

Some notes on 'song to destroy myself / song to destroy the world'

A response to the *Trans Pathways* (Strauss et al., 2017) study, available here:

<https://www.telethonkids.org.au/our-research/brain-and-behaviour/mental-health-and-youth/youth-mental-health/trans-pathways/>

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

Video recording of 'song to destroy myself / song to destroy myself' (visuals cut out halfway through); Sage Pbbbt (2017)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfW9xlCePls>

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

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

Also, while one can clearly perform magick without writing, my exploration of non-linguistic (or non-logocentric or non-phallogocentric) ritual has happened alongside an investigation exploring ritual spaces outside of a clear intent (except for the desire to explore a particular kind of experience). While I have greatly enjoyed and learnt a lot from these experiences, I also wonder if my practice has elements of playing into passivity, or at least a lack of assertiveness which feels problematic as someone who has suffered from depression for years (for me, tied to a sense of lack of agency). And I feel some concern around the gender politics of the queer, trans woman 'letting go

of her will' to 'accept whatever arises', while the straight, white male magickians 'assert their will' all over the planet. This feels problematic. Or confusing. But also perhaps a 'valid tactic' of nonparticipation within the cis-normative heteropatriarchy. The challenge I find in moving between my logical or rational mind and physical, embodiment feels echoed in the difficulty I have in moving between score and improvisation (or at least the kind of improvisation that I have explored and find exciting).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

technique. The practice centres on recognising again and again the three qualities of *all* phenomena—and it does not really matter what phenomena you pay attention to.

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

While I have greatly enjoyed, and learnt a lot from these experiences, I also wonder if my practice has elements of playing into passivity, or at least a lack of assertiveness which feels problematic as someone who has suffered from depression for years (for me, tied to a sense of lack of agency). And I feel some concern around the gender politics of the queer, trans womxn ‘letting go of her will’ to ‘accept whatever arises’, while the straight, white male magickians ‘assert their will’ all over the planet. This feels problematic. Or confusing. But also perhaps a ‘valid tactic’ of nonparticipation within the cis-normative heteropatriarchy.

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

I have realized that my experience of invocation—and the bleed through into ‘other’ forms of improvisation—has an aspect of collage or cut up to it. I cut between different techniques readily and often cut between different voices. (Or *voixes*—a word I have used for a few years referring to the voices of spirits, particularly when

multiple or unclear who they belong to; this feels curiously similar to spellings such as ‘folx’ or ‘womxn’ though not intentional.) But in another sense, I try to ‘integrate’ different experiences, different ways of manifesting in the world. ‘Cutting’ between different experiences does not quite seem enough, somehow. I would like to develop the capacity to move between interacting in the spirit realm and socializing with people and fully inhabiting my physical body, for example; or, perhaps, develop the capacity to hold all of these experiences in my consciousness at the same time.

I wrote these notes to accompany the uploaded video:

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

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

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

Thinking back some months later, I certainly have some questions around the ‘effectiveness’ of different art forms and will continue to interrogate their usefulness in giving voice to particular experiences—whether my own, or those of communities that I belong to. But art does not have to always do this, or do it effectively. Art functions in other, parallel ways similarly to how different spiritual practices can sit alongside each other in a model like the 8-circuit brain model. Not everything has to

do everything. (She tells herself.) A ritual performance like this might simply read as someone embodying (or performing) anger. They may or may not feel moved to explore further given the cues and contexts.

Bibliography

- Carroll, P. J. (1987). *Liber Null & Psychonaut*. York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser.
- Chapman, A. (2008). *Advanced Magick for Beginners*. London, England: Aeon Books.
- Crowley, A., Desti, M., & Waddell, L. (2008). *Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four, Parts I-IV* (H. Beta Ed. Second Revised ed.). San Francisco, CA: Weiser Books.
- Galás, D. (1993). *Vena Cava* [CD]. England: Mute.
- Galás, D. (1998). *Malediction and Prayer* [CD]. England: Mute.
- Gammelsæter, R. (2008). *Amplicon* [CD]. USA: Utech Records.
- Hine, P. (1995). *Condensed Chaos: And Introduction to Chaos Magic*. Tempe, AZ: The Original Falcon Press.
- Ingram, D. M. (2018). *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha: An Unusually Hardcore Dharma Book (Revised and Expanded Edition)*. London, England: Aeon Books.
- Pbbbt, S. (2017). *song to destroy myself / song to destroy the world* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfW9xlCePls>
- Strauss, P., Cook, A., Winter, S., Watson, V., Wright Toussaint, D., & Lin, A. (2017). *Trans Pathways: The mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people*. Retrieved from <https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/brain--behaviour/trans-pathwayreport-web.pdf>: