

Oral Frictions and the Echo of an Otherwise



Folk singers Juuli Ott, Marie Paemurd, Liisu Tamp, and Mari Kilu with folklorists Herbert Tampere and August Pulst, 1936. Image: P. Parikas. ERA, Foto 828.

In the oral tradition of *regilaul*, a lead singer improvises lines of site-specific verse which are taken up by others to produce a trance-like quality used for a variety of purposes including rituals, creation stories, and communication with non-humans. *Regilaul* has been practiced by Finno-Baltic peoples for at least two thousand years. This exchange of letters between Vaim Sarv and Mia Tamme traces and amplifies the echo of *regilaul*'s pagan roots in the context of the Estonian nation-state and its complicated colonial pasts.

Vaim is an experimental vocalist and curator whose practice blends pagan oral tradition with noise music and free improvisation. Mia is an artist and filmmaker who combines ethnographic research with autofiction to connect to stories from the periphery. Vaim was born and

raised in North America by Estonian parents and Mia was born in Estonia but spent most of her life in Western Europe. They feel like outsiders in Estonia, a position they write from with a mixture of mischief and melancholy. Their text is a speculative queer effort; a kind of critical play with the boundary between past and present, personal and political, fact and fiction.



Dear Mia,

I'm writing to you in order to start our dialogue about the oral tradition of *regilaul*¹. I'm interested in this practice because I feel it contains and produces a kind of friction. A way of being with other people in the same space, bodies all connected through breath and word, that starts to rub up against your (my, our) sense of self. This friction takes you apart, song by song, and blurs the borders between you and the others, muddies the boundary between human and non-human worlds. And you can't choose who you're singing with. The geographical and social limits of patrilocal village life mean that I'm stuck with the same difficult people, year in, year out². And you have to make it work. You have to encounter this friction and let it enter you. I have to sing because otherwise our crops will fail. We must sing because there's no other place to put all these feelings, like my husband's brutality, or the beauty of that willow tree beside the stream in spring, or all the homes I've had to leave behind, or what those fucking protestants did to my sister for

¹ *Regilaul* is commonly translated from Estonian as runosong, a term borrowed from Finnish which lumps all Baltic regions into one and loses cultural specificity in the process. The authors have chosen to use the original term to resist what they see as a form of respectability politics in which Estonian scholars seek assimilation into majoritarian European culture.

² Relating to a pattern of marriage in which the couple settles in the husband's home or community.

growing *üheksavägi*³. I must sing to distribute this pain and this joy between our bodies in a way that erases me, windpipes all tangled up in the muck of this collective organ called us.

I sing because otherwise the thread between me and my grandmother will break. And all that knowledge? Transmitted mouth to mouth to ear to mouth, or aurally, in a way that violates the differentiation of the senses that modernity imposed upon us. That knowledge will vanish. Swallowed by the spirits from whom it came, like those in that bombed field outside your summer house, but much, much older. They have oral traditions, too; I know this because I heard them whispering to themselves at night.

Because we can't write it down. Because if we could (and dear god, how they try, sending convoy after convoy of folklorists to come and collect my half-remembered songs, most of which I make up to please them so that they would leave faster) then this friction would be lost.⁴ It would be devoured by the voracious appetite of the written word and the way it fixes us, straps us down on the operating table of the world system, injects us with the planetary poisons of capital and whiteness. And creates the violent fantasy of my self as a separate thing that must be improved, maintained, and protected at all costs.

Warmly and with lots of love,
Vaim

³ The Moravian Church, one of the oldest Protestant denominations, sent missionaries to Estonia in the eighteenth century who violently suppressed pagan practices such as the use of the *Verbascum thapsus* plant for medicine, protection, and divination.

⁴ During Estonia's national awakening, which started in the middle of the 19th century, a huge effort was made to collect and record living examples of *regilaul* from rural villages to help fabricate a national identity. Started by elite Baltic German estophiles, this work was carried on by university-educated folklorists and continued throughout the Soviet occupation.

Dearest Vaim,

I think back to the moment that you proposed stepping into dialogue, formally, that is. I live in relation to you, but the excitement of tightening professional ties was clouded by 'don't fuck where you work'. I stare into the eyes of our foremothers branded into sepia images with torn edges downloaded from the national archives. I look for comfort in those pictures. They pose on a field, holding children in their hands. They fucked for work; they really did. Love was labour. Life was work. Peeling potatoes showed care, but left blisters on their hands. The messy mouths of our singing mothers and the remains of their voices call us to tune out from the modern promise of a work-life balance.

