

EMBODIED SPEECH THROUGH SONG: A QUEER AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC  
EXPLORATION OF GENDER AFFIRMING VOICEWORK IN MUSIC THERAPY

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Embodied Speech Through Song: A Queer Autoethnographic  
Exploration of Gender Affirming Voicework in Music Therapy

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Slippery Rock University  
Music Therapy Program

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### **Abstract**

Through queer autoethnography (i.e., queerly telling stories), I have explored the beginning development of a gender affirming voicework method within music therapy, informed by my personal experiences of seeking a more affirming voice for myself as a nonbinary trans person, specifically doing this through my singing voice. This was further informed by literature from the fields of speech-language pathology, vocal pedagogy, and music therapy. This method will potentially provide a uniquely holistic space, working with the physical voice in terms of working on gendered behavioral changes and healthy vocal habits; the psychological voice in terms of supporting the emotional relationship that a person has with their voice, body, and Self; and the body in terms of encouraging relaxation and groundedness as well as working with the ways a person expresses/relates to their voice, body, and Self. In attempts to ignite a conversation around the possibilities of gender-based work within music therapy for trans, nonbinary, and cis individuals, I share my experiences of engaging in gender affirming voicework. Although this voicework is likely relevant to all individuals, it is perhaps more pertinent for trans and nonbinary folk. This is reflected throughout my autoethnography.

*Keywords: voicework, gender affirming, transgender, nonbinary, queer, autoethnography, music therapy, embodied speech*

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what a privilege it has been  
to have been  
created from the same dust,  
droplets of cosmic rain,  
ancient energy  
and cradled  
by our Mother Universe,  
in the same  
interstellar nursery  
as you.

(Nikita Gill, *From Writer to Reader*)

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Link to full album on SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/sets/embodied-speech-through-song>.

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### **Preface**

What follows is one account of what gender affirming voicework in music therapy might be. I hope this story inspires creativity and that you find yourself realizing new and different meanings that go beyond the words I write on these pages. Further, I hope this story leads to new and unknown understandings of what gender affirming voicework in music therapy might be.

## CHAPTER 1

### Childlike Explorations

*You are a myth born to the wrong age. You are the kind of book  
that has magical stories trapped in every single page.*

(Nikita Gill, *Untitled VI*, italics in original)

With their living room as their underwater ocean trove, a young child wholeheartedly  
belts, on repeat, at the top of their lungs:

I wanna be where the people are

I wanna see, wanna see ‘em dancin’

Walkin’ around on those—whad-ya call ‘em?—oh, feet

Flippin’ your fins you don’t get too far

Legs are required for jumpin’, dancin’

Strollin’ along down a—what’s that word again?—street

Up where they walk

Up where they run

Up where they stay all day in the sun

Wanderin’ free—wish I could be

Part of that world

(“Part of Your World,” *The Little Mermaid*)

Watching ‘The Little Mermaid’ as a child, they see themselves in Ariel’s story—the mermaid with the beautiful voice who wanted more than what she had...who wanted to be where the people are. Their young Self intuitively knows something then that they wouldn’t fully realize until their 20’s. They love Ariel because she is curious and adventurous. She wants to be a part of

something different from what she is *told* she is a part of. She doesn't want the ocean...she wants something...*more*. She wants land, streets, fire, feet. And she is determined and independent, knowing that she doesn't solely belong where she is and standing up for that. Doing something about it, with or without permission. And her voice is one of the most important aspects of her identity. It is what makes her recognizable to others, what others use to define *who* she is. Without it, she isn't Ariel. Just a girl without a voice, walking on dry land. Misperceived and misunderstood.

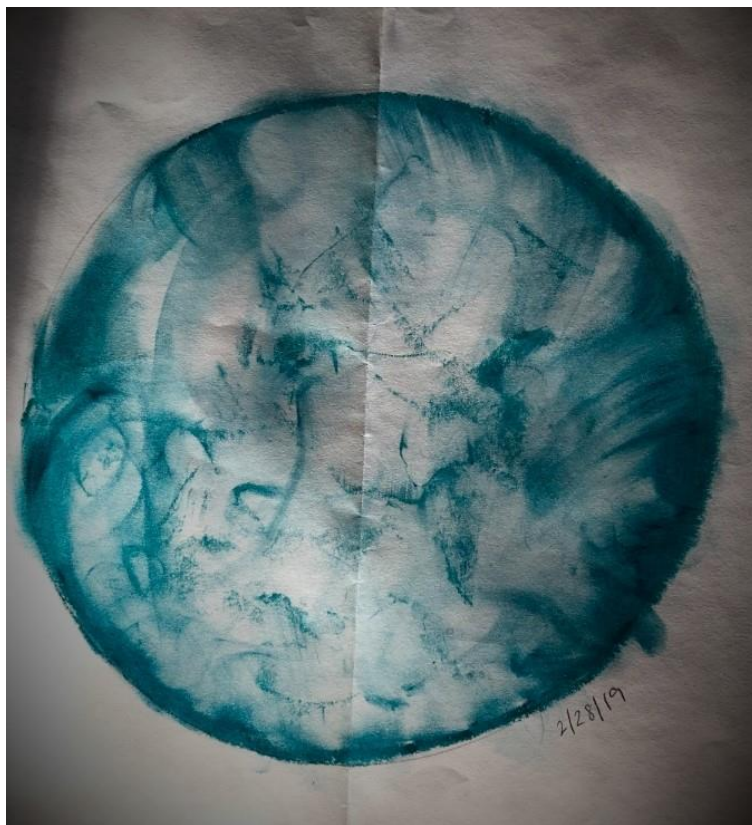


Figure 1 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, 2/28/2019.

A twenty-three-year-old childlike person begins research, still intuitively knowing themselves to be Ariel walking on dry land, having an intimate knowledge of who they are. Nonbinary. Neither singularly man nor woman. Something much more complicated. They hold the fluidity of both fins and feet, their gender as fluid as the magic that shifts Ariel from one state

of being to another. But people do not hear them for who they are. Their voice does not carry with it any real or perceivable sound for who they know themselves to be. It carries ‘girl,’ ‘woman,’ ‘female.’ They are not heard. At times, it is like they have no voice at all.

Yet their voice—*my* voice—is such an important and intimate part of me. As a musician—more specifically, a singer—it is often my instrument of choice, an instrument that I carry around with me into every space I occupy. It is one of the very first instruments I started studying in middle school and that I continued to study throughout college as my primary instrument. My voice is something I take pride in and often receive compliments about. I know my voice well and how to use it to engage in quality music. In fact, making music with my voice is one of my favorite things to do. It is self-soothing, both a resource and strength. It vibrates my body with warmth, filling up the spaces within me and extending into the spaces around me. My voice connects me with other people and yet it also separates me in the way it offers one of many ways to misgender me. Of course, my voice is not the only site of misperception, as my body makeup and gender expressions also play important roles. However, it cannot be denied that when someone hears my voice paired with my body and expressions, whether I am singing or speaking, they often make assumptions about who I am and how I must identify. I love this voice even as I am frustrated by it.

In coming to know my gender, there came with it the realization that I wanted a voice that accurately and authentically represented who I am, how I identify, and how I want to express that to the world. This occurred concurrently with beginning to consider what kind of thesis research project I might pursue to complete my Master of Music Therapy degree at Slippery

Rock University. Upon reading an article by Randi Rolvsjord<sup>1</sup> and Jill Halstead (2013) which explored the politics of gender and the voice in music therapy, I had an interest in voicework and exploring how folks in LGBTQ+ communities experience their voices in terms of self-esteem, gender, and sexuality. The more I reflected on my own relationship with my voice, however, particularly with my singing voice and its overlap with my speaking voice, the more it became clear that the research project I was meant to do was a self-study on gender affirming voicework in music therapy. This was a gradual process where the focus expanded into different areas and also narrowed into a clearer project throughout my process of reflecting on my voice, engaging with various bodies of literature, and engaging in actual voicework.

Autoethnography became the method for the research. This method will be explored in greater depth later, but it involves the researcher writing about “epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, & Arthur P. Bochner, 2011, n.p.). Further, it values the reflexive process of analyzing and reanalyzing audio/video recordings, field notes, memos, and recollections using creative methods, such as writing, poetry, music, etc., to find meaning and understanding (Byrnjulf Stige & Allison Ledger, 2016). As the focus of my research continued to emerge, it became clear that queer autoethnography would more specifically serve as my method because of the ways it is grounded within a queer theoretical framework.

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<sup>1</sup> I am intentionally including authors’ first names in efforts to challenge the unconscious assumption that authors are both male and white. I am also using first names in efforts to create an engaging and personal text which feels more conversational for the reader. I recognize that this does not strictly adhere to APA guidelines. This is an intentional queer choice on my part to write new discursive options that humanize people and recognize authors’ subjective positioning. The first time I cite an author, I use their full name. Thereafter, I use first names when the author is mentioned directly in a sentence, and I use last names within parenthetical citations.

Although an exploration will later be provided containing the ways in which Tony Adams and Stacy Holman Jones have hinged together autoethnography and queer theory (2008; 2010; 2011; 2016), it is important to offer a definition of queer theory before more deeply sharing my story as I will refer back to acts of queering throughout my autoethnography. Simply, although incompletely described because of the ways it can have many meanings, queer theory is a critical theory and theoretical framework which involves deconstructing and destabilizing normal, fixed, and binary understandings. Queer theories have their birthplace in the work of Judith Butler (1999; 2004), Michel Foucault (1978), and many others. Common features of queer theories can include “resisting the categorization of people; challenging the idea of essential identities; questioning binaries like gay/straight, male/female; demonstrating how things are contextual, based on geography, history, culture, etc.; and examining the power relations underlying certain understandings, categories, identities, etc.” (Meg-John Barker & Julia Scheele, 2016). Queer can be an adjective (i.e., a queer person), a derogatory noun (i.e., the queer), or a verb (i.e., to queer something). Here, I turn to queer as a verb, meaning to take action. This draws upon common features of queer theories in efforts to destabilize and dismantle normative understandings, stories, and knowledge. Throughout my autoethnography, I acknowledge moments of queering, and I consider gender affirming voicework informed by queer theory.

Early on in my voice explorations, I emailed the following to my professor and thesis advisor, Susan Hadley, with whom I had been sharing the complexities of gender and talking about this potential research project:

*I'm finding my own experience with my voice interesting because from high school up until this point, I have been all over the place vocally, flipping from high soprano to*

*mezzo-soprano and back...and then back again. I've worked with several teachers who have followed me with this, either working with me within soprano territory or moving me towards mezzo land. I mean that in terms of pitch range, but also in terms of voice color and in some ways the themes of the repertoire itself. Sopranos typically have a lighter, more delicate or what I would perceive as "feminine" sound. Mezzos typically have a warmer, richer and more "masculine" sound. I'm interested in the context of me being connected with either, or rather both, of these sounds. Meaning, did my feeling connected with my assigned gender let me feel more comfortable with that more "feminine" part of my voice which led me to have an easier time in singing soprano repertoire? And then on the flip side, did not feeling connected with my assigned gender lead me to feel a sense of wrongness and a struggling with using that "feminine" voice? [Reflecting back,] I don't think that I can really know the answers to these questions, but I know that there have been times where I have had a lot of difficulty in navigating my voice—where anxiety takes over, and I end up vocally giving up because of a feeling of being uncomfortable. (2/2/2017)*

As I reflected more on what I expressed in this email, I thought of times where my high notes would blossom—where the sound would pour out of me and everything would just work. I recalled these moments as feeling 'good,' 'right,' filled with confidence, like it all just made sense. My voice was an extension of me, expanding into the room, taking up as much space as it could. And in sharp contrast, I thought of specific moments where I shut down and these notes would not work, regardless of how hard I tried to access them. The sound—lost somewhere within me, not finding its way out. My voice—clunky, forced, harsh, pushed into a space that wasn't working. I recalled how some of these moments occurred in the presence of others,

particularly in voice lessons, and how this often brought me to the verge of tears, halting the work I was doing.

These questions and reflections arose within a desire to understand my voice and gender in all their complexities and to access vocal sounds that accurately reflect how I know myself to be. Since writing this email just over two years ago, I've realized that there are certainly moments of singing and speaking where I openly embrace the femininity of my voice, with/for myself, with friends and family, and with those I work with clinically. Sometimes this feels right, wholesome, affirming. However, more often than not, this comes with discomfort. I feel much more connected to my whole Self when I sit within sounds that would likely be associated with masculinity or androgyny. Not always—but often. Further, musically, I have found that my voice has settled into mezzo land as a contralto and even sometimes a high tenor and that I am most at home when singing in the lower and richer parts of my voice. In particular, I love the way these sounds rattle and vibrate my chest, neck, and body in ways that bring about a sense of aliveness and fullness.

Where do I live in my house?

There are parts of my home I spend more time in,

but I travel around,

sometimes up to the attic,

sometimes down to the basement,

sometimes out in the garden,

sometimes settled in the kitchen.

But I am drawn to the basement.



I keep coming back,  
 finding comfort there  
 even though its cold  
 and damp  
 and there's no furniture  
 to sit on.  
 I'm drawn to the basement.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 5/5/2019)<sup>2</sup>

### **An attempt at defining my gender**

You are made of planets  
 and stars and seas and oceans.  
 And no one can tell them  
 what they can and cannot be.

(Nikita Gill, *Planets and Stars*, second stanza)

Throughout this autoethnography, I use Self with a capital S, referring to a person's inner most world, to a person's truest and most whole understanding of themselves as it may change from moment to moment with fluidity. It is the notion of being connected with the center of your being, to being fully with yourself. I do not understand it to be a stagnant, fixed 'essence' that carries with it a singular truth and which remains unchanging, existing in isolation from others. It is not like a house with sturdy walls and a clear foundation. I do understand the Self to be in a constant state of becoming something else, impacted by their interconnectedness to other people, to other interconnected Selves. It is like the ocean in that it is both a singular body and a fluid

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<sup>2</sup> Influenced by Lisa Sokolov's discussion of the voice and body as a 'house.' Refer to Sokolov (in press).

body that continues to ‘become.’ While recognizing the way ‘Self’ has often been used and understood as this fixed truth, I intentionally use the word, attempting to re-author it into a more fluid, complex, and queer understanding of identity.

Considering this, I turn to my gender as a part of my identity. Despite developing more intimate understandings of my gender, I don’t think I will ever find ‘perfect’ language to offer others. Because of this, I am often hesitant to attempt defining my gender as it feels as though it is constantly becoming something else, like an ocean, the moving of water, the rotating of the planets, the expansion of the stars. I worry that my words will grossly concretize something that is so complexly malleable and shifting. Definitions can limit or reduce us to one way of being even as they can be helpful for communicating and understanding. That shared, I am growing to know that a parcel of my gender truth(s) is that *nonbinary* and *agender* have become the most comfortable set of words to describe myself, as they feel able to hold my continued tensions with gender. Perhaps that will shift because over time these words have emerged out of different words such as *genderfluid* and *genderqueer*, which were somewhat comfortable but not quite complete. At the moment it feels as though nonbinary and agender most accurately encompass the natural shifting that occurs within my gender.

Succinctly, though perhaps not adequately described, I am drawn to understanding myself as *genderless*, meaning that I have no gender and solely connect with different and/or multiple points along a spectrum of culturally constructed ideas of masculinity, androgyny, and femininity. Where I connect in relation to this spectrum has shifted over different periods of my life. I have realized that I go through short and sometimes long phases where my style and sense of Self settles into/onto/outside of this spectrum, at multiple points simultaneously. It is difficult to describe this if you have not witnessed or experienced it personally, but my relationship to my

Self and body feels differently across these phases. It is always nonbinary, but nonbinary along a spectrum of culturally gendered meanings. Each time I reflect on my gender, my understanding expands into more complex territory, which is beautiful yet also challenging to communicate to others.

on the land

there are two poles:

Woman

and Man.

to resist one,

you must approach the other.

I bind my body

to fit

into a carefully constructed,

narrow

space

where only a few

will find me.

it reads,

“Other.”

this space is not a pole.

magnets tug from both sides.

they pull at my bones.

I hold myself together.

sometimes, I run

like the little boy I was

on my second-grade soccer team

a little wild

but powerful

and my lungs scream

to take up more space

sometimes, I sing

holding an infant

in a room full of new mothers

and only the baby knows

how my chest

is not for her

on the land,

I pose

and adjust

the dial of my appearance

I cannot paint myself

green, gold, and sky blue

here.

we are given

only black and white

so I attempt

the most perfect grey.

in the water

my chest is unbound

but I do not mind.

there is no word

for “woman”

here.

in the water

I am expansive

fluid

illegible

my arms stretch

my legs kick

my lungs expand

my hair flows

my body flips and curves

my spine realigns

from the slouch of bound resignation

to the stretch and curve

of an otter's playful dance.

my back no longer hurts.

here, I understand

how the octopus

enacts perfect camouflage

despite being colorblind.

I know what it is

to create colors

that, where I'm from,

do not exist.

(Victoria Gilman Fansler, *on the land \_ in the water*)

### **Reflections on binding**

It feels important to spend some time discussing what a binder is and how it has impacted my ability to breathe and therefore my ability to sing and support my sound. Binding—the act of wearing a binder—is something that many trans men and some nonbinary, female-assigned persons do to compress their breasts and give a flat-chested appearance. A binder is made of elastic material that compresses everything, causing the body to have to work harder to breathe.

It's obviously not ideal; however, the physical discomfort often relieves emotional discomforts. For many, not all, this is a temporary solution until a person is able to have what many trans and nonbinary folks refer to as 'top surgery.' Below I share a series of emails sent to Sue where I reflect on binding prior to starting voicework.

*I'm going to need to notate when I am and am not wearing binders [for voicework].*

*Because they put a lot of pressure on my ribs and lungs, they drastically affect my breath control and support. Some days I can't [or rather shouldn't] wear them because of either [my] asthma stuff or because my skin is raw from the pressure. [...] Future note—when I eventually have top surgery (binders are not a long-term solution [for me] as a vocalist [and music therapist]), I'm probably going to have to return to some of this work (if all goes well) [...]*

*[...] binding, in general, is really stressful on the body. It's not really a long-term solution for anyone and if people don't practice healthy habits, they can seriously damage their body—break ribs, break down their cartilage, etc. [...] I bind mindfully, really avoiding [wearing] anything longer than 12 hours, having 'off' days with no binding especially when my body is saying I need to, etc. In general, it's a stressful thing though.*

*[This reflection comes from Sue asking if I might decide to wear something looser—she is concerned and saddened that binding causes me pain and difficulty with breathing. ...] [V]oicework might be easier with something looser, but unfortunately, I don't know when I will have surgery—it could be years from now—and if I'm going to be living how my body is now, I'd rather learn how to support a sound with how I'm most comfortable at this moment. Honestly, I think supporting that sound after [a] surgery*

*would be even easier because my body would (hopefully) be trained to work at it. [I imagine supporting would involve less work post-surgery.] If I do end up doing this work with female-assigned folks, I'm going to run into similar struggles. Especially because surgery is super expensive and not always covered by insurance because it's [sometimes] seen as cosmetic... (10/18/2017)*

Further, I reflect on the ways a binder, amidst these challenges, has brought about a positive impact:

*[...] I've known I've wanted a [breast] reduction since middle school, but it wasn't until I started binding a year ago though that I realized it was more than that. I think of my experience in voice lessons. One of the comments I'd always get from teachers was "shoulders back, chest out" but that was so uncomfortable for me [to do because of the (un)conscious ways my large chest felt hypervisible] and I'd tend to collapse in on myself. When I'm wearing a binder, I don't feel that way. I feel like I can stand taller, and it's not a masculinity thing [i.e., feeling able to take up more space]. It's an "I feel comfortable in my own skin" thing. I feel like that's hard to understand if you haven't experienced it, but it's very real for me. In some ways binding has improved my singing because of [having my shoulders back and chest out], even as I don't have the same phrase lengths that I used to have [and even though it requires more effort to stay expanded]. (10/18/2017)*

Throughout my voicework, I ended up wearing binders for all sessions, and I never did work when I was having a 'bad' breathing day. It feels important as I consider working with other



people to be able to comfortably talk about binders and their impacts on breathing, singing, and more broadly supporting sound.

Of course, binding exists within a history that should be recognized. I experience tension when considering how cis women bound themselves using a corset in efforts to look pleasing to men. Because of the ways this has become understood as repressive and oppressive, cis women fought against this. But for trans and nonbinary folks, I would suggest that binding perhaps feels anything but oppressive. For me, it feels liberating, even as it leaves me sometimes gasping for air. Despite this historical context, I experience a beautiful kind of freedom in being so tightly bound.

“Woman”

is a loose-fitting garment

a hand-me-down

passed through generations

an opera gown, from my father’s grandmother

stunning and simple

a frame for the music

and I am made of melody

yet the frame

does not fit

a feather boa, from my father’s mother

playful and bold

tap-dancing through her seventies  
and I spin, and take up space  
yet the feathers  
make me sneeze

a maternity blouse, from my mother herself  
tenderly making space for me  
living and loving for family  
and my heart, it holds so many  
yet my womb  
never will

this garment is so sacred  
I might never have taken it off  
itchy and vacant,  
but rich with the history  
of those who made a way for me

I dared not reject it  
I dared not let it fray  
I dared not stand naked  
at the opera  
at the studio

in my home

The first time I bound my chest

I cried

at seeing myself

in something

that finally

fit

I cried

at seeing

myself

...

somewhere in my lineage

is a tightly-fitted corset

and a woman who unbound herself

I wonder if I disappoint her

but I think

I embody her the most

...

somewhere in my progeny  
is a twelve-year-old  
whose gender has no name

I will offer them  
a tightly-fitting garment  
and they will stitch their story

(Victoria Gilman Fansler, *Woman is a loose-fitting garment*)

### **My tensions with taking testosterone**

Within these ongoing journeys of understanding myself more deeply, I realized a desire for a voice, particularly a speaking voice, that would be perceived in a more androgynous-something-outside-of-man-and-woman kind of way—something that would not as easily lead to female perceptions of gender and that would hold my gender in all the ways it shifts. Importantly, I desired this voice to exist simultaneously to the singing voice that is such a strength and resource for me. That is, I wanted my voice to be more androgynous, to hold the ways I embody both my masculinity and femininity, but I did not want to lose the familiarity I had with my singing voice, the instrument that I felt (and feel) so intimately connected with. I began engaging with various bodies of literature from the field of speech-language pathology as well as from other fields specific to musical vocal training and vocal health, all of which considered trans (and subsumed within that, nonbinary) voices.

I learned that many trans men and female-assigned nonbinary persons<sup>3</sup> pursue hormone therapy<sup>4</sup>; that is, they take testosterone (Eli Coleman, Walter Bockting, Marsha Botzer, Peggy T. Cohen-Kettenis, Griet DeCuypere, Jamie Feldman, Lin Fraser, et al., 2012; Shelagh Davies & Joshua M. Goldberg, 2006; Shelagh Davies, Viktória G. Papp, & Christella Antoni, 2015). This is because of how effective testosterone is at creating permanent and significant vocal changes, along with other bodily changes. These include “deepened voice, clitoral enlargement (variable), growth in facial and body hair, cessation of menses, atrophy of breast tissue, and decreased percentage of body fat compared to muscle mass” (Coleman et al., 2012, p. 188). A deepened voice typically occurs because the vocal folds are thickening, similar to what a young adolescent cis boy experiences during puberty. Once this change happens, it is permanent and cannot be undone. It is important to note that no one can pick and choose the changes that testosterone might yield (Maddie Deutsch, 2014). Taking testosterone does not consist of a checklist where a person can select which effects they want and which ones they do not or the intensity of the aforementioned effects. Of course, there are ways to have some control over the process through using low-dose testosterone and stopping after certain effects occur, but it is not an exact science because individual bodies can and do respond differently. Some effects are only present when a

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<sup>3</sup> It is very important to me that I utilize gender affirming language, emphasizing in my descriptions of people gender instead of assigned sex. Throughout this autoethnography, I do this as much as possible because I intimately understand the painful experience of reading literature which continuously uses invalidating language to describe trans and nonbinary people. However, sometimes when discussing nonbinary people, in particular, it becomes important to include language regarding assigned sex. I only do this when it is imperative to understanding nonbinary vocal situations. I express my deepest apologies if my language causes harm to anyone.

<sup>4</sup> Hormone therapy encompasses several different types/options. This can include puberty suppressing hormones, which are fully reversible and provide youth with time to explore their gender by preventing the development of secondary sex characteristics (Coleman et al., 2011). Hormone therapy can also include taking hormones to create partially reversible bodily changes—estrogen to feminize and testosterone to masculinize. An exploration into these various types of hormone therapies is important for considering what gender affirming voicework might be in the future. However, for the purposes of this autoethnography, I solely reflect on the possibility of taking testosterone given my positioning as a female-assigned nonbinary adult.

person is actively taking testosterone, but any effects caused by testosterone on the voice are permanent, despite any discontinuation.

This new knowledge left me with a large amount of tension for various reasons. While I knew that I wanted some kind of vocal change, I really did not want all the other physical changes that would potentially come with hormone therapy, even if some of those effects would only temporarily occur when I was actively using testosterone. Furthermore, taking testosterone, even if only for a period of time, “greatly reduces the ability to become pregnant, but it does not eliminate the possibility” (Deutsch, 2014, p. 8393). I do not know what the future may hold for me in terms of physically having children, but I wanted that option kept open to its fullest capacity.

