

**“YOUR VAGUE EDGES ESCAPE ME:”  
ON TRANSGENDER VOICES, THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY, AND  
HEALING THROUGH MUSIC**

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Little academic research is currently available on transgender communities' relationships with music. There is also a need to examine ways transgender people might connect with their community and in self-expression.

**Objective:** In order to further examine the healing capabilities of music for transgender individuals, music's relationships to community and voice in transgender communities are further examined.

**Design and Method:** The research method is designed qualitatively, based primarily on a review of academic articles. There is a small section relating to personal experience as a transgender individual as well. Selected articles from various fields of thought dating from 1988 to 2020 were synthesized to draw out comparable information. Information was primarily sorted into the categories of healing, voice, and community in order to answer the research question: *How can music, by providing potential opportunities in finding community and in nurturing an expressive form of voicing, serve as a tool for transgender individuals to experience healing?*

**Results:** Music shows many active modes of community formation, healing potential, and possibilities for aiding in the finding of a 'voice.' Through the process of connecting trans individuals and themselves as individuals, music allows trans people to engage otherwise repressed and oppressed voices while healing themselves.

**Conclusions:** While music has healing capabilities for all individuals, its importance to the transgender community is greatly important. Trans people have less access to like-minded individuals than their cisgender counterparts, and there is a culture of punitiveness around non-hegemonic and non-normative gender expression. Music can bridge this gap and allow trans individuals to their larger community and nurture voices that have been silenced.

**Keywords:** *Transgender, Music, Healing, Community, Self-Expression*

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As the public presence of transgender (trans) and gender nonconforming (GNC) individuals continues to grow, the question arises as to how the voices of this community, which had previously been underrepresented to the point of being nearly invisible on a larger cultural scale, have been empowered to stand up and be heard. The presence of an evolving scene involving trans and GNC musicians and music fans has provided, quite literally, a stage for individuals within these communities to gather and share a sense of community, as well as to let out all of their thoughts and feelings that had been silenced by an unaccepting heterosexual and cisgender cultural majority. In my own experience as a nonbinary transgender musician and audience member who has worked with other trans and GNC musicians, I have felt deeply the sense of community this has fostered in me. Within this experience, I have also felt ways in which restrictions on my voice could be released, and expressing myself through music has provided an outlet for feelings I had not been able to put out into the physical world prior to creating music.

The intention behind this study is to examine the ways in which the music scene provides a unique space for transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals to gather and express their collective feelings while simultaneously creating a strong sense of community within the collective. Particularly, this study has the goal of answering the research question:

**RQ:** *How can music, by providing potential opportunities in finding community and in nurturing an expressive form of voicing, serve as a tool for transgender individuals to experience healing?*

Not a great deal of research has been done on transgender people's relationships to music or music scenes; therefore, this study aims to fill some of the gaps in that research; while bridging the gaps between existing literature. The question of the healing powers of both music and the music scene for trans and GNC people is held close to my heart, and with respect to that closeness, there will be autoethnographic components to this research. This research offers a firsthand account and relates these personal stories to the larger question of how the music scene provides a sense of empowerment, community, and voice. I was thankful to discover there were academic sources (Schott, 2020) (Kelleher, 2017) (Farrow, 2020) written within recent years that covered artists and communities with that I have a personal relationship. I was also pleasantly surprised to find other sources (Taylor, 2012; Jennex, 2020; Wasserbauer, 2019; Pearce & Lohman, 2018) that very directly addressed the research question of the particularities of the power of the relationship between queer/trans/GNC communities and the music scene.

Finding community, voice, and healing, all of which are of utmost importance to transgender individuals' well-being (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016), are principles offered in many ways through music; as a listener and observer and as a direct participant in arranging music spaces or creating music (Farrow, 2020; Halberstam, 2003; Jennex, 2020; Kelleher, 2017; Pearce & Lohman, 2019; Schott, 2020; Taylor, 2012; Wasserbauer, 2019). Within the literature for this research, there were many overlapping themes throughout articles, offered through various perspectives yet with, often, common ground regardless of geo-location (though much, not all, of this research is centered in urban/suburban areas). These commonalities are often attributed to differences in queer time/space or "temporalities" that operate very distinctly from those of their cisgender (non-transgender) and heterosexual counterparts (Halberstam, 2003, Taylor 2012 & Butler, 1988). Literature is sampled across several different theoretical realms

and schools of thought. The variety present within the academic articles was selected with respect to the multifaceted nature of the topic; music, transness, queer theory, and queer history all have relevant places within the process of this study. As terminology within this realm of study can be relatively complex conceptually, concerning certain broadly defined or perhaps non-binary concepts, the usage of terms will be further elaborated upon within the Literature Review section. This method of explanation allows for the literature to be referenced in the process of explaining larger concepts, as opposed to overly simplified definitions.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

As the public presence of transgender (trans) and gender nonconforming (GNC) individuals continues to grow, the question arises as to how the voices of this community, which had previously been underrepresented to the point of being nearly invisible on a larger cultural scale, have been empowered to stand up and be heard. The presence of an evolving scene involving trans and GNC musicians and music fans has provided, quite literally, a stage for individuals within these communities to gather and share a sense of community, as well as to let out all of their thoughts and feelings that had been silenced by an unaccepting heterosexual and cisgender cultural majority. In my own experience as a nonbinary transgender musician and audience member who has worked with other trans and GNC musicians, I have felt deeply the sense of community this has fostered in me. Within this experience, I have also felt ways in which restrictions on my voice could be released, and expressing myself through music has provided an outlet for feelings I had not been able to put out into the physical world prior to creating music.

