

## **Embracing Polyphony: Voices, Improvisation, and the Hearing Voices Network**

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### **Abstract**

This paper theorizes at the intersection of practices of improvisation and the Hearing Voices Network (HVN) approach—two ways of being with others that embrace polyphonic identity, democratic participation, and polyculture. The paper itself is unapologetically polyvocal, moving between discussion of concepts drawn from Mad Studies and improvisation studies on one hand, and self-reflexive autoethnography on the other. Multiplicity of voice and identity and hearing voices phenomena are often interpreted as weakness, illness, or pathology as defined within bio-psychiatric conventions. In this paper I argue that hearing voices experiences and plurality are part of a broad, rich, and complex spectrum of human experience, and that inclusive frameworks such as the HVN serve to witness and support voice hearers marginalized by current systems which pathologize those outside of a narrowing range of normalcy. Safe spaces such as those created in HVN groups, like spaces for music and dance improvisation, are critical places of resistance that offer hope in the form of democratic creative action in connection with others. In this paper, I explore this terrain through autoethnographic and critical reflection.

*Keywords:* hearing voices; improvisation; autoethnography; Mad Studies; Deep Listening.

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This paper contextualizes a spectrum of hearing-voices, plurality-of-identity phenomena and inner polyculture together, beyond the narratives of pathology in which they are situated by bio-psychiatric convention. Experiences and utterances of inner plurality—including those of voice hearers, plurals, in(ter) and trans-disciplinarians at the margins—though not the same, do share some common ground. These experiences are rich in creative potential and need not be seen as symptoms to be treated nor relegated to social, academic, or artistic obscurity. What might happen if, instead, there were more spaces in which people and multiple voices could be witnessed in their complexity? Improvised choral groups like VocalX (St. John’s Vocal Exploration Choir), and Hearing Voices Network groups both create spaces for such witness—witness to human experience as deeply personal, richly polycultural, reciprocative social resonances positioned in social and ecological spaces and reflecting archetypal patterns—and “potential wellsprings of emergent transformation” (Collins, Hughes, & Samuels, 2010, p. 163).

I situate this inquiry at the intersection of Mad Studies—which invites us to reconsider psychiatric hegemonies and oppressive concepts of ‘normalcy’ (Menzies,

Reaume, & LeFrançois, 2013; Michalko & Titchkosky, 2009); somatic psychology—which witnesses and analyses embodied experiences and reflects on how family, culture, education, and other institutions reciprocally shape tissue, posture, and enactment<sup>1</sup> (Johnson & Grand, 1998; Grand, 2012); and spiritual care approaches—which emphasize listening and dialogue while acknowledging archetypal, individual, and transcendent meaning making (Pavlicevic & Impey, 2013; Puchalski, 2006; Romanyshyn, 2013).

The particular meaning making that I engage in at this intersection is grounded in a critical psychology which de-centres dominant discourses of psychological knowledge and acknowledges all discourse as constructed.

There are always multiple centres for meaning if there are “centres” at all, and it is always possible to take apart an intellectual system and trace its component parts to different ideological representations or to the interests of certain social groups. This is the case for all “psychologies,” even the ostensibly most radical, and every careful analysis adds to our critical psychological knowledge about the interrelationship between culture and theory, and the interrelationship between theory and practice. (Parker, 1999, p. 4)

The Hearing Voices Network (HVN) approach, begun in the 1980s in the United Kingdom, is an established peer-support group approach that began with the gathering together of a group of voice hearers in a safe space to support one another. The HVN has evolved into an international movement with groups in more than 30 countries around the world, including Canada. There are currently groups in Vancouver, Toronto, Winnipeg, and Montreal. Since the beginning of 2015, HVN groups for voice hearers and their supporters have also started in St. John’s, Newfoundland. These groups support, care, and witness the diverse experiences of voice hearers, some of whom are experiencing extreme psycho-emotional states. Hearing Voices is a unique approach, in that instead of viewing voice hearing solely as a symptom of mental illness, it offers an alternative understanding: that voices are real and meaningful and that a person’s ability to cope with voices is linked to the relationship that they have *with* them. As an artist-researcher and improviser writing and thinking toward possible futures, I am struck by the success stories of the HVN—a peer-based, democratic, participatory group work that honours inner and outer polyphony.

