

Never Fully What It Is: Transfeminine Experience Through Digital Sound

Abstract

Never Fully What It Is is an electronic/pop music performance constructed with the intent of exploring the interplay between digital sound and gender in the context of my own transition throughout the past year. Thematically, the project focuses on issues of emergence and authenticity in the contexts of trans identity and queer feminism, drawing from literature regarding debates about queer assimilation and gendered associations within systems of genre. It aims not to encapsulate the whole of my transition, but rather to focus on the forces shaping it. From a sonic perspective, the techniques used are largely drawn from hyperpop and other experimental and/or queer genres. The resultant performance is an attempt to understand itself, as a digital body and as an encapsulation of how it feels to be young, transgender, and online.

Personal Background

Transitioning

The most important thing to understand about the circumstances surrounding this project is that it is not an attempt to encapsulate an experience I have already had, but instead an image of change. I began my transition in April of 2021, and began research for this project in May of the same year. Unsurprisingly, given the temporal proximity of these processes, this has made the goal of exploring the transfeminine experience in a unified sense much more difficult than I anticipated it being.

The realization I ultimately came to is that what I mean to examine is not my transition's start and end point, but the forces which have pushed and shaped me during this time. To look at the teenage boy that I was is unproductive and saddening, and to examine the queer woman I am now feels pointless given the rate at which my conception of self continues to change. Instead

my focus is on the ideas which have shaped and continue to shape me as a queer person, a trans person, and both at once. It is music about Dungeons and Dragons groups, working at coffee shops, clothing that does not fit, sub-100 member music production discords, milquetoast LGBT studies courses, and poorly applied eyeliner. Audre Lorde sums up this sentiment very well (although in a very different context, that of a black lesbian in the 50s and 60s), closing the intro to her autobiography with the line “*to the journeywoman pieces of myself*” (Lorde, 1982). I have attempted to put as many of the things that have become part of me, from theory to experience to media, on display and in focus for deconstruction.

The performance I ended up constructing is fragmented at times, bordering on inscrutable. The issue is that in order to capture a very specific trans experience and the unique position presented by it within a digital culture, accessibility and coherence must at times be sacrificed in the name of continued growth. Transitioning to another gender is very rarely as simple as just changing one’s gender identity and presentation. It brings with it questions regarding the internal prejudices one has regarding others’ identities, and often forces an initially pyrrhic struggle out of which forms a new individual. Both of these were certainly the case for me, regardless of the extent to which I was aware of it at the onset.

It is worth keeping in mind that as much as this is a piece about transition, it is also a piece created during transition, and that is as essential to the meaning as any theory behind it. In the months I have spent working on this this I have also started hormone replacement therapy, left and entered relationships, seen and been involved with performances by queer artists, progressed my personal music practice, and I continue to be in flux to this day. I may never be done transitioning and I certainly will never be done changing.

Previous Practice

A good majority of my background in music lies outside of an academic context. I have been making music in various forms and for various reasons for eight years, mostly within the genres of indie rock, pop, and hip-hop. I was a songwriter, then an instrumentalist, then a singer, then a producer, then a rapper, then a performer, and finally all of those at once. This particular set of experiences brings with it a variety of approaches to music, all of which I draw on in my current practice. At a certain point it is impossible to separate them; I can continue to develop my practice but it's useless to try and remove an influence.

I think often of an interview Andy Partridge did where he talks about attempting to copy other artists in secret, being too proud to openly emulate or borrow (Partridge, 2000). Certainly, there is some amount of this individualistic pride in me as well; a constant need to create something new or bring something unheard to everything I create (an urge which is ultimately impossible to achieve.) It is a common feeling for trans individuals; creating one's own gendered experience can easily turn into delusions of grandeur. In the end, this comes down to an issue of personality and mental health, which is impossible to quantify but also deeply relevant to the experience I try to reflect in this performance.

Queerness

To define queerness is a difficult task, both because it exists in endless forms across people and cultures and because a central part of many queer identities is a refutation of normative identity.

Still, there is a fine line to be tread with defining things as queer. It's inappropriate to suggest that just because a queer individual uses a technique, that technique becomes queer in the context of their work. Queer artists are capable of making use of normative identities and techniques in their work, whether intentionally in exploration of identity or in the interest of

accessibility. In the same way, cis/het artists can make use of queer themes and techniques in their work. The queerness of anything's meaning is as dependent on contextualization as it is on intent or identity.

That is not to say that things that are created by queer individuals do not hold some inherent queerness. Wendy Carlos, a trans woman, created "Switched On Bach" (1968), a collection of Johann Sebastian Bach's work performed on MOOG synthesizers which was almost solely responsible for bringing synthesizers as a sound into the public mind (Tucker 2020). SOPHIE, also a trans woman, inspired artists across nearly every genre and remains one of the most important artists in the experimental electronic and hyperpop canons even after her death. House music was pioneered in gay clubs as a "deeply pleasurable act of communion" (Daniel, 2011) for queer individuals who had few other safe social outlets. There is a queer history to the technology and aesthetics that these women pioneered. It simply is a matter of how an artist's work is positioned, either by themselves or by its audience.

The queerness of my work in this project is rooted in its technique. I think diving deep into lyricism or reaching for allegorical meaning to small musical decisions would be both gauche and outside of the scope of my research and intention for this project. In this project, lyrics serve less as a driving force for meaning and more as an highly varied and expressive instrument, and the structure of my performance serves to differentiate focus rather than demarcate any shifts in my personal experience.

Thematic focuses

Destruction and Emergence vs. Transformation

In her coming out video, YouTuber and philosopher Abigail Thorn describes transitioning gender as "[having] your whole life, your memories and identity as a person, come apart,

disintegrate, and then come together again as something new” (Thorn 2021). Despite the brutality of this description, it is an oft-repeated one among trans people, and reveals an inherent tension living within transness: does transitioning represent a transformation of body and identity, or is it a process of death and rebirth?

Jack Halberstam, in his book *Trans** (2018), argues that transness is a consistent process of deconstruction and reconstruction. Refuting the oft-repeated comparison of trans bodies to houses or temples, he instead compares it to LEGO, saying that “Lego architectures are in a consistent state of emergence and collapse” (Halberstam 2018). As cultural and political understandings of transness and gender change, so too does the position held by trans individuals, and thus they are forced to be in a constant state of considering and reconsidering their personhood. Additionally, this model serves to account for the mutability of the trans body, as well as how those bodies pose a potential threat to dominant modes of thought across nearly every sphere. Whether or not an individual is medically transitioning or not, transness represents a shift in the presentation and perception of one’s body, both externally and internally. The queer praxis that emerges from this model is centered around “rethinking the function, the purpose, and the productive force of the architecture we inhabit” (Halberstam 2018).

I personally do not find this model particularly compelling, at least insofar as it does not encapsulate my experience with being a trans person to date. Why should societal perceptions of my identity be given the power to force me into a limbo of change? Should the identity that I create and hold within myself not come first? It seems contradictory to the goal of queer liberation to suggest that the position a trans individual holds must figure so centrally within their identity. My transness is certainly a central part of who I am, however the ways I sustain and celebrate that transness are based on no one’s experiences but my own.

Additionally, this argument seems to strip some meaning away from transness in its scope. What makes the suggested reconsideration of our surroundings trans past the fact that it is thought or said by a trans person? Can similar conclusions about the cisheteronormative system in which we live not be similarly understood through different queer lenses? I am able to have experiences in which my transness figures that are not trans experiences.

The point of all this is to say I conceptualize transgender identity and personhood as continuous but also deeply fragmented, and that is not contradictory. I am not the person I was a year ago, but I have that person's memories, and lived in that person's body. There are people, places, and ideas which have remained consistent forces in my transition, and even though the ways in which I internalize these influences has changed since I first came out they have grown no less significant.

Hyperpop/Microgenre

It will become immediately evident to anyone familiar with the genre that my work in this performance is very heavily inspired by hyperpop artists like SOPHIE and 100 gecs. Looking back, it almost feels inevitable that this is the genre I would be drawn to having been online and immersed in strange corners of internet culture for a majority of my life. The path I have taken to my current state as an artist and performer has evolved alongside internet trends and social media thanks to slowed versions of Carly Rae Jepsen songs (Blanket Curtain, 2020), nightcore remixes of club music (TEMPO Entertainment, 2011), and every other musical internet phenomenon that entered my awareness.

The adaptation of genre to a digital space has provided artists a break from restrictive and often harmful normative associations that come with being categorized as an artist within a certain genre. The prevalence of 'microgenres' within EDM and hip-hop serves not only as a

method of refuting the cultural expectations that come with being, for example, a gay DJ or a woman pop singer, but also provides entirely new metrics through which music can be categorized. In this way, genre becomes a marker not only for sonic aesthetics but also for an artist's identity. Looking to Bandcamp and Soundcloud, platforms which require nothing more than an internet connection to release music on, one will find music tagged with genres such as 'traumacore', 'hardwave', or 'space disco'.

