### **KEYWORDS**

k.d. lang  
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#### **ICONICITY, THE BODY, AND VOICE**

k.d. lang is a widely acclaimed Canadian musician from Consort, Alberta whose thirty-year career has seen over sixteen albums, four Grammy Awards, eight Juno awards, and induction into the Order of Canada and Canadian Music Hall of Fame. Musically, she is best known for her 1992 recording of "Crying" with Roy Orbison, her multiplatinum *Ingénue* that same year, her 2005 *Hymns of the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel*, a collection of Canadian covers, and her live performances of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" at both the 2005 Canadian Juno awards and at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. Over the years, she has been drawn to country, torch and twang, rock, and crooner cool. lang's voice is widely acknowledged as an extraordinary gift. Her performances for many bring about the experience of epiphany discussed by art historian Stephen Jaeger (2012): "epiphany gives the person who observes it the sensation of the limits of common humanity overcome, of the real existence and sudden embodiment of a spiritual world" (37).

Key here is the phrase “*embodiment* of a spiritual world.” Scholars theorizing iconicity underscore the importance of materiality and the body in their definitions of a somewhat elusive concept. Corporeality was central to the power of Byzantine cult images and later the icons of Orthodox Christianity. Iconic images of Christ and other holy figures were believed to be physical manifestations of the divine and created without human intervention. Contemporary iconic photographs, too, rely on representations of the body for their arresting power. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites argue that “[p]erformances traffic in bodies, and they evoke emotional responses precisely because they place the expressive body in a social space” (2007: 35). Cornelia Brink (2000) in her study of Nazi concentration camp photographs argues that these “secular icons” feature material objects – barbed wire fences, abandoned barracks, and crematorium chimneys – and that the emaciated bodies depicted therein inspire compassion, grief or awe (136). Iconic bodies efficiently condense powerful symbolic meanings, elicit strong emotions, and visually reconcile tensions between individual and collective concerns.

It is in this context that I contemplate the expressive body and voice of Canadian singer k.d. lang, who is considered an icon by many: a Canadian icon, a lesbian icon, a country music icon and a pop icon, to name a few. Iconicity is more than a matter of epithets, however. The iconic figure in popular culture, like the Christian saint of the religious icon, inspires veneration and strong emotional response; iconic encounters exceed words and touch upon the numinous—the mysterious, ineffable, and engulfing. The vocabularies of devotion resemble the language of religious experience; the iconic figure is held up as a model for human conduct and emulation. (lang, for instance, is but one of a long line of celebrities and artists who have functioned as Buddhist role models in Western popular culture, a point I take up below.) John Frow outlines how, in literal terms, one might understand the religious dynamics of stardom, arguing that “[t]he sacred is . . . a force or a presence, whether anthropomorphized or not, which is conceived non-naturalistically as a suspension or rupture of normal time and space by the uncontrollable outbreak of ‘spots’ of transcendence” (202). The sacred includes “the accursed, the outcast, and the holy, a force which is above all dangerous, contagious, and compelling” (202). k.d. lang calls herself K-Daddy and Big ol’ Les’ and has the voice of an angel. Her non-normative body and practices (e.g., veganism, lesbianism) have upset Alberta cattle ranchers and right-leaning Nashville musicians, but her voice is also “the bearer of meanings beyond any ordinary meanings” (Dolar 10).

While lang has been considered all manner of icon, she particularly enjoys the title of *dykeon* or dyke icon. The word is funny: it links the sacred icon with the profane dyke, but

also sounds like the word daikon, or Asian radish. The wordplay is uncannily apt, given lang's spiritual identification with Asian philosophy and practice, specifically Tibetan Buddhism. While scholars have written about lang's sexuality since her coming out as a lesbian to *The Advocate* in 1992, her coming out (or pseudo-coming out) as a Buddhist in recent years has attracted to date no scholarly analysis. While some see lang's sage Buddhist ethos as a departure from her earlier frenetic self, I speculate that her Buddhism is instead a refraction of a coherent, career-long narrative characterized by what philosopher Charles Taylor describes variously as expressive selfhood (1975; 1989) or "an ethics of authenticity" (1991a). Romantic expressivism, which has its roots in eighteenth century Romantic thinking, is characterized by authenticity, inwardness, expression and what Taylor calls inspiration from "nature as source" (1989). One can trace a romantic sensibility in lang's public remarks and performative ethos, especially as these play out through her body and her voice.

