"It's Like Mixing Paint":

Songwriting Alternative Gender Cultures with Young People as an 'After-Queer' Methodology

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Abstract

This paper conceptualises songwriting as an 'after-queer' approach for exploring notions of gender and sexuality with young people. The article draws on songs created by seven groups of young people in music-based workshops which took place in schools with participants aged between 14–17. During these workshops, songwriting was used to explore the participants' imaginings of what gender might look like in their "perfect world". 'After-queer' scholarship is introduced and referred to throughout the paper as it relates to queer theory and research with young people, particularly focusing on discourses of risk and vulnerability that emerge across these fields. The paper highlights the value of creative and arts-based methodologies in queer research, through which expansion and questions of possibility, alternative, and identity can be raised and responded to. 'After queer' is offered as a useful lens for critical analysis, particularly in light of complex questions related to the promotion of "diversity" that emerged through the findings.

Keywords: *gender, gender diversity, young people, schools, songwriting, after-queer*

Introduction

This article draws on songs created by seven groups of young people in music-based workshops, to conceptualise songwriting as an *after-queer* (Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010) approach for exploring gender and sexuality with young people. The paper demonstrates the value of creative and arts-based methodologies in queer youth research, through which notions of expansion, alternative possibilities, and identity can be raised and responded to. In doing so, I seek to highlight and critique dominant narratives present in research related to young people – narratives that focus on woundedness, victimhood, and risk, and that ultimately position queer and gender diverse young people as inherently vulnerable. I write the paper as a queer person myself, who is White, socialised as a woman, and nondisabled. As a non-Aboriginal person in Australia, I locate myself as a settler on occupied lands. In relation to matters of gender and sexuality, I am informed particularly by the work of scholars who reflect upon the

ways the gender binary has been normalised and naturalised through overt and covert processes of White dominance, colonisation, and Western imperialism (for example refer to Lugones, 2013; Mohanty, 1988).

The data drawn upon in this paper stem from a broader doctoral project which examined the role of music therapy in exploring gender and power with young people in school. The project commenced with a one-year pilot study, in which songwriting was used with groups of young people in one-off workshops across seven separate school sites, to explore their ideas of what gender might look like in their "perfect world." I commence the paper by articulating the key tenets of *after-queer* scholarship, and its relationship to queer theory. Next, I review the literature related to gender and queer theory in music therapy research and practice. I then provide a methodological overview of the study before presenting a selection of the songs written by the participants in the project. Using an *after-queer* lens, I examine the themes present in these songs and what songwriting offered as a process of repositioning, and I note some of the complexities and tensions that arose in the data.

After-Queer

After-queer is a term initiated by gender and sexuality theorists in youth studies and educational studies, Susan Talburt and Mary Lou Rasmussen. In defining and proposing the need for *after-queer* scholarship, Talburt and Rasmussen (2010) explicated several key points. First, that *after-queer* does not denounce or police queer theory or imply that it is *post* or *beyond* queer theory (p. 1). Rather, the language of *after-queer* acknowledges that *queer* itself is an always-incomplete project rather than an arrival point. In this sense, *after-queer* is a pursuit of queer and a pursuit of meaning *beyond* what can still be accomplished within queer theory (p. 2). Such pursuit is a response to the limitations identified by authors such as Jean Bobby Noble (2006) in the ways queer representational vocabularies tend to both stabilise and destabilise. Alan McKee (1999) wrote about the sense of fatigue in routine queer analysis: "Queer writing too often falls into simplistic celebration – how many times can one read that Queer offers a way of deconstructing the binary categories by which heterosexuality sustains and reproduces itself, and still feel excited?" (p. 166).

Thus, *after-queer* seeks to engage critically with tendencies, habits, limitations, and traditions associated with queer theory and research; it is an inevitably fraught and multifaceted project. Centrally, however, *after-queer* is invested in problematising and decoupling notions of the *subject*, particularly queer youth. Talburt and Rasmussen (2010) pointed to the "abject gay youth" as a foundational figure in queer research (p. 3). They argued that the constant drift towards narratives of woundedness, risk, and victimhood that pervade queer narratives construct a paradox: positioning queer youth as "our children" in need of protection, appeasing the guilt of the privileged, and reifying ideas of nationalistic "goodness." Talburt (2010) wrote that *after-queer* offers new possibilities to extend queer's potential for analysis, by detaching *queer* from specific subjects and necessitated associations with transgression and resistance (p. 50). Daniel Marshall (2010) wrote that *after-queer* "sympathizes with but also moves beyond the queer critique of victim-based or deficit approaches" (p. 66). Broadly, *after-queer* does not necessitate a centring of queer subjects, and it challenges the sense of othering constructed by the binary of homo/heterosexual. *After-queer* seeks to disrupt universalising discourses of "problems" and "solutions," problematising regulatory narratives of progress and the idea that transgression is inherently transformative. Talburt (2010) summarised, "A goal for 'after-queer' research is to refuse to create identities as answers or to create answers for identities" (p. 62).

