RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at
ray@yorksj.ac.uk

The Use of Trauma-Informed Community Music Practice in

Enabling Narrative Through Songwriting

Catherine Birch

York St. John University

Abstract

This chapter investigates approaches to trauma-informed community music practice that enable narrative through songwriting. The York St. John University Prison Partnership Project forms the locus of the explorations, where the Emerging Voices singing and songwriting project occurs weekly at a maximum-security women's prison in the UK. Using the three strands of narrative inquiry as a framework for exploration of this complex community setting, this chapter considers approaches to practice through the lenses of temporality, sociality, and place, enabling a deepening understanding of both the participants, the context, and the creative process. The women's stories are explored through the text of their songs as a way of engaging in both individual and collective narratives. The Five Values of Trauma-Informed Care (safety, trust, collaboration, empowerment, and choice) are unpacked both theoretically (as philosophical and ideological foundations for music making) and practically (as core values embedded in the weekly singing sessions). Considerations of the conditions of practice to support the women sharing their stories through song, point to the facilitators' willingness to be open, reflexive, listen intently, and validate the individuals' experiences by bearing witness, enabling an ethic of care to flourish, where individual voices can begin to emerge and be heard.

Keywords: creative collaboration, carceral settings, reflexivity, reciprocity, dialogue

Introduction

Tears in my eyes as I stop and ask why

This path I take

Can never undo the mistakes I make

Rebuild all that is broken

Say the words we left unspoken

Trust in time, you're forever in my heart

(Emerging Voices, July 2019)

Stories and storytelling are at the heart of human interaction. They help us understand one another as we listen intently and derive meaning from both the language used, and the uniqueness of the individual voice speaking to us (Cavarero, 2005). Stories help us see one another with greater clarity, recognizing the common threads of our existence and the intertwining of our experiences, narrative as a mode of knowing and being known. Stories enable reciprocity in our interactions, and, as Barrett and Stauffer (2010) suggest, "we find connection in and through stories" (p. 2). The idea of connecting with others through storytelling, becomes even more potent in a context where narrative is hidden, silenced, shut-off, or contained, for example, within carceral settings. The belief that "everybody should be heard" (Barrett & Stauffer, 2010, p. 135) is a powerful statement challenging music educators, practitioners, and community musicians to consider our part in enabling the voices of marginalized communities to be heard (Higgins, 2012). It is crucial, however, that we examine our motivations in doing so and the dangers of the potential for unhelpful power-dynamics, holding in tension both the responsibility *to* our participants, and also the responsibility *with* them. To effectively enable the narrative of others, I must be willing to be part of that narrative, part of the process of unlocking, and willing to be open to the potential

for change in me alongside those with whom I work.

I work as a community music practitioner on the York St. John University (YSJU) Prison Partnership Project (PPP), facilitating Emerging Voices, a weekly singing and songwriting provision with women in a maximum-security prison in the UK[1]. The weekly sessions offer an opportunity for the women to engage in developing vocal technique with warmups, breathing exercises, and singing together designed to support improved mental health, positive group interactions, and development of self-esteem. Collaborative songwriting provides a platform for self-discovery and greater individual empowerment for the women with whom we work. York St. John University staff and students support the women in these collaborative processes.

Statistics pertaining to women in custody in the UK reveal that large proportions will have experienced prior trauma in the form of Adverse Childhood Experiences (Felitti et al., 1998), domestic abuse, and sexual violence (Covington, 2015, 2016; Lempert, 2016). The women I work with are no exception, and the stories of trauma and abuse, often not from the women themselves, but disclosed by prison staff to give context for the creative work, are disturbing in both frequency and detail. This chapter explores approaches to trauma-informed community music practice that enable narrative through songwriting, from my perspective as the facilitator of the project. My role in running the weekly sessions has enabled a deeper level of reflection, reflexivity, and understanding of the participants, the context, the creative processes, and me as a practitioner immersed in the work (Adler & Adler, 1987; Etherington, 2004; Merriam, 1988).

Through engaging with the trauma-informed approaches to practice, and the collaborative group songs, I examine the imperative of connecting with and listening to the silenced (Belenkey et al., 1997) voices of the women. These "secret" (Clandinin, 2013, p.

---

[1] For more information on the YSJU Prison Partnership Project, specifically the Emerging Voices program, please see https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/working-with-the-community/prison-partnership-project/

185) stories are part of the fabric of our community, despite being hidden behind bars and

towering walls. Working with the women has helped me identify and challenge my own

preconceived ideas and deeply held beliefs about crime, punishment, and the "fracture"

(Conlon, 2020, p. 174) that exists in society that 'others' [2] (Levinas, 1969, 2006) the prison

population. Recognizing that my story interacts with some of the women I have worked with,

has, in part, enabled a setting aside of differences, a crossing of, in some cases, profound

social barriers. Understanding that there are more similarities than differences, that I can

listen to individuals' lived experiences and acknowledge that they resonate with my own, has

helped me to reach across the, sometimes, uncomfortable social divide.

To clarify my understanding and experience of this, on the one hand, there is the clear

social divide of incarceration—a physical barrier where the women are separated from

society, that I am able to cross only in the context of the project. The social divide can also

refer to class. For some of the women who are working class and have not had the same

privilege and access to education, I have wondered if they see me in a particular way. For

example, some of the women have called me 'teacher'—elevating my status and diminishing

their own, which is not my intention as a facilitator. Some of the social divide and barriers

can be eroded through the weekly interactions and as trust grows and develops. There are a

lot of subtleties on the project that contribute to this sense of inequality of status. For

example, I am allowed to use a china mug to make a cup of tea, but the women have to use

plastic cups, for safety reasons. I wanted to use the plastic cups as it felt wrong to be marked

out and privileged in that way, but the prison warden supporting the project insisted. Many

---

[2] Levinas explores, as one of his key philosophical ideas, the humanism of the 'other,' whereby our relationship with those who could be perceived as being different, changes when we recognize our responsibility to them as more important than our responsibility to ourselves. When society 'others' individuals or groups, as in the case of incarcerated citizens, it creates societal fractures. Community musicians often practice in contexts where their participants have potentially been 'othered' by society. For example, projects operate in homeless shelters (Knapp & Silva, 2019), with sex workers (de Quadros, 2011), with young people in challenging circumstances (Mullen & Deane, 2018), and people with lived experience of forced migration (Burnard et al., 2018). In each of these contexts, community musicians recognize their responsibility to the 'other' and have a deep understanding of an ethics of care (Noddings, 2013) towards their participants (see Higgins, 2012).

moments such as these illustrations highlighted the social differences and reinforced the women's incarcerated status during the project, regardless of their class or background.

