Giving voice to the extra-normal self with the extra-normal voice: Improvised exploration through the realms of shamanic chaos magick, insight meditation and gender performance.

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Giving voice to the extra-normal self with the extra-normal voice: Improvised exploration through the realms of shamanic chaos magick, insight meditation and gender performance.

Sage Jane Harlow

This exegesis is submitted in partial completion of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy at the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University

Submitted 17th December 2018
an autohagiography
Abstract

This thesis documents practice-led research exploring the intersections of, and tensions between, improvised invocation ritual within a chaos magick paradigm and Buddhist insight meditation. I explore the extra-normal self—those aspects of consciousness not usually present, or not usually accessible, in day-to-day life—by mean of improvised ritual work with the extra-normal voice and seek to maintain a Buddhist ‘witness’ consciousness throughout these explorations. I also explore the tensions between politics, aesthetics and spiritual practice; in particular, queer and trans politics, a timbre-centred vocal aesthetics and chaos magick, shamanic and Buddhist spiritual practices.

This work constitutes part of a larger project of attempting to secularise and democratise spiritual practice greatly influenced by Sam Harris’ book Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion (2014) and to some extent from chaos magick, some iterations of which strive to ‘free’ the western esoteric tradition from its religious trappings. I also take cues from Hakim Bey (1985) as one of the few anarchist writers who sees spiritual practice as profoundly important and not at odds with anarchism. I make use of a ‘radical agnosticism’ (Wilson, 1977) in my practice, privileging subjective experience and critical engagement over the search for an objective truth. I take an autoethnographic approach to this project with a focus on process rather than outcome, with the final project consisting of a description of these approaches and their value (and limitations), accompanied by selected musical examples (recordings).

The thesis also explores a practice that functions as a navigation away from the normative, phallogocentric western esoteric tradition taking cues from feminism, trans and queer politics as well as anarchism. My improvised possession rituals seek to give voice to aspects of the extra-normal self and/or spirits or demons. The different Belief Systems used in this work frame these experiences in different language. My practice strives to accept ‘whatever arises’ (a meditation term) with compassion—whatever their ontological status.
The main text of this thesis consists of three sections: Improvising Theory, Workings and Scores. The first section presents some of my thinking through concepts and theoretical paradigms that I have engaged with over the last few years of my research. I explore the illusion of free will, the intersection of gender and timbre theory and the use of the cut-up technique in chaos magick generally and my practice specifically.

The second section of the thesis presents in-depth discussion of some of the explicit ritual performances and recordings that I have explored over the course of the research. This section explore more fully concepts central to my practice such as the interweaving of insight meditation and improvised ritual work. I present reflections on my explorations of dada ‘anti-magick’ ritual which critiques the normative, phallogocentric western esoteric tradition, taking cues from feminism, trans and queer politics as well as anarchisms. This culminates in an exploration of the concept of ‘True Shamanic Black Metal’—a tongue-in-cheek gesture towards a serious exploration of rhythm inspired by my understanding of shamanic drumming, particularly from Tuva, Mongolia and Korea, merged with an interest in extreme metal traditions, particularly black metal. I explore what shamanic black metal might sound like, centring the discussion around the album I recorded in 2017 *invocations of unknown entities*.

The third section of this thesis presents thoughts on playing scores and on writing scores. I explore scores as open invitations to explore either extra-normal states of consciousness or particular aesthetic or ethical interests.
Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

i. incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

ii. contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or

iii. contain any defamatory material;

Sage J Harlow
Acknowledgements

I recognise the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first inhabitants of the land now known as Australia. I pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the lands on which I conducted this research, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation and the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin alliance and to their elders—past, present and emerging.

Thanks to Jonathan W Marshall and Frances Barbe for excellent supervision on this project. Thanks also to Professor Cat Hope who supervised the first year and for her enthusiasm for the project.

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Introduction

This thesis presents aspects of my autoethnographic research from 2016-2018. It constitutes part of a larger, ongoing and open-ended exploration of voice, meditation and ritual practice. The research presented here explores the intersections of, and the tension between, Buddhist insight meditation and shamanic chaos magick ritual work within the medium of free improvisation with extra-normal vocal technique. I use improvisation in ritual work as a means of exploring extra-normal aspects of myself, and ‘giving voice’ to them. I approach ritual work with a mindset influenced by the practice of insight meditation, with the intent of accepting, without judgment, whatever might arise, as the subjective truth of the moment.

This work attempts to secularise and democratise spiritual practice influenced greatly by Sam Harris’ book *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (2014) and to some extent chaos magick, some iterations of which strive to ‘free’ the western esoteric tradition from its religious trappings. I also take cues from Hakim Bey (1985) as one of the few anarchist writers who sees spiritual practice as profoundly important to, and not at odds with, anarchism.

Personal context

I have practiced Buddhist insight meditation since 2006 and dabbled in chaos magick since the late 1990s (more seriously since 2010). The term ‘insight meditation’ refers to a number of different Buddhist techniques that lead to Awakening—I use the term ‘Awakening’ in place of the more common ‘Enlightenment’, as it more closely captures the meaning of the Pāli word *bodhi*, and gives a sense of process rather than event (Cohen, 2006, p. 1; Nyanatiloka, 1980, pp. 30-40). I mostly practice the insight technique ‘vipassanā’, but have realised that I include other techniques in my own meditation practice, and that the differentiation between ‘insight’ and ‘concentration’ techniques has more importance than the particular flavour of insight meditation one practices which should give one similar experiences and eventually insight into the nature of consciousness.
Chaos magick constitutes a plethora of diverse practices, sometimes seemingly at odds with each other. Chaos magick came out of the north of England in the late 1970s and early 1980s and has remained one of the most prominent expressions of the western magick (esoteric, occult) tradition. The core of chaos magick constitutes a pragmatism that favours practical magick over an emphasis on theory. Chaos magick has two main components: an insistence that magick requires some form of an extra-normal state of consciousness, given the name gnosis; and an interest in the effect that Belief Systems have on one’s experience of the world, including an interest in manipulating these for one’s own benefit (however one might define this). The Illuminated Order of Thanateros (IOT), founded by Peter J Carroll in 1986 (Illuminates of Thanateros, 2002) and Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth, founded by Genesis P-Orridge and others in 1981 (P-Orridge, 2010b, pp. 17-18), represent the most influential organizations in the chaos magick tradition. Many chaos magickians practice outside of these structures, however, and the ‘tradition’ consists of numerous disparate groups and individuals often with wildly different opinions, practices and ideals.

I first heard Tuvan and Mongolian throat singing (also called overtone singing, or khoomei in Tuvan, khoomii in Mongolia; spellings vary considerably) in 2006 when a friend introduced me to it. I listened to a lot of recordings, read what I could and taught myself the basics of the techniques that practitioners use in these traditions. I sang for a few years before getting quite ill and not feeling able to sing, and only seriously took up singing again on the 7th August 2013. On this date, I decided that I would record a vocal piece every day for a year. I decided to do this because my previous attempts to re-learn the techniques and develop the muscles required for the Tuvan and Mongolian inspired techniques had not gone well—I had found it quite frustrating failing at the same exercises that I had previously felt quite confident in. My decision to record every day had an element of forced routine and self-discipline to it no doubt influenced by my readings of Buddhist texts (Barford, 2011; Bodhi, 2005; Ingram, 2008; Trungpa, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c) and particularly the Zen tradition (Leggett, 1960; Reps, 1971). I would commit to doing something every day, no matter how ‘bad’. But it also played to my strengths, or at least what I love about music—the ‘creating’ aspect, whether the embodiment of an idea, or an
improvisation. I had also realised that I thought of myself as a barista (my paid work) who sometimes wrote poetry or played music, whereas for most of my life I had thought of myself as a poet or musician who happened to work in a cafe. At this time, I also re-committed to a daily meditation practice, something that I had occasionally let slip despite recognising the immense benefit I felt. These daily rituals (Sage Musick, 2013-ongoing) functioned as a larger ritual work to re-value my artistic practice, and to give it more prominence in my life. Within the year, I had quit my job and moved back to Australia. In less than three years I had far exceeded my previous skill level in my singing practice, played more gigs than I ever had and started this research project focused around my singing praxis. I now feel like a musician who had a brief stint as a barista and this feels much more comfortable.

I also feel much more grounded in my meditation and magickal practice and because of my perseverance I feel fairly sure that I entered the second vipassanā jhanna (the ‘Arising and Passing Away’) as described in the Theravādan maps of Awakening (Ingram, 2008, p. 204). At the same time, I had explored ritual works invoking my ‘Future Magickal (fully Awakened) Self’, one of the most important magickal workings in the Western Magickal tradition which functions as the ‘equivalent stage’ to the Theravādan ‘Arising and Passing Away’ (Chapman & Barford, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Ingram, 2008). These peak experiences brought with them clarity about my gender identity. When my ‘Future Magickal Self’ manifested as a woman, this seemed like a quite clear message as to the path I might have to take in the coming years. I began the process of transitioning soon after, eventually starting hormone replacement on 13th September 2015. ‘Social transitioning’ continues as an ongoing struggle and continues to inform, complicate and speak through my musical and magickal practice. (I also acknowledge the problem of ‘self-diagnosis’ in the ‘spiritual attainments’, and reserve a certain amount of scepticism around them.)

Extra-normal voice

The idea, of course, is not to sell to the masses or even to the small market of classical music consumers but simply to continue the time-mandated inquiry into “What’s next?” (Edgerton, 2015, p. xxix).
In his book *The 21st-Century Voice: Contemporary and Traditional Extra-Normal Voice*, Edgerton suggests that after a surge of interest in vocal experimentation by composers through the 1950s to the 1970s, this essentially came to a halt in no small part because of a lack of precise, technical descriptions for ‘extra-normal’ vocal technique. His book attempts to provide this. I have taken a lot of inspiration from Edgerton’s book at the technical level. I also take from Edgerton the term ‘extra-normal’ vocal technique. While the term ‘extended vocal technique’ has much wider usage it seems problematic to me. At best it seems inaccurate; in many traditions such techniques get learnt alongside ‘normal’ singing techniques, or simply as a different way of singing, rather than an extension of regular technique—overtone singing in Tuva, for example (van Tongeren, 2002, pp. 54–55). At worst, it seems Eurocentric, verging on racist, to suggest that only western singing, and forms like it ‘count as singing’ and then one can optionally add some additions, or extensions, to that language. It seems to me that the term ‘extra-normal’ evades some of these problems. It still ‘normalises’ some techniques, but then in all the traditions that I have familiarity with, people recognise that the techniques we wish to describe with these terms differ from other, more widely practiced types of singing.

I have found Edgerton’s book hugely helpful in both refining technique, as well as presenting new challenges in the form of techniques that I had not yet discovered myself. For the singer or composer, it functions as a map of the possible in a similar way that the International Phonetic Alphabet does for the sound poet, mapping, as it does, all of the known sounds that all human languages have used to encode meaning at the phonemic level, as well as great detail as to the realisation at the phonetic level (International Phonetic Association, 2016). Like all maps, however, they do not constitute the territory (Korzybski, 1933, p. 58).

As we explore further, we discover more, and as the individual singer explores their own voice in more details, they discover more of the idiosyncrasies of their own voice. As an exploratory, or experimental singer, these idiosyncrasies present some of the richest areas for exploration; in some sense the question becomes ‘what does it mean to have a voice?’ Not just one particular instance of the phenomena of ‘voice’, but a recognisable, artistic voice, an individual voice.
My initial exploration of sounds outside of what constituted ‘normal’ for me came about with my exposure to Tuvan and Mongolian throat singing. Not having had any interest in singing previously, I found myself inspired and fascinated by the possibilities of the human voice. This tied in very closely with a realisation of the pitch-centred nature of the western music tradition. Exploring Tuvan and Mongolian music (as well as reading about it) opened up a completely different way of listening to sound, listening ‘widely’ to timbre, rather than ‘narrowly’ focusing on pitch, considered in-depth in ‘Listening the Tuvan Way’ (Levin & Süüzükei, 2006, pp. 45-72; see also my chapter ‘Gender and/as timbre’). This resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of ‘Nomad art’ and non-striated space (1988, pp. 474-500), the theorization of which I will explore more fully throughout the project.

While my own practice owes a lot to my understanding (or perhaps misunderstanding) of Tuvan and Mongolian sound culture and timbre-centred listening, I do not call my practice ‘Mongolian overtone singing’ (or ‘Inuit throat singing’). My work does not constitute an expression of the traditional art form and I work in a very different cultural context. In my understanding, Tuvans and Mongolians have no issues with other people learning techniques of overtone singing. Indeed, the Mongolian singers I have met offered enthusiastic encouragement. I also attended one of Michael Ormiston workshops in the UK; Ormiston has studied in Mongolia with masters of overtone singing since 1993 and received explicit permission to teach traditional Mongolian overtone singing to people in the UK (Ormiston, 2019).

Issues of cultural appropriation have recently had more prominence with regards to Inuit throat singing (Wheeler, 2019). I wish to acknowledge my influences (and encourage others to listen to these musics). My own use of techniques inspired by Inuit throat singing does not, however, attempt to sound like Inuit throat singing. My engagement with this incredible vocal tradition has led me to explore ways of using ingressive and egressive breath in my own idiosyncratic way that pays respect to the inspiration, without trying to appropriate the aesthetics.
Autoethnography

Little exists by way of writings by exploratory vocalists within the field of autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006; Das & Mullick, 2015; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011); perhaps not surprisingly because of the newness of the genre. Some autoethnographic works exist by singers, but all with more traditional aspects of singing praxis (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009; Das & Mullick, 2015; Emmerson, 2009; Jones, 2009; Schindler, 2009). This thesis therefore constitutes a significant contribution to this field.

This thesis presents a range of critically-engaged voices, poetically resonating with the variety of ‘voices’ that the Singer utilises and the Magickian invokes. Some of these voices read as raw, almost diary-like reflections on creative work, some have a ‘harder’ academic quality, some resort to the language(s) of poetry. All of these voices offer insights into, and reflections upon, my process. They also, however, constitute the practice itself. My theorising has fed directly into what I have chosen to pursue artistically and my artistic, particularly improvised, explorations have prompted questions and theorisation.

I use a queer, reflexive, autoethnographic methodology. As Adams and Jones write:

*The autoethnographic* means sharing politicized, practical, and cultural stories that resonate with others and motivating these others to share theirs; bearing witness, together, to possibilities wrought in telling. *The queer* means making conversations about harmful situations go, working to improve the world one person, family, classroom, conference, and essay at a time. *The reflexive* means listening to and for the silences and stories we can’t tell—not fully, not clearly, not yet; returning, again and again, to the river of story accepting what you can never fully, never unquestionably *know* (Adams & Jones, 2011, pp. 111-112).

The multiplicity of the voices in my work may at times read as jarringly different. These analogously reflect the diversity of experiential states that I have explored in this work and seek to *integrate*, while having no desire to unify them under One Law (discussed further in the chapter ‘Gender and timbre’). In this way, I follow Haraway who writes, in her ‘Manifesto for Cyborgs’:

→ 6 ←
Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century. Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism (Haraway, 1991, p. 176).

I have chosen to present a diversity of voices in this thesis as part of a methodology against normative, hegemonic Author-ity and to emphasise the ongoing, and process-centred nature of this work. I seek to ground my work in a practice of compassion, for all the entities that I work with, and for all the aspects of myself (or my selves) that I work with. This means giving space for their voices to manifest in various forms.

I also take inspiration from literary criticism, taking cues from a range of more writerly academic voices. In a poetic mode, I do not always explicitly foreground every insight for the reader. While I value clarity of intention, I feel comfortable allowing the narrative(s) of the text to unfold and shed light on previous writings, providing insight and reframing along the way. This process produces a more fluid, diverse and hence non-judgmental way of both theorising and practicing (inasmuch as we might think of them separately). Some autoethnographic work can read as self-indulgent; I hope that this thesis presents a personal, embodied and emotionally honest account while at the same time always remaining critically engaged.

Autohagiography

I have not come across any writings by exploratory vocalists within the field of autoethnography (Anderson, 2006; Atkinson, 2006; Das & Mullick, 2015; Ellis et al., 2011); perhaps not surprisingly because of the newness of the genre. Some autoethnographic works exist by singers, but all with more traditional aspects of singing praxis (Bartleet & Ellis, 2009; Das & Mullick, 2015; Emmerson, 2009; Jones, 2009; Schindler, 2009). This thesis therefore constitutes a significant contribution to this field.

1. chaos magick;
2. Buddhist insight meditation; and
3. industrial shamanism.

All of which inform and question each other.

I take the term ‘autohagiography’ from Aleister Crowley who used it for what most people would call his autobiography: *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autohagiography* (Crowley, 1989). Crowley had a great sense of humour, no doubt evident in this title, but he did also seriously consider himself the prophet of a new aeon; some followers of the religion he founded (Thelema) and other contemporary magickians consider him as such. I use the term in part to take seriously the suggestion that we can fully Awaken in this life time—a challenge laid down by writers such as the Buddhist Ingram (2008) and chaos magickians Duncan & Barford (Barford, 2011; Chapman, 2008; Chapman & Barford, 2009a, 2009b, 2010)—and to foreground having a sense of humour about practicing magick or meditation, which just about every book on these subjects highly recommends as a way of retaining one’s sanity whilst inviting experiences outside of the usual.

I coin the term ‘musick’ to refer to musical practices that intersect with ritual. The use of the term musick-with-a-k references Crowley’s spelling of ‘magick’ which he adopted “in order to distinguish the Science of the Magi from all its counterfeits” referring mostly to stage magic (Crowley, Desti, & Waddell, 2008, p. 47). I first used this term to label my ongoing collection of ‘Daily Sketches’ under the title ‘Sage Musick’ (Sage Musick, 2013-ongoing). These constitute, in part, a record of my magickal practice in sound. I perform and record under the name ‘Sage Pbbbt’, a holy name given to me by Eris, Goddess of Discord and Confusion.
While western magick has a history of secrecy, pseudonyms and silence, a number of contemporary practitioners have decided that the need for silence around magickal practice has rather dissipated since the time of the Inquisition, and the benefit of sharing experiences far outweighs the mild social stigma that one might experience. I favour openness around my own practice for a number of reasons. I think destigmatising various spiritual practices likely makes them more approachable to more people, making these tools more accessible. I also think that the challenges presented to these practices (and practitioners) when we talk openly about our work can strengthen them. I also want to deconstruct the boundaries rather than (re)enforcing them and exploring the presumed margins of a practice. A veil of silence also lies around most Buddhist practitioners’ experiences of Awakening and around the maps that various traditions have created. Ingram discusses these reasons in detail—as well as why he feels it extremely useful to openly discuss them (2008, pp. 259-272). The magickal autobiographies that I have listed all come from chaos magickians except for Crowley although most chaos magickians would see chaos magick as a continuation of his project. In what follows I offer personal reflections and details of workings as part of an ongoing, open-ended narrative of exploring my idiosyncratic chaos magick practice entwined with my experiences (towards) Awakening.

The term ‘chaos magick’ has multiple different definitions and interpretations but all chaos magickians agree on the need for ‘gnosis’ in magick, and an interest in how inhabiting different Belief Systems affects one’s experience of the world—quite simply, everything we experience, we do so through out nervous system, and this filters the vast amount of data it receives through a Belief System in order to act more efficiently in the world. Chaos magick views Belief Systems as potentially useful tools for facilitating desirable experiences in the world. The term ‘gnosis’ in chaos magick refers to a state of consciousness in which the ‘normal’ ego does not have prominence. Practitioners use various techniques to facilitate this, among them sexual excitation, pain, the use of entheogens and particularly in my case the use of singing and meditation.

While a considerable literature exists of first-hand accounts of chaos magick praxis, often fused with theory and various sorts of modelling, we have sparse academic
literature on chaos magick. Academic authors tend to give a brief overview of the history (Clarke, 2006; Drury, 2011; Duggan, 2009, 2013; Hume & Drury, 2013), or mention it in passing (Asprem, 2015; Greenwood, 2009; Petersen, 2014; Possamai, 2012) rather than offer a detailed engagement. While Esoteric Studies, or Magick Studies, have taken off in recent years, chaos magick seems underrepresented in these fields. This may have something to do with the prominence of a sense of humour in chaos magick practice, perhaps inviting ‘serious scholars’ to ‘not take it seriously’. Or it may have to do with the critical bent of writings on chaos magick. Most, if not all, chaos magick texts engage with current theories of chaos magick, perhaps not surprisingly for a tradition that takes belief in anything—including theories of how chaos magick functions—as a tool which the magickian can utilise to their own end. Either way, space certainly exists for more work critically engaged with the paradigm of chaos magick.

From the point of view of the chaos magickian, ‘insight meditation’ can function as an investigation of one Belief System with a particular set of techniques. Within the Buddhist Belief System, it leads to an experiential ‘ultimate truth’. How I might integrate profound experiences of Awakening with other Belief Systems and how this affects one’s capacity to ‘belief shift’ (a chaos magick technique for adopting different Belief Systems for their functionality) remains an open question that I feel can only find an answer through ongoing personal and music al praxis rather than philosophical posturing. One potentially useful model for integrating various experiential realities comes in the form of the ‘8-circuit brain’, which maps eight different types of ‘intelligence’, or aspects of the ‘self’ (Alli, 2003, 2014; Leary, 1989; Wilson, 1983, 1990b). Timothy Leary developed the model basing it off a version of the Hindu chakra system. Robert Anton Wilson and Antero Ali have both developed the model further and it has fairly wide use amongst chaos magick practitioners. The 8-circuit brain model and chaos magick more generally can accommodate the experiences of Awakening alongside other experiences without needing to put them in a hierarchy. According to the 8-circuit brain model, a ‘healthy’ individual manages to nurture the different aspects of self without privileging one over the others, and the ongoing investigation of all the different circuits constitutes the magickal path—it need not only focus on one circuit, and a magickian need not focus only on Awakening. While I do not often explicitly refer to the 8-circuit model, the broader
perspective of different aspects of one’s life existing in parallel (and potentially strengthening each other) has informed my meditation, ritual and musickal practices.

I see the potential in chaos magick for personal liberation and an orientation that allows for a multiplicity of voices. I also, however, find most iterations of the western magick tradition have a strong focus on asserting one’s Will on the world in a way which can seem hedonistic, macho, and/or reasserting white, male privilege. In some ways, I have felt more at home with my meditation practice, but have also questioned this apparent ‘comfort’. In part, meditation has as its basis the acceptance of one’s present reality. I have found it incredibly helpful in most areas of my life, but have at times found that my practice (or mis-practice) of meditation, coupled with a history of depression and a (until recently repressed) trans identity has fed into a lack of assertiveness and conviction. I have found integrating the ‘assertiveness’ of magick and the ‘accepting nature’ of meditation difficult at times, but this also feels like the great koan of life—how to act authentically, but without desire.

Chaos magick also has a resonance with queer theory/praxis in its investment of energy in the fissures and edges of consensus reality. As Steve Dee writes in a post on the Blog of Baphomet:

> Part of why I view my own magic as Queer (as well as being that of a Kinky, Bisexual and gender fluid person), is the way in which Queerness for me embodies the role that we as magicians have as edge-dwellers who question oppressive categorisation and help pull our cultures forward (Dee, 2016).

The life and work of Genesis P-Orridge also enacts the ‘queerness’ of chaos magick, most obviously in their ‘Pandrogyne’ project with/as Lady Jaye Breyer P-Orridge. In this project they both employed the cut-up technique developed by Brion Gysin and William S Burroughs (himself a member of the IOT) directly on their bodies/genders/sexes, literally cutting their bodies up to reinvent their identities (P-Orridge, 2010b, pp. 441-451). This narrative of exploration, reinvention and re-contextualising resonates with and offers inspiration for my ideas of improvisation and the exploration of extra-normal vocal technique.
Improvising ritual

It occurred to me some years ago that I could *improvise* my magick ritual work in a way not dissimilar to musical free improvisation or the use of open-scores (see chapter ‘Some scores and some notes on those scores’ for more on this). Rather than have a planned out ritual, I could instead delineate a sacred space within which to have a particular experience, state an intent, and spontaneously and creatively engage with ‘whatever arises’ in this space.

My practice-led research has focused on exploring improvised work that has an explicitly ritual intent, as well as ‘less intent-full’ improvisations which function to ‘give voice’ to whatever I experience in the moment. But I also have a strong interest in the queering of these boundaries, and exploring the extent to which meditation, or ‘giving voice to whatever arises’ has a ritualistic quality, and how I can integrate these different experiences into ‘normal’ consciousness. This feels at odds with some iterations of the western magickal tradition that put an emphasis on clearly segregating different aspects of one’s life, and making sure that one ‘banishes’ these conjured elements after the completion of a ritual. I have taken influence here from Tibetan Chöd ritual (discussed more in the chapter ‘The Residence Workings’).

The exploratory aspect of my vocal work ties in very closely with the accepting, exploratory nature of insight meditation, which also acts as a framework for processing experiences that come from explicit ritual work. I feel happily agnostic about these experiences—at times using different models that represent these experiences as other aspects of my personality, gods, spirits, demons, archetypes in the collective unconscious, or important archetypes in my own idiosyncratic psyche. I take cues from Robert Anton Wilson (a chaos magickian and key influence on me) in developing a ‘radical agnosticism’ about one’s experiences. As Wilson says: “belief is the death of intelligence. As soon as one believes a doctrine of any sort, or assumes certitude, one stops thinking about that aspect of existence” (Wilson, 1977, p. ii). But an acceptance of the subjective experience—however unusual, or at odds with one’s current Belief System—feels like the basis for a healthy way to integrate, or at least accept, various aspects of oneself (or selves). I enjoy a critical engagement with these experiences, and my work generally, which enriches rather than limits my praxis.
Trans and queer narratives

The process of insight meditation requires looking at everything that arises, not just what one feels comfortable with; the process of ‘giving voice’ to what I experience in the moment inevitably involves thoughts and feelings related to my experience of gender, especially in performance spaces where, however comfortable one might feel in the comfort of one’s own home, a confrontation with the reality of the social constructedness of gender seem inevitable. Having suppressed or not acknowledged my gender identity for the first thirty-six years of my life, I feel sceptical of any voice that suggests I can or should ignore the importance of gender.

I felt moved to add another voice to the collection of trans narratives we have available in our culture. While I feel in awe of the progress that our society has made in just the last ten years—or even five years—in terms of the proliferation of trans narratives (and their accessibility) I certainly do not feel that we have reached saturation point, and while some ‘alternative’ discourses exist to the cliché of ‘I always felt like a woman trapped in a man’s body’ (and vice versa) much of the trans autobiographical writing (to say nothing of the much larger collection of texts by cis writers about trans people) gives voice to experiences and expressions of gender that differ wildly from my own. I simply think more trans voices need to get heard.

Transitioning presented a very clear challenge to my understanding of insight meditation and demanded an engagement with the question of ‘how to act authentically without increasing your suffering’. I found it hard to reconcile a desire to transition, and all of the acts that this entails—from taking synthetic drugs every day for the rest of my life, to the possibility of surgically altering my body—with the Buddhist concept of ‘accepting whatever arises’. Surely whatever discomfort or dysphoria I experience I could simply meditate on instead? This feels, however, like a common mistake meditators come across, and in a sense, represents the great koan of life, which requires an answer in action, not logic. As Ingram says of Awakening, it “is not a thing or a mind state or a thought, it is an understanding of perspective
without some separate thing that perceives” (Ingram, 2008, p. 47). The distancing of “our self” from “our actions” cause suffering more so than “our actions.”

‘Asserting myself in the world’ or exploring an ‘authentic’ sense of self, feel like core questions in my experience of gender, but also in my musical and magickal praxis. For singing, this question becomes something like ‘how can I continually explore, and push the boundaries of what I think I know, and at the same time sing my truth’. For magick, this constitutes the continuous ‘authentic’ engagement with both ideas of self, and Belief Systems as well as ‘the world’. I find the word ‘authentic’ rather problematic, but I intend to use this discomfort as a starting point for further investigation into what we might mean by ‘authenticity’. Many trans writers talk about a need to express an ‘authentic self’, and many musicians talk of the need to ‘find an authentic voice’.

Julia Serano introduces the term ‘subconscious sex’ to refer to most peoples’ deeply held subconscious sexual identity which she distinguishes from ‘gender identity’, a term that suggests an element of choice (2007, pp. 77-93). Serano does not propose ‘subconscious sex’ as an absolute, essentialist concept, and acknowledges that it may have socially constructed elements, though perhaps more deeply engrained than our notions of gender. She does, however, also point to research in neurobiology that looks at the similarities in some aspects of the brains of cis women and trans women, and cis men and trans men. Accepting aspects of our self, such as our ‘subconscious sex’—whether biologically determined, or deeply engrained—can feel like a challenge to our ideas of freedom, or feminism. To create a better reality for ourselves and others, however, we must strive to see the current reality clearly. In a similar way, insight meditation and magick require a radical acceptance of ‘reality’ (at least as we have the capacity to experience it, in the moment) for the possibility of insight, or to affect real change in the world.

The use of exploratory voices of women represents a radical exploration of the performance of gender. I like some extreme metal music, but feel much more interested in women vocalists than men. I have seen anger and violence performed by men countless times in our society whilst when a woman performs these emotional states this still reads as transgressive. Runhild Gammelsæter represents
one of the most inspiring vocalists for me in the extreme metal tradition. Not only did she front Thorr’s Hammer (1996), one of the most influential doom/drone bands (despite existing for a mere six weeks), her work with the band Khlyst (2006) explores a much wider range of sounds than one usually hears in this genre of music and her solo album *Amplicon* (Gammelsæter, 2008) layers her voice and moves between ‘clean’ singing, growling and screaming to exploring what feels like the full range of the darker side of human emotions—anger, fear, torment, pathos—sometimes seamlessly interweaving these in an almost-possible-to-follow narrative thread that draws the listener in whilst they also feel moved to distance themselves from the unpleasant evocations.

Diamanda Galás’s work provides another example and challenge to anyone who wants to explore the possibilities of the human voice, and of what the human voice can channel. Galás also challenges our assumptions about the gendered voice in no small part because of her incredible range and seeming ability to sound ‘female’ and ‘male’ and ‘neither/both’ in a way that resonates with queer and genderqueer theory; see, for example, ‘I – I am – Dream’ or ‘M Dis I’ from *Schrei X* (1996, tracks 2 and 3). As Galás says of herself: “Woman, man—I am a fucking nigger, white person, lesbian, homosexual witch, snake vampire—whatever!” (Vale & Juno, 1991, p. 11). Her music has the capacity to combine the ‘ethereal’ and ‘beautiful’ with the ‘demonic’ and ‘ugly’. Her technique seems impeccable but never cold or purely for the sake of technique—first and foremost her music forces one to feel. We can read it then as initiatory and incantatory—see, for example *The Litanies of Satan* (Galás, 1989). The listener experiences intense things and responds either by confronting and accepting these ‘unpleasant’ experiences (as part of their self), or they retreat into repression, or stop listening.

I take from Gammelsæter and Galás a desire to explore the darker aspects of women’s experience in the world and ‘give voice’ to them. Sainkho Namtchylak and Tanya Tagaq’s work both hold particular interest for me on this front as they each continue the traditions of their respective homelands while moving them forward, not in the least in terms of gender performance.
My own project will build on these investigations into how women, trans or queer experimental singers working within the framework of singing as a shamanic (or other spiritual) practice function to both continue these living, ever-changing traditions, as well as transgress boundaries of musical and gender performance. In this, I question my own sense of ‘tradition’ which in many ways feels like a postmodern experience of music as diverse and accessible.

Thesis overview

The main text of the thesis consists of three sections: Improvising Theory, Workings and Scores. The first section presents some of my thinking through concepts and theoretical paradigms that I have engaged with over the last few years of my research.

The first chapter looks at ingressive singing and a reading of this as an antinomianist practice and more broadly how aspects of my singing practice relate to the left-hand path spiritual paradigm. I then look at Sam Harris’s argument against the concept of free will in his book Free Will (2012a) and consider what this means for an improvisation practice as well as its implications for invocation ritual as well as how this book subtly altered my meditation practice. I then muse on the practice of timbre-centred listening, inspired by Tuvan music and culture. I read this alongside Judith Butler’s notion of the performativity of gender and Cornelia Fales’ concept of the ‘paradox of timbre’ suggesting that our reading of gender and sex echo our readings of timbre and pitch. I then turn my attention to the notion of the ‘cut-up’, a technique that has played an important role in the construction of my voice as a singer and which I have utilised as a tool for integrating the aesthetic and magickal properties of this techniques with vipassanā insight meditation as a way of exploring a ritual practice that can function alongside (or as) my meditation practice. This chapter also engages with queer and trans theory of the body, particularly Jack Halberstam’s The Queer Art of Failure (2011) as cut-up and builds on the previous discussion of gender and timbre.
The second section—‘Workings’—presents in-depth discussion of some of the explicit ritual performances and recordings that I have explored over the course of the research. I focus on two main working: ‘The Residence Workings’ and ‘invocations of unknown entities’. The first of these constitutes a reflection on the first explicit invocation rituals that I performed with an audience. I consider the ethics as well as the politics and aesthetics of these workings in particular, but also engage more deeply with the concepts of invocation and possession. The other focus of this section explores the notion of a dada ‘anti-magick’ ritual, which critiques the normative, phallogocentric western esoteric tradition, taking cues from feminism, trans and queer politics as well as anarchisms. It also functions as a methodology for exploring the limits of invocation work and how it intersects with Buddhist insight meditation. As well as a dada ‘anti-magick’ ritual, this chapter presents my workings with the concept of ‘True Shamanic Black Metal’—a somewhat tongue-in-cheek gesture towards a serious exploration of rhythm inspired by my understanding of shamanic drumming, particularly from Tuva, Mongolia and Korea, merged with an interest in extreme metal traditions, particularly black metal. I explore what shamanic black metal might sound like, centring the discussion around the album I recorded in 2017 invocations of unknown entities (Pbbbt, 2017d).

The third section—‘Scores’—presents thoughts on playing scores and writing scores; this section presents several scores that I wrote over the last few years with reflections on them. I had not envisaged this third section in the original proposal for the thesis as my score writing felt like a separate practice and not a very prolific one. It certainly became more prolific over the course of the research, and I realised that I had an interest in exploring the invocatory notions of the score. They also provided a site for exploring the ethics of working together—something essential to my ritual practice working—as well as a way of tentatively exploring the integration of different practices—an intellectual, writerly practice and an embodied, ritual practice. This section presents works with commentaries in a format reminiscent of Roland Barthes’s Lover’s Discourse (2002) in that the scores function as figures, recognisable archetypal forms, and with a sense of building up an image repertoire rather than presenting an absolute argument.
A Miscellany appears before the Conclusion, presenting brief, poetic, fragmentary impressions which resonate back throughout the reader’s engagement with the thesis. This section offers further insight into some of the linguistic choices at play in this work.

*Audio examples and recordings*

The thesis includes numerous examples of recordings from my Daily Sketches project (Sage Musick, 2013-ongoing) that serve as examples; I consider them part of the thesis text. I have embedded hyperlinks to the Bandcamp site that houses them for ease of listening. I have also included these examples on a usb, labelled by page number for ease of reference.

The following works constitute the assessable works of the submission. I present links here and have also provided copies on the usb. I have also submitted physical copies of the double cd ‘*invocations of unknown entities*’ as the artwork constitutes part of the creative component of this album.

*Assessable recordings*

https://tonelist.bandcamp.com/album/invocations-of-unknown-entities

https://ashesofburntsage.bandcamp.com/releases

Sage Musick (2018a) ‘2018-05-14 this way madness lies’.
https://sagemusick.bandcamp.com/track/2018-05-14-this-way-madness-lies

Sage Musick (2017a) ‘song to destroy myself / song to destroy the world’.
IMPROVISING THEORY
Ingressive singing and antinomianism

My first encounter with ingressive singing that really moved me came from the music of Inuit throat singing in which a singer moves between ingressive and egressive singing in a rhythmic way and traditionally with a partner. Traditional Inuit throat singing has elements of play and mimicry, with the two singers copying each other’s sounds and adding elements to extend them (Ammann, 1993; Charron, 1978; Deschênes, 2005; Nattiez, 1983, 1999). I found Inuit throat singing fascinating and beautiful, but felt particularly moved by the work of Tanya Tagaq. Tagaq developed her solo singing practice while studying at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design as a way of feeling a sense of connection to her homeland (Perry, 2006).

The Inuit techniques had a great appeal to me—particularly the more exploratory, “avant-garde” direction that Tagaq took—and I spent a lot of time exploring similar techniques and developed an interest in ingressive singing more broadly. In part, this comes from an interest in new vocal techniques and the aesthetics of these techniques, but also an interest in how ingressive singing manifest (or does not manifest) in different cultures. Eklund offers a good survey of ingressive speech (the use of ingressive airflow in language):

Pulmonic egressive speech can be referred to as ‘modified breathing’ (Abercrombie 1967: 25; Ball & Rahilly 1999: 20). Rosner & Pickering (1994: 2) and Clark, Yallop & Fletcher (1995: 17) observe that no known language seems to use ingressive airflow as a distinctive feature. According to Davenport & Hannahs (1998), among the six possible types of airstream mechanism, two are not found: ingressive pulmonic and velaric egressive, but, they say, ‘it is unclear why this is so’ (p. 9). More recently, Bloomer, Griffiths & Merrison (2005: 234) observe that while ‘[m]ost speech sounds . . . are made using a pulmonic egressive airstream mechanism . . . [i]t is . . . possible to reverse the direction of airflow so that the air moves from outside the body down towards the lungs’. [...] However, Cruttenden (2001: 32) points out that the ingressive pulmonic airstream may occur in English as ‘a common way of expressing surprise or pain’. He also mentions an ‘ingressive interdental fricative for hurt’ (1986: 180), while Jackson (1980: 3) mentions that ingressive lung air is
sometimes used in ‘moments of tension’ (Eklund, 2008, pp. 237-238 emphasis in original).

I found this relatively widespread use of ingressive speech in language as an extra-linguistic phenomenon particularly interesting as an artist interested in dada, sound poetry and other forms of language-like-but-not-language art forms. This technique offered a way of very directly referencing language, or even using language but in a way which no human language made use of in everyday speech. In this sense, it offers an always liminal quality to its use. Ingressive singing has several different functions in non-Inuit cultures. Sometimes used by shamans, sometimes used in storytelling for the voices of ‘bad things’ as well as used by ventriloquists (Eklund, 2008, 2015; Vanhecke et al., 2015).

The Inuit-inspired techniques that I taught myself readily offer-up trance experiences to the practitioner because of their intense demands on the voice and the body. Inuit throat singing does not necessarily have an explicit shamanic function, however, and traditionally two young women practice/play it as a game (Charron, 1978; Nattiez, 1983, 1999). It does, however, come from a culture infused with animism and with strong shamanic roots (Laugrand & Oosten, 2015; Nattiez, 1999). The traditional practice incorporates the sounds of various creatures from the environment and Tagaq frames her practices as explicitly shamanic.

Sometime in to my exploration of singing inspired by the Inuit style, I had the idea of exploring overtone singing with both ingressive and egressive singing. I started an exploration that fused an exploration of timbral manipulation and variation with both forms of breath. In some ways this feels like the ‘truth encounter’ (Badiou, 2005, pp. 393-409) that facilitated my subjectivity as a singer—the finding of ‘my voice’. A fidelity to this ‘truth’—as Badiou would phrase it—has driven my practice for the last four or five years. Some of my first explorations of ingressive overtone singing utilised by ventricular folds rather than my vocal folds. Tuvan and Mongolian overtone singing as well as Tibetan Yang chant make use of the ventricular folds in some forms of egressive singing (called kagryaa in Tuva and Mongolia) (Glenfield, 2003; Grawunder, 2008; Hinds, 2005; Lindestad, Södersten, Merker, & Granqvist, 2001; Sakakibara et al., 2001; van Tongeren, 2002). I have, however, not found any traditions of ingressive ventricular fold resonance. Some occurs on Chyskyryrai’s
album *Vocal Evocations of Sakha-Yakutia* (Chyskyyrai, 2008) for example on track 3, ‘Vocal Improvisation on Northern Themes’ around 6:35 and I have a distinct memory of surprise hearing a moment on a Jaap Blonk track. I have not managed to find this again though, despite feeling fairly sure it occurred on *Flux de Bouche* (Blonk, 1993) and listening through this and other recordings numerous times.

The allusions to shamanism, ventriloquism, and all sorts of ‘others’ that ingressive phonation references in human languages had a mythopoetic and aesthetic pull for me as I explored an improvised ritual practice influenced by numerous shamanic practices. That non-human animals also make use of ingressive phonation felt like another way of queering the dominance of the rational, intellectual, human self in my creative practice, interweaving well with techniques from sound poetry and semantically-null sounds.

Furthermore, as I read more about left-hand path spiritual traditions, ingressive phonation seemed like a beautiful analogy for these kinds of expressions of spirituality. Taking some inspiration in my magick practice from Flowers conceptualising of left-hand path spiritual traditions (Flowers, 2012), I have explored ingressive singing as an embodiment of left-hand path ideas. Flowers described the difference between right- and left-hand path spiritual traditions:

> The right-hand path answers this question simply by saying that the subjective universe must harmonize with itself with the laws of the objective universe—be that envisioned as God or Nature. The right-hand path is the path of union with universal reality (God or Nature). When this union is completed the individual self will be annihilated; the individual will become one with the divine or natural cosmic order. In this state, the ego is destroyed as “heaven” is entered or a nirvana-like existence/nonexistence is “attained.” This is clearly the goal of all orthodox Judaic, Christian, Islamic, or Buddhistic [sic] sects (Flowers, 2012, p. 8).

Whereas:

> Essentially, the left-hand path is the path of nonunion with the objective universe. It is the way of isolating consciousness within the subjective universe and, in a state of self-imposed psychic solitude, refining the soul or psyche to ever more perfect levels. The objective universe is then made to
harmonize itself with the will of the individual psyche instead of the other way around. Where the right-hand path is *theocentric* (or certainly aleocentric: “other-centered”), the left-hand path is *psychocentric*, or soul/self-centered. 

[...] An eternal separation of the individual intelligence from the objective universe is sought in the left-hand path. This amounts to an immortality of the independent self-consciousness moving within the objective universe and interacting with it at will (Flowers, 2012, p. 9).

Flowers goes on to assert two major criteria for left-hand path practices: “deification of the self and antinomianism” (Flowers, 2012, p. 11). He defines antinomianism as: the purposeful reversal of conventional normative categories: “evil” becomes “good,” “impure” becomes “pure,” “darkness” becomes “light.” Literally speaking, antinomianism implies something “against the law.” [...] He or she is bound to break the cosmic laws of nature and to break the conventional social laws imposed by ignorance and intolerance (Flowers, 2012, p. 12).

Putting aside self-deification, I have certainly read some aspects of my singing practice through an antinomianist lens. Ingressive breath literally inverts “normal” singing techniques and for me, functioned as a site for exploring the inversion of norms and antinomianism of a left-hand path practice, at least analogously.

The term ‘left-hand path’ itself comes from Hindu tantrism:

Besides meaning “left,” the Sanskrit word *vama* can also mean woman, or the Goddess. The real meaning behind this is that the Goddess and woman are thought to be the embodiments of *Shakti* (power). Here it is quite clear, at least from the masculine perspective, that the essence of the vamachara is the total transformation of the human initiate into something superhuman or god(dess)-like. This lies at the root of why antinomianism (inversions of all kinds of normatives) is so important in the methodology of Eastern forms of the left-hand path (Flowers, 2012, p. 33).

The transgressive nature of this path, and the Goddess worship, both appeal aesthetically (and perhaps politically). While I find the phrase “from the masculine perspective” profoundly problematic—not to say normalising, as if all iterations of masculinity sit comfortably in one neat “perspective”—I have sometimes framed my gender transition as an act of ‘Greater Black Magick’, (Webb, 2012, pp. 285-286;
manifesting a magickal, Goddess version of myself and changing the ‘Objective Universe’ in the process.

I have not, however, ‘feminised’ my singing voice, for my singing voice already spans a greater range than that of most humans, whatever their gender; I have, however, explored ‘voice feminisation’ for every day, conversational voice use with the techniques in The Voice Book for Trans and Non-Binary People (Mills & Stoneham, 2017).