Of course, lang's adoption of Buddhism operates within a larger cultural context. The celebrity Buddhist and her connections with Romanticism warrant a closer examination and critique than this brief discussion can provide. As many scholars have pointed out (e.g., McMahan, 2008; Cusack, 2011; Iwamura 2011) celebrities have, since the nineteenth century, popularized a modern form of Buddhism in the West, where it has been understood in terms of individualized practice, private choice, secularism, personal fulfilment, and consumer capitalism. The aligning of Buddhism with Romanticism, which originated during cultural contacts in the nineteenth century, was an act of cultural appropriation and transformation. While the celebrity Buddhist icon in the West signals a democratic attitude towards spiritual practice, it also reinforces dominant, totalizing narratives.

The element of iconicity I focus on in this discussion involves the complex interplay between aesthetic surface and depth, a dynamic generatively theorized by Jeffrey Alexander (2008; 2010). Writing of Garbo's face, Alexander argues that "the beauty of Garbo-surface, the visible signifier, connects us to the invisible meaning of Garbo-depth, the sacred signified, the spiritual essence of the human being" (325). My examination—which by necessity can only adumbrate the concepts under discussion—takes up this notion of iconic surface/depth with attention to lang's voice. Both lang's iconicity and Taylor's language about expressive selfhood resonate strongly with the idea of voice. Sound is in some cases an indispensable element of iconicity, an understanding that follows the thinking of rhetorician Greg Goodale (2011), who provides an extended treatment of what he calls "sonic persuasion" and points to the modern air-raid siren as a sonic icon for Americans (107). As

Mladen Dolar tells us, the voice is at once a familiar and elusive concept—it is materially produced by the mouth, tongue, teeth, and vocal cords; it is a bearer of meaning; it is an aesthetic object of appreciation; it expresses our individual humanness and facilitates social bonds. The *inner* voice is also a marker of subjectivity: “In isolation, in solitude, in complete loneliness . . . we are not simply free of the voice—it can be that this is when another kind of voice appears, more intrusive and compelling than the usual mumbo-jumbo: the internal voice, a voice which cannot be silenced” (14). My use of the term voice in this paper includes both literal/material and figurative/metaphoric understandings of the term and is meant to be suggestive rather than conclusive. While the roots of the word icon lie in the Greek *eikon*, meaning picture or portrait (Brink 2000: 139), Bissera V. Pentcheva (2006) reminds us that the icon in Byzantine times was a synaesthetic phenomenon that engaged all the senses; it was “a surface that resonate[d] with sound, wind, light, touch, and smell” (2006: 631). It is this resonance between vocal surface and depth that I explore.

#### **K.D. LANG, THE ROMANTIC EXPRESSIVE SELF AND BUDDHISM**

With the release of her 2008 CD *Watershed*, lang discussed her Buddhist practice in *Shambhala Sun* magazine, pseudo-officially coming out as a Buddhist. Buddhism has been a guiding practice in her life; she became a serious student of Nyingma Buddhism, a form of Tibetan practice, when she found her teacher Lama Chodak Gyatso Nubpa in 2001. Her affinity for Buddhism can be traced even earlier to her days of camp cowboy punk, when lang understood herself to be the reincarnation of Pasty Cline and named her tribute band the reclines. lang has also long epitomized in her music and in her public persona the Buddha's first noble truth and the foundation of Buddhism, the inevitability of human suffering. Dissatisfaction and melancholy have underpinned lang's ethos, which has been tied to “the realm of suffering” (Kurt, 2011: n.pag.) and defines her most successful musical moments: her performance of “Crying,” her rendition of Neil Young's “Helpless” and, most famously, her interpretations of Leonard Cohen's “Hallelujah.” Her biggest hit, “Constant Craving,” is a meditation on human vulnerability and the pain of unsatisfied desire. Buddhism guides lang's worldview and everyday actions, but (to quote the title of a recent release) she tends not to “sing it loud” in the media. Nonetheless, write-ups over the past decade often mention lang's Buddhism, describe the simplicity of her lifestyle, her practice of mindfulness, and her belief in Buddhist teachings about causality, creative flow, the interdependence of life, and the transient nature of all things. As she grows older, lang is increasingly understood as a

mature philosopher sage, which is to say, balanced, thoughtful, slightly ironic, comfortable in her own skin and – to quote a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation interviewer – “enlightened” (CBC, 2013, n.pag.).