The foundational belief of the project is that in providing space for the women to be heard, to be validated and valued, and given a platform for expression through creative collaboration, there is an opportunity for them to discover a renewed narrative; one not tangled in their past veiled narrative of crime and trauma, but one in which they can begin to recognize their own uniqueness and value through creative engagement. As Conlon (2020) states, "the PPP seeks to develop the women's ability to speak, to not let themselves be silenced, to lay strong roots of resistance and resilience and to enable new creative ways of being" (p. 186). I explore the women's narratives through their collaborative songs, reflecting on the creative processes, and the value in listening to each individual voice, as described by Cavarero (2005) that is "the most hidden and genuine part of the person" (p. 2).

I acknowledge that this exploration is imperfect, focused by my own limited viewpoint, with the potential for misinterpretation and misunderstanding. I also acknowledge that the privilege of my position in an academic institution, means that I am voicing the stories of those who currently are not "free citizens" (Johnston & Hewish, 2011, p. 3). This notion of citizenship is taken from an artists' guide that I was given to read before I started work on the Emerging Voices Project. The idea that the women are no longer "free citizens" (ibid.) struck a chord with me and is something I reflected on during the project. My intention during this chapter is therefore to create a space for the women's narratives to come to light and their voices to be heard, despite the potential for this to be an imperfect process. Accordingly, the research questions that guide this inquiry are:

- How can trauma-informed approaches be integrated into community music practice?

- What contextual conditions need to be taken into consideration when

designing specific trauma-informed frameworks?

- How can silenced voices be appropriately represented?

Narrative Inquiry: A Methodological Frame

Narrative inquiry provides the framework for these explorations, where it forms both my positionality as the researcher and the method of interaction within the singing group. As facilitator on the singing project, I have been able to position myself as a researcher "deeply involved in the research relationship" (Barrett & Stauffer, 2010, p. 12) reflecting on the shared collaboration and co-creation of narrative through song. Three strands of narrative inquiry, as rooted in the philosophies of John Dewey (Barrett & Stauffer, 2010; Froelich & Frierson-Campbell, 2013), form the basis for exploration within this complex community setting and are woven through the chapter. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) interpreted these as initially,

> Interaction; describing the personal and social elements of the situation
>
> Continuity; recognising past, present, and future implications
>
> Situation, or place, depicting the physical details of the place where the research takes place, and acknowledging its impact on the stories and their interpretation. (p. 47)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that this three-dimensional inquiry field is "created by viewing participants' stories as evolving over time, within their contexts, and in relationship with the researcher" (p. 70). In this way, narrative inquiry has enabled greater understanding for me as the researcher interpreting the women's narratives from within their current context through my observations and reflection. Further development of these strands has created a conceptual shift towards temporality, sociality, and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Finally, underpinning the explorations of this chapter, is the understanding that music cannot only support narrative but that "Song exalts the voice and its potential" (Cavarero, 2005, p. 5)

and can go beyond communication of the spoken word and limitations of language. I recognize the important role that music has to play in storytelling, specifically in enabling the concealed narratives of the women to be heard.

In the context of music making in a carceral setting, however, there are deeper considerations to supporting the women in communicating their narratives through song. The framework of trauma-informed practice, which I explore in the next section, provides core values that can be applied across every aspect of the workshop space. I have used this framework of The Five Values of Trauma-Informed Care (Harris & Fallot, 2001) to explore the women's narratives, and have selected both collaborative and individual songs written during the Emerging Voices project, that resonate with each of the values. I unpack the approaches to practice by first connecting with one of the original song texts through the Narrative Interludes. These were selected by considering the underlying narrative themes and threads contained in the lyrics and, importantly, chosen as a way of honoring and bearing witness to the women's stories. The Narrative Interludes and exploration of the Five Values of Trauma-Informed Care, thread together the theoretical foundations of the project, alongside examples from the practice.

For the purposes of this chapter, the women's identities have been anonymized by using pseudonyms.

Trauma-informed Practice

Described by Caruth (1996) as a wound, Barney and Mackinlay (2010) assert, "Trauma is lived and breathed very much as a crisis of truth" (p. 7). The women I work with have experienced trauma, impacting their ability to feel safe and connected (Porges, 2017), and they often inhabit moments of existential unreality. They can be immensely vulnerable, anxious, and can feel out of control (Caruth, 1996; Garrido et al., 2015; Herman, 1992; Lempert, 2016; van der Kolk, 2014). Trauma narrative can be confused, fragmented,

chronologically incoherent, and disjointed (Anderson, 2016; Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014), and beginning to understand trauma and its manifestations is the basis for developing a trauma-informed approach.

Trauma-informed practice has been developed on the understanding of responses to traumatic incidents, whether through a single event or prolonged exposure (Harris & Fallot 2001; Hess & Bradley, 2020; Levenson 2017; Quiros & Berger, 2013). The Five Values of Trauma-Informed Care (Covington, 2015, 2016; Harris & Fallot, 2001) form the framework of practice within which the PPP facilitation operates. These values are safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and choice. Exploring each value in turn, I unpack approaches in the following sections as five Narrative Interludes, each of which support the understanding of the hidden narratives embodied by the women in custody. Through these approaches, I endeavor to enable an environment within which the women's individual and collective narratives have space to unfold. This process does not involve directly addressing or interacting with the women's trauma narratives. I am not a trained therapist, and this approach would be both irresponsible and unsafe for the participants. Instead, my focus is on enabling the opportunity for "narrative repair" (Barney & Mackinlay, 2010, p. 8) in songwriting, as explored throughout the chapter.

