

REFLECTIONS ON PRACTICE | PEER REVIEWED

The Unmasked Vocal Chameleon: A Composite Case Study of LMT-GAV

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Abstract

The *Liberatory Music Therapy Model of Gender Affirming Voicework* (LMT-GAV) is a developing model that aims to address voice and gender-based needs for people of all gender identities within music therapy (Gumble et al., 2025). Previous exploration of gender affirming voicework within music therapy has included an introduction through queer autoethnography (Gumble, 2019a, 2019b, 2020), exploration of a unique practicum placement (Dietrich, 2024), and exploration of clinical work within the community setting (Lipson, 2013, 2022; Myerscough, 2022). However, an exploration into LMT-GAV within the individual clinical setting has yet to be explored. This article presents a composite case to represent individual work completed with twelve white, neurodivergent, transfeminine therapy participants who were focused on the vocal function of their speaking voice. This composite case study offers an example of what LMT-GAV might be within the clinical setting.

Keywords: gender affirming voicework; gender; embodiment; trauma; composite case study

Introduction

This article offers a composite case study that incorporates both the Liberatory Music Therapy Model of Gender Affirming Voicework as well as Internal Family Systems. Further, this case study is intended to rest alongside the theoretical foundations and scope of practice article introduced in this same issue (Gumble et al., 2025). To situate the clinical work, a brief introduction to these models as well as composite case study is provided.

Liberatory Music Therapy Model of Gender Affirming Voicework

Gender affirming voicework can include many forms of gender-focused vocal training. The

specific model used within this case study is the Liberatory Music Therapy Model of Gender Affirming Voicework (LMT-GAV). LMT-GAV uses “various music therapy methods to access and embody spoken and/or sung vocal aesthetics. It is rooted in liberatory practices aimed at consciousness-raising [of internalized white cisheteronormativity] and tending to the emotional process of therapy participants” (Gumble et al., 2025, Defining LMT-GAV section, para. 1). Within both speech and song, this might involve working with the physical voice to address vocal function or engaging in emotions and identity-based work to address any emotional process that arises.

LMT-GAV is aimed at working holistically with vocal habits, emphasizing that most gender affirming voicework is aimed at skill development and vocal aesthetics rather than treating pathologies. Since deeper explorations have been provided elsewhere regarding the foundational underpinnings of LMT-GAV, the reader is encouraged to refer to related publications for a more robust framing (Dietrich, 2024; Gumble, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Gumble et al., 2025; Lipson, 2013, 2022; Myerscough, 2022).

Internal Family Systems

What emotional holding and processing looks like within LMT-GAV largely depends on the background, training, skills, and theoretical orientation of the music therapist as well as the unique needs of therapy participants (Gumble et al., 2025). For all my mental health music therapy work, I am grounded within Internal Family Systems theory (IFS; Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020), particularly informed by IFS therapists who work alongside individuals with complex trauma and high levels of dissociation (Twombly, 2023). My approach to emotional holding and processing within LMT-GAV is informed by this grounding. Since there has been minimal exploration of IFS within the music therapy field outside of the work of Cephass (2020), a brief introduction is provided here.

IFS is a non-pathologizing, psychotherapeutic approach developed by Richard Schwartz (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020) in his work as a family therapist. The approach arose out of listening to clients and applying family systems techniques and principles not just to their external family but also to their internal world. IFS is rooted in the basic premise that the mind is multiple—that is, we are all naturally made up of many parts or ego states. Individual parts might have different motivations, intentions, ways of thinking, and ways of existing in the world when compared to other parts within a system. While not the first theory to emphasize this, IFS is the first to work with these parts using family systems principles by understanding an individual’s parts as a unique internal family unit. In this sense, multiplicity is not a sign of pathology but rather the natural state of the mind; however, like external families, parts can enter into polarization with each other.

More specifically, each part enters into different roles or functioning positions, similar to external families. When there is harmony within the system, parts are freed up to pick up different preferred and enjoyable roles that do not lead to dysfunction. When individuals experience wounding and/or trauma that is left unprocessed and unintegrated, parts can step into extreme roles and carry burdens. Extreme roles can include: (1) Exiled parts that carry the burden and emotions of the original wound(s) are often pushed away as they are understood as too overwhelming or dangerous to cope with; and (2) Protector parts that will either proactively (as “managers”) or reactively (as “firefighters”) attempt to keep a person from re-experiencing the wounds of exiles. Protector parts are often exhausted from carrying the burden of this role, and their roles can only be sufficiently sustained for so long.

This model assumes that everyone already has access to what they need to heal. Specifically, every individual has the capacity for Self-energy—an energy of curiosity, compassion, calmness, clarity, confidence, courage, creativity, and connectedness. When an individual can connect into this energy, they access their own internal resources and

often know exactly how to support their own parts. The aim of the work is to support an individual with cultivating a critical mass of Self-energy within their system so that they can, rooted in the present, build relationships with their parts and help those parts release their burdens. IFS is not focused on absorbing parts back into a singular essence. Instead, when parts can let go of their burdens, they are able to assume more preferred and enjoyable roles within the system. That is, the internal family can function harmoniously with its natural Self-leadership (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020).

I believe that IFS meshes well with LMT-GAV in that both are focused on mindfulness, the cultivation of resources within a person's system, and consciousness-raising about lived experience. Further, my own integration of IFS has at times assisted with seamlessly exploring how someone might vocally embody themselves from context to context or in relationship to different aspects of their identities. It has also left room to explore any relational dynamics between parts that are impacting an individual's progress or even the goals they are setting. For example, perhaps a trans woman has the following parts arise during clinical work: (1) One part that is deeply motivated about this work and determined to access a sound that is more affirming; (2) Another part that feels silly whenever I ask her to explore sounds in a musical way; (3) One part that feels overwhelmed by the mind effort required to change vocal habits and does not see the point of even trying; and (4) Yet another part that actually enjoys her sense of masculinity and is concerned about losing some of these qualities amidst her gender transition. The integration of IFS into my practice allows for a nuanced exploration of the impact each of these parts might have on this person's emotional process and intentions for the work.

