

RESEARCH | PEER REVIEWED

## Gender Affirming Voicework: A Queer Autoethnographic Account

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### Abstract

I've previously offered an initial introduction to gender affirming voicework (Maevon Gumble, 2019b) as informed by personal experiences, my queer autoethnographic research (Maevon Gumble, 2019a), and literature from the fields of speech-language pathology, vocal pedagogy, and music therapy. Gender affirming voicework is a new holistic method aimed at assisting individuals with accessing and embodying affirming gender expressions, particularly vocal expressions. I encourage you to read the aforementioned introductory text (2019b) prior to moving forth. In this current article, I will expand upon those understandings by offering a queer autoethnographic account of engaging within intensive personal work as a nonbinary trans person. This article will more deeply consider my personal experiences and journey of engaging with literature as well as participating in the following: voice lessons with a former voice teacher; several Alexander Technique lessons; both full and adapted Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) sessions; and solo voicework sessions, where I more directly explored the possibilities of gender affirming voicework. This queer story – or rather set of stories – that I tell here is a version of what is presented within my thesis research (2019a); however, in queer autoethnographic fashion, revisiting my stories to put together this current story has led to further 'becomings' of something new. It is my hope that this creative text provides one personal example of what gender affirming voicework might be within the field of music therapy.

**Keywords:** *voicework, gender affirming, transgender, nonbinary, queer, autoethnography, music therapy, embodiment, gender, queer theory*

### 'Becoming' together through queerly telling stories

*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)

Before more deeply sharing my stories of exploring gender affirming voicework, it is important to consider what it might mean to queerly tell stories. While this story

arose alongside both the tensions and love I have for my voice and gender, it also arose concurrently to identifying a thesis research project that I might pursue to complete my Master of Music Therapy degree at Slippery Rock University. The intersections of these areas quickly led to the realization that an autoethnography, more specifically a queer autoethnography, would serve as my research method.

Autoethnography is a research method that involves the author 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,<sup>1</sup> Tony Adams, & Arthur Bochner, 2011, para. 8). Pulling from *autobiography* and *ethnography*, it is a study of the self in culture (Tony Adams & Carolyn Ellis, 2012) and is both a process for engaging in research and a product with its finished text (Tony Adams & Carolyn Ellis, 2012; Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, & Arthur Bochner, 2011; Carolyn Ellis & Arthur Bochner, 2006). In autoethnography, authors pull together their experiences, 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 (Tony Adams & Carolyn Ellis, 2012; Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, & Arthur Bochner, 2011; Carolyn Ellis & Arthur Bochner, 2006). Reflexivity is vital for autoethnography, with authors deeply engaging with their own stories to more complexly understand them. In telling these stories, autoethnographers are mindful of aesthetics and use conventions of storytelling such as character, scene, and plot development and by showing, telling, alternating points of view, and using thick descriptions (Tony Adams & Carolyn Ellis, 2012; Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, & Arthur Bochner, 2011).

More specifically considering queer autoethnography, Tony Adams and Stacy Holman Jones (2008) have avoided clearly defining this research method because of the ways it would pin down and hem in the complexities of what it *could* be into something easily digestible and identifiable. They have, however, hinged together queer theory with 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 (1990, 1993, 2004), Michel Foucault (1975, 1978), and many others. Common features of queer theories 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, p. 31). Queer can be an adjective (i.e., a queer person), a derogatory noun and slur (i.e., the queer), identity (i.e., I am 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.

Tony and Stacy have expressed 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 (referencing Judith Butler’s work); 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. “Queering 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 wants of living” (Tony Adams &

Stacy Holman Jones, 2008, p. 384). I understand 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 (Tony Adams & Stacy Holman Jones, 2010). 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).

Due to the permanent nature of texts in that they often cannot be altered once published, Tony and Stacy describe texts as fixed identities. Understanding this, a queer autoethnographer:

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). I understand this to mean that the queer autoethnographer tells stories that: 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), or do not 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' 'academic' understandings. This is particularly true when considering more creative texts.

Relatedly, Tony and Stacy have written about the queer autoethnographic process as a cyclical one that circles around three important pieces: 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 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" (Tony Adams & Stacy Holman Jones, 2010, p. 150), understanding that both author and reader continue to "become" while engaging with the author's stories. Tony and Stacy described this as writing without endings (2011). With all this in mind, queer autoethnography can be considered a queer political action in the ways it challenges dominant discourse and grand narratives (Tony Adams & Stacy Holman Jones, 2008).

In terms of representing and more deeply exploring my early wanderings of gender affirming voicework, queer autoethnography has served as an ideal playground, providing me with tools to tell my story grounded in queer theory while continuing to queer my thought processes as well as the foundations of what gender affirming voice-work might be.

### Childlike explorations

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

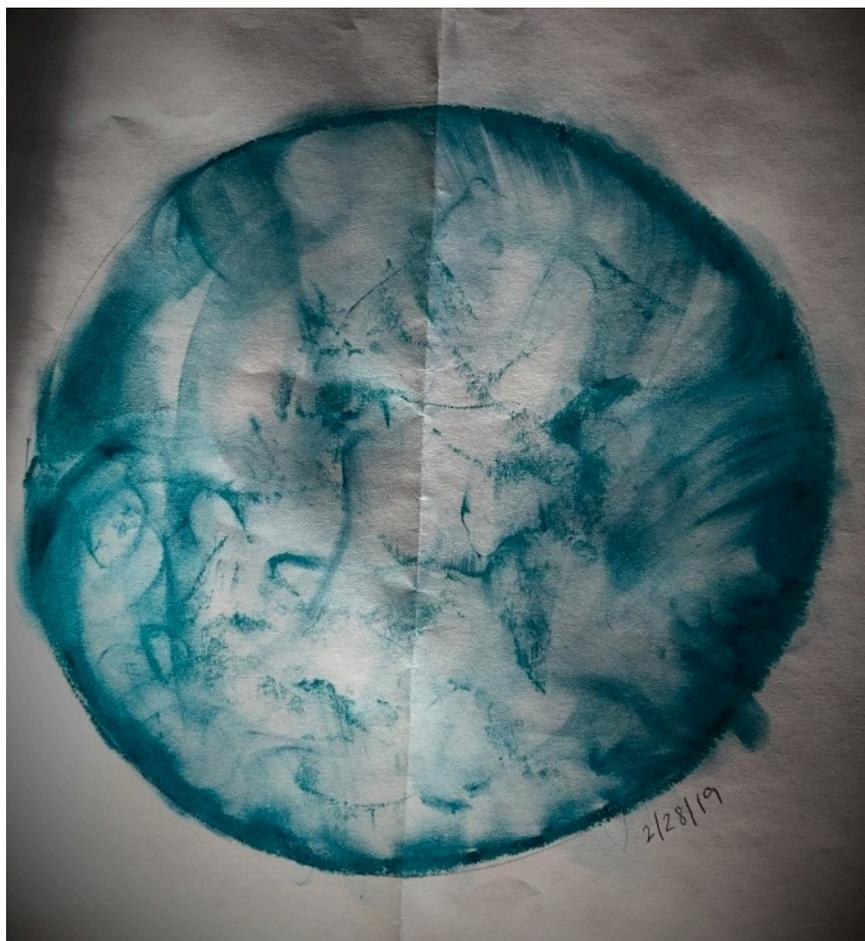


Figure 1

Image shows a mandala from a personal music therapy session on 2/28/2019, with teal sweeps of color that look like ocean waves.