Community musicians have been described as boundary walkers (Higgins, 2006; Willingham, 2021), creating the potential for tension within the practice where boundary lines could be easily blurred. Within the context of community music in prisons, the boundary lines between therapy and therapeutic practice, essentially music therapy and community music, are razor sharp. Trauma-informed practice enables a more clearly defined framework for community music practitioners to understand their role in this complex space, focusing on music-making processes, and the positive function these can play. Conlon (2020) explains the creative educational focus (as opposed to therapy) of the PPP clearly in the following

sentences, stating:

> By explicitly co-creating an educational, learning community that nurtures a
> sense of commonality, connectedness and acceptance through dialogue,
> learning and creativity, we create a learning community that is individually,
> socially and institutionally transformative. (p. 178)

It is important to note the emphasis on transformation, extending from individuals involved in the project, through to the institutions housing them. This mutually transformative experience is a vital part of the PPP and will be unpacked through explorations of the trauma-informed framework of practice, below.

Narrative Interlude One

I sit here, when I lived with James

He was always being cruel

And playing sick games

22 years man died

All that for compulsive thrive

I said he's been playing cruel and brutal games

Now I'm 29 years old, he ain't going to play no more brutal games

I said he ain't going to play no more brutal games

(Emerging Voices, February 2020)

The example of lyrics above, from the Emerging Voices project, was written by Chloe who had not been in custody for long. She was simultaneously wrestling with the immense challenges of transitioning into prison life, painful withdrawal from prolonged substance abuse, and separation from her child. Chloe joined the singing project a few weeks into her incarceration, while experiencing high levels of anxiety, sleeplessness, and depression.

Engaging in that particular project were several women who had been through the theatre program of the Prison Partnership Project and were a few years into their sentences. Some had very similar experiences to Chloe, recognizing she mirrored their own previous fear and anxiety. I watched as they came alongside her in welcome and open conversation, giving her advice about how to deal with the intense substance withdrawal, and how to manage the methadone and its side effects. I also saw them recognize someone who had a gift for singing and begin to encourage that in her. As we worked together over the weeks, sometimes she just needed to come and cry, express her distress in her current circumstances, and be comforted by the group. As she began to engage in the music making, joining in with the group singing, there was a determination and commitment that grew.

The lyrics above were written in a songwriting session about halfway through the 10-week program. When Chloe shared them with the group, it was clear that her level of safety and trust were such that she was able to be vulnerable. The women's lyrics are not always transparent and often veiled in metaphor. The clarity of Chloe's previous abusive relationship was stark, as was her defiance and sense of finality that the cruel games would stop. It is moments like these where in a tangible way, one could see, hear, and bear witness to the women finding their voices.

Safety

The women we work with are often immensely vulnerable and, as a result of their trauma experiences and the rigid constructs of the criminal justice system, it is hard for them to feel safe (Herman, 1992; Lempert, 2016; Porges, 2017). Songwriting requires vulnerability, and a willingness to be emotionally exposed, but for women whose safety has been threatened in the past, the kind of emotional vulnerability needed to open up their internal worlds can be too difficult and overwhelming. Lempert (2016) describes the "constant state of vulnerability" (p. 133) that incarcerated women face, negatively impacting

their sense of safety and trust within daily interactions. The YSJU Prison Partnership

practitioners have to continually reinforce safety in our approaches in order to create a space

in which creative vulnerability is nurtured. I have sought to understand what genuine safety,

as an emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually secure environment for each of the

women, needs to be. Approaches that are safe for one of the women may be unsafe for

another. Continual reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) is essential, as well as understanding

that this is not a flawless process. Collaborative songwriting cannot take place without the

safety of the women, and I have learnt that several interacting approaches are vital: listening,

bearing witness, being welcoming, providing hospitality, and offering empathy.

       Porges (2017) explores the relationship between establishing safety in the therapeutic

space, and that of listening attentively as crucial in "communicating mutual safety and trust"

(p. 49). Listening is a way of paying attention to the face of the "other" (Levinas, 1969;

2006), attending to the uniqueness of their person, looking carefully, and being responsive.

Listening also enables me, as the facilitator, to bear witness, validating the stories and hidden

narratives the women carry with them. The veiled approach to interaction within the singing

and songwriting sessions, is a necessary part of the trauma-informed approaches in

establishing safety. However, this can be complicated for songwriting processes, where

openness and vulnerability intersect. Barney and McKinlay (2010) suggest that "song as

musical text offers the possibility of historical witnessing and the possibility of truth in a new

space opened up by testimony and narrative" (pp. 8–9). Songwriting can therefore be seen as

a safe space in which to bear witness to the women's narratives, whether shared openly or

explored through metaphor and imagery.

       Anderson (2016) reinforces this understanding of bearing witness to trauma narrative,

narrative that is veiled and fragmented, by stating that, "In the act of telling they become

known, not just to the listener but to the teller" (p. 413). This being known and knowing is at

the heart of narrative inquiry as a form of co-creation, interpretation, and meaning making (Barrett & Stauffer, 2010). Bearing witness also connects to the idea of engaging in "working with" not "working on" people (Higgins, 2012, p. 156). Understanding that I work with the women in an equal creative partnership, listening with respect and openness, attending to the narrative they want to share, helps me establish safety in the space.

For community musicians, the concepts of welcome and hospitality (Higgins, 2008, 2012, 2020) are foundational values in establishing safety. As Porges (2017) asserts, welcoming, open, and hospitable gestures in the form of body language and facial expressions, are crucial for establishing safety for those who have experienced trauma. Hospitality, as both a philosophical notion and key value of community music practice, however, is challenged significantly within the context of working with incarcerated citizens (Birch & Higgins, 2020).

