

PhD Proposal: Jennifer (Jenny) Hickinbotham. S9051257

Title & topic

Title: Voices to Sing

Sub-title: Singing up radical political defiance

I live with diagnoses of Developmental Trauma, complex Post Traumatic Stress, Dissociative identities, schizophrenia and this year Aspergers was identified. My animation and song *Polyvagal Body Song* is about the impact of our Vagus Nervous system on our bodies, the accompanying song I wrote, explains what is happened to the body in response to stress, anxiety and/or fear. *Song for Sue*, my hand-written song about Sue, incarcerated at Larundle Mental Asylum and the impact this place had on people, graffiti cried, Please, Please Help Me, many died. *Songs so far*, was to be installed at Blindside Gallery as their Sound Series piece, I was commissioned by Liquid Architecture. Mannequins represented my wooden and emotionally distant immediate family, who refuse to hear or believe my story of childhood abuse and trauma, inflicted on my six-year-old self as my parents travelled overseas in 1963. I wrote five songs giving voice to the mannequin couples, which represent my mother's ancestors and parents. The songs were recorded and produced by Joel Stern, Creative Director with Liquid Architecture, with support from James Rushford on electric organ and vocals and Steph Treesea on Ukulele and vocals. When lockdown stopped the Blindside exhibition going ahead, I made the work into a 45-minute film called *Living Live*. I recorded conversations with my mother about her extended family, I sourced genealogical documents and archival photographs, I used animation and personal recorded writings with selfies to tell the stories. *Living Live*, is now showing as part of Melbourne Fringe digital on-demand performance, I also have two live performances of the work scheduled for late October in Woodend. An essential element of this work is to interrogate the cultural construction of disability, including the impacts of emotive experience or intersections such as gender and race

Emotion has long been attributed to feminine weakness. Professor Antonio Damasio in 2005 proposed that all mental health challenges begin as emotional distress¹. Mental Health challenge has traditionally been treated as a medical and biological condition. The social model of disability demonstrates that emotional distress is grounded in social and cultural conditions, experiences and impositions. This practice led research project will employ explorative creative expressions such as sound and video art, song writing, singing and music making as well as writing, illustration and publication to explore emotional experience, expression and the impact of mental health treatments within 21st century Australia.

Through-out my undergraduate Fine Art Honours Bachelor's and Master's Degrees at RMIT 2017-2021 my creative practice has focussed upon my own lived experience of mental health challenge. Using artmaking as a means of interrogating and expressing my growing emotional awareness, self-awareness and capacity for self-knowing I have adapted a variety

¹ Lenzen, M., 2005, *Feeling our Emotions*, Scientific American MIND, (last paragraph), 1 April, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/feeling-our-emotions/>

of materials and forms in my art making with the aim of sharing my art as praxis, including video, animation, sound, print, performance, narrative, text and publication.

Inspiration comes from Alan Ginsberg's *Father Death Blues*, which can be seen on YouTube and originated as part of the film, 'A Poet on the Lower East Side'². Ginsberg has a natural singing voice, with small intonations, he accompanies himself on the harmonium. This song was written by Ginsberg as he travelled home to his father's funeral, it's addressed to Death. Like *Song for Sue*, this is an emotionally engendered musical experience, the words lead listeners to consider Death from a multitude of connection points. Ginsberg wrote about the social and cultural issues of his day, homosexuality, gay rights, communism, Vietnam war, drug trafficking, drug use, he is remembered for his poem 'Howl' about his illegal homosexuality in the 1950s USA³. *Sister with Transistors* 2020 is a video about electronic music's women pioneers, produced by Lisa Rovner. Pauline Oliveros, said, 'if you tread lightly your feet listen like ears'.⁴ A reassessment of the body's capacity to experience feeling and emotions. I heard Oliveros again on Patrick O'Brien's show *O'Tomorrow* on 3RRR 11th. '2001 06 25 at Nameless Sound (Pauline Oliveros Foundation)' was performed by Scorces, Heather Leigh Murray and Christina Carter, beautiful synthetic sounds verging on dronal, with a baby talking to itself in the background⁵. My song *Sense so far* starts with a baby droning in the background as Maz sings volubly, I recorded Maz in a St Kilda café. My own poetry/songs are like folk songs or ballads, they reflect the sort of music I enjoy listening to, Leonard Cohen, Joan Baez, Eva Cassidy, Mary Black, songs/poems that tell stories and share emotional experiences.

