

Seeking Vocal Alignment
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Abstract For PhD

Seeking Vocal Alignment

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Analyzing his own research-creation over the years, the author uses a framework around a heuristic notion of *alignment* to analyze the quest for coherence between his sense of self and his artistic practice. Although this quest has characterized his personal and artistic trajectory, the model offers a distinct potential to help other research-creation artists locate and address *areas of misalignment* (friction points between their art and their self), prompting or framing their own processes of *seeking alignment*. Seeking alignment is both a process of self-reflection and a research-creation method that leads to discernible shifts in an artist's life and practice.

The author has evolved this notion of *alignment* from the more specific term *vocal alignment*, commonly used in vocal technique and pedagogy. His conception of vocal alignment includes and goes beyond the physiological alignment of different body systems designed to optimize the production of vocal sound, giving equal importance to both semantic interpretations of the word *voice*. It asks: how can an artist align the vocal sounds their body produces with their artistic, personal, social, and political voice?

This thesis investigates the author's process of seeking vocal alignment through his voice-based artistic work. Each of the three core chapters is preceded and followed by sections called "Alignments," in which self-reflexive and auto-ethnographic writing provides insight into his research-creation process. The reader is invited to engage with these artistic works through sections called "Exhibits" (*Lip Service*, *Anthropologies imaginaires*, and *Bijuriya*).

Chapter 1 investigates the author's critical stance on musical, social, theoretical, and practical aspects of musical life in the Canadian new music scene, highlighting the colonialist assumptions, cultural prejudices, and power imbalances that impact it.

Chapter 2 is an analysis of the author's project *Anthropologies imaginaires* (2014). He analyzes how his use of voice, body, satire, deception, humour, and laughter formulates a critique of coloniality.

Chapter 3 focuses on the author's solo interdisciplinary drag performance *Bijuriya* (2021-22). He analyzes the different musical, vocal, and performative strategies that coexist in the piece, and his exploration of different relations to the body and the voice, in line with the concept of vocal alignment.

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I would like to extend my deepest appreciation to my committee members Sandeep Bhagwati, Noah Drew, and David Howes. Their support, knowledge, experience, and kindness have sustained my interest in pursuing this degree. Even in my strongest moments of doubt, each of them took turns convincing me that a thoughtful reflection about my artistic practice could generate valuable doctoral research. I am very thankful for their support in this journey, even when I felt desperately *misaligned* with my engrained preconceptions of academia.

This thesis engages with previously written texts, articles, and interviews which I wish to properly acknowledge. I started developing the *alignment* framework in my article “Vocal Alignment,” forthcoming publication in issue 196 of *The Canadian Theatre Review*. The article was commissioned for the “Voice Practice in Canada” issue, co-curated and co-edited by Shannon Holmes (University of Regina) and Danielle Wilson (Brock University). I would like to thank Sarah Albu for her feedback and the editorial board, particularly Shannon, for their suggestions and revisions. This 1000-word article prompted the core reflection process that informs this whole thesis.

Chapter 1 is largely based on “Reflets de la colonialité dans la scène des musiques nouvelles,” published in *Intersections*, vol. 39, no. 1 (2019). The article was commissioned for the “Decolonizing Pedagogies” issue co-edited by Robin Attas and Margaret Walker (Queen’s University). Thank you to Sandeep Bhagwati, Noah Drew, David Howes, Erin Gee, Symon Henry, Kama La Mackerel, Catherine Lefrançois, and the *Intersections* editorial board for their suggestions, references, and revisions. Translation from French by Elise Pineda and minor revisions were both made possible with financial support from the National Arts Centre (2021).

Chapter 2 is largely based on “Anthropologies imaginaires: Une critique de la colonialité par la voix et la satire,” published in *Anthropologie et Sociétés*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2019). The article was commissioned for the “Champs sonores” issue, guest-edited by Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier. I completed a translation from French in 2021, which has benefitted from language revisions by Christina Woods. For their insight, references, and proofreading, I thank Sandeep Bhagwati, Noah Drew, David Howes, Christine Jourdan, Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier, and Catherine Lefrançois. My gratitude extends to all artistic collaborators involved in *Anthropologies imaginaires*: Alexandrine Agostini, Daniel Anez, Florence Blain Mbaye, Luc-Martial Dagenais, Catherine Lefrançois, Paul Neudorf, Ménad Kesraoui, and James O’Callaghan. I also send my regards to countless peers from my artistic community and audience members, whose insights and feedback on this work was of utmost value.

Chapter 3 is an expansion of “Bijuriya Chamke! Curating my Drag Sound,” published online on *Post45*, as part of the cluster “Feel Your Fantasy: The Drag Race Cluster,” (2022) co-edited by Monica Huerta and Tyler Allen Tennant. I wish to thank both of them for their support and feedback, as well as Francisco Robles for revisions. My gratitude extends to all artistic collaborators and helpers involved in *Bijuriya*: Gabriel Ledoux, Julie Pichette, Jon Cleveland, Vidita Kanniks, Michael Tonus, Keith Fernandez, Elizabeth Lima, Heaven Genderfck, Angela Rassenti, and Steven Doman. I am very grateful to Michael Toppings and everyone at the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels) for supporting the presentation of this piece from its initial stages. I also thank Miriam Ginestier, Nicole Mion, Mark Takeshi McGregor, Sanjeet Takhar, and David Dacks for allowing the work to live beyond its premiere.

My reflections on queerness have considerably evolved while writing “Queer Perspectives in New Music,” published in *Circuit*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2021). The article was commissioned for the “Quelle norme? Parole queer et création musicale” issue co-directed by Éric Champagne and Martine Rhéaume, with Maxime McKinley as editor in chief. This collection of texts investigates how queerness manifests in contemporary new music practices. I curated the six contributions by queer artists, which I frame by an introduction and conclusion. Many thanks to all contributors, whose insight and artistic work have nourished my personal reflections: Annette Brosin, Anthony R. Green, Luke Nickel, Emily Doolittle, Symon Henry, and Teiya Kasahara 笠原 貞野.

I addressed the development of my drag practice in relationship to new music in the written interviews conducted by Vanessa Massera, for “Taking the Temperature Crisis, Curating, and Musical Diversity” in an Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival publication co-directed by Brandon Farnsworth, Anna Jakobsson, and Vanessa Massera.

Over the span of eight years of doctoral research, I remember having several discussions about the challenges of academia, artists’ relationship with research-creation, and other adjacent subjects. These conversations might have happened over coffee, during conferences, at cultural events, or by texts and emails – there are too many to recall and list, but I am nevertheless thankful for all these encounters.

I would like to thank the directors, staff, and fellow residents at Civitella Ranieri and the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. In such inspiring environments, I was able to be productive and focused, giving my thesis the attention it desperately needed. Thank you for being great accountability-buddies and amazing artists.

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If you’re a fan of Bijuriya, I love you too. Please continue to follow, like, comment, share, and subscribe.

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ALIGNMENT 1: INTRODUCTION

The concept of alignment

Alignment is a framework I use to describe the quest for coherence between my personal sense of self and my artistic practice. This heuristic notion of alignment was conceptualized through the theorization of my own research-creation over the years. It has proven useful to frame and further investigate the relationship I intentionally cultivate between the art I create and the ways I want to be in the world. This thesis unpacks how my practice of this model has come to diversify my range of creative strategies, influence the nature of my artistic output, and foster more meaningful engagement with my desired audiences, communities, and networks.

By framing alignment as research-creation method, the model may be of interest for fellow artists, arts educators, or researchers. Rather than striving for a virtuous, idealistic, or exemplary form of alignment, the model emphasizes the *seeking*, to wit the process of self-reflection, choices, and actions that lead to discernable shifts in an artist's life and practice. One seeks alignment when acknowledging a feeling of *misalignment*. Areas of misalignment may relate to a variety of factors that come to influence one's artistry and one's sense of self, for example: one's political beliefs, a specific layer of one's identity, one's relationship with a tradition, the audience or institutions one engages, one's ecological footprint, or one's moral stance on a current event or situation.¹ Alignment involves thinking critically about how different components of living and artmaking interact, agree, or disagree. It helps locate potential friction points where things feel misaligned, fraught, or incoherent.²

For example, a visual artist who is increasingly interested in an ecologically sustainable artistic practice might gradually identify areas of misalignment. These could range from the use of toxic products in their artistic process, to them accepting funding from large companies with disastrous records of environmental damage. Seeking alignment aims to solve these areas of misalignment over time, through concrete steps. Perhaps this visual artist will gradually shift their practice to prioritize eco-friendly products, perhaps they will seek cross-sector collaborations with like-minded NGOs.

Different key points contribute to my conception of alignment. I characterize it as cyclical: after an artist's initial observation of an area of misalignment, reflection on how to address it optimally leads to the implementation of change(s) in their creative or professional processes. Another important key point is its lack of a clearly conclusive outcome; there is no formula that will irrefutably "solve" misalignment. After what might feel like a successful cycle, one's understanding of the world, lived experience, and artistic interests will keep evolving. Unforeseen challenges may destabilize this sense of achieved alignment. Other areas of misalignments will likely surface. Perspective and hindsight gathered from one cycle will, however, reveal new paths of research for the next. Alignment is thus

¹ Although this thesis does not deeply engage with theory of the self, I acknowledge that the model of alignment exists within a broader context of diverse work in humanistic psychology, liberation psychology, philosophy, feminist studies, queer studies, intersectionality, etc. Some correlations between my heuristic notion of self and these fields of research will be highlighted or evoked in the thesis.

² My vocabulary around alignment/misalignment and coherence/incoherence brings to mind Rogers' foundational model of self-concept, in which incongruence/congruence may occur between self-image, self-worth, and ideal-self (Rogers 1959).

a regenerative, iterative, and contextually adaptive process. The knowledge and experience gained from various alignment cycles are cumulative and favour cross-pollination.

Furthermore, not all identified areas of misalignments will equally spark an artist's desire to change – one may very well accept or tolerate a given area of misalignment to better focus on another that feels more urgent. A minor shift might be deemed to be adequate for now, or a given area of misalignment might be put on the backburner. Ultimately, it is up to the artist to evaluate the timeline and the level of engagement with an area of misalignment. However, alignment only becomes useful as a framework if the observation of misalignment is followed by *some* level of adjustment.

Alignment places emphasis on individual agency. It values and stimulates the personal, social, and artistic potency that comes from self-reflection, adaptability, and the desire to increase the coherence between oneself, one's art, and one's place in the world.

The model is meant to be personalized: different artists will naturally engage with different issues. This thesis focuses on my own personal research and artistic practice and will expand on my reflections on issues relating to decolonization and coloniality.³ Before conceptualizing the model of alignment, my previous research questions asked: what are strategies to decolonize an artistic practice? How can artistic work contribute to social justice or decolonization? That framing not only implies a result, but a result that is not achievable on an individualistic scale. This sense of realism does not indicate resignation towards decolonizing efforts. I have found that the quest for alignment emboldens artistic agency, accountability, activism, and action, but calibrates its impact on the world to a more realistic scale. These previous research questions also made it difficult to account for the unavoidable contradictions and challenges that arise when trying to “do better” through art. Whether I was at the stage of identifying areas of misalignment, seeking alignment, or undergoing various cycles of alignment, the model acknowledged my own limits, as well as the time it took to reflect upon and implement changes.

Regardless of artistic discipline or formats, engaging with the notion of alignment enables reflection on the contextual, professional, financial, promotional, social, and political components related to artmaking. My personal set of reflection points for creating, sharing, and disseminating artistic work includes: Who funds, who gets paid, who pays for a ticket? How much? Who heard about the work, and how did they hear about it? Where is it happening? When? Who attends, who cares, who feels engaged, who benefits, who is uplifted, who is dismissed, who is included, who is excluded? Here, the process of seeking alignment can be useful: When artists face obstacles at the structural level, they may crave more agency over the presentation of their work. Distancing, disengaging, dissenting, disidentifying, and daring to do things differently are always options, especially in a post-pandemic world in which revitalized discussions about social equity and decolonization⁴ offer the potential to transform the mission of many artistic institutions and organizations, or inspire the emergence of new ones.

³ Some of the core principles of liberation psychology directly engage with the notion of self with regards to community, inequity, oppression, activism, intersectionality, decolonization, feminism, social justice, and more. For an overview of liberation psychology's concepts, as well as more recent insights into its applications, I suggest *Liberation psychology: Theory, method, practice, and social justice*, edited by Comas-Díaz and Torres Rivera (2020).

⁴ Alignment 4 further addresses the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to my own artistic work and process of seeking alignment.

How can I align the vocal sounds my body produces with my artistic, personal, social, and political voice?

Vocal alignment

Alignment will therefore engage different aspects of one individual's artistic practice, depending on its nature and context. It is thus useful to narrow the scope and address the specific challenges of different artmaking communities. My process of seeking alignment specifically engages with my ever-evolving approach to voice. Thus, in the context of this thesis, I use the term *vocal alignment* to engage with the processes and choices that arose in my own research-creation process. By extension, my model for vocal alignment can potentially be useful for other singers, vocalists, vocal performers – and quite possibly also beyond these practices: a variety of interdisciplinary artists, whether they use voice or not, can engage with and transfer insights from the detailed analysis of this process.

In vocal technique, the notion of alignment usually refers to a head-to-toe posture that engages our skeletal, muscular, and respiratory systems.⁵ Used as a metaphor, this notion has prompted me to conceptualize and develop my framework of alignment. The vocal alignment I write about includes and goes beyond the physiological alignment of different body systems designed to optimize the production of sound in our vocal tract. My conception of vocal alignment gives equal importance to both semantic interpretations of the word *voice*. It asks: how can I align the vocal sounds my body produces with my artistic, personal, social, and political voice? Vocal alignment as a technical term is directly connected to how the voice is used, how it sounds, and how it connects to the body. In my model, it expands into a wide array of personal, social, and political considerations, such as the way it communicates with the audience, refers to stylistic genres, to artistic or academic concepts, etc. It has driven my vocal, artistic, and personal growth over the last 15 years; perhaps it can be useful to those – vocal artists, particularly – who wish to think mindfully and critically about the relationship between their artistry, their creative projects, their sound, their technique, their values, and their lived experiences.

I currently self-identify as an interdisciplinary vocal artist, but my access point to the arts was musical training on the cello and composition lessons, both from a Eurocentric point of view. After my conservatory-level training, I accumulated professional experience as a composer in the “new music” scene.⁶ Through different cycles of alignment, my practice considerably shifted away from this focus.

⁵ Use of the term *alignment* is widespread in vocal technique, whether by vocal coaches or pedagogues such as Richard Armstrong, Roy Hart, Kristin Linklater, or Richard Miller, or in voicework techniques such as the Alexander Technique, Fitzmaurice Voicework, or Estill Voice Training. Alignment is not necessarily a key concept of these approaches, but it is a useful and consistent descriptor for body posture, alongside vocabulary around breath, or physical grounding. Coming from a vocal pedagogy perspective, Chapman and Morris' *Singing and Teaching Singing* devotes an entire chapter to the notion of *postural alignment* (Chapman and Morris, 2021). Considering how voice is connected to physiology, the notion of alignment (skeletal alignment, mostly) is also present in physical therapies such as physiotherapy, osteopathy, and kinesiology, as well as in many practices such as yoga and Pilates.

⁶ I use “new music” to refer to what is also called the contemporary Western art music scene. This language has been problematized: Western classical music exists and has been evolving well outside the boundaries of Europe and North America, “new music” could easily mean any type of music that has been created recently. Older language used for “new music” includes “contemporary music,” “concert music,” or “art music.” Bhagwati defined “art music” as “an awkward parallel to the more appropriate French term ‘musique savante’ which means: learned music. ‘Western art

I found myself distancing from the new music paradigm, in which I was expected to use musical notation to compose vocal and instrumental musical scores for orchestras, chamber music ensembles, choirs, and soloists.

To illuminate the artistic and vocal strategies embedded in my process of seeking vocal alignment, this thesis focuses on two pivotal projects in my artistic development: *Anthropologies imaginaires*, a mockumentary about the perception of otherized vocal sound, and *Bijuriya*, a queer exploration of my *brownness* through sound-based drag. It also engages with a conceptual performance piece called *Lip Service*.

Queer alignment

Beyond my distinctly queer exploration of drag artistry, queer theory has greatly informed my conception of alignment, as well as my personal research-creation trajectory. “Queer” is a word with fluctuating, overlapping, and paradoxical definitions. At different points in history, it has been used to describe, to stigmatize, and to reclaim power for marginalized individuals and communities. Although gender and queer studies have vastly theorized upon it, its meaning remains elusive, porous, and malleable.⁷ From my perspective, the lack of a conclusive, absolute, or scientific definition of “queer” recognizes how queerness allows for or even invites indefinite answers and contradictions. These characteristics of queerness carry over to my model of alignment and the nature of my research-creation.

In the context of this thesis, “queer” refers to the recognition or the celebration of one’s marginalized and non-normative sexuality and/or gender identity. Self-labelling as queer may also involve a nonconformist or *disidentifying* stance towards the standardized heteronormative lifestyles that are broadly legitimized and accepted. However, for some individuals within the LGBTQ2IA+ spectrum, the emulation of heteronormative lifestyles or gender roles offers safety, self-preservation, the privilege of *passing*,⁸ and access to equal opportunity.

Emulation of the norm is not something to be judgmental of. My personal process of seeking alignment is indebted to Muñoz’s concept of disidentification, which he defined as a “mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 1999, 11). My process of seeking alignment has similarly gone through an initial phase of emulation of the norm, where the validation of my teachers, peers, and community of musicians felt too important to ignore. With time, and at an exponential rate since *Anthropologies imaginaires*, my process of seeking alignment has embraced a queerer epistemology; I don’t shy

music’ stands for a tradition of musicking that traces its origin to medieval practices in Europe and has maintained an unbroken tradition of musicking, enhanced by music notation and music reflection, since then” (Bhagwati 2018, 15–22). Useful language that can expand these definitions of new music are Eurocentric or Eurological music.

⁷ For a succinct history of “queer” and its multiple definitions, accounting different points of view, see Somerville, 2014.

⁸ *Passing* usually refers to transgender individuals being perceived as, or assumed to be cisgender in mainstream society, whether intentionally or not. Passing can also apply to sexual orientation or race. A monolithic view of “queerness” is not helpful; one’s sexual orientation or gender identity does not determine one’s degree of adherence to the dominant culture. Therefore, using “queer” as an umbrella term for the whole LGBTQ2IA+ spectrum while necessarily implying a form of social nonconformity has its limits.

away from questioning, challenging, and abandoning the standardized ways of the new music paradigm. The fluidity of alignment reflects how queerness defies notions of normalcy.

Divergence from the norm is not necessarily “queer” – there are countless artists, of any sexuality or gender identity, who challenge, enrich, redefine, evolve, stand out, or disrupt. Many aspects of identity are bound to influence one’s artistic output: race, ethnicity, age, class, education, citizenship, physical ability, neurology, spirituality, and language. It is still useful to express that my personal queerness is inextricable from my propensity to diverge from “normalcy” and that it is a particularly important component of my process of seeking alignment. Working from a stance of divergence will likely stir up the tensions – contextual, mental, or embodied – brought forth by misalignment. My own process has been characterized by an active yet measured engagement with these frictions. In seeking alignment, I have *used* this tension to cumulate insightful, informative, and embodied experience. I have worked on and against my experience of misalignment in ways I could almost qualify as “productive.”

While queerness exists in relation to an accepted form of normalcy in the form of heteronormativity, “normalcy” is certainly not a concept we would instinctively associate with the new music scene *or* with drag artistry – both of which will be of major importance in this thesis. However, both are examples of subcultures that may simultaneously act as dominant ideologies. Despite being culturally marginal, the new music scene still operates around consolidated ways of doing, creating, understanding, and perceiving, which loosely delineate what is considered usual, standardized, or expected.

An important distinction between new music and drag, however, is how it relates to privilege and dominant forms of power. Drawing from Harney and Moten’s notion of *undercommons*, Bhagwati speaks of new music as part of the *overcommons*, which he defines as “an informal rhizome of elite artists, academics, and activists that reinforces existing social dynamics by over-accentuating them” (Bhagwati 2020). He highlights new music’s relation to privilege by stating how “many public and private sponsors fund New Music-making with patronage, opportunity, and recognition, allowing it to build lasting institutions and inhabit the academy.” (Bhagwati 2020) On the other hand, drag and queer performance have generally and historically been associated with the creativity of marginalized communities.⁹ The origins of modern drag are multiple and arguably untraceable, but if we consider its significant development through *ball* culture in the 1980s, marginalization of its pioneers would include notions of sexual, gender, class-based, and racial identities – Halberstam speaks of such bodies as queer and black undercommons (Halberstam 2021).

As it pertains to popularity or mainstream appeal, Bhagwati writes: “That the music itself still does not command the interest and adulation of the general public allows this overcommons to re-use the narrative of marginality to suss out new support: New Music has always been an institutionalised top-down rebellion” (Bhagwati 2020). On the other hand, even though drag has roots in marginality and subversion, the *Drag Race* reality television franchise (2009-) has brought it to the mainstream. Even before that, drag as an artform of entertainment has engaged wider audiences from within and outside the queer community.

⁹ Alignment 4 further addresses the roots of drag and its development within marginalized communities.

Expanding on these ideas, Chapter 2 will illuminate how *Anthropologies imaginaires* challenges the “normalcy” of the new music scene, whereas Chapter 3 shows how *Bijuriya* challenges homonormativity or the uniformization of queerness in drag.

Methodology

My methodology puts art first. Although I am currently able to “neatly” describe my research-creation methodology as one that seeks vocal alignment, the trajectory that led to this theorization has been far more convoluted. My artistic process involves bifurcations, compromise, entanglement, and doubts, alongside a significant amount of care, friendship, laughter, generosity, and joy. Through the theorization of my artistic practice, I reflect on what concepts and vocabulary might aptly capture the essence of my artistic practice and output. As per the cyclical nature of alignment, my research questions, insights, and findings all emerge from the tail end of my creative process. Thus, my approach to research-creation has resonance with other methodologies that emphasize the importance of experience, process, and producing new forms of knowledge (Manning 2016), or ones that make room for freedom and improvisational approaches (Caines 2021).

I particularly recognize elements of my research-creation methodology in Loveless’ concept of *polydisciplinamory*, which “names a practice of intellectual curiosity and insatiability that is also, crucially, one of love and of care” (Loveless 2010, 10); “an organizational principle for research-creation, one that helps tutor us in managing the frictions, dissonances, and different demands required by not only more than one discipline but more than one form, and to recognize these negotiations as always already imbricated in structures of power” (Loveless 2019, 70). In a 2021 virtual panel, she explains how polydisciplinamory moves away from a “discipline comes first” framing, into one where the “mode of accountability is shifted from a fidelity to discipline, into a fidelity that’s organized by drive and by desire.” She acknowledges how there is nothing new about this approach in research but observes a tendency in academia to disavow moments of curiosity, instinct, and working in an intuitive way (Loveless 2021, 00:30:00–00:31:50). These very notions carry over to the notion of alignment – while connecting to my instincts and curiosity, I have been driven by my interests, goals, and desires.

I find it important to highlight that methodology, terminology, or notions derived from an academic approach to research-creation rarely make it into my creative consciousness. Most of my engagement with existing methodologies comes in hindsight; my academic research follows my creative process. As an artist, I tend to engage more effectively with other artists’ ideas, concepts, methods, or works (there are too many and the range is too wide to compile a fair list).

Self-reflection based on methods of auto-ethnography allows me to draw relationships between theory and the artistic components of my research-creation. I investigate my artistic intentions and creative strategies, supporting them with literature, other artwork, media articles, reviews of my work, and my own observations about audience engagement. When speaking of his research methods, vocalist and scholar Tonelli “strongly [feels] that there is a need for ethnographic arts scholarship that comes from [a] fully engaged place alongside alternate methodologies that gain insight from a more detached observational perspective on arts engagement and communities. Both lead to knowledge the other cannot yield” (Tonelli 2019, 9). As such, the full-time commitment to my interdisciplinary artistic practice, as well as my navigation of different networks and communities, have generated very personal and engaged lines of enquiry, methods, and findings. I

also draw a parallel between this type of practice-based research and “performative forms of scholarship” which Robinson explains “do not necessarily eschew standards of disciplinary rigor; instead, they unsettle the normative scholarly formats whose ideological underpinnings we typically ignore” (Robinson 2020, 101). This thesis will demonstrate my tendency – both as a researcher and artist – to diverge from rigid scholarly formatting or standardized artistic formats, to seek better alignment between form and content. These divergences add complementary sensory engagement to the written form. For example, my occasional use of typography and font size changes emphasize key sentences or highlight a change of tone (as was done on page 3). Exhibit A opts for a looser type of conceptual analysis. Alignment 3 showcases simultaneous timelines of my musical development. Use of arrows in the annotated lyrics (Appendices 3-7) offer an alternative to linear thinking. Although I only use a small fraction of their potential, I consider these formatting strategies to be effective and sensory tools of communication. In addition, Exhibit sections provide video documentation of my research-creation projects. Providing pictures from my performances allows the reader to draw relationships between the interdisciplinary nature of these artworks and the written theorization of their artistic intentions.

About this thesis: content and structure

In lieu of an introduction, this thesis started with Alignment 1, which defined the overarching concept of alignment. This section also presented the concept of vocal alignment and queer alignments, specific forms of alignment that pertain to my own personal artistic practice. Defining these concepts from the onset allows for a better grasp of nuances within later chapters. The concept of alignment will be revisited throughout the thesis, as I investigate the relationship between my artistic output – particularly its format, sound, and context of presentation – and my sense of self.

The thesis is subdivided into three core chapters interconnected by five sections called “Alignments.” Alignment sections appear before, between, and after chapters. More exploratory in form and written in a self-reflective tone, they flesh out my process of seeking alignment. They identify areas of misalignment, provide context surrounding my artistic work, and explain what led me to shift my artistic practice from one project – or approach – to another. Alignment sections also gradually and cumulatively define key terms and concepts, ask further research questions, acknowledge my personal limitations, establish connections between these different ideas, and share strategies, recommendations, opinions, and findings.

Finally, the reader is invited to engage with three research-creation artistic works via “Exhibit” sections. The sensory encounter of these artworks allows the reader to experience diverse ways of understanding the text-based research comprised in other sections.

Chapter 1: Reflections of coloniality in the new music scene investigates my critical stance on musical, social, theoretical, and practical aspects of musical life in the Canadian new music scene, highlighting the colonialist assumptions, cultural prejudices, and power imbalances that impact it. This chapter provides context to understand the areas of misalignment I have engaged with in the new music scene.

Alignment 2: Potential solutions for the new music scene addresses institutions’ and organizations’ attempts to counter coloniality. Mildly interested in what these institutions can do, I highlight the role that can be played by individual artists seeking alignment – positing that the artwork we create can collectively expand the range of artistic expressions and thus contribute to decolonial efforts in the scene.

Exhibit A: *Lip Service*: The reader is invited to engage with the video documentation of my 7-minute vocal piece *Lip Service* (2023). This piece adds ambiguity, playfulness, and a sensory dimension to the theme of institutional and individual responsibility addressed in Alignment 2.

Alignment 3: Initial steps, India, imaginary culture, interdisciplinarity fleshes out the process of seeking alignment that eventually led me to create *Anthropologies imaginaires*. I reflect upon my formative years of musical training and my early career, which was well situated within the confines of the new music scene. Engagement with Indian music, the theme of imaginary culture, and an interdisciplinary approach to my voice have all informed cycles of alignment in my research-creation.

Exhibit B: *Anthropologies imaginaires*: The reader is invited to engage with the video documentation of my solo performance project *Anthropologies imaginaires* (2014). Having been conceptualized and premiered prior to my doctoral studies, please note that this artwork does not constitute a doctoral research-creation project – it serves as a reference that complements the theorization of my practice.

Chapter 2: *Anthropologies imaginaires: A critique of coloniality through voice and satire* offers an in-depth analysis of the artwork. I address the critical, satirical, and ethical dimensions of this vocal, musical, and theatrical live-arts piece I performed publicly over thirty times so far since its premiere. I analyze how my use of voice, body, satire, deception, humour, and laughter formulates a critique of coloniality, to an audience with mostly Eurocentric cultural references.

In Alignment 4: So how about drag? I explain how addressing areas of misalignment about my brownness and queerness led me to create my drag persona Bijuriya. Particularly important in my process of seeking alignment were the contexts of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the heightened media awareness around social justice issues. As my drag project transitioned from private to public, the interplay between my work as Gabriel and my work as Bijuriya provided valuable pathways towards better alignment. Alignment 4 also defines key concepts and issues pertaining to drag artistry.

Exhibit C: *Bijuriya*: The reader is invited to engage with the video documentation of my 80-minute solo interdisciplinary drag performance *Bijuriya* (2021-22). This work is the central research-creation component of the thesis.

Chapter 3: *Bijuriya: Curating my drag voice* frames drag artistry as an art of self-curation and cultural reference, highlighting how sound-curation is near impossible in the *Drag Race* franchise. I analyze the different musical, vocal, and performative strategies that coexist in the piece: original songs, porous lipsyncs, sound design, speech, and voice work. These strategies are combined to create hybrid artistic formats where I explore different relations to the body and the voice, in line with my concept of vocal alignment.

Alignment 5: Conclusion reflects on my personal form of vocal alignment, in which change, fluidity and adaptability are key components. I reflect and advocate for a diversity of other forms of alignment for artists with different positionalities, priorities, or areas of misalignment.

Figure 1 proposes a visual map of the thesis in which different shapes represent different types of sections. Although many correlations exist between all sections and research-creation projects, a colour-code clarifies the general categories of the thesis. Yellow sections pertain to reflections of coloniality in the new music scene, blue sections to *Anthropologies imaginaires*, and orange sections to *Bijuriya*.

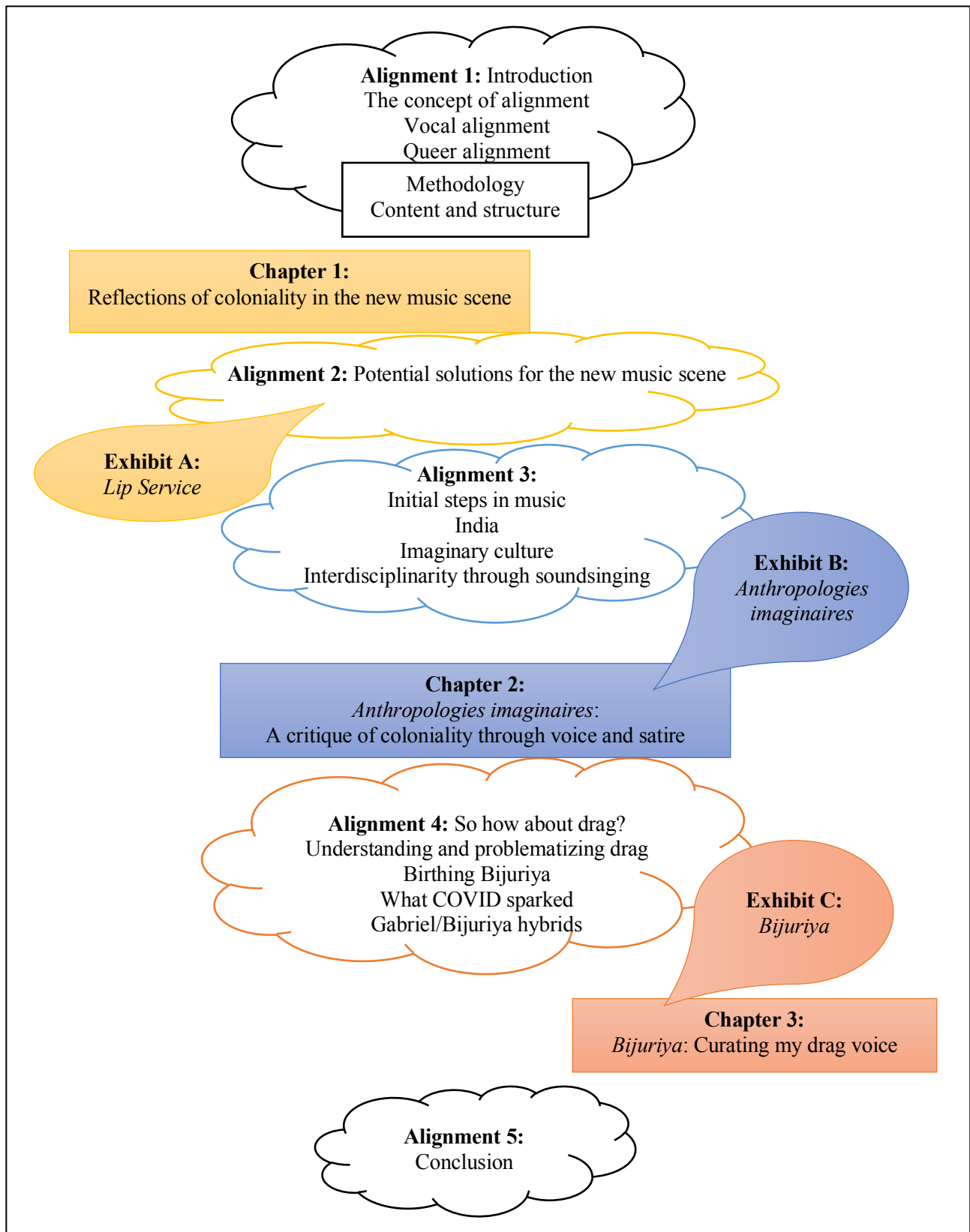


Figure 1: Thesis map.

CHAPTER 1: REFLECTIONS OF COLONIALITY IN THE NEW MUSIC SCENE

1.1 CHAPTER METHODOLOGY

Compared to other sections of the thesis, this chapter is the furthest from the theorization of my artistic practice and research-creation methodologies. However, it is still a personal piece of writing, as methods of auto-ethnography interact with my attempt to engage scholarly with a subject I am admittedly “too close to!”

This chapter is based on my own opinions, observations, and experiences in the new music scene. I have been an active member of the scene since the early 2000s, studying and working as a composer, improviser, and vocal performer, as well as researcher, curator, administrator, organizer, cultural mediator, and mentor in a variety of contexts. In these different roles, I have interacted with a broad scope of people engaged in our musicking scene: composers, improvisers, sound artists, musicians in classical and new music ensembles, artistic directors and festival curators, as well as people with artistic, educational or administrative roles in academic institutions (such as conservatories and university music departments/faculties), arts institutions (Groupe Le Vivier and its member organizations, Société de musique contemporaine du Québec), associations (Conseil québécois de la musique, Canadian Music Centre, Canadian League of Composers, SOCAN), networks (Canadian New Music Network), funding bodies (Canada Council for the Arts, Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec) and a number of other organizations. In addition, my networks have allowed me to work both in Canada and internationally. Consequently, I have gained a particularly solid understanding of the new music scene through my work.

The writing in this chapter is informed by other factors that inform my critical perspective on the new music scene and my desire to work towards its decolonial future. These include my positionality as a person of colour and my bicultural identity (my father is Indo-Caribbean and my mother is Québécoise), my training and additional artistic forays into other musical traditions after my initial education in Western classical music,¹⁰ my penchant for intercultural collaboration, and finally the gradual and deliberate diversification of my audiences and partners.

I should also disclose some of my biases or limitations. First, my active participation in the new music scene significantly decreased from 2019. Alignment 2 and Alignment 4 will more effectively describe how my intentional move *away* from the new music scene particularly accelerated during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. This directly correlates with the development of my drag artistry and the exploration of other networks and communities. Keeping this in mind, I would like to acknowledge some of the more recent efforts to counteract reflections of coloniality within the new music scene. For example, the Canadian New Music Network has made tangible “efforts toward decoloniality [and] put many aspects of ‘new music’ under scrutiny,” acknowledging how “the category itself is highly problematic indeed” (Campbell and Hron, 2023).

Another limitation I have is my lack of an embodied experience of the new music scene *before* 2000. Some of my assertions might betray my unawareness of earlier situations, events, artistic

¹⁰ Although I use “new music” to avoid problematized words such as “Western” and “Western classical”, I use “Western classical music” freely to refer to musical culture, repertoire, and practices that predominantly engage with European classical music that encompasses periods of Western music history such as Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and modern. Most practitioners of this field would indeed refer to it as “classical music.”

works, initiatives, panels, gossip, etc. Based on my engagement in the scene for over 20 years, I appreciate that only a fraction of *what actually happens* is written about or documented. I can also assert that the many insights I have gathered on this field are not easily documentable. While a more scholarly approach might entail a thorough literature review, I base my writing predominantly on my embodied experience and observations, supported, of course, by scholarship and relevant media sources.

The benefit of this approach is that it acknowledges, or even demonstrates how practicing artists within the scene – even the academically curious ones – are often oblivious or unaware of scholarship that specifically pertains to their artistry and community. Knowledge produced by musicological scholarship very slowly seeps (if ever) into the collective consciousness of the actual scene. For example, when I critique the claim to universality held by Western Classical music in sub-chapter 1.7, I am aware there is a wealth of literature that has already critiqued and problematized this over the last five decades. This does not change the fact that this notion was dominant during my education, that it permeates Western Classical music marketing strategies, that such universalist discourse still taints my interactions with peers, audiences, artistic directors, etc. Long after a problematized notion has been unpacked in musicological scholarship, even artist-researchers like myself, who are interested in challenging it, must slowly undo and rewire notions that have been established over years of practice and engagement.

The downside of approaching this subject from an auto-ethnographic point of view would be the various gaps that are due to my own limitations. Hence, I have taken care to support or complicate most of my opinions with relevant references. These sources have helped me formulate and solidify my embodied instincts and observations. The reader is encouraged to engage with these references to further investigate what may prompt their own curiosity or lines of enquiry.

1.2 CONTEXT

In recent years, the Canadian new music scene has seen an increasing number of calls to decentre its Eurocentric roots and challenge its colonialist, imperialist, capitalist, institutional, racial, heteropatriarchal, and other biases. Concern over issues related to “decolonizing” the scene has been growing, in convergence with other long-debated topics. Although decolonial issues are more frequently discussed in theatre and dance communities, the new music scene is increasingly considering its relationship with Indigenous communities and artists, its representation of cultural diversity and its approach to intercultural collaboration. Events are specifically organized to discuss such topics,¹¹ and they also come up in informal conversations between colleagues. However, we should be discerning rather than simply jumbling them all together in a so-called “decolonization” process. Tuck and Yang (2012) critique the use of the term “decolonization” to describe social justice models that existed well before the growth of this analytical framework, which, they claim, must be primarily or even exclusively reserved for dealing with issues related to real and persistent colonialism with regards to Indigenous peoples. Although the issues highlighted by Tuck and Yang have led me to think deeply about the ways I can express and practise my solidarity with this cause, it is useful in my research to relate to “decolonization” in a broader sense, as defined by Levitz

¹¹ Pre-pandemic public events addressing these topics include: “Compositeurs: une espèce en voie de disparition?” (Montreal/New Musics Festival 2019), “Forum 2018: Entr’Arts/Between the Arts” (Canadian New Music Network 2018), “Horizons musicaux contemporains” (Montreal/New Musics Festival 2017) and “Democratization of Performance” (Canadian League of Composers 2015).

(2017). In her recommendations to the Society of American Music (SAM), Levitz describes “a collective project that involves theorizing about and clarifying coloniality of power, considering its spatial and temporal consequences, and taking a wide range of actions to counter it” (Levitz 2017, 2). In keeping with this three-part definition, it would be helpful to identify how coloniality of power is reflected in the new music scene before we even start discussing the measures and strategies that could make up a decolonizing framework.

This chapter focuses on identifying and describing various reflections of coloniality in the new music scene: its cultural homogeneity, issues related to access, its roots in Western classical music, the concept of European excellence, the assumption of universality, how legitimacy and marginality can coexist, the ambiguous relationship with cultural appropriation, and the basis for the attribution of merit. Further sections of the thesis will flesh out how these reflections are related to my perception of the new music scene as an area of misalignment in my artistic practice.

1.3 CULTURAL HOMOGENEITY AND ASSIMILATION OF DIFFERENCE

The new music scene in Quebec is culturally homogenous and predominantly white. People of colour or Indigenous people who self-identify as part of the scene tend to employ an artistic discourse that serves, caters to, or is compatible with the dominant culture’s perspectives or interests. Cultural differences tend to be assimilated, adapted, or reformatted to better fit the genre's definitions and boundaries. This process can lead to valuable artistic outcomes and reveal whether an artist's relationship with a given tradition is centred on preservation, reproduction, transgression, experimentation, or any other creative strategy. However, individuals from the dominant culture who work in the scene rarely have the tools to understand the ratio of tradition to innovation in music from or inspired by another culture. I will get back to this point later. Some of my compositions inspired by Indian Carnatic music have been well-received by members of the community, but this appreciation often hides a colonialist disdain towards other attempts at hybridization that are deemed to wander too close to “world music.”