What was perhaps my biggest concern, though, was a worry that I would permanently change my voice, more specifically my singing voice, in a way that I might regret. I sensed that I could cope with regretting this possible change in my *speech*, but not with my *singing*. I read literature about specific problem areas that might be experienced by those using hormone therapy including pitch range/variability, vocal control/stability, vocal power (i.e., strength), vocal endurance, glottal function, the singing voice, breathing, muscle tension/posture, and other functions not specified (David Azul, Ulrika Nygren, Maria Södersten, & Christiane Neuschaefer-Rube, 2017). Other literature noted that there are important considerations that must be kept in mind for individuals who sing and use testosterone because of the ways it can decrease a singer’s pitch range (Richard Adler, Alexandros Constansis, & John Van Borsel, 2012). In particular, there may be a “loss in the high tones [that] might not fully be compensated for by a gain in the lower frequencies” (p. 159). Further, Alexandros Constansis (2009) has written about the phenomenon of *entrapped FtM vocality*, a term that describes the difficulties that individuals

who've used testosterone may experience with getting their lower pitches to resonate. This has to do with the fact that female-assigned persons' vocal tracts are not getting larger, even as their vocal cords thicken. This expressed, I had read personal accounts on the Internet of singers who had used taken testosterone and were able to successfully maintain the flexibility and technical skillset of their singing voice. However, I had also read horror stories of people who were reduced to only an octave of their voice. As musicians and/or music therapists, I'm sure that we can imagine how this would limit the musical capabilities of a singer. While recommendations exist regarding how to best work with singers who've taken or who are taking testosterone (Adler, Constansis, & Van Borsel, 2012; Constansis, 2008; Anita Kozan, 2012), the variability is certainly concerning.

I draw upon my early reflections on this:

*I am a music therapist and my main instrument is my voice...my voice is a huge part of my identity, both personally and professionally. Not only do I need my voice for speaking, but it is my musical instrument and one that I have been using for a large portion of my life. Musically, I have a particularly intimate relationship with it. I know how to 'play' it, how it functions, and which notes and vowels I need to pay more attention to than others—meaning, I know the nuances of my own voice and how to make it do what I want it to do when I am singing. With this, the voice is different from other instruments in that it cannot be picked up and put down as others can. It is a part of my being as I carry it with me, regardless of whether I use it or not. With hormone therapy, I could pick up a new instrument by taking testosterone, and I could find that I love this new instrument, even more so than my current one. However, I could also find that I regret the change, and given the fact that vocal changes from testosterone are permanent and irreversible, I*

*would not be able to put this new instrument down. This is not a risk that I am willing to take.*<sup>5</sup> (Spring 2017)

Yes, it is true that if I had pursued hormone therapy, my voice post-testosterone would essentially function in the same way it did pre-testosterone (i.e., the mechanics behind how my voice is able to produce sound would be the same). But there *would* be differences to that functionality which would change how I *know* how to use my voice.

For instance, imagine this situation on any other instrument you might know well; I will use the cello as an example. Imagine you've been playing a specific model and type of cello for most of your playing life. Because of the length of time you've been playing, you know the intricacies of the cello. Further, because you've been playing that *particular* cello throughout this time, you know *that* cello intimately. You know what string tends to go out of tune. You know how much pressure is needed by your fingers or the bow to create a specific kind of sound. You know how long the endpin needs to be for the cello to feel most right in your body. You know how your hand needs to be placed to jump from one note to the next. You know the physical experience of playing that cello and the ways it vibrates across your body and into the room around you. You *know* that instrument in an intimate way.

Now let's imagine that you start playing the bass for the first time. Sure, the mechanics behind how the cello and bass function are essentially the same, but there are subtle and perhaps drastic differences that make those instruments uniquely different. You would likely fumble in playing the bass, at least at first, not *knowing* it in the same kind of intimate ways that you know the cello. The strings would feel different at the point they meet your fingertips. The instrument's

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<sup>5</sup> I draw attention to the ways my thinking here sat in a queer and fluid space. In these early reflections, I consider my voice as not only a deeply intimate part of my Self and identity, but also a tool and outside resource that I can use. I understand the voice to not singularly be only one of these things, but rather both.



size and shape—settled cautiously and perhaps clumsily in your hands and on your body. The bow held at new and perhaps strange angles by your arm. The vibrational feedback experienced with a uniqueness. The bass would in many ways be foreign territory, even as it might feel vaguely familiar. Perhaps this vagueness would be a kind of change that you want. Perhaps you would find that the bass is *your* instrument in a way the cello never was. Perhaps it feels like ‘home,’ perfectly sitting on your body, in your hands, at your fingertips—as though it is simply an extension of who you are and how you exist in this world. If so—*beautiful*—you keep playing the bass. If not, then you simply put it down and pick up your cello or even another instrument altogether.

But again, the voice cannot be picked up and put down like other instruments. That intimacy and connection that I have with my singing voice is something that is more important to me than something that I could *potentially* connect more with. Perhaps I lacked the willingness to venture into the unknown—to relearn my instrument and the ways testosterone would give it new intricacies. Or, perhaps, I instead wanted the voice I know and love—even as it doesn’t always fit me, even as it at times frustrates me—to be my ‘home.’

## CHAPTER 2

### Dropped in an Ocean

The growing, aching quiet of this home  
has led me to reading space theories.  
The notions are slowly wrapping around my bones,  
settling between my heart and ribcage with intricacy.

(Nikita Gill, *Multiverse*, first stanza)

### Immersing myself in speech therapy

At this point, I continued to have tensions with the possibility of taking testosterone, grappling with this decision and working my way through other literature from the field of speech-language pathology. While I recognize hormone therapy to be an important and invaluable resource for many trans and nonbinary folks, I wondered if it could really be the resource that might fulfill my individual needs. I learned that in addition to vocal surgeries (something I knew for certain I did not want to pursue), speech therapy was a possibility, one that was often used in conjunction with testosterone. I read that as long as people are not pushed to the extremes of their voices, it can “make a speaker’s voice more flexible” (Azul, 2015, p. 80), which felt relevant to my own vocal situation particularly given the capabilities I already possessed as a practiced singer. Clinical guidelines suggested that speech therapy can be used to make clinical changes around gendered parameters of the voice including pitch, intonation, resonance, articulation, speech rate, strength, language usage, and nonverbal communication, all of which influence perceptions of gender (Azul, 2015; Adler, Constansis, & Van Borsel, 2012; Davies & Goldberg, 2006; Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015). I grew more intrigued by and curious about an alternative route toward vocal change for myself, specifically within music therapy. I

didn't quite know *what* that overlap was because what I was reading was housed within the field of speech-language pathology, not vocal pedagogy or music therapy, but I sensed that there was some kind of potential there that overlapped with my own vocal strengths and knowledge as a singer and music therapist.

Reading literature and engaging with my own voice in the ways I have, I've grown to appreciate to an even greater depth the intricacies of the voice. There are so many different aspects that make 'our' voice unique to us while existing within patterns of speech that lead the listener to 'hear' gender in the voice (Azul, 2013). Understanding these culturally saturated speech patterns is important for speech-language pathologists working with trans and nonbinary voices (Richard Adler, Sandy Hirsch, and Michelle Mordaunt, 2012; Coleman et al., 2012; Davies & Goldberg, 2006; Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015). These patterns are steeped in the social norms that surround us. Further, I suggest that the voice is not just about gender—it gives cues to important information about other aspects of identity, such as geographic location, heritage, language, age, race/ethnicity, sexuality, etc. This is not to imply that aspects of identity have essential sounds that are identifiable and that inherently mean one thing, but instead, that vocal sounds can potentially give cues, whether those cues are right or wrong, to various aspects of identity. With this, the idea of a universal *feminine* or *masculine* sound fails to consider the nuances of "age, culture, region, and social context between speaker and listener" (Davies & Goldberg, 2006, p. 169). What is understood as feminine or masculine varies across different cultures, regions, and historical periods.

Culturally situating my own voice beyond my gender as nonbinary and assigned sex as female, I am also a classically trained singer and music therapist who was twenty-three years old during the beginnings of this research. I am white, queer, and physically non-disabled but live

with dysthymia (persistent depressive disorder) and asthma. I am also an American-English speaker with a graduate-level education who grew up in a rural mid-Atlantic region of the United States and in a lower-middle-class family. Each of these cultural markers of my voice can potentially be ‘heard’ or realized, some perhaps more so than others.

Despite understanding how there isn’t a universal feminine or masculine voice, there *are* patterns of speech that are more likely to be perceived in feminine or masculine ways specific to a Euro-American context. Patterns that tend to be perceived in more feminine ways and therefore lead to people more likely being identified as women/girls include those who tend to speak within the range of 180-220 Hz (around F3-A3) (Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015); with a greater range of inflection; with higher head resonances and brighter, more nasalized, breathy, and weaker sounds; and with lighter but more drawn out articulation (Adler, Hirsch, & Mordaunt, 2012; Coleman et al., 2012; Davies & Goldberg, 2006; Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015). Speech patterns that tend to be perceived in more masculine ways, leading to identification as men/boys, include those who tend to speak within the range of 100-140 Hz (around G2-Db3) (Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015); with a more level or monotone kind of inflection; with lower chest resonances and richer, warmer, stronger, and clearer sounds; and with staccato-like and punched-out articulation (Adler, Hirsch, & Mordaunt, 2012; Coleman et al, 2012; Davies & Goldberg, 2006; Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015).

I learned that of these parameters, there are certain ones that are more significant for gender perception, particularly when considering work with trans and nonbinary individuals. Pitch (or fundamental frequency) is one of the most important cues of gender (Marylou Pausewang Gelfer & Quinn E. Bennett, 2013; Marylou Pausewang Gelfer & Victoria A. Mikos, 2005; James M. Hillenbrand & Michael J. Clark, 2009; Verena G. Skuk & Stefan R.

Schweinberger, 2014), and although there are certainly fluctuations with the ranges mentioned above, voices that sit within those frequency ranges and/or just outside of them are more likely to be perceived in feminine or masculine ways, respectively. In the space between these two ranges exists what is understood as a gender-neutral or more androgynous range—that of 145-175 Hz (around D3-F3) (Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015). Within this androgynous range, resonance actually becomes the most important cue of gender, more specifically the formant frequencies of vowels (also known as FFs or the vocal tract resonances) (Donald G. Childers & Ke Wu, 1991; Davies & Goldberg, 2006; Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015; Pausewang Gelfer & Bennett, 2013; Hillenbrand & Clark, 2009; Skuk & Schweinberger, 2014). These will be explored later, but they are particularly important in relation to gender as more masculine speech patterns tend to have lower FFs and more feminine ones tend to have higher FFs (James M. Hillenbrand, Laura A. Getty, Michael J. Clark, & Kimberlee Wheeler, 1995). Further, resonance is important even outside of that androgynous range.

[A]s the length and complexity of utterances increases from vowels to syllables to connected speech, the perception of gender becomes less and less a function of speaking fundamental frequency [i.e., pitch] and more reliant on other parameters of the voice.

...[and o]ne of those parameters is clearly vocal tract resonance. (Pausewang Gelfer & Bennett, 2013, p. 565)

This means that when working with trans and nonbinary voices, resonance is uniquely important to perceptions of gender (Adler, Constansis, & Van Borsel, 2012; Coleman et al., 2012; Davies & Goldberg, 2006; Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015; Hirsch & Pausewang Gelfer, 2012; Jane Thornton, 2008). When I consider my own vocal situation, I realized resonance, pitch and pitch range, and the overall quality of the voice were areas that I was most interested in working with.

words  
language  
bodies  
wrapped in gender  
like the water  
wraps around my skin  
as I swim.

I swim within  
these waves  
trying to  
grab onto  
the slipperiness  
of their gender.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 5/5/2019)

Through these explorations of speech therapy, I found a Voice and Communication Program specific to trans (and nonbinary) individuals that was developed by Richard Adler (2012) (refer to Appendix A). This focused on vocal feminization but would be relevant for vocal masculinization as well. Here, suggestions were offered for speech therapy work. It was suggested that throughout treatment, a client's voice should be measured for visual and auditory feedback and that clients should keep a journal of their successes and failures. Further, the use of diaphragmatic breathing exercises, speech therapy protocols, various speech therapy assessment tools, and progressive relaxation exercises should be incorporated. Adler advised that the client

practice new speech patterns by reading short and long poems, taking part in spontaneous conversations with the clinician, and employing these techniques in their everyday social environments. Lastly, working on singing techniques, if appropriate, was mentioned. In a separate chapter that was part of the same book as this Voice and Communication Program, specific suggestions were offered for working with those masculinizing their voices (Adler, Constansis, & Van Borsel, 2012). These included working to maintain a lower pitch and comfortable range; establishing chest resonance; establishing diaphragmatic breathing patterns and stabilizing posture; producing a strong, easy vocal onset; eliminating the harsh glottal attack; releasing tension from the jaw and tongue; and releasing body tension. This program and additional suggestions specific to vocal masculinization helped to inform the kind of work I would personally do in conjunction with the knowledge I already had as a singer and music therapist.

At this point, I had not begun any kind of intentional voicework. However, engaging with this literature and learning more about gendered patterns of speech led to changes in the ways that I voiced into the world and experienced my Self. I grew more attentive and aware—sometimes hyperaware—of my own vocal tendencies.

In voicing, I hear the disconnect  
like a sound you don't quite expect  
to be coming out of the body you see  
but somewhere in the water  
there must be some semblance  
of sound  
that can hold me

in the ways I know myself.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 5/5/2019)

I noticed specific things about my speech and the ways it would move into and out of different ‘spaces.’ I acutely noticed the ways my voice would, at times, jump up and into this high, breathy, small space and how this brought discomfort—wrongness—annoyance even. I sense that this was something I had already been unconsciously experiencing prior to this research—I considered my email to Sue where I reflected on previous experiences of my voice. But I didn’t have the language then to articulate it for what it was and, further, I struggled to experience my voice (and whole person) in a full-bodied kind of way. I believe that having that gendered vocal language allowed me to understand and articulate my discomfort with my own vocal pattern, and, more specifically, the ways it often fell into what is commonly perceived as feminine. During this time, I—and those with whom I often interacted and in particular who knew about the literature I was exploring—noticed how I both intentionally and unintentionally began shifting aspects of my speech into its lower parts in terms of pitch and resonance to some degree, although not consistently and not effectively. In a queer way, these changes were both purposeful and not purposeful...both conscious and unconscious in thought...both with intention and without...and they were changes that arose from a heightened awareness. These were affirming even as I continued to struggle with my voice and with finding my place within all this literature.

Further engaging with the literature specific to feminizing or masculinizing the voice through speech therapy, there were disparities identified by the authors I was reading. Most notably, much of the literature focused on the experiences of trans women (and subsumed within that, male-assigned nonbinary persons). Although present, literature on vocal masculinization is sorely lacking in comparison to literature regarding vocal feminization through the use of speech



therapy (Adler, Constansis, & Van Borsel, 2012; Azul, 2015; Azul et al., 2017; Davies & Goldberg, 2006; Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015). I learned that this difference within the literature is likely attributed to the impacts of testosterone on the voice. For male-assigned individuals who went through puberty, they've already experienced the permanent and irreversible effects of high levels of testosterone in the body. Because of this, hormone therapy (using feminizing hormones and not testosterone) does not impact the vocal cords of male-assigned individuals in the drastic ways masculinizing hormones can impact female-assigned persons (Coleman et al, 2012). This means that trans women and male-assigned nonbinary folks must pursue other options such as speech therapy and/or vocal surgeries, while trans men and female-assigned nonbinary persons are more likely to use hormone therapy (i.e., taking testosterone) because of how effective it is. However, given the difficulties that may be experienced by individuals who take testosterone to masculinize the voice (Azul et al., 2017; Adler, Constansis, & Van Borsel, 2012; Constansis, 2009), speech-language pathologists I read stated that speech therapy for vocal masculinization needs to be further explored (Adler, Constansis, & Van Borsel, 2012; Azul 2015; Azul et al., 2017). I suggest this needs to happen not only for trans men and female-assigned nonbinary persons who *do* use take testosterone but also for individuals such as myself who are reluctant to pursue its usage.

### **Finding myself in the narrative**

And finally

I will open the doors

and welcome myself home.

(Nikita Gill, *Homes*, third stanza)

At this point, I had learned of gendered patterns of speech, androgynous range, and the importance of resonance to gender perceptions. I further had learned about the divides within the literature and understood why those likely existed, even as guidelines suggested speech therapy can be used for both feminization and masculinization (Adler, Constansis, & Van Borsel, 2012; Azul, 2015; Davies & Goldberg, 2006; Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015). But all of this knowledge still left me with tension that I couldn't quite shake. I thought, "This is great—but also—what does this mean for me?" All of this literature was talking about trans men or trans women, yet the literature that I might relate more to as a female-assigned nonbinary person was not explored at a depth that satisfied the uncertainty and ambiguity I was experiencing. Yes, I was excited by what I was reading, but I couldn't quite situate it. "Where am I in this literature? Where am I in these narratives of trans vocal experiences? I don't see myself..." I knew the information that I was soaking up was important, but I struggled to understand myself in relation to this new knowledge. *What did this mean for me and my own voice—for this voicework?*

The water is lukewarm  
 too cold and too warm  
 it's not quite right  
 I don't feel home.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 5/5/2019)

In more specifically considering the voices of nonbinary individuals, there was virtually no research that mentioned this community. One of the first instances of myself in the literature came in the form of two paragraphs in a larger forty-two-page article that I had already been reading regarding vocal feminization and masculinization:

Many people identify as being under the gender nonconforming “umbrella” and there is great variation in the extent to which voice and communication changes are undertaken or desired by gender nonconforming individuals. Some gender nonconforming persons seek to develop two speech patterns (one more masculine and one more feminine) either because they identify as bigendered [i.e., nonbinary] or because external pressures (family, employment, cultural community, friends) prevent living full time in a way that is consistent with their felt sense of self. Some people may have a sense of gender that is not at either pole of the cismale/cisfemale scale [i.e., man to woman spectrum] but is on a continuum of masculine and feminine. They would like a more flexible gender presentation to reflect this gender identity.

Further, most current transgender speech and voice protocols do not support bimodal speech as a treatment goal, based on the belief that to achieve maximal change it is necessary to have a consistent single speech pattern. Switching back and forth between two speech patterns may be too difficult for some clients and inconsistent use decreases practice opportunities to acquire the new speech/voice habits. However, the human capacity to learn and speak more than two languages or dialects, develop a specific accent for an acting role, and develop a singing voice that is different from the speaking voice suggests it may be possible to develop bigender speech/voice. We encourage speech-language therapists to be open to this possibility and not to routinely exclude clients who have two speech/voice patterns as their treatment goal. We recommend that speech services be made available to the full spectrum of the gender nonconforming community. (Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015, pp. 120-121)

And further pulling from an earlier clinical guideline which utilized similar, if not identical, language as the above, there was also the statement that “[s]ome transgender persons who desire changes to speech and voice seek maximum feminization or masculinization, while others experience relief with a more androgynous presentation” (Davies & Goldberg, 2006, p. 168). I was both excited and put off by the collective of these statements. I felt excited by the way they recognized my existence as a nonbinary person for the first time in the literature. This was unique to what I had engaged with up to this point, and I think because of this, I mostly stayed within this space of excitement, perhaps because it felt safer. I wanted to be recognized, to witness myself within the literature. But I was also put off by the way these statements so barely scratched the surface. They were one nonbinary drop of water in the vast binary ocean of trans vocal experiences that were explored within these clinical guidelines. Again, they were two paragraphs in a larger forty-two-page article and were almost verbatim to those found in a thirty-page guide published almost ten years earlier. There had been no movement, except the removal of any vague statement about those seeking androgynous voices—that is, me.

These statements existed alone and made no references to research that had been done in relation to more nonbinary patterns of speech, whether those kinds of speech be more fluid (i.e., ‘bimodal’ or even multimodal) or more consistently androgynous. This was a drastic contrast to the vast amounts of research cited for other aspects of vocal change (although as noted most of that research focused on trans women). If these are felt realities by trans and nonbinary persons, then where were the clinical and research-based explorations of these variations and of ways of working towards these kinds of speech patterns? Further, I experienced the way ‘bimodal’ speech patterns were discussed as dismissive in some regards, as if this queer vocal fluidity was often explained away by the medical community as ‘improbable’...or worse ‘impossible’...or

even worse ‘unhealthy.’ This caused tension that I did not fully realize at the time—and as I reflect back on this literature now, it angers me. I recognize that tension to be tied to the ways vocal fixity (i.e., one singular speech pattern that isn’t variable) is antithetical to understandings grounded in queer theory. I now wonder if the field of speech-language pathology will shift to more fluid understandings of the voice and gender. Interestingly, I’ve since engaged with an ethnomusicology article by Alec MacIntyre (2018), where bodily and vocal performances of drag were explored through ethnographic research, specifically how one drag performer embraced three different personas that consistently voiced very distinctive gendered vocal sounds. The use of three separate and distinct voices suggests that we as people are capable of more than one singular speech pattern; that is, we can speak and sing in multi-modal ways. Although drag culture is certainly unique and separate from understanding trans and nonbinary communities, the performed gendered fluidity of the voice(s) that were explored in this article alludes to the importance of developing literature situating non-binary understandings of speech patterns.

Returning to the speech-language pathology literature, I did eventually find knowledge that more specifically explored vocal masculinization in ways that allowed room for my existence as a nonbinary, female-assigned person. I particularly appreciated work by David Azul, which seemed to embrace more fluid understandings of the voice and gender. I read of explorations into the ways in which the voice was experienced, focused on people who are not trans men and who were seeking vocal masculinization (Azul, 2016). I further read that nonbinary individuals complicate ‘typical masculinization,’ having different needs (Azul, 2015). This literature importantly emphasized that

Changes that are achieved [in speech therapy] are generally reversible and can be fine-tuned according to the speaker's wishes. This makes the behavioral development of vocal communication skills [i.e., speech therapy] also suited for speakers who present with shifting subjective gender positionings and for those who are interested in adopting idiosyncratic vocal gender presentations that may deviate from generalized notions of female [i.e., feminine] or male [i.e., masculine] communication patterns. (Azul, 2015, p. 80)

I read this and found great comfort, even excitement in it, but it was still only a small corner of the literature. Further, it still didn't specifically offer case studies or more in-depth research that worked towards nonbinary speech patterns—not just the *possibilities* of them. I wanted to read literature that explored working with nonbinary clients to 'achieve' nonbinary voices, whatever that might mean to those clients. Like other texts I engaged with, this literature did point to the ways speech therapy can make a person's voice more flexible and can work on gendered vocal parameters. Significantly, this literature stressed the importance of speech-language pathologists shifting toward a more client-centered perspective, which leaves room for the clinician to more intentionally realize the unique needs of not only nonbinary persons but all trans persons seeking vocal change. Outside of these instances, though, the experiences and difficulties of nonbinary individuals' voices were conspicuously absent.

Coming back to that two-paragraph blurb from the clinical guidelines, the following line stuck with me:

the human capacity to learn and speak more than two languages or dialects, develop a specific accent for an acting role, and *develop a singing voice that is different from the*

*speaking voice* suggests it may be possible to develop bigender [or rather, *any* kind of nonbinary] speech/voice. (Davies, Papp, & Antoni, 2015, p. 121, italics added)

This felt significant considering my own personal vocal desires. It acknowledged the relationship between the singing and speaking voice for the first time in a way I had not previously experienced in the literature. I was excited. Outside of this small instance, the majority of the literature discussed *either* the speaking voice *or* the singing voice, and there were certain patterns to how each of these were discussed. Most of the literature that focused on the *speaking voice* focused on vocal feminization and the experiences of trans women (and nonbinary, male-assigned persons). Most literature that focused on the *singing voice* focused on vocal masculinization and the experiences of trans men (and nonbinary, female-assigned persons). There was very little variation to these patterns and little to no overlap between discussions of *both* the singing *and* speaking voice. Reflecting back on this, perhaps speech-language pathologists attend to this overlap in other capacities, but in reading the literature, I didn't recognize it within a conversation on trans and nonbinary persons. These patterns mirrored the kind of dichotomous thinking I had about my own vocal transition during this time period, meaning that I was very much immersed within my having to choose between *either* my singing voice *or* an androgynous speaking voice. There was almost no middle ground and no overlap between those two realities. These binary patterns within the literature and within my own mind heightened the tensions that I was already experiencing.



Figure 2 Mandala entitled “The Split” from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read “disconnected but connected” 2/10/2018.

disconnection

detachment

separation

a pulling apart of sound.

however, there must

be something

different.

there must

be something

in the middle.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 5/5/2019)



### **A moment of queer clarity**

There was a pivotal moment that shifted my understandings of all of this that I remember with clarity. Before this, I knew my research project would be exploring the intersections of speech-language pathology and music therapy, but I still held tension about whether I could do this with or without testosterone in a safe way. I asked Sue Hadley if we could set up a time to Skype and talk about the tension I was experiencing and how I might move forward with this research project. I sat on my bed in my apartment on the verge of tears talking about how most of the literature on female-assigned persons focused on those who took testosterone, telling her that I wasn't sure how to gain access to the kind of voice I desired. I felt like I had to pick one voice or the other and that by choosing a more affirming voice for my gender, I would have to choose taking testosterone and lose (or at the very least experience difficulties with) my singing voice. This was the overarching narrative that I saw of myself within the literature. Reflecting back on this, my experienced tensions seem so exaggerated because of the ways speech therapy *was* situated as an avenue by the literature I'd been reading. But my tensions were so intensely felt. Sue supported me and reflected back everything I shared but also questioned and challenged me. Specifically, she said a series of words that drastically altered my understanding of my voice, the kind of work I might engage in, and more specifically *how* I might go about engaging in that kind of work.