Composite Case Study

In discussing psychotherapy case studies for clinical training, Maureen Duffy (2010) describes composite clinical cases as the "blending of the clinical material from two or more client case sources [then] presented as a single case" (p. 147). According to Duffy's guidelines for creating a composite case (refer to pp. 148–152), the author first identifies a theme, then selects at least two therapy participants that address that theme, then pulls out integral moments from their individual narratives, and finally integrates these cases together into one cohesive narrative. In composite case studies, demographic information is pieced together without pulling too many details from any one person. Specific to music therapy, composite case study has been used to describe an anti-oppressive music therapy service to under-housed youth (Smith, 2012, 2022).

One benefit to using this type of case study is that it protects the identity and anonymity of therapy participants. This allows for thick descriptions without compromising a participant's right to privacy. The rich narratives that emerge from thick descriptions also allow for us to consider more complexity as a music therapy community. By providing as much detail as possible about this work, we as a profession can learn together and continue developing this model. Additionally, I believe composite case studies minimize the exploitation of marginalized and minoritized people by not requiring one therapy participant to consent to the intimate details of their healing narratives to be shared to educate professionals. Too often these individuals become the spokes-people of their communities. In the spirit of this, it is important to emphasize that trans, nonbinary, and gender expansive communities are not a monolith, and this case study is not intended to paint them as such. I intend for this composite case study to leave breathing room for the LMT-GAV narratives that are not reflected here.

To create this composite case, I identified twelve voicework participants with whom I have worked and, from these cases, wove together a singular narrative that highlights complexities and nuances of LMT-GAV. I call this person Jamie¹ (she/they). While Jamie's narrative represents a compilation of lived experiences, the people who reach out to me

are typically white, neurodivergent, transfeminine individuals who want to work on the vocal function of their speaking voices, with some interest in their singing voices. The majority of my understanding of this work has come from working alongside individuals with Jamie's lived experiences.

A smaller portion of my caseload has included transmasculine individuals, trans and nonbinary musicians and/or music therapists, BIPOC trans and nonbinary individuals, trans and nonbinary youth, and people seeking to solely explore their emotional relationship with their voice. People with different intersections of identity and experience may engage differently in LMT-GAV, and I hope to continue writing composite case studies that reflect this. In addition, I hope an increasingly diverse group of LMT-GAV facilitators will share their clinical experiences for the continued development of this model.

Throughout the narrative, European musical notations are provided to visually and musically experience the work with Jamie. It is my hope that these offer another layer of contextualizing that honors creative meaning-making processes.² A description of each notation is provided for those unfamiliar with or unable to read scores. In the future, I intend to make use of audio recordings and spectrograms for additional ways of engaging with case study material, not only for accessibility purposes but also to represent complex concepts such as resonance in as much detail as possible.

This composite case study begins with a thorough introduction to situate Jamie and explore what is considered in assessment. From there, the case is presented as a compilation of multiple sessions brought together to reflect an entire therapeutic process that occurred over the course of approximately a year. This is done in place of going through what occurred from each individual session to the next, partially due to (1) the nature of composite case studies where several individuals' therapeutic processes are being integrated together and (2) my desire to consider the overall therapeutic process in a cohesive way.

Lastly, the order in which I describe different aspects of LMT-GAV with Jamie is not intended to be a step-by-step protocol; in fact, I highly discourage music therapists of being too formulaic as that kind of rigidity might lead to the therapist not following their own creative intuition as well as the insight and awareness of a therapy participant's internal system and learning process. Instead, this composite case study is an example of what an LMT-GAV process could be like.

The Case

Jamie is a white, 25-year-old, nonbinary, transfemme adult who is Autistic³. She is disabled when their environment is not conducive to their processing and sensory needs. They are an avid music listener and described their taste as "eclectic." She lives in Pittsburgh, PA, U.S. and works in customer service at a call-in center. They considered their current and historical socioeconomic status to be middle-class.

Jamie reached out primarily due to the tension and discomfort they were experiencing at work, where she was regularly answering phones and navigating misgendering from customers. These experiences often led to intense dysphoria, anxiety, and concentration issues, which further impacted their ongoing motivation and attendance at work. Their coworkers and supervisors were all very supportive but could not change how one-time customers would interact with her. Referred to this work by their mental health provider, Jamie was already engaged in verbal psychotherapy focused on their gender transition and overall mental health. This continued throughout our work together.

Jamie had a solid understanding of her own gender and, knowing that transition is different for everyone, was figuring out what this meant for them. Through verbal psychotherapy, Jamie had already explored the ways that being socialized as male led to

performing masculinity to uphold ideas of manhood. Further, they had explored the ways they were expected to perform femininity as a transfeminine person. Jamie experienced gender performance as intertwined with her Autistic identity, specifically the “masking” she found herself doing as a neurodivergent person. As they began voicework, they were already focused on “taking off the masks” they wore due to sociocultural expectations.

In describing their voice, Jamie identified it as “deep, low, disgusting, and masculine,” reporting that it was difficult for her to listen to the sound of her own voice, particularly while at work and especially when there was an echo on phone or video calls. Jamie knew they would not feel so negatively about their voice if they were not confronted with daily misgendering at work. To my ear, Jamie’s default voice was pitched at around A2 with thick registration and a marcato speech pattern. The melody of her speech tended to fall down to lower pitches, and there was little pitch variation or jumps in her sound. Lastly, her resonance was big, booming, and low.

Jamie had a very supportive friend group of online gamers who were also trans/queer and who she regularly met up with. Their immediate cisgender and heterosexual family of origin was positively involved in their life and supportive of their transition. In these family and friend spaces, Jamie was less concerned about her voice because she was being correctly gendered (i.e., receiving she/they pronouns and other gender honorifics and language). In their gaming circle, they often played tabletop games that involve character creation and acting, providing space for Jamie to “try on” voices for different characters. Jamie had struggled to access different voices but felt comfortable enough with friends to try.

In considering a direction for voicework, they identified wanting to access and embody a voice that would help them “pass” at work (i.e., be more consistently gendered as a woman). For Jamie, that meant having customers use language such as she/her pronouns, ma’am, Ms., or Mrs. prefixes. While such language did not completely capture Jamie’s experience of their gender, they identified this possibility as a “good enough” work alternative to being misgendered (i.e., use of he/him pronouns, sir, or Mr. prefix). Jamie also identified a desire to explore what an “actually authentic” voice would be for them—a voice stripped of cisheteronormative ideas of gender and one that felt emotionally connected and embodied regardless of how others perceive it. She reported a desire to engage mostly with speech with a little interest in exploring her singing voice. They reported often feeling as though their voice was unpredictable and unreliable, particularly when trying to access higher pitches. Overall, Jamie expressed wanting this “actually authentic” voice to be flexible and fluid, with the ability to shift into different vocal spaces depending on the situation.