Gender and Sexuality in Music Therapy

Since the 21st century, literature related to music therapy practice and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual + (LGBTQIA+) studies has grown significantly. Discourse in music therapy began with a small handful of reflections on work-

ing with LGBT clients (Ahessy, 2011; Chase, 2004), has since seen an empirical interest in examining music therapists' attitudes and actions, and has developed new theoretical models and best practice guidelines for working with LGBTQIA+ populations (Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2012; Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2013; Whitehead-Pleaux & Tan, 2017). Said research indicated music therapists' interest and support for working with LGBTQIA+ clients, though highlights some of the persistent clashes within the literature related to how queerness and gender diversity is examined and represented. In Whitehead-Pleaux et al.'s (2012) national survey, over half of the respondents indicated that music therapists do not feel adequately prepared for such work. A smaller study by Wilson and Geist (2017) subsequently surveyed music therapists in training, aiming to gauge music therapy students' self-reported preparedness to work with LGBT clients. Their research revealed inconsistencies in students' knowledge and self-perceived preparedness, and the authors encouraged music therapy educators to more directly address gender and sexuality-related issues.

An after-queer perspective, however, may critique the positioning of queer and gender diverse clients as a separate and distinct subject group who therapists must "prepare" to work with. Primarily, an after-queer lens questions the implications of seeking progress through a focus on the "LGBTQIA+ subject." Especially given that measuring therapists' self-identified preparedness conveys not only a level of implied vulnerability of the queer subject, but a focus on the music therapy profession to reveal how comfortable/uncomfortable they are to work with, and indeed protect, such a population. Further, by grouping and seeking to develop "best practice" for LGBTQIA+ people, narratives of queer and gender non-conforming individuals as a single and cohesive group are upheld. Doing so could be seen to collapse the broad range of needs and infinitely diverse experiences of LGBTQIA+ people into this one category, furthering processes of abnormalisation and ultimately positioning queer and gender diverse people as "other." Relatedly, the after-queer pursuit is predicated on the ways the gender binary and heteronormativity are ideologies under which we *all* exist. Therefore, such a lens advocates for a focus on these systems that regulate and uphold violence and erasure, rather than seeking only to ameliorate the consequences suffered by those who do not comply.

Literature that works to *queer* music therapy research and practice has appeared in recent years, with authors extending discussion beyond power differentials between men and women, or therapists' competencies with LGBT populations, and into the fluid and performative dimensions of gender as a naturalised social construct. Rolvsjord and Halstead (2013) laid the contemporary foundations for considering music therapy as an arena for gender as an action and performance which is in constant negotiation, using the example of a client's singing in music therapy to unpack notions of gender disruption and affirmation. Candice Bain, Patrick Grzanka, and Barbara Crowe (2016) initiated a music therapy framework informed by queer theory for working with young people. *Queer music therapy* draws on affirmative and liberatory approaches to gender and sexuality and can be located more broadly within anti-oppression scholarship that situates personal struggles as inextricably connected to broader structures of oppression (Baines, 2013). Bain et al. (2016) explicated how queer theory can both complement and problematise developments in social justice-based music therapy approaches, particularly in questioning notions of "fixed" and "normal" identities. As such, their model serves as the first in music therapy which advocates for dismantling the existing framework in order to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ young people, rather than assuming they can be included within the existing framework.

In developing "radically inclusive" queer music therapy for adolescent contexts, Bain et al. (2016) advocate for journeying away from "therapy for queer clients," and into "queer therapy" (p. 28). Such positioning resonates with themes in after-queer scholarship –rejecting notions of young people's inherent vulnerability, that LGBTQIA+ youth are in need of fixing, or that they should be encouraged to adjust to normative culture. Instead, queer music therapy works to create spaces for young people's celebration and alternative imaginings – a recurring theme called for across both

after-queer literature (Bryan, 2017) and queer music therapy. Radically inclusive music therapy techniques include ways of *queering* musical autobiographies, songwriting, lyric analysis, multimodal arts-based activities, and group anthem writing. In two book chapters I have articulated examples of how these techniques can be applied in music therapy in school settings (Scrine 2019; Scrine & Stanger, 2019). In these chapters I advocated for the shift beyond working to *include* queer and gender diverse young people in music therapy practice and into including an after-queer perspective into adolescent music therapy practice.