*"I'm not a singer and don't know about the voice like you might, but I imagine there's a connection there between your singing and speaking voice..."*

*...We sat in silence for a few moments, me digesting her words, her seeming to ponder what she had just said...*

*"...What if you tried to access a speaking voice through your singing voice?..."*

*I sat in further silence, still digesting what Sue said, but feeling her words open up a door to something I did not fully understand. (3/2017)*

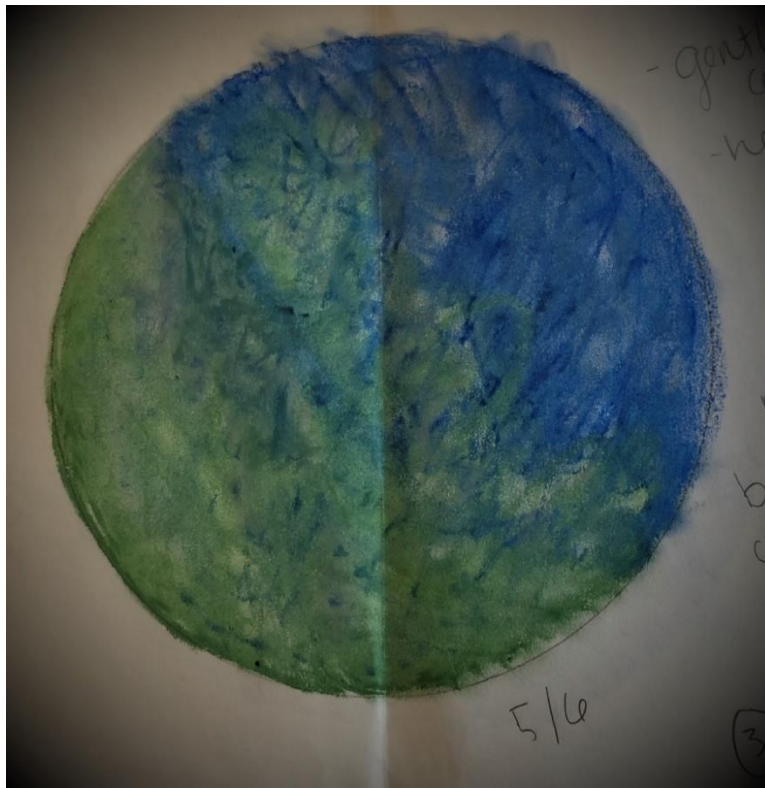


Figure 3 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "gentle collision" 5/6/2018

In these moments, I remember clicking into those words and feeling this vast sense of relief pour into and out of me. These words made sense of all the knowledge I already had about myself, my voice, how to use my voice as a singer, and then all the literature that I had been engaging with. Although I might use my singing voice in a slightly different way than I might use my speaking voice, Sue was right. They both come from the same place, the same instrument. So why was I talking about them so separately? Perhaps I was too close to myself or my voice to see this. But also, the literature I was immersed within expressed similar understandings of the singing and speaking voice as a binary. This moment of queering, of embracing the both/and of my singing and speaking, offered such clarity. Although it might seem simple and obvious now, it was a deeply important moment in considering what gender affirming voicework might be. Sue's

words opened up the potential that I sensed was present between speech-language pathology and music therapy with trans and nonbinary folks. Of course, there were still so many questions, but this conversation brought a sense of clarity which leaves me feeling forever grateful to Sue.

If when singing I am able to access certain timbres and qualities of sound that feel so connected to who I am as a person, why couldn't I then take those sounds and shift them into my speaking voice? What an integrated kind of speech that would be! I began really considering how music therapy could be a space where this kind of voicework might exist—where a person may be able to shift back and forth between their singing and speaking voice in search of something truly affirming for who they know themselves to be. This was certainly new to music therapy, and something that I didn't recognize as present within the speech-language pathology literature that I had been reading. I was excited but also not completely certain of how to move forward.

**Having my truth reflected back to me**

It is the day

I will finally return

to myself.

Learn how to call

my own arms home.

(Nikita Gill, *Baptism*, third stanza)

With newfound excitement and energy, I turned to Christopher Scott, my former undergraduate voice teacher and (at the time) current graduate chamber choir director. I was unsure about myself and this voicework...Would it work? Could I do it? I was hopeful and eager, but I wasn't completely confident. He quickly agreed to meet with me. I wanted Chris's

opinion on whether this could be a real and healthy possibility for me, meaning, could I do this voicework without testosterone and not physically harm or misuse my voice? I valued his input on this given his experiences as a professional singer and vocal educator and also because of how he knew my voice well through teaching me privately throughout most of my undergraduate degree. I also knew that I could openly talk to him about gender within our relationship and not have it be strange or awkward. At the time, I didn't realize how important that last factor was, but it made this experience and future experiences enriching because of the ways I could openly share my gender. I told him of my own vocal desires, some of the tensions that I had been experiencing, and about this voicework. His excitement was palpable and validated that this was important and real work.

We met in his office and after talking, jumped into playing around on the piano and with my voice, similar to my previous voice lesson experiences with him. It was familiar but also incredibly new and exciting. Although brief, this meeting was momentous for me...

*We're exploring playing with resonance and with the lower pitches of my voice. He encourages me to just let the sound fall out. "Okay." I find myself staring at the space on the wall that I would often fixate on during lessons, just across the piano, not really looking at anything—but attentive to the inner experiences of my voice, physically, mentally, willing myself to let it open up. "You're already naturally lowering your larynx for these notes—that's good," he says. I think "This is sort of working...Maybe I can do this..." We continue to explore.*

*While he moves down and around the piano, he asks, "Are you supporting it?" knowing full well that I am not. Chris often uses these kinds of yes/no questions when the answer is no. Although it is at times frustrating, I personally value the questions over*

*being bluntly told that I'm not doing something correctly. It keeps me engaged and thoughtful about my own experiences, rather than shutting down. It's constructively critical. With his question here, I chuckle because I don't think I can count how many times he's asked me this in previous lessons. He says, "Put it lower in your body." "Okay."*

*We continue to play with my voice, exploring breath support and engaging my full body. I attend to my breath, focusing on how deep I allow it to go—am I forcing it? I breathe in...feeling the compression of my binder against my chest. I breathe out...feeling that compression push my air out further, quicker than it used to. The length of my phrases has gotten shorter since binding. Supporting my sound has always been one of my biggest challenges and binding just made it harder. "This work will require you to support your voice or you'll vocal fry—that won't be good for your health."*

*We continue playing: him, as always, interjecting with helpful comments to support my voice, my sound—and me, as always, struggling to keep my voice in my body. This is not unusual—I often struggle to stay present to myself. I aim for a full-bodied sound—breath expanded, rooted in the ground, feeling my support all the way down to my feet. We continue playing and exploring for about ten minutes or so. Until eventually, he stops and says, "Yes, I think you can do this!" (reflective account of 3/2017 meeting with Christopher Scott)*

I can't express how affirming it was to hear these words. I knew at some level that I *could* do this, but because all of this was such new territory, I think I needed someone who not only knew the voice well but knew *my* voice well enough to tell me that this was a real possibility. During this meeting he mentioned formant frequencies—I recognized these from the literature I had

been engaging with—and he wondered if they might lower through my doing this work. I shared that they had come up in the literature and that that makes sense given what I’d read but that I didn’t really understand formants. At this point, I knew they had something to do with resonance and vowels, but I didn’t quite comprehend them in any kind of in-depth way. However, his comments inspired me to re-engage with the literature and, further, to explore the way singers (un)intentionally work with formant frequencies. Throughout the rest of my research, Chris became a vital resource for whom I remain greatly appreciative. Specifically, he graciously agreed to meet with me for additional meetings after this, in what I came to understand as mini-voice lessons, where I sought his guidance on this work and shared some of my own insights regarding what I was doing on my own. At this point, I left this meeting with that tension further melting away. Curious...excited...engaged.

### **Learning about my voice**

The growing, aching quiet of this home  
has led me to [continue] reading space theories.  
The notions[, further] ~~are slowly~~ wrapping around my bones,  
settling between my heart and ribcage with intricacy.

(Nikita Gill, *Multiverse*, revised first stanza, brackets and  
strikeouts added)

Leaving my brief meeting with Chris, I realized that while I had an internal ‘sensed’ knowledge about how my own voice works, I didn’t always have the technical language to understand the mechanics of the voice. I returned to the literature. Some of what I engaged with was a review, but some led to explorations of the physics and acoustics of the voice, which not

only deepened my appreciation for it as an instrument but also my understanding of how I voice and how I might be able to voice more effectively.

The voice is perhaps more complex than other kinds of instruments given how malleable and shifting its shape is...

*You breathe in...the air travels down your vocal tract to your lungs. You breathe out...the air flows out from your lungs and through your vocal tract whether you create pitch or not. This vocal tract—your resonating chamber, containing your mouth (i.e., oral cavity), throat (i.e., pharynx), and nasal passages—all of these carry that air.*

*You breathe in again...you bring your vocal folds together to create a pitch...you breathe out. The air passes through your vocal folds, creating vibrations that produce a pitch and its various harmonics. These vibrations travel up throughout your vocal tract and also down into your body. Your lips and tongue, teeth and jaw, your soft palate—the articulators—they all move and shift your inner spaces, your vocal tract, changing it. You move these different spaces around to form different vowels... “ey” ...”ee” ...”ah” ...”oh” ...”oo”... Each vowel uniquely different. Your whole vocal tract one space, but that whole tract still creating different spaces within for each vowel. Those spaces getting bigger in some areas...smaller in others.*

*You breathe in...You form a vowel bringing your vocal folds together...You breathe out on that vowel singing or speaking a pitch and its harmonics. Your articulators, creating the space to amplify or dampen certain bands of frequencies.<sup>6</sup>*

I learned that these amplified frequencies are the FFs discussed earlier (formant frequencies or vocal tract resonances) and are labeled F1 (formant 1), then F2 (formant 2) for the

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<sup>6</sup> For more on this, refer to Johan Sundberg (2006).

next lowest, and so on up until F5 (formant 5). Understanding how these FFs relate to the vowels of the voice, “the frequencies of the two lowest formants determine most of the vowel quality, whereas the third, fourth, and fifth formants are of greater significance to personal voice timbre” (Johan Sundberg, 2006, p. 105). The first formant relates to the throat space whereas the second formant relates to the mouth space (National Center for Voice and Speech, 2018). The National Center for Voice and Speech provides a vowel chart (refer to figure 4) which shows the way these formants relate to specific vowels and the formant patterns that exist for each vowel.

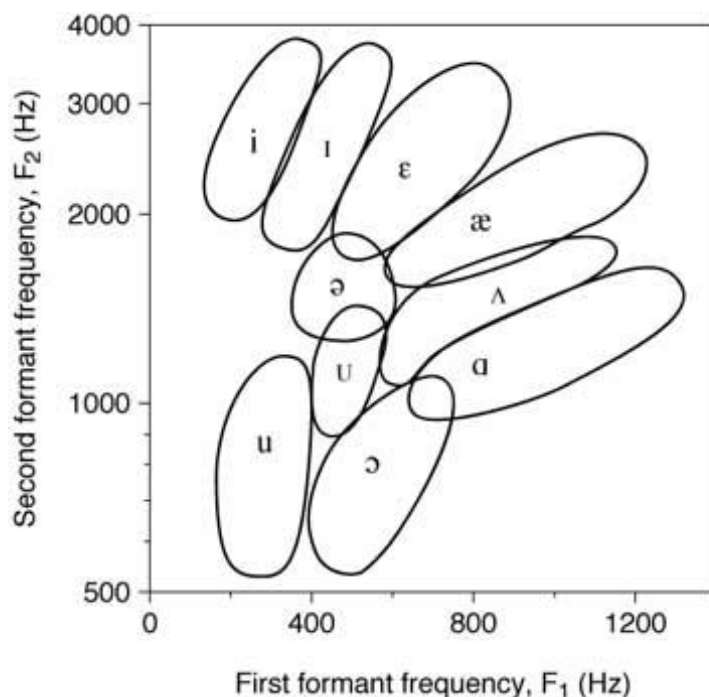


Figure 4 Chart of vowels and their respective formant frequencies, from the National Center for Voice and Speech, adapted from work by Peterson and Barney in 1952. Vowels included in the graph: “ee,” “ih,” “eh,” “ae,” “uh,” “ah,” “oo,” and “oh.”

Each vowel has a different formant pattern that allows us to distinguish it from other vowels (Hirsch & Pausewang Gelfer, 2012). Although not a completely correct metaphor but one that is perhaps helpful for understanding this, the vowels we speak and sing are almost like individual instruments, separate from each other. Musical instruments have different timbres that make them identifiable between each other. For instance, a clarinet sounds different from a cello



which sounds different from a trombone. When considering vowels, the difference between an “ee” and “oo” could be comparable to the difference between a clarinet and a cello. Obviously, though, these vowels are being produced by the same instrument, but they are uniquely identifiable based on their formant patterns.

speech, words

containing

perhaps

a million

different instruments

and we don’t even

realize it.

language is

a part of the music.

we are our

own orchestra

of sounds.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 5/5/2019)

Beyond the ways the articulators form specific vowels, I further learned that the length and size of the vocal tract itself (outside of what the articulators are doing) influences which frequencies resonate better than others (Sundberg, 2006). The longer the vocal tract, the lower the FFs as there is more space for those frequencies to resonate (Jo-Anne Bachorowski & Michael J. Owren, 1999), and as mentioned before this is important for gender perception because more masculine speech patterns tend to have lower FFs for all vowels in comparison to

more feminine patterns which tend to be higher for all vowels (Hillenbrand et al., 1995). We can physically raise or lower our larynx through the way we voice, thereby shortening or lengthening the vocal tract, creating smaller and larger spaces, impacting the quality of the voice. In returning to our musical instrument metaphor, we can consider how the timbre of an instrument changes even within a particular instrument family, such as the strings. For instance, a bass and a cello both belong within the same instrument family; however, the size of each instrument's body (i.e., resonating chamber) influences the timbre of that particular instrument, even when playing the same pitch, as certain harmonic frequencies will be boosted with each instrument. Sound quality also can vary dependent upon the thickness of the strings, the age of the wood, the way the resonating chamber is carved out, the flexibility of the bridge, etc. In considering the vowels, if two people with differently sized vocal tracts were to speak or sing "ee" on the same pitch, the harmonic frequencies that will be boosted would depend on the size and shape of each vocal tract, as well as the individual characteristics of a person's voice. However, the articulators of either person's vocal mechanism can move to create small changes to the spaces within the vocal tract without compromising the clarity or integrity of the vowel itself. This is related to *formant tuning* (Adam Kirkpatrick, 2009; John Nix, 2004; Sundberg, 2006) or *vowel modification* and is something that we often hear in choir or from voice teachers when working to get vowels to resonate more clearly within the voice.

*You breathe in...You form the vowel "ee" and vibrate your vocal folds to create a specific pitch...it doesn't quite sit well...it perhaps feels forced, tense, or muffled...you adjust your vocal tract, creating a new sense of space...the vowel still "ee" but slightly different...the note and vowel feel less forced—they resonate more clearly, freely.*

Although a simple explanation, this is formant tuning or vowel modification. The aim of this is to have the fundamental frequency of a sung pitch or one of its harmonics clearly resonate within the spaces of the vocal tract, which would mean that these frequencies are within the FFs of the vowels (Kirkpatrick, 2009; Nix, 2004; Sundberg, 2006). Singers move their articulators into certain positions to create vowels, and they can then modify that vowel by slightly altering the position of the articulators, creating spaces within the vocal tract that are different from what they initially were. Because the shape of the vocal tract is changing somewhat, the FFs of the vowel being sung also shift, being raised or lowered depending on the articulators. This relates to the vowel patterns seen in figure 4. Again, the aim of this is to get the pitch being sung or one of its harmonics to clearly resonate within the vocal tract. In this way, singers engage in vowel modification, shaping their “vowels with respect to the location of the vowel formants so that the sung pitch or one of its harmonics receives an acoustical boost by being near a formant” (Nix, 2004, p. 173).

Changing which harmonics are boosted effects the quality of the sound and how that sound is perceived. It is noted that when higher frequencies are enhanced, and lower frequencies are dampened, the tone is brighter (Kirkpatrick, 2009). Further, with warmer, richer tones, the vocal tract is strengthening the lower frequencies and dampening the higher ones. John Nix (2004) summarizes four ‘rules’ for modifying vowels:

- (a) formant frequencies lower uniformly by lengthening the vocal tract (either by lowering the larynx or protruding the lips or some combination of both; (b) formant frequencies are lowered uniformly by lip rounding and lip spreading; (c) fronting and arching the tongue lowers [the] first formant and raises [the] second formant, while

backing and lowering the tongue raises the first formant and lowers the second formant;

[and] (d) opening the jaw raises the first formant and lowers the second formant. (p. 173)

However, this explanation is often not experienced or understood within a technical acoustic-based language, but rather in terms of felt experience. Before understanding resonance in this complex way, I mostly knew resonance as the sensations I physically experienced within my body as a result of the process of resonating. Meaning, was the sound in my head and/or nose or was it situated in my chest, or some combination of these? This kind of understanding relates to the FFs of vowels, and the knowledge surrounding formant frequencies has provided me with not only a more in-depth understanding of the voice but also a richer and deeper relationship with my *own* voice. I am now able to think more technically about resonance while also sitting with the visceral experiences of where sound is vibrating in my body.

Reflecting on the literature and my experiences as a practiced singer, it became clear that many of the areas that speech-language pathologists focus on overlap with that of singers and voice teachers. Of the greatest significance to my own vocal situation, we as singers work with pitch, creating different vocal qualities by working with our resonance. Further, we also work with other areas that are explored within speech therapy, including articulation, vocal strength, nonverbal communication or body language, and what might more broadly be understood as vocal expression. Although I struggled, and continue to struggle, with whether I am trained enough to do the kind of work I imagine, this realization validated that I do have a unique skill set as both a practiced singer and trained music therapist.

At the same time, there was a period during which I pondered reaching out to a speech-language pathologist and actually reached out to a musical vocal education professional with a desire to be assisted in this kind of work. However, in the instances where I did reach out, I

found that we had different ideas and visions for what the work might be. Despite not knowing how, I desired that the work be more improvisational, and those I reached out to seemed committed to this work sitting more firmly within a voice-lesson-like space. Reflecting back on this, while I believe that those collaborations could have been wonderful, at the time I didn't have the language to really articulate what I was imagining gender affirming voicework in music therapy to possibly be. My inability to represent those ideas limited how I could imagine such a collaboration. In addition, Sue later challenged me to question why I felt I needed to rely on others and on outside fields when I had the resources within my own self and resource pool, such as Chris. She further tied this to the way music therapists often feel the need to validate their work by basing it in other disciplines. Because of the interdisciplinary understandings that I was exposed to in my graduate coursework, I know that Sue wasn't diminishing the knowledge from other fields. But she did seem to be questioning why I wasn't valuing the knowledge that *I* personally possessed given my own standpoint as a vocalist and student of vocal pedagogy and music therapist. With reflection, I've realized that I wanted what I was doing to be validated by someone more than I actually needed the resources. This led to me cautiously exploring more technical literature within speech-language pathology in an attempt to understand how it might expand the skillset that I already possessed and to help me broaden the basis of what gender affirming voicework in music therapy could be.

### **Bringing it all back to music therapy**

Considering the more technical aspects mentioned within the Voice and Communication Program specific to trans (and nonbinary) individuals developed by speech-language pathologist Richard Adler (2012), I imagined that I might approach this voicework by turning to clinical techniques I was already familiar with as a music therapist, such as progressive muscle

relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing exercises, clinical improvisation, and most obviously, the use of the voice through familiar songs and vocal exercises. These would be grounded in technique and healthy vocal use informed by my training as a singer, and they would be centered on the gendered vocal parameters from the literature with which I had engaged. I also considered using poetry and song lyrics in similar ways to those suggested by Richard Adler—as practice opportunities. Because I did not have an intimate understanding of speech therapy protocols, I did not incorporate these into my own voicework. I instead approached my work from within the space that I was most familiar—my training as a practiced singer and music therapist.

Further, I imagined this kind of voicework to be something of what I might experience in a voice lesson while also integrating aspects that were even more improvisational, allowing the work to be less focused on the goals of a vocalist and more focused on speech goals. More specifically, I imagined using improvisation to: explore vocal sound, play with pitch and pitch range, play with my voice's harmonics and vowel FFs, and explore vowel modification. I also wondered how improvisation might be particularly helpful for speech-based work given that it involves spontaneous sound making, which mimics the spontaneity of everyday conversation. After all, I think we more often than not speak without much thought to *how* we are speaking, especially when we are actively engaged with whatever it is we are doing (i.e., not with our voices). Improvisation could encourage sound to sit within this natural in-the-moment space, while still giving opportunities for intentional shifting of vocal sound. Working with poetry or more 'performed speech' sometimes shifts us out of our natural voice into something with exaggerated expression. Of course, expressive speech when performing is often considered a positive as it will likely lead to a more captivating reading; however, with the kind of work I was imagining, 'performed speech' would probably not get at a person's day-to-day vocal pattern.

This in-the-moment queer improvisational space is something that I've come to understand as important to my ideas of what gender affirming voicework might be. It is queer because of the ways improvisation sits in this fluid, liminal, 'becoming' space. I've been deeply influenced by an exercise described by Sanne Storm in her dissertational work (2013), which was aimed at developing a voice assessment specific to music therapy which could communicate more qualitatively based experiences (i.e., using the voice and body in music therapy) into medical psychiatric settings to bridge understandings from one discipline to another. This voice assessment specifically focused on assessing those who have depression, and her work showed overlaps between the ways speech-language pathologists make quantitative measurements of the voice and how music therapists might assess gender affirming voicework. While a deeper focus on Sanne's assessment (which has influenced my own ideas of how music therapists might assess gender affirming voicework) is beyond the focus/intent of this autoethnography, I intend to explore in another article what gender affirming voicework assessment might look like. However, relevant to this research, I was particularly inspired by Sanne's CoreTone exercise from the assessment protocol that she developed for the purposes of the gender affirming voicework I was beginning to develop. According to Sanne, the CoreTone exercise involves voicing a single note and letting that note grow out into something else. It is a dynamic phenomenon that changes with mood, energy, and/or state of being. Describing this exercise, Sanne writes:

The client was instructed to place one hand on top of the other covering the chest bone. Then the client was asked to imagine that when [they were] going to give sound to the CoreTone, sounding from the chest area covered by the hands. The client was also told that while giving sound [they] might sense the vibration of the sound in [their] hands.

Then the client was instructed to talk about something; it could be anything. It could be about the weather or about how [they] now [were] going to find [their] CoreTone for this present moment.

While talking the client was asked to listen very closely to the melody of [their] speech. The speech was kind of circling around one single note. The client could come closer to the pitch of this note, the CoreTone, by sustaining different vowels a little longer in the speech in general. Then finally the vowel came out as a note sounding at a comfortable loudness level in the form of the sound Ah as in the word “car” or “farther.” (2013, pp. 134-135)

In talking with Sanne via Skype, she further discussed how the CoreTone is about asking myself what my most relaxed and easy pitch to sound is in this particular moment and letting this sound spring forth from my speaking voice, examining what I’m already speaking and moving into singing, sticking to the sound, repeating it over and over again, recognizing that it might change but that this is where I am now (personal communication, 10/30/2017).

This exercise concretely articulated aspects of what I was vaguely imagining this voicework to be. It mirrored more in-the-moment and improvisational work, and it considered vocal harmonics (i.e., resonance) and qualities of sound in ways that I was considering for my own voice. Further, I imagined the CoreTone to be a kind of “home base” of the voice, showing where the voice gravitates...and whether that gravitation feels like an authentic and true representation of who and how a person knows themselves to be. And, of course, it would likely change over time, from day to day.

Am I in the basement?

The attic?



The garden?

The kitchen?

Where's my voice?

Where is it traveling within my home?

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 5/5/2019)<sup>7</sup>

I considered how the CoreTone might be used to encourage someone to ask themselves: “What is my most authentic sound in this moment? Is it free and easy to sound? And how does it feel in the body?” I was inspired by Sanne’s description of this exercise, and it led to incorporating the CoreTone into my own voicework and to eventually expanding those ideas into more speech-based work. I was further inspired by Sanne’s words surrounding the body and the voice:

Take it [your sound] with you—bring it with you so that you can walk hand in hand with it. Always. Because when you are close to your energy and the sound qualities you like, then you can take it and walk [with] it hand and hand, up and down the piano...when you are doing that, then you are listening to yourself, then you’re listening to when your sound is ready to do the work and when your body is ready to do the work, not your head...Your body is speaking to you. (personal communication, 10/30/2017)

Her words were energizing, and they felt like a powerful way of thinking about gender affirming voicework. I love the focus on being present to yourself, to finding a sound that walks alongside or rather with you, to listening to and for your own authenticity, to honoring what that authenticity is expressing about where you are in the work. Sanne’s work definitely impacted my clinical thoughts regarding what gender affirming voicework might be.

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<sup>7</sup> Influenced by Lisa Sokolov’s discussion around the voice and body as a ‘home.’ Refer to Sokolov (in press).

At the point I began doing voicework, I hadn't immersed myself within my 'home' field—that is, within music therapy literature. Sanne's dissertation was the first piece of music therapy literature that I deeply engaged with, and it was only after I had already begun to do my own voicework. I think I was perhaps drained after so deeply and fully engaging with literature from related disciplines. That exploration had occurred over the span of five-six months. It was a long and emotional experience in and of itself, stemming from my own need to find non-hormonal strategies for changing my speech to fit my gender. In some ways, I think it felt less necessary to bury myself in music therapy because I already had a 'sensed' understanding of music therapy that I didn't completely have of speech-language pathology. I think I also didn't more fully explore new literature because I didn't expect the kind of gender affirming voicework I was imagining to be present. And I was correct to a certain extent. As I reflect back now, though, I wish I had more deeply immersed myself in music therapy literature from the beginning because it could have further enriched the meaningful experiences I did have in voicework.

Towards the beginnings of this research process, though, I did do a preliminary search for music therapy and creative arts therapy literature on related topics, and I did already have some basic knowledge of psychotherapeutic understandings of the voice (Diane Austin, 2009). However, much of my engagement with music therapy and other creative arts literature occurred concurrently with my engagement in voicework and/or in writing this autoethnography. Exploring literature was a very malleable and queer process, and one that, as I reflect back, was needed given that this is such a new area of clinical work for the field of music therapy. I explored and then returned to re-explore certain literature as it became more relevant to my experiences and sought out new literature as different struggles arose. This return has helped me

to understand the complexity of my experiences. Throughout the majority of this research, I was more often than not reading literature as I did voicework, perhaps trying to situate my own experiences.