I endeavor to be hospitable and welcoming towards the women, both relationally and creatively, as it is me who is intruding into their (unwanted) space. This can be challenging when the women do not respond accordingly or where there is hostility within the interactions (Higgins, 2012). There can be aggressive outbursts, negative language, and disruptive behavior during the songwriting sessions. These outbursts could be connected to many things, including the ongoing impacts of past trauma, the current, daily trauma of incarceration, and the continual need for the women to be on high alert in such a hostile environment. The challenges and tensions of embodying and nurturing hospitality as a core value of community music practice within carceral settings, is explored further in a chapter entitled Qui sarai sempre il benvenuto (English translation, *You Will Always Be Welcome*) (Birch & Higgins, 2020).

The group dynamics, alongside sensitivity towards each individual needs to be delicately cared for, and empathy as a relational quality of the practice, is also fundamental to

this work. In reflecting on my ability to work with and alongside others and be emotionally

attentive and responsive (Hasler & Nicholson, 2017), empathetic processes have helped me to

consider whether these negative behaviors are present as a result of the women feeling

unsafe, in which case, adjustments can be made.

Narrative Interlude Two

I listen to the voice inside,

The music is a part of me

A voice from deep within

Waiting to be heard, setting me free

I turn the music loud and sing above the sound

And in that moment I can understand … why …

It calms me down and it sets me free

It builds a passion inside of me

(Emerging Voices, November 2018)

Coral was one of the first women I met on the project. In the early weeks of our

interaction, she appeared to be chaotic and alternately aggressive or withdrawn. Eye contact

was immensely hard for her, and I observed her gravitating towards those she knew and with

whom she evidently felt safe. She was suspicious of new people and that included me. She

did not like being put on the spot or singled out in any way, and when one of the student

facilitators made an insensitive comment critiquing her technique during a warmup exercise,

she shouted and aggressively pushed past into a smaller room adjacent to the main workshop

space. The prison warden who supervises the singing project, knows Coral well and followed

her out to help de-escalate the situation. I remember feeling vulnerable and noticing that the

other women were looking alarmed at this sudden and unexpected outburst. I also remember

that I felt the need to go and see if Coral was okay and emphasize that she was still welcome in the group.

Leaving the student facilitator to continue the session, I went through to the side room and found Coral in tears. It was apparent that her aggression was covering up a deep-seated fear and insecurity, and, as she explained to me, she had been the target of some serious bullying and offensive behavior within the prison. Being, as she considered, picked on by the student facilitator, threatened her sense of safety and she reacted accordingly. As I worked with Coral over the coming weeks and months, I noticed a shift in her behavior and outlook. It turned out that she loves writing and is a published poet[3]: it is an important creative outlet for her. She collaborated with a small group of women on the lyrics above, as they responded to the question, 'what does music mean to me?' I watched Coral becoming freer in her interactions, more confident in herself, and much calmer emotionally.

Trustworthiness

For women serving custodial sentences, trust is very difficult to establish within social interactions (Lempert, 2016). Carceral settings are not conducive to developing relationships of trust—to an extent, punitive dealings thrive on mistrust. Mistrust feeds into the women's vulnerabilities, and to survive in that context, they may feel the need to emotionally, mentally, and physically guard themselves against intrusion. Levinas (1969) explores the face as a "notion of truth" (p. 51), as connected to expression. If I want to create the space for trusting relationships to be built with the women, whereby we can emotionally and creatively connect, I need to understand that face-to-face conversation, exploration, and expression are vital. If my face beholds truth, about who I am, about my intensions to be trustworthy, then in face-to-face interaction, I can convey meaning beyond my words and gestures of welcome. Levinas explains further,

---

[3] Coral's poems are published in a collection called *Seen and Heard* (2019) which are all written by parents and children impacted by incarceration.

> For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the
>
> avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of
>
> approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship established over the
>
> things henceforth possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the
>
> relationship of conversation. (p. 50)

This generosity of approach is impactful to the music-making processes and enabling the women's narratives through songwriting. The common ground, according to Levinas, is that of conversation. Through conversation, dialogue, and engaging in open and supportive discourse, I can enable a process of ongoing trust to be gradually established. Higgins (2012) additionally encapsulates these themes, as connected to hospitality, emphasizing the need for "emphatic understanding" (p. 165). Empathy as a requirement of safety, also helps to create trust in the music-making space. Higgins (2012) also connects these notions as conscious choices for community music practitioners, not abstract concepts or personality traits. I have to be intentional in my practice.

As trust can begin to be built, it opens up possibilities for greater vulnerability in the dialogic processes of songwriting and creative collaboration. Escobar (2011) asserts that trust has to be modelled before mutual trust can be developed. He also connects the demonstration of trust and vulnerability with "open invitations to engage in dialogue" (p. 33), but cautions that this can also create an element of risk in disclosure. Facilitators on the YSJU Prison Partnership Project are encouraged to be selective in what they disclose about themselves. Certain topics or areas of conversation can be complicated for the women, for example relationships and motherhood. Dialogue, as a key part of engaging in each other's narratives, needs to be sensitively and carefully considered within the context of the songwriting workshops, placing value on equality in interaction.

In his hermeneutics of trust, Gadamer (1975) asserts that environments of trust can

enable a dialogue where pre-conceived ideas, misunderstandings, and potential for miscommunication can be explored and highlighted. Within the context and complexity of life for the women serving sentences, this kind of non-judgmental and open dialogue is key. This is summarized by Moran (2000) as follows:

> Gadamer, then, seeks a form of encounter with others which is at once wholly open to new possibilities, and, indeed, to the truth of the other's position, while, at the same time, remaining deeply respectful of one's own starting point, one's inherited outlook and presuppositions. (pp. 251–252)

These assertions reinforce the understanding that both researcher/facilitator and participant are connected through open dialogue, while acknowledging each other's past, in relationship to the encounter.

The reaching of mutual understanding is important to the songwriting process and enabling of the women's narratives. This understanding, whether spoken aloud, or perceived through other ways of interacting, is reached as each person connects more authentically, or truthfully, to themselves and each other. If authenticity is enacted within those moments, "in which we are most at home with ourselves" (Moran, 2000, p. 240), then this is surely a challenge within carceral settings. However, the women have spoken of the weekly singing and songwriting encounters being a space in which they can momentarily forget their surroundings, and feel more at ease, more themselves. An authentic, creative space, one where the emphasis is on being genuine and true to oneself and each other, can enable the development of trust, which, in turn, can enable greater vulnerability and more open disclosure.