Traumacore especially fascinates me as a genre marker. It communicates nearly nothing about what to expect the music to sound like, but instead focuses on the emotional intent and impact of the music and serves a very different purpose from what one would usually expect from a genre categorization. In practice, Traumacore is a genre defined by its thematic and emotional intensity. Heavy use of distorted images of innocence, childlike anger, and futile struggles against overwhelmingly oppressive force tie together artists who in many ways have nothing to do with each other. It represents a larger trend in online music towards genres deeply based off of aesthetic self-identification rather than sonic quality, in the same vein as seapunk or vaporwave.

For a significant period of time, I avoided making hyperpop or hyperpop-adjacent music because it felt almost like participating in stereotype (the trans individuality complex strikes again!). I am a queer trans woman; of course I would make that kind of music, therefore I must avoid it to maintain my individuality. However, as I became more involved and invested in the community and culture surrounding it online I became aware that hyperpop, like traumacore, encapsulates much more than a set of sonic qualities. The hyperpop fan/artist has emerged as a decidedly queer identity that was created, grew, and exists in its modern form almost entirely in a digital space. It's a genre which serves as a bridge between queer visual, emotional, and sonic

aesthetics, and as such it has already built massive online queer communities, as evidenced by the success of Minecraft festivals like Lavapalooza (Open Pit, 2020).

One could even argue ‘hyperpop artist’ to be an inherently queer and/or trans category. It is, at its core, rooted in the same opposition to normativity that queerness finds itself concerned with. The genre seems to appeal uniquely to queer individuals, likely owing to its roots in countercultural scenes where queer people found community in the 2000’s and early 2010’s — raves, web forums, conventions, and gaming circles being notable ones. Additionally, the genre is currently dominated by queer individuals, with a notable number of transfeminine artists garnering significant followings (likely due to SOPHIE’s influence). Even the few prominent cis het artists in the genre are careful to acknowledge the genre’s queerness, something which is unsurprising considering the amount of collaboration that happens within the genre.

It is important to note that to adhere to these identities strictly or treat them as exclusionary is to backslide into the current state of genre-based biases, and I think that this idea was central to my reluctance to participate in hyperpop. Lesbianism, gayness, bisexuality, transness, masculinity, femininity, and any other descriptors of gender or sexuality are, as Butler puts it “complexitie[s] whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what [they are] at any juncture in time” (Butler 1999). To treat these categories as having harsh edges is to work with the forces that seek to organize and reduce individuals to little more than categories. Hyperpop is a wonderfully diverse genre, spanning gender, sexuality, race, and nationality, and the urge to give it these same strictly defined edges serves only to integrate it into the dominant system of genre. If the continued fragmentation of genre does not lead us to a music landscape in which genre serves personal identity before stereotype, it simply leads us back to the restrictive system we started from.

Revolution/Authenticity

Both Halberstam (2018) and Sycamore (2008) regard the notion of intersectionality to be central to queer activism, positing that if one's queerness or transness does not make space for queer identities which exist alongside a plethora of racial, social, and economic positions it is counterproductive. In a sense, this is a natural progression of Butler's groundwork for what constitutes "good feminism" (Butler 1999).

As previously noted, queer communities are far from immune from reproducing the same limiting forces they seek to resist. Existing within a larger culture which strives to create a line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of expression unfortunately means that normative or 'mainstream' queerness often fall prey to similarly counterproductive normative regulatory practices. To return to Drew Daniel's (2011) example of house music, the description he gives of it as a marker of community is followed immediately by a description of how the queer people he is with when they hear the song find it alienating, stripped of the significance it once had by normative gay culture.

This normative queerness (as oxymoronic of a phrase as it is) expressed itself in different ways across different communities. In circles of gay men the term "gold star gay" is often thrown around to refer to gay men who have never had sex with a woman. In lesbian communities cisheteronormativity thrives in the discourse surrounding political lesbianism and the perceived validity of he/him lesbians. For trans individuals, normative queerness often takes the form of a strong desire to "pass" as one's preferred gender and appear cis to strangers. A good number of trans individuals, after receiving gender affirming surgeries, live out the remainder of their life as "stealth" trans, hiding their transness and living as a cis individual would. There is strong

societal pressure for trans individuals to treat transness as a personal matter, and assign transition the end goal of cisness.