From the start, I was aware that overlaps existed between speech-language pathology and music therapy around speech-based work, but they were situated around vocal disorders. I didn't have a disorder. I had emotional tensions around a voice that was functioning in a healthy manner. The work I was imagining doing wouldn't solely surround improving vocal functioning. It would also surround identity and gender. That expressed, music therapists do already engage in work similar to that of speech-language pathologists. Although quite different in focus, I later found language overlaps with Neurologic Music Therapy, which provided descriptions that felt particularly important. Specifically, Vocal Intonation Therapy was described as using inflection, pitch, breath control, timbre, and dynamics to simulate the prosody, inflection, and pacing of normal speech (Michael Thaut, 2013). Further, Therapeutic Singing was a technique described as using singing to facilitate speech and language and to increase breathing capacities (Thaut, 2013). These understandings were situated within neuroscience and not identity; therefore, the focus and reasoning behind these techniques as described in the literature were not necessarily pertinent, although the techniques themselves were.

As mentioned before, I did come to this research with psychotherapeutic understandings of the voice and voicework as a kind of metaphor of identity and reflection of the internal self, based in the work of Diane Austin (2009). I had read through her work during my undergraduate degree because it was an interest of mine. I imagined these understandings supported the ways trans and nonbinary folks often have complex relationships with their voices, especially as the voice is an important cue of gender (i.e., identity), although, initially, I didn't fully realize how

emotionally-based work was integral to the kind of work I would personally be doing. This did make sense and was repeatedly suggested to me by Sue throughout the beginnings of this research, but I didn't realize the extent of this until later, when engaging in this voicework brought about deeply emotional experiences. From the start, I was focused on physical vocal changes (i.e., more behavioral and not emotional work), but this eventual realization shifted me and my understandings of gender affirming voicework.

Further, I came to this research with an understanding that Randi Rolvsjord's and Jill Halstead's work (2013) was quite relevant to my work. Their exploration of gender politics and the voice focused on work with a woman who experienced anxiety and depression in relation to having a very low singing and speaking voice. Therapy with this client focused on active music making and verbal conversations that were centered around her relationship to the music, the experience of singing with the therapist, and her own voice and singing abilities. It feels safe to assume that this woman was cis, although it was not specifically mentioned in the article. How interesting, though, to consider their work within the context of working with a trans woman. While the therapeutic work that was done there is indeed related to what I have discussed thus far, due to the nature of the work with the client, the focus was not on creating vocal changes but on exploring feelings and emotions pertaining to the voice and music. Importantly, their work suggested that the voice, and music therapy in particular, can be a place to disrupt gender. This felt incredibly relevant to my own vocal desires and to the ideas I had about gender affirming voicework. In accessing (or even attempting to access) an androgynous speaking voice, I would, to some degree, be disrupting the automatic assumptions attributed to my voice.

During the early instances of my own voicework, Sue came across a Facebook flyer regarding a voicework group for trans and nonbinary people. She suggested I contact Julie

Lipson, the music therapist facilitating this group. I was excited that someone else was doing similar work, although my impressions were that this group seemed focused on supporting the more emotional aspects of trans and nonbinary vocal experiences and not necessarily on creating physical or behavioral changes to the use of the voice. It further seemed focused on body-based work and embodying sound. After being introduced through Sue via email, Julie and I arranged a phone call. Julie shared their Master thesis (Lipson, 2013). In their research, they interviewed trans individuals about how they experienced their voice after a music therapy session.

Specifically, Julie discussed how those who participated in their research experienced having reactions and associations to the vocal experience provided, “noticing physiological changes, memories, emotions, and personal characteristics” (p. 78). Participants also described putting a lot of effort into the way they used their voices as well as a need to relearn how to use their voices during various stages of vocal transition. This research made me even more excited because of the ways it brought together trans and nonbinary people, the voice, music therapy, voices in transition, etc.

Through our personal communication and through their research, Julie discussed how music therapists have the training to work with the psychological voice, whereas speech-language pathologists are trained to work with the physical voice (personal communication, 3/2018; Lipson, 2013). Julie further suggested that music therapy could fill an important space for which speech-language pathologists just did not have the training for because they are trained to work with behavioral aspects of the voice, making physical changes to functionality, qualities of sound, language, etc. in relation to gender perceptions. They are not trained to support the ways people, particularly trans and nonbinary people, have deeply emotional relationships with their voices that may or may not be experienced with tension. This support of the inner self

through voicework is within music therapists' area of already formed knowledge, although this could certainly be explored in greater depth. This differentiation helped me to reflect on the boundaries between speech-language pathology and music therapy in relation to this work. Where might speech-language pathologists' work end and where might our work as music therapists begin? Or better yet, where might they overlap? Could music therapists sit within both of these spaces with the right knowledge and training?

I again considered my unique qualifications and positioning as both a trained singer and board-certified music therapist which brought me to this research. My thoughts expanded to consider how my skillset might lend itself to a more holistic way of working on trans and nonbinary vocal change. I thought about the integration of these two areas of practice and how music therapy might truly be a place where both could exist, where a person could work with many different facets of themselves as those facets become relevant to their experiences, that is, not having to go to separate spaces for emotional support or physical support but working with both the psychological voice in terms of the emotional relationships people have to their voices and working with the physical voice in terms of gendered parameters of singing and speaking. Further, I later considered even more holistic ways of working that might begin to open up space for other kinds of work, such as body-based work to physically embody gender, address experiences of dysphoria, and work on releasing tension within the body, and also broader work to contain the way each of the aforementioned facets will likely bring about deeply emotional experiences. This holistic way of thinking is certainly much more complex than where I started my own personal journey in voicework.

I now understand gender affirming voicework as a potentially holistic, systemic way of working, and relate it to an article by Joanne Loewy (2004), who ties together neurological, emotional, historical, and cultural uses of the voice, specific to music therapy. Joanne states that

The use of spoken language is one of the most uniquely human parameters that differentiate one human being from another. The words we choose and the musical qualities that we use to express our words are based on a broad spectrum of functioning. (n.p.)

And further:

Music therapists are deft at working with issues associated with language and voice dynamics and content development. As it is nearly impossible to separate the speaker from the speech, or the singer from the song in vocal discourse; the reader may attain the most holistic model of vocal expression by viewing distinct aspects of thought, speech and expression as a gestalt which contributes to emotion and meaning in human communication and function. (n.p.)

Joanne's work importantly connects the behavioral aspects of my work to the emotional and cultural pieces of what drove me to seek voicework in the first place. These words, and the work of Julie (2013), Diane (2009), Randi, and Jill (2013), encourage me to consider gender affirming voicework as holistic, with the capacity to open up many aspects of a person.

Relatedly, I've come to realize that Lisa Sokolov's Embodied VoiceWork method wraps around my own voicework in important ways, containing many, if not all, of my experiences.

The growing, aching quiet of this home  
has [immersed me within] ~~led me to reading~~ space theories.

The notions [have wrapped] ~~are slowly wrapping~~ around my bones,

settling between my heart and ribcage with intricacy.

(Nikita Gill, *Multiverse*, revised first stanza, brackets and  
strikeouts added)

I did not realize this, though, until personally experiencing the work I did and more deeply exploring Lisa's method afterward. I had minimally known of her work before but did not fully appreciate it for what it was, partly because it is sparsely written about, and partly because what is written is largely not written by Lisa. Because of this, I found little through academic databases in my search for her work. After re-exploring her work (Sokolov, 2009) and finding her personal website (Sokolov, 2019), I reached out to her to request other work she might have, at which point she shared a chapter of her unpublished book. I regret that I did not more deeply explore her method from the beginning, as I think it could have expanded my own voicework. I find it interesting that Sanne's clinical work is rooted in Lisa's method as well as Diane's and others. Witnessing my own experiences in aspects of Lisa's work has validated for me the ways that gender affirming voicework might be situated within the field of music therapy.

On her website, Lisa writes:

Embodied VoiceWork is a method exploring the resources and the power within the process of finding and freeing one's voice. [...] The work is about listening. It is about connecting into and sensing our bodies. It is about giving voice to what is heard and felt. [...] The goal of the work is to embody the voice, to come more fully into one's body, one's sound, one's music and one's expressiveness. Participants can expect to be more grounded in their bodies and to improvise and sing more freely and expressively. They will be more fluent in the language of music. Listening skills will be awakened both



internally and externally. This work can open individuals to a powerful experience of emotional, energetic and expressive aliveness. (2019, n.p.)

Further, in the chapter from her forthcoming book which I have been given permission to include aspects of here, she writes that it is a

method of free, expressive, non-verbal, improvisational singing which aims at the development of fuller human potential through the practice of attentiveness, an attitude of radical receptivity and listening. [...] [It focuses on] a musical expressivity that is inherent in all of us. [...]

This work is about listening. We listen by sensing what is happening in our body. We open to kinesthetic experience, breath, tone, and to the imagistic language of our inner life. We listen deeply into what we are hearing. Immersion into the language of non-verbal singing brings us into conversation, into a play with the body, with ourself, with others and with the essentials of music. And, as we listen, we are led into a process. Through inner listening we come to meet the body. We open to the descent of resonance into the body. Through listening we come into flow with inner impulse and our innate musical expression. Through listening we come to meet the other. Through listening we come to meet the essentials of music. (in press, n.p.)

This method asks people to listen to themselves in-the-moment in a holistic way.

The emphasis on radical listening feels intertwined with queerness. In a chapter co-authored with Sue (forthcoming), we have considered queering our listening practices as informed by Yvon Bonenfant's work (2010). Specifically considering classical music, Yvon articulates the need to cultivate the aesthetic sensitivity of *queer listening* by becoming more aware of the ways that we lean in or pull away from voices (and bodies) that unsettle normative

voicing, particularly in regards to queer voices (i.e., voices that don't conform to cis- and heteronormative expectations). Yvon (2010) has discussed this in terms of finding appreciation for queer voices, thereby leaning into them instead of pulling away. Sue and I (forthcoming) have considered this in music therapy spaces given the ways the voice is often important. I now consider the ways this kind of awareness could support listening in to the Self to access a voice and embodiment that we lean in towards, finding sounds that are affirming and validating. That expressed, I believe beginning to find appreciation for parts of our voice that we also pull away from could simultaneously be important work. Queer radical listening certainly feels relevant to gender affirming voicework.

Returning to Lisa's work, she understands how we as human beings live on many levels with many interconnected bodies: the physical body—the bone, blood, viscera, fluids earth/water; the energetical body—the spark, the electrical aspect, the flow of aliveness, fire/air; the emotional body—the feeling aspect; the mental body—the thinking verbal body; and the knowing body—the wisdom Self (Sokolov, in press).

Our body is a great house with many rooms. And yet many of us live perched in the attic, hesitant to take our rightful places. We often resist fully inhabiting the body. Our breath can be shallow, our tone can be thin and reside predominantly in the head or throat. Fear of feeling, fear of power, fear of living entirely alive, contribute to an all too common profile of shallow, halting breath and small tonal range. (Sokolov, in press, n.p.)

I am drawn to considering the body as a house to be inhabited, to be embodied.

In articulating this work, Lisa describes specific tools of Embodied VoiceWork, including those of breath, tone, touch, imagery, and improvisation (Sokolov, in press; Sokolov, 2009). Each of these has importantly arisen within my own work, as you might recognize as I

share my experiences. Lisa writes that we live in “an ocean of air”—that is, the breath—and it is a vital aspect of this work. She understands tone or resonance of the voice to be a complex and multitudinous thing that holds many notes and overtones that unfurl out of each other. It is self-generating. Lisa’s words create an image of endless vocal possibilities, and, as I’ve described, resonance was an important aspect of the work I did myself. Lisa further described ‘touch’ to be a tool for awareness, for opening up, landing in, and connecting to the body. It involves questioning within the body: “What do you notice? What does it feel like?” I resonate with the ways these questions encourage someone to be fully present to themselves, to sit in a space of authenticity. Embodied VoiceWork begins with a warm-up, moving through a developmental sequence where a person moves from being “curled up on the floor, to sitting, to standing, and eventually into walking and running” (in press, n.p.). Lisa writes that when we listen to tone and the body through time, a descent of resonance happens within the body (i.e., a more grounded sound). Imagery is also described—that is, the “language of our deeper mind, our knowing Self” (in press, n.p.). She writes that this imagery emerges from the Self, and “speak[s] from and to the deepest aspects of our beings” (2009, p. 45). I connect this to ideas of living authentically, of finding ‘gender imagery,’ of finding vocal and embodiment language that represents the ways I internally understand my gendered Self. Lastly, Lisa writes about improvisation being a tool for moving through the aforementioned tools.

There is an arc to Embodied VoiceWork, where a person moves through a series of stages—exploration, awareness, release, new balance of strength and openness, and integration (Sokolov, in press; Sokolov, 2009). I recognize these stages as present within my own work. The first stage is *exploration*, which is defined as

[...] a state of mind, a willingness to see what we see, to hear what we hear, to feel what we feel, to notice what we notice. It is an open mindset of radical receptivity. [...] It is a letting go of what we think *should* be happening, what would make us feel worthy if it were happening, what happened before, what someone told us would be happening, what we assume will happen. It is a receptivity to what *is* happening. (Sokolov, in press, n.p.)

This moves us into *awareness*, where we recognize our experiences and sensations, noticing what we notice. Then we begin to shift into a *release* of tension, recognizing that tension to be a misplaced strength, allowing the release to lead to a *new balance of strength and openness*. This is like an unwinding—a release of authenticity where a “powerful surge of real laughter or crying leaves us” (Sokolov, in press, n.p.). We then move into *integration*, where one shift impacts the whole of a person. Lisa writes:

Change in a part of a system reverberates out into the whole system be it the individual body, the relational body, the familial body, the community body. These ripples, if not dampered by resistance to change, continue the process, cycling us back to exploration, awareness, release, new balance, integration, exploration, awareness, release... (Sokolov, in press, n.p.)

It is a systemic way of working.

Lisa understands the therapist’s role within all of that to not be a giver of awareness but a creator of openings. She writes:

The therapist creates the vessel for the process to play through by creating and holding safe, clear space. The therapist has faith in the process and is able to stay with the powerful tides of being human without fear. Awareness comes in on its own when we are open to it. (Sokolov, 2009, p. 52)

And further,

Music therapists understand the power of resonance. In this understanding, we know that our primary work is in our own capacity to carve out our own beings, to fully embody ourselves. It is through our own commitment to self-work and self-knowledge that one becomes embodied, and then in one's very presence, one becomes a conduit to growth. (Sokolov, 2009, p. 53)

Embodied VoiceWork seems to be a full-bodied, full-Self experience that does not focus on one aspect of the voice in isolation from other aspects. Although a holistic kind of perspective was not one I began with at the beginnings of my own voicework, it is one that I have realized is important to the possibilities of gender affirming voicework with others. Lisa's method doesn't specifically focus on gender, but in reading about it after engaging in voicework, I found myself witnessing important overlaps that perhaps you might also recognize within my autoethnography.

With all of this in mind, though, the idea of gender affirming voicework was and is a new endeavor within the field of music therapy, with so much that needs to be navigated. But it felt clear to me that I was uniquely positioned as a music therapist, singer, and nonbinary person to explore what this voicework might be. One might ask, "Why are you exploring your own voicework? Why not work with others?" Good questions. This is certainly something I am moving towards now, but to answer these questions I turn to the ways this research project emerged out of deeply personal experiences of my voice and Self that, at the point I was beginning research, I had not yet explored. It makes so much sense to me to allow those explorations to be the research. I also consider Lisa's reminder that self-work allows us the space to become embodied which further provides us with the capacity to be conduits of growth for

others. Further, I turn to the early workings of Analytical Music Therapy by the trio of Mary Priestley, Peter Wright, and Marjorie Wardle. They did not find it ethical to experiment on clients with such a new approach, so they explored this with each other. And Mary Priestley kept copious notes, writing down these explorations and then sharing them with others. As such, I turn to autoethnography, a method in which I write and tell my own story about my experiences of gender affirming voicework.

### CHAPTER 3

#### ‘Becoming’ Together Through Queerly Telling Stories

*Fairytales exist.*

*They always have.*

*We just have to rewrite them*

*over and over again*

*till they fit.*

(Nikita Gill, *Untitled III*, italics in original)

#### **But what is autoethnography?**

The texts I engaged with describe autoethnography as a study of the self in culture that is interested in how people tell stories about their lives (Tony E. Adams & Carolyn Ellis, 2011). It pulls from *autobiography* and *ethnography*—stories of the self and stories of culture—making it both a process for engaging in research and a product with its finished text (Adams & Ellis, 2011; Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, & Arthur P. Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). This method sounded very different from the kinds of research I usually had heard about. Telling stories? How is this research? I read that in autoethnography, researchers reflexively write about their past experiences, not typically “liv[ing] through these experiences solely to make them part of a published document” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, n.p.). They are instead pulled together afterward, with autoethnographers reflexively drawing upon many different kinds of materials, including personal memories, interviews, journals, memos, and recordings, and creatively working with them through writing, music, art, poetry, creative endeavors—all in efforts to share epiphanies of lived experience (Adams & Ellis, 2011; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Because I began actual voicework experiences knowing that I would eventually write an autoethnography, it prepared me to collect many possible kinds of material throughout the process so that I'd be able to creatively work with them as I write this story. The suggested program by Richard Adler (2012), which I discussed earlier, helped to form the basis of the kinds of materials I would gather throughout this voicework. Broadly, I gathered 'sensed' experiences through actually doing voicework. More concretely, I summarized what happened during these experiences and reflexively journaled about the ways I experienced them and about my broader journey of this voicework. I also collected as many audio recordings of my voice as was possible through the use of either a microphone that was generously purchased by Slippery Rock University's music department or my iPhone when this microphone was not readily available (i.e., when recording opportunities arose that were not planned or intended or when the environment was not conducive to setting up recording equipment). The purchased microphone was not tailored to pick up certain kinds of frequencies but rather to gather raw sound. This allowed me to get a sense of how I actually sounded without filtering. Further, I utilized a free voice analysis program, *Praat* (Paul Boersma & David Weenink, 2018), which has been used within the field of speech-language pathology as well as other fields that acoustically analyze the voice. Along all of this, I further had the creative modalities such as music, art, poetry, etc. with which I engaged throughout this voicework and throughout the writing of this autoethnography. This data has greatly assisted me in not only remembering the details of this voicework but also by providing me with a large body of materials to creatively engage with and include within this autoethnography.

In returning to an exploration of autoethnography, Tony Adams and Carolyn Ellis express so succinctly that scholars turn to this method:



because they [want] to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to experiences shrouded in silence and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different. (Adams & Ellis, 2011, p. 197)

I further learned that reflexivity is vital to autoethnography as writers “analyze these epiphanies by comparing them to existing research, interviewing others with similar epiphanies, and using their academic training to interrogate the meaning of an experience” (Adams & Ellis, 2011, p. 199). It means relating self-experiences to the ‘other,’ “illustrat[ing] new perspectives on personal experience...by finding and filling a gap in the existing, related story lines” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, n.p.). These reflexively engaged stories are immersed with and inspired by the beautiful/evocative.

Autoethnographies are mindful of aesthetics and attempt to be captivating, using conventions of storytelling such as character, scene, and plot development (Adams & Ellis, 2011; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). I learned that this involves showing, telling, shifting and alternating points of view, and the use of thick descriptions (Adams & Ellis, 2011; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Showing brings you, the reader, into the actual story to vicariously experience that story, and this often occurs through the use of conversation by the autoethnographer. Telling provides some distance from the story so that the reader can think more about the events being explored rather than viscerally experiencing them. Shifting and alternating points of view involves portraying the story through first-, second-, and third-person accounts for various perspectives. Lastly, thick descriptions aim to offer complex and nuanced understandings of the cultures and communities being storied.

When I consider the ways autoethnography is a creative, evocative process and product, I find that I resonate with it on a deeper level because of my identities as a musician and music therapist. Demeko Freeman (2018), in his own music therapy autoethnography, writes about how “[m]usic itself often explicitly or subtly tells a story. ... [and that] we as individuals have our own unique stories to the music [and perhaps importantly for my research, the instruments] that we love” (p. 6). Music is storytelling and has the potential to be incredibly evocative. Further, I have often witnessed both within others and myself the ways in which engaging in creative acts can bring about new insights, and that the more a person engages with these insights, the more expanded they can become. Personally, I tend to value moments where I am able to immerse myself within the confines of a music-making process, whether it be songwriting, improvisation, recreation, or listening to music and creating physical artwork. As a creative person, creative methods overlap with the ways in which I tend to make meaning of my life and of my own experiences. Additionally, autoethnography perfectly captures the way I enjoy writing. I often spend hours upon hours writing, reading, rereading, rewriting whatever it is I am working on. In addition to other creative acts, writing is a way to more deeply understand something. That is, autoethnography as a method importantly mirrors my own meaning-making processes.

In reading literature on autoethnography, I further learned that it developed in response to researchers critiquing more traditional science-based research, which focused on precise “facts” and “truths” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). The field of anthropology utilized ethnography to engage in an objectivist studying of culture, with the ‘neutral’ researcher removed from the culture being studied (Peter Collins & Anselma Gallinat, 2013). This objectivism within anthropologic work has been called into question (Renato Rosaldo, 1989) with autoethnography emerging out of a reformation of social science (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Scholars began

advocating for personal narrative, subjectivity, and reflexivity within research, realizing “that stories were complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, n.p.). Carolyn and Tony (2014) note that:

These scholars were interested in the importance of storytelling and enactments of culture, and they progressively became engaged by the personal traces in ethnographic practice. Rejecting the idea that ethnographers should hide behind or perpetuate an aura of objectivity and innocence, these researchers began including themselves as part of what they studied, often writing stories about the research process and sometimes focusing on their own experience. (p. 3)

Alongside this, there was a recognition of the ways people speak, write, value, and believe differently based on their sociocultural location, which importantly influences their various research endeavors (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Out of the intersections of these various critiques and shifts within the field of anthropology, emerged autoethnography as a research method.

Because of the ways autoethnography involves the personal experiences of authors, it is often critiqued as being “insufficiently rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and too aesthetic, emotional, and therapeutic” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, n.p.). However, an important aspect of autoethnography involves the integration of both the emotional and analytical, and in particular, finding a balance between these two. With this, I’ve read about the distinctions often made between ‘analytic’ (more academically-situated) and ‘evocative’ (more emotionally-saturated) autoethnographies. More ‘evocative’ autoethnographies have been critiqued for the ways they are understood as not being committed to enclosing the writer’s experiences within theoretical frameworks (Leon Anderson, 2006; Clifford Geertz, 1973). I can understand these

distinctions; however, I resonate with how these distinctions have been counter-criticized for the ways they continue to privilege certain kinds of ‘knowledge’ and for the ways in which any autoethnography, without distinctions, *is* evocative (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Autoethnographies focus on lived personal and emotional experiences—thereby, the evocative. Given how it is also important to ground an autoethnography in the analytic, distinguishing subgenres of evocative and analytic autoethnographies seems redundant and perhaps makes these labels unnecessary and meaningless. These distinctions seem to position autoethnography against itself, placing more value upon the empirical (i.e., science). Surrounding all of this, it is important to consider the gendered way in which this analytic/evocative binary exists, with analytic relating to ‘masculine’ and the evocative relating to ‘feminine’ understandings, perpetuating the devaluing of knowledge informed by the ‘feminine.’

Referencing the criticisms of Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (2003), Tony Adams and Stacy Holman Jones (2008) state:

He wonders if our interest in realism, in evocation, in proving—once and for all—that what autoethnographers and experimental writers are doing *is scholarship*—trades in and betrays literary ambiguity, writerly vulnerability, institutional bravery, difference, and artistry. He suggests that telling stories of subjugated knowledges – stories of pleasure, gratification, and intimacy—offers one possibility for writing against and out of the bind of sacrificing a multitudinous *artistry* for clear, unequivocal *knowledge*. (p. 374, italics in original)

In other words, autoethnographers, myself included, often experience a need to write within an either/or, choosing either between what is more likely to be deemed as ‘knowledge’ (analysis) or the evocative, vulnerable, ambiguous story. I still experience attempts to consider

autoethnography within the analytic/evocative binary but am trying to navigate the ways autoethnography is *both* analytic *and* evocative. An autoethnography informed by queer theory unsettles this binary, encouraging the telling of deeply evocative stories based in a queer theoretical perspective.

### **Queering autoethnography**

While exploring literature regarding autoethnography, I found myself particularly drawn to the way Tony and Stacy write about it. Specifically, they avoid clearly defining autoethnography because of the ways it would pin down and hem in the complexities of what it *could* be into something easily digestible and identifiable (2008). They do, however, hinge together queer theory with autoethnography, merging the analytic/evocative binary into a joint space where a queer theoretical framework guides analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Tony and Stacy express that both queer theory and autoethnography disrupt traditional narratives around research and the ‘norm’; commit themselves to novelty and innovation through reflexivity; embrace the fluidity and instability of identity; serve as sites of ‘discursive trouble’ to call out social injustices; and are critiqued in similar ways due to their commitment to reflexivity (2008; 2010; 2011; 2016). What I particularly love about the writings of Tony and Stacy is the way they leave room for me, in reading their texts, to arrive at my own understandings of what autoethnography, and more specifically *queer* autoethnography, is. Autoethnography as queer seems to be aimed at an autoethnographic process of writing and rewriting, of engaging in creative practices, to hinge together meaning and unhinge that meaning all in one breath, to find partial understandings that continue to change and develop. I was excited by their work and the ways they based it within a queer theoretical perspective and the way it also moved away from

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<sup>8</sup> Refer to pp. 5-6 of this autoethnography.

the analytical/evocative binary. I read, “[q]ueering autoethnography embraces fluidity, resists definitional fixity, looks to self and structures as relational accomplishments, and takes seriously the need to create more livable, equitable, and just ways of living” (2008, p. 384). I understood that this method encourages us to move outside of clear categories and to dismantle set labels and understandings by embracing languages’ failure to fully or accurately capture or contain us. Further, it involves positioning identity as shifting and changing over time, thus requiring constant negotiation and navigation through different contexts (2010). Further, it embraces “stories of pleasure, of gratification, of the mundane, as they intersect, crisscrossing rhizomatically with stories of subjugation, abuse, and oppression” (2010, p. 385).