In traditional Inuit singing, each singer copies the other and the ‘lead’ role swaps breath to breath, so that each singer inhales when the other exhales and vice versa. This almost gives the impression of one unbroken rhythmic breath with a dual quality of both in- and egressive quality. But it also means that the individuals breath in an alternate way to each other so that one’s mimicry of the other’s uses the inverse breath. I found this interesting considering Flowers’ rending of the left-hand path. I absolutely do not suggest any inherent left-hand path aspect to Inuit throat singing, traditional or otherwise. But the use of ingressive breath seemed like an interesting tool to explore an embodied and symbolic exploration of an antinomianist, “inverted” musickal/magickal practice in my own practice. I also felt (and feel) aware that this exploration would not necessarily translate to an audience. But then many left-hand path practices have an element of secrecy about them, sometimes even hiding in plain sight. In some ways ingressive singing generally and some techniques I explored directly inspired by Inuit throat singing functioned simply as another technique to integrate with my vocabulary. But in another way, ingressive singing took up a central place in my mythopoesis.

Most often, I use ingressive phonation alongside egressive phonation, and have explored these techniques of voicing as complementary, perhaps as ‘giving voice’ to different aspects of my self, perhaps even analogously giving voice to my ‘shadow’ (Jung, 1983, pp. 88-93) alongside, and interwoven with the conscious aspects of my self. Similarly, the use of both ingressive and egressive breath has mirrored my interest in both left- and right-hand path traditions. My meditation practice clearly falls in a right-hand path tradition, but some of my magick ritual feels more at home when framed within a left-hand path paradigm. An exploration of two modes of
breath has given me a site to inhabit two apparently antagonistic modes of expression and to explore pushing each to the extremes of mimetically engaging with each other. While perhaps only analogous to the framework of spiritual practice I have cultivated, and seek to integrate, aspects from these frameworks and at times use these vocal modes as a tool to explore them. (I return to this in the chapter ‘cutting up the selves / cutting through the self’.)

More mundanely, I have a deep interest in exploring the qualities of each of these voices, and pushing them both to their limits, taking inspiration from each other to further their possibilities. I have spent some time pushing these ‘two voices’ as close to each other as they will go. I try and imitate each voice with the other. My explorations with one form in turn influence my explorations of the other, sometimes resulting in each voice performing a perhaps perverse mimicry of my (other) self. The mimesis that grounds overtone singing functioning as a methodology for introspection of the ‘dualistic self’ (or selves) created by giving voice to both in- and out-breath.

(I also have a purely technical interest, an interest in performance, and a blurring, or confusing of boundaries, or of transgressing the limits of our bodies (of my body), by seemingly not taking breaths, not ever stopping; presenting a singular, unbroken line; an apparent transgression of the dualistic world we experience, itself an illusion, manifesting from oneness, from zeroness, emptiness...)

One paper (Vanhecke et al., 2015), talking about ingressive phonation had some interesting (mostly physiological) findings, the last of which states: “The two voicing modes [ingressive and egressive] cannot be differentiated by blind listening” (Vanhecke et al., 2015, p. 1). I have tried to explore as full a range as possible of phonation types, and enjoy queering the difference between different modes, but I feel that I can differentiate between ingressive and egressive singing, certainly in my own voice (on recordings) but also on recordings of other artists—Tanya Tagaq and Jaap Blonk, for example. That said, several people have said to me after gigs that they could not clearly differentiate between egressive and ingressive phonation (though they used less technical words) or that they realised at some point during the performance that they had not noticed me breathing so must have used ingressive
phonation as well. Vanhecket’s paper only looks at highly skilled soprano voices, however, sounding ‘clean’ notes and does not consider other forms of phonation such as ingressive multiphonics, ventricular fold resonance, etc. Similarly, DeBoer’s thesis ‘Ingressive Phonation in Contemporary Vocal Music’ offers an important overview of ingressive singing practice and repertoire, but does so from an Western art music background, focusing on techniques such as clean and breathy voice (DeBoer, 2012).

Some contemporary experimental vocalists explore the idea of continuous phonation, sometimes explicitly referencing the circular breathing of wind players. ‘Circular Song’ by Joan La Barbara (La Barbara, 2003) attempts to engage directly with this technical (and aesthetic) challenge. A recording by Carolyn Connors entitled ‘Point’ (Connors, 2012) alternates between ingressive and egressive singing, the ‘point’ of the title perhaps alluding to either where the breath points to/from or the point at which ingressive becomes egressive (and vice versa) or analogously to circling around a point—not moving in a linear manner, but moving, instead, around a point. While I admire these recordings, it seems trivially easy to differentiate the direction of breath.

(Ingressive phonation has also influenced my physical presence in performance from adjusting my stance to facilitate breath control, which has in turn adjusted how I use my breath with egressive phonation, to always tying my hair back when I sing. I quite like the aesthetics of having my hair out—and it would certainly suit the aesthetics of more metal oriented gigs that I have played—but having once accidentally inhaled a strand of hair and had it wrap around my larynx, I have no desire to experience this again.)

In death meatal circles people dismiss ‘ingressives’ as a vocal style—seemingly because lower vocal utterances come easier with this technique and therefore have an aura of ‘cheating’ or a lack of technical capacity (Metal Inquisition, 2008). This seems completely absurd to me. Sure, if some people take the easy way out to achieve some effect I can see the interest in applauding those who do it the hard (technical?) way. But to write off a whole area of technique seems incredibly close-minded. Nothing says ‘extreme’ and ‘transgressive’ like codifying your artistic output into a repetitive cliché of a genre.
The illusion of free will and its implications for improvisation and invocation

Sam Harris’ book *Free Will* (Harris, 2012a) argues convincingly that the notion of free will as generally understood in western philosophy makes no sense at all, either objectively or subjectively. I feel convinced by the logic of his arguments and since reading his book have continued to strive to integrate this understanding into my daily life with wavering success. I do not think that I will be able to do justice to his argument in the short space I have to consider it, but I hope to cover some of the most important points before turning my attention to improvisation and what the argument against free will means for it.

First, the objective arguments: Harris draws on a mix of neurobiology and psychology to argue that nothing about the world as we observe it suggests that such a thing as free will exists. In fact, trying to conceive of a world in which it did exist actually seems absurd. Harris argues that we live in a deterministic universe—this moment has arisen out of the previous moment. This seems obvious enough looking at the world without people in it. But when we include people in this observation, some feel uncomfortable because the notion of free will has such central importance to our society. It forms the foundation of much of western philosophy, it forms the basis of our legal system and the Abrahamic religions all have free will as their central tenant—the story of the garden of Eden, or an eternity in either Heaven or Hell do not make much sense without some absolute sense of free will for the individual. (We might note here that other cultures do *not* have free will as a central guiding principle.)

So, what feels different about people? It perhaps *seems* like they have freedom of choice about what they do. I can decide to drink tea or coffee, or I can decide to sing this particular overtone or this ingressive multiphonic in my improvisation. But these decisions do not really point to free will at all. Like a good philosopher, Harris gives an extreme and violent example to make his point, describing a horrific murder in the opening section of his book. But he then gives some example situations after this which point to our different moral intuitions as regards the perpetrators of these
crimes. For example if the killer had a brain tumour in the medial prefrontal cortex region of their brain, which we know affects “control of emotion and behavioural impulses” (Harris, 2012a, p. 50). Or if we found out that the killer had suffered abuse throughout their childhood resulting in a particular psychological and neurological make-up.

Harris suggests that a brain tumour instances a particular, acute, or perhaps crude example of how our biology affects our actions. The difference between a killer having a brain tumour that “made him do it” and the killer having experienced a combination of genetic and sociological experiences that resulted in him becoming the kind of person who murders people does not actually seem very different; simply more clear-cut in the first example. Harris rightly asserts that if he—or I—changed places with this killer, atom for atom, we would have become that person in every way. We would have become a killer (Harris, 2012a, pp. 1-6).

The concept of free will relies on the idea that we could have done differently. I sang this note, but I could have sung this other one (or I murdered this person, but could have not done so). But we have no evidence of this. Every experience, every decision that a person makes results from a combination of their genetics, biology and their socio-political history which gives rise to particular biological and neurological reactions to situations resulting in our actions. In one experiment, scientists could accurately tell which of two buttons the subject would press up to ten seconds before the subject consciously “decided” to with 80% accuracy (Harris, 2012a, pp. 7-14). In this example, the “decision” to press a particular button happens outside of consciousness—a product of various brain processes which then produce a thought in consciousness. The idea that independent force, external from the forces of cause and effect in the material world, has some say in our decisions makes no sense at all. And given this, the idea of free will makes no sense.

But it also makes no sense subjectively. The idea that we consciously author our own thoughts, and that we could have done so in a different way does not make any sense in light of our own experience of the world. We do not actively decide to think thoughts. They simply appear in our consciousness. What would it look like to decide, with our presumed free will, to think something? It seems an absurd
question. Thoughts just arise. And we respond to various situations in different ways based on a combination of genetics and biology and socialization.

This does not erase intention—that we do some actions intentionally, having thought about their consequences still matters, and makes a difference in judging how people will likely act in the future. But in some fundamental way, we have no ‘free will’ over our thoughts or actions. Harris uses the example of ‘think of a city’ (Harris, 2012b), but it works just as well for ‘think of a chord’. If you take some time to think of a chord, to choose a chord, you might believe that you have chosen this chord of your own free will. And Harris suggests that if free will exists anywhere it must exists here—in a situation in which no consequences hang on your decision, in which you really can feel free to choose whatever you like with no external pressures. But if you take the time to do this, and pay some attention to the process... you will notice that different chords simply occur to you—they arise as possibilities into your consciousness seemingly out of nowhere, as does the reasons to pick chord x or y and the final ‘decision’. You did not choose to consider these chords. They arose out of a mysterious process that you have no control over. So, Harris would ask, do you feel free to choose those chords that did not even occur to you?

Harris’s arguments against free will affected my outlook in all sorts of subtle ways. But I will turn now to consider how his arguments affected my thinking about free improvisation, and then my invocation practice.

Certainly, on one level, an argument against free will does not make too much difference to an improvisation—some of the kinds of freedom and agency that people reference when talking about improvisation still matter. The freedom of expression that comes from having knowledge of twenty scales rather than two still matters, still give us a greater variety of potential musical expression, and things like group dynamics and the interpersonal politics of improvising groups still have great importance as do the politics of gender, ethnicity, class, neurodiversity, etc. But some other things look quite different.

John Corbett in his book *A Listeners Guide to Free Improvisation* proposes two “hypothetical poles” of ‘Everything is improvised’ and ‘Nothing is improvised’. He
suggests that: “In practice, these are impossible hypothetical poles; all real music lies somewhere in between” (Corbett, 2016, p. 127). But I’d like to read his description of the ‘nothing is improvised’ world:

you could opt for a deeply paranoid view that holds in contempt any suggestion of free will. Nothing is improvised because nobody has a choice; everything is mapped out in some frighteningly detailed way. Imagine from this perspective that a musician who thinks he’s improvising is first personally unenlightened, deluded into imagining that decisions about how to proceed are made by him, when in truth he’s programmed to make those decisions. Always, at every level, without exception. He and his trio play some wild music, seemingly free—ha! Their freedom is a simulacrum of liberty, every move as predictable as one in a game of checkers. No surprises. In fact, the very notion of surprise is an unreality. From the selection of instrument to the specific material played in a given context, everything is part of a completely orchestrated, calculable cosmos (Corbett, 2016, p. 127).

This paragraph performs a few of the misunderstandings about what it means to live in a deterministic universe which does not include free will.

Firstly, while in theory with the right developments in neurophysiology, the right brain-scanning equipment and enough computational power, we could map out every note that this hypothetical musician might play, before they played it, we will almost certainly never have this capacity. This does not give us any more freedom, but it certainly has important consequences in terms of our experience. We constantly see the world unravel before our eyes in complex unexpected ways. Not because of the freedom of individuals acting in the world, but because of the sheer complexity of it. We do not ascribe free will to the weather, but we cannot predict it accurately simply because of its complexity. Corbett also makes the slide from ‘we live in a deterministic universe’ to using the phrase “orchestrated” which rather heavily implies that something or someone has planned the universe out. Accepting the illusory nature of free will does not imply some God or creator, or ultimate plan for the universe. It can remain as mysterious, beautiful and stochastic as it seemed before. Perhaps more so. The word ‘paranoid’ also points to this—paranoid thought assumes a threat to oneself by some other entity. Considering, or accepting, a universe that does not contain free will in no way invokes some entity ‘out to get you’.
In fact, this only makes sense if you think you *had* free will and someone took it away from you. *That* seems paranoid.

But the main mistake that Corbett makes here has to do with equating improvisation with freedom and, implicitly, performing scored work with a lack of freedom. He does say that all music lies between these “hypothetical poles”, but this equating improvisation with freedom seems absurd, not only in light of Harris’ argument, but simply the assumption that choosing to play a scored piece or that anything requiring a concerted effort to manifest something with a particular outcome in mind inhibits our freedom. A musician who chooses to play a Bach cantata has no more or less freedom than a ‘free improvising’ musician—though they will have quite different musical experiences.

Steve Lacy, asked by Frederic Rzewski to define the difference between improvisation and composition in fifteen seconds offers a different take:

> In fifteen seconds the difference between composition and improvisation is that in composition you have all the time you want to decide what to say in fifteen seconds, while in improvisation you have fifteen seconds (cited in Bailey, 1992, p. 141).

To me, this definition makes a lot more sense. In no small part because it allows for a continuum between ‘improvising’ on the one hand and ‘composing’ on the other. We can imagine music which has a ‘purely’ improvised quality, with everything decided in the moment, we can imagine music that takes days, weeks or months to compose and we can imagine all sorts of combinations of the two—pre-composed music that contains sections for improvising, delineating parameters to improvise within, etc.

We do not ‘gain freedom’ in the sense of ‘free will’ when we improvise; if anything, we ‘gain’ complexity. The apparent ‘freedom’ of improvisation has more to do with chaos theory and the complexity of interacting systems than some kind of individualistic, transcendental free will outside of the determinist universe we inhabit at all other moments in our life. In some sense, improvisation can perhaps function to give us an awareness of our interconnectedness. But only if we put our attention there. I feel sceptical about any kind of music inherently leading to insights about the nature of consciousness. I happen to have focused on this in my
improvising practice for a number of years, but this has come about alongside my meditation practice of twelve or so years.

If we do try and let go of our notion of free will, we might look at a few things differently. Harris suggests two main things it means ethically—firstly, pride and shame do not make much sense. But, as Harris says, “they weren’t much fun anyway” (Harris, 2012b) because these kinds of emotions isolate us. Secondly, love and compassion make sense. Whatever you have accomplished, you did so because of the circumstances of your birth, genetics, biology and upbringing, none of which you controlled. Even things that required effort you managed to do because you happened to end up with the kind of personality and constitution that could make and sustain that effort. Other people have not had such luck and ultimately, we cannot blame them for that—they happened to not have the right parents, genes, personality, attention span, opportunities, etc.

The Romantic ideal of the original genius musician does not make much sense. A more diffuse understanding of the conditions under which great music happens suggests that all of us have complicity in such occurrences. And while some people write about this in terms of group dynamics and thinking about improvisation as not the domain of a singular agent, if we let go of the illusion of free will, this argument becomes even more profound, suggesting that not only the group dynamics of the individual performers matter, but in some very real sense, everything that ever happened to them matters and creates the music that they make in this moment.

Arguably—and perhaps perversely—the delusion of the ‘great artist’ might contribute to a particular artist’s innovation. The psychological forces that act upon us do necessarily ‘make sense’ in order to move us. This raises some challenging questions about truth and art and whether or not we think they can or should intersect. On some level, we might criticise the ‘great improver’ with the huge ego as deluded about the true nature of creativity, but does that change the quality of their music? Do we need or even want music to have an acute awareness of reality or the nature of consciousness? Many musicians (at least in the West) have functioned under the apprehension that they had free will—this misapprehension does not diminish the
quality of their work or our ability to enjoy it, although we might note how often artists talk of a work ‘speaking through them’ or feeling like a piece ‘wrote itself’.

If we do desire to explore such questions, improvisation perhaps acts as a space within which some of us might fruitfully do so. The ‘interconnectedness’ of the performers and the audience, for example, can become a lot clearer at times in improvised work. As Derek Bailey says:

the audience for improvisation, good or bad, active or passive, sympathetic or hostile, has a power that no other audience has. It can affect the creation of that which is being witnessed. And perhaps because of that possibility the audience for improvisation has a degree of intimacy with the music that is not achieved in any other situation (Bailey, 1992, p. 44).

Accepting and investigating this sense of interconnectedness can have a profound effect on the kind of music one chooses to make. For me, improvising has not functioned as a way to give myself ‘greater freedom’ but to investigate how my lack of free will manifests in different circumstances, and to explore this profound, strange truth. But I also know that most of the people I have improvised with have not had similar experiences; they have paid attention to different aspects of their experience sometimes even talking about the ‘freedom’ they feel. The ‘freedom’ of improvisation—particularly free improvisation—functions as a freedom from certain constraints in other types of music. But it does not give us more freedom in an absolute sense. It simply frees us from some ‘constraints’ while foregrounding others.

This definitely has some overlaps with Csikszentmihalyi’s writings on ‘flow’, though he does tend to emphasize the autotelic nature of ‘flow’ states. In one example, he quotes a dancer:

If I have enough space, I am in control. I feel I can radiate an energy into the atmosphere. It’s not always necessary that another human being be there to catch the energy. I can dance for walls, I can dance for floors. ...I don’t know if it’s usually a control of the atmosphere. I become the atmosphere (Caines & Heble, 2015, p. 155).

This feels a lot closer to my experience—I improvise every day alone, and as often as I can to an audience. What I ‘give voice’ to changes considerably depending on the context, including the audience (or lack thereof). But the fundamental technique, or
intent of acceptance of what arises and give voice to this remains the same. As does the realisation that I have not chosen these experiences of my own free will.

My own musical exploration has felt intertwined with a search for better models of subjective truth through the infusion of meditation and ritual work with my musical practice. It has certainly influenced the experience of making music—I feel like I have a much clearer sense of music (like everything else) arising in me, seemingly by magick and my role in this as simply observing, perhaps even trying to get out of the way. While this is exactly what insight meditation practice is about, Buddhism rarely talks explicitly about people lacking free will—focusing instead on the ‘interconnectedness’ of everything. I have found Harris’ book useful in refocusing my experience.

I feel like a logical understanding of the illusion of free will has subtly shifted my meditation practice—none of the Buddhist texts I have read talk explicitly about a ‘lack of free will’, though it seems obvious now, they tend to use other terminology, talking about interconnectivity or ‘oneness’. The lack of explicit discussion of ‘free will’ in Buddhist texts might simply come from the different cultural context that Buddhism usually comes from—free will seems like a particularly western philosophical concept whereas the various philosophical cultures in India, Tibet, Thailand and other places where Buddhism has thrived have not historically foregrounded (or even accepted) this concept. In Hinduism and Buddhism, for example, the ‘individual’ has a place in a social, historical and karmic tapestry which defines them as much as any inherent, ‘separate’ characteristics. Whether or not this explains the lack of discussion of free will in most Buddhist traditions it certainly seems true that in place of this, Buddhist texts instead focus on the interconnectedness of all beings and indeed all phenomena. Indeed, ‘being at one’ with the universe might stand in as a pop-psychology explanation of what Buddhism means or tries to achieve. Trungpa actually speaks of ‘zero-ness’ rather than ‘one-ness’:

Nonduality does not mean that you dissolve into the world or that the world become you. It is not questions of oneness, but of zero-ness. No synchronization of the sense perceptions is necessary. Everything is reduced into zero, and the whole thing becomes one-pointedness—or zero-
pointedness. That is *moksha*, or “freedom”. You do not have any hassles and no synchronization is necessary. Things just unfold by themselves (Trungpa, 2013b, p. 272).

I find this rephrasing useful as it perhaps escapes the problem of trying to ‘become one’ ‘with something’, neither concept making much sense or having much use. I have found Harris' book useful in refocusing my (meditative) experience in a way that feels thoroughly aligned with ‘traditional’ meditation techniques and philosophy, but which addresses a central challenge that this philosophy presents to the western practitioner. To me, at least, this has felt like a profound addition to the Western Buddhist tradition.

Some Buddhist texts *do* attribute free will to humans. I confess to not understanding their rather obtuse explanations for this. Gier and Kjellberg give a good overview of both Pāli and Mahāyāna (Gier & Kjellberg, 2004) but their arguments seem to present a slippage around the notion of free will similar to ‘compatibilist’ arguments that Harris argues—and I agree—confuse the issue at hand (Harris, 2012a, pp. 15-26).

One essay that I read recently—hoping for some clarification on the matter from a self-professed ‘scientist’ and long term meditator with a ‘western perspective’ who taught in the lineage that I have taken a number of retreats in (S. N. Goenka’s ‘Vipassanā Meditation’)—talked about chaos mathematics and karma (or *kamma*, in pāli) and I realised with some frustration that the author had simply equated ‘unpredictable’ (due to incredible complexity) with ‘free will’:

> Chaos theory tells us the same thing when it describes its reality-modelling, nonlinear equations as being capable of both variable yet solvable outcomes. There is a give, a flexibility, in the world, which philosophers and theologians call *free will*, and which scientists designate as *chaos* or as loci of indeterminacy (Fleischman & Fleischman, 1999, p. 128).

The author simply misunderstands *practically unpredictable* as *not (completely) deterministic*, imagining that we can sneak in some ‘free will’ which might account for the lack of predictability rather than simply resulting from complexity. A cursory reading of any sensible text on chaos theory clearly disputes such a reading. I find...
this misreading of chaos theory incredibly frustrating and, sadly, quite common in writings on meditation (and magick).

I find Harris’ work so inspiring because it explores meditation and the subjective weirdness one experiences alongside rigorous scientific work at the cutting edge of neuroscience. While I cannot offer a perspective so well trained in science, I hope that my work can serve to explore from a somewhat rigorous perspective some of the extra-normal states that meditators and magickians seem capable of experiencing fairly reliably. While I cannot offer a perspective so well trained in science, I hope that my work can serve to explore some of the extra-normal states that meditators and magickians seem capable of fairly reliably experiencing from a somewhat rigorous perspective. At the very least I hope that I can give an account of my practice that ‘remains true’ to my (subjective) experience without amplifying the ‘woo’ factor around magick and meditation.

Most of my ritual magick practice in the last few years has centred around invocation work—inviting various different ‘entities’ to manifest in, as, or through me. And I feel completely agnostic about the ‘objective truth’ of what happens in these experiments. But it feels interesting that I can do certain things to have the subjective experience of feeling possessed by some particular spirit, archetype, or aspect of myself. That feels exciting and strange. Perhaps especially so, given a deterministic universe.

I did a small residency recently doing four works explicitly framed as ritual, telling people that I would invoke a different entity each night and allow them to manifest however they desired. (It felt very intense.) One of the questions that came out of this—from a few different people—had to do with how these experiences relate to my understanding of the illusory nature of free will—which I have discussed on many occasion with various friends. Do I still feel like free will does not exist when I also have the subjective experience of some other sentience ‘taking control’ while I sit back and watch them perform with my body?

I try and maintain my mediation practice through this kind of ritual work (and life in general) and have come around to answering this question by recognising that the subjective experience of some entity manifesting in, as, or through me does not feel
very much different at all from the experience of hunger manifesting in my body, or the experience of a thought arising, or the desire to make a particular sound during a vocal improvisation. It all feels like I sit, witnessing various kinds of experiences arise, seemingly out of nowhere. The characteristics of different experiences can feel very different—pain feels different to pleasure, Choronzon feels different to the Great Serpent spirit—but the experience in terms of agency, in terms of free will—or rather, lack thereof—feels exactly the same. I have awareness of various different experiences coming into my consciousness, staying for some time, and then leaving.

I have experienced some confusion around this over the years—essentially how to integrate meditation and magick practices. I even designed an image that integrates the Buddhist dharmachakra (wheel of dharma) with the chaos cross or star that represents chaos magick which I tattooed on my inner left forearm as in invitation or reminder to explore this koan, and perhaps as a sigil to understand the koan.

![Chaos Cross](image1.png) ![Dharmachakra](image2.png) ![Combination](image3.png)

Reading Harris’ book, and some online discussion with other chaos magickian, meditation practitioners helped me come to an understanding that I can recognise, and continue to pursue, the perhaps-strange truth of the illusory nature of free will as well as performing magick. In the same way that a musician can perform or a composer can compose without the illusion of free will. Perhaps a shift occurred in my understanding of the term ‘magick’ which I now think of as an ongoing, open-ended exploration of all sorts of extra-normal states. As well as creating intentional change in the world—but intentional in the way that I might have the intent to write a piece of music or an essay; not requiring any mysterious ‘free will’ outside of causality. How magick functions still seems mysterious to me at times, and I certainly think that we can do more to explore the range of effects that people refer to
with that word. But creative endeavours seem equally ‘mysterious’ at times and often (at least for me) overlap. For me, musick and magick at times serve as a space within which I can continue my investigation of my lack of ultimate agency.

It seems to me that John Cage explored some of these ideas, perhaps most explicitly in his ‘number pieces’. I had the opportunity to play a couple of different versions of his piece ‘four’ this year, a piece in which each performer chooses the twelve sounds they will make in the piece beforehand, fixing all of the parameters. The piece consists of timeframes within which one performs particular sounds. For me—and those I played them with—these pieces really pushed the limits of choice and decision in performance—the performers only get to choose when they start and stop making a sound having determined everything else beforehand (so they also have some agency in the decisions pre-performance around which sounds they will make). But these pieces function as improvisation, in a sense. Certainly, as indeterminate—we used different sounds for different performances and picked different parts each time we played. This gave the performances a sense of urgency and at times anxiety—the scores feel quite hard to read at times, deliberately so, we thought. This score, and other scores by Cage, have an interest in exploring the power dynamics between composer, performer and audience. As Cage says himself:

> We need first of all a music in which not only are sounds just sounds but in which people are just people, not subject, that is, to laws established by any one of them even if he is ‘the composer’ or ‘the conductor’. Finally (as far as I can see at present), we need a music which no longer prompts talk of audience participation, for in it the division between performers and audience no longer exists: a music made by everyone (cited in Liebner, 2014).

I think these pieces do a good job of questioning the composer-performer relationship, though I do not think—in and of themselves—they do much to explore the audience-performer relationship so they do not “succeed” in this sense, but they certainly raise interesting questions and have prompted me and my peers to question our assumptions and experiences around these concepts—and this perhaps constitutes a better measure of “success”.

Nearly everyone I played ‘four’ with had a significant number of experiences of frustration at playing the piece. But we found this frustration interesting and it
instigated a number of interesting questions about agency. All seven people I played with—two ensembles of four, with me as the only member of each—consisted of people who play ‘free improvisation’ but who also play notated music. The questions that arose centred around frustrating at feeling *so constrained* by this score even though the score arguably has more “freedom” than a totally notated piece. And in some ways, this felt like the point, or one of them—to bring attention to the processes of decision making, to delineate very strict parameters within which players can make decisions and in doing so facilitate a greater awareness of the experience of this process and (at least potentially) realise how little control we have over this process. With an implicit invitation to explore this beyond the frame of the performance.

People meditate in quiet rooms on retreats for a reason. But meditation practices should not just occur ‘on the cushion’ but extend to all aspects of one’s life—no matter how complex or noisy. But practising the skill of meditation has great importance. Similarly, one might strive to keep awareness of the determinist nature of the universe and use free improvisation as a tool for exploring an ever-deeper understanding of this, even extending this practice to the most complicated musical environment.

If you want your music practice to focus on this. But not everyone has an interest in music functioning to explore the nature of consciousness—people interact with it in a variety of different ways: politically, aesthetically, somatically ...and some will explore the fundamental questions of consciousness. One understanding or appreciation does not trump another, or serve a ‘higher purpose’. The complexity of music—like the universe itself—offers endless questions, confusion and interest.
Gender and timbre

My singing practice takes inspiration, amongst other things, from Buddhist insight meditation and the concept of ‘timbre-centred listening’, as expounded by Süzükei (Levin & Süzükei, 2006, pp. 45-72). These practices have facilitated a heightened sense of my embodiment, whilst also questioning my sense of ‘self’. Both my singing and meditation practice function to deconstruct the concept I have of my body, whilst facilitating a much closer relationship with it as both source of inspiration and instrument. My singing practice feels both grounded in my body, whilst also performing the essentially conditional nature of embodiment. My experience of transitioning gender has had a similar function—allowing me to feel more present with and connected to my body and gender, whilst also ‘seeing through’ gender in a way that the work of Judith Butler and other gender and trans theorists have written about.

In the last few years, my spiritual and musickal practice has taken me through explorations of timbre, gender identity, sense of ‘self’ and authenticity. I have come to realise that I have much more interest in exploring what a sense of authenticity might feel like through a process-led practice, rather than striving for the attainment of the creative expression of some conceptual idea(l). I find the term ‘authenticity’ problematic, but in the way that I will use it, authenticity refers to an awareness of the limits of one’s own perceptual apparatus. In this sense, authenticity has more to do with ‘self-awareness’ than it does with some kind of ‘objective truth’, although an attempt to get closer to this—while realizing that it will always remain out of reach—forms a significant part of the process.

One of the ways in which this sense of authenticity functions centres around a desire to integrate seemingly disparate aspects of one’s self. Trans theorist Kate Bornstein talks about trying to do this in her artistic practice(s):

I keep trying to integrate my life. I keep trying to make all the pieces into one piece. As a result, my identity becomes my body which becomes my fashion which becomes my writing style. Then I perform what I’ve written in an effort
to integrate my life, and that becomes my identity, after a fashion (Bornstein, 1994, p. 1).

I keep trying to integrate my life. I keep trying to realise that I have formed all of these pieces out of one piece. (An idea I will return to in depth in the chapter ‘Cutting up the selves / cutting through the self’.) And I still think in similar terms to Bornstein. I have an intellectual understanding of what Buddhism terms the ‘nondual’ but I have not experienced it directly. I live in a world of (seemingly) disparate elements. In this piece I take cues from Bornstein, and from Donna Haraway’s “ironic political myth” of the cyborg (Haraway, 1991, p. 149) which also weaves seemingly disparate elements together. As Haraway suggests:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method (Haraway, 1991, p. 149).

I adopt this tactic, this poiesis throughout my work, attempting to weave together, to integrate, seemingly disparate aspects of my practices and experiences.

I first heard Tuvan and Mongolian throat singing (also called overtone singing, or khoomei in Tuvan, khoomii in Mongolia; spellings vary considerably) in 2006 when a friend introduced me to it. I listened to a lot of recordings, read what I could and taught myself the basics of the techniques that practitioners use in these traditions. As well as the basic techniques of throat singing, I found myself very interested in Tuvan and Mongolian sound culture, at least as I understood it from reading other people’s accounts (Glenfield, 2003, 2007; Levin & Süüzükei, 2006; Lusk, 2000, 2001; Pegg, 1992, 1995, 2001; Raine-Reusch & Dutton, 1997; van Deusen, 2004; van Tongeren, 2002).

I felt particularly struck by the idea of ‘timbre-centred listening’ which felt like a completely different way of listening to sound than I had experienced myself up to this point. The Russian ethnomusicologist Valentina Süüzüki describes the difference between timbre-centred listening and the style of listening that we learn in the West:

Westerners who listen to drone-overtone instruments like the Jew’s harp, or to throat-singing, often ignore the drone and focus only on the melody. But for
the Tuvan listeners, drone and overtones form an inseparable whole, and the
timbre of the drone is crucial to producing a harmonically rich sound that
extends over a wide frequency range. When you are in this kind of sound
space, you hear not only overtones but undertones—you can hear sound at all
audible frequencies (Levin & Süükei, 2006, p. 50).

She presents a visual analogy:

If you pick up snow, pack it into a snowball and throw it, it goes in a single
direction and, depending on the force of your throw, it can go quite far. But if
you scoop up some loose snow and toss it, no matter how much fore you exert,
the snow just scatters. Sound is like that. In European music, sound is packed
compactly into discrete pitches, with the fundamental frequency and
overtones all perceived as one. But Tuvan music is like loose snow, and
overtones are like the snow spray (Levin & Süükei, 2006, p. 48).

I practiced this kind of listening for years as I learnt how to manipulate overtones
and explore the subtleties of overtones in my voice. Doing so has radically altered
how I listen to music and sound. I tend to think of timbral listening as listening
‘widely’ to timbre, rather than ‘narrowly’ focusing on pitch. I also feel that having
practised this has fundamentally changed how I focus on sound. My journey
exploring timbre-centred listening has happened alongside a journey of insight
meditation and, in the last few years, transitioning gender. This has suggested some
interesting, if idiosyncratic, potential parallels between the three.

Many writers talk of the beneficial qualities of singing, because it utilizes a large
number of parts of our brain, as well as various physical systems of our bodies. Some
claim that the integrated use of this quite variety of our ‘selves’ allows for a more
utilize the breath as a way of exploring the link between the ‘conscious’ and the
‘subconscious’ self. Focusing breath sits at the centre of some Buddhist and Hindu
practices and other practices like Christian centred prayer, and recitation of mantras
or scripture whether sung or chanted find a place in most spiritual traditions
(Becker, 2004, pp. 52-54; MacKendrick, 2016, pp. 96-116; Rodenburg, 2015, pp. 85-
108). We cannot control most of our bodies core systems without extreme effort—
some yogis can control their body temperature or their heart rate—whereas we can
control our respiratory system’s functioning with ease. We can slow or speed up our
breathing, breathe deeper or shallower; these changes in our breathing affect our other bodily functions as well as our emotional experience (Boston & Cook, 2009; Brulé, 2017; Goodchild, 2015; Linklater, 2006; Rodenburg, 2015).

Many writers talk about the ‘meditative’ quality of overtone singing. In doing so, they make use of the unusual timbral qualities of overtone singing to shake us out of our usual habit-patterns of listening (Cope, 2004; Levin & Süzükei, 2006; van Tongeren, 2002). The history of overtone singing in the west seems inexorably linked with a search for some sense of the universal or absolute, something higher than the self, as well as constant reference to its ‘meditation-like’ qualities. Van Tongeren devotes a whole section of his book on overtone singing to ‘metaphysics’ and gives a good overview of this history of western overtone singing (van Tongeren, 2002).

While I certainly agree that overtone singing offers the possibility of meditative or spiritual experiences, I find it problematic to assert any universals about singing—presumably some people simply find overtone singing unpleasant or boring. Equally, I do not subscribe to the ‘everyone should meditate’ camp, or that ‘meditation fixes everything’. Most research on meditation has a strong bias, or does not account for various other factors (see, for example, Heuman & Britton, 2014; Lindahl, Fisher, Cooper, Rosen, & Britton, 2017).

Van Tongeren suggests that while all the other aspects of a sound get manipulated easily, a sound’s timbre comes from the acoustic ‘real’. This perhaps seems a slightly unusual statement in a discussion about singing techniques that centre around manipulating timbre, however all this manipulation does happen through the manipulation of the acoustic space of the resonator, or overtone singer rather than some outside processing. Van Tongeren goes on to say that:

> Detaching sound from a linguistic meaning, so that it becomes a pure symbol, has a deep psycho-physical effect. Vowels, simple tones, hums or other prolonged sounds without definite meaning seem to reside halfway between our conscious and our unconscious minds (van Tongeren, 2002, pp. 228-229).

Certainly, in my own practice, I have used ‘non-referential’ singing as a way of exploring ‘extra-normal’ aspects of myself—those which I do not (or did not) have
access to in ‘ordinary’ consciousness—but I feel sceptical of van Tongeren’s assertion of overtone singing as inherently non-referential. Most of the overtone singing styles (or techniques) have strong associations with sounds from the environment—burbang nadyr imitates the sound of water flowing over rocks and ezengileer imitates the sound of stirrups knocking against the side of a horse when riding, for example (Levin & Süüzükei, 2006, p. 66; van Tongeren, 2002, p. 66). As well as this, Tuva and Mongolia have a rich culture of folk songs, the tunes of which—sung in the harmonics of a drone note—often get played on other instruments and often have words; so, while a direct association may not seem present, overtone singing in these contexts happens within a rich tapestry of linguistic and cultural associations. We might think of the ‘realness’ of timbre as offering a challenge to our perception of sound. As van Tongeren suggests, “in the end the hardest work must be done by the ears and the conscious mind, which can now listen to every sustained sound with the knowledge that all these harmonics are simultaneously present” (van Tongeren, 2002, p. 259). But all of this relies on having already learnt a different way of listening—one that emphasises pitch over timbre.

Cornelia Fales writes of timbre as the identity of a sound: “To the general listener, pitch and loudness are variable characteristics of sound, timbre is a condition; pitch and loudness are things a sound does, timbre is what a sound is” (Fales, 2002, p. 58). He gives the example that: “We say—I hear a cricket; not—I hear a sound that may indicate the presence of a cricket” (Fales, 2002, p. 63). But in Western music, for the most part, timbre does not have prominence. Our music paradigm (and notation system) has reduced timbre to instrumentation within our musical pedagogy—and listening habits—focusing on pitch, duration, loudness and rhythm. Western musicologists encounters with non-western musical traditions has highlighted this bias in our musical tradition and Fales coined the terms “pitch centrism” and “timbre deafness” (Fales, 2002, p. 56) to describe these biases, particularly when they have encountered traditions who have much more of a focus on timbral qualities—which the western musicologists have either failed to recognize the importance of, or simply not heard. Fales also coins the phrase the “paradox of timbre”:

The paradox emerges with the observation that while timbre is a dimension of central importance to identifying sources, it is also the dimension that is most divergent from the sound in the physical world [...] The paradox exists
because however different the perceived version of a source might be to the physical signal it represents, it is a version that works in our world, it is a version that is consistent with versions of other listeners, it is a version “real” enough that it allows us to deal with the physical environment. The version is that source to us, and as long as it continues to work, we need no other. [...] in music something happens to timbre that makes listeners aware of its paradox (Fales, 2002, p. 58).

Fales gives overtone singing as one of the prime examples of music that highlights the ‘paradox of timbre’ because of the way that it manipulates the timbral quality of sound—doing things unexpected of the human voice, and shocking us out of our complacency. Overtone singing manipulates both the formant structures of an individual voice (how their physiology augments the resonance of the sound from their vocal folds) as well as manipulating pitch by using formants to accentuate overtones while quietening the fundamental frequency (usually experienced as ‘pitch’) so that the listener perceives two or more distinct ‘pitches’ coming from a single human voice (Bloothooft, Bringmann, van Cappellen, van Luipen, & Thomassen, 1992; Cope, 2004; Fales, 2002, pp. 66-69; Grawunder, 2008; Levin & Süzükei, 2006; van Tongeren, 2002). Our familiarity with human voices contributes to our confusion in hearing multiple ‘pitches’ in overtone singing.

Timbre of the human voice has a fundamentally embodied aspect to it. As Chion points out: “The human individual is probably the only cause that can produce a sound, the speaking voice, which characterizes that individual alone” (Chion, 2012, pp. 48-49). Most sounds identify a category of object or animal—a dog’s bark, the sound of a clarinet—but do not identify an individual dog or an individual clarinet for most listeners. We ‘hear crickets’ but not the voices of individual crickets. However, our hearing has such sensitivity to the timbral qualities of human voices that we can generally recognize different individual voices, even through low-fidelity mediums such as telephone calls. Not only that, but we can differentiate the formant structures of individual voices within moments so that we can discern vowels which have no absolute differentiation outside of individual voices.

Fales goes on to explain that while timbre carries a lot of information about the sound source—enough to allow us to identify it, down to the individual person—it
also carries the most information about the environment through which the sound has travelled (Fales, 2002, p. 57). The unique physiology of everyone’s vocal tract augments the resonance of their vocal folds in ways that we can manipulate, but always within the constraints of that physiology. Ferrer takes this further, addressing some disparate theories of timbre perception which they integrate with their theory of ‘affordance’. This leads them to assert, amongst other things, that embodied cognition of sounds involves an internalised, anthropomorphised projection extrapolated from the sound data:

It is probable that these projections reflect a unique part of the individual’s self, as well as a fingerprint of the cultural environment embedded on herself as a result of her development. Such a reflection can be identified as identity, at an individual and at a social level. Identity is what remains after the individual participates with the environment and reorganises itself, preserving its unity, structure, and autonomy as a closed system (Ferrer, 2011, p. 67).

So, an individual’s cognition of timbre includes a large amount of information about the environment and the individual, including their socio-political history.

In some sense gender tells us much more about the social environment it has moved through than the gender of the individual. An individual’s gender manifests—or performs—within a socio-historical context that shapes the individual’s experience of the world. And while ‘sex’ can sometimes seem like a fixed attribute of an individual organism, our conceptions of sex have come about through the lenses of gender that we have encountered. Roughgarden’s incredible book Evolution’s Rainbow (2013) starts with a discussion of the assumptions that biologists have made based on Darwin’s writings about evolutionary biology; a fundamental assertion Darwin made stated that certain universals of sex applied to all species—dominant males and passive females. This has proved untrue in numerous examples, and in some cases, has led biologists to wrongly classify organisms based on assumptions (from Darwin) about sex roles. These preconceptions contort our understanding of the world. Butler’s hugely influential writings of gender performativity explore the cultural and forces at play in our understandings of ‘gender’ and ‘sex’. She writes that:

“sex” is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, “sex” is an ideal construct which is
forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialization “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms [...] performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names (Butler, 1993, p. xii).

And asserts that:

the construal of “sex” no longer as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies (Butler, 1993, p. xii).

We cannot know the ‘objective fact’ of sex outside of, or away from our understanding of gender.

Analogously, an understanding of the perception of pitch rather queers the idea that we hear the ‘objective fact’ of frequency. Although it seems like pitch has an objective reality, free from our perception—and, indeed, our perceptualization—our processing of ‘pitch’ takes timbral information into account, so much so that in many instances we will hear a pitch not present in a sound because of the harmonics above that we ‘know’ resonate a particular fundamental. Even if objectively no fundamental pitch has sounded we will still hear it. This resonates with the misunderstanding that we can read the ‘objective fact’ of ‘biological sex’ free from our cultural and linguistic experience of gender (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004; Roughgarden, 2013; Stryker, 2008; Wilchins, 1997, 2004).

Fales gives several examples in his paper of musical experiences which take us outside of our usual experience of timbre, most prominently overtone singing. He suggests that these experiences bring in to focus the process of perceptualization that normally functions unnoticed:

Though subtle and brief, the moment offers listeners phenomenal evidence that the world is a facsimile, a humanized rendering—as though perception were nothing more than a projection of features onto a domain whose real character is indecipherable. In this moment, the paradox of timbre is revealed (Fales, 2002, p. 75).

In my own practice as a listener, but particularly as a practitioner-listener, the
‘metaphysical’ or ‘meditative’ aspects of overtone listening seem to centre around this exploration of the constructedness of the world. Instead of experiencing our usual perceptualized soundscape, we can get a sense of the ‘seamlessness’ of sound—striving to hear things ‘as they really are’ rather than ‘what we expect’. We can develop the skill of exploring the ways in which we construct our own (sonic) reality.

This resonates with the concept of the ‘nondual’ in Buddhism. One may, by paying attention, develop a sense of the nondual, or one-ness, or seamlessness of reality itself, free from our usual cognitive differentiation into discrete categories. With sound, we can develop an intellectual appreciation of this while developing our listening skills. Perhaps we can also develop an embodied, intuitive or physiological understanding of sound’s seamless quality? The difference—at least from written accounts—lies in Buddhism’s claim that individuals may directly experience the nondual. Indeed, Awakening consists of experiencing this in three stages: momentarily (Sotāpanna, Sakadagami); at will (Anāgāmi); and then fully integrated with one’s experience (Arahant) (Chapman & Barford, 2009a, pp. 134-144; Ingram, 2008, pp. 241-258).

In chaos magick all things emanate from a primal, formless chaos (the ‘chaos’ of chaos magick refers to formlessness, not to disorder). I sometimes personify this chaos as the Babylonian goddess Tiamat; from a ritual working I performed a few years ago:

Tiamat, Mistress of Chaos, Divine Mother, Sacred Whore, Fatherfucker, Lord of Chaos, Lord of All Things, White Noise from which all Melody is Divined. Broadcasting at full volume on All Frequencies. Hail! Hail! Hail!