### 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. They intuitively know 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.

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.

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:

I'm finding that my own experiences 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 given up because of a feeling of being uncomfortable (2/2/2017).<sup>3</sup>

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 and authentically reflect how I know myself to be. I've been humbled by the way I have, at times, found myself attempting to leave the fixed box of female/feminine/woman only to attempt to box and limit my sound and gender to "one true authentic" way of existing. I've instead been trying to embrace the idea of queer voicings – of accessing something that feels authentic *at least for this moment*, recognizing that it might change and shift with the passage of time. Since writing the above email over two and a half 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, especially as these sounds

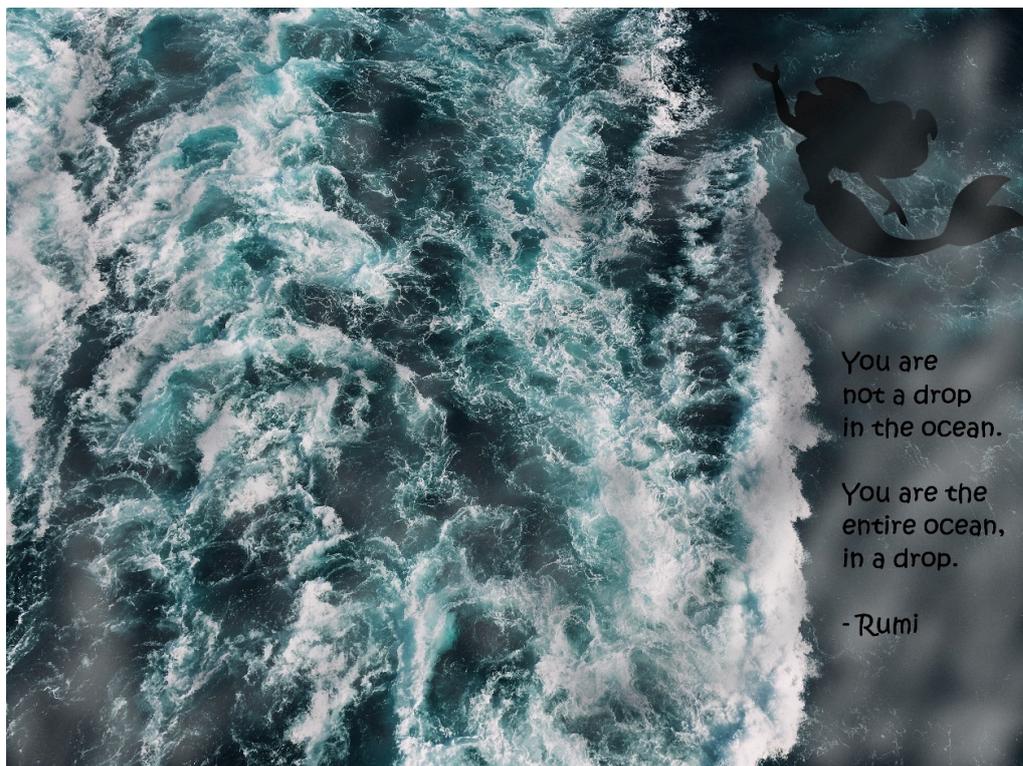


Figure 2.

"The Ocean": Image of ocean waves with a black silhouette of Ariel, the mermaid. On this image is the text by Rumi: "You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean, in a drop."

often arise within my personal life when I am feeling ungrounded or when I'm navigating feelings of vulnerability. I often feel much more connected with my gender when I sit within sounds that would likely be associated with masculinity or androgyny. Not always – but often. Further, musically, I have found 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. Again, not always – but often.

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 it's cold  
and damp  
and there's no furniture  
to sit on.  
I'm drawn to the basement.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*)

### A creative attempt at defining my gender

My gender is an ocean:  
fluid  
shifting

unsettled  
untethered  
an ever-expansive body of water  
that holds every part of me  
(Maevon Gumble, Facebook post, 9/15/2019)

on the land  
there are two poles:  
Woman  
and Man.  
to resist one,  
you must approach the other.  
I bind<sup>4</sup> 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 shade of 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.  
  
 (Vee Gilman Fansler, *on the land \_ in the water*)

### I cannot abandon this home

I longed 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 for 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 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 pursue hormone therapy<sup>5</sup> (i.e., they take testosterone) given how permanent and effective it is at not only creating vocal changes but other bodily changes (Eli Coleman, Walter Bockting, Marsha Botzer, Peggy Cohen-Kettenis, Griet DeCuypere, Jamie Feldman, Lin Fraser, Jamison Green, Gail Knudson, Walter Meyer, Stan Monstrey, Richard Adler, George Brown, Aaron Devor, Randall Ehrbar, Randi Ettner, Evan Eyler, Rob Garofalo, Dan Karasic, Arlene Istar Lev, Gal Mayer, Heino Meyer-Bahlburg, Blaine Paxton Hall, Friedmann Pfäflin, Katherine Rachlin, Bean Robinson, Loren Schechter, Vin Tangpricha, Mich van Trotsenburg, Anne Vitale, Sam Winter, Stephen Whittle, Kevan Wylie, & Ken Zucker, 2012<sup>6</sup>; Shelagh Davies & Joshua Goldberg, 2006; Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella Antoni, 2015). I further learned that a person can experience specific vocal problem areas in using testosterone (e.g., pitch range/variability, vocal control/stability, vocal power, 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). More specifically, singers can experience difficulties with a decrease in pitch range (Richard Adler, Alexandros Constansis, & John van Borsel, 2012) and resonance (Alexandros Constansis, 2009).

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. (personal reflection, 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 upright 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 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.

## 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)

I continued to have tensions with the possibility of taking testosterone, simultaneously understanding that testosterone is an important and valuable resource for many trans and nonbinary people. 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 (Coleman et al., 2012). 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 (David Azul, 2015; Richard Adler, Alexandros Constansis, John van Borsel, 2012; Shelagh Davies & Joshua Goldberg, 2006; Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella Antoni, 2015).