What intrigues me about *regilaul* is that it has little to do with music. I'll let you correct me! I am not of music. I don't sing. That's a lie... I never sing out of joy. But there are moments when I open my mouth out of necessity and sound flows out. Once, when steep waves shook the rudder in my hand, fear gathered in my shoulders, so I hummed with my enemy, my friend, the water. A lonely voice calling upon the spirits from the past, telling the waves: I hear you, I respect you, I am one with you. Who knows if the water heard, but I sang the rhythm of the sea. At that moment, I gave up my human body. A singer, even if addressing worldly matters, becomes in their vocal flow a bird, a sail, an untameable wave – non-human matter.

There is melancholy in your letter to me. An air of urgency sensed in those lines of *regilaul* that are often far from my understanding of Estonian. I admit, I only open my mouth in the most desperate times. But the melody that flows out is calming, almost hypnotizing. That

correlation between beauty and sorrow draws me in, ties my hands. Like a cry of help, too pretty to be ignored. Old songs sound weak and lonely from a distance, but when you follow with your voice, they eat your body. Make you carry the message not only in mind, but in flesh.

Regilaul is not a lonely practice, but it becomes isolated in text. These songs used to be alive. Their meaning was sung into existence together; constantly re-edited, carried communally, and decorated by multiple authors. There was no right or wrong. Many truths and realities were voiced and swirled in parallel.⁵ A single judgment could only be imposed when *regilaul* was written down by the other, the outsider, those representatives of what you call capital and whiteness. They dragged these songs away from their source. Made it possible to read them without giving your voice in return, without giving up your humanity.

Echo something back to me...

Yours truly,
Mia

⁵ A hallmark of *regilaul* is a form of parallelism, in which the intention of the singer is not directly stated (as that would bring bad luck) but hinted at through a repetitive layering of overlapping meanings.



Folk singer Liisa Kümmel and folklorist Arvo Krikmann, 1963. Image: H. Kokamägi. ERA, Foto 6689.

Dear Mia,

You're right. It is urgent. It's a matter of life and death for me to listen for these echoes and try to amplify them. These echoes, that friction, this noise: they are blueprints for a way of being that is whole, incomplete, and nonetheless ontologically total.⁶ A way of being one *and* many at the same time. A way of being that not only pre-exists but works against the hardcore loneliness and self-imposed violence of everyday 21st century life.

⁶ Cedric Robinson, tracing the history of the Black Radical Tradition, describes the ontological totality as a revolutionary way of being that emerged out of a metaphysical system that did not allow for private (i.e. individualistic and anthropocentric) property in either the physical, social, or psychic senses.

I think oral traditions contain the sound, feel, and taste of an elsewhere and an otherwise that is *right here, right now*. Somewhere off to the side and off-site, outside the margins of the periphery, marginalized to the outskirts of our peripheral vision, buried like chemical waste in leaking concrete coffins, these cacophonic echoes are what I'm actually made of. This is a fact that the guards in my head and the watching, assaultive eyes on the streets of Tallinn try without fail to cover up.

But what does it mean to preserve these traditions when they've become static symbols of nationalism? What happens to these echoes when they've been smoothly incorporated into the machinery of monocultural reproduction and social control? How can we rescue the friction that has been stripped away by this process? Can we fall into the abrasive, immanent noise of pagan oral tradition and use it to fight back?

Without reserve,
Vaim



Folk singers Liis Alas and Reet Sutt in the recording studio in Tallinn, 1937–1938. Image: P. Parikas. ERA, Foto 779.

Dear Vaim,

I wish I had an answer to your questions. But perhaps these questions have no answers in words nor in individuals. They hide in soft unwordly spaces where they can only be visited with the ununified collective voice, that is, indeed, ontologically total. There is fear. Fear of returning to practices, oral or otherwise, that give access to our innermost layers in which beauty and pain stretch on the same spectrum.

Today, the practice of *regilaul* is kept on life support, held under a mechanical ventilator by faded female voices dressed in floral prints, joining every Wednesday for communal song. What they sing is not pagan oral tradition but historical re-enactment. They have been taught old, archived songs that have nothing to do with their lives. We have been taught to preserve our “national heritage”, yet in that preservation we have forgotten that *regilaul* must be improvised, that it must respond to the needs of the more-than-human community *in this moment*.

Something much larger and more shadowy lurks beneath the surface of this strict preservation of heritage. There are some communities, few and far between, who have maintained contact with their pagan roots. We keep on returning to their peripheral lands, to the islands and the border-zones, to listen to those rare voices.⁷ We wish to fall under the enchanting spell of their orally transmitted knowledge that used to swell like storms, stretch like seasons, spread like swamps. But no matter what we do, those old singing girls are still afraid that we, me and you, the outsiders, might steal *their* glue to the world, gentrify their living practice just like the folklorists did.

That gap between us and them has become too wide. I don't care to point fingers, to fight about who *regilaul* belongs to or to prove that I'm Estonian enough to sing. We are left to our own devices. So I come to your odd concerts in cellars, wastelands, and artist-run spaces. In your mouth those songs are alive, and they feed on the friction: the beauty and loneliness of our time. How do you feel, my dear, in those moments when you open your mouth on stage? Do you long for us to sing along? Is it the Estonian-ness you relate to or the worldwide practice of joint

⁷ The practice of *regilaul* has been most authentically preserved in geographically and socioeconomically marginalized areas of Estonia, such as Kihnu island and Setomaa.

orality? How dare you twist up those dusty archival folders full of verse!?⁸

With love,
Mia

Dear Mia,

I feel frustrated when I open my mouth and it spills out, all lopsided, accented, wrong. Fearful eyeballs piercing my skin, supercharging buried pockets of yearning, anger, rootlessness. Body and orifice crisscrossed by lines of desire and vulnerability which I breath and expel, trying my best to hold it all every time. Often failing, especially when I'm alone.

So yes. I long for so many things. Like people to sing with and learn from who I can feel safe with despite my transgendered faggotry. Or rather, I long to make a *regilaul* that converts that otherness into stone and mud, bends me into hurricane wind and forest fire, frees me from the prison house of this body so that I can fly through the countryside, wreak havoc on the city, crawl through the sewers into the Pedja river to caress the ceramics my grandmother threw there, the ones into which she poured all her frozen trauma.⁹

I want to sit on the wooden floor of an old apartment and make this song together. Weave it out of the tangled threads of the present moment.

⁸ To read about and listen to archival recordings of *regilaul*, please visit <https://folklore.ee/regilaul/lugu/>.

⁹ Estonians have been impacted by multiple collective traumas, the most recent of which is the Soviet occupation. In most cases, this trauma remains unprocessed at an individual, community, and geopolitical level. Vaim's grandmother never had the opportunity to process her time in the gulag, but used her ceramics practice as a way to silently transmute her suffering.

Make it the colour of what you're going through with your mom and give it the taste of our love. Have it smell like Kim and let it hold us the way Nadya hugs. I'd like to cut ourselves open with this song, bleed like the never-ending stream of Estonian microaggressions. Make it sound like Sanna's warm laughter or the screeching tram lines. Take it through the stages of an abusive relationship, then a trusting one. Inject it with the feeling of anxiety and doomscrolling for hours and finally crying. Have it breathe like a baby seagull nesting in the rain.

And then I'd like to sing this *regilaul* together. In a mixture of American English, Russian¹⁰, and Estonian all slathered in slang and ad-libs, code-switched on the fly, rewritten in real-time to hold space for whoever showed up, for whichever ghosts are haunting today. I will sing out of need and necessity. I promise you. Use this song to get even closer to each other, all up inside one another, rubbing up and against and through the other, into a communal heat, a disappearing body feast, a dirty ritual.

And when we're done and this song has used us up, I'd like to bury it in the forest. Let it die the way these songs are meant to die and be forgotten. Let it go back to that place where it came from. Because only then might it return.

I long for this, I really do. Can we try?

¹⁰ Estonia, which has a population of 1.3 million, is home to more than 383,000 Russian speakers who face systemic discrimination at the hands of the Estonian state and public. Vaim would sing this *regilaul* partly in Russian as a gesture of solidarity and in defiance of a culturally segregated society.



Kihnu elder Kossu Mari also known as Mari Kose. Estonian National Museum. ERM Fk 1097:6