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## **Background**

In conceiving the idea of a “trans music scene,” a preliminary discussion is necessary on the language used to discuss these topics. Gender itself, as Butler suggests in her essay, *Performative acts, and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory*, is a construct that exists as “...an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, 1988, p 519) and that “...gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences,” whereby

“those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler, 1988, p 522). Butler (1988) also notes that “...the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time...one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure, essence or fact, whether natural, cultural, or linguistic” (p 523). In the realm of the way gender is constructed by social “actors,” Butler states, “...the more mundane reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence” (Butler, 1988, p 524). Butler’s foundational analysis of gender performativity provides a base for understanding operating as transgender in a culture regulated by punitive gender norms. First, if, as Butler suggests, to become one’s gender requires repeated acts in the direction of claiming that gender (in ways often informed by history and unwritten social laws), then we can begin to recognize the difficulty that arises out of repeated acts of rejecting one’s gender. In a punitive environment, this repetition becomes dangerous. Butler writes a large section illustrating the socially punitive nature of gender, using the example of the difference between a ‘transvestite’ (now an outdated term, yet acceptable for the point of Butler’s work in the context of the time period it was written) when they are on stage versus on the street; Butler (1988) explains:

...gender performances in non-theatrical contexts are governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions...the site of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, and even violence. The conventions which mediate proximity and identification in these two instances are clearly quite different... In the theatre, one can say, ‘this is just an act,’ and de-realize the act, make acting into something quite different from what is real. Because of this distinction, one can maintain one’s sense of reality in the face of this temporary challenge to our existing ontological assumptions about gender arrangements; the various conventions which announce that ‘this is only a play’ allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life. On the street or in the bus, the



act becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act, indeed, on the street or in the bus, there is no presumption that the act is distinct from a reality; the disquieting effect of the act is that there are no conventions that facilitate making this separation...From the point of view of those established categories, one may want to claim, but oh, this is *really* a girl or a woman, or this is *really* a boy or a man, and further that the *appearance* contradicts the *reality* of the gender, that the discrete and familiar reality must be there...The transvestite, however, can do more than simply express the distinction between sex and gender, but challenges, at least implicitly, the distinction between appearance and reality that structures a good deal of popular thinking about gender identity. (p 527)

The above section is imperative to this research, as Butler, though she uses the example of a transvestite instead of a transgender individual, has posited an interesting idea about the willingness to accept a transgender person if they are on a stage, making their gender a performance, but ‘not real’ the way other genders are ‘real;’ despite Butler’s ideas that there is an essential, equal level of gender performance that is occurring both on stage and as an actor of gender in daily, mundane life. Butler (1988) ends her article by stating, “Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds” (p 531). The idea of “subversive performances” calls to the idea of the presence of a transgender musician on stage; a musician who, though they may add extra performance/art/emphasis to their persona on a live stage, are ultimately performing their gender on stage in line with their gender identity in daily life (unless drag performance is in play alongside music, though gender in drag may still be reflective of gender in life).

To further address the terminology being worked with in this research, it is important to be upfront about defining queer/transness. However, many argue (Farrow, 2020, Halberstam, 2003, Kelleher, 2017, Pearce & Lohman, 2019, Taylor, 2012, Wasserbauer, 2019) queerness and

transness themselves aim to escape definition. In the perspective of Farrow, author of *Feeling Pain/Making Kin in the Brooklyn Noise Music Scene*, states that within the Brooklyn noise music scene,

...noise resonates with the destabilizing potential ascribed to queerness. Queerness, whether related to gender, sexuality, or non-normative socialites, exposes ‘unity’ ascribed to identity (male/female, heterosexuality, ‘traditional’ family structure) as regulatory fictions which are naturalized in order to maintain heterosexual, patriarchal, binary gendered, settler colonial, racial, and classed hierarchies...Although many noise artists discussed identify as queer, non-binary, and/or trans, I do not seek to define a genre of ‘DIY queer noise music’... Within the Brooklyn noise music scene queerness expresses itself through sexuality, nonbinary gender identity, non-normative lifestyles, and aesthetics in always changing ways. Queerness, noise, and DIY are constituted through breaks from normativity such that persons can experience different ways of being and relating to one another. (Farrow, 2020, p 10)

In this regard, there are some that would rather not conceive of a scene being explicitly labeled as queer, yet there is still an acknowledgment of the large and influential place of queerness within the scene. The desire to not label the entire scene comes from a reflection of the desire of certain queer mentalities, which aim to be beyond succinctly encapsulated categories (Farrow, 2020). Taylor (2012), author of *Scenes and sexualities: Queerly reframing the music scenes* perspective, explains the current usage of the word queer and how it has been “reclaimed:”

The reclamation of this once pejorative term indicates an ontological challenge to the medicalization of gender and sexual non-normativities and to distinct and hierarchical gender and sexual categories. Queer now embodies a highly fruitful anti-essentializing ambiguity that produces a complex and ever shifting set of relationships to the perceived norm for not only gender and sexuality but to all normalizing regimes. Thus, queer identities, practices, and scene collectives problematize placement within a static binary sub / dominant culture, as they emerge – in an urban context at least – in contestation to the dominant norms of both heterosexual culture and what is perceived as the assimilated mainstreaming of lesbian and gay culture. (p 144)

Within this context, the usage of the word “queer” or queerness itself is also aimed at escaping the binary definition and any attempts at assimilationism. Queer aims to posit itself against the ideals of hegemonic heterosexual/cisgender ideals without binding itself to any binary identity (for example, homosexual as opposed to heterosexual) and lives within the freeness of that sense of ambiguity. Unlike Butler’s understanding of the punitiveness of gender nonconformity in society, queer people within queer social circles and scenes are provided a space where ambiguity and fluidity are encouraged and allowed room to flourish. Pearce & Lohman (2019) also address this idea of evasion and flexibility in their article, De/constructing DIY identities in a trans music scene,

The starting point for the research project that forms the basis of this article was a process of critical reflection upon the authors’ own involvement as performers and event promoters within a loose network of trans-orientated events. The scene we discovered through this network worked actively to *not* define itself, and was populated by individuals whose own identities were similarly complex. Our findings describe a scene in which flexible ‘trans’ approaches to gender are reflected in the *spaces* that participants created in order to share and experience music and performance. We argue that this is a de/constructive process by which participants draw upon practices of ‘genre evasion’ (Steinholt, 2012, as cited in Peach & Lohman, 2019, p. 98) and/or ‘cut-and-paste’ (Bornstein, 1994, as cited in Peach & Lohman, 2019, p. 98) in order to engage with complexity and possibility in a deeply personal – but nevertheless *social* – manner. (p 98)

Here, again, we see the persistence of an idea within queer/trans scenes to escape definition, to be free of limiting categories, and to encourage a sense of autonomy over the body. As for the term transgender, Schott provides a helpful definition in his article - “Delicate, Petite & Other Things I’ll Never Be”: trans-punk anthems and love songs:

Being transgender describes both individual experience of incongruence between sense of self and assigned gender at birth and non-normative expressions of gender... (Brooks, 2000; Lev, 2004; Mallon, 1999; Stryker, 2008; Whittle, 1998, as cited in Schott, 2020, p. 37). The emergent field of transgender studies has sought to reinforce trans realities whilst exposing society’s attempts to “subjugate non-normative ways of doing gender” (Westbrook 2010, p.45 as cited in Schott, 2020, p. 37). This has

subsequently led to greater attention being given to the “productive power” of transgender as a viable social identity and “knowable category of personhood” (Westbrook 2010, p.46 as cited in Schott, 2020, p.37). As a mode of actuating a transgender identity, ‘transcending’ “privileges the sub-process of ‘re-defining,’ as part of a radical critique of gender polarities. (Ekins and King 2010, p.25 as cited in Schott, 2020, p 37).

In this definition, we see that the term transgender has moved not towards simply encapsulating a cisgender ideal of clear “male to female” or “female to male” transition but also to non-binary individuals who challenge standard expectations of gender and gender roles; in opposition to binary ideals. Though some non-binary individuals do not identify with the term transgender (often due to the overly-medicalized presentations of transgender individuals), in more modern discourse, the definition of transgender has broadened to include all those who do not fully identify with the gender they were assigned at birth (Schott, 2020). For these purposes, the terms “trans/transgender” in this study will generally be used to reference these broader definitions of transgender, which include non-binary/genderqueer/and other individuals, unless a particular individual prefers not to be referred to as specifically transgender. Barr, Budge, and Adelson also define “transgender identity development” as perhaps being “best understood as the integration of gender experiences into a person’s overall understanding of themselves and the related development of a collective identity as a transgender person. Collective identity is identification with a social category or with a group of people based on shared characteristics...” they continue, “A personal transgender identity develops through an integration of the person’s understanding of their individual and unique experiences with gender...” (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p 88). Taken into account alongside Butler’s analysis, Barr, Budge, & Adelson lead us to an understanding that for transgender people, claiming their gender must not only consist of the repetition of personal gendered acts but also of understanding oneself within the collective identity of transgender.

## **Music as a Healing Agent for Trans Individuals**

Well-being, as encapsulated by Barr, Budge, and Adelson, authors of *Transgender Community Belongingness as a Mediator Between Strength of Transgender Identity and Well-Being*, is “measured by self-esteem, satisfaction with life, and psychological well-being” (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p 88). With this in mind, we understand music as ‘healing’ in such that it leads to an outcome of greater well-being. Understanding the consequences of presenting one’s gender outside of societal/cultural norms from Butler’s work, we can infer the effects of these societal pressures inevitably have some effect(s) on transgender individuals’ well-being. I, as well as several of the authors whose research I have sampled, argue that music serves as a vehicle for healing; and, therefore, towards greater well-being.

Wasserbauer’s conversation with their narrator Tom has insights into the healing power of music from the standpoint of a trans musician. In her words, “Making music is a process of personal growth for Tom. At a young age, he internalized what his mother taught him: that he is incapable of playing any instrument. For many years of imposed self-doubt, he did not attempt to make music” (Wasserbauer, 2019, p 75). In his 30’s, Tom decided to try to learn the guitar, followed by learning the piano (Wasserbauer, 2019). After learning to play, his world changed,

Tom expresses that ‘music is actually the most important thing in my life, because I get so much pleasure from it.’ Making music is strongly connected to mental well-being: Tom states that the extensive period of his ‘inability’ to play an instrument coincides with being in a depression. Now, music is essential to express himself: composing songs and writing lyrics allows him to ‘be more honest and be visible through something artistic. (p 75).

For Tom, music provided an opportunity to heal from the effects his mother’s criticisms had on him, and it opened a new (now “essential”) mode of self-expression and a sense of “visibility” to him. The “performativity” and “actedness” of gender discussed by Butler (1988) can also be understood as a mode of self-expression. Butler discusses how “[...] the more mundane

reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence[...],” which have created a “set of corporeal styles” (Butler, 1988, p 524). This idea expressed by Butler ties back to Wasserbauer’s interview with Tom regarding the necessity of understanding gender as a type of self-expression. For transgender individuals, self-expression of the “style” of one’s gender is of particular importance and ties back to the kinds of healing Tom felt in music as self-expression, of being able to express what was once not allowed outlet.