I read about how Tony and Stacy understand written texts. Due to their permanent nature, texts become fixed identities regardless of the autoethnographer’s intent because they cannot be changed once published—they are therefore stagnant bodies. Interestingly, Tony and Stacy have republished some of their work using very similar if not identical language at times, but with each new publication expanding upon their previous statements or continuing to reframe them. This seems to demonstrate what a queer autoethnographic process might look like...and how it doesn’t end once a story is published. They wrote about how in this kind of research, the writer:

recognizes that bodies are immersed in, and fixed by, texts, but also recognizes these bodies as doing, speaking, and understanding beings, forthrightly incomplete, unknown, fragmented, and conflicting. Failing to recognize these contingencies, ellipses, and contradictions, autoethnographers textually paint themselves into a corner... (2016, p. 211)

This corner further creates a fixed, unmoving, static identity where, “[i]n the place of relationality, performativity, and transitivity, we create singularity, clarity, and certainty” (2016,

p. 211). As writers, we often aim to write ‘good stories’—stories that are recognizable and that offer concrete understandings to others, stories that have a sense of completeness (2008).

However, a queer autoethnography supports uncertainties, lack of clarity, and unfinished-ness (2008). At the same time, we tell stories in attempts to be recognized by others, to be real and intelligible. I am telling my story, in some ways, to be recognized by you, the reader. I am also telling my story, in some ways, to have gender affirming voicework recognized as a possibility within music therapy. Queer autoethnography, though, might ask me to willingly be undone and unreal in the presence of others, to be witnessed but probably not recognized, at least not fully (2011)—perhaps a truly radical way of being, of writing. I understand this to mean that the author tells stories which

- lack clarity due to the author moving away from fixed understandings
- lack clarity due to the author being in the midst of ever-evolving conflict (i.e., no resolution of the story)
- don’t offer the kind of concreteness that academia tends to value

I further understand this as leaving the author in a vulnerable space, subject to criticism and outright rejection for their failure to offer ‘meaningful’ understandings. With all this in mind, this method can be considered a queer political action in the ways it challenges dominant discourse and grand narratives (2008).

I found meaning in the ways that Tony and Stacy wrote about how a queer autoethnographic process calls the author to reflexively engage with their stories. Specifically, to reflect on the stories they are not ready or not willing to tell, questioning *why* they are not ready or willing to tell them and whether that is precisely the reason why they *should* tell them (2011). It involves “listening to and for silences and stories we can’t tell—not fully, not clearly,

not yet; returning, again and again, to the river of story accepting what you can never fully, never unquestionably know” (2011, pp. 111-112). Further, I read about how telling these ‘risky’ stories ‘shrouded in silence’ is dangerous because of the ways they are unclear, the ways they situate the writer, the ways they situate those implicated in the story. I write about this below, but stories do not exist in a vacuum; they are interconnected to the stories of others, and sometimes telling stories involves sharing parts of someone else’s stories that might place those individuals in vulnerable positions alongside the author. These stories can be told, though, “in the hopes of making discursive and relational trouble; using a coauthored, I-we-you voice—an ambiguous and fluid queer textual technique” (2011, p. 112). This I-we-you voice can decontextualize the story, removing identifying information by shifting the ‘subject’ of the sentence; however, the stories are still ‘risky’ in the ways they often don’t have clear, concrete meanings and can still be easily contextualized. The use of ‘I’, ‘we’, and ‘you’ nevertheless brings the reader and writer together into shared experience (2008; 2011; 2016). This mirrors the way autoethnographies often offer alternative points of view or voices (Adams & Ellis, 2011). However, Tony and Stacy situate this practice within its ability to bring both author and reader together into bearing witness to harmful practices, violent and painful experiences, and the trials and tribulations of ‘(desiring) normalcy’ (2010).

Tony and Stacy further show the ways a queer autoethnographic process seems cyclical, going around in a circle between three important pieces of this method in a form of analyzing: the autoethnographic (the personal cultural story), the queer (the parts of the story that draw attention to a problem), and the reflexive (the understanding of how we frame ourselves and others) (2011). This cyclical way of engaging with the author’s stories involves embracing a stance of “never becoming comfortable, always already wanting and being ready to (re)create”



(2010, p. 150), of the author always ‘becoming’ something else by re-witnessing their experiences. The writer also understands that those who read the text are also ‘becoming’ within and alongside it. As the autoethnographer writes, they and their stories become something else. As you, the reader, reads, you and your stories become something else. We both expand and develop concurrently although separately. Because of this, Tony and Stacy allude to a need to write without endings—to write without telling a clear story with a ‘good’ ending that provides a precise meaning or take-away message. They suggest that we don’t have to provide these and that authors might instead simply tell their stories without necessarily requiring analysis, thereby making or leaving room for movement, re-imagination, and re-creation within the text (2010). The reader can and will tell their own stories and their own understandings in response to and alongside of the author’s story.

Tony and Stacy so beautifully portray this ‘writing without endings’ to me through a parent telling of an interaction with his child at the pool (2011). I tell it in my own words here, not completely understanding the meaning of it but sensing that it importantly expands my ideas regarding the telling of stories. A child and parent float on their backs in the pool. The child drifts into the deep end, a place she has not ventured before. Bumping her head on the floating barrier, she opens her eyes and panics, vigorously swimming back to her father, angry that he let her float away. Eventually, she finds appreciation for the experience. But later, when both parent and child are driving home from the pool, she (un)relatedly talks of being angry and scared and of worrying about moving to a new school, staying close with family, making new friends, and fitting in. She further says that she didn’t tell her father about all this because he would try to ‘fix’ it. She talks about how when floating on her back in the pool, she had no worries until she looked up and realized she was in the deep end. She then says: “Today, while I was floating in

the water, I decided I am just going to be who I am and not worry so much.” The parent says: “I think that is very wise.” But then, defeated, the child says: “It worked until I looked up.”

You [the parent] open your mouth, ready to speak, then stop. [...] On the drive home, you think about her floating in the water, suspended between here and there, between where she is and where she wants to be. You look in the rearview mirror, looking for (eye) contact. You want to tell her something that will make a difference, to tell her a story she can take with her. You want to say that stories can be insurrectionary acts if we make room for our (all of our) selves and their desires, for making trouble and acknowledging the implications of doing so, for embracing the texture of knowing without grabbing on to sure or fast answers. You want to tell her these things, but you can’t—not fully, not clearly, not yet. And you understand that even if you did tell her these things, your telling them won’t make it so for her. She will discover the power and responsibilities of telling stories herself. You watch as she turns her head and looks out the window. You think about her moving away from you, into the deep water, and you let her go. (2011, p. 114)

While not fully understanding this story, it suggests to me that the autoethnographer writes their stories, arriving at their own ever-evolving, ever-incomplete meanings, and then shares those stories with others—but doesn’t necessarily interpret their epiphanies or offer concrete understandings. Instead, this story suggests to me a willingness to share my own story in efforts to foster empathy and expand understandings within the fields of music therapy and even speech-language pathology, while inviting you, the reader, co-create your own meanings alongside my own. I offer loose understandings that I’ve hinged together, while still attempting to leave room for you to dive into your own deep waters as you read. We both are expanded—we both become something else—by relating to these stories in different and/or perhaps similar ways.

Reflecting on my research process, I ‘became’ and continue to ‘become’ something else by exploring all the literature that I read and re-read and with my stories and experiences. I developed new meanings and understandings alongside the authors and researchers I read, some of which were very different than the often concrete ideas that were presented. These expanded my own knowledge in important ways. However, engaging with these texts was painful at times because of the ways the authors (un)intentionally wrote me out of their stories. The literature left little room for my experiences as a nonbinary person and often used language that was offensive and pathologizing of trans and nonbinary people. Although I don’t suspect maliciousness, these stories denied my existence. The majority of this literature also heightened the tensions I was experiencing around my voice. Further, I am currently developing new meanings and understandings as I engage with my own past stories of actual voicework. As I consider these experiences, it reminds me of how important the job of the author is. We tell our stories because they must be told. But we must also leave room for readers to wholly take part in these, and thereby with their own stories, providing the space for them to co-author and ‘become’ something else within and alongside them. By telling my stories here, I fully expect you to find your own meanings as you engage with my larger story, your story, our stories. Telling and reading stories can sometimes be painful, for both author and reader. I experienced hurt at times in reading some of the stories told by the field of speech-language pathology. I also experienced hurt when navigating whether to tell or not tell different parts of my story. But telling and reading stories can also lead to growth, to change, to expansion.

### **Interrogating power and privilege in storytelling**

In reading about autoethnography, I learned that a conversation around relational ethics becomes imperative when we recognize narratives as ways of living and making sense of our

lives (Adams, 2008). Autoethnographers have discussed how they have responsibilities to consider the harm that can come to those they implicate in their stories (Ellis, 2007; Martin Tolich, 2010). As mentioned earlier, the stories we write about ourselves are also the stories of others, and these stories could disclose intimate details of relationship and perceptions in ways that could be harmful to those implicated. Carolyn Ellis wonders “How do we honor our relational responsibilities yet present our lives in a complex and truthful way for readers” (2007, p. 14)? I read how she articulated that there aren’t any clear-cut rules to writing in relationally ethical ways, but that she personally aims to maintain respect, dignity, and connectedness for those implicated in the stories she tells. Martin Tolich (2010) has since offered specific strategies for writing autoethnography in ethically sound ways, including respecting participant autonomy; participating in ‘process consent’; recognizing how it can be coercive to seek consent after a manuscript is written; consulting with others on ethical dilemmas; not publishing anything you would not show to those who are implicated; being aware of internal confidentiality; anticipating future vulnerability; avoiding or making the greatest attempt to avoid harm; minimizing risks through pseudonyms; and lastly assuming that all people implicated will read the text at some point (pp. 1607-1608). Many of these are also in line with suggestions for ethical writing by Carolyn (2007).

While understanding the need for guidance on ethical questions, I read about how Kerri Mesner (2016) directly references Martin’s work and challenges authors to queer their ethics around autoethnography, emphasizing the ways that ethical concerns are situational and require context to understand. A sort of ethical ambiguity is embraced—that is, movement away from ethical certainty in attempts to question our autoethnographic ethics. Kerri suggests that “institutional guidelines [such as Martin’s] support structures of unexamined privilege, where

existing procedures serve to censor [and engage in a kind of narrative erasure of] voices and stories that are already systemically marginalized” (p. 225). There is a queer give-and-take in recognizing the ways my positionality and the positionality of those who I implicate in my stories influences the way my story gets told. How does my sociocultural location, as well as the locations of those implicated, influence the experiences contained within a story? Where am I offering a privileged narrative and where a marginalized one? Where am I protecting and at who’s expense? Where am I choosing *not* to tell a story out of protection—for myself or another or both? How do I balance prioritizing my own marginalized narrative within the narratives of those implicated?

Kerri acknowledges the importance of protecting those who are implicated in the stories we tell, but also questions the emphasis on those protections for the ways they may further harm the author. Considering the telling of stories, Tony and Stacy question:

what of the stories we want to tell because they are so important and enraging and courageous and hopeful but we don’t because they aren’t ours—alone—to tell? Does *not* telling these stories, or telling a story about all we can’t tell, do something in the world? (2011, p. 109, italics in original)

With these ideas in mind, Kerri (2016) instead offers a set of ‘querying/queerying’ questions to guide ethical considerations:

- Whose voices are being heard within this particular ethical review process?
- Whose ethical boundaries are being prioritized and at whose expense?
- How might queer, disability, and decolonizing discourses help the autoethnographer to re-envision the ethical parameters of their work?

- What are the costs to the autoethnographer [and others] of putting this work into the wider world? What are the costs of not doing so? How might either choice hold potential for ethical violence to the researcher themselves [and to those implicated]? (p. 234)

In the writing of my autoethnography, I tell a story of my own experiences; what led to this voicework; interactions I had with people I consulted with; and interactions I had with peers, friends, family, and acquaintances throughout this process. The way I represent those implicated in my story is an ethical concern. While writing, I have considered a combination of both the ethical guidelines suggested by Martin given their clarity as well as Kerri's questions given their basis in queer theory.

### **Queer autoethnography and gender affirming voicework**

Deeply engaging with queer autoethnography in the literature brought about excitement within me. This method embraces a way of thinking that I had small inklings of prior to this voicework and that, outside it, I was beginning to more fully move towards. Further, its basis in queer theory provided a theoretical foundation that meshed so perfectly with my research and with my queer experiences as a nonbinary person. This voicework had not been explored before and as such, my narrative is only one account of the possibilities and potential limitations of gender affirming voicework. Although I am thoughtful about how my own experiences might assist me in understanding different trans and nonbinary narratives around voicework, my own story more specifically explores the possibilities of voicework with nonbinary, female-assigned persons not taking testosterone and who have a strong foundation in vocal techniques prior to the work. Queer autoethnography, then, begs me to leave room for re-creation and expansion into other kinds of narratives, narratives that might lead to very different kinds of voicework (i.e.,

work with trans men and female-assigned nonbinary persons who take testosterone; trans women and male-assigned nonbinary persons; intersex individuals who have completely been erased within literature; or even cis men and cis women). Further, I am but one person exploring this and know that others have much to add to this conversation. I want to leave as much room as possible for you to creatively engage with my story. As such, it is through queer autoethnography that I share my experiences of gender affirming voicework in music therapy.

## CHAPTER 4

### Gender Affirming Voicework

Every time you think you are broken,  
know this: you are never really breaking.  
No one can break an ocean,  
darling, all you are doing,  
is breaking the glass that is holding you back,  
diving deeper into your own depths,  
discovering yourself in pockets  
of the most somber waves,  
rebuilding your heart with coral,  
with seaweed, with moon coloured sand dust.  
So stop trying to hold yourself back inside that glass,  
it was never meant to hold you.  
Instead, break it,  
shatter it into a thousand pieces...  
and become who you were always meant to be,  
an ocean, proud and whole.

(Nikita Gill, *The Ocean You*)

I want to wake up and know where I'm going  
Say I'm ready, say I'm ready  
I want to go where the river is overflowing  
and I'll be ready, I'll be ready



I'm ready to let the rivers wash over me  
I'm ready to let the rivers wash over me  
If the water can redeem me  
I'm ready, I'm ready  
I'm ready to let the rivers wash over me  
I'm ready to let the rivers wash over me  
I want to wake up  
I want to know where I'm going  
I want to go where the rivers are over-flowing  
I'm ready to let the rivers wash over me  
I'm ready, I'm ready

(Tracy Chapman, *I'm Ready*)

In considering how I might best represent the work I've done, I started off writing a linear story from beginning to end, detailing each session, lesson, and conversation that surrounded my voicework. Although an overarching timeline was helpful for me in more deeply relating to my own experiences, it wasn't manageable for this autoethnography nor was it a queer way of sharing my stor(ies). A queer story is perhaps one that flows in and out of the author's experiences—jumping ahead, falling behind, stretching out the present moment—to understand something more complexly. I offer an abbreviated version of that timeline here.

Throughout my voicework journey, I engaged in a variety of experiences both on my own and with others. Much of my work with others consisted of consulting with Chris on technique within vocal exercises and repertoire, and even engaging in some speech work with

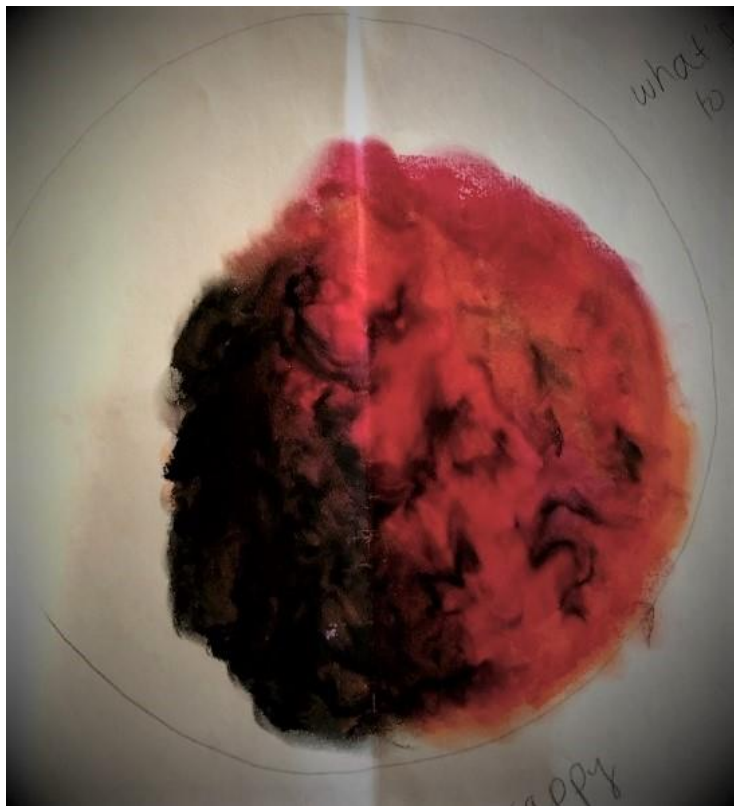
him. Partway through this voicework, I also began working with an Alexander Technique<sup>9</sup> teacher focused on body awareness, releasing unnecessary tension, and becoming more comfortable with my body through chair work and constructive rest. My decision to pursue Alexander Technique was because many musicians pursue this kind of work to decrease tension and improve their own body awareness. This felt as though it might be helpful for the kind of work that I was focused on, and Chris agreed that it might be of use. Based on some of my experiences in Alexander Technique, I felt the importance of spending time with my body; however, I struggled with the ways Alexander Technique is such a hands-on approach, with the teacher having you lay on a table or sit in a chair. They'll go through various body parts, picking up your arm, leg, foot, head, etc. to support them and ask you to give them the weight of that body part, letting go of unnecessary tension. I experienced a lot of discomfort with this person touching me. I barely knew them, and I didn't know their perspective on trans and nonbinary individuals. The gender of this person also influenced the way I experienced these lessons.

It's from reflection on these experiences that I recognize the ways my positionality is so important when considering gender affirming voicework with others. As a music therapist, my embodiment, values, and sociocultural location will impact the ways I relate to others and they relate to me. Trust feels integral to sharing intimate parts of one's Self with another person. Power and privilege seem connected with trust, especially in considering work with a teacher, helper, or therapist. That person sits within a privileged position, and a relationship with them is

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<sup>9</sup> The American Society for the Alexander Technique (2019) states that Alexander Technique is a teaching method to "change faulty postural habits [...to improve] mobility, posture performance, and alertness along with relief of chronic stiffness, tension and stress" (n.p.). Further, they state that "Most of us have many habitual patterns of tension, learned both consciously and unconsciously. These patterns can be unlearned, enabling the possibility of new choices in posture, movement and reaction" (n.p.). Lessons provide the space to "learn how to undo these patterns and develop the ability to consciously redirect your whole self into an optimal state of being and functioning" (n.p.). In these lessons, a teacher provides verbal and manual guidance, helping a person to recognize and interfere with habitual patterns.

uniquely experienced dependent upon the intersections of other aspects of identities (e.g., gender, sexuality, race, and so on) between both the helper and the helped. I did not experience maliciousness or a misuse of power with this Alexander Technique teacher; however, giving them the weight of my leg/arm/etc. required a certain level of trust that just wasn't there. While I strongly believe that the perfect amount of discomfort can lead to growth, the amount of discomfort that I was experiencing in these lessons was simply too much and very triggering for me.



*Figure 5 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "discomfort," 3/8/2018.*

I instead found ways to integrate some of the tenets of the Alexander Technique, particularly that of releasing unnecessary tension. This would be incorporated into the body and breath experiences that I found myself doing within my solo voicework sessions and outside spaces, which I will explore later.

Importantly, shortly after starting this voicework I also began working with a music therapist who was trained in GIM (guided imagery and music) and MI (music and imagery)<sup>10</sup> in order to engage in intensive (bi)weekly psychotherapeutic work. Although my reasonings for seeking out a music therapist did not seem based in voicework but rather other personal life challenges, it soon became apparent that these spaces which initially seemed very ‘separate’ within my mind were quite connected. Many of the themes from both spaces seemed to overlap. Interestingly, the focus of my work with this therapist grew to be on authenticity and integration, among other things, both of which obviously parallel voicework focused on accessing an affirming voice. I realize now how unnecessary it was of me to compartmentalize and consider these as distinct spaces. It is very easy for me to compartmentalize, just as it was easy for me to consider voicework as strictly behavioral, void of any emotion. A binary of voicework and GIM/MI existed in my mind. However, a queering has begun to take place, where I am trying to embrace the overlap. After all, this work occurred concurrently, and my Self grew out from the intersections of gender affirming voicework and GIM/MI music therapy. Within my GIM/MI based work, I have worked with many of the resistances that parallel more mindfully engaging in gender affirming voicework.

Of great significance, my work with this music therapist eventually led to voicing and exploring my inner experiences of childhood trauma which profoundly influence my intense discomfort with bodywork. Although the more intimate details of that therapeutic work are beyond the scope of this autoethnography, more than I am willing to share, and not always

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<sup>10</sup> According to the Association for Music & Imagery (2019), “the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music is a music-centered, consciousness-expanding therapy developed by Helen Bonny. Therapists trained in the Bonny Method choose classical music sequences that stimulate journeys of the imagination. Experiencing imagery in this way facilitates clients’ integration of mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of well-being” (n.p.)

completely related to gender affirming voicework, spending time with my body led to me spending time with the impacts of past experiences. In understanding some of the overlaps between my therapy space and voicework space, I've recently been listening to an audiobook by Jacob Tobia (2019) with a few friends. Jacob's memoir importantly positions the gender socialization that they experienced as a kind of trauma and emotional abuse that they must cope with—how growing up involved navigating the trauma of needing to let go of certain aspects of their gender and gender expression or face rejection. Both the letting go and the rejection is traumatizing. I resonate with Jacob's experiences and view that trauma as a kind of death of Self. For me, my gendered Self is wrapped up within my own experiences of childhood trauma. I think Jacob says it best:

...I want the world to understand that depriving a child of the ability to express their gender authentically is life threatening. I'm sharing this with you because I want you to understand that gender policing is not some abstract, intellectual concept; it is a pattern of emotional abuse that came from every direction and singularly robbed me of my childhood. I'm sharing this with you because I want you to understand that telling a boy not to wear a dress is an act of spiritual murder. (2019, n.p.)

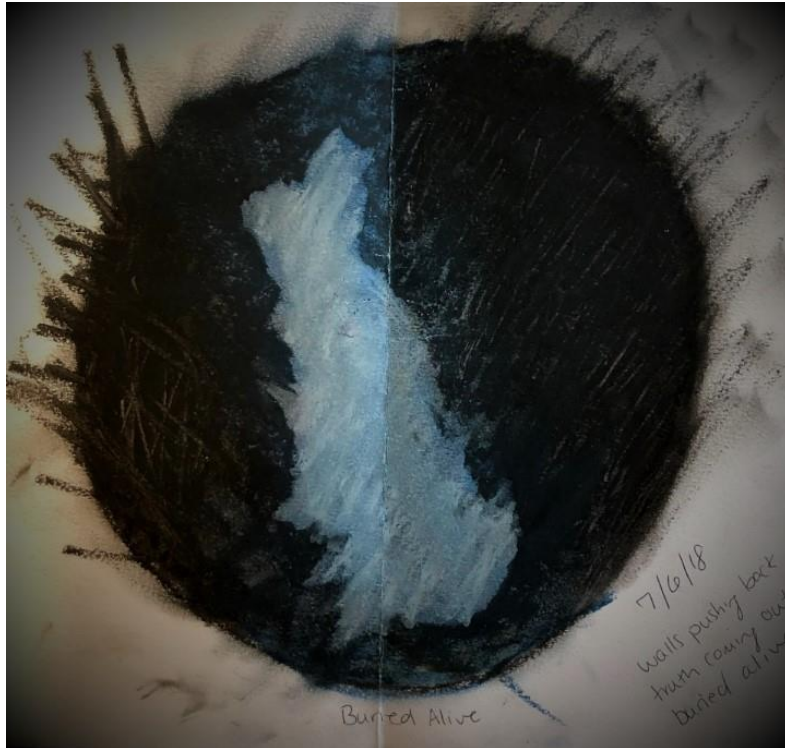


Figure 6 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "walls pushing back, truth coming out, buried alive," 7/6/2018.

My own GIM/MI work centered around a different kind of trauma. However, I've realized that in considering the kind of 'gender trauma' that Jacob describes, I am drawn to very similar imagery as that of my GIM/MI music therapy work.

To heal you must first dive into the deepest ocean you will ever find and you will find it locked in that soft, secret thing you call your heart.

(Nikita Gill, *An Ocean Called Healing*, excerpt)

When I began this voicework, my experiences of myself were disconnected from my larger holistic understanding of my Self, that is, considering my voice within the scope of my physical body/embodiment, emotions, internal world, and so on. I will more deeply explore this later, but I was more focused on behavioral work similar to that of speech therapy and not on a more holistic understanding of gender affirming voicework. I was not 'in sync' with myself. The

innermost parts of my Self were quite frankly a mess, a never-ending ocean that I felt like some miniscule pinpoint within.

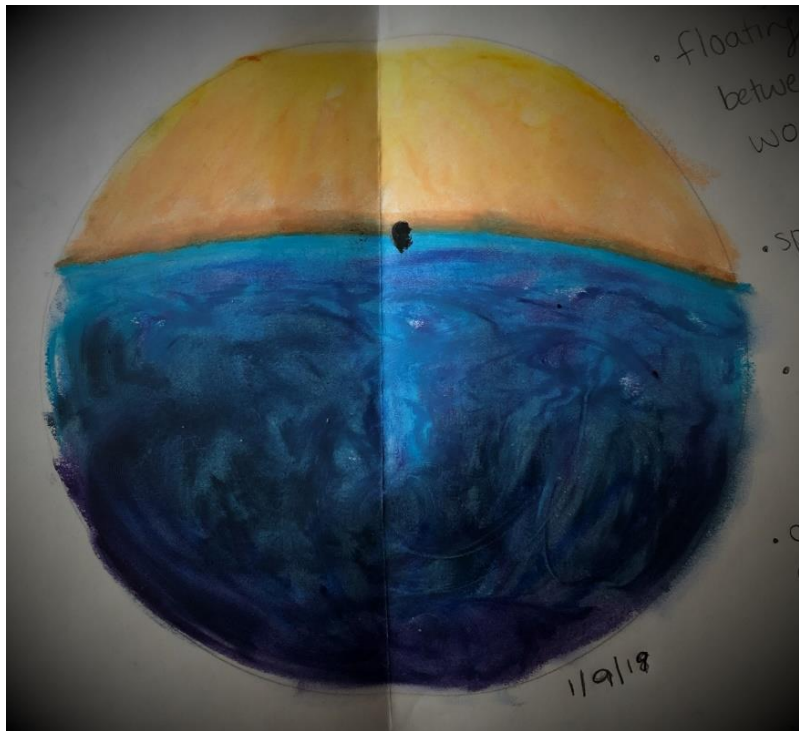


Figure 7 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read “floating between worlds” 1/9/2019.