The popular reception of lang’s spiritual ethos makes sense when positioned within the context of what Taylor calls “an expressive view of human life” (1989: 374) in which one’s identity is both realized and invented through human expression. This philosophy, which Taylor traces back to Jean Jacques Rousseau and English and German Romanticism, is a subjective turn that privileges imagination and feeling against rationalism and neo-Classical ideals. lang exemplifies such an expressivist understanding of self in her *Shambhala Sun* interview where she describes her identification with Buddhism in terms of sentiment: “From a very early age I have considered myself to be a Buddhist. I don’t even know where that came from, it was just an innate feeling” (McLeod, 2008: n. pag.). Key to Romantic expressivism is the belief that each of us finds our truth by listening to “the voice of one’s self” (Taylor, 1989: 369), which can be accessed only by turning inward, a place of inner depths: “The sense of depth in inner space is bound up with the sense that we can move into it and bring things to the fore. This we do when we articulate” (1989: 390).

In interviews, lang describes her encounters with Buddhism in language that affirms the expressivist view that significant insights lie deep within one’s self. The initiation stage of dharma practice, lang reveals in one interview, “is like standing naked in front of the mirror and *diving inside* to see what you’re working with” (McLeod, 2008: n.pag., emphasis added). In another interview, lang expresses it thus: “I’d been *delving deep into my own thoughts* about my choices and interactions in the world, my relationships in general, and I find that I’m not finished there” (Schroeder, 2009, n. pag., emphasis added). A journalist for Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* muses that lang “has travelled a long way in eight years, and much of the journey has been inside herself” (Everett-Green, 2008, n.pag.). In live recordings, these inner depths are often communicated through selective camera work, which features close-ups of lang’s tightly closed eyes, tilted head and bent body, all of which suggest a closed interior life of infinite depth and, more important, lang’s inward attunement to the inner impulses that dwell there – all of which drive her intense artistic expression.

The expressivist preoccupation with inwardness and interiority mirrors the surface/depth interplay that characterizes iconicity and media depictions of lang. As mentioned at the outset of this paper, theorists (e.g., Alexander 2008; Morgan 2012) have pointed to the tension between surface and depth in iconic representations. The physical icon’s texture, luminosity, and tactility arrest the senses, while at the same time inviting

immersion in something deeper and mysterious. lang's bare feet, clothing, bodily movements and facial expressions – surface forms – suggest inner depths and the capacity for profoundly felt pain. But it is, above all, the timbre and shading of her voice that draws listeners into the intensity of shared feeling states and rapturous response (e.g., spine tingling, hair raising, breath taking, etc.). Importantly, this is a *singing* voice. In singing, the voice draws attention to its surface, its intonation, resonance, and pitch. Dolar argues that “singing . . . brings the voice energetically to the forefront, on purpose, at the expense of meaning” (30), but at the same time:

[t]he voice is endowed with profundity: by not meaning anything, it appears to mean more than mere words, it becomes the bearer of some unfathomable originary meaning which, supposedly, got lost with language. It seems still to maintain the link with nature, on the one hand—the nature of a paradise lost—and on the other hand to transcend language, the cultural and symbolic barriers, in the opposite direction, as it were: it promises an ascent to divinity, an elevation above the empirical, the mediated, the limited, worldly human concerns. (31)

Dolar's connection of voice with nature is suggestive. In addition to a selfhood that privileges feeling, inner depths and inwardness, the Romantic expressivist philosophy is distinguished by its affirmation of nature as source. This was “the impulse in us of nature, as the larger order in which we are set . . . nature as a great current of sympathy, running through all things” (Taylor 1989: 369). Some interpretations of Buddhism also believe that within each of us lies the potential for awakening and that through quiet meditation and religious observance we can connect with the impulse of Buddha nature within us and achieve enlightenment. Like the idea of nature for Rousseau and for the Romantics, Buddha nature for many Western Buddhists represents a source of the good that they must open themselves up to. lang's description of Buddhism, for instance, sees dharma as a flow of energy between the self and the cosmos, which calls to mind the Romantic view of “the élan running through nature which emerges inter alia in the voice within” (Taylor 369: 371). In talking about *Watershed*, lang draws on the natural metaphor of water, connecting it with one's innate nature. This belief in the reverberation of outside natural forces with those within makes lang a “natural” Canadian icon. Collections like *Hymns of the 49<sup>th</sup> Parallel* and countless Canadian publications repeat some variation on the theme that the wide-open spaces of the Canadian prairies serve as lang's inspiration and define *her* nature.

The final element relevant to this discussion of expressive selfhood and voice is authenticity, which eighteenth century figures like Johann Gottfried Herder understood as “following the voice of nature within us” (Taylor 1991: 26) in order to discern one's own

particular way of being human. In the brief space that remains, I highlight Taylor's metaphors of the voice in his commentaries about expressive selfhood and authenticity. These are particularly relevant to lang's expressive ethos. In *Sources of the Self* (1989), Taylor refers to "an inner voice or impulse" (368), "the voice of one's self" (369) and "the voice of nature within us" (370). He links the philosophy of expressive selfhood to being "attuned to nature" (372) and uses words like resonance and vibrancy, which connotes sonic vibration too. It is the voice that constitutes the essence of lang's iconicity, especially as understood within an expressive framework, because it instantiates her authenticity as Taylor theorizes it: her outer voice is *attuned with* her inner voice. She enacts authenticity through her singing. In his comment about lang finally being named to the Canadian Music Hall of Fame, Canadian singer-songwriter Royal Wood conveys this idea quite succinctly:

I mean it sounds so pedestrian to say but she's an iconic Canadian and she's the real deal. There's no autotune, there's no correction, she's a talent. She deserved to be there a long time ago. (Graham, 2013: n. pag.)

In a nationally broadcast radio interview, the host voices a similar sentiment:

It's not that you haven't always been known for the veracity, the authenticity that you bring and that somehow is imbued in your vocals, but it's especially been the case, it feels like, in the last decade. (CBC, 2013: n. pag.)

lang's inner sense of pitch accords/a-chords with externally correct pitch. She does not need instrumental means (i.e., autotune) to correct her voice because she is viewed to possess an intuitive balance and attunement with the world around her. This voice is uniquely and superlatively her own. Ghomeshi notes that this authenticity has been particularly evident "in the last decade," which aligns with lang's Buddhist spirituality and shift to a quieter artistic ethos. Many media pieces and interviews have centred on lang's decision to turn away from the noise and distractions of stardom and the music industry, which suggests that she prizes the voice within in order to achieve what she believes to be human fullness and a life rightly lived.

## CONCLUSION

I am by no means the first scholar to note historical and philosophical confluences between Buddhism and Romanticism (See Lussier 2006; McMahan 2008). I have, however, located new sites of intersection amongst powerful ideals in the contemporary Western imagination: iconicity, modern expressive selfhood, Buddhism, and the voice – specifically as these

converge in the articulations and practices of k.d. lang. As suggested at the beginning of this article, the icon is often characterized by contradiction. One of the primary contradictions exemplified by a Buddhist icon in the expressivist mode is the notion of selfhood itself. How does one create, articulate, and understand an authentic self when Buddhist practice encourages the emptiness of that same self? Taylor stresses that expressivism inaugurated a new kind of individuation, the privileging of a unique self, which he argues in our day and age can take the most “degraded, absurd, or trivialized forms” (1991b: 29). The popular forms of Buddhism in the West as instantiated by lang tend to focus, too, on individualism and the quest for understanding one’s identity. This view plays well within discourses of national identity and national iconicity. In her CBC interview, lang acknowledges Canada for her 2013 induction in the Canadian music Hall of Fame. Canada, to her mind, is “really more celebratory in terms of *individualism* and *uniqueness*,” a statement which got uproarious applause. She continues, “[i]t’s more about these *individuals* who rise through this culture that allows people who would never make it in the States” (CBC, 2013:n.pag.).

With its emphasis on individual identity, a Western framing of Buddhism is easily reconciled with discourses of holistic well-being, new age spirituality, and health. lang’s voice seems to affirm ideologies that are compatible with contemporary understandings and practices of Buddhism. Her voice, on the one hand, is very much located in this mundane life. In interviews she describes how she takes care of it: she breathes, rests, warms up, eats well, and meditates. She prayed and did breathing exercises before her performance at opening ceremonies of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, and reminded herself that “this is as real as anything. It’s as real as grocery shopping. Or as real as being in Regina in the spring time” (CBC, 2013, n.pag.). On the other hand, the texture, temperature, and timbre of lang’s voice is positioned discursively in the media as signifying interiority, intensity (the capacity of immense feelings in the bounded space of her body), and “morality, creativity, and spirituality in the deep interior of the soul” (Mahan 13). lang is not quite as visible in the popular mainstream today as she was twenty years ago, but her iconic power echoes and reverberates nonetheless as she “gives voice” to ways of living in a disenchanting, romantic, and rationalistic modern world.

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