Taylor also discusses the ways in which music and queer styles/gender expression are informed by music. Taylor (2012) explains that she,

As a young queer teenager in the 1990’s, who, like many other queer teenagers, had no real way in to any form of organized queer culture, and thus had no idea of what queer should look like or sound like, it was the music and a blend of their accompanying fashions that I – a queer insider researcher - ‘naturally’ gravitated towards from which I drew my queer instruction. As such I fashioned a kind of queerness from the sounds and visual styles of [Taylor lists a number of artists]. Thus, my queer self has, and remains, mediated through a number of ‘subcultural’ styles including goth, alternative rock, industrial and more recent forms of glamorous electro and indie. (p 149)

Taylor goes on to discuss other artists and genres' influences on queer participants in her ongoing ethnographic research where there were “[...] seemingly unrelated artists and bands located across incompatible musical styles [...]: all of which have been cited by queer scene participants as possessing queer qualities – some more decidedly than others – and, most importantly, affirming their identities” (Taylor, 2012, p 150). Despite Taylor’s article being published in 2012, Taylor being a teenager in the 1990s, and Taylor’s ethnographic work beginning in 2005, out of the 31 artists/bands explicitly mentioned within her article, I, as a trans person, have listened to - or, with many of these artists, have felt profoundly affected in my gender/musical tastes – 26 of these artists; or about 84 %. This article seemed worth noting, considering Taylor’s

claims on the persistence of some of these artists' functions as queer symbols and validations, whether they were explicitly queer themselves or not (Taylor, 2012). Pearce & Lohman (2019) also discuss these same ideas of the vast array of style inspirations, both connecting to music and queerness, and centered on how both trans expression and musical tastes connect simultaneously to ideas of “construction” and “deconstruction.” The side-by-side comprehension of trans identities and music spaces reflects both “cut-and-paste” mentalities of taking small pieces of cultural markers (to form one’s queer style/identity/gender and one’s musical style/genre), reflecting “construction” and ideas of “genre evasion,” of a desire to remain somehow “fluid” and capable of “redefinition,” reflecting construction, allow for the authors understanding of these ideas of construction and deconstruction working together and without conflict (Pearce & Lohman, 2019).

To return more explicitly to the question of healing, the ties between self-expression, healing, and music needed to be more closely examined. Now that we have worked through some of the connections between music, self-expression, and gender, it is important to understand the imperativeness of self-expression for transgender individuals’ well-being. Farrow (2020) closely navigates this question of music, music spaces, and healing in his article on the Brooklyn DIY (Do It Yourself) noise scene. Farrow refers to a set by Deli Girls (whose vocalist is trans) where the rest of the show was posited in a scene that “embraces androgyny, gender play, and non-binary identity as comfortable aspects of DIY life in Brooklyn, with at least half of the performers on the bill at Trans-Pecos identifying as genderqueer and/or trans” (Farrow, 2020, p 18). The vocalist of Deli Girls expresses pain and anger, often surrounding experiences of sexual violence, through their lyrical content and the usage of harsh sounds and voice-straining screams (Farrow, 2020). Farrow notes that for the audience engaged in this performance;

The mosh eschews the necessity of identifying with Orłowski's lyrical content, instead dwelling in the collective affect of shared pain. [...] The community found in the mosh pit mobilizes shared pain into anger against sexual violence. As members of the crowd scream "You'd Kill Me/ But I'll Kill You First," collective pain from different experiences of violence illuminates agency. Feeling pain together is a source of strength, endurance, and power. [...] Orłowski's moshing with the audience as they vocalize their pain stresses solidarity and collectivity over knowledge and recognition. Pain isn't communicated but felt. [...] As a shared element of noise music performances involving mosh pits, pain is an element of the performance, but the pain experienced in the performance and the pain expressed in performance are distinct, co-constitutive elements. [...] Pain in moshing is a felt epistemology of social belonging in the noise community, binding participants together through sharing pain within a community. Performance allows artists to explore their own emotional depths while learning through others' experience of the same but different feeling. In this way, Orłowski's performance overcomes the difficulties of discussing sexual violence through creating a collective space of community and shared pain within the mosh pit. For audience members, the mosh pit becomes a place to support and care for one another through shouldering the ongoing pain of past traumas together. (p 19-21)

This section of Farrow's text also ties into the research areas below, considering he addresses ideas concerning healing, voice, and community. Farrow expresses that this kind of collective healing, experienced in the artist and the audience, can exist due to the expression and feeling of shared pain, regardless of understanding the specificities of the roots of the pain others besides 'the self' in the room are experiencing (Farrow 2020). This idea creates an environment that allows an outlet for pain that may not otherwise have been able to be expressed; as with Tom in Wasserbauer's article, music becomes a necessary outlet for releasing and expressing pain or other difficult feelings (Farrow, 2020 & Wasserbauer, 2019). Farrow also ties back into Barr, Budge, & Adelson's ideas on the importance of the collective in the role of transgender lives, and, as seen within the context of Farrow's above quote, the power of music fosters a space for



transgender individuals to gather and find both collectivity and healing through shared expression and feeling (Farrow, 2020).