Further, my experiences with my body more often than not led to tension, hesitance, discomfort, and feeling overwhelmed. I was compartmentalized—my voice separate from my body separate from my emotions separate from my gender separate from my larger internal world.

The deep personal work which I strongly believe to have unconsciously begun in voicework and which then shifted to my GIM/MI space could have perhaps been contained within a singular therapeutic space of gender affirming voicework had I already been working with a therapist knowledgeable in this kind of voicework and prepared for the ways trauma-based work might arise. I do not intend to suggest that work within that kind of singular space would be the same as to what I have experienced in GIM/MI. It would not because they are different ways of working, and, further, they were focused on different although deeply related

experiences. However, a voicework space could have perhaps contained some of the themes/ideas that came up in working with that music therapist, aspects such as using breath as a resource; being present to the fullness of my Self and my imagery (which often involved imaging through the body); and integrating compartmentalized parts of my Self. I couldn't do that kind of work completely on my own, so it makes complete sense that my Self sought out the support of a therapy space. I feel that we as music therapists need to be at least adequately prepared to potentially navigate the fluidity and intensity of what a voicework space might be. It might shift in focus around the physical voice, the body, the breath, the emotions, the internal world, etc. and the intersections of all of these. This gender affirming voicework, for me, opened up a whole ocean of inner movement at multiple levels—physically in terms of my voice and body, and emotionally in the ways I experience myself in various capacities.

My voice.

My body.

My whole inner world.

All an ocean.

All overlapping,

intertwining together

like waves crashing

against and alongside

each other.

To pull apart water from water

makes no sense at all.

And what a difficult task, at that.



Where does one end  
and the other begin?  
I cannot speak,  
I cannot sing  
without a body to create sound.  
I have nothing to say,  
I have nothing to sing  
without that which drives my voice.  
My internal Self is as vast as the ocean.  
I beg of myself to witness all of me.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 4/2019)

My experiences in working with Chris and with my Alexander Technique teacher, alongside the literature that I had been exploring, my experience as a music therapist, and my experiences within GIM/MI based therapy influenced the voicework that I did on my own and my thoughts that surround what this work might be with others. In what follows, I offer a series of composite sketches based on what my solo voicework sessions typically looked like. I found myself almost always engaging in specifically ordered types of experiences during these sessions. This space was like a playground where I explored what kinds of experiences might come up within gender affirming voicework, although this was difficult to do given that I was working by myself. I typically started off with body- and breath-based work, shifted to a vocal warmup, engaged in work around speech and song, and sometimes ended in more emotionally driven music experiences that went deeper than my other kinds of work.

This session structure/routine worked for me but would perhaps not work for others. This typical session has provided a way for me to understand the work that I've done and the ways it has been influenced by both those I consulted with and the experiences I had outside of voicework. I also draw upon experiences that I had in sharing aspects of gender affirming voicework with others in different spaces. Initially, I worried that sharing my experiences through a kind of 'mock session' might be a simplification, an attempt to offer clear take-away points to you, the reader. However, I've come to understand that this session structure was significant to my understanding of my story and what gender affirming voicework might be with other people.

### **Breath, breathe, breathing in the water**

"One cannot imagine breath without body."

(Timothy Huffman in Bryant Keith Alexander, Timothy Huffman, &  
Amber Johnson, 2018, p. 317)

I will wash myself  
with water  
made of self care,  
made of kindness  
made of joy.

(Nikita Gill, *Baptism*, second stanza)

*I put on Sergei Rachmaninoff's Op. 34: No. 14, Vocalise arranged for cello and piano, enjoying the sensation of the cello—it feels free and yet grounded.<sup>11</sup> I listen to the piece*

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<sup>11</sup> Performed by cellist Vladimir Ashkenazy and pianist Lynn Harrell from the Spotify playlist *Solo Cello*. I also used other pieces during similar experiences, particularly those that I deeply connected with during my GIM/MI music therapy work.

*once, lying on my back, feeling the carpet against my body. I focus solely on my breath—specifically breathing down and into my back. Binding compresses my chest, but the back of my binder has a thinner material that expands much more easily than the front does. I’ve realized that focusing on that part of my body while breathing is helpful. I follow the phrasing of the music, being intentional to take deep breaths but also willing my breath to be as natural as possible. It feels good to just be in the music.*

*The piece starts again, and I turn my attention to the rest of my body. I do a progressive muscle relaxation, moving from my toes and feet all the way up to my head and down and out through my arms. I tense each muscle a few times, then let the tension fade into relaxation. I struggle with tuning into each part of my body. I feel myself disconnect and struggle to stay present, my mind drifting to the sounds outside the practice room. While the stretching feels good, the hyperawareness of physical sensation brings about discomfort. I feel silly/ridiculous in taking time to be with my body. This is shame. I come back to my breath and continue to move through the progressive muscle relaxation, willing myself to be present and release unnecessary tension.*

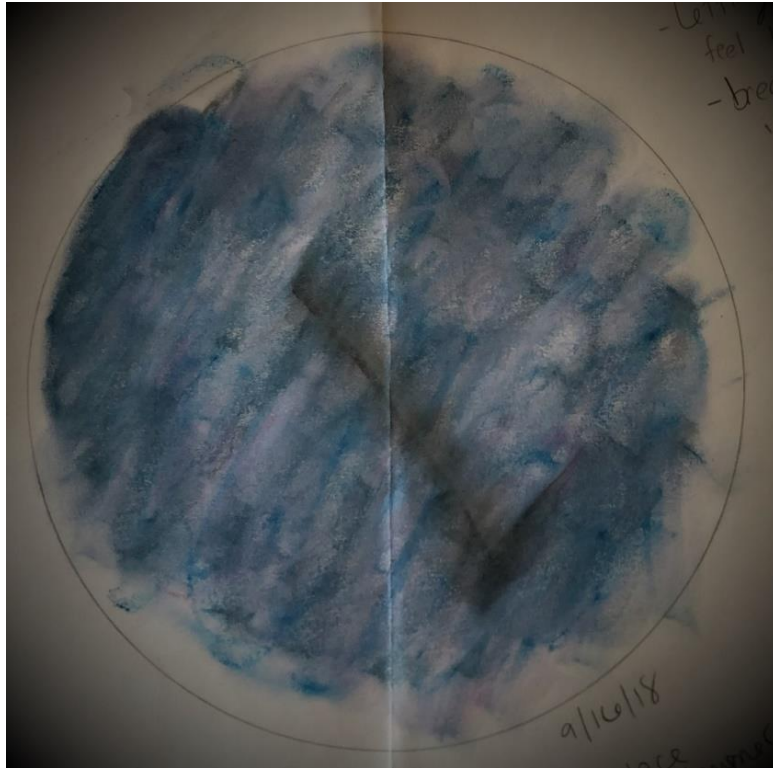
*Having finished, I move into a seated cross-legged position, still on the floor but with my back now against the wall, music still playing. I freely massage my face, neck, and shoulders. I find myself humming along to the recording, enjoying the experience of my voice alongside the cello. This further morphs into free stretching, continuing to work out the tension that remains in my body. I don’t leave a seated position, but I allow my legs to come uncrossed, to let my body, muscles, breath, and voice move freely, following my intuition, feeling the way my body wants to stretch and move, willing it to unwind and relax. I ask myself: “How am I holding myself? What’s the least amount of work that I*

*can do to just be here as I am? How am I feeling the energy of me here within this space?" This feels good, but I have to keep myself from giving into the 'silliness,' the shame that I also experience.*

*Sometimes it is so difficult for me to realize where in my body I am holding tension, to be present to myself physically. That can be overwhelming. Tuning into myself, into my body, requires so much awareness. The progressive muscle relaxation is particularly helpful for me as it is focused on slowly isolating individual parts of the body. When I **am** able to be more present to myself, I can work on getting physically grounded in myself, experiencing my voice and Self within my physical body. I can be connected with my breath, my body, my instrument. (reflective account based 10/28/2017, 1/20/2018, & 1/23/2018 voicework sessions)*

It feels so simple that it shouldn't have to be said, but it is a profound thought when you really sit with the fullness of it. The body is imperative to voicework. The voice as a musical instrument is the body. Without body, there is no voice. You cannot produce sound without your instrument, without your body. You might have vocal cords, but without the lungs, the muscles, the full *body* taking in breath and releasing that breath, there will never be sound. I say that repetitively because I want you to feel the weight of what those words mean. Being present and aware of that instrument is so very important. Not doing so would be like playing the clarinet but only considering the reed the instrument. For me, I personally cannot recall a time where I didn't have discomfort with my body, which has obviously been impacted by my experiences of trauma as well as tensions surrounding my gender. I came to this work so focused on my voice as this isolative experience and was hit with the fullness of discomfort because, as I've previously

stated, voicework requires being with the body. My work involved breathing through the discomfort to find a place of groundedness, of Self, of some kind of comfort.



*Figure 8 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read “letting myself feel it in the body” and “breathing → slowing it down” 9/16/2018.*

But the body is not only an instrument. Our bodies are also scripts that get ‘read’ by others within broader cultural narratives. These narratives dictate how bodies should behave dependent upon gender or presumed gender. We live in a strict gendered world where we are socialized to behave and exist in cookie-cutter ways, and that, of course, intersects with other axes of our identities. Considering stigma, sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) writes:

While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of [their] possessing an attribute that makes [them] different from others in the category of the persons available for [them] to be, and of a less desirable kind—in the extreme, a person who is quite

thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. [They are] reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma [...] (p.11)

The stigma that comes from both intentionally and unintentionally breaking outside of narratives relates to three kinds of stigma identified by Erving. The first two include stigmas of physical deformities and blemishes of individual character. The last includes “stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family” (1963, p.13). This work surrounds stigmatized people who are not considered normal or even ‘human.’ Of great importance to gender narratives, Erving writes

[...] a discrepancy may exist between an individual’s virtual and actual identity. This discrepancy, when known about or apparent, spoils [their] social identity; it has the effect of cutting [them] off from society and from [themselves] so that [they stand] as a discredited person facing an unaccepting world. (p. 30)

Within this world, we learn how we must exist in order to be accepted, whether partially or fully.

We are taught to behave, to be compliant and unspoiled.

Womanhood [and trans and nonbinary living]

is rich with unlearning.

How to unlearn the way

you hate your body,

how to rebuild your spirit

after the supernova of love

finally bursts,

how to understand that

there are a million

new versions of you,  
hiding under your skin.  
How each one is born  
from suffering agonisingly,  
unlearning what others  
want you and your body to be,  
finding moments  
and seconds by metaphors  
in everything  
that make you feel good  
make you feel  
how you are supposed  
to feel.  
Reiterating them  
till there is finally understanding  
and accepting  
inside your very soul.  
The only thing that truly matters  
is how often you say  
on your journey,  
“This, all of this,  
is for me.”

(Nikita Gill, *Unlearning*, brackets added)

I've grown to understand gender affirming voicework to be that of a return to the child who existed prior to the learning of gender took hold. Let me show you.

Sue invited me to lead a few experiences around gender at one of the program's intensives.<sup>12</sup> I facilitated several, but one body and music experience has stuck with me. I am grateful to those who participated in that intensive for their willingness to be so vulnerable and honest.

*While playing a recording of "Kuan Yin" by Troika,<sup>13</sup> I invite my peers to open their awareness to the ways they occupy space, specifically tuning into the ways they sit/stand/walk in gendered ways—into the ways that their body and movements are a part of their gender and gender expression. I also encourage them to become aware of that experience in relation to those in the room around them, not just paying attention to themselves but also turning their attention to others and noticing their own internal responses. I further encourage my peers to take up space in a way that felt most authentic and affirming to them. We start by sitting, then shift to standing, then shift to walking about the room, taking time to be present to each.*

*Afterward, a genderqueer person shares that they experienced "not wanting to be seen" and this shame surrounding gender, even with those they were close or intimate with. They express feeling dysphoric about the idea of people reading them as 'woman,' but importantly feel the most fear about being read as 'nonbinary' and facing rejection for that. In their words, "the idea of being understood as deviant or nonconforming was what brought a feeling of shame." They showed this in their body during the experience,*

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<sup>12</sup> SRU's MMT program is online; however, twice a semester, students will travel to one location to engage in more experientially based learning as well as just to bond. This particular intensive occurred 11/3/2018 and 11/4/2018.

<sup>13</sup> "Kuan Yin" on the album *Goddess* by Troika



*physically slouching and sort of curling in on themself. That shame is something that several in the room, including myself, deeply connected with. (reflective account of SRU MMT intensive, 11/4/2018)*

Later, that person privately described to me how the experience had moved a conversation about gender out of an intellectual space and into their body. They described how the experience brought the awareness of how they did experience their body. They shared:

*I am feeling that now. I have never felt the desire to change my body based on gender; I actually feel genuine love for my body pretty consistently. But what I realized today, when I became aware of how my body expresses gender when I'm "just sitting there," and how others see me and read gender, was that I do have a problem with gendered interpretations that are projected onto my body. [...] They [feel] too simple at best, erasing and invalidating at worst. (personal communication, 11/5/2018)*

Relatedly, I offered a similar experience of my gender affirming voicework as part of a three-hour CMTE at the MAR-AMTA 2019 regional conference.

*One person who had looked very uncomfortable and who had been standing quite still during the experience shares that they didn't feel comfortable moving their body because if they moved the way they wanted to move, they'd "be locked up in a mental institution." This seems to have a profound impact on those in the group—it has definitely stuck with me. It leads to a conversation about shame and not being comfortable with our bodies or the perception of our bodies. It further leads to the suggestion and a deeper conversation around how this gender affirming voicework surrounds us "returning" to our inner "child," the child within us who is free and unashamed and so present to themself. (reflective account of MAR-AMTA 2019 regional conference CMTE)*

I share my reflection on this idea.

*[Very young] kids move without care to how they're seen. They voice without care to how they're heard. They feel things without filtering those feelings. They exist without thought to the way they exist. They're carefree in the way they occupy space.*

*But at some point, we grow older [and are stigmatized, by others and even ourselves] and many of us (although I might argue all) lose that [pure, unfiltered-ness], whether partially or fully[, learning internalized scripts of what is and is not acceptable]. We begin filtering our movements, voices, emotions, etc. We conform them to what is safe and/or acceptable. We pack away things and feel shame[, disgust, anger, fear, and so on]<sup>14</sup> about what is “odd” or “peculiar” or just plain “too much” [i.e., spoiled].*

*And that is incredibly harmful. It wounds us, damages us, shifts us away from our authentic [S]elves into something more palatable to others. When I think about this it makes me so sad and angry because it doesn't have to be that way. (Facebook post, 3/29/2019)*

As described by Erving (1963), signs/symbols can mark people as spoiled, thereby becoming sites of stigmatization. Consider the cis woman who sits with their legs wide open. Or the cis woman who speaks loudly and with confidence about their beliefs and opinions. Or the cis man who cries. Or the cis man who speaks with a lisp and lots of expression within their voice. While cis, trans, and nonbinary people will realistically *all* experience social pressure

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<sup>14</sup> Because of the experiences I witnessed both within myself and others, my initial thoughts surrounding this focused on shame. However, Cindy has importantly challenged me to not assume and limit the possibilities for what a person might experience. As I reflect on my own personal experiences, I recognize the ways other kinds of emotions have arisen, particularly those of disgust and fear.

surrounding gender expression sometime in their lives (unless they exist within some beautiful genderless vacuum), trans and nonbinary folks must often navigate all of this alongside a need to ‘prove’ their trans-ness or nonbinary-ness by conforming to traditional conceptions of gender expression. Consider the trans woman who doesn’t wear makeup. Or the trans man who loves wearing dresses. Or the female-assigned nonbinary person who chooses to express their gender in more feminine ways. Although I’m sure many people have found their pocket of friends and family who will respond in affirming and loving ways to instances of gender nonconformity, I would suggest that the larger cultural response to gender nonconformity becomes one of stigma. Stigma for not maintaining gender expectations. And, of course, that can become internalized.

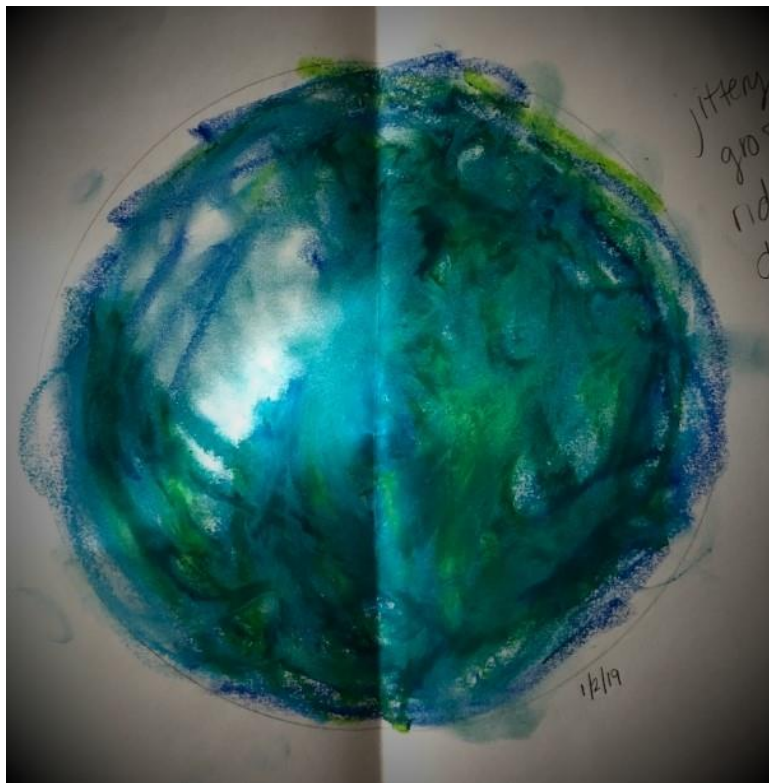


Figure 9 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, "Shame," notes read "jittery, gross, ridiculous, dirty," 1/2/2019.

The way you hate yourself  
sometimes,  
you seem to forget

that there is still a child  
somewhere inside you,  
and you're feeding  
that innocence  
within you  
poison  
with those  
cruel words.

Protect that child  
by being gentler  
with yourself.

Protect that child  
by being kinder  
by yourself.

Because no one else  
will protect them  
other than you.

(Nikita Gill, *The Child Inside*)

The MMT and CMTE experiences mentioned above both share the idea of *listening into the Self*, becoming more aware of the ways we inhabit and relate to our gendered bodies, voices,

experiences. They also share the idea of critiquing and unlearning internalized cultural scripts that surround gender and ways of being. In gender affirming voicework, I am particularly drawn to understanding the Self as this inner child who, when given the chance to be within their full authenticity, could move, voice, feel, think, *be* without regard or care to how stigma might hit them squarely in the face. Listening into that child seems to require the kind of radical sensitivity and listening that Lisa describes in her Embodied VoiceWork method and that I relate to in terms of queer listening. On paper, it sounds so simple, yet, in practice, it personally feels quite difficult, almost impossible. Wading through the waters of ‘me’ versus ‘not me’ when I’m swimming in an ocean that seems to just keep getting larger and larger is beyond overwhelming. It’s so easy to drown in something that’s that big. And if I’m able to swim through it, to breathe in enough oxygen to keep myself alive, if I’m able to find my Self within the water, owning the fullness of that requires a vulnerability, a kind of nakedness to the entire world. Letting that child, that Self rise to the water’s surface feels so radically brave and courageous. Authenticity means nakedly existing as I am, despite what might come of that.

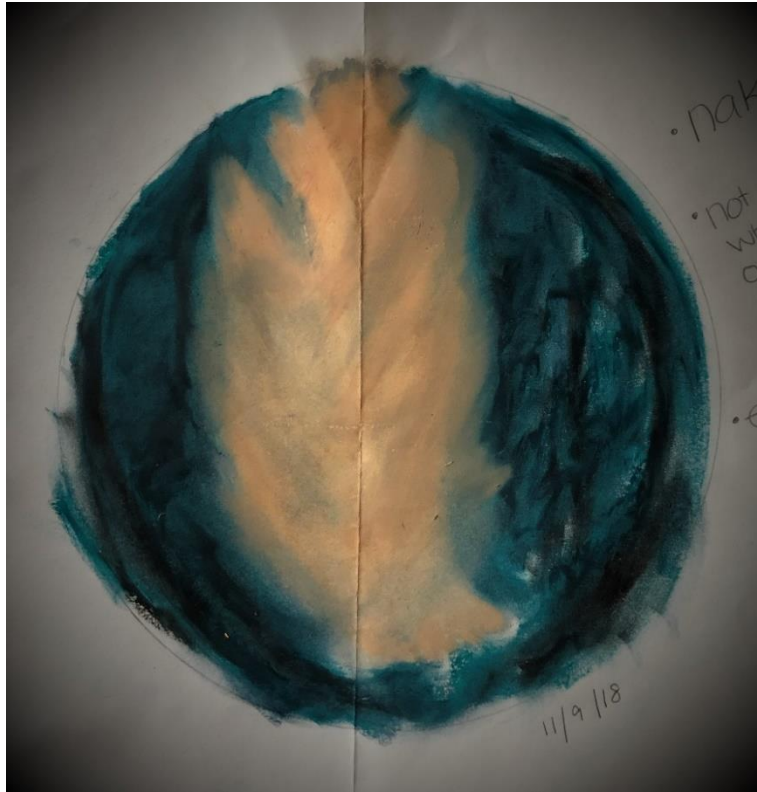
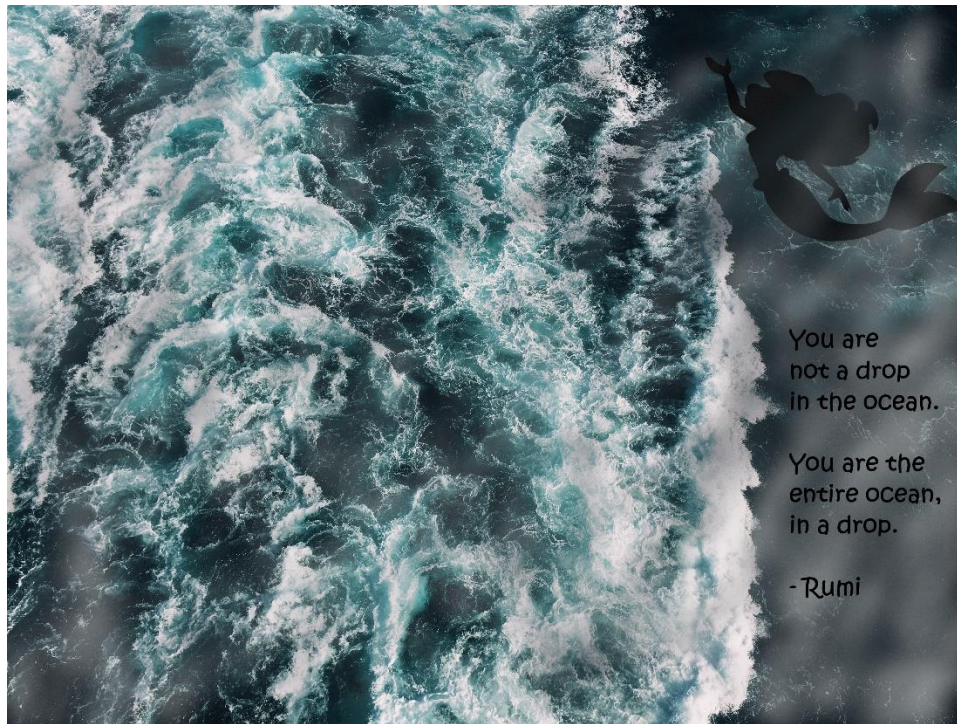


Figure 10 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "naked" 11/9/2018

In coming to gender affirming voicework, I was attentive to my identity as a nonbinary trans person and was keenly aware of the ways my existence went against cultural narratives surrounding gender. I recognized a disconnect within myself, specifically my gender, my Self, my voice, and later with my body and the intersections of all of these. Developing an awareness of this requires some level of listening, although I think it was through refining my skills, listening with more nuance, listening while moving past shame, listening *radically*, listening *queerly* that I've become more grounded within myself on a holistic level. I still am not the greatest listener, and some days I am truly terrible. But I'm trying to be better. It's a dynamic, queer, messy process that doesn't have a clear beginning and will likely not have a clear end. It is a craft and skillset, a sensitivity to be continuously developed. When I consider my own experiences of gender affirming voicework, I think that I eventually moved into work that

attempted to cultivate to an even deeper and more profound level the ability to listen to and embody my own radically present child within my body, voice, Self, inner world.

Although I haven't dove into literature surrounding GIM/MI music therapy work, I have lived experience as a client and believe that this approach could importantly inform what gender affirming voicework might be. I eventually grew curious about what I'm coming to understand as *gender imagery*—images, sounds, experiences, and ideas that are reflective of that child within me. Chris and I discussed an Imaginary Body acting exercise, a character study from Michael Chekhov (2002) where an actor imagines every aspect of the character, stepping into the body of that person—from how they walk to how they wear their coat to how they wear their boots to how they talk. It's about taking the actor's body and filling it into the body of the character. I recognize the tensions that perhaps come from turning to an acting exercise. Embodiments of Self could be construed as inauthentic performances given that this exercise is based in attempting to portray and embody something that you are not in 'real' life (i.e., acting). It makes me think of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and the ways gender sits in a space of duality (2004). Gender is both performative (unreal, an act, part of a cultural script) and authentic (real, a self-embodiment, an identity, an aspect of the Self). However, I do not believe that gender affirming voicework centers on inauthentic performances that focus on embodying something that a person is not, but rather on an uncovering of what already is within a person. The idea of 'stepping' into imagery seems to require a deeply curious and imaginative space, in my opinion. For me, my own imagery has largely come out of my GIM/MI work.