In response to the charge of cultural homogeneity, it is often pointed out that the scene includes several individuals with “Asian” cultural backgrounds. In a section of *Re-sounding the Orchestra* that deals with cultural elitism and East Asia, Attariwala mentions Yoshihara, who describes how the processes that Asian cultures used to adopt Western classical music were closely tied to their drive to modernize (Attariwala and Peerbaye 2019, 40). Xia traces the onset of this modernization back to the Opium War in 1840, writing how “in the inexorable tide of China’s modernization after 1840, Chinese music was a crucial target to be modernized and the patterns used were drawn from the Western music system” (Xia 2022). The integration of Western forms of art sustained well into and after World War II for Korea and Japan and after the Maoist era for China (Yoshihara 2007). In an email correspondence, Attariwala describes these as “calculated moves to gain cultural capital by imitating elite Western expressive culture; in tandem with these countries' attempts to gain footholds in the global economy, which was—at the time—dominated by the West.”¹² Attariwala says that the expressive cultural ideals of South Asia and Africa clearly differ from those of East Asia in ways that reflect the “colonization, post-colonial reclamations and cultural resurgences” of the countries in those regions.¹³

¹² Attariwala: Personal communication the author, April 28, 2019. Reproduced with permission.

¹³ Attariwala: Personal communication the author, April 28, 2019. Reproduced with permission.

Aside from a few small territories, Japan, Korea, and China were never subsumed by Europe's colonial empires, and therefore colonialism did not influence their assessment of Western music (Attariwala and Peerbaye 2019, 40). Although Japanese, Korean, and Chinese musicians are often found performing at cultural venues, paying to go to a concert is not part of their cultural norms (Attariwala and Peerbaye 2019, 41). Consequently, the onstage diversity acquired through these moves to gain cultural capital has not translated into a substantial change in the demographics of orchestral music audiences.

Beyond definitions of Asianness centered around East Asia, other research unpacks the distinctive cultural contexts found within and across the Southeast Asian region. For example, Feliz (2021) problematizes monolithic definitions of Asia and addresses how both modernity and forms of musical regionalisms comes to influence contemporary music creation in the Philippines.

New music communities also exist in what we may refer to as the Global South. However relevant and meaningful their ideas, innovations, and music may be, the work of new music practitioners and researchers in those parts of the world is often rendered invisible by the unevenness of the global lens.¹⁴

We should also recognize how the erasure of Black figures from the history of classical music sends an exclusionary message that persists to this day. Green (2018) talks about how Ignatius Sancho, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, Blind Tom, Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, William Grant Still, and several other composers have mostly been left out of university curricula, except for specialized classes or more recent editions of major textbooks. Green asks why such musicians are not studied in general music history classes (Green 2018) and concludes that academic institutions' failure to include them sends a message to Black composers "that [they] are not wanted, no matter how much success [they] gain. New music has done very little to change the expected optics of classical music, which is why new music's identity problem is what it is today" (Green 2018).

In response to the increased consciousness around anti-black racism since 2020 (unpacked in Alignment 4), I do acknowledge that progressive voices within the fields of music pedagogy, Western classical music history, and new music curation have contributed anti-racist statements, initiatives, or efforts to address various related issues. Considering how anti-racist activism tremendously predates the death of George Floyd in 2020, I have been cautious not to be overly gracious towards institutional initiatives that have not been rooted in longstanding practices of social justice. Alignment 2, Exhibit A, and Alignment 4 will all dive deeper into my subjective take on institutional lip service.

People with different cultural backgrounds are sometimes even invited in, yet this is usually meant to be considered as something of a privilege. In reality, it is often the guest artist who makes the biggest compromises or is forced to adapt, whether in terms of the context in which their work is presented, their musical material, or the artistic considerations themselves. Meanwhile, the host

¹⁴ Acknowledgment is due to composer and researcher Juro Kim Feliz, our discussions on these issues have been particularly insightful. I also acknowledge that most of my knowledge of the Global South's new music practices have come to my attention from Sandeep Bhagwati's research initiatives. To a lesser level, I have been able to feel the pulse of the international new music scene from my opportunity to attend the International Society for Contemporary Music's World Music Days in 2014 (Wroclaw, Poland), 2017 (Vancouver, Canada), and 2019 (Tallinn, Estonia).

organizations benefit. Their reputations are bolstered in the eyes of the public and of the funding bodies, which encourage organizations to move in this direction. Once the collaboration is over, who truly gains from these projects? Shouldn't the act of decentralization and an openness towards difference also include some sacrifice and concessions on the part of the organization in the position of power?

Let us consider, as an example, an intercultural music project with Indigenous participation aimed at educating a (primarily white) audience about the atrocities of colonization in an attempt to contribute to the reconciliation and reparation process. Xwélméxw (Stó:lō) academic Robinson (2012) examines how the audience's emotional and sensory experience with respect to the music and artistic concept may be confused with a feeling of finality and real reconciliation: “The *feeling* that something has been achieved positions such intercultural music performance as symbolic reconciliation and something more. Indeed, as much as the very ‘power of music’ might have a range of benefits, it might just as well convince its audiences, that [...] the experiencing of such performance is the doing of reconciliation itself” (Robinson 2012, 123). Such intercultural collaborations may be “a form of reconciliation made visible, but lacking adequate provision for action” (Robinson 2012, 120).

At other times, such projects are initiated by people from Indigenous groups or cultural minorities, but this does not mean the intercultural negotiation is safe from criticism. Among the various responses to Brent Michael Davids' *Powwow Symphony*, Robinson highlights that of Waziyatawin, who thought “the tour was too much about the appearance of reconciliation without the substance of redress” (Robinson 2012, 122). If intercultural solidarity is just window-dressing, a symbolic gesture that does not offer much in terms of real change, isn't that simply one of the limitations of art? Are concrete solutions to be found in what is peripheral to the work itself, such as the context within which it is presented or through cultural mediation? Can the scene free itself from the very notion that a work should be considered separately from its context?

1.4 ISSUES OF ACCESS

For performers, success or mere inclusion is deemed merit-based, but acquiring the skills to work within the new music scene requires extensive training that almost always involves private music lessons or specialized music education programs starting from an early age, followed by musical training in a conservatory or university. This is a journey consistent with that of people from the middle and upper classes. Socio-economic and racial privileges such as wealth, whiteness, educated parents, and membership in the dominant culture are self-evident, but there is value in discussing them and calling them into question so that they can be directly connected with issues of access and merit. All those years of musical training are aimed at cultivating a level of virtuosity that cannot be achieved otherwise.

For composers and other sound artists, when it comes to access-related issues, there is no aggressive gatekeeping with respect to gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Our subculture sprang from the avant-garde. It focuses on unique artistic voices, which may be compatible with celebrating difference and stylistic distinctiveness. It seems like the doors are wide open, and the diversity policies of funding bodies back up the image of a progressive and inclusive scene. But, as shown by Couture (2019), there is still a gender disparity among composers whose works are performed by the major new music organizations in Montréal.

There are so few non-white composers in the scene that the lack of in-depth research and statistics on non-white new music composers is not surprising. We must not forget that structural problems make it hard for non-Western or immigrant composers to access the same type of education, funding, and opportunities. Given the standard profile of composers, with their musical educations and training in how to play an instrument, it seems appropriate to refer to the possible solutions regarding access to educational resources proposed in *Re-sounding the Orchestra*. The report also stresses the need for additional, ongoing support and mentorship to reduce the impact of economic, cultural, and family-related factors that discourage people from pursuing a musical career.

Non-Western and immigrant composers often miss out on crucial networking during their years of training. Many of the opportunities offered to me throughout my career can be traced back to the personal relationships cultivated during my studies. A composer who has trained abroad (especially outside the so-called Western countries) and recently immigrated here will have a harder time forging these bonds and reaping their tangible benefits. There are many highly understandable reasons why artistic directors, ensembles, and curators tend to favour professional relationships that entail guaranteed successes. Collaboration between cultures or with people from immigrant backgrounds brings challenges and risks that some welcome with enthusiasm and others view with a restrictive kind of pragmatism, regardless of whether these artists' work is rooted in different traditions or is compatible with new music.

If the doors really are open, then who actually wants to come in? Do musicians with innovative or experimental approaches who belong to another tradition feel like the new music scene would welcome their work? Or can their artistic path be better understood and supported elsewhere? Does the scene have enough culturally diverse role models to inspire younger generations? Are composition and music history professors actively diversifying the roster of composers and sound artists they introduce to their students?

1.5 INHERITANCE OF AND ENTANGLEMENT WITH WESTERN CLASSICAL MUSIC

To use a rather shaky analogy, Western classical music serves as the “grandparent” of new music. Just as new music looks at the Western classical scene as both a benefactor and supporter, at other times it thinks of it as too old-fashioned, out of touch, or objectionable. But the influence of this lineage is clearly felt among musicians, who often maintain close ties with classical music through various permanent or temporary contracts in orchestral or teaching positions. For creators involved in composition and sound art, the situation is more complex. Many claim they have broken away from their Western classical roots. Others may have entered into new music from another kind of background/training and think they have nothing to do with it. But it is undeniable the scene has inherited its main tools and creative models from this Eurological musicking:¹⁵ grant funding, the primacy of scores and notation, the commissioning paradigm, the concert protocol and experience, the clearly defined roles and hierarchies, as well as the more obvious characteristics such as the musical instruments that are learned, played, and composed for.

In Quebec, most new music organizations coexist and interact alongside Western classical ones as part of bigger families such as Conseil québécois de la musique or the Ludwig Van online media outlets. They subscribe to these families through paid membership, and therefore openly seek, choose, and consent to this affiliation.

¹⁵ “Denotes all musicking – whatever its geographic origin – that a) places itself within, and b) shows several salient characteristics of the Western art music tradition” (Bhagwati 2018, 16).

Although many subgenres of new music have evolved far away from classical music (such as improvisation, *musique actuelle*, sound art, and media arts), these alternative paths are not necessarily evolving towards a decolonial future or away from other problematic biases. For example, the sexism and lack of gender diversity in areas related to music technology, free improvisation, and experimental jazz are often criticized.¹⁶ Recognizing the different systems of oppression based on identity (such as cultural, ethnic, religious, gender, sexual, class, and educational identities) promotes an intersectional decentralization of power.

1.6 EUROPEAN EXCELLENCE

“The language and set of beliefs that characterizes Western classical music specifically as ‘great’ and ‘universal’ emerges from empire, from colonialism and capitalism” (Attariwala and Peerbaye 2019, 39). Whether it wants to or not, Western classical music is a celebration of historical European (and white) excellence. In today’s context, little is done to challenge its role as a marker of whiteness. Let’s take a closer look at the slogans for Ludwig Van Toronto (English) “If You Think Classical Music is Dead, You’re Dead Wrong!” and Ludwig Van Montréal (French) “Si vous croyez que le classique est mort, nous sommes morts de rire !”.¹⁷ Even though they are meant to be funny, these slogans perpetuate the image of a threatened artform surviving in a hostile contemporary context.

Although classical music might be perceived as declining or extinct by its opponents, these slogans proclaim an unwavering confidence in its legitimacy. If the survival of the genre involves conservation and preservation, does this kind of rhetoric also evoke an ideal of purity and authenticity in which otherness is passively shut out and deemed to pose a danger of contamination? Finally, any other options that could represent middle ground between survival and death, or any outcome that leaves space for growth, adaptation, compromise, or transformation is not included in the realm of the possible. That’s where artists in the new music scene can make choices and break away from this Eurocentric legacy. This is reminiscent of the view of decoloniality as envisioned by Maldonado-Torres, in which “the production of counterdiscourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices [...] seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world” (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 10). Can the new music scene make more of an effort to recognize, identify, include, and celebrate these artistic alternatives? Are our definitions of excellence, virtuosity, and refinement so narrow that we dismiss a number of multifaceted artistic proposals that could actually transform us?

1.7 THE ASSUMPTION OF UNIVERSALITY, LEGITIMACY, AND MARGINALITY

By 2000, Small had already connected the concept of decentralization with the musical field. Stanton sums up Small’s theory as “Western classical music is an ethnic music, just like any other type of music,” then goes on to ask, “why does one ethnic music enjoy the privilege of so-called universality” (Stanton 2018, 10)? Stanton believes that Western classical music has been granted this “universal” status due to a context of colonial violence. As he says, “epistemic violence facilitates the naturalization of its primacy” (Stanton 2018, 10).

¹⁶ These criticisms are often made via social media by artists calling out issues such as the lack of female representation in various improvised music festivals. As for media arts and electroacoustic music, I’d like to thank Erin Gee for pointing me towards the work and writings of Tara Rodgers, Andra McCartney, and Freida Abtan on these topics.

¹⁷ These slogans used to be featured on the title bar of Ludwig Van Toronto and Ludwig Van Montréal websites, as early as 2014 and as late as 2019. A Ludwig Van Toronto reader’s comment on this page from 2014 alludes to it: <https://www.ludwig-van.com/toronto/2014/12/09/breaking-news-orchestra-london-silenced/>, and Ludwig Van Montréal acknowledges it as their motto in this article <https://www.ludwig-van.com/montreal/2019/11/15/actualites-quatre-bonnes-nouvelles-musique-classique-devriez-connaître/> (Both webpages accessed on July 3, 2023).

If Western classical music benefits from assumed universality and legitimacy, new music has inherited this privilege in the eyes of institutions and funding bodies. The scene is protected by its association with Western classical music. It conveniently benefits from the automatic assumption of its legitimacy. Cultural mediation initiatives aimed at contextualizing and presenting the work of contemporary composers frequently take advantage of this historical kinship. By comparing their work with that of leading figures from the history of classical music, contemporary approaches are deemed valuable and benefit from this transferred legitimacy. This is a privilege earned and inherited by colonialist structures.

The new music scene is made up of different stakeholders. Some hope for wider acceptance and recognition, while others would prefer the scene to remain marginal, research-focused, and distanced from anything mainstream (popular, commercial, and publicized music). Many actually want both. The desire to reach a wider audience can coexist with a more realistic wish to remain on the fringe. This gives members of the scene the feeling that their work is relevant, essential, and entitled to legitimacy yet simultaneously relegated to a status of marginality. Bhagwati observes how the new music scene's "self-image of being minoritarian often comes with a certain insouciance towards and an unwillingness to acknowledge the marginality of others" (Bhagwati 2020). This causes the new music scene to exempt itself from being part of a dominant ideology or in a position of power over others.

"If music expresses personal or group identity, it plays a role in negotiating relationships between unequals, as a way for a dominant group to reinforce its hegemony, or for a subordinate population to fight back at some level" (Nettl 1983, 256). In this context of unequal groups negotiating relationships through musicking, the new music scene is able to conveniently switch from positions of assumed subordination and unsuspected power. Does the scene have the willingness and courage to give up some of its power so it can better advocate for diversity and inclusion? Would artists and audiences who do not identify with the legacy of classical music be more interested in the new music scene if this relationship were clearly and deliberately decentralized? Can a healthy marginalization of the scene, which is both voluntary and enshrined in socio-political and artistic ideals, be preserved by broadening our scope? This could mean things like including innovative artistic approaches that come from non-European traditions. Could a gradual transformation of the demographics and cultural references of the new music scene give it more legitimacy and relevance in the eyes of our culturally rich and diversified society?

1.8 AN AMBIGUOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH APPROPRIATION

In my experience, I have come across less critical discourse about appropriation in music than in other artforms that involve bodies, iconography, and imagery. I have thus wondered whether sound is more abstract than images and bodies, whether it involves fewer cultural markers? As someone who has researched musical traditions that clearly or arguably do not "match" my own cultural background, I have also wondered whether the flow of ideas between musical traditions is generally more accepted, or more easily regarded as cultural *appreciation*. To some extent, perhaps? Despite these personal reflections, musical practices – in and outside of new music – are not immune to forms of unethical or exploitative cultural appropriation.

From my time in the new music scene, I have witnessed my fair share of questionably appropriative works. I have also been privy to murmurs and behind-the-scenes gossip about dubious new music

projects or compositions. Considering the small size of the scene, few people would be willing to stir up public controversy on the matter. By refraining from listing all the examples I can think of, I am no exception to the rule. I don't think new music has been confronted with its relationship to cultural appropriation as much as it might have "deserved" to. When compared to the infamous *SLĀV* controversy (unpacked in Chapter 2), I have no knowledge of a new music work or project that garnered a fraction of its media attention and ensuing critical discourse on appropriation.

Outside of new music, there is abundant critical discourse surrounding appropriation in music. For example, it is increasingly acknowledged in mainstream culture that the development of rock'n'roll is rooted in the work of Black musical pioneers, whose songs have been stolen, appropriated, and reframed to fit within the dominant culture's taste. Although it is spoken and written about, the erasure of Black voices and the whitewashing of Black sound is still prevalent in many pockets of mainstream culture (Jacob 2021; Jancelewicz 2019). Even more egregious is the institutional whitewashing of jazz's history, which causes short-term memory in white and non-Black audiences, and even jazz music students who "often fail to make this connection between the art and its Black roots" (Bartol 2020). At the intersection of cultural appropriation and the politics of apartheid was the controversy surrounding Paul Simon's *Graceland*, marked by both acclaim and outrage (Denselow 2012; Greer 2006).

Born and Hesmondhalgh have illustrated how "the turn to other musics—urban popular musics, Western and non-Western folk and 'ethnic music' as well as 'non-art musics' were conceived by modern composers 'as others' to be drawn in a variety of ways into their compositional practice" (Born and Hesmondhalgh 2000, 13). Although discussions about cultural appropriation in music composition might have happened in academic scholarship, at no point in my musical education (circa 1998-2007) were these practices investigated from a critical point of view. University curricula may have evolved since I graduated, but to what extent?

For critical discourse about new music to exist within mainstream culture, there needs to be big enough an audience to engage with it. Referring back to the scene's marginal yet legitimate status, it could be argued that there is no critique because not enough people actually see, hear, or experience what is being produced. Some members of the new music scene lament the lack of media attention it gets.¹⁸ I posit that the scene is so insulated from the public forum it escapes criticism that could influence our internal conversations. The subject of cultural appropriation has created such upheaval in the press and sparked international debates when creators in the field of dance, theatre, or the visual arts have been criticized for irresponsibly engaging with a culture that isn't their own. The question of whether this criticism is justified and deserved is a whole other debate. I do believe that such debates can create an awareness of inescapable issues in contemporary society that could help establish a decolonizing framework. These debates show that there are a variety of opinions out there and force us to arrive at a consensus or even create sometimes necessary schisms.

Members of the scene could improve the ways in which they hold each other mutually accountable for the ethical aspects of their artistic offerings. This passivity puts off what could be opportunities

¹⁸ For example, the editors of the *Cette ville étrange* website describe the platform as an initiative that tries to respond to a chronic lack of a space for proper critique of creative concert music in the public forum, and especially in mass media whose discretionary power over the form and substance of ideas shared seems greater than ever (Accessed June 9, 2023. <http://www.cettevilleetrange.org/a-propos-editos/a-propos-2013-edito-anno-iv/>).

for useful reflection within the scene, in terms of how it approaches and engages sounds, music, and collaborations from outside the limits of the genre.

Although I insist on its poor track record, I am aware of some calls for accountability towards cultural appropriation in new music. In November 2019, Tanya Tagaq criticized the use of *katajjak* in *Partita for 8 Voices* by American composer Caroline Shaw, which won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for music. Thanks to Tagaq's media influence and credibility, to my knowledge this is one of those rare instances where an “external” critical viewpoint pushed an artist from the new music scene, in this case Shaw and the group Roomful of Teeth, to offer an apology, correction, and reparations.

In 2020, the Canadian Music Centre introduced the Indigenous Advisory Council, which’s purpose is “to oversee the work of redressing the misuse of Indigenous songs and mis-representation of Indigenous cultures/peoples in compositions”¹⁹ by its associate composers. Indigenous council members include Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō/Skwah), Marion Newman (Kwagiulth/Stó:lō), T. Patrick Carrabré (Métis), Melody McKiver (Anishinaabe), and Olivia Shortt (Anishinaabe). The Accountability for Change Council has also been created to “support the ‘Board’ to carry out its due diligence function to promote human rights, equity and social justice to ensure that the CMC is inclusive in all its affairs.”²⁰ Unfortunately, at the time of writing, no official statements or updates have been published about these promising actions and advisory bodies. It is thus speculative to measure the impact of these initiatives on the practice and reality of new music in Canada.

My understanding of cultural appropriation is nuanced (more in Chapter 2.6) and my aim is not to call out every musician who may have borrowed music and sounds from outside their own culture, whether they do so regularly or just on occasion. My point is that despite some recent initiatives, the new music scene isn’t concerned enough with accountability to the media, to researchers, to oppressed minorities, or to the cultures being borrowed from. If a sound artist wants to launch a dialogue with other musics through their own musical language, I would encourage them to think deeply about whether such an artistic approach is relevant, and whether the benefits it brings to their own practice outweigh what it takes from others in terms of cultural, financial, or symbolic capital. However, I want to make it clear that such self-reflection will by necessity involve its own share of difficult and uncomfortable realizations. Taking the position of a victim whose freedom of expression is violated is rarely productive and shows an unwillingness to listen to the criticisms made.

1.9 ATTRIBUTION OF MERIT

Enriquez identifies five steps in processes of colonization, the third being to denigrate, belittle, and insult the systems and practices of the colonized. Building on this, Laenui suggests five phases of a people’s decolonization, the first of which is rediscovery and recovery (Laenui 2000, 2). When applying this approach to the new music scene, it is important to remember that not so long ago extra-European musics were considered exotic curiosities whose value was both idealized and/or belittled. Members of the new music scene dismiss and disparage other musics more often than we would like to admit (we even disparage music from within the scene!)

¹⁹ Purpose of the Indigenous Advisory Council, as published on the Canadian Music Centre’s website (Accessed August 2023: <https://cmccanada.org/indigenous-advisory-council/>).

²⁰ Information about the Accountability for Change Council, as published on the Canadian Music Centre’s website (Accessed August 2023: <https://cmccanada.org/accountabilityforchange/>).

Merit is attributed to other musics based on how the scene senses and understands them, which in turn is based on dominant culture's own ways of sensing and understanding. Musics are judged or are dismissed for lacking complexity, yet there is often no acknowledgement that we do not have the tools to grasp the parameters of difficulty, sensitivity, complexity, or layers of depth and meaning in musics we are not well acquainted with. The overenthusiastic idealization of these musics is just as problematic, as this discourse is often limited to a few superficial elements, and we convince ourselves that we understand more than we actually do.

I have observed how new music practitioners will comfortably attribute value or merit upon classical Indian music for its rhythmical complexity and melodic refinement. I presume that their position of respect and admiration is informed by the fact those are parameters of value that have parallels in Western classical music. It is also a “classical” music that is practised and appreciated by the Indian elite, and therefore is deemed to be advanced and sophisticated. In contrast, these same members of the new music scene might easily dismiss hip hop, despite its musicological and artistic merits, most likely because these are overshadowed by social parameters and a divergent set of parameters for artistic value. According to Cervantes, “rapping [is] more than making words simply rhyme [...] the practice involves breath control, organization skills, rhythm, the ability to articulate your voice, and conveying messages that reflect social experience and condition” (Cervantes 2015, 8).

There are obviously other ways of appreciating unfamiliar music that fall between dismissal and idealization. Artists should be able to find inspiration without selectively screening them at the source, but this could be done with more curiosity and humility. Ignorance about a given music does not necessarily have to be a source of shame, nor should it be disguised by pseudo-intellectualism. We can own our ignorance and let it fuel a real desire to educate ourselves. When reflecting about this ignorance, I often find myself thinking about Robinson’s *Hungry Listening*. What is left unknown from our limited experience of other musics, our ignorance “is not to be understood as lack that needs to be remedied but merely an incommensurability that needs to be recognized” (Robinson 2020, 53). The critique Stanton levies towards Western classical music’s “universality and subsequent propensity to delegitimize, subordinate, appropriate, and tokenize other systems of aesthetic value” can reasonably be applied to the new music scene (Stanton 2018, 10).

Let's flip the script. Many musicians from outside the new music tradition critique it for its lack of rhythm or recognizable melody, cerebral nature, undanceability, and the fact that you must sit and listen to it in silence. In my experience, many members of the new music scene feel no impetus to defend it against such critiques. They remain confident and unwavering in their belief in the legitimacy of the scene, or even enjoy its marginal status, accepting without compunction its lack of intelligibility for whoever does not understand its codes. Criticisms resulting from other ways of sensing or understanding music, whether made by non-experts or leading figures of another musical tradition, are automatically dismissed. These criticisms are not viewed as opportunities for growth that may transcend the limits of the genre. Although new music is obsessed with its own progress, this progress is achieved on its own terms. Of course, a number of musicians and composers are listening to the criticisms listed above, but as artistic practices move increasingly in this direction (reconnecting with rhythm, melody, and physicality), they tend to disassociate from the new music scene or become judged and rejected internally.

1.10 CONCLUSION

It is evident from the above that the new music scene wants to project an image of progressiveness and innovation. Some of its members are trying to understand how it can become even more inclusive, equitable, and representative of the contemporary social fabric – unfettered by the coloniality of power. But not everyone shares these values. While some members of the community are initiating or contributing to the decolonization process, others shrug it off, are unaware of it, resist it, or even infringe upon it.

Many members of the new music scene do not accept or find it very difficult to recognize how systemic racism and socio-economic obstacles affect the careers of its artists and of those who are still excluded or overlooked by it. People in positions of power within the scene often hide behind the fact that their intentions are good. Excuses are made that would never cut it in other disciplines such as theatre or dance. It is not unusual to hear defences based on invisibility (“I don’t even think there are any Black women composers, how can we program them in our concert series?”), colour blindness (“I don’t see colour when I listen to a piece. The music is what matters.”) or even quality (“We couldn’t find an Asian singer qualified enough for this role.”). When someone in a position of power takes pride in their generally progressive positions on social issues, these excuses indicate a reluctance to recognize their own prejudices. For the scene, such excuses, combined with a generally progressive attitude, foster a feeling of innocence and distancing, which is a typical stance in systemic contexts of coloniality.

A failure to recognize how systemic inequalities affect the new music scene amounts to an unhealthy denial that maintains the status quo. Assuming that we cannot do anything or change anything ensures everything stays the same. In the foreword to the Consultation Report on Systemic Racism in the Arts, Culture and Media Sectors in Montréal commissioned by Diversité artistique Montréal (Hajji 2018), director Pruneau reminds readers that “this is not about pointing fingers at individuals. Instead, it is about accepting the idea that administrative and organizational mechanisms, although run by individuals who are not necessarily racist, create unequal and oppressive situations” (Hajji 2018, 8).²¹

Still, it is individuals who make the decisions and implement different initiatives, and it is individuals who create and produce artistic works.

Obviously, reflections of coloniality are not limited to the new music scene. They exist in several fields and to varying extents. However, processes of alignment invested in decoloniality must first recognize the many ways that coloniality is reflected across communities – the communities to which we belong, the communities that belong to us, the communities we can help shape and transform.

²¹ “[I] ne s’agit donc pas ici de pointer des individus du doigt, mais bien d’accepter l’idée que des mécaniques administratives et organisationnelles, bien qu’opérées par des individus pas forcément racistes, engendrent des situations inégalitaires et oppressantes.”

ALIGNMENT 2: POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR THE NEW MUSIC SCENE

The observations, ideas, and reflections I investigated in Chapter 1 have led me to thoughtfully engage with my own pathways in navigating the new music scene. Perhaps they can furthermore explain, contextualize, inspire, and reinforce the use of strategies and policies to decolonize the scene, or even lead to further academic research. For members of the new music scene interested in decolonizing efforts, critical engagement with these reflections of coloniality helps identify potential areas of misalignment. This first step can then be followed by a process of seeking alignment.

Indeed, many individuals and organizations are already looking to the future, adopting measures, producing artistic work, and contributing to the process of transforming the scene. The recommendations for the Society for American Music (Levitz 2017) and the reports by Diversité artistique Montréal (Hajji 2018) are good resources for anyone who wants to improve how they understand and work towards decolonial artmaking, even if they weren't designed specifically for members of the new music scene. *Re-sounding the Orchestra* (Attariwala and Peerbaye 2019), a report commissioned by Orchestras Canada, examines certain problematic aspects of relationships between Canadian orchestras, Indigenous peoples, and people of colour. It can serve as a basis for reflecting upon and rectifying coloniality in music. However, we must keep in mind that the world of orchestral music is centred around historical repertoire, while the new music scene self-identifies as an art of our time, with a focus on the future. The issues and potential decolonization strategies are innately different. As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, institutions like the Canadian Music Centre and the Canadian New Music Network are also thinking more critically about decoloniality, social justice, diversity, and equity (Campbell and Hron 2023).

On an international scale, the context of heightened awareness of social issues during the pandemic has led to different texts and publications. “Taking the Temperature Crisis, Curating, and Musical Diversity” (Farnsworth, Jakobsson and Massera 2020) addresses the theme of curating, which I consider to be the area that holds the most potential for solutions in the new music scene. The collection of texts also includes an interview of mine, conducted by Vanessa Massera. My personal observations are analysed in the introduction, stating “that as the pandemic has worn on, artists’ willingness to produce and stay busy at any cost have begun to wane. As they come to appreciate slower ways of working, artists have also found an unexpected fissure in institutions reliant on their overproduction, opening doors to new forms both of creating and of resisting” (Farnsworth, Jakobsson and Massera 2020).

This leads us to consider potential solutions for creators, sound artists, and composers from Indigenous groups and diverse cultural backgrounds (and I include myself in this second group). I believe we need to think of decolonization *through* art, not decolonization *of* art. As Sioui Durand explains, “we have entered a new phase: that of decolonization through art. The process of decolonization of art was based on resilience, resistance, contestation and criticism. The process of decolonization through art, on the other hand, aims to complete the re-inscription of Indigenous peoples into political history, using art as a vanguard. This process is far from over” (2018, 24).

As individual artists seeking alignment, we should ask ourselves how our work can move beyond established ways of doing, thinking, and sensing music and sound. Our work should question the standardized frameworks inherited from Eurocentric models and perpetuated through institutionalized systemic racism. Our artistic output could be presented and experienced in different spaces that reach wider diversified audiences and people. Our work could go beyond musical creation and include other contributions such as mentorship, education, cultural mediation, and public speaking. Maintaining an individual and multidirectional artistic practice helps develop a sense of constant negotiation and adaptation that allows us to avoid the dominant, fixed, or dogmatic ways of doing things. We could make engagement and social relevance our central concerns while we rethink our roles. Furthermore, we could minimize our focus on presenting our artistic output in prestigious settings. Artistic works can live inside and outside mainstream institutions, with or without the approval of famous artistic directors or respected peers. The social relevance of our work is likely to increase through contact with a more varied group of individuals. According to Stanton, “decolonial musicking often exists in active resistance against institutions, in an exterior relation. It is from exteriority that decolonial methods of struggle can permeate and radically transform the hegemonic function of dominant institutions” (Stanton 2018, 11).

Are institutions and organizations preventing artists who are interested in decolonial musicking from aligning their beliefs and their work? If artists have these issues at heart, what keeps them from cutting ties with institutions, from acting from this “exterior relation”? Perhaps because institutions are still the ones who provide opportunity, conditions, income, validation, and even some sense of community?

On January 28, 2021, I took part in the Canadian New Music Network’s Decolonization Series 4 virtual panel titled “We can’t play their game, their way,”²² curated and moderated by Remy Siu, with other guests Melody McKiver, Nancy Tam, and Leslie Ting. An audience member asked what we would want to see from institutions or organizations, such as the Canadian Music Centre, about how they could provide space for us to make the things we think are important, as opposed to being forced to do what they expect us to do.

My response was an arguably emotional rant, and as someone who tends to be diplomatic and does not particularly want to make enemies, I was pretty proud of this sudden display of honest insouciance. The waning of my patience afforded by the pandemic (further fleshed out in Alignment 4) might have had something to do with it. I feel ambivalent about the unedited version which might be available forever on YouTube, so here is a more thoughtful and clear rephrasing of it:

²² Canadian New Music Network, “Decolonization Series 4: We can't play their game, their way,” streamed live on January 28, 2021, YouTube video, <https://youtu.be/RKNWjBiUMPC?t=4999>.

If you ask me why or how it is important
to change the Canadian Music Centre,
I would say that...

[pregnant pause]

I don't care.

The answer would be the same for other institutions:

I don't care.

If they can't prove their relevancy today, well... yeah...

I don't know!

This isn't an attack;
I'd be happy if they found a way but ...

[rambling]

I just think we must trust artists.

The intermediary between our work and audiences
often happens to be these institutions

[laughter]

I think that's why lots of artists are getting impatient
or taking matters into their own hands.

I'm very proud to be part of this panel
among artists who are invested in doing just that.

The bridge between our work and the people we want to engage
is something we would want a little bit of control over.
I've had to compromise so much as a composer that if I were asked how,
or what should chamber orchestras or string quartets do
to stay relevant...

I'd be, like... **figure it out! Or step away!**

All that money that they are getting to play some... wood quintet...

(!)

There is so much money there, yet there are so many artists that
have so much to say, that have unique perspectives...

[withheld, but implied:

“who don't have nearly as much financial means.”]

My quest for alignment considers how such issues relate to my own artistic practice. It influences how I navigate the professional and social context of the new music scene. Many other artists share these concerns – the ones who spoke at that panel and so many others. Collectively, we have the potential to design a wide array of new artistic expressions and call into question the prevailing ways of experiencing music in this community.

Considering how composers generally undertake and complete higher musical education, it is necessary to consider the gaps that prevail in this type of institutional training. In *Hungry Listening*, Robinson explains how “classical music composers, by nature of their artistic practice, are concerned primarily with the aesthetic interweaving of musical materials.” Moreover, “this training often excludes consideration of the aesthetic relationship with gender, sexuality, and race, not to mention questions of ethics and collaboration that are a part of social arts and community-oriented artistic practices.” I agree with Robinson’s opinion that “composition programs need to significantly rethink curricula in order to reflect these changing priorities” (Robinson 2020, 133).

Waterman adds that “composition studios may well encourage wide exploration of musical styles, but the professionalization of the composer entails learning to be efficient, to be oriented toward product over process. Professional music careers reinforce this training. [...] We listen for excellence, or perhaps for improvement, but the terms of that listening are most certainly already ‘settled.’ We do not teach alertness to new possibilities, and we do not teach practices of freedom” (as quoted in Robinson 2020, 250).

Beyond the educational gaps in conservatories and music faculties, the responsibility for change exists at various levels. It lies with funded cultural institutions that receive grants to implement their cultural mandates at the municipal, provincial, national, and international levels. It lies with organizations, funded or not, which should feel compelled to research, commission, organize, and program more ground-breaking, socially relevant, and decolonial new forms of art. Financially speaking – in terms of public funding for the arts in Canada – while many established institutions (sometimes with questionably relevant mandates) benefit from a big piece of the pie, so many artists are subjected to play the grant writing lottery with their rent, subsistence, and general health at stake. When salaried artistic directors or cultural administrators ask us to tell them what they should do to be “saved,” I’ve been wondering whether we should share the answer even if we knew it. Artists must stay one step ahead, since this process of so-called decolonization of the artistic community starts with art – the art we create.

– the art we create.

EXHIBIT A: *LIP SERVICE*

I.

Does the world need... change?
Does our community need change?
Do we need change?
Well *I* think things *should* change.
Things *need* to change
Things *will* change.

II.

Li Lip Lips Lip Serv Lip Service Lip Service Lip Service

III.

Things need to be done!
Who's doing the work?
Who's *actually* doing the work?
Who's doing the *actual* work?
Who's *actually* doing the *actual* work?

Am I... doing the work?
Am I... *actually* doing the work?
Am I... doing the *actual* work?
Am I... *actually* doing the *actual* work?

Is *art* work?
Is *artwork* work?
Is *this* artwork work?
Is this artwork *actually* doing the work?
Is this artwork *actually* doing the *actual* work?

IV.

A Ac Act Action
Actual action

Decentre Diversify Words Decolonize Unpack Complicate Analyze
Denounce Critique Words Radicalize Words Demonstrate Words
Awaken Coopt Nuance Words Protest Words Counteract Disidentify
Words Distance Voice Words

But what about actual action?

O Op Opt Optics
Optics / Action

V.

Heavy is the tongue
Heavy is the tongue that does the lifting

Contextual information

Lip Service is a text-based performance piece for solo voice and electronics I conceptualized and created in 2023.

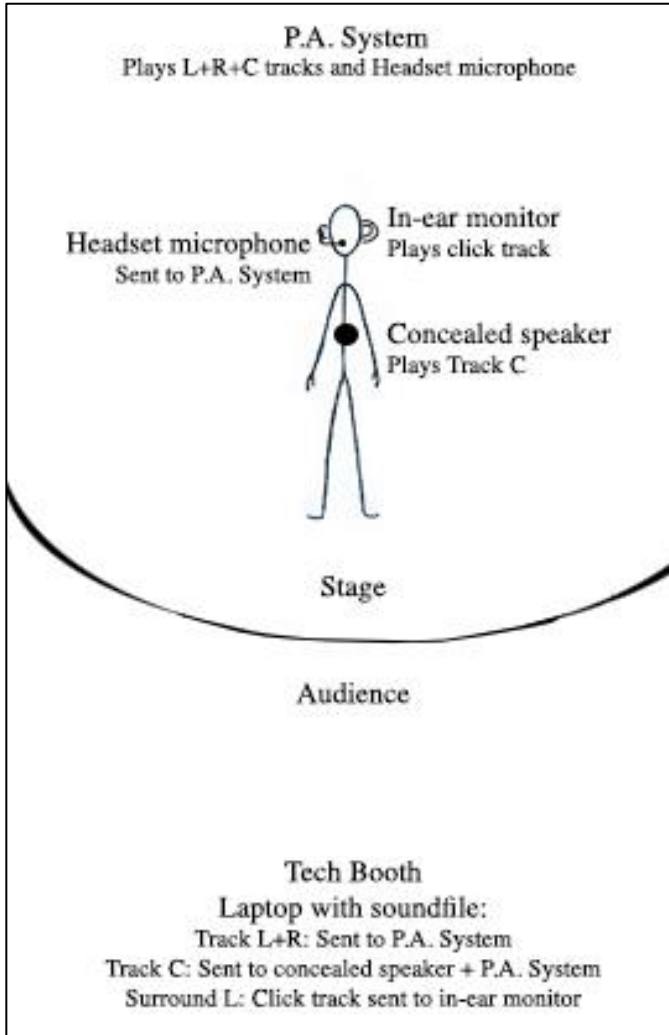


Figure 2: Audio set-up for *Lip Service*.

I collaborated with Nataq Huault for technical direction, sound engineering, and mixing. The premiere was at New Music Concert's event "Re-Sequencing Berio: a Film/Concert Spectacular" on April 30, 2023 at Paradise Theatre (Toronto).

Figure 2 illustrates the audio set-up. The original concept involved a small speaker concealed behind my shirt/near my body. This strategy was meant to enhance the ambiguity of the different vocal sounds' origin. All sounds seemingly originate from the same physical space where I stand on stage, but they do not necessarily emanate from within my body.

However, the premiere was in a large hall that necessitated substantial vocal amplification. This created high risk for feedback due to the proximity of the headset microphone with the speaker on my body. Thus, the video documentation provided is performed solely with the P.A. system and without the concealed speaker. Ideally, the piece would be presented in a more intimate venue.

The reader is invited to engage with the piece through:

- The score (available for consultation in Appendix 1)
- The provided video documentation, uploaded to the Spectrum platform as: **Lip Service** Turgeon-Dharmoo_PhD_F2023_video1_Lip_Service.mp4
- The text (previous page)

Legend: Black text is speech

Orange text is ventriloquism

Purple text is a hybrid between speech, lipsyncing, and ventriloquism

Green text is played from a speaker

- The following conceptual analysis:

Lip Service

explores

the porosity

between

voice and body:

As I speak the first words of the piece, the vocal sound unambiguously originates from my body on stage.

Things *will* change.

As the piece progresses, ventriloquism blurs the origin of the vocal sound. For example, in most of section III, my lips and body are still yet all words originate from my ventriloquizing body.

Who's actually doing the work?

Two-colour phrases such as this one feature sound both from my ventriloquizing body and pre-recorded vocal sound played from the speakers.

Lip Service

Some phonemes are harder to camouflage through ventriloquism. Such is the case for **p** and, to a lesser extent, **v**. While my ventriloquist mouth invisibly utters *Li_ser_ice*, the **p** and **v** phonemes are cleverly/conveniently entrusted to the pre-recorded track. Sections II and IV explore the gradual construction of these split-up words.

O Op Opt Optics

Lip Service

explores

the porosity

between

words and action:

It is a tongue in cheek critique of institutional lip service and the conflation of optics and action. The text being spoken out loud is mostly delivered in the manner of false and empty promises: lip service. On the other hand, the text delivered through ventriloquism is a reflection of inner thoughts, doubts, and feelings of insufficiency.

Things need to be done!

Who's doing the work?

The piece critiques cultural organizations' questionable attempts to project an image of social relevancy and dedication to different causes. Artists – or myself – are not let off the hook either. Dramaturgically, I play various versions of myself: candid, cheeky, confused, or (self-)critical. Is the ventriloquized voice giving voice to what many others are thinking? About cultural organizations? About their peer artists' work? About their own work?