Despite knowing that there isn't a universal feminine or masculine voice given how perceptions of the voice are steeped within cultural understandings, there *are* patterns of speech that are more likely to be perceived in feminine or masculine ways. 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) (Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella 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 (Richard Adler, Sandy Hirsch, & Michelle Mordaunt, 2012; Coleman et al., 2012; Shelagh Davies & Joshua Goldberg, 2006; Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella 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; Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella 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 (Richard Adler, Sandy Hirsch, & Michelle Mordaunt, 2012; Coleman et al., 2012; Shelagh Davies & Joshua Goldberg, 2006; Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella 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 Bennett, 2013; Marylou Pausewang Gelfer & Viktoria Mikos, 2005; James Hillenbrand & Michael Clark, 2009; Verena Skuk & Stefan Schweinberger, 2014). Within the space between more feminine and masculine speech patterns is an androgynous range of 145-175 Hz (around D3-F3; Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella Antoni, 2015), where resonance actually becomes the most important cue of gender, more specifically the formant<sup>7</sup> frequencies of vowels (Donald Childers & Ke Wu, 1991; Shelagh Davies & Joshua Goldberg, 2006; Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella Antoni, 2015; Marylou Pausewang Gelfer & Quinn Bennett, 2013; James Hillenbrand & Michael Clark, 2009; Verena Skuk & Stefan Schweinberger, 2014). Further, resonance is important even outside of that androgynous range as words/phrases get longer and more complex, moving from vowels all the way to full connected speech (Marylou Pausewang Gelfer & Quinn Bennett, 2013). This means that when working with trans and nonbinary voices, resonance is uniquely important to perceptions of gender (Richard Adler, Alexandros Constansis, John van Borsel, 2012; Coleman et al., 2012; Shelagh Davies & Joshua Goldberg, 2006; Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella Antoni, 2015; Sandy Hirsch & Marylou Pausewang Gelfer, 2012; Jane Thornton, 2008).

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*)

Through these explorations, I found a Voice and Communication Program specific to trans (and nonbinary) individuals that was developed by Richard Adler (2012), which was focused on vocal feminization but would also be relevant to vocal masculinization. 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. Richard 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. Richard Adler, Alexandros Constansis, and John van Borsel (2012) have further offered suggestions specific to working with those who are masculinizing their voices: 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.

At this point, I had not begun any kind of intentional voicework. However, I had grown 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)

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 (Richard Adler, Alexandros Constansis, & John van Borsel, 2012; David Azul, 2015; David Azul, Ulrika Nygren, Maria Södersten, & Christiane Neuschaefer-Rube, 2017; Shelagh Davies & Joshua Goldberg, 2006; Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, & Christella 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 nonbina-

ry persons must pursue other options such as speech therapy and/or vocal surgeries, while trans men and female-assigned 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 (David Azul, Ulrika Nygren, Maria Södersten, & Christiane Neuschaefer-Rube, 2017; Richard Adler, Alexandros Constansis, & John van Borsel, 2012; Alexandros Constansis, 2009), speech-language pathologists expressed that speech therapy for vocal masculinization needs to be further explored (Richard Adler, Alexandros Constansis, & John van Borsel, 2012; David Azul, 2015; David Azul, Ulrika Nygren, Maria Södersten, & Christiane Neuschaefer-Rube, 2017). I suggest this needs to happen not just for those taking testosterone but for others such as myself who are reluctant to pursue its usage.

## Finding myself in the ocean

And finally  
I will open the doors  
and welcome myself home.  
(Nikita Gill, *Homes*, third stanza)

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 discussed trans men or trans women, yet the literature that I might relate to more as a female-assigned nonbinary person was not explored to the depth that satisfied the uncertainty and ambiguity I was experiencing. I knew the information that I was soaking up was important, but I struggled to understand myself in relation to it.

I found aspects of myself in two paragraphs that existed in a larger forty-two-page article authored by Shelagh Davies, Viktória Papp, and Christella Antoni (2015):

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 (pp. 120-121).

And in an earlier clinical guideline authored by Shelagh Davies and Joshua Goldberg (2006) 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" (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. Because of this, I stayed in this space of excitement, perhaps because it felt safer than feeling the anger that existed beneath. These statements were one nonbina-

ry 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 42-page article and were almost verbatim to those found in a 30-page guide published almost 10 years earlier. There had been no movement, except the removal of any vague statement about those seeking androgynous voices – that is, me. 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 now recognize as being tied to the ways vocal fixity (i.e., one singular speech pattern that isn’t variable) is antithetical to understandings grounded in queer theory, and it was also not aligned with my own experience of my voice and gender.

I eventually found the work of David Azul, who seemed to embrace more fluid understandings of the voice, emphasizing that

Changes that are achieved [in speech therapy] are generally reversible and can be fine-tuned according to a 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 (2015, p. 80).

David’s work felt unique from the larger narrative surrounding trans and nonbinary vocal experiences, instead alluding to the fact that not all people seeking vocal masculinization have the same needs (2016) and that there is a need to shift to client-centered perspectives (2015) for vocal change. I found great comfort in David’s work, even as it remained only one small corner of the literature that I had engaged with.

### Moments of queer clarity

As I explored in my recent article where I introduced gender affirming voicework (2019b), “Also present within the majority of the literature was an emphasis on *either* the speaking voice *or* the singing voice with little to no discussion of the overlap that exists between them” (p. 7), with discussions of the speaking voice focusing on vocal feminization and the experiences of trans women (and nonbinary, male-assigned persons) and discussions of the singing voice focusing on vocal masculinization and the experiences of trans men (and nonbinary, female-assigned persons). There was very little variation to these patterns, and they were reflective of my own thinking in relation to my voice.

Disconnection  
detachment  
separation  
a pulling apart of sound.

however, there must  
be something  
different.  
there must  
be something  
in the middle.

(Maevon Gumble, *Untitled*)

There was a pivotal moment that shifted my understandings of all of this that I remember with such 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. I sat on my bed in my apartment on the verge of tears talking about how most of the literature on female-assigned people focused on those who took testosterone,



**Figure 3**

"The Split": Image of a mandala from a personal music therapy session on 2/10/2018. Pictured is an hour-glass figure with reds, oranges, and yellows on the top and blue, purple, and black on the bottom. Notes read "disconnected but connected."

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 gender affirming voice, I would have to choose taking testosterone and lose (or at least experience difficulties with) my singing voice. 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 understandings of my voice and the kind of work I might engage in.