In this proclamation, the goddess Tiamat, equated with chaos, functions almost like a blank canvass from which we can perform any or all ‘melodies’. These formulations of chaos share a similarly to the “Form is emptiness [śūnyatā], emptiness also is form” of the ‘heart sutra’ [Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya] that has prominence in Mahāyāna Buddhism (Trungpa, 2013a, p. 437).

I have practiced vipassanā, a form of Buddhist insight meditation, since 2007. When I first started practicing vipassanā meditation, I would try to move my attention through my body, following a set route, but I would frequently have experiences such
as moving my attention down my arm and ending up at my foot—not where I should have found myself. These disorientating discontinuities came about, I imagine, because of my disassociation from my body due to my history of depression and gender dysphoria (though I didn’t have awareness of the latter at the time).

The focus on physical sensations in my vipassanā practice forced my mind to remap my body. Over time the ‘discontinuities’ ceased to occur, and as my power of concentration increased, I became able to pay attention to more and more subtle sensations throughout my body. This progression to more and more fine-grained, and fast-paced sensations gets attention in the various different maps of the progress of insight (Ingram, 2008, pp. 195-362 gives a good overview from many traditions).

Because of the widespread experience of gender dysphoria, I imagine that many trans people have similar dissociative experiences of their bodies, and would have similar experiences when practicing forms of body-centred meditation. The meditation teacher that I had on my first vipassanā retreat—the one looking after the ‘men’s section’ of the retreat that I found myself in—seemed surprised that I had such experiences, and seemed a bit bewildered as to how to answer my questions about the best way to practice. The day after, however, having spoken to the ‘women’s teacher’, he said that according to her, many, many people had these experiences and I should just continue to practice as best I could—things would sort themselves out. Which they eventually did. I remember feeling surprised at the time that he had not come across similar questions as I had done some reading that talked about how commonly women experienced a sense of disassociation from their bodies. I felt surprised that the teacher had not come across similar questions, either in men, who presumably experience similar dissociative traits, however less commonly than women, or simply in conversation with other teachers. I got the impression that the ‘women’s teacher’ had found his question surprising.

The early years of my vipassanā practice clearly constituted a sense of feeling more connected to my body and of ‘having a better map’ of my body. The maps of insight meditation discuss several different stages of insight in which our ideas of our bodies can become challenged. My experience has followed that as described in the maps: with more subtle sensations, experienced with greater rapidity in a way which can
feel quite unsettling. These experiences lend themselves to the meditator questioning their sense of having a solid, unified or whole body. And, of course, we do not; we ‘have’ a collection of ever changing chemical interactions which we abstract or narrativise into what we refer to as ‘our body’. So far in my practice, my sense of having a body has felt somewhat undermined, or deconstructed, but it has not felt like a *distancing* from it; it feels like a closer experience of the bodily reality, accompanied by a gentle letting go of the concept of my body as a fixed ‘thing’. I feel embodied, more than I ever had, while also experiencing the ever-changing nature of what I refer to as my body.

Practicing vipassanā also tends to bring to the fore various psychological or emotional challenges that you have in your life. While it also functions as a methodology for experiencing these, or ‘processing’ these ‘safely’, I have no doubt that my practice of vipassanā ‘brought to the fore’ my unexplored issues around my experience of gender. Vipassanā also tends to ‘flatten’ all sensations one experiences to simply different versions of the three characteristics—impermanence, non-identity and unsatisfactoriness—that Buddhism asserts all phenomenon possess. In *some* sense, it does not matter what you feel, a re-observation and eventual continuous observation of these phenomena give rise to insight and eventual Awakening. The meditator can use any sensations as the ammunition with which to liberate themselves. Any phenomena will do.

I have a certain amount of scepticism about mediation as giving the meditator a ‘more real’ experience of sensations, sound, etc. We know that our attention changes the ‘object’ of our perception; giving ‘neutral’ attention to the sensations in one’s arm will likely affect what sensations arise. I believe that meditation really has itself as the ‘object’ of meditation—the development and refinement over time of the skill of awareness and a striving to ‘get out of the way’ of its own process. But I do think that meditation practice can give us insight in to how we distort and/or create our own (experience of) reality. We get to observe our ‘perceptualization’ of reality in real-time and we can learn to abstract or narrativise less, or at least develop a healthy scepticism of our narratives. This holds up for our experience of timbre—and the ‘truth’ of sound—as much as it does for the ‘truth’ of physical sensations.
The composer and improviser Pia Palme speaks of musicians making use of concentration meditation for performances, but notes that “musicians hold continuous thinking activity responsible for distortion, blockage or stage-fright” (Palme, 2014, p. 91). Csikszentmihalyi popularized the notion of these kind of states in the western psychological world with his research into what he called ‘flow’. But Palme goes on to say that:

In my performance practice I take a different, inclusive view that is equally workable: whatever appears in my mind is already an ingredient of performance and even potentially enriching (Palme, 2014, p. 92).

This feels much closer to how I work—giving voice to whatever arises. Buddhist writers talk of the danger of concentration techniques because while they have great importance in developing one’s skill of concentration, the absorptive states that one enters with intense concentration allow one to experience bliss. While not bad in itself, it can lead one away from the true goal of realizing that we cannot find lasting happiness in the cycles of samsara. Feeling bliss regularly might blind us to the truth of suffering, and will itself inevitably lead to more suffering as we crave more bliss when it has inevitably faded. While concentration meditative undoubtedly benefits performers, it will not lead to ultimate liberation from suffering and, depending on how often and how deep their practice, might actually lead one deeper into suffering. Csikszentmihalyi and others have claimed that ‘flow’ (absorption in a state of concentration meditation) improves one’s quality of life. While this might have some truth, I follow Palme in that I have decided to incorporate my musick and my meditative practice so that by giving voice to my experience I at the same time—hopefully—liberate myself from the ties of experience and incarnation in the cycles of samsara. Or at least, I get to process some of my craving and aversion in real time and create performances out of this.

Given my relationship to improvising, I have quite mixed feelings about composition and performing composition. I have explored some of the associations that I make below:
Concentration meditation | Insight meditation
---|---
compositions | improvisation
interpretation | exploration
control | acceptance
peace, quietness of mind | struggle, eventual Awakening

This heuristic functions as a somewhat reductive binary, but nevertheless, I believe it has influenced my choices for performance. And I recognize that it says more about my limited ideas of what ‘composition’ might mean that it does about actual composition. Indeed, Palme says:

> What I find interesting is that the scientific definition of noise makes the border between mental signal and noise clearly visible. I can now deliberately shift it to increase a flow of mind activity as material for composing (Palme, 2014, p. 92).

For Palme, composing can happen, similarly to how some people theorize improvising as ‘composing in real time’ (Bailey, 1992, pp. 140-142; Dobrian, 1991). Many scores exist that explore the continuum between these perhaps imagined poles. I recognize that every performance has restrictions and the ‘freedom’ of ‘free improvisation’ perhaps makes best sense read as freedom from a particular set of sociohistorical constraints rather than a radical, individual freedom. (And we could consider any ‘restrictions’ as functioning like a score.) But I still feel some discomfort with the idea of performing or writing compositions. On one hand, they seem anathema to my praxis of improvising-meditating. On another hand, they simply offer different challenges and prompt different sensations with which the meditator might engage. The idea that improvisation ‘offers more’ in terms of subject matter to meditate on seems absurd. Although developing the skill of improvising perhaps offers the possibility of also developing one’s insight meditation practice in a way which developing the skill of performing a traditional score might not as it perhaps requires the kind of focus that excludes much of one’s experience. Some writers talk of exclusion and inclusion meditation techniques. Exclusion techniques (concentration techniques) focus on one thing to the exclusion of others whilst inclusive techniques include anything that might arise (insight techniques). The above table tries to point at the (sometimes radically) inclusive quality of improvisation, which with the right intent might become a site for accepting

→ 52 ←
whatever arises (and which might lead to Awakening). Scores, in my reading of them, usually require the performer to exclude some possible experiences to ensure that the piece manifests as demanded. They then share some of the characteristics of concentration meditation techniques.

Fales suggests that as listeners we come from a culture where pitch is governed by law while timbre is governed by taste, where musical execution is judged correct or incorrect according to variations in pitch, while variations in other parameters of music are judged pleasing or displeasing (Fales, 2002, p. 56).

In this schema then, my singing practice consists entirely of “taste” rather than “law”. As absurd as this might seem in some sense, I feel like some truth might reside in this. Many people have said of my performances that they have ‘never heard anything like it’; while on one level this statement simply sheds light on their listening habits (I could recite a fairly long list of influences and similar artists), it perhaps also reflects that this kind of sound production does not conform to the language of music that they have learnt. It seems meaningless to them—obviously having content, but nothing ‘decipherable’.

This also raises questions about ‘what constitutes music’. If certain types of music contain very little of the criteria with which you usually judge it, comprised only of parameters of music that we usually judge “pleasing or displeasing”, then we can only judge this music on how it makes us feel. Some abstract noise artists I have known have insisted that these kinds of music deconstruct our sense of ‘music’, leaving us without the usual criteria for explaining and decoding it. This supposedly leaves us only with our response on a particular day and recognises that our experience of these kinds of music depends very much on the context—how we feel that day, the auditory context and so on. This strips us of our conventions of critiquing music leaving us with ‘just the sound’.

We experience all music through the lens of our ‘taste’, I certainly do not suggest that it has more importance in my music than in our experience of other types of music, but perhaps in western culture, our taste or preferences feel more codified than in musics with a strong pitch language.
I often feel quite “lost” in my practice: I feel unsure of how to navigate through the possibilities of sound, or at a loss as to how to assess my work. I could navigate by the pleasure of the sensations that I feel (or some other positive association), but coupled with my interest in vipassanā, exploring all sensations and my desire to ‘give voice to’ whatever might have arisen in the moment, most of the criteria for judging the experiential side of timbral singing feels less useful. The sense of ‘lostness’ also feels tied in to my experience of the ‘Dark Night of the Soul’, the stage of meditation I believe myself to currently inhabit. (Based off my understanding of the maps of Awakening from various traditions, but also with the understanding I may have misread my experience.) The Dark Night consists of the questioning of one’s faith or practice and the beginnings of the deconstruction of the illusion of a permanent, reified ego. As Ingram writes:

We face a profound and fundamental crisis of identity as our insight into the Three Characteristics begins to demolish part of the basic illusion of there being a separate or permanent us. This suffering is a kind of suffering that has nothing to do with what happens in our life and everything to do with a basic misunderstanding of all of it (Ingram, 2008, p. 214).

The sense of feeling lost feels like an important part of my spiritual journey (for want of a better phrase) and ‘giving voice’ to this process feels an important part of my spiritual practice and the aesthetics of my work. I strive for a sense of ‘authenticity’, a sense that the timbral quality of the sounds that I produce feel less abstracted away from my moment-to-moment experience. This intent drives my singing practice, as well as my meditation practice and my continued exploration of gender.

In this I feel influenced by the Buddhist notion of seeing things as they “really are”—and while I find this assertion problematic, rephrasing it as ‘striving to see things with less abstraction (by means of perceptualization) from our actual experience in the moment’ feel much less problematic and opens up the possibility of striving for greater clarity—or perhaps simply less confusion—in our understanding.

This echoes John Cage’s desire to hear sounds as sound, and not as referential:

When I hear what we call music, it seems to me that someone is talking. And talking about his feelings, or about his ideas of relationships. But when I hear
traffic, the sound of traffic—here on Sixth Avenue, for instance—I don't have the feeling that anyone is talking. I have the feeling that sound is acting. And I love the activity of sound...I don't need sound to talk to me (cited in Sebestik & Bidou, 1992).

In some sense, my meditation practice functions to strive to treat sensations as sensations without a need to interpret or judge them. Even if these sensations create confusion or feeling lost.

The opening of the aperture of awareness to a greater appreciation of the nuances of timbre almost feels analogous to the opening of awareness in inclusive (insight) meditation rather than exclusive (concentration) meditation. We see more, we allow more in and we open up the possibility of a deconstruction of the narratives that we have written or received about the world. The narrativization that leads to belief in the solidity of an ego, or a self—abstractions from the reality that we actually inhabit, that we can see through if we pay attention close enough and for long enough—perhaps feel akin to the perceptualization that occurs when we listen to music and hear ‘notes’.

Rather than assert that pitch does not exist, or that the ego does not exist, it feels more useful to simply consider this as one truth alongside another truth. In the case of pitch, we mean the complexity of the relationship between what we refer to as pitch and timbre and the perceptualization that contributes to our comprehension of pitch. Similarly, we can refer to a collection of phenomena as ‘ego’ while recognising that this functions as an abstraction. The same goes for the notion of the ‘non-dual’. In some sense the universe consists of only one form in various different and constantly changing states. Identity politics have an inherent flaw in them—they function exclusively. They draw lines, they divide people and they abstract from a more complicated truth (Wilchins, 1997, pp. 79-88). Arguably they also serve a useful political function (Butler, 2004, pp. 1-16).

For myself, recognising a narrative in a number of individual phenomena over many years allowed me to see the narrative—recognising myself as a trans woman—might give some meaning or structure to my suffering. In terms of insight meditation, it certainly would not lead to the cessation of suffering because it did not address the
root causes of suffering. But it did allow me to recognise in my own experience some patterns from other people’s stories and facilitated me taking steps to alleviate some of my suffering and giving myself more agency in the world and feeling more in touch with my body and emotions. None of this seems anathema to the project of meditation; it can happen alongside it. The danger of identifying too strongly with these kinds of narratives feels real, but also, at least for me, at least in this moment, avoidable. And perhaps part of the much broader question of how to act in the world of dualisms, of differences, which most of us feel we inhabit. I have not attained Awakening. I have an intellectual understanding of the nondual, but I have not experienced it on the profound level that marks ‘stream entry’ in the Theravādan maps. I might intellectually understand this, but this has not yet allowed me to fully appreciate this and orientate my life by it.

We can also think about the nondual in terms of particle physics—while in some sense the desk I sit at and the cup sitting on the desk have their separate natures, another way to think about it considers them as both consisting of the same fundamental particles, simply in different configurations at this time. And not in a fixed configuration, but in a constant flux of various forces and energy. When the cup smashes, the ‘cup’ does not disappear, or cease to exist magically, the component parts have simply changed their configuration. The identity ‘cup’ does not refer to anything fundamental in the physical world. We use it to name a particular configuration of elements and this configuration, this pattern, will only ever ‘exist’ for a limited amount of time. No cup preceded the big bang and we do not expect any to survive the heat death of the universe. In some sense, the entire universe consists simply of the same ‘stuff’. And yet it makes sense for us to navigate the world using the inherently flawed identity of cups.

The critique of identity politics—or more recently critiques of the limited usefulness of this way of doing politics—has become quite prominent in gender theory in the last few decades (Butler, 1990, pp. 2-46; 2004, pp. 1-16; Stryker, 2008, pp. 55-57; Wilchins, 1997, pp. 79-88; 2004, pp. 125-210). Some authors have followed this to a critique of the idea of an autonomous self and of concepts of authorship. Paul Preciado writes:
I write about what matters most to me, in a language that doesn’t belong to me. This is what Derrida called the monolingualism of the other; none of the languages I am speaking belong to me, and yet there is no other way to speak, no other way to love. None of the sexes that I embody possess any ontological density, and yet there is no other way of being a body. Dispossessed from the start (Preciado, 2013, pp. 133-134).

No-one experiences their own gender. No-one speaks their own language. And no-one experiences their ‘own’ sensations. These form part of a much larger web of causality that ‘we’ fundamentally have no control over. (For a more in-depth discussion of this, see the previous chapter ‘The illusion of free will and its implications for improvisation and invocation’.) The idea that we create our own thoughts, or the emotions that we feel or the language that we speak in some kind of vacuum free from the effects of the rest of the world simply does not hold up to scrutiny, though most of us live much of our life acting under this assumption. As Judith Butler writes:

If gender is a kind of a doing, an incessant activity performed, in part, without one’s knowing and without one’s willing, it is not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not “do” one’s gender alone. One is always “doing” with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my “own” gender appears perhaps at times as something that I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author (and that radically contests the notion of authorship itself) (Butler, 2004, p. 1).

Many folk music traditions have relationships between pieces and artists which feel attuned to this notion of the ‘language that precedes us’ and perhaps the impossibility of creating something unique—something outside of the tradition. The notion of ‘making a song your own’ feels familiar from the folk traditions that I have familiarity with, as well as in western rock and pop, though to a lesser extent. It certainly applies to the Tuvan and Mongolian traditions also: “There is no such things as musical ownership in Tuva or Mongolia, so musicians freely imitate or copy one another and may call a piece theirs afterwards” (van Tongeren, 2002, p. 126). This kind of ownership of language, of music, perhaps allows for individuals to have agency in the world, while also acknowledging the context within which they work.
some ways, it feels like only a small extension of this same attitude to get to a profound realisation of the interconnectedness of all phenomena, musical and extra-musical.
Dolorous interlude: Gender as timbre

(After Judith Butler, Cornelia Fales and Trevor Wishart.)

Reading biological sex as pitch.
Reading gender as timbre.

Our ideas of [pitch/sex] become impossibly confused when we realise how much [timbre/gender] effect everything that we ever experience. It becomes impossible to conceive of [pitch/sex] apart from [timbre/gender].

Some tentative associations:

Timbral-centred listening—queering our listening, queering out ‘gaze’.

Harmony—theories of relationships. (Tend towards enforcing normative behaviour.)

Pushing the boundaries of harmony—searching for new models of relationships, new ways to love.

12 tone serialism—polyamory; with all its rules and dogma.

Openness—realizing the perceptualization of everything. Striving to recognize this in real-time. Striving to acknowledge other people’s realities and navigate through the mess of the world. Some kind of faith in process.

One can find music, one can find love, in any of these forms.
Cutting up the selves /

cutting through the self

“Cutting is a feminist aesthetic proper to the project of female unbecoming”
(Halberstam, 2011, p. 135).

The cut-up has played an important role in my practice both as a methodology for finding a voice—by cutting up different vocal techniques—as a tool for cutting through illusory narratives of self and by collaging together spiritual practices from different traditions.

A collaged vocal style

My work utilises a variety of different vocal styles collaged—or cut-up—together, for example overtone singing influenced by Tuvan and Mongolian cultures, a mix of ingressive and egressive vocalisations influenced by Inuit throat singing, particularly the work of Tanya Tagaq, extreme metal death growls and techniques that I have come across in a ‘western avant-garde’ context such as ingressive multiphonics. The process of ‘finding my voice’ has come about from collaging seemingly disparate techniques and influences, particularly and exploration of timbre influenced by Tuvan sound culture and an interest in egressive and ingressive breath influenced by Inuit sound culture.

The cut-up/collage aspects of my practice have a more surface-level manifestation as well—the exploration of ingressive and egressive singing alongside each other meant perhaps inevitably meant that I investigated the ‘cuts’ between directional air flow. I used them rhythmically and I explored pushing the sounds of ingressive and egressive vocalisation as far as they could go. I explored the differences between these methods of vocalising while also pushing them towards each other, mimicking sounds with one technique that I had learnt in the other. This feedback strives to queer the idea of each having a distinct sound, or at least to play with obfuscating the differences.
As well as in/egressive airflow, I have used cutting between different vocal styles, or collaging different vocal styles. One of the first ‘tricks’ of this sort that I felt really did something interesting consisted of interrupting some death growling with the sygyt style of Tuvan and Mongolian overtone singing. Sound-wise, this moves from low, distorted sounds, to high, clearly pitched sounds. I liked the effect and still use it, with other variations. To me at least, the contrasting of these sounds has a humorous quality to it in part, perhaps, because death growling usually has such a serious presentation. But it also functioned as a kind of in-joke for experimental singing technique geeks, because the two styles require radically different techniques. In death growling, a large volume of air gets pushed through the a very relaxed larynx (aside from small amounts of muscles tension to engage the top of the throat and/or the vocal folds to control tone-colour). Death growling safely and well requires a lack of tension in the throat (as do most singing techniques aside from specific ‘tension’ to engage the vocal folds, etc.). The sygyt styles requires considerable tension in the throat and a much slower rate of air. Forcing large amounts of air through a constricted glottis would likely cause damage. The sounds contrast distinctly. I find the combination of the technical control required, and the silliness of the resulting sounds amusing. Admittedly most listeners will not have the same response (I have a quite obtuse sense of humour at the best of times).

I use a lot of cutting-between techniques in my singing, but I have also spent a lot of time exploring movement between different sounds through a variety of subtle timbral changes. This has resulted in a sometimes quite seamless moving through a wide-range of timbres and vocal techniques and an interest in exploring the subtle differences between them. Sometimes my singing practice functions more like bricolage or collage rather than cut-up. Analogously, I explore the nuances and variations in the stream of phenomena entering consciousness, their differences but also, at a more fundamental level, their similarities.

From Tuva and Siberia, I have found myself more influenced by what I read as the more ‘avant-garde’ artists in the traditions that I have felt particularly inspired by (with an awareness that this term perhaps says a lot more about my listening practice than the artistic practice of these singers). These include Albert Kuveizin’s Yat-Kha,

Namtchylak’s work in particular has had a profound effect on my praxis. Her albums *Lost Rivers* (1992) presents an intense collection of solo voice pieces. Some tracks show the influence of the mimetic sound culture of Tuva (and Mongolia, as she lived in the borderlands) that take their inspiration, for example, from bird calls (the first track has the title ‘Night Birds’, and consist of mimetic interpretations of birds). Other tracks constitute guttural explorations (‘Dream of Death’, ‘Lost Rivers’, ‘Long Continuum’). The album in its entirety constitutes an almost comprehensive exploration of extra-normal vocal techniques, all while retaining Namtchylak’s distinct sense of ‘voice’. Natchylak’s work offers a challenge—or I take one from it—to explore as vastly as possible, while integrating all of these aspects into something recognisable as a ‘voice’; to sing with ‘authenticity’ while exploring uncharted terrain.

Namtchylak explicitly refers to herself as a shaman, and about the need to cross cultures and linguistic barriers in our search for meaning (or perhaps in search for shared experience that has little to do with ‘meaning’). She wrote of Demetrio Stratos (another huge influence on my practice):

> The solo recordings [by Stratos] represent for me, coming from faraway Siberia, an authentic and difficult challenge in the passage to shaman rituals and ‘transvisual’ vocal performances that were truly avant-garde (Namtchylak, 2006, p. 20).

I love the diversity of Namtchylak’s creative output, which I read as a practice with a grounding in a continuous tradition, but that feels free to explore, collaborate and
integrate other musical aspects. I perhaps read this as the sign of a ‘healthy’ voice or praxis, and a ‘healthy’ tradition—I read her work, and that of other ‘experimental’ practitioners from Tuva and Mongolia as part of a continuing, living (and therefore constantly changing) tradition, not a break from it. As Carole Pegg, an English ethnomusicologist who has done extensive fieldwork in Mongolia, writes:

Neither Mongolian nor my own performances have neat dénouements but constitute fluid and developing scenes in ongoing contemporary dramas. Individuals and groups are drawing on, adapting, interpreting, and hybridizing their traditional performing arts in recreation of themselves in the present (2001, p. 284).


My practice has taken a lot of inspiration from what I know about Tuvan and Mongolian sound cultures (and animism and shamanism in general) but always with the intent of taking these principles and applying them to the world that I find myself in—the urban, industrialized west—so that I sing duets with washing machines and radios and explore timbres that reference electronic and industrial sounds. For me, this feels like a more authentic practice and engagement with the core of these traditions than striving to emulate more ‘traditional’ sounds.

Having practiced various throat singing techniques for some years, I came across the music of Tanya Tagaq (2005, 2008, 2012, 2014) which has a similar relationship to traditional Inuit throat singing as Namtchylak’s has to traditional Tuvan throat singing; a grounding in the tradition, but also a very clear and quite marked departure from previous expressions. Tagaq’s work has a striking visceral quality to it, the guttural sounds of traditional throat singing perhaps seem intensified by her extension of the usual time-scale of this practice. She often uses loops or multiple layers of voice to create a soundscape that seems reminiscent of shamanic music practices which often intervene in our usual experience of time. The breathing technique of Inuit throat singing, as well as the use of looping techniques seems conducive to trance states; both as a practitioner, but also listening to recordings of Tagaq the sense of a ‘non-usual’ experience of singing, of breath has the capacity to alter one’s own experience of time. Manipulating one’s voice to become a concertina-
like experience of breath—*always* sounding, rather than broken up into in-breaths and out-breaths—we can read as deconstructing our usual experience of linear space-time and allowing a more expansive experience of the moment as infinite. This also allows for the experience of extra-normal types of consciousness conducive to magickal work and the ongoing exploration of, and acceptance of, the whatever arises.

In my own mythopoiesis, the exploration of egressive and ingressive breath work functions analogously to an exploration of right- and left-hand path magickal practices. I realize that this manifests out of my own idiosyncratic reading of ingressive breath as antinomianist (as explored in the chapter ‘Ingressive singing, antinomianism and the left-hand path’), but the embodied, physicality of this process had given me a grounded site in which to explore what it means to have an interest in supposedly antagonistic paradigms. This framing also moves away from searching from an intellectual answer to exploring the open-ended question in an embodied way. The cutting-up of the breath in this sense can function to ‘give voice’ to disparate selves not usually heard.

*The cut-up in tape music and chaos magick*

Cutting-up in music—tape-music, sampling and remixing—had a similar way of re-ordering ‘reality’ and re-arranging what we could possibly experience. It created new possibilities, new collages of sound and some early sound cut-up artists explored this as a way for creating new arrangements of ‘reality’. P-Orridge writes of their experience of using the cut-up as a magickal technique with William S Burroughs:

> Everything is recorded. If it is recorded, then it can be edited. If it can be edited then the order, sense, meaning and direction are as arbitrary and personal as the agenda and/or person editing. This is magick. For if we have the ability and/or choice of how things unfold—regardless of the original order and/or intention that they are recorded in—then we have control over the eventual unfolding. If reality consists of a series of parallel recordings that usually go unchallenged, then reality only remains stable and predictable until it is challenged and/or the recordings are altered, of their order changed.
These concepts led us to the realization of cut-ups as a magical process (P-Orridge, 2010a, p. 279).

For Burroughs and Brion Gysin—widely attributed with inventing the ‘cut-up’ although also perversely acknowledged as knowing about the Dadaists use of cut-up and collage (Lake, 2014; Robinson, 2014; Stevens, 2014)—the cut-up functioned to break down the normative functions of language and control:

Breaking down the mechanisms of language and prescribed word associations was, for Burroughs, the route to freedom not only from the tyranny of language but the tyranny of social control (Robinson, 2014, p. 239).

And Burroughs writes:

I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the ugly Spirit, and manoeuvred me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out (cited in Stevens, 2014, p. 316).

Burroughs attributes the accidental death of his wife Joan to possession from a demon of Control and seeks new worlds, new realities by literally cutting-up the current one. Burroughs asserts that:

The montage is actually much closer to the facts of perception than representational painting. Take a walk down a city street and put what you have just seen down on canvas. You have seen half a person cut in two by a car, bits and pieces of street signs and advertisements, reflections from shop windows—a montage of fragments (cited in Lake, 2014, p. 306).

But we tend to assemble these fragments into whole ‘representational’ images. Representational painting does a better job of performing these (assembled) experiences that more closely fit our imagined experience. We know from psychology that we only absorb fragments of vision information from that available and that we fill in the gaps with our a priori knowledge. In so doing, we construct whole scenes from fragments. Burroughs and others demand we pay closer attention to the moment-to-moment experience of reality—not filtered, orchestrated into a narrative or ‘representation’, but closer to the raw experience of fragmentary informational input that comprises our lives.
Halberstam, writing of collages queer feminist potential, asserts that:

Collage precisely references the spaces in between and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other, art object from museum, and the copy from the original. In this respect, as well as in many others, collage (from the French *coller*, to paste or glue) seems feminist and queer. Collage has been used by many female artists, from Hannah Hoch to Kara Walker, to bind the threat of castration to the menace of feminist violence and both to the promise of transformation, not through a positive production of the image but through a negative destruction of it that nonetheless refuses to relinquish pleasure (Halberstam, 2011, p. 136).

More contemporary artists have queered the boundary between art and life—and extended the use of collage or the cut-up—even more explicitly. Cosey Fanni Tutti used nude modelling (and occasional pornographic) work as a *tool* for her artistic practice:

As I sat cutting around the naked bodies, the idea of cutting around my own body and collaging myself as a nude model from a sex magazine struck me as having an honesty and potency that I felt could be the embodiment of a consummate artwork. I would have created the very image that I then used to create a work of art. That approach and process seemed to epitomise what I wanted from my work—‘My Life Is My Art. My Art Is My Life’—and I’d get to enter a world that intrigued me and was (at that time) shrouded in mystery (Tutti, 2017, p. 116).

And Genesis P-Orridge made extensive use of the cut-up throughout their career, but perhaps most noticeably with their partner Lady Jaye Breyer P-Orridge exploring a different medium of cut-up in their pandrogyne project, literally cutting up their bodies with multiple surgeries alongside hormone use and other body modification to recreate their bodies in the images of themselves—each moving closer to the image of the other, meeting in the middle (P-Orridge, 2010b, pp. 441-451).

The quote that I opened this chapter with comes from a section of Halberstam’s book *The Queer Art of Failure* that I found particularly confrontational. Not because I found the ideas confronting in-and-of themselves, but because this sentence almost
seemed like a justification, or *encouragement* to self-harm, thoughts of which felt strangely prominent to me at the time after an absence of such desires for nearly two decades. (I put Halberstam's book aside for a few days until I felt better able to read on). While I agree that “if taken seriously, unbecoming may have its political equivalent in an anarchic refusal of coherence and prescriptive forms of agency” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 136), I found—or find—it hard to navigate the perhaps imaginary line between an expanded form of agency on one hand and an *inhibition* of agency, a reduction of available options due to a social situation, on the other.

As a trans woman, reading statistics about trans women’s rates of suicide, depression, self-harm and general wellbeing conjures all sorts of emotions in me ranging from anger (at cis-normative heteropatriarchy) to fear (that I will ‘become a statistic’) to a kind of empathic understanding—an acknowledgment that for some people suicide constitutes an option and an act of agency. While I agree that our society does horrific things to women, queer people, trans folk and all sorts of other people, I do feel some kinship with Halberstam’s advocating for reading cutting and suicide as agentive. This feels profoundly uncomfortable at times. In part because it feels like ‘advocating’ suicide or self-harm, and at other times because it feels like this kind of political analysis might facilitate my own self-harm which most of the time I do not wish to facilitate.

Wilchins writes about other trans friends:

One was my friend Hannah, a sculptor. She’d nearly severed her hand with a radial arm saw when she was eighteen. She swears she was lucid and calm at the time; yet she was also so desperate, lonely, and disconnected, she hoped it would kill her, or bring someone running—anyone—who’d finally listen to the pain inside her.

The other was Christine, a guitarist, writer, and sometime working-girl. Trying to escape from her life for one night, she stoned out on a mix of booze and PCP. Then, using the sharp blade of a sword, she severed the fingers of her guitar-picking hand right above the top knuckle, one-two-three-four, and didn’t feel a thing until the next morning. The cops had seen this particular tranny in the tank so many times they didn’t even try to have her fingers sewn back on (Wilchins, 1997, p. 20).
How does one decide whether to embrace “unbecoming” or to fight for a more accepting world? And can one’s “unbecoming” function as part of this fight? The latter questions prompt a consideration of framing. How much does how an ‘audience’ might read one’s actions matter? In some ways, these questions feel like exactly the wrong questions—the argument for unbecoming functioning by not engaging with the argument ‘on its own terms’.

When I read of the mass suicides of some indigenous groups affirmed as an alternative to their oppression and continued existence within the confines of an imperialist capitalist system. I obviously cannot imagine this situation, but I can respect the desire to exist—including to die—on one’s own terms, within one’s own cultural belief system. (See, for example, Downer, 2018; Jalata, 2013).

Halberstam’s argument resonates with Keller’s in relation to about women’s agency in possession. It may seem ‘submissive’, but this submission performs a certain type of agency, but one which western, phallocentric psychology does not recognise (Keller, 2003). Kathy O’Dell (1998) writes of masochistic performance art of the 1970s as a performed refusal of wholeness and a demonstration of Deleuze’s claim that “the masochist’s apparent obedience conceals a criticism and a provocazione (cited in Halberstam, 2011, p. 139).

Kathy Acker offers another cut on the masochism and self-destruction of writing and collage. In In Memoriam to Identity, we read: “Writing is one method of dealing with being human or wanting to suicide cause in order to write you kill yourself at the same time while remaining alive.” (Acker, 1993, p. 174) The title In Memoriam to Identity performs Acker’s letting go of the concept of identity (or a realisation that identity never made sense):

Who am I? That’s not quite the question that I keep asking myself over and over. What’s my story? That’s it. Not the stories they’ve been and keep handing me. My story (Acker, 1993, p. 154).

In writing this she foregrounds the power of texts and stories, more so than identity. The words and stories that we have forced upon us have power over us and we must search for our own story. But Acker uses other people’s texts to construct her own. She does not naively think that we can write our own story in some utopic, context-
free utopia. We must cut-up and collage the language that we have inherited, write ourselves in to other people’s stories to create fictions, to create texts that at least write against normative power. For Acker, we cannot escape from the world, but must remake, rewrite it, to better see the systems of power that entangle us, and to perhaps find some kind of agency. Acker frequently uses masochism in her texts and in talking about her texts as a metaphor for language—we have no choice but to submit to the systems of oppression, but can perhaps, perversely, find freedom in doing so. The masochistic classic *Story of O* (Réage, 1972) features heavily in Acker’s work.

*Cutting through the ‘self’*

In thinking through the cut-up as it relates to a nominally stable notion of self, we come up against the political critique of identity politics and the spiritual critique of identity. We need to remain clear about which we have engaged in, though my work explores both. In her discussion of sadomasochism, Hart talks about the different functions of identity:

> There is a danger of becoming mired in this litany, a tendency toward creating so many categories that there is no way left to speak of communities at all, much less a community. [...] My position on identities and their politics is a fairly simple psychoanalytic one. Identities are necessary in order to function in “reality”. I see them as prosthetic devices, which is not to say that they are any less “real” than anything else. They are, however, in a conflicted relationship with sexuality and its practices. In some sense, a sexual identity, any sexual identity, is a fundamentally unstable concept. For, as I understand sexual desires, they are always mutable, shifting, contextual, changeable, and anti-ontological (Hart, 1998, p. 2).

In the meantime—in the pre-Awakened time—an embracing partiality and an open acknowledgment of this as all of what we call reality, all that we can experience in/through language. Collaging fragments embrace the nature of fragmentation, to not (re)write grand narratives that ‘explain everything’. And in pursuit of seeing through the illusion of the world of fragments.
Buddhism offers another take on the fragment, asserting that our experience comprises individual motes of experiences called ‘formations’ (Ingram, 2008, pp. 236-240) which we can actually observe directly with practice and, eventually, ‘see through’ to the emptiness between. I have yet to experience this. Direct observations of formations come before one’s first experience of emptiness, void, god; after passing through the Dark Night of the Soul. I therefore do not feel especially comfortable talking about this with any sense of authority. But my ‘cutting up’ practice certainly feels influenced by the Buddhist conception that we can cut everything up to a minuscule level by refining our perception to the point that we can see through it. This view ‘makes sense’ to me on multiple levels, from the way we narrativise our personal experiences and invest in identity politics when our actual experiences vary so greatly.

In this way, the cut-up can function not as a technique for assembling some new ‘reality’, but re-assembling ‘reality’ into new experiences which do not fundamentally change that ‘reality’—we still live in the illusion of dualism. But this process can give us some agency in the (illusory) reality that we live in. And it can—perhaps—also allow us to see through the illusion; by cutting up reality and re-assembling it into a new collage, we can recognise that reality has a flexibility, a re-orderability which undermines its absolute nature. Alvin Toffler states that: “Descartes said the way to approach a problem is to break it into pieces. We’re very good at that, but not very good at putting it together again” (cited in Lee, I. (Director) & Gund III, 1998). We could critique our culture in this way and compare it to other cultures that have a more ‘holistic’ view, or value ‘interconnectedness’. But we could also demand that we take this process deeper, pursue it more fully. But we do not need to cut deeper, we need to cut more often. We need to cut with a more fine-tuned concentration. We need to cut through our sense of self: a human sacrifice. We do not need to just destroy, we need to de-story, to cut through our process of narrativization, to cut through our self, through our emotions, through our thoughts, to cut through to each mote of experience and then to cut through that...

...something that I have yet to accomplish, yet to experience; something that it feels absurd writing about from the wrong wide of. And something that I sometimes doubt the possibility of.
Aleister Crowley offers another example of self-critique in his *Book of Lies*, Chapter 51 ‘Terrier Work’ the begins:

Doubt.
Doubt thyself.
Doubt even if thou doubtest thyself.
Doubt all.
Doubt even if though doubtest all.
It seems sometimes as if beneath all conscious doubt there lay some deepest certainty. Or Kill it! Slay the snake!

Sometimes my meditation practice feels vaguely analogous to this. Most often, this kind of masculine, violent doubt feel reads like the doubt of the privileged, the doubt of the masculine voice, a doubt that will ‘test the will’ of the (male) magickian, already assured of their voice in the world. And doubt—for a queer, trans, femme—feels like the usual baseline, feels like the socio-political context that undermines agency on a daily basis, rather than a radical, spiritual act.

*Normalisation and normativity*

While the use of cut-ups in sound and music undoubtedly created new possibilities and new worlds, over the years, in part because of how the technologies have evolved, it has become increasingly, almost ubiquitously, the case that sound made using various cut-up techniques has coalesced into a strict temporal matrix structured around—or at least under the influence of—quantised beats. I do not have a problem with beat-based music, but in terms of the potential for exploring new arrangements of realities, the reification of sound cut-up into variations of a striated temporal matrix and often, striated pitch matrixes most obviously manifest in twelve-tone equal temperament seems, if nothing else, a limitation of the possible.
The various technologies that make sound cut-up techniques so easy also make it so easy for our musical realities to adhere to these striated matrixes. Increasingly, it seems to me, this occurs without any consideration of the alternative possibilities. I find this normative function of technology profoundly disturbing. Not because it limits the possibilities of a magickal technique—not everyone wants to explore magick or Awakening with their music practice and why should they—but because this normative frame becomes a new (apparent) ‘underlying’ reality. It becomes a new box—or rather temporal-pitch matrix—that we might want to have the option of thinking outside of. I find it hard to separate the practice—or perhaps non-practice, or lack of awareness—of accepting any norm from the political implications that it has for non-normative expression—whether intentionally anti-normative, antinomianist or simply not conforming to the norm. The tools that can liberate our experience of music, writing or ‘reality’ can also function to create new norms of power and control of our experiences.

In my own practice, I have used the cut-up as both a technique for creating a voice by collaging other styles and techniques into a new ‘reality’, a new voice, in parallel to using it as a way of deconstructing our tendency to narrativise our lives, using it as a tool to see more clearly the fragmented, moment-to-moment nature of what arises in our consciousness. While these practices might seem at odds with each other, I instead read them as functioning on different levels, in different ways, perhaps analogously to the ‘two truths’ doctrine in Buddhism (Trungpa, 2013b, pp. 452-453) or the 8-circuit brain model in chaos magick (Alli, 2003, 2014; Leary, 1989; Wilson, 1983, 1990b).

I also use the cut-up in collaging together a spiritual practice for myself, in creating new worlds to inhabit. I practice insight meditation, which anyone familiar with the dichotomy would clearly read as a right-hand path spiritual practice; but I also have some magickal practices that read more as left-hand path in their transgression of norms and intent of creating new paths in the world. Rather than navigating myself by a strict adherence to one of these supposedly mutually exclusive paradigms, I use ethics and creativity as a guide and freely collage together practices that I feel moved by.
Dolorous interlude:
Quantum probability identity

Identity politics always function negatively and exclusively. I prefer *queer* used as a verb. Queer as a process of proliferation, of possibilities, undermining the assumption of a normative, fixed, position or self. Queer as quantum probability waves of identities in superposition. Identity politics as the collapsing of possibilities into a reified, singular ‘self’. The collapse happening when we ‘measure’ ourselves against others, when drawing a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’; when others measure us against themselves, drawing a line between ‘them’ and ‘not’.
WORKINGS
‘The Residence Workings’

Audio recordings; (Pbbbt, 2017a):
https://residenceseries.bandcamp.com/album/2-sage-pbbbt-four-nights-of-invocation-the-residence-workings

Video recordings (not great quality) (Pbbbt, 2017b);
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLcRw21FuSa0IrwElamAFL_pe2wJFrGDH

Dan O’Connor founded the Residence Series in Perth, 2015 (O’Connor, 2015). O’Connor performed in the first Residence for six nights, each night solo and then with other collaborators. O’Connor wanted to work on extending the length of his solo sets and performing every day for six nights allowed him to work on this. He then decided to extend this invitation to other artists with the suggestion that they could use this opportunity to work on an aspect of their practice. O’Connor invited me to have a residence in his series in early 2017 (27th February-2nd March) and I used the opportunity to explore performances of explicit invocation workings. Possession or channelling (and magick or ritual more broadly) had played a large part in my improvisation practice, but up until this point I had not performed anything framed explicitly as invocation. These performances felt like one of the most intimate things that I have ever done. I have included below the original information I provided to attendees followed by analysis.

*Invitation sent to guests*

Hey folx,
When Dan invited me to do a Residence Series, I remembered that I have had this intention to explore the more explicitly ritual / magick / shamanic side of my practice in a “performance” context. This feels like a great opportunity to explore this in what feels like a pretty safe space, in a small venue, with people that I feel pretty comfortable with.
I will present a series of improvised ritual workings utilising sound as the most prominent medium. My ritual practice has felt a lot more fun, creative and open-ended since I started doing more improvised work. I usually have a clear intent to explore a particular kind of experience and allow things to manifest. Often I use a pre-existing form—a God, Spirit, Archetype—to explore this ‘particular kind of experience’. I use the technique of ‘possession’ by these entities to explore ‘extra-normal’ aspects of myself. I also try to remain agnostic about everything. I find the ‘possessed by a spirit’ model a useful tool for framing my experience—and for creating the possibility of an experience—but that certainly doesn’t mean that I believe in the objective reality of said spirit. I do, however, believe that entering such a belief system can facilitate having interesting experiences that one might not have access to in a different belief system. Make of that what you will!

I have never done this with other people around. The extra energy might make things more intense, or I might feel too self-conscious to experience deep trance (and just stand there feeling silly), or it might feel really intense for me, but look and sound really boring to the audience. I feel terrified by the idea of this project; this feels like a good reason to proceed.

*Invitation sent to guests: Menu*

**Day 1. Invocation of the Serpent Spirit**—a pretty common entity in many religious/spiritual traditions. Also (at least in the west) associated with Left Hand Path traditions.

**Day 2. Invocation of Choronzon**—a ‘demon’ that features prominently in Thelema (Aleister Crowley’s religion). I have taken great inspiration from Demitria Monde Thraam’s writing on Choronzon as well as Tibetan Chöd ritual. Briefly, I often think of
Choronzon as a personification of the process of realizing the illusory nature of Ego as part of the path of Awakening (Enlightenment). The experience can feel hard, but one should accept it with love.

**Day 3. Invocation of the Spirit of Plastic**—Taking Animism seriously, but in the industrialised world. If Oak and Bear have a spirit, surely by now so does Plastic. I have done some work with Plastic before and it has felt intense and very weird. They queer ideas of ‘purity’ and ‘nature’; they embrace hybridity, change and toxicity.

**Day 4. Invocation of Unknown Entity**—High Dada Magick. Ritual with unknown effect. Last time I performed a rite along these lines I realised that I might have just created time. Or gravity. Or love. Or genocide. Along with a rewriting of history and my memory and that I might never know the effects of this ritual. Or perhaps it altered the flap of one butterfly’s wing... All of the experiential aspects of ritual magick with none of that messy *outcome*. A deconstruction of the idea of magick as bringing about intentional change in the world. Hail Eris!

*Invitation sent to guests: Order of events*

People can arrive from 7pm and hang out in the garden.

I will do some pre-ritual meditation and scene setting alone in the space. At 7:30pm someone will show you in to the space. Please remain quiet throughout the ritual. Also, please don’t clap (even at ‘the end’), clapping often feels strange to me—almost like a banishing ritual, dissolving any effect that a performance might have—and in this instance, it especially doesn’t make sense to me because these performances will function more like ritual than art; the audience functions more to ‘bear witness’ than to ‘enjoy’. At the end of the ritual I will probably stay inside to do some grounding or meditation. I imagine that socialising might feel a bit weird for me straight after.
Please head outside and feel free to chat with other folx, shake all the weird off, etc.