Am I... doing the work?

The piece is self-investigating; it asks questions about the limits of art making as an agent of change or activism. The piece is a case study in itself. The questions are simultaneously literal, rhetorical, ambiguous, critical, and self-deprecating.

Is this artwork *actually* doing the *actual* work?

The text offers no answers, but the performance is as shrouded in doubt as it is paved with good intentions. If my process of seeking alignment is inspired by decolonial efforts, when does the artistic output tangibly engage with the issues? When is it merely... lip service?

Words Words Words Words

Words Words Words Words

As the piece ends, an ambiguous sense of responsibility lingers. Is my/our assessment that these institutional or artistic efforts are merely futile? Am I/Are we feeling disheartened? Surely, one should still *try* to act? One should try to do *some* of the heavy lifting? Right?

Heavy is the tongue that does the lifting

ALIGNMENT 3:

INITIAL STEPS, INDIA, IMAGINARY CULTURE, INTERDISCIPLINARITY


My process of seeking alignment has concomitantly evolved with my awareness of reflections of coloniality in the new music scene. With time, I realized to what extent they affected me – and in many ways held me back – on personal and artistic levels. Various elements contributed to my gradual shift away from composing new music towards creating and performing *Anthropologies imaginaires*.

A quick overview of my initial steps in music will illuminate how I ended up working as a new music composer in the first place. With hindsight, I can tell how this path was shaped on the one hand by my personal interests, and on the other hand by my responses to the Eurocentricity of my musical education.

While this section reads as a biographical timeline of my musical education, the indented text provides complementary information on extra-curricular or independent artistic experiences that have particularly shaped me. This is meant to complicate a timeline that would have solely focused on academic or formal experience.

Initial steps in music

I studied the cello at Cégep Sainte-Foy between 1998 and 2000.²³ This followed almost 10 years of private cello lessons during my childhood, as well as additional musical activities on the alto saxophone in high school (wind band, stage band).




In parallel, I had been writing lyrics and recording my own homemade songs on the computer, inspired by my idols on the fringe of mainstream pop culture (i.e., Björk, Beck, Portishead). My undiscovered electro-pop gems included “Hotel Hate,” “For Your Enemy,” “If You Only Knew,” “Waiting for a Signal,” and “Destroyers.” I guess the lyrics helped me process my teenage emotions. Despite that, I remember my creative process being quite focused and joyful.

I never particularly dreamed of being a professional cellist but studying music at a cégep appeared to be my gateway to a life in the arts. As an instrumentalist, I lacked the drive and desire to diligently practise existing repertoire for hours daily. Through the school curriculum, my knowledge of Western classical music history and repertoire exponentially increased. I became very drawn to the 20th-century modernist canon and particularly admired Béla Bartók. As I learned more about how innovation and creativity interacted with this music through the work of composers (a stance I knew existed within mainstream or commercial music), I was beginning to grasp the existence of the new music scene. I genuinely felt I could potentially be a part of it. After all, my predisposition to be creative felt much more compatible with the role of the composer than


²³ Cégep is the equivalent to college in the province of Quebec. Academic paths vary depending on the specialization; mine was a two-year program between high school and my undergraduate studies.

that of the instrumentalist. This led me to register to an optional sound creation course with François-Hugues Leclerc (1999-2000).



In parallel, I continued writing songs, which were becoming more experimental in their form. I had friends studying visual arts. I was very inspired by the freedom of form and of aesthetic in performance art. In 2001, I released my album *Besoins cathodiques* on the independent label Déluge. There is a cyber-trace of me speaking about my artistic process in 2002: “I have ideas that come to me on the cello, I record them, I modify them with effects and I add sound textures that are appropriate to the atmosphere I want to have. [...] With the cello, my work is very measured, but with the computer, it's more experimental.”²⁴


After cégep, I pursued undergraduate studies in composition at Université Laval (2000-2003) with Éric Morin. In addition to composing various pieces as part of the curriculum, I played the cello in new music ensembles, performing pieces by my peers and teachers. As my knowledge of the new music repertoire increased, so did my awareness of the realities, opportunities, and ways of operating in the new music scene.



Important in those years was Framboos: a band comprised of fellow composition students – more importantly, very close friends and peers – Elizabeth Lima (voice and clarinet), Luke Dawson (voice and double bass/bass), Patrick Beaulieu (piano), and myself (cello and voice). We co-created arguably weird songs such as “Camel,” “Patchworks,” “L’ange de la ferraille,” “Giraffe,” “I’ve Seen it All,” and “International Eaters.” Improvisation was a big part of our creative process, alongside humour, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Lima and I were particularly drawn to sound-based vocal exploration, foreshadowing the vocal approach we both specialize in today. Framboos participated in cabaret-type events, self-produced a few shows, recorded a demo, and participated in the Conga, a university contest. We were the delightfully and intentionally quirky misfits in a sea of punk, folk, rock, and metal bands. We did not win.


At the age of 21, my composition *À l’Homme* for soprano and double bass was awarded a first prize at the SOCAN Foundation Awards for Young Composers. Feeling such validation, support, and even praise during my formative years gave me no reason to stop or to question anything. I could only keep the momentum going.

²⁴ “J’ai des idées qui m’arrivent sur le violoncelle, je les enregistre, je les modifie avec des effets et j’ajoute des textures sonores qui sont appropriées à l’atmosphère que je veux avoir. [...] Avec le violoncelle, mon travail est très mesuré, mais avec l’ordinateur, c’est plus expérimental.” Quoted from <https://voir.ca/musique/scene-locale/2002/01/17/les-viperesgabriel-dharmooconga-2002noel-en-rappel/>, published January 17, 2002.



By choosing to focus on composition more seriously hereinafter, the type of artistry I was developing outside of school slowed down. I often wonder whether my formal training deviated me – or misaligned me – from what with hindsight seems to be such an aligned and coherent approach to my sense of self and artistic self. My artistic output and perspective today seems to be a direct continuation of that work, which despite being green was personal, free, whimsical, playful, and quite honest.

In 2003, I moved to Montréal to further hone my skills at the Conservatoire de musique du Québec à Montréal with Serge Provost. I obtained a degree in instrumental composition (2006) and another in musical analysis (2007), earning two “Prix avec grande distinction” – the highest honours.



I also formally studied improvisation with René Lussier and Robert Marcel Lepage – untypically so, at the Conservatoire! Unfortunately, the administration cancelled this course the following year; I happened to be there exactly at the right time. Whereas I used to improvise primarily on the cello, I had the inkling I should develop my approach as a vocal improviser.

In and around those years, I won a few more awards, I participated in young composers’ workshops, I was asked to write commissioned works, I sought part-time jobs that were music-adjacent... The new music scene felt like a community of peers and musicians that was ready to embrace me.

However, being of mixed cultural heritage, the cultural homogeneity in the new music scene was an area of misalignment I could not overlook for long. Although I was not engaging with diversity issues at the systemic level, I was aware that my cultural distinctiveness could inform my artistic work. I wondered about how to better align, how to be myself – or more of myself – and still belong in the new music scene. My first instinct was to diversify my personal musical references by engaging with my own cultural background.

India

Since childhood, I have had a starry-eyed fascination for Indian culture. Throughout my musical journey, this developed into a desire to deepen my musical knowledge in India. Shortly after graduating, my process of seeking alignment led me to study South Indian Carnatic music in Chennai twice, in 2008 and 2011. Both trips were funded by art councils; my applications focused on how musical and cultural periods of immersion would help me develop new tools for my work as an emerging new music composer. This research was also obviously intertwined with my process of identity formation as a bicultural person with ancestry in India. Alignment is often marked by this coexistence of the artistic and the personal.

I learned theory with Dr. Usha Prasad, voice with Madurai G.S. Mani, and rhythm with N. Govindarajan. I also rekindled my interest in playing the cello through mentorship with V.S. Narasimhan. He taught me how to adapt Carnatic music from the violin to the cello. All these lessons not only provided me with new knowledge, but also afforded me a first-hand experience

with a non-Western musical tradition that challenged preconceived notions I had inherited from my Eurocentric training. I saw nearly a hundred classical Indian music concerts and dance recitals.

Upon my return, I intentionally welcomed the influence of Indian music in my new compositions, without going as far as trying to reproduce it faithfully. This is present in works such as *Moondraal Moondru* (2010), *Sung in a Rickshaw* (2010), *Sur les rives de* (2011), *Ainthu miniyeccars* (2011), and *Ninaivanjali* (2012). By then, it felt like I had artistically engaged layers of my identity through my musical work, completing a cycle of alignment! However, alignment is regenerative in nature. Unforeseen misalignments surfaced. I quickly felt rather uncomfortable and apprehensive about taking on the role of an ambassador for a highly complex musical system and culture I had only dipped my toes in. I also found that some of my audience had misconceptions about Indian music based on my own work, which was deliberately bending most of its rules. I felt like a hypocrite; if an Indian musician heard what I composed, what would they even make of it? As will be fleshed out in Chapter 3, the relationship between my new music compositions and my Indianness is a central theme of *Bijuriya*, created about 10 years later: alignment takes time.

Imaginary culture

Despite these areas of misalignment, my exploration of Indian music was not something to renounce completely – it deeply changed my ways of hearing, singing, and conceptualizing music. However, my next cycle of alignment sought to remove the “Made in India” label from my work whilst still celebrating the idea of a culturally diverse – or decentred – sound world. Having an artistic predilection for innovation and wishing to avoid overt cultural influences or affiliations to existing traditions, I started exploring the theme of imaginary culture.²⁵ Beyond Indian music, I have been exposed to and influenced by many other types of music from other cultures, whether through my musicological research in Vietnam, my yodelling mentorship in Switzerland, or my training in overtone singing. While I haven't exactly mastered any of these musical genres or vocal techniques, each discovery has found its way into my compositional style, as well as my vocal or improvisational style. Most of these musics were merely a source of inspiration – never something I used, claimed, or labelled as this or that. Imaginary culture thrives in mystery and ambiguity.

In the imaginary culture-based works I have composed, the vocal or instrumental qualities were always mediated by an intermediary: orchestras, chamber music ensembles, artistic directors, or other performers. Such works include *Notre meute* (2012), *Vestiges d'une fable* (2014), and *Wanmansho* (2015). I observed how the different individuals involved – most often white and always of a different positionality than mine – seemed disconnected from the issues I was interested in. This discrepancy was particularly striking in vocal music: despite the skill, agility, and open-mindedness of the singers I was working with, their voices carried significant cultural weight, including traces of their Western classical training, their mother tongue, and other cultural idiosyncrasies. Other elements also betrayed this cultural affiliation: body language, stage protocol and etiquette, and the mere presence of music stands and scores. As a composer

²⁵ The theme of “imaginary folklore” is central in the work of Béla Bartók, who I heralded as my favourite composer during my undergraduate program. I prefer using the term “imaginary culture”, as it evokes a broader playground than afforded solely by musical parameters.

interested in vocal sound, I identified an area of vocal misalignment where the way my projects *sounded* and the way in which they were presented did not reflect what I wanted to say as an artist. It became clear to me that my own voice and body were a better vehicle for exploring the imaginary cultures I wanted to invent. This new cycle of alignment would lead me to create *Anthropologies imaginaires*.

Interdisciplinarity through soundsinging

Until *Anthropologies imaginaires*, there was little crossover between my practice as a vocalist and my career as a composer: they operated rather in parallel. As previously mentioned, the importance of voice in my artistic practice has led me to consider a personalized model of alignment: vocal alignment. In this thesis, voice is a central theme in all research-creation “Exhibits” the reader will encounter. My quest to seek vocal alignment has prompted, shaped, and influenced the artistic outcome of all these artworks, as well as my artistic reflections at large.

My vocal practice can fall under categories such as extended-voice, sound poetry, or more aptly, *soundsinging*. According to Tonelli, “soundsinging is one name for the practice of making music using an idiosyncratic palette of vocal and non-vocal oral techniques” (Tonelli 2016, 1). As mentioned previously in the description of my initial steps in music, the development of my practice as a singer-improviser evolved around the same time I was specializing in musical composition, albeit more intermittently. In contrast to the classical training that led me to work as a composer, my soundsinging generally manifests itself in non-institutional, independent, or marginal contexts.

To produce a broad spectrum of sound, I use my voice in ways perceived both as raw and sophisticated, channelling my visceral instincts as well as my analytical musical brain. My style blends various classical, experimental, and traditional musical elements, with an emphasis on the full exploration of the physiology of the vocal instrument, linguistics, and ethnomusicology. My voice is versatile: I have been immersed or trained in various vocal styles and am familiar with different techniques, for example those of Western classical music, South Indian Carnatic music, noise, free jazz, experimental music, overtone singing, yodelling, or beatboxing. I have also developed idiosyncratic techniques that result from years of experimenting with my voice. Through improvisation, I evoke, transform, decontextualize, and combine a variety of these sonic elements. Performances vary in length, whether in solo or with other musicians, and the creative process unfolds formally or structurally in a multitude of ways, from highly evocative sonic storytelling to abstract, atmospheric, and textural sound weaving.

Through soundsinging and my pluricultural musical training, my voice has acquired a versatility that allows me to invoke the music and vocal techniques of imaginary cultures in a way that fits my personal imagination. This solves the challenges I had when working with other singers or musicians through the commissioning paradigm of the new music scene. My body is that of a visible minority of mixed race or ethnicity; it suggests the image of a racialized “Other.” *Anthropologies imaginaires* was created in these circumstances, at a time when I was particularly eager for alignment between my art, my identity, and my political and personal beliefs.

Before *Anthropologies imaginaires*, I had never attempted to create a work as a composer-performer, let alone with the addition of a theatrical and video component. For Canadian composers who deliberately work outside the commercial music industry, most professional opportunities fall

under the paradigm of commissioned work, for example a new composition specifically commissioned by an orchestra, a cultural organization, a string quartet, a soloist, or a chamber ensemble specializing in new music. Creating *Anthropologies imaginaires* through such channels would have been technically possible, but the underlying cultural model associated with these ways of creating and presenting music was too Eurocentric for my taste.²⁶ For example, in addition to misogyny, cultural imperialism is one of the most complex issues when classical operatic works are presented in a contemporary context. “Oriental” characters sing in a resolutely Western manner in Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Delibes’ *Lakmé* and Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot*, among others. I argue that in the current context, the aesthetic choice of lyrical singing in a contemporary work implies an affiliation to Western classical music, a Eurocentric stance that I try to challenge and complicate in my art.

Had *Anthropologies imaginaires* taken the form of an opera or involved classically trained singers, there would have been an obvious disconnect between the medium and the message. Had it been created and/or performed by a white cisgender male or an opera singer, the reception of this work would have been quite different and arguably ethically problematic. My interdisciplinary and identity-driven approach was necessary; I had to bring my own body and my own voice to the stage.

²⁶ In the interest of transparency, I must point out that the Canada Council for the Arts and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec have financially supported the development of the project and/or have provided me with travel grants to present it elsewhere in Canada and abroad. It is important to distinguish between arts councils (which aim to encourage cultural diversity through their guidelines and peer assessment committees) and organizations (institutions and musical ensembles) that commission or present works. While the art councils fund the organizations, there are several nuances that differentiate between operational support to these and ad hoc support that allows individual artists to develop their own projects.

EXHIBIT B: *ANTHROPOLOGIES IMAGINAIRES*

Please note that the conceptualization of this piece (between 2013 and 2014) and its public premiere (2014) predates my PhD research at Concordia University. It does not constitute a doctoral research-creation project. However, touring the piece up until January 2023, as well as my ongoing reflections about the work are an integral part of my process of seeking alignment and theorization of my artistic practice. To better grasp the nuances of Chapter 2, readers unfamiliar with the live performance of the piece are invited to engage with it through:

- Full video documentation of the premiere available for viewing here: <https://youtu.be/Hr9trgpbFmI> (private link)
- Shorter video excerpts, press quotes, and other information, which are available here: <http://gabriel dharmoo.org/en/projects/anthropologies-imaginaires>
- Table 1, which will familiarize readers with the general structure of the piece and its eleven invented populations.

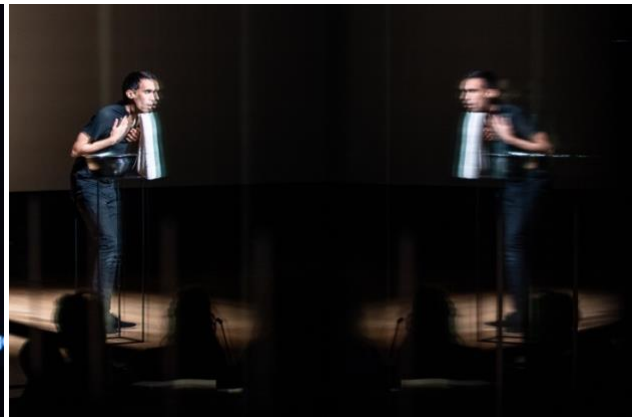


Figure 3 (top left): Gabriel Dharmoo performing *Anthropologies imaginaires* (Ruonshtan scene) Sydney Festival in Sydney (Australia) in January 2017. Photo credit: Jamie Williams.

Figure 4 (top right): Gabriel Dharmoo performing *Anthropologies imaginaires* (Ab-Pe scene) PuSh Festival and Music on Main in Vancouver (Canada) in February 2016. Photo credit: Jan Gates.

Figure 5 (bottom left): Gabriel Dharmoo performing *Anthropologies imaginaires* (Kshâhich scene) Sydney Festival in Sydney (Australia) in January 2017. Photo credit: Jamie Williams.

Figure 6 (bottom right): Gabriel Dharmoo performing *Anthropologies imaginaires* (Sviljains scene) Budapest House of Music in Budapest (Hungary) in January 2023. Photo credit: Balázs Mohai and Átlátszó Hang Újzenei Fesztivál - Transparent Sound New Music Festival.

| Section/ Population | Description of the population | Performance notes |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Introduction | A projected text on the screen provides context: “As part of its new exhibition <i>Other Places – Other Voices</i> , the Memory Museum has invited Dr. Vernün Ffūgs, Dr. Trična Bisay, Hli-Ay Feja, Rhodres Gartious and Kedikta Torskap to comment on the most striking vocal practices and sound rituals from their archives.” The piece unfolds as one population after another is embodied by the vocalist and commented on by these speakers on the screen. | |
| 1. Ruonshtan | Known for melodically supple spiritual invocations. | Fluid and graceful arm and hand movements support the melodic contours I sing. |
| 2. Kshâhich | Insect-eating population who constantly produce strange mouth sounds such as tongue clicks, lip pops and other non-pulmonic paralinguistic sounds. | Relaxed, casual, slightly stylized posture. Suggests loitering, idleness and food gathering (insects). |
| 3. Dzendew | Folkloric dance song with roots in mountain music such as yodelling, overtone singing, and throat singing. | Yodelling and overtone singing accompanied by rhythmical body percussion (hands and fists against my chest). |
| 4. M’jieté | Children of the third sex are raised to become performers of Cheuw’a theatre – a highly sophisticated form of sung theatre. | I embody two contrasting characters, shifting my facial expressions and vocal style accordingly. |
| 5. Webörglez | The population practice a playful form of 12-tone singing. This section is a parody of 12-tone dodecaphonism or serialism, a compositional technique of the 20th-century avant-garde that is generally considered to be rigorous and arid. | Casual, playful, and mischievous. A tongue-in-cheek reference for those familiar with the history of Western classical music. |
| 6. Sviljains | Preventive exorcisms (grunts and spasms) performed after every sexual act. The phenomenon is emblematic of a very complex male psyche, heavily marked by sexual guilt. | With a large bowl of water. Imagining oneself in front of the bathroom mirror after sexual intercourse. Banal grooming activities are interrupted by the preventive exorcism. |
| 7. Paretongn | When this nomadic population discovers water, it brings forth joyous celebrations, including aquatic songs, where water becomes an extension of the human voice. | With my face submerged in the large bowl of water, I alternate between melodic singing and beatboxing techniques. |
| 8. Sariêh | A master resorts to collective hypnotic trance techniques to conducts large choirs, composed of all members of the Sariêh community. | I conduct members of the audience and make them sing along with me. |
| 9. Ab-Pe | Although the singing of this population is melodious, the vocal colour (ingressive singing, voiced on the inhale rather than the exhale) and the occasional interjection of grunts lead specialists to describe its music as unrefined. | Low lighting. Comparable to a circus animal forced to face the audience. Obvious reluctance, but the lack of confidence gives way to a certain defiance of the speakers on-screen. |
| 10. Élélé | This population’s hit songs are praised for their successful adaptation to modern life. | Full spotlight. Pop-style clichés delivered with the confidence, vanity, and cockiness of a famous pop star. |
| 11. Girrhu | Polyphonies are sung through clenched teeth, so as not to be seen by the oppressor during their labour. | I pretend to be picking fruit or cotton, hinting at intensive labour or slavery. |
| Conclusion | After speaking for the last time, biographical notices of each interviewee are projected on-screen and confirm their lack of authority on the subject. Audience members understand that they have witnessed the rambling of various pseudo-intellectuals or figures with a political agenda. In other words, none of the speakers were professional and ethically sensible anthropologists or musicologists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A postdoctoral candidate researching the undefined concept of post-determinist destructionist equality - An ethnocentric musicologist - A popular singer and life coach - A bourgeois cardiologist in semi-retirement, owner of a golf and wine-tour club - The Ministry of Assimilation, also the spokesperson for the Memory Museum’s 2-week exhibition, <i>Other Places – Other Voices</i> | |

Table 1: Formal structure presenting the eleven invented populations in *Anthropologies imaginaires*.

CHAPTER 2: ANTHROPOLOGIES IMAGINAIRES: A CRITIQUE OF COLONIALITY THROUGH VOICE AND SATIRE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Anthropologies imaginaires is an artistic project I created in 2014 and performed for audiences in Canada, the U.S.A., Germany, the U.K., the Netherlands, Norway, Italy, Hungary, Turkey, and Australia. The solo vocal, musical, and theatrical performance is framed by a video mockumentary (fake documentary). The musical content is based on the notion of imaginary culture, whereas the film script parodies anthropological and ethnomusicological discourse with colonialist overtones. Over the course of 40 minutes, the audience is confronted with eleven fictitious populations whose use of the human voice could be perceived as particularly strange, by their songs or sound rituals. I embody this panoply of “Others” alone on stage, through my voice and movements. On a screen behind me, the five individuals interviewed in the video mockumentary comment on these vocal traditions. In a reversal of academic conventions, the human specimen is physically present on stage, while the speakers who analyze and scrutinize it have a virtual presence on-screen. For readers with a background or career in anthropology, it is useful to know that beyond the satirical narrative that parodies early colonial anthropology and ethnomusicological discourse, *Anthropologies imaginaires* constitutes a critique of widespread colonialist attitudes towards “Other” music or vocal sound. It has not been uncommon for me to hear comments or observe attitudes that dismiss or belittle non-Western music and vocal techniques. I detect such manifestations regularly, among peer musicians, audience members, and even among certain figures of authority (mentors, teachers), not to mention mainstream media.

This chapter’s methodology is the theorization of my artistic practice and draws on self-reflection and self-critique. It is also based on informal comments from the public as well as articles and reviews published following my performances. It attempts to explain how voice, satire, the mockumentary format, the exploration of imaginary cultures, laughter, and audience deception have, to some degree, been combined to critique colonialist views of music as well as the failure to understand the vocal and musical practices of “Others,” whether imagined or real. Before going any further, the reader is invited to engage with the work itself.

2.2 IMAGINARY WORLDS VS. REALITY

The most important creative strategy of my piece was to set my narrative in an imaginary world, rather than anchoring it in reality. This is a strategy that I share with several artists who wish to distance themselves from existing situations, whilst still critiquing aspects of the real world they wish to creatively engage with. Striking and relevant examples of imaginary or fantastical worlds in literature include Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726), Henri Michaux’s *Voyage en Grande Garabagne* (1936), as well as several works by Italo Calvino and Fernando Pessoa.

In the case of *Anthropologies imaginaires*, this strategy allowed me to creatively explore issues such as oppressive power relations, cultural assimilation, cultural extinction, relentless globalization, normalized racism, colonial museology, and appropriation. With no direct references to factual current events or history, the use of an imaginary culture allows me to explore these themes in an uninhibited, humorous, and hopefully thought-provoking way.

As an artist, I am more comfortable with this approach for four reasons. First, I do not consider myself qualified or specialized enough about any particular historical or political situation to be able to tackle it in a responsible way. Second, I am neither entitled nor do I have the will to assume the role of a spokesperson or self-appointed ambassador for these real-life situations. Third, the artistic exploration of real situations would bind me to a multitude of facts, most of them of crucial importance, which would leave little room for creativity. In other words, creating art is of a completely different nature than writing an encyclopaedia entry. Fourth, choosing one particular political situation over another seems inadequate to me; I want my art to draw attention to broad patterns of human, cultural, and societal behaviour.

A parallel should be drawn here with the controversy surrounding *SLĀV* (2018),²⁷ an Ex Machina, Robert Lepage and Betty Bonifassi production, which is self-described as “a theatrical odyssey through the songs of slaves.”²⁸ I was extremely disappointed by the creators’ defensive argumentation (Lepage 2018; Bonifassi and Lauzon 2018) in response to the criticisms expressed by the Afrodescendant community and its allies (Craft 2017, 2018; Sumney 2018). Revisiting the four reasons for my artistic choice of imaginary culture mentioned above, there are clear differences between their artistic process and mine when it comes to sensitivity and ethical responsibility. Firstly, the creators of *SLĀV* considered themselves competent or specialized enough to artistically explore the theme of slavery. The self-confidence they displayed during the controversy appeared unshakeable, hence their feeling of being denied their freedom of expression. Secondly, by deciding to enact and stage elements of historical tragedies, they have proclaimed themselves their spokespersons and ambassadors. Thirdly, the creative liberties they have taken in the staging disregard the actual facts or, in this context, the different perspectives of those affected by the subject matter they address – including the outlook put forward by rapper and historian Webster, who expressed reservations about the play while acting as an advisor in the development of the show. Those reservations were ignored.²⁹ The same is true of Craft’s analysis, published in December 2017, which foresaw the controversy. For the fourth point, there is in our two processes a comparable intention not to limit the phenomenon explored artistically to one real situation. However, Bonifassi believes that suffering is among the few things that unite humanity (Bonifassi 2018); she claims not to see colour and not to consider that it exists, either physically or in music (Craft 2018), reminiscent of the problematic phenomenon of colour blindness (Bonilla-Silva 2014). As for myself, I wanted my work to bring awareness about other historical and contemporary instances of cultural assimilation and institutionalized racism in the world, but to focus my critique on those in power. I want to provoke a difficult reexamination of coloniality in our own minds by avoiding a posture of victimization and complacency in the universality of suffering.

Some of my creative strategies reflect this belief that the use of an imaginary culture can evoke these broad patterns even better than the treatment of specific existing situations. First, to play the

²⁷ The height of the *SLĀV* controversy happened in June and July 2018, four years after I premiered *Anthropologies imaginaires*. I have not seen the work in question, which has been cancelled. My opinions are based on the views expressed in the media by several stakeholders, of which I am quoting only the tip of the iceberg. About *Kanata*, a collaboration between Robert Lepage and the Théâtre du Soleil (Paris), the work was also criticized in the summer of 2018 for its lack of collaborators from Canadian First Nations.

²⁸ All translations of French quotes are by the author. From the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde official website <https://www.tnm.qc.ca/piece/slav/>. Accessed July 9, 2018.

²⁹ Radio interview, accessed on the Internet (<https://ici.radio-canada.ca/ohdio/premiere/emissions/1-heure-du-monde/segments/entrevue/78009/webster-slav-tnm-festival-de-jazz-de-montreal>), June 22, 2023.

role of the interviewees, I chose to work with five actors³⁰ of different genders (3 cisgender women, 2 cisgender men) and race/culture/nationality (3 white, 1 Colombian, 1 mixed with African descent). This avoids limiting possible interpretations of the work to the widely held idea of colonial power in the form of the white man oppressing a racialized people. Second, the names of the speakers as well as those of the eleven fictitious populations are phonetic assemblages that refer only vaguely or inadequately to existing languages or cultures. Third, my choice of all-black clothing reflects a desire for cultural neutrality. This neutrality is in itself questionable, as black clothing is a very common stage code. My aim, nonetheless, was to avoid using costumes or stage props that would allude to an existing cultural group or a type of lifestyle. Fourth, I have been careful never to associate fictional peoples with existing geographical locations and not to use loaded words such as *tribe* (Lowe 1997) or *civilization*, favouring *peoples* and *populations* instead. Audience members are thus left with their own assumptions and might just be confronted with their own biases as the work unfolds.

2.3 THE CRITICAL UNDERTONES OF SATIRE

Beyond the invention of imaginary cultures, my piece also communicates critical discourse in the form of satire. Although the title and promotional texts hint to the fictitious nature of the show, a significant percentage of the audience enters the hall with little information (especially in festivals). Many are faced with a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty, wondering whether these populations really exist, whether their characteristics have been exaggerated or even caricatured, or whether they are completely fake. The piece begins as a realistic mockumentary; the first two or three populations could very well exist. However, the satirical tone gradually increases, revealing the problematic power dynamic between the on-screen “experts” and these ethnic minorities: the fictional and satirical nature of the content is affirmed. Audience members who had little information about the work are likely to go through a range of emotions: confusion, wonder, outrage, and anger, but also delight, critical thinking, and appreciation. In his article *Subtle Satire*, reviewer Kretzmann (2015) describes this shift in perception, a statement that echoes other personal accounts received from audience members: “I grew increasingly angry with him as he appeared to be appropriating other cultures as means to try [to] elicit humour for his own behalf. And then, through imperceptible inflection, [...] what he was actually doing started becoming apparent. As my suspicion gained strength I began to realise the brilliance of the show [...] Up until yesterday, I would have argued subtle satire was not possible” (Kretzmann 2015).

As such, every component of *Anthropologies imaginaires* contributes to the fabrication and unveiling of an elaborate hoax. The balance between the credible and the satirical, however, aims to maintain a certain ambiguity for as long as possible.

By looking at examples of imaginary worlds devoid of satire, we can better understand how satire can contribute an additional layer of critical thinking. Many fantasy novels and youth literature classics, as well as their adaptation for cinema or television, fall into that category: J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956), and more recently Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008–2010) and George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-ongoing), perhaps best known as *Game of Thrones* after its adaptation for a television series. Although these fantastical or dystopian stories have a background

³⁰ Respectively played by Daniel Anez (musician), Catherine Lefrançois (musicologist), Florence Blain Mbaye (musician and actress), Luc-Martial Dagenais (actor), and Alexandrine Agostini (actress).

of social critique, they do not claim to be intentionally humoristic satires. These fantasy works tend to combine romantic fiction, science fiction, and adventure and aspire to mainstream appreciation and/or commercial success. These works have been analyzed from a post-colonial and/or feminist perspective, whether by scholars (Liebherr 2012), critics (Toynbee 2005), or Internet bloggers (Thomas 2013; Chen 2015; Dockterman 2015; O'Neil 2016). Although the authorial intention of these works might differ from its interpretations in the contemporary context, Tolkien and Lewis' works have been likened to strategies to promote a Christian agenda (Toynbee 2005). The diverse issues being critiqued in the aforementioned works are not universally agreed upon, but they lead me to wonder how perception of my work might evolve over time, as different social issues arise in the collective consciousness. Instead of dwelling in anxieties about such hypothetical futures, I investigate my own relationship with artworks from the past that have been scrutinized in newer contexts. What I've noticed is that I find myself able to overlook dead angles or problematized components of such artwork if they manage to feel satirical, comedic, or thoughtful, rather moralistic, self-important, or oblivious to important issues.

Also set in a fantasy futuristic world is James Cameron's blockbuster film *Avatar* (2009), which was the object of academic discourse in *Cultural Anthropology* (Clifford 2011; Starn 2011). Starn (2011, 179) compares *Avatar* with the encounter between colonizing powers and indigeneity, particularly Indigenous peoples in the United States: "Here we have the usual presumed radical divide between us and them, with whites, the SkyPeople, linked to technology, individualism, and reason and the indigenous Navi—Plains Indians in sci-fi drag with a dash of World Beat spice—tied to community, spirituality, connection to the ancestors, and, needless to say, harmony with nature" (Starn 2011, 179).

In a response to Starn, Clifford (2011, 219) credits the film for "inviting the imagination of indigenous resistance leading to definitive anticolonial victory," while still acknowledging that "yes, it still takes a white leader to turn the tide." Simpson (2011, 206) also contributes to the discussion, adding valuable insight as a Mohawk scholar herself: "But to emphasize the film's analogous relationship to anthropology, the film offers a representative foil for the guilt, shame, horror, and hope that gets shuttled someplace else when the matters of settlement and genocide are contemplated. The film is a story of an averted ecocide and possible genocide" (2011, 206).

Regardless of the perceived artistic or moral value of *Avatar*, we can observe from these articles that the film did prompt a nuanced and complex discussion with respect to indigeneity and colonialism. Whether intentional or not, it is the starting point for some dialogue.

While *Anthropologies imaginaires* explores similar themes as *Avatar*, both artistic creations are not exactly equally accountable. While the criticism towards *Avatar* might be pointing at intellectual shortcuts or a certain naiveté due to the privileged position of its creators, my piece aims to exploit all these potential traps by way of satire.

For any artist, making claims about how an audience understands their artwork is challenging. I fully acknowledge its members are diverse and that their perception of a work will not always correlate with the artist's intentions. Furthermore, I would agree with Bennett (1997, 73) when she says "the theatre audience shares with the spectator of an art work the inability to take in everything with a single look, but where the art work remains for subsequent looks, the theatrical performance is ephemeral" (Bennet 1997, 73).

This realistic attitude is not intended to diminish or challenge the audience's aptitude or level of sensibility. When viewing a satirical work, I do believe that most audience members detect whether the critical undertones are imbued with sensitivity, understanding, and a grasp of these concerns or, inversely, whether the creative process shows a total lack of concern or blatant ignorance of the significance of certain issues. It is through these critical undertones that the artist's point of view and personal sense of ethics may be assessed. Despite the sensitive themes explored in *Anthropologies imaginaires*, reviewers generally detect and appreciate the role of humour and social critique in the work.

Although at times hilarious -who doesn't want to gargle, sticking one's head in a giant bowl of water- there was a critical note as well. As we went deeper into the evening, the fake academics got more and more patronising in their comments. [...] And so the great pitfall of anthropology, practiced from a white, Eurocentric standpoint, is fully exposed.

Westerik 2015 ³¹

Anthropologies imaginaires bears a broad smirk beneath its deadpan mask of academic seriousness and it humorously questions the ways in which Western society judges and defines otherness, and packages it for consumption.

Blake 2017

Gabriel Dharmoo's fun, quirky display of vocal gymnastics explores darker themes of cultural colonisation and Exoticism.

McPherson 2017

2.4 THE LEVEL OF AUDIENCE DECEPTION

What mostly contributes to the gradual unveiling of the satire is the narrative and script, spoken by the on-screen actors. At the beginning of the piece, the audience readily believes such and such population would have forms of sung invocation prayers, dance music or sung theatre. But as the show progresses, they grow sceptical: are there such things as preventive exorcisms, aquatic songs, and hypnotized choirs? What about the Webörglez, presented as an "avant garde tribe that has independently evolved 12-tone music" (Kaye 2016). Is it deception, or an inside joke meant for 20th-century musical history connoisseurs, who would catch the reference to dodecaphonism, a modernist technique often despised or ridiculed for being too academic and cerebral?

The fictional populations seem more and more unlikely and eccentric to the audience, but I argue that vocal sound has little to do with this assessment. If audience members with limited familiarity with non-standard ways of singing were to hear the audio recordings of each of my fictional populations, without any additional context, I don't think they would gauge with the same level of confidence whether a population is real or fake. Their conclusion about the likelihood or falsehood of these songs is hinted through the theatrical narrative and the description of these sound rituals in strange contexts. The threshold of disbelief varies enormously from one listener to another.

Although exploring imaginary culture has allowed me many creative liberties, there is an unfortunate side effect. Once the audience recognizes the hoax, no counterargument is offered to

³¹ A translation from Dutch was provided through email communication by Westerik.

support the actual existence of equally bizarre and unlikely vocal traditions. How would this same audience have reacted if I invented a population where the buzzing of a beetle in front of an open mouth produces a form of harmonic overtone singing? Would they be surprised I did not make it up, that it has been recorded and documented (Juillerat 1971) in the Yafar population of New Guinea? I increasingly insist on organizing post-show Q&A sessions with the audience just so I can slip in such ethnomusicological accounts.

Anthropologies imaginaires is different from other sound-art or music mockumentaries that I have encountered because the hoax is purposely revealed during the course of the performance. Ideally, nobody leaves the performance thinking they have just witnessed an actual ethnomusicological lecture. A reviewer noted that the show “left the audience both titillated and complicit” (McPherson 2017).

In *The Last LP: Unique Last Recordings of the Music of Ancient Cultures* (1987), Canadian artist Michael Snow recorded multiple tracks of his own voice to create parodies of songs from populations on the verge of extinction. Snow deceptively situates these fictional peoples in existing geographical locations such as Tibet, India, Brazil, Niger, and Finland. While he gives seemingly accurate information about these field recordings in the liner notes, he slyly reveals the spoof through text printed backwards, legible when using a mirror. Sandeep Bhagwati defines his *Die Gesänge der Ghat Biwa* (2002) as a “pseudo-ethnological exhibition in the Royal Tropical Museum Amsterdam with audio environment” (Bhagwati 2002). To deceive the audience even further, a mock lecturer at the concert acts as a figure of authority on the subject. Similarly, the first public presentation of composer André Hamel’s *Musiques d’Urnos* (2004) was preceded by a fake lecture.

In all three of these works, the mystery (or the farce) should last as long as possible and could, theoretically, never be uncovered.³² This might affect the relationship with audience members. Is the “clueless” audience duped, whereas the prepared, curious, insider or sly audience member is likely to be in on the joke? Does this distinction create an Other, by virtue of appealing to insiders? Personally, this type of elaborate hoax amuses me because of its irreverence, humour, and somewhat rebellious nature. But whereas my mockumentary strives to be overt, the deceptive nature of the three aforementioned works ideally remains covert. This covert attitude might be regarded as unethical, but the consequence of deceiving a few audience members is not that egregious.

In comparison, a covert position for *Anthropologies imaginaires* would have been either impossible or ill-advised. A few distinctions between these works’ parameters will shed some light on this. In Bhagwati (2002) and Hamel (2004), the role of the composer is distinct from that of the performers on stage. To explain the presence of these musical ensembles on the stage, the artistic works are framed as reinterpretations or reconstructions of the music of these cultures, composed from the vestiges of musical notation and artifacts gathered by other researchers.³³ My piece is different in that I am physically involved onstage as a performer, embodying these Others, which opens a

³² In the case of Bhagwati, this is true of the Amsterdam version (exhibition). The live concert performance that preceded in Stuttgart was similar to *Anthropologies imaginaires* in that it was overtly a prank. The actor who played the role of a Eurocentric ethnomusicology professor was well known to local audiences; the audience could not have been deceived.

³³ Information gathered through personal email communications with André Hamel and Sandeep Bhagwati (May 2016).

different set of ethical concerns. Also, I would think it is near impossible for anyone to actually think that I belong to or represent eleven different and equally obscure cultures. By embodying otherness myself, the concept of appropriation becomes much more tangible than in the works mentioned above. The overt or temporary nature of my deception complicates potential accusations of insensitive cultural appropriation. These populations are, after all, figments of my own imagination (more on this later).

In turn, the debate focuses on whether my representation of otherness is ethical or problematic. Representing up to eleven populations on stage helps convey the important message that there is a wide range of artistic forms around the world and that each has its own value. To differentiate each of my fictional populations, a precise framework of vocal techniques, movements, and stage acting, delimits each one. A piece in which I would have portrayed only one imaginary population could have been perceived as an essentialist attempt to lump thousands of distinct cultures into one homogenized version of otherness. My portrayal of these populations is also intended to elicit the audience's empathy or solidarity, the sole exception being my caricatural portrayal of the Éléélé, eager to assimilate and achieve celebrity status by successfully catering to the oppressor's (bad) taste in insipid pop songs.

2.5 THE RISK OF OFFENDING

In creating this piece, I have sought to avoid making audience members feel uneasy, offended, or even outraged. I also wanted to avoid that the audience perceives the humoristic layer in a superficial way and that my work unwillingly becomes an outlet where laughter allows their normalized racism towards cultural difference to thrive. During the development of the piece, I explored different creative strategies to address my ethical concerns. In the context of my artistic practice, my understanding of ethics refers to a set of moral principles that I set for myself in order to feel fully comfortable sharing my work with audience. Considering the fluidity involved in seeking alignment, I find it important to acknowledge how my stance on different matters has grown or shifted throughout the years. This risk of offending I am about to flesh out still rings true some years later, although it feels particularly specific of that era in my creative path.