I was involved in the Fall and Winter of 2014–2015 with the start-up of Hearing Voices Atlantic Canada, as a friend and ally of voice hearers in my community and in collaboration with Dr. Brenda LeFrançois, Mad Studies scholar, author, activist, and professor at Memorial University. My perspective is not based on participating in HVN group work, nor do I have personal experience as a voice hearer, but I consider myself to be an ally. As I learned about this unique and

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<sup>1</sup> I draw on the thoughts of one of my teachers, Dr. Ian J Grand, director of the Centre for the Study of Body in Psychotherapy in San Francisco, whose thoughts and play around social and environmental contexts for individual, plural, and collective embodiment has inspired me since graduate studies in the early 1990s and whose work continues to be both critical and hopeful.

powerful work, I began seeing intersections with critical psychology theory, somatic psychology, and improvisation.

### **Inner Plurality and Maintaining Resilience**

Almost five years ago now, I moved house to spend more of my time away from the city, in the woods, where being near trees, ocean, and sky make it possible to “sustain my sensitivity and resilience” (Collins et al., 2010). Visits from chickadees and nuthatches along the trail and conversations with tiny shrews on my stoop keep me “sane.” Experiences of meaning on the land, near the sea, of the seasons, of my heart quickening in the movement of the wind and my spiraling body twisting in and out of pain alongside bending trees, keep me balanced in my journey into and out of dark interiors. I am blessed to have this hermitage in which to enter and leave the lap of comfort and care, to find healing, to seek equilibrium.

(Still), moving in and out of urban landscapes and digital environments I find myself carrying and treading (clean)water, flailing to glimpse congruence. The field which connects me to others whom I love is also a war zone. We’ve co-created global crises, and while media focuses on economic growth, ever-expanding violence, and terrorism, the image and text is still trying to sell me a new gadget, an effective anti-wrinkle cream, is asking my (mostly able) body to move in ways it cannot. (If we can keep her skin pliant, perhaps she will be more compliant.) Amid the onslaught of advertising and political posturing, the colonizing continues. I am privileged and protected by my social positioning, by my family lineage, by my being racialized as white, by my above-poverty-line status, but my heart is heavy.

The process of in(ter)disciplinary research is in itself sitting in a field of multiple voices. It demands that fluidity of identities be taken both seriously and lightly. Who I am moves—artist today, counsellor this evening, sound designer tomorrow, researcher, mother of an adult son. What is constant is that it is always in motion. I am not one, but many, as I appear and recede from social environments that call on me to step forward anew, posture shifting, voice and tone changing based on “what is expected” socially and how I respond emotionally, intellectually, creatively to the challenges of my polycultural and social terrain. My various somatic enactments—postures, gait, gestures—as Grand (2012) said, “can be in conflict with each other or act together to form a positive complex of various kinds of empowerments” (p. 552). I am privileged to have the frames of reference of art, interdisciplinarity, somatics, Deep Listening,<sup>2</sup> and improvisation—my knowledge empowers me more of the time so that I am not in conflict with my plurality.

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<sup>2</sup> I attended a workshop with Pauline Oliveros in the early 1980s at Sound Symposium, a new music and sound event initiated under the leadership of percussionist, teacher, and cultural leader Don Wherry, in St. John’s, Newfoundland. My learning with Oliveros and other pioneers of listening, improvisation, and sound had a (trans)formative impact in my life. As an artist-researcher, though I have not studied Deep Listening formally, its practice and principles deeply inform my creative process and experience in the world. For more on Deep Listening see Oliveros (2005).

My process of inquiry as an artist in an academic environment parallels some accounts described by some plurals—those empowered by rejecting outright or developing nuanced understandings beyond the bio-psychiatric labels of schizophrenia, affective psychosis, or dissociative identity disorder—those whose “front” is the voice or identity in the foreground while other personalities or voices within the system take a backseat role or a side(wo)man position in response to social environments and psycho-spiritual fluctuation. Plurals, in contrast to voice hearers, sometimes experience each identity as a fully formed person co-occupying one body and whose posture and other enactments of identity may shift dramatically depending on who is fronting (“What is plurality,” 2013).