Hyperpop in its earliest form emerged as a response to “the baseless nature of the music we regularly take for granted as ‘real’ and ‘authentic’” (Ball 2016). It sought to refute the conception that using technology to augment expression somehow make said expression less authentic or valuable, instead adopting the heavily digitized and produced sounds of EDM and industry pop and taking them to their extremes, becoming indistinguishable from pastiche. In time this approach would spread to mainstream rap and pop punk, with artists approaching the genres as earnest fans but still taking the forms and sounds to their most absurd extremes.

When one applies a queer lens to the idea of authenticity, two possible interpretations arise, both of which are reflected in the hyperpop approach. The first is that authenticity is something to be regarded as little more than a tool aimed at encouraging normative expression. The cultural determiners of authenticity are nigh-unattainable by trans individuals, as what authenticity ends up meaning practically is a small set of digestible forms of expression designed to cater to cis people. Expression outside of those categories, regardless of its earnestness, will be written off as inaccessible or exotic and treated as other.

The other option is that authenticity is something to be strived towards, and that what the cisnet masses regard to be authentic is misidentified. Defining authenticity as the platonic ideal of expression, human experience in its purest form, opens up avenues for all forms of expression to be authentic. In theory this sounds lovely. However, in practice this often circles back to form boundaries for acceptable expression in different forms.

In a way, the approach hyperpop takes to authenticity is revolutionary. When presented with a choice of authenticity or artificiality, it chooses to examine the structure that enforces this

binary and present a critique of it, not just through refutation but by creating art which the structure is unable to account for. It's an act of queer revolt, and I seek in most aspects of my art and life to refuse this categorization in a similar way.

Specific Queer Techniques and contextualizations

Granular synthesis in a queer context

Granular synthesis has in recent years become a bit of a catchphrase in producer circles, used to show that someone is experienced enough to have a grasp on lesser-known production techniques. The irony of this is that in modern experimental circles, granular synthesis is far from avante-garde. Similarly to how normative queer identities have been reinforced within queer communities, granular synthesis has settled into a position of experimental mainstream-ness. It is the first 'alternative' synthesis method most producers learn about, and so rests on the surface of what is a much deeper iceberg of experimental synthesis techniques. I attempt to dive deeper in this project not necessarily in the complexity of my synthesis techniques, but in the contextualizations I developed for their use.

Granular synthesis can be used/contextualized through a queer lense a few ways in the context of this project. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, is the use of live granulation for vocal modulation. I will mention before getting into it that the voice is one of the areas in which a transmasculine and transfeminine experience differ the most. The context within which I discuss trans voices is pointedly transfeminine. Max Schaffer (2021) mentions in their article the fascination with voice modulation within hyperpop, contextualizing it within the larger trend of what they call "chaos-trans" practice (Schaffer 2021). Their description of queering a voice as "tearing [the voice] up until it's unrecognizable, and then putting it back together into this strange sound via new accessible technologies" (Schaffer 2021) can easily be represented

through granular synthesis, quite literally chopping the voice into grains and modulating their playback into new sounds and instruments.

The other queer contextualization of granular synthesis comes from a queer feminist understanding of the system as one which strays from a binary. Thompson suggests that “If understandings of noise that are associated with dualisms [...] might be considered ‘masculinist’, in that they rely upon a binary logic, then cybernetic conceptions of noise [...] might be understood as feminised.” (Thompson, 2016) This idea of binary logic as a tool through which the status quo is upheld can be useful in queer understandings as well. We can position binary logics of good/bad or on/off as cis/heteronormative, and point to systems which defy these as queer. My implementation of granular synthesis in this project makes use of many granular synths’ ability to set a range of values available for each grain generated, straying from dominant synthesis logic of parameters being preset and changing only based on other preset patterns. The introduction of a non-fixed aspect presents a refutation of a dominant binary system, and thus lends another queer meaning to the synthesis technique’s use.

Even in queer systems, one must still be careful to avoid the urge to conform to dominant sonic and/or social practices. It is worth noting that pointing to cisness and heterosexuality as defaults does, in itself, reinforce somewhat of a binary system through the dichotomies of cis/trans genders and gay/straight sexualities. It is important to stay aware that the goal of this type of systemic analysis is not to completely refute binary logics, but to acknowledge ways in which we may refute and stray from their dominance. As I participate in gender as a binary trans individual, I am careful not to participate uncritically in harmful femininities. In this same sense, I tried to avoid harmful stereotypes reinforced through dominant sonic practices.

