an embodied journey on gender essentialism de.construction through a voice and a guitar

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introduction

I write this text, starting from my own body experience, its sex assignment and its gender transformations throughout the years. Locating myself outside of the gender binary, I am interested in how we embody gender, how our bodies get shaped through this embodiment and the political consequences that come with this transformation. I see this text as a personal attempt to realise the damage caused by gender classifications and heal from it. My research starts from a personal need, hoping that more bodies who are marked by gender will find this process repairing.

Gender is usually perceived through a visual lens: through a body's anatomy and surface; through how someone looks or moves inside a space. As it is an under-researched area, I would like to locate gender inscriptions through sound: I wonder *in which ways we can hear and deconstruct gender essentialism, if we approach it through a voice produced by somebody's phonatory system, or through a system of sounds emerging from a body's relation to a technological artefact – like a guitar –.*

My urge to research the sound imprints of hierarchical, gendered relations starts from a lived experience: by receiving a middle conservatory training on jazz guitar and by being active in jams and music circles of Patras for several years. While, experiencing the narrow and excluding ideal of the (white cis male) dominant, autonomous, frontal, genius performer who tames his instrument and has the absolute control on his sound, I started seeing the political connotations of this approach and searching for new ones; feminist, queer, post-human. Simultaneously, I locate my research interest on my own body, sensing the frictions created by having a voice, while not identifying with my assigned gender at birth. Though a voice is an intimate, fluctuating and personal sound produced by someone's organism, it gets classified to a gender binary from the moment it is articulated.

Alongside this, I wonder in which ways a guitar located inside a patriarchal, anthropocentric and ableist culture orients a body into cis-heteronormativity[1] and in which ways can a guitar support a fluid gender expression? What are the consequences of technically classifying one's voice to a gender binary depending on their vocal pitch? In which ways can a voice deconstruct these technical classifications, while connecting to the here and now of its embodied situation? What can be the processes that help to caress and amplify queer[2] voices, as the sound imprints created by the systemically unheard?

Hopefully, I cannot represent a generalised way that bodies get oriented by sound so my writing will evolve through auto-ethnography[3]; I will commence from my experiential knowledge of not fitting

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1   The assumption that being cisgender and being heterosexual is the normal way to exist.
2   The word queer has been used as a reclaiming and an abbreviation for someone that belongs to the lgbtqi+ community. It can describe also someone that defines themselves outside of the cis-heteronormative system. Throughout the thesis I will refer to queer as someone's identity but also as a position to deconstruct cis-heteronormativity and caress marginalized voices.
3   The auto-ethnographic writing is experimental, involves the position and the experiences of the researcher, carries their

into my assigned gender at birth, incorporating my own perceptions, biases and feelings around gender embodiment through sound in an attempt to initiate a dialogue that exceeds my self. This knowledge intersects with my being a guitarist who grew, received training and performed in cis-heteronormative spaces. Along with these shaping experiences, I will write through my current sound navigation: through realizing the embodied journey and transformative power of my voice and through re-learning the ways to relate with the guitar alone and with others. Simultaneously, I will reference queer, feminist and post-human theorists, as a way to situate my writing of the self to a broader context.

In the first chapter, I will write about the processes that lead to my alienation from my guitar and the ways to repair my relations with it, seeing it as a potential regulatory and prosthetic device (Preciado, 2000). In the second chapter, I will touch traces of the embodied, individual and social part of having a voice, starting from my own queer, living body. I will continue with insights of what can be a queer collective voice, incorporating my experiences of being part of a self-organized, political Pride Festival at Patras, Greece. I will question the need for mapping voices as fortified gendered territories depending on their pitch. Therefore, I will imagine ways that voices connect to the here and now of their embodied situation and open up to the multiplicity of relating while dismantling patriarchal and anthropocentric perceptions. In the third chapter, I will introduce a different approach on (collective) sound making that I have partially experienced since I arrived to Rotterdam. Specifically, I will write about my navigation into alternative ways of jamming with friends and classmates from my master course. I will focus on a specific moment: The process of preparing our performance at the Re#sister[4] Expanded Radio session at Radio Worm[5].

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vulnerability, can be fragmented and partial, sheds light on subjugated narrations and situates the personal into larger social contexts (Gannon, 2017).