Heidegger (2000) explores the Greek word, alethia, meaning *'unconcealment'* (Heidegger, p. 107). I have wondered if it is possible to connect this etymological idea of alethia (*un-covering*, *dis-closing*, and *dis-covering*) into the idea of enabling narrative

through songwriting. The *re-vealing* of oneself in text demands a high level of trust, as well as truth. For the women I work with, who have experienced trauma, the idea of *un-covering* themselves, displaying the vulnerability needed to tell their stories, may be wholly unsafe. The mental, emotional, and spiritual *dis-closure* in songwriting can be powerful but needs to be facilitated within the prison setting with great care. Trust can be broken. Through many of the women's stories and songs, it is clear they are painfully aware. However, what if this concept of alethia can be connected to self-knowing, understanding of the truth about oneself? As the women and I have engaged together in this creative journey of knowing, it has become more apparent to me that building a depth of trust could enable the vulnerability for a process of *un-earthing*. This is furthered only by interaction with others and cannot happen independent of human connectedness.

Narrative Interlude Three

I'm living in the moment, I go back in the past

And I know in my soul that the music will last

Expressing myself I feel free in my mind

Take the good with me, leave the rest behind

My soul is lost in the rhythm

My heart skips to the beat

When I'm feeling happy, or angry or sad

I think of music and the good times I had

I need music to feel alive

I need music to keep me strong

I need music to help me survive

I need music to know I belong

Music means the world to me

It's a burning feeling, it's part of my healing

Music means the world to me

A voice from deep within

(Emerging Voices, October 2018)

     Sophia loved singing. She came to the group having taken part in the Prison Partnership theatre program, and, as I later discovered, had experienced serious and prolonged abuse, both as a child and in her adult relationships. She was nervous about writing. Responding to the question, "what does music mean to me?" she did not know where to begin. I encouraged her to engage in free-writing, and not to think too carefully about what came out, essentially to trust in the process. She reluctantly agreed to try, and what happened over the next few minutes was a deepening of focus and concentration as she poured her thoughts onto the page. She agreed to share with the group what she had written, and her free expression had emerged like the text of a poem. Every line began with the words, *I need music*. The other women loved what she had written so much that, after some refining and input from the group, it became the chorus of the first collaborative song, *I Need Music.* This moment had a profound impact on Sophia, and she stayed with us on the project for one year, committing wholeheartedly to the weekly sessions, and encouraging others to fully engage even when they were lacking in confidence. Her story impacted me as I was able to observe a tangible shift in her during that time, witnessing her "courage to move out of the constricted stance of the victim" (Herman, 1992, p. 202).

Collaboration

     Emerging Voices, the name for the singing and songwriting project of the YSJU

Prison Partnership, was conceived with the notion that if "the voice is the barometer of the

soul" (Barnwell, 2000, p. 54), then every individual has the right to express their unique

narrative with weighty expression. Enabling space for the women's voices to be heard, and

narratives expressed in songwriting, demands a reciprocal approach, whereby facilitator and

participants engage in conversation, in dialogic exchange. In his explorations of dialogue,

Escobar (2011) states, "Knowledge is co-created in conversation. In dialogue, the exchange

of ideas is mutually transformative and enhances understanding of selves and others" (p. 17).

This concept of co-creation of knowledge deepening our understanding of each other, can in

some way help to explain why collaborative songwriting can be so powerful. Within carceral

settings, engaging in dialogue in the creative process can therefore have transformative

potential, for both facilitator and participants. Conversation can also provide the opportunity

to be challenged within unfamiliar territory, and the perceived otherness that, whether we

acknowledge it or not, we are connected to. Thus, the facilitator/researcher becomes the

"'story-teller' and 'story-liver' alongside research participants" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990,

p. 12).

The dialogic processes within the songwriting workshops are often veiled, with the

women creating text in response to images the students and I brought into the sessions, and to

metaphorical ideas. Negotiation of these processes can be challenging, where there are some

voices that are louder than others, women with a greater level of confidence and some who

need a lot of encouragement just to speak out loud within the group. Higgins (2012) explores

the idea of the workshop space, where "the event disrupts preexisting frames or contexts,

giving opportunity to the possible emergence of new form and voices" (p. 146). This provides

an incentive for me as a community musician, to keep understanding the potential for

disruption that the workshop space elicits, and with this disruption, the potential for original

material and fresh expression. This demands reciprocity in interaction, or "mutual

recognition" (oed.com). The possibility of collaborating as enabling significant narrative

meaning making (Barrett & Stauffer, 2010; Escobar, 2011) within the singing and

songwriting program is a key factor in supporting reciprocity. As a facilitator, meaning is, in

part, derived in the undertones of conversation, in the training and knowledge of trauma and

trauma-informed approaches, *reading* the room and sensing the women's voices, even if what

they are communicating is concealed. This is of particular importance where trauma narrative

can remain hidden or fragmented (van der Kolk, 2014).

In collaborative songwriting, a mutual understanding is reached so that the music

does not belong to one person but is a culmination of the creative discourse. Escobar (2011),

suggests that:

> Participating in this form of communication requires a set of abilities, the most
>
> important of which is remaining in the tension between holding your own
>
> perspective, being profoundly open to others who are unlike you, and enabling
>
> others to act similarly. (p. 16)

Through collaborative songwriting, stereotypes, perceptions, and perspectives can be

challenged. As a Prison Partnership team, we place value in the equality of the creative

partnership, helping us to maintain an openness in our weekly encounters, and challenging

our own preconceptions around the stigma of incarceration. For mutual understanding to take

place, it also necessitates the need for human connectedness, for belonging, imperative for

survivors of traumatic experience (Porges, 2017).