The dance of plural identity is a relational creative process, is cyclic, and flows through alternating periods of clarity and chaos. The relationship between structure and randomness is its inherent dance. It not only resembles practices of improvisation—improvisation is the ground of its fidelity. Improvisation begins with deep listening (Oliveros, 2005, p. xxiv), is expressive, is an intentional entering into relationship in which the listener and the listened risk being transformed, which is both deeply uncertain and hopeful. Waterman (2015) described:

Improvisation is an arena of social interaction and accountability. It also positions improvisation as a site of dialogism-in-action, where we bring our personal histories and values into contact with others in the spirit of openness to change. What’s at stake in improvisation, then, is nothing less than the possibility of personal transformation. (p. 60)

Improvisation always takes place in social environments and demands accountability. This accountability is to selves, inner and outer others, and the voices and presences that are invoked by attendant becoming. In improvisation, *sense of presence* experiences, in which voices of spirits may be invoked or called into memory, are empowered to inform musical (choreographic, compositional) structure. The validation and witness of those layers of experience which are sometimes pathologized, sequestered, ignored, or managed into invisibility by the nervous system (sometimes at great physiological expense) may be shared here. In an environment of trust, experiences of loss, traumatic stress, and bereavement can feed rather than destroy those present. To improvise means to be present and to allow the meanings in the room (and afar in space and time) to condense, like sweat on the skin, as a vibration in the air, as a sound, sometimes laughter rising from the belly, another time a tear (Clarke, 2014). Improvisation is also situated in history and tradition.

As the ground in which research occurs, improvisation is the context for both “mere rationality”<sup>3</sup> and the presence of the unconscious (Romanyshyn, 2013). In both music and dance improvisation there is a trust that upon entering into the unknown, without a specified goal or agenda, meanings will emerge. Gestures and interactions emerge from the space between us and the environment. There is a

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<sup>3</sup> I refer to Romanyshyn’s (2013) phenomenologically situated use of *rational* in terms of the “merely rational” for which he quoted Jungian author Rowland (2005): “Anything derived merely from rationality risks being profoundly inauthentic unless it also bears witness to the destabilizing presence of the unconscious” (p. 23).

becoming. There is an attendance to bodies, to their gestures, and to the physical environment; there is an openness to emergent structure and order and a practice of deconstructing the unexamined habitual.

Fischlin (2014) described:

Improvisation is the embodiment of the spiritual quality that makes connections and relationships worthy of being called such. Connections require links forged out of dialogue, listening, responding—being responsible to what makes it possible to be together with others. (p. 292)

Holding the space for improvisation is holding space sacred for the fullness of those who enter it. This was the quality of intentional space cultivated by improvising vocalist and choir director Chris Tonelli when he founded the St. John's Vocal Exploration Gathering in 2014 (now VocalX). Tonelli began the project during a post-doctoral fellowship with the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation at the Centre for Music, Media, and Place at Memorial University in 2014. This improvising choir space is a welcoming (and accessible) place for people from various communities in the region to connect and be present with others from many walks of life. Anyone can show up at any of the regular rehearsal sessions or join in for performances and interventions.

Vocal X has developed a unique space for people, for voices, for the vocal expressions of diverse bodies, and for development of new community connections. New members are welcome in each session. No previous vocal experience is necessary, just a willingness to use your voice and to abide by the principle that all vocal sound is meaningful and valuable. Sometimes the choir is small. Other days, and for special occasions such as during Sound Symposium, more than 40 people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds have attended, making sound together and connecting with others in community. For some, this connection has been an important, safe entry point into community for their authentic selves.

Tonelli's approach to group improvisation resonates with the way safe spaces are intentionally held for the group work in the Hearing Voices Network (Romme, 2014a, 2014b) that has been measurably effective for treatment of psychosis and for the support of voice hearers for whom other methods of finding balance have failed (Dillon & Hornstein, 2013; Romme & Morris, 2013). In HVN groups, "through empathic listening and uncritical noting of inconsistencies, gaps, or areas in need of further exploration, the group can help to foster attentiveness to triggers, patterns, and explanations that a person might not notice or be able to formulate on his/her own" (Dillon & Hornstein, 2013, p. 292).

### **'Normal'**

Concepts of normalcy (Michalko & Titchkosky, 2009) and the creative potential of the "post-normal"<sup>4</sup> (Montuori, 2011), hegemonies of the psy complex, able-

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<sup>4</sup> Montuori (2011) is hopeful and makes the choice to use (reclaim?) the problematic language of normalcy rather than throwing it out completely. This contrasts the deconstruction of the word *normal* in disability studies or its use in Mad scholarship, which

bodiedness and -mindedness as well as economic, social, and religious orthodoxies remain problematic for persons and communities seeking creative alternatives to exclusive norms and so-called “common sense” responses to psychospiritual and global crises (Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013). Singlet and monocultural identity is so normalized that many voice hearers and plurals don’t share their experiences with anyone, living in isolation (and sometimes in poverty) and spending considerable inner resources to manage postures and performances of ‘mental health’.