4 Re#sister is a community of women and non-binary people based in the electronic music studio of WORM.

5 WORM is a cultural space in Rotterdam.

chapter 1

my guitar as regulation, my guitar as prosthesis

This is a chapter that starts with a guitar in order to think about gender; To grasp how bodies can perform as masculine or feminine -good luck to those laying in between-, with the connotations that these mythologies bring, while situated in specific cultural spaces. I wonder how playing a musical instrument in specific ways can carry the weight and pass on the ways of a patriarchal, competitive, culture. For this, I will navigate with my own experiences as a guitarist, with no desire for making general assumptions. I see my stories as symptoms of a system, while always being filtered by my current embodied situation.

In parallel, I will write through the trans philosopher's Paul B. Preciado's (2000) position that bodies' sex is being compulsory assigned as male or female, through medical, administrative, and technological procedures. I will focus on his thinking of devices that can regulate gender, can deconstruct it and can create different possibilities of experiencing one's body. In this chapter when I write about regulatory devices, I will refer to technologies that repress and fabricate bodies into specific [gendered?] roles according to a hegemonic system. Alongside this, prosthetic devices are related to technologies of prosthetic limbs and implants – like a prosthetic leg –. In this sense prosthesis is about devices that are getting added to a living body, devices that are not biologically human, but become part or extension of someone (Preciado, 2000). My urge is to read my guitar as a potential regulatory device but also a potential prosthesis. To see my relation with it as an embodied process that utters sound imprints.

locating the guitar in relation to my body

While I start writing this chapter I wonder: how should I tell the story of relating my guitar to my gender? Can I even locate its start? Where do I find myself right now? How does my body touch the instrument and how it gets moved by the guitar's sound? With whom did I play it? When and where? How and for whom? With what sounds and processes is a guitar usually associated? What is my guitar's agency?

"play like a man"

During my adult years, while musically training and performing, I was accompanied by a guitar called Blue. Blue is an expensive instrument, made from *precious* wood, equipped with sensitive coils, designed and crafted ergonomically. Many times, Blue was criticised by my fellow, male musicians. It was seen as out of place, wrong for the occasion; Apparently, it didn't look jazz enough, its *body* shape and size betrayed the fact that it was crafted for a much more popular music genre. Nevertheless, there were several occasions – like after a rehearsal or after performing at the jam venue – that a fellow, male musician would comment something like this:

> "I wouldn't expect that such a guitar would sound that well."

I wonder if this surprise was also related to me sounding that well, despite my own *body*

appearance, that of a gender non-conforming queer that looked out of place.

My feeling of out-of-placeness was rooted in who made sound in that jazz venue and in what ways. While it is true that almost all of the musicians in those jams where white, cis, males, I would like to put my attention on what were the processes for the jam's creation and what culture were these processes producing. For this, I am going to think through Joanne Armitage and Helen Thornham's (2021) feminist perceptions on live coding as an embodied process between human, technology, code and sound. Their writing helps me to re-position sound making as an embodied system and understand why I didn't fit in those jam sessions. For the two researchers: Sound is not just an output created by a human agent; sound is also a contributor. Technology is not just a neutral facilitation for a human genius; it is relational, complex and interconnected. The human body that writes the code is part of a system of hardware, software, sound equipment, space and audience. In that sense, I realize that while I play the guitar my body gets shaped from its design, moves according to the guitar's arm, depends on the cables' physical condition, attunes to the sound produced and responds. By approaching a performance as a process, we can embrace latency, slowness, things that don't work the way we anticipated, failure (Armitage and Thornham, 2021). I believe that with this approach there is more space to be real with one's embodied situation, present in the moment, position oneself as part of human and non-human systems and relate.

Every Wednesday night the jam session was opened by a trio of the most skilled musicians, who were also tutors in the city's conservatories. Although in these jams people were invited to improvise, there was not a lot of space for mistakes. A top down hierarchy indicated what sounded right, depending on the tastes of our (male) tutors. Our instruments were approached as our *bodies*; to be tamed, to get the most out of them through constant practice, discipline and commitment. The idea of caring for the people, the equipment and the sound involved as if we were a kin was absent. This music space was carrying hierarchies present in working environments, in the streets, in schools, in families: A stage for competition on someone's performance, on harassment based on gender, on human exceptionalism over technology, on unpaid artistic labor. While it is not easy to isolate the gender-based damage created from this music circle, as it is entangled with different types of hierarchies, there were several micro-aggressions that I would connect more to that; What was praised was an autonomous subject with a fast, care-less, expansive attitude, that relates a lot to what social masculinity is about. In that sense phrases like

"Play like a man."
"After performing this song, hair is gonna grow on your chest."
"You play with such a sensitivity because of your female brain.",

were directed to me probably because of how I looked and how I sounded, while desiring to sound in different ways than the above. As I finish these thoughts, I wonder if we can actually listen to the different relations and hierarchies involved in sound making processes.

while the guitar sits on my thighs and I hold it around my arms

The guitar I have on me right now is one without frets. It is the first electric guitar that I have ever related to. My parents initially bought it for my brother when we were teens but at some point I

was the one playing more with it. This guitar doesn't have a name and I don't know the ways that it got produced. It was forgotten for years in my parents' house, but I decided to take it with me when I moved to the Netherlands. At this point, I had already stopped playing music – relating with sound – in the ways I used to. It was a period through the pandemic, where I got totally detached from the jazz circles. While this was painful, it created space to outgrew ways of relating – while creating sound –, that didn't resonate with me any more. I am thinking of how my body gets touched by this guitar and how this instrument accompanies my journey of embracing queerness and coming out as non-binary.

How an instrument, as to say a technological artefact can be approached, relates a lot to its design. Guitars are fabricated in order to perform into the western tonal system, a system that is colonially considered neutral and is arbitrarily taken as the main reference point when we talk about music theory. The location of a guitar's frets creates the available notes, that is, sounds located in specific frequencies that someone can play. While I was abstaining from my previous music practice I related to sound and music practitioners that located instruments and ways of producing into broader cultural-power systems. For example, the ethnomusicologist Kyam Allami (2019) showcases how the majority of digital tools for making music are designed to perform inside the western musical system and narrowly guide the producer on a specific cultural outcome. Part of his research is the creation of a browser-based generative music system named Apotome, which allows musicians to experiment with different tunings that correspond to multiple cultural systems, as a way to decolonise music making (Allami and Counterpoint, 2022).

On the one part, I took out the frets of this guitar as a way to approach micro-tonalities and connect with a sound culture that was always present in Greece but institutionally under voiced as non-western. On the other part, I urged to re-learn the guitar's sound, to heal from my previous training and de-classify its body. With this fretless guitar there are not pre-picked frequencies that map specific sounds. It is much harder to play an accurate note, so there is space to embrace in-betweenness and farewell purity. Its sound is part of a continuum and it can dissolve the fragmentation of its energy that lattice based music systems engrave (Wishart and Emmerson, 1996).

The ways that my hands have learned to touch the guitar don't feel the same. The old patterns cannot be imitated. I play slower, I hear more. This new instrument is a dissident to the system of knowledge that used to bound the Blue. This new instrument re-orients me towards a process based sound making and disconnects me from my previous training. Simultaneously, I see this new guitar as a bridge to relate and de-classify my body from a gender binary. My body is inscribed with gender based classifications: My gender assignment at birth, my vocal mapping that categorizes me to a gender binary, my fragmentation into a reproductive system depending on my anatomy. I wonder if this sonic in-betweenness can open up a perception of a body's fluidity.

gender embodiment through regulatory and prosthetic devices

In *Counter-sexual Manifesto*, Paul B. Preciado (2000) writes about human bodies and their sex classifications related to power, their trimmings off into discrete organs which matter more than others and have specific functions that create hierarchies of meaning between them. He introduces the dildo as a technology of sex and deconstruction, that exposes the contingency of the

hegemonic sexual organization of bodies and the centrality of the genitals in the fabrication of a sexual binary (Preciado, 2000).

In order to locate the emergence of the first genital repressive apparatuses and connect them with the biopolitical production of the self-regulated sexual body, he is presenting a genealogy of the vibrator, the dildo's ancestor: What is today a sex toy, was introduced in the late 19th century as a regulatory device for the treatment of the female hysterics, operated first by doctors in medical beds and later by husbands in marriage beds. According to his research, the vibrator can be seen as a pleasure-repression production technology that was introduced during a social policy of pathologising sexual abstinence and masturbation. This pathologising was situated at a moment of a broader patriarchal, colonial and capitalist episteme in Europe, which established a systematic reproductive sexuality (Preciado, 2000).

Continuing with Preciado (2000), the vibrator was used as a regulatory device that contributed in the heteronormative and patriarchal control on female bodies, diminishing them to reproductive organs: Wives that were dissidents of their role in the heterosexual household, associated with rejecting their husband's seed and being sexually deviant needed to be controlled and brought back to their care-taking duty in order to support the domestic and inheritance economy. With this paradoxical practice, the female's body orgasm was regulated by the medical and the heterosexual institution of marriage, dislocating and extracting the pleasure of her body, to tune it and associate it with just a mechanical response to the vibrator, operated by his hand (Preciado, 2000).