Research questions you plan to investigate in the context of existing research/literature in the area: Research Questions

1. How can my story and engagement attract emotional/ mental health challenged collaborators to share their stories supporting the creation of a series of songs worthy of publication in a Songbook, an album culminating in a concert performance?
2. Can it be shown, through making songs and singing, that verbalising emotional experience leads to feelings of self-knowing, inner-richness and healing?
3. Can short informative video/animation incorporating song/sound influence the quality experience of Family systems' emotional health?

Significance and impact of the research

This PhD practice led research project aligns with the interests and networks RMIT's Creative Care Project area has initiated. The Care-full Design Lab considers values, methods, scale/speed of how research is performed, aiming to impact the transforming of urban future-making. The **aim** of *Voices to Sing* is to engage respectfully and intimately with

² Ginsberg, A., 2009, *Father Death Blues*, casadellapoesia, YouTube Video, 12 June, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ew6ef3nE-E4>

³ Website Contributors, 2017, A Summary and Analysis of Father Death Blues, July, <https://beamingnotes.com/2017/07/10/summary-analysis-father-death-blues/>

⁴ Rovner, Lisa, 2020, *Sisters with Transistors*, Documentary/Music Film, March.

⁵ 2001 06 25 at Nameless Sound (Pauline Oliveros Foundation) sung by Scorces, produced by Patrick O'Brien, aired on 11th August 2021, on O'Tomorrow, radio 3RRR.

people who have experienced silencing at the hands of family, society and their communities. This researcher has lived with the impact of family inflicted trauma and abuse, subsequent silencing, impacting connection capacity, resulting in gross isolation. Collaboration between this recovering researcher and others living with the impacts of trauma will support gentle and respectful connection experience, as well as, creativity inspired cathartic shared emotional growth. Similarly, RMIT's Biomedical Health and Innovation Platforms align with this PhD research, which is based upon the neuroscientific premise that our brains can change, that thinking can impact our bodies and keep us healthy. The Biomedical Health and Innovation Platform tackles rising health issues, such as the impact of covid-19 on people and communities, this PhD project **aims** to collaborate with The Biomedical health and Innovation Platform objective through its innovative community-level intervention programs. The researcher **aims** to establish a collaboration with a support focused not-for-profit such as cohealth, orygen or Arts Access, thereby accessing participants, gaining their trust and establishing individual/group supportive creative connection experiences. CAST or Contemporary Art and Social Transformation is an RMIT initiative aligning directly with this PhD project, which **aims** to explore the intersections between artistic practices and issues such as equity, access and democracy through a collaborative practice. *Voices to Sing* **aims** to support the raising of equitable voices, in particular those who have been taught to be silent, by society's prejudices and stigmas, rendered invisible and soundless by unjust and undemocratic communities. Accessing one's own voice, empowering the self, accessing listeners/viewers, are key **aims** of this practice led research project.

This PhD practice led research project **aims** to operate from a position of radical political defiance, to give voice, active listening and an authenticating experience to those often marginalised, mis-treated, and disempowered by societies cultural paradigms. Emotional experience attached to social conditions such as poverty, homelessness, unemployment, where we live, equality of schooling, racism, physical illness, isolation, divorce, being denied access to an active listener and we now add covid-19, also greatly impact people's capacity to find agency and to speak out. Psychiatry's medical model approach to 'treatment' for mental health distress continues an historic trajectory of victim blaming, locking people out of sight, and disempowering authentic emotionally charged stories, voices and truths. Such voices have included women and children, as well as homosexual persons and through-out history those who choose to appear/behave 'differently' for whatever reason. Speaking at the ADisorder4Everyone online festival 17th September 2021 Dr Johnson proposed that people who are empowered to tell their emotionally grounded story to an active listener are also empowered to recover. Dr Johnson explained that people who are hospitalised due to emotional/mental health distress, treated within the parameters of psychiatry and the law, generally experience re-traumatisation⁶.