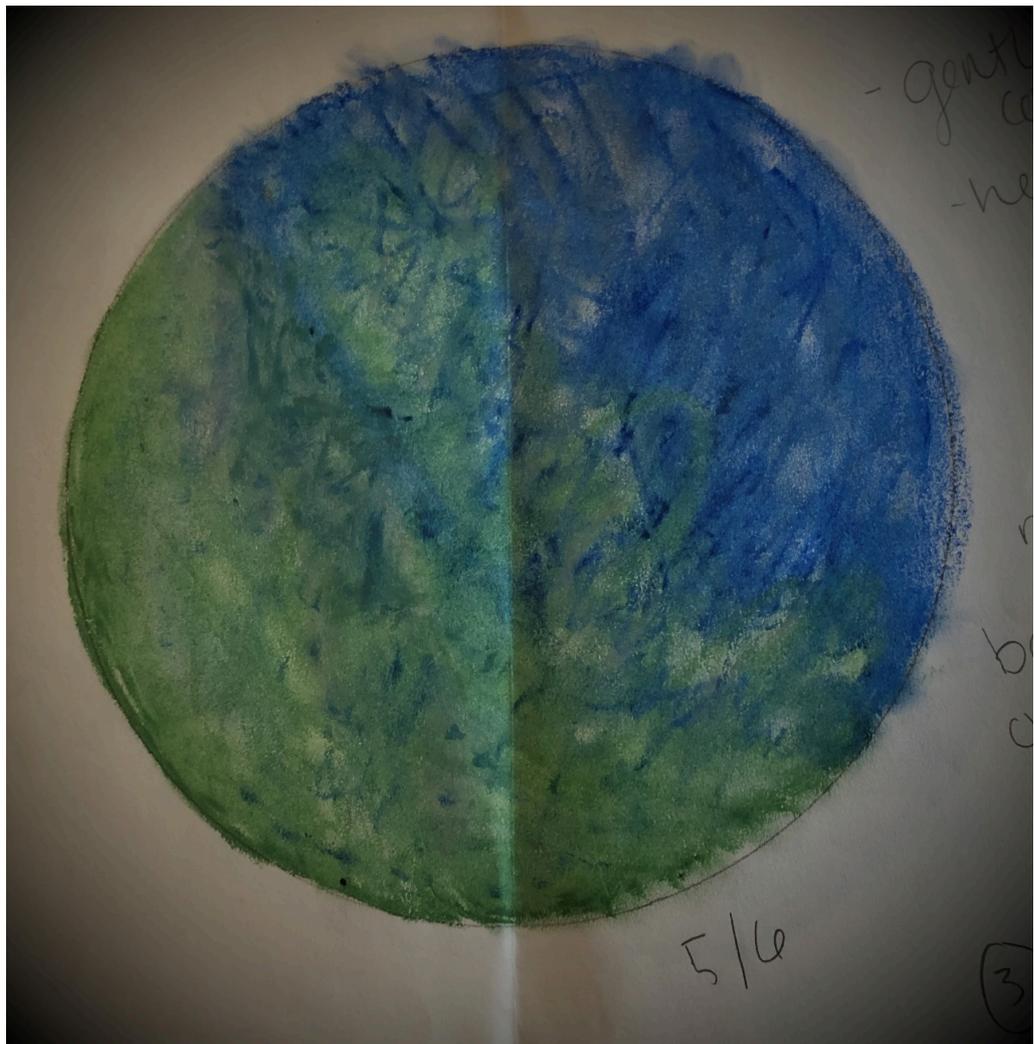
"I'm not a singer and don't know about the voice like you might, but I imagine there's a connection there between your singing and speaking voice..."

... 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).

Relief poured 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 all the literature I had been engaging with. As I've previously written (2019b),



**Figure 4**

Image of a mandala from a personal music therapy session on 5/6/2018. The mandala is completely filled with one side green and one side blue. The blue and green fade into each other.

although I might use my singing voice in a slightly different way than I might use my speaking voice, these voices and others come from the same place, the same instrument. My thoughts shifted to: If when I am singing I am able to access certain timbres and qualities of sound that feel so connected to who I am as a person, can't I also access these sounds when I am speaking (p. 7)?

This moment of embracing the both/and of my singing and speaking – this moment of queering – offered such clarity, even as it might seem so simple now.

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 told him of my 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 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 new and exciting.

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 the 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 and 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 the 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. It was a validation that I think I needed to hear in order to move on.

From this meeting with Chris and my conversation with Sue, I left with more questions than answers. But I also left with a drive to more deeply understand the possibilities of these ideas. I returned to the literature, first more deeply exploring formant frequencies and technical understandings of the voice, then tying these understandings and knowledge from speech-language pathology into that of music therapy.

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)

Before going on, I encourage you to pause here and read through what I've already written on more technical understandings of the voice as well as relevant literature in music therapy (2019b, pp. 8-12), as I have decided not to more deeply explore them here to avoid redundancy and preserve space.

## 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*)

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. It also consisted of me engaging in solo voicework sessions where I pooled together my experiences and knowledge and explored what this work might be within a more therapeutic space, although this was sometimes difficult to do because I was working on myself. I began very focused on my physical voice and vocal function, working in a similar way to what might be experienced in a voice lesson. However, in a messy, unclear, and simultaneous manner, this eventually shifted into more in-the-moment ways of working. This voicework also included a focus on both body/breath-based work as well as emotionally-driven experiences.

**Voice-lesson-like work.** After working with my body and remaining attentive to my breath, I would start voicing.

<https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/collage-of-vocal-warm-ups>.

... 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 tension 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 my body. I sometimes forget to breathe and gently remind myself to take full breaths...

... 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 1/28/2018, 1/26/2018,& 2/22/2018, voicework sessions).

<https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/speech-work-excerpt>.

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 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 (in our meetings) or talking aloud to myself about what just happened within my voice.

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



**Figure 5**

Image shows a mandala from a personal music therapy session on 12/1/2018 where the top half is a red/orange/yellow and the bottom half is a teal blue. Separating both halves is a white line of space. Notes read "disconnected."

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).

I was attempting to navigate an exercise that originated outside the context of my everyday speaking experiences. I wasn't necessarily working with how my speech was *already* being voiced. 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)

Sometimes this more voice-lesson-like work involved engaging with technique or expanding pitch range while singing a song – often changing the key of the song to do so.

<https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/the-promise>.

I sit at the piano, singing and playing Tracy Chapman's "The Promise." I love Tracy's voice – it's warmth and richness, the ways it unsettles expectations, sitting in this queer and fluid space. 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 the 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 – all to access what feels like some deeper-than-my-chest register. These sensations 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 between 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).

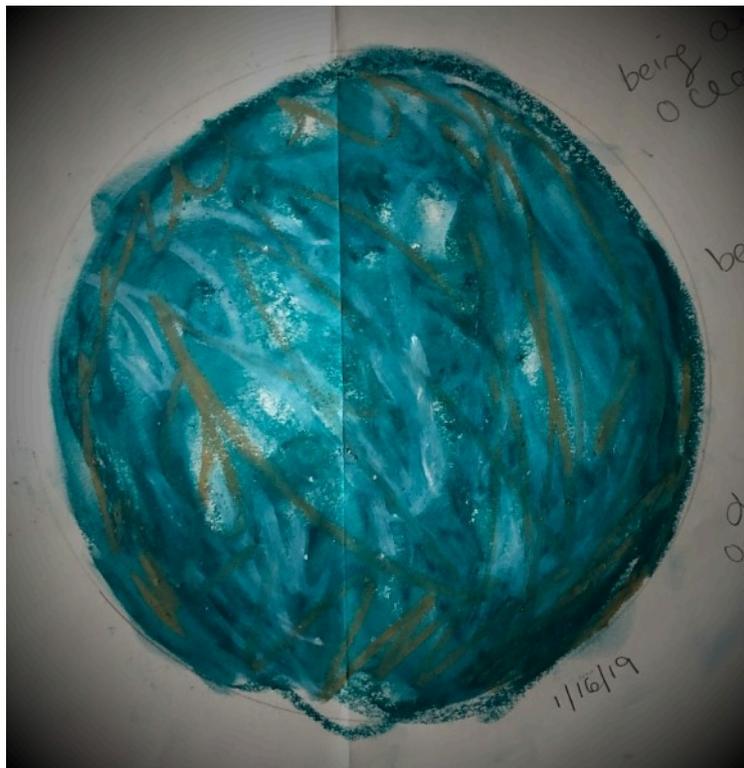
Accessing that sound required me to realize specific sensations experienced within myself that opened up the space so that I could more intentionally enter it outside of just sheer luck. For me this included: focusing on the sensations felt on my hard palate, feeling the vibrations of that and tuning into it to connect with my chest voice; focusing on letting the space between my top back teeth grow wider and bigger; engaging my whole body in the creation of sound; and focusing on the imagery of “raw and real” sound.