Intentional Misuse as Trans

In *Gender Troubles* Judith Butler offers the question “To what extent do *regulatory practices* of gender formation and division constitute identity [...]? To what extent is ‘identity’ a normative ideal rather than an experience?” (Butler, 1999).

In applying this question to conceptions of gender identity, we can refute normative assimilationist pressure through intentional misuse and recontextualization of standards of cisness. In my practice, this takes the form of alternative and/or experimental production and mixing techniques, as well as breaking from and reordering traditional song structure. That’s not to say these are unexplored techniques, in fact a large majority of them are borrowed from various niche EDM and pop subgenres. The intention behind their use is as building blocks for new expression and a break from the oft-homogenous modern popular sound.

Drew Daniel, in his piece “All Sound Is Queer” (2011), asks “How might an attachment to ‘knowing’, to the secure grounding of verification and proof, itself constitute a way of protecting ourselves from the queer surrender of simply listening [...]?” (Daniel, 2011) Indeed, the concern with understanding one’s end point, with having some preconceived notion of what one should be working towards, makes purely authentic expression an impossibility. It’s typical and even encouraged to look to individuals further into their transitions as images of transness to aspire to, and this can be undeniably useful for those early in their transition. Within this, however, lies the pitfall of not knowing how another individual conceptualizes or experiences normative gender. At some point, that goal must be shed in favor of constructing one’s own femininity. The important aspect is not what someone was or is, it is the influences they have taken in.

Applying this narrative of trans emergence to music production, the misuse of effects transcends being a refutation of a dominant sound and becomes a process through which one can

create queer identity. It not only represents a process through which something new is created, but also a process through which new methods of creation can be developed in a way that is highly individual. Even if one is borrowing techniques and sounds from other genres, the process of discovering and implementing these techniques as part of one's own sonic practice will inevitably change them to be a more individual approach. Just as an artist can have a queer approach to vocal performance, through misuse one can develop a queer approach to music production as well.

Sound/Chord Generation as Creation of Identity

The only purely melodic effect I built for this performance I called “impressionist chorder” after seeing a Tiktok that suggested “[using] the lens of impressionism to see a chord not as one distinct object but as a fluid gesture [...] by cycling through the inversions” (Martin, 2021). The effect I ended up building does a similar thing, creating inversions of a chord based around whatever base note it is given through random selection of an octave out of three for each note.

Like any dominant system of expression, music theory begs interrogation from queer, trans, and feminist perspectives. With the understanding that “Music and other discourses do not simply reflect a social reality that exists immutably on the outside; rather, social reality itself is constituted within such discursive practices” (McClary, 1991), one can understand the dominant models of music creation as not only having its roots in discriminatory practices, but also as being a method through which discriminatory practices are maintained and circling back to sustain itself.

The goal of this specific effect was to interrogate the idea of inversion as it sits, in both a sonic and theoretical sense. When treating a chord's root position as a kind of status quo, an

inversion suddenly becomes a revolutionary act, especially considering the association “stability” has when discussing inversions, generation without regard to it becomes something destabilizing for anyone subscribing to the dominant paradigm. The base chord is the most stable, first inversion less stable, and second inversion the least stable. However, one can view the concern with stability similarly to how hyperpop views authenticity. Stability, as it exists in music, serves to push the expression of those who value it towards general acceptability. To create music, or in this case specifically chord sequences, without concern for it serves to (no pun intended) destabilize the grasp of dominant music practices.

Pitch Shifting/Correction as Normative and Trans

Plenty of writing has been done on the trans implications of vocal modulation technology. There are clear gendered implications to formant- and pitch- shifting, as those two elements represent two of the most significant markers for how voices tend to be gendered (Erose, 2020). Lilia Kilburn (2021) points to an interview between Cher and Rosie O’Donnell in which Cher speaks about having complicated feelings towards old recordings of her voice. Kilburn posits that “listening to Cher’s voice not only serves as a site of simple audition. but also a site where her voice is judged. In audition’s alternate meaning: she auditions for herself as well, and tunes her voice to how she thinks she ought to sound” (2021). In this sense, autotune and other pitch shifting technologies become a tools through which queer artists may create their ideal form of gendered expression within their art.