I generally feel uncomfortable offending anyone and I do not consider gratuitous provocation to be part of my arsenal for artistic expression. In contrast, I unabashedly create unconventional art music and I understand it will not appeal to everyone. A negotiation takes place during my creative process; to feel comfortable with what I present and be able to confidently stand by it, I first must address any concerns the audience might have. *Le Devoir* reviewer Cadieux (2014) qualified the world premiere performance of *Anthropologies imaginaires* as being “doucement effronté” that is, softly, sweetly, politely, or inoffensively brazen, or cheeky.³⁴ By mixing politeness with insolence, this “softly cheeky” label absolutely captures the tension between moral correctness and playful irreverence that describes my artistic process. From the very first draft of my work, I was aware of the risk of ridiculing or exoticizing otherness, but I believe that the satirical undertones of the piece succeed in conveying my intentions. Despite my desire for the predominantly white, Western audience to laugh at themselves and recognize their privileged position, my main hope was that people who identify as cultural minorities feel a bond of kinship or solidarity with my satirical discourse.

³⁴ “hybride doucement effronté entre performance musicale et conférence multimédia” (Cadieux 2014).

During my creative process, I anticipated two general categories of people whom my work might hypothetically offend: individuals who speak out against problematic instances of cultural appropriation, and anthropologists and ethnomusicologists. I acknowledge the premise of *Anthropologies imaginaires* might raise their eyebrows; my aim was to win them over by the end of the piece.

As an artist who engages with intercultural themes, I cannot ignore the prickly topic of cultural appropriation, defined by Scafidi as “taking – from a culture that is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history, and ways of knowledge” (Scafidi 2005, 9). While awareness and sensitivity on the subject help me to situate my work and enhance my contribution to intercultural dialogue, the artistic exploration of these issues raises complex questions with many shades of grey. I navigate these issues in an extremely nuanced way, an approach I largely attribute to my mixed cultural background. Internet bloggers have expressed how a mixed positionality involves a different set of challenges towards appropriation (Hallett 2016; Salgado D’Arcy 2017).

Because cultures have borrowed and grown from one another throughout history, the distinction between a positive form of *appropriation* and a negative *misappropriation* is relevant. Mainstream media and the public sphere most often define cultural appropriation as a form of unethical theft, placing great emphasis on the absence of permission from the appropriated culture. Schneider challenges the insinuation that all appropriation is bad, fleshing out how contemporary art and anthropology “both engage with cultural difference” (2006, 29) and how artists may show different levels of “engagement and dialogue with the other” (2006, 51).

Art dealing with otherness is often at the centre of controversial debates, with much speculation as to whether the particular artists are dealing with culture creatively, complicating the dual relationship between oppressors and oppressed, or whether particular artists hijack and insensitively misappropriate others’ culture. In addition to *SLĀV* (2018), recent highly mediatized examples include Dana Schutz’s *Open Casket* (2017) (Delgado 2017; Friedersdorf 2017) and Dominic Gagnon’s *of the North* (2015) (Everett-Green 2016; Montpetit 2016; Nakonechny 2015). In reaction to uproar over pop star Justin Bieber’s dreadlocks hairstyle as appropriating black culture, Malik (2016) describes the “campaign against cultural appropriation [as] part of the broader attempt to police communities and cultures.” Malik’s criticism of those who impose themselves as the “arbiters” or “gatekeepers” of cultural appropriation is reminiscent of Schneider (2006, 48) stating “as there are no ‘originals’ in art, so there are no fixed ethnic, racial, or national categories – but only different claims to these by groups and individuals.” As Malik (2016) adds, “those who most suffer from such policing are minority communities themselves, and in particular progressive voices within those communities.” I believe artists are an essential part of these progressive voices, particularly those like myself who wish to foster intercultural dialogue and whose cultural boundaries were never clearly defined.

Anthropologies imaginaires is partly inspired by vocal techniques and musical elements that originate, or exist, in the folk, classical, or traditional musics of other peoples. Whatever my source of inspiration may be, the vocal sounds I produce are recontextualized and transformed through my own sensibility and my predilection for the experimental vocal techniques of soundsinging. *Anthropologies imaginaires* showcases the virtuosity, versatility, and strangeness of the human voice, without ever claiming to be an actual ethnomusicological catalogue. Instead, the wide range

of vocal techniques questions the concept of normality and reminds audiences how the people of humankind use their voice differently: “Dharmoo wants to bring forth an awareness about how people sing differently. He says there is not just one right way of singing, as there is not just one way of thinking” (Ferria 2016). A simple lesson, but one that fosters intercultural dialogue, made possible through an open and respectful process of sharing and reappropriation. As much as I strive for audience members to check in with their own cultural biases and reflect upon what they consider to be acceptable or valuable ways of singing, my intentions do not always match the viewer’s experience. A less enthusiastic review states “by the end you’re either laughing along with [my] latest repetitive riff on a nonsensical vocalization, or eyeing the door desperate for respite from the barrage of annoying sounds” (Bimm 2016). Regarding audience perception and the Eurocentric gaze towards art dealing with difference, I encourage readers to engage with Bennett’s unpacking of Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s *Two Amerindians Visit* series (1997, 188–191). Although it does not stem from music or sound art, the themes it addresses are very similar to *Anthropologies imaginaires*. Coming back to Schneider’s (2006) theory of contemporary art and appropriation, the dialogue I attempt to establish here is one of kinship, respect, and engagement with these imaginary Others.

I claim full creative credit and authorship for *Anthropologies imaginaires* even though I drew on existing sources. Are issues of cultural appropriation simply averted by exploring imaginary folklore? No, it can’t be that simple – what about power, money, privilege? I recognize that the piece has allowed me to tour internationally, has contributed to my income, and has earned me respect and recognition from the artistic network in which I operate, but do these gains come at the expense of other people’s suffering or subjugation? I’m not able to debate these grey areas objectively – I am aware dead angles exist, I consider their existence seriously, but I must not let them hinder my artistic work. Any artwork is subject to sets of contradictions, but they are usually worth attempting, and they may bring to light layers of nuance as well as foster constructive dialogue.

Regarding anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, I must admit I felt terrified they would despise my piece. After all, *Anthropologies imaginaires* blatantly ignores the growth and evolution the discipline has undergone since its colonial beginnings. Whenever a post-show Q&A is organized, I can set the record straight and clear up any misconceptions of anthropology as this evil discipline. I note, however, that some members of the audience express satisfaction seeing these figures of authority being ridiculed. On a few occasions, some have confided their complex or difficult relationship with academia, but not so much with anthropology specifically. Many people have felt excluded by academia, patronized, or dismissed by academic figures of authority – who are we to criticize these feelings and experiences? No discipline, no individual should be immune to satire. I did want to rattle the academic world a little bit, while making an artistic statement clever enough for them to consider me an ally. My strategy was to completely discredit the five speakers and reveal, in the end, that they had no training or expertise in the subject. Not only are they imposters or self-proclaimed experts, but some of them are actually promoting problematic political ideologies (see Table 1 for a reminder of their biographical notes). This created an interesting layer to the piece that I had not initially anticipated: the complex relationship of trust between media, the state, and the people. As such, the audience is likely to assume these speakers are experts, but later realize that their trust in them was misplaced. Although fictional in nature, the museum institution and the state are criticized through the Museum of Memory and its tacky exhibit *Other Places – Other Voices*, endorsed by none other than the state’s Minister of Assimilation.

To my knowledge, only one ethnomusicologist found the piece to be offensive (towards him and his discipline). His criticism was not communicated to me directly, but through a common friend. I don't wish to go into the anecdotal details here, but the fact remains that I was very disappointed not to have been able to avoid or smooth over this reaction with a conversation. Given the scarcity of such situations, I can remind myself that my process purposely *did* include creative strategies to avoid such reactions. I accept the fact I can't conveniently control how others perceive my work and my intentions. Some may be more likely to take things personally, or perhaps the satirical layers of the work resonate differently depending on culture and sense of humour, and at the risk of sounding presumptuous, my very deliberate discrediting of the speakers in the end might have simply gone over their head! To my great relief, many anthropologists and musicologists have positively insightful interpretations of the work. Such is the case of Wees (2016) from the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography, whose review on the organization's website encouraged me to maintain a relationship of engagement and complicity with this community of researchers: "And in the end, as we come back to ourselves, we are reminded of the fragility of cultural forms and of the arbitrariness of history, and that, in fact, the exotic Other is to be found as much within ourselves as in the peoples whose lives and ways resonate in the anthropological imagination" (Wees 2016).

Having evolved as a person and artist since 2014, I am not as convinced that offending people is necessarily something to be avoided. After all, isn't it almost unavoidable in art? Yet there is something to be said about alignment: what kind of relationship do I want to entertain with my audience? To what level do I want to empower those I would consider allies, and to what level do I want to ostracize those I feel should be shaken? The controversy over *SLĀV* divided public opinion and revealed how audience members' political orientations and personal values shape their reception of a work. Since we cannot achieve a unanimous response, we must have the courage of our own convictions. Personally, I first need to feel comfortable with the work I share publicly and, secondly, be self-critical enough in my process to minimize my artistic intentions being misconstrued or misunderstood. Ultimately, the art will resonate with those it should resonate with.

2.6 THE ROLE OF HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER

For Driessen, the lesson to be drawn from anthropology is the humility of a certain cultural relativism, as a strategy aimed at combating the intolerance and racism of Western ethnocentrism. Now, is the same true of humour? [...] Does the study of humour lead us to embrace cultural relativism?

Critchley 2002, 65

Anthropologies imaginaires provokes laughter from the audience. But why does the audience laugh? Are they laughing *with* or *at* me? *With* the speakers, or *at* the speakers? Does the audience's laughter reflect a sense of superiority that rejects the culture of the Others, or does it advocate for them by ridiculing that which symbolizes colonial power? Can they sense my singing is sincere, committed to these odd songs, or do they think I am making fun of them? When I first started performing soundsinging as an improviser, the types of unusual sounds I would produce with my voice would often provoke laughter, probably due to their relative eccentricity.

Anthropology shares with humour the basic strategy of defamiliarization: common sense is disrupted, the unexpected is evoked, familiar subjects are situated in unfamiliar, even shocking contexts in order to make the audience or readership conscious of their own cultural assumptions.

Driessen 1997, 227

The “defamiliarization” and “cultural assumptions” mentioned by Driessen could very well apply to the way we are used to hearing the human voice in a limited scope and in prescribed ways. Mauss’ analogy of the bio-socio-psychological triangle in *Techniques of the Body* (1935) could be applied to techniques of the voice as well. While children explore their vocal abilities at length, playing with a variety of noises and “funny voices,” parents and other grown-ups have a way of policing what is deemed acceptable and appropriate, both in speech and song. If a singer sounds like a cross between an elephant, a typewriter, and a trumpet, laughter or confusion are among the expected reactions. This type of reaction is not uncommon in the context of soundsinging performances.³⁵

With *Anthropologies imaginaires*, I was able to observe how the addition of a theatrical dimension to a soundsinging performance significantly changes the relationship between vocal sound and laughter. As previously implied, the first three populations of the piece are relatively credible, both in my vocal technique and in the way the on-screen speakers present them. A few chuckles may be heard; perhaps the way I sing is a bit unexpected or outside the box? But laughter is far from being generalized. My rather exuberant interpretation of the M’jieté character, which is vaguely similar to Chinese opera in its sound or Balinese dance in my movements, signals a change. At this point, the audience usually feels authorized to overtly laugh, shakes off any remaining doubt, and accepts the whole thing as spoof. Were the laughs stifled in the earlier parts because people were still assessing whether it was appropriate to laugh at the traditional music of another culture? Now that the mask is off, is it acceptable to laugh?

Building upon Hobbes’ concept of “sudden glory at our eminence and the other’s stupidity,” Critchley (2002, 69–70) complicates the relationship between humour, “ethnicity” and ethnicity: “In ethnic humour, the *ethos* of a place is expressed by laughing at people who are not like us, and usually believed to be either excessively stupid or peculiarly canny [...] the belief is that ‘they’ are inferior to ‘us’ or at least somehow disadvantaged because ‘they’ are not like ‘us’” (Critchley 2002, 69–70).

After my first few performances of *Anthropologies imaginaires*, I could sense the laughter during the M’jieté sequence was the most problematic. I wondered whether people were laughing *at* this imagined people, or *because* what I was singing had an intrinsic comedic quality. I worried that my portrayal of the M’jieté third-sex theatre performer was verging on caricature, while my intention was to showcase the worth and diversity of uncommon vocal artforms. Consequently, for a couple of performances I made a deliberate attempt not to overdo the comedic or clown-like acting in this section. I then took a few steps back to explore a middle ground, reminding myself that this M’jieté storytelling artform could very much be comedic *in* the context of their culture. Critchley (2002, 66) writes: “Apparently there have never been cultures without laughter, although the varieties and intensities of humour vary dramatically.” The risk of avoiding all comedic acting in my own performance was to paint an erroneous image of Others as incapable of any humour at all. Dehumanizing otherness is as problematic as ridiculing it, albeit on different levels.

I hope my piece can encourage audience members to confront their prejudices about otherness and their normalized racism, as well as to question their privilege. According to reviewer Murray (2017), “this work [is] simultaneously riotously funny [...] and interrogative, forcing us as we

³⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the public reception of soundsinging, read Tonelli (2016).

laugh to consider our own imperialist assumptions while we see them so well-parodied on the screen above” (Murray 2017).

While I have no control over who in the audience will further investigate the roots and nature of their laughter, my intentions are once again reflected in Critchley’s words: “[...] yet our sense of humour can often unconsciously pull us up short in front of ourselves, showing how prejudices that one would rather not hold can continue to have a grip on one’s sense of who one is” (Critchley 2002, 74).

If audience members catch themselves laughing *at* bizarre vocal practices, perhaps “humour can provide information about oneself that one would rather not have. [...] If humour tells you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are perhaps not the person you would like to be” (Critchley 2022, 74–75).

2.7 CONCLUSION

Beyond my parody of outdated early colonial anthropology, I am very inspired by the way the discipline of anthropology has questioned, reflected, and tackled its ethically complex origins in an ongoing process of decolonization. In comparison, new music, as an academic field and an institutional artistic practice, is still very much attached to its Eurocentric legacy; reflections of coloniality still considerably hinders the scene’s growth.

Having created *Anthropologies imaginaires* almost ten years ago, I need to acknowledge how further along I am in my process of seeking alignment. Around 2017-18, at the point where I was touring the piece and thinking about future projects, I identified two areas that could benefit from further exploration and research. The first was the concern that artworks might not contribute anything more than spectacle, mere entertainment – are institutions the only ones who can be guilty of lip service? Through its cheeky line of questioning, my piece *Lip Service* pondered whether art, all art, some art, or *my* art specifically is achieving any real purpose beyond spectacle and entertainment. This is a rhetorical question activism-driven artists encounter in their creative process. Does art then detract attention from the real issues, comforting communities to the point of preventing them from taking action? How porous is the boundary between art and activism? Regarding *Avatar*, Simpson writes: “Spectacles do all sorts of political work in every society but are especially useful in settler societies because they continue to redirect emotions, histories, and possibilities away from the means of societal and historical production—Indigenous dispossession, disenfranchisement, and containment” (Simpson 2011, 206–207).

As a mainstream entertaining blockbuster movie generating huge profit, *Avatar* clearly is a spectacle. Simpson points out how the release of this spectacle was “one day shy of the day President Barack Obama signed an apology resolution to Native Americans,” (2011, 207) which went quite unnoticed. The irony is impressive. But does non-commercial art for modest art-loving audiences like *Anthropologies imaginaires* compare in terms of impact, or social responsibility?

In 1995, *Current Anthropology* presented a debate between D’Andrade’s “pro-objectivity” and Scheper-Hughes’ “pro-subjectivity.” The latter embraced an extended definition of her role as an anthropologist, to include militant anthropology and political activism. In her article, Scheper-Hughes questioned the appropriateness of remaining a mere bystander when research raises

troubling issues. She argued that a growing sense of responsibility was needed for the discipline of anthropology to truly detach itself from its colonial past and drew a parallel with the many artists who wish to broaden their responsibilities and engage in critical or activist art. With the emergence of creative anthropology and other approaches like ethnographic films, my insight is that research on vocal agency is rich and multilayered. Being directly connected to the body, speech, language, and culture, my exploration of vocal alignment holds the potential to creatively challenge assumptions and prejudices about cultural difference. My reflections post-*Anthropologies imaginaires* led me to investigate how voice can be an agent for decoloniality, repatriation, cultural affirmation, and negotiation. I maintain that the standardization of vocal sound reinforces the hold of coloniality on our thinking and wrongly implies a hierarchy of artistic practices. But still, to what extent does an appropriately aligned artistic practice amount to activism, or – as framed in *Lip Service* – to what extent is it “doing the work?”

Audience engagement and development was another area of potential growth I identified – some way to shake off the feeling of preaching to the choir. I have mostly performed *Anthropologies imaginaires* in the so-called Western world (North America, Australia, and Europe), for music, theatre and performance arts festivals or institutions and sometimes in an academic setting. Although my piece’s hybridity defies conventional expectations of both music and theatre, Bennett writes: “Whatever the nature of the performances it is clear that established cultural markers are important in pre-activating a certain anticipation, a horizon of expectations, in the audience drawn to any particular event” (Bennett 1997, 105–106).

What is achieved by presenting works solely to audiences that are likely to attend, appreciate, and understand them? What if I were to perform this piece for an audience outside of the Western art circuit? Could it be offensive, or misunderstood? Would the sense of humour be lost in translation, lost in culture?

With experience and hindsight, I have come to terms with the fact that *Anthropologies imaginaires* is a work destined to a relatively contained audience: the receptive, curious, generationally diverse but somewhat culturally homogenous, fairly intellectual, privileged, and open-minded art audience.

As hinted in Chapter 1, some people in the new music community, perhaps similarly to some in academia or the field of anthropology, strive to cater to all, to reach as many people as possible, perhaps to veer off accusations of elitism, or perhaps for the scene to survive and maintain relevancy. The new music community struggles to realistically assess its potential outreach. I’ve often come across the unhelpful assumption that despite engaging a relatively small audience, everybody *should* care about new music. Our cultural organizations implement outreach strategies and cultural mediation that focus on superficial promotion and accessibility initiatives. I argue that to expand our audiences in a sustainable way, it is up to artists to create work that meaningfully engages the imagination, intelligence, and sensibilities of others, regardless of their musical background, or lack of.

Audience engagement had been an identified area of misalignment in my work as a new music composer. Composing concert pieces for small audiences of mostly musically educated peers did not generate a level of inner fulfilment I deemed proportional to the amount of time, care, and effort I put into it. In my quest for vocal alignment, *Anthropologies imaginaires* allowed me to

exercise my art and creativity on the outskirts of the new music scene. I was able to explore other social dynamics, audiences, and subcultures. The piece sparked interesting conversations – outside and within the new music community – that went beyond musical parameters such as pitch, harmony, rhythm, and form.

Despite what felt like a successful cycle of alignment, I still saw room for development and growth. I identified new areas of misalignment and became engrossed with new paths of my artistic exploration that took me further away from the new music scene. The boldest, or most concrete step *away* from the new music scene I've taken was towards the non-institutional (and queer!) artform of drag.



Figure 7: Promotional picture for *Bijuriya*. Photo credit: Paul Neudorf and Jonathan Goulet.

ALIGNMENT 4: SO HOW ABOUT DRAG?

Understanding and problematizing drag

Drag! The popular queer art form finds its home on stages, in bars, in parades, and in protests, as well as everyday life. Yet, despite its range and current popularity, drag isn't as simple a concept as it seems ... or reads.

Crookston and Kuling 2022, 5

As suggested by Crookston and Kuling, there is no one-size-fits-all definition for drag. Definitions of what drag *is* are often very much influenced by different stakeholders' opinions about what drag *should be*. I define drag as the transformation of oneself through a limitless exploration of gender.³⁶ Drag allows for self-expression but will also often provide entertainment through the shared experience of one's artistry. The goal of drag transformation is to *feel our fantasy*,³⁷ to bring our drag persona to life, to curate it and perfect it over time as we deem fit. Creating a drag persona thus involves making countless aesthetic, artistic, conceptual, and political choices. Artists may rely solely on their own skillset or combine it with outside help and resources, which often come in the form of drag families or hired collaborators (designers, stylists, or makeup artists). Crookston and Kuling describe drag as drawing "on the profound capabilities of changing bodily forms and hybridizing the performance selves" (2022, 5). Their plural use of "selves" is reminiscent of my model for alignment. In fact, enriching my sense of self with the addition of a "drag self" further engages the idea of multiple porous selves that may feel in or out of phase, that may be seeking alignment. Drag transformation is thus a form of alignment between multiple selves – true, original, genuine, artistic, imagined, caricatural, empowered, and/or dormant selves. Drag transformation is not quite as temporary as it appears – once the makeup is off, the experience may leave an imprint on the "out of drag" self. On a personal level, I had not foreseen to what extent these imprints would shape my being, my experiences, and my reflections.

Although I have thus far focused on my critique of the new music scene, I also experience areas of misalignment with the drag scene. Both scenes are similar in that they both reckon with addressing diversity, social justice, and equity challenges. However, with contrasting relationships to funding, class, and access, drag culture's specific challenges involve very different complications and outlooks. Financially, drag expenses related to makeup, wigs, and costumes can add up fast. Craftiness, inventiveness, and creativity are thus valued as intrinsic qualities of drag artistry. Impressive artistic impact can be achieved from modest means. Access to the artform and to performance opportunities are informed by class, race, age, experience-level, and other factors. Just as inclusivity and equal access to opportunity may be exemplary in one drag community, different manifestations of gatekeeping will still exist in another. Depending on the cities or neighborhoods, access is often linked to who has control over bookings and who owns the spaces (often clubs).

³⁶ I insist on "limitless" to counterargue the widespread misconception that a drag artist can only be "a man transforming into a woman." Drag may be an exploration of gender within and across all gender lines, in all and any directions (i.e., a cisgender woman may have a drag queen persona, a transgender woman may have a drag king persona, a cisgender man may have a genderqueer drag persona, etc.). The fact that *Drag Race* almost exclusively casts cisgender gay men with drag queen personas does little to dispel this misconception.

³⁷ In drag lingo, *feeling your fantasy* is a state of euphoria where a drag artist comes to fully embrace and enjoy their transformative experience – it may or may not be related to the gender euphoria experienced by transgender and/or nonbinary individuals.

Racism and race relations within drag communities are also common problems. Writing from an (auto-)ethnographic perspective as an active Indo-Caribbean drag queen working in Toronto as Tifa Wine, Persadie has “noticed how long-standing tensions between QTBIPOC and white drag artists/collectives have largely impacted solidarity and coalitional efforts among us” (Persadie 2021, 22). Drag culture today in Canada and the United States – including its mainstream manifestations in the *Drag Race* franchise – is an evolution and transformation of *ball culture* (also known as the ballroom scene), which is in turn linked to the creativity of marginalized Black and Latinx queer people. Notably, the New York ballroom scene in the 1980s was particularly influential. The film *Paris Is Burning* (Livingston 1991) offers a particularly compelling (if not voyeuristic) window into this subculture. Considering the filmmaker’s positionality as a privileged white cisgender woman, it is important to engage critically with the film’s representation of ball culture as it relates to drag, class, and race.³⁸ Ball culture’s contribution to culture is often whitewashed. For example, many miscredit Madonna with the creation of *voguing* because her global hit song “Vogue” brought massive exposure to the underground dance.³⁹ Mainstream culture today shares this tendency to whitewash. Every Pride season, activists must relentlessly remind privileged members of the community (often but not exclusively white gay men) that Stonewall was a riot. The crucial contribution of the Black and Latinx trans community – before, during, and beyond Stonewall – is often forgotten or erased: most notably, the role of Marsha P. Johnson (Black transgender person and drag queen), Sylvia Rivera (Puerto Rican drag queen, later transgender person), and Stormé DeLarverie (biracial lesbian butch/drag king).

Although the rights that have been acquired post-Stonewall largely benefit today’s LGBTQ2IA+ community, the first rights to recede are usually those of the transgender community. The current wave of anti-transgender bills in the United States “include bans on transition care into young adulthood; restrictions on drag shows using definitions that could broadly encompass performances by transgender people; measures that would prevent teachers in many cases from using names or pronouns matching students’ gender identities; and requirements that schools out transgender students to their parents” (Astor 2023). In addition to legislative violence, there is the lived experience of marginalized transgender people, particularly Black transgender women who face higher rates of unemployment, violence, and hate crimes (Forestiere 2020). Ramifications of all these dynamics influence drag communities at the local and global level.

Then there’s *Drag Race*. To understand *Drag Race*, all the layers of it, there is really no other way than to watch the show! Many people who have never set foot in a queer space or a local drag show have become *Drag Race* connoisseurs (not to confuse with “figures of authority for all types of drag”). Tennant clarifies the pedagogical role the show plays to situate drag and give insight on its roots to audiences unfamiliar to the artform, but notes that it is still heavily curated to be palatable to both a queer and heteronormative audience: “Positioning itself as pedagogical, in the vein of *Paris Is Burning*, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* provides viewers lessons in how to consume a kind of co-opted queerness. *Drag Race* frames for its audience a method for reading queerness—or *queer reading*—along with examples, and a lexicon and grammars which order the chaos of queering into a structure of language” (Tennant 2022).

³⁸ For additional nuance on *Paris Is Burning*, read contributions by Butler (1993), Harper (1994), and hooks (1996).

³⁹ For more about voguing, Madonna, and ball culture, read Brathwaite (2020).

Drag Race's cultural monopoly is an important area of misalignment for me. From my perspective, the *Drag Race* phenomenon represents a segment of queer culture that skews towards capitalism and mainstream appeal, whereas I have always felt compelled to create art in the fringes, without much consideration for commercial success or celebrity culture. Although drag started as a subversive artform, *Drag Race* brings drag to the mainstream, so it is inextricably linked to capitalism: "As a reality competition show embedded in the fabric of globalizing capitalism, *Drag Race* connects its mass production of vernacular and figures of queerness to *Paris Is Burning* (1991) by situating itself as an inheritor and purveyor of its vocabulary" (Tennant 2022).

This might become more obvious after reading Chapter 3, but I have never really pictured myself being on *Drag Race*, nor have I contemplated applying to Canada's *Drag Race*. Even still, I am engrossed by the show: I watch year after year, season after season. I fall in love with a fair number of queens, impressed by their artistry and captivated by their on-screen personas. I engage with the franchise critically, as a fan who is both *living*⁴⁰ and side-eyeing RuPaul's fracking (Carpou 2022); the absence of kings, things, and shapeshifters (Chemeche 2022; Phelps 2018; Stone 2022); the transphobic track record (Fairchild 2018; Framke 2018; Levin 2018; Woodzick 2022); the negative bias towards queens from a cultural or linguistic minority (Goldmark 2015); the homonationalism (Jabbar 2022); and the exploitation of – or repercussions on – contestants' mental health.

While navigating both Montréal's local drag community and the global community online, I find most of my drag peers' ambitions are linked to *Drag Race*, either as a model to follow, a dream to dream, a career path to pursue, or a way to gain more clout, fame, or wealth. I am in no place to have an opinion on my peers' aspirations, but I have often felt a discrepancy between theirs and mine. At my cheekiest, I would say that I personally find it very odd that one would choose to engage with such a *toxic* fanbase.⁴¹ ...choices!⁴²

The problematization of drag through the lens of diversity, access, race, appropriation, and its relationship to capitalism and mainstream culture has led me to observe the various areas of misalignment that impacted my readiness to engage with it. Despite this, I had witnessed enough inspiring local drag in my life, I had been a loyal enough fan of *Drag Race* since 2012, and I had enough overall curiosity towards this artistry to jump in! My process of seeking alignment had already made me embrace performance, movement, acting, and vocal performance in *Anthropologies imaginaires*. My perspective was that drag was an appealing way to develop my already-existing artistic practice and explore new territory. The trajectory that led me from new music composition to drag artistry is not typical per se, but "drag artists frequently come to drag through theatrical or other forms of performance training and in doing so infuse this vibrant queer art form with myriad interdisciplinary performance styles" (Crookston and Kuling 2022, 6).

⁴⁰ Drag lingo for fully loving, embracing, engaging with something.

⁴¹ The *Drag Race* fanbase is often labeled as *toxic*, meaning many fans will express hateful comments targeting different contestants they do not like, in the form of virtual trolling and even threats. In my remark, I imply that those who wish so adamantly to be part of the *Drag Race* franchise have questionable fame-driven ambitions and may forget that the pursuit of mainstream glory comes at the cost of exposing themselves to such a toxic fanbase.

⁴² "Choices" or "[pause]...choices" is a catchphrase from *Drag Race* contestant Tatianna. It alludes to the fact that the choices made by one drag artist can appear questionable to another.

Birth of Bijuriya

Let me start with the distinction between Bijuriya, the name of my drag queen persona, and the italicized *Bijuriya*, the eponymous research-creation project I premiered in 2022, which I will analyze in Chapter 3.

My drag journey as Bijuriya officially started at the age of thirty-seven in 2018. My first sporadic explorations⁴³ were done amidst maintaining an active practice as a music composer, vocal performer, and interdisciplinary artist. Being a reluctant academic, drag was also yet another stimulating project that allowed me to procrastinate my PhD research; I was *not* envisioning how it would end up at the centre of this thesis!

My strongest incentive in creating Bijuriya was to explore the intersection between my *brownness*⁴⁴ and my queerness. Although I engaged with these layers of my identity in other arenas of my life, I felt they were neglected or disavowed by my artistic practice and output. To address this area of misalignment, I attempted to artistically engage this vulnerable tension point in my personal life. This process of seeking alignment led to a highly stimulating artistic playground, provoking personal growth beyond my expectations.

Two research-creation projects paved the way to the birth of Bijuriya: *Lending Voices* (2015) and *Brunir la voix* (2016, revisited in 2017). Although they informed subsequent cycles of alignment, I remember considering these works to be clumsy, not fully mature. I still do. As in most research-creation methodologies, trial and error, or even failure, are customary aspects of alignment.

Wishing for my art to reflect my multiple cultural influences, my solo stage performance *Brunir la voix* – which translates to *Browning the voice* – explored different types of vocal styles and musical repertoire. It was structured as a series of short performative, vocal, and video episodes that played around with references as diverse as Franz Schubert, Patrick Bruel, Das Racist, South Indian Carnatic music, and an array of Bollywood references. One section explored my budding interest in embodying contrasting representations of “South Asian femininity” through drag. The scene started with me donning a long black wig and lipsyncing to “Piya Aiso Jiya Mein” from *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam* (1962). I then proceeded to rap to “Bring the Noize” by M.I.A., a British recording artist of Sri Lankan descent. Video projections of the original film song sequence were projected behind me – I first mirrored actress Meena Kumari’s body language and facial expressions, then the video editing rhythmically looped and remixed her image to accompany M.I.A.’s hip hop track.

My concept for the video series *Lending Voices* (2015) was to replace the original audio of song sequences from *Pyaasa* (a 1957 Hindi film produced, directed, and starring Guru Dutt) with multitrack recordings of my own voice. This voice switcheroo was inspired by the Internet phenomenon of *shreds* – a form of parody where YouTubers swap the audio content of iconic video

⁴³ I wish to acknowledge the support of the MAI (Montréal, arts interculturels) and their Alliance program (previously called “Programme d’accompagnement”), which allowed me to hire Christos Darlasis (Pythia) to develop my drag makeup skills, and Rameez Karim for Indian dance lessons (introductions to Bollywood, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, and Bhangra).

⁴⁴ I use *brownness* as an identity marker to define my cultural mixedness, as well as my claim to a diasporic South Asian identity. I acknowledge the term is vague, confusing, and should rightfully be problematized. For references that critically engage with brownness as South Asianness, I recommend Mudambi (2015), Naraharsetty (2022), and Silva (2010). For its relation to mixedness and Latinx identities, read Rivas (2022).

clips to de-glamourize, mock, or question the merit, talent, or virtuosity of the featured onscreen character or celebrity. With *Lending Voices*, I aimed to achieve something closer to a tribute, homage, or reinterpretation of the source material. While *shreds* mostly play off of mainstream popular culture, the songs from *Pyaasa* were largely unknown to my audience back then. I was interested in whether my artistic reinterpretation of vintage Bollywood references could be of interest for individuals that did not share the same experience and knowledge of the original source.

Similarly, with *Brunir la voix*, the foreseeable absence of brown bodies in the audience was a limitation that I used to test-drive how South Asian cultural references could engage the new music community. In a Facebook post publicizing the 2017 performance at the VivierMix event, presented by the new music institution Groupe Le Vivier, I wrote that,

the performance juggles multiple references to music, images, celebrities, or historical situations pertaining to the South Asian diaspora. Although these cultural references may be recognized by millions of human beings, I take it for granted that they may remain obscure or superficially perceived by millions of others. This project therefore aims to measure, with a touch of humour and derision, the extent to which cultural references of the new music and contemporary art audience are informed by the Western thought canon.⁴⁵

After presenting the work, I came to the somewhat predictable conclusion that artistically engaging my brownness for an audience of outsiders provided very little satisfaction at the community-building level. Connecting with an audience (i.e., a *brown* audience) that would better engage with this layer of my identity would be great! Why not convince (plead) as many of my “brown friends” to come? I realized my reticence towards inviting them to my concerts, knowing they would not have the cultural profile nor the musical background or training to “get it.” Race, class, (musical) education, and culture are entangled in this assumption. I grappled with this. At moments, the realization of new music’s exclusivity made me feel shame for even being a new music composer, for being merely linked to such a scene. Many people I appreciate or interact with would not even know what new music *is* – understandably so. These friends or acquaintances who are queer, or brown, or eager for culture, arts, and knowledge – why can I not see them as potential audience members? I liked to believe they would appreciate what I do, with a whole lot of contextualization – but would they appreciate the experience of being in those spaces, those events, these contexts, supporting these structures and institutions? I could not conceptualize how sticking to the codes of new music could possibly allow me to be my authentic self, to express my artistry in an uncompromising way, to honour and represent my multiple cultural references, *and* to engage with the audiences I was craving to engage. Funnily enough, my exploration of a South Asian-identifying drag queen felt like it could address these areas of misalignment.

I decided to start my exploration of drag artistry in secrecy, mostly because I did not want to consider the expectations of people from the new music scene. I believe the misalignment and uneasiness I felt when creating and performing *Brunir la voix* was a direct consequence of having it presented by Groupe Le Vivier, well within the confines of the new music community. Any feedback given to me after that performance felt forced, condescending, or disconnected from my actual artistic intentions.

⁴⁵ Quote from my personal Facebook profile, May 2, 2017.

When seeking alignment, different iterations of an idea might be needed before finding the right approach. For example, the baby steps of my drag queen persona in *Brunir la voix* were revisited in Scene 18 of my *Bijuriya* show, using the same song reference in my “Vanity Scene” (Chapter 3.4.5). Following *Lending Voices*, I deepened my artistic engagement with the film *Pyasa*, as well as the complex relationship between its director Guru Dutt, playback singer Geeta Dutt, and lead actress Waheeda Rehman (Chapters 3.2.4 and 3.3.3). It often takes time and care for growth in new directions to ring true, sincere, and aligned.

Gradually, drag allowed me to build another audience and community. This took time. It mostly happened through Instagram and by fostering friendships in the local queer community. In Montréal, I mostly connected with the *queerdo*⁴⁶ scene, or the more independent, subversive, weird, non-conforming spaces of the city’s queer subculture.⁴⁷ Whilst exploring my drag identity online, I found great joy and a sense of belonging within the global South Asian queer community. Locally, I also engaged with Montréal’s queer South Asian and diasporic community. We organize different meetups and events, often through Jhalak, run by dancer and choreographer Rameez Karim. But Montréal’s brown community is relatively small and fragmented. In comparison, cities with larger diasporic communities have thriving queer South Asian diasporic nightlife with clubs or parties such as *Rangeela* (Toronto), *Tashan Events* (Toronto), *Sholay Events* (New York), *Jai Ho!* (Chicago),⁴⁸ and HUNGAMA (East London). In India, The LaLiT group of hotels features South Asian drag performance in their queer clubs Kitty Su (Mumbai, New Delhi, and Chandigarh) and Kitty Ko (Bangalore). Montréal lacks a sizeable audience that would engage meaningfully with my choice of lipsyncing songs, from Bollywood films or other Indian music styles. Despite this, even a handful of fans who follow and appreciate my drag means the world to me. I felt like my drag had more actual impact on others and myself than when I have spent months composing a commissioned piece, only to have it played in a concert with a small audience. It was difficult not to be cynical about new music. It also felt sane and healing for me to explore and form new allyships with the local and global queer community.

What COVID sparked

What used to be a tolerable feeling of misalignment with the new music scene was amplified manyfold during the COVID-19 pandemic. Beyond lockdown and public health concerns, 2020 was an important year in terms of social justice. If issues about race and diversity have increasingly become part of the collective consciousness and public discussions, it stems from just how much racist violence made it on the news during the pandemic. Most linked to the pandemic itself was the sizable increase of East Asian racism, simply because COVID-19 originated in China (Huang, Krupenkin and Rothschild 2023). Then came the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) following the death of George Floyd – the lockdown was probably crucial in more people listening and mobilizing (D’Amore 2020; Davis and Love 2022; Rohlinger and Meyer 2021; Wortham 2020). Furthermore, the shooting of Chantel Moore in New Brunswick (Brend 2020; Lamoureux 2020), the negligence involved in the death of Joyce Echaquan in a Joliette hospital

⁴⁶ A portmanteau for *queer* and *weirdo*.

⁴⁷ Pre-pandemic, I performed at Alternadrag (December 2018), Glitterbomb (July 2019), Get Bent (August 2019), and House of Gahd’s Church (September 2019). I also performed at Cabaret Mado, a mainstream drag venue, in February 2019. I was featured as part of a large cast in Uma Gahd’s “Out of Village” number at the official Fierté Montréal Illusions 2019 event. Out of drag, I attended the *queerdo* scene’s shows and parties, rarely the mainstream ones.

⁴⁸ For an impressive ethnography of South Asian and diasporic queer night life in Chicago and Bangalore, read Khubchandani (2020).

(Cecco 2020; Morin 2020), the death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet in Toronto (Nasser 2020), the Mi'kmaq fisheries dispute in Nova Scotia, (Hamilton 2020) and more incidents (which don't always make it on the news) revealed the ugly side of colonialism and racism towards First Nations in Canada. South of the border, the harrowing double standard in police brutality was also made evident when comparing all the above with how authorities handled Trump supporters' storming of the Capitol (Eligon 2021; Fletcher 2021).

Judging from social media, the ways in which different agents of the new music scene reacted to these issues revealed information about who I felt solidarity and kinship towards, and who I could no longer endorse or feel connected to. I remember how I felt on Black Tuesday, when many people and organizations posted black squares on social media, in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. I remember observing how silence from some institutions – or in some cases, their forced or hypocritical statements – pointed to the flagrant lack of diversity in their programming and/or audiences, or their lack of efforts regarding accessibility and outreach. These observations about coloniality and representations of diversity by artistic institutions are by far not as crucial as the importance of the BLM movement – which signifies the difference between life and death, which challenges normalized forms of dehumanization. However, issues of all sorts often become conflated in the aftermath of extreme situations, such as the death of George Floyd. I found it concerning that it took this particular distressing and horrific situation for some institutions or organizations to suddenly start a process of reflection about race. By listing other instances of violence against Black lives – which happened in the months prior to lockdown and social distancing – Wortham summarizes how these extreme situations are not new, or isolated events: “Ahmaud Arbery was chased down and killed in Glynn County, Ga., on Feb. 23 [2020]. Breonna Taylor was in bed when the police entered her apartment and sprayed her with bullets in Louisville, Ky., on March 13 [2020]. Nina Pop was found stabbed to death in Sikeston, Mo., on May 3 [2020]. Tony McDade was gunned down by the police in Tallahassee, Fla., on May 27 [2020]. By the time outrage and despair over Mr. Floyd's death filled our feeds, the tinderbox was ready to explode” (Wortham 2020).

A few years later, did this momentum in social justice advocacy lead many arts institutions to sustain their self-reflection and self-education? Are they now more prone to call out racism without hesitation, to recognize forms of privilege, or to start making concrete changes at different scales? At an institutional level, it's up to the individuals in leadership roles to do that work. But we can't underestimate just how much passive and active resistance there is when it comes to provoking meaningful change. I wish I could present you with data about these questions, but as I mentioned in Alignment 2, I could not care less about what those institutions were scrambling to do in 2020 to save face.

Consistent within my process of seeking alignment, I was drawn to engage with new ideas, structures, creative processes, and projects that were based on values I adhere to or strive towards. Those are not coming from institutions entangled with – or with deep roots in – coloniality, such as symphony orchestras, opera companies, or the bulk of new music organizations. Deep transformation at the social or institutional level takes time, but even if I'm a patient person, my eagerness to shift the paradigm felt mismatched with the clunky pace I was witnessing in the new music scene.

My process of seeking alignment thus brought me to self-distance from the new music scene, not being able overlook the incompatibility I felt with its structures – structures it does not need to conserve. Coincidentally, the early years of the pandemic saw many of my new music events and projects cancelled, allowing me to put more energy into my drag than I normally would have been able to. The COVID-19 lockdown sparked a new cycle of alignment, with drag at its core.