Well known actor of stage and screen Anthony Hopkins came out as a voice hearer in 1993, but only after his creative genius had been well established and there was little danger of being locked away from a professional career (“Anthony Hopkins,” 2011). For marginalized voice hearers with less social, family, or culturally rooted supports, what occurs according to Rachel Waddingham in the video *Voices Matter* (2013) is isolating and dehumanizing. Though the voices they live with are integral aspects of a real human experience, the mental health establishment teaches that their truth is a lie and an aberration. The “range of normalcy” narrows as disease categories expand to enclose more and more of the spectrum of possible human identity. Mills (2014) suggested that a “psycho-political analysis of how psychiatry renders increasing numbers of people as ill, in an ever-expanding market in abnormality” (p. 132) is desperately needed here—an analysis that supports non-medical spaces for healing.

From the resistance of those marginalized by notions of psychological ‘normalcy’ to those experiencing more extreme systemic violence—of forced compliance or solitary confinement in the guise of treatment—narratives of voice hearers are many. These narratives can be characterized as ethnographies of victimization, as triumphs of political resistance, as resonant accounts with implications, as tellings of personal healing journeys, as signifiers of ethical crises that (may or may not) inform social reconstruction, or as revelation (Randal, Geekie, Lambrecht, & Taitimu, 2008, p. 339). To acknowledge the presence of wisdom on the edges of ‘mental health’ or in art is to challenge dominant ways of meaning making and to be open to new meanings: new meanings from listening into an impasse, into “it doesn’t all add up”; into it doesn’t “make sense.” Hearing Voices Network approaches, like practices of improvisation, celebrate inherent, situated messiness of identities and in so doing, cultivate belonging.

### **“Other” Ways**

In the collection of essays found in the book *Mad Matters* (LeFrançois, Menzies, & Reaume, 2013) a group of Canadian researchers and activists describe how democratic, participatory models of care and support can begin to heal the oppression of bodies by psychiatry. The history of resistance to psychiatric models includes narratives of women, Indigenous peoples, people of colour, LGBTQ, disabled, and other psychiatrized persons and groups (Gorman, 2013; Shimrat, 2013; Tam, 2013; Wipond, 2013). In the diverse perspectives represented in this collection of essays,

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critiques the embeddedness of all normalcy language in biomedical and psychiatric hegemonies.

various oppressions “interweave not in a sum, where one is added to the other and not as discrete entities that only relate through analogy—but in a knot” (Mills, 2014, p. 8). Tam (2013) implored us not to forget the critical race and anti-colonial critique: “Theorizing psychiatric violence as being *like* racism or *like* colonialism writes out the existence and relevance of colonial gender violence in the foundations and ruling organization of mental health services” (p. 297, emphasis added).

Theorizing the Hearing Voices Network group work to be *like* improvisation is, of course, also problematic. It is an uncomfortable theorizing that I am attempting here. In finding my voice as a white, hetero, able-bodied, female Canadian artist and scholar I have a responsibility to attend to the ways that various oppressions are inscribed on me, my body, my relationships, the institutions I inhabit—and which inhabit me—my knowledge and ways of meaning making. How can I write from my experience without falling into othering? I am from a high-income country, from the “West”—much more than a place or time, but an effusive neo-colonial fluid in which all structures, psychologies, and enactments swim (or sink).

I suffered a traumatic event. I suffered a loss in my family. I found myself suffering from chronic pain. I was overwhelmed by a toxic work environment. I became emotionally paralyzed by pervasive images of rape, environmental destruction, and inevitable pandemic. My doctor looks very worried, her brow furrows, “Maybe you’re depressed, dear, how about taking an SSRI for a little while.” I am not a “danger to myself or others”—reason enough for my human rights not to be suspended and for me not to be incarcerated and forced into compliance through various means, at the heart of which lie pharmaceutical interventions. Phew. I tell her that I’ll let her know right away if I “take a turn for the worse.”

Shoulders up near my ears.  
 Consciousness doesn’t seem to help  
 when tissue is bunched up  
 again.  
 The associative jail of histories,  
 embodied oppressions  
 and addictions  
 raise their glasses.  
 Clink;  
 they grin.