### **Sense of Community**

Regarding community, “Sense of belonging is defined as an experience of personal involvement and integration within a system or environment...Sense of belonging is associated with a wide range of psychological outcomes, including greater self-esteem and perceived quality of life and lower levels of depression and anxiety” (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p 87). The goal of Barr, Budge, & Adelson’s research was to measure “transgender community belongingness as a mediator between strength of transgender identity and well-being," using a sample of “571 transgender adults ( $n = 209$  transgender women,  $n = 217$  transgender men, and  $n = 145$  nonbinary-identified individuals)” (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p 87). Though they found that “strength of transgender identity was not significantly directly related to well-being,” they did find a “positive relationship of small to moderate size between community belongingness and well-being" (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p 91). Beyond this and with greater implications, the authors’ “study found that community belongingness fully mediated the relationship between strength of transgender identity and well-being;” concluding that their research “suggest[s] that the belongingness derived from the transgender community may be of particular importance” and that “relatedness, perceived social support, satisfaction with friends, lack of loneliness, and strength of social relationships [are] correlates of positive psychological outcomes” (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p 92). They continue this thought on page 93, suggesting that these previously mentioned qualities “are all components of community belongingness, and may be mostly (or exclusively) accessible to transgender people within transgender communities” (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p 92). The authors also acknowledge

the importance of “transgender spaces” that are “inclusive and affirming of the diversity found within the trans community;” and particularly emphasize an “increased effort on creating community spaces specifically for transgender people with marginalized intersecting identities” (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p 94-95). One of the most important things this article provided for my research comes with the authors’ closing line, regarding “transgender community belongingness” as “an important construct for transgender people’s psychological wellness;” “at the community level, organizers can increase opportunities for all transgender people to find spaces where they feel they belong” (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p.95). This quote gives a medically verifiable context for the necessity of transgender spaces as a facilitator to the well-being of the transgender people participating in those spaces. The implications of this correlation create a particular lens with which to view transgender music spaces as an opportunity for its members to foster a greater sense of well-being and community, especially between transgender people themselves.

Further commentary on the importance of community, in particular queer communities in music scenes, is provided in Jennex’s article. During a protest held by Black Lives Matter – Toronto (BLM-TO), Jennex states, “BLM-TO’s demands for self-determination in spaces of collective music participation and the removal of uniformed police at Pride events recall a long-established queer political project that includes both a turn away from the state...and the creation of community-run music spaces in which heterogeneous queer formation can occur” (Jennex, 2020, p 416). Jennex explains the importance of the history of queer dance spaces in Canada and their potential as spaces for radical organizing (as well as for bringing together individuals who would not otherwise inhabit the same spaces) (Jennex, 2020). An important observation made in the article is that “participation in community-organized dance music cultures in, for many,

integral to forging a sense of queer identity, political agency, and collective power...music venues are spaces in which queer individuals – and other marginalized people – can explore ideas of identity, politics, difference, and community,” (Jennex, 2020, p 416) continuing, “The sense of collective belonging and political agency attainable through participation in music cultures is formative for queer people and, in particular, queer people of colour, who often face quotidian and extreme violence in public spaces” (Jennex, 2020, p 416). Again, we see how the culture of queer music spaces bleeds into identity formation, acceptance, and understanding of the self through unity with other queer individuals. Jennex discusses the queer dancefloor as a type of political space of the mundane, where politics occur naturally through ‘being’ as both an individual/collective and through providing a stage for political solidarity to be formed. This political solidarity, as noted through Jennex’s historical examples within Canada (briefly mentioning Stonewall in the U.S. as well), leads to collective political action that can occur both at fundraising events on the dance floor and in other types of protest/direct action enabled by the bonds created in dance spaces (Jennex, 2020). Jennex also speaks to individuals who were involved in Canada’s historical dance spaces, who helped reveal the ways in which dancing in these queer spaces “encouraged a reconnection to their own bod[ies], a connection regularly severed and repressed for queer individuals in a homophobic society – a connection to a broader community and to a sense of individual and collective agency” (Jennex, 2020, p.424). Here, Jennex brings us back to Butler once more. In a culture that seeks to suppress those who present or act their gender/sexuality in non-normative ways, reconnecting to a queer community allows queer individuals to reconnect to themselves, their bodies, their feelings, and their sense of agency (Jennex, 2020; Butler, 1988).

## **Finding a Voice**

Voice, for our purposes, is beyond simply speaking; this category will also encompass sensations of autonomy and empowerment, of feeling or seeing one's inner voice represented elsewhere (in this case, through music), and of feeling able to express oneself. Furthermore, voice references the power to freely express oneself and one's feelings (an opportunity not always afforded to transgender individuals, who may need to hide their feelings/identities for the sake of different kinds of safety). Narrative-based research is also imperative to representing transgender voices authentically and with respect to the reality of queer lives and feelings. On the importance of narrative, Wasserbauer notes, "... investigating trans\* life narratives undoes the dominant clinical logic... providing insights into aspects of trans\* identities and lives that go beyond medical and legal discourse" (Wasserbauer, 2019, p 70). Wasserbauer continues to cite several sources recognizing the complexities of gender identity and notes the ways in which the inclusion of trans narratives allows the scope of research to be broadened to encapsulate further aspects of trans lived experience, especially those experiences which have not been of interest to the hegemonic ideals of a dominant heterosexual/cisgender society (Wasserbauer, 2019). Wasserbauer also explains the importance of narrative in studying music and identity, stating that: "Music aids in finding and expressing one's identity... Not only does music reflect its listeners; it also produces them through the creation and construction of the self," continuing, "... Our interaction with and interpretation of music is what makes it so valuable in our lives... By talking about our experiences with music, we talk about ourselves in ways that words alone might not be able to describe. Moreover, music functions as a structuring element in the life stories told by my research narrators" (Wasserbauer, 2019, p 71). The "research narrators" referenced here are Wasserbauer's participants, who provided insight using their lived

experiences and feelings regarding the importance of music in their lives, the kinds of music they've listened to throughout their lives, and whether they saw any connection between their musical interests/tastes and the development of their gender identities (Wasserbauer, 2019, p 73). Concerning the ways in which musicians, whether they are trans or are otherwise challenging traditional gender norms, contribute to finding a voice in self-expression as well as bringing voice to queer issues (political, interpersonal, inner, etc.), Wasserbauer's conversation with their narrator Tom provides important insight (Wasserbauer, 2019).

Throughout his life, Tom's interest in music reflects his general world view, and connections between music, gender, and sexual identity emerge. Just like many Flemings, Tom liked the music of the Flemish rock band K's Choice in his teenage years. The androgynous appearance of lead singer Sarah Bettens intrigued him; in fact, she was the only woman with short hair he knew at that time. Tom was assigned female at birth and raised with the mindset that he is a girl, that girls should look a certain way and should be in relationships with boys [...] The openly lesbian singer broadened his horizon and disrupted this heteronormative thinking pattern... (p 73-74)

This quote brings attention to the importance of the visible presence of gender-nonconforming individuals in the lives of trans people, especially trans young people who have yet to be exposed to the idea that gender roles can be challenged in these modes of expression. When transgender individuals are presented opportunity to engage with media where gender nonconformity is expressed proudly and without restraint or fear of punishment, it opens a world where these 'rules of gender' become much less rigid, or, at the very least worth confronting. In a way, the presence of gender-nonconforming/trans musicians provides a voice with which to begin challenging these norms by inspiring those who resonate with their non-stereotypical acts of gender.

Another instance of voicing is noted by Schott, who states: "Punk has time and again served as a site for making visible and verbalizing discordant experiences, which [Laura Jane]

Grace has accessed to document her complex and troubled personal intercessions, transgender realities, and their uncertain future” (Schott, 2020, p 37). Schott here notes the ‘verbalizing’ power of punk music and how this mode of expression was used by transgender anarcho-punk musician Laura Jane Grace to articulate her thoughts and feelings about her transness (both hidden within lyrical symbolism prior to coming out and in more overt lyrics and narratives expressed in her music post-transition) (Schott, 2020). This idea of using punk music as a mode of expressing criticism towards homophobic systems at play is noted by Halberstam, who, as a young queer person in England in the 1970s, “...plunged into punk rock music, clothing and rebellion precisely because it gave me a language with which to reject not only the high cultural texts in the class rooms but also the homophobia and sexism outside it” (Halberstam, 2003, p 7). In this quote, Halberstam’s use of the word ‘language’ is key to understanding music as a mode of queer voicing; in this case, a voice of resistance. Wasserbauer (2019) addresses a similar idea, stating:

I argue that music acts as an excellent intermediary in talking about experiencing and navigating LGBTQ identities: as a temporal and cultural medium surrounding us constantly, music is able to evoke memories and feelings adhering to specific times in our lives. Talking about music helps to structure memories, and it enables telling about oneself in an indirect, metaphorical way, which for many is easier than speaking about intricate identities directly. (p 67)

Wasserbauer’s quote envisions music as a particular tool for voicing queer identities, as a way of expressing queerness itself. This idea of using music as a tool for expressing transness is similar to what was noted by Schott in that Grace was able to use music to express her feelings about her transness; before, she was able to express those feelings to the world in other ways (Schott, 2020).

Kelleher, like Schott, uses Laura Jane Grace of *Against Me!* as the focus of their work. In the context of Kelleher's article, Grace's physical voice is used as a model for her public challenging of gender stereotypes and expectations (Kelleher, 2017). One of Kelleher's claims is that Grace challenges notions of what a woman "should" sound like; in interviews as well as through the power of her performance and presence on stage, refusing to adapt her stage style to what was expected of her transition by cisgender onlookers (Kelleher, 2017, p 2). Kelleher uses examples of certain expectations placed on Laura after coming out as trans and prior to coming out in the role of a "masculine punk" to illustrate how cisgender people expect transgender individuals to conform to cis-normative preconceptions of gender and gendered behaviors (Kelleher, 2017). Within the realm of challenging these binary expectations of a transgender individual's transition, Kelleher explains: "It is precisely this disruption between voice and body-in conjunction with Grace's decision to embody certain markers of femininity while rejecting others-that creates her unique identity, a new assertion of what it means to be a woman" (Kelleher, 2017, p 3). They then expand further on this notion of disrupting gender norms, elaborating, "maintaining her aggressive and energetic physical stage presence in addition to her low pitched, harsh vocal timbre, Grace's construction of womanhood rejects a number of conventional feminine traits, yet celebrates her autonomy over her own gender identity" (Kelleher, 2017, p 4). For Grace, and many other transgender individuals, finding the personal ways in which one desires to claim their gender is much like finding a voice; to be finally able to articulate one's idea of the self through gender in a way that is true to oneself and is by no other person, culture, or government's expectations. Kelleher also addresses the voice found within the audience of an *Against Me!* The show played in North Carolina, where Grace burned her birth certificate on stage following the passage of NC's transphobic "bathroom bill" laws (requiring

that individuals must use the restroom aligned with one's birth certificate ordained gender).