In April of 2020, I came out publicly as a drag queen on my personal Facebook page, posting the “Don't Rush Challenge: Desi Royalty Edition” video in which I appear both as Gabriel and Bijuriya, writing: “I kept pushing back when/how I'd publicly introduce everyone on Facebook to my semi-secret drag persona, but I suddenly feel empowered to do it with this video! So here is my official drag queen coming out, in virtual company of these other beloved queer Desi drag artists.”⁴⁹

During the 2020 lockdown, drag had made me feel independent, creative, and free; my video-editing partner Paul Neudorf and I self-produced⁵⁰ about a dozen videos for virtual drag shows organized locally and globally. Usually, a drag number performed in a club would focus on one costume, one song and have limited possibilities in terms of stage design. With the opportunity for costume changes, makeshift sets, modest videography, and creative editing, virtual drag took my drag practice to new heights. Of course, these video projects were done with the most rudimentary means: phone cameras, available lighting, and apartment walls made bare to use as a background! In addition to virtual drag numbers conceptualized between 2020 and 2021, I also gave drag workshops, performed for online parties, and hosted cabarets featuring local talent (Appendix 2). These virtual activities strengthened my ties with the international community of drag artists of South Asian and pan-Asian descent, as well as my footing in the local community.

Gabriel/Bijuriya hybrids

This lockdown period also prompted new music organizations to find ways to still fulfill their mission of supporting artists and present their work virtually. Filmed and published between May and June 2020, Little Chamber Music's Isolation Commission provided an opportunity to explore the intersection between Gabriel and Bijuriya's work.⁵¹ My artist statement published in the YouTube video description mentions how the project allowed me “to reflect on how to be creative in this period of physical distancing and social media overload.” I mention how “I've been exploring makeup and drag artistry for some time [...] eager to see how it can intersect with my own work as an experimental vocal artist. This commission gave me the opportunity to try something out: embodying and vocalizing an imaginary clown-like being from a fictitious culture.”

This hybrid approach of combining makeup and soundsinging inspired my application to the Canada Council for the Art's Digital Originals program in the Summer of 2020. I wanted to explore the concept further, with more focus and better financial conditions. After funding was confirmed, it led to the creation of my series of *Portraits*, created in collaboration with videographer Jonathan Goulet. Released one at a time every Thursday in August 2020 and subsequently edited into one full video,⁵² each of the four videos portrays a fictional character that is brought to life through voice, body, and makeup (Table 2 and Figure 8). My wish was for these videos to engage the new music audience, as well as my drag following.

⁴⁹ Quote from my personal Facebook profile, April 15, 2020.

⁵⁰ Our virtual video production tandem was officially credited as Butter Chicken Productions.

⁵¹ This was the 85th of Little Chamber Music's Isolation Commissions. It was commissioned by Jan Gates, James Benson and Anonymous. It is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvIrPD574yM>.

⁵² *Portraits* is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NS3lfRTq1PI>.

| Name | Character description |
|--------|---|
| Qülps | Mischievous, inquisitive, and agile, Qülps is an otherworldly being who transcends binaries. Their vocal lexicon includes an array of effervescent coos, clicks, and pops. |
| Rwogh | Witness to centuries of unrest, Rwogh has developed a self-preserving and farouche nature. Recluse and moody, their vocalizations ward off unexpected visitors. |
| Bymnef | Benevolent and altruistic, Bymnef is appreciated for their tenderness towards all beings. Seemingly lost in fanciful states of daydreaming, they are actually connecting with benign energies that hover beyond the physical realm. |
| Daçji | Bold and majestic, Daçji is a captivating yet elusive entity. Their effervescent and erratic songs reflect life’s unpredictable nature. |

Table 2: *Portraits* character names and description.



Figure 8: Screen capture from *Portraits* (2020).
 Top left: Qülps; Top right: Bymnef;
 Bottom left: Rwogh; Bottom right: Daçji.

Through a Renaissance Opera commission, I released another voice and makeup video (Figure 9) in December 2020. Titled *Drawing the Curtains*,⁵³ my artist statement in the YouTube video description reads as: “We are isolated. Our minds are dark rooms where our thoughts and sensations bounce and reverberate. What should be voiced out into the world, and what should remain private, behind the confines of our mind?” As we will see in Chapter 3, engaging conceptually as well as sonically with the theme of voice became an important component of *Bijuriya*, directly linked with the notion of vocal alignment.

⁵³ *Drawing the Curtains* was commissioned by re:Naissance Opera for IndieFest2020, with support from the Province of British Columbia, CreativeBC, and The City of Vancouver, with acknowledged support from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Government of Canada. It is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4JVDSr9Pt4>.



Figure 9: Screen capture from *Drawing the Curtains* (2020).

Other self-produced videos of soundsinging with makeup and styling have followed, notably *The Bijuriya and Boujee Wacky Tacky Cabaret* (Figure 10), a collaboration with composer Olivia Shortt's drag alter ego Nina Boujee presented as a livestream event at Suoni Per Il Popolo festival in June 2021, and subsequently shown as a virtual exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Toronto (MOCA) in July 2021.



Figure 10: Screen capture from *The Bijuriya and Boujee Wacky Tacky Cabaret* (2020).

In most cases, I have posted the videos on my personal Facebook and Instagram, as well as Bijuriya's Facebook and Instagram. In terms of audience engagement (measured online through likes, comments, and shares), I observed they seemed to garner more attention from my personal audience than my drag audience.⁵⁴ But I was still thrilled to witness members of my drag following – who don't have a typical contemporary music profile – express appreciation for the innovative

⁵⁴ We should acknowledge that there are many algorithmic social media mysteries that can affect how much visibility or engagement a given post will get.

or creative aspects of my drag. The quirky vocal explorations from my soundsinging practice were well received and piqued interest – if anything, these videos cemented my label as a “weird” drag artist. No complaints here.

Having “come out” as a drag artist during the pandemic, the solid boundary between Gabriel and Bijuriya became increasingly porous over time. These hybrid projects brought together many aspects of my practice and themes: *Anthropologies imaginaires*’ taste for fictional beings, Gabriel’s sound and music approach, and Bijuriya’s queerness and visual artistry. They are also a prime example of how vocal alignment manifests in my artistic output: my use of voice was aligned with the artistic vision of each project, and with the way I wanted to represent myself as queer, playful, subversive, and quirky.

My cumulative experiences in and out of drag made me realize how much Gabriel is in Bijuriya, and Bijuriya in Gabriel. I wasn’t sure whether these projects should be credited under Gabriel Dharmoo, or Bijuriya, usually opting for both. There were a few such kinks to work out, but I felt aligned. I felt ready to produce more work in this holistic approach, where I embrace as much – and disavow as little – of myself as possible.

EXHIBIT C: *BIJURIYA*

Bijuriya is the central research-creation piece of my thesis. It is an 80-minute solo drag performance – a hybrid of music, live-arts, and theatre. I started developing it in 2020 (arguably earlier) and it premiered in March 2022 at Montréal, arts interculturels (MAI) with subsequent performances at the Vancouver Queer Arts Festival (June 2022), the Music Gallery in Toronto (October 2022) and Springboard Performance’s Fluid Fest in Calgary (October 2022).

The reader is invited to engage with the piece through:

- The provided video documentation, uploaded to Spectrum platform as: **Bijuriya Turgeon-Dharmoo_PhD_F2023_video2_Bijuriya.mp4**

To get a better sense of the pacing, the reader is encouraged to experience the video documentation in one viewing. As they make their way through Chapter 3, they may also watch specific scenes being discussed, using the timings in Table 3 as a reference.

Note: The main source of footage for this video is from my performance at Springboard Performance's Fluid Fest (Calgary), on October 28, 2022. The video edit occasionally includes footage from other performances, as a means to better showcase some of the originally intended light design, to give better visibility to some of the costumes, and to share special moments of audience interaction.

- Optionally, video excerpts available on the Internet may be found here:
Trailer: <https://youtu.be/mnbanLzrEQw>
Excerpt from Scene 12: <https://youtu.be/hZA-M84Iuc8>
Excerpt from Scene 17: <https://youtu.be/JkJVkJQOhg3A>
- Appendices 3 to 7 provide annotated lyrics for the show’s original songs. These include additional tidbits of information and performance notes (in italics).
- Appendices 8 and 9 provide transcripts and additional notes and references for some of the show’s speech or voicework scenes.
- Figures 13 to 43 provide visual information that complement the analysis of different looks, scenes, or specific moments. Score excerpts were added for reference as well.
- Table 3 indicates the chronological sequence of scenes during the live performance, with references to sub-chapters and timing in the video file. Chapter 3 will describe and analyze the artistic intentions for each category. Some scenes combine different conceptual approaches and will be investigated through the lens of two different categories. Considering the particularly multilayered nature of Scene 16, a hybrid category will analyze it from the lens of three categories.

| | Scene Title | Category | Chapter reference | Video timecode |
|----|-----------------------------|---|-------------------|----------------|
| 1 | “That Land, India” | Porous lipsync | 3.3.1 | 00:00:25 |
| | | Sound design | 3.4.1 | |
| 2 | “Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 1” | Original song | 3.2.1 | 00:03:40 |
| 3 | “Conversation 1” | Sound design | 3.4.2 | 00:06:13 |
| | | Speech | 3.5.1 | |
| 4 | “Bollywood Alphabet 1” | Voicework | 3.6.1 | 00:11:15 |
| 5 | “How Many Ks” | Original song | 3.2.2 | 00:13:40 |
| 6 | “Bollywood Alphabet 2” | Voicework | 3.6.1 | 00:18:20 |
| 7 | “Sung in a Rickshaw” | Sound design | 3.4.6 | 00:21:15 |
| | | Voicework | 3.6.2 | |
| 8 | “Wardrobe Scene” | Speech | 3.5.2 | 00:23:20 |
| 9 | “Whitesplaining Bollywood” | Speech | 3.5.3 | 00:25:25 |
| 10 | “Bijuriya Chamke, Pt.2” | Original song | 3.2.1 | 00:35:22 |
| 11 | “Train Transition” | Sound design | 3.4.3 | 00:38:20 |
| 12 | “Carnatic Voyage” | Porous lipsync | 3.3.2 | 00:42:55 |
| | | Sound design | 3.4.4 | |
| 13 | “Avec et sans feinte” | Sound design | 3.4.4 | 00:48:18 |
| 14 | “Curry’s a Mix” | Original song | 3.2.3 | 00:51:55 |
| 15 | “Conversation 2” | Speech | 3.5.1 | 00:56:45 |
| 16 | “Weird Bollywood” | Hybrid format (Sound design / Voicework / Porous lipsync) | 3.7.1 | 00:59:35 |
| 17 | “The Concept of Vocal Drag” | Speech | 3.5.4 | 01:04:35 |
| 18 | “Vanity Scene” | Sound design | 3.4.5 | 01:10:43 |
| 19 | “Geeta” | Original song | 3.2.4 | 01:12:23 |
| 20 | “‘Her’ Voice in the Ether” | Porous lipsync | 3.3.3 | 01:16:58 |

Table 3: Chronological sequence of scenes in *Bijuriya*.



Figure 11: Look for “Carnatic Voyage.” Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.

CHAPTER 3: *BIJURIYA*: CURATING MY DRAG VOICE

3.1 CURATING A “DRAG SOUND”

To expand upon my prior definitions, I believe *drag* is an artform of cultural reference and of self-curation. With the show *Bijuriya*, I sought to find vocal alignment through these defining elements of drag artistry, going further and in other directions than my drag queen persona Bijuriya had gone thus far. Self-curation is a framing that also applies to the *Drag Race* format, where contestants have agency over their artistry and how they present themselves. However, deliberate and self-curated musical choices are near impossible on *Drag Race*. Considering how crucial voice, sound, and music are in my artistic practice, the need to curate “my own sound” led me to conceptualize *Bijuriya*. The show is a succession of twenty scenes, paced by costume changes and diverse creative approaches: original songs, sound design based on my work as a new music composer, voicework, character work, and conceptual episodes where I explore different relationships between the voice and the body (singing, lipsyncing, and ventriloquism). All these categories will be further analyzed in the following sub-chapters. It was my intention that the show travels through different modes of listening, experiencing, and engaging with drag artistry. I sought to curate a playful and conceptual coexistence of different sound worlds that come to represent my “drag sound,” as well as a balance between entertainment, critique, and reflection.

Coming back to the idea of self-curation, a *Drag Race* contestant’s best way to influence how they will be portrayed and perceived on the show is through a well-curated set of looks.⁵⁵ Season after season, the bar is raised – judges and audiences expect increasingly high standards of polish and quality. It is no wonder contestants pour so much energy and financial resources into their *Drag Race* looks.⁵⁶ With only a few months to prepare all elements needed for their season’s checklist of runway themes and challenges, contestants are expected to spend a good fortune in garments, materials, designers, and commissioned collaborators to make sure everything is not only ready, but TV-(gag)worthy.⁵⁷ Assuming they want to excel in all challenges and runways, contestants need to curate a collection of looks that coherently fits with their persona (or as some marketing-savvy queens would say, their *brand*), while still making sure they showcase a variety of silhouettes, styles, colours, textures, and concepts to feed the judges and their future audience’s appetite for the unexpected. Most of their pre-show preparation will be focused on the visual layer of their drag persona.

Of course, drag culture isn’t solely visual. The show claims a true winner should have charisma, uniqueness, nerve, and talent⁵⁸ – all these qualities are closely linked to one’s character, wit, and overall charm. But challenges that will feature those talents (scripted or improv-comedy) are not revealed until they film the show; preparation or self-curation in that department is limited. The exception would be the Snatch Game challenge – based on celebrity impersonation – for which they would have prepared a few character options and done some character research to make sure

⁵⁵ A look is the combination of costume, accessories, wig, makeup, and styling at a given moment. When entering *Drag Race*, you are expected to carry with you a collection of various looks that meet specific creative briefs for various challenges and themes. For a layered definition of all components that constitute a look, read Tennant (2022).

⁵⁶ For more about personal financial investments from *Drag Race* contestants, read Miller (2021).

⁵⁷ In drag lingo, gagging is a good thing. You gag over things that are stunning, or absolutely amazing.

⁵⁸ A cheeky acrostic, well known by the fans.

they look the part, sound the part and...make it funny.⁵⁹ Beyond that, contestants might have thought of a witty entrance line for their first moments on camera as they enter the workroom, a catchphrase they'll want to be known for, or a few generic "reads" that could be adapted on the spot to poke fun at this or that sister when the "library is open."⁶⁰ Otherwise, contestants are entering a semi-scripted reality TV show and will need to roll with the punches.⁶¹

What about choices pertaining to sound or music? *Drag Race* contestants traditionally encounter music in standard formats, with varying levels of agency:

- **Level-0 Agency:** Lipsyncs (*for your life, for your legacyyyyy, for the crown!*), which are "randomly chosen" (but likely pre-determined) songs.
- **Level-1 Agency:** Rusicals, which are precomposed, either lipsynced or voiced by the contestants themselves. Here, contestants might be able to pick which character in the ensemble cast they will play.
- **Level-2 Agency:** Girl groups or final numbers, which are precomposed songs, with additional "blank" verse written and voiced by the contestants themselves—here, contestants can infuse a bit of their personality through their singing or rapping.
- **Level-3 Agency:** VIP only, reserved for All Stars.⁶² Talent shows, where queens can choose the type of number they will present, including performances of original songs and, occasionally, musical performances that depart from the expected styles usually pushed by the franchise.

As a drag artist who is also a musician, I crave **Level-10 Agency** towards my musical choices. I am always disheartened when *Drag Race* participants need to reel in their creativity to fit in and conform to the show's digestible (and arguably questionable) musical formats such as Rusicals, girl groups, and 8-bar verses in a RuPaul song. The Talent Show format is one instance where music-oriented queens may bring some of their own musicianship in styles that are outside the expected *Drag Race* genre; one can think of Thorgy Thor and Trixie Mattel in the All Stars 3 Talent Show episode.⁶³ However, these numbers usually go unnoticed or remain safe,⁶⁴ despite the artistic risk of presenting something unexpected and different. By singing "Vi ravviso, o luoghi ameni" from Vincenzo Bellini's *La Sonnambula*, Monét X Change broke that curse with her deep baritone voice.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ For more about the Snatch Game, read Lurz (2022).

⁶⁰ In drag lingo (and with origins in ball culture), a "read" is a clever, witty, and funny insult. Referencing to the traditions witnessed in *Paris Is Burning*, "the library is open" is a quote voiced by RuPaul at the beginning of every reading challenge, a staple for every season of the show. For more about "reading" read Tennant (2022).

⁶¹ For more about the nature of the show as reality TV, read Tennant (2022).

⁶² Usually reserved for All Stars Seasons, a Talent Show episode was introduced to a regular season with Season 15 in 2023.

⁶³ In *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* (Season 3), episode 1 (aired January 25, 2018), Thorgy Thor played the violin, first in a Western classical style, then with a dance-pop backing-track. Trixie Matter sang an original song in a country-folk style, accompanying herself on autoharp.

⁶⁴ Meaning that for a given episode they will neither be in the top (in the running to be the challenge winner) or in the bottom (run the risk of elimination).

⁶⁵ In *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars: All Winners* (Season 7), episode 11 (aired July 22, 2022), Monét X Change ranked in the top two queens of the week.

I acknowledge *Drag Race* does hold considerable space for surprise, innovation, and creativity, but this mostly happens outside the musical realm. Because it caters to a large mainstream audience, its musical dimension relies comfortably on conformity and standardized formulas, which are informed by commercial music's consumerist and capitalistic model. When Charity Kase recorded her girl group verse for "B.D.E (Slice Girls Version)", she attempted to do it in a witch-like voice. I perceived her approach to be very coherent: an exciting expansion of her visual identity into vocal sound.⁶⁶ To me, it felt and sounded aligned. To members of pop band Steps – present during the recording as guest vocal coaches – her vocal sounds were so jarring, it seemed they had never heard anything beyond saccharine pop music. They all had a good laugh, but the vocal direction was deemed inappropriate for the challenge. Sure, the verse could have been workshopped (probably better with Diamanda Galás than with Steps) to maximize its impact, but Charity Kase was advised to "blend in" and not "stick out."

There is an obvious misalignment between *Drag Race*'s standardized music and my preferred forms of artistic expression. My drag refers to classical/traditional musics of South Asian origins, Bollywood music, and experimental sound practices that seek to push the boundaries of music. These genres are distinct enough – from mainstream drag music, and from one another – that I had to create my own show, with the goal of making their coexistence make artistic sense. I wanted my drag to reference my intersecting musical identities without compromise, something I consider both generous, honest, and subversive. How I think *my* drag should be.

3.2 ORIGINAL SONGS

My choice of including original drag-pop songs to this show was directly related to my process of seeking vocal alignment at the sonic and conceptual levels. A show based purely on sound design, soundsinging, and new music compositions would not have conveyed everything I wanted to convey – especially since I have been purposefully seeking audiences who do not necessarily have a musical education or exposure to new music. Similarly, I never intended to create a show with only drag-pop songs. I knew from the initial stages that code switching between musical aesthetics would be the best representation of my artistry and of my musical brain. Because of their higher level of approachability, original songs in a pop genre were a great way to inject talent, skill, and personality into the show.

As mentioned in Alignment 3, I used to compose songs as a teenager and young adult – not so coincidentally, my formal music education halted that. It was challenging, playful, and inspiring for me to flex my musical brain in drag-pop songwriting, after years of commitment to "serious new music." While I wrote all the lyrics, the music composition credit is split 50/50 between Gabriel Ledoux and myself. Besides providing vocals for all songs, I also played cello, harmonium, and steel pan for different tracks. The producing is by Gabriel Ledoux and the final mix and mastering by Steven Doman.

Prior to this process, when asked to perform lipsyncs to existing songs on queer stages, my choice of songs or cultural references only allowed moderate curatorial agency; writing original songs allowed me to reveal more about myself and my artistry. Songwriting involves choices around aesthetics, musical style, and lyrical content. Songs with lyrical content are an act of

⁶⁶ In *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* (series 3), contestant Charity Kase's aesthetic verged towards horror, rather than glamour. The girl group challenge occurred on episode 4, aired October 14, 2021.

communication; they allowed me to address ideas, issues, or themes I care about. Although I critique the narrowness of musical styles in mainstream drag, the musical aesthetic for my original songs was deliberately chosen to fit within drag culture, namely pop music with influences from hip hop, electronic, and dance music. These are genres I *do* enjoy as a listener, both genuinely and as guilty pleasures.

However, it is impossible for me to fully endorse the way *Drag Race* celebrates mainstream capitalist pop culture through music and upholds it as the standard form of music, with the expectation that everybody should relate to it equally. This is the same mentality that I critique in Eurocentric classical music and new music: what lies outside the boundaries of the genre is too easily dismissed. With the musical experiences, knowledge, and culture I have acquired over decades, “gay anthems” are far from being the only thing my drag artistry can engage with! This is where my creativity within the pop genre, as well as the other creative strategies concerning sound come in – it is through the layering of musical and vocal approaches that the show achieves better vocal alignment.

Each song has its own function within the narrative. “Bijuriya Chamke” is a theme song that introduces me to the audience. “How Many Ks” explores the specificity of Bollywood cultural references. “Curry’s a Mix” critiques “pure” definitions of brownness. “Geeta” is a poetic homage to singer Geeta Dutt, as well as a broader reflection on the relationship between voice and body in the Indian film industry *and* drag artistry. The following sub-chapters below will address each of my songs, providing information on the lyrical and musical intentions. Additionally, annotated lyrics may be found in Appendices 3 to 7.

3.2.1 Scenes 2 and 10: “Bijuriya Chamke (Pt. 1 and 2)”

“Bijuriya Chamke” is my theme song. It tells my story and sets my point of view to music. It is the closest to a standard *Drag Race* song format, but I gave myself **Level-10 Agency** and creative control! It is split into two parts. Part 1 is performed in Scene 2 near the beginning of the show; Part 2 occurs in Scene 10 near the mid-point. What ties both parts of the song together are the autobiographical narrative expressed in the verses and the celebratory pop-dance chorus that states my drag manifesto. Let’s break down the components of this manifesto, articulated as my desire “to shock, ignite, empower and delight — make art, connect, engage, and reflect.”

- To shock, ignite: I don’t want my drag to be generic or tepid; I want my artistry to provoke or elicit strong reactions from people. In Hindi, *bijuriya* means lightning bolt – through the evocation of lightning, thunder, and storms, the song features other snippets of *bijuriya*-lexicon.
- Empower: Instead of seeking fame and power, I’d rather channel what form of power I already have to empower and uplift others, especially “queers of my descent” as stated in my upcoming rap section.
- Delight: In a promotional interview for my performance at the Queer Arts Festival in Vancouver, I was able to unpack this important notion: “All eight items on Bijuriya’s agenda are inseparable, but of them, ‘delight’ might be the most important. ‘There’s different reasons why I do drag, and one of them was the lack of delight in what I was doing before,’ Dharmoo says. ‘Composing, as an art form, has never brought me much delight—

or *anyone* delight. You get some sort of validation if a piece is successful, but it never really feels like delight. It's more like passing a test... I just felt like I needed more of that idea of sharing joy, and having joy, and having joy not just in the result but the process, also” (Varty 2022).

- Make art: In my drag priorities, art supersedes everything. It is always at the forefront.
- Connect, engage: Dissatisfied by the level of connection and engagement I was experiencing in the new music scene, drag allows me to meaningfully interact with a broader community of people who share similar stories, layers of identity, tastes, and passions.
- Reflect: Despite being artistic and whimsical, I like when my drag (or other people's drag for that matter) is thought-provoking.

Beyond the chorus, the verses weave an autobiographical narrative. In a nutshell: Verse 1 tackles my family history. Verse 2 addresses my musical training and distancing from the new music scene. Part 2 of the song engages my relatively failed attempts at engaging my Indianness, through a passion for Bollywood in Verse 3 and through my musical journey learning Carnatic music in Verse 4. Leading us into each chorus' drag-pop energy, each verse ends with a short cheeky sentence: “I'm gonna do drag!”, “So how about drag?”, “I'd rather do drag!”, and “You wanna do drag?!”. Let's look at the verses in more detail.



Figure 12: Look for “Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 1”: Before and after the instrumental break.
Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.

Verse 1 is about my mixed identity and brownness. Because identity is central to the show, it was important for me to acknowledge early in the performance how my father's Indian ancestry is a result of the Indian indenture system, enforced by the British in Trinidad and Tobago. In addition, as much as my drag persona draws inspiration from her Indian roots, there is no denying my whiteness and being raised in French-speaking predominantly white Québec City. Although I state the specific "recipe" of my cultural background, Verse 1 seeks to engage anyone who may struggle with their sense of identity and/or cultural belonging. As detailed in Alignment 4, I decided "I'm gonna do drag!" to engage with my brownness in a quest for alignment.

Verse 2 is about my background as a new music composer, hinting at the preliminary steps in music I detailed in Alignment 3. As I sing about "chamber and symphonic" music, the sound design weaves in an excerpt from *D'arts moult* (2006), the orchestral piece I composed at the end of my studies at the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal. Displeased by the reflections of coloniality in the new music, which "felt so academic" and "felt so Eurocentric", I ask myself: "So how about drag?"

During the following instrumental break, I engage the local audience – usually by giving a shout out to the festival, venue and/or city (like a rock star would) – and hike up my dress to transform from my statuesque silhouette in a mermaid dress, to something more playful that matches the energy of the rap that is about to follow (Figure 12). Indeed, I tried my hand at writing an 8-bar rap, the same way a *Drag Race* contestant would in a girl group challenge. My goal was for the rap to feel sincere and parodic at the same time – the delivery is playful but the lyrics hint at my critical stance on drag culture. In self-identifying as a "musical clown," I underscore a distinction between my drag and more conventional forms of drag that strive to achieve realness, beauty, and polish by mostly engaging with mainstream culture. It is also my way to acknowledge my association to the Montréal *queerdo* scene, where many artists self-identify as clowns. Finally, by reminding my audience that "drag is a revolt," I place importance on the subversive political and social contours of drag.

Part 2 of the song happens during Scene 10, halfway through the theatrical production. I am now wearing the red dress I wore during Scene 9 but swapped the blonde wig of my "Whitesplaining Bollywood" character with my staple black hair (Figure 13). Verse 3 addresses how Bollywood music and films helped me connect to my Indian culture. Perhaps consuming the products of Indian mainstream culture was a way for me to learn more about my heritage? Between 2000 and 2009, I was *properly obsessed* with Bollywood films, music, and even celebrity gossip. I was finally seeing brown-skinned people in media, not only as stereotypes, but as empowered heroes and heroines with good looks, charisma, and layers. I never related with Hollywood personalities in that way, so it was refreshing to engage with the Indian film industry instead. However, over time I found the capitalistic and superficial nature of Bollywood celebrity culture to be an area of misalignment. I finish the verse by stating how "I kinda hate mainstream." Instead of becoming overly engrossed with Bollywood celebrity, "I'd rather do drag!" so I can play with its cultural references with a sense of parody and critique.



Figure 13: Beginning of Scene 10 “Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 2.” Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.

Verse 4 is about my travels to India to research Carnatic music on voice and the cello – as described in Alignment 3. The mood is more vulnerable and personal. The sound design features personal field recordings of train travels in India (which will be central to the sound design of the following “Train Transition” scene), as well as samples of me playing Carnatic cello during lessons. The lyrics of Verse 4 reference a few Carnatic music terms (raga names such as Kalyani and Thodi) and sound qualities (“melodic and majestic”). Although I have not actively pursued Carnatic music performance or fostered a continued association with it, I wanted this verse to attest just how deeply I did fall in love with it. Even if I gained some knowledge of Carnatic music, even if it expanded my musical ear, the reality is I’ve only skimmed it superficially. As much as I wanted to engage with my musical roots, I lacked the years of immersion in the culture and language to make it feel like something worth pursuing... Disillusioned, I turn to the audience and ask them: “You wanna do drag?”.

3.2.2 Scene 5: “How Many Ks”

The specificity of cultural references is something I wanted to explore as much as possible in my show. With projects such as *Lending Voices* and *Brunir la voix*, the exploration of an insider/outsider dynamic had already been part of my process of seeking alignment. In those earlier projects, I was mostly curious how South Asian culture at large could be engaged with by a new music scene. With *Bijuriya*, I exaggerated the specificity of the cultural references; they feel closer to inside jokes.

When I first got into Bollywood in the early 2000s, I was struck by how many celebrity names, as well as films or song titles started with the letter ‘K’. Was this a happenstance, a coincidence, or does it carry some sort of deeper symbolism? “How Many Ks” is a song about this random fact, but tied in with wider discussions about numerology, superstition, and nepotism in Bollywood. Not everyone will get all the jokes or the level of wittiness of my references, but if I’m being honest, I think they are pretty witty! For every person that catches a reference, my level of happiness dramatically increases. Having felt both “unaddressed” and “very seen” as an audience member in the past, I hope to engage of reciprocal happiness in whoever catches a joke. My artistic intention

was to lend more care and attention towards the audience member that would be an insider, than the one who would be an outsider. My intention here was not to ostracize the outsiders, but to kindle a rare and fascinating power dynamic. I have observed outsiders actually *really* enjoy being part of this dynamic (this has been supported by direct feedback from audience members and an observation of the group dynamics in video documentation). In the context of the Canadian arts events, the degree of insiders' enthusiasm reflects a lack of representation in other spaces – perhaps the outsiders pick up on that and feel somewhat touched.

In addition to “How Many Ks”, Scenes 4 and 6 (“Bollywood Alphabet”), as well as Scene 9 (“Whitesplaining Bollywood”) particularly engage with cultural specificity. In the context of the show (Figures 14 and 15), “How Many Ks” is a tangent, which interrupts the “Bollywood Alphabet” of Scenes 4 and 6. By the time I arrive to the letter ‘K’, I share with the audience my observation about how many things start with the letter ‘K’... before they know it, the audience is swept into a song number.

Every specific cultural reference from “How Many Ks” is explained in the annotated lyrics of Appendix 5. How many references did *you* get?



Figure 14 (left): Look for “How Many Ks”: Back-jacket detail. Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.

Figure 15 (right): Audience interaction in “How Many Ks.” Photo credit: Kevin Jones and Music Gallery.

3.2.3 Scene 14: “Curry’s a Mix”

“Curry’s a Mix” is a playful take on identity discourses within the brown, South Asian, and/or Desi community. As demonstrated by Venkatraman (2021), Sircar (2020), and Naraharisetty (2022), the use of any of these as blanket terms has been problematized.

“South Asian,” “brown” and “Desi” are three [broad umbrella terms] that are dominant today. For some, they’re apt names to describe inherently similar cultures and a connected history. Others say they paint over a vast array of peoples who make up the subcontinent and its diasporas. Erasure is rampant, some say, and it happens inside “South Asian” circles as much as outside them.

The debate has raged online for years — when referring to the diaspora, should we be as specific as possible or as inclusive as possible? And is there a way to do both?

The three terms sometimes don't do what they were intended to, experts say, and it's important to note that they don't always mean the same thing.

Venkatraman 2021

Some believe that the term “Desi” refers exclusively to Indians and excludes other South Asians. They also claim that it seems to primarily identify a section of dominant, upper-caste Indians, erasing the gamut of other cultural identities.

Sircar 2020

[C]onversations about Brownness claim to encompass South Asians as a homogenous group while speaking only to Whiteness; it reproduces an orientalist narrative about its culture – one that invokes stereotypical associations of unknowability, mysticism, and discovery.

When Brownness is claimed as an identity, it is usually in the context of relatively privileged desis settled abroad – usually in the US, the UK, or thereabouts. And therein begins the problem. The best Brown representation we have is Hindu upper caste representation, assimilated nearly completely into American culture. Under the auspices of Brown representation, authenticity can be claimed just by being present as a Brown-skinned person in a predominantly White environment.

Naraharisetty 2022

I personally self-identify as “brown” because its vagueness addresses the lack of clear cultural boundaries in my mixedness. I also self-identify with terms such as “diasporic” and “Indo-Caribbean” as they point to the histories of displacement of my ancestors and avoid lumping me in with continental South Asian identities. From experience, language and cultural terms are often the subject of debate in initiatives that target our complex and diverse cultural group, whether we are attempting to describe a call for performers, a community meetup, a Pride march contingent, or other. When using terminology pertaining to these interlinked identities, I do it with care and provide context whenever appropriate.

My tactic with “Curry’s a Mix” was to base the lyrical content on a common culinary staple of our cultural group – those who relate to it will relate to it. As a dish or a powdered spice blend, there are different variations of what curry could be – or taste like! I was inspired by the fact that curry powder “is not a singular entity.” It will typically consist of a combination of cumin, pepper, chili, turmeric, ginger, coriander, mustard, fenugreek, garlic, salt, or more. Using this as a metaphor, “Curry’s a Mix” highlights the diversity of identities within our cultural group. The introduction (“Brown people are also a mixture”) and chorus (“A dash of this, a dash of that coming together”) drive home the notion of power in diversity and allyship.

The spoken verses attempt to empower whoever has faced forms of policing based on caste, skin shade, language, religion, cultures, histories of displacement, or other. Having felt excluded from communities with narrow definitions of this identity, I wish to inspire anyone who has felt like they don't belong – by drawing mostly from my own personal experiences. For example, if “your whole

life was whitewashed,” I suggest you “turn your brownness up a notch,” which gives insight into my own process of seeking alignment.

In sections of the song I refer to as “drama verses,” lyrics like “don’t *essentialize* me” critique assumptions about my perceived identity. As an ambiguously racialized body, whose origins are not always legible, I playfully challenge the audience to “Try and label my identity; Try and pinpoint my ancestry; Try and guess my family history.” I then switch to a very colloquial Montréal French and state my identity as...surprise surprise...a brown, French-speaking Québécoise! This jab is directed to Québécois people who do not instinctively assume I was born here, or who often address me in English without a hint of a clue that I speak their language as my mother tongue. The interplay of Québécois and Indian musical elements in the song is intentional and reflects the duality of languages of the song. A fiddle-like sample I recorded on the cello is made to evoke a Québécois “rigodon.” This *québ* musical sample then coexists with the Indian percussions, harmonium, and vocal style of the outro. To top it off, my Trinidadian roots are also sonically present via a dynamic steel pan riff, which I also recorded myself.

“Curry’s a Mix” is thus a song that seeks to celebrate and encourage inclusivity within my broad community. Yet in doing so, I point at my hybridity – which could be perceived by some as my “inauthenticity” as a bonafide Indian, or Desi, or South Asian, or Trinidadian, or Québécoise person. I am reminded of Khubchandani speaking about “the heterogeneity of performances by desi drag queens, and occasionally drag kings, at *Jai Ho!*” events in Chicago, which “unsettles any stable orientation to Asianness in that gay space, revealing brown bodies and desi performance as hybrid and unfixed” (Khubchandani 2020, 147).

The costume elements and accessories for “Curry’s a Mix” are worth analyzing. I conceptualized my character to be some sort of ambulant spice-*wala*, or a spice vendor...a role that evokes South Asianness and tradition but is actually just a figment of my imagination. After changing backstage during Scene 13, I walk onstage wearing an oversized turban with a Rajasthani style puppet on top (Figure 16). The puppet’s posture on the turban is a queer nod to genderbending. These puppets are usually seen dangling vertically; here, the puppet is lying with its legs crossed and its upper body propped up, looking like Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* or Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*, with some extra *sass*. The costume’s vivid colours and patterns also vaguely evoke Rajasthani culture. I am carrying a thali with different types of spices around my neck (Figure 17) and a spoonful of curry (mixed in with glitter to catch the light) in my hand. Within the first seconds of the song, as I sing “Let me tell you about curry,” I blow onto the curry-glitter to dazzle the audience and provide a limited olfactory dimension to those in the first few rows (Figure 18).

After the introduction, the music features steel pan and Indian harmonium. I flip the spice thali upside down and reveal how the other side hid a small toy steel pan (Figure 21) – not many catch the musical, cultural, and symbolic reference here. This is the type of specificity of cultural references that I am interested in.

During a 4-measure instrumental break, I open my skirt and reveal seven more Rajasthani puppets wrapped around my waist (Figures 19 and 20). *Reveals*, or costumes that transform onstage to reveal surprising elements, are a big trend in drag lipsync performances. Drag fans love them and almost expect them to happen at some point in a show, especially when the artist walks in wearing something bulky that suspiciously looks like it could be hiding something else.



Figure 16 (left): Look for “Curry’s a Mix”: Turban with Rajasthani puppet. Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.
Figure 17 (right): Look for “Curry’s a Mix”: View of the spice thali. Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.



Figure 18: Performance of “Curry’s a Mix”: Blowing onto the curry-glitter. Photo credit: Chris Randle.



Figure 19: Look for “Curry’s a Mix”: Before and after the reveal. Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.



Figure 20 (left): Look for “Curry’s a Mix”: Detail of Rajasthani puppets under the skirt. Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.



Figure 21 (right): Making of the spice thali from a Trinidad and Tobago toy steel pan.

3.2.4 Scene 19: “Geeta”

“Geeta” is written from the perspective of Geeta Dutt, my favourite Indian film industry singer from the 1950s and 1960s. In film song sequences, the industry standard was – and still is – for actors and actresses to lipsync to the sound of playback singers, such as Geeta Dutt. The song is inspired by the fact that Geeta’s voice is often heard through the image of other bodies. “Geeta” is about a love triangle between herself, her husband Guru Dutt (acclaimed filmmaker, actor, and producer), and Waheeda Rehman, an actress he was allegedly having an affair with. Guru Dutt’s films often had an implied autobiographical lens to them. Waheeda would be cast in these films, sometimes embodying characters that complicate the real-life/on-screen love triangle. In some song sequences, we see Waheeda’s body, face, and lips...but hear Geeta’s voice...in *her* body. As mentioned in Alignment 4, this triangulation of voices and bodies has fascinated me for some time – it was evoked in my research-creation project *Lending Voices*. The song is sung from Geeta Dutt’s perspective. “You” is directed to her husband Guru, whereas “her” refers to Waheeda.



Figure 22: Look for “Geeta” with Geeta Dutt’s image on the circles. Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.

Contextual and visual references help communicate the song’s concept to the audience. First, I am wearing a black sari and a bindi. My hair is in a bun adorned with jasmine flowers, evocative of 1950s Bollywood aesthetics and archival photographs of Geeta (Figure 22). At the end of Scene 17: “The Concept of Vocal Drag” (3.5.4), I verbally contextualize the story of the love triangle by presenting the images of Guru and Waheeda to the audience on large circles. I had their photos printed on coroplast, cut them into circles, and attached them to wands that allow me to manipulate them in my choreography. Before walking away for the “Vanity Scene”, I pre-set both circles on the floor so that Guru’s image will be to my left, Waheeda’s to my right.

As I sing “Geeta”, my body language shifts towards whichever character I am evoking in the lyrics. When singing about myself as Geeta, I centre my body and direct my gaze upwards. During the second verse of “Geeta”, I handle the circles in my hands, engaging with the images of Guru and Waheeda (Figure 23). Geeta’s picture, printed on the opposite side of each circle (Figure 22), will only be revealed during the second repetition of the chorus, as I sing “and me... Ethereal Geeta,” solidifying the metaphor of myself as Geeta.

A final surprise occurs at the end of the song, as the veil I had been wearing over my sari is pulled wide-open, to reveal Geeta's image (with a BBC microphone) printed on the sheer fabric (Figure 24). As I interact with her image, the levels of transparency between her image and mine reflect the levels of porosity between voices and bodies achieved through lipsyncing. During the climax of the song, I spin with the veil, in an intertwinement of our voices, bodies, and identities.



Figure 23 (left): Performance of “Geeta”: Interacting with Waheeda Rehman and Guru Dutt’s images on the circles. Photo credit: Kevin Jones and Music Gallery.



Figure 24 (right): Performance of “Geeta”: Interacting with the Geeta Dutt’s image on the veil. Photo credit: Chris Randle.

Geeta Dutt’s impressive contribution to Indian film music as a playback singer is highly respected, but her cultural legacy seems to be tainted by this alleged affair and her (and Guru’s) tragic outcome. I do not bring this up in my show, but Geeta’s death is generally attributed to liver cirrhosis, linked to depression and alcohol addiction, whereas Guru’s death is debated as either an accidental overdose of alcohol and sleeping pills, or a suicide (there had been previous attempts). By channeling the memory, artistry, and life of Geeta in my song, I try to revive the agency and meaning of her voice, through my own voice and body. At the same time, channelling Geeta’s voice through my drag informs my embodiment of femininity and Indianness.

3.3 POROUS LIPSYNCS

Lipsyncing is a central element of drag culture – a majority of drag performers engage with already-existing songs for their numbers, revisiting them through concept, choreography, costume, various levels of impersonation, and many other creative elements. When conceptualizing a drag lipsync number, the song one chooses becomes an entry point into their artistry and how it connects to a broader culture. Drag artists are also known to be the cultural memory of queer culture, sustaining the relevance of iconic, camp, and cult classics – songs that sometimes don’t have the same cultural resonance in heteronormative culture. As drag artists accumulate a collection of songs, they create an assemblage of cultural markers. This curated collection of their “drag sound” will be more or less thoughtful, depending on the artist’s priorities towards music.

When I am to perform a lipsync number in a club, I always pick a song that I musically or personally connect with. For example, performing Hindi songs in Montréal or other Canadian cities is my way of showcasing my culture to my audience, as well as a means of eliciting meaningful responses in those who might feel represented. In *Bijuriya*, all pre-existing songs I bring into my “drag sound” hold musical, symbolic, personal, and lyrical value. The following sub-chapters will provide more information on each specific choice.

For this show, rather than lipsyncing to copyrighted tracks, I wanted to re-record the lead vocals, consequently isolating the sound of the female voice and removing the musical accompaniment that could point to its specific era and style. I collaborated with Vidita Kanniks, a singer with experience in South Indian Carnatic music, Hindi film songs, and Eurocentric classical music through her university training. Heard at different moments in my show, recordings of Vidita’s voice come to represent “her”: Bijuriya’s aspirational vocal sound – an ideal of both femininity and Indianness. This aspirational voice is outside my body, out of reach, but I embody it through lipsyncing.

Bijuriya includes some instances of straightforward lipsyncing, but I mostly subvert its expected conventions by interchanging it with live singing, originating from my body onstage. I call such episodes *porous lipsyncs*, evoking how the boundaries between the involved bodies and voices are not as solid as in conventional lipsyncs. Porous lipsyncs create an interplay between my voice, “her” voice, my given body, my body in the form of Bijuriya’s, and “her” invisible body. These ideas also tie in with what we have thus far analyzed in “Geeta” (3.2.4) and additional conceptual layers discussed in Scene 17: “The Concept of Vocal Drag” (3.5.4).

In *Queer Voices*, Jarman-Ivens describes how mouth movements and “numerous other subtle bodily movements [...] may determine the perceived accuracy of any given act of lip-syncing” (Jarman-Ivens 2011, 27). In my porous lipsyncs, the audience member is not necessarily focused on measuring the accuracy of the lipsyncing illusion. Because the source of the vocal sound is not fixed, porous lipsyncs invite another type of experience. This is meant to bring the audience’s attention to the undefined borders between visible/invisible/imagined bodies and fleeting glimpses of their sounding/lipsynced voices. Connor’s notion of the *vocalic body* can help visualize this assemblage of ambiguously resonating voices, which “are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies” (Connor 2000, 35).

The audience never sees Vidita during my performance – she is an invisible body. My lipsyncing attempts to host her voice in Bijuriya’s body, but the temporary presence of my acoustic voice onstage (which due to its lower pitch, evokes Gabriel) allows glitches in perception, which exaggerates Connor’s definition of vocalic bodies as “not fixed and finite” (Connor 2000, 36). Once audience members understand or accept how Vidita’s voice is not coming from my body, some might wonder who is singing. Eidsheim’s *acousmatic question* asks:

Who is this? Who is speaking? Regardless of whether the vocalizer is visible or invisible to the listener, we are called into positing this most basic question—a question of an acousmatic nature.

Eidsheim 2019, 1

But whereas Eidsheim’s acousmatic question confronts the listener to the biases or assumptions (racial or other) embedded in their vocal *identification* of disembodied voice, my porous lipsyncs invite a sensory engagement of the boundaries between the drag self and the drag fantasy, through the porous layering of voices.

Porous lipsync in Scenes 1 and 16 also introduce another relationship between the voice and the body: ventriloquism. My use of ventriloquism does not involve a dummy, or any other type of object to which I assign my concealed voice. I agree with Jarman-Ivens’ point that the “fascination with and anxieties surrounding both ventriloquism and impersonation are ultimately rooted in the explicitness in both cases with which the voice exceeds the boundaries of the body” (Jarman-Ivens 2011, 47). My use of ventriloquism is more so interested in eliciting “fascination” than “anxieties.” It seeks to evoke a sense of whimsical oddness in which audience members might lean in with another sort of attention. The texts I deliver through ventriloquism are all related to internal thought processes that belong to a Bijuriya/Gabriel hybrid. Although the lines are scripted, the meaning I attribute to them is by no means fixed. My embodied experience of voicing the words changes from one performance to another. At moments, it feels like these thoughts are externalized from my body against my will, to be shared with the audience. I could also be focused on the physical sensation of words resonating within my body onstage, while I preserve an uncanny poker face. At other times, I feel like Gabriel’s thoughts (which often manifest as doubts or question marks) are communicated through Bijuriya’s body, that they hijack her body and drag performance. The concealed voicing of these thoughts informs Bijuriya’s facial expressions and body language, but the “body possession” stops as far as her lips.

Regarding the deceptive mockumentary approach in *Anthropologies imaginaires*, I wanted the audience to eventually be complicit – I enjoy when my creative strategies are engaged with, part of the audience’s experience. Similarly, I wish for the audience to understand or be perceptive to the displacement of the vocal sound in porous lipsyncs, as it occurs. Therefore, I do not insist on the perfect accuracy of my lipsyncing and ventriloquism. Other choices help displace the vocal sound in the physical space – special attention was given to whether vocal sound is acoustic or pre-recorded; amplified or unamplified. My strategy with porous lipsync sections is to discernibly shift the modes of perceptions so that the audience travels through different configurations of voices and bodies. These configurations may come to signify the intertwinement of Gabriel and Bijuriya’s identity, the aspirational symbolism of “her” voice, Vidita’s invisible anonymous⁶⁷ voice, Geeta’s conceptual voice, as well as the porous boundaries that exist between all of us.

3.3.1 Scene 1: “That Land, India”

The opening number of *Bijuriya* is based on “Yeh Jo Des Hai Tera”, a song composed by A.R. Rahman with lyrics by Javed Akhtar from the 2004 film *Swades*. In *Swades*, actor Shah Rukh Khan plays the role of a NASA project manager with a non-resident Indian (or NRI) identity. His journey back to India, or the motherland, prompts reflections about his sense of belonging. This song is a patriotic call of the land.

Within the first minutes of my performance, I sweep across a variety of relationships between voice and body. I first lipsync to Vidita’s rendition of the chorus, followed by two lines sung with my

⁶⁷ Vidita Kanniks is credited as “Additional vocals” everywhere where credits should appear. What I mean by “anonymous” is that the show isn’t designed to credit her overtly.

own voice, one octave lower. From the onset, I establish how voices can come from within or outside my visible body, as well as how perception of gender can shift in reaction to feminine or masculine forms of vocality. The sound design (fleshed out in 3.4.1) then introduces excerpts from my 2011 composition *Ainthu miniyeccars*, for flute, vibraphone, and tabla. My thoughtful facial expression and fluid arm movements transition into an odd smile and a puppet-like stance. I proceed to use ventriloquism to communicate the song's lyrical content, highlighting my hesitant sense of belonging towards this "motherland":

That Land, India
Is it yours?
Uh...
It is calling you
Over and over again

This connection
Is it fickle?
Is it significant?

That country of yours,
Of yours?
Calls out to you...

The sound design reintroduces Vidita's voice, my lipsyncing prompting me to espouse the contours of her voice with my lips and facial expressions and shift my body language to embody "her." The number concludes with more ventriloquism, as I repeat "I have Indian ancestry." My still lips don an awkward smile as I ventriloquize the sentence with various vocal inflections. The stillness of my face evokes a mask, but my eyes wander. My concealed inner monologue is marked with feelings of insufficiency, self-doubt, and vulnerability. Although Scene 2 is a stark change of character with its drag-pop energy, "Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 1" starts with that same exact sentence, tying both scenes together conceptually.

3.3.2 Scene 12: "Carnatic Voyage"

The longest and most elaborate porous lipsync of the show is not to a Bollywood song, but to "Vanajakshiro", a classical Carnatic *varnam* set to raga Kalyani, composed by Ramnad Srinivasa Iyengar (1860-1919). I learned this *varnam* both on voice and cello during my research of Carnatic music in Chennai. Through lipsyncing, Bijuriya clings to Vidita's rendition of the *varnam* for most of the number. She attempts to embody this aspirational voice, whose sound, pronunciation, and stylistic nuance we (Bijuriya and Gabriel) can only dream of achieving. Approximately halfway through the number, Vidita's voice fleetingly disappears from the sound design. In those moments, I sneak in with my own unamplified voice, my voice sounding one octave below, reading as Gabriel's.

As hinted in Verse 4 of "Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 2", while I did connect with Carnatic music, I only dipped my toes in the genre and any attempt in singing this repertoire in front of people feels illegitimate. This affects the way I sing: at moments a sense of joy and love for the music inhabits me, at other moments I sing with a sense of insufficiency, lacking confidence. Through porous lipsyncing, the real and imagined voices fall in and out of my body, only one voice being heard at a time. A climax finally brings me to sing fully in the same octave, creating a unison between my

sounding acoustic voice, and Vidita's pre-recorded voice. The sound design in this scene, which integrates my string quartet composition *Avec et sans feinte*, will be discussed in 3.4.4.

My look for this scene (Figures 11 and 28) draws inspiration from the white and gold costumes associated with Mohiniyattam, an Indian classical dance from Kerala. Of course, we took this idea further, exaggerated the proportion, and gave it a personalized drag twist! The look consists of an imposing dress made of white and gold dhoti fabric, a pleated bustier, gold jewels, long red nails on white gloves, and a long braid adorned with jasmine flowers that reaches the floor. When combined to my recontextualization of Carnatic music, the scene evokes grace, majesty, but also, a sense of tradition. However, experts of both Carnatic music *and* Mohiniyattam would not claim this artistic expression as accurate. They are not wrong: Carnatic music may accompany Mohiniyattam, but the singer would not be wearing such a dance costume. Also, Mohiniyattam is not necessarily the first visual one thinks of when hearing Carnatic music, which is associated with different states of South India, including but not limited to Kerala.

Drag artists of diverse cultural backgrounds often reinterpret traditional or classical art forms. On *Drag Race*, looks and costumes that celebrate a contestant's distinct cultural background have often been acclaimed. Beyond looks, some contestants have even performed traditional artforms linked to their heritage during talent show episodes. Outstanding examples are Gia Gunn performing Kabuki⁶⁸ and Raja performing a Balinese dance.⁶⁹ Interestingly, in both cases, the traditional music that accompanied their performance was not remixed to make it more palatable to the general audience. Although both performances were well received by the judges, I argue it is very difficult to lend justice to such artforms in the *Drag Race* context. While I treasure the incredible impact this has had on some fans of the franchise who saw their cultures represented, I raise the fact that the judges (and in some cases, the live audience present at the filming) have next to no clue how to appraise the quality, value, or skill displayed in these culturally specific artforms. By that, I am not implying these judges should be concerned with the artists' claim to legitimacy, or their performances' degree of authenticity – I, for one, am not too interested in a purist approach of traditional artforms in drag. My point is, when a *Drag Race* judge does not share the same cultural references as the drag artist, they cannot distinguish the extent to which the act is a faithful rendition of a traditional artform, nor the extent to which the artist has revisited it with a personal twist. Drag being an art of cultural reference, the judges' ability to assess and appreciate a contestant's personal and queer take on an "original source of inspiration" seems important...*if* we are concerned with fair judging on a reality TV show! In other contexts (where artistry is not actively ranked against your peers for the enjoyment of an audience), the discovery of, or engagement with unfamiliar artforms between an artist and their audience may provoke reciprocally meaningful experiences. Throughout my artistic life, I cannot recall one instance where I expected the audience to share my set of cultural references; I enjoy the process of sharing deeply personal ideas and seeing how they resonate in other minds.

As my "Carnatic voyage" and many other scenes from *Bijuriya* can attest, I think drag artists have agency to spin, or idiosyncratically reinterpret the artforms they have a cultural connection with. Although both Gia Gunn and Raja have come in direct contact with their respective artform during their childhood, other queer artists might not have had the opportunity to officially learn the

⁶⁸ In *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars* (Season 4), episode 1 (aired December 14, 2018).

⁶⁹ In *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars: All Winners* (Season 7), episode 11 (aired July 22, 2022).

artforms that have come to represent their culture. Perhaps they have not benefited from enough immersion, exposure, or training in the artform due to an array of systemic, circumstantial, or personal reasons. Drag artistry engages with forms of fantasy – the fantasy of things we are not able to be, or to fully embrace. We accept drag as a fantasy of gender performance. Drag can also explore the fantasy of one’s performance of culture, through traditional artforms and the imagined potential of their intersection with queerness.

3.3.3 Scene 20: “‘Her’ Voice in the Ether”

The final scene of the show is an extension of my original song “Geeta.” After having sung from the perspective of Geeta Dutt, I wanted to end the show with a meaningful cultural reference that interconnects all three individuals involved in the love triangle. “Waqt Ne Kiya” is a song from the 1959 film *Kaagaz Ke Phool*, composed by S.D. Burman with lyrics by Kaifi Azmi. As you might have guessed by now, in the film’s song sequence, Geeta Dutt lends her voice to Waheeda’s body onscreen.

As the melody starts to soar over the ethereal cello soundscape, the ambiguity of whose voice is heard is deliberate. The audience hears Vidita’s voice, but considering how I have highlighted Geeta’s influence on my drag in the previous scene (3.5.4), they might easily assume it is actually an archival recording of Geeta Dutt’s voice. Through digital pitch transposition, Vidita’s voice evokes 1950s Bollywood sound production and vocal aesthetics. This last porous lipsync is meant to be beautiful in its simplicity. I lipsync to most of the song, but in one of the verses, I channel all forms of my self and drag self to sing along, an octave lower, in a duet with Vidita, or Geeta...or simply, “her.”

3.4 SOUND DESIGN

Although the original songs I create as Bijuriya are accessible yet *genius* pop masterpieces, my show’s audience is also introduced to a whole other dimension of my musicianship: my work as a somewhat serious and overly trained award-winning new music composer. Despite my self-distancing from the new music scene, I immersed myself in this artform for so long that it has left an unarguable imprint on my artistic identity and sensibility. This training and experience allowed me to engage with sound in creative and meaningful ways, which are not easily accessible to non-musicians. This has influenced the curation of Bijuriya’s sound, her choices, and the formats of her artistic output. I take pride in how my journey as a musician and composer has shaped my drag artistry. Rather than disavow this important chapter of my life, I wanted *Bijuriya* to celebrate it in a way that felt sincere and aligned with my present artistic self. In addition to mentioning my education in Eurocentric classical music in Verse 2 of “Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 1” and in speech-based Scenes 3 and 15, my sound design contributes a sensory experience of this multilayered musical identity. By engaging and talking openly about new music, I could argue that my show has introduced many members of the audience to the very existence of the new music scene, or the concept of a new music composer.

The sound design in *Bijuriya* incorporates six of my past musical compositions, written for solo instruments, chamber ensembles, or orchestra (Table 4).

| Composition title | Instrumentation | Year | Performer ⁷⁰ |
|----------------------------|---|------|---|
| <i>D'arts moult</i> | Symphony orchestra | 2006 | Conservatoire de musique de Montréal orchestra (conducted by Louis Lavigueur) |
| <i>Moondraal Moondru</i> | Chamber orchestra | 2010 | Ensemble Chorum (conducted by Jean-Michel Malouf) |
| <i>Sung in a Rickshaw</i> | Trumpet | 2010 | Aaron Hodgson |
| <i>sur les rives de</i> | Flute, clar., piano, perc., violin, cello | 2011 | Ensemble Paramirabo |
| <i>Ainthu miniyeccars</i> | Flute, vibraphone, tabla | 2011 | Marie-Hélène Breault, Catherine Meunier, Shawn Mativetsky |
| <i>Avec et sans feinte</i> | String quartet | 2019 | Quatuor Bozzini |

Table 4: List of instrumental compositions heard in the *Bijuriya* sound design.

These compositions are not presented as they would be in music concerts; they are recontextualized and remixed with Bollywood samples, South Indian classical Carnatic music, field recordings of my travels to India, or my live voicework. Their structure is sometimes chopped up to optimize its interaction with other sound sources. They occur during porous lipsyncs and most of the onstage/offstage costume changes.

3.4.1 Scene 1: “That Land, India”

Because it opens the show, this porous lipsync needed to capture as many of the conceptual layers of voice/body as possible: singing, lipsyncing, and ventriloquism (3.3.1). Expanding from the sound of Vidita’s voice singing “Yeh Jo Des Hai Tera”, I wanted the sound design to open a multidimensional sonic space, achieved through the flute, vibraphone, and tabla sounds from *Ainthu miniyeccars*.

In colloquial Tamil, *Ainthu miniyeccars* means five miniatures, reflecting the structure of the piece. My sound design integrates the first miniature in this scene, as well as the third one in Scene 16: “Weird Bollywood” (3.7.1). The score in Figure 25 indicates how this first miniature is played through thrice: the first time only with the flute, adding the vibraphone, then the tabla. When combined with Vidita’s voice and mine, each instrument’s entrance subsequently adds a new colour and opens a new sonic space.

The audience first encounters the isolated sound of Vidita’s voice. After one verse of my lipsyncing, the flute enters, adding support and colour as I introduce my live singing voice. Although we hear a Western flute, the type of playing is inspired by Indian music with its slow glissandi and ornamental figures. The ensuing addition of the chiming and loosely atonal vibraphone creates an odd dreamlike space, which matches the uncanniness of the ventriloquism. Finally, the tabla – widely recognizable as an Indian percussion instrument – ties in both sound worlds together: a sonic glue between the Indian singing and the Indian influence of the new music composition. The flute also acts as a sonic transition towards Scene 2; the song “Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 1” begins with sounds of distant flutes before transforming into a pop song.

⁷⁰ Four of these compositions have been performed more than once, by different soloists or ensembles. Table 4 indicates which performers are involved in the recordings I have used in the sound design.

Partitions en notes transparentes
 - Flûte: notes du plus bas
 - Percs: notes octaves plus haut

Ainthu miniyeccars
 Cinq miniatures pour flûte, vibraphone et tabla

Gabriel Dharmoo

I.

1e fois, flûte seule: $\text{♩} = 69$ (très souple - sans ♩)
 2e fois, ajout du vibraphone: $\text{♩} = 74$ (longs notes - sans ♩)
 3e fois, ajout du tabla: (idem) $\text{♩} = 74$

1e, 2e et 3e fois
grande flûte

Flûte: *mf* * Voir notes pour indications sur ce gliss. *f*

Vibraphone: *ppp*
 2e et 3e fois
 2e: sempre (pédale légère, doit suivre le phrasé)
 3e fois

Tabla (ou ka): *mf*
 Na Na Tin Na Na Na Tin Tin Na Na Na Tin Tin Na Tin Tin Ra

Flûte: *mf* * Voir notes pour indications sur ce gliss. *f* *fp*

Vibraphone: *ppp*

Tabla: Tin Tin Na Ra Na Na Tin Tin Na Na Ra Na Na Tin Tin Ra Tak Na

Flûte: *f* *ppp* *ppp* *ppp*
 Jouer 3 fois (2 reprises)
 Jouer 2 fois (1 reprise)
 Jouer 1 fois (sans reprise)

Tabla: Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak Tak

-2-

Figure 25: Score excerpt from *Ainthu miniyeccars*, used in the sound design of Scene 1: “That Land, India”.

3.4.2 Scene 3: “Conversation 1”

The transition between Scene 2 and 3 is marked by a sudden mood change, bringing us into the first costume change. My voicing of “Drag is a revolt!” prompts the onset of my chamber music composition *sur les rives de*, which we hear on its own for just over a minute while I remove my wig, jewels, and different elements of my costume on the dimly lit stage (Figure 27).

By the time I’ve fully removed the costume and start changing into the second one, *sur les rives de* has transitioned into a softer part of the composition (Figure 26). Over that backdrop, the audience hears a conversation between myself as Bijuriya, and myself as Gabriel – obviously scripted (Appendix 8) and pre-recorded. The conversations will be further detailed in Chapter 3.5.1, but it is worth highlighting how this inner dialogue provides the audience with context and information about the show’s sound design. The voice of Gabriel explains how “the piece you’re hearing now is called *sur les rives de*,” how I composed it in 2011, etc. Bijuriya then challenges Gabriel: “if you’re gonna add your subventionné⁷¹ sort of academic music into this show, my only request is you don’t just plop it in.” Gabriel further details how he wishes to recontextualize his compositions by adding layers of music and sound with overt Indian influences.

As such, superimposed on the textural and atmospheric sound of *sur les rives de* and the pre-recorded conversation, a third sound source is introduced: a dreamlike stretched and reversed remix of the song “Ek Shahenshah Ne Banwake Haseen Tajmahal” composed by Naushad for the 1964 film *Leader*. The choice of that song, which is composed in the Hindustani raag Lalit, is a personal

⁷¹ Music benefitting from arts council funding through grants (or in French, subventions).

reference to my early composition *Lalita Ki Khushboo*. This piece for two cellos and two percussions was composed in 2005, when I was a composition student at the Conservatoire de musique de Montréal. The piece was loosely based on raga Lalit, and I was in the early stages of exploring my Indian heritage through music. While searching for other songs and music in this raga, I stumbled upon “Ek Shahenshah” and soon became obsessed with it.

sur les rives de

♩ = 80

Gabriel Dharmoo

The musical score is for a piece titled "sur les rives de" by Gabriel Dharmoo, with a tempo of 80 beats per minute. It features six staves: Flute, Clarinet (with a note that it is a partition in reeds), Percussion, Piano, Violin, and Cello. The Flute and Violin parts include the instruction "Respecter les articulations en restant le plus tenuto / sostenuto possible". The Percussion part is for 3 cymbals (8-10" splash, 14-16" crash, 18-22" ride) and uses wooden sticks or brushes. The Clarinet part is marked "Arrière plan - très doux, textural". The Cello part is marked "Arrière plan - très doux, textural non vib.". Dynamics range from *mp* to *ppp*.

Figure 26: Score excerpt from *sur les rives de*, used in the sound design of Scene 3: “Conversation 1”.



Figure 27: Costume change during Scene 3: “Conversation 1.” Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.



Figure 28: Entrance of the “Carnatic Voyage” look during Scene 11: “Train transition.”
Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.

3.4.3 Scene 11: “Train Transition”

At this point in the show, all previous costume changes had occurred onstage, something drag artists will tend to avoid in most contexts.⁷² Those costume changes are always combined with sound design, voicework, or speech that I deliver to the audience. The audience is let into a visible step-by-step process of my drag transformation. The transitory state of a semi-nude, wig-less, padded body⁷³ with a face full of makeup is the height of gender ambiguity, and somewhat of vulnerable and private space.

This costume change has me hidden backstage for the first time,⁷⁴ for reasons both logistical and dramaturgical. The costume is quite voluminous and involves assistance from the backstage dresser. When this look enters the stage, it is visually quite impactful (Figure 28); I wanted to captivate the audience upon my entrance, rather than allow them to piece the image together

⁷² For drag artists who work in the realm of theatre, exceptions to this rule are more bound to happen. The logistical constraints associated with costume changes will necessarily lead to problem-solving solutions. For example, in *Rock Bière: Le Documentaire* – presented at Espace Libre in 2021 – the drag king performed impressively quick costume changes. At times as part of the choreographed performances, other times further upstage while a video projection grabbed the audience’s focus.

⁷³ Usually made from sculpted upholstery foam, *pads* are used in drag to modify an artist’s silhouette. In my case, hip pads are inserted under three or four layers of tights, enhancing the shape of my hips and derriere.

⁷⁴ One other backstage costume change happens during Scene 13 (3.2.3, 3.4.4).

gradually as one costume element is added after the other. For those reason, the stage lights flicker in the dark, my body is absent, and the audience is submerged into sound.

Sitting in the dark and listening to sound design for nearly four minutes is nothing extraordinary in new music concert culture. In public presentation of electroacoustic music, for example, an absence of bodies or other visual elements is common. The acousmatic listening experience is often deliberate, as it heightens the focus on the sound dimension. For a show like *Bijuriya* – where I use codes from drag, theatre, live-arts, and dance – it was a gamble. If there is nothing for the eye to see, an audience used to other stage codes might feel bored, restless, or assume there is an intermission. The sound design thus needed to be inviting and provide insight into my musical brain, my sound world, and my life as a composer.

I based this scene on my chamber music piece *Moondraal Moondru*, which I composed after researching Carnatic music in India for the first time, in 2008-09. The Tamil title can be translated to *Thrice Thrice*. It refers to the formal structure of the piece as three times three types of sections: three trios that explore melodies and ornamentations inspired by Carnatic music ragas, three rhythmical sections, and three “sound pictures” based on precise sonic memories I have experienced in India.

The excerpt I use in my sound design comprises two sections: “Shatabdi Express” and “Trio carillon.” The sound picture or sound memory behind “Shatabdi Express” is from a train halt between Chennai and Mysore. From my personal field recording of this moment, I scored an instrumental transcription. Although the field recording includes various elements, such as a person loudly sneezing, other people speaking, and my handling of the recording device, I focused on transcribing its three main sound elements:

- women singing in a nearby coach (the song is unknown to me), represented by the piccolo and the strings. I took the liberty of adding different transpositions of the song’s melodic profile to complexify the harmony (top left in Figure 29).
- the passing of another train, mimicked by the winds and percussion (top right in Figure 29).
- vendors walking in the train coach, chanting their slogans to sell “coffee, coffee, coffee, coffee, coffee,” “bisi idli, vade, idli, vade, masala dosa, uddine vade, maddur vade” or “bisi rice bath, rice bath, maddur vade.”⁷⁵ The rhythm and intonation patterns of these slogans were transcribed as closely as I could for the woodwinds, which I harmonized to my liking (bottom section in Figure 29).

When *Moondraal Moondru* is performed in concert with a chamber orchestra, there is no trace of this field recording. It only served as inspiration for my transcription – other such transcriptions occur later in the piece as well. My sound design thus unearthed this source field recording, as it coexists sonically with the concert recording of its transcription. The addition of reverberation to the mix amplifies the conflation between both sound sources, creating a dreamlike soundscape.

⁷⁵ Thank you Sriram Kumaran for helping me identify these slogans. “Bisi” means “hot” in Kannda, the rest of the words are typical South Indian foods found in Tamil Nadu or Karnataka, where the Shatabdi Express train halt would have occurred.

Fl. *non reh.* *pp*
 Ob. *mf*
 Clar. *pp*
 Bas. *mf*
 Horn *pp*
 Tpt. *pp*
 Tbn. *pp*
 Perc. 1
 Perc. 2
 Pno. *f*
 Vln. I *pp*
 Vln. II *pp*
 Vla. *pp*
 Vcl. *pp*
 Cb. *pp*

Fl. *reb. ond.* *pp*
 Ob. *reb. ond.* *pp*
 Clar. *reb. ond.* *pp*
 Bas. *pp*
 Horn *pp*
 Tpt. *reb. ond.* *pp*
 Tbn. *pp*
 Perc. 1
 Perc. 2
 Pno. *mf*
 Vln. I *pp*
 Vln. II *pp*
 Vla. *pp*
 Vcl. *pp*
 Cb. *pp*

Figure 30: Score excerpt from *Moondraal Moondru*, “Trio Carillon” section.

After this train scene, the sound design naturally flows into *Moondraal Moondru*'s following section, "Trio Carillon" (Figure 30). Characterized by the chiming of the glockenspiel, xylophone, and piano, this musical section renders the sound design a new quality, hopefully reviving the audience's attention. At this point in time, my costume change is almost done! A regal Carnatic-esque oboe and bassoon duet highlights my majestic entrance onstage (Figure 28). The music I composed over ten years ago informs my dignified yet dreamish demeanour and body language as I make my way to the stool for Scene 12.

3.4.4 Scenes 12 and 13: "Carnatic Voyage" and "Avec et sans feinte"

This majestic procession stops at the stool, which is pre-set centre stage left from the beginning of the show. The stool is covered with elements that tie its aesthetic to the "Carnatic Voyage" costume: white and gold Kerala-style dhoti fabric and strings of jasmine flowers. During Verse 4 of "Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 2", I physically acknowledge the presence of this "Carnatic stool", sitting on it as I sing about my relationship with Carnatic music. All these elements foreshadow this upcoming "Carnatic Voyage."

My sound design in this scene is at its most layered. It starts with a field recording of an audience waiting for the imminent beginning of a Carnatic music concert in Chennai. As I sit on the stool, I wanted to create the impression that I am about to perform to an audience of Carnatic music connoisseurs; we hear Tamil in the audience chatter, the drone of a tambura box, the sounds of a mridangam, and a violin tuning. The clapping of the audience leads to a silence, after which Vidita's voice may be heard, singing the Carnatic varnam "Vanajakshiro" (3.3.2). In addition to Vidita's voice, the sound design includes my string quartet *Avec et sans feinte* (Figure 31). This is yet another piece of mine where elements inspired by Carnatic music, such as ornamentation and melodic fragments, coexist with new music compositional techniques and aesthetics. Whereas Carnatic melodies usually soar over the drone of a tambura – harmonically stable and grounding – my string quartet's textural background travels through different levels of dissonance and instability, transforming into dense textures of swells and glissandos, high-pitched screeches, and bow-scratching sounds. These harsher sounds affect my movements, my body writhes and contorts in reaction. When combined to Vidita's voice singing Carnatic music, both sound worlds collide – a common occurrence in my multicultural brain, but perhaps disorienting to other listeners. Despite the dissimilarity of both sound sources, my sound design seeks to weave them together, converging towards shared peaks and valleys.

At the end of the porous lipsync, I slowly exit the stage and the string quartet plays along for about two minutes during an offstage costume change (Figure 32).

3.4.5 Scene 18: "Vanity Scene"

The "Vanity Scene" is a short transition scene that accompanies the composed and elegant ritual of putting on my wig and jewels to perform "Geeta." The sound design is based on one of my favourite Geeta Dutt songs, "Piya Aiso Jiya Mein" composed by Hemant Kumar with lyrics by Shakeel Badayuni from the 1962 film *Sahib Bibi Aur Ghulam*. This film also happens to be produced by Guru Dutt. The reference to the song is not easily recognizable – the audio is reversed, slightly stretched, and reorganized to evoke a dreamy soundscape. As mentioned in Alignment 4, this cultural reference had inspired my first baby steps in drag, in *Brunir la voix* (2016-17).

does however address notions related to sound design when he states how he “simply could *not* explore [his] Indianness as genuinely and as legibly with compositions in chamber music or symphonic style” than the way Bijuriya does through her drag artistry and this show.

By recontextualizing my new music catalogue through the sound design, I feel these compositions have been revitalized or given a second life. These musical scores that gathered dust, these unreleased archival recordings that took up space on hard drives, they now resonate in a new and more aligned configuration. During my education in music composition, my interdisciplinary approach to art took the backseat. However, I remember my compositional process often engaging with notions of musical characters or atmospheres. I often sought to weave sections of music together to create a compelling arch. The music I included in *Bijuriya*'s sound design was thus already embedded with dramaturgical potential. When thinking about which musical atmospheres would be appropriate for different sections of the show, I was often able to quickly recall specific excerpts from my new music catalogue and use them as dramaturgical building blocks. I provided myself the opportunity to reclaim my musical creativity, so it has more points of connection with my full artistry and my wider interests as a performer.

3.5 SPEECH

The function of speech in *Bijuriya* is to communicate directly with the audience. Many of the creative strategies we have analyzed thus far are quite sensory and conceptual. Creating rapport with the audience allows me to render my concepts more legible. For any given performance of *Bijuriya*, past and future, there will be a various mix of audience members. Different “selling points” might have convinced them to attend. They might be regulars of the venue or festival, fans of drag artistry, people from the new music community, people from a South Asian, or brown, or Desi, or diasporic background, etc. The insider/outsider dynamic I have been speaking about actually exists at multiple levels. As such, there are certain concepts I will want to illuminate for different segments of the audience who might not be familiar with, for example, Bollywood, new music composition, or drag culture...On the flip side, there are many concepts I will prefer to remain unclarified, which points to my desire of engaging with specific cultural references. Some things will land (or hit home) for *insider* members of the audience, while they won't for *outsiders*. I've mentioned my engagement with specific Bollywood references, but there is also a substantial number of inside jokes, lingo, or side remarks that cater to the new music community,⁷⁶ *Drag Race* fans⁷⁷ or French speakers. These will easily fly over an *outsider*'s head.

The following sub-chapters will summarize my artistic intentions for all speech-based scenes. However, I recommend the reader engage directly with these scenes through the video documentation (and in some cases, additional information in the appendices). There are many nuances to be detected through the observation of the live performance and of the audience dynamic.

⁷⁶ For example, the self-deprecating insinuation of new music as “subventionné sort of academic music” in Scene 3: “Conversation 1”

⁷⁷ For example, the way I deliver my line “Bijuriya Firangiya Patel Singh Singhanian, but your *bapu* just calls me Biju...” at the beginning of Scene 9: “Whitesplaining Bollywood” is reminiscent of *Drag Race* contestant Katya's delivery of “Yekaterina Petrovna Zamolodchikova but your dad just calls me Katya” in “Read U Wrote U”.

3.5.1 Scene 3 and 15: “Conversation 1” and “Conversation 2”

These conversations take the form of pre-recorded internal dialogues between two versions of myself: Gabriel the music composer and experimental vocalist, and Bijuriya the drag artist engaging with South Asian culture. For a transcription of these conversations, refer to Appendix 8. These conversations’ relationship with sound design has also been discussed in 3.4.2 and 3.4.6.

In the early phases of conceptualizing this show – when I still struggled to do my own makeup and had very limited experience in drag – I envisioned a theatre piece where two “characters”, one in drag and one out of drag, would be somewhat (and comically) antagonistic to one another. As I grew stronger in my drag identity, I found that Bijuriya was not only a drag persona. She was an expansion of Gabriel’s self. Ultimately, it made more artistic sense for their rapport to evoke a sense of sibling-like bonding. Both care for one other. Both poke fun at one another. Both uplift one another, but don’t hesitate to be firm, or honest with one another. “Conversation 2” highlights how both are drawn to weird stuff and quiriness, both “like to look at things from odd angles,” and engage with things they “actually really, really care about.” Creatively, both are indebted to one another, inspire each other. Both are very invested in one another’s process of seeking alignment.

3.5.2 Scene 8: “Wardrobe Scene”

This scene is an onstage costume change, during which I interact with the audience. Wearing only a blonde wig and my hip pads, I tiptoe my way upstage left to the five vertical coat racks. I examine the choices in my wardrobe, I ponder upon what I should be wearing next. As I pick dress options one after the other, I prompt the audience for their advice. In doing so, I establish rapport and warm them up for the comedic “Whitesplaining Bollywood” scene that follows.

Each dress is deemed to be either too *costumey*, too bohemian/hippie, too juvenile, too ambiguously ethnic, or simply not quite right for the occasion (Figure 33). I finally set my eyes on a “classy” red dress and proceed to change into it. The four “problematic” dresses speak to the complex connotations of “Indian ethnic wear” and how they are perceived by the “Western gaze.” Bijuriya’s hesitations reflect how these considerations may shape the fashion choices of those seeking to represent aspects of their cultural heritage.

The background music blends MIDI tabla, sitar, and sarangi sounds with a funky *Seinfeld*-like baseline. The musical pitches are based on *sarali varisai*, a Carnatic music exercise encountered in a beginner’s first few lessons. As I change into the red dress, I casually sing along to the ascending (*arohana*) and descending (*avarohana*) scale of the Mayamalavagowla raga. Interestingly, I had composed this background music in my first year of doing drag, for a social media segment I called “Whitesplaining Bollywood”...which leads us to our next scene!

3.5.3 Scene 9: “Whitesplaining Bollywood”

In the first months of developing my drag persona in 2018, I was craving to create more comedic content on social media. I came up with this “whitesplaining” character, who “generously” offers to answer her followers’ questions about Bollywood (Figure 34). Anyone with a moderate knowledge of Bollywood will be able to tell how this character’s eagerness and passion for Indian culture do not make up for the fact that she is oblivious to her own cluelessness. She brands herself as a great cultural mediator between different cultures, but her pronunciation of Hindi, film analyses, and personal take on celebrity gossip are highly questionable.

Scene 9 revisits this character, whom I've always thought did a great job at poking fun at my shortcomings as a "half-white" Bollywood fan. The main difference between the 2018 skit and this new version is I've transformed the character from a social media influencer wannabe to a Bollywood academic.

After the "Wardrobe Scene", I turn towards the audience in my bespectacled avatar and welcome them to the conference "Diversity Discourse in Arts and Academia: The Intersection between Action and Optics" for which I have been invited to be the keynote speaker. We can be reminded that the satire of academic figures or disciplines is a theme I've explored in *Anthropologies imaginaires*, and that the intersection of action and optics is at the centre of *Lip Service*.



Figure 33 (left): Scene 8: "Wardrobe Scene." Photo credit: Mike Tan.

Figure 34 (right): Screen capture from early *Whitesplaining Bollywood* social media content, December 2018.



Figure 35: Performance and look for Scene 9: "Whitesplaining Bollywood."
Photo credit: Jonathan Goulet.

I then open my arms to reveal the title of my keynote presentation embroidered on my white gloves: “Whitesplaining Bollywood” (Figure 35). And proceed to introduce myself and answer three audience questions about Bollywood, with varying degrees of accuracy – *insiders* will discern the falsehoods, but also detect how I (as the writer of this script) am actually quite knowledgeable in the subject to be able to come up with these jokes. In that regard, the “Whitesplaining Bollywood” scene is in direct relation with the “Bollywood Alphabet”, as will be discussed in 3.6.1.

3.5.4 Scene 17: “The Concept of Vocal Drag”

As the show unfolds, the audience has glimpses of my interest in exploring the boundaries of voice and body: porous lipsyncs, ventriloquism, and live singing. However, it is only towards the end of the show that I address the theme directly, illuminating in concrete language what I have been doing conceptually. In Scene 17, I speak of the transformative power of drag available through voice and draw links between lipsyncing in drag artistry and in the Indian film industry. Here is an edited transcript of my Toronto performance on October 14, 2022 (performance notes in italics):

Bijuriya breaks character and starts talking casually to the audience. As she speaks, she takes off elements of her costume, one at a time.

“My favourite thing about drag is its transformative power. When we think of the transformative power of drag, we often think of it as a body-based thing, an image-based thing. We explore, push, play with the boundaries of gender... or of humanness.

But I also love to think of the transformative power of drag available through voice. The same way we transform our bodies to embody others...others we might admire, respect, or want to see what it feels like to be them...well, the same is true for drag, and lipsyncing, and voice. When we lipsync...we ride the wave of someone else’s vocal sound. It transforms us.”

By that time, Bijuriya is out of her costume, solely in tights and padding. She walks to the clothing racks and gradually changes into her next costume, a black sari (Figure 36).

“Now, lipsyncing is obviously a central element of drag artistry, but it’s also quite important in the Indian film industry. In most cases, Bollywood actors and actresses lipsync to the sound of other people’s voices, called playback singers. In the films’ song sequences, who you see is not who you hear, and who you hear is not who you see. Even the biggest of celebrities will play and experiment with the magic of vocal drag, where someone else’s vocal sound informs the way they move, emote, and feel a song. Invisible playback singers are lending their voice to other bodies.”

After having described The Concept of Vocal Drag, I explain the Geeta-Guru-Waheeda love triangle and proceed to perform “Geeta” (3.2.4).



Figure 36: Scene 17: “The Concept of Vocal Drag.” Photo credit: Chris Randle.

3.6 VOICEWORK

In Alignment 3, I address my relationship to soundsinging and my interest in integrating a large spectrum of sound to my vocal style. The positioning of this approach has more often been done in relationship to the new music, *musique actuelle*, free improvisation, and free jazz scenes. Although the cultural context is very different, drag lingo also showcases a wealth of vocal range and unconventional sound. Tongue pops, extended tongue trills, “gay lips”, vocal fry, or “gay gasps” all engage in a form of dramatic, exaggerated, or non-normative vocal expression. Queer vocality and soundsinging share this “possibility of the disruption of hegemonic discourse” (Taylor 2022, 177).

Taylor’s case study of the “Miss Vanjie” catchphrase emphasizes how *Drag Race* “has amassed an encyclopedia of catchphrases that have become adapted and appropriated” by the fandom (Taylor 2022, 175). He attributes the contagiousness of *Drag Race* catchphrases to factors such as “linguistic ambiguity, elatory tone, parody,” and the disruptive potential mentioned above (Taylor 2022, 177). This list could be expanded to include various parameters of vocal production and delivery. With the proper pronunciation, inflection, timbre, and *je ne sais quoi*, insiders may immediately recognize *Drag Race* references with even a single word. Ever heard of “hi,” “absolutely,” “choices,” “opulence,” “beast,” “microwave,” “factory,” “baloney,” or “party”?

Considering I use my voice differently in different projects and that I engage different artmaking communities, I tend to make a distinction between *soundsinging*, which I relate to musical, improvisational, and sound-based explorations, and *voicework*, which I consider to be language-based. My voicework in *Bijuriya* draws from notions of character work, theatricality, and drag lingo, but my vocal arsenal is heavily informed by what I have been developing for years in soundsinging.

Categories aside, what matters is the sense of playfulness and wonder I channel into my vocal expression. Tonelli states how “it is important to acknowledge how pleasurable it can be to explore

unexplored avenues of one’s voice” (Tonelli 2019, 135). By bringing into alignment my practice as a soundsinger and my practice as a drag vocalist, the joy I experience exploring these “unexplored avenues” is tremendous!

3.6.1 Scene 4 and 6: “Bollywood Alphabet”

Engaging with the video documentation of the “Bollywood Alphabet” will provide the best experience. The video edit includes footage from two different performances, with different audiences. The editing choices were made to showcase how the unscripted banter and interaction with *insider* audience members truly infuse life into the show. To complement the sensory experience of the video documentation, the reader may also consult Appendix 9 for the complete script, detailed references, and performance notes. The following description of some of the scenes’ artistic intention will provide additional context to the video documentation.

In my introduction to the “Bollywood Alphabet”, I sing the “A B C D E F G H I Love You” song from the film *Hum Saath Saath Hain* (1999). The choice of this song serves different purposes. First, the listing of alphabet letters allows me to set up my “Bollywood Alphabet” as well as the “How Many Ks” song that interrupts it halfway. Also, the song is quite famous and allows me to quickly gauge how many Bollywood *insiders* there might be in the audience. My assessment of the audience’s demographic will adapt my performance of the next few scenes, as they particularly tackle the theme of specific cultural references! Finally, there are a few cultural references in the show that engage other elementary aspects of “learning.” While this song helps us learn our ABC, *Ek Do Teen* shows us how to count (3.7.1) and the *sarali varisai* teaches us the names for notes in Carnatic music (3.5.2). Engaging these elementary aspects of learning reflects my basic efforts to connect to my Indian language and culture.

The “Bollywood Alphabet” is a vocally expressive abecedarium in which every letter prompts one or a few words related to the Indian mainstream entertainment industry (mostly Bollywood, Kollywood, and Indian reality TV). The choice of words or phrases ranges from words commonly heard in film dialogue (“Acchha!”, “Bas!”, “Chup!”), quotes (“Happy birthday Robert!”, “Pooja! What is this behaviour?”), song lyrics (“Chocolate Lime Juice”, “Rang de Basanti!”, “Yeh dosti!”), or phrases related to the industry (“Eros Entertainment”, “Smoking is injurious to health”). The level of popularity for all these cultural references varies – in some cases, they are words or sounds that particularly marked me in my isolated journey of discovering this culture, in others they are part of the current Bollywood zeitgeist or common knowledge, the same way *Drag Race* catchphrases are. I also picked elements that had the potential for exaggerated or playful vocality, such as “Gumsum Gumsum Gu-p chu-p!” and “Jaadoo, Jaadoo, Jaadoo, JAAAADOOOO.”

Considering the distinctiveness of every scene in the show, I wanted to tie things together conceptually and musically as much as I could. During the letter ‘Y’, I directly reference Scene 1: “That Land, India.” The speakers start to play a sound file of Vidita’s voice singing “Yeh Jo Des Hai Tera.” I proceed to lipsync to it and repeat the same gestures as I had in Scene 1. This creates a short moment of interiority and peace, as I recall my relationship to that song, and to ancestral India.

Between each letter, I hop one step towards stage left, using my heels and angle bells to percussively punctuate the change. Appropriate movement, character play, and elements of choreography enhance the experience of each cultural reference. I’ve observed how my performance garners laughter from

the audience, whether the jokes are understood as the specific cultural references they actually are. Sometimes my delivery is enough to elicit a response or to entertain. This analysis is informed by my own observation of the quality and intention of the laughter based on context and perceptiveness, as well as informal audience feedback I have gathered.

3.6.2 Scene 7: “Sung in a Rickshaw”

Once I finish the Bollywood Alphabet, the first trumpet notes from *Sung in a Rickshaw* play from the stage right speaker. From my position downstage left, I shift my body towards the vanity upstage right, moving in small increments, following the rhythm of the music. I sing along to the trumpet piece, with a sense of playfulness and nonchalance. There is a fair amount of freedom in how I move and sing, as I concentrate on the logistical manipulations of different jewel clasps, knots, and zippers. I connect to the sound of the trumpet, punctuating my movements and gestures to the music in a way that sometimes reads as physical humour, other times as enjoying the privacy of my intimate space. Once I reach the vanity, I gradually remove the elements of my costume (Figure 37) as I continue to sing.

The 2010 program note for *Sung in a Rickshaw* states:

Auto-rickshaws are noisy! But the noise turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as it would allow me to practise for my voice or rhythm lessons, with no one hearing me. Alone in a rickshaw, with no teachers around, rehearsing melodies or rhythmical patterns would often drift off into free vocal improvisation. This composition tries to recreate these moments where I would explore a stylistic fusion between these new musical elements and my personal way of understanding, hearing, and singing music.

In a sense, this piece was always meant to be sung *to* and *for* me... whether in a rickshaw, or in a drag studio. Adding a layer of theatrical and conceptual voicework to the piece revitalizes it and makes the composition accessible from different entry points. Just as noisy rickshaws were a space for me to explore my voice privately, my singing in this scene resembles the type of vocalization I would use in my compositional process. The way some composers use a piano, I have used my voice to test out and develop musical ideas; the motivation for singing is thus personal, not performative.



Figure 37: Scene 7: “Sung in a Rickshaw.” Photo credit: Mike Tan.

The trumpet composition *Sung in a Rickshaw* (Figure 38) is inspired by *konnakol*⁷⁸ rhythms I was learning in India; the precision at which I sing along to the rhythms and pitches of a contemporary music solo trumpet piece is meant to elicit a sense of endearing and whimsical playfulness, a sort of “who would sing along to this kind of stuff?” and the answer being: “Gabriel/Bijuriya.”

Sung in a Rickshaw
For solo trumpet
Gabriel DHARMOO

♩ = 180-200

Solo Trumpet in C

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Sung in a Rickshaw - page 2

Figure 38: Score excerpt from *Sung in a Rickshaw*, used in the sound design of Scene 7: “Sung in a Rickshaw”.

3.7 HYBRID FORMATS

My creative process usually seeks to blur boundaries between ideas and avoids systematic use of creative strategies. Hybridity and intermingling of formats are at their most manifest in Scene 16, which draws from lipsyncing, ventriloquism, movement, sound design, speech, and voicework in an inextricable way. Having examined most scenes from the lens of their dominant category, a combined analysis of the different strategies found within Scene 16 will highlight the interdisciplinary nature of my drag.

3.7.1 Scene 16: “Weird Bollywood”

Discussions about *weirdness* in “Conversation 2” lay the groundwork for what I intended to be the most experimental scene in terms of sound, movement, and voice. I don’t know that many people would consider Bollywood to be particularly weird, other than via Internet audiences’ appetite for a “so bad, it’s good” taste level, where unintentional weirdness can be perceived. I wanted to engage with Bollywood culture in a delightfully weird way (as opposed to an ostracizing kind of weird): the cultural references are distorted through sound design, my voicework draws from my soundsinging, and the whole scene is meant to feel like a weird Bollywood dream.

⁷⁸ The art of using vocal syllables to evoke percussion instruments, or perform percussive rhythms, or rhythmic solfege.

Although it is highly modified through sound design,⁷⁹ the first Bollywood cultural reference in this scene is the song “Ek Do Teen” by composer duo Laxmikant–Pyarelal with lyrics by Javed Akhtar from the 1988 film *Tezaab*. In Appendix 9, I mention how subtle allusions to the song have already been slipped in during the Bollywood Alphabet (letters ‘E’, ‘M’ and ‘N’). Here, I lipsync and recreate the choreography of its famous introduction, in which Madhuri Dixit’s character is in dialogue with her dynamic audience (who astoundingly delivers lines in perfect unison). The sound design weaves in an orchestral excerpt from *D’arts moultis* (Figure 40) where soaring French horns and melodramatic strings add a wondrous quality to the film dialogue. The very clear culture reference – for those who recognize it – is recontextualized in this uncanny soundscape, an invitation into my musical brain. We may be reminded that this orchestral excerpt from *D’arts moultis* was also sampled (although differently) in verse 2 of “Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 1”.

Following the introduction, the sound design transitions to Vidita’s voice referencing another of my favourite Bollywood songs – “Bole Re Papihara” composed by Vasant Desai with lyrics by Gulzar from the 1971 film *Guddi*. I lipsync, in the conventional sense, to Vidita’s rendition of the chorus, which is modified and transposed to a higher chipmunk-like pitch.

The song refers to a bird, or “papihara,” speaking. Costume elements take this idea further: there are small little birds attached to my headpiece and sleeves (Figure 39). Another birdlike layer is provided in the sound design, which includes the third miniature from *Ainthu miniyeccars*. Chirping sounds of the piccolo, high-pitched ringing of vibraphone tremolos, and rhythmical tabla figures evoke the flapping of wings (Figure 41). But the playful birdlike weirdness of this scene mostly manifests in my physicality and soundsinging: since the song refers to a bird speaking, why not give it a voice? I wanted to evoke a wide array of strange birdlike creatures, from high whistling, to cooing, to harsher sounds from rare or imaginary birds.

Tonelli describes how soundsingers Jeanne Lee and Yoko Ono included “abstract unconventional vocal sound” in their vocabulary as “part of their broader strategy to refuse to be reduced to the types of gender performance expected of female vocalists” (Tonelli 2019, 27). Jarman-Ivens proposes “the figure of the monster or more specifically the monster/nonmonster boundary” to describe how Diamanda Galás uses “her voice in deliberately ugly ways” (Jarman-Ivens 2011, 130). The element of surprise, subversion, and playful provocation of a drag queen vocalizing as a weird bird allowed me to challenge and broaden the definition of what drag artists can sound like, going beyond the diva idolization we most often witness.

The soundsinging portion of the number transitions into a slow-motion “Ek Do Teen” counting sequence, where I exaggeratingly lipsync and count on my fingers, as we hear playback singer Alka Yagnik melodically count from 1 to 13 in Hindi. The act of counting is conceptually related to my use of the alphabet in the “Bollywood Alphabet”; letters and numbers represent the elementary levels of learning a language. Using famous songs with such straightforward choruses evokes the feeling that Bijuriya is still in the 101 “Learn About Your Culture” course. This also ties into my inclusion of the *sarali varisai* exercise in Scene 8, showing off what are simply the basic first steps of learning Carnatic music.

⁷⁹ In this occurrence, the sound design remixes and modifies the actual film song recording – not Vidita’s voice singing the lead melody.

The number ends with a ventriloquism bit:

Bijuriya smiles widely and delivers the text in ventriloquism.

“You can fall in love with drag for different reasons: Looks, fashion, costumes, hair, song, dance, music, comedy, theatre... reality TV?!... Weirdness...”

Here, my lips stay still and repeatedly vocalize and deform the word “weirdness.”

“and also...”

I stop the ventriloquism to clearly articulate the next word:

“voice!”

My use of ventriloquism in this excerpt is meant to be playful and delightfully weird – whereas its use in Scene 1: “That Land, India” was startling and odd, but less comedic. The extension of the word “weirdness” is always improvised. I do it differently for every performance, channelling my soundsinging artistry while being limited by the challenge of sticking to ventriloquism as I produce the most imaginative sounds I can.



Figure 39: Performance of Scene 16: “Weird Bollywood.” Photo credit: Chris Randle.

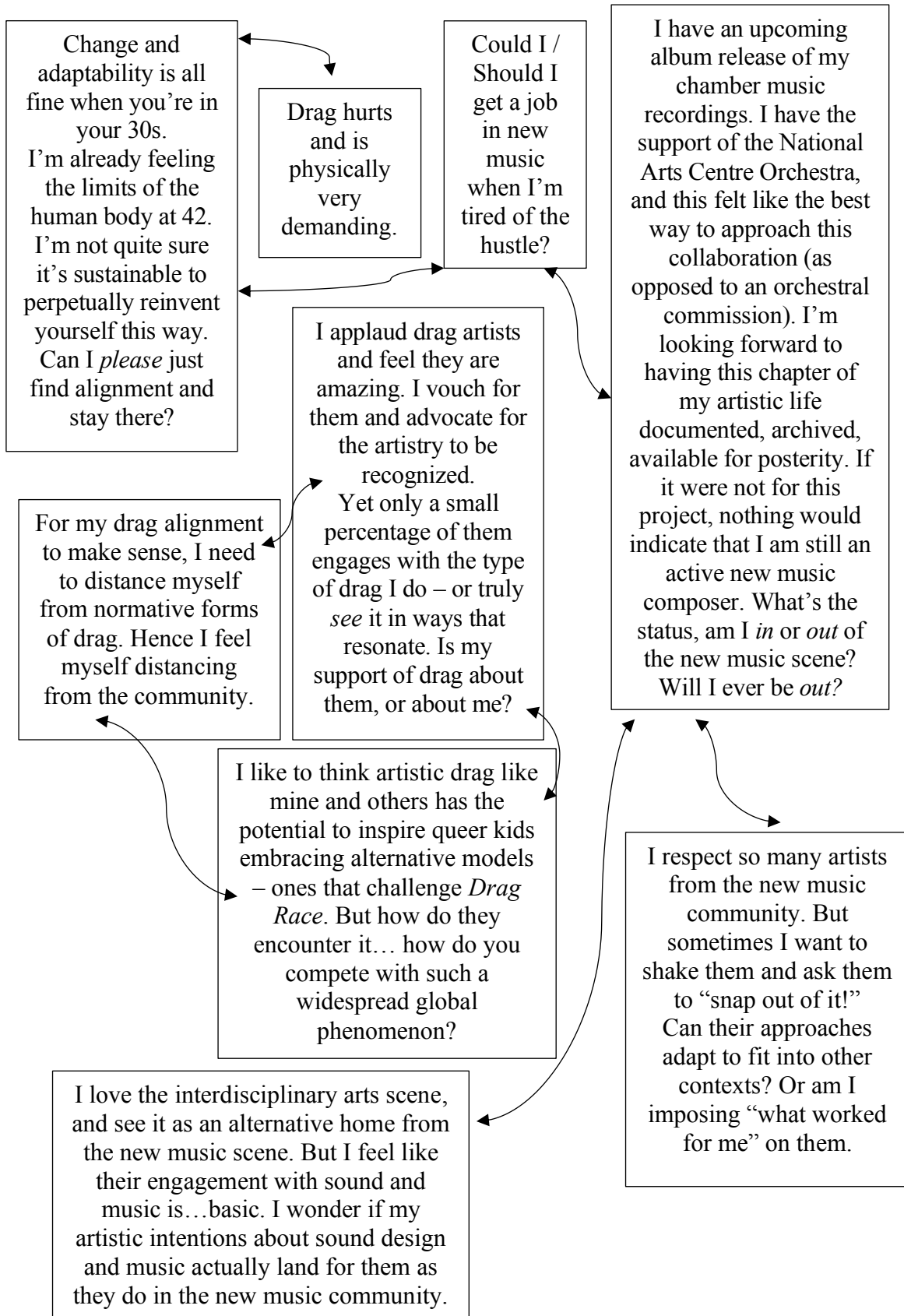
Musical score for page 40, featuring multiple staves for various instruments including Flutes (Fl. 1, Fl. 2), Clarinets (Clar. 1, Clar. 2), Bassoons (Bas. 1, Bas. 2), Saxophones (Sax. 1, Sax. 2), Trumpets (Trp. 1, Trp. 2, Trp. 3), Trombones (Tbn. 1, Tbn. 2, Tbn. 3), Percussion (Perc. 1, Perc. 2, Perc. 3), and Strings (Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Violoncello, Contrabasso).

Musical score for page 41, continuing the orchestration with various instruments including Flutes, Clarinets, Bassoons, Saxophones, Trumpets, Trombones, Percussion, and Strings.

Musical score for page 42, showing dense musical notation for the string and woodwind sections, including Flutes, Clarinets, Bassoons, Saxophones, Trumpets, Trombones, Percussion, and Strings.

Musical score for page 43, featuring complex rhythmic patterns and dense notation across multiple staves, including Flutes, Clarinets, Bassoons, Saxophones, Trumpets, Trombones, Percussion, and Strings.

Figure 40: Score excerpt from *D'arts moults*, used in the sound design of Scene 16: “Weird Bollywood.”



ALIGNMENT 5: CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have expanded on the factors that particularly come to influence my process of seeking alignment. The most substantial ones are: decolonial efforts, audience engagement, queer ways of doing, and the conceptual framing of my vocal sounds. These multilayered issues might just captivate me for the rest of my life!

I now wish to review my process of seeing vocal alignment by revisiting this crucial question I posed in Alignment 1. Regarding the wide range of vocal sounds, techniques, and stylistic genres present in my three Exhibits:

How can I align the vocal sounds my body produces with my artistic, personal, social, and political voice?

Exhibit A:

Lip Service

Lip Service focuses on a conceptual approach to lipsyncing, ventriloquism, speech, and occasional moments of singing. The text is a critique of institutional lip service. Various artistic choices playfully explore the ambiguity between optics and action, at both at the individual and institutional levels: the displacement of vocal sound in and outside the body, the uncanny stillness of my lips and body as it delivers texts, as well as various degrees of (in)genuine performativity.

Exhibit B:

Anthropologies imaginaires

Anthropologies imaginaires weaves together a variety of vocal sounds, in a theatrical framing where they are perceived as forms of vocal otherness: soundsinging, mouth clicks and pops, yodelling, overtone singing, grunting, singing in water, singing with clenched teeth, singing with the live audience, etc. The combination of this vocal approach with other creative strategies, such as the satirical mockumentary, formulates a critique of widespread colonialist attitudes towards othered musics or sounds, which may be expanded into broader, more political contexts.

Exhibit C:

Bijuriya

Bijuriya honours the coexistence of various layers of my self, by celebrating various musical genres, from original pop songs (sung or rapped) to Carnatic music, as well as a playful approach to voicework and a conceptual approach to lipsyncing and ventriloquism. This allowed me to reflect upon the intersection of my queerness and my brownness. Furthermore, the sound design and overall narrative acknowledge my journey as a new music composer. Through voice and sound, these different layers of my self intertwine and align.

My model for vocal alignment implies a fair degree of vocal flexibility, in line with my inclination to sing *differently*.

Singing *differently* reflects the ways I wish to be in the world:
engaged and critical, playful yet subversive, unpredictable yet adaptable.

Singing *differently* defies the norms of
accepted, categorizable, and celebrated singing styles or techniques.

It is an inclusive approach where any type of vocal sound may be integrated, whether it corresponds to standardized notions of beauty or not. This approach directly relates to what may be referred to as soundsinging, extended vocal technique, sound poetry, or experimental voicework – but ironically, these vocalizing styles often seek to exclude “overused” stylistic references and tend to avoid any sense of familiarity. Therefore:

Singing *differently* means adapting my vocal sound
to best serve the nature, concept, context, and intention of a given project.

I partially attribute my vocal flexibility to a lack of formal vocal training or rigid technique. If one way of vocalizing feels like a hindrance to my vocal alignment, I will think of, or draw from another. I will sing like *this* for a project, but like *that* for another. As I engage with different types of spaces, networks, communities, and audiences, my use of voice is reframed, reshaped, and adapted. I want my singing to summon a sense of wonder, beauty, discovery, community strengthening, and resistance – at different levels in different projects, with different audiences in mind, to foster different types of collective experiences.

My experience as both a new music composer and soundsinger has shaped the way I think of my personal model for vocal alignment. As seen in Alignment 3, my musical development evolved in different streams simultaneously. The stream that led me to being a new music composer was more so academic and institutional. My practice as a soundsinger, however, has evolved in independent, underground, DIY, or free improvisation music communities – communities that don’t often get their fair due as hotspots for effervescent innovation. With a musical background so focused on sound explorations, it makes sense that the parameters that led to my vocal alignment started at the sonic or musical level. I have always reflected on how vocal sound is composed – or organized, during improvisation – with consideration to the fundamental elements of pitch, duration, dynamics, tempo, and musical structure. Vocal sound production has also been important; timbre, colour, or tone all expand into physiological placement and choice of technique. Then there are notions such as stylistic references, phonetic repertoire, or verbal/lyrical content (if any). The interplay between all these factors has created an inspiring playground for my vocal artistry. I still *love* expressing myself through soundsinging – but not every context is as appropriate for it as, for example, a free improvisation gig, or the projects of our vocal collective Phth.⁸⁰ When the context isn’t quite as fitting – i.e., a drag performance – I try to figure out in what ways my use of voice can be not only appropriate, but meaningful, special, and aligned.

⁸⁰ Vocal collective formed of Sarah Albu, David Cronkite, Elizabeth Lima, Kathy Kennedy, Andrea Young, and me.

My process of seeking vocal alignment has been marked by the key notions of change, fluidity, and adaptability.

Improvisation has influenced my use of alignment as a research-creation method. When it comes to the perennial comparison between improvised music and notated music, I've always straddled both worlds but have felt better aligned with the former. Even in my childhood and adolescence, making up funny songs on the fly or fiddling around with music software were much more interesting to me than practising the cello repertoire. I always had a strong propensity to adapt and go with the flow – not only from a musical or professional perspective, but as a way of life. If something doesn't feel right, I won't stubbornly keep "playing from the score." I will not hesitate to change course; to improvise. I wholeheartedly agree with Tonelli's claim that "Maggie Nicols is, perhaps, the improvising musician most responsible for promoting the notion that the crucial prerequisite for improvisation is *social* virtuosity" (Tonelli 2015, 1).

I do feel to keep that openness, that flexibility, that almost anarchic quality of not actually fixing things is important. Which doesn't mean that you don't have principles—I think it's important to have principles—but if it becomes dogma, you know. So that's what I feel improvisation does. There is a skill. There's a body of knowledge. We have our own traditions, but at the same time, as I was saying before, we're constantly being aware that the universe itself is evolving and we are evolving with it.

Nicols as quoted in Tonelli 2015, 9

I appreciate Nicols' emphasizing how the world changes, and so do we. The process of seeking alignment embraces that. As an improviser who shares the same weariness of "dogma" as Nicols, I choose to go with the flow rather than stay still. As I seek alignment, I cannot foresee what kind of shifts (in my artistic practice or in my life) await me. Still, I seek change. I welcome it. I come to expect it. From composer, to vocalist, to interdisciplinary artist, to drag artist, to... I don't know what.

In full acknowledgement of my subjectivity as an artist, I can't help but associate vocal commitment to one "genre" with Nicols' idea of fixity and dogma. Through my artistic work, I wish to provoke a reflection in my peers and audience alike. Is the use of standardized vocal sound by various artists an artistically aligned choice, or the direct result of standard vocal training? In discussing the impact of training or education on new music composers, Robinson denotes "a near-exclusive focus on the formal qualities of music in compositional training" which results in "a lack of opportunity for composers to question the ethical implications [of] the cultural and social significance of the musical languages they use" (Robinson 2020, 133). Whereas composers are encouraged to focus on "formal qualities of music," vocalists often learn one way of singing only, which remains unquestioned throughout their career. In both examples, it is the "ethical implications [...] of the musical languages they use" (Robinson 2020, 133) that, for me, provide a great source of reflection.

**As a researcher *and* artist, I make a distinction between
vocal alignment as a potential framework for others and
artistic opinions or perspective I have developed over the years.**

Because I care so much about the vocal approach I have been developing for years, it is only natural that I would engage critically with other vocalists' artistic practices, whatever their style or approach may be. Whatever opinion I may have on their work is related to my artistic subjectivity, rather than my proposed model of alignment, which I do believe has potential for those who wish to personalize it. For example, I am not interested in "converting" singers to a "weird soundsinging" vocal approach simply because it "works for me." Most likely, that would be misaligned with the artistry they have developed and the singing they love, and genuinely care about. Yet there is something to be said about perceiving misalignment in other people's work. I am reminded of Robinson's questioning of the neo-Baroque musical language used in the Indigenous-led and themed project *Giiwedín* (2010) by Spy Dénommé-Welch and Catherine Magowan. Robinson observes that "their more general use of an early music aesthetic remains particularly incongruous" (Robinson 2020, 126).⁸¹ Sometimes, my instincts lead me to believe that shifting *this* or *that* could benefit an artist's better alignment, or constructively address a contradiction I may perceive. Often times, this can be done without affecting the core of the artist's practice, or their sense of self. Mentorship and pedagogy already engage with similar methodologies of constructive feedback and criticism.

**As an art lover and audience member, I strive for
a diversity of alignments.**

In comparison to an improvising soundsinger, singers who have honed their skill and artistry over many years in a given musical style or tradition might be less prone to (or used to) change. However, they are still subject to identify areas of misalignment. Their artistry, positionality, and overall stakes are different, so will their personal strategies for vocal alignment. I often think of opera singers who critique the genre's problematic legacy, outdated sensibilities, questionable themes, and exclusionary typecasting regarding gender identities or body type. Depending on the severity of their internal misalignment, they might want to distance themselves or opt out of the opera world's standardized ways of doing. My observation is that these singers will not readily abandon their hard-earned vocal technique. In their process of seeking vocal alignment, their focus might be on other factors that affect their artistic practice. Beyond changing or adapting their vocal sound, vocal artists who seek alignment have agency around concept, content, themes, method, format, and other practical aspects such as performance-practice protocols, concert/event planning or etiquette, staging, and involvement of other artforms or collaborators.

For example, Nikkei Canadian queer/trans non-binary opera singer Teiya Kasahara approaches operatic repertoire critically. Kasahara writes:

⁸¹ When observing or perceiving areas of misalignment in others, "incongruous" is a useful word. The "incongruence" inherent to Rogers' concept of self-concept comes to mind (Rogers 1959).

I don't want to abandon opera. There is so much sonic beauty, power, and theatricality within the canonic works. Sadly, that beauty is surrounded by racist and misogynistic storylines. I increasingly find it troubling to perform in such works, and continue to reckon with this. I think one way forward is to ensure that these works are presented truthfully and in respectful, transparent ways by artists whose lived experiences can best reflect the storylines.

Kasahara in Dharmoo et al. 2021

Kasahara acknowledges the artform's systemic racism and the fact the "opera industry wouldn't change for [them]," yet these contradictions offer the opportunity to "express [their] journey of gender and internalized racial oppression" through the creation of new artistic work (Dharmoo et al. 2021). Rather than the nature of their vocal sound per se, Kasahara's model for seeking vocal alignment is more so informed by a desire for tailor-made artistic creations and agency regarding the presentation of their work. Teiya and I use distinct and personalized *vocal* alignment strategies, yet both of us have found similar forms of *queer* alignment.

Artists seeking vocal alignment might choose to adapt or change either their vocal technique, choice of artistic formats, or the contextual circumstances surrounding the sharing and presentation of their artistic output. In other words, *something* must shift, but not *everything* needs to change, or needs to shift at the same time, with the same level of commitment.

I perceive forms of alignment in the practice of many other artists, often at different levels in different projects. Any attempt at providing a list feels unfair to those I would inadvertently be omitting. In bringing up Elizabeth Lima and Kathy Kennedy, who are friends and colleagues, I point to the fact that my degree of familiarity with their work *and* their being allows me to appreciate more layers of their vocal alignment.

By channelling the lyrebird's particular ability to mimic an astonishing range of sounds, Elizabeth Lima's *Lyrebird Hotel* (2023) "serves as a metaphor for improvisation, an act of social interaction in which we attempt to understand the other and their relationship to others through imitation, response, or dialogue." As Lima showcases her particularly idiosyncratic vocal palette, drawing from lyrical singing, cabaret, goth, growl and noise music, the project also artistically engages discourse on feminism and the "mad, bad or sad" tropes assigned to the female artists she pays homage to.⁸²

Kathy Kennedy's engagement of "public space and physical space through voice" feels aligned with her research interests in "listening skills, acoustic ecology and vocal improvisation," as well as her artistic output as "sonic choreographies," which are "large-scale sonic installation/performances for many singers and radio." The fact she engages with multiple singers' voice feels aligned with her desire to foster community through the arts.⁸³

⁸² All quotes and information concerning Elizabeth Lima are from the promotional description of "Lyrebird Hotel," as published on Suoni Per Il Popolo's website (Accessed August 2023: <https://suoniperilpopolo.org/program/elisabeth-lima-lori-freedman-julie-houle>).

⁸³ All quotes and information concerning Kathy Kennedy are from her biography, as published on her personal website (Accessed August 2023: <https://kathykennedy.ca/bio/>).

My personal conception of vocal alignment

**celebrates a diverse range of vocal approaches
that takes into serious consideration
their interaction with the social and cultural context.**

Whenever I've felt my alignment strategies worked for me, it was because I investigated more layers of myself and adapted my creative strategies in consequence. I see alignment as the potential intermingling, reconciliation, allyship between the selves – I seek their alignment, rather than their separation. The benefit of seeking alignment is for me to grow stronger into myself and my artistic self, in relation to the realities that come to affect me and the communities I care about. Rather than seeking mainstream appeal, so-called prestigious opportunities, or a high level of excellence in a celebrated musical genre, I have prioritized the compatibility between my medium and my message – between my voice and my *voice*. My vocal alignment happens to question, subvert, and challenge expectations.

I advocate for a diversity of alignments. Diverse alignment strategies can come to enrich the broader culture. I strive for more vocal alignments, queer alignments, [_____] alignments.⁸⁴ I believe that art created from a process of seeking alignment is art that speaks from an artist's most genuine place. As more of us seek alignment, our artistic communities grow stronger. Alignment leads to legible and coherent artistic propositions; their accumulation, combination, and crosspollination creates social artistic discourse. The stronger the discourse, the stronger our potential for meaningful and significant agency.

⁸⁴ [_____] are not mine to define, these would come to influence other artmaking communities beyond my scope.

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APPENDIX 1: PERFORMANCE SCORE FOR *LIP SERVICE*

Gabriel Dharmoo

Lip Service

I.

Without backing track

| MODE | PERFORMER EXPRESSION | PERFORMER VOICE |
|--------|---|---|
| Spoken | Spoken <i>Performative character</i> | Does the world need change? Does our community need change? Do we need change? Well <i>I</i> think things <i>should</i> change. Things <i>need</i> to change. Things <i>will</i> change. |

TECH BOOTH:

START BACKING TRACK

Right after “Things *will* change”

II.

| MODE | REPEATS (measures) | PERFORMER MOUTH | PERFORMER VOICE | BODY SPEAKER | PA SPEAKERS | IN EAR | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|---|-------------|---|-------------|
| Standby | BACKING TRACK | | | | | Click track ♩ = 100 (8 beats intro) | |
| Started from tech booth at end of I. | | | | | | | |
| Ventriloquy | 4 | <i>Neutral</i> | Li | | | Click track ♩ = 100 | |
| | 4 | | Li | __p | | | |
| | 4 | | Li_ sss | __p | | | |
| | 4 | | Li_ ser | __p ___vvv | | | |
| | 4 | | Li_ ser_s/ | __p ___v | | | |
| | 4 | | Li_ ___ice/ | __p serv | | | |
| | 4 | | Li | <i>deconstruct</i> | | | __p service |
| | free | | <i>Creep in a smile</i> | L <i>deconstruct rhythm</i> | | | Lip service |
| | free | <i>Odd wide smile</i> | Sustained Ingressive sound | <i>Repeated</i> <i>Reaches climax</i> <i>Ends with conclusive</i> | | | |
| | | <i>Conclude in relation to:</i> | Lip service | | | | |

III. *attaca*

| MODE | BODY SPEAKER | PA SPEAKERS | IN EAR | PERFORMER VOICE |
|---|--------------|-------------|-------------|---|
| Spoken <i>Performative character</i> | | | | Things need to be done! |
| Ventriloquy (neutral) | | | 1 click cue | Who's doing the work? |
| | | | 1 click cue | Who's <i>actually</i> doing the work? |
| | | | 1 click cue | Who's doing the <i>actual</i> work? |
| | | | 1 click cue | Who's <i>actually</i> doing the <i>actual</i> work? |
| Ventriloquy + Speaker | Am I... | | | ... doing the work? |
| | Am I... | | | ... <i>actually</i> doing the work? |
| | Am I... | | | ... doing the <i>actual</i> work? |
| | Am I... | | | ... <i>actually</i> doing the <i>actual</i> work? |
| Ventriloquy (look around) + PA | | Harmonies | | Is <i>art</i> work? |
| | | | | Is <i>artwork</i> work? |
| | | | | Is <i>this</i> artwork work? |
| | | | | Is this artwork <i>actually</i> doing the work? |
| | | | | Is this artwork <i>actually</i> doing the <i>actual</i> work? |

IV. *attaca*

| MODE | REPEATS | PERFORMER MOUTH | PERFORMER VOICE | BODY SPEAKER | IN EAR |
|---|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--|--------------------------|
| <i>Standby</i> | 2 | <i>Neutral</i> | 8 beat count | | Click track ♩ = 100 |
| Ventriloquy | 1 | | A (æ) x 2 | | |
| | 1 | | Ac x 2 | | |
| | 1 | | Act (ækt) x 2 | | |
| | 1 | | Act (ækʃ) x 2 | | |
| | 1 | | Action x 2 | | |
| Spoken <i>Performative character</i> | 2 | ʒ ʒ Actual ʒ | action ʒ ʒ ʒ | | 1 click cue |
| Ventriloquy | 8 (free rhythm) | <i>look around</i> | Words | <i>Whispered word cloud</i> Decentre, Diversify, Decolonize, Unpack, Complicate, Analyze, Denounce, Critique, Radicalize, Demonstrate, Awaken, Coopt, Nuance, Protest, Counteract, Disidentify, Distance, Voice | |
| <i>Standby</i> | 2 | | | | 8 beats |
| Spoken <i>Performative character</i> | 2 | ʒ, But what about actual | action ʒ ʒ ʒ | | 1 click cue + 4 beats |
| Ventriloquy | 3 | <i>neutral</i> | O (ɑ) | | Click track ♩ = 100 |
| | 3 | | O (gradually shorten) | __P | |
| | 3 | | O | __pt | |
| | 3 | | O__tics (short O) | __pt | |
| | 4 | | O__tics Action | __pt | |

V. attaca

| MODE | BODY SPEAKER | PA SPEAKERS | PERFORMER VOICE |
|--|--------------|---------------------|--|
| HYBRID Ventriloquy LipSync Spoken | | P p heartbeat-cloud | <i>Improvise on</i> Heavy is the tongue |
| Ventriloquy | | | <i>End on</i> Heavy is the tongue... that does the lifting... |

APPENDIX 2:

BIJURIYA’S VIRTUAL AND TELEVISED DRAG VIDEOS (2020-2021)

| Virtual Event and/or Context | Song and/or Concept | Date |
|---|---|------------|
| “Don't Rush Challenge: Desi Royalty Edition” – A “Pass the brush challenge.” ⁸⁵ Initiated by members of the Desi drag community (USA and abroad). | A video showcasing Desi drag artists in and out of drag, to “Don’t Rush” Young T & Bugsey (ft. Headie One). | April 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/B-8iDmSnNpo/ | | |
| Brown Drag Exists – A “Pass the chai challenge” initiated by Asifa Lahore (UK and abroad). | A video showcasing brown drag artists in and out of drag, to “Kaliyon Ka Chaman” Harry Anand (Remix DJ X Holic X DJ AK). | April 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/B_SabVsndhn/ | | |
| “Akela” – Virtual Bollywood Party. 2-hour Bollywood set by DJ Aman with over 20 Desi drag artists providing virtual videos. Produced by Rangeela (Toronto). | First part: “Crazy Habibi v/s Decent Munda” from <i>Arjun Patiala</i> in which I dance and showcase my different cultures with flags from India, Trinidad and Tobago, Canada and Québec. // Second part: “Mere Rashqe Qamar” from <i>Baadshaho</i> in which the videography reflects the lyrics sand, the desert, and thirst. | May 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/B_5CWRdny4r/ | | |
| A+ The Pan-Asian Drag Revue – Virtual Cabaret featuring over 40 drag artists from the pan-Asian diaspora. Two numbers: “Old School Girl” and “Boss B*tch De Basanti”. | “Old School Girl (Haryanvi)” from <i>Tanu Weds Manu Returns</i> – I play both the boy and girl characters in a love story with handwritten letters. | May 2020 |
| Produced by Emi Grate (New York City). | I create my own musical mashup of “Boss Bitch” by Doja Cat and “Rang De Basanti” by A.R. Rahman. I wished to merge a current hit by Doja Cat with a Bollywood reference. | May 2020 |
| Sped-up excerpt of “Old School Girl” available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CK6sx7xno8i/ “Boss B*tch de Basanti” available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CBVp2i7nQ_1/ | | |
| “Yass Rani” – Virtual Bollywood Party. 2-hour Bollywood set by DJ Aman with over 40 South Asian drag artists from 7 countries providing virtual videos. Produced by Rangeela (Toronto). | First part: “Mungda” from <i>Total Dhamal</i> in which I reference the original song video from <i>Inkaar</i> where Helen traps an ant in a glass. Second part: “Ole Ole 2.0” from <i>Jawaani Jaaneman</i> in which we edited footage of me interacting with the video playing on a TV. | June 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CB_cDEAHnHW/ | | |
| “Tashan-e-Pride” – Virtual Bollywood performances and interview snippets. Produced by Tashan Events (Toronto). | A Bollywood number on “Bani Bani” from <i>Main Prem Ki Divani Hoon</i> , in which I poke fun at some Bollywood actors. I also lipsync to instrumental sounds in a humorous way. Tashan also asked the drag artists to answer questions and published our answers on social media. | June 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CBvTZYPFI6g/ | | |
| “Night of Caribbean Drag” – Virtual Cabaret featuring drag artists from the Caribbean diaspora. Produced by Caribbean Equality Project, Laila Gulabi and Sundari Indian-Goddess (New York City). | A storytelling video using “Mrs. Tourist” by Lord Kitchener. Using a family story about my parents meeting in Trinidad and Tobago and neighbours referring to my mom as “Mrs. Tourist,” I address my relationship and engagement with Indo-Caribbeanness. | July 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CCyUQz1HWvU/ | | |

⁸⁵ A trend on TikTok and Instagram where makeup artists or drag artists film themselves before and after their transformation. Brushing the camera lens with a makeup brush between both video segments allows to edit them together as a seemingly magical or sudden transformation. Participants “pass the brush” outside the frame of the camera, and the next participant appears to grab it from them and the whole thing loops until the end.

| | | |
|--|---|-----------|
| “Digital Coven” – Virtual Cabaret for queerdo, horror, weird or filthy drag artists. Produced by House of Gahd (Montréal). | An interpretation of “sad day” by FKA twigs with looks and headpieces made of electrical cables and earbuds. Every performance I do for Coven, I see as an opportunity to engage with non-South Asian cultural references, on the weirder side. | July 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CDO1DrYnWaa/ | | |
| “Illusions” Virtual Drag show. Produced by Fierté Montréal and televised on MaTV (Montréal). | An improved version of my virtual drag number “Boss B*tch de Basanti”. | Aug. 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CF2NCj2Hqe4/ | | |
| “360 Edition – Vox Pop on the different drag communities.” Produced by Fierté Montréal and televised on MaTV (Montréal). | One of the guests in a Vox Pop with various questions about drag communities. Hosted by Mado Lamotte and also featuring Anaconda La Sabrosa, BiG SiSSY, Uma Gahd, Rock Bière, and Denim Pussy. | Aug. 2020 |
| “Finding your Drag Identity” Tutorial on Instagram Live. Produced by It Gets Better India (India). | I gave a one-hour interactive live talk from their Instagram account. | Aug. 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CDWg7R9lijh/ | | |
| “Desi Arts in Montréal” Cabaret Produced by Pervers/Cité (Montréal). | Masala Massi and I applied to Pervers/Cité and presented a 90-minute virtual event showcasing local Desi talents. | Aug. 2020 |
| “Digital Coven” – Virtual Cabaret for queerdo, horror, weird or filthy drag artists. Produced by House of Gahd (Montréal) | I sang and arranged an interpretation of Henry Purcell’s “Cold Genius Aria” from <i>King Arthur</i> . | Nov. 2020 |
| Available at: https://youtu.be/9fs2Az_N2GE | | |
| “Digital Jai Ho” – Virtual Cabaret with South Asian drag artists. Produced by A Queer Pride and Trikone Chicago (Chicago). | A vintage and very quirky number from “Aankhen Meri Maikhana” from <i>Sawan Bhadon</i> in which I embody lots of fun characters (of different gender expressions) and use the rich musical potential of the song. | Dec. 2020 |
| Available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CI1dErXHUBs/ | | |
| “All About ME Season 5” hosted and produced by Miss Bhenji (India). | India-based drag show featuring music from the past decade. My year was 2013 and pays homage to M.I.A.’s album <i>Matangi</i> . | Jan. 2021 |
| Available in 3 parts: Part 1 “Bring the Noize”: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CJrDGq2n8Aa/ Part 2 “Bad Girls”: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CJueY7anAOY/ Part 3 “Come Walk With Me”: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CJzTJO1nBB5/ | | |
| RepARTtations Fundraiser for Indigenous environment protectors and mutual aid – Early 2000s Burlesque and Drag event. Hosted by Ms. Pepper and produced by RepARTtations (Montréal). | A storytelling number with some elements of comedic voice work, on two early 2000s songs associated with Kareena Kapoor: “Dupatta” from <i>Jeena Sirf Mere Liye</i> and “Dupatta Mera” from <i>Mujhe Kucch Kehna Hai</i> . | May 2021 |
| Sped-up excerpt of “Old School Girl” available at: https://www.instagram.com/reel/CK6sx7xno8i/ | | |
| “Digital Coven” – Virtual Cabaret for queerdo, horror, weird or filthy drag artists. Produced by House of Gahd (Montréal). | A cover of Kate Bush’s “Wuthering Heights” in collaboration with Mercyry (composer James O’Callaghan). | Aug. 2021 |
| Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9njoB9ddMo | | |

APPENDIX 3: ANNOTATED LYRICS FOR “BIJURIYA CHAMKE, PT. 1”

Scene 2 – “Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 1”

Verse 1

*I sing Part 1 of this song
in a marvelous
Bollywood-princess look!
(Figure 12)*

I have Indian ancestry
Can't you tell from my bindi?