Building on the queer music therapy model, Catherine Boggan, Patrick Grzanka, and Candice Bain (2017) then undertook an evaluation into music therapists' perspectives on queer music therapy, interviewing 12 music therapists who identify as LGBTQ+ or are experienced in working with LGBTQ+ clients. The authors opened the article by noting the lack of substantive engagement with critical theories in music therapy and the significance of the queer music therapy model in obligating music therapists to engage with critical race theory and intersectional scholarship (p. 376). Departing from the sense of enthusiasm the authors have identified among music therapists to engage with critical theory and the new proposed model, their study illuminated some strengths and weaknesses of queer music therapy. Overarchingly, their investigation pointed to music therapists' varied perspectives on politicising therapy, which some participants saw as a complication, whereas others saw as inherent and obligatory. Their findings indicated the strengths of the model to include the theoretical basis of queer theory in challenging notions of deficit, pathologisation, deviance, and political neutrality. The limitations the authors identify within queer music therapy centre upon an insufficient engagement with intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and a lack of attendance to structural privilege within the profession. Most recently, in Susan Hogan's edited text, *Gender and Difference in the Arts Therapies*, Susan Hadley and Maevon Gumble (2019) rigorously unpacked the binary framework of gender and sex in music therapy, adopting an anti-oppressive stance to demonstrate the rigidity of this framework within therapeutic contexts. Throughout their chapter, Hadley and Gumble challenge cisgenderism[1] as an ideology regulated and maintained by social institutions, seeking to *queer* music therapy discourse by attending to the dynamics of representation, and intentionally examining the ways we use look, listen, and use language. Hadley and Gumble problematised routine practices throughout health and social care, emphasising the role of these systems in upholding oppressive gender norms. Simultaneously, they celebrated the multiplicity of gender experiences and positioned music therapy as an affirmative space in which acts such as singing can shift the gendered dimensions of a space. In queering music therapy practice, gender and sex are complicated, and gender expressions are fluid and vast, rather than limited to fixed, binary expectations. In this sense, Hadley and Gumble's (2019) chapter echoed the departure points of the after-queer pursuit, focusing on attending to the intricacies of gendered systems, rather than solely on the needs and trauma of LGBTQIA+ subjects. Across all of the queer music therapy literature, however, there is a tendency to attend primarily to queer and gender diverse clients as the focus of inclusive practice and to draw on instances of oppression and harm based on their identities as the *work* of therapy. Inspired by the premises of after-queer scholarship, this article turns to focus on the experiences, insights, and visions of young people in general.

Music Therapy and Young People

The significant and multifaceted relationship that young people have with music is well documented across disciplines including music therapy (McFerran, 2010), youth identity (Tarrant, North, & Hargreaves, 2002), music psychology (Saarikallio & Erkkilä, 2007), and psychology (Laiho, 2004). Some shared tenets across these diverse fields of research and practice include the ways young people use music to communicate, support their own wellbeing, and construct and perform their individual and group identity (refer to McFerran et al., 2015; Miranda, 2013; Ruud, 1997). It has been

noted for some time, however, that the role of music in young people's lives will vary along sociocultural lines. Karen Estrella (2001) wrote,

> The meaning and function of church music for a working-class African American woman, and of pop rock-and-roll for an upper-class White adolescent girl are different. How culture defines, contextualizes, and prioritizes the experience of music is essential knowledge for music therapists. (p. 54)

Rolvsjord and Halstead's critical explorations of the gendered underpinnings and politics of musical acts (2013) and musical instruments (2017) indeed come into focus here, when considering the different ways young people may experience and express their musical identities. However, aside from Bain et al.'s (2016) article on queer music therapy, there is limited exploration into how issues related to gender, sex, and sexuality are relevant in the lives and institutional contexts of young people. Rather, a focus in the literature has been on developing standardised assessment tools and conducting randomised controlled trials and systematic reviews concerning adolescent practice. It could be said that music therapy literature concerning young people has tended to focus on adolescent vulnerability, pathology, and how music can act as a preventative and supportive resource for adolescents broadly positioned as "at risk." Such literature has worked to meet the demand for evidence-based practice, focusing on the role of music in relation to mental illness or mood management (for example, refer to Gold, 2017; McFerran, Garrido, & Saarikallio, 2016; Papinczak, Dingle, Stoyanov, Hides, & Zelenko, 2015; Porter et al., 2017), substance abuse (for example, refer to Albornoz, 2011; Hohmann, Bradt, Stegemann & Koelsch, 2017), and integration and violence prevention in schools (Carr & Wigram 2009; Derrington, 2012; Wölfl, 2016). Looking beyond approaches that single out and seek to treat or "help" particular populations, some music therapy literature adopts a position more aligned with an after-queer lens, instead focused on reshaping the structures that delineate power and that position particular groups on the margins. These are typically identified within the community music therapy and resource-oriented music therapy scholarship (for example, refer to McFerran & Rickson, 2014; Winter, 2015). A handful of publications explicitly describe collaborative or emancipatory perspectives that seek to challenge deficit models (Bolger, 2015; Fairchild & Bibb, 2016; Fairchild & McFerran, 2018), or work against protective inclinations and discourses of risk in relation to young people's assumed vulnerabilities (Scrine & Stanger, 2019; Smith, 2012).

Methodology

Background

Seven one-off music workshops were conducted over the first year of a broader participatory action research project. The aim for this first cycle of inquiry was to understand the kinds of issues young people wanted to explore in relation to gender and what would emerge when music was used as a medium for exploration. Aiming to identify issues most salient to young people, the workshops were constructed as a space to open up thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a topic as vast and complex as gender, through music-based activities that were flexible, participatory, and relevant to their lives and interests. The importance of gauging and exploring young people's current attitudes and beliefs related to issues of gender and power not only aligns with principles of participatory research that prioritise communities' own knowledge and agency (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014); it is also central in understanding and shifting oppressive gender cultures (Flood & Pease, 2009; Webster et al., 2019).

The role of the arts and creative modalities have been described by researchers of youth gender cultures to engender unforeseen and transformative modes of thinking, feeling, and voicing in ways that can shift oppressive practices and cultures (for example, refer to Renold, 2018; Renold & Ringrose, 2016; Stanger, 2018). In parallel, the tenets of creative methodologies that challenge discourses of risk and deficit have recently been identified as congruent with after-queer scholarship (Scrine, 2019; Stanger

& Scrine, 2019). Research into the therapeutic potentials of songwriting illuminates (a) its potential to express and construct meaning about our past, present, and future lives (Baker et al., 2017), (b) its emotional potency due to the ways music encodes into memory (Baumgartner, Lutz, Schmidt, & Jäncke, 2006), and (c) its meaningfulness to participants as both a process and a product (Silverman, Baker, & McDonald, 2016). Furthermore, songwriting is an accessible medium that allows for intrapersonal exploration with individuals across a range of cognitive and physical capacities (Baker et al., 2017). From a methodological perspective, songwriting has also served as a participatory and arts-based form of data generation, not only benefiting the project, but also serving as an ongoing resource for the young people. Arts-based research is identified as a way of bringing data to life (Leavy, 2015) through multiple forms of sensory engagement that provokes participation in powerful ways distinct from traditional forms of data collection (Parsons, Heus & Moravac, 2013; Viega & Forinash, 2016). Within arts-based research, songwriting has been specifically recommended by researchers such as Laura Beer (2016) and Rebecca Fairchild (2018) as a collaborative approach that allows participants to distil the essence of their contribution and often communicates principles of social justice.

Recruitment and action

Schools were recruited through a wide range of professional and personal networks across Australia, England, and Scotland. Not seeking to target specific demographics, recruitment aims focused on capturing sufficiently rich data and highlighting the voices of young people across a range of diverse demographics, rather than attempting to generalise the results. The seven group pilot workshops were conducted across a range of government school settings, with young people aged 14 to 17 years who all volunteered to take part in a workshop during school hours. The groups ranged in size from 5 to 18 participants. Table 1 summarises some demographical information about the participating groups to provide context. The schools were all co-educational, participants were not separated by sex, and groups did not aim to meet any specific identity demographics such as gender, sexuality, economic status, or cultural background. Across the groups, there were several participants who openly identified themselves using terms such as "queer," "gay," "non-binary," and "trans." Overall, the participants were from a range of geographical locations, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, disabilities, and class backgrounds:

The songwriting component of the workshops asked the young people to imagine their "perfect world" in relation to gender. The term "perfect" was not used in order to serve the analysis of the songs, nor to position change and progress as linear. Rather, the "perfect world" was considered an accessible opening for discussion framed around parallel possibilities and *alternative* futures, without centring harm or requiring the young people to identify what is currently "going wrong." The songs were written using a process typical of songwriting in music therapy, including a facilitated group discussion, group brainstorming, negotiating the musical elements, integrating the lyrics and music, and playing the song together, all while attending sensitively to group dynamics.

Analysis

Because each of the songs were built upon a structure which had a repeating chorus or "hook," the process also offered a means of analysis *in the moment*, given that the young people had to identify the central message of their song as they wrote it. Outlining this method in detail, Rebecca Fairchild and Katrina McFerran (2019) described group songwriting as a collaborative methodological strategy for engaging young people in a simultaneous process of data generation *and* analysis. Building on the action-oriented qualities of songwriting as a methodology in my own research, each of the group workshops also included a discussion about what the young people would like to do with their song. This included consultation with staff liaisons at each school in

Table 1

School	Location	Participants	Ages
"School 1" Alternative school	Cambridgeshire, England	7	14–15
"School 2" Mainstream public school	Near Geelong, Victoria, Australia	8	16–18
"School 3" Mainstream public school	Outer suburbs of Melbourne, Australia	9	16–17
"School 4" Mainstream public school	Outer suburbs of Edinburgh, Scotland	15	14–15
"School 5" Alternative school	Inner city London, England	10	16–18
"School 6" Mainstream public school	Regional Victoria, Australia	6	14–17
"School 7" Mainstream public school	Outer suburbs of Melbourne, Australia	18	15–16

order to support the young people's plans to be put into action following the workshop.

Results and Discussion

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on three of the songs written during the workshops and examine several important themes that emerged throughout the workshops. I will use *asterisk marks* to indicate data from song lyrics, and "quotation marks" to indicate words that were spoken by the participants during the workshops. The gendered terms I use to identify participants are based on the way they identified themselves during the workshops. The lyrics of three songs are shown below in Table 2.

Beyond "boys and girls"

Findings across all of the workshops pointed to the ways young people are expanding their vocabularies related to gender identity and expression, advocating for the demarcation of gender labels, and their support of gender diversity, non-conformity, and fluidity. These themes echo research internationally which has pointed to young people's awareness and support of gender diversity within and beyond educational contexts (Bragg, Renold, Ringrose & Jackson, 2018; Jones et al., 2016; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017). Across the workshops, discussion commenced with the group attempting to build a working definition of gender. Initially, there was typically a definition raised that constructed gender in relation to biological sex and using the binary: "Boy or girl," "Male or female," "Males have different body parts than the female." How-

Table 2

School 1: Song 1	School 2: Song 2	School 3: Song 3
(To the tune of "Cheerleader")	In a perfect world	What if you stood in someone else's shoes?
Chorus:	There is so much more to be	
Be free for who you want to be	Than just a guy or a girl	Would you win or would you lose?
There is no gender – people are comfy	I can just be me	What if you were the minority?
Respecting everyone no matter who they're attracted to	And if you don't agree	Would equality be your priority?
Consent is valued, both boys and girls	Keep it to yourself	Don't be afraid to express yourself
And family accept you for who you are	Lock it in a box	You know you better than anyone else
Girls respect each other, it will take you far	And throw away the key	Let's make stereotypes a thing of the past
	Chorus:	Discrimination cannot last
	It's a matter of education	*Chorus:*
	We don't need your discrimination	Acceptance of individuality
	We'll let everyone know who'll hear	This should be our reality
	You are who you are	He or she
	Straight, binary, or queer	You or me
	You are who you are	Choose your own identity
	Straight, binary, or queer	

ever, this was often immediately challenged by other participants, who used new vocabulary to contest these definitions: "But you can also get transgender and agender!", "Agender is someone who goes by no gender.", "Transsexual[2], bisexual, gay…", "You can also get gender fluid, like sometimes a boy and sometimes a girl."

Their discussion drew heavily on notions of *freedom* and *fluidity* to expound their understandings of gender and how their definitions depart from cisnormative[3] understandings:

> "I think that a lot of people would see it as that [male or female] but I kind of see it as whatever you want it to mean … So like, gender doesn't have to be what you were born with, it could be what you identify with. Maybe you don't identify with a gender!"

> "Well [gender is] what you identify in that term."

> "[Gender is] what you say you are, what your mindset is and how you feel."

The participants used their song lyrics to summarise their declarations, often reaching a consensus that gender is "whoever you think you are." Their lyrics represented these assertions: *Choose your own identity*; *Be free for who you want to be*. Importantly, these lyrics were not specifically directed at queer young people, but to everybody. When they sang *you are who you are* and *you know you better than anyone else*, the young people were not speaking to LGBTQIA+ young people, they were speaking to *everyone*: *we'll let everyone know who'll hear*. The group in School 2 (Song 2) were passionate about advocacy and hoped to use the song as *a matter of education*, eager to play their song to their peers, school, and broader community. School two was one of three (out of the seven participating groups) groups containing members who spoke openly about being queer, trans, and/or gender non-conforming during the

workshop. Often, these participants had strikingly nuanced and detailed ways of defining gender in relation to their own personal experience:

> Gender for me is the way you want to express yourself outwardly to other people, and because of the way society has formed, it tends to fit into certain binaries sometimes. So you know, society has given us the stereotypes of male and female, and sometimes the way you want to express fits into those binaries, and sometimes it doesn't. It's just a way of expressing who you are. That's what it is to me.

Validation and celebration

As after-queer scholars have noted, research tends to focus on discourses and practices that can universalise and undermine the agency of queer young people (Bryan, 2017; Marshall, 2010; Talburt & Rasmussen, 2010). But in their songs, rather than seeking either to centre notions of harm or victimhood in queer youth or indeed to *naturalise* notions of queerness, the participants in this project instead focused on self-determination, their internal knowledges, and the fierce validity of each of our own subjective experiences of gender.

Across all of the discussions, notions of multiplicity and fluidity were present. One participant described their experience of gender as "It's like mixing paint! You just put whatever colours you want!" Some participants were critical of gender being seen as a spectrum and drew on these metaphors of fluidity to present their clarifications. One participant described gender as mutable and expansive, like a swimming pool:

> I think like, there are narrow minded people who say that there's the binary and you're somewhere in between, but it's not like that. It's like a big swimming pool! And you just get thrown in it and end up where the water is, and that's just what you are.

A great deal of complexity was often present in these discussions, and some participants articulated how gender is in fact "non-definable." They identified the ways gender relates to our ever-shifting identities and emotional experiences, and they questioned whether definitions can ever be stable. For instance, "One day you could be feeling male, could be feeling female, could be feeling both, could be feeling none! And you just, you just go along with it… your emotions, flow. I don't know." Another non-binary participant expanded on this complexity, echoing notions of fluidity and alluding to the shifting importance of labels:

> It's hard to define, because the only person who can define your gender is you, so it's one of those things where everyone is going to feel differently about it, but in the end you're the only one who can make the final decision of what gender you are. And it can be fluid, like you might identify as one thing one day, and something else the next. Or you might think you're comfortable identifying with something, and all of a sudden discover something that you didn't even know was a gender and have that click moment of "Hang on a minute! That's what I feel like!"