When I get **out** of it [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).

**In-the-moment work.** Although I have found great value in this voice-lesson-like work, it often invoked a kind of performance anxiety where I just wanted to “do it right” – to sing/speak androgyny in the “right” way. 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 and being “right.” This 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 myself. It was quite distant from the raw imagery that I eventually realized was important. However, 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 more voice-lesson-like work and into more in-the-moment ways of working.

I would warm-up around different “givens” of improvisation (Tony Wigram, 2004).

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 engage my support, my diaphragmatic breathing.<sup>8</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 “ng” to an open “ah” and then back and forth between an “ah” and hum. My fingers still following my voice on



**Figure 6**

Image shows a mandala from a personal music therapy session on 1/16/2019 that is filled with different hues of teal blue as well as a gold-brown color. The notes read "being an ocean, being present to all of me, drastically opposite to [feeling like] the pinpoint."

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 – to have a kind of depth to it instead of a thinner kind of support. It was hard to fulfill this need on my own while still attempting to voice and be attentive to the work I was doing in that capacity.

I also worked around improvisational givens focused on technique or different thoughts.

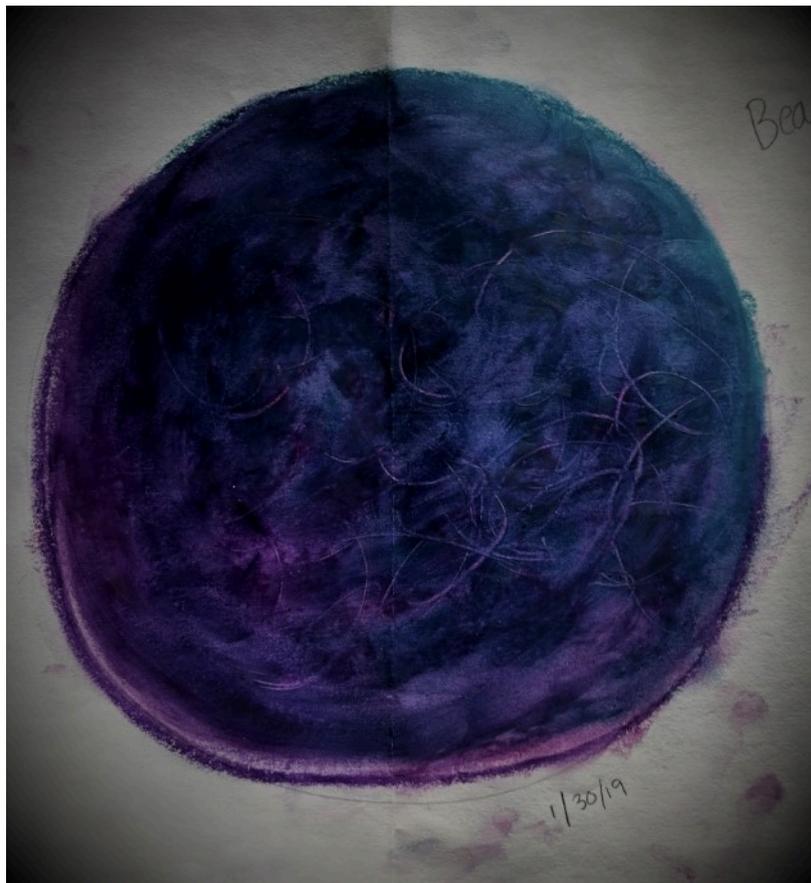
<https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/improvisational-warm-up>.

I hum throughout the improvisation, letting my voice settle to where it wants to be in the moment. Playing around on 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 opens up 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 fragile and strong space that I am so connected with (reflective account of 2/22/2018, voicework session).

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.

There was a pivotal moment that shifted me more deeply into in-the-moment ways of working.

<https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/coretone-variation>.



**Figure 7**

Image of a mandala from a personal music therapy session on 1/30/2019 that is filled with mixtures of deep blue, purple, and black. Swirling lines are etched into the colors. Notes read "beautiful."

Beginning a variation of Sanne Storm's CoreTone exercise,<sup>9</sup> 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).

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. *I 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). There was movement within my voice, and on the piano, I unintentionally was supporting the extremes of my voice (E-B) by playing an E minor chord.

Then I shifted outside of isolating the CoreTone, instead focusing on larger melodic phrases of speech. This began with poetry and song lyrics because that felt safer and less awkward. Eventually though, this moved into more intentionally working with my organic conversational speech.

<https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/poetry-speech-work>.

Womanhood  
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*)

I read the text of the above poem aloud, 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 slower to feel the way each sound exists within my voice and body. With the second time through, I search for the CoreTone 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 an 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 feel like they blossom into something warmer and richer within my body and voice. Most of my phrases drop off on the end, not really existing on any pitch, but fading off into the fabric of my speech. These are moments where I am not quite supporting my sound. 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 my own sound. After slowly working through the poem, I read it back through again returning to my using speech speed, playing the piano underneath in attempts to capture some of the moment 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. More often than not, I've left these kinds of experiences and have remained in the vocal sound that I had just spent however long improvising/toning within. It's like the repetition made it easier to come back home because I had been "living" within that space 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)

**Breath and body-based work.** Partway through this voicework, I also began working with an Alexander Technique<sup>10</sup> teacher focused on body awareness, releasing unnecessary tension, and becoming more comfortable with my body through chair work and constructive rest. Many musicians pursue Alexander Technique to decrease tension and improve their own body awareness, and, in agreement with Chris, this felt supportive of the kind of work I was focused on. 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. As I've previously expressed,

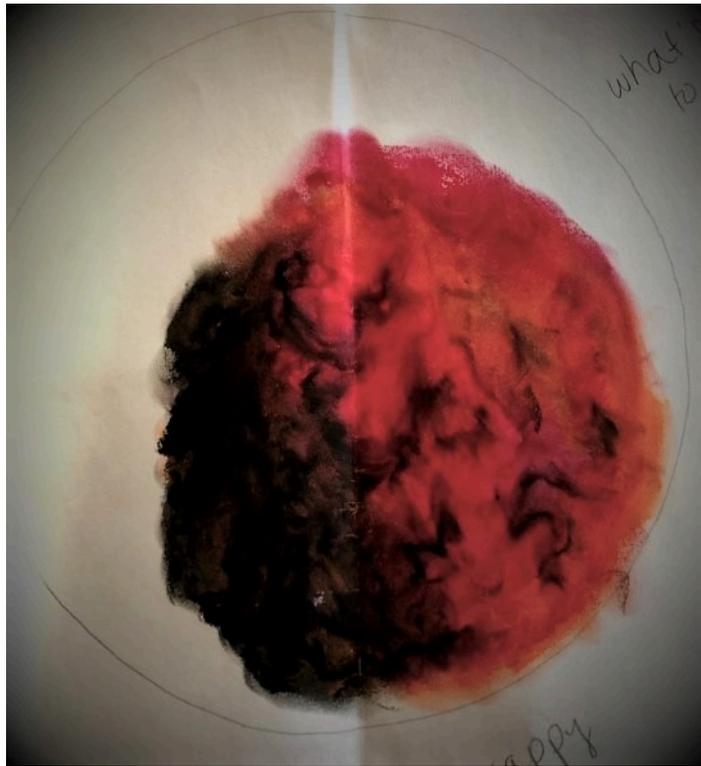
I experienced a lot of discomfort in attempting to give the weight of my body to the teacher who was touching me. I barely knew this person, and I didn't know their perspective on trans and nonbinary individuals. Further, the gender of this person [cis man] also influenced the way I experienced these lessons (2019b, p. 15).

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.

I instead found ways of integrating some of the tenets of Alexander Technique, particularly that of releasing unnecessary tension. This would be incorporated into the body and breathe experiences that I almost always started with during my solo voice-work sessions, prior to voicing.

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 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.



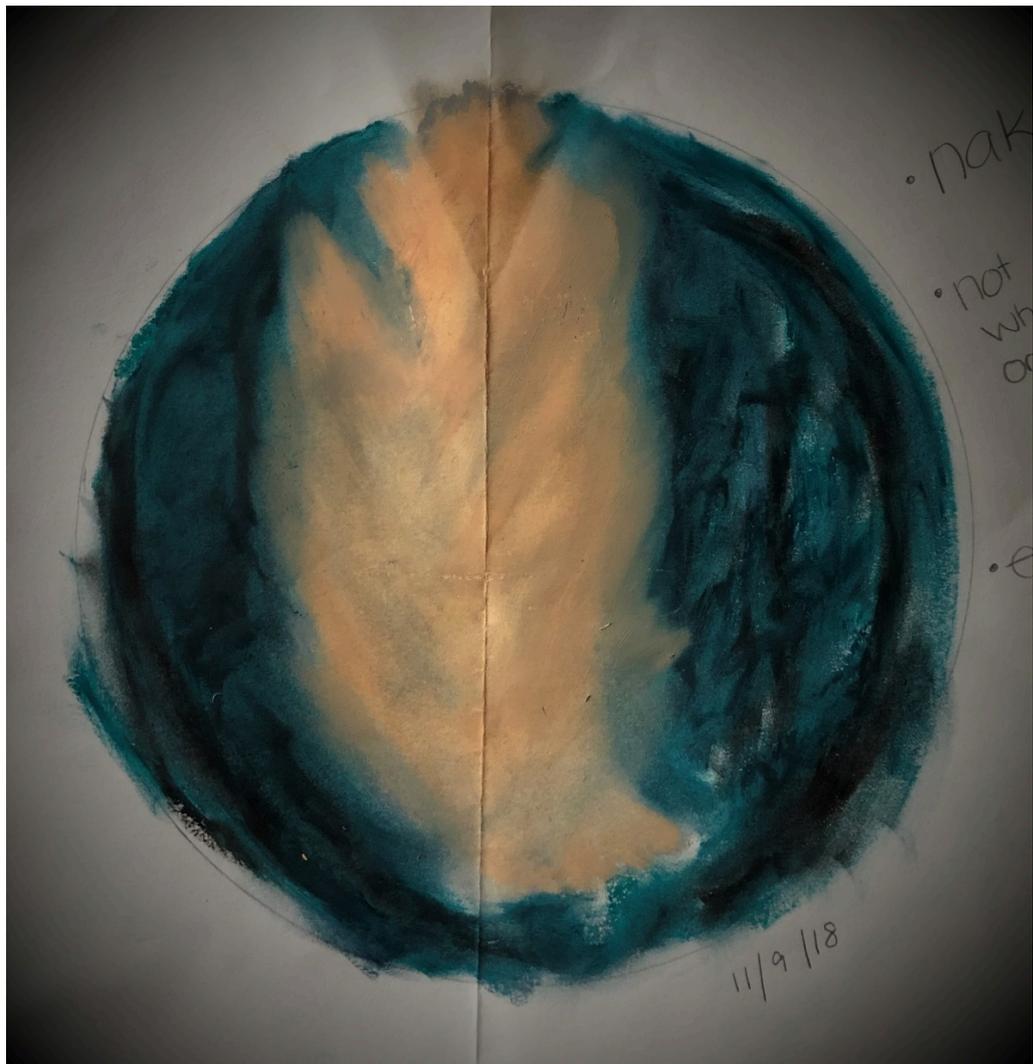
**Figure 8**

Image shows a mandala from a personal music therapy session on 3/8/2018, where about two-thirds of the mandala is filled with the overlaps of a red-orange color and black. The notes read "discomfort."

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. Turning 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. I can be connected with my breath, my body, my instrument (reflective account based on 10/28/2017, 1/20/2018, & 1/23/2018, voicework sessions).

I also had ideas about embodiment experiences based on Michael Chekhov's Imaginary Body acting exercise (2002)<sup>12</sup> and using gender imagery (i.e., imagery that specifically serves as a representation of gender). This was something that I minimally explored personally due to my own significant discomfort around the body, but I did have opportunities to lead a few experientials with classmates and during a CMTE with colleagues to explore what this work might be. These experientials asked others to tune into the way they sit/stand/move in gendered ways – to the ways that their body and movements are a part of their gender and gender expression. It also asked of them to consider what it would be to sit/stand/move in the most authentic gender affirming way. Many individuals shared feelings of shame around their bodies, regardless of whether they identified as cis, trans, and/or nonbinary.



**Figure 9**

Image shows a mandala from a personal music therapy session on 11/9/2018, with the background of the mandala in a various shades of teal and my pale skin tone blurry image ovetop. Notes read "naked."

On paper, these ideas of being so present to your body perhaps sound 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 myself within the water, owning the fullness of that requires a vulnerability – a kind of nakedness to the entire world. Letting that child 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.

With reflection, I recognize the ways I have been resistant to more deeply engaging in the intersections of body-based and imagery work. Words fail to express how difficult that work is, at least for me. My naked, vulnerable body – both as a metaphor (i.e., imagery) and as a reality (i.e., my physical body) – is something that 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 myself 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 say that that skin is not real. Writing these words only for 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 on this, and it is unbelievably hard.