I think that very often the use of vocal modulation by queer artists in order to alleviate vocal dysphoria, functionally ‘masc-ing’ or ‘femme-ing’ one’s voice, can easily translate to an unexamined desire to pass. One could interpret pitch correction and formant shifting as an

alternative normative force, applying pressure towards perceived cisness rather than the perceived immutability of sex-link characteristics.

I bring this up not as a condemnation of autotune's prevalence in queer music but as a general caution, one which I tried to heed in my performance. As much as it is good and necessary for trans people to work against dominant systems of enforcing gender, it's not a fight worth fighting at the cost of one's self-esteem and happiness. Dysphoria is real, and despite what I have said regarding passing it would be dishonest of me to say that I do not feel extreme pressure to pass in my day to day. I spend a substantial amount of effort trying to make myself appear more believably feminine (whatever that means), and I have sought out and practiced exercises for vocal feminization. Using Autotune or similar pitch and formant correction software in order to feel comfortable with one's voice and art is more than acceptable but it must not replace the need to challenge societal notions of what it means to "sound like a man" or "sound like a woman". I use autotune in my performance as a result of influence from a canon of modern queer musicians.

Breakdown of performance

Overview

In *Gay Shame: From Queer Autonomous Space to Direct Action Extravaganza*, Sycamore (2008) writes about how in order to avoid naming a single leader, her organization created a fictional figurehead called "Mary". She states that the name "[invoked] a camp queer history" (Sycamore, 2008), and would eventually help spur the protest movement of "Mary for Mayor" in protest against what they considered to be Gavin Newsom's faux-progressive politics. I was struck by this form of queer emergence - identity being created not out of a need for

creativity but rather out of convenience, but still being able to become a figurehead for various ideals. I like to conceptualize the final form of my performance in a similar way: it began as an attempt to explain my own emergent identity, and grew to become a reflection of the various thoughts and tensions which continue to pull me into a different shape.

The five sections of the performance have little significance past being convenient ways to demarcate focus, sonic quality, and methods of control. I'll be referring to these sections as song and sections interchangeably for convenience, the piece is still intended to operate as a unary. I could have easily chosen to start with a somber piece about my struggle coming to terms with my transness, and closed with something uplifting and triumphant, playing into how I am expected to tell this story. That would, however, fail to acknowledge so many aspects of what this performance intends to communicate. The biggest shortcoming of a chronological setup, and the one which informed my decision to reject it, is that it would fall woefully short in terms of addressing the trajectory that I close the set with.

As I stated in the introduction, the meaning in this piece exists largely in the production and sound design practices and influences within it, less so within the song structure and lyricism. I knew from the get go that I wanted to lean heavily into pop music influences, and the way that I decided to do that was by keeping my music mindless in as many ways as I was able to manage. I wrote nearly all the lyrics for it in a day, focusing not on coherence or relevance but instead coming up with melodies that were catchy and compelling. My chord progressions and basslines are simple, as are most of my drum patterns. It's my interpretation of the hyperpop approach to authenticity; I was not trying to root my art's value in making something complicated or even necessarily good by standard metrics. I was trying to make something meaningful and fun.

Title

As may have become evident when I referenced it earlier in this piece, the title of this project is inspired by a line from Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999). Despite any feelings I may have about the accessibility of that book, the phrase "never fully what it is at any juncture in time" (Butler 1999) has stuck with me. It is so applicable to my personal trans experience, bouncing between different femininities and personalities but not fully adopting any new one and not fully leaving any past one behind. It speaks to the aspects of gender which continue to mutate with personal and societal attitudes, but also captures the feeling of having been created by a plethora of disparate hands and claws, pulled into a shape that feels more and more like me every day.

Sections

I am going to keep this section brief, as much of the contextualization for my music has already been done in the theory that I covered. The purpose is more to point out any techniques or meanings of note, mention any tricks or lines I'm particularly proud of, and identify some of the more concrete influences and borrowed sounds.

The first section centers around being able to substantially change the quality of a sound massively with minimal input. I tried to achieve a feeling of regality that I could then make unrecognizable with distortion and reverb, playing both off of the symbolism of revolt against structures of power and also the meaning of my chosen name, Reyna. The synths are all deliberately extremely simple, as I think it makes the contrast between the mundanity of the introduction and the abrasiveness of the climax more effective.