The young people often referred to gender as a *limitation* in their discussion, describing the binary as "outdated" and constraining. They used the songwriting experience as a way to reframe these ideas into the emancipatory alternatives they envisioned. When I asked the group who wrote Song 2, "Is the binary something you've talked about together?" they began to call out passionately: "Abolish!", "Delete!", "It's not real!" Their anger was evident, and as we began to work on their song, the participants stayed connected to a fierce sense of advocacy. One participant described wanting the song to get "stuck in people's heads." Another agreed, "Like one of those annoying ads!" Their vehement responses about "deleting gender" were not censored or invalidated but rather transformed into expansive and celebratory song lyrics that they wanted to share:

> *There is so much more to be
>
> Than just a guy or a girl
>
> I can just be me*

Musically supporting the narratives of emancipation and expression that their discussion about non-binary identities centred on, their song was upbeat with a syncopated drum beat, a 'pop'-inspired chord progression, and a chanting chorus. After each workshop, the group was left with the recording, chords, and lyrics to their song to use however they wished. The group who wrote Song 2 have since performed the song at their school assembly, an education conference, and as a part of a drama production. In another workshop, the participants shared a similar wish to "abolish" gender:

> Jake[4]: In a perfect world there is no gender! People wear what they want to wear. What they feel comfortable in.
>
> Anna: All the homophobic people… they…
>
> Jake: Die!
>
> Luc: Go die, disappear!
>
> Jake: There's no taking the mickey out of anyone. Like no one getting bullied, because of who they're attracted to…
>
> Anna: Yeah!

Jake and Anna both spoke about feelings of shame and exclusion they had experienced at home and school in relation to their sexuality and gender presentation – Jake because he was gay and presented effeminately, and Anna because she did not see herself as a "typical girl." Anna was open about being sexually active and described that she "liked to wear jeans" and would "just punch them [other girls] in the face." The discussion about gender in this workshop centred on issues related to bullying, expectations of sexuality, and relational conflict between teenage girls. When transforming this discussion into their song (Song 1), the group decided to do a lyrical substitution to a popular remix of the song "Cheerleader"[5], a reggae pop song originally by Jamaican artist OMI, which rose to global success following a dance remix. "Cheerleader's" dancehall foundations, light and upbeat house music pacing, samba-inspired keyboard part, and distinct trumpet melodic motifs give the song a sense of buoyancy and brightness. Its infectious and memorable instrumental qualities are combined with lyrics describing the woman of his dreams, a cheerleader "always right there when I need her," granting his every wish, "like a genie in a bottle." The gender roles subtly inscribed throughout the original song's lyrics were some of the very same the group had raised in their discussion. However, now they were repurposing the catchy pop song to outline their vision for the future – one in which *there is no gender, people are comfy*. Their advocacy for liberatory relational dynamics and, similar to the group who wrote Song 2, challenging of heteronormativity and cisnormativity were harnessed into an expression of celebration.

Songwriting as 'after-queer' subjective repositioning

The challenges the participants raised with fixed or stable identities echo the alternative imaginings explored in after-queer scholarship, especially pertaining to the relationship between youth, adults, institutions, and temporality (refer to Talburt, 2010, p. 50). Implicit throughout the discussions and songs was the role of institutions in defining, policing, and regulating gender. The young people recognised this as important: "So many people don't have this education, so they don't know what exists." They located fixed and traditional gender norms in a continuum of time, often referring to them as "stupid, outdated ideas." As Talburt and Rasmussen (2010) underscored, queer research has maintained a preoccupation with linear time, lineage, nationhood, and the narrative of political progress, inevitably seeking to assume authority and "protect the future" for "our children" (p. 3). Indeed, in the workshops, discussion of "outdated" gender standards often evoked impassioned outcry: "It's just so outdated! It's…. AAAAAAGH!" one participant groaned and put their head on the desk. One student

reflected on ideals of masculinity, stating that it, "has this stupid concept of not show-ing weakness of emotion or anything," and another cried out, "It's so outdated as well! That comes from like ANCIENT TIMES!"

In writing their own song however, the young people constructed a narrative which was entirely their own, detached from any sense of historical or future truth, or rela-tion to a linear temporality. Their "perfect world" was not based in a presumption of their innocence, or a need to protect or adjust, nor did it need to convey coherence or intelligibility. Rather, it was their own alternative universe, where they were the authority of their own experiences. Rather than singing about their own lives or iden-tities, placing themselves as the subjects, the song itself was the subject. The question to the young people was not "What harm has come to you that we need to know?" nor was the purpose of the study to examine what is happening in the lives of the LGBTQIA+ youth, as much of queer and adolescent research seeks to investigate. In-stead, the research posed a different subject to the young people: "What do you want *this song to say*?" and "How can we make it say that through the music?" The young people were welcome to share their experiences, and many shared experiences of ex-clusion and shame as well as sentiments of anger and frustration. However, their ex-pression was imbued with agency, rather than being haunted by the "woundedness" that pervades research on queer youth, as described by Talburt and Rasmussen (2010). The songs were the subject of the workshops and data for the ongoing research. How-ever, the songs were not only narratives represented through words or numbers for a researcher's purposes, they also remained the participant's own object of creativity – to construct, experiment with, perform, and use however they wished. They could listen to the recording at home or play it to their friends; they could sing the words of the song or hum the melody to themselves. These processes of action and reposi-tioning allude to the capacities in songwriting as a pursuit of after-queer methodology. Songwriting allowed for a) repositioning the young people as the authorities of their own experience; b) repositioning their experiences not as a subject for investigation or informant for political progress, but as materials through which to envisage alterna-tive narratives; and c) repositioning their narratives not simply as research data, but as their own creative object, for purposing and repurposing.

Diversity politics

Across the research sites, young people were critical of gender inequalities in general and eager to advocate for change. In School 3 who wrote Song 3, none of the members openly identified themselves as queer or gender diverse. In comparison to some of the other groups, their discussion did not feature the same level of critique of the binary or the power relations embedded in gender conformity. Their song identified discrim-ination as a key experience related to gender and sexual diversity, though they chose to keep the tone of the song general, in order to convey the idea that discrimination "in all forms" was what they sought to change. This signified an interesting theme that presented throughout many of the workshops. Throughout all workshops, the par-ticipants frequently demonstrated their capacity to identify gendered power differen-tials and their passion to promote change. However, the groups varied vastly regarding *where* they located the problem.

For example, the young people often raised scenarios that indicated an analysis of power, particularly in relation to gender and socioeconomic status. One participant in a regional school setting described how gender intersects with class to delineate women's experiences of sexual harassment: "It's like if you work at Maccas. Like a girl working at Maccas, and the manager's older and they go 'alright do this otherwise I'm going to sack you, or not give you Friday off'." Another participant agreed, "…Yeah so I think it links into both how you look and what your gender is and where you are in the work field." In another regional school group, a participant explicitly drew upon the concept of power to describe how sexual harassment operates:

> And it's sort of like that power, "if you dress a certain way I have power over you", or "if you are that gender I have power over you". It's like in that movie, Girl With the Dragon Tattoo. There's a girl who has this probation worker and because of his power over her and because of his authority, he took advantage of her sexually. And she couldn't do anything about it, because she had a criminal record.

However, the young people's responses also indicated a level of concern that girls' success and access to power has in some ways "gone too far":

> Luc: Well, some females think like men are like misogynists, like they think they're a lot better than males, like they're overly cocky about themselves as well.

> Sera: Yeah, some women see men as dogs, like they're just there to hurt females and stuff.

The repudiation of feminism amongst young people has been explored in the literature, which has noted how neoliberal school contexts create conditions in which girls gain power by siding with boys (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2016). Characterising these "postfeminist" tendencies, Jessica Ringrose (2013) has described how readily discussions about gender are met with panics about whether feminism has spent "too much time" focusing on improving girls' achievements in schools, and sidelined boys' success and wellbeing. One school's discussion focused on body image and gendered expectations for "girls and guys," and I asked them whether they saw these as equal, similar, or different experiences for "girls and guys." "Equal," a boy called out. "Yeah equal," a girl affirmed, "Cos like boys are stereotyped as like muscly, strong, intimidating and that." Another participant spoke up quietly, "Just personally, I think it's, um, not kind of equal. I think girls are judged a lot more. Because they're judged a lot more on how they look as well…." The discussion then began to focus on how "judgment" was the cause of these problems, and the group summarised that the song should be about "getting rid of judgment," rather than focusing on one gender as more or less marginalised than the other: "Just like more general equality for everyone," they decided, "How we treat each other. How some males treat females and how some females treat guys."

There appeared to be an oscillating importance placed on the binary, and the value of gender categories themselves. This occurred alongside the strong theme of "abolishing gender" that presented in some of the groups, and the support for gender fluidity and self-identification that reverberated across all groups. Indeed, as youth literature on contemporary gender cultures has demonstrated, the current landscape in which young people are negotiating notions of activism, equality, and sexuality is complex and in some ways paradoxical (Bragg et al., 2018; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Scrine, 2017). The key question that arose through this project was whether the support of gender fluidity and queer affirmative language may function to circumvent a comprehensive recognition of power imbalances. In this case, it is possible that celebratory notions of "fluidity" and "diversity" may *replace* actually attending to and dismantling patriarchy. Such tendencies echo what critical race scholars have identified in regard to the ways race and racism are attended to institutionally. In school contexts, the literature has documented how complex and specific discussions about race or Whiteness are silenced in favour of simplified and de-racialised tolerance, celebration, and "respect for all" approaches (for example, refer to Emdin, 2016; Vass, 2014; Walton, 2018). As Sara Ahmed (2012) has explicated, the promotion and celebration of cultural diversity does not replace actual anti-racism and can in fact be *counterproductive* to the critical work of dismantling white supremacy.