**What to Expect**

Because of the improvised nature of my ritual work, and because I haven’t ever done this with other people, I honestly don’t know. But based on previous work I have done (in the comfort of my own home / temple), you might expect some chanting, weird singing, possibly some ‘Sage-not-seeming-like-herself’ weirdness, time-dilation, disorientation and general strangeness. Also, I can’t honestly say how any of you will react individually to whatever “manifests”. Perhaps you will find it frightening, confronting, exciting, life-affirming, triggering, boring, silly... I have to ask that you “take responsibility” for your own experience (as much as that makes sense).

**Please Bring**

A sense of humour, an openness to new experiences, a willingness to ‘hold the space’, a healthy scepticism (optionally put aside for the duration of the performance, but embraced afterwards).

**‘The Residence Workings’: Reflections**

I felt very emotionally vulnerable in these performances (or rather, after them) as I had shared something extremely intimate, something that I had not shared with anyone in my life so far. In some sense this also felt like introducing two disparate groups of friends to each other—my human friends and my spirit friends—with all the apprehension that this often evokes. I have close relationships with some of my ‘spirit friends’, and felt vulnerable introducing them to other people I deeply cared about (as well as the few people that attended that I did not know—friends of friends who came along). It also felt profoundly strange to have a spirit look at people I knew through my eyes. I have a great sense of gratitude for having the opportunity to
explore these experiences in a safe space with people that really respected my practice. Each night at the end of the performance, I would ring a bell and the audience would leave to spend time together outside. I joined them when I felt able to do so. Most nights we had discussions about the work—people asked questions and shared opinions in an extremely respectful way.

I had great apprehension about what might transpire in these performances. The two most prominent worries centring around the intensity of the experience: either nothing would happen because I felt too self-conscious (and self-censored); or, because of the additional ‘energy’ (for want of a better term) from other people’s presence, things might feel particularly intense and ‘get out of hand’. Despite these apprehensions, during the performances I did not feel self-conscious at all—I felt completely in the experience. The first day, however, after the performance, I rang the bell, people left, and I suddenly felt extremely self-conscious. I wondered what people would think of what I had done, what they had seen and it felt more confronting walking out of the studio into the garden to chat with the audience than it had to explore an invocation experience with an audience for the first time. I had similar feelings on the other three nights, but of a much milder intensity.

What invocation, possession and channelling mean became a more prominent question for me when thinking about these performances. In the comfort of my own home, my agnosticism around these terms felt reasonable enough. But the ethics of ‘what happens’ became a much more pointed question for me with other people present.

**Investigating terminology: Invocation and possession**

For the most part, I have tended to default to a ‘psychological model’ in the sense that I often think I can (in theory at least) explain most of my experiences as various aspects of my mind or unconscious, by using a more permeable notion of ‘self’. I can regard the ‘spirits’ as archetypal forms, or aspects of my subconscious, perhaps the collective unconscious. Within this model, the idea of performing an invocation in front of other people feels ethically comfortable—I might present something
confrontational, but it feels ethically akin to any other form of art. But within the spirit model—if I think that actual sentient entities with autonomy and power manifest in the space because I invite them—the ethics of this feel much less clear to me. The possibility that the spirits might do something that I did not intend feels possible, at least. I still default to a psychological model as it seems like the most useful framing for talking to most people in our culture without sounding crazy and as part of a real desire to speak as openly as possible about my spiritual practice and valuing the experiences over the frame. That said, the spirit model sometimes feels like a better description of my experience; and with other magickians (or other sympathetic folks) it feels more precise to talk of spirits.

I had some discomfort with the ethics of doing invocation work with others present and I did not really come to any clear conclusion or resolution. I did use a circle to demarcate a space for the performance (which the invoked entities would not leave). But I still felt unsure about the ethics of allowing a spirit to communicate with the audience. As it happened, a couple of the audience members had nightmares following some of the performances. I made time to speak to them both and neither of them felt that I had acted unethically—they both felt prone to nightmares anyway and they framed their experience as reacting to a moving performance rather than anything nefarious. One of these people had experience in western esoteric traditions, the other had some first-hand experience of Peruvian shamanism. The question of ethics remains open for me. But I proceeded, and would do so again, based on the strength of the relationships that I have with these ‘entities’—whatever their ontological status. The ethics of mutual aid, solidarity and form the core of my practice and feel somewhat anathema to following strict rules to enforce safety. I have no desire to rely on asserting power over others. Overpowering entities does form the basis of many western esoteric practices of evocation (and sometimes invocation), perhaps most clearly in the Lesser Key of Solomon (Peterson, 2001), still a widely-used text and still inspiring (equally problematic) reinterpretations such as Ody’s Magister Officiorum which literally forces spirits to manifest using more and more aggressive threats if first attempts do not work (Ody, 2018, pp. 21-30). I decided to focus on invocation rather than evocation in my practice some years ago. Carroll defines evocation as:
the art of dealing with magical beings or entities by various acts which create
or contact them and allow one to conjure and command them with pacts and
exorcism” (Carroll, 1987, p. 36).

Invocation he describes as:

adding to the magician’s psyche any elements which are missing [...] these
forms may manifest with sufficient force to convince the mind of the objective
existence of the god. Yet the aim of invocation is temporary possession by the
god, communication from the god, and manifestation of the god’s magical
powers, rather than the formation of religious cults (Carroll, 1987, p. 41).

I use invocation rather than evocation in my work for several reasons. Firstly, I feel
much more comfortable with the ethics of situating a practice in my own body and
mind and inviting others in to this space rather than making things happen ‘out
there’. This perhaps allows a distancing which inhibits engagement with the
relational ethics, whether or not one invests in the ontological autonomy of the spirits
one works with. Secondly, invocation work allowed me to integrate my ritual magick
practice with my insight meditation which focuses on an awareness of bodily
sensations (and does not need to concern itself with the cause of these sensations).

Definitions of terms such as ‘possession’ and/or ‘channelling’ presents more of a
challenge. DuBois gives a good overview of the challenges:

Theorists have debated extensively the relations of ecstatic trance and
possession. Some have wished to see shamanic ecstasy and possession states
as part of a single complex (e.g., Findeisen 1957; Lewis 1971) while others (e.g.
Eliade 1964; Paulson 1964) have wished to maintain a clear distinction
between them. Gilbert Rouget (1980: 30-1) asserts that shamanic ecstasy is
marked by characteristics that easily distinguish it from possession [...] however, Rouget readily admits that a single individual can sometimes
undergo either or both experiences, or that a given experience can prove a
composite of the two (1980:36). He suggests in fact that the two states are
poles in a single continuum (1980:36), a view seconded by Louise Bäckman
this continuum can be differentiated along two axes: on the one hand, the
degree of control retained by the percipient; on the other, the degree of mental
My experiences of invocation have functioned more like extending an invitation to an entity to ‘manifest in and through me if they so desire’ (actual wording I have used). I have never demanded anything from any entity I have worked with, or ‘negotiated’ in the way that many writers on shamanic traditions discuss (DuBois, 2009, pp. 82-106; Harvey & Wallis, 2007, pp. xv, 1-8; Hume & Drury, 2013, pp. 57-80; Tedlock, 2005, pp. 20-21; Walsh, 2009, pp. 15-16). And, while in the ritual, I have not felt like I had control—it has felt like ceding control of my mind/body to these spirits, while managing to maintain the ‘witness’ experience, the ‘pure awareness’ of meditative practice. I use the terms ‘shamanism and ‘possession’ as they most closely fit both my subjective experience as well as my aesthetic and political interests. I look at ‘possession’ below and consider the term ‘shamanism’ in-depth in the following chapters.

I also use the term ritual in my work and the term ‘workings’ to refer to ritual works. The term ritual has problematic and contested usage (for a good overview, see Sax, 2010). Richard Schechner, for example focuses on the formal aspects of ritual. He defines rituals as: “collective memories encoded into actions” (Schechner, 2013, p. 52) and suggests that:

- Rituals are frequently divided into two main types, the sacred and the secular.
- Sacred rituals are those associated with, expressing, or enacting religious belief (Schechner, 2013, p. 53).

This framing does not leave much room for innovation in ritual by individuals and certainly not for improvised ritual work. My interest in ritual focuses more on the state of mind of the ritualist. Antero Alli suggests that: “Ritual distinguishes itself from “routine” in that the former serves to enhance awareness of Self/World, whereas the latter functions to diminish it” (Alli, 1987, p. 8). He also writes that:

- Ritual, and its purpose, is [...] those activities triggering awareness of our living relationship with the entity embodies as this planet. [...] Ritual serves to enhance our unique placement... who we are and why we are here (Alli, 1987, p. 3).

This sits a lot closer to my use of the word ritual. Like William S Sax, my interest lies in exploring how ritual can function to enable this exploration. As Sax suggests:

- To analyse rituals as “expressing” inner states of feeling and emotion, or “symbolizing” theological ideas or social relations, or “representing” psycho-
physical states of the human organism, is to neglect the question of how they might be instrumental, how they might actually do things (other than in the trivial sense of representing ideas, social relations, or inner states more of less accurately) (Sax, 2010, p. 6).

For me, any act can function as ritual with the right intent. Ritual enables exploration of the extra-normal self. Or as Catherine Bell frames it, certain embodied practices function as ritualized actions which produce a ritualized agent (see Bell, 1992). I also feel uncomfortable with frameworks that suggest ritual has clear and delineated spaces. In my own practice I seek to integrate seemingly different experiences of the world and, as the chaos magickians say: “Initiation never ends” (Chapman, 2008, p. 113; Wilson, 1990a). Ritual should resonate beyond the circle.

Passivity, possession and gender

Many writers associate the term possession with passivity and femininity. I have had some tendencies towards passivity in my life in part related to a history of depression and tied into the suppression of my gender identity. My magickal practice has in part functioned as a space within which to explore asserting myself in the world and to explore the relationship between my self (or selves) and the world as well as my relationship to meditation. Recently a friend, commenting on the amount of performances that I have, asked if I felt this pattern of passivity had manifested in my musick practice as well. I do not ever organise events myself, or seek out people to play with, and I tend to say yes to everything offered me. As a result, I get to play a lot, with a variety of people, but perhaps always on other people’s terms. I also wonder if I might do a better job of cultivating the kinds of musickal experiences that I wish to explore. On the other hand, I say yes to everything offered in part because Perth does not have a huge amount of opportunities for experimental musick, and simply because I feel like I need the practice at performing—I still feel in the process (perhaps never-ending) of finding my language, exploring my vocabulary as an improviser. It seems sensible to take every opportunity to do this.

Despite thinking of my magick praxis as exploring ‘assertiveness’ (broadly speaking), it has also come to pass (she said, deliberately eliding her subjectivity) that a lot of
my ritual work has a more improvised, open-ended and exploratory sensibility. I initiate ritual with an invitation of some particular experience—perhaps embodied as an entity, though not always—to manifest in/as/through me. Ultimately—with a Buddhist Belief System—the content of one’s experiences do not matter so much as the quality of attention to them one maintains. But I certainly have time to take seriously a (self)criticism of my possession ritual work as passive. As someone with a history of depression who has tried to seriously engage with this (and feels relatively free from this for the last few years), but also as a queer, trans person, and as a trans woman, I think noticing a tendency in one’s practice towards passivity seems potentially problematic. Mary Keller considers the question of agency in possession and the gender politics that surround this in her book *The Hammer and the Flute*:

Religious traditions in which people are possessed have existed throughout human history and continue to exist on all continents of the globe. Women predominate in these accounts, and their predominance is noted by many scholars who attribute it to women’s inferior gendered status in patriarchal culture. These analyses suggest that possessions are symptoms of the women’s social and psychological deprivation that happen to find expression in culturally specific religious traditions. Traditionally in scholarly texts, the possessed woman is valanced negatively as psychologically fragile, permeable, “less than” a Western, rational agent. The power of her possessed body is reduced to “hysteria” at worst and creative therapy at best. The key to the problem is not that possession studies are sexist or racist but that a social scientific method is unable to take seriously what the witnesses to the possession say is the case—that the power that overcomes them comes from an ancestor, deity, or spirit (Keller, 2003, pp. 2-3).

For Keller, the capacity to experience possession and the actual experience of possession can function as forms of agency. And scholars do a disservice to their subjects when they read possession as a function of a belief that the scholar does not share. Keller’s book has raised serious questions for my practice and how I think about the politics of it in terms of agency. In sometimes framing my practice within a purely psychological model, I perhaps undermine the reality of my experience and its social and political importance. That said, I have always tried to foreground my subjective experience and offer various frames that it might sit within. And my agency as an autoethnographer feels markedly different from that of other subjects of
ethnography or anthropology. Keller’s arguments for the agency of women’s possession resonates in some ways with Halberstam’s arguments about cutting as a “feminist aesthetic” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 135) which I discussed in the Chapter ‘Cutting up the selves / cutting through the self’. We should note, however, that Halberstam’s argument ends in “female unbecoming” while Keller argues for women’s agency in allowing another force to subjugate one’s selfhood temporarily and within set parameters.

I use the term ‘possession’ in my work as it highlights the subjective experience of lack of agency. Importantly though, my exploration of these experiences has highlighted how this lack of agency does not differ from any other experience at a fundamental level—feeling possessed by the desire to drink a cup of tea—as explored in the chapter ‘The illusion of free will and its implications for improvisation and invocation’. This framing of the experience of possession has helped facilitate an integration of insight meditation practices with ritual, deepening both.

The term ‘spirit’ presents more issues with definition as Harvey points out: Strangely, those who are willing to endlessly argue about the meaning and applicability of ‘shaman’ often refer to ‘spirits’ as if everyone knows what the word means, as if the rod were self-evidently understood, and the beings universally experienced (Harvey, 2003, p. 9).

Harvey suggests avoiding the term ‘spirit’ because of its ambiguity and suggests instead using indigenous terminology (Harvey, 2003, p. 9) or using the term ‘other-than-human persons’ popularised by Hallowell (see Harvey, 2003, pp. 9-11; Harvey, 2017, pp. 17-10).

I use the term spirit in part because of the fluid nature of the term. This shifting sits comfortably with my ‘radical agnosticism’ (Wilson, 1977, p. ii) and facilitates moving between different models or frames for my experiences, facilitating multiple readings of my ritual work. In some ways this problematic, ambiguous term that has links to colonialism constitutes my own cultural heritage and I seek to engage ethically and critically with this heritage. As Harvey suggests in his critical engagement with this and other terms, perhaps the terms “might not be mystifying but initiatory” (Harvey, 2017, p. xv).
Queering Choronzon

A precedent for my work and another important influence on my magickal praxis comes from the writings of Demitria Monde Thraam. Thraam has a band called Choronzon featuring herself and the ‘xenodimensional entity’ Choronzon as members. The entity Choronzon traditionally gets depicted as a demon, the Lord of the Abyss, who ‘destroys your Ego’ when you experience ‘crossing the abyss’ in the Thelemic map of Awakening. The language around this has a very combative and macho feel (as much of the Western magick tradition does). I love Thraam’s take on Choronzon. Criticising Crowley—and others—she writes:

You do not call up a xenodimensional—something from another place, though not precisely another world—and demand it to do things any more than you do that to a person, and expect it to be nice to you. This guy wants to “cross the Abyss”? Exactly how does he hope to do this if hostile to its entity? (Thraam & Rune Logix, 2005).

Thraam views Choronzon as a powerful entity to co-create with, and embrace the relationship with love. I really like her intervention as it offers—as I read it—a real queering of tradition, and, in some sense, a learning to make peace with and actually embrace this part of the magickal journey. Thraam sees Choronzon as performing a specific function as the Lord of the Abyss. To adopt an antagonistic attitude to an entity because it performs the functions that comprises its sole reason for existing seems extremely counterproductive.

Thraam’s take on the entity Choronzon influenced my practice quite heavily in the last year or two and functioned, for me, as a way of integrating chaos magick, the usefulness I found in the A.˙.A.˙. (a western esoteric order) maps of enlightenment, and insight meditation. I have struggled with the intersection of an ‘observer’ vipassanā practice, and a magick tradition focused on ‘asserting one’s will’, and the sometimes-directionless quagmire of the postmodern chaos magick diaspora. Queering Choronzon offers a creative, chaos magick take on rewriting the A.˙.A.˙. narrative without discarding it, that also accepts the ‘stages on the way’ and engages with them as part of the process of Awakening.
Thraam’s take on Choronzon also echoes the Tibetan tantric Chöd practice, in which one strives to love one’s demons and ritually feeds oneself to them as a way of embracing one’s demons rather than allowing them to overpower you. My understanding of Tibetan Chöd ritual comes almost entirely from Tsultrim Allione’s book *Feeding Your Demons* (2008), a teaching originally given to and passed on to Allione. She has also written a collection of lives of women Buddhist saints (2000) and has lead a remarkable life as a monk, mother, divorcee, ex-monk, writer and many other things, but all framed within a strong spiritual practice. She does not ever frame herself as ‘straying from the path’, more that her path has a different route to the usual and oftentimes quite macho seeming ‘sit and meditate X hours a day until you get enlightened’ vein of Buddhism which, at least in most of the traditional lineages, have a very strong patriarchal leaning.

_Mutual aid and ontological anarchism: “The time has come to be constellations”_

One of the reasons that I felt interested in exploring the sharing of ritual practice with people comes from my interest in some version of Anarchism. I have taken great inspiration from some anarchist writings. At times, I worry that my praxis—artistic and academic—has a hedonistic, individualistic or introspective aspect to it at times whereas most reports of ‘traditional’ shamanic practices note the important social functions that the shaman performs. This feels like a huge question over my work and the ethics around it and something that I want to explore—even if just in the sense of engaging with an audience in ritual work, or exploring ritual work with other people. At other times, though, I recognize the serious work of transformation that I have undertaken and which not many people take up. I read it as both embracing what freedoms we do have and nurturing our individual freedoms, as well as “acting as if already free,” which Graeber defines as the direct action and anarchist traditions (Graeber, 2009).

It also comes from taking seriously the possibilities of the profound freedom that comes from liberating oneself from suffering through spiritual practice and in this sense owes a debt to Hakim Bey’s ontological anarchism (Bey, 1985), though I also
feel interested in the possibility of contributing to others’ political freedom, as distinct from their ‘spiritual freedom’, by sharing one’s spiritual practice. The third line of the Book of the Law by Crowley (or Aiwass through him) reads: “Every man and every woman is a star” (Crowley et al., 2008, p. 305). This text ushers in the Aeon of Horus, with the central tenant “do what thou wilt” (Crowley et al., 2008, p. 318). The Aeon of Horus brings about the age of individuality, and Crowley’s magick arguably marks the beginning of a magick that more fully embraces individuality. Though undoubtedly tongue-in-cheek, I have taken great inspiration from a lyric from the band Daddy Carbon, taken from their song ‘Shut up and Pay Attention’: “When this century opened we were told that every woman and man was a star; well, the time has come to be constellations” (Daddy Carbon, 1993). Crowley’s Aeon of Horus may have proclaimed the individual as the centre of the western magickal universe, but perhaps the time has come to create pathways and networks between these stars and recognise the importance not just of individuals, but the networks that they form. I seek to do this in my ritual work—creating ethical relationships with spirits—and also hope that my practice and openness around my practice will perhaps nurture a desire to explore spirituality in an ethical, honest and critically-engaged way.

The queer art of ritual failure

Improvised ritual feels like it has a lot more space for exploring interesting failure than scripted ritual. In scripted ritual, if one forgets a line or points a sword in the wrong direction, things have gone terribly wrong. With improvised ritual work—and working without a pre-determined desirable outcome—a lot more scope exists for the magickian exploring interesting quirks of themselves and unexpected aspects of their self / reality / consciousness / the world... As Halberstram states in The Queer Art of Failure with regard to championing an ‘undisciplined’ practice of criticism: “the desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production around which I would like to map a few detours” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 6).
Setting up for this ritual work, I really enjoyed the simplicity of wearing a t-shirt and jeans and preparing a ritual space and the overall lofi sense of aesthetics with the whole performance. I enjoyed the relatively relaxed feel to the setup—chatting and sorting a few things with Dan O’Connor (who extended the invitation for these performances to me and hosted the events), setting a few things up, drawing on the floor with chalk, and meditating. I enjoy the sense of ‘anyone could do it with anything’. A number of people commented on the ‘simplicity’ of the setup and the lack of paraphernalia or symbols from explicit traditions, something that I also enjoy about my practice. At the same time, the space and the performances had a clear sense of intent about them, and these came through to the audience as well. A number of people commented on how different this felt from other performances they had seen, or that despite the lack of magickal tools or symbols from traditions, the space had a very clear sense of ritual and purpose about it.

Spending time in the space for an hour or so before the performance on the first night I had a clear sense of ritual or meditative space. I had wondered if it would feel strange, or out of place to do ritual work in another person’s house. I suspected that my sense of ritual, meditation, presence, would translate to another context easily enough—with the right intent—but it nonetheless felt reassuring to feel that I managed to transform the space (or ‘hold a space’) relatively quickly, easily and with few props.

Robes, bell, altar, circle while relatively simple did give a clear sense of intent and framing. The robes felt like a particularly clear marker of distance between the audience and performer in a useful way, but I also feel interested in exploring the possibility of doing ritual work with even less in the way of props or framing, and exploring if the sense of intent could get conveyed without any of this kind of framing. The frame does, however, allow one to explore new ways of failing, or to present these failures as part of an open-ended experiment in extra-normal experience.
Reflections: Day one: Invocation of the Serpent Spirit

I started these workings with Serpent because I have worked with this entity for longest, and because they have a 'primal' and visceral quality about them—which we could perhaps attribute to the oldest, 'reptilian' parts of our brain and the fight-or-flight responses that this has control over. I felt most comfortable with this as a 'performance' as I expected people would find it relatively easy to relate to this entity as manifest in/through me, whereas Choronzon, for instance, personifies a much more complex and abstract experience.

This felt like the most visceral, and the simplest of the performances. I invoked Serpent silently in my head after lighting a candle, and they manifested almost immediately and took control of my body, resulting in my writhing around on the floor screeching and snarling for twenty minutes or so. This ritual did not feel markedly different from other ritual work that I have done with Serpent, it almost immediately just felt like ritual space, and I/we/they did not have any concern about 'audience expectations', though they did focus their attention towards the audience, but not in a very individuated way.

On reflection, this perhaps felt like the least interesting ritual as a performer; the 'results' manifested approximately as expected—an intense, reptilian presence functioning with the 'baser' aspects of consciousness. It 'worked' and felt quite extreme (and scared a few people), but it did not raise many questions for me as a magickian, musickian or performer.

Reflections: Day two: Invocation of Choronzon

After this ritual, I felt overcome by sadness, sat and cried for a while. Then did some writing before going out to meet people. Before starting this project, I felt the least confident about this ritual, or rather the least sure of what would happen, or if my experiences with this entity would translate into something that other people could make sense of. I feel deeply fond of Choronzon, but our relationship feels profoundly
idiosyncratic. As I understand them, Choronzon functions in part as a personification of the illusory nature of ego, one of the main ‘challenges’ of ‘crossing the abyss’ or the ‘dark night of the soul’. I love the queerness of the concept of a personification of the illusory nature of personhood. And it makes sense that a lot of people might have a challenging time with Choronzon—some writers, most notably Crowley, refer them as a demon to overcome (Crowley, 1989, pp. 23, 623, ; 2007, p. 494) others embrace them as a force of ‘evil’, as in some contemporary left-hand path practices, most obviously the journal *Choronzon* by Martinet Press where they function as a placeholder for any antinomianism (Martinet Press, 2015-ongoing). Chaos magick did reconfigure Choronzon as a positive, or at least neutral figure—most prominently with Carrol’s ‘Mass of Choronzon’ (Carroll, 2013) and I have felt particularly moved by the writing of Demetria Monde Thraam (Thraam; Thraam & Rune Logix, 2005). The queerness of a personification of the illusory nature of ego might also go some way to explain Choronzon’s quirks and why people find them challenging; though we should also note that all of us construct our egos just as Choronzon does and the openness of this process presents the challenge rather than the uniqueness of it manifested in someone.

After this ritual, I wondered why I had bothered trying to share my experience with Choronzon with anyone. The solitary nature of the ‘dark night of the soul’ constitutes one of its most prominent and challenging aspects (Ingram, 2008; St. John of the Cross, 2008). Choronzon manifest in many forms and sometimes takes the epitaphs ‘lord of lies’ or ‘lord of hallucinations’ (Thraam, 2017). In many ways, this felt like a futile exercise and a lot of my experience in this ritual centred around the impossibility of conveying certain experiences, particularly ones relating to the Dark Night, but also more generally to the existential alone-ness of our manifestation in this world.

I tried to explain how I felt to someone as having a lover (or friend) who you value highly, but who you do not especially enjoy the company of when with other people—whatever you like about them does not hold up in this context—so that you completely understand why other people do not like this person, while at the same time feel a profound sense of loneliness and isolation because of the inability to share what you love about this person. I felt profoundly alone at the conclusion of this
ritual, and it highlighted the solitary nature of my magickal-meditative practice. During the ritual, however, this sense of the impossibility of sharing (some) experiences did not always feel unpleasant. For some sections, Choronzon felt content to just sit and meditate, observing sensations arising and passing and acknowledging the impossibility of sharing that with any of the ‘audience’. At other times, the ridiculousness of the task at hand seemed amusing to them.

For most of these workings, I started the invocation aspect by lighting a candle, which signified the ‘intent’ of the piece. Choronzon (who had manifested before the audience entered for this ritual) eventually lit the candle. But then blew it out. In so doing they performed the impossibility of fulfilling an intent—as we do not have free will, and we do not have an ego—while also performing the attempt at doing so. This amused them (and seemed to amuse some of the audience). They also later lit the candle and left it burning, because although we can never ‘manifest our will’ in any pure or absolute sense, neither can we free ourselves from the impulse to do so, or from acting in the world. We cannot ‘give up’ our ego, or will. I admit to still feeling confused by this. In some ways, it feels like the crux of what Choronzon has to teach and while I might understand it in some ways on an intellectual level, I feel that I need to sit with the experience, and muddle through a bit longer. (Not enlightened yet.)

Another aspect of this had to do with the idiosyncratic nature of Choronzon’s manifestation in/as/through me. They felt such a huge distance between this version of their self, their otherwise infinitely-complex and multifaceted form and the audience members with their own array of idiosyncratic belief systems and idiolects. Trying to communicate with the audience, limited by Sage’s ‘vocabulary’ felt frustrating, futile and ridiculous; as well as having its own beauty. The ritual contained a lot of silence, some speaking, mostly in undecipherable sounds, but occasional fragments of English (transcription below). A lot of the speaking in this ritual felt like trying to communicate in English and failing. I wonder if part of this had to do with me feeling self-conscious about tying things down to language that we can easily interrogate and critique, but I also wondered if Choronzon had attempted to use some kind of ur-language, freed from the idiosyncrasies of my language use—the western esoteric tradition has a long history of various forms of ‘angelic’
languages, most famously Enochian, and many possession traditions feature glossolalia.

Despite all my confusion around this working (in particular), people did seem to really connect with this performance. Josten Myburgh—a Perth performer, composer, organiser and friend—came to the last three nights of this series and felt interested enough in it to interview me about it for Harbour.blog. When talking about the Choronzon working, Myburgh said:

It felt like you couldn’t do anything ‘wrong’—we were witnessing something which was like, you witnessing yourself as well, so you were as much an audience as us. It kind of made me think, I have to think about this now, now I’ve witnessed this, how can this performative feeling be recreated, or how can other ways of doing this exist. It was a really amazing form of intimacy as an audience member. You didn’t feel worried that something was going wrong in the same way that you might watch a performer of notated music and think, oh, they must have really practiced really hard, oh, I hope they don’t make a mistake (or watching an improvised situation go awry and hoping that the performers can ‘solve’ the ‘problem’). But watching you do this was like, watching a flower grow or something. Like a weird natural process. I found that mystifying and confusing and really interesting. The long silences where you weren’t doing anything, as well, but just knowing that something was happening. The silence became this sort of swarming activity, and then you finally made a sound and it was like, oh! It made me jump! (Myburgh, 2017).

Other attendees made similar comments and my confusion and loneliness presumably did not ‘get in the way’ of performing something that engaged those present. The sense of ‘presence’ perhaps feels more important than striving to translate my own idiosyncratic struggle with the illusory nature of the ego. The sense of isolation in this aspect of my spiritual path felt extremely prominent around this performance and still does, reflecting on it sometime later, still in the ‘dark night of the soul’.
Reflections: Day three: Invocation of the Spirit of Plastic

The invocation of Choronzon felt like the most challenging, or the working that I felt the least sure about in terms of the likelihood of something ‘performative’ coming out of it. Working with Plastic felt like a return to something more obvious in terms of a ‘likely outcome’. That said, I find Plastic a profoundly weird entity to work with. I first invoked them on 4th August, 2014 and this ritual scared me more than anything else I have ever done because it felt so intense and so other (Sage Musick, 2014). I have wondered if part of the intensity of this ritual had to do with no one having ever invoked them before, so it also functioned as a kind of birth for them (in invoked form). My interest in working with Plastic comes from Genesis P-Orridge’s notion of “industrial music for industrial people” (Vale, 1983, pp. 9-11), as well as an interest in...
‘taking seriously’ the idea of animism in an urban context. It seemed obvious to me that if an animist view posited a spirit of Oak, and a spirit of Bear and a spirit for each river, then surely by now a spirit of Plastic must have coalesced or manifested? In exploring this idea I embrace not only a Discordian cheekiness and chaos magick ‘awareness of the constructed nature of my Belief System’, but also a queerness of species inspired by Donna Haraway (2006, 2016) and Heather Davis (2016a, 2016b) as well as Boetzkes and Pendakis (2013).

The Spirit of Plastic felt weird and alien, as they usually do, but I also noticed a childlike quality to their experience which I hadn’t felt aware of before. Part of me feels that this makes some kind of sense given that plastic has existed for a lot less time in this world than, say, ‘serpents’ have (and I tend to think of this word as having quite a broad range of interpretations or manifestations). Considering the time-frames of most spirits (or the creatures or substances that they form the essence of), Plastic seems young, at least in the archetypal form it holds in our culture: that derived from petrochemicals. Boetzkes and Pendakis suggest that:

There is an eternity in plastic, though one very far from the dreams of Platonism or Christianity. This is not the transcendent suspension of change dreamed of by Plato, a dream of Truth, Beauty, and of the continuing power of the Idea to engross and challenge a human body. Instead, this eternity is a persistent “reality” that arrives from one continuous, infinite, and seemingly inexhaustible source, a source without location or specificity (Boetzkes & Pendakis, 2013).

And later go on to write: “oil is very literally time materialized as sediment, buried deep in the ground” (Boetzkes & Pendakis, 2013). I have had a very strange sense of time whenever I have worked with Plastic, almost like a sense of time not changing, or changing extremely slowly.

I wonder if this has anything to do with the life-cycle of plastic, which unfolds in a radically different way to most other substances and which Davis considers as a potential source of inspiration for queer political struggle—a sense of timelessness, of not allowing our politics to ‘degrade’ (Davis, 2016b). Davis also notes similarities between the modalities of queerness and plastic:
There is a link here between sex, plastic, and nonreproductivity that goes beyond the use of plastics and silicones as sex toys. There is an uncanny resemblance between the modalities of queerness and plastic’s expression, despite the fact that one emerges from liberatory struggle and the other from advanced “petrocapitalism.” [...] Queerness teaches us to love the surface, to play on it and with it. It is opaque; there is no secret to reveal. The objects of plastic obey a similar logic: they are plastic all the way through, proudly displaying their designed surfaces that conceal nothing, creating uniform and impenetrable entities while quietly leaching and breaking down, imperceptibly but irreversibly changing our environment (Davis, 2016a, p. 188).

This description resonates with my experience of invoking Plastic (across all my workings with them). I have always experienced a weird sense of time, but also of timelessness—perhaps akin to a deep meditative state where each moment seems to last forever—but I could also perhaps reframe the ‘childlike’ or naïve sensibilities of this experiences as a fascination with surface, concealing nothing. In this invocation, I felt perplexed by some of the things that held Plastic’s attention—they kept returning to a scratch on the piano in the room, and the base of a microphone stand in particular. They also kept knocking off the top of the incense; I have no idea why. They also felt fascinated by a couple of the audience members and looked directly at them, though they also felt a lot of shyness—which afterwards I found quite amusing, the idea that a Spirit could feel shy seems absurd in a way. But then, so does invoking the Spirit of Plastic. The eye-contact and direct engagement with individual audience members felt markedly different from the previous two rituals and afterwards I wondered (again) about the ethics of this practice. Talking to them after the event though, neither of them felt too uncomfortable with the situation, though they did notice this and had quite intense experiences of the performances. They also noticed this sense of shyness and childlike aspect to Plastic.

The Plastic ritual consisted mostly of singing—mostly ingressive multiphonics with a sense of aesthetic beauty to them, but without discernible rhythmic or melodic hooks. The ritual also had a feel of self-indulgence. Plastic seemed very happy to sit in themselves and play-another childlike aspect to the performance. I had started the performance by drinking a small amount of water from a plastic water bottle (which
perhaps contains traces of plastics) and used this as a percussive accompaniment to the singing, later using some plastic bags that I had on the altar as well. At some point, Plastic just played very slowly with the plastic bags for some time, one of them balanced on their head for a while and a strange, open, yet insular childlike quality permeated my/their experience. They just sat, happily scrunching a plastic bag for quite some time. Outside of a ritual, I wonder if I would have the sureness to do this within a performance context; though doing so in this ritual context—and hearing people’s positive responses to it as performance—made me curious about trying to engage more with this sense of purpose, or intensity of concentration in performance 

no matter what the activity consists of. Though in some sense I sat watching this, it felt profoundly liberating to just sit with a plastic bag resting on my head smiling at another plastic bag in my hand and for this to feel absolutely ‘right’.

Plastic might seem like a strange, deliberately obtuse or simply ridiculous entity to work with. But as Davis asserts:

To live ethically in the present moment means finding creative strategies for living with toxicity—to accept it as a new queer future and to find ways of navigating horror while resisting the policies, governments, and corporations that would like to see our lives foreclosed (Davis, 2016a, p. 192).

While Haraway does not consider ‘entities’ like Plastic in her important work Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (Haraway, 2016), the interspecies ethics (and queerness) of her work resonates with Davis’. ‘Staying with the trouble’ must also mean “finding creative strategies for living with toxicity. I feel confused about how much my (often introspective) spiritual practice can integrate with political action. But I do know that I have no desire to harken back to some pristine shamanic pastoral. I have found exploration within a shamanic framework fruitful in all sorts of ways. But for it to feel “authentic” to me, it must incorporate the political, social and ecological realities that comprise the world that I live in.

As Francis writes:

The word ‘plastic shamanism’ is often used as a derogatory term for modern shamanism, because it does not come from an unbroken ‘tradition’ or lineage. However, I think doing so is to confuse ‘traditional’ with ‘authentic’. [...] The people who decry modern shamanism as being ‘plastic’ are also usually the
people who say that shamanism must be Spirit-led. Well, you can’t have it both ways. Either shamanism is something that can only be learned from other humans, and passed down generation to generation in an unbroken line. In which case, anything that is not ‘traditional’ or from a ‘lineage’ is not shamanism. Or, shamanism is something that is Spirit-led, and so can be learned directly from Spirit. [...] in fact, people being directly Spirit-taught is a well-known and respected thing in many shamanic cultures. It is why shamanism is sometimes referred to as the path of ‘direct revelation’—something that is revealed to someone directly from Spirit (Francis, 2017, p. 172).

I affirm a Spirit-led practice, and one that invites an exploration of the world we actually find ourselves living in rather than harkening back to some idealized (or “traditional”) past. While in some ways the term “plastic shamanism” suits my practice—both in my embracing of the industrialised world, as well as embracing the “toxic” present—I have thus-far refrained from using this phrase as it seems like a useful tool for some of the valid critiques levelled at Western (neo)shamans around issues of cultural appropriation. I will consider this further in the following chapters.

Reflections: Day four: Invocation of Unknown Entity

This final ritual functioned as an exploration—or a continuing of my explorations—of Ritual Without Intent. A questioning, a queering, of the concept of ritual as having a purpose. A more explicit exploration of ‘ritual space’ or ‘ritual self’ as a mode of experience rather than a means to an end. A rewriting of the ‘Great Work of Magick’ as a queering of the delineated borders between different ‘selves’, allowing them—or inviting them—to manifest as and when they will. Inviting in whatever arises. An explicit gesture of inviting the unknown, and acknowledgment that we cannot control what we experience, and yet wanting to explore the experience—and develop the skill—of ritual work within this existential crisis.

I used my ritual drum for this work—made from a discarded flower pot that I found during a ritual, with the top cut off and a skin of cello tape. In some ways, this ritual had the most ‘traditional’ structure—drumming and singing, the singing used as
chant to summon the spirit, and this becoming the entity singing through the magickian. The change-over occurred fairly early on in the piece and a few people had a sense of this change, apparently. This ritual felt the most melodic and conventionally beautiful and actually sounded like a piece of music, albeit an improvised, meandering one with some unusual vocal techniques—mostly ingressive singing, multiphonics and overtone singing—and unusual timbres from the cello tape-layered drum. My use of the drum took inspiration from my understanding of Siberian shamanic practices in which the drum has a magickal rather than musical use; in these traditions, the drumming has a very repetitive quality. Myburgh reflected on this in our interview:

You were beating this drum, and it just kept going. I was negotiating this feeling of ‘if this weren’t what it is...it would get very annoying!’ The drum was just there. Then you would go to a new section, or it would feel like it was a new section, and all you’d be doing is just playing it a bit faster or something! I was thinking there was this song-like melody ‘thing’, over the top, and this drum is doing this structure that doesn’t fit, it’s not changing how it ‘should’. And yet it was really interesting. It felt like you could step back and just listen to the material, but there was still an energy there, which maybe comes from that quality of presence (Myburgh, 2017).

This ritual felt as intense as all the others, but as to how it felt... I find this hard to put into words. It felt like it had a very clear sense of intent, but also felt open and improvisatory; which obviously, all of these rituals did, but the openness felt foregrounded, or I felt more aware of it throughout the experience. Or they felt aware of it, embodying it, and I watched.

‘Invocation of Unknown Entity’ felt like Dada art magick. Or Dada anti-art magick. Or Dada art anti-magick. Like Dada, this ritual—and those explored in the following two chapters—explored embracing the absolute unknowability of cause-and-effect (which we might also learn from chaos mathematics). An existential question mark, an embrace of openness, a queerness. An exploration of the conundrum of performing resistance to a normative trope of formulaic, outcomes based magick, within the genre of ritual work—a genre almost entirely based on manifesting desirable outcomes.
‘invocation of unknown entity’ (a foreshadowing)

On the 2nd of March, 2016, I improvised a ritual, the recording of which I entitled ‘invocation of unknown entity’; (Sage Musick, 2016d):
https://sagemusick.bandcamp.com/track/2016-03-02-invocation-of-unknown-entity

This working began as exploration of ‘dada anti magick that would result in my album invocations of unknown entities. (Pbbbt, 2017d) Or it at least congealed some experiences into something I could point to as a beginning. That night, I had finished my evening meditation and:

I felt this intense connection with my [shamanic] drum. And a sense of some presence in it / or potentially present. And a clear sense of ‘purpose’ or ‘calling’ or whatever. I felt very clearly the I should perform a ritual. An invocation (and possession).

An “Invocation of an Unknown Force / Entity”

The ritual felt easy and obvious and intense and fantastic.

Glossolalia, free flow of sounds. Started drumming and singing and it kinda just all happened (Harlow, 2016).

My magick diary has multiple references to this ritual in the following days and weeks musing on the possible effects of this ritual; I will return to this after a little context.

I consider my practice to fit within the chaos magick paradigm, a postmodern iteration of the western magickal tradition. At its best, chaos magick privileges a multiplicity of subjective experiences (rather than the one-truth-fits all of most spiritual or religious practices), creative engagement with the world and heteroglossia (though they probably wouldn’t use that term—I just love Donna Haraway’s A Manifesto for Cyborgs (Haraway, 2006). At its worst, chaos magick looks a lot like a bunch of privileged white men hedonistically glorifying their achievements while disrespecting a wide variety of the worlds cultures. People have various different definitions of magick in the western magick tradition, but probably the most widely cited, and the most influential comes from Aleister Crowley: “Magick
is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will” (Crowley et al., 2008, p. 126).

While I have found some deviations from this ‘working model’, most of the western magick tradition seems to start with this kind of assertive, self-assured individual with some explicit goal which they use magick to accomplish, often overcoming obstacles along the way. I have worked using this kind of formulaic approach to magick at times, but a few years ago I started experimenting with improvising in ritual work, and ‘discovered’ that this worked just as well as formalised, goal-oriented work. In fact, I found that it worked far more effectively, in part because I felt (and still feel) pretty sceptical about the whole ‘magick’ thing. I would describe my worldview from 20 years ago as ‘material determinism’, coupled with a heavy dose of depression—not a fun combination. I first read about chaos magick around this time and it seemed like a way to engage with my ‘worldview’ which I recognised as ‘unhelpful’ to say the least, but couldn’t quite mange to motivate myself to ‘invest’ in various other options. Chaos magick seemed like a paradigm which required zero investment—you only needed to ‘believe’ in anything for the duration of the ritual that grounded in that belief. Cut to 15 or so years later: after much dabbling, some more serious magick work, years of daily meditation practice, along with a host of other things to engage with depression, I feel completely free of (that type of) depression, have a much more complex (and confused) ontology, but still have a tendency towards scepticism. Demarcating a space to allow an exploration of some (unusual) experience, and (re)framing it in a creative context—musick, and free improvisation—let that sceptical, ‘rational’, ‘logical’ part of my brain relax a little.

In the last couple of years, I have discussed ‘improvised ritual’ with a few other magickians that have a significant amount of ritual practice, and they have all said something along the lines of ‘ah, you’ve discovered that’, as if improvised ritual work counted as some kind of ‘advanced magick’ that only skilled practitioners could master. This confused me because I had simply found it deeply liberating from what I saw as the burdens of a particular ‘voice in my head’, or way of thinking about the world. Despite what these magickians have said in person, most what I have read about magick has tended towards goal-oriented ritual work.
I should perhaps clarify that I still have an intent in the ritual work that I do (at least until a bit later in the story). I have just let go of the idea of having a specific goal in mind. Instead of creating a ritual with the intent of achieving x I will devise a ritual with the intent of, say, inviting a particular demon to manifest and exploring what happens. And on the subject of demons, the traditional, or at least Crowleyan take on this kind of ritual looks something like this: 1. summon demon, 2. restrain them, 3. subjugate them with the force of your Will, 4. make demands of them, 5. achieve desired results. I try to view remain agnostic about as much as possible, in the sense that Robert Anton Wilson used the word—he suggests that “as soon as one believes a doctrine of any sort, or assumes certitude, one stops thinking about that aspect of existence” (Wilson, 1977, p. ii). And: “Everyone has a belief system, B.S., the trick is to learn not to take anyone’s B.S. too seriously, especially your own” (Wilson, 1993).

One can view possession by demons in a few different ways (or through different Belief Systems): demons or spirits actually exist as independent sentient entities, they represent some personification of some aspect of yourself not usually given expression, they represent some aspect of the ‘collective unconscious’, or an archetypal form that we have some relation to. Whichever model one might choose to adopt to ‘explain’ one’s experiences, this doesn’t seem like a very healthy way to relate to... whatever you think has manifested. I now tend to simply invite (something) to manifest if they feel like it and collaborate. This seems like a much healthier basis for a hopefully useful relationship.