In relation to the feminist philosopher Donna Harraway's (1990) cyborg and the idea that bodies living inside technological contexts don't end at their skin, there is plenty of space for feeling the affect that inanimate objects and prosthetic devices create to human bodies. Preciado (2000, pp.98- 99) locates the current position of the vibrator in the place of a "masturbating hand", a "synthetic sex organ" or a "plastic extension of the clitoris" used by women, trans people and queers for pleasure and self determination. The bodies for which a sexual regulatory device was made, can re-appropriate and re-signify their oppressor, reclaim their pleasure and deconstruct a hegemonic sexual regime. In this sense, it can be empowering and healing to detach an artifact from its repressive context and use it as prosthesis, as an embodied artificial organ that someone becomes with.

Connecting with the vibrator, I wonder how much my guitar has been a regulatory device, a tool for building my excellence. A part of a patriarchal tradition of competition, taming and distinction. How this approach has influenced the ways I relate to others, to my emotions and to my body. How much I have been part of this culture, being hurt by and hurting others in the way. The guitar is a metaphor and I the retired virtuoso a symptom of a broader system.

Simultaneously, by seeing the guitar as a prosthesis I give space for a less hierarchical relation to it. I realize the impact that it has on me, the spaces I have been into through it, its body's connection with my own body. If the guitar is a prosthesis, I can imagine ways of sound making that are malleable, in flux with someone's needs. In this way, a cultural heritage that oppresses can be seen also as prosthetic, as something that can be questioned, deconstructed and removed.

chapter 2

voice coming from the inside, voice negotiating with the outside, voices mapped and transformormed

traces of embodying a queer voice

Timbre, is a genuine sound quality. It relates to a sound's texture and transmits the unique physical situation of the body that generated it. Timbre makes a voice unique, fragile and subjective. For example, the timbre of a trombone is created by the instrument's architecture, material, physical state. It relates also to the way that someone uses their body to blow it. In terms of a human voice, timbre is connected to the body's internal conditions, the anatomy of its organs, their physical and mental state, the person's eating, drinking or smoking habits. It feels that a voice once it is out, travels as a wave, carries the imprint of the body that produced it and in this way is highly personal and intimate (Bonenfant, 2010).

I am thinking about my voice, feeling it as a point of interconnections. It is closely embodied. I breath and air flows through my lungs where it gets empowered with force to continue. It moves through my larynx and turns into sound from the pulses of my vocal folds. It gets shaped and filtered to come out as a voice through my lips, my tongue, my nose. My voice is in a constant flux, as my body is. My timbre, that deeply personal sound trait echoes my body situation; the anatomy of my internal organs, the ways I breath, I use my lips and my tongue to articulate sounds, my metabolism, my insomnias, my urges and my addictions.

The perfomance-maker and art-maker Yvon Bonenfant (2010), describes sound as a form of social touch, as a haptic vibration that travels and meets bodies. He likens vocal timbre to a person's fingertips that stretch to reach towards others. He wonders: what timbres are allowed to seek for other bodies, what timbres do we let ourselves to be touched by? What are the procedures happening inside of us that urge us to choose to be caressed from these timbres rather than others? How could someone train their ears to queer listen, as to reach for the timbres of the disoriented, the hidden or the subjugated?

My voice is connected with my becoming and contains different embodied journeys. If the act of voicing is motivated by the urge for reaching others, how do identities that have learnt to be hidden, to be out of reach in order to be safe, use their voice? I am thinking of myself and the different stages of coming out that I have experienced throughout my life. Growing up in a heteronormative, small, Greek town with zero lgbtqi+ visibility, where I needed to be oriented as a heterosexual girl, while not finding myself in either of these categories. Being in a constant, internal, conflict of misfitting to the words, the ways and the sounds of the most people that I would relate to.

Probably due to this environment I created a pseudo-self, with a voice that was switching between what sounded authentic to me and what felt right and acceptable by peers and adults. This

perhaps unconscious switch, had been creating a big confusion inside of me, on what is wrong and right in terms of gender expression: Feeling a strong alienation from what would flow organically out of myself, I was digging deeply inside of me a lot of my fundamental desires. I recall this time period more as a series of sensations than valid facts. Although, I can remember being indicated by tutors on how to laugh, sing, talk or shout in a correct way according to my assumed gender. I remember experiencing a confused feeling of shame and exposure after each indication. Like being busted for doing something wrong or getting revealed of a self that I was too terrified to express back then.

At that time, I suppose that my timbre was adapting to what each environment would expect from me, my voice was confused on who they wanted to reach, fluctuating between an authentic expression coming from the inside and a fake, failed, performance for being included in the outside. And though this teen has hopefully transformed to what they were scared of becoming, I still catch myself by surprise sometimes. Last year, while I was working for a delivery company I realised that I would unconsciously voice myself in a more pleasant, high pitch tone, every-time I would hand over an order. With that I realise that even after years of processing, environments can re-tramautize us and re-surface traces of past voices.

There are a lot of personal experiences related to voice and misfitting, probably because there are a lot of predefined expectations on how someone should sound. A gay friend has once told me that he avoids sending voice messages, as it is somehow difficult for him to listen to his voice back. I don't remember if I asked him why, but I think he mentioned something in a light way that sounded like this:

"Eh, you know, my gay voice... haha."

His timbre, which I love, is not that of a typical "masculine". It is less bass, more playful, more fluctuating in pitch, more free. I think that through his speaking, his sexuality could probably be assumed. And while he is out and proud, there are hostile environments where this outing has turned out dangerous for him.

I remember two years ago, while in lock-down and curfew, I started listening back to my voice on recordings that I used to send to friends that were away. I was doing that as a way to feel less lonely, to feel a person's vocal presence in the room. But after a while I realised that I have started liking the way I sounded, I started feeling closer to that person in the recording, than I would feel in the past. While still wearing masks in all public spaces in Athens, I remember a specific incident. I was in a bus to go back to my home-town and there was a mother that came to say goodbye to her two children that would travel in that same bus. She saw me and asked me something like this:

"Are you going back to see your family, my lad?"

I am not sure what I answered to her, but I remember that I used my voice to phrase what I wanted to. I recall her surprise when I didn't sound masculine enough, and she had this uncomfortable body reaction, which I cannot clearly describe. It felt as if she was both ashamed of her mistake, while also blaming me for deceiving her. I felt confused, with feelings of guilt for making her feel

uncomfortable, shame as if I did something wrong, anger for getting misgendered, unsafe for possible consequences, loneliness for the ride back home, agitation as if my voice underlines a paradox.

traces of queer collective voices

I see more clearly now that the different ways of voicing, or having a voice at all, is political. If specific cis-heteronormative expectations filter the way voices should sound, then there is already a fundamental restriction on how someone can express themselves. I am thinking of the metaphors of having a voice. To voice can be related to making a stance, to speak your mind, to influence, to demand. We can say that someone is covering the room with their voice and someone else always remains silent. The spectrum of how much a voice is encouraged or allowed to be public can emerge as a trace of power dynamics at play.

I will attempt to think of a protest as a concerted, political sound practice that relates to the declaration of a collective presence in public space. In a protest, living bodies create space together, multiply their voices to a polyphonic timbre in order to reach out to other entities, either antagonistic ones, like the government or fellow ones, like the systemically marginalised. A body that is part of a protest, might sense liberations and restrictions. It is emancipating to join forces, to voice together for things that are deeply personal but not merely individual, that are symptoms of power relations. There can emerge feelings of care for your fellow protesters, which can evolve into embodying solidarity. It can also feel restrictive, when there is a top down hierarchy, a narrow indication on how to use your voice, a filtering on the multiplicity of possible timbres.

My perception on claiming a collective presence in public space changed radically, when I became part of a grass roots, queer group for the creation of a self-organised lgbtqi+ Pride festival in Patras. This collective was a pretty unique initiative; We were trying to create safer spaces for the lgbtqi+ community in a city where there was none at that moment, while the exclusion from the public sphere was an everyday experience for the most of us. Simultaneously, in my opinion, Pride festivals in the most European countries are unfortunately strongly institutionalised: They are usually organised by a small, closed committee, funded by big corporations and used by governments for pink washing. Many times, the most systemically marginalized queers, like trans, non-binary, non-white, immigrants, refugees are less voiced, or not voiced at all.