When asked to identify qualities of sound or specific voices that Jamie felt drawn to (i.e., her vocal imagery), she identified two sets of desired voice qualities and provided examples of individuals who demonstrated aspects of these qualities. Her vocal imagery was as follows:

- *Work voice*: Higher pitch, forward but also warm and smooth, bouncy and expressive, clear, not rumble and in the chest but instead sitting higher within the body; Nicole Maines (activist), Cherami Leigh (voice actor), Maddie Taylor (voice actor).
- *Actually authentic voice*: Not forced or contained, open and relaxed but also expressive, limitless. Current pitch felt adequate but there was a desire to explore resonance.

Jamie found it more difficult to identify words or vocal examples for the “actually authentic” voice and expressed a desire for this voice to organically arise through voicework. This parallels their exploration of what it would mean to “unmask” their

Autistic identity and gender embodiment. Jamie tended to relate to her voice through both imagery and body sensation and had very little understanding of vocal mechanics. They reported wanting to build upon this embodied knowledge by developing more understanding of their vocal mechanics.

Jamie had no past experience with voice lessons, voice therapy, or music therapy, but regularly sang along with favorite songs and had independently tried to shift her voice. She had explored pitch, but other elements of gendered sound, such as shifting resonance, were more difficult to explore. This had sparked frustration, embarrassment, and shame and often resulted in “giving up.”

Jamie described a complicated relationship with her body and was attempting to foster a sense of “being home” in her body. Jamie had acknowledged that tuning into their body was difficult at times but that they had been engaging in mindfulness practices to cultivate kinesthetic awareness. When stressed, they identified experiencing tension in their shoulders and back. This reflected the tension that would arrive when attempting to voice in different ways, at times feeling vocally strained. Jamie identified not having any issues in taking a full breath and denied any vocal pathologies. When asked about potential trauma or mental health needs coming into the work, she stated her current individual therapist was helping her process childhood trauma, gender-related needs, and “unmasking.” Jamie anticipated needing emotional holding but not necessarily emotional processing, as their current therapist was supporting them with these. Jamie reported that she felt able to name and request support should anxieties arise.

It was clear to me that Jamie was a great candidate for LMT-GAV. Although not a requirement for the work, she had established social and emotional resources through her therapist, friends, and family as well as work groups where she could be supported in exploring different ways of voicing. Additionally, Jamie arrived with some experience shifting their pitch and attempting to shift resonance, despite some frustrations with that process. They demonstrated willingness to collaboratively work with their voice and to use music as a tool. She also brought mindfulness practices as a resource, which would help her engage with many of the prompts given in this work.

The biggest challenge I noticed was Jamie’s emotionally strained relationship to their voice within the work setting (i.e., using “disgusting” to describe their voice). She expressed that frustration, embarrassment, and shame had led to giving up her previous independent work on her voice. Such experiences and language indicate voice- and/or body-related discomfort if not dysphoria, and I anticipated Jamie’s shame, anxiety, and/or distress might arise during our sessions. This was a potential challenge as we began; however, Jamie expressed an openness to tend to their relationship with their voice, gender, and body, and as such, this felt like a workable challenge from my perspective.

Jamie’s goals included:

1. To access and embody a work-specific voice that helps her be gendered correctly more often in efforts of easing dysphoria and gaining a greater sense of safety.
2. To access and embody an “actually authentic” voice for everyday life, which would involve redefining what gender, embodiment, and the voice meant for them amidst cultural messaging that centered neurotypical and cisheteronormative experiences.
3. To be able to flexibly and fluidly shift between her work-specific and “actually authentic” voices with intentionality.
4. To tend to the emotional process arising, particularly to ground Jamie through any potential anxieties and discomforts while holding space for the intersections of her gender and Autistic experiences.

While considering whether Jamie was a good fit for LMT-GAV, I also considered my own

skills, experiences, and personal scope of practice. While no two voicework participants are the same, the aforementioned goals were familiar enough to me that I felt I could adequately support Jamie. Additionally, they fell within my scope of practice as a music therapist and licensed professional counselor. We agreed to meet biweekly for Zoom sessions (we met virtually as a byproduct of the COVID-19 pandemic). Due to the nature of Jamie's work at a call-in center where she was often on phone and video calls, the virtual environment was a resource in that we actively engaged with technology in sessions.

Early Work

The primary intention in our early work was to foster mindfulness and curious play by helping Jamie connect with their here-and-now, present experience of their voice, gender, and embodiment. I helped Jamie recognize the voice as inherently musical just as it is, whether in speech or song. By creating opportunities to play with different variables and nuances of gendered vocal sounds (e.g., pitch, inflection, registration/weight, and so on), Jamie developed a more embodied knowledge about their voice and gender. Our early work also involved Jamie identifying strategies to re-access vocal sounds found within sessions when she was outside of sessions. This early work also involved them becoming even more invested in their learning process. I drew on transformational learning theory to help Jamie identify their lived expertise with voice, consider the emotional stakes of their learning, get additional clarity about their specific goals, and build a relationship with me.

Setting the stage for gender and the voice

From the start, I shared with Jamie my tendency to work independently with discrete variables of the voice before putting them all together or working with them simultaneously. When asked, Jamie identified that it would be helpful to share how combinations of voice variables tend to be perceived in terms of gender, given her goal of passing at work.⁴ Jamie wanted to understand voice stereotypes while also considering how to set them aside in service to an "actually authentic" voice that could reflect her own embodiment.

As we continued to discuss this, Jamie and I jokingly referred to her becoming a kind of "vocal chameleon"⁵ through the ability to access whatever quality of sound she wanted at any given moment. Jamie was intrigued by the parallels between this imagery and their explorations of "masking" in different contexts. We worked with the extremes of each gendered voice variable to find qualities that aligned with the different voices Jamie sought to access.

Exploring the vocal folds

By introducing the concept of the CoreTone of the voice, I could support Jamie in hearing what their voice did in relation to pitch. I demonstrated the process of finding my own CoreTone, drawing attention to the pitch of my voice (Figure 1).

Figure 1. M. Demonstrating How to Find the CoreTone.

Figure 1 shows musical notation for two types of speech: 'Usual speech' and 'Stretched-out speech Toning'. The 'Usual speech' section is marked with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 120$ and a 3/4 time signature. The 'Stretched-out speech Toning' section is marked with a tempo of $\text{♩} = 100$ and a 3/4 time signature. The lyrics are: 'This is my voice. This is my voice. This is my voice. I might go up and talk here, and I might go down and talk here for a bit, but I tend to talk here. Ev-en as I go up and down and back here.'

Note: Musical notation is displayed. In the score, the author demonstrates speech as a fast-paced melody to stretched-out speech toning, where the melody is slower and more elongated. As the author is talking about moving the pitch of the CoreTone, they demonstrate this in their voice. The author says: "This is my voice. This is my voice. This is my voice. I might go up and talk here, and I might go down and talk here for a bit, but I tend to talk here. Even as I go up and down and back here."

I asked whether Jamie wanted to use conversation as a place to start CoreTone exploration or whether they wanted to read from a passage, book, song lyrics, or poetry. She selected a book she was in the process of reading—*The Selected Works of Audre Lorde*—and I invited her to mute or unmute and turn her camera off or leave it on, depending on what she was comfortable with. They began to read through a passage, tuning in to the pitch their voice repeatedly came back to (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Jamie's A2 CoreTone.

Figure 2 shows musical notation for Jamie's A2 CoreTone. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 70$. The lyrics are: 'It is with-in our dif-'fren-ces that we are both most pow-er-ful and most vul-ner-a-ble and some of the most dif-fi-cult tasks of our lives are the claim-ing of dif-'fren-ces and learn-ing to use those dif-'fren-ces as brid-ges rather than as bar-ri-ers be-tween us.'

Note: Musical notation is displayed. Jamie voices at mostly at A2, with G#3 occasionally coming in. The melody is faster-paced and closer to speech patterns. The specific passage used is as follows: "It is within our differences that we are both most powerful and most vulnerable, and some of the most difficult tasks of our lives are the claiming of differences and learning to use those differences as bridges rather than as barriers between us."

I identified Jamie's CoreTone as an A2 and matched them on my piano, rolling an Asus2 chord freely without a clear tempo, leaving space for Jamie to voice between rolls. I then encouraged them to elongate each syllable and let it be more explicitly musical (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Jamie Elongated Speech.

♩ = 70

J. It is with - in our dif - 'fren - ces

M.

Piano Improvised rhythm

3

J. that we are most pow - er - ful and most vul - ner -

M.

Pno.

5 Jamie pauses

J. 'ble

M. What are you no - ti - cing? —

Pno.

7 Jamie shifts back to speech

Note: Musical notation is displayed. The author and Jamie voice together. The author plays the piano with Asus2 and Dsus2 chords as well as an improvised rhythm that follows Jamie's voice. Jamie tones on an A2 using the Audre Lorde passage with eighth notes and quarter notes. The tempo is 70 beats per minute. When Jamie pauses, the author checks in on the same pitch by asking "What are you noticing?"

She identified that physically, the note itself was comfortable, but emotionally, she was disconnected and uncomfortable. They wanted to try a different pitch, but we both noticed their anxiety.

I sang an invitation, still on A3 in an improvised rhythm: "What would it be like to just focus on your breath without voicing for a moment?" She did this, and I prompted them to follow the pace of their breath and try to let it slow as they were able. I followed the tempo of their breathing with the piano, bringing in a predictable rhythm as I oscillated between the same chords as before. We took time here without voicing, using breath and the music as resources for grounding. As they found this grounding, they eventually brought their voice back in, expressing readiness to continue.

Keeping the musical container the same—stable and slow—I invited Jamie to slide to a different pitch that she emotionally resonated with. I then offered an example through my own voice (Figure 4).

Figure 4. M. Demonstrating CoreTone Movement.

Figure 4 displays musical notation for a demonstration of CoreTone Movement. The notation is presented in four systems, each featuring a vocal line (M.) and a piano accompaniment (Piano/Pno.).

The first system shows the vocal line with the lyrics: "What would it be like - to be a lit - tle". The piano accompaniment is marked "Improvised rhythm".

The second system shows the vocal line with the lyrics: "high - - - er? Yeah, and now I'm talk-ing here and I'm". The piano accompaniment includes a triplet of eighth notes.

The third system shows the vocal line with the lyrics: "gon - na read the pas - sage just to see how it feels.". The piano accompaniment is marked "Pno.".

The fourth system shows the vocal line with the lyrics: "Yeah - how does this feel? Gon - na see how this feels.". The piano accompaniment is marked "Pno.".

Note: Musical notation is displayed. The author demonstrates movement from one pitch to another, voicing on an A3 while playing Asus2 on the piano. Specifically, they say: "What would it be like to be a little higher?" They then slide up to a C4, with the piano accompaniment following to eventually land in Csus2 and Fsus2. The author then narrates what they are doing while voicing at the C4. They say: "Yeah, and now I'm talking here, and I'm gonna read the passage just to see how it feels. How does this feel? Gonna see how this feels."

Figure 5. Jamie on E3.

♩ = 70

J. *And some of the most dif-fi-cult tasks of our lives are the*

M.

Piano *Improvised rhythm*

4

J. *claim-ing of dif-'fren-ces and learn-ing to use those dif-'fren-ces for brid-ges*

M. *I hear tension in her voice.*

Pno.

6 2

J. *ra-ther than bar-ri-ers _ be-tween us.*

M. *Hey Ja-mie I*

Pno. *piano gets softer but still present*

8

J.

M.

won - der what you're no - tic - ing if a - ny - thing?

Pno.

9

J.

Well. I like this sound but it takes a lot of ef-fort. Phys-i - 'cly.

M.

Pno.

3

Note: Musical notation is displayed. Jamie voices on an E3 while the author plays Asus2 and Esus2 chords on the piano, improvising a melody around Jamie's speech. While Jamie's reading the Audre Lorde passage, the author begins to hear tension in Jamie's voice. When Jamie comes to the end of a phrase, the author softens the piano accompaniment and brings their voice in on E3 to prompt Jamie: "Hey Jamie, I wonder what you're noticing, if anything?" Jamie responds, still on the E3: "Well, I like this sound but it takes a lot of effort. Physi'cly."

On a scale of 1 (minimal effort, sustainable) to 10 (high effort, unsustainable), Jamie identified that they were at a 7 (their initial CoreTone was a 3).

Still in speech at an E3, I asked, "What would it be like to try to relax around that sound? What's the least amount of work you can do while voicing up there?" We ended up exploring familiar relaxation strategies, then entered back into the musical container, still on Esus2 and Asus2 chords. I encouraged Jamie to do a body-scan from toes to head to notice any tension and do whatever felt right to relax tension as they were able (e.g., muscle tensing and releasing, stretching, self-massage). I also offered prompts to support Jamie in relaxing different muscles of the throat. Lastly, I encouraged them to connect to and relax their breathing.

After this, I shifted into conversational improvisation and asked, "What would it be like to bring your voice back in on the exhale and let that breath support your sound?" Jamie agreed and began toning on the E3, holding it out and engaging the lower half of their body more than before. I also encouraged them to move, shaking their hands/arms, gently rotating their neck, rolling their shoulders forward and backward. When I checked in between their voicings ("What are you noticing?"), she shared that it felt more relaxed and closer to a 5 on the effort scale.

I gently circled back to the anxiety that surfaced earlier, and Jamie shared that they had tapped into a dysphoric internal voice that said their voice was "disgusting." This had caused what they call "spiraling," an experience that made it hard for them to focus and

voice due to racing thoughts and their throat closing up. Jamie shared that it was helpful for her to have the space to experience this anxiety, but then to come back into voicing at her own pace (rather than ending the experience due to the anxiety).

Following Jamie's intuition, I supported them in naming this internal voice as their "Vigilant Protector"—a part desperately clinging to cisheteronormative ideas about voice and embodiment to try to help them avoid ongoing misgendering at work. As Jamie built a relationship with this part, she began to understand that it held onto the burden of cisheterosexism to keep her from experiencing systemic violence from others through misgendering or physical harm. The unfortunate byproduct of this protective move was that the violence became self-inflicted. In naming this part and beginning to understand what it was trying to do for them, Jamie was able to begin having a different relationship with it and to support it with letting go of harmful messages while simultaneously still offering important cues about Jamie's personal safety and when "passing" felt important. Further, it allowed Jamie to begin having a more compassionate and curious relationship with her voice.

We returned to the Audre Lorde passage, first staying completely on an E3 while reading, then beginning to explore pitch inflection (Figure 6).

Figure 6. M. and Jamie Exploring Pitch Inflection.

♩ = 70

J. *[Whole rest]*

M. *[Melodic line]*
 What would it be like _ to ex-plore the notes a-round that one? like this one

Piano *[Improvised rhythm]*

3

J. *[Whole rest]*

M. *[Melodic line]*
 _ ex-plor-ing this one _ or e-ven this one _ ex-plor-ing this one _

'no. *[Chords]*

5 2

J. It is with-in our dif-'fren-ces

M. It is with-in our dif-'fren-ces

Pno.

7 2

J. our dif-'fren-ces it is with-in

M. our dif-'fren-ces It is with-in

no.

9 3

J. our dif-'fren-ces

M. our dif-'fren-ces

Pno.

Note: Musical notation is displayed. In the score, the author continues with Esus2 and Asus2 chords. The author voices on E3, then shifts to F#3, then eventually a G#3. The author moves up in a whole-step motion to demonstrate the pitch change while saying: "What would it be like to explore the notes around that one, like this one, exploring this one, or even this one, exploring this one." The author invites Jamie back in and uses phrases from the Audre Lorde passage in a call and response type fashion to explore different speech melodies that make up the following pitches: E3, F#3, G#3, and B4.

We also considered the overall melody of these pitches to explore where the line moved (Figure 7).

Figure 7. M. and Jamie Exploring Speech Melodies.

$\text{♩} = 70$

J. *low and go high*

M. *What would it be like — to start low and go high?*

Piano *Improvised rhythm*

3

J. *low and go high* *high and then low?*

M. *low and go high* *or may-be high and then low?* *or may-be*

Pno.

ZX

5 2

J.

M. *high and then low, then in the mid - dle?*

Pno.

6

J. *high and then low, then in the mid - dle.*

M.

Pno.

Note: Musical notation is displayed. In the score, the author continues with the use of call and response to show examples of different melodic directions for speech melodies. As the author talks about each movement, they demonstrate it in their voice, and Jamie voices it back to the author. Throughout the entire notation, the author says the following: “What would it be like to start low and go high? Or maybe high and then low? Or maybe high and then low, then in the middle?”

As Jamie explored pitch variance, they recognized their tendency within their default voice to (1) stay around one or two notes and (2) move downward within the melody of their speech. They reported wanting to explore more “bounces” in the sound, with more pitch variance and upward movement.

Simultaneously, I got the impression that Jamie was emotionally uncomfortable exploring her voice in this way. I remarked on this and Jamie shared that they were feeling “silly,” which I empathized with and said, “I’m thinking about a few different things: (1) We might be voicing in a way that doesn’t feel aligned to your own experience of your gender, and that might be giving us important information about vocal embodiment and what kind of vocal qualities align with what you’re looking for. And/or (2) We might be voicing in a way that is outside your current vocal habits, so it feels awkward—kind of like riding a bike or speaking a new language for the first time. In that case, it might just be about building up the muscle memory needed to voice in a different way. I don’t have the answer to what it is for you, but I’m curious if it might be one or both of these (or perhaps even something else).”

Jamie shared that she liked more varied pitch sounds with upward movement, but the melody felt clunky and “unnatural” in her voice, probably because she was not used to it. I asked how her Vigilant Protector part was doing with voicing in this way, and Jamie realized that this was the part that was feeling silly. Jamie recognized that this part was again trying to help her by avoiding sounding fake or unnatural. I let Jamie know that I also did not want this for them and, further, that any sound that comes out of their body was technically a “natural” one; it just might not be a habitual one. By talking through these feelings and possible meanings, Jamie’s Vigilant Protector felt a little less silly (if still somewhat self-conscious), which allowed her to resume experimenting with pitch variance and bouncy sounds. It continued to feel awkward for a period until, as Jamie’s voice acclimated to the muscle coordination, it felt more “natural.”

We then worked to slowly transition to speech. While still supporting on piano, I encouraged Jamie to very slowly try to bring her voicing back to speech, mostly through “shortening” the sound while staying at the same pitches (Figure 8).