**Emotions/identity-based work.** After starting this work, I also began working with a music therapist who was trained in the Bonny method of GIM<sup>13</sup> and ways of adapting this work to use music and imagery at various levels. This was 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, although it took me a long while to realize this. 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 and embodying an affirming voice. A dichotomy of voicework and therapy work existed in my mind; however, a queering eventually took place where I embraced the overlap and then reviewed my experiences in therapy to relate them to my experiences of voicework. This included pulling out my therapy mandalas, which are often used as a way of processing experiences within GIM. Within this autoethnography, I have included significant mandalas that voice some of the emotional experiences I was having in voicework but that I didn't verbalize outside of my therapy until embracing the both/and of these spaces. I have grown substantially from these overlaps, (un)intentionally exploring within therapy many of the resistances that I experienced while 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 current paper, more than I am willing to share, and not always completely related to gender affirming voicework, spending time with my body led to me spending time with the impacts of past experiences. However, from the overlaps of my personal therapy work and gender affirming voicework eventually came the understanding that this voicework surrounds healing from gender-based trauma. My own GIM imagery captures so much of the experiences that have led me to gender affirming voicework and also the work itself.

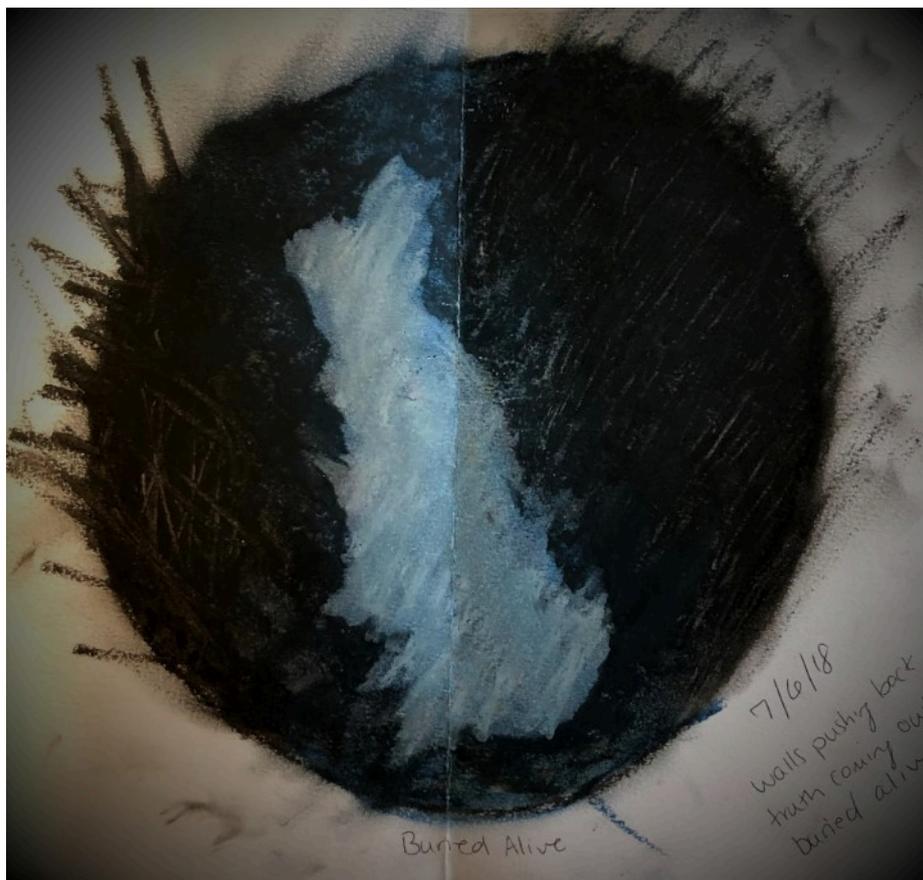
When I began this voicework, my experiences of myself were disconnected from a larger holistic understanding of myself – that is, considering my voice within the scope of my physical body, emotions, internal world, and so on. I was more focused on working with areas of vocal function and not on a more holistic understanding of gender affirming voicework. Further, I was not “in sync” with myself. The innermost parts of me were quite frankly a mess, a never-ending ocean that I felt like some miniscule pinpoint within.

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.

I strongly believe that this deep personal work unconsciously began in voicework and then shifted to my therapy space. With that, I am intrigued by the ways that it 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. For instance, more emotion-based work did arise in the gender affirming voicework I explored; however, I believe it was more largely contained within my personal therapy.

<https://soundcloud.com/maevongumble/improvising-to-hold-emotion>.

I read aloud Roger Quilter's “Weep You No More,” spending time with the first two lines of the song, attending to the melody of my speech, which surrounds the notes 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.



**Figure 10**

Image shows a mandala from a personal music therapy session, with the mandala filled and colored outside-the-lines with black. On top of the black is a faint blue-white figure. Notes from session read "walls pushing back, truth coming out, buried alive."

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 needed for what was going on internally for me, and honestly, is perhaps my "best" representation for what I imagine gender affirming voicework to be because of the ways this experience moved into a more holistic space. This was valuable work, but it could have been more deeply experienced had I been able to process it within a therapy space with a trained music therapist.

I share the above experience not to suggest that emotion-based work in gender affirming voicework is the same as GIM or other music psychotherapeutic approaches – because they are not as they are different ways of working. However, a voicework space could have perhaps contained some of the themes/ideas that were indeed present within my voicework but that more specifically came up in working with that music therapist. This gender affirming voicework, for me, opened up a whole ocean of inner movement on multiple levels – physically in terms of my voice and body, and emotionally in the ways I experience myself in various capacities.