Kelleher (2017) states

The excitement from *Against Me!'s* May 16, 2016 show in Durham, North Carolina, rose not only out of the band's captivating stage presence and energetic performance that evening, but also from an invigorated audience, called to action by Grace in support of urgent LGBTQ issues. The show itself took on the role of an active protest, standing up against House Bill 2's discriminatory opposition of the basic rights of trans and gender nonconforming people. Much in the way that Laura Jane Grace's active refusal to change the timbre of her traditionally masculine singing voice protests a conventional, limiting binary view of gender and its presumed roles, *Against Me!'s* refusal to cancel their concert in North Carolina gave voices to those fighting back against hateful and oppressive legislature coded into laws like House Bill 2. (p 7)

Again, the use of the word “voices” comes up (similarly to its usage in Halberstam, Schott, and Farrow) in connecting music/ music communities to an ability to express queer frustration, anger, and protest; as a collective.

Pearce & Lohman (2019) compare transness itself to the experience of “genre avoidance” in trans music spaces, stating:

For our research participants, being ‘trans’ can be understood as an outcome of *simultaneously* evading gendered definition, and constructing new gendered possibilities in a ‘cut-and-paste’ manner. Trans identities come to be in the space between these processes. Gender pluralism (Monro, 2007 as cited in Pearce & Lohman, 2019, p. 105) is hence not simply an interpersonal phenomenon, but also a means by which *individual* engagements with gender might draw upon a great range of possibilities for being. These strategies work to create space in which trans people might express and understand themselves and communicate with others in a more authentic way. (p 105)

From this passage, we may draw a deeper understanding of the importance of healing and community for trans individuals leads to a greater ability to express oneself and one's voice. The healing found within music communities (healing which encourages one to find and feel oneself inside a community and inside oneself) comes back to the individual, allowing that person to



take inspiration from the expression they have seen in their community, leading to finding new ways to invent and reinvent, to newly embody, one's expressive voice.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### *Phase One*

Primarily, this study consists of qualitative data and comparative analysis across sampled literature. One research sample included consists mainly of quantitative data (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016). I have reviewed literature across several disciplines, time periods, and geographic locations. The fields of thought and analysis included consist of (but are not limited to) the following: feminist theory, queer theory, anthropology/(auto)ethnography, subcultural theory, sociology/cultural theory, phenomenology, analysis of queer history in relation to the present, psychology, and ethnomusicology. Though my research was aimed at being centered in primarily American social contexts, several authors note queer cultural similarities across different geo-locations; and with respect to these notions, relevant literature from other countries is included in this study. Authors included were located within the United States, Canada, various parts of the U.K., New Zealand, Australia, and Belgium, and the research included ranges in publications dating from 1988 to 2020. For the nature of this study, the wide range within the research, in the aforementioned capacities allows for the similarities between them to exist with implications of greater historical and cultural weight. The majority of the literature sampled was found within the SUNY Purchase Library Database, mainly through searches on transgender individuals and their connections to music and community. The Halberstam article was located through a Google search, as I had previously read Halberstam's work and believed he could make a significant contribution. Limitations in the search process were reflected in the lack of research done on this particular topic. However, sufficient information was able to be

drawn from the variety of articles that were chosen. This literature was sampled with the intent of forming a base for the analysis of my research question:

**RQ:** *How can music, by providing potential opportunities in finding community and in nurturing an expressive form of voicing, serve as a tool for transgender individuals to experience healing?*

Articles were selected for their determined ability to address one or more components of this research question. Due to the lack of research on transgender music scenes, supplemental data was drawn from articles that referenced how music interacts with larger queer and LGBTQ+ groups. Five of the ten articles included make specific reference to transness and music; one included article addresses transness and community from a medical perspective; two foundational queer theorists are included, one of whom comments specifically on queer music scenes; and the final two articles address music and queerness. Information from the selected literature was sorted into categories referencing healing, community, and finding a voice. Similar concepts found across the literature were taken into account and placed alongside each other for synthesis and analysis.

### ***Phase Two***

Phase two of the process for this study consisted of a comparative analysis between the information derived from the literature and the autoethnographic components of my experience as a transgender musician. A great deal of data was found within the reviewed literature that had relevance to my lived experiences. With respect to my closeness to this topic, and to further emphasize the data collected from the literature, it felt important to include these lived experiences in conjunction with the literature. The autoethnographic components to be included were decided after reviewing the literature, in order to conceptually align the respective components as well as possible.

Study quality may be affected by time constraints, as well as by the lack of in-depth research into transgender communities' relationships to music. Bias may come into play as I am a transgender musician with a very close relationship to this topic. However, it is noted by several authors in the reviewed literature that narrative-based research is imperative to bringing a further depth of understanding to the complexities of queer and trans-lived realities. I did enter this research with a hypothesis, based on personal experience, that music can act as a particularly powerful healing agent for transgender individuals, particularly in its ability to foster community and serve as a tool for finding a voice. This hypothesis could have led me to potential bias; however, no academic research counter to this argument could be found in my search.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The aforementioned research methods and reviewed literature in the previous sections of this paper were aimed at answering the research question:\

**RQ:** How can music, by providing potential opportunities in finding community and in nurturing an expressive form of voicing, serve as a tool for transgender individuals to experience healing?