*I point to the bindi in the
middle of my forehead.
Take a hint, this sticker isn't
cultural appropriation!*

My daddy is a Trini!
I'm also white and Frenchy

Bonsoir Québécoise mommy!

Yeah, that's my family history

I'm on a quest for learning

The different parts of me

*A desified reference to
Shrek's onion layers.*

A layered onion bhaji

*In Hindi, *bijuriya* means
lightning or thunderbolt.*

My Indianness has benchmarks

In shapes of question marks

And that's when lightning sparks

Eureka!

I'm gonna do drag!

*A lightning bolt sound
effect emphasizes this word.*

Chorus

*The chorus is
choreographed with
Bharatanatyam gestures
that evoke each verb/idea
of the manifesto.*

To shock, ignite,
Empower, and delight
I'm Bijuriya!

(Bijuriya Chamke, Bijuriya, Bijuriya)

Make art,

Connect,

Engage,

and reflect.

I'm Bijuriya!

*Sample from a Hindi song.
I'll remain vague (I don't
want a lawsuit) but it is
from *the* film that got me
hooked on Bollywood.*

(Bijuriya Chamke, Bijuriya, Bijuriya)

Verse 2

The vocal effect on
“Yeeeah” emphasize the
feeling of uneasiness.

You can hear my
orchestral composition
D’arts moults in
the sound design.

Before the wigs and lipstick
I’d always been artistic
With flair for sound and music
To cultivate this passion
I sought an education
Which led to composition
Yeeeah I’m a trained composer
Jot music notes on paper
As if my ears don’t matter
From chamber to symphonic
It felt so academic
It felt so Eurocentric
So how about drag?!

With its reverence of scores,
the new music scene
is very eye-based.

Chorus

To shock, ignite, empower,
and delight, I’m Bijuriya!
Make art, connect, engage,
and reflect, I’m Bijuriya!

*I get the audience to cheer
and hike up the
mermaid dress to reveal
yellow tights and
red Converse high heels
(Figure 12).*

< Instrumental break >

Rap

Poking fun at *Drag Race*
contestants’ clichéd lyrics,
which often hint at
deserving “the crown.”

*I end the song with
my fist out and a fierce
expression.*

Bijuriya, Bijuriya,
Bijuriya Chamke!
That means: Lightning strikes
Queers of my descent I wanna represent
But I feel so insufficient
Half-white half-brown
I’m a musical clown
No desire for a crown
Storm’s a-brewing
I’m a thunderbolt
Reminder: Drag is a revolt!

Impostor syndrome,
anyone?

Additional references to the
meaning of my name.

APPENDIX 4: ANNOTATED LYRICS FOR “BIJURIYA CHAMKE, PT. 2”

Scene 10 – “Bijuriya Chamke, Pt. 2”

The words from the chorus echo as I sit at the makeup table (Figure 13).

To shock, ignite,
Empower, and delight.
Make art, connect,
Engage, and reflect.

In this verse I recreated quotes from “Deewana Hai Dekho,” from the film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*. I’ll help you spot all three sound bites...

Verse 3

Listen for sound bite 1: I imitated the awe/“wow” sound effect of the chorus, followed by the iconic “Whatever” voiced by Kareena Kapoor as her now cult-classic character Poo.

Bewildered by my culture
I felt like an impostor
Is Bollywood the answer?
I watched a million movies

For many years, an Excel file kept track of which film I had seen, along with cast and crew credits and my rating.

My consumption of Indian media did not discriminate — I watched repertoire films as well as the worst films you can imagine.

I built an expertise
In repertoire and cheese
I recognized my genes
in the faces on the screens
I thought I’d found my queens

Listen for sound bite 2: I recreated the very cheesy choral bit: “We’re Cool Like That, We’re Hip Like That”

Many film stars endorse fairness creams, products that reinforce skewed, colourist beauty standards.

But they use fairness creams
Live the capitalistic dream
And... I kinda hate mainstream
I’d rather do drag!

Listen for sound bite 3: “Who are you” / “Who is he?” from the same Poo character.

Chorus

To shock, ignite, empower,
and delight, I’m Bijuriya!
Make art, connect, engage,
and reflect, I’m Bijuriya!

Yup . . . I’ve always gravitated towards the countercultural, the alternative, the subversive. Although my interest in Bollywood in the predominantly white cultural context of Québec felt quite “countercultural”...

Verse 4

Indian percussions are evoked in the mix.

I went on an adventure
Compelled by my ancestors
From India to Indenture
It took me on a journey
Where self-discovery
Met with music artistry

Acknowledging indenture and the histories of displacement of my ancestors.

Using my arms and fingers to play air-cello. My eyes closed...

< 20 second instrumental passage >

I learned to play Carnatic

I tap the tala of the song in my hands, a way to keep the rhythm and highlight the reference to the tradition.

Connected to that music
Melodic and majestic
I sang Ni Sa Ri Pa Ga Ri

These Carnatic music swaras (solfege notes) actually fit the melody of my song.

Two ragas that I learned in my studies. The Carnatic cello we hear in the mix is in raga Thodi, whereas the upcoming Scene 12: "Carnatic Voyage" uses raga Kalyani.

In Kalyani and Thodi
Quite superficially...
You wanna do drag?

The tapping of my tala softens and turns into a gesture of dismissal.

Chorus

To shock, ignite, empower and delight, I'm Bijuriya!
Make art, connect, engage and reflect, I'm Bijuriya!

Big smile! – somewhat jarring from the vulnerability just expressed. Why even try to pursue Carnatic music when drag is an artform which such freedom!?

< Outro >

APPENDIX 5: ANNOTATED LYRICS FOR “HOW MANY KS”

Scene 5 – “How Many Ks”

Intro

Kishore Kumar, ← Three playback singers
Kavita Krishnamurthy, ← with double-K initials.
Kailash Kher, ←
KK, KK?
OK, ok, Ok ok, KK 'Kay

KK is also a playback singer, but here I play with the alliteration between his name and ‘OK’

Verse 1

I’ve always been struck with how many celebrity names, as well as film and song titles start with the letter ‘K’.⁸⁶

‘K’ is a common letter catapulting star power
Bollywood’s obsessed with that mystical letter
Maybe it’s the power of Indian numerology
Add up ‘em letters to control your destiny
(yeah) Karan swapped a C for a K in Koffee
It’s all about astrology, not KKK supremacy
But lucky number lucky letter ain’t the trick
If you want success just go nepotistic

Karan Johar’s famous talk show *Koffee with Karan* is just one of many of his endeavours that superstitiously starts with the letter ‘K’.⁸⁸

Whereas filmmakers might embrace numerology for luck and success, I imply that the underlying factor for success in that film industry is nepotism. Karan Johar has been described by Kangana Ranaut as the “flagbearer for nepotism” and is often associated with it.

Many filmmakers change the spelling of film titles for auspicious reasons linked to numerology.⁸⁷

I felt like a song about the letter ‘K’ in the North American context needed to outrightly dispel any KKK association!

Also, the prominence of the letter ‘K’ in surnames is not a coincidence; powerful surnames like Kapoor, Khan, Khanna, and Kumar tend to multiply through nepotism.

⁸⁶ Apparently I’m not the only one: <https://www.quora.com/Whats-so-special-about-the-letter-K-in-Bollywood-Why-are-the-heroes-either-Kapoors-or-Khans-or-Kumars-or-Khannas> (Accessed July 2023).

⁸⁷ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/numerology-dominates-b-town/articleshow/6706610.cms> (Accessed July 2023).

⁸⁸ <https://www.iwmbuzz.com/movies/photos-movies/story-behind-karan-johars-movies-starting-k/2020/01/12> (Accessed July 2023).

In my choreography, I show off the “Bijuriya” design element on the back of my jacket (Figure 14) and I form the letter ‘K’ with my body.

Both Kapoor sisters have been working as actresses in the Hindi film industry and have double-K initials. Kareena was dating dimpled actor Shahid Kapoor but left him for Saif Ali Khan. Saif is often referred to as a nawab – although the royal title is now abolished, he is indeed the son of Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi, the last Nawab of Pataudi.

I imply that triple-K power must be pretty hard to beat! Neither Aamir Khan, Shahrukh Khan, or Salman Khan (the 3 Khans) could ever dream of that. They are only single-K level, although they fight for the top spot as the best actor of their era.

Bollywood commonly refers to male heartthrobs as “chocolate heroes.” The 3 Khans did indeed rule the box office for three decades since the late 1980s.⁸⁹

Chorus

How many Ks can you take
There’s power in that letter

Interlude

Karisma Kapoor
Kareena Kapoor Khan

Verse 2

Two Kapoor sisters with
Double K initials
But Bebo needed more,
she just cannot accept rivals

Found herself a nawab
and dumped the cute one
with the dimples

Leveled up her K game,
from doubles, to triples
Triple K initials:

none of the 3 Khans could
Although they self-proclaim
as King Khan of Bollywood

Strutting their stuff like
there never was a Genghis
Macho Chocolate Heroes
Conquering the Box Office

Chorus

How many Ks can you take
There’s power in that letter

After singing each first name, I hold the microphone to the audience to see if they can scream the last name (Figure 15). The tactic of checking whether the audience catches my narrow references is a very present throughout my piece – the lack of participation is expected, yet interesting to observe.

Bebo is Kareena’s nickname. Compared to Karisma, she would be more ambitious and has a feistier personality.

She ended up marrying Saif. By adding Khan to her surnames, her initials went from double-K to triple-K.

A reference to Genghis Khan, and these 3 actors seemingly overestimating their power.

I shed my jacket and get the audience to cheer!

⁸⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khans_of_Bollywood (Accessed July 2023).

Interlude

Katrina Kaif,
Kalki Koechlin,
Kirron Kher,

Katrina Kaif is a British actress
(so a foreigner, or *firangi*)
yet one of biggest
Bollywood superstars.

Kalki Koechlin is French,
but was born in
Pondicherry, India.
She is known for both
commercial films and
offbeat independent films.

Verse 3

Kajol

Katrina's repping for
the firangis
while Kalki's a frenchy -
but also born-desi (bonjour!)

Kirron Kher often plays
a mother or auntie type of figure.
Her on-screen persona is quite
lovable, but turns out in her real
life she's a member of the BJP,
the right-wing Hindu nationalist-
leaning political party.

Kirron is all versions -- of
your mommy -- your aunty,
Loving but conservative,
supportive of the BJP

Kangana Ranaut often stirs up
controversies when she voices
her opinion in ways sometimes
witty, other times uninformed or
insensitive (for example calling
farmer protesters terrorists, or
implying that India only
obtained true freedom in 2014
with Narendra Modi).

Kajol, mononymous powerhouse
(Iconic!)
Beautiful monobrow, barely
any lipstick

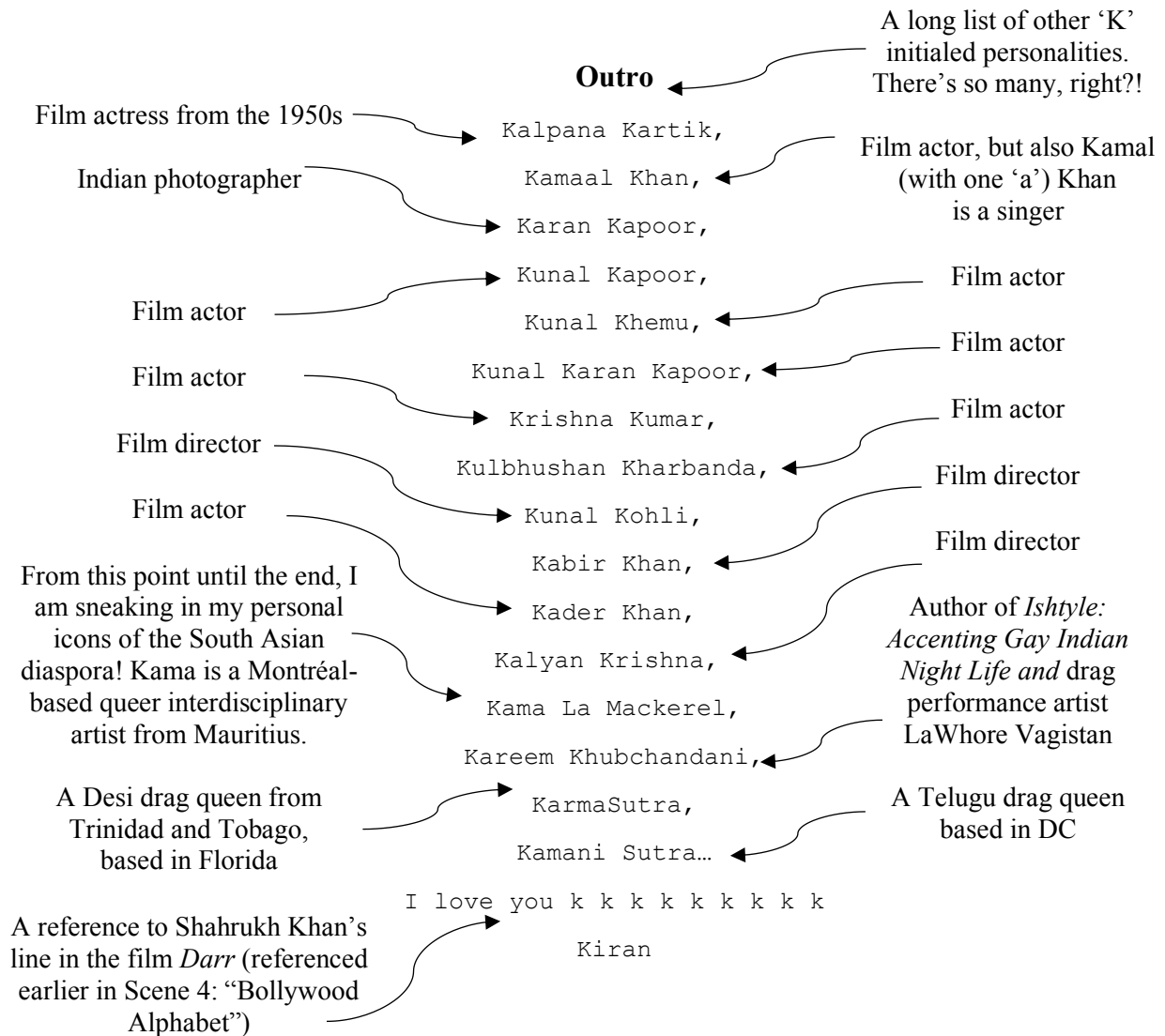
Kajol only goes by Kajol,
a mononymous name. In
her earlier years of
stardom, she sported a
natural monobrow and a
rather natural beauty rather
than dramatic makeup.

Kangana's short a K, but if
she had more, YIKES
She'd spew more nonsense and
get more LIKES

I joke that it might be a good
thing she doesn't have
double-K level power - more
power could allow her to stir up
even more controversy.

Chorus

How many Ks, How many Ks
How many Ks can you take
There's power in that letter



APPENDIX 6: ANNOTATED LYRICS FOR “CURRY’S A MIX”

Scene 14 – “Curry’s a Mix”

Introduction

The tone is gentle, mildly patronizing and tongue in cheek. My character channels a Desi Mary Poppins sort of energy.

Let me tell you about curry
It is not a singular entity
Let’s clear up misconception
Curry’s a complex concoction
Brown people are also a mixture
With subtleties in flavour
Beware of claims to authenticity
Being Desi is NOT about purity

I walk in with a Rajasthani puppet turban and a spice thali around my neck (Figures 16 to 18).

The light changes to red as I warn the audience!
There’s no one authentic way of being Desi, or Indian, or South Asian.

I follow this with an evil “Disney villain” laughter produced by ingressive vocalization – a hint of my soundsinging!

< 8-measure instrumental >

The music features steel pan and harmonium, which I played myself for the track. I reveal a toy steel pan underneath the spice thali (Figure 21).

Chorus

Referring to the method of soaking up curry dishes with a bread (naan, roti...) and scooping it up to your mouth. My choreography mimics this action.

Curry’s a mix
It’s always been a mix
A dash of this, a dash of that
Coming together
Coming together, mmm
Curry’s a dish
Spicy and delectable
Soak it up, Scoop it up
Soak it up, Scoop it up
Curry’s a mix
It’s always been a mix
A dash of this, a dash of that
Coming together
Coming together, mmm
Curry’s a dish
Spicy and delectable
Right hand finger-licking

A wink at the practice of eating with your right hand only.

A reference to the KFC slogan “It’s finger lickin’ good.”

Spoken Verse 1

So you wanna learn to play sitar?
 But they only teach guitar?
 Your whole life was whitewashed?
 Turn your brownness up a notch

Who knows what would
 have happened if I'd taken
 sitar lessons as a kid?

Cuz curry's a mix
 It's always been a mix
 We still add taste
 Even though we been displaced
 We gotta fake it til we make it
 But we make when we break
 The myth, the fiction
 Of just one nation

Kuti is a Hinglish
 derogatory word for
 "bitch" but also used
 casually amongst
 friends.

I proudly state how I'm
 Québécoise, brown, and
 French speaking –
 proving that assumptions
 about how I look are often
 incorrect.

Drama Verse 1

Don't essentialize me kuti
 Try and label my identity
 Try and pinpoint my ancestry
 Try and guess my family history
 Quin chu queb, brune, franco
 Ch't'un bijou, un joyau
 Ch'tune queen d'la diversité

"I'm a jewel" I play
 with the sound of my
 name. Bijou = Biju,
 short for Bijuriya.

"I'm a diversity queen,
 throw yourselves at me!"

This is a way of saying
 "Oh hey, I exist... you
 know I exist right?
 If you're so interested in
 'diversity issues,' why
 aren't you throwing
 yourselves at me?"

Costume reveal! I open
 my skirt to reveal 7
 Rajasthani puppets that
 match the one on my
 turban (Figure 19 and 20).

< 4-measure break >

Spoken Verse 2

Is there a blemish
on your brownness?
A cage around your queerness?
They say you're not authentic?
Well we ain't monolithic.

Curry's a mix
It's always been a mix
But people will conflate
And segregate

Barbershop bridge

But the powders come together
From the cumin to the pepper,
to the chili, to the turmeric,
to the fenugreek, to the garlic,
to the salt and coriander

To enumerate the different spices that can be found in powder curry mix, the music changes into a barbershop style because...why not! The oldie feeling of the sound ties in with the introduction.

The bilingual drama verse is repeated, but whispered in a somewhat sexier energy.

Chorus

Drama Verse 2

The sound design includes a reference to Québécois "rigodon" musical style, which I recorded on the cello but transposed to a higher octave to evoke a fiddle.

Outro

Pa ni da Pa, NI ni da Pa, -
ni Ma GA ri- gnsr Ma GA Sa

I sing the swaras of the melody heard on the harmonium.

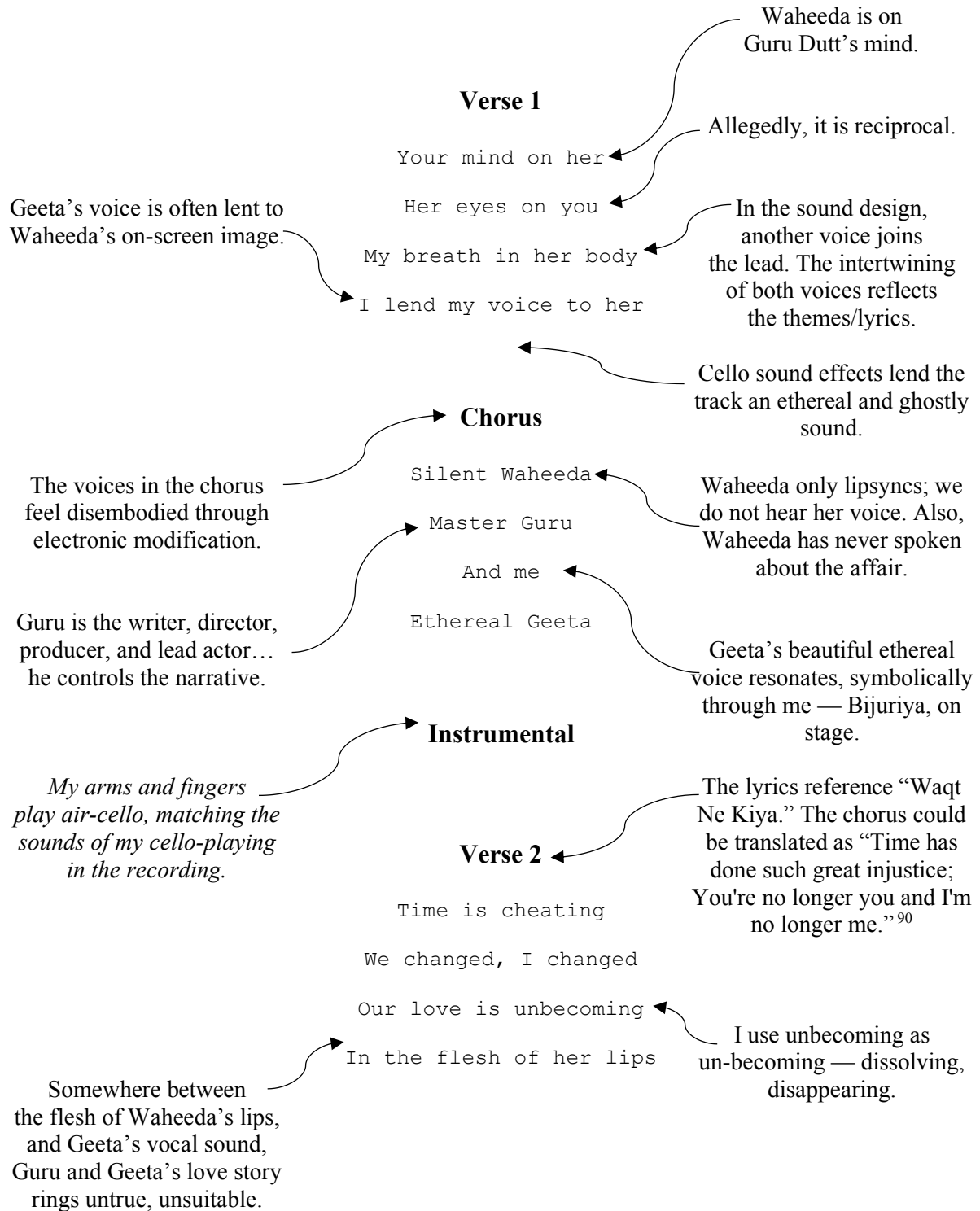
The first repetition is in a masculine voice that channels a Hindustani music singer.

The second is operatic and whimsical.

Pa ni da Pa, NI ni da Pa, -
ni Ma GA ri- gnsr Ma GA Sa

APPENDIX 7: ANNOTATED LYRICS FOR “GEETA”

Scene 19 – “Geeta”



⁹⁰ English translation for “Waqt Ne Kiya”: <https://www.filmlyquotes.com/songs/3832> (Accessed July 2023).

Chorus

Silent Waheeda
Master Guru
And me
Ethereal Geeta

*I lift Waheeda's circle,
I lift Guru's circle,
I flip both circles to reveal
Geeta's image on the back of
both circles
(Figure 22 and 23).*

Verse 3

Spotlight on her
Acclaim for you
But the world
still hears Geeta
My voice in the ether

Waheeda, on screen,
is the film star.

Guru is an acclaimed artist and
celebrated for his role as actor,
director, and producer.

*I undo the magnet mechanism
on my veil to reveal Geeta's
image on the sheer fabric
(Figure 24).*

Despite this,
Geeta's voice is heard
and beloved.
She is timeless.

Chorus

Silent Waheeda
Master Guru
And me
Ethereal Geeta

*I play with the transparency
of the veil, my face behind hers,
my lips behind hers.*

< Outro >

*I spin with the veil and
find my way to the floor
or the final scene, Scene 20:
"Her' Voice in the Ether."*

**APPENDIX 8: TRANSCRIPT SCENE 3 AND 15:
“CONVERSATION 1” AND “CONVERSATION 2”**

Scene 3: “Conversation 1”

- Bijuriya:** Gabriel? ... Gab?
- Gabriel:** Oui? Quoi?⁹¹
- B:** Well, stop hiding!
- G:** Yeah...I’m here, I’m here, I’m ready...
- B:** Ok, ok, so I’m Bijuriya, I’m the drag queen, I’m the fun one, the fabulous one...
- G:** [laughter] Ta yeule osti...⁹²
Uh, I’m Gab or Gabriel or Gabriel Dharmoo,
- B:** Dharmoo!
- G:** uh... composer, vocalist, researcher.
Uh... I work in the field of contemporary music and...
- B:** [interrupting] Nobody knows what that is!
- G:** [chuckle, continues in an academic tone] I navigate the troubled roots of Western classical music...
- B:** Ooh! Sounds serious! But bro, what is this music? Tell us about it...
- G:** Bro!? Uh yeah... The music you’re hearing now is an example of music I composed.
- B:** [mockingly] In your career as an award-winning composer?
- G:** [laughs] Is that in my bio or something?
- B:** [teasing] Yea-ah!
- G:** [laughs] Uh... anyways, uh the piece you’re hearing now is called *sur les rives de*, I composed it in 2011. It’s for flute, clarinet...
- B:** [interrupting, in a high-pitched mocking tone] “I composed it in 2011 for flute, clarinet, blblbl...”
- G:** [forcefully, but with humour, over Bijuriya’s mocking]
...violin, cello, piano, percussion...and...
- B:** [interrupting, insisting] So *why* are we including that to my drag show?
- G:** Uh...Excuse me, it’s *our* show...and...
- B:** [voicing disbelief] Hmm?
- G:** I invented you, so!
- B:** Ok, ok, if you’re gonna add your subventionné⁹³ sort of academic music into this show, like, my only request is you don’t just plop it in...you know?
- G:** Oh trust me, like, I’m gonna recontextualize it...

⁹¹ Translation: “Yes? What?”

⁹² Translation: “Oh shut up...”

⁹³ Music benefitting from arts council funding through grants (or in French, subventions).

B: Mh hmm?
G: Like add layers of...
B: Bollywood?!
G: Yeah! I wanna work the sound design, like add some sort of, like, layers of, Indianness [fades out in the sound design] with different sounds that could, like, stretch...
B: [fades out in the sound design] I wanna talk about the songs we're gonna use...
[approximately 45 seconds later]

Gabriel: The thing is, when I composed this music, it was heavily influenced by Indian culture, concepts, my contact with Indian music, my travels...
Bijuriya: Yeaah, but like as a Desi girl, I would say this Indian influence is... isn't legible, like it doesn't read at all... it stills sounds like chamber music, like Western classical, but experimental, but I do hear it, like the melodies ...like [imitates a sound heard in the sound design] like I see how it kind of is in resonance (?) with Carnatic music...
G: Well, it is.
B: I get the concept, I see what you're trying to do, but...
G: Yeah, but like these were all composed in a totally different context, right? So you train to be a creative musician, you go through this training, but then you deal with Western instruments, Western perspectives, ears, audiences, so...at some point it's...
B: Yeah... Ok, I'm gonna have to cut you off, just cuz I'm ready for my next number and...let's catch up later.

Scene 15: "Conversation 2"

Gabriel: [in a Québécois accent] Do you speak French, au juste?
Bijuriya: Ben là, oui! Chu québ, brune, franco, ch'tune queen d'la diversité!
Pitchez vous su moué!
G: [laughs] Ouin, mais genre le monde catch pas ton côté franco vu que ton drag puise beaucoup dans un processus disons de... de formation identitaire là...⁹⁴
B: Yeah, I mean my drag *is* about my brownness and, you know, identity through immigration, displacement, indenture, but yeah, French is my first language.
G: But you don't speak Hindi, or Tamil, or any other South Asian language either, yet...

⁹⁴ Translation: Gabriel: "Do you actually speak French?" / Bijuriya: "Well duh of course! I'm Quebecker, brown, French-speaking, I a diversity queen! Throw yourselves at me!" / Gabriel: "Yeah but like people don't really get your French side, because your drag draws a lot from a process of...let's say identity formation..."

B: Yeah, well that's why I love lipsyncing as an artform, like, I have a sense or a feel for Hindi, uh, but I'm much too self-conscious to sing in that language, let alone speak it, I'd just be so afraid of, you know, mispronouncing and... I know it's kind of stupid to think of it that way, but like, lipsyncing...it...it allows me to sort of...

G: Well, it allows you to put your imposter syndrome in the trash!

B: Yeah, like exactly! When I lipsync, I feel the fantasy of ...not just my femininity, but my Indianness...

G: Well, drag is such a creative playground for you and... I love that for you!

B: Ha!

G: I simply could *not* explore my Indianness as genuinely and as legibly with compositions in chamber music or symphonic style, you know?

B: But you said your compositions drew inspiration from Indian culture and...music?

G: Yeah, I mean they do, but... as you said it's not always legible and I mean I had lots of fun, like I included lots of orchestral and chamber music and solo trumpet compositions to the sound design of the show and it was just so much fun to have the creative license to play around with it.

B: So when you say "creative license", do you mean like the creative license that *I* gave to you?

G: [snort laughter] Shut up... but yeah...

B: I have to say though that you've inspired me too cuz like,

G: Awn!

B: ...my drag might have started from a desire to connect with my South Asianness, but now I love including quirrier elements that I find are *so... you!*

G: Yeah, but like, quirkiness is *so you* too, like, both our respective personalities are drawn to like...

B: Weirdness!

G: [laughter, in a mocking tone] Yeah, oh my God, we're so weird!

B: [in a mocking tone] We're *so* weird!

G: But no, I guess we like to look at things from odd angles or to challenge our creativity.

B: Yeah, and what I like about us working together is that we get to shake up, we get to blur and combine all these different cultural references together and...

G: Mm-hmm!

B: ... they're all things we actually really, really care about.

**APPENDIX 9: SCRIPT, REFERENCES, AND NOTES
ABOUT THE “BOLLYWOOD ALPHABET”**

| Part 1: ‘A’ to ‘K’ | Reference and translation | Performance notes and description |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| Acchha! | “Good!” from Hindi. Common phrase in films to indicate agreement or understanding. | Wide-eyed, smiling, and nodding. |
| Bas! | “Enough!” from Hindi. Common phrase in films to express one has had enough, has reached their limit. | Loudly, hand gesture forward to indicate “Enough!” |
| Beta? | “Son”, “child” or “younger person” from Hindi. Commonly heard in films, particularly from mother figures. | Spoken in a worried tone, like a mother expressing concern for her child. |
| Besharam! | “Shameless”, “immodest” or “vulgar” from Urdu, also used in Hindi. Refers to someone who brings shame by their action (i.e., character that disrespects a woman). | As if covering my upper body and protecting myself – I tend to associate it to rape culture or misogyny, prevalent in many mainstream films, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. |
| Chup! | “Silence!”, “Be quiet!” or “Shut up!” from Hindi. Common phrase in films. | Spoken loudly to express dominance or impatience. |
| Chaiyya, Chaiyya, Chaiyya, Chaiyya... | Song from <i>Dil Se</i> (1998). “Walk in the shade” from Hindi. | I sing the melody, bobbing my head back as Shahrukh Khan does in the song sequence. Also referenced in Scene 9: “Whitesplaining Bollywood”: there is an audience question about this song/film scene. |
| Chocolate Lime Juice | Song from <i>Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!</i> (1994). | Singing the melody, emphasizing the high-pitch and Indian accent. |
| Dishoom! Dishoom! | Onomatopoeia for punches or gun shots. | I pretend to punch or fire a gun, leaning into my voicework to celebrate onomatopoeic nature of the sound. Also referenced in Scene 9: “Whitesplaining Bollywood”. |
| Eros Entertainment | Voice heard in film trailers and DVD menus in the 2000s. | I imitate the male voice. |
| Ek Do Teen! | Song from <i>Tezaab</i> (1988). “One, two, three!” from Hindi. | Singing the melody, emphasizing the high pitch, and counting on my fingers. Also referenced in Scene 16: “Weird Bollywood”. |
| Firangi... | “Foreigner”, “British person” or “white person”, from Hindi or Urdu (usually derogatory). | I vaguely scan the audience to find a white person (not very difficult) and then proceed to insult them (probably unbeknownst to them). |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Gumsum Gumsum Gu-p chu-p! | Song “Kehna Hi Kya” from the <i>Bombay</i> (1995). Onomatopoeic sound that evokes the telling of secrets. | Singing the melody, leaning into my voicework by emphasizing the high pitch and oddness of the sound. |
| Haila! Juhi Chawla! | “Oh god! Juhi Chawla!” (an actress) from Hindi or Urdu, Arabic roots. Film dialogue spoken by Aamir Khan in <i>Andaaz Apna Apna</i> (1994). | The scene is from a dream sequence in which Amar (Aamir’s character) can’t believe he is meeting film star Juhi Chawla (played by herself, as a cameo). I imitate Aamir’s voice as best I can. |
| Happy birthday Robert! | Film dialogue spoken by Shehzad Khan from <i>Andaaz Apna Apna</i> (1994). | Bhalla (Shehzad’s character, one of the villains) insists they pretend it is Robert’s birthday to perform a ruse, when Robert unwittingly says today is not his birthday, Bhalla pressingly delivers this hilarious line. I imitate Shehzad’s voice as best I can. |
| I love you K K K K K Kiran | Film dialogue spoken by Shahrukh Khan in <i>Daar</i> (1993). | Kiran (played by Juhi Chawla) realizes that the blood-soaked Rahul (Shahrukh’s character) is the obsessed stalker that was taunting her, as he delivers this now-iconic line. I imitate Shahrukh’s voice as best I can, but with a sense of camp and exaggeration. Also referenced in Scene 5: How many Ks. |
| Jaadoo, Jaadoo, Jaadoo, JAAAADOOOO! | Song (and alien character name) in <i>Koi Mil Gaya</i> (2003). “Magic” from Hindi. | I sing the song and lean into my voicework to imitate Jadoo’s distorted alien voice at the fourth repetition. Also referenced in Scene 9: “Whitesplaining Bollywood”. |
| K...k... Ok, ok, ok ok, kk, k... | | I appear to draw a blank when I reach the letter ‘K’. I then proceed to explain how it is impossible to name just one or two things that start with the letter ‘K’ in Bollywood... there are all these films... then others are playback singers... this leads us into Scene 5: How Many Ks. |
| Scene 5: “How Many Ks” (discussed in 3.2.2) | | |
| Part 2: ‘L’ to ‘Z’ | | After the performance of “How Many Ks”, I regain my composure, start reciting the alphabet again (using the <i>Hum Saath Saath Hain</i> version of the melody) and find my way back to ‘L’. |
| Lamberghini chalai jande ho | Viral song by The Doorbeen, featuring Ragini Tandan (2018). “You’re riding in a lamberghini [sic.]” from Punjabi. | I sing the melody and pretend to drive a car. |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| Mohini! Mohini! Mohini! | Audience cheering at the beginning of “Ek Do Teen” song from <i>Tezaab</i> (1988). Name of the film heroine. | I channel the energy and sound of a full audience and chant. Also referenced in Scene 16: “Weird Bollywood”. |
| My name is... Anthony Gonsalves | Song from <i>Amar Akbar Anthony</i> (1977). | I sing the song but leave a pause before voicing the name in case I get interaction from audience members (it sometimes works!). |
| Mera naam... Chin Chin Chu | Song from <i>Howrah Bridge</i> (1958). “My name is Chin Chin Chu” form Hindi. | I sing the song but leave a pause before voicing the name in case I get interaction from audience members (it sometimes works!). This song is originally sung by Geeta Dutt, another wink at how different themes and references tie together. |
| My name is Sheila, Sheila Ki Jawani (I’m too sexy for you) | Song from <i>Tees Maar Khan</i> (2010). | I sing the song but leave a pause before voicing the name in case I get interaction from audience members (it sometimes works!) and recreate the choreography from the item song, also making fun of it. |
| Namaskar! Namaskar! | Introduction dialogue at the beginning of “Ek Do Teen” song from <i>Tezaab</i> (1988). “Hello!” (respectful greeting across different languages derived from Sanskrit). | I first mimic Alka Yagnik’s high-pitched voice (playback singer of the song) and Madhuri Dixit’s choreography (actress in the film), then channel the energy and sound of the audience replying. Also referenced in Scene 16: “Weird Bollywood”. |
| Om Shanti Om | Song “Deewangi Deewangi” from <i>Om Shanti Om</i> (2007) “Eternal Peace” from Sanskrit. | I sing the melody and recreate the choreography by waving my arms upwards. Also referenced twice in Scene 9: “Whitesplaining Bollywood.” The first time, I talk about the O.S.O. acronym for the film, the second time I provide context for the letter ‘O’ alphabet when asked by an audience member to clarify. |
| Pooja! What is this behaviour? | Viral quote from reality TV show “Bigg Boss” (2011, uploaded to the internet in 2017). | I try to imitate the voice as best I can. |
| Qurbani, Qurbani, Qurbani | Song and film <i>Qurbani</i> (1980). “Sacrifice” from Urdu. | I sing the melody and sway with my arms open wide, hands to the sky. |
| Rang De Basanti! | Song and film <i>Rang de Basanti</i> (2006). “Colour me/Paint me of saffron colour” (colour of the Indian flag). | I sing the melody and evoke the movements of bhangra, a Punjabi dance form. |
| Smoking is injurious to health | Health disclaimer featured before films in India (legislation on its mandatory nature varies from year to year). | I imitate the voice as best I can. |

| | | |
|--|--|---|
| Tattad, Tattad, Tattad | Song from <i>Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela</i> (2013). Onomatopoeic singing. | I sing the melody and recreate the choreography, in which Ranveer Singh and the backup dancers toss the back of their hair repeatedly. |
| USP – Unique selling point | Using this business language to measure star quality or star appeal is quite common in India. Someone’s USP is what makes them different from other celebrities. | I talk as if I’m a giving a sales pitch. |
| Vande Mataram | A widespread song and saying, I reference to the A.R. Rahman song from his 1997 studio album <i>Vande Mataram</i> . “Praise to the Motherland” or “Mother, I bow to thee” from sanskritized Bengali. | I sing the melody and channel A.R. Rahman’s voice. |
| Why this kolaveri, kolaveri, kolaveri, kolaveri di? | Song from Tamil film <i>3</i> (2011). “Why this murderous rage?” from Tamil slang. | I sing the melody and channel Dhanush’s voice. |
| X...x... X... Xavier’s College? | St. Xavier’s College is a college in Mumbai – several members of the film industry have attended it, it is mentioned in films and has also been a filming location. | I halt, acknowledging the difficulty of finding words that start with the letter ‘X’... then unassumingly offer Xavier’s College as an option, not too convinced it’s good. It has happened that audience members got the very subtle joke. |
| Yeh Mera Dil | Song from <i>Don</i> (1978). “Oh my heart” from Hindi. | I sing the melody of these next five songs, one after the other. |
| Yeh Kya Hua? | Song from <i>Amar Prem</i> (1971). “What happened?” from Hindi. | |
| Yeh Dosti! | Song from <i>Sholay</i> (1976). “This friendship!” from Hindi. | |
| Yeh Duniya Agar Mil Bhi Jaye To Kya Hai | Song from <i>Pyasa</i> (1957). “For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” from Hindi. Allegedly a translation of Matthew 16.26. | Foreshadowing of Scenes 17-20 by being from a Guru Dutt film starring Waheeda Rehman as an actress and Geeta Dutt as a playback singer. |
| Yeh Hawa, Yeh Fiza | Song from <i>Sadma</i> (1983). “This air, this wind” from Hindi. | I also imitate the instrumental part between the lines and emphasize it by stomping my feet/ankle bells. |
| Yeh Jo Des Hai Tera, Swades Hai Tera... Tujhe Hai Pukara | Song from <i>Swades</i> (2004) “This country of yours, your motherland calls out to you” from Hindi. | In direct reference to Scene 1: “That Land India”, the speakers play a faint sound file of Vidita’s voice... which I lipsync instead of sing. This brings a moment of interiority and peace. |
| Zoobi Doobi Zoobi Doobi Pa paaaaa lllaa | Song from <i>3 Idiots</i> (2009). Onomatopoeic singing. | I break the moment by stomping the ankle bells for the final letter and sing the melody. |