Because of a general lack of care -or even hostility- of the Greek institutions and of a need for self-organisation, intersectionality, horizontal decision making and connection with the wider grass-root political scene in Greece, there were several self-organised Pride festivals popping up in different cities. We were participating in protests and organising our own, being part of a political culture that understood the importance of public appearance and governmental pressure through the streets. But while being part of this culture, our ways and timbres shifted. In this sense we sounded different than the archetype of the male political militant that owns the megaphone and indicates the slogans to the *body* of the protest: We were more butch, more dyke, more faggot, more trans, more queer, collectively shouting with our timbres that are mapped, classified and traumatized as abject. By creating a collective queer timbre, we were reaching out for others in the same streets and squares that some of us used to walk everyday, while being overly conscious for a possible aggression. We would also rephrase slogans that were already

popular in anti-fascist, anti-austerity or anti-state protests like this:

"the passion for freedom is stronger than all cells"
"the passion for anal is stronger than holy water"

"fascists, you fools, hangers are coming"
"fascists, you fools, faggots are coming"

But one of the most popular slogans was this one:
"Greece should die, for us to live, to hell with the family, to hell with the fatherland"

the gender neutral classification

But what are the sound thresholds whereas a voice is mapped as normal, as desired, as profitable and as abject? What are the different layers that influence these classifications?

By reflecting on how a voice is personal, embodied and can be collectivized through a queer perspective, it feels forced to classify someone to a gender binary depending on their frequency behaviour. It feels violent to delimit so strictly something that is deeply connected to touch, to embodiment, to a personal utterance. This reductionist practice creates imbalances, biases and hierarchies. In that sense, I am interested to understand the impact of gender binary to vocal processing that can be traced in traditional sound engineering. For this I will refer to Q, the so called first genderless AI assistant created in collaboration between the Copenhagen Pride, the VICE media group Virtue, the nonprofit organisation Equal AI, the studio Koalition Intereactive and the sound designer thirtysoundsgood (GenderLess Voice, 2019). While this project tries to question gender bias in AI voices, for me it doesn't manage to escape the rationalisation and fragmentation of human bodies. The way that voices get scientifically classified, can be seen as an imprint of an efficient, purist, surveillant, patriarchal and profitable entanglement that naturalises and stabilises the current gender system.

I trace the different and conflicting needs that Q satisfies. I listen to Q (Meet Q- The First Genderless Voice, 2019) and I cannot visualise the body of that voice: Their vocal sound combined with the video's visuals create a disembodied sci-fi atmosphere. I wonder if these aesthetic choices help all the transgender[6] bodies that already have a voice. Q's voice is created through participants that don't identify as male or female and then placed between 145 Hz to 175 Hz as to sound gender neutral (Meet Q- The First Genderless Voice, 2019, 0:27). According to the product's creators, Q is designed for broadening gender representation and for breaking gender biases in how AI assistants are voiced (GenderLess Voice, 2019).

Q is a product launched for the highly profitable market of Artificial Intelligence and by being the first one to address trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming consumers, it has a great potential for bringing financial success. I wonder how much the fact that Q needs to distinguish their voice from their male and female market antagonists leads to a reductionist idea of placing a gender neutral voice into a specific Hz range. What does this mean for all of us that don't place

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6   By transgender I mean all those people that don't fit to their assigned gender at birth.

ourselves in the gender binary but our voices are not inside this spectrum? How emancipatory is to continue classifying voices to a specific frequency range, while the political force of gender queerness relates to questioning these categories?

While I listen to Nis Nørgaard, the sound engineer of Q, I realise how mechanical is his understanding of gender (Thirty Sounds Good, 2020). In contrast to the fact that he is working for challenging gender biases, in his talk, he is referring to a pre-defined sound range of a typical male and female voice without being critical to these classifications at all. Alongside this, while he sampled 20 gender non-conforming participants, his methodology was to find and generate one voice that sounded neutral enough. What affirmed my suspicion about his surface perception on gender is how he addressed his audience by the end of his lecture:

> "So ladies and gentlemen, last but not least, let me introduce to you Q." (Thirty Sounds Good, 2020, 09:36)[7]

voice as an exit door to transformation

But how could we hear differently? Dismantle the classifications that reproduce damage and imagine different ways of relating to our timbres? Can a voice create an exit door from the gender binary? Preciado (2020) in his text *A new voice* narrates moments, thoughts and epiphanies about his voice being in a constant transformation through testosterone injections. Everyday his timbre is unpredictable, related to the gradual thickening of his vocal cords. His new voice, underlines how a body is not a property but fabricated by relations, his sovereignty is trembling, while losing the control over his vocal timbre. *But does any-body have an absolute control over their timbre?* While he is experiencing the embodied transformation of his voice, a transformation that carries dislocation and contingency, his body gets re-classified as that of a cis masculine (Preciado, 2020). His voice gains power, acquiring the privilege of social masculinity thus gets more animated, agent and alive (Chen, 2012) in a system where a person's unidentified gender blurs their political rights. His text ends with a question that still resonates in me: What if his new voice was associated with that of a whale or a sledge and not that of a man (Preciado, 2020)? What if we related the timbre of our voices to more than human vocal existences? Could this create political instabilities?