The second section focuses on experimentation with granular synthesis and misuse of MIDI information. I use granular synthesis as a way of "censoring" lyrics that end with things

that could be embarrassing for someone to admit, such as how late they stayed up or what they think their primary driving forces are. The sampled drum break is controlled by a Max for Live object that takes the MIDI notes being fed to the instrument and uses them as probabilities with which to activate and generate alternate patterns and rhythms. The bubbling sound was made from a heavily filtered bass guitar. The effect is heavily inspired by SOPHIE's production on songs like "LEMONADE" and "VYZEE" on her album *Product* (2015), and similarly aims to challenge the idea of "authentic" sonic quality by digitally recreating organic sounds.

At this point I was worried the performance would end up being the same overly somber songs that dominate online conversations about artists with "lesbian vibes". So, I chose to pivot from a mellower IDM and breakcore inspired sound to intense, borderline industrial hip-hop drums and 808 basses. With this I tried to shift the tonality of my lyrics to introduce some levity, trying to adopt an almost Beastie Boys-ish delivery in my verse. Obviously with this influence comes a question of appropriation, and during my years producing and making hip-hop it is a concern that I have taken very seriously. The conclusion I come to is that, as long as I am putting in the effort to keep my music authentic and respect the cultures that come along with any genre, the rap music that I make can and does exist without being appropriative.

The fourth section of the performance is, at its core, an earnest attempt to incorporate a hyperpop song. The trademark huge saturated drums, grimy bass growls, plucky chiptune chords, and pitched vocals all make appearances. Additionally, the lyrical focus draws heavily from my time in online spaces as a teenager, seeing people who were functionally strangers to me publically lament the state of their minds and lives. I try to capture that unique form of online despair and take it to its extreme, speaking about it in a comically upbeat tone and punctuating

the chorus with a purposefully cringeworthy tirade on the systemic violence perpetuated by gendered public bathrooms.

My approach to creating the conclusion to the piece was to treat it as a landing pad. After ten minutes of sensory onslaught, I wanted to create a piece that could serve to reorient and ground not only the audience but myself as the performer. In service of this, I chose to use the section to speak about myself. I think it plays nicely with my conceptualization of this performance as something temporary, intending to capture the human that I am at any given time. It's a way of putting myself into the performance, becoming aware myself and making the audience aware of the interactions I have with the systems I'm working with (heavily inspired by D.B. Shannon and S.E. Truman's *Problematizing Sound Methods Through Music Research-Creation*(2020)). Additionally, I chose to perform this last section with a mouse and keyboard, forcing me to be at my computer while I complete it. I think this similarly provides a grounding force, concluding with an understanding that the entire performance should be understood digitally.

Performance Form Factor

The last part of this project to come together was how physically involved I wanted to be in it. On one hand, the involvement of a trans body in a state of rapid change (my own) opens an avenue to make the conceptualization of this piece as a body in itself even more explicit. On the other hand, however, the involvement of the body in the performance could serve to take away from the intended focus. Additionally, no matter how statically I position myself as a performer I am unable to fully remove myself from my music as an influence (see Shannon & Truman, 2020). As I stated earlier, the queerness and theoretical focus of this project is to be reflected nearly entirely in the production methods used within it. For that reason I decided to treat the

performance as more static, allowing the knowledge that I created and developed the sound to carry the weight of leaving a part of me on the stage.

Conclusion

When I began this project, it was an effort to better understand myself and the ways in which my art is able to reflect my experience. I expected it to be a largely introspective project, considering mainly how the research I did applied to my own identity. I was wrong. Every book, study, and essay I read left me reconsidering aspects of my own personal identity. Every sound I was designing was creating me in return, an almost Newtonian process. As a result of this, the final performance I have developed is all the more personal and significant. It has the hands of so many versions of me on it, and when I look at the differences in their signatures it makes the piece all the more significant as an examination of my journey. It is not about a trans woman, it is about transition.

Afterword

When I first started releasing my music, I chose the pseudonym Charmacist. I liked the idea that I could be something magic, discovering unknown means of healing and creating. I am often struck by the irony of my younger self, unmedicated and unaware, being drawn towards the aesthetic of pills and chemicals. Certainly there was present in that mind an unrealized desire to be fixed, a hope that one day something would click and all the struggles I was facing would melt away. Five years and many months of hormone therapy later, I have moved past that.

Around the time I initially came out as transgender, I stopped making music altogether for a number of months, not in a conscious rejection of the medium but as a byproduct of hopelessness and overwhelming change. When I came back after this time, I retired Charmacist

and deleted all of the songs I had released in an effort to demarcate the beginning of something new. I began releasing music as Rotten Produce, the pseudonym which I use to this day.