*Figure 11 “The Ocean,” imagery created by me, surrounds the fluidity and vastness of my gender, text reads “You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean, in a drop. -Rumi,” 4/2019.*

In many ways, that ocean imagery and the experiences that accompany it are such perfect representations of my internal world and Self. When I first began considering gender imagery, I imagined the imagery to involve the creation of a collage of more concrete images that contain the different ways in which I express or desire to express my gender (e.g., fashion style, aesthetic, voices I am drawn to, etc.). I think exploring this is important; however, I think this focus was limiting for me. And in some ways the unchanging-ness of a picture is not representative of the ways my gender lives in a state of flux. However, the ocean is constantly changing and moving. It is a fluid body, obviously one large body, but a body that is always becoming something else. When I first considered gender imagery, I hadn’t really found the most affirming imagery.

With reflection, I recognize the ways I have been resistant to more deeply engaging in the intersections of body-based and imagery work. I’ve yet to bring this imagery into my own



voicework space despite feeling the ways it might lead to deep and important work. First and foremost, this is because being present to my body is overwhelming at times and movement/dance is something that I tend to avoid at all costs. Upon writing this, Cindy LaCom, one of my thesis readers, asked if I could write more here. Not asking as if to say, “you must write more,” but instead a genuine questioning of *am* I able to *safely* write more without harming myself. Cindy questioned the ethics of even asking me this question, knowing their positionality as my professor and mentor and the privilege and power that those come with. In reflecting on this, I appreciate Cindy’s thoughtfulness with these comments.

It is beyond challenging to write a thorough response because an exploration into my resistances of body-based and imagery work parallels my GIM/MI work so intimately, and words fail to express how difficult that work is. However, Cindy’s question sparked inner movement within me as it, in a round-about way, asked me to directly look at what I am resistant against. I have decided to write more because I think it’s important to acknowledge the complexity of what gender affirming voicework might be. I have also decided to write more as I turn back to my own words regarding queer autoethnography where I am asked “to reflect on the stories [I am] not ready or not willing to tell, questioning *why* [I am] not ready or willing to tell them and whether that is precisely the reason why [I] *should* tell them.”<sup>15</sup> That expressed, my decision to go into greater depth leaves me feeling very exposed because that part of my story is messy, dirty, and very open-ended. In returning to the naked, vulnerable Self from a few pages back, I recognize their courage. Sharing them with you is a small courageous step into the water.

If I am to be 100% honest with myself and with you, the reader, I must write that my naked, vulnerable body—both as a metaphor (i.e., imagery) and as a reality (i.e., my physical

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<sup>15</sup> Refer to p. 79 of this autoethnography.

body)—is something I look upon with disgust. Writing these words feels unsafe because of the way they are so very real. It is easy to silence a metaphor out of existence, to look upon that Self and cast them to the bottom of the ocean. It is harder to deny a physical body its reality, to open my eyes and see my own skin, to then say that that skin is not real.

‘Cause if I just believe  
then I don’t have to see what’s really there.  
No, I’d rather pretend I’m something better than these broken parts,  
pretend I’m something better than this mess that I am  
‘cause then I don’t have to look at it  
and no one gets to look at it.  
No, no one can really see  
‘cause I’ve learned to slam on the brake  
before I even turn the key  
before I make the mistake  
before I lead with the worst of me.  
I never let them see the worst of me.  
‘Cause what if everyone saw?  
What if everyone knew?  
Would they like what they saw?  
Or would they hate it too?  
Will I just keep running away from what’s true?

(“Words Fail,” *Dear Evan Hanson*, lyrics excerpt)

Writing these words for only myself invokes deep shame and hurt. Writing them with the thought of these words being read by you, the reader, invokes fear—fear of being seen, of being witnessed, of being unworthy. A naked Self at the bottom of the ocean cannot be seen by anyone, even myself. Hence the avoidance of body-based work. I am still working at being with that Self on a physical level, and it is unbelievably hard.

So, while I haven't more deeply experienced in the intersections of body-based and imagery work, I intend to pursue them at some point because I recognize their importance and value, for myself but also in considering work with others. I could do so much more with my own imagery now that I have realized it and now that I am in more of a grounded place than I was at the beginning of my voicework. I am drawn to the idea of 'stepping' into gender imagery, feeling how it impacts the ways in which I experience myself from moment-to-moment, although that work is certainly a large task, filled with deeply emotional full-body experiences. But it is all focused at embodying that imagery within my Self. These explorations might lead to worthwhile work and shift the ways in which I experience myself. The body has been imperative to connecting in to my Self and instrument.

Because of this, my own gender affirming voicework sessions almost always started with the body and the breath so that I could begin to more consciously and with as little tension as possible take in the air I needed to voice, to sing, to speak. This would then shift into attending to my voice.

### **Connecting parts, voicing Self**

Considering my own process within this journey, I began gender affirming voicework very focused on my physical voice and vocal behaviors. Although in a messy, unclear, and simultaneous manner, more voice-lesson-like work occurred alongside more improvisational

ways of working, I have attempted to tease out the more voice-lesson-like work from the more improvisational in what follows. Perhaps this is antithetical to what queer autoethnographers have encouraged of me; however, the difference between those two ways of working yielded very different kinds of experiences. While the work in each was indeed related and feel important to what gender affirming voicework might be with others, the ways I naturally engaged with more improvisational, chant-like voicework allowed me to more fully be both a witness to my Self and to embody that Self. For this reason, it feels important to tease out, while still attempting to leave my experiences within a queer space.

After working with my body and remaining attentive to my breath, my more voice-lesson-like work would start by warming-up my voice in the kinds of ways I might in a practice or choral setting, using a variety of melodic patterns, modulating up and down while working with technique to support the sound as I move about my voice. Refer to supplemental file 1.<sup>16</sup>

*...I hum, singing the vocal pattern 1-2-1-7-1, focusing on keeping my voice in a nice smooth legato. I pay attention to the ways I sometimes grab onto my tongue creating unnecessary tension to switch between notes. This would cause a kind of mechanical click with each pitch change. I move the legato pattern up and down the piano, and down into the lower parts of my voice, supporting my sound with some gentle accompaniment. ...*

*...On the pattern 1-5—4-3-2-1, I sing “ee,” moving up and down the piano, focusing on creating my sound from within a supported place, letting the sound come from low within by body. I sometimes forget to breathe and gently remind myself to take full breaths. ...*

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<sup>16</sup> Collage of vocal warm-up recording: <https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/collage-of-vocal-warm-ups>.

*...I sing “ee” on a staccato 1-3-5-3-1, attentive to my breath and to breathing deep into my body. I ask myself if my sound is supported, if the sound is connected to my body. I play the piano with the kind of energy and engagement that my voice needs.*

*...(reflective accounts based on 1/23/2018, 1/26/2018, & 2/22/2018 voicework sessions)*

In the beginning of this kind of work, vocal exercises then moved into speech at the end of the vocal pattern in attempts to navigate the fluid space of singing and speaking. Refer to supplemental file 2.<sup>17</sup>

*On “ee” I create what sounds like an engine rev in attempts to loosen my tongue, then let this fluidly shift into a five-note pattern of 5-4-3-2-1, moving into the phrase “easy is this sound” at the end of the pattern, attentive to the liminal space between song and speech. How can I carry this sound out of the context of an exercise and into my speech? How can I move up and down the piano and still maintain the sound? My struggles come with staying in the timbre and resonance of the sound, letting it be grounded and supported within my body. Where does the sound ‘fall’ out of the support? Where am I closing off the space, not voicing within the warmth of my voice? Am I letting go of the sound or attempting to control it? (reflective account of 11/6/2017 voicework session)*

In working in this liminal space between singing and speaking, I grew attentive to how I was engaging in the fluidity of song and speech naturally, working with the space between exercises where I would insert little comments, either in talking with Chris or talking out loud to myself about what just happened within my voice. I considered how my sound would change between exercises and actual speech.

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<sup>17</sup> Speech work excerpt (11/6/2017) recording: <https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/speech-work-excerpt>.

*I sing “ee” on the same vocal pattern and stop myself mid-through to say “okay, how about I do this,” but the difference between the sound I am working towards when singing is a striking contrast to the sound I fall into with these outside-the-exercise comments. My speech is much smaller and more forward in sound. It’s not the warmth of that “ee.” It is very different and doesn’t feel at all connected to what I am doing. It is frustrating to access something so warm and then to not have it transition. (reflective account of 11/6/2017 voicework session)*



Figure 12 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "disconnected," 12/1/2018.

I think part of this disconnect had to do with my voice attempting to navigate an exercise that was outside the context of my every-day speaking experiences. I wasn't working with how my voice was *already* voicing. I was doing an exercise and expecting that work within my singing to automatically shift into my speech.

Sing.

Speak.

Sing.

Speak.

But wait, are they not the same?

Sing-Speak-Si-Sp-ng-eak.

Whatever happened to that?

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 5/2019)

Returning to the more voice-lesson-like work, sometimes this would involve engaging with technique or expanding range while singing a song, changing the key of a song, running parallel to what I might do in a voice lesson. Refer to supplemental file 3.<sup>18</sup>

Remembering your touch, your kiss

Your warm embrace

I'll find my way back to you

Please say you'll be waiting

Together again

It would feel so good to be in your arms

Where all my journeys end

If you can make a promise

If it's one that you can keep

I vow to come for you

If you wait for me

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<sup>18</sup> "The Promise" (11/6/2017) recording: <https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/the-promise>. Please note that this was recorded using my iPhone and is not of the same quality as some of my other recordings.

And say you'll hold

A place for me in your heart.

(Tracy Chapman, excerpt from *The Promise*)

*I sit at the piano, singing and playing the entirety of this song. I love Tracy Chapman's voice, it's warmth and richness, the ways it unsettles expectations, sitting in this queer and fluid space. In many ways, Tracy's voice is a part of my gender imagery, something that I am drawn to and lean in towards. In attempting to embody that sound, I question: Am I supporting the sound? Where does the sound sit in my body? Am I opening up the vowel to fill it with warmth? I spend time with the lower notes of the song, taking them out of context of the song to let them expand into a larger and warmer space. I work to keep the sound consistent as I move throughout my voice and the song. Being fully immersed in the music is so enjoyable, particularly when the notes vibrate the full of me. (reflective account of 11/6/2017 voicework session)*

There was a point during my own voicework when I became very aware of how I was shifting sound to access the lower, richer parts of my voice with ease and deep resonance. To access that kind of sound requires patience, an opening up, a blossoming of sound, an awareness of sensation, of voicing—all to access what feels like some deeper-than-my-chest register. It is difficult to find adequate words to share with you the sensation of all of this because it is very much a physical experience for me and one that I feel I cannot simply describe. It's become sensations that I've learned about my own body and voice that clue me into being more connected with a voice that resonates with me.

*It's not another register, but the way I'm approaching it is similar to how I would approach an intentional switch from my chest-to-head or head-to-chest voice. This lower*



*space felt like it was just blooming out of my chest and the back of my head. It was incredibly validating, comforting, and freeing. (journal entry regarding 2/23/2018 voice lesson)*

Accessing that sound required me to realize specific sensations and experiences within myself that opened up that space so that I could more intentionally enter it outside of just sheer luck. Within the context of an exercise or within some of the more improvisational, chant-like work that I will soon explore, I utilized overtone singing<sup>19</sup> and humming, attending to the sensation of this, playing with the space within my mouth, particularly around my lower notes. Working with overtones involves intentionally playing with resonance, opening up the space for different notes to resonate and sound more clearly. This also sat alongside me focusing more on the sensations felt on my hard palate, feeling the vibrations of that and tuning into it to connect with my chest voice. I found it important to attend to the sensation within the back of my throat and mouth, particularly the space between my top back teeth, focusing on letting that space grow wider and bigger. As I've already expressed, it was important to check in with the level of engagement from my whole body in the creation and support of my voice. Lastly, I found the imagery of a "raw and real" sound to be so helpful. The image that comes up for me when considering raw sound is that of visceral, pure, full-of-life-and-body, got-me-moving-and-engaged, messy kind of experience. It vibrates. It pulses. It's an energizing sound.

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<sup>19</sup> According to the Smithsonian Institution (2019), in overtone singing (or throat-singing) "a singer can produce two or more notes simultaneously through specialized vocalization technique taking advantage of the throat's resonance characteristics. By precise movements of the lips, tongue, jaw, velum, and larynx, throat-singers produce unique harmonies using only their bodies. Throat-singing is most identified with parts of Central Asia, but it is also practiced in northern Canada and South Africa where the technique takes on different styles and meanings" (n.p.). It often is understood as a kind of chant-like singing.

*When I get **out** of it [i.e., this sound], I need to think about: What do I need to do with my body—my voice—to get back in that space? What's happening that's preventing me from staying there? That takes some effort to recenter myself, but I feel that since I've more concretely realized what needs to happen in my singing to access this space, I have more understanding of what needs to happen in my speech. Once I'm in it, it just clicks. Before it was all happenstance...it felt like pure chance that I could do it. And I don't know that I ever **really** successfully accessed that space while speaking before. It felt forced and took a lot of thought. All of this excites me even more because I have had some concern about whether accessing that sound through my speech would require a lot of effort—all day everyday—or that it wouldn't feel natural...but, over the past day or so, there have been moments, conversations, instances where it **doesn't** require conscious effort and when it feels **completely** natural. I'm just talking. (journal entry from 3/3/2018)*



Figure 13 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "being an ocean, being present to all of me, drastically opposite to [feeling like] the pinpoint," 1/16/2019.

My voice is an ocean,  
filling all of me.  
It is warmth.  
It is expansion.  
It is cleansing.  
It is a resource.  
It is a strength.  
My voice is an ocean,  
taking up so much space,  
letting me go to a greater depth,  
where my child sits wrapped in a blanket of that warmth.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 4/2019)

Although I have found great value in some of this earlier work, it's important to note that most, if not all, of the more voice-lesson-like work invoked a kind of 'perfection/performance' mindset where I just wanted to 'do it right,' to sing/speak 'androgyny' in the 'right' way. I understand that this mindset was tied to the ways in which I experienced that work as a voice lesson. Given my history as a voice student, I associated lesson and practice spaces as those in which I was focused on doing something correctly, improving my technique, being 'right.' While I understand this, that mindset wasn't helpful or productive. Nor was it queer. Nor was it really 'me' in that it was focused on performing and doing 'right'—that is, not just *being* with my Self. It felt quite distant from the 'raw' imagery that I eventually realized was so important. Alongside all of this, at one point, I began to experience tension with the ways this more voice-lesson-like work felt like forcing sound. In a reflection, I wrote in a journal that "it doesn't sound

like ‘me.’ It sounds forced and mechanical. Outside of speech. Not a part of ‘me’ but an organized effort.” For me, this required me shifting the way I approached this work, although perhaps for others, they might be able to exist in a voice-lesson-like space without experiencing the difficulties I did with being present to my Self.

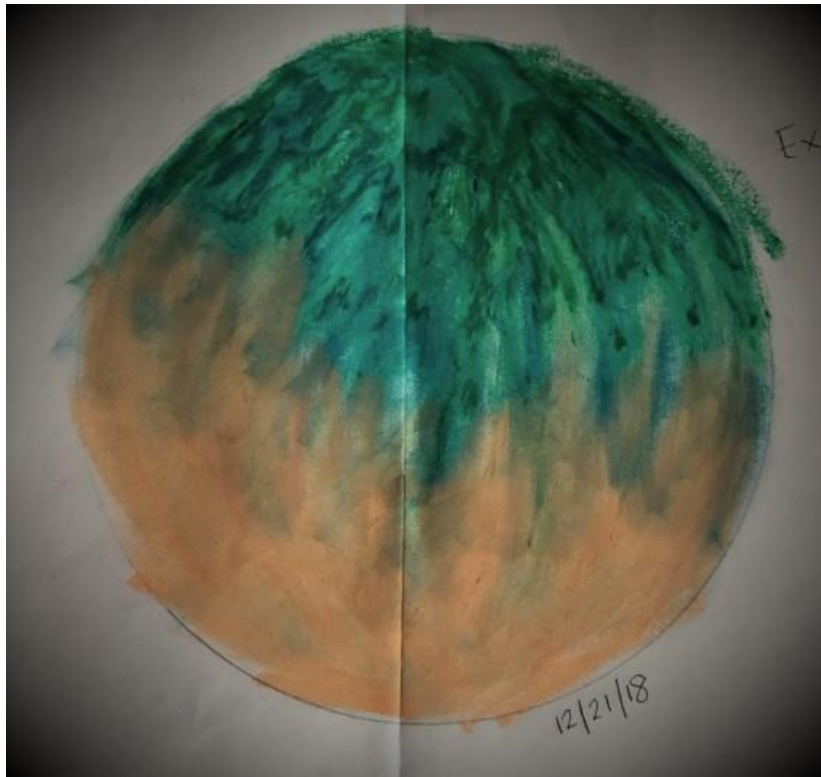


Figure 14 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "expansion," 12/21/2018.

The more voice-lesson-like work that I’ve discussed thus far was important, and I don’t intend to suggest that it’s not where *any* work happened or that it is somehow ‘less than.’ Because that’s just simply not true. I grew as a person within this work and began to have an even deeper, richer relationship with my voice, understanding it more intimately and the ways I could use it to access something that was truly ‘me.’ This work was an important part of my journey and has impacted the way I experience my voice and Self. But within my own gender affirming voicework, there was a gradual and almost unnoticeable shift from “How am I being heard by others?” to “What am I hearing from within myself?” And that shifted me out of work

that paralleled voice-lesson-like experiences and into more in-the-moment way of working where I grew more attentive to my own Self and experiences and became less focused on outcome. “Process over product,” as they say. I shifted into a more improvisational, chant-like work which emerged as I sat honestly and in-the-moment with my voice. This focused on being so deeply attentive to my own voice, to where it was naturally settling, to where I was feeling myself drawn to. It centered around willing the sound to open up, to be supported by my whole body, to be free and relaxed, and further to be present to my own body and experiences. This feels connected to the kind of radical receptivity and emphasis on listening to the body and Self that Lisa describes in her Embodied VoiceWork method.

Here, I would warm up my voice not through exercises, but through simply making music around different ‘givens’ of improvisation (Tony Wigram, 2004). This shift was important because it helped me to move out of a perfection mindset. Unfortunately, I do not have a recording of this particular experience.

*I sit at the piano and start a vocal and piano improvisation. I focus specifically on the sounds “s,” “ts,” and “z” to help me to engage my support, my diaphragmatic breathing.<sup>20</sup> I play with my voice rhythmically, my fingers adding to this rhythm along the black keys. I’m less focused on supporting myself and more focused on just being in the music, letting my voice sit alongside the piano. While this is enjoyable, I keep forgetting to breathe down into my back. Eventually, I gradually transition from the “z” sound into vocal sighs on “ah,” following my inner urge to sing and voice. The sighs soon turn into an “ng” sound. I feel the sound moving around my mouth, my voice returning to the rhythms from before. I let my voice wander around the piano, allowing it to morph from*

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<sup>20</sup> Constansis (2008).

*“ng” to an open “ah” and then back and forth between and “ah” and hum. My fingers still following my voice on the black keys. There’s freedom in just being with my voice while playing, although it is a struggle to both sing within that freedom and support myself on the piano in the ways that I want my voice to be supported. (reflective account of 10/28/2017 voicework session)*

I so desired for the kinds of music-making I was doing to be musically rich. I craved the music that sat beneath my voice to have a depth to it and to not just be a simple kind of support. It was hard for me to fulfill this need on my own while still attempting to voice and be attentive to the work I was doing in that capacity.

In this kind of work, I would also engage in improvisations where the givens were focused on certain techniques or thoughts. For example, one given was just to track resonance on my palate and to play with the sensation of shifting it around intentionally while also just being in the music and my own voice. Refer to supplemental file 4.<sup>21</sup>

*I hum throughout the improvisation, letting my voice settle to where it wants to be in the moment. Playing around the piano, I realize that I am singing in the key of Db. There’s some tension in my voice at the start. However, the entire improvisation has this “coming home” kind of feel to it, and the further I go along, I hear the way my voice open ups into a warmer and freer space. I felt so much contentment coming out of this improvisation, not only because my voice was in this really engaged space, but the piano was such a presence underneath me. At several points, I join the piano in unison, entering this both*

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<sup>21</sup> *Improvisational warm-up (2/22/2018) recording: <https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/improvisational-warm-up>. Please note that the microphone was placed too closely to the piano causing the piano to overpower the voice at times.*

*fragile and strong space that I am so connected with. (reflective account of 2/22/2018  
voicework session)*

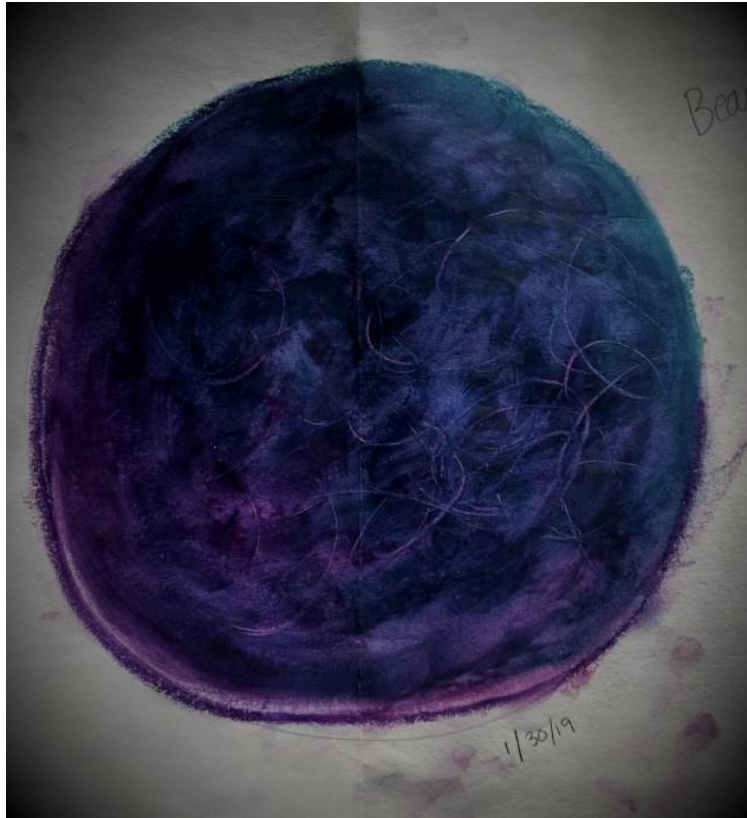


Figure 15 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "beautiful," 1/30/2019.

Although I was focused on technique and more deeply experiencing my voice by tuning into physical sensation, this improvisation moved into just being with my voice within the music, finding the ways that I wanted to engage in that moment. It was so grounding, and it satisfied the desire I had to be contained and expanded upon within the music. I think in some ways, by exploring vocal technique within improvisation, it opened voice-lesson-like work into a place of curiosity and wanting to know my own voice better. A voice-lesson-like space was too intimidating for me, perhaps because it was so familiar, and I had a particular way of existing within that space. So while the work is the same...it was so different.

One of the most pivotal moments in shifting into more in-the-moment song and speech work was with Sanne's CoreTone exercise from her voice assessment, which I mentioned earlier.<sup>22</sup> For review, it is the idea of being present to the ways I am using my voice, noticing the specific pitch, the CoreTone, that my voice gravitates to, elongating that pitch and sound out, and then toning on that sound, letting it open up and become relaxed and grounded in the body. Refer to supplemental file 5.<sup>23</sup>

*Beginning a variation of Sanne's CoreTone exercise, I begin talking to myself and it feels incredibly awkward. Not only am I very aware that I am talking to myself, but I am also aware that I am recording myself talking to myself. It's strange and doesn't feel natural at all. It's outside the context of my 'normal' speech. I want to quickly move into the toning part of this. I speak, letting my words become longer, letting there be more space between the consonants where the sound can be sustained. But I don't sit in this liminal space as long as I could have, perhaps because it feels awkward.*

*While toning what feels like my CoreTone on an open "ah," I let it move to a hum and then continue to go back and forth between these two sensations. Sanne's exercise calls for me to sing a singular pitch on an "ah," but I really enjoy the sensation of the hum in my chest and within my body. Searching for this note on the piano, I realize that it is an E3. I create what feels like waves of sound on the piano by sustaining an E minor chord in various octaves, moving my voice and the piano together, letting the piano lighten up as I pause to breathe and letting it come back in as I exhale sound out of me. (reflective account of 11/6/2017 voicework session)*

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to pages 55-57 of this autoethnography.

<sup>23</sup> CoreTone variation (11/6/2017) recording: <https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/coretone-variation>.



After listening back to the recording of this, I recognized that when I first began searching for my CoreTone, I was actually closer to an F3 or G3 than I was to an E3. Further, I even jumped up higher than that at times to a B3. At first, I thought: “Well, I did that wrong.” But then I thought: “Does it really matter? Perhaps that can give me important information.” I started off at F3/G3 but didn’t stay with those notes, despite the fact that these were really where my voice was. *My Self desired to sit lower within my voice.* That feels important. I wondered how working with the CoreTone in this kind of work could give me insight into where the *first* sound starts, where the voice is itself. And then where the voice *wants* to be, where it gravitates toward. I heard movement within my voice. That movement might show me where the work needs to happen. Listening back to this first experience of the CoreTone, I was also intrigued by the way I unintentionally supported my CoreTone with an E minor chord, which contains the extremes of my speech during this experience—E3 to B3.