Narrative Interlude Four

Life ebbs and flows,

That's just how it goes

'Cos that's how we grow, how we grow

Ignore life's rejections

Make friends and connections

'Cos that's how we grow, how we grow

When the dark clouds bring you down

Don't face life with a frown

'Cos after every storm there'll be a rainbow

Instead of hiding from the rain

Let it wash away your pain

'Cos after every storm there'll be a rainbow

(Emerging Voices, March 2019)

The "collective empowerment" (Herman, 1992, p. 216) of collaborative songwriting is key to the creative work with the women. Helen had previously taken part in the PPP theatre program, and was, on the surface, friendly, open, and confident. She had no difficulty in speaking up in the early days of the project, was able to be clear about her musical tastes, expressed severe dislike over some of the repertoire I brought to share with the women, and became a significant spokeswoman for the group. I was concerned, however, by Helen's need to control group processes, and that she could get easily upset and angry if she felt others, including me, were disagreeing with her. What was less clear to me at the start of the project, was Helen's deep-seated need for approval, her difficulty in navigating any kind of conflict, and, as was exposed following a session that she had missed, a fear of not being needed, of having no value to the group.

What is intriguing to me about the song lyrics above, created from the project in which Helen took part, is the recognition of the ups and downs, and the inevitable twists and turns of life. Helen's input into this collaborative song was significant, and she openly wanted the song to be uplifting, as well as communicate a positive message. It is interesting to me

that within the text are words such as 'rejections,' 'hiding,' 'dark,' and 'pain.' These are

balanced with hope, however. The text 'make friends and connections,' is important to note,

as I observed the importance of these connections for Helen in the context of the project. In

realizing that the women in the group (including me) were on her side, valuing her

contribution, and treating her with respect, she was able to release a little of the control she

felt the need to exert over the group, and enable others to step forward and shine creatively.

Empowerment

Mills (2000) states that "our 'voices' [encompass] not only *how* we speak but what

and when, and that the ability to be heard, to be truly expressive, is deeply interwoven with

possessing the right to speak, the freedom to enjoy communication" (p. 5). She explores the

philosophy of vocal therapist, Alfred Wolfson, in his assertion that if an individual is not able

or allowed to fully express themselves, then they will endure suffering. In facilitating the

Emerging Voices project, I am continually looking for ways to enable spaces for the women

to be expressive and give voice to their ideas and opinions. These can be ideas in the form of

musical choices related to performing repertoire. For example, some of these choices may

include musical decisions about tempo, appropriate dynamics, harmonies, or the addition of

instrumental accompaniment. Enabling space for the women to express their own unique

selves (Cavarero, 2005), through their physical voices, is also crucial in the project. In this

way, steps towards self-empowerment, recovery, and healing can take place (Belenkey et al.,

1996; Herman, 1992).

Singing itself is suggested, by Diane Austin (2002), to be empowering:

> Feeling one's strength in the ability to produce strong and prolonged tones;
>
> experiencing one's creativity in the process of making something beautiful;
>
> having the ability to move oneself and others; and hearing one's own voice
>
> mirroring back the undeniable confirmation of existence. Owning one's voice

is owning one's authority and ending a cycle of victimisation. (p. 236)

It has been intriguing to observe the repertoire that the women have gravitated towards and have taken on particular significance for the group. Often these songs have messages and meanings that are positive and empowering. For example, Bill Withers' 1972 classic, *Lean on Me,* has been a firm favorite for many of the women. Labi Siffre's *Something Inside So Strong,* seemed to resonate and connect with many of the women in an emotive and powerful way. As they sang about the barriers they faced and having their rights taken away, the hope of the chorus offered a claim of sustaining inner strength. Listening to the women singing these songs has, at points, enabled a window of understanding into the hidden narratives that lay concealed beneath the surface. It has also helped me to understand why these self-empowering moments are vital for the women's recovery. As Austin (2015) states, in song repertoire, the women "are revealing something they cannot say either because they aren't consciously aware of it, they don't have the words to say it, or they do not feel safe enough to talk about it" (p. 624). Austin (2015) continues by explaining that risk taking through singing, can enable risk taking and empowerment in other areas of participants' lives.

Narrative Interlude Five

Let me stand unafraid in the rain

Free from hurt

Free from pain

Where my dreams take me to new exciting places

Not tangled in a mind that always races

Don't let it bring you down

My heart beats too fast

Holding onto moments I know can't last

I wanna feel on top of the world

With my feet still on the ground

Don't wait for the storm to pass

Dancing in the rain x2

It's raining, raining, raining x3

(Emerging Voices, July 2019)

I met Mary in January 2019. Contrary to my perception that women in prison were predominantly from a low socio-economic background or socially deprived, Mary challenged me by being confident and well-put-together. There was an ease in her interactions with me and the group, and she ventured to talk about her life outside of her custodial sentence, in a way that not many of the women did. She also told darkly humorous stories of life inside the prison walls. Mary was coming to the end of a life sentence and was in a wing of the prison that facilitated more open access and independence. Women in this wing had keys to their own rooms and could interact with one another socially as they wished, by cooking and cleaning together and spending time in the communal spaces.

Mary loved music and singing and spoke repeatedly to me of finding a singing group in the community, post her release. She contributed significantly to the group song, Dancing in the Rain (above) by telling the group a story about a recent experience she had on the open wing. Mary had ventured out for a walk one day, within the enclosure of the high fences surrounding wing, a reminder that her freedom was limited. As she walked, it began to rain; not drizzle, but huge raindrops poured down on her as she stood outside. Rather than running into the shelter of the wing, Mary chose to stand in the rain and let it wash over her. After the event, she explained to the group that she loved the inspirational quote I had brought to one of our sessions: *Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass … It's about learning to dance in the rain.* As she let the rain fall on and around her, she was reflecting on this quote, and

was moved to share it. The other women were inspired by this idea, to the extent that it became the basis for our collaborative group song.