The practice led research project will place the artist amongst those around the globe who are challenging psychiatry's legally sanctioned punitive 'treatment' regime. Psychiatry and the medical model of mental health 'treatment' are under pressure from lived experience peer workers, survivors, neuroscience in its many forms, Mad Studies and groups such as ADisorder4Everyone. Psychiatry is still convinced of a 'common' behavioural or genetic

⁶ Johnson, Lucy, Dr., ND, Beyond Psychiatric diagnosis, <https://adisorder4everyone.com/video/#i'm-with-her>

connection between persons 'diagnosed' with the same 'disorders' and are now focussing on biomarker research. UK Clinical psychologist Dr Lucy Johnson developed an alternative assessment tool to the USA psychiatrist's DSMV, the Power, Threat, Meaning Framework, which asks the question, 'what happened to you', rather than psychiatry's, 'what's wrong with you'. Psychiatry is pre-disposed to blame the victim, rather than acknowledging that much mental health results from emotional distress imposed by other human beings, such as paedophiles, violent partners, abusive or neglectful parents. Dr Dan Siegel says 35-45% of Americans have attachment issues as a result of traumatised parenting⁷. Showcasing the epigenetic inheritance of trauma through video, animation and sound art will share new knowledge with parents struggling with 21st Century pressures. Neuroscience empowers this practice led research project to propose and support behavioural change through consciousness raising.

Expression of our emotional selves, knowing our emotional feelings, is now thought to empower self-awareness and self-knowing which leads to a rich inner life, core balance and integration. This practice led research project aims to support participants to tell their emotionally distressing stories, to share their traumas with this artist activist, thereby sharing in the creative process of turning painful words into song/catharsis, emotionally charged expression, proposing radical political defiance.

Methodology/research tasks required to undertake the research

This PhD project aims to collaborate with people challenged by emotional/mental health experiences and to share their story with the aim of creating a poem/song. *Song to Sue*, is an example of this form of collaboration. I wrote *Song to Sue* after Sue responded to my social media call out for collaborators in 2020. The collaborator will also be asked to illustrate their song with a poem, drawing, painting, collage, text, their choice, the aim will be to record the collaborator's response to the song and the process. Songs will draw upon the language of willing participants/peer collaborators, active listening to their stories and sharing will inform the writing of a song about lived experience. Songs will encompass themes of advocacy, mental health 'treatment' truths, myths and lies, impacts of covid-19, impact of 'caring', the truth about listening, the benefits of compassion and kindness, feeling our emotions. These songs will revisit and reclaim under-represented/denied narratives, voices and experiences that have historically defined and marginalised the feminine and the disabled. This showcase of new songs, in various musical styles, published, performed and recorded, will form new knowledge and lead to change in the world of mental health experience, acceptance and understanding.

A songbook containing up to 30 songs will be published. An album will be produced, I am in the throes of producing an album currently with the support of Joel Stern, Creative Director of Liquid Architecture, who has expressed his willingness to support this project or help me to develop a recording studio. The culmination of the PhD project will be a choir concert, all the songs will be performed, at a venue such as MPavilion. Recent research by Dr Alan

⁷ Siegel, D., MD, 2019, Presence, Parenting and the Planet, *Talks at Google*, YouTube video, 11 June, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ouzb_Urt7LQ

Harvey and others shows the impact of listening and performing music on a person's mental facilities, nearly every aspect of mental functioning improves, and benefits and these benefits last for a life time⁸.

In association with the *Voices to Sing* project this PhD practice led research project will create a series of short animation/video & sound pieces, topics to be covered will include epigenetics, or inherited emotional experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs. An example of epigenetics is someone whose parent experienced depression, but this person is happy and healthy until they grow isolated with age and start to feel the sadness of depression. Voice hearing is a diagnosable condition, this practice led research project will expose the diversity of voices people hear, real, remembered and fantasised. Dr Dan Siegel proposes the notion of MWE, that is ME as my internal self and WE as my relational self⁹ an animated video may be able to bring some humour to this topic. Dr Stephen Porges developed the Polyvagal Theory¹⁰ my animation/song *Polyvagal Body Song* reflects this research. Porges and Siegel, propose that connection, relationships and linkage are more significant to the quality of human experience in the 21st Century than shelter or food. This project continues the artist's Master of Fine Art research interests which culminated in the video of *Living Live*, presented at Melbourne Fringe as a digital on demand experience and two live performances at Norma Richardson Hall in Woodend.

Collaborators would be sought through my approach to organisations that receive funding and endorsement to support people challenged by mental health issues such as Arts Access, cohealth and orygen. Working in conjunction with a service provider would endower me with a space, group (such as Hearing Voices) and thereby the capacity to build trusting consistent connections with collaborators week after week. Consistent connections with the same collaborators will ensure this research project develops authenticity, complexity and endurance. Over ten years I have worked extensively as a peer support/consultant in mental health community settings, I facilitated three Hearing Voices Groups. Most recent I worked with Victorian Mental Illness Awareness Council, the peek body supporting those experiencing mental health challenge in Victoria. I have extensive experience supporting people living with mental health challenge in various settings, spaces, connection forms, and various states of distress.

Working as Lived Experience Consumer Consultant with cohealth's Panorama project in Footscray 2014 I was asked to facilitate a research project to assess the program. I worked with a research professional in seeking the ethics approval for a qualitative questionnaire, privacy information, instructional information. I conducted various interviews using the ethics approved documents, recorded all online, maintaining coded privacy practices. I understand that my PhD proposal will require ethics submission and approval, I believe I am well versed and qualified to facilitate the ethics requirement of this research project.

⁸ Harvey, Alan, 2017, Your Brain on Music, TEDx Perth, Video, November.

https://www.ted.com/talks/alan_harvey_your_brain_on_music?language=en

⁹ Siegel, D., MD, 2019, Presence, Parenting and the Planet, *Talks at Google*, YouTube video, 11 June,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ouzb_Urt7LQ

¹⁰ Home of Dr. Stephen Porges, ND, <https://www.stephenporges.com/>

I am familiar with grant writing, and grant opportunities related to the arts. I raised \$50,000 consecutively over five years for Household Relief Fund, a charity I started in 2010 to raise money for women and children escaping family violence, I also managed the funds and acquitted the grants.

Timeline

1st year appeal to networks for collaborators, through successful collaborations develop ten songs, begin to assemble Songbook. Also work on the short video/animation component of the PhD research, literature search and begin assembling thoughts and fragments for video/sound work(s) production, making trial works to test ideas and production techniques
2nd year continue collaborations, writing songs, record songs in home studio, complete Songbook. Also work on the video/animation component of the PhD research, literature search and continue assembling thoughts and fragments for video/sound work(s) production, making final works to showcase the project.
3rd year finalise all components of the PhD project, Songbook, Album and Video/sound works. Write up thesis.

List of Art Works

Living Live (trailer @melbfringe) & preview for Songs so far (Blindside Gallery). video, animation, song, photography, narrative, 2021, 13 mins
<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/615688197/df2f55fd32>

Polyvagal Body Song, animation, song written, sung and produced by Jenny Hickinbotham 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7NFvvM_J-g

Song for Sue, recorded & produced by Joel Stern, Creative Director, Liquid Architecture on 2nd Aug 2021, James Rushford electric organ and vocals, Steph Treesea ukulele and vocals, Jenny Hickinbotham vocal and lyrics. <https://soundcloud.com/jenny-hickinbotham/song-to-sue-1/s-hfJ2eL24JgD>

Sense so far, Song written by Jenny Hickinbotham, sung by Maz Strong, Evan Douglas-Smith, Jen Austin and Jenny Hickinbotham. Produced by Jenny Hickinbotham, 2021. 6.16 mins.
<https://soundcloud.com/jenny-hickinbotham/sense-so-far>

A Diabolical History: Omnipotent Psychiatry
<https://vimeo.com/478295700>

Scientifically endorsed three-hourly baby feed led to Rhesus Monkey experiments.
<https://vimeo.com/user118234819>