Figure 8. M. Demonstrating Movement from Singing to Speech.

M. $\text{♩} = 70$

I'm try - ing to talk here. I'm try - ing to

5 talk here. I'm try - ing to talk here. I'm try-ing to

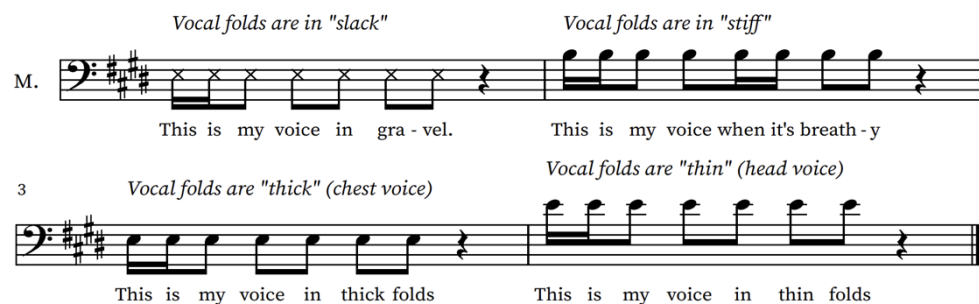
8 talk here. try-ing to talk here. I'm try-ing to talk here.

Note: Musical notation is displayed. Here, the author demonstrates moving from singing or toning back to speech. This is done by repeating the phrase “I’m trying to talk here” multiple times, gradually going from longer note durations to shorter and shorter ones, adding staccato in to encourage movement back to speech. Eventually, the author is fully back in speech.

Moving forward, we would regularly come back to exploring pitch and pitch variance in this way, noticing that on different days, Jamie's default and desired CoreTone as well as the variance surrounding it would vary depending on mood, context, energy, and goals for that day.

While voicing, Jamie remarked on how their voice was still more "rumbly," despite going up in pitch. This led us into an exploration of how the vocal folds were coming together. Jamie was hearing thicker registration in her voice. After providing education about how the vocal folds can come together in different ways, I offered a demonstration of this using my own voice, inviting Jamie to recreate these different qualities while repeating each sentence (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Demonstrating Vocal Fold Qualities.



Note: Musical notation is displayed. Here, the author demonstrates four different vocal fold qualities: (1) "Slack" by saying "This is my voice in gravel." This quality has no pitch and sounds like a "creaky door." (2) "Stiff" by saying "This is my voice when it's breathy." This quality has a lot of air in the sound and can exist across an entire person's range. (3) "Thick" by saying "This is my voice in thick folds." This quality is the equivalent of chest voice, which is commonly associated with lower pitches; however, it can also be brought into higher pitches to a certain point. (4) "Thin" by saying "This is my voice in thin folds." This quality is the equivalent of head voice, which is commonly associated with higher pitches; however, it can be brought into lower pitches to a certain point.

As Jamie began to do this, I helped them to play around with a thinner sound as this was something they wanted in their speech to a greater degree. Her Vigilant Protector again considered this "silly," and by slowing down to attend to this part, Jamie understood it was holding onto harmful childhood messages about this quality of their voice (e.g., "man up," "stop acting like a girl"). In elaborating on this protective part, Jamie was able to (1) recognize how this part was again attempting to keep her out of emotional pain through internalized cisheterosexism and (2) help this part explore how these ideas do not reflect what Jamie believed to be true about gender and expression. Importantly, Jamie and I needed to reassure this part that neither of us was going to judge them for voicing in a thinner way and that Jamie was able to defend their vocal choices to anyone who may judge. In doing this, the Vigilant Protector continued to soften and allowed for a deeper exploration.

Jamie explored [i] and [u] with thinner folds, sirening around and attempting to be more "mouse-like" in efforts of staying within a thinner vocal sound. As she grew more comfortable with this, I helped her see how low she could go while still staying thin, recognizing that at some point, Jamie's voice would intuitively want to flip into thicker vocal folds. With practice, they were able to strengthen and widen the range of this part of their voice, bringing thin down lower and lower, then working to speak with more thinness. This eventually became easier as Jamie also engaged in resonance work (refer below) to move them out of a falsetto sound and into a projected, strong head voice. At this point while speaking, Jamie found herself quickly shifting out of this thinner sound and into her default voice.

This experience led Jamie first into frustration and eventually into what they called a

“lightbulb” moment. Specifically, this was about the mindset with which she was approaching all the voicework “exercises” thus far. Instead of “doing an exercise” and then “letting go” of it and assuming the “exercise” would automatically translate back to her speech, she needed to fully embody that she would be engaged in a kind of spoken-singing all the time (and that she had already been doing this previously but had not realized it because it was a vocal habit). It was about letting their speech be musical but not sing-song (thus, not outwardly sounding like music to the average listener). In truly embodying the understanding that everyone is singing all the time (even when speaking), Jamie was able to begin translating this work into their everyday life with more ease. We anticipated that after doing this for long enough, it would no longer feel like singing and would subsequently shift into habitual speech.

Exploring the vocal tract

As Jamie and I were talking about the shifts she has been noticing with her pitch and thinness, I reflected back on the piano the various pitches that she was bouncing between in the session—F3 as her CoreTone with moments of D3, E3, G3, B3, and C4—rolling between each of them. They commented about how they were enjoying these pitches, but the sound was “deeper” than they would like, partially because she was occasionally dropping into a thicker registration. Still rolling the notes she was voicing at, I asked, “Where are you physically noticing the sound resonating in your body?” They felt the sound in their chest and throat, with no resonance any higher. I reflected, “I wonder what it would be like to pick a physically comfortable note and explore a different resonance....” She stuck with the F3, and I offered prompts that helped her explore how raising and lowering the position of her tongue in her mouth impacted the quality of the sound. I rolled an Fsus2 chord while Jamie tested the sound out the difference between a more forward [i] vowel versus an [i] that was warmer and sitting in the back of the mouth.

With my encouragement, they repeated the phrase of “Hi, I’m Jamie” in this more forward resonance. She reported that she liked the sound a little more when her tongue was raised but was noticing that it was challenging to maintain when she went to talk, mostly in terms of mind effort. I validated this as something many participants experience and introduced the concept of silent voicing and breathwork, encouraging Jamie to breathe in and out within an [i] position with a higher tongue position. While rolling the Fsus2 chord, I encouraged Jamie to try and breathe in and out, feeling both the inhale and the exhale stay within the forward space. I added a steady rhythm, moving between Fsus2 and Bbsus2 chords. Jamie noticed that this became a little easier with practice.