Working with the CoreTone exercise sparked a deeper thought within me—what if instead of just isolating one singular note, I worked with longer phrases of speech? This began with poetry and song lyrics because in many ways they felt safer and less awkward—I had a piece of paper telling me exactly what to say. I didn’t feel pressured to talk about anything in particular but simply to read what was directly in front of me. But eventually, I moved into more intentionally working with my natural in-the-moment-outside-the-context-of-an-experience speech. Refer to supplemental file 6.<sup>24</sup>

*I read the text of the poem out loud,<sup>25</sup> the entire thing first, just to get the sound and words in my mouth. The second time through, I spend time with each phrase, working*

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<sup>24</sup> Poetry speech work (4/3/2019) recording: <https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/poetry-speech-work>.

<sup>25</sup> Nikita Gill, *Unlearning*.

*slower, to feel the way each sound exists within my voice and body. With the second time through, I search for the note on the piano—an Eb3—and I teeter back and forth between this note and F3. On the piano, I mostly move back and forth between and Eb major chord and F major chord, but I also occasionally include a Db major chord. I spend time with a few notes and words, ‘reiterating them,’ humming and focusing on the sensations on the palate, enjoying the way the words feels like they blossom into something warmer and richer within my body and voice. Most of my phrases drop off at the end, not really existing on any one pitch, but fading off into the fabric of my speech. There’s a moment where I pop out of the context of the poem and attend to my speech, which slightly shifted into a smaller space.*

*I question if the sound is free, relaxed, open. I question if the sound is grounded in my body. I question if I feel connected to the sound, if it is a representation of who I know myself to be. I question how I might be holding the sound back, only letting some small part of it out into the world. These questions encourage me to be present to myself and to open to my own sound. After slowly working with the poem, I read it back through again returning to my usual ‘speech’ speed, playing the piano underneath in attempts to capture some of the movement of my voice. The words of this poem so perfectly sit alongside this experience. (reflective account of 4/3/2019 voicework session)*

Some of the most exciting work for me has come out of engaging in this kind of chant-like, opening up of sound, where with repetition, the sound becomes freer, more relaxed, more grounded. It becomes filled with me—with my Self. I understand this aspect of the work I’ve done to be a kind of radical listening to the Self and the voice in-the-moment, attending to where they are and where they want to be, to where they want to grow, to the movement they desire.

My excitement with this work was not always the case, as I alluded to when describing the first CoreTone experience I did. While I've grown quite drawn to this way of working, I struggled alongside of that to sit within that liminal space between speech and song, where there's little distinction between one or the other. It was so easy for me to quickly move from speaking into singing and singing into speaking, to tease apart the ways my voice sings and the ways it speaks. It was hard to embrace the *overlap* between these voices without popping into my "singing voice" or my "speaking voice." In some ways, *both* were performed. But I grew more curious about *my* voice, and *that* voice is found within the in-between liminal space, where there's an uncertainty of whether I am singing or speaking. Perhaps I am always simultaneously doing both. I now so love that liminal space. It's where I am most energized at the thought of working with other people.

A big piece of my excitement comes from the ways these kinds of experiences have impacted me. I more often than not have left that chant-like space feeling more connected to my voice and to gaining access to richer and deeper resonances. In fact, there have been instances where I've shared this work during presentations, demonstrating the fluid shift between speech and song, showing the ways chanting and toning around my already spoken speech opened me up into something I more deeply connected with. After demonstrating that to those in attendance, it has impacted the ways I speak immediately afterwards, with my voice often staying with the same resonance that I just left the experience with. I was very aware of the ways this often happened, but it was so validating when those I was talking to heard it as well. It's easier for me to stay within that resonance after this kind of chant-like work because I had just spent all this time accessing it consistently. *It made it easier to come back home because I had been living there for a little bit.*

My basement,  
warm and furnished,  
a place where I can live,  
a place where I can find comfort.

I still go to the attic.  
I still go to the garden.  
I still go to the kitchen.  
But I am *home* in the basement.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 5/2019)

I get so excited about this work because I can spend a few minutes sitting with my speech and then let that shift me into a more connected space. I can do it in my car or when I'm at home. I personally think that working with my actual speech, out of the context of poetry or song lyrics, has been most meaningful because it's taken away some aspects of the 'performed,' of the voicing to 'sound' in a particular way. However, it also has required the most willingness to listen radically without shaming myself or feeling ridiculous.

At the moment, I am currently wrestling with the tensions and overlaps between where some of my own work started and where it is at the writing of this autoethnography. They feel quite different but still connected, intertwined together. I would likely not have experienced the work I ended with in the same ways had I not first engaged in the work that I started with. My beginning feels more behavioral. My current ending, or perhaps my current beginning, feels more holistic. When I think about how I might want to work with other people based on my own experiences, I'm drawn to work focused more on radically listening to one's Self; however, this

work is, of course, informed by more voice-lesson-like work which still assists me with voicing in healthy and sustainable ways.

**Held in the music, held in the water**

You are:

[...]

An untamed, powerful ocean  
of every experience that made you  
into a journey full of storms  
and quiet starry nights.

(Nikita Gill, *What You Are. What You Are Not.*, excerpt)

Within this gender affirming voicework, there were important instances where music held and supported the strong emotional responses I had within the work, containing those emotions through improvisation and music-making, providing a space to acknowledge and be with them. One experience began with reading the lyrics to “Weep No More,” a song that Chris and I had been working with during a voice lesson and that I took to my solo voicework space. The lyrics/music are filled with a melancholy feeling. Although the song was selected purely for working with technique, I find it interesting how reading through the text of these lyrics to work with speech eventually led an experience filled with a kind of sadness and disappointment. Refer to supplemental file 7.<sup>26</sup>

Weep you no more, sad fountains;

What need you flow so fast?

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<sup>26</sup> *Improvising to hold emotion (2/1/2018)* recording: <https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/improvising-to-hold-emotion>.

Look how the snowy mountains  
Heaven's sun doth gently waste!  
But my sun's heavenly eyes  
View not your weeping,  
That now lies sleeping,  
Softly now, softly lies sleeping.

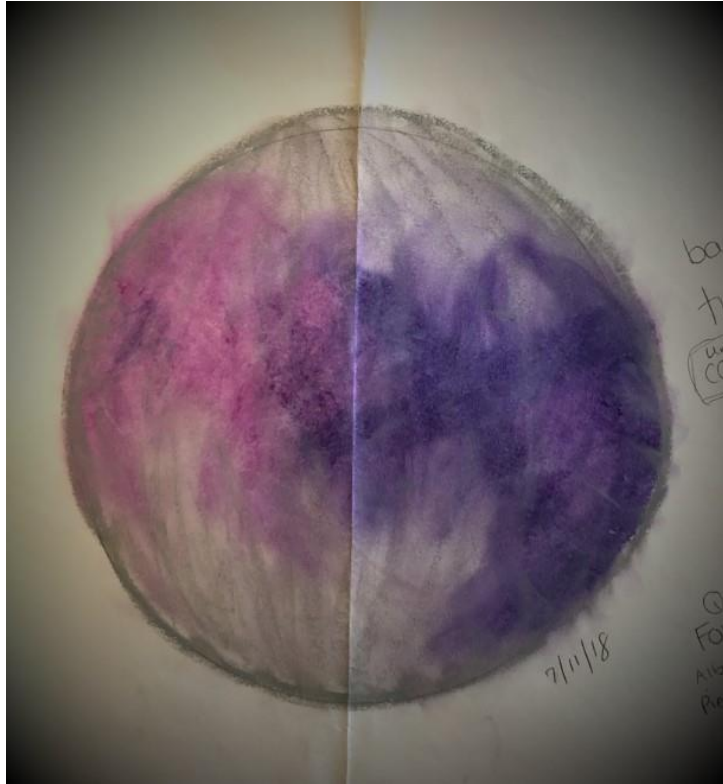
Sleep is a reconciling,  
A rest that peace begets:  
Doth not the sun rise smiling  
When fair at e'en he sets?  
Rest you, then, rest, sad eyes!  
Melt not in weeping,  
While she lies sleeping,  
Softly now, softly lies sleeping.

(Roger Quilter, *Weep You No More*)

*I spend time with the first two lines of this, attending to the melody of my speech, which surrounds the notes of F, G, G#, and A. I play around on these notes, taking them out of the specific melodic pattern they began in. I tone on them, focused on letting them grow out into something else. I work with playing with overtones of these notes, and there's an opening up that comes with this. However, as I progress, I find myself getting very frustrated because my voice wasn't quite working the way I want it to be working. I experience it with a heavy, clunky, and tense ungroundedness. Eventually, I give up on*

*continuing with more technically focused work and seamlessly move into an improvisation not focused on anything in particular. I can't recall the specific point at which I moved away from the 'work.' I am so connected to this improvisation, using the same notes I had just been working with, although I added various aspects of a minor scale to them as the improvisation progressed. As the improvisation begins to come to an end, it grows quite angsty, with some very strange vocal sounds and techniques coming out of my voice. I left my voicework session here, in this weird space. I experience my voice after this improvisation as sad, disappointed, discouraged. I feel disheartened about what just happened. (reflective account of 2/1/2018 voicework session)*

This experience was so needed for what was going on internally for me, and honestly, is perhaps the 'best' representation for what I imagine gender affirming voicework to be with others because of the ways this experience brought me into a more holistic space. This was valuable work in that I was present to what I was feeling and took the time to attend to that. However, if I had been working with a music therapist, we could have attempted to process how this improvisation related to the greater context of my voicework, and we could have processed the emotional experiences of that larger context. Most, if not all, of my gender affirming voicework sessions were not processed in-the-moment with another person in the kinds of ways a music therapist could support that processing. The work existed within the void of a practice room, where I was the only one present. Even when working with Chris, who *was* attentive to the ways I at times experienced hesitation and discomfort within our work, he isn't a music therapist and isn't trained for that work. A music therapist trained in gender affirming voicework could have helped to broaden the meaningful experiences I had within this voicework.



*Figure 16 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "uncomfortably comforted," 7/11/2018.*

Considering other instances, there were times when I would access this part of my voice that I so deeply connected with, where my voice would work, flow, fluidly exist in this rich and warm space with an ease that was so comforting and enjoyable. Sometimes I would continue in the work that led me to that space, whether that be working with speech melodies, a CoreTone variation, and so on. Other times, I would turn to improvisation and music-making as a way of more deeply appreciating and being with that sound, enjoying the sensation it gave me, vibrating my body, filling me with a kind of wholeness. In those instances, I didn't want to be in the work I was just in. I wanted to swim in a sound bath of my Self.



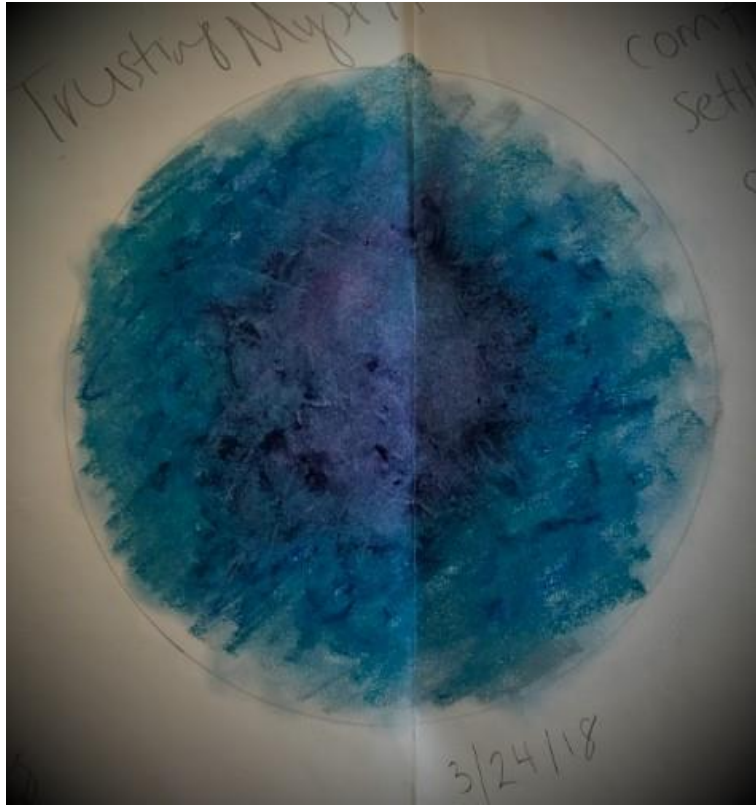


Figure 17 Mandala from GIM/MI music therapy session, notes read "trusting myself," 3/24/2018.

All in all, music served as this holding space for me, where the emotions contained within my gender affirming voicework found a way to be explored to at least some degree. My work was deeply emotional, providing the space for my own past experiences of trauma to spring into the moment, pushing me to pursue work with a GIM/MI music therapist, even as that work didn't evolve from the conscious awareness of my being pushed. My gender affirming voicework also provided the space to invoke feelings of hope for a more affirming way of existing (i.e., the future). I am so grateful for the ways music exists in this nonlinear, interconnected space, where so much can come out if we only provide it the space.

### **The return**

When I sing for them,

I crave their love.

I crave the applause.  
I crave their words  
to validate  
that my voice  
is worth using.  
When I sing for them,  
I don't see myself.  
I see their response,  
their praise, their pain.  
So I sing them things that make them smile.  
I sing them things I know they love.  
But you didn't ask me this.  
You asked me what it *means* to sing for them.

Singing for them  
means drowning myself.  
It means suffocating myself  
in that ocean,  
sinking myself down  
to its bottom  
where I can't breathe,  
where I can't sing,  
where I am lost,

where some ghost of myself  
floats at the top,  
half-heartedly singing  
some fairytale of a song.  
Yet they don't tell the difference.

But you also asked what it means  
to be heard as my authentic self  
...and I cry...  
because I don't know how  
to sing for them  
and simultaneously sing for myself.  
Because to be heard as myself  
means I must sing for no one else.  
Because to be heard as myself  
means I will likely  
not be heard  
by them.  
At least not  
with praise,  
with love-like words,  
with applause.

Because to be heard as myself

means diving down

to the deepest depths

of this ocean

to find the part of me

that has morphed

into some foreign,

magical creature

to survive.

To find the part of me

that has become water.

That grew fins

to swim and not die.

That grew gills

to keep singing

in solo water caverns.

That made home

in this ocean,

finding songs within the waves,

echoes in the caves.

That found safety

in solitude and independence,

because the authenticity

of this creature  
was banished.

But nothing  
can live  
in darkness  
forever.

And nothing  
can sing  
in silence  
forever.

You ask what it means  
to be heard as my authentic self.

It means freedom.

It means letting the comfort  
of those love-like words  
mean nothing

because they alone  
don't validate my worth.

It means letting their manipulation  
roll off my skin  
like drops of water

for I have survived  
deeper waters.  
For the water  
is as a part of me  
as my very breath.  
For I can breathe  
on land and in oceans.  
And perhaps  
that is the  
one gift  
all of this  
has given me.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*, 1/2019)<sup>27</sup>

I return to that child from the opening pages of this autoethnography who wholeheartedly belts at the top of their lungs, throwing pure, unfiltered, radical sound at a world whose vastness they haven't fully realized. That child sings of a desire to run, to jump, to dance, to wander, to be on the surface with the people, to be a part of something they knew they were always a part of. That child felt their humanness and knew their place within the world, within some alternative fairytale that we missed the beginning of. You see, before Ariel was a mermaid, she was human, not the other way around. The real story is that Ariel in her human state got thrown into the ocean, sank deep down into a place she never thought she'd go. To save her, Ursula used her

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<sup>27</sup> After discussing with my therapist the overlaps that I was recognizing between my GIM/MI music therapy space and my gender affirming voicework, my therapist encouraged me to journal. This poem came out of that journaling.

magic to change Ariel from human to mercreature, meaning well although the damage was done. There's a kind of death in transformation. When it was finally safe enough, Ursula returned Ariel back into a human. And my child, my inner Self was always human. They lived through the trauma, but they want us to know that we all missed the point. We all focused on the wrong part of the story. *We saw transformation. But it was always a return.*

**Still ‘Becoming’**

“My closing refrain has played at the corners of my mind. I don’t plan to write much. I don’t need to, as I’ve said much of what I must say. Why am I not writing? It isn’t quite writer’s block, because I think that if I sat down I’d know what [I’d want] to say. [...]”

(Timothy Huffman in Alexander et al., 2018, p. 322)

I am not analyzing my experiences to provide some clearly articulated summary. This is in the attempt to provide you, the reader, with the space to breathe, to live and create within this text, this story. To find your own meaning, your own creative understanding of what this account means to you about the field of music therapy and gender affirming voicework with others. I do, however, wish to state that this work is an approach and method that I have developed and will continue to develop as I begin to work alongside individuals who wish to access a more affirming voice and embodiment for themselves. The ideas surrounding and contained within gender affirming voicework fill me with such an excitement, and it is through experiencing my own journey of this work that I’ve come to realize that this is my life’s passion. I am particularly interested in prioritizing the voices, experiences, and bodies of trans and nonbinary people in attempts to intimately engage with the complexity of this process within a therapeutic relationship. In my mind, that begins with dialogue and working alongside each other to explore the challenges and possibilities of this work. Once I begin clinically working with others in this way and become informed by those experiences, I will further share my method to more deeply consider this work within music therapy. As mentioned earlier, I relate to the experiences of Mary Priestley, Peter Wright, and Marjorie Wardle, who explored Analytical Music Therapy first amongst themselves and then shifted that work into clinical spaces.



I must also explicitly write of the importance of training within this gender affirming voicework method that I am developing. I have been immersed in these ideas and this process for over two years and have only worked with myself. That has been deeply informative to my understanding of gender affirming voicework. I do not feel that this work is something you can just read about and do. I believe that it requires an in-depth exploration of speech-language pathology literature surrounding trans and nonbinary voices; an engagement with similar voicework music therapy methods (such as Lisa's Embodied VoiceWork method); an intimate knowledge of healthy vocal use and vocal pedagogy; training around working with imagery in informed and deep ways (such as GIM); an in-depth understanding of trauma-informed work and the ways it could inform understandings of trans and nonbinary experiences; continued learning surrounding trans and nonbinary healthcare and culture; and a deep interrogation and addressing of personal values and biases surrounding gender and other cultural axes of identity. I am not an expert by any means, and personally think that words like 'expert' too easily impose hierarchies and reduce the possibilities for the 'expert' to continue to expand. I have so much growth yet to do with the intention to pursue training and/or personal work with Lisa, potentially some GIM training, and other trainings/education around vocal health and function, while continuing to immerse myself in trans and nonbinary culture, spend time with my own voice and body, and continuously work to engage with more cultural humility. Despite feeling strongly about all of that, I am left with more questions than answers.

In attempts to invite you, the reader, into my own experiences, I wish to voice a set of questions that arose throughout this autoethnography and that we might query together through dialogue and further exploration.

- How might gender affirming voicework impact a person on a holistic level?

- What might be the roles of the music therapist in working with the physical voice, the psychological voice, the body, gender imagery, and the overarching emotional aspects of gender affirming voicework?
- What kinds of experiences might we offer in gender affirming voicework?
- What kind of knowledge/training do we need to engage in gender affirming voicework safely and effectively?
- How might we assess and evaluate gender affirming voicework?
- How might we collaborate with other fields?
- What considerations are needed to possibly expand gender affirming voicework into different kinds of gendered experiences (i.e., working with other trans and nonbinary or cis persons)?

These questions hold so many possibilities of breathing new life into the air. I understand gender affirming voicework to be a work in progress, and there's no great way of ending a story that's in the process of becoming something else. However, I will end with a quote that perhaps captures this autoethnography in some miniscule way. I hope my story leaves you with the wonder, excitement, and passion with which I am currently filled.

“I am inspired by the ideas that float through this article like pockets of oxygen trapped in a sea meant to breathe life into our bodies long enough for us to escape our realities and offer a bit of hope for what is to come. Much of what is to come is buried in the questions [...]”

(Amber Johnson in Alexander et al., 2018, p. 323)

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## Appendix

### Suggested Steps in a Voice and Communication Program (Adler, 2012, pp. 515-519)

Following is a generalized voice and communication therapy protocol for the transgender/transsexual TG/TS client. This is by no means a complete voice and communication program but rather a suggestion of where to at least begin. Based on the individual needs of the client, the steps below may be used in their entirety or only parts of the program may be used.

- A. Establish a vocal health program to ensure safety and preservation of vocal folds.
- B. Use instrumentation measures to allow for visual and auditory feedback to the client for pitch work, intonation, perturbation, and shimmer.
- C. Have the client keep a journal of successes and failures during the days when the client does not attend therapy so that the clinician can monitor the client's progress during the transition period. This allows the clinician to check for vocally abusive or misuse practices.
- D. Teach and establish spontaneous abdominal breathing for optimum breath support for speech production purposes.
- E. Establish optimum breathing patterns; check for jitter and shimmer at this point; notice any misuse or abusive vocal behaviors.
- F. Attempt a sequence that uses nasalance to establish a proper and appropriate forward resonance pattern [vocal feminization].
- G. There are a number of voice therapy protocols that may be implemented for TG/TS client with a pre-existing voice disorder or subsequent problems due to abuse or misuse.
  - Chewing method
  - Yawn-Sigh Method
  - Pushing technique
  - Progressive Relaxation
  - Easy-Onset Initiation
  - Beckman Facial Massage (Beckman, 1999)
  - Laryngeal manipulation (helpful to those who have difficulty raising the larynx to increase fundamental frequency of pitch) [vocal feminization]
  - Digital Laryngeal Manipulation
  - Humming/chanting for resonance
  - Resonant Voice Therapy (RVT): frontal focus [vocal feminization]
- H. Introduce the *Rainbow Passage* to establish breathing, phrasing, relaxed easy onset for spontaneous reading and eventually speaking in connected speech. The *Rainbow Passage* helps the patient to transition from short phrases with and without nasalance to more connected, yet still controlled speech.
  - When the sunlight strikes raindrops in the air, they act like a prism and form a rainbow. A rainbow is a division of white light into many beautiful colors. These take the shape of a long round arch, with its path high above, and its two ends apparently beyond the horizon. There is, according to legend, a boiling pot of gold at one end. People look, but no one ever finds it. When a man looks for something beyond his reach, his friends say that he is looking for the pot of gold at the end of the Rainbow.
- I. Introduce the *My Grandfather* passage as a more difficult reading task to further establish breathing, phrasing, relaxed easy onset for spontaneous reading and eventually speaking

in connected speech. This passage helps transition the client from shorter sentences to longer utterances with and without nasalance to more connected, longer yet controlled speech. [Below is] illustrated the typical *My Grandfather* passage that is used in most therapy sessions.

- You wished to know about my grandfather. Well he is nearly 93 years old; he dresses himself in an ancient black frock coat, usually minus several buttons. Yet he still thinks as swiftly as ever. A long, flowing beard clings to his chin, giving those who observe him a pronounced feeling of the utmost respect. When he speaks, his voice is just a bit cracked and quivers a trifle. Twice each day he plays skillfully and with zest upon our small organ. Except in the winter when the snow or ice prevents, he slowly takes a short walk in the open air reach [sic] day. We have often urged him to walk more and smoke less, but he always answers “Banana Oil!” Grandfather likes to be modern in his language.

- J. Introduce the *Town-Heuer Reading Passage*, which is a more difficult piece to read, and at the same time control breathing, phrasing, intonation, and so forth. This will help the client move from simple connected speech as in *My Grandfather* to a more difficult illustration using multisyllabic words and more difficult sentence structure while maintaining practice with and without nasalance, yet still controlling speech output and maintaining the new fundamental frequency of pitch. [Below] illustrates the part of the *Town-Heuer Reading Passage* that is commonly used in voice and fluency therapy clinics.

- If I take a trip this August I will probably go to Austria. Or I could go to Italy. All of the places of Europe are easy to get to by air, rail, ship, or auto. Everybody I have talked to says he would like to go to Europe also.

Every year there are varieties of festivals or fairs at a lot of places. All sorts of activities, such as, foods to eat, sights to see, occur. Oh, I love to eat ices seated outdoors! The people of each area are reported to like us—the people of the U.S.A. It is said that it is true except for Paris.

Aid is easy to get because the officials are helpful. Aid is always available if troubles arise. It helps to have with you a list of offices or officials to call if you do require aid. If you are lost, you will always be helped to locate your route or hotel. The local police will assist you, if they are able to speak as you do. Otherwise, a phrase book is useful.

I have had to have help of this sort each trip abroad. However, it was always easy to locate. Happily, I hope, less help will be required this trip. Last trip every hotel was occupied. I had to ask everywhere for flats. Two earlier trips were hard because of the lack of heat at hotels.

On second thought, I may want to travel in autumn instead of August. Many countries can be expensive in the summer months and much less so in autumn. November and December can make fine months for entertainment in many European countries.

There may be concerts and musical events more often than during the summer. Milan, Rome, and Hamburg, not to mention Berlin, Vienna, London, and Madrid are most often mentioned for music.

Most of my friends and I wouldn't miss the chance to try the exciting, interesting, and appetizing menus at most continental restaurants. In many European countries, food is inexpensive and interestingly prepared.

- K. Introduce progressive relaxation to reduce tension in the laryngeal area.
- L. Have the client read from a short and then a longer poem that will aid in helping to learn different breath support needs depending on the length, tone, mood, sentence, or word length of an utterance.
- M. Have the client practice [their] new vocal parameters during a spontaneous conversation chosen by the clinician.
- N. Have the client practice [their] new vocal parameters during a conversation with a client-chosen topic.
- O. Employ all techniques through interaction in the client's community, work, and/or school environment without help from the clinician.
- P. Review all exercises above.
- Q. Have at least two or three counseling sessions near the termination of therapy to allow the patient to vent about [their] feelings concerning the new voice and communication skills, ask questions, as well as develop confidence in the new voice. Know when "speech and voice" counseling should be referred to a professional psychologist or counselor when emotions seem to dominate the session.
- R. Work on singing techniques if appropriate for the particular TS/TG patient, because many singers often forget their voice training when talking.

It is important for each client embarking on voice/communication feminization to maintain a healthy and safe voice throughout the entire process. The above protocol is an outline of a total program that may meet most client's needs. The clinician and client will need to decide those aspects that are necessary.