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7   You can navigate through the game Shell Song by Everest Pipkin (2020) to experience a critical narration about gender and AI from a technical voice.

chapter 3

jamming as a process for creating safer spaces

Out of a mutual urge for experimenting with sound and a need for human connection in an entirely new country, I started jamming with several of my xpub[8] classmates. Alex, Kamo Supi and I still continue to engage in this process. In general, our desires and experiences around sound making are not identical; I can easily sense that we come from different artistic backgrounds and personal journeys. What I find strong in our bond is a shared point of disconnection from the contexts that we left behind and a need for creating space for new ones.

Simultaneously, since last year I am part of *Re#sister*, a community of women and non-binary sound makers–explorers that are based in the electronic studio of Worm. I started going to *Re#sister* meetups in search of a kin; a reparative music space for people that have been systemically undervalued because of their gender. In the meetups we are invited to use the studio's equipment, experiment and learn alone or with each other while jamming. Occasionally, parts of these jams get published in the *Re#sister* radio, bringing value to a process of experimentation, amateurism, doing while learning and making public under–represented voices. As Alex and Supi are also part of this community, we were invited to perform a session that would be broadcasted live.

What I find strong about that gig was our approach to preparing it. Alex facilitated the structure for the jam's preparation, which included: A session of free writing about our current feelings, insights and questions. Interviewing each other in order to clarify our conceptual motives for the upcoming gig. Creating cards for sound notation, which were related to the above conceptual motives and would work as an initiation point for our playing together. Jamming. Alongside this, as each one of us struggled mentally every time we met, we evolved a ritual of speaking out our current emotional state before starting the sound making session. This ritual of care, furthered the trust between us, helped us further explore our emotions about the process that we were embodying and our upcoming public moment.

In this jam I was heavily influenced by the text *Don't Touch My Midi Cables* (Armitage and Thornham, 2021), that I introduced in the first chapter when I tried to imagine a non–hierarchic relation between my body, an instrument and sound. I proposed to Alex and Supi that we see our upcoming gig as a process (Armitage and Thornham, 2021), where all of its moments are valuable, even the awkward or unexpected ones. This related to my need for distancing myself from exceptionalism, embracing output as part of a process and acknowledging that our bodies were creating sound in relation to instruments, cables, hardware and the possible nuances between them. Supi was interested in how to create an entry point for an instrument that is unknown to her; seeing sound as an imprint of a relation. Alex was keen to understand what makes her feel present in the moment and give value to her own voice.

Through our discussions a mutual need emerged to create space for music making where it

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8   XPUB is an abbreviation of the master course Experimental Publishing.

doesn't already exist: This can be related to amateurism, to sexism, to cis-heteronormativity and racism; to broader hierarchies of who is eligible to be public. It felt as if we didn't want to make a gig that make us distinct among others, but more to bring several qualities that create space in a potentially competitive culture. These qualities are related to how we made that gig happen: through deep listening (Oliveros, 2005), as paying attention to the spectrum of sounds that each one of us produces and responding to them. Through making a notation system that spoke to our embodied moment. Through creating a process of care between us.

In terms of sound making, my main idea of how to engage in the process was to use a half working loop along with my fret-less guitar. This loop couldn't be controlled as its knob for starting and pausing wasn't always working. My approach was to start the loop and then make big time iterative recordings that didn't have a specific tempo. Then to add layers in order to create a soundscape, where the sounds come and go without my precise knowledge of their position. To let go and flow. In this way, I felt caressed by the sound which was much more a contributor than it would be if I tried to control its exact time position and build on that. This basis worked pretty well for Alex and Supi, as they needed a sound-ground to evolve their voices.