Easing up on the piano to leave more space between the notes, I voiced at F3, stretching out the sound for conversational improvisation, “What would it be like to bring your voice in very slowly with short phrases?” Jamie followed suit and began exploring the word “Hi” again, sensing that it feels a bit easier. We lengthened the phrase back to “Hi, I’m Jamie,” still in the same forward quality.

Over the course of several sessions, we followed a similar process to explore different qualities of Jamie’s voice, various positions for each quality, and what it would be like to build those positions and qualities into their sound. This led to Jamie recognizing a desire to remove nasality from the voice by raising the palate while still narrowing the throat slightly to create a smaller space. It also involved slightly raising her larynx without overextending. Additionally, it involved spreading her lips slightly into more of a smile. Lastly, Jamie was able to access a more legato and smooth sound in comparison to the more punctuated marcato of their default voice. Eventually, each of these areas took less and less mental effort to voice as Jamie developed the tools to do so.

Later Work

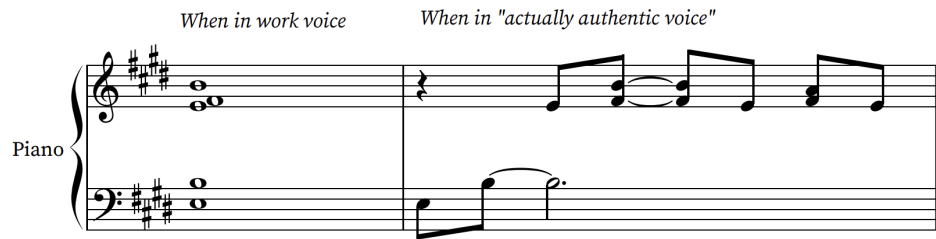
As Jamie became more and more familiar with navigating individual variables of the voice independently from each other, she began zooming out to consider the full voice, specifically the ways these variables moved together and how Jamie might pair them together in different ways (e.g., lower pitches with more pitch variance, thinner vocal folds, and more forward resonance). In this part of our work together, Jamie would regularly move between exploring individual variables and exploring their full voice. This integrative work led us into participant-guided play during which Jamie was able to independently move around their voice without necessarily needing feedback from me. Jamie had the tools to navigate her voice, knew how to use those tools, and often came into sessions with a clear understanding of what she wanted to work on. My role shifted into being a witness to Jamie's process, mirroring back what they were experiencing, providing space to practice their different voices, and supporting Jamie in transitioning out of voicework sessions. Additionally, I continued to support Jamie with identifying and working with any internal parts that arose.

Differentiation, Embodiment, and Continued Emotional Process

Jamie and I had conversations about masking as Autistic as it intersects with their experiences of gender and how it had at times been difficult for them to figure out what their actual voice was anymore because they had done so much masking to be the neurotypical cisheterosexual boy they were expected to be. Jamie began to understand masking as a kind of trauma, and thus, we held space for their grief as they processed this. She named this part of herself "The Mask," and grew to understand that it masked out of a desire for love and acceptance and to avoid the social punishment of being unmasked. Before The Mask came into their life, Jamie remembered "vocally stimming" and recalled that her vocal expression had more varied pitch and volume as well as a more forward resonance. The Mask was very connected to Jamie's Vigilant Protector; they often worked together to keep her safe. Working with these parts helped Jamie recognize the ways they had been engaged in an ongoing performance of neurotypicality and masculinity, and that they had even engaged in a heightened performance of femininity in their efforts to not be misgendered in the workspace.

At this point, Jamie had grown aware that her initial vocal imagery had slightly shifted from the beginning of our work. They noted that they wanted their "actually authentic" voice to be somewhere around an F3 and to have more inflection through the use of pitch and volume. Their authentic voice also sat within their cheek bones and had a thinner register and smooth quality with moments of breathiness as Jamie shifted to lower pitches. Further, Jamie grew aware that her work voice had all of these qualities, just "dialed up" a little more and with a bit more bounciness and upward inflection.

In entering the session, Jamie would occasionally slip back and forth between their previous default voice and their actually authentic voice, but when working intentionally, Jamie was able to get back to their developing default voice. Jamie wanted to work more on shifting between their work voice and authentic voice in conversation. I asked them to help me define musical cues I could use to signal when I was hearing sounds associated with either voice. Figure 10 illustrates how Jamie and I landed on these cues.

Figure 10. Jamie's Musical Cues.

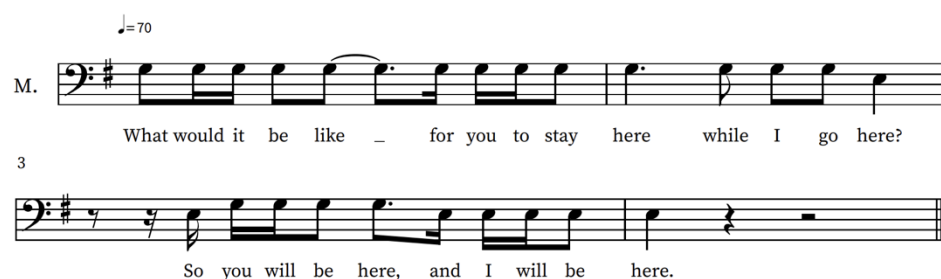
Note: Musical notation is displayed. In the score, the author demonstrates two different musical cues. The first cue is the “when in work voice” cue, and it includes a whole note Esus2 chord. The second cue is the “when in ‘actually authentic voice’” cue, and it includes an Esus2 chord played with eighth note movement. The cues were sped up and slowed down in varying degrees depending on how close or far away Jamie was to her work voice.

Jamie’s aim was to remain mostly in their work voice since it was the more “extreme” version of the two and was harder to maintain.

Jamie began talking about not knowing what to talk about, and me encouraging them to pick something that they felt comfortable talking about and could talk about for some time. They chose to talk about a situation with their sister, who they felt very supported by. As they talked, I sped up and slowed down as I heard shifts in Jamie’s sound. Vocally matching her notes, I engaged in the conversation where appropriate, encouraging her to keep going.