I found some solidarity with this approach in the writings of the magickian Demetria Monde Thraam whose work I came across last year. She has worked quite extensively with the entity Choronzon. (I discussed Thraam’s take on Choronzon in the previous sub-section ‘Queering Choronzon’ in the chapter ‘The Residence Workings’.) I really like Thraam’s intervention as it offers—as I read it—a real queering of tradition, and, in some sense, a learning to love things ‘as they are’ (which the vipassanā-meditator part of myself approves of), in the sense that she sees Choronzon as performing a particular function. To hate this entity for performing that function that comprises their sole reason for existing seems ridiculous. (It also echoes the Tibetan tantric Chöd practice, in which one strives to love one’s demons and ritually feeds one’s to them as a way of embracing one’s demons rather than allowing them to overpower you.)
My understanding of Chöd comes almost entirely from Tsultrim Allione’s book *Feeding Your Demons* (Allione, 2008). I also really like Allione’s intervention in what can seem like a quite patriarchal lineage of Buddhism; Allione wrote a collection of biographies of women Buddhist saints, *Women of Wisdom* (2000) and has lead a remarkable life as a monk, mother, divorcée, writer and many other things, but all framed within a strong spiritual practice—she doesn’t ever frame herself as ‘straying from the path’, more that her path has a different route to the sometimes quite macho seeming ‘sit and meditate X hours a day until you get enlightened’ spiel one gets from some (usually male) Buddhists. Ken Wilber mused somewhere about how a matriarchal spiritual lineage might differ from the patriarchal ones that we have inherited; I perhaps read Allione’s life as a partial answer to this (rhetorical) question.

Thraam’s take on Choronzon influenced my practice quite heavily in the last year or two and functioned, for me, as a way of integrating chaos magick, the usefulness I found in the A·A· maps of enlightenment, and vipassanā meditation. I have struggled with the intersection of an ‘observer’ vipassanā practice, and a magick tradition focused on ‘asserting one’s will’, and the sometimes-directionless quagmire of the postmodern chaos magick diaspora. Queering Choronzon feels like a creative, chaos magick take on rewriting the A·A· narrative without disregarding it, that also accepts the ‘stages on the way’ and engages with them as part of the process of awakening.

So, having explored various forms of improvising ritual work with a specific intent but without a specific goal, I finished meditating one day and ‘felt moved’ to do a ritual which didn’t really have a specific intent. Or at least not one that “I” knew about. Invoking some ‘unknown entity’ and letting it take control of your body (and mind?) goes against most of the teachings of the western magick tradition. Many, I feel sure, would call it dangerous (I perhaps don’t argue with that). But for me, the most exciting part of my magickal practice has to do with exploring the nature of consciousness and my relationship to ‘reality’. Having a praxis based on asserting one’s Will on the world seems inherently limiting—you will only ever explore what you have already processed with your conscious mind. This ritual seems to have
functioned in several ways. It feels like a big ‘fuck you’ to the results oriented, patriarchal-hedonistic stream of magick (albeit a ‘fuck you’ said quietly by myself in the comfort of my own home), a deliberate act against the grain (and in this sense perhaps truly in keeping with left-hand path ideologies of antinomianism—a really important part of chaos magick). I also see it as a Dada (or Discordian) ritual. I wrote in my diary some days later: “This feels like the greatest Dada Prank of all time (for me).” An action that embraces the contradictory aspects of life, that writes against monological rationality, and that embraces the body and the absurdity of life. But also, perhaps the ‘intent’ had something to do with freeing myself from the need to have an intent? Sometime before, I created a sigil that I used in a ritual: “My True Will is to not have a True Will.” (The concept of ‘True Will’ has central significance in Crowley’s religion Thelema.) I suspect that on some level I took inspiration from a story that a friend of mine wrote many years ago, which really struck me:

One day a girl found an old lamp, rubbed it, and a Genie appeared. The Genie said to the girl, ‘I will grant you a wish… Anything you like.’ The girl thought for some time, and then said to the Genie “I wish that my wish wouldn’t come true.” And with that, the Genie disappeared in a puff of logic (after Iqbal, 2003).

I find the paradox in this story really appealing and beautiful. I think my ritual work has a similar function—I get to have the experience of ‘having my wish granted’ (of doing magick, creating ‘change in accordance with my Will), but I also don’t get anything out of it. Except, perhaps, the self-satisfaction of the smart-arse.

Sometimes I feel that I have done a good job of not getting distracted by the shiny things that magick can produce, which Buddhists explicitly talk about as dangerous because of their capacity for distracting the seeker from the path towards awakening. Ingram (Ingram, 2008, pp. 173-181) has an excellent overview of this subject. Other times, I wonder if some part of me works to deliberately undermine my potential. Have I ‘liberated myself’ from my ‘power’? That does not actually sound so bad. But have I ‘liberated myself’ from my capacity to enact change in the world? Or to enact my idea(l)s?

I feel interested in the tensions between documenting a ritual work (in sound) and the creation of a work of art (music). Some writers insist, for instance, that “good
magick makes bad art, and good art makes bad magick,” (Chapman & Barford, 2009a, p. 282) whereas others equate them – Aleister Crowley, for one: “All Art is Magick” (Crowley et al., 2008, p. 197). This recording perhaps references ethnomusicology, and definitely feels like a ‘recording of a ritual’, rather than a recording of a ‘song’ or ‘artwork’. I quite like this about it (and it feels true to the spirit of the experience). With this track, I think I lean towards not necessarily thinking that this ritual makes for ‘good art’ (and this despite that fact that I have found the ritual powerful, and engaging for some time after the ‘completion’). I find the use of drum and singing in a ‘nonsense’ language perhaps comes across as culturally insensitive—I have no problem with using these techniques in a genuine (?) spiritual practice, but reading it ‘as music’, it seems to come across quite differently.

I do like some of the sounds in the piece: the ingressive ventricular fold resonance at around 5:00 and the nasalisation and uvular trilling from 6:15, followed by alternations between ingressive and egressive singing all have some aesthetic appeal. I find the radio static-like sounds at around 10 minutes quite amusing given that the ‘channelling’ ends immediately after this, as if the ‘signal’ from whatever entity I ‘got in touch with’ had some interference and then cut out. I do like the piece as a recording of a ritual work. But while experientially it may have functioned as a kind of ‘Dada anti-ritual’, I don’t think that comes across in the recording at all. The ‘seriousness’ doesn’t suggest any kind of parodic aspects, though perhaps in the right context this could work in its favour. I feel curious as to what the right context might look like for this piece (and others that I have like it). Sitting as one track amongst a collection of about 800 on a website with no navigational instructions aside from rather arbitrary breaks into chronological sections doesn’t situate the piece very well. This feels like work for another day; but I wonder when that day will come—I have recorded most days for nearly two years now. I really value this collection as a kind of diary or sketchbook, but unlike an artist’s sketchbook, one cannot very easily ‘flick through’ because of the teleological aspect of musick.
‘invocations of unknown entities’:
“True Shamanic Black Metal”

This album comes out of my exploration of an improvisation practice influenced by extreme metal as well as various shamanic music traditions that have a much more fluid sense of rhythm. I wanted to explore a music that felt like a waterfall or fast-flowing stream or busy freeway—a chaotic, overwhelming sound, but with a constant sense of flux and flow. I also took particular inspiration from left-hand path spiritual traditions and the driving forces of black metal—the desire to explore extremes, the investigation of transgression and the antinomian stance. As a queer, trans woman, inhabiting these spaces acts against the tendency of this work to act as the hedonic expression of the privileged at the expense of those who have less privilege precisely because of normative and authoritarian systems antinomian positions nominally critique.

In the last few years, I have moved away from “results-oriented magick” that “asserts its Will on the world” to a more open-ended, creative and collaborative ritual practice. My possession ritual feels more like inviting a friend in and collaborating than demanding things of some entity. And I’ve done some invocations of forces I felt present that I could not name and did not know. Which felt like a mix of existentialism, Buddhist Chöd ritual (Allione, 2008), cultivating compassion for all sentient beings, and a kind of Dada anti-magick. Ritual without intent! Magick without results! An open-ended, ongoing exploration of (magickal) consciousness and its aesthetics. This has also led me to explore queering the boundaries between explicit magickal work and musick. Because no boundaries exist. Which sometimes feels liberating and sometimes feels terrifying and sometimes feels hilarious.

Shamanism

The appeal of shamanism for me had something to do with wanting to explore a spiritual practice that did not feel like cultural appropriation, and that felt free of the influence of (phallogocentric) monotheism. The way that Harner (Harner, 1980),
Walsh (Walsh, 1990, 2009) and many others write about (neo)shamanism present it as both a precursor to *all* religions and spiritual practices as well as a *universal* set of practices and beliefs, albeit with great cultural diversity in their ‘expression’.

Alice Beck Kehoe’s excellent book *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking* (Kehoe, 2000) examines the use of the term “shaman” and argues that the term’s broad use has a racist underpinning in the way that it groups together so called “primitive” cultures’ spiritual practices. She argues that we should use the term to refer to Siberian cultures only, and use the local terms for other practices that currently get grouped together. Kehoe argues convincingly for the dissimilarities of these hugely disparate practices and asserts that they do get grouped together because of a racist assertion of their “primitive” status:

> All known societies are “shamanistic” societies in that they harbor individuals who have seen, and learned, ritual practices disapproved by mainstream Christian and Jewish seminaries. Labelling non-Western societies “shamanic” while at the same time claiming that contemporary Europeans and Americans have lost “the way of the shaman” perpetuates the hoary notion that they are barbarians and we are civilized. That notion disrespects the religions and ritual practitioners of other cultural traditions at the same time that it blinds us to the reality of similar practices among many of our own citizens (Kehoe, 2000, p. 55).

Kehoe’s writes an erudite and informed critique of the West’s use of the term “shaman” and much of it I find convincing. However, Kehoe does not address the centrality of nature and/or our interconnectedness with non-human persons (animals and “spirits”). Kehoe criticizes the fuzzy, broad inclusion of spiritual traditions from all over the world under the title “shamanic” and suggests that Christian and Jewish practices might just as well come under such a definition. But the monotheistic religions moved the focus of spiritual life from navigating our complex relations with other sentient species—finding our place in the world—to a much more hierarchical, ordered sense of place, and one which does not (often, or necessarily) include “nature” or other species (and arguably asserts our superiority over them). While many of Kehoe’s critiques resonate strongly—and she has many, insightful criticisms—the appeal of the term “shamanism” perhaps has more to do with an open-ended spiritual practice, exploring altered states of consciousness that
acknowledges our interconnectedness. While I do not have the space to explore this in the literature fully, I would at least like to acknowledge that my own use of the term comes from a desire for an open-ended, non-monotheistic exploration of consciousness and interconnectivity and while I acknowledge many of the problematic uses, I hope that my own use of the term highlights some of these problems and invites a more critical reading. At the very least I hope that my tongue-in-cheek, ironic use of the term does not normalise it in the way that (neo)shamanic practitioners do such as Castaneda (Castaneda, 1968, 1972, 1974, 1977) Cowan (1996), Francis (2017) Harner (1980), Ingerman (2004), Noel (1997) or Walsh (1990, 2009) all writers whose texts I feel that I have benefitted from in their practical or technical advice (or descriptions thereof) and all texts that I find problematic to varying degrees in how they present this material and their relationship to the various traditions that they orient themselves around.

The social, cultural and religious differences in different traditions labelled as ‘shamanic’ have great importance, and muddying these differences certainly belies an ignorant, if not racist stance on the world. I also feel that however misguided at times, this search for a ‘universal shamanism’ comes from a desire for a non-monotheistic spiritual practice, that foregrounds our interconnectedness to other forms of life and that has an open-endedness to it. The stripping away of cultural trappings—while problematic in many instances—at its best constitutes a desire to find the technologies of ritual that form the basis for any spiritual practice and which one can apply in any context. Ideally, this eliminates the need to appropriate cultural practices as one can explore the technique in one’s own cultural context. The best iterations of chaos magick function like this. While some neo-shamanic practitioners talk about a ‘select few’ people getting ‘called to shamanism’ the universalist outlook of these practices suggest that everyone can practice at least some aspects of ‘shamanic spirituality’—and often give instructions for shamanic journeying as an example of a practice open to anyone. I do not have any desire or intention of searching for universal truth or spiritual practice, but the open-endedness of shamanism—at least as presented in the neo-shamanic stream—has practical appeal as both a spiritual and aesthetic approach.
Firstly, it seems, at least potentially, non-hierarchical. It certainly does not equate all people’s skill levels of power, but at least in theory anyone can participate in ‘shamanism’. This lack of fixed power structures often extends into the spirit realm as well. Spirits and humans help each other out and make deals with each other rather than one worshipping the other. The huge diversity of shamanic practices around sometimes seems like it invites an exploration of a shamanic practice that sits well with one’s personal ethics and cultural context.

Secondly, because of the fairly simple baseline for what constitutes shamanism—altered states of consciousness and interacting with spirits—neo-shamanism can incorporate other belief systems relatively well. Contemporary western practitioners talk about meeting Jesus or Buddha or John Lennon as well as spirit animals. However cheesy or cringe worthy I might find specific descriptions, to me this really does seem like the flexibility of a quite powerful tool to different symbolic systems or image-repertoires. We might think of shamanism as a kind of open-source spiritual practice. Anyone can contribute and change it, adapt it to their own needs and include programming from their own subconscious or idiosyncratic symbolic system. I particularly enjoy Jodorowsky’s take on ‘shamanic psychotherapy’ that he calls psychomagic which fuses a variety of different magick traditions with psychology and an exploration of communicating with the subconscious ‘in its own language’—that of symbols rather than words (Jodorowsky, 2004, pp. vii-ix). In fact all of the systems of magick that I have most resonated with have given shamanism a prominent role—Jodorowsky’s psychomagic (Jodorowsky, 2004, 2008, 2016), Peter Carroll’s argument that all forms of magick ultimately derive from shamanism (Carroll, 1987, p. 8). Antero Alli’s ‘paratheatrical research’ (Alli, 1987, 1991, 2003, 2014), or what he calls “A Modern Shaman’s Guide to Reality Selection” (Alli, 1991) as well as Robert Anton Wilson’s writing (Wilson, 1977, 1983, 1990b, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995) within which he refers to ‘The Shaman’ as one of the more prominent voices or personalities he acknowledges. Duncan Barford and Alan Chapman’s practices also embrace the open-endedness of shamanic practices while having a strong Buddhist, Thelemic and chaos magick flavour as well (Chapman, 2008; Chapman & Barford, 2009a, 2009b, 2010).
In the first documentary to address the problem of cultural appropriation in white shamanism Charlie Hill says:

You can always tell a white person when they get their Indian name. It’s always these, Hollywood type of names—Rolling Thunder, or Swift Dear or—you can always tell these names and their always English names so to speak. I think that’s ridiculous because they don’t know the reason they have names. They don’t have naming ceremonies’ (Macy & Hart, 1996).

And Thomas Bearhead Swaney asks: “Why don’t they pick up a name like Bloody Guts. Something that doesn’t have that ring of power and spirituality” (Macy & Hart, 1996). In amongst watching the cringe-worthy and truly ignorant white people, I must confess to letting a smile across my face remembering the acquisition of my magickal name—from Eris, the goddess of discord and confusion (from the Greeks, but very much via the Discordian Society) and so ridiculous and silly. Pbbbt. The transcription of blowing a raspberry. Not quite ‘Bloody Guts’, but certainly—I hope—undermining any suggestion of my own authority. Perhaps also taking inspiration from Robert Anton Wilson and his relationship to the rabbit Harvey: “when High Weirdness occurred, I would just file-and-index it as a six foot tall white rabbit from County Kerry, playing games with me. I still prefer this model to all others, because there is no chance that I or any sane person will ever take it literally” (Wilson, 1991, p. 64). Perhaps privilege allows one to have the option to not take oneself seriously.

As Sam Harris writes in his book Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion, “It is decidedly inconvenient for the forces of reason and secularism that if someone wakes up tomorrow feeling boundless love for all sentient beings, the only people likely to acknowledge the legitimacy of his [sic] experience will be representatives of one or another Iron Age religion of New Age cult” (Harris, 2014, pp. 14-15). Harris attempts to present meditation in a secular context, to liberate the technologies of liberation—and of experiencing boundless love—from the cultural context that they originated in. It seems like a hugely important project to me. (And incidentally, one that most Buddhist feel comfortable with—most iterations of Buddhism privileging meditation as more important than belief or following other practices.)
I feel lucky to have come across chaos magick and other more creative, open-ended forms of magickal-spiritual exploration that—while they often take influence from other cultural traditions—has a strong grounding in the ‘western magickal tradition’. (Even if the ‘western’ magickal tradition looks a lot like a mix of Egyptian and Hellenistic influences amongst others rather than an ‘indigenous’ Anglo-tradition.) A chaos magick approach does not only allow for inappropriate cultural appropriation—which, sadly, it does at times—but at its best, demands a critical engagement with methodology. This means that people who might appreciate the historical importance and powerful ritual of the O.T.O. might not simply blindly accept their misogynistic and heteronormative rituals, but instead take inspiration from this tradition, from this technique and create their own rituals, write critically about their experiences and perhaps form new groups with better gender politics (Psyche, 2014).

The ‘harkening back’ to shamanism may therefore serve as a technology through which to explore a collection of spiritual tools that in their most abstract forms do have great similarity across cultures—altered states of consciousness from music or entheogens and exploring ‘other worlds’. Taking these tools from their cultural context raises ethical problems and issues of appropriation but we should strive to parse this from the technologies of spiritual practice. I find it hard to see an ethical problem with a privileged white person playing a drum they have made or bought themselves that has no cultural significance to any indigenous groups and exploring the strange effects on consciousness that arise from the intent of ritual. But as soon as the white person has any Native American or Siberian imagery on that drum, I feel profoundly uncomfortable. That said, I do not think their ignorance and racism voids their experience. It sits alongside it. Similarly, I do not think that this person’s exploration of the ‘spirit realm’ will necessarily make them a better person. Or give them more compassion. Or make them more culturally sensitive. These battles we must engage with our mind, with intellectual engagement and with compassion for others.
Channelling kin in the Chthulucene

Donna Haraway’s *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Haraway, 2016) offers a Speculative Feminism (SF) embracing the trouble of our times, remaining present in the messiness of the world, creating, recognising intersections and entanglement in the here and now. She writes:

This book argues and tries to perform that, eschewing futurism, staying with the trouble is both more serious and more lively. Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all. That kind of material semiotics is always situated, someplace and not noplace, entangled and worldly (Haraway, 2016, p. 4).

My magick and musick take inspiration from this SF “worlding”, a term that Haraway uses as Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction and Science Feminisms do, in *imagining* other worlds, other possibilities (Haraway, 2016, pp. 2-3, 10).

My tentacular/chthonic magick explores the tentacular sympoiesis of the Chthulucene. And in so doing, deconstructing (or simply realising) the illusion of ego, of the autopoietic self and an opening up to the sympoietic web. Analogously, I ‘give voice’ to a multiplicity of voices, all of which have some sense of interconnectedness, none of which seem like the voice of my egoic ‘self’, all of which, in some sense, seem ‘like me’.

Some people read the upward pointing pentagram (most often associated with witchcraft, paganism and western occultism) as symbolising an ascent from the mundane into the spiritual or divine. The downward pointing pentagram (associated with Satanism and other left-hand path traditions in the west) as symbolising a descent into the world. This might read as the divine manifesting in the world (in a similar way to the expansion of the divine through the Qabalah from Kether to Malkuth). The left-hand path practitioner treats this world as (potentially) divine and, perhaps more importantly, this self. They do not harken to some future paradise, but seek to create change in the world in accordance with their self. The Chthulucene, however, offers no possibility of transcendence and no self-deification. While the absolute Law of Anthropos asserts its objective truth and Grand Narrative, the Chthulucene instead offers a messy tangle of (possible) connections.
Haraway’s writing on the Chthulucene resonates with how I have thought about my invocation practice: “eschewing futurism” sits comfortably alongside staying present in the moment, accepting whatever arises as the practice that leads to peace. “Making kin” resonates with my Chöd-inspired practice of not just accepting demons, but nurturing relationships with them in a mutually beneficial way. Haraway’s “making oddkin [...] unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles” (Haraway, 2016, p. 4) gave me a new tool to think about my invocation work—composting the various experiences that arise in my conscious into new forms, a continuous process of transformation. This sits in parallel with the more explicit socio-political aspects of ‘staying with the trouble’ which resonates with anarchist traditions that focus on nurturing relationships now, that seek to find spaces and contexts in which we can thrive, not investing in some utopian future.

Haraway distances her writing from Lovecraft’s Cthulhu mythos and while I have taken great inspiration from Phil Hine’s Pseudonomicon (Hine, 2009), particularly his embracing of the irrational as well as fear, terror and madness in his magick practice, I have similar hesitations about Lovecraft’s worlding. Haraway says of her Chthulucene:

> These real and possible time-spaces are not named after SF writer H. P. Lovecraft’s misogynist racial-nightmare monster Cthulhu (note spelling difference), but rather after the diverse earthwide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tngaroa (burst from water-full Papa), Terra, Haniyasu-hime, Spider Woman, Pachamama, Oya, Gorgo, Raven, A’akulujjusi, and many many more. “My” Chthulucene, even burdened with its problematic Greek-ish rootlets, entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus (Haraway, 2016, p. 101).

Lovecraft’s dreadful underworld chthonic serpents were terrible only in the patriarchal mode. The Chthulucene has other terrors—more dangerous and generative in worlds where such gender hierarchies do not reign, an open-ended, queer world where all nightmares might manifest—not just those of the dominant ideology. The dada magick of *invocations of unknown entities* does not just open
itself to the horrors of our patriarchy-ridden world, but to the horrors—and joys—of anything that might arise.

It feels tempting to me to read the Chthulucene as a stand-in for the Abyss (Da’ath, the Dark Night of the Soul). A lot of what Haraway writes resonates with my experience of the struggle to stay present with the difficult things and a desire to not project into the future. But most of the traditions that acknowledge these realms/experiences map beyond the Abyss into stages of experiencing the Diving/Awakening. And this kind of reading implicitly posits the Chthulucene as a stage to pass through rather than a place to inhabit.

“True Shamanic Black Metal”

I offer “true shamanic black metal”, and the album invocations on unknown entities as a counterpoint to the predominance of New Age, neo-shamanism which often has a quite “positive vibe”. Accounts of traditional practices (that have had the label “shamanic” applied to them) often have a much broader scope of emotional and ethical content. My slogan offers a performative (and tongue-in-cheek) reminder of the ‘dark side’ of working with spirits and exploring spirituality.

The limited (to five) box-set editions of my album have the phrase “true shamanic black metal” engraved on them and a picture of a fist holding a drum mallet in the circle of a drum echoing the second-wave feminist symbol (and other variations). I use the phrase “true shamanic black metal” ironically, as a faux-harkening back to some fictive sense of authentic origin.

I reference the phrase “true Norwegian black metal”, used for the name of an album (Gorgoroth, 2008) a book (P. Beste, 2008) and a five-part documentary series (Beste, P. (Director), Beste, Semmer, Berglin, & Washlesky, 2007) as well as descriptive phrase that performs authenticity. (Phillipov, 2012; Scott, 2014) The use of the phrase “true black metal” extends beyond Norway (Granholm, 2013, p. 19; Kuppens & van der Pol, 2014).
In using the phrase “True Shamanic Black Metal”, I want to foreground my awareness of *inventing* a genre that makes use of ‘shamanism’ which some people propose as a universal spiritual (ancient) paradigm. I hope my tongue-in-cheek assertion has a similar quality of intensity and seriousness (trve kvlt!) as well as silliness. That said, a small number of bands have described themselves as ‘shamanic metal’ that mix neopagan and/or neoshamanic music with traditional metal. To my ears, the ‘shamanic’ musical elements sound somewhat tacked-on and reference New Age musics (or interpretations of shamanic musics) rather than having studied traditional shamanic musics and tried to integrate these with metal. In this sense, the gesture towards shamanism seems tokenistic, at least in terms of musicality (I have no desire to doubt anyone’s intentions in their individual spiritual practices). My use of the phrase “true shamanic black metal” also points to a non-ironic deeper exploration of what the intersection of shamanic drumming and a black metal aesthetic could look like. The shamanic drumming that I feel most moved by, and which I have taken inspiration from, comes from the locations that Kehoe believes has the only claim to the term ‘shamanic’. So, we might read the “true shamanic” of “true shamanic black metal” as referencing this, though as a profoundly ironic gesture given my own distance from these cultures.

Aside from the few bands that call themselves ‘shamanic metal’ described above, a couple of bands do exist that seem to have seriously explored the idea of ‘shamanic black metal’, albeit in different ways than I have, most notably Darkestrah from Kyrgyzstan. Darkestrah mix traditional folk instrumentation with black metal and include aspects of shamanism and Tengrism (a central Asian animist religion) in their lyrical themes as well as performances. Their albums (Darkestrah, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2013, 2016) include recordings of ambient sounds including bird calls and singing around campfires and integrate different genres of music often within the same song. I adore Darkestrah, but they do still sound like a metal band with elements of Kyrgyz folk blended in rather than a radically new form of hybrid shamanic/metal. This should not read as a criticism of Darkestrah, I simply note our different intentions.

Many artists and critics write about the meditative, trance-like, or trance-inducing qualities of black metal, which largely comes from the repetitive nature of the music.
The trance-like qualities of black metal function similarly to the trance-like qualities of drone, industrial, rave or any repetitive dance music. In some sense then, we can read the trance-like qualities of black metal as part of a meta-narrative of the striatification of music (see below). Electronic music (or technologies) in particular has made repetition—precise repetition—not just much more accessible, but a normal (normalised) part of our experience of music. In the early days of industrial music, this repetition functioned as an analogy for totalitarianism. Bands like Throbbing Gristle, Cabaret Voltaire and Laibach subjected us to stark, repetitive beats as part of a ritualistic exploration of power dynamics. Now, we have come to accept these forms as the norm, and deviations from them sound particularly marked.

Exploring a non-striated musick

In 10,000 Plateaus Deleuze and Guitarri write about nomad space. I read this text as an “ironic political myth” as Donna Haraway called her ‘Manifesto for Cyborgs’ (Haraway, 1991, p. 149) rather than factual anthropology or historical analysis. They suggest that nomadic cultures have a sense of space and time which has more of a sense of flow and expansiveness about it. This sits in opposition to sedentary cultures which have a tendency to erect borders and divide time and space into identical, measured and measurable units. Nomad cultures tend to have a more expansive understanding of time and space and their instruments tend not to have frets and include lots of glissandi and moving freely around and between notes and intervals as well as a much ‘looser’ or free sense of rhythm. In sedentary cultures, notes become more strictly defined—to the point where we define an A as 440 Hz—instruments and develop clear delineations between individual notes—frets for stringed instruments, and much less use of note bending and glissandi—and radically delineate our sense of both time and space. In sedentary cultures we divide time up into measurable, identical units of hours, minutes, seconds, which we constantly measure and our spaces become defined by Cartesian axes, whether in our square buildings, roads or maps (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, pp. 477-478).
Most shamanic musics come from relatively nomadic cultures, at least traditionally. And many shaman-musicians speak of (shamanic) music needing to come from the heart, breath, core or soul. Each beat of a drum, each sung note, must have the full presence of the shaman, resulting in the shamanic “nothing rhythm” as the shamanic grandmaster Park Byong-Chon puts it in the documentary film *Intangible Asset 82* (Franz & Franz, 2014). Or as Hakim Bey muses: “the smell of TIME unlocked from all grids of school, music lessons, summer camps, family evenings round the tube, Sundays in the Park with Dad—authentic time, chaotic time” (Bey, 1985, p. 47).

At the extreme other end of the spectrum of striated-ness, we have the piano and Twelve Tone Equal Temperament. This scale system compromises most of the harmonic relationships to facilitate movement between different tonal centres. Slight tuning ‘error’ becomes the norm so that we can move seamlessly between equally weighted relationships, each note *approximating* values in multiple keys. With everything written down in a now ‘universal’ language of music that has colonised far and wide across this planet, stretching its grid over many of the musics of the world. The grid of Twelve Tone Equal Temperament casts itself over all of the musics of the world, leading ethnomusicologists to mis-transcribe the musics of non-western cultures and musicians to ‘correct’ mistakes in indigenous musics.

Could we ask for a better performance of normativity? All things reduced to ‘equivalent’ component parts. A universalist trope eroding difference, literally forcing things into a matrix that it admits they do not fit, but persists in doing so anyway.

All of this set against the radically embodied, individual and yet profoundly culturally and socially engaged sense of sound grounded in every moment, of sound-making as the centre form which all things resonate.

*Shamanic drumming*

The shamanic drumming that I have taken inspiration mostly comes from Tuva, Siberia and Mongolia. This style of drumming has a constantly changing timbre and rhythm. Tim Hodgkinson has spent years in Tuva and Siberia researching shamanic
drumming as well as cofounding K-Space (K-Space, 2002, 2005) with Ken Tallisker (who also researched Siberian drumming with Hodgkinson) and Gendos Chamzyryn (a Tuvan shaman and musician). Hodgkinson writes of Tuvan shamanic drumming:

> the way they played the drum seemed to involve almost constantly changing the tempo and shifting the accent. There was no equivalent to this in any other kind of music I had ever heard (Hodgkinson, 2016, p. 33).

The constant subtle changes in the drumming has a relationship to healing and the spirits. Van Deusen asserts that:

> Constant changes in timbre and volume keep them interesting. The healing quality lies in this variation, which tracks and directs the patient’s energies (van Deusen, 2004, p. 124).

These alterations also serve to please the different spirits who present themselves, or as a tool for manipulating the shamans’ own consciousness. Hodgkinson observes that: “Shamans using varying rhythm to engage with spirits and to manipulate their subjective experience” (Hodgkinson, 2016, pp. 33-34). Susan Grimaldi works as a Choctaw shaman involved with Harner’s Foundation for Shamanic Studies as well as in supporting shamanic practitioners around the world (Grimaldi, 2016). She reports on an Ulchi shaman’s description of working with spirits:

> Rhythms played by shamans reveal what the spirits are commanding of them. Grandfather can work with the voice of the swan, and then in a moment a new rhythm begins. When calling a flying spirit. the beat is soft and tender. When calling Tiger, the sound is stronger. When searching, they have a high rhythm. When driving out illness, they get faster and louder. For divination, a more monotonous tone is played. For a fish transformation, they play the drum with the beater gliding over the drum face, which indicates going into the water, head down, coming up for air and then gliding. The shamans’ rhythms are improvised, expressing the moment in their journey (Grimaldi, 2005).

DuBois also offers a good overview of ways that various shamanic traditions use different rhythm to represent spirits, considering a more broad geographical range (2009, pp. 153-161).

Hodgkinson links improvisation and shamanism. He asserts that both:

> are deeply concerned with the limits of control and prediction. Both can be thought of as lying at the heart of their respective domains, in the sense of
being strong forms of what becomes more diluted in other contexts. Shamanism has a loose claim to be the original “old-time” religion, and improvisation has a loose claim to be the source of all music, if not the model for all human experiment (Hodgkinson, 2004).

This sense of primacy, of urgency, perhaps even of ‘starting afresh’ appeals to me and resonates with what I have explored with “true shamanic black metal”. However tongue-in-cheek, I do have some investment in the idea of letting go of all the complicated models of western ritual magick and “starting again”, directly from the spirits. The clear danger here lies in the racist trope of the ‘primitive’ shamanic culture. I do not attribute this kind of ‘primitivism’ to any shamanic cultures. And various shamanisms have developed radically differently as Kehoe (2000) points out, and have their own complex, distinct cultural, symbolic and ritual systems. I fully acknowledge that I have taken inspiration from some aspects of these cultures musick and ritual practices. But I share Hodgkinson’s interest in the primacy and directness of both basic (or as Harner (1980) would say, ‘core’) shamanic techniques and improvisation. My project attempts to take inspiration from the Tuvan, Siberian, Mongolian (and Korean) shamanic drumming practices and explore the intersection of these kinds of techniques with black metal. A blackening of true shamanism. A shamanising of black metal.

Transcendental black metal and “true shamanic black metal”

Hunt-Hendrix, who fronts the band Liturgy (Liturgy, 2009, 2011, 2015) coined the term “transcendental black metal” for his new iteration of the genre. I see some curious parallels—and clear differences—between Hunt-Hendrix’s proclamation and my own exploration of “true shamanic black metal”. Hunt-Hendrix contrasts transcendental black metal with Scandinavian (second wave) black metal which he terms “hyperborean black metal” (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010). For Hunt-Hendrix, transcendental black metal means “affirmation” and has a specific drumming technique, the “burst beat”, in contrast to the “nihilism” of hyperborean black metal and the technique of the “blast beat”. Hunt-Hendrix posits the “haptic void” as the “hypothetical total or maximal level of intensity. It is the horizon of the history of
metal” (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 55). This horizon has central importance to Hunt-Hendrix’s theory:

Hyperborean Black Metal is the culmination of the history of extreme metal (which is itself the culmination of the history of the Death of God). The subject of this history may be compared to a mountaineer, manoeuvring over and across the various terrains of thrash, grindcore and death metal—or rather, carving these terrains into the mountainside—and striving to reach the Haptic Void, dimly understood but strongly felt, glimmering brightly at the summit. Hyperborean Black Metal represents the mountaineer’s arrival at the peak and a supposed leap off of it, directly into the Haptic Void. A total, maximal intensity. A complete flood of sound. An absolute plenitude. But there he learns that totality is indistinguishable from nothingness. He learns that it is impossible to leap into the horizon. And he is left, crestfallen, frozen and alone, in the Hyperborean realm. It is a dead static place, a polar land where there is no oscillation between day and night. But stasis is atrophy. The Hyperborean realm is dead with purity, totally absolute, selfsame and eternal. The mountaineer undergoes a profound apostasy that he cannot fully understand and arrives at nihilism (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 57). He then asserts that:

Transcendental Black Metal represents a new relationship to the Haptic Void and the self-overcoming of Hyperborean Black Metal. It is a sublimation of Hyperborean Black Metal in both its spiritual aspect and its technical aspect. Spiritually, it transforms Nihilism into Affirmation. Technically, it transforms the Blast Beat into the Burst Beat (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 58).

I have similar critiques of some aspects of ‘hyperborean’ black metal to Hunt-Hendrix and a similar fascination with a fluid sense of rhythm. We diverge considerably, however, in ways outlined below. Our orientation forms a major difference. While Hunt-Hendrix wants to ‘back off’ from the Haptic Void, and in doing so, avoid arriving there, I instead orient my practice around inhabiting the space of Otherness, the Spirit realm, the Abyss, the Chthulucene. Rather than orienting myself around this event horizon, a singular, static absolute, I instead inhabit a throbbing, pulsing, Abyss always present, always multiplicitous, always manifesting, becoming in new forms—always cohabiting the moment with our oddkin, with spirits, with the extra-normal aspects of voice, self, reality. This is a
realm we can always access and which I seek to *integrate* into my daily practice. Rather than holding back from the void like Hunt-Hendrix, I instead embrace the queer failure (Halberstam, 2011) of staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016). Of manifesting and remanifesting in the present. Of giving voice to the multiple, entangled voices that arise when one opens oneself to them. Embracing the failure of a hegemonic, singular, phallogocentric narrative.

Hunt-Hendrix presents a table contrasting his ideas about hyperborean and transcendental black metal (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 61). I have recreated this table below with an extra column for “true shamanic black metal”. I have also added one row to Hunt-Hendrix’s table with the entries ‘riffs’ and ‘timbre’. A discussion of the elements follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hyperborean</th>
<th>Transcendental</th>
<th>“True Shamanic” (Chthonic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nihilism</td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>Invocation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atrophy</td>
<td>Hypertrophy</td>
<td>Tentacular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blast Beat</td>
<td></td>
<td>Burst beat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riffs</td>
<td>Timbre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunar</td>
<td>Solar</td>
<td>Chthonic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depravity</td>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>Compassity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Infinite</td>
<td>The Finite</td>
<td>Multiplicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purity</td>
<td>Penultimacy</td>
<td>Un/Becoming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *invocation* here represents the invocation of the Unknown, of the Other. An open invocation without intent. An invocation of *acceptance*.

*Tentacular* after Haraway (2016), representing entanglement and the messiness of connectivity with Other critters in the Chthulucene. A move away from the primacy of the monadic individual; embracing the *network*.

*Burst beat* after Hunt-Hendrix. I might equally have used “nothing beat” after Park Byong-Chon’s use of the term shamanic “nothing rhythm” (cited in Franz & Franz, 2014), or “shamanic beat,” (perhaps even “true shamanic beat”) but I hesitate for the same reason that I hesitate to use the word “shamanic” without the ironic gesture of
scare quotes—I recognise that I have created my own bastardised musick here that owes a lot to my (mis)understanding of shamanic traditions and musick, but I do not assert any sense of historic or cultural authenticity. Instead, I (re)use burst beat as much of Hunt-Hendrix’s description of this technique appeals to my own playing. He writes:

The burst beat is a hyper blast beat, a blast beat that ebbs, flows, expands and contracts, breaths. It replaces death and atrophy with life and hypertrophy. This transformation is accomplished by two features: acceleration and rupture (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 59).

And goes on to describe it in more detail:

The first feature of the burst beat is acceleration. The burst beat accelerates and decelerates. It has an ebb and a flow. This flow both mirrors life and stimulates life. It expands and contracts like the tide, the economy, day and night, inhalation and exhalation, life and death.

The second feature of the burst beat is rupture. The burst beat features sudden ruptures or phase transitions. Just like all natural systems, it breaks suddenly from one state to another. Consider the horse as it switches from walk to trot to canter. Consider water as it switches from ice to liquid to gas. The moment of the rupture is the moment of transcendence. What is holy if not the moment that water turns to steam? Or the moment that a walk turns to a run?

The burst beat expresses an arc of intensity. It responds to and supplements the melodic flow rather than providing a rhythmic container or backdrop. The rate of change of the tempo, whether positive or negative, corresponds to a level of intensity. Any static tempo is a zero degree (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 60).

Much of the purely technical sense of rhythm here resonates with (my understanding of) Siberian (and related) shamanic technique. The sense of ebb and flow, the expansion and contraction. On can also draw a link between Hunt-Hendrix’s ‘rupture’ and the change of rhythm when a shaman’s drumming takes on the characteristic of a new spirit voice (or adopts a new rhythm for the emerged spirit). This represents one of the main differences in Hunt-Hendrix’s black metal and my own; my practice centres around inviting others in, in affect and in channelling, rather than performing an aesthetic ideal.
Another clear difference arises here. For Liturgy, and for most, if not all, black metal to date, the burst beat (or blast beat) remains in service to the riff. While Hunt-Hendrix asserts the primacy of the blast beat and burst beat in hyperborean and transcendental black metal respectively, both musics centre around guitars and riffs. As Hunt-Hendrix himself writes, the burst beat “responds to and supplements the melodic flow rather than providing a rhythmic container or backdrop” (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 60). We might generously read this as asserting the equal value of the drums with the guitar—but not their primacy. My “shamanic black metal” practice asserts the primacy of voice and drums, letting go of melody and harmony to embrace a deep, open-ended, fluid exploration of rhythm and timbre. In my solo practice, these elements weave themselves through each other, pulling and pushing each other along.

The primacy of “shamanic rhythm” and “channelled voices” in my practice allows for a deep, dark, exploration of the chthonic. Just as Haraway distances herself from the Lovecraftian version of Cthulhu:

Lovecraft’s dreadful underworld chthonic serpents were terrible only in the patriarchal mode. The Chthulucene has other terrors—more dangerous and generative in worlds where such gender does not reign (Haraway, 2016, p. 174).

I similarly distance myself from other uses of chthonic black metal such as Famine of Peste Noire who asserts that black metal:

is a CHTONIAN [sic] religion: a cult of the EARTH and a return to it, therefore a nationalism; a cult of what is BELOW the earth: Hell — the adjective “chthonian” applies to the Infernal gods as well. Black Metal is a fundamentalism, a music with integrity [...] It is the apology of the dark European past. It is a psychosis which helps us to flee a reality we cannot tolerate anymore (cited in Noys, 2010, p. 111).

As Noys points out though, these gestures possibly function as irony, parody or humour (Noys, 2010).

Compassion grounds the self in relationship to others. Depravity and Courage can both function in a purely solipsistic mode. Chthonic black metal functions in an
open, collaborative mode by “making kin” (Haraway, 2016), by “feeding our demons” (Allione, 2008).

We can read the burst beat and “shamanic black metal” can as a kind of “assemblage” in the terms of Deleuze and Guattari:

In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmenatrity, strata and territories; but also lines of flights, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an assemblage. A book is an assemblage of this kind, and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity—but we don’t yet know what the multiple entails when it is no longer attributed, that is, after it has been elevated to the status of a substantive (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, pp. 3-4).

This sense of exploration, of mapping permeates my project of Daily Sketches, of ‘invocations of unknown entities’, of my whole open-ended project of creative exploration of the ‘spirit realm’, or Chthulucene, of a deep engagement with the selves and of the present.

Of “penultimacy”, Hunt-Hendrix writes that

the burst beat never arrives anywhere, eternally “not yet” at its destination, eternally “almost” at the target tempo. Like a nomad, the burst beat knows it will never arrive (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 60).

And goes on to say that:

Transcendental black metal sacralizes the penultimate moment, the “almost” or the “not yet”, because it has been found that there is nothing after the penultimate moment. The penultimate moment is the final moment, and it takes place at every moment. The fabric of existence is open. There is nothing that is complete; there is nothing that is pure (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 63).

I would reframe this as the present moment, not the “penultimate”. Becoming as a positive affirmation of the present moment, a radical, compassionate acceptance of whatever arises rather than some “not yet” harkening to some an idealised futurity, however “negated”. Unbecoming as an anti-individuation. A deconstruction of the
individual. A welcoming of the Other in/as/through the “self”. An embracing of the Chthonic. As Haraway writes:

Staying with the trouble does not require such a relation to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing point between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings (Haraway, 2016, p. 1).

I affirm “the messiness and imprecision of the Now” as my practice, the compost, the trouble, the messy, tentacular, chthonic interwoven, thick present. I embrace not contradiction, but messiness and multiplicity not a harking back to the past, but an embracing of failure in the present.

Black metal creation myths

Hunt-Hendrix asserts: “Hyperborean Black Metal is lunar, atrophic, depraved, infinite and pure. The symbol of its birth is the Death of Dead [the lead singer of Mayhem]” (Hunt-Hendrix, 2010, p. 54). “True Shamanic Black Metal” is chthonic, tentacular, compassionate, multiple and (un)becoming. The birth of “True Shamanic Black Metal” occurred on 3rd February 2016, recorded as ‘invocation of unknown entity’ (see previous chapter).

Satanism

This album came about from an interest in extreme metal as well as ‘shamanic’ musics and free improvisation. I love an admittedly idiosyncratic selection of extreme metal and have felt particularly interested in the idea of black metal both for the aesthetics of transgression and extremity as well as the interest in antinomianism. I also find a great deal of it problematic whether the infamous arson, suicide and murder associated with Norwegian black metal scene (centred around bands Mayhem and Burzum), or the stream of National Socialist Black Metal, or just the general manifestation of sexism (Davisson, 2010; Gardell, 2003; Granholm, 2013, 2014; Langebach & Raabe, 2013; Lucas, 2010; Patterson, 2013; Phillipov,
Perhaps Black Metal has similar levels of sexism and racism to other musical genres. But they just seem more apparent in Black Metal because of the explicit Satanic imagery and interest in the transgressive, including performing socially unacceptable views (even if these views, while ‘unacceptable’ might still permeate our cultures). I sometimes feel surprised by the lack of engagement with the kinds of prejudice that we inherit from our society/culture. Satanism—arguably the defining feature of black metal—manifests in a wide variety of forms from theistic Satanism to explicitly atheistic Satanism with various agnosticisms and acceptance or criticism of other gods and traditions (particularly Norse and Pagan) along the way, but ‘Satanism’—and various other belief systems that might take the place of Satanism in black metal—highly values a belief in the individual and in challenging hegemonic thought. Often, however, it seems that Satanism—and other left-hand path practices, at least in the West—can function as an excuse for those with privilege in society—white, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis-men—to not engage with their privilege and pursue a hedonistic engagement with the world under the aegis of a spiritual (or philosophical) practice.

While some black metal musicians perform Nazism or other offensive motifs as transgressive and perhaps with no other intent, they at the same time perform their privilege in their capacity to inhabit these positions. Aside from my adoption of the term “true shamanic black metal”, my exploration of black metal has striven to embrace authenticity, vulnerability and fragility alongside musickal intensity.

My transgression against normative forms comes in my experience as a queer, trans woman inhabiting the space of black metal—and by association ‘Satanism’ and/or ‘left-hand path’ practitioner. And inhabiting this space of sympoiesis, a site for multiplicitous voices, rather than a singular, phallogocentric, monotheistic (True) Self.