During our debrief moment, each one of us expressed our being aware of trying not to disrupt each other's voicing while playing. Supi was feeling that not knowing precisely how her synth would react, could create nuances when she would jump in. Alex was afraid that by using her human voice, that is a sound that someone can relate to easily, she could create a power imbalance on the ongoing soundscape. I was worried that while being the most experienced in music, I could easily become the centre of attention. It is interesting to reflect on what an instrument and the person embodying it can impact inside a collective sound making. I find it important to be aware of possible imbalances, but also to explore how these different qualities can support each other. In an established music genre each sound has already its purpose; the percussion, the bass, the melody and the sounds embodying them. It can be a flourishing experience to collectively experiment and re-learn sound making through voices and instruments, while re-locating them in different ways. While, reflecting on a sound's position inside a soundscape, we can sense how the person's making that sound locates themselves inside the group as well.

conclusion

While I write these last paragraphs, I see how straight environments and their technological outputs can orient a voice to utter through a gender-binary speaker; to mask and to filter its timbre, its fluctuation and expression. Simultaneously, I sense how an instrument like a guitar can regulate the body that relates with, while operating in cis-heteronormative, cultural spaces. Therefore, I am glad that bodies can potentially embrace the uniqueness of their timbres, can grasp their fundamental, relational conditions and welcome a voice that is not static, is not defined by its frequency range. Alongside this, I am glad to realise that a guitar's body can be an extension of my own and not a mere vessel. A body that plays me as much as I play it, that caresses me when I caress it.

Regulatory devices carry information about the contexts that they were created for. When I was playing the guitar in the Patras' circles, I was indicated on how to sound and how to approach the instrument. To sound like a "civilised man": pure, fast, technical, melodic, harmonic; to compete and to delimit sound as an output of my trained hands. Usually, we disconnect a musical outcome from the relations that produced it. By writing about how my guitar was regulating my body, I realised that if we listen attentively to music we can hear the urges and the positions, the relations and the hierarchies between the human and non-human agents that made it happen.

Through writing about my current relation with the fret-less guitar, emerged intimacy. I saw that a less mapped instrument can invite off the grid sound explorations. It can repair my previous expansive approach to the guitar and give space to my current sound utterances: to care about the sound continuum, the process of producing it, the ways my body relates to the instrument's body. If a guitar can be a prosthesis of a queer body, it can deconstruct a top down hierarchy of the "stronger" human agent over other bodies, sounds, instruments, hardware and devices. It can underline the entanglement of bodies, technology, emotions, urges, world-views, actions and re-actions that make sound waves.

Classifying voices to gender thresholds in relation to their pitch restraints them. Through writing from the I, I felt the journey of filtering my vocal utterance in order to fit to a pre-defined gender expression. I realised that queer bodies might delimit, lower, shut down their voice in order to be safe in hostile environments. I recalled the confusion, the loneliness and the agitation of perceiving my voice as a paradox in relation to my looks. If specific vocal thresholds create access and exclusion, acceptance and rejection, success and failure, I wonder what are the political rights of those voices that are left outside of these demarcations.

In parallel, it is not a surprise that creating a genderless AI assistant while operating inside a culture of vocal fragmentation and rationalisation is politically superficial. It falls into the trap of techno-solutionalism, it doesn't question the gendered power relations that fabricate a voice. It fails to make audible the reality of all those bodies that are trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming.

So let's listen to our timbres. Let's feel how situated they are to our unique body conditions. Let's

observe how our body vibrates in order to generate our voice. How our voice changes depending on our body internal and mental conditions. This can be a way to deconstruct gender essentialism: by acknowledging that our ever-changing timbre is much more rich and impactful for our intimate relations, than a frequency spectrum.

Queer voices can be caressed through processes of care and amplified through echoing with others. In the self-organised Patras Pride, the power of our voice was its collective, heterogeneous timbre. We were making public a cacophonous, collective voice against the cis-heteronormative, aesthetic standards. Voicing a different perspective than a more straight, homogeneous, leftist, political culture. However, just merging the voices of people that have been politically damaged cannot guarantee endurance and healing. The most important part is to create processes of care and mutual aid between us.

So, during the sound jam with Supi and Alex our main focus was on how our sound imprints will be created by a process that followed our situated needs. To embrace amateurism, partiality, latency and failure. To try to create space for us and others instead of competing for claiming one. This approach can create an embodied knowledge, where by re-learning collectively the ways of making sound, we can reflect on and reposition ourselves in relation to a system's dynamics.

Making theory out of experiential knowledge can be empowering for one's practice. Deconstructing experiences of systemic exclusion can work as a transformative force to move forward and meet bodies with similar needs. I acknowledge that queer theory and disobedient practices of other people have had a great effect on my processes of coming out and on my current sound perception. In the upcoming months, for my graduation project, I am going to focus on transforming my voice through live coding, in order to embody the theory produced by this thesis. Alongside of this, I will continue jamming to create caring ways of relating through sound.

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colophon

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