At one point, I sped up because Jamie had shifted out of their work voice, but they missed the cue. I more drastically sped up and increased the volume to get Jamie’s attention, and they adjusted their voice and quickly apologized. I emphasized there was no need to apologize, and that musical feedback was an attempt to communicate cues without verbally interrupting. Still in musical conversation, I asked if the Vigilant Protector had just come in to apologize. Jamie agreed and noticed the pressure this part applied to do their work voice “right.” This part was able to give Jamie more space for curiosity and compassion, and Jamie found this made it easier for them to maintain their work voice.

We also explored differentiation in this phase of the work (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Exploring Differentiation.

Note: Musical notation is displayed. Here, the author models vocally, encouraging Jamie to voice at a G#3 while the author stays down on an E3. The author says: “What would it be like for you to stay here while I go here? So you will be here, and I will be here.”

Jamie tried this with me, and we both worked to stay in our respective sonic locations while talking. Jamie noticed her pitch descending at times but adjusted when I emphasized it through musical cues on the piano.

This led to further conversation about The Mask and this part’s tendency to vocally mirror what Jamie heard around them; The Mask acted like that “vocal chameleon” without Jamie even realizing it. This part was drawn to replicating what was around her, which had previously made it challenging for Jamie to identify which vocal sounds she was drawn to without The Mask’s influence. Jamie and I reflected on how this part had

been a resource in voicework all this time. For example, in most of our work, I musically mirrored what Jamie's voice was doing or offered a vocal quality they were trying to work on. The Mask made it easier for Jamie to absorb what I was doing with my voice and match those qualities. In later work, we were running into the challenge of differentiating our individual vocal sounds without enmeshment. Through voicing together in our own respective vocal states, Jamie and I worked to develop their confidence and consistency to stay in the voicing they wanted.

Toward the end of our work together, Jamie expressed her desire to work with vocalizations like laughing, shouting, and coughing. For laughing, I supported Jamie in exploring how many different ways she could musically laugh, working with the same variables that she had already been working with and then transitioning those back to less explicitly musical sounds. For shouting, I supported Jamie with projection strategies to adequately anchor the sound in their body and allow their voice to resonate (e.g., tilting the cricoid cartilage, narrowing the aryepiglottic sphincter, adding a higher tongue position). To avoid vocal irritation or damage, we only briefly explored coughing with forward vowels (i.e., [i] or [ɛ]) versus more backward vowels (i.e., [o] or [a]). Jamie was encouraged to practice this whenever she needed to cough.

Jamie and I shifted to monthly sessions with voicework becoming a kind of check-in as Jamie integrated new ways of being with their voice and adjusting voicing as needed or desired in daily life. By the end of our work together, Jamie could flexibly shift back and forth between her work and authentic voices. Jamie expressed that voicework helped them feel more at home in their body and voice, and, more specifically, explore her voice at the intersection of vocal function and emotional experience. Lastly, Jamie shared that having the space to tend to parts that contributed to their internal dialogue about their voice helped her feel more empowered to move through various sociocultural contexts with the understanding that she could be an unmasked "vocal chameleon" intentionally, rather than as a protective response to past trauma. Importantly, this provided Jamie with internal resources to put on whatever voice they wanted to navigate a world that is sadly still filled with cisheteronormativity and violence directed at trans, nonbinary, and gender expansive people. In this way, Jamie could "change her voice" when she wanted or needed to.

Closing Remarks

Through the use of vocal mirroring and harmonizing, conversational improvisation, education on the voice and gender, relaxation strategies, mindfulness strategies, transformational learning principles, and Internal Family Systems, I supported Jamie in accessing and embodying different vocal qualities related to their desires for two different vocal patterns that reflected their gender experience. We addressed vocal shifts related to the vocal folds (i.e., pitch, pitch variance, and vocal fold body covers) as well as vocal shifts along other places of the vocal tract (i.e., resonance and articulation). Our voicework process also involved a resource-oriented and mindfulness-based approach to the voice that emphasized the inherent musicality of speech. This involved considering individual voice quality features as well as the whole voice on a systemic level. Parts of Jamie's internal family system arose and required that we recognize the impact of internalized cisheteronormativity. Further, Jamie was open to engaging in emotionally saturated work to a greater degree than some LMT-GAV participants, and I believe the emotional dimension of our work allowed for a more nuanced and embodied exploration of the voice. Perhaps because of this emotionally open atmosphere, Jamie was more open to guide our musical play and more readily bring her experiences from voicework into her everyday life.

Jamie's process took place over the course of a year through biweekly sessions; we met for about 30 sessions, and this timeline is typical for participants who engage in emotional processing and who do not have any background in vocal training. The therapeutic process may be shorter or longer depending on the participant's need and degree of interest in emotional process, commitment to practicing outside of sessions, musical and/or vocal training background, and frequency of meetings.

In conclusion, this composite case study offered one example of how LMT-GAV, informed by Internal Family Systems theory, might play out clinically. More specifically, this case study considered work with a white, neurodivergent, transfeminine individual who wanted to work on the vocal function of their speaking voice. Given the individual needs of each person engaged in a LMT-GAV journey, music therapists must creatively and curiously consider how to apply elements of this example to other participant processes.

About the Author

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Maevon Gumble has published and presented nationally on topics related to gender affirming voicework, vocal pedagogy, and queering music therapy practice. They are currently pursuing doctoral studies in vocal pedagogy at Shenandoah Conservatory. As a music therapist and licensed counselor, Maevon works with members of queer, transgender, nonbinary, gender-expansive, polyamorous/consensually nonmonogamous, and/or BDSM/kink communities. Their work centers on the intersections of gender, sexuality, identity, voice, embodiment, trauma, and mental health.

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¹ This name is a pseudonym and is not reused from any past or current individuals with whom I work.

² I must acknowledge my gratitude to the article editor and reviewer for their suggestion to musically notate segments of this narrative. It has been an invaluable resource to my own understanding of this work, and I intend to continue this practice in the future. It has also been an important reminder that we so often use written word to describe the creative processes that we are engaged in, and I am grateful for the learning that happens when we let that go.

³ This is capitalized intentionally, using the identity-first language preferred by the Autistic individuals compiled for this case study.

⁴ Some participants are less interested in how voices tend to be perceived and more interested in what feels good for them, regardless of stereotypes. If Jamie was not focused on passing within the work setting, I sense that she would have been less interested in exploring these stereotypes in a deeper way.

⁵ This has become a phrase often used with the therapy participants I work alongside.