Choice

Choice in the songwriting process can support the unlocking of an alternative narrative for the women, an exploration of different facets of self and identity. Enabling choice in free writing of text, releasing of the women's imaginations (van der Kolk, 2014), and space for exploration of the mess and complexity of their internal and external lives, is not without complications. Trauma fragments narrative (van der Kolk, 2014), so often we are writing songs with fragmented text and concealed meaning. I have had to consider how to responsibly facilitate the recording and retelling of the women's narratives, especially if they tell the stories I may not be prepared to hear or produce text that is negatively impactful to any of the other women.

To facilitate collaborative songwriting, I often brought a creative stimulus to the session, for example, images, inspirational quotes, or themes. The women engaged in freewriting around the stimulus they chose, and then worked in pairs or small groups to share their ideas and edit each other's work. We examined song structures, and the women focused on shaping text to fit different parts of a song (e.g., chorus, verse, bridge or middle eight). We then spent time exploring chord sequences and improvising melody lines to find melodic and harmonic shape for the song. This process could take several weeks, and, depending on the women's engagement and commitment, by the end of a 10-week project, there might have only been one group song, or there might have been several. The importance of choice in this process was crucial to the work and directly impacted the women's sense of accomplishment over a group song. They remembered which line/s they wrote and what they contributed to the melody or chord sequences and discussed the sense of pride they felt in the creative work.

One of the strategies in which choice can be responsibly navigated, is the

development of a group contract at the start of a new singing and songwriting project. This strategy has become a signature of the YSJU Prison Partnership Project. I ask the women to talk together in pairs about their hopes and fears for the project, and what they envisioned for a collaborative process. Responses have included listening well to each other, keeping information confidential, respect, encouragement, committing to attending, and not swearing. These values underpin our group interactions and create a shared sense of responsibility in the creative processes. They also serve as a reminder of the need for each individual to make positive choices while working on the singing and songwriting project. I am also aware of my commitment to these expectations as crucial to the development of group cohesion. I will therefore provide prompts if the women are short of ideas or lack confidence to speak up, in order to promote positive interactions that will support healthy relationships as we collaborate.

It is notable that this process of choosing is inherently dialogic, where group processes are agreed and acted upon relationally and decided in conversation. Ahonen (2016) attributes the choices and processes around singing with those who have experienced trauma to the formation of a "new narrative" (p. 271). These face-to-face encounters within the group enable the potential for reciprocity in interaction, whereby the women can begin to understand their value and worth through mutual support and understanding. Choice is a key component in helping to support the women's understanding of the value of their individual and collective contributions to the creative work.

Conclusion

As I have reflected on the processes of the Emerging Voices project to enable narrative sharing through songwriting, using the theoretical framework of trauma-informed practice, I have been drawn again to the stories of the women with whom I have worked. These reflections have enabled me to explore the research questions which underpin my

explorations. Through the inquiry, I have considered:

- How can trauma-informed approaches be integrated into community music practice?

- What contextual conditions need to be taken into consideration when designing specific trauma-informed frameworks?

- What are the limitations for practitioners working with trauma-informed approaches and how can these be appropriately navigated?

- What are the ethical considerations of practitioners and researchers knowingly working with trauma?

- How can silenced voices be appropriately represented?

Whether stories of hope and resilience, or stories that betray the shadow of the past, I can hear the women's voices resonate in my mind, some strong and clear, and others hesitant, full of fear, shame, and desperation. The connectedness and belonging created through the Emerging Voices sessions speaks to the importance of dialogic exchange and intentional listening, which can lead to the emergence of new meaning and knowledge (Gadamer, 1975). As Bartleet and Higgins (2018) state, "The skills needed to undertake this kind of facilitation require community music facilitators to be well versed in activities and processes that encourage open musical dialogue among different individuals with differing perspectives" (p. 8). At the forefront of community music-making in carceral settings, and especially where a trauma-informed approach is needed, openness in dialogue, both musical and relational, is key in acknowledging the differences of perspectives present in the creative space.

Returning to the framework of narrative inquiry, examining the connected strands of temporality, sociality, and place can help make sense of the women's stories, as contextually located, seen, and observed through my facilitator lens. Narrative inquiry, in this three-braided approach, can continue to provide a platform within research and practice, where

individuals' stories are given worth, and where it is possible to engage in a meaningful way with the *other*. Narrative inquiry, as a way of intently listening and bearing witness to another, can enable an ethic of care to flourish, where individual voices can begin to emerge.

In his 2016 publication, *Lines,* Tim Ingold quotes an indigenous elder writing about how songs emerge: "Songs are thoughts which are sung out with the breath when people let themselves be moved by a great force … When the words that we need shoot up of themselves, we have a new song" (p. 6). Reflecting on the process of narrative inquiry through the songwriting project has helped me conceptualize the need for words to pour out, for the women to have space for individual and group expression as a means of self-empowerment. The potential for new narratives to emerge, impacting identity and positive transformation is powerful. Bearing witness to the women's voices and concealed narratives, in conversation and interaction, has enabled a connection to truth as relationships of safety and trust have developed. Understanding my role in this process, not as the driving force, nor as the insignificant bystander, has helped me to see the potential for mutual transformation in this work.

The women have been heard. I have been changed.

References

Adler, P., & Adler, P. (1987). *Membership roles in field research*. Sage.

Ahonen, H. (2015). Adult trauma work in music therapy. In J. Edwards (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of music therapy* (pp. 268–288). Oxford University Press.

Anderson, S. (2016). The value of "bearing witness" to desistance. *Probation Journal, 63*(4), 408–424. https://doi.org/10.1177/0264550516664146

Austin, D. (2015). Vocal psychotherapy: Discovering yourself through the voice. In J. Edwards (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of music therapy* (pp. 622–636). Oxford University Press.

Austin, D. (2002). The wounded healer. In J. Sutton (Ed.), *Music, music therapy and trauma* (pp. 231–259). Kingsley Publishers.

Baldwin, L., & Raikes, B. (Eds.). (2019). Seen and heard: 100 poems by parents and children affected by imprisonment. Waterside Press.