Through the process of analyzing and synthesizing the literature, using information across varied sources, this research question was able to be directly addressed; in a way, I had not seen it previously studied in a singular piece of referenced academic literature. This study aimed to answer directly, and succinctly as possible music provides opportunities for trans individuals to heal by connecting them with communities that encourage them to express themselves authentically, which is not always allowed in a world that engages with a transphobic hegemony (Butler, 2019). Music allows trans musicians to have an outlet for expressing difficult feelings, which can be felt by trans music listeners who engage with music that they feel expresses feelings they have been unable to express (Wasserbauer, 2019). Transness and queerness themselves have been claimed to aim at escaping definition, and music and music scenes centered in this ideal allow trans individuals the opportunity to flourish in this fluidity (Farrow, 2020; Halberstam, 2003; Kelleher, 2017; Pearce & Lohman, 2019; Taylor, 2012; Wasserbauer, 2019). Again, this outlet for expression is particularly important for the process of trans people's healing process, considering their voices are so often blocked from expression (Butler, 1988). Historically, music had served as a way to create spaces for queer individuals to gather, dating back to an era when it was illegal to have such gatherings (Jennex, 2020). This

way of creating space for queer and trans communities is unique to the power of music, with music being a central component of various kinds of queer gatherings.

As noted by Barr, Budge, & Adelson (2016) in their article, connection to the community is important for trans people's well-being, especially connection with other trans individuals. Within this article, in addition to those by several other authors (Taylor, 2012; Halberstam, 2003; Wasserbauer, 2019), community connection, and specifically the connections found in music communities or as a music listener engaging in collective scene or genre-specific aesthetics, shows significance in the process of queer and trans identity formation. As Wasserbauer (2019) explains, music can act as a way to speak about and understand one's own transgender identity; by using examples such as genre or scene ideals instead of directly speaking about gender. Trans artists such as Laura Jane Grace show the impact the visible and vocal presence of a transgender woman can have both on music scenes and, importantly, trans scene members (Kelleher, 2017 & Schott, 2020). Grace's story shows that voice is a necessary component of visibility and connection. When cisgender individuals had control over her narrative, she was not fully represented in a way that was truthful to her day-to-day or even onstage expression (Kelleher, 2017). However, when Grace was allowed to control her narrative, she was able to challenge cis-normative ideals on gender, while simultaneously bringing together and uplifting other transgender people through her music (Kelleher, 2017 & Schott, 2020). Music spaces centered on queerness and the expression of shared pain, as mentioned in Farrow's (2020) article, allow the main three concepts of community, healing, and voice to all intermingle with and strengthen each other. Throughout the literature, the healing capacity of music is re-emphasized, often in ways that I have seen reflected in my experience as a trans musician and scene participant.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

As hypothesized based on my personal experience and the experience of my trans peers, music can be a powerful tool to heal transgender individuals through community and voice. The specificities of this process of healing were affirmed in many ways throughout the literature. No academic literature was found that countered the argument that music has vast potential in healing transgender individuals, increasing their sense of well-being, bringing them together, and assisting in their finding a voice. The articles sampled supported all these arguments, as well as provided further detail on the ways in which this healing might happen.

It was exciting to see that despite the small amount of research on this topic, what was contained within the cited literature had a deep resonance with the lived experiences of myself and my peers. There were references to artists I had personal relationships with in my journey to accepting, understanding, and articulating my gender. Taylor's (2012) list of artists that they found referenced by many queer individuals as relating to their understanding of their gender/sexuality contained a great number of artists which I now, or in the past, have connected to my gender and sexuality; including several who were of deeper importance. Wasserbauer's (2019) ideas on the importance of music in self-expression for transgender musicians and music fans have also been reflected in my life. As a transgender person, especially one raised in a conservative environment, I did not feel safe expressing my emotions, even more concerning my feelings relating to my queerness/transness. As Wasserbauer (2019) suggested, music allowed me to understand these complex feelings regarding queerness and to begin finding a way to express my gender identity through music and aesthetics found within music scenes. This

repression of emotions is not only reflected within a conservative household but also in conservative and transphobic cultural hegemony.

As Jennex (2020) presented, research into queer and trans music scenes has importance within today's society, as well as within queer history. Queer music spaces are imperative to allowing trans individuals to form a community, as Jennex (2020) showed in his historical analysis of queer gatherings and in his analysis of the relevance of Black Lives Matter – Toronto's more current pride parade protest, which placed emphasis on the need for music and dance spaces in the lives of queer and trans people of color. Farrow (2020) also addressed the importance of queer music spaces in allowing for collective healing and the expression of shared pain. Barr, Budge, & Adelson comment, while referring to “transgender community belongingness” as “an important construct for transgender people’s psychological wellness,” that “at the community level, organizers can increase opportunities for all transgender people to find spaces where they feel they belong” (Barr, Budge, & Adelson, 2016, p 95). This aforementioned type of research allows the need for queer music spaces to be acknowledged so that individuals may become more aware of this need and, ideally, engage in further efforts to create spaces for trans individuals to gather in community, healing, and music. The quote in the title, “your vague edges escape me,” is a line within an unreleased song by my current band. The quote encapsulates many things within this study; however, I would like to call to its representation of the joyful blurriness that can come alongside expression in transgender music and gender identity and the example it presents of allowing transgender musicians to encapsulate their emotion and their gender through music.

As a transgender musician and music fan, music has played an incredibly important role in the journey of discovering and accepting my gender. Unlike cisgender individuals, who are



considered the social default and are automatically surrounded by others like them, transgender individuals must seek out a community of peers; music allows this to happen. In addition, for trans people who have been denied a voice in society, music can open the gate to self-expression and self-acceptance, and healing. Self-expression and connection to community have been shown to be of utmost importance to transgender individuals' well-being, and music creates opportunities to connect to these factors. Ultimately, this study has shown how music allows transgender individuals to find themselves, find community, and heal themselves from the effects of an oppressive culture.

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