Tendencies to collapse difference into superficial notions of equality can be understood as a function of neoliberalism in which identities are de-politicised under the assumption of a meritocracy and push for achievement (for example, refer to Ylöstalo & Brunila, 2018). Under neoliberal logic, diversity is indeed fostered as good for the market; diversity and pluralism are promising factors for economic success. Sexuality can be examined as an apparatus of neoliberalism in the name of diversity (for example, refer to Ludwig, 2016). For example, gay and lesbian communities have been identi-

fied as key consumer groups or "market audiences"; same-sex couples living monog-amous "respectable" lives are legally recognised and "deserving" of the institution of marriage.

Rather than situating the responsibility for transforming subtle and overt problems on the individual to simply treat everybody equally, an after-queer analysis may point to further examination of the ways the celebration of gender diversity is opera-tionalised as a component of school identities. In Australian contexts specifically, this requires attending to the ways gender fuses with Whiteness and settler-colonial rela-tions to re-inscribe notions of progress and citizenship (for example, refer to Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

Conclusion

This project echoes findings from international research which demonstrates the im-portance of providing spaces for young people to explore notions related to gender and sexuality and express their ideas and visions for alternative cultures. Indeed, these are topics young people appear eager to engage in, and many are already passionate advo-cates for change. In the context of complex and shifting gender terrains, young people are developing new practices and terminologies to understand themselves and contem-porary gender cultures. Music therapists have a role to play here, not only in keeping pace in this shifting landscape, but as a profession with a dedicated interest in critical methodologies.

In using songwriting not only to generate data, but to instil young people with agency and authority over their own narratives, music therapists have a powerful tool at their disposal. Beyond its therapeutic affordances, songwriting has the capacity to challenge narratives of queer youth as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection. This paper served to demonstrate the congruence of an *after-queer* lens in queer mu-sic therapy discourse. By positioning young people as capable of inscribing and cele-brating their own alternative futures, songwriting as an *after-queer* methodology may open up new forms of expression and advocacy, which young people are enthusiastic to engage in. Furthermore, *after-queer* as a theoretical framework offers rigorous crit-ical analysis, undoubtedly necessary in seeking to understand the complex landscape young people exist within.

While the participants were on the whole, highly critical of gender inequalities, there were complexities that arose in relation to how they imagined transformation should occur. Some of the participants saw gender and the binary as the overarching system which needed "abolishing," while others saw "judgement" between men and women equally as the predominant issue. Overarchingly, the participants saw gender as a fluid and complex construct, one which each individual has the right to decide and define for themselves. Within this, the participants' support of gender diversity raised a question about whether current language and practices of "acceptance and celebra-tion for all genders" may limit the capacity to attend to and dismantle existing im-balances of power, instead favouring a broadened, depoliticised version of "diversity." Such questions signal important pathways for further critical analysis, especially in re-gard to what young people represent as new "market audiences" for the exportation of diversity and equality geared towards profitmaking. In this sense, it would be valu-able to conduct further analysis of how expanding "diversity and inclusion" practices and policies in schools can be considered as relevant to the interests of the neoliberal labour market.

Importantly, the project not only demonstrates young people's enthusiasm and readiness to participate in discussions related to gender and sexuality, but their ca-pacity for rigorous critical analysis simultaneous to celebration of alternative gender cultures. Furthermore, the findings indicate the endless possibilities available in song-writing with young people. These are affordances that move beyond the frame of LGBTQIA+ trauma and vulnerability, or simply investigating the needs and experi-ences of queer youth. Drawing on *after-queer* as a mode of thinking, songwriting offers

opportunities to explore the gendered norms and conditions under which we all exist, and for young people to write, sing, and play new possibilities into being.

About the author

Dr Elly Scrine is a music therapist, lecturer at the University of Melbourne, and electronic artist. Elly's research examines the role of music for young people exploring gender, and how schools operate as sites of power and regulation. Elly currently works with young people in community mental health, and is passionate about the affordances of music in engendering personal, social, and structural change.

Notes

1. A term to describe the social and institutional practices and attitudes that abnormalise trans and gender diverse people and delegitimise their gender identities.

2. This was the word used by the participant, though it is not a term generally favoured in trans and gender diverse communities given its association with pathology and medicalisation.

3. Assumptions and expectations that a person's gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.

4. All names used throughout the discussion are pseudonyms.

5. OMI, Dillon, C., Bradford, M. & Dillon, R. (2012). Cheerleader [Remixed by Jaehn, F.] On *Me 4 U*. Ultra Music: Miami, Florida

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