Rotten Produce, as a concept and an identity, informed a lot of the thematic focus in this product. The tension between the death and decay of natural materials and the growth of decomposers, the refusal of a plant vs animal dichotomy, a forced acceptance of immutable aspects of life, I could go on. The way I understand my own artistic identity has been massively progressed by the process of working on this.

I can not say with confidence that I would have chosen to do this project knowing what I know now, but that change is what makes this project meaningful. It started as an attempt to understand who I am, what it means to me to be a woman and trans, and ended as an attempt to understand itself.

Bibliography

- Ball, C. (2016). "PRODUCT: Surface Play and Simulation in PC Music". Gateway Prize for Excellent Writing. Paper 13. <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/studentawards/13>
- [Blanket Curtain]. (2020, June 13). Run Away With Me - Carly Rae Jepsen (slow + reverb) [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJ44HGU90I0>
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge Classics) 2nd (second) edition (2nd Edition). Routledge.
- Carlos, W. (1968). *Switched On Bach* [Digital]. New York City: Columbia Masterworks.
- Daniel, D. (2011, November). All Sound Is Queer. *The WIRE*, 333.
https://www.academia.edu/15525147/ALL_SOUND_IS_QUEER
- Halberstam, J. (2018). *Trans: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability (Volume 3)* (American Studies Now: Critical Histories of the Present) (First ed.). University of California Press.
- Herrera, I. (2021, Dec 03). Arca once made electronic music. now she builds worlds. *New York Times* Retrieved from <http://login.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/arca-once-made-electronic-music-now-she-builds/docview/2605503332/se-2?accountid=4485>
- Kilburn, L. M. (2016). *Answering machine, auto-tune, spectrograph: queer vocality through sonic technology* (Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)
- Lorde, A. (1982). *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name - A Biomythography* (Crossing Press Feminist Series) (F First Edition Used ed.). Crossing Press.
- Martin, J [@koalanights] (2021, July 2) *learning all the inversions! Try it! Check out patreon instructions vid (bio) on how to do this #guitar #chords #guitartok #guitartutorial*

Open Pit. “Open Pit presents #Lavapalooza August 14 & 15 at 6PM ET a Minecraft benefit for @TheOkraProject with: @FlatbushZombies @sanholobeats @100gecs @TNGHT + many more! takeovers from: @dogshowrecords @vitalicnoise @LuckyMe @pcmus @bitbird at <http://minecraft.xxx>” Twitter, 2020 August 7, <https://twitter.com/OpenPitPresents/status/1291811368467861506>.

Partridge, A., & Alexander, T. (2000). Interview With Andy Partridge. *JoyZine*.
<https://www.artistwd.com/joyzine/music/xtc/xtc.php>

[TEMPO Entertainment]. (2011, May 16). Nightcore - Everytime We Touch [Video]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKDulhNVLyG>

Thompson, M. (2016). “Feminized Noise and the ‘Dotted Line’ of Sonic Experimentalism”.
Contemporary Music Review

Thorn, A. [Philosophy Tube]. (2021, January 30). Identity: A Trans Coming Out Story |
Philosophy Tube ★ [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AITRzvm0Xtg>

Erose, Z. [TransVoiceLessons]. (2020, May 28). *The Big Picture of Voice Feminization | A Comprehensive Overview | Lecture & Demonstration* [Video]. Youtube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZWQ7MICbDY>

Schaffer, M. (2021, July 13). *Modulation & the chaos-trans voice*. Max Schaffer. Retrieved
October 18, 2021, from <https://maxmadethat.com/publishing/transvocalmodulation>.

SOPHIE. (2015). *Product* [Album]. Numbers.

Sycamore, M. B. (2008). Gay Shame: From Queer Autonomous Space to Direct Action
Extravaganza. In Sycamore, M.B. , *That's Revolting: Queer Strategies for Resisting
Assimilation* (268-295). Soft Skull Press.

Shannon, D. B., & Truman, S. E. (2020). Problematizing Sound Methods Through Music
Research-Creation: Oblique Curiosities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920903224>

Tucker, K. (2020). Wendy Carlos, the electronic music pioneer who happens to be transgender:
As her work broke new ground, the composer faced ridicule and threats, writes Amanda
Sewell. *The Washington Post*.