Barney, K., & Mackinlay, E. (2010). "Singing trauma trails": Songs of the stolen generations in indigenous Australia. *Music & Politics 4*(2), 1–25. http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mp.9460447.0004.202

Barnwell, Y. M. (2000). The voice of African American women. In F. Armstrong & J. Pearson (Eds.), *Well-tuned women: Growing strong through voicework* (pp. 54–63). The Women's Press.

Barrett, M., & Stauffer, S. (Eds.). (2010). *Narrative inquiry in music education. Troubling Certainty.* Springer.

Bartleet, B. L., & Higgins, L. (Eds.). (2018). *The Oxford handbook of community music.* Oxford University Press.

Belenky, M., Clinchy, B., Goldberger, N., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The*

development of self, voice and mind (2nd ed.). Basic Books.

Berger, R., & Quiros, L. (2014). Supervision for trauma-informed practice. Traumatology,

    20(4), 296–301. http://doi.org/10.1037/h0099835.

Birch, C., & Higgins, L. (2020). Qui sarai sempre il benvenuto: Welcome, willkommen,

    добро, velkommen, пожаловать, 欢迎, ترحيب. In A. Coppi (Ed.), *Donare-Donarsi:*

    Relazioni, interdipendeze e inclusione nella pedagogia della Community Music (pp.

    93–106). Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana.

Burnard, P., Ross, V., Hassler, L., & Murphy, L. (2018). Translating intercultural creativities

    in community music. In B. L. Bartleet & L. Higgins (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of*

    community music (pp. 229–242). Oxford University Press.

Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins

    University Press.

Cavarero, A. (2005). *For more than one voice: toward a philosophy of vocal expression.*

    Translated and with an Introduction by Paul A. Kottman. Stanford University Press.

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry.* Jossey Bass.

Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Developing qualitative inquiry. Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Left

    Coast Press.

Conlon, R. (2020). The meeting place: Collaborative learning in a university–prison

    partnership. In C. McAvinchey (Ed.), *Applied theatre: Women and the criminal justice*

    system (pp. 173–186). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry.

    Educational Researcher, 19(5), 2–14.

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. Green, G. Camilli, & P.

    Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (pp. 477–

    487). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Covington, S. (2015). *Becoming trauma-informed: Tool kit for criminal justice professionals*. One Small Thing.

Covington, S. (2016). *Becoming trauma-informed: A training programme for criminal justice professionals* (3rd ed.). One Small Thing.

de Quadros, A. (2011). Community, communication, social change: Music in dispossessed Indian communities. *International Journal of Community Music*, 4(1), 59–70. https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.4.1.59_1.

Escobar, O. (2011). *Public dialogue and deliberation: A communication perspective for public engagement practitioners.* University of Edinburgh.

Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a reflexive researcher.* Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14,* 245–258. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0749-3797(98)00017-8.

Froehlich, H., & Frierson-Campbell, C. (2013). *Inquiry in music education: Concepts and methods for the beginning researcher.* Routledge.

Garrido S., Baker F., Davidson J., Moore G., & Wasserman S. (2015). Music and trauma: The relationship between music, personality, and coping style. Psychol. 69–77. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00977.

Gadamer, H. G. (1975). *Truth and method*. Continuum.

Harris, M., & Fallot, R. D. (2001). *Using trauma theory to design service systems*. Jossey-Bass.

Hassler, L., & Nicholson, C. (2017). Cello lessons and teargas: War, peace and music education. In G. Barton & M. Baguley (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of global arts*

education (pp. 417–430). https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55585-4_26.

Heidegger, M. (2000). *Introduction to metaphysics.* Translation by G. Fried and R. Polt. Yale University Press.

Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery* (2nd ed.). Basic Books.

Hess, J., & Bradley, D. (2020). Dewey's theory of experience, traumatic memory, and music education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, An International Journal.* ISSN 0039-3746. http://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09706-z.

Higgins, L. (2006). *Boundary walkers: contexts and concepts of community music.* University of Limerick.

Higgins, L. (2009). Community music and the welcome. *International Journal of Community Music 7*(3), 319–400. https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.1.3.391/1.

Higgins, L. (2012). *Community music in theory and in practice*. Oxford University Press.

Higgins, L. (2020). Rethinking community in community music: The call, the welcome, and the 'yes'. In B. Jansen (Ed.), *Rethinking community through transdisciplinary research* (pp. 231–246). Palgrave MacMillan.

Ingold, T. (2016). *Lines: A brief history.* Routledge.

Johnston, C., & Hewish, S. (2011). *Criminal justice; An artists' guide.* Arts Alliance, Clinks.

Knapp, D. H., & Silva, C. (2019). The shelter band: Homelessness, social support and self-esteem in a community music partnership. *International Journal of Community Music, 12*(2), 229–47. https://doi.org/10.1386/ ijcm.12.2.229_1.

Lempert, L. (2016). *Women doing life: Gender, punishment, and the struggle for identity*. New York University Press.

Levenson, J. (2017). Trauma-informed social work practice. *National Association of Social Workers.* https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swx001.

Levinas, E. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Alphonso Lingis, transl.

Duquesne University Press.

Levinas, E. (2006). *Humanism of the other.* Translated by N. Poller. University of Illinois

Press.

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* Jossey-

Bass.

Mills, J. (2000). A vocal album: Snapshots from vocal history. In F. Armstrong & J. Pearson

(Eds.), *Well-tuned women: Growing strong through voicework* (pp. 1–25). The

Women's Press.

Moran, D. (2000). *Introduction to phenomenology.* Routledge.

Mullen, P., & Deane, K. (2018). Strategic working with children and young people in

challenging circumstances. In B. L. Bartleet & L. Higgins (Eds.), *The Oxford

Handbook to Community Music* (pp. 177–194). Oxford University Press.

Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education.*

University of California Press.

Porges, S. (2017). *The pocket guide to the polyvagal theory; The transformative power of

feeling safe.* W. W. Norton & Company.

Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* Basic

Books.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the

transformation of trauma* (2nd ed.). Penguin.

Willingham, L. (Ed.). (2021). *Community music at the boundaries.* Wilfrid Laurier University

Press.