### **Hope in Becoming Unsettled**

From within a sticky, hegemonic plasma it is a challenge not to recapitulate the very oppressions that are being resisted. Tami Spry (scholar of performative autoethnography and performance studies at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota), while recently presenting at the Gender and Performance Symposium at

Memorial University of Newfoundland, spoke of how it is by entering into the uncomfortableness itself, or in de-centring comfortableness that lies in the potential for theorizing.

In imagining creative listening spaces—safe places for those having a good day or those in crisis to show up and be in community, like in HVN approach—one dares to imagine bringing it back to Mad bodies and empowering people to inhabit, share, and be witnessed in the dullness or intensity of psycho-emotional experience. Dialogue and other forms of improvisation (Haas, 2012, p. 332) in such a context is complex and reflects the difficult and rich ambiguity of the phenomenal world(s) of bodies. This work does not impose a need to codify, simplify, or reduce to essences. The only agenda here is to witness one another into presence.

Alfonso Montuori, a transdisciplinary theorist at the California Institute of Integral Studies, offers helpful insight into how complexity and polyphony are sources of unknown potential rather than pathology or danger:

The social creativity of complex dialogue can involve grass-roots efforts to explore the future together, to envision alternatives, because this also means learning to talk across differences in ways that see difference as the source of creativity rather than mutual destruction. (Montuori, 2011, p. 225)

Montuori celebrates a growing understanding that hope lies in offering generative environments in which to engage with diverse voices. Mills (2014) described this type of work as “to stake out an ‘other’ space that does not fit the needs of colonialism or psychiatry and which makes sense to people in terms of their grounded experiences of distress” (p. 143). This is certainly important for persons with significant psycho-social challenges, those responding to hearing voices phenomena, post-traumatic experiences, and complex grief, where democratic, participatory group work has been emancipatory (Dillon & Hornstein, 2013; Supiano & Luptak, 2014).

Generative environments are non-competitive and supportive of each and every voice present. The rules of communication used by Chris Tonelli and the VocalX choir include a number of improvisatory structures that are conducted using a gestural signalling system developed by Christine Duncan, founder and director of the Element Choir in Toronto. Duncan’s always evolving signalling system for improvising choir is a responsive gestural language developed by cultural innovators—improvisors, including Butch Morris, Anthony Braxton (with whom Duncan worked firsthand), Phil Minton (Feral Choir project), John Zorn, and Jean Derome (Duncan, personal communication).<sup>5</sup> These unique approaches contain and emancipate the guttural, the serious, the fecund, the foolish, the emotional and potent sounds of those present.

Sometimes Vocal X lets loose with free improvisation, sometimes members are invited to conduct the whole group in any number of pieces with varying degrees of structure. Anyone can have the opportunity to lead the group if they choose. Vocal X

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the development of gestural language used for conducting improvised choir, see Thompson (2006), Stanley (2009).



is a shining example of democratic, participatory group work, an ethics of care and a praxis of listening. It is more than great fun for members, for it is a palpable, embodied experience of hope, creativity, and love in community.<sup>6</sup>

### Future Intersections of Inquiry

Transdisciplinary scholarship and professional praxis working within participatory, democratic methodological paradigms can look to the emerging fields of improvisation studies and Mad Studies for ways to reimagine the playing field(s) and to invite those exiled from the game(s) to play. This paper has looked at two models that create safe, intentional spaces for polyvocal expression and community connection. Both the improvising choir VocalX, and HVN groups demonstrate participatory democratic principles in action. Both approaches model exciting potentials for creative, peer-driven, inclusive community building. Both approaches have implications for stakeholders in community health and social work, in particular for those who are looking for new and effective structures and ways to move away from paternalistic, coercive practice.

Beyond the academic gaze and theoretical reflection, persons who are voice hearers, artists, and improvisors at the margins have ways of knowing and being that are valuable in and of themselves. Listening to real, complex, messy, and polyvocal others can be unsettling and can shake assumptions loose. This is good. It is an opportunity for something new to happen. Safe spaces for listening, speaking and being unsettled together can be critical spaces for resisting the status quo and can provide opportunities for reconciliation and healing. Hope lies where marginalized voices are included and celebrated in the fields where we connect to each other—fields of grief, joy, being, and becoming, which bridge inner and outer voices, peoples, and generations.

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<sup>6</sup> See VocalX video on youtube. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YjOxezAl\\_k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YjOxezAl_k)

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