Other traditions or individuals do seriously engage with what it means to privilege the rights of individual sentient beings in a world full of power imbalances. Many Satanic and left-hand path groups encourage at least the consideration of vegetarianism (Granholm, 2009) and some actively disavow racism or sexism (Temple of Set, 2012). The Satanic Temple mostly function as a secular religious
group promoting civil rights, including, for example, the rights of women seeking abortions in states of the USA that have antagonism towards this right. They have several cases in progress in different states, for example:

THE SATANIC TEMPLE (TST) has filed both state and federal lawsuits against the state of Missouri on behalf of Mary Doe, a pregnant woman seeking an abortion. Missouri law requires that all women seeking to lawfully terminate their pregnancy must be given reading material claiming that life begins at conception, and they must endure a 72-hour waiting period between their initial appointment and their actual abortion procedure. TST objects to these restrictions on religious grounds because they violate our belief in the inviolability of one’s body (The Satanic Temple, 2017).

The Satanic Temple seem genuine about their desire to function as an atheistic, science-embracing religion, as well as making good use of the dissonance that comes from occupying the space of a religion—and demanding all the privileges that American society accords a religion. They function both as a genuine expression of religiosity and as a parody of other religions in a manner similar to the Discordian Society.

The more recent history of Black Metal has had an influx of feminist and queer proponents as well as a couple of bands fronted by openly trans women, for example Kat Gillham of Winds of Genocide and Marissa Martinez from Cretin (Gillham, 2012; Kowalska, 2014; McGinn, 2015). The increased popularity of veganism in recent years (EO Executives, 2017; Lowbridge, 2017) has also at times taken on a black metal or Satanic aesthetic for example the front cover of Melbourne vegan restaurant’s cookbook Smith & Daughters: A Cookbook (That Happens to be Vegan) (Martinez & Wyse, 2017). They also sell inverted cross badges made for them:
The YouTube channel ‘Black Metal Chef’ shares a similar tongue-in-cheek aesthetic (Vegan Black Metal Chef, 2017). Yet we should not consider this tongue-poking as a lack of seriousness or of serious intent, but rather a critique of the established, taken-
for-granted norms (of, in this case, eating meat and other animal products) with a sense of both authenticity and self-deprecation.

_Uncharged sigil of unknown intent_

The box-set version also contains an ‘uncharged sigil of unknown intent’ which has the following text on the back:

‘Uncharged Sigil of Unknown Intent’
gifted from ‘Unknown Entity’ during ritual work, 4th October 2017

**charge at your own risk**

_neither Sage Pbbbt, Tone List nor any affiliates take any responsibility whatsoever for results that may or may not occur because of the deployment of this sigil_ (Pbbbt, 2017c).

I drew these five sigils in a trance state having invoke the/a ‘unnamed entity’ asking them for this gift. Usually magickal sigils encode an intent, abstracted from language into a ‘magick-looking’ diagram and people have all sorts of different techniques for doing so, most commonly leaving out repeated letters, arranging the remaining into something that ‘looks magickal’ to the magickian (Carroll, 1987; Chapman, 2008; Fries, 1992; Spare, 2007; Vitimus, 2014; Webb, 1999; White, 2010). No one, so far as I can find, uses sigils without a clear outcome in mind, although writers often suggest that part of the effectiveness of sigil magick comes from letting go of the intent with the rational mind—thus the need to abstract it into a form not recognizable by the conscious mind and “charging it” in gnosis.

The inclusion of these sigils offer an invitation to the listener to engage in the process of “dada magick”—charging a sigil, the intent of which remains unknown. But as with my own dada magick workings, this questions the very notion of magick and efficacy. If we do not know the intended outcome, how can we possibly judge whether something “worked”? We cannot, of course, if we have the outcome as the focus. Instead, these processes undermine out notions of cause-and-effect and refocus our attention on the _experience_ of ritual in the moment (or perhaps on reflection) rather than searching for something achieved. The inclusion of this sigil/invitation invites the listener in to the ritual of dada magick.

→ 129 ←
The box set also includes some chocolate from Gabriel Chocolate in the Margaret River region, an intense, rich 99% cocoa chocolate from the Chuau region in Venezuela. I like this chocolate more than any other and the intensity of it seemed like a great match for the album, as did the silliness of including a chocolate bar with a black metal album. This also suggests the possibility of a chocolate and musick pairing and references the Mayan uses of chocolate in ritual contexts (Hull, 2010; Kufer, Grube, & Heinrich, 2006; LeCount, 2001; Christine McFadden & France, 2000; McNeil, 2009). At least one of the recipients of the box set reported having quite intense reactions to the 99% cocoa chocolate and had the intention of exploring these alongside listening to the album.

Recording process

Some time ago Dan O’Connor offered to have a play with recording drums in his studio. I currently have a two-input soundcard and when exploring singing and drumming have just used one condenser mic for drums. Which has worked relatively well for the lofi, diy, black metal sound that I have had interest in. But had also considered buying a soundcard with more inputs (which I have now) and Dan had expressed interest in perhaps recording, or helping to record my free improvised black metal album. I feel really comfortable working with Dan—he initiated my Residence Workings project and did a lot to facilitate it and made sure things ran smoothly and people felt comfortable. He also expressed his discomfort or reservations which felt an important part of the process of making everyone feel as safe as they could—him included.

On the last two days of June I went to Dan’s studio with the intent of recording some drumming and playing around with different sounds. But this turned into actually recording an album. Tone List—of which Dan comprises one quarter—had asked me to record an album for them this year and offered me a small grant from the money they had via Tura New Music for women and queer artists to facilitate recordings of projects. I initially felt confused by this offer as I keep a collection of Daily Sketches on my Bandcamp (Sage Musick, 2013-ongoing) which compiles everything that I do.
solo. I have also started going through this collection of over a thousand recordings to select some of my favourites to repackage or reframe somewhere but this process has taken a lot of time and goes slowly. The notion of creating ‘an album’ felt somewhat anomalous until I had a clear idea to explore the notion of “shamanic black metal”. I had started tentatively playing drums again earlier that year and when I had the vision of this album I focused on developing my skills to the point that I could record this album (which took about nine months).

Working with Dan felt easy and hugely fulfilling. I had a quite vague ‘plan’ in terms of the sound that I wanted—something muddy and bubbly, with each detuned drum sound bleeding into the others. I wanted it to sound like one messy sound, rumbling, rolling along, with different elements bubbling to the surface at different times, but always having a sense of interconnected elements. I feel that Dan managed to manifest this (vague) vision and felt very happy to read Pino’s review of the album on Disaster Amnesiac:

> great for this fan of drums is the way that they sound here: loosely tuned, big and booming. Along with the lovely timbres, it’s great to hear what sound like a few different striking implements utilized on the drums. Invocations’ percussion sounds wonderfully live, vigorous, and untamed. Not always a common occurrence, that’s for sure. Credit must be given here to engineer Dan O’Conner [sic]. What a great job of capturing what can be a very elusive vibe (Pino, 2017, emphasis in original).

**Album cover**

I did consider hiring local photographer Josh Wells to take some photos of me—he has taken a lot of photos of local improv and experimental music and done a lot of work for Tone List and I liked the idea of contributing to that relationship. But I also thought that doing it myself and doing something in keeping with the lofi, diy, ‘bad computer art’ aesthetic of the album covers I have created for my Daily Sketches project. I also liked the idea of doing something with a black metal aesthetic to acknowledge that influence on this album. Many black metal albums and promo shots have black and white, overexposed, high-contrast images. I took a few photos
the day after the recording and played around with colour settings—overexposing and increasing the contrast, etc. By accident, I created a cover I quite liked but feel deep ambivalence about. I had intended to take some photos to crop to just include the head and shoulders—I used my phone’s camera leant against some books on a bookshelf—but because of the distance from the camera they included more of my body, unclothed because I just took my shirt off to get my shoulders in the picture. And it happened that something moved me about one of the pictures (after I had played with the colour). The ambivalence comes in part from my discomfort with presenting a naked representation of myself and in part from this image representing a naked woman with her head removed—which feels like a recognisable trope of problematic, objectifying presentation of women’s bodies.

This image does not, however, seem particularly sexualised to me (though perhaps others could better judge that). And the ‘erasure’ of the head almost feels like it gives it more power—it becomes the void from which ‘unknown entities’ emanate, or it becomes a confrontation to the audience. The strange angles in the body struck me first in this image and seem to add to the ‘otherness’. These come in part from the unusual (accidental) stance, and from the prominence of my ribs, which stick out below my breasts (which I remember doctors telling me this comes from having severe asthma as a child, but which I have found nothing to verify this). The single trace of light in the middle of the head does represent one of my eyes, thought this does not seem obvious from the picture. I quite enjoy both the presence of the gaze and its obfuscation.

This image resonates with some of the transgressive elements of black metal and I enjoy the contrast between this aesthetic and that of free improvisation which, while I would really struggle to give any kind of definition of a visual aesthetic for it, certainly feels at odds with that of black metal. This does not look like the cover of a free improv album.
invocations of unknown entities
Sage Pbbbt
Inverse circular breathing: Some technical geekery

Over the course of about six months, I have explored a vocal technique which I have termed ‘reverse circular breathing’. Reverse, because unlike the usual circular breathing technique utilised by wind players which produces a continuous stream of air exhaled from the mouth, my technique utilises a continuous lingual ingressive airflow. The more usual circular breathing technique involves ‘storing’ air in the mouth and cheeks, exhaled through the mouth while breathing in through the nose. With practice, wind players can create a seamless airflow from their mouths alternating between air from the lungs and air from the mouth and cheeks. This continuous airflow, pushed through the instrument can create a sustained tone or the full range of usual instrument sounds without pauses for breath. For most instruments this constitutes an ‘extended technique’, but forms the basis of yidaki playing.¹

Most forms of singing cannot make use of the usual circular breathing technique because the vocal folds—the sound source for almost all forms of singing—lie in the trachea which the air must flow through to replenish the lungs when breathing in through the nose. Some contemporary singers have experimented with alternating between ingressive and egressive airflow to explore continuous sounds most famously Joan La Barbara’s ‘Circular Song’ (La Barbara, 2003) and the Inuit throat singing tradition makes use of these alternations though with two voices usually voicing out of sync with each other (producing a continuous egressive and ingressive airflows). For some time, I have considered ways in which I might approach a technique that either mimics or perhaps simply references or pays homage to wind players’ circular breathing. In part, this comes from an open-ended curiosity about the (perceived) limits of the human voice, in part, because circular breathing has such a strong presence in the repertoire of ‘free improvisers’ who play wind instruments (and I find myself performing in this context most often) and in part

¹ More commonly, and problematically known as the ‘didgeridoo’. Yidaki also has common usage, but technically refers to instruments made by the Yolngu people rather than the whole family of instrument.
because my own practice has its roots in mimesis and mimicry under the influence of the Tuvan and Mongolian throat singing2 that first inspired me to start singing.

I have experimented a little with a continuous lingual egressive phonation but found I had more control and interest in ingressive sounds for this technique. In part, this comes from an idiosyncratic association I have with ingressive techniques and left-hand path spirituality—for me the ‘inversion’ of ingressive singing references the transgression and inversion of hierarchies in left-hand path traditions (that I take a lot of inspiration from). For the last six months or so, I have practiced ingressive bilabial and labiodental fricatives striving for an unbroken, continuous sound while breathing in and out through my nose, or in through my mouth and out through my nose. Because of the fricative nature of these sounds, they have a sense of instability and rupture anyway, but with practice, I have managed to develop a sense of continuity in these sounds.

I had several reasons for exploring this technique. Firstly, amongst other things I consider myself an experimental vocalist in the most literal sense of the phrase. Part of my project centres around experimenting with the possibilities of what the human voice can do. Secondly, it presented a concrete challenge, the pursuit of which might lead to unexpected rewards—through discovering other techniques, or developing skills which would help with other techniques. Thirdly, because at present I do not know of anyone who uses this technique. Finally, because this technique has a certain silliness which appeals to my aesthetic and spiritual practices. (Hail Eris!)

With practice, I have gotten to a point where I can maintain this technique for five minutes or so before a build-up of saliva requires some attention and action on my part. I have continued to work on this by finding ways to reduce the saliva content in my mouth while continuing the resonance—basically drooling out of the side of my mouth. I have slowly gotten less self-conscious about small amount of drool in my performances—partly in response to the freedom with which wind players empty

2 Khoomii, khoomei, xoomii, and various other spellings when using the Tuvan of Mongolian words, also called overtone singing (a more accurate technical description) though throat singing has quite wide usage as a translation from the original terms, or at least how people describe it in Tuvan and Mongolian cultures.
valves mid-performance and in part a desire to inhabit my body in all its messy, visceral reality.

While I feel that I likely have more control than most over the quality of sounds I can make with these techniques, they do pose some quite severe limitations. Using low airflow (and low volume) I have explored a range of chaotic sounds with a quite ‘electronic’ feel utilising the tension of airflow through narrow, moist passages which magnify, at low volume, the subtle variations. Still, the palette of available sounds still has a very small range compared to other vocal techniques. I have used this technique in several performances, alongside other techniques, and have often felt that the nuances get lost amongst other more obviously varied sounds. I have sometimes felt confusion of anxiety around this with other techniques in my repertoire; I spent many years listening to Tuvan and Mongolian overtone singing and learning to listen a different way—what Süzükei calls ‘timbral-centred listening’, a widening of the aperture of focus of attention to really hear the full timbral range of an single sound-source, particularly the human voice (Levin & Süzükei, 2006)—but most of my audience will not have done this. Similar interests in timbre do permeate a lot of free improvisation, drone and other contemporary or experimental music and sound explorations—I certainly do not feel ‘on my own’ in my listening habits—but I have also had a number of conversations about ways of listening that seem to have affected how people have perceived my work (and that of others). Considerations around framing offer important opportunities for facilitating the kind of listening that ‘makes sense’ for this kind of singing and I feel aware that I could do a lot more to frame this technique well. Sitting amongst other sounds perhaps allows the subtleties to get lost. I have recorded a number of tracks in my Daily Sketches project (Sage Musick, 2013-ongoing) and the solo voice recordings I feel work better, but also suffer from existing amongst a collection of over a thousand other sketches.

I had a breakthrough in the last few weeks in exploring this technique when I realised that I could continue these ingressive bilabial and labiodental fricatives while also voicing with my vocal folds or ventricular folds. I already knew that I could resonate my vocal and/or ventricular folds in an in-breath while adjusting tension in my lips (or with teeth) but had put this aside in exploring a continuous sound from these sources. But when I realised that I could also continue my ingressive
bilabial/labiodental sounds with an egressive airflow over my vocal folds I felt that I had stumbled upon something with great potential. This recording feels like a sketch that I could refine into a performance and/or recording; (Sage Musick, 2018a): https://sagemusick.bandcamp.com/track/2018-05-14-this-way-madness-lies

I feel excited about continuing to work on this technique and getting to a point where I can sit, alone, with a microphone and explore some chaotic fricative noises with and ‘inverse circular breath’ for five minutes or more, giving the audience time to adjust their attention to this soundscape and the timbral nuances (and, perhaps, to perform the ‘technical feat’) and then bring in pulmonic ingressive and egressive phonation on top of this already established fricative drone.

In sharing these experiments with my colleagues Josten Myburgh suggested playing with projecting the sound to different speakers—perhaps using contact mics to pick up the vocal and ventricular fold sounds and project these from a different speaker than the microphoned lips. While the aesthetics of this spacialisation appeal, in my experience contact microphones really muddy the sound source and I feel greatly drawn to really pushing the possibilities of a single human voice with one microphone (or performing acoustically). In some sense this feels like a direct continuation of my path over the last few years—I had previously used a lot of delays and loops in my solo voice performances and slowly moved towards performing with just my voice and no effects whatsoever. I did this in part to push my technique, to develop the skills as a vocal performer to hold a space with just my voice, but it also fed into a process of engaging with my body more as a performer—I started transitioning about three years ago and exploring my physical (sometimes gendered) presence on a stage has felt like an important part of my transition.

Dan O’Connor also suggested using the nose as another sound source, which I have tentatively started exploring too. I have mostly tried to avoid breathing sounds in my practice—I hold my hand flat under my nose when ‘inverse circular breathing’ to limit my breath’s presence to help facilitate a more seamless sound—though I have used intentional breathy noises and sometime plain breath in performances, it can easily overwhelm other sounds and can sound accidental. I have, however, explored this in a few recordings, the most effective of which lies here; (Sage Musick, 2018b):
This exploration forms part of a larger exploration of timbre and the possibilities of voice as well as an open-ended exploration of giving voice to various entities through a possession/channelling practice.
Dolorous interlude:
i don’t know who this is, but welcome

https://sagemusick.bandcamp.com/track/2017-10-13-i-dont-know-who-this-is-but-welcome (Sage Musick, 2017b).

This improvisation really threw me. I have done improvised invocation many times before, sometimes utilising glossolalia—particularly in a number of pieces with Choronzon last over the last couple of years—but I have never had the experience of ‘channelling’ or feeling a voice speak through me that seemed like it spoke in an actual language. And with such self-assurance. It seems quite likely that this piece consists of nonsense words that sound a bit like Tuvan or Mongolian or Kyrgyz to my (untrained) ear rather than actually consisting of words from one of these languages. I have listened to a lot of Tuvan and Mongolian music over the years and a few different Kyrgyzstan artists more recently. Most likely, my subconscious has absorbed some of these sounds and used them in this trance state to perform a “shamanic” version of my self.

In some parallel world where I have the time and the resources, I have had this recording translated into English from Tuvan, Mongolian and/or Kyrgyz, giving the recording to translators asking them to translate whatever they can. In this parallel world, my curiosity has won out over my discomfort with the politics of cultural appropriation.

And this discomfort feels part of a larger discomfort with ‘oversharing’, or at least with the politics of sharing one’s ritual practice (or any other intimate process-oriented practice). Perhaps it might ‘make sense’ for my subconscious to use a Siberian or Mongolian shamanic character to communicate
something with my conscious mind. And I do not think that it makes sense to judge people’s idiosyncratic symbolic systems which we have little or no control over—this makes about as much sense as holding someone responsible for their dreams. And while I think repeated images that have elements of sexism, homophobia, cultural appropriation, etc., warrant self-investigation, our sub(or super)conscious minds work in mysterious ways and “we” should not feel responsible for everything that comes out of them.

However, if we present our dream diaries, or share our ritual practice (or sexual fantasies, or therapy sessions, etc.) openly, we need to carefully frame these as such. While I hope that my ‘Daily Sketches’ project reads as a diary of experiments and quite personal ones at that, these recordings do all sit in a public forum that anyone can access with minimal context.

Some part of me did not want to share this track. But that feels equally—if not more—problematic. I feel like I need to own and openly share—and ideally discuss—the ethical issues around my practice. I just do not feel that I have a particularly strong practice around this outside of a small number of friends, or this PhD.
SCORES
Playing other people’s scores

Performing John Cage’s ‘Aria’

Audio recording; (Sage Musick, 2016b):

Lindsay Vickery suggested that I do a performance of John Cage’s ‘Aria’ (Cage, 1958) and then write an article together—he from the compositional side while I would contribute my experience as a performer. I performed ‘Aria’ on 13th August (the article still to happen).

I decided to perform ‘Aria’ in a pretty “straight” way, following Cage’s instructions as precisely as possible; many excellent performances exist that take a more liberal approach to the score which work really well—Claron McFadden’s for example (Claron McFadden, 2011). I decided to do a ‘stricter’ version of ‘Aria’ for two reasons—firstly, to really learn the score, and what Cage intended to explore with it (and because I have very little experience with working from scores) and secondly, because the palette of sounds that I have feels markedly different from those used by other performers of the score that I have heard.

Cage wrote the piece for Cathy Berberian and the score includes the vocal styles that Berberian sang the piece using: Jazz, Contralto, Sprechstimme, Dramatic, Marlene Dietrich, Coloratura, Folk, Oriental, Baby and Nasal (Cage, 1958). Some of the ‘styles’ that I used give a similar range of effect on the range of the voice, for example: using the fingers to trill the lips, nasalised voice, uvular ululations and using the hand as a vibrato or wah-wah effect. But other styles that I used for the piece, and most of the sounds I have explored in my singing practice, I tend to use much less for exploring (fundamental) pitch, and more for exploring the nuances of timbre that they offer. In ‘Aria’, I used these other sounds: khoomii (the main style of Tuvan and Mongolian throat singing), ingressive vocal fold resonance, ingressive ventricular fold resonance, egressive ventricular fold resonance (similar to Tuvan and Mongolian
kagyrää, or Tibetan chant but without the vocal folds engaged), death metal growl, and a saliva-gland fricative.

My choice of sounds seemed obvious to me—I used techniques that form the core of my practice, and that gave a sense of making the piece my own, as well as differentiating it from other available versions. I enjoyed the challenge of strictly following a score, and letting go of my usual improvisatory mode of performance. While ‘Aria’ has a quite ‘loose’ score with no absolute pitch notated, I found working with a melodic piece extremely challenging, but rewarding. The audience responded well to the performance and many colleagues commented positively on the performance, some even suggesting that it had more focus or clarity than other performances they had seen.

Reflecting on the concert afterwards, I found myself feeling quite confused, and perhaps discouraged by people’s enthusiasm for my performance. In some ways, ‘Aria’ felt like a caricature of my usual practice. I utilized a number of different vocal styles, but in some way, they felt reduced to just that—a style, a style with which to sing a melody. I switched between ten different styles, and sang the melodies, sang the words. But I didn’t explore the styles. I did not explore the nuances of the harmonics that comprised the khoomii I sang or the subtleties of the ingressive multiphonics. The styles got used as colours to paint melodies in ten different colours. I felt that this distracted from investigating the nuances of any one particular colour or moment of sound.

Of course, not every piece or every performance has to explore the same aspects of sound, but it felt very different from my usual practice and I felt somewhat thrown by a number of people’s enthusiasm for this performance and at some point found myself wondering ‘has anyone ever heard my music?’ I have spent years listening to the timbral nuances of Tuvan and Mongolian throat singing and practising ‘timbral centred listening’ and I explore this in my daily singing practice. But most people (in Perth’s improv, experimental and/or new music scene) do not. Most of the people who hear my work do not. I wondered if most people hear my work more like they hear Cage’s ‘Aria’—moving between different colours rather than an exploration of the minutia of variations in colour. I wondered if the reason that most people lied the
‘Aria’ performance had something to do with it having ‘more than that’ happening—melody, words, etc. Things missing form my improvisation, the absence of which might feel particularly marked if one doesn’t hear what I think of as the ‘actual music’—the fine-grained exploration of timbre.

Obviously (I hope) ‘no one has ever heard my music’ functions as hyperbole, but the concern than an audience has a very different experience of the music than the musician seems a reasonable, unavoidable concern (in all music).

‘Aria’, and my confusion about my performance raised questions for me about how composers might explore timbre in composition and I have searched for pieces that do this in the last few months without much luck. Some graphic scores perhaps seem interested in timbre more than pitch, but I haven’t come across anything yet that explores precise timbral notation. But perhaps the complexity of timbre does not lend itself to this—and I have struggled thinking about how I might do so with my own vocal work, or what kind of notation I might present to a composer to write something for my vocal palette. Cataloguing sounds seems to miss most of what excites me about singing, because the subtleties and nuances of timbre seem too subtle to pin down, and idiosyncratic to an individual’s voice (at least in the case of singers). Attempts at ‘codification’ perhaps feel anathemas to my project of an open-ended exploration of a non-striated sound space (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, pp. 474-500). But it might prove an interesting, if ultimately futile, journey?
Playing Antoine Beuger’s ‘un lieu pour être deux’ with Josten Myburgh at Noemi’s house; with Josten Myburgh in Hyde Park

Antoine Beuger’s piece ‘un lieu pour être deux’ (Beuger, 2007) consists of 50 pages each with two numbers, between zero and three written on them, one above the other. The only instructions for the piece read: “sounds: very quiet not really short to very long” and “entries: free”. Josten Myburgh has studied with Beuger and has introduced this piece along with a lot of other Wandelweiser work to the Perth exploratory music community. The (post)Cageian aesthetics and profound interest in the politics of performance resonate deeply through the Perth community and, I think, constitute one of the defining features of the Perth exploratory music landscape. The title of this piece roughly translates as ‘places to be two together’ and with incredible efficiency of ‘instruction’ invites a profound exploration of the process of performing music as two people. Beuger’s work draws on that of Alain Badiou’s writing on ethics and politics (in English see, for example Badiou, 2006), but also exploring in scores such as ‘un lieu pour être deux’ Badiou’s assertion from Being and Event that “mathematics is ontology” (Badiou, 2005, pp. 1-20) and the politics of numbers (Another Timbre, 2017).

* * *

Feeling visible and vulnerable.
Also feeling safe.
The space feeling held by the audience.
The open door at Noemi’s house contributing some beautiful ‘ambient’ sounds which seemed to allow our performance to veer very much towards sparseness, stillness, ‘silence’; the ‘silence’ feeling interesting, rich, charged, beautiful, able to hold itself. Having felt deeply moved, challenged and enriched by playing ‘two sounds, very short’ with Josten previously (once in Hyde Park, alone, and once as a performance). This piece, these pieces, feeling like they explore the dynamics of relationship in a ritualized way that we don’t really have many spaces for in our society (perhaps no societies do?)
Anxiety about life in general replaced with the anxiety of when to make a sound, and which sound, and how does the other player feel about it, and the audience. But the
piece feeling like a safe space within which to feel through those things. This anxiety feeling like an important (and therefore perhaps comfortable?) part of the performance.

This piece seems to explore trust, love, and the power dynamics of relationships. Playing with Josten, it seemed that he had often ‘used up’ his sounds on a page before me (sometimes all of them before I had ‘used up’ any of mine). And this felt absolutely fine and comfortable. And it felt like it expressed something about our different relationships to sound, music, silence; and perhaps how we interact with people. (Or perhaps just aesthetic preferences?) I feel prone to silence, introspection, I feel very introverted. The rigid (in some sense) structure of this piece allows our different experiences, or personalities to sit alongside each other in a codified space; allows us to see these tendencies as they play out within the rules.

Music as a technology for facilitating people falling in love with each other.

In Hyde Park, the silence feeling fuller, having much less of a sense of tension or possibility. Our sounds sitting amongst many others. The performance having much more pace. Allowing four hours to play the whole piece, based on our previous performance. Taking two hours. This not feeling rushed, just different.
Anxiety around organising the performance (having slightly misunderstood the timescale). This feeling totally anathema to the spirit of the piece. Like rushing around getting stressed to get to a meditation session...

My printer breaking the day before the performance. Not having any time to go anywhere else. Remembering that I have a set of playing cards (that I used in a performance last year) and writing out the score on 50 of the 52 cards. Enjoying the feel of this ‘score’, and the ease with which it shuffles.

Meeting Annika; enjoying each other’s company, chatting. Perhaps feeling nervous.

Laughing and looking at each other a lot.

Shuffling the cards.

Silent giggling in the first few seconds.

Still looking at each other.

A fig falling from a tree onto the spokes of my bike, making a wonderful gong-like sound as if to announce the beginning of the piece.

Wondering if I pay more attention to traffic sounds than bird sounds.

Loving the stillness of the morning.

Loving Hyde Park; feeling that I don’t spend as much time there as I could, as I would like.

Not knowing many bird calls.

The performance feeling really full... but also really spacious... enjoying both of these aspects of it.

Enjoying the large amount of mimicry and mimesis in this performance.

Also enjoying some very Annika or Sage sounds that add something different to the soundscape rather than blending in or referencing the ‘context’.

A few cards in, Annika maintaining eye contact and picking up the next card which she holds up to her forehead so I can see it without breaking eye contact, then holding it up against my head so she can do the same.

Doing this for the next two hours.

Staring into each other’s eyes for two hours aside from a couple of moments when one or both of us shut their eyes, or look down.

All of the things that I project onto Annika; the Annika in my head.
This feeling very much like meditation. But also meditation with a prescribed action—singing—and interaction—a social aspect—which sometimes makes me wonder if meditation practices could improve on their capacity to integrate into everyday life.

Missing having people in my life who meditate regularly.

Enjoying some long, comfortable silences in this performance, not necessarily coinciding with the 0,0 cards.

Loving the purity, the absolutism, the humour of 0,0.

Mild concern for my fixation on absolutism and extremism.

Really enjoying the power dynamics and ethical questions as well as compositional questions around the various combinations of numbers.

The simplicity of the piece stripping right back to the core of something about what it means for two people to play music together, or just of two people together. And an invitation to explore this.

Yawns and sighs incorporated as music.

Wiping spit off my chin after a salival fricative; Annika grinning at me.

The intimacy of this performance reminding me of Nat and all that feels shifted in my life in the last few weeks.

All the sadness and grief and happiness, happiness, happiness.

Everything feeling turned up to eleven.

Feeling overwhelmed with sadness about an hour in to the piece. Feeling on the verge of tears for the next hour or so. It feeling safe to feel sad.

Feeling—imagining—that Annika felt angry at me. Perhaps for feeling sad. Or perhaps something to do with intimacy.

Also knowing that this has a lot more to do with me and my projections than anything to do with Annika.

Feeling totally aware of my everyday insanities.

Sometimes, feeling incredibly comfortable.

Feeling connected and present with this Other person.

Also feeling aware of the impossibility of knowing another persons’ experience.

The insurmountable loneliness of the world.

Feeling seen.
This phrase, ‘feeling seen’, having a huge amount of weight for me in the last few years having changed my name, gender... feeling more grounded in my body than I ever have.

And sometimes feeling that people *really see* this version of myself (which feels much more honest, open, vulnerable...)

This piece of music stripping everything away.

Sometimes finding it hard to ‘break’ the silence and create a sound in the world.

Noticing again my discomfort with taking up space in the world, with asserting myself, with people seeing me.

Feeling accepted (as a queer, trans woman; or just generally) in the Perth improv / exploratory scene. This sinking in deeper and deeper, slowly, slowly over the last year or two. (And as I accept myself).

The queerness of eye contact, of meditation, of this piece.

Playing pieces like this facilitating a radical level of acceptance which on the one hand ‘does away with’ identity politics, but on the other hand requires a radical acceptance of everything about someone.

The weight of every action.

The lightness surrounding every action.

The koan of how to act in the world without desire—just accepting the reality of the moment—while you change it.

Amazed at how easy it feels to slip into *presence* by simply looking at some numbers on a page and deciding to make that many sounds.

Wondering how to achieve this level of focus, presence, acceptance that I sometimes feel in meditation, ritual or music, in every moment.

Wanting to play this piece with *everyone*. Wanting everyone to have the opportunity to play this piece. Thanking Josten (multiple times) for asking me to play this piece with him, and for instigating this incredible project.

Feeling grateful and humble for this work by Antoine.
Performing Calum Rodger’s ‘01Sonate’

Audio recording; (Sage Musick, 2016a):

This piece felt like a way of engaging with Kurt Schwitters’ Ursonate (Schwitters, 2002, pp. 52-80) while sidestepping the weight of other versions of the piece. I have spent a fair bit of time over the years reading Ursonate and searching for a way in to the work. With such excellent recordings like Jaap Blonk’s (1985, 2003) and Christian Bök’s (2002) it feels a quite intimidating to undertake, not to mention the weight and importance of the poem in and of itself. I have also tried exploring extra-normal vocal techniques in the realisation of ‘Ursonate’ and various other sound poems, but have always felt unsatisfied with these experiments as they seem to detract away from the poetics of the sound poems, taking them further into the realm of singing, or sound art and losing their immediate connection to language, which I really enjoy. This feels hard to pin down definitively—drawing a clear line between singing and poetry perhaps feels antithetical to the praxis of sound poetry—but my favourite line blurring performers—artists like Bob Cobbing, Jaap Blonk, Maja Ratkje—tend to use a fairly small palette of vocal techniques when performing sound poetry. Jaap Blonk perhaps offers the best example, as he has quite a range of vocal techniques used unsparingly in his musical and sound improvisation work, but in his performances of ‘Ursonate’ (and other sound poems), he tends to refrain from the extremes and his renditions of sound poems seem stronger for it.

(We should perhaps note that some ‘sound poems’ also include extra-normal techniques—Bök’s The Cyborg Opera: Synth Loops (Bök in Various, 2005), transcribes beatboxing, for example—and the division between a score for a piece of music or sound, and a sound poem feels increasingly arbitrary. But for most sound poems—and certainly, I have felt, for ‘Ursonate’—erring on the side of simplicity seems to give a more faithful rendition of the intent of the work.)

The text ‘01Sonate’, by Calum Rodger consists of a machine translation of a recording of Schwitters’ epic sound poem:
01Sonate is constructed using the automatic caption/translate function of YouTube. First a performance is chosen, then the captions are transcribed verbatim. Next proceeds further close listening with reference to the original score in order to align the captions as closely as possible with the original. Finally the captions are inserted, lineated, into the frame of the original score. Linear distribution should follow the original score as closely as possible; however, a degree of creative license is considered inevitable at this stage. The translation should include punctuation from both original score and captions, except when a lack of textual elements leads to successive punctuation marks, in which case repeated marks may be removed. Upper and lower case should remain in accordance with captions (Rodger, 2013).

The resulting text consists of mostly English words, with occasional borrowings from other languages—particularly Italian in this case, as Rodger chose a rendition of Ursonate by Bök which Bök recorded imagining what it “might sound like if performed at high speed by [the Italian Futurist] F.T. Marinetti” (Bök, 2002). The piece ‘01Sonate’, then, has a clear connection with Schwitters’ piece, but has a radically different content; one would probably not recognize ‘01Sonate’ as a reiteration of the original.

The rewriting of ‘Ursonate’ as something more like English language nonsense, rather than German language sound poetry gives a piece with a radically different sense of poetics. It perhaps draws connections between nonsense verse (Malcolm, 1997, pp. 78-124) as well as performing a ‘pataphysical engagement with the text, keeping in mind one of Alfred Jarry’s definitions:

Pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular, despite the common opinion that the only science is that of the general. 'Pataphysics will examine the laws governing exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one (Jarry, 1996, p. 21).

The process also feels like an exploration of the failings of machine translations—failing at their intended purpose, but in doing do creating beauty, humour, poetry, etc. We probably live in the golden age of machine translation poetry. In the not-too distant future, the algorithms will have improved to the point where the poetry of the failure has diminished to such an extent that they will stand out as occasional interruptions in an otherwise coherent text, and eventually disappear altogether.
Both Rodger’s engagement with the text, and YouTube’s transcription failure, explore the impossibility of engaging with Schwitters text with our logical, sense-making intelligence. As Rodger says or ‘Ursonate’:

‘It is the primeval sound, at once before and beyond sense. The feeble language of common humanity is powerless to penetrate or paraphrase its depths!’ And yes: even today, this is true. But our technologies augment and extend us. The algorithms of natural language processing create lines of flight to peaks once inaccessible. We may still be too human for Ursonate, but need not be as feebly human as once we were. Thus, out of our heads, and into the machines. Let the machines read Ursonate. Imaginary solutions to imaginary problems have real means. The boulder fills with helium; we float (Rodger, 2013).³

But we cannot get away from the human, all too human; letting the machines read ‘Ursonate’ also performs the biases of the user-base for the program, veering, as it frequently does, towards technical and pop-culture ‘solutions’ to sound transcriptions. In this sense, it serves as a portrait of the community of people involved in the captioning project and/or the user-base of this service, rendering clear(er) that which often goes unquestioned, or we might assume has a neutral value.

I made use of ‘01Sonate’ as a score—in contradistinction to a sound poem—from which to improvise. While I love Rodger’s poem, I feel that the pleasure of the text largely comes from reading it alongside Schwitters’ original and I feel that a ‘straight’ reading of ‘01Sonate’ as a poem might not hold up as a performance. The sense of playfulness in Rodger’s piece allowed a sense of freedom to play with my interpretation of the text, and I felt that my use of a variety of extended techniques and a quite ‘performative’ interpretation, gave the piece a vitality without obscuring the ridiculousness and humour of the text—the audience could still discern most of the semantic content.

³ I asked Rodger about the ‘quote’ at the head of this section: “The quote isn’t really a quote—just an archetypal/hypothetical thing that a Schwitters scholar might say!” (personal communication, October 4, 2018).
Of late I have felt curious about possibilities for scores that make sense for me to use in my practice; while I feel curious about the possibilities that visual scores offer in some ways the slight amount of musical information in a text score allows for a greater emphasis on ‘interpretation’ in this realm, whilst also providing a sense of structure and, in the case of ‘01Sonate’, humour and a clear link to Dada poetics and sound poetry.

Of late, I have felt that I have found a way in to ‘Ursonate’. A musician friends studied with Antoine Beuger and since they have returned, together with a few other people, we have explored some of the Wandelweiser pieces as well as some similar composers, and done so in a number of low-key performances in various locations. The emphasis on clear, simple pieces that move more towards honesty and openness rather than complexity or, especially, irony eventually suggested an understated rendition of ‘Ursonate’. The renditions by Schwitters, Bök and Blonk all explore a wide dynamic range and emphasize the wildness, the craziness, of the piece; and they can feel very masculine, if not macho. On 16th October 2016, I performed the first movement of ‘Ursonate’ as part of a series of performances throughout that month with other musicians, mostly exploring work by Wandelweiser composers and associated people. I tried to keep my rendition simply and unassuming, allowing the text to speak for itself and I really enjoyed the results. I intend to continue working on a simple, understated variation of ‘Ursonate’ to perform sometime next year.
Failure: A failed attempt at failing to play ‘Meditation on Death (Love Song)’ by Sage J Harlow

Audio recording; (Sage Musick, 2016c): https://sagemusick.bandcamp.com/track/2016-09-29-failure-performance-at-outcome-unknown

On 29\textsuperscript{th} September someone asked me if I could perform at a night of improvised music as another act had cancelled; I said yes, and an hour or so before the performance I decided that I would like to try something different so took my acoustic bass guitar (which I had not played very much in the last five years or so), a songbook with mostly unfinished songs and a copy of Fernando Pessoa’s Book of Disquiet (Pessoa, 2001).

I feel increasingly interested in how to incorporate words and, by extension, the logical-rational mind into my improvisation practice and more generally how to integrate this aspect of myself with the subconscious or extra-normal conscious states that I have cultivated in musick and ritual work. I feel that I created a space in my life to explore these ‘non-rational’ aspects which felt like a healthy balance to the heady, intellectual self I had become, but as a result I have found myself with a somewhat compartmentalised experience of different aspects of myself. Improvising with words felt like a challenge to this compartmentalisation and I addressed some of these issues in the work.

I read the following passage from Pessoa’s book in the performance which I feel a profound resonance with:

I’m astounded whenever I finish something. Astounded and distressed. My perfectionist instinct should inhibit me from finishing; it should inhibit me from even beginning. But I get distracted and start doing something. What I achieve is not the product of an act of my will but of my will’s surrender. I begin because I don’t have the strength to think; I finish because I don’t have the courage to quit. This book is my cowardice (Pessoa, 2001, p. 136).

This text haunts me. In some ways, my improvisation practice feels like a collection of failures, and a documentation of the process of embracing the idiosyncrasies and
‘mistakes’ of many moments. But sometimes I feel like it suffers from a lack of focus, or a lack of ambition or determination. It also reminds me of the story of Kitano from 101 Zen Stories in which this monk discovers his pleasure in smoking, and promptly gives it up before it can become a distraction from his meditation. He later discovers his talent for I-Ching, then calligraphy, then poetry, all of which he gives up when he realises his success in these arts for, as he says, “if I don't stop now, I'll be a poet not a Zen teacher” (‘Non-Attachment’ from 101 Zen Stories in Reps, 1971, p. 85).

I sometimes feel that I fail at pursuing meditation and that singing feels like a distraction. At other times, it feels like integrating meditation practice as my singing heavily focuses on presence in the moment and ‘giving voice’ to this experience. But I often feel that I fail at conveying—or experiencing—some Absolute. In part the reason for this has to do with a real scepticism of Absolutisms, and an embracing of the ‘imperfect’, the fragment, the moment. But I often feel drawn to the idea of pursuing something more fanatical, more disciplined, more extreme. At times the path of pursuing Awakening through meditation feels not Absolute, not Extreme enough; though this perhaps says more about my lack of commitment to it than the actual path.

I also fail because I find myself enjoying the failure. In my singing and magick practice I have often embraced accident and interesting failure in place of pursuing my intent to its realization. When I made electronic music, I would often attempt to create some effect and—due to my lack of technical expertise (I taught myself as I went along)—I would invariably fail at what I had attempted, but discover some interesting sound in the process. And I never attempted to create a cohesive album; rather, I collated cd length collections of sketches or fragments. The first collection I called ‘demos ongso ne’—a mangling of ‘demo songs one’—and I just kept creating collections of these ‘demos’ (up to ‘demos ongsfi fteen’). I didn’t revisit pieces or ever pursue the original idea that I had had for a piece beyond failing at it and creating something else.

My singing practice has followed a similar trajectory—I have published collections of Daily Sketches for over three years now. And have always embraced unexpected sounds in performances believing that we might not expect a sound, but that doesn’t
make it wrong, and the process of improvisation has as much to do with creating a context within which to read sounds that have happened as it does ‘making the right sound’ in the first place.

Also, as I have explored a fairly wide range of extra-normal vocal techniques, I have invariably failed at their execution at various times, particularly when they I start learning them. But I firmly believe in incorporating techniques into my improvisation practice sooner rather than later; I enjoy the liminal states of having a technique... but not really having it. Or having it, but not ‘under control’ so that it seems to have a life or will of its own. Because I record every day it feels interesting to me to explore what improvising sounds like with a half-mastered technique. It feels precious. We have a small, limited time where we cannot quite control our technique—assuming that we go on to master it—and the seeming randomness or chaotic function of these half-learnt techniques have their own ephemeral beauty. I have taken great inspiration from an interview that I read with Sainkho Namtchylak in which she talks about range and technique:

I don’t need to warm up or... say, “Oh, today it’s not working.” Fine! “I don’t have any high notes today.” Fine. It doesn’t mean anything for my music, because my emotion’s there, my ideas are there. And how I express this feeling is a question of technique: not to think that here I must take only a high note and if I do not, but take a low one, people won’t understand me. I don’t worry about the quality of my voice anymore, because it’s part of my soul (cited in Raine-Reusch & Dutton, 1997).

With my insistence on improvising and recording every day, I have followed this through to explore what my improvisation might sound like on days when I don’t feel like improvising, when I feel ill, and so on.

While I really enjoy this methodology, and my daily practice, and think I have hugely benefited as an improviser because of it, I wonder what I miss out on from not having a stronger intent and the discipline to pursue it to fruition.

On reflection, my ‘Failure’ piece felt like a way to share some of my discarded (or at least neglected) attempts at writing more conventional songs in a context I felt fairly comfortable in—the Perth improv scene—and without having to ‘finish’ writing this
song, and without having to perfect a performance of it. I could present this piece as a ‘work in progress’ (which may well never ‘progress’ further) ad give some context for the song as well as discussion of my writing practice. In some sense, it felt more like a lecture on praxis than a music performance. It also felt like an exploration of comedy in a more explicit way than I usually explore. It also felt like it took inspiration from my readings of Discordianism (Gorightly, Wilson, Thornley, & Hill, 2014; Malaclypse the Younger, 1994) and the Church of the SubGenius (The SubGenius Foundation, 1983), which contains one of my favourite back-cover quotes: “A rare knack for masking genuine wisdom in the guise of utter bullshit” (Jay Kinney cited in The SubGenius Foundation, 1983). And perhaps Derrida’s notion of ‘serious play’.

I feel an affinity with stand-up comedy, or to engage more explicitly with comedy. Part of me wants to pursue stand-up, but I don’t feel that I have a good enough memory for it. I love the idea of stripping things down to just a microphone, and have pursued this over the last year in my vocal performance, having spent a year or two playing mostly with live looping and delays of my voice.

I really enjoy the humorous aspect of some experimental music, and enjoying the tension in performing in this context when at times an audience wants to laugh but feels that they cannot because of they have attended a (presumed ‘serious’) new music concert; I find this amusing and enjoyable as a performer. I also really enjoy it when people do laugh and find it perplexing when others act as if this response has broken some ‘rule’. Free improv might suffer from codification and so on, but the attendance of concerts suffers much more deeply. (Imagine: a music where in theory anything can happen; with a heavily codified acceptable response!)

It felt extremely enjoyable to break through this and have what perhaps felt a more honest or open exchange with the audience. The explicitly humorous content of the improvisation felt hugely important for this. Perhaps also simply the use of words—a tool designed to convey ideas—and in part because I felt that we generally have more experience at engaging with people playing songs and/or talking to us.
In some sense this performance felt ‘less like free improv’ than what I usually perform, but this distinction seems arbitrary and dubious. The use of preconceived materials feels like a spectrum rather than a binary, and we always bring things to a performance even if we bring ‘the intention to not have an intention’. And the idea that ‘free improvisation’ cannot include, well, everything, feels ridiculous.

One of the things that I sometimes struggle with in my ‘usual practice’ has to do with the ethics of performance: what can an audience gain from seeing someone perform a quite introspective (if not introverted), oftentimes confronting vocal improvisation? I occasionally wonder about the ethics of confronting people with quite intense, visceral sounds. While I usually perform within a new music or free improvisation context where the audience have a certain expectation inclusive of my practice, this can sometimes feel like a bit of a ghetto, or bubble. I have contemplated taking my practice into other settings—as part of a wider project of exploring integrating different aspects of myself—and feel somewhat confused about the ethics of, say, performing as I usually do while busking in the CBD. It feels less clear to me that the kind of improvisation that I usually explore has a place in other contexts and for some reason, this troubles me sometimes. Hummingwards, a free improv band I played with in Glasgow for a few years, played a number of house gigs, and invariably some people would leave because they found our music ‘too intense’. This sometimes happened at our concerts as well, as we often played outside of a ‘free improv’ scene. Usually I have taken this as a good sign—I have enjoyed evoking some reaction in an audience member. But of late, I have felt interested in how to connect with people in a more accessible way, and I perhaps felt that I managed this with this piece ‘Failure’. Although the audience did consist of the usual people from the improv scene, and perhaps a not-insignificant part of the pleasure of this performance came from the audience’s familiarity with my ‘usual’ work.

In some ways, my ‘Failure’ piece felt like a great success in trying something new, in exploring a different kind of vulnerability as a performer, and presenting something honest and open. While my usual practice feels honest and authentic, it doesn’t necessarily feel ‘open’ or accessible. The ‘voice’ that I have found for myself, or the ‘language’ that I improvise with feels like the product of many years of exploring a particular way of singing, but also of listening—timbre centred listening (Levin &
Süzükei, 2006, pp. 45-58)—and it does not feel like a language that many other people seem fluent in. Sometimes this feels absolutely fine, and a common experience with many artistic practices, and tied in to a broader question of art’s interpretation by an audience; but sometimes I worry if an exploration of a more accessible or practice would have a greater benefit (whatever that means) for myself and for the world. In some sense, I also failed in that I did manage to stumble through the whole song ‘Meditation on Death (Love Song)’ and, however messy a rendition, the audience did hear the full song and have the opportunity to respond to it.
Dolorous interlude: The handedness of musicks

Improvisation
as a Left-Hand Path ritual act—create an objective manifestation of your subjective experience.
Transcend the limitations of your ‘self’ by creating a new form of being, by self-deification.

Playing a Score
as a Right-Hand Path ritual act—get your subjective experience in line with the objective document.
Transcend the limitations of ‘self’ by submitting to an experience greater than yourself.
Some scores and some notes on those scores

This chapter presents a collection of scores that I have written over the last few years along with some notes on these scores. As my website states:

The pieces (should) stand by themselves. The ‘notes’ constitute some of my reflections on them and do not constitute definitive statements about how people should play them. Musicians should feel free to disregard these reflections and/or explore other manifestations of the pieces. Many of these pieces constitute invitations to explore a particular sonic or relational world in a quite open-ended way, putting a lot of trust in the performers and process (Harlow, 2018a).

I include the notes on my website because the extra voice alongside the score adds something to at least some people’s readings. I keep them separate so that people can just let that voice go and read the score as presented, inviting a broader range of engagements, readings, etc. I see this as an extension of my meditation practice—we have some control over how we act in the world, what we put out, but we cannot control how people will interpret this, or where they may take our work. Making this explicit around my score-writing practice formalises the practice of ‘accepting what arises’ in this context.

I try to write scores that invite exploration of particular themes or ideas rather than functioning prescriptively. This practice takes inspiration from anarchist, consensus and direct democracy practices where the ethos centres around mutual aid and solidarity, and in making sure that all voices get heard. I hope that my scores function as invitations to explore particular ideas, experiences, ways of listening. Most of my scores have a very open-ended sense to them because they really do work collaboratively in my mind—they do not do much by themselves, they ask for an investment of time, energy, attention by a performer. I also welcome alternate readings or takes of them (though I guess I also think that ‘strict’ accordance to a score can facilitate interesting questions, innovations, etc.).

My scores, then, sit well with Eco’s notion of the open work:
appeal to the initiative of the individual performer, and hence they offer themselves not as finite works which prescribe specific repetition along given structural coordinates but as “open” works, which are brought to their conclusion by the performer at the same time as he [sic] experiences them on an aesthetic plane (Eco, 1989, p. 3).

And as Eco says:

Every performance explains the composition but does not exhaust it. Every performance makes the work an actuality, but is itself only complementary to all possible other performances of the work. In short, we can say that every performance offers us a complete and satisfying version of the work, but at the same time makes it incomplete for us, because it cannot simultaneously give all the other artistic solutions which the work may admit (Eco, 1989, p. 15).

I see this open-endedness as vital to my text-scores, and for me, an embodiment of an ethics of free association and collaboration. They propose music(k) as a never-ending process of exploration. While the scores may have an aesthetic (poetic) beauty of their own, they require an investment of time and energy from the players. The often-ambiguous scores ask a lot from the players and undermine the author(itarian)ship of the Composer. They invite another way of listening, another way of performing, another way of living. They take inspiration from assorted anarchisms, in particular Hakim Bey’s notion of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ)—exploration of our freedom in the present:

The TAZ is not a harbinger of some pie-in-the-sky Social Utopia to which we must sacrifice our lives that our children’s children may breathe a bit of free air. The TAZ must be the scene of our present autonomy, but it can only exist on the condition that we already know ourselves as free beings (Bey, 1985, p. 131).

They contribute to Bey’s call for ontological anarchism, and the demand for an anarchist spirituality and a penetration of spiritual practice and of magick into everyday life (including musick, art, performance, dialogue). They delimit zones for exploration of ritual(ised) togetherness. But they require the other, they require solidarity, to manifest. And each manifestation has a specific, temporary, embodied facticity. As Bey writes:

The TAZ is “utopian” in the sense that it envisions an intensification of everyday life, or as the Surrealists might have said, life’s penetration by the
Marvellous. But it cannot be utopian in the actual meaning of the word, *nowhere*, or NoPlace. *The TAZ is somewhere* (Bey, 1985, p. 109).

The invocations of the scores resonate in poetic, open-ended ways, but any interpretation of the score has a situation, an embodiment, a presence.

Wishart talks of music as abstract, as *not sound*, and refers to scores as “normative on the musical experience” (Wishart, 1996, p. 35). While I have sympathy for Wishart’s argument for some kinds of music (perhaps in a way that for some conceptual art, the idea(l) has more importance than the actualization), in another sense, I strongly disagree. In (free) improvisation, the sound and the music have equivalence. And the sound has an embodied, space and time specific difference—people will have (perhaps vastly) different experiences—but they do not *reference* some abstract ideal. Scores, perhaps do. Sometimes. The idea of the notes on the page, or in the mind of the composer constitute ‘the music’ and the sound one hears on the day, a particular iteration of it. But not equivalent. And if we hear a cough, or a scraping chair, this sound, present in the moment does not become the music, whereas in (free) improvisation, at least for some listeners, it does.

Some of my scores have attempted to function as invitations to improvise in a particular way, in response to a particular idea, or navigating a certain idea, while allowing (perhaps even encouraging) the kind of radical acceptance of ‘the sound’ = ‘the music’ that has formed the core of my own improvising practice. The practice of accepting ‘whatever arises’ sonically as ‘the music’ requires a radical rethinking of the agency of the composer as well as the composer and, perhaps, the audience. This way of thinking about sound—and the listening practices associated with it—owe a lot to John Cage, Pauline Oliveros. For me, these practices constitute a serious attempt to integrate meditation and sound making that allows them to inform and enrich each other. If we really have no free will (see the chapter ‘The illusion of free will and its implications for improvisation and invocation’) how can we work with this insight in a meaningful way with sound? How might a score invite deep, attentive listening (aside from the instruction ‘listen deeply and attentively’)?

I could have written this chapter other ways. I might have had all the scores in an appendix and written a more essay-style piece about recurrent themes in my
composition practice. Perhaps I should have. (Perhaps I will in another context.) But I have kept this structure of ‘score, notes, score, notes...’ for a few reasons. Firstly, I like the idea of the pieces and notes standing somewhat by themselves and not necessarily having to tie in to a broader narrative. Secondly, I take inspiration from Roland Barthes more poetical works (Barthes, 1977, 1992, 2000, 2002) and in particular his conceptualisation of building up an ‘image repertoire’ in some of these texts, most explicitly in The Lover’s Discourse. Barthes Lovers Discourse consists of texts that he calls figures which take shape insofar as we can recognize, in passing discourse, something that has been read, heard, felt. The figure is outlined (like a sign) and memorable (like an image or a tale) (Barthes, 2002, p. 4).

And that:
Each figure explores, vibrates in and of itself like a sound severed from any tune—or is repeated to satiety, like the motif of a hovering music. No logic links the figures, determines their contiguity: the figures are non-syntagmatic, no-narrative; they are Erinyes (Barthes, 2002, pp. 6–7).

While it might seem perverse to equate my scores with “sounds severed from any tune”, I take a certain pleasure in this perversity and recognise that I have written invitations to explore sounds, or sound-worlds, rather than tunes. The pieces that follow do not, for the most part, have a sense of narrative or clear linear movement towards. Rather, each functions as a site—or topos (Barthes, 2002, p. 5)—for exploring the various ways in which the players might relate to an archetypal form as presented in the score. I also take inspiration from the collaged nature of Cat Hope’s The End of Abe Sada (Hope, 2014), which documents the end of her bass noise group with scores, reviews and essays.

I have only included those which relate to the broader interests of this thesis and while I had originally left them in chronological order, they appear now rearranged, so to speak, in a way that introduces concepts and themes in a way that I hope facilitates the most enjoyment and ease of reading. Here I diverge from Barthes who insists on an “absolutely insignificant order” for his figures (Barthes, 2002, p. 8) though elsewhere I follow Barthes in this—using chronological order of completion analogously to Barthes alphabetisation system (https://sagepbbbt.com/scores).
In *The Open Work*, Eco writes of Mallarme’s *Livre*: “We do not know whether, had the work been completed, the whole project would have had any real value.” (Eco, 1989, p. 13) And Richard Zennith makes a similar claim about Fernando Pessoa’s *Book of Disquiet*:

He planned to make a ‘rigorous’ selection from among all the texts he had written, to adapt the older ones to the ‘true psychology’ of Bernando Soares [the ‘heteronym’ that Pessoa attributed the book to], and to undertake ‘an overall revision of the style’ [...] This operation would have resulted in a smooth, polished book with perhaps half as many pages, and perhaps half as much genius (in Pessoa, 2001, p. xxvii).

I love the unfinished, fragmentary nature of Pessoa’s work—and the open-ended, expandable nature of Barthes’ *Lovers Discourse*. I have some discomfort with editing down the open-ended, in-progress image repertoire of my collection of scores. But works can manifest in different forms and my use of these pieces in this chapter, narrativising them as an argument in a larger work about ‘exploring extra-normal selfhood’ will not, I hope, detract from their more open-ended function as fragments in the “factless autobiography” of the composer Sage J Harlow.

**Magick**

I sometimes think of scores as magickal invocations. Incantations that summon experiences that can manifest in various forms depending on the particular people who perform the invocations. Open-ended pieces of magick, much the same as my possession ritual practice. But making use of the powerful tool of poetry. These rituals seek to facilitate a “complete and satisfying version” of the archetypal form, or experience that the scores points to, without exhausting the possibilities of this experience (Eco, 1989, p. 15).

These scores, invocations, incantations, expand on a collection of open-access, open-ended forms that players may use for exploration of musickal, meditative and magickal effect.
Some of my scores explore silliness. Sometimes I wonder if the silliness might ‘detract’ from less silly scores because silliness has such stigma in our culture—if something has elements of silliness it cannot possibly have elements of seriousness (and if someone ever writes something silly, this undermines the seriousness of all of their work). I find silliness interesting and worthy of exploration in writing and in music. And do not see that this has to affect my explorations of other ideas. (No one would suggest that if someone wrote a piece about anger that this would undermine their capacity to write a separate piece about love or if they wrote a piece about faith they could not write one about blasphemy or if they wrote a completely atonal piece they could not also write a harmonic piece).

Our society does not take silliness very seriously. Or at least, experimental (avant-garde / art / contemporary classical…) music has a tendency towards a culture of seriousness. And this despite some quite silly works. John Cage’s 4’33” seems quite silly to me. And I do not see this as derogatory, or to in any way undermine its importance to music and sound culture. As a Discordian I take silliness quite seriously. I also recognise (and enjoy) the importance of silliness in ‘pataphysics and Dada. It seems strange to me that silliness has such stigma in the culture of experimental music—it seems anathema to seriousness, whereas we can easily conceive of music as beautiful and ugly, happy and sad. Silliness, seems to have a weight to it—so in this sense we perhaps take silliness too seriously. Other art forms do hold space for silliness—we can find plenty of silliness in pop music or painting, for example, that manifest in ways that do not preclude people from taking them seriously. I imagine that most people would readily acknowledge the silliness of ‘Gangnam Style’ by the K-pop artists Psy. And most of these people would not see this as a detraction from the seriousness of this piece of popular music—the first to ever receive one billion views on YouTube (Gruger, 2012). I seek to integrate silliness and spirituality into my musickal practice, sometimes at the same time.
‘Some notes on...’

A few people have commented positively on my writing about my compositions and even suggested that this writing gets integrated into the scores. But for me, it feels really important to keep the score and my thinking about the score separately. For me, this points to the agency that a reader or performer has—sure, you can read a score like ‘Meme’ and write it off as a stupid, ugly, dumb, throwaway joke (and it certainly does function like this on one level). But like most things, if you give it some space and attention, it can go somewhere. I think that most things get really interesting if you give them enough attention. Think of any random thing—aglets, for example—and if you read enough about it, the history of it, the socio-political context of it, or even if you do not read anything, but make the space in your life to really think through your relationship to the little plastic bits on the ends of your shoelaces and how they affect your life, and what the world would look like if it did not contain these bits of plastic, how they get manufactured, the French original of the word aguillette, that aglets have existed since Roman times... then aglets, or a ridiculous score about punching people, or most things... become quite fascinating.

And a lot of my pieces function similarly. ‘Thirteen pages of improvisation’ definitely reads like a gimmick or joke. And I genuinely mean it as a very silly joke and expect laughter or mirth as an initial response. And... if someone spends time with this piece, they might go elsewhere... because the score does point to some interesting things. In this way they have a lot in common with the pieces in the Fluxus Performance Workbook (Friedman, Smith, & Sawchyn, 2002).

I do not to put my thoughts into the actual scores for several reasons:

1) they do not constitute the score;
2) the reductive reading someone else might make seems totally valid to me;
3) I want to point to how much agency the reader, performer has in creating something magickal, open, creative, even out of something ‘simple’ like the instruction to punch people in the face;
4) I reckon other reader/performers might have equally interesting thoughts, ideas, takes on the pieces, some of which might not sit well alongside my thinking about them and while I really like some of my thoughts, I also like
the idea of a score as an open-ended site for exploration not hindered by all the ‘criticism’, ‘references’ or ‘meanings’ that anyone else has put on them, even/even especially of that person wrote the score; and

5) Most, if not all my scores have this collaborative ethos as one of their central concerns/interests. They (hopefully) function as invitations to explore within certain parameters rather than as prescriptive of particular ways of thinking or action—writerly texts in the language of Barthes (1990, pp. 4-6);

All that said, I like the piece ‘Meme’ a lot more alongside my thinking about it. And I have thought about writing notes for all the pieces and having the links right next to the score so that they will more likely get read. And to just reiterate the difference between score/notes or art/criticism at the top of the ‘Compositions’ page of my website as a fundamental principle.

Gender balance

I have often considered writing in to my scores that they should have a minimum of 50% women/non-binary players. But I have (so far) resisted this. Because while I absolutely think that programming more women/non-binary people as composers and as players has huge importance in the long, slow, (and often boring) fight against sexism and misogyny, I wonder about the usefulness (a word I find problematic) of me—a queer, trans woman—demanding that all her scores only ever have a decent gender balance in their performance. Should I take that task upon myself? Of course. But not alone. And I feel that these kinds of gestures perhaps have more weight when straight, cisgendered men do them. As a trans, woman composer, insisting my work get played, or that I will only perform in concerts with a decent gender balance might actually make the problem (marginally) worse. If a large number of men started refusing to play at concerts with problematic gender balances of composers or performers, that would feel very, very different (and exciting). And a man refusing to play in a concert that should have more women/non-binary folx playing in it at least symbolically opens that space to those players.
Thirteen pages of improvisation

A piece for one or more improvisers; any instrumentation. The piece should be played from the score (not memorised).

Duration: at least fifteen minutes.

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Some notes on ‘Thirteen pages of improvisation’

For me, this score explores the notion of how a score functions, or what a score ‘is’. In some ways, it functions as a rewriting of John Cage’s 4’33” but translated into the genre of improvisation rather than notated music. Both pieces attempt to ‘reduce’ a score to as little information as possible. For Cage, this actually translates to the music becoming as little as possible—silence, or the sounds that comprise ‘silence’ when we remove all ‘intentional’ sound. My piece functions quite differently in this sense as it contains no information about the actual performance and interpretations will no doubt vary wildly. Rather, it functions as an exploration of how empty of content a score can become while still functioning as a score; the facticity of the score becomes what the performer engages with rather than the content of the score.

The piece also takes inspiration from meditation practice. In meditation, one focuses on something—a breath, flame, bodily sensations—and it will invariably happen that one gets distracted, caught up in thoughts; the practice of meditation consists in starting again, in coming back to the object of concentration, again and again. In this sense, ‘Thirteen pages of improvisation’ functions as a kind of reminder to the improviser of the process that they have undertaken—to improvise. Perhaps they have gotten lost in thought, or emotion, or even ‘lost in the music’? What does it mean to keep in mind the intent to improvise? Furthermore, the score asks the performer not just to improvise, but to improvise from a score, albeit a score with almost no content. The piece demands that the performer come back to this intent to improvise from the score, to refocus on this (at least thirteen times).

In ‘letting go’ of a musical intent, the piece implicitly asks what it means to improvise having let go of aesthetic judgment. In some sense, you cannot play this piece ‘wrong’—a performer could sit silently for fifteen minutes, or play noise, or a melody—nothing in the score disallows or judges (or suggests) any of these interpretations. If we could read anything that happens as a ‘valid’ interpretation of the score, how then does the improviser proceed? The focus of ‘improvising’ shifts from what one improvises to how or why one improvises. In my own improvisation practice, as well as my meditation practice, I have tried to cultivate an ‘effortless striving’ for acceptance of ‘whatever arises’; this has required a shift of focus from
aesthetic judgment—which arises from an ‘outside’ voice—to a focus on feeling ‘moved by’ the acoustic environment, including my own place in it. I have no doubt that this radically affects the sounds that I produce, but this seems secondary.

The piece also foregrounds the tyranny of the blank page—although not literally blank (something I considered, but didn’t think worked as well). The pages of the score offer up very little to the performer; they offer no constraints or guidance (except the notion of playing from a score) although the repetition of the word ‘improvise’ does suggest thirteen discrete sections and raises the question of whether these should sound distinct from each other—thirteen ‘improvisation’s—or if the performer should read the repetition as an exact repetition—do the same thing: ‘improvise’. The score foregrounds everything not present, and the challenge—perhaps even existential challenge—that ‘free improvisation’ presents.

I considered the length and number of pages of this piece for some time before finally writing it. I wanted a length that allowed for some engagement with the process of playing the piece, I wanted enough pages that it had a comic effect, but not so many that they would take up too much space in the piece. Thirteen seemed like a good number because of its associations in our culture with bad luck, and resonates with an antinominalist stance in my praxis as well as a queer reclamation of various taboo cultural ephemera. Fifteen minutes also seemed like the shortest time that I could imagine the piece having enough space around it for the performer to explore a relationship to the score, and I liked the idea of the score containing less than one page per minute—I do not want to invite too much attention to the (physical) score in performances; the score should have a presence for the performer, and demand some kind of engagement in their performances, but a 100 page score for a fifteen minute performance, say, would most likely lead to it getting in the way or becoming a prop rather than prompting (hopefully interesting) questions.

The element of humour feels very important in this piece as well—I hope that a reader or performer when first looking at this score will laugh, or at least let a smile cross their face. But this is also a serious humour, in the tradition of Zhuangzi (Zhuangzi, 2009), some Zen writers, Dada and Discordianism, a humour designed to shock the reader out of their complacency.
These notes constitute my own musings on this piece and no one should regard them as definitive or instructional. I do not believe that the piece requires explanatory notes (and these do not constitute such) and interpretations that explore different aspects of the score that have not occurred to me have as much—if not more—“validity” than anything that happens to sit comfortably along what I have written here. I welcome alternate engagements.
John 4:33

A piece for one or more silent readers.

Duration: variable.

by Sage J Harlow (Sage Pbbbt), Djuna Lee and Dan O'Connor
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instructions

Player(s) read the texts silently. Optionally with food provided for the audience.

texts

New International Version
Then his disciples said to each other, “Could someone have brought him food?”

New Living Translation
“Did someone bring him food while we were gone?” the disciples asked each other.

English Standard Version
So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?”

Berean Study Bible
So the disciples asked one another, “Could someone have brought Him food?”

Berean Literal Bible
Therefore the disciples were saying to one another, “No one brought Him anything to eat?”

New American Standard Bible
So the disciples were saying to one another, “No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?”

King James Bible
Therefore said the disciples one to another, Hath any man brought him ought to eat?

Holman Christian Standard Bible
The disciples said to one another, “Could someone have brought Him something to eat?”

International Standard Version
So the disciples began to say to one another, “No one has brought him anything to eat, have they?”

NET Bible
So the disciples began to say to one another, “No one brought him anything to eat, did they?”

New Heart English Bible
The disciples therefore said one to another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?”

Aramaic Bible in Plain English
The disciples were saying among themselves, “Did someone bring him something to eat?”
GOD’S WORD Translation
The disciples asked each other, “Did someone bring him something to eat?”

New American Standard 1977
The disciples therefore were saying to one another, “No one brought Him anything to eat, did he?”

Jubilee Bible 2000
Therefore said the disciples one to another, Has anyone brought him anything to eat?

King James 2000 Bible
Therefore said the disciples one to another, has any man brought him anything to eat?

American King James Version
Therefore said the disciples one to another, Has any man brought him ought to eat?

American Standard Version
The disciples therefore said one to another, Hath any man brought him aught to eat?

Douay-Rheims Bible
The disciples therefore said one to another: Hath any man brought him to eat?

Darby Bible Translation
The disciples therefore said to one another, Has any one brought him [anything] to eat?

English Revised Version
The disciples therefore said one to another, Hath any man brought him aught to eat?

Webster's Bible Translation
Therefore said the disciples one to another, Hath any man brought him aught to eat?

Weymouth New Testament
So the disciples began questioning one another. “Can it be,” they said, “that some one has brought Him something to eat?”

World English Bible
The disciples therefore said one to another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?”

Young’s Literal Translation
The disciples then said one to another, ‘Did any one bring him anything to eat?’
Some notes on ‘John 4:33’

I co-wrote this piece with Dan O’Connor and Djuna Lee backstage at a concert in 2017. I had half-seriously thought about getting a tattoo that said ‘John 4:33’ but hesitated (and ultimately decided against this) because I imagined that most people would read this as a straight Bible quote rather than a very silly and obtuse experimental music pun. I have jokingly referred to John Cage as ‘our lord JC’ both recognising his importance in my musickal journey (and that of other people I know) as well as making fun of the problematic tendency of some people to idolise him or his work. This joke owes a lot to the Not the Nine O’Clock News sketch ‘General Synod’s Life Of Python’ which contains a discussion of the imagined film ‘The Life of Christ’ seen as “a lampoon of the comic messiah himself—our lord John Cleese—even the initials, JC are the same” (Not The Nine O’Clock News, 1979).

Somehow talking about ‘our lord JC’ morphed into the creation of this piece; in part by looking up what the verse John 4:33 said (which I had not actually done myself). The idea of performers reading silently obviously references Cage’s 4’33” although in this piece the performers do have a text score to ‘perform’, albeit silently, to themselves. The verse inspired the optional food offerings.

This piece obviously constitutes a joke; but the silliness of the piece feels important to me—as someone who genuinely feels moved and inspired by Discordianism as well as Cage’s work, I find it important to not shy away from the silliness or humour of ‘performing silently’ (alongside the other important questions and experiences this piece provokes). Different meditation traditions, especially Zen have long histories of embracing humour and absurdity. Some practitioners of experimental music can get a bit serious—at the expense of other ways of experiencing the world. And, as Our Lord JC said himself, “I consider laughter preferable to tears” (Cage, 1960). I see my piece as faithful to our lord JC, but “faithful in the way that blasphemy is faithful” (Haraway, 1991, p. 149).

For an even sillier reading of the piece, we might consider the Bible verse as it pertains to our lord JC and silence. The disciplines ask the question ‘did someone bring food?’ because Jesus has just said he feels fully satiated to a Samaritan woman.
She had come to get water at the well and Jesus has talked (cryptically) to her saying that people who drink at this well will get thirsty again, whereas if they drink of His water they will have their thirst quenched indefinitely. He then says the same of His food and the disciples turn up and get confused wondering if someone else gave Jesus some food while they had wandered off. If we had the inclination, we could read this score as suggesting that silence provides a deeper, more ‘thirst-quenching’ sonic nourishment than the everyday satisfaction of music. Music can provide sustenance, but only temporarily, whilst silence nourishes us indefinitely (and perhaps transcendentally). Or we might read the apostles confusion as analogous to the confusion of audience members (and sometimes performers) playing Cageian music. “O, has the performance started already?”

Alongside these readings, we should remember that Cage’s chance compositions technique—building up randomly generated units of silence until he had finished his score—holds the responsibility for the length of his piece and therefore which Bible verse my own piece centres around. In this sense, ‘John 4:33’ functions as a work of Dada magick as well as an ode to the goddess Apothenia—the personification of our ability to find patterns and make meaning out of randomness (Carroll, 2008).
Silence backstage

For one or more players backstage at a concert.

Duration: variable (dependent on length of concert piece).

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While backstage at a concert sit or stand in silence, listening attentively to whatever you can hear of the performance on stage. Treat this sound and the other sounds you can hear—whether ambient sounds or other people—as a piece of music which you are also playing, but contributing silence (in this section). Listen attentively and sit or stand as you would if you had an audience. Hold the space. Enjoy the experience of the piece.

Optionally bow at the end of the piece.
Some notes on ‘Silence backstage’

This piece explores notions of performance, performativity and ritual as well as (lack of) audience. I improvise every day and do a lot of ritual work. This often happens without an audience (although I have a potential, or imagined, audience as I record the audio of most of these workings for my Daily Sketches project). For me, the experience of improvising in many ways has the same quality with or without an audience—my process centres on ‘giving voice’ to whatever arises and while ‘what arises’ feels quite different depending on the audience, or lack thereof, the skill of staying present and voicing feels fundamentally the same. For me, ritual work feels grounded in the intent. And ritual work—at least in the western esoteric tradition as I understand it—can equally happen alone, with others, or with or without an audience. But the intent and the sense of focus constitutes the fundamental difference between a ritual and non-ritual interaction with the world. Eating a meal can function as ritual—whether alone or in company—as can singing, and it depends on the state or mind, body, of the ritualist.

I feel very comfortable with silence as a performer in solo and collaborative improvisation settings (and the more explicit ritual performances that I have explored). I have at times ‘remained silence’ for a considerable percentage of my time on stage; but I feel sure that this silence contributes something to the performance. And because I have the frame of a ‘performer’ the silence has a certain ‘marked’ quality—it feels different to the silence of the audience member. (I have a recurring fantasy about performing in a group improvisation and remaining silent for the entire set, not out of a lack of anything to say, but because saying silence feels like the right thing to say for the duration. But I have no desire to force this, or make it a gimmick.)

This piece explores what it means to ‘contribute silence’ to a performance. To really listen to a piece and consider your silence as one of the voices of the performance. How does this change what you hear? How does this change the power dynamics of the piece? How does this affect the quality of your experience of the moment? To what extent does this constitute meditation? Or ritual?
The piece also explores what it means to perform without an audience and it explores what it means to ‘hold a space’ for a performance as an audience member—even if as an audience member not in the designated audience space. In part this piece manifested out of my frustration at times with other performers conduct backstage at performances, during pieces that they did not perform in. I felt, sometimes, that the casual social interactions and lack of focus or of attention undermined the performance and/or my own experience of wanting to feel present in a performance or ritual space both during someone else’s performance—out of respect, as well as believing that I could gain something from staying present with their piece, even if I could not experience it as directly, or immediately as someone sitting out front. I also often desired a space conducive to cultivating a sense of ritual or performance in myself for my own performance which felt somewhat undermined by ‘idle chitchat’ from other folx backstage.

This should not constitute judgment of other people’s conduct, however, simply a statement about my personal preferences for pre-performance spaces. Other people seem perfectly capable of having subdued social interactions while another performer has the stage and then walking on themselves and playing well. I often find the world of socialising somewhat challenging—at the very least I seem to find it a little harder than some to move from this mode to performing. In any case, this piece performs my idealised experience of ‘waiting backstage’—one that cultivates a sense of presence and attentive listening that I enjoy, and perhaps find conducive to my own work.

The piece can also function as a methodology for engaging with the power dynamics (and gender politics) of performances. I have performed this piece several times backstage at performances when the program had significant gender imbalance. While performing this piece to/for oneself should not replace taking action to right these imbalances, it can provide one with a tool for self-empowerment in these all-too-common spaces.
Egregore

For multiple voices; to precede another performance by the same players.

Duration: variable.

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Chant your own name in any way that feels right.  

Invite a sense of groundedness, presence and strength.

Chant for as long as you feel you need or want to.

When it feels right, allow your attention to expand; allow your intent to move from your self to the group. Allow your chant to adapt in response to the other chants that you hear, as slowly or quickly as you like.

Over time allow a group chant to emerge; the process should take as long as required and needn’t be a linear progression from ‘self’ to ‘group’. At any time you feel the need to, move back towards focusing your attention on your self.

At all times, strive to maintain a sense of groundedness, presence and strength, moving from a sense of these qualities as an individual, to these qualities as manifest in the group.

Eventually, the players chant the same sound, together.

(The chant may become louder.)

The group finds an ending.

After this work, the group goes on to play another piece allowing the effects of ‘Egregore’ to resonate through their playing.

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4 You may replace your ‘own name’ with a stage name, magickal name or any name that feels right.
Some notes on ‘Egregore’

In chaos magick, the term egregore means a group thoughtform or group mind (Delaforge, 1987; D. Lee, 2006, pp. 172-173). I first proposed and used this technique in a ritual (chaos) magick context. It feels like a good way of embodying the intent to ‘work together as one’—exploring this by ‘giving voice’ first to our individual selves and working towards ‘giving voice’ to the collective. Earlier drafts of the piece included more magick jargon such as the word ‘invocation’ which I eventually removed, wanting the piece to read as a score without explicit reference to ritual magick aside from the title of the piece.

This felt important as I have an interest in exploring ritual in my work without any desire for performers to feel the need to have investment in any particular belief systems. And because I hope that a work like this can work just as well when framed in a music context as in a magick context. My writing (and talking) about magickal work often frames these practices in a ‘psychological model’ wherein we can read ‘spirits’ or ‘demons’ as stand-ins for aspects of the unconscious. This framing feels like a useful tool for facilitating conversations with people who might otherwise feel dismissive of such things. Hopefully it allows for meaningful exchange by changing the flavour of the language. I tried to do that in this piece as well and hopefully the intent of ‘invoking a group spirit’ comes through in this piece without the need for language that might put many people off—such as words like ‘invoking’ and ‘group spirit’. I did keep the word ‘egregore’ as the title of the piece, however, as a reference for those who might want to explore the ideas behind the piece, and to perform that this kind of “magickal” work can, and does, happen outside of explicitly magickal settings.
Variations without a theme (drones ongs)

A collection of pieces for small to large ensemble; any instrumentation. Written for the Perth Drone Orchestra, with love.

Durations: variable.

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one; two

1. Play a long, slow, quiet drone. Ensemble voices blend as seamlessly as possible.

2. Continuing the drone, but start to notice the individual sounds that comprise it. Pick one and blend your voice as seamlessly as possible with this individual voice, rather than the ensemble sound.

morphing

1. Play a long, slow, quiet drone. Ensemble voices blend as seamlessly as possible.

2. Move your individual contribution to the drone very, very slowly through different timbres (and possibly pitches) that you already hear present in the ensemble sound. Strive for a slow, seamless morphing sound for individual players, and for the group.

distance

1. Play a long, slow, quiet drone. Ensemble voices blend as seamlessly as possible.

2. Allow slightly more variation in timbre, though still within the ‘sound’ of the group drone; keep to this for the remainder of the piece. Follow the score for either 2a or 2b:

   2a. Pick out an individual sound you can hear clearly. Try to match your intensity with the sound you have chosen as exactly as possible.

   2b. Pick out an individual sound you can hear clearly. Try to play slightly quieter than this sound.

[For a very small ensemble, to ensure at least some people play each part, someone could assign parts—but without the other players knowing who plays what.]

inverse

1. Play at a quiet volume, long, slow phrases with whatever timbres (or pitches) you like. Strive for constant ensemble sound but of any quality. Feel free to adjust your sound within a phrase and between phrases.

2. Very slowly move towards blending the ensemble voices as seamlessly as possible.
three

Three (pre-determined) players start playing at the same time. They each play ‘one sound’ for their phrase, as unvarying as possible (with little consideration for what the other players sound like—they should all start at the same time without predetermining any sounds).

For the remainder of the piece, as any individual player comes to the end of their phrase—a single breath for breath-based instruments, or approximate equivalents for others—another player ‘takes over’ their sound. The three sounds do not need to start and finish together after the beginning of the piece. Players should focus on the individual quality of one particular sound with no regard for the other sounds.

Strive to make the ‘transitions’ as seamless as possible, and ‘match’ the sound as closely as possible within the constraints of your instrument(s). Players should disregard all previous versions of the sound and try to ‘match’ only what they currently hear.

Explore ways to facilitate easy transitions; consider the group dynamics.
Some notes on ‘Variations without a theme (drones ongs)’

This collection of pieces constitutes my first foray into writing ‘scores’. I have written singer-songwriter pieces (for acoustic bass guitar and voice) music for different band projects, but the pieces I have written in the last few years feel of a different ‘genre’ than my previous writing. My explorations into writing scores came easily out of my involvement in the Perth improvised music community as well as spending time with more composers and having the opportunity to play some more experimental and/or contemporary scores, in particular text based scores, with other performers in Perth.

This piece attempts to explore some of the aspects of my own improvisation practice that differ from some other people’s focuses. The piece takes inspiration from my practice of meditation, and developing one’s concentration—focusing on the subtle differences, and minutiae that appear when one tightens the focus of one’s attention.

The pieces invite explorations of various notions of the self: the self as an individual, the self as part of a group, the relationship of the self to the Other and a non-monadic sense of ‘self’. I also intend these pieces to explore the ethics of playing together, not just in how our notions of self feel in different situations, but in creating a space within which people can question and explore these; the players hold space for each other to ask these questions of themselves and the group.

The pieces also reference other drone musics, many of which use high volume to create their effect (and/or affect). These pieces explore similar motifs but at the other end of the intensity spectrum in some sense integrating the deep listening practice of Pauline Oliveros, the influence of John Cage and some of the Wandelweiser composers. I also acknowledge the huge influence of Perth composers and improvisers who explore quiet musics: Jameson Feakes, Djuna Lee, Josten Myburgh, Dan O’Connor and others.
drone piece for sandpaper and drum

For single player.

Duration: variable (long).

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Sit in silence for some time.

Start rubbing the head of a drum with a piece of sandpaper in a continuous motion; explore variation in rhythm and texture but move slowly between these.

Change the sandpaper when you need to but strive not to interrupt the sound.

Keep playing until you put a hole in the drum head; stop.

Sit in silence for some time.
Some notes on ‘drone piece for sandpaper and drum’

A piece that invites an exploration of repetition, boredom, fine-tuning one’s attention and timbral-listening. The repetition of the piece finally punctuated by the instrument’s destruction.
Hair. Metal.

For multiple long-haired metalheads.

Duration: variable.

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Each player has a single drum or cymbal set up in front of them, ideally of varying sound qualities. Players listen to a favourite metal track with headphones (that will stay in) and headbangs in such a way that their hair lightly brushes against their drum or cymbal on each beat.

Songs do not need to have the same tempo; players may stagger their entries and endings.
Some notes on ‘Hair. Metal.’

This score explores the individuation of (sonic) space and experience facilitated and perhaps amplified (pun intended) by headphones and other personal media devices. It contrasts the loud volume of the metal listened to by the performers with the near-silence that the audience hears.

The audience do not get to hear what the performers hear; equally, the performers do not get to hear what the audience hears.

The piece uses loud music and intense movement to facilitate the manifestation of gentle, quiet music, foregrounding different experiences of the ‘same moment’ that have manifested by means of the same source.
Meme

For solo performer. Dedicated to Dan Thorpe.

Durations: Ongoing.

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1. Tattoo “meme” on the knuckles of the hand you lead with in a fight.

2. Make videos of yourself punching people in the face and upload them to the social media of your choice.
Some notes on ‘Meme’

While extremely simple, for me, this piece potentially functions in a number of different ways. Firstly, it explores the idea of what constitutes a meme and to some extent how they function. Can adding the literal word ‘meme’ act as enough of a frame to move an act into this function? No doubt the particular context in which some particular idea gets shared goes a long way to determining whether or not it ‘goes viral’. Does the repetition of an action (and the sharing of it on social media) have enough force to facilitate this? And does a meme constitute a piece of art? The score in itself does not engage directly with these questions, merely implicitly raising them.

Secondly, this piece explores ideas of violence (in art). A few people who have read this score have felt repulsed by it or found it ‘nasty’ or ‘problematic’. This assumes that violence always has negative consequences. It also assumes an equal, violence-free status quo as the foundation-context for any act of violence. The score, however, makes no distinctions about who to punch. The most famous punching meme of the last few years centred around punching Nazis. People’s opinions differ as to the effectiveness of such actions in creating a society free from racial hatred and the ethics of such practices, but at least most of these debates nowadays admit a context where Nazism poses a real threat (Moosa, 2017; Ohlheiser, 2017; Stack, 2017). Whether or not you think that punching a Nazi constitutes a good idea (or a good piece of art), as a society and as individuals it seems increasingly likely that we will have to make decisions as to when and how force comes in to play against violent hate groups and at least one white nationalist has admitted the efficacy of antifa actions (Lennard, 2018). We live in a society riddled through with a multiplicity of forms of violence—against people of colour, women, queers, trans folx, etc.—to suggest that any act of violence comes ‘out of nowhere’ against an assumed peaceful backdrop erases the everyday experience of most people in our society. In this sense, if we take this (admittedly quite silly piece) seriously, it asks of the performer: ‘Who would I punch? In what context would I feel comfortable punching someone?’

Thirdly, this piece functions similarly to some Dada and Fluxus pieces which present a single idea or action and to some extent put the focus on the player to create
meaning. George Brecht piece ‘For a Drummer’ gives us a good example; the entirety of the piece reads:

Drum on something you have never drummed on before.

Drum with something you have never drummed with before (Brecht cited in Friedman et al., 2002, p. 27).

No doubt many have read this piece and not given it a great deal of thought, not engaged deeply with it, but this piece—and others by Brecht—had a significant impact on the works of percussionist Greg Stuart and composer Michael Pisaro, starting with works like Ricefall (Stuart, 2009).

‘Meme’ also calls to mind André Breton’s statement that the “purest surrealist act” consist of walking into a crowd with a loaded gun and firing into it randomly (cited in Strom, 2006, p. 35). Breton’s statement, however, insist on embracing random violence. Breton’s (imagined) piece feels like the wet-dream of the male psychoanalyst—a ‘pure’ act of violence ‘straight from the subconscious’. A piece written in 2017, by a queer trans woman, dedicated to a radical queer composer/performer has a quite different context (though we might also note some similarities of context in the rise of white nationalist and fascist tendencies).

That said, fourthly we can also read the piece as engaging with the absurdity of life and/or an artistic attempt to engage with existentialism along similar lines as Breton’s piece, or other Dada pieces. While I have read into the piece in terms of politics, the piece itself does not contain these references and a ‘valid’ interpretation of the piece might well involve ‘walking into a crown and punching a random stranger’. Repeatedly. Most of my scores have very open-ended interpretations that ask the performer to bring a lot to the piece.

Fifthly, we can, of course, easily read this as a conceptual piece. The piece asks for the player to tattoo their knuckles. This seems like quite a commitment to a work by an unknown composer. Perhaps the work functions as poetry and as a site for exploring ideas around memes, art and violence rather than necessitating that a performer actually inflict violence on someone. (Though we might also want to keep in mind the violence of words and ideas...)
Lastly, the piece also functions as a kind of ‘joke’ and (another) enactment of silliness, an important part of my practice. In this sense, it functions for me as a performative act of wanting to embrace the multifarious aspects of my self and let them all find expression, rather than shying away from some aspects in the pursuit of a ‘more serious’ artistic practice.

The composer Alex Temple explores similar ideas, having a profound interest in “reclaiming socially disapproved-of (‘cheesy’) sounds” (Temple, 2018) but also struggling at times with how she presents herself or her work; talking about removing a piece from her website because it did not sit well with how she wanted to present herself, she had concerns about “squashing parts of [herself] in the name of a false unity” (cited in Solomon, 2016).

I have some concerns around this but have so far erred on the side of sharing everything (that I think of as ‘finished’) but I occasionally have some discomfort around the possibility of people not ‘taking me seriously’—amplified by my queerness, transness and lack of any formal musical training. So far though, I have felt quite resolved to share my silliness with the world. (I took ‘Pbbbt’ as my stage name and worship the goddess Eris.)

A large part of me hopes that no one will ever play this piece. Some small part of me does feel quite excited about the idea of it manifesting in the world along with all of the ethical questions that this would raise about my complicity in the acts. In this sense, the piece embodies the pseudo-existential question about our incapacity to ‘really communicate’ with people, our inability to know how our actions will change the world (because of the sheer complexity of it) and raises questions for me about the ‘inevitable suffering’ of ‘samsaric existence’.
silences

For two or more players (any instrumentation).

Duration: variable.

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**intent**

The piece consists of nine (or ten) sections alternating between free and scored; the scored sections all consist of silences of different qualities asking the players to explore ways to facilitate the scored silences. In composing with scored silences, the piece attempts to challenge the idea of silence as a transcendental signifier (or of signifying nothing) and seeks to question the assumption that a piece can convey particular experiences for an audience—silences, in particular, can evoke vastly different responses in people experiencing the ‘same thing’. In this sense, one might read the piece as ‘impossible’ and/or an exploration of the impossibilities of communication, but hopefully one that pushes the players (and perhaps audience) to explore these impossibilities with more rigour or attention to detail.

**score**

a welcoming, open silence

free

an amusing, unexpected silence

free

individual, introspective silences

free

an uncomfortable silence that feels too long

free

an ambiguous silence

(end)
Some notes on ‘silences’

Most of what I would write in some notes on this piece I included in the ‘intent’ section of the score. This feels markedly different from other pieces that I have written in which I have kept the score as pared down as possible to facilitate open-ended readings, and to separate a site of invitation and a site of reflection, consideration and intent. It felt important to include the ‘intent’ of the score, perhaps because it seemed absolutely possible that the intent would not translate from the score itself. Which somewhat undermines my assertion that pieces should ‘stand by themselves’. I still feel that the score—inclusive of the ‘intention’—feels very open-ended, functioning more as an invitation to explore rather than a set of prescriptive instructions.

This piece took partial inspiration from Cage’s 4’33” as well as Craig Dworkin’s Unheard Music (Dworkin, 2009) which catalogues a number of ‘silent’ pieces and describes them in some detail. For me, the pieces in Dworkin’s book fall into a few rough categories:

1. silent scores, or scores with silent sections (John Cage, Alphonse Allais, Mike Batt, Leif Elggren, Per Jonsson and Kent Tankred, Yves Klein, Peter Vähi, Mieko Shiomi, Ervín Schulhoff, Baudouin Oosterlynck, Vasilii Gnedenko);
2. recordings of ‘silence’ (Pavel Büchler, Ken Friedman, David Hoyland, Jonty Semper, Reynols, Pavel Büchler, Christopher DeLaurenti, The Phantom Pregnancies, Matt Rogalsky, TAC, Jens Brand, John Levack Drever, Jacob Kirkegaard);
3. recordings that leave only the silence, (Nick Thurston, Language Removal Service, George Maciunas, Alvin Lucier);
4. pieces or recordings that we cannot hear (Stephen Vitiello, James Whitehead, Jarrod Fowler, Tellium Group, Linear Regressionists, Coil, *o);
5. pieces that consists of noise or sound, but lack agency (Christian Marclay, W Mark Sutherland, Steve Reich, Matmos, Coil, Institut für Feinmotorik, Richard Eigner, Joseph Beuys, Ulrichs, Braco Dimitrijevic, Nick Thurston); and
6. recordings of sounds not usually heard (Haco, Mattain and Taco Unami).
None of these pieces compose with different silences sitting against each other, or explore the contexts that contribute to the silences that they consist of or encompass (though some explore the context of one particular context).

My interest in ‘silences’ feels markedly different to most of these pieces in that it explores the emotional, performative aspect of various silences in context. In some ways, the focus lies on the context, most of which the performers must create in their improvisation (or devising). Presumably, the “amusing, unexpected silence” has these qualities because of the sounds preceding it—in another context this “same silence” would have different qualities. In this sense, the score plays with ideas of presence and absence and the visceral, emotive experiences of players and audience in a way which many other silent pieces do not—either because they explore silence as a conceptual idea and/or in the abstract.

With this piece, I wish to queer the idea of silence as a transcendental signifier—even if that transcendental signifier signifies “nothing”. I wish to invite an exploration of the messy, context-ridden silences of actual performances. And to invite an exploration of these contexts to try and facilitate the kinds of silences that the score demands. In this way, the focus lies not on the silences but on the sounds that create (or facilitate) them and a foregrounding of these contexts as spaces of potential for manifesting a wide-variety of silences that ‘sound differently’ even though, out of context, they might ‘sound the same’.
not clapping

For everyone present at a performance.
Duration: variable/ongoing.
At the end of a performance don’t clap. Allow the performance to permeate into the social realm. Navigate a transition from the ritual of performance to whatever comes next in a mindful way, taking stock of how you and others feel. Give yourself permission to feel affected and pursue a course of action that nourishes you.

If programmed with other pieces, consider the effect ‘not clapping’ might have on other performances.
Some notes on ‘not clapping’

Sometimes it feels that the ritual of clapping functions to ensure that the world of the performance does not permeate outside of the confines of its allotted time. It can work to renormalising a space so that we can return to the codified social interactions that feel familiar, having fenced of any possible effect (or affect) of the performance within the confines of the stage and length of performance. This score invites people to explore a world with less rigid boundaries and how we might navigate together through this world.

(We can, of course, read clapping in other ways—as a communal show of gratitude or appreciation, as the audience having a voice after remaining silent through a performance, etc.)

I have thought about (not) clapping for some years, first asserting this preference when at Dan O’Connor’s Residence series, discussed in the previous chapter ‘The Residence Workings’. Not clapping felt particularly important in this context as I felt clear that I wanted people to read these ‘performances’ as ritual work primarily rather than musical or physical performance (though they obviously constituted this as well). This also felt like a space in which I could control the environment easily and that made sense for me to do so—I here shared my invocation practice explicitly with attendees for the first time and people recognised the intimacy of the project.

Arnold Schoenberg ran the ‘Society for Private Musical Performances’ in Vienna from 1918-1922. Schoenberg formed the society to “give artists and art-lovers a real and accurate knowledge of modern music” (cited in Jarman, 1993, p. 64). The society put on a concert most weeks of music from Mahler to the present day and they had strict rules about attendance: “admission by subscriber pass only, no applause or expression of disfavour and no music critics” (Yoell, 1988, p. 290).

Schoenberg seems to have had more interest in sharing music free from critical judgment, than an aesthetics or politics of ritual, but to some extent this might manifest similar results to the intent embedded in my own score—at the Society for
Private Musical Performances the work stands by itself, the audience allow themselves to feel the effect of the work in ways other than a critical response.
Ashes of Burnt Sage

For multiple drummers and multiple vocalists.

Duration: variable (ideally at least 20 minutes).

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instrumentation

DISALLOWED
Cymbals, sticks, snares.

ALLOWED
Bass drums (double kicks highly recommended), toms, frame drums, timpani, etc. played with various mallets.
Rattles, shakers, maracas, detritus, etc.
Bells, singing bowls, etc. (end section).

score

A set starts with a single drum. Other drums, percussion and voices may join in at any point (even after just a few moments). The piece should generally have a high intensity. Towards the end of the set drummers should sound bells, singing bowls, etc., perhaps only once or twice each, perhaps up to a few minutes, optionally while maintaining drumming. The bell sounds indicate to everyone to start searching for an ending, coming down, grounding oneself.

Strict rhythms should always be avoided. The piece calls for an exploration of ‘shamanic rhythm’ or ‘non-striated’ music.

The piece does not require a sense of cohesion in the ensemble. All players should strive for an individualistic sound with less regard for other players than in other forms of music.

The aesthetic of the piece is something like the sounds of a rapid flowing river or waterfall, or busy freeway—chaotic, but with a sense of momentum. The ‘flow’ may change, even radically at different points, but always with a sense of movement. Different sounds may clash with each other.

I encourage singers to use methods from extreme metal—death growls, screams, etc.—but any emotive or extreme vocal expression will work including laughter, crying, groaning, moaning, deep breathing, etc. Strive to allow yourself to feel affected by the intensity of the music and put aside one’s usual censors and filters. Sing (and play) from the gut or from the heart. Always avoid words, though feel free to make use of language-like sounds.

A player may drum and sing. Drummers should feel free to vocalise even if this happens only occasionally and vocalists may also use rattles, shakers, drums, etc. If using microphones to amplify voices, everyone should have a microphone, have the option of using their voice on an equal level, even if not actually utilised.

Optionally: end the piece with all players standing in a circle in silence.
Optionally: burn sage incense sticks before or during the performance.
Some notes on ‘Ashes of Burnt Sage’

This project comes out of my exploration of an improvisation practice influenced by extreme metal as well as various shamanic music traditions that have a much more fluid sense of rhythm. I wanted to explore a music that felt like a waterfall or fast-flowing stream or busy freeway—a chaotic, overwhelming sound, but with a constant sense of flux and flow.

I also took particular inspiration from left-hand path spiritual traditions and the driving forces of black metal—the desire to explore extremes, the investigation of transgression and the antinomianist stance. I feel interested in inhabiting these spaces as a queer, trans woman, given that some expressions of these stances can read like the hedonism of the privileged at the expense of those who have less privilege precisely because of normative and authoritarian systems antinomianist positions nominally critique.

The piece explores the idea of a ritual context that has a communal element in creating a set and setting conducive for ritual experience, but which focuses on an individual (and perhaps individualist) experience. In this sense, it functions as an individual-anarchist spiritual practice. Mutual aid and solidarity in the pursuit of an individual(ist) spiritual experience. Antero Alli’s ‘paratheatrical’ work has a similar individual focus and he suggests that:

Exploring ritual without buying into imposed dogmas invites a certain willingness to govern oneself. This type of self-dominion forms the basis for individual integrity, without which true group unity could never emerge. A unique group dynamic activates with the fulfilment of each individual’s personal style of expression. This type of collective identity communicates a fierce quality of Being shared equally amongst participating members. All are equal by the virtue that each member is responsible for being him/herself (Alli, 1987, p. 9).

Sonically it takes inspiration from Tuvan shamanic practices where multiple shamans will each play their own varying beat. As Hodgkinson notes: “Xenochrony is the technical term for this, and you can hear it when several shamans participate in

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one ritual, each with a personal tempo of drumming, each addressing personal spirits” (Hodgkinson, 2016, p. 148).

I have no desire to prescriptively suggest these, however, and players may read the score simply as musical instructions. That said, I firmly believe in a spirituality that infuses everyday life rather than something separate from it and a musickal experience can function as a spiritual one in my world. (For clarity—I regard any experience a performer has as a valid expression of the piece. No investment in any form of spirituality required.)

The constant intensity of the piece defies an exploration of dynamics or narrative—the piece cannot ‘go’ anywhere. The piece does away with linear narrative and becomes about exploring—through playing or listening—textural, timbral differences. The piece makes use of repetition to deconstruct our usual experience of linear time and to perhaps facilitate a sense of trance or the ‘ecstatic’. The piece invites us to let go of our desire to order sound (because in this instance we perhaps cannot) and to instead refocus our attention on the present moment—each beat, each moment becomes its own world. The physicality intensity of the piece also contributes to this.

The structure of the piece takes cues from descriptions of shamanic journeying. The piece starts with a drum beat, and drums drive the whole piece, and the piece ends with bells and chimes which signify a move to finding an ending. Many spiritual traditions make use of bells, chimes or gongs as a means to focus the attention. In this work, they also function to bring the ensemble back to a sense of common experience and presence in the moment. This also has a ‘grounding’ effect—or at least signifies that the players should seek to ground themselves, particularly if they have had any intense experience during the piece. The end also serves as a transition out of the intense, individualistic, extreme soundscape of the piece and perhaps offers some relief and can facilitate the transition for the audience as well.
song to destroy myself / song to destroy the world

For trans femme voice with drum and rattle.

Duration: variable.

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performance

The performer reads the invocation while circling the drum head with mallet; after the invocation the performer starts drumming (with rattle in hand) and channelling the affect.

invocation

I really love doing cut-up like destroying everything and making music out of it I especially like writing absolutely anything I want because I know it’s going to be destroyed.

Trans young people found it difficult to access health services with 60% feeling isolated from medical and mental health services, and 42% having reached out to a service provider who did not understand or respect their gender identity. [...] Around 3 in every 4 trans young people have experienced anxiety or depression. Four out of 5 trans young people have ever engaged in self-harm, and almost 1 in 2 trans young people have ever attempted suicide (48%).

Cutting is a feminist aesthetic proper to the project of female unbecoming. [...] masochism is an underused way of considering the relationship between self and other, self and technology, self and power in queer feminism. [...] If taken seriously, unbecoming may have its political equivalent in an anarchic refusal of coherence and proscriptive forms of agency.

References

Some notes on ‘song to destroy myself / song to destroy the world’


Also, a personal response to my own gender dysphoria and mental health issues around transitioning.

Video recording of ‘song to destroy myself / song to destroy myself’ (visuals cut out halfway through); (Pbbbt, 2017e): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfWqxlCePls


My improvisation practice has centred around ‘letting go’ of intent and exploring an embodied, non-intellectual experience of the world. This has felt incredibly important to counter years of ‘living in my head’ suffering from depression and (looking back) gender dysphoria and emotional disengagement. Cut to some years of meditation, singing, embodied ritual practice and gender transition and I realise that I have a disconnect between my heady, intellectual, word-using engagement with the world and this other way of engaging in, manifesting in the world. And that disconnect feels a little uncomfortable. I would like to integrate these different ways.

For myself, exploring an improvised, embodied ritual practices liberated from my overbearing ‘rational’ mind felt incredibly important. But I now feel uncomfortable with the (apparent) divergence between these different ways of experiencing the world. I would like to integrate these different aspects of myself.

Also, while one can clearly perform magick without writing, my exploration of non-linguistic (or non-logocentric or non-phallogocentric) ritual has happened alongside an investigation exploring ritual spaces outside of a clear intent (except for the desire to explore a particular kind of experience). While I have greatly enjoyed and learnt a lot from these experiences, I also wonder if my practice has elements of playing into
passivity, or at least a lack of assertiveness which feels problematic as someone who has suffered from depression for years (for me, tied to a sense of lack of agency). And I feel some concern around the gender politics of the queer, trans woman ‘letting go of her will’ to ‘accept whatever arises’, while the straight, white male magickians ‘assert their will’ all over the planet. This feels problematic. Or confusing. But also, perhaps a ‘valid tactic’ of nonparticipation within the cis-normative heteropatriarchy. The challenge I find in moving between my logical or rational mind and physical, embodiment feels echoed in the difficulty I have in moving between score and improvisation (or at least the kind of improvisation that I have explored and find exciting).

I have realized that my experience of invocation—and the bleed through into ‘other’ forms of improvisation—has an aspect of collage or cut up to it. I cut between different techniques readily and often cut between different voices. But in another sense, I try to ‘integrate’ different experiences, different ways of manifesting in the world. ‘Cutting’ between different experiences does not quite seem enough, somehow. I would like to develop the capacity to move between interacting in the spirit realm and socializing with people and fully inhabiting my physical body, for example; or, perhaps, develop the capacity to hold all of these experiences in my consciousness at the same time.

My use of text in this performance, while referencing cut-ups did not actually employ this technique—more so, it juxtaposed different texts that I had deliberately selected (more like collage). During the day I played around with a number of texts but could not work out anything that moved me as a way of engaging with the texts and incorporating improvisation. I printed a page or so of different texts that had importance to me at the time and took them with me thinking I would not use them. Quite last minute (totally in character), I decided to read the three texts that ended up in the score, and then do an improvised ‘song to destroy myself / song to destroy the world’ immediately afterwards. In this sense, the texts function as an invocation in that they invoke in me particular feelings and perhaps thoughts.

This improvisation (and ‘score’) perform my first attempts to include text and perhaps a clearer, more discernible intention in an ‘improvisation’. Except I ended
up just reading the texts rather than incorporating them somehow, it has become a ‘score’ and by ‘intention’, perhaps I just meant ‘expressing my anger’.

On 6th October 2017, I had a gig booked at ‘Shock of the New’, the staff and postgrad showcase as part of every semester’s ‘Sound Spectrum’ concert series. I had intended to do another ‘shamanic black metal’ set of drums and vocals improvising and exploring ritual/possession space as I have done recently. But I felt... moved... to do something with my shamanic drum and words and explore the idea of channelling or expressing my anger and sadness of late into a performance and/or a ritual work.

I had sat in a café earlier in the day listening to Diamanda Galás’ albums *Vena Cava* (1993) and *Maledictions & Prayer* (1998). I had also recently listened to *Amplicon* by Runhild Gammelsæter (2008). These artist—while quite different—seem to manage something that I have thus far not managed—using words and narrative but with improvised or seemingly quite free vocalisations.

Words have the (dis)advantage of specificity. They can refer to a particular kind of suffering, but in doing so limit it to this. In a similar way to how that empathy has a limited, ‘tribal’ quality—we have a tendency to feel more empathy, and find it easier to feel empathy for people of our own religion, ethnicity, dialect, etc.

Words do a very good job of conveying specific ideas. Western magick has had a strong focus on asserting one’s Will in the world, and Crowley even gives the example of writing a book to change people’s ideas about the world as an example of magick (Crowley et al., 2008, p. 126). Sigil magick—the starting point for most chaos magick texts—involves writing a desired outcome in words—which then get rearranged into mantras, sigils, etc. The word has primacy. Not only this, but most western magickal texts insist on the importance of a written magickal diary deemed essential for progress in magick (Carroll, 1987, p. 13; Chapman, 2008, pp. 23-27; Crowley et al., 2008, pp. 63, 107-108, 239-240; Hine, 1995, pp. 42-43).

Counter to this—at least in my idiosyncratic image repertoire of belief systems—Buddhism focuses heavily on meditation practice and does not place much value on discussion of particular phenomena, in fact some writers point out that the getting
caught up in the particulars misses the point (Ingram, 2018, pp. 115-116, 137-140). Written texts only have value for improving our reflections on ethics and meditation technique. The practice centres on recognising again and again the three qualities of all phenomena—and it does not really matter what phenomena you pay attention to.

Importantly, most magick traditions—and certainly most ‘shamanic’ traditions—have oral histories and training. Writing things down, whether one’s own reflections or ‘the teachings’ themselves seems like a phenomenon that comes out of monotheistic religions and the primacy of the text to these belief systems. While one can clearly perform magick without writing, my exploration of non-linguistic (or non-logocentric or non-phallogocentric) ritual has happened alongside an investigation exploring ritual spaces outside of a clear intent (except for the desire to explore a particular kind of experience). This has felt incredibly important to counter years of ‘living in my head’ suffering from depression and (looking back) gender dysphoria. But I now feel uncomfortable with the (apparent) divergence between these different ways of experiencing the world. I would like to integrate all of these different aspects of myself.

The challenge I find in moving between my logical or rational mind and physical, embodiment feels echoed in the difficulty I have in moving between score and improvisation (or at least the kind of improvisation that I have explored and find exciting).

I have realized that my experience of invocation—and the bleed through into ‘other’ forms of improvisation—has an aspect of collage or cut up to it. I cut between different techniques readily and often cut between different voices. (Or voixes—a word I have used for a few years referring to the voices of spirits, particularly when multiple or unclear who they belong to; this feels curiously similar to spellings such as ‘folx’ or ‘womxn’ though not intentional.) But in another sense, I try to ‘integrate’ different experiences, different ways of manifesting in the world. ‘Cutting’ between different experiences does not quite seem enough, somehow. I would like to develop the capacity to move between interacting in the spirit realm and socializing with people and fully inhabiting my physical body, for example; or, perhaps, develop the capacity to hold all of these experiences in my consciousness at the same time.
I wrote these notes to accompany the uploaded video:

   An attempt to include text and perhaps a clearer/more discernible intention in an improvised piece. Except I ended up just reading the text first and using that as a frame for the ‘song’. And by ‘intention’, perhaps I just meant “I feel angry about these things.”

   The video cut out about 8 minutes in. Almost like I destroyed myself/the (visual) world and only the song/incantation remains... (Pbbbt, 2017e)

At the end of this performance (after I had walked out and spent some time alone and then come back) three young people (two queer, one of those trans) had tears streaming down their faces, having felt very moved by this performance. I have felt a lot of different things reflecting on this performance. I wonder about the ethics of ‘making people cry’. I wonder about the ethics and politics of only affecting young queer people. I wonder about the impossibility of truly connecting with anyone else. A while ago I felt confused about whether or not people actually heard my music—or at least, heard it as I hear it—because of the timbral-centred quality of it, having practiced this quality of listening for some years and feeling that it had racially altered how I hear. I felt a similar anxiety after this performance. Could only trans and/or queer audience members really connect with this work? And did that mean that I had failed as an artist?

Thinking back some months later, I certainly have some questions around the ‘effectiveness’ of different art forms and will continue to interrogate their usefulness in giving voice to particular experiences—whether my own, or those of communities that I belong to. But art does not have to always do this, or do it effectively. Art functions in other, parallel ways similarly to how different spiritual practices can sit alongside each other in a model like the 8-circuit brain model. Not everything has to do everything. (She tells herself.) A ritual performance like this might simply read as someone embodying (or performing) anger. They may or may not feel moved to explore further given the cues and contexts.
Some notes on ‘song to destroy myself / song to destroy the world’ as a score

Sometime after performing this set, it still had a sense of functioning as a ‘piece’, or the intent or focus of it still seemed clear. I could imagine performing it again, which felt different from most improvised performances that I have done which feel so grounded in whatever has arisen in that moment. This piece, however, feels grounded in a set of experiences, and provides prompts that harken to the archetypal forms of these experience and/or prompts them. Although I had not had the intention to do so when I started collaging words that morning, I ended up writing this performance up as a score. The instructions read:

The performer reads the invocation while circling the drum head with mallet; after the invocation the performer starts drumming (with rattle in hand) and channelling the affect (Harlow, 2017).

The three texts constitute the ‘invocation’ and I deliberately used explicitly magickal references in this piece—framing it this way felt important (I have used ‘magickal’ ideas in other pieces or contexts but tried to refrain from explicitly magickal language so as to make them more ‘accessible’).

In a way ‘song to destroy myself / song to destroy the world’ came about through an improvisational score-writing practice. I had not intended to write a score, but had improvised with collaging words (which we can always read as scores), improvised from this cut-up, and then retroactively created a score out of this. In this way, it feels like the most integrated of my pieces as it collaged together improvisation and writing; the embodied, visceral sense of self and the logical-linguistic sense of self.

I have yet to perform this piece again (though I feel open to doing so in the right context). Nor has anyone else performed it. But it seems like it would stand up as a piece outside of its original context. I also like the score’s openness. It functions quite similarly to my possession practice—a statement of intent and then an open-ended, manifestation of this. As a mostly improvising performer, this score feels quite comfortable and seems to do the work of manifesting or inviting an intent while also allowing for the individual player to explore whatever moves them in response. And feelings around dysphoria, gender inequality and self-harm feel likely to resonate with future manifestations of myself and or other trans femme people.
I have recently gotten in touch with Shoshana Rosenberg—another trans, femme improviser, musicians, composer and sometimes vocalist—about performing this piece and she seems keen. I have also considered the possibility of either 1) inviting different trans femme vocalists to perform this piece as part of an extended engagement with the *Trans Pathways* study, or to apply for some funding to create, or curate a collection of works by various experimental trans artists in response to the study. This could function as both an artistic reaction to an important set of facts about our world—and give voice to some embodied, experiences thereof, as a parallel text to the statistical evidence—as well as perhaps drawing more attention to this important document and the systemic social problems that it points to.

This score embodies more strongly than most other scores that I have written both a sense of a score as an outline for a ritual (as one might find in magick texts and grimoires) as well as an invitation to experience ritual space (in the sense that I usually use the word ritual—as an experience of extra-normal consciousness).
MISCELLANY: POETRIFICATIONS
‘drones ongs’, ‘charms trange’ and other nonsense

Josten Myburgh asked me about the title of one of my pieces—drones ongs—which we performed with the Breaking Waves ensemble the other day. (He prefaced his inquiry with the assertion that he felt sure I had some reason for this—such faith he has in my intention around my work!) I started giving an answer and realised that I had actually mused over this quite a bit.

I started playing with word breaks in the early 2000s as titles for my explorations of electronic music. (The neologism ‘word break’ references ‘line breaks’ and suggests that the break might come anywhere, but that it also has a poetic meaning.) I made a couple of cds of experiments with electronic music and ended up calling them ‘demos ongso ne’ and ‘demos ongst wo’. I liked the weirdness of these phrases and the transparency of the original meaning. I continued using similar titles for the fifteen cds I created of music:

demos ongso ne
demos ongst wo
demos ongsth ree
demos ongsfo ur
demos ongsfi ve
demos ongsi x
demos ongse ven
demos ongseig th
demos ongsni ne
demos ongst en
demos ongsele ven
demos ongst welve
demos ongsth irteen
demos ongstfour teen
demos ongstfi fteen
The aesthetic follows a set of rules—the resulting phrase should have the same number of words as the original and for this set, should try to avoid repetition of ‘words’. This happened once with ‘ne’ in the first and ninth titles; but it seemed obvious to me that in the first, ‘ne’ would have a pronunciation like [ni] whereas in the ninth, it would have a pronunciation like [ne].

This playful breaking up of words takes influences from sound poetry and concrete poetry as well as dada and nonsense poetry (Malcolm, 1997). Also informed by Derrida and Spivak’s notions of deconstruction. From Derrida I take an interest in the way that our language favours the written form of the word (logos) (Derrida, 1976, pp. 3-5) and his reading of western metaphysics as phallogocentric. From Spivak I take up the invitation to learn from Derrida’s critique and “then go somewhere else with it” (Spivak, 1997, p. 48). From queer theory (as well as Dada, 'Pataphysics, Discordianism and other foolery) I take a playful stance to engaging with this inherited power structure. ‘Deconstructing’ the site of phallogocentric power in such a way that it disrupts its normal (and normative) functioning, but not in a way that totally obscures the intent, though it of course questions (or queeries) this as well as adding another layer of meaning to this, similarly to the technique of sous rature developed by Heidegger and used extensively by Derrida.

‘drones ongs’, the title that Josten asked me about, follows this playful logic, but also plays with the use of the ‘s’ that we might read as ‘shared’ between the two words. ‘drones ongs’ references both. The ‘s’ may come from the front of the word ‘songs’, or it the nonsense word ‘ongs’ maybe have come about from moving the ‘s’ from the beginning to the end of the word ‘song’ to avoid the previously suggested clumsiness. I particularly enjoy the ambiguity of this phrase. I like ambiguity more than most people.

My album invocations of unknown entities has two discs called ‘charms’ and ‘trange’. I did not want to use ‘disc 1’ and ‘disc 2’ (boring); ‘left’ and ‘right’ felt more interesting, but perhaps felt like it referenced Nine Inch Nail’s The Fragile which did not particularly make much sense to me. I considered a number of other options of
paired words but settled on ‘charm’ and ‘strange’ (the pair of second generation quarks in the Standard Model) because I felt that the qualities that these words invoke particularly suited the album and because some strands of chaos magick have a quite strong association with quantum mechanics. Moving the ‘s’ from the beginning of ‘strange’ to the end of ‘charm’ resulted in two words with equal numbers of letters which I found aesthetically appealing (and suited the monotype aesthetics of the album covers and disc labelling) and resulted in a strange non-word: trange. I could also use the resultant plural ‘charms’ as the title for the disc that had two tracks on—which we might read as two musickal/magickal charms—leaving one strange, long track with the nonsense title ‘trange’. The letter-displacement also functioned as a particularly silly and obtuse pun on the phenomenon of quantum-entanglement (the two words ‘entangled’ and only decipherable with each other).

This all functions as a deconstruction (if you'll pardon the pun) of the striated/atomistic nature of our linguistic apparatus to be read alongside the non-linguistic, non-striated music of the album. As well as an implicit critique of identity politics. An invitation to see through the boxes that we so often live in, or at least realise that the world is vaster than the boxes. A desire to use language whilst performing its limitations.
Dolorous interludes

“As Adorno famously said, the finished work is, in our times and climate of anguish, a lie”
(Steiner, 2001).

Fernando Pessoa’s *Book of Disquiet* (Pessoa, 2001) consists of a collection of over five-hundred textual fragments found in a chest after his death. Pessoa had intended to edit these texts down, but many believe that they work better in their unedited form—similarly to a writer’s journal, they have a beautiful, transparent quality and perform an unfinishedness that Pessoa (or perhaps Soares, the heteronym that Pessoa attributes the *Book of Disquiet* to) writes eloquently of:

I’m astounded whenever I finish something. Astounded and distressed. My perfectionist instinct should inhibit me from finishing; it should inhibit me from even beginning. But I get distracted and start doing something. What I achieve is not the product of an act of my will but of my will’s surrender. I begin because I don’t have the strength to think; I finish because I don’t have the courage to quit. This book is my cowardice (Pessoa, 2001, p. 136).

Pessoa’s work performs the beauty of the dream and of foregrounding the incompleteness of our work. The repeating theme of ‘Dolorous Interlude’ in Pessoa/Soares’s text evoke a dreamlike other world, referenced, alluded to, but not wholly contained within the *Book of Disquiet*. Pieces in this thesis titled ‘Dolorous Interlude’ invoke the fragmentary, liminal quality of the writings of Pessoa, dreaming as Soares; Harlow, dreaming as Pbbbt.
Dolorous Interlude: Being verbs

“Phew, finished a book without using a single “are” “is” “was” or “be” of our own. Out Demons Out!”

(Carroll, 1995, p. 128).

Peter Carroll and Robert Anton Wilson tout the avoidance of being verbs—is, was, are, were, etc.—as a useful tool for reorienting how one thinks about the world. Carroll gives practical examples of magick groups moving away from being verbs (and insisting that people rephrase their assertions without them) resulting in less disagreement (Carroll, 1995, pp. 95-102). This linguistic approach functions to refocus the conversation to ‘what people had experienced’ rather than ‘what actually happened’. People have a much greater tolerance for divergent experiences than divergent claims about reality.

Carroll and Wilson’s critical engagement with being verbs stems from Alfred Korzybski’s General Semantics (Korzybski, 1933) and David Bourland’s ‘E=prime’. A student of Korzybski’s, Bourland devised ‘E-Prime’—the use of English without using any forms of the verb ‘to be’ (Bourland, 1989; Bourland & Johnson, 1991). Korzybski’s asserts that:

The subject-predicate form, the “is” of identity, and the elementalism of the Aristotelian system are perhaps the main semantic factors in need of revision [in our language], as they are found to be the foundation of the insufficiency of this system and represent the mechanism of semantic disturbances, making general adjustment and sanity impossible (Korzybski in Bourland, 1989, p. 205).

The avoidance of “the ‘is’ of identity” can, in my experience, provide a certain clarity of thought and prompt a refocusing on
becoming rather than essence. Focusing on one’s own experience rather than making claims about the essential nature of reality—‘I had the experience of feeling possess by a demon’ rather than ‘I was possessed by a demon’. This simple grammatical constraint can serve to focus a writer on one’s subjective experience rather than make claims about an (implied) objective truth.

We can also read the avoidance of being verbs as undermining one’s voice, however. If, instead of saying ‘this is sexist’, one writes ‘I find this sexist’ or ‘this seem sexist to me’, our assertions have less authority. I see this as a feature, rather than a bug. The issue of authority lies at the heart of this. Do we want to speak with authority? Or do we want to share our experience, listen to others and continue a discussion?

I also recognise the diversity of ways that we can use language and the necessity of making forcible assertions against oppression and authority. We might also read a problematic imbalance between authoritarian voices, happy to make essentialist utterances, and anti-authoritarian voices which insists on a plurality of voices, perhaps shying away from more ‘powerful’ use of language. An insistence on plurality hopefully undermines authoritarianism, and demands that everyone takes responsibility for their voices and experience and implicitly (if not explicitly) critiques authoritarian, essentialist speech.

Korzybski himself did not have anything against all instances of the verb ‘to be’, however. Bourland notes the “is of identity” in the above example that warns against the dangers of it (Bourland, 1989, p. 205). And Korzybski’s most famous adage contains a (negated) “is of identity”: “The map is not the territory” (Korzybski, 1933, p. 58). But Bourland, Carroll,
Wilson and others find the use of E-Prime useful in their theorising and philosophising.

I have personally found reframing some sentences to avoid using the verb ‘to be’ useful in my own thinking and writing—particularly when avoiding “the ‘is’ of identity”. The complete avoidance of being verbs, however, seems somewhat arbitrary, unnecessary and ridiculous. Fnord. That said, it can constitute a wonderfully challenging Oulipian game and I welcome a touch of the ridiculous in my artistic and academic pursuits. One might read the avoidance of all forms of being verbs as a playful, Dadaist, Discordian game, embracing the absurdity of misplaced energy and a ridiculous pursuit of a somewhat arbitrary goal interwoven with a profoundly useful one. Hail Eris!
CONCLUSION
Conclusion

I have documented aspects of my own practice in part as a model of an ethically-engaged spirituality. I have presented musick and ritual work as models for other ways of practising, in contrast to some of the dominant paradigms of western esotericism and spirituality. Much in the way that Donna Haraway or Ursula le Guin’s work functions as speculative: offering other paths. These paths might offer a new way that someone else wants to follow, or a reader might take inspiration from the act of pathmaking to create new ways of their own.

I firmly believe that frank, critical engagement of experiences that we might call spiritual or magickal will enrich our language for discussing these and other experiences. I see two benefits to this. Firstly, opening up to critical thought areas that often, to their detriment, shy away from such discussion; secondly, making these experiences accessible to more people by moving away from obtuse language and obfuscation.

I do not view myself as a privileged, special practitioner of a secret, elite art. Rather, I see magick and meditation as a set of tools that I would like to see more widely used by others. I would like to live in a world where we support ourselves in the practice of manifesting the best versions of ourselves and the best version of the world that we share together. This outlook owes a lot to my anarchist leanings and the works of Hakim Bey, Robert Anton Wilson and others who seek to liberate western magick from its elitist history.

While I do not think that magick and ethics need intersect in any deterministic way, I seek to explore an ethically engaged magickal practice. Peter Carroll (at least partly in jest) refers to himself as an “off-white magickian”. He dismisses “Self-Professed Black Magicians” as “fantasizing constantly about becoming powerful psychopaths” and White magicians as spending “most of their careers casting ineffectual spells at imaginary evils to no effect” (Carroll, 1995, p. 59).
I sometimes worry that magick (or other practices) follow a different path to meditation or ultimately serve as a distraction. I take great comfort in Duncan Barford’s reframing of insight meditation as magick. He notes that the Buddha’s teachings require an intent—to liberate oneself from suffering. They do not work without this magick. Barford—a chaos magickian and vipassanā insight meditation practitioner concludes: “I’m no Buddhist. I’m a magician who uses Buddhist techniques” (Chapman & Barford, 2009a, p. 103). This framing feels very useful to me. Meditation as just another type of magick. A type of magick that I want to practice every day, but not something so different from any other practice. I perhaps also take some comfort in the writings of another chaos magickian talking about the same meditation course that I have also sat on and who takes the project of Awakening seriously.

The second edition of Daniel Ingram’s Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha came out in late 2018. The second edition includes a much longer discussion of ‘the powers’ (Buddhist magick). He states that: “Consciousness plus intent produces magick. Anything in the least conscious or subtlest way, is a magickal act or product” (Ingram, 2018, p. 536). He then draws a distinction between ‘ordinary magick’ (writing or picking something up) and ‘extraordinary magick’ (what most people would consider magick). He goes on to suggest that we can regard insight meditation as the greatest form of magick (Ingram, 2018, pp. 550-551). I find this framing of all conscious intent as magickal liberating and beautiful. I also take inspiration from Ingram’s focus on the ethics of using the powers (magick) and keeping sight on the purpose of such skills.

Scores

The scores became a significant part of my practice over the last few years and offered another way for me to explore the intersection of a body-centred improvisation and meditation practice with an intellectual engagement. The scores included in this thesis explore a variety of different interests, but the last two presented in the section represent, perhaps, the most succinct exploration of some of my main concerns. ‘Ashes of Burnt Sage’ explores a way for supporting individual
and individualistic spiritual practice in a group ritual. It functions as a model for a collective practice centred around the notion of individuals striving to manifest the best version of themselves. In this way, it suggests a model for an anarcho-spirituality that privileges individual autonomy and spiritual growth, while recognising that we can hold space for each other to do this work. The score ‘song to destroy myself / song to destroy the world’ explores the intersection of explicit socio-political interest with an embodied, emotive practice that functions in the same modality as my invocation practice. As such it represents an important intersection for my practice(s). This piece foregrounds the importance of compassion and acceptance in both the broad, deep sense of a meditation practice that fosters Awakening and as a political necessity for seeing the world in its present state (so that we may act ethically in it).

Future research

Most of the meditation practices that I have explored come from the Theravādan tradition. I have not had time in this thesis to explore in detail practices from Mahāyāna and Vajrayana. These ‘turnings of the wheel of dhamma’ arguably incorporate more magickal techniques; Vajrayana in particular as it incorporates Tantric practices. As noted by many authors, however, Buddhist teachings have included magickal practices from the start (Ingram, 2018, pp. 469-557; McFarlane, 2010; van Schaik, 2009). Studying texts from the Mahāyāna and Vajrayana traditions in more depth would undoubtedly offer rich possibilities for exploration, as would spending more time with the Visuddhimagga and the Vimuttimagga, texts that do not form part of the Pāli canon but have great importance in some Theravādan schools and which offer a system of meditation and magick (Buddhaghosa, 2010; Upatissa, 1961).

The question of cultural context remains underdeveloped in this thesis. I have written one score which explicitly explored with this but did so by foregrounding my lack of deeper engagement (Harlow, 2018b). It feels uncomfortable to have written about an ethically engaged practice and not more fully engaged with my complicity in the ongoing colonisation of the lands on which I live and work. I would like to
explore the intersection of indigenous magick and spirituality with my own non-indigenous practices, but do not have the knowledge yet as to how to proceed with this in a respectful way.

I would also like to explore more fully ritual practices with others. While I have done some of this, most of the work presented in this thesis has come out of solitary practice, or represents my invitations (in the form of scores) to others, but not a great deal of musick or ritual devised in collaboration. This feels like an obvious next step for a practice grounded in the ethics of mutual aid and solidarity. I will continue to expand my practice and strive to cultivate relationships grounded in compassion. The writing presented in this exegesis constitute selections from the last three years of my exploration; fragments from an ongoing, open-ended, creative engagement with the world.

“Initiation never ends”

(Chapman, 2008, p. 113; Wilson, 1990a).

Choyofaque!
APPENDICES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY
Why 'Pbbbt'?

1. Because I have a great affection for silliness (and sometimes experimental sound stuff can feel a little stuffy).
2. I like that people stumble over the pronunciation / don’t know how to say it.
3. As a head nod to Derrida and his ‘differance-with-an-a’, which asserts the primacy of the written word over the spoken.
4. As a head nod to the great Dada sound poet Kurt Schwitters (who wrote a poem called PPPPPP).
5. To turn my (stage) name into a sound poem.
6. Because I like the idea of blowing a sage (wise) raspberry. Zen has a long and glorious tradition of mixing the profane and ridiculous into meditation teachings and ‘pbbbt’ gets used on the internets as a transcription of blowing a raspberry; though of course the linguolabial or bilabial trill gets transcribed by linguists as [r̼] or [ʂ].
7. Because Eris told me to. She gifted me this (magickal) name as part of an invocation ritual I performed. Look away now if you don’t want to hear the results.

How do you pronounce ‘Pbbbt’? [okay, I actually get asked this a lot]

a) See point 2. above!
b) blow a raspberry
c) say ‘Pee Bee Bee Bee Tee’ or ‘Puh Buh Buh Buh Tuh’ [Pbbbt has three ‘B’s in it]
d) say ‘Sage Raspberry’
e) anything else that makes sense to you

Why don’t you use the phrase ‘extended vocal technique’?

While the term ‘extended vocal technique’ has much wider usage it seems problematic to me; at best it seems inaccurate—in many traditions such techniques get learnt alongside ‘normal’ singing techniques, or simply as a different way of
singing, rather than an extension of regular technique—at worst, it seems Eurocentric, verging on racist to suggest that only western singing, and forms similar to it ‘count as singing’ and then one can optionally add some additions, or extensions, to that language. Michael Edgerton uses the term ‘extra-normal’, which evades some of these problems. It still ‘normalises’ some techniques, but then in all the traditions that I have familiarity with, people recognise that the techniques we wish to describe with these terms differ from other, more widely practiced types of singing. I don’t find that as problematic as asserting the primacy of ‘normal’ singing. And I haven’t come across a better term. I welcome suggestions.

*Why do you sometimes spell musick with a ‘k’ on the end?*

Well... this chap Aleister Crowley started spelling magick with a ‘k’ at the end to differentiate it from ‘stage magic’. Some folx use this spelling, others don’t. But as a lot of my music has elements of ritual work and/or meditation, and because my ‘sage musick’ project in some sense constitutes a magickal diary, I thought it fitting to spell it ‘musick-with-a-k’. And, you know, I enjoy neologisms and wordplay. (Not a massive Crowley fan; I acknowledge his huge influence on Western esotericism but he did act like a dick a lot of the time.)

*Do you really have a phobia of origami?*

Yes. And I feel totally comfortable with people laughing at this—even I find it funny—and it also genuinely freaks me out, no joke.

*Which Spirits do you work with?*

I have worked with a number of different entities over the years, I’ve felt particularly drawn to or inspired by Baphomet, Choronzon, Eris, Kali, the Great Serpent, the Spirit of Plastic, Green Tara, Tiamat, Unknown Entity and Washing Machine. Plastic and Washing Machine function as experiments in the idea of urban or industrial shamanism/animism. I’ve done a lot of work with ‘Unknown Entity’ as part of an exploration of dada or ‘anti’ magick in the last few years. Magick without results! Ritual without intent! An alternative to the results oriented, patriarchal-hedonistic stream of magick. A life affirming action, in the way that Dada had a life-affirming, anti-dogmatic stance.
Isn’t Choronzon a scary evil demon?

Choronzon gets a lot of bad press. For me, Choronzon functions as a personification of the process of realizing the illusory nature of ego that forms part of the process of the ‘dark night of the soul’. Meeting them can feel quite challenging, yes. But they just do their thing. I took a lot of inspiration from Demitria Monde Thraam’s writings on Choronzon (particularly this interview) as well as Tibetan Chöd ritual as channelled via Tsultrim Allione (short version: have compassion for demons). I have a bunch of recordings of workings with Choronzon that I will rework into an album in the hopefully-not-too-distant-future. <3 <3 <3
Photographs of box-set version of ‘invocations of unknown entities’
I’m astounded whenever I finish something. Astounded and distressed. My perfectionist instinct should inhibit me from finishing; it should inhibit me from even beginning. But I get distracted and start doing something. What I achieve is not the product of an act of my will but of my will’s surrender. I begin because I don’t have the strength to think; I finish because I don’t have the courage to quit. This book is my cowardice.
—Fernando Pessoa, The Book of Disquiet, Text 152

I record every day. Partly to improve my skills—technically, but also the skill (?) of improvising. My practice feels very strongly focused on process rather than product, or attaining a ‘goal’ (and this perhaps seems anathema to my meditation practice!)

Recording ‘an album’ felt like a strange thing to do. And I feel all sorts of things about it. But perhaps letting go of the absolutism I perhaps associate with the idea of ‘an album’ has more importance than not making ‘an album’?

In some sense, this album “is my cowardice”.

The boxed set perhaps more so! The original idea for this box set came from Gabriel Chocolate making this exceptional chocolate with the Chuao cocoa from this island off the coast of Venezuela. They made a few different versions (cocoa percentages) of this chocolate. And they made one that consisted of 99% cocoa (and 1% vanilla). By far the best chocolate I have ever had. The idea of pairing this ‘intense, extreme, dark’ (and delicious) chocolate with my album seemed too silly to resist!

Sadly, they have stopped making this chocolate. They still have some of the 80% (my second favourite chocolate of all time) which we intended to include in the boxed set. But they don’t actually have any in stock yet. But we’ll get you some very soon.

If I had known of the unavailability of the 99% version I probably wouldn’t have made this box set. (The whole inspiration came from the ‘extremeness’ and silliness of the idea.) But I feel glad that I did; even based on an expectation that didn’t eventuate. So this box documents another failure, in some sense. But the failure of actual things manifesting in the world, the failure of abstract desires. And perhaps that constitutes a failure worth embracing. (My magick practice certainly does.)

Thanks for listening.
Kitano Gempo, abbot of Eihei temple, was ninety-two years old when he passed away in the year 1933. He endeavoured his whole life not to be attached to anything. As a wandering mendicant when he was twenty he happened to meet a traveller who smoked tobacco. As they walked together down a mountain road, they stopped under a tree to rest. The traveller offered Kitano a smoke, which he accepted, as he was very hungry at the time.

“How pleasant this smoking is,” he commented. The other gave him an extra pipe and tobacco and they parted.

Kitano felt: “Such pleasant things may disturb meditation. Before this goes too far, I will stop now.” So he threw the smoking outfit away.

When he was twenty-three years old he studied I-King, the profoundest doctrine of the universe. It was winter at the time and he needed some heavy clothes. He wrote his teacher, who lived a hundred miles away, telling him of his need, and gave the letter to a traveller to deliver. Almost the whole winter passed and neither answer nor clothes arrived. So Kitano resorted to the prescience of I-King, which also teaches the art of divination, to determine whether or not his letter had miscarried. He found that this had been the case. A letter afterwards from his teacher made no mention of clothes.

“If I perform such accurate determinative work with I-King, I may neglect my meditation,” felt Kitano. So he gave up this marvellous teaching and never resorted to its powers again.

When he was twenty-eight he studied Chinese calligraphy and poetry. He grew so skilful in these arts that his teacher praised him. Kitano mused: “If I don’t stop now, I’ll be a poet, not a Zen teacher.” So he never wrote another poem.

Further Listening (aside from my album)

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