Singing Our Way to Awareness:

Trusting the River Through the Practice of Environmental Vocal Exploration (EVE)

[Chanter pour atteindre la pleine conscience : Faire confiance à la rivière dans la pratique de l'exploration vocale expérimentale (EVE)]

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Abstract

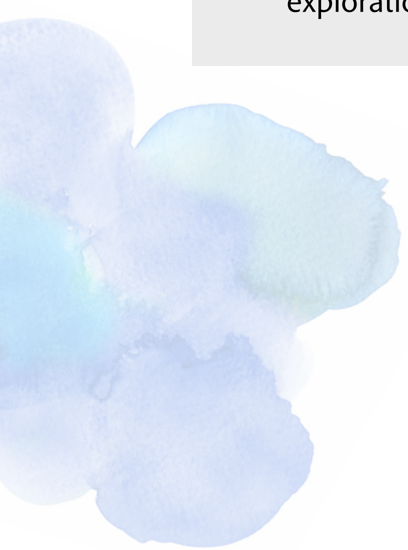
This article explores vocal improvisation as a practice of listening awareness. I examine the use of the voice when singing in place as a way of changing perceptions of the self and the environment, through an improvisational performance practice I call environmental vocal exploration (EVE). This article describes the project *The Singing Field: A Performance of Environmental Vocal Exploration*, a summer-long commitment from five singers who joined me in six EVE performances in various locations, during which we used vocal improvisation as our primary way of interacting with different environments and with each other. The performers shared their perspectives through interviews, debriefs, and journal writing. Using autoethnographic, ethnographic, and research-creation methodologies to analyze our experiences, I developed the concepts of *environmental countertransference, environmental vocalist,* and *xeno-song.* The results of my research highlight that singing with listening awareness in place can create a relationship between self and place, leading to a new awareness and attunement to both.

Keywords: vocal improvisation, listening awareness, environment, soundsinging, environmental vocal exploration

Sommaire

Cette article se penche sur la pratique de l'improvisation vocale pour développer l'écoute consciente. J'examine l'usage de la voix et du chant pour changer la perception de soi et de son environnement par le biais de séances d'improvisation vocale que j'appelle exploration vocale expérimentale (EVE). L'article décrit le projet *The Singing Field: A Performance of Environmental Vocal Exploration*. Cinq chanteurs se sont joints à moi durant tout un été pour donner six prestations d'EVE à divers endroits. Nous avons utilisé l'improvisation vocale comme principal outil d'interaction avec différents environnements, et les uns avec les autres. Les artistes ont exprimé leurs points de vue en entrevue, lors de séances de débreffage et par l'écriture d'un journal. En recourant à des méthodes autoethnographiques, ethnographiques et de recherche-création pour analyser notre expérience, j'ai développé les concepts de *contre-transfert environnemental, de vocaliste environnemental et de xéno-chanson.* Les résultats de ma recherche indiquent que la pratique du chant dans un contexte d'écoute consciente peut permettre d'établir une relation entre le soi et l'environnement, ce qui mène à une expansion de la conscience et à une meilleure harmonisation entre le soi et l'environnement.

Mots-clés : improvisation vocale, écoute consciente, environnement, soundsinging, exploration vocale environnementale



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The saying "don't push the river" invites us to resist resistance, to go with the flow. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a great proponent of flow, suggests that one way of preventing ourselves from becoming stuck is by challenging ourselves with tasks that we take on for their own sake, allowing ourselves to be engaged without any expectations about the outcome (2014). I have always found the concept of going with the flow, rather than trying to resist the direction of the river, useful. Many people can relate to the experience of trying to push the river and having things not go as planned. Or things go as planned, but we encounter enormous obstacles along the way. Because I did my research during the COVID-19 pandemic, I learned that there was no point in trying to push the river. Instead, I needed to trust my intuition and allow myself to be carried along. The power was just too vast—the power of the river, the power of our lives, the power of our chosen paths.

I hope that what I share with you will invite a change in your perspective of the world around you, and a transformation of your perception of your self in that world. I also hope that you will consider how intentional, improvisatory singing in place can allow for communication and reciprocity between our selves and our environment.

Background

I have been a music therapist, vocalist, choir director, and performer for nearly 40 years, and an educator for the past 12 years. This substantial career has inspired my diverse perspectives on singing, and has had a significant influence on my PhD research. As a music therapist, the voice has always been my primary medium of intervention and interaction. Singing is the main tool I use when helping people work towards the goals that are important to them.

For my master of arts (MA) thesis, I explored how singing can be difficult for many people (Oddy, 2001). The group members I studied as part of my master's research had been told as children that they should not be heard singing, and that they should mouth

the words to songs in choir or not join in at all. Sometimes the criticism came from teachers, parents, siblings, or music teachers, and sometimes the criticism came from within. Our voices are personal and can reveal so much of who we are. We live in a culture, however, wherein singing is often considered to be something that should be left to the "professionals," something we should refrain from doing if we are not behind a microphone or have not attained the approval of others. To me, the voice is an extension of the self: The quality of our voices is as different from one another as are the features on our faces. I believe that every voice is beautiful in its uniqueness. As music therapists, we are gifted with the privilege of hearing a range of voices through our work.

In my MA research, I sought to find ways that people could learn to appreciate their voices anew. One of the approaches I used was to have people explore different ways of singing. Since the breath is the precursor to singing, we began with the breath. We then added some small sounds sung to our selves, after which we added community singing—singing together. At this point, I began to explore some hypotheses. First, to see if singing in a reverberant place would help to change their vocal self-perspective, I took participants to the stairwell of the local library. Indeed, it had a profound effect on them; according to one of the participants, the stairwell of the library became a sacred place (Oddy, 2001). Second, to query whether singing outside would change their vocal self-perspective, I brought participants to the lake. The open air offered a different kind of liberating experience, perhaps because of participants' associations between outdoor song and singing around the campfire, where vocal self-perception has no bearing on one's involvement.

This research launched me into many years of helping people see how singing in place could elicit change. The workshop I did with those six people became the basis for structuring dozens of subsequent workshops (Oddy, 2011). I was no longer focused solely on those who were told they could not sing, however; I was helping people with self-growth. The flow of the river then brought me to my PhD studies. After decades of exploring how making sound in different locations could enable a person to learn something about themselves, I now wanted

to explore how that act could enable an individual to learn about the reciprocal relationship between the self and the places in which they were singing.

As part of my PhD, I conducted a study entitled "Seeking Awareness of Our Selves and the Environment Through Vocal Improvisation in *The Singing Field*" (Oddy, 2022). *The Singing Field* is the name of the performance that I created in summer 2020 during the fieldwork for my study. It is based on an experience that I call *environmental vocal exploration* (EVE). Broadly defined, EVE is a way of using improvisational singing as a listening practice. When engaging in EVE, participants use vocal improvisation to sing in specific environments. I find that using vocal improvisation can release us from the confines of pre-composed melodies and lyrics, and allow for open exploration. I came to this research having already established the concept and practice of EVE in my personal practice: I had named it and had a great deal of experience with it already. In the spirit of learning how to deepen our listening both to the world around us and to our selves, I wanted to learn more about how singing could be a listening practice. In April of 2017, as I was developing EVE as a concept, I went for a walk along the Cornish coast in Dorset, England, and did a sing at St. Catherine's Chapel in Abbotsbury (Figure 1). To have a sing means that I took in the place and the feelings I was having there, and then engaged in a vocal improvisation. As the nature of the improvisation emerged, I experienced a reciprocity between my self and the place. It is that reciprocity that is key to the EVE experience.

Figure 1

Photograph of the Outside St. Catherine's Chapel

A recording of my sing at St. Catherine's Chapel is available here: Singing in St. Catherine's Chapel (https://nicolaoddy.com/from-sound-to-song/singwalk). Doves are nested in the chapel (Figure 2). When the recording begins, you will hear the doves and then my singing. At the end of the recording, you will hear the wind whistling through the windows.

Figure 2

Photograph of the Doves in St. Catherine's Chapel

Theoretical Foundations of EVE

Each word in the appellation EVE describes a part of the practice's theoretical foundations. The word *environmental* is related to the term acoustemology. A combination of the words acoustics and epistemology, this term was conceived by ethnomusicologist Steven Feld as part of his concept of knowing through sounding (2015). He developed this term as a result of his fieldwork with the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, who relate to their environment through singing. The idea of this relationship was important to me as I explored how we could learn from our own environments by singing in them.

For the word *vocal,* I focused on vocality scholar and ethnomusicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim's discussion of intermateriality (Eidsheim, 2015). Considering the materiality of an environment was key for me as I thought about how human-made structures or natural materials affected the dynamic between the environment and the singer. The experience of singing in a highly resonant concrete tunnel, for example, might differ significantly from the struggle of singing against the overpowering sounds of a dam site.. Eidsheim (2015) sees

singing and listening as a vibrational, multisensory practice that changes with the materiality of the environment. She writes that although sound, body, and voice are separate entities, they are interconnected when sounding in place (2019, 38). She points out that vibrations have no boundaries and that "their relations are defined by process, articulation and change across material" (17). She adds that musicking—the act of listening to or making music (Small, 1998)—is a vibrational practice, ever changing with each moment that sound is in transmission. This focus on vibration comes from her desire to think about music as a practice, rather than an object. Eidsheim's theory resonates with my work in *The Singing Field,* where we considered the effect that the materiality of place and body had on our perceptions of self and place. I also take the effects of place into account in my music therapy practice, as a serious element in the therapeutic space.

When doing the fieldwork for my study, I considered the idea of singing as a listening practice as performance. The word *exploration*, in that context, was connected to the theatre of confluence, a term created by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer to describe how the arts come together while maintaining their distinct identities. I follow his lead of creating performances that were taken out of the concert hall, that were immersive, that were potentially transformative, and that often explored relationship with environments (2002). Schafer was not satisfied with the kind of concert where you just sit down, listen, and watch. For him, it was also important for the audience to be engaged and to be a part of what was going on.

Singing as a Listening Practice

Listening and engaging in EVE emerged from an experience called *soundwalking*, which is the act of listening with intention while moving through a place, to engage in what Andra McCartney calls "intimate listening" (2016, 40). McCartney thinks of listening as a form of improvisation, a way of keeping us "open to the possibilities of the moment" (2016, 38). She does not include singing in her listening practice, but the sensibility of her impassioned listening resonates with my own passion for singing in environments.

The practice of soundwalking has a long history. It began with Max Neuhaus around 1966, when he led his audience around New York City neighbourhoods to listen to the sounds of the city in his "Concert of Traveled and Traveling Music" (Murph, n.d.). He wanted listeners to embrace urban sounds in keeping with John Cage's (1961) idea of music as sounds that one hears. It was not until 1977, however, that R. Murray Schafer coined the term soundwalk, in the early days of the World Soundscape Project, when he asked people to engage in aural explorations of place to consider the implications of the sounds therein.

Many practitioners have carried Schafer's ideas forward, such as singer and improviser Vivian Corrigan, who says that soundwalking is about "waking up a listening perception" (2018). For Corrigan, soundwalking is a way of strengthening the ear and a way of understanding more about the environment through the sounds made in it. Similarly, the composer and performer Pauline Oliveros uses the voice in her practice of Deep Listening (2005). She developed a practice of listening to the world around us and within us, saying that to listen is to "give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically" (2005, xxiii). Much like McCartney, Oliveros writes about the importance of "listening inclusively to all that can be perceived in the moment" (2016, 82) with no prior commitment to any sound. Deep Listening is about the participant learning to open themselves to the complexity of sound and to expand their awareness of this complexity. Oliveros calls her sonic meditations "attention strategies," which she describes as "nothing more than ways of listening and responding in consideration of oneself, others and the environment" (2005, 29).

Like Oliveros and McCartney, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy advocates for listening as a form of awareness, saying that to listen is to stretch the ear, through "an intensification, a concern, a curiosity or an anxiety" (2007, 5). He argues that when we listen, we enter into tension with ourselves as we search "to be on the lookout for a relation to self" (12). Nancy's conception of listening is thus connected to how a music therapist may look beyond surface-level meanings while listening to and engaging in improvisation. Listening in general is an extremely important element when singing our way to awareness. Soundwalking, Deep Listening, and listening as a way of stretching the ear are all concepts that informed me as I developed my project.

Seeking Awareness of Our Selves and the Environment Through Vocal Improvisation in *The Singing Field*

During my PhD, in order to study the relationality between our selves and our environments, I put out the call for singers who would like to join me in improvisational singing at six locations around Ottawa. Five singers came forward. Each singer was given the option of using a pseudonym, but they each chose to have their names used publicly. Ellen was a retired teacher of children who are blind, Helen was a musician and retired schoolteacher, Cait was a musician and receptionist, Frances was a writer and singer, and Kelly-Anne was a music therapist.[1] I recruited them through social media, my choir, my association with Schafer's work *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon* (2002), and by talking to people about the study I was about to embark upon.

The research questions for this study were:

1. Can performative vocal improvisation in different environments lead to a transformed relationship with those environments, and if so, with what effects?
2. What is the affective force of EVE (e.g., personal, emotional, spiritual) and what impact does it have on performers?

Methodology

My project was autoethnographic: I was the sixth singer. I sang with the other five participants so that I could engage in the experience and have a personal understanding of it. I wanted to be in the experience and not just observe others. I wrote the first draft of my autoethnography before *The Singing Field* began, as it gave me a chance to position myself within the project, while also enabling me to relate to the experience as it unfolded. I felt this was important in order to examine my own biases and leanings (Denzin, 2003).

I also used research-creation methodology (Stévance & Lacasse, 2013), meaning in this case that the creation, *The Singing Field*, came first, and the research followed. There were

[1] At first, Kelly-Anne opted for a pseudonym, but when the film was complete and she approved of it, she changed her mind for future publications. This is why in the film she is referred to as Karen.

three main outputs of this research-creation project: one was the performance of The Singing Field; a second was the written dissertation; and a third was the film. Hasi Eldib of Carleton University filmed the entirety of the fieldwork, including the opening and closing interviews, and the post-performance debriefs. He and I worked together to create a film to help place this work in context. The film can be viewed at either of these websites: https://vimeo.com/hasi/thesingingfield or, https://vimeo.com/hasi/thesingingfielddescribed. The trailer is available here: https://vimeo.com/hasi/thesingingfieldtrailer.

Lastly, my project was ethnographic. The five singers who joined me in *The Singing Field* were collaborators both as fellow performers and because their input helped me to answer my research questions. Ethnographic data was gathered during a preparatory workshop that I led, in one-on-one interviews both before and after the set of performances, and during group debriefs that took place after each sing event. In addition, I asked participants to journal throughout the performances in order to capture thoughts and feelings that occurred between sing events.

Locations for the Fieldwork

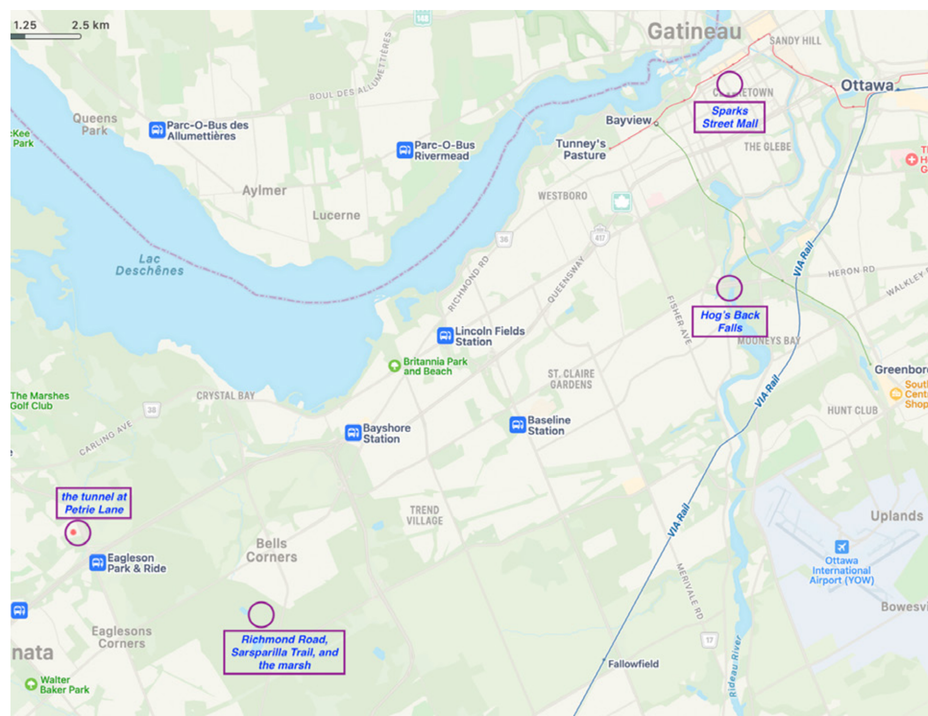

Figure 3

Map of Singing Locations for *The Singing Field*

The locations in which we sang included a reverberant tunnel at Petrie Lane in Ottawa (Figure 4), Hog's Back Falls, a dam site near Carleton University (Figure 5), the city centre (Figure 6), a busy road (Figure 7), a nature trail (Figure 8), and a viewing platform overlooking a marsh (Figure 9). For a map of the locations, see Figure 3. These sites were chosen in order to provide a variety of EVE experiences. As a consequence of COVID-19, I did not always have the option of using locations I had originally hoped for and my choices required flexibility.

Figure 4

Photograph of the Six Performers Singing on the Inside of the Tunnel

Figure 5

Photograph of Ellen Singing at the Dam

Figure 6

Photograph of a Pillared Building in the City Centre with Five Singers Engaged in EVE

Figure 7

Photograph of Frances Singing at a Busy Roadside (Richmond Road)

Figure 8

Photograph of the Singers on the Nature Trail (Sarsparilla Trail)

Figure 9

Photograph of Singers on the Viewing Platform Overlooking the Marsh

Each location took on a character of its own that influenced our singing, how we felt about the places in which we sang, and how we reflected on our selves. I was hoping to explore indoor places too, but due to COVID-19 indoor options were off limits (as were public gardens and outdoor amphitheatres).

Format of the Sing Events

Sing events all followed the same performance arc of ritual opening, singing, and ending with a debrief with each other. The ritual was important for establishing a grounding and a link from one performance to the next. The use of ritual is an important factor in my work as a music therapist, so going into the project I was aware of its benefits as a way of establishing the beginning and ending of an experience, and of guiding the process of creating order in our small community. Carolyn Kenny has been a deep influence on me in terms of my use of ritual in sessions. In her book *The Mythic Artery,* Kenny discusses ritual as an event that incorporates patterns, processes, images, and symbols (1982). Ritual creates a container for the experience, helping participants understand what is going to happen from session to session, or providing a sense of security and an intention for the proceedings. During my own experiences with *And Wolf Shall Inherit the Moon*—a performance piece by R. Murray Schafer (2002)—I was buoyed by the unchanging ritual element of our days, which began with an aubade and a community circle, followed by the act of creation, sharing with others, and ending with a nocturne.

In *The Singing Field,* our ritual included the simple formation of a community circle at the beginning and end of each sing event. The opening ritual was different each time, depending on what the group required in that moment—a need for grounding or a need for energy, for example. After the ritual opening, we sang with one another in an unscripted and improvisational manner. We sang as a group, in solos, and alone-but-together in what I would describe as parallel play. In these instances, participants sang at the same time throughout the space, though not necessarily engaging with each other. Then there was a final closing circle and debrief after each sing, which provided necessary processing time and closure in our performance arc. To encourage the debrief and to help create a framework, I often asked each person to think of two words to describe how they felt after the sing event; this helped them to express what they had experienced. The final debrief was a crucial time for sharing, and an opportunity for me to gain significant insights from the performers.

I invite you to try the EVE process, which I will describe briefly here. The practice starts with a moment of mindfully engaging with the world around us. We do that by standing silently in the place we are about to sing in. While standing, we listen, look, smell, notice the play of the light, and take in any movement around us. We then go inward and begin to create intuitive sound based on our experience of the place, starting with breathing, to the creation of a small sound, to a sound that others can hear, and then to a full vocal expression of our being in the environment. We end by closing our eyes for a few seconds, taking stock of how our bodies feel, and then by opening our eyes again. We think about what has transpired emotionally, spiritually, and personally. We then take a moment to think about what has changed in our perceptions of place since our initial sensory observations. It helps us to then speak, write, or draw about the experience.

If We Are Singing in Environments, How Can We Be Listening too?

When we have a verbal conversation with someone, we go back and forth. We cannot listen unless we are silent and focused on what the other person is saying. How can we truly listen in conversation unless we use the turn-taking skills we learned as children? But when we have a musical conversation with someone, we make music *together*. When we play music together, we listen to each other in order to inform the music that we are going to make. We listen *while* we musick. Our listening then informs what we will do next. Will we match the other person's music, reflect on it, do something completely different, or develop the original idea? There is reciprocity in music making. When we enhance the music of the person we musick with, our own music becomes enhanced. We help each other to create by playing together: We musick together as a listening practice.

When engaging in EVE, we use singing as our listening practice. By singing to, with, and through the environment, we are listening to and musicking not only with the environment, but also through the energy of the environment—the tension or the beauty of the environment—which allows for insights on the other side of the experience.

Composers and performers of environmental music reflect a great deal on this kind of music-making experience. R. Murray Schafer discusses the unique tones of each natural soundscape, including sounds that other creatures make, such as bird song, insect sounds, and the sounds of water, creatures, and animals. He writes that, in order for humans to join in with the world around us, we need to extend our vocality to include growling, howling, whimpering, grunting, roaring, and screaming (2002). David Rothenberg (2002), composer, clarinetist, and author, also engages with the soundscape as an improviser. He suggests that we can inhabit a bird's song by improvising along with it. He refers to the voice and the power of environmental interaction in, for example, the effect of an echo: "Take your ax and go stand in the bottom of a canyon. Blow in the instrument, pluck it, strike it, let out a piercing wail. Listen to what the world gives back. Play with the response, question it, explore the sonic shape of the land" (2002, 70). Bernie Krause thinks along these same lines too, writing that we need to embrace an awareness of the world around us by being an active listener through what he calls "careful listening" (2012, 223). He feels that by being a careful listener our connection to the biosphere will intensify.

This research confirmed for me that listening can go beyond what we can hear with our ears. As we gain the awareness to be alert to something, we find that we can not only listen to the environment, but also listen to how the environment affects us in turn. We can notice how we affect each other, how we listen inwardly, and how we listen to what is *implied* by what we hear with our ears.

Analysis and Outcomes

I interpreted the ethnographic data generated by this study by using an analytical coding of fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 2011) and by contemplating on my findings through a systems approach called field theory (Kenny, 1985). Through this process, alongside my own reading, my personal experiences, and my conversations with the other singers, I discovered that, through singing in place, people experienced increased listening awareness, which in turn created a relationship with place and the vocal self. That relationship was filtered through their emotional experience.

Vocal Self

Some of the subthemes that emerged under the *vocal self* included acoustics, spirituality, vulnerability, and playfulness. The acoustic was vital to the nature of the experience. There was only one highly reverberant sing event in my study: the tunnel. This space gave people a chance to play with the structure of the place, showing that singing in a reverberant place can enhance a person's confidence through the overt experience of sonic reciprocity. The harmonics in such a place and the experience of hearing the various eigentones[2] therein gave the space a special aesthetic.

In the tunnel, several performers noted that singing in an environment that reflected our voices back on to us was a spiritual experience. Performers commented on the spiritual dimensions of their experiences in all of the locations, however. For example, in reference to singing at the Sparks Street Mall in Ottawa's city centre, Ellen wrote:

> By investing myself for an hour or two to this process, this place, and these people, I am changed. It feels like I have just meditated and have emptied myself of much of the inner chatter that otherwise often occupies my head, the remembering and planning

[2] Described on https://www.sfu.ca/~gotfrit/ZAP_Sept.3_99/r/resonance.html as "an acoustical resonance or standing wave in an enclosed space caused by parallel surfaces." The eigentone can be found by standing in a resonant place, and by sliding the voice from one's lowest range to the highest. At some point, the voice sounds amplified. This occurs because the voice has touched on a pitch that is sympathetic (i.e., is a note within the harmonic series) to the room in which the singer is located.

of an adult life. This sound-making empties me of all of the past and future and I am engrossed in the now (journal entry, summer 2020).

Helen said, "Those moments were intensely present. Singing is generally intensely present. . . it's very much being in the moment" (exit interview with author, August 26, 2020). These are just two examples of the sense of numinosity that we all experienced throughout *The Singing Field*.

The Singing Field tested our feelings of vulnerability. Was the experience negative in this sense? Positive? Perhaps it is not surprising that all six women, including me, felt vulnerable at times. By placing ourselves in public places and making unusual sounds in the presence of others, we put ourselves at risk of being policed (Tonelli, 2020a). We spoke about these conditions and how they made us feel vulnerable, including how being in a community of women afforded us a feeling of protection in most cases, how a sense of exposure affected our vocalizations, and how we protected ourselves. Despite the unusual nature of what we were doing, singing in public in an unconventional manner with a mutually supportive group of women was, for some of us, less threatening than being a woman in many of the male-dominated spaces in which we work and live. The fact that women improvising together is not an everyday occurrence (Smith 2004) led us to discuss how, because we were women, we were used to feelings of vulnerability. The result was that vulnerability actually gave us an extra boost of courage to be creative in these unusual circumstances.

A sense of play, curiosity, and creativity permeated our activities at all of the sites. Through vocal and rhythmic play, we felt a sense of curiosity and creativity in terms of the sounds we made and the ways that we interacted with one another and with the sites. Play offered possibilities for new insight. Ellen experienced playfulness at the Sparks Street Mall when she made rhythmic sounds with her hands and feet as she sang: "It feels very childlike (in a good way) to approach all these surfaces with curiosity to see what will come of it" (group debrief at Sparks Street Mall, August 5, 2020). Kelly-Anne experienced a different kind of playfulness at Hog's Back Falls dam site, where she noticed

> a space between two rocks that you couldn't see down in between. And I wanted to be a part of it. I wanted to sing to that. It was like a hidden special place that I connected to even though it was one place where I wasn't getting all of the visual stimulation. It was a secret hidden spot, and I sang into that quite a bit (group debrief at Hog's Back Falls, July 22, 2020).

Place

Under *place,* themes related to settler culture, built environments, and natural environments emerged. The places in which we sang were at the heart of the study. In a sense, places were characters in the play and improvising partners in our performances. Our experiences in *The Singing Field* highlighted the effects of humans on places. These effects were evident even when we sang in more natural locations, such as the trail and marsh, where we could still hear the road and the occasional airplane flying overhead and could see the hydro lines near the marsh and the refuse left behind by former visitors to the site. All of this affected our experiences and our perceptions of our selves and of these locations.

The built environment had a significant impact on each of our sings, ranging from the stark, reverberant walls of the tunnel to the rushing water and concrete dam at the falls, from the architectural variety of the pedestrian mall to the gentle forested pathway and viewing platform overlooking marshland framed by hydro lines. Built elements were everywhere and inspired conversation about the impact that humans have on the natural world. These discussions ranged from expressions of acceptance to feelings of overwhelm. Some participants even felt empowered and inspired. Frances's initial thoughts at the tunnel at Petrie Lane were about the cement from which the tunnel was made, and how it was "a nightmare material." But then, Frances said, "when I got to the end, I felt an overwhelming gratitude to be able to sing there. So much is given by a bike tunnel. That seems a windfall—one of those things that happens that is so generous—to be given that space" (group debrief at the tunnel, July 6, 2020).

When singing in place we were struck by an awareness of the ways that settler culture, history, and industrialization converge. We found that there was an array of experiences to be

had in the built environment, ranging from gratitude to surprise; we even felt a thrill when singing in some places. We felt a strange juxtaposition, sensing the human impact from both positive and negative viewpoints. There is beauty in the built environment, in history, in industrialization. But it is also—literally—concrete evidence of settler culture, surrounding us at all times. When in a city, I will often marvel at the architecture, the amenities, the other people, or the storefronts. It was when singing in place that I became acutely aware of what had come before, and the means by which the city had become what it is. Our experience at Sparks Street Mall prompted such discussions, as that space is a microcosm of the history of settler colonialism in Ottawa, an environment completely taken over by colonial architecture. Frances said,

> There were lots of different feelings in some of those doorways or in the pillared building, plus the place in general. I wasn't thinking about the environment in there. I was thinking about human history—settler history. A human history environment (group debrief at Sparks Street Mall, August 5, 2020).

Overall, I learned that EVE can change the intensity of a person's listening—both inwardly and outwardly. I also learned that developing listening awareness of the world around us through EVE can help us develop compassion for that world. When we sing to, with, and through environments and heighten our listening, we can engage with the details around us. In short, through EVE, I have learned to embrace the reciprocity between place and the self.

Figure 10 provides a diagrammatic illustration of my overall of analysis of the study.