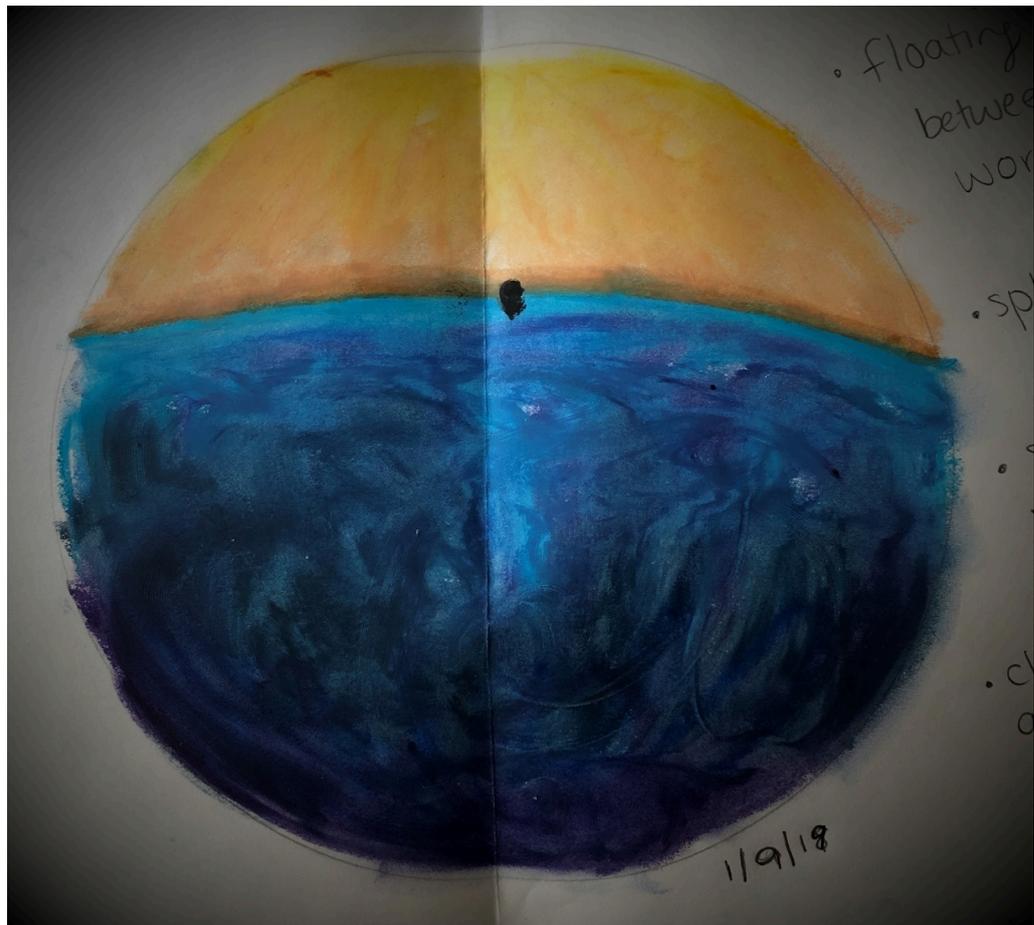


Figure 11

Image shows a mandala from a music therapy session on 1/9/2019 which shows a yellow-orange sky meeting with a fading blue ocean. Where they meet, is a small black dot. Notes read "floating between worlds."

## 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  
 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 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, *Authenticity*, 1/2019)<sup>14</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. Because, before Ariel was a mermaid, she was human – not the other way around. My 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 magic to change Ariel from human to mercreature, meaning well although the damage was done. There's a kind of death in transformation. But perhaps there's also birth and new life. When it was finally safe enough, Ursula returned Ariel back into a human. And my inner child 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.*

### A moment of reflection

I return to this story in true queer autoethnographic fashion, finding that my understanding of these experiences continues to shift and grow. This is particularly true as I have been relating them back to a music therapy context and to the clinical work that I am now doing to support other trans and nonbinary people in accessing and embodying their own voices and genders. I could go into some of these expanding thoughts here – interweaving my narrative into the theoretical and clinical, more concretely tying these experiences to academic literature and knowledge. However, I will not be doing this, partly because I have previously offered an introductory exploration of these ideas grounded in literature from the fields of speech-language pathology, vocal pedagogy, and music therapy (Maevon Gumble, 2019b).

To venture into an analysis of my lived experience in some way feels like boxing that experience up into a nice, neat package to give to you, as if to say, "This is what all of this meant." I must critique myself because in my previous article (Maevon Gumble, 2019b), I feel as if I did this, thereby sanitizing myself, firmly pulling the 'acad-

emic' away from the deeply personal parts of this autoethnography. In actuality, my personal, emotional story *is* academic and a source of important knowledge without requiring literature to make sense of it. I have so many unanswered questions, but the one thing that I do know is that – as a nonbinary trans music therapist – my journeys of exploring my voice, my gender, my body, and the possibilities of gender affirming voicework have started me along a path that I will likely continue exploring for the rest of my life. I do hope others join me.

## About the author

Maevon Gumble, MMT, MT-BC, is a board-certified music therapist based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (USA) working toward LPC licensure. They currently work as a mobile mental health therapist with older adults within their homes and other community settings (Familylinks). Maevon also maintains a small private practice (Becoming Through Sound) where they offer gender affirming voicework to those seeking to access and embody affirming gender expressions, particularly vocal expressions. Maevon completed their undergraduate and graduate studies at Slippery Rock University (Pennsylvania, USA) and has served as a guest editor on *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* for the special issue on queering music therapy (No. 3-2019). Maevon's professional interest include continued development of gender affirming voicework.

## Notes

1. Throughout this article, I am using authors' full names. This is done on purpose as a way of queering the writing process, thereby providing a more personal and engaging text while also offering more context beyond that which is given when only utilizing last names.
2. Throughout the entirety of this article, I am maintaining a more personal and conversational tone of voice, retaining my use of contractions. While this doesn't adhere to 'academic' standards, it feels important that my queer autoethnography stay true to my personal voice, especially given that my autoethnography is about embodying vocal expression. I am also maintaining this language choice in efforts of queering and unsettling the notion of 'academic' language and the ways that it sets clear boundaries on the ways authors are given permission to communicate about ideas.
3. In extracts of personal emails, journals, and reflections, I am choosing to maintain the original language despite occasional grammatical errors. This is in efforts of maintaining my personal voice within the autoethnography without imposing an 'academic' focus.
4. 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 the chest, causing the body to have to work harder to breathe. It's obviously not ideal; however, the physical discomfort often relieves emotional discomforts. This voicework calls for a deep consideration of the impacts of binding on the ability to use the voice freely. Some days I have had to take breaks from binding because they put a lot of pressure on my ribs which occasionally leaves my skin feeling raw from the pressure or exacerbates my asthmatic symptoms.
5. 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., 2012). Hormone therapy can also include taking hormones to create partially reversible bodily changes – estrogen to feminine 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, I solely reflect on the possibility of taking testosterone given my positioning as a female-assigned nonbinary adult.

6. In line with footnote 1, I am including each author for all references. Despite this not adhering to APA guidelines, I do this throughout the text in efforts to recognize that each author has contributed to the piece. However, for references with many authors, the reference will thereafter be referenced in APA style after the initial citation (in this case, Coleman et al., 2012).
7. Formant frequencies are the bands of frequencies of any sung/spoken pitch that are amplified within the vocal tract and are influenced by the size and shape of the vocal tract as well as the movements of the articulators (i.e., lips, tongue, teeth, jaw, soft palate). According to Johan Sundberg (2006), “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” (p. 105).
8. Alexandros Constansis (2008).
9. Refer to music therapist Sanne Storm’s (2013) dissertation work where she introduces a VOIAS voice assessment. This includes the CoreTone exercise which basically is focused on being present to the central pitch that a person is speaking around. This pitch is then elongated and toned on with the intention to let it open up and become relaxed and grounded within the body.
10. 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” (para. 1).
11. 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 personal music therapy sessions.
12. As I’ve previously described (2019b), “this exercise involves an actor imagining ever aspect of a 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” (p. 13).
13. 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” (para. 1).
14. After discussing with my therapist, the overlaps that I was recognizing between my personal music therapy work and my gender affirming voicework journeys, my therapist encouraged me to journal. This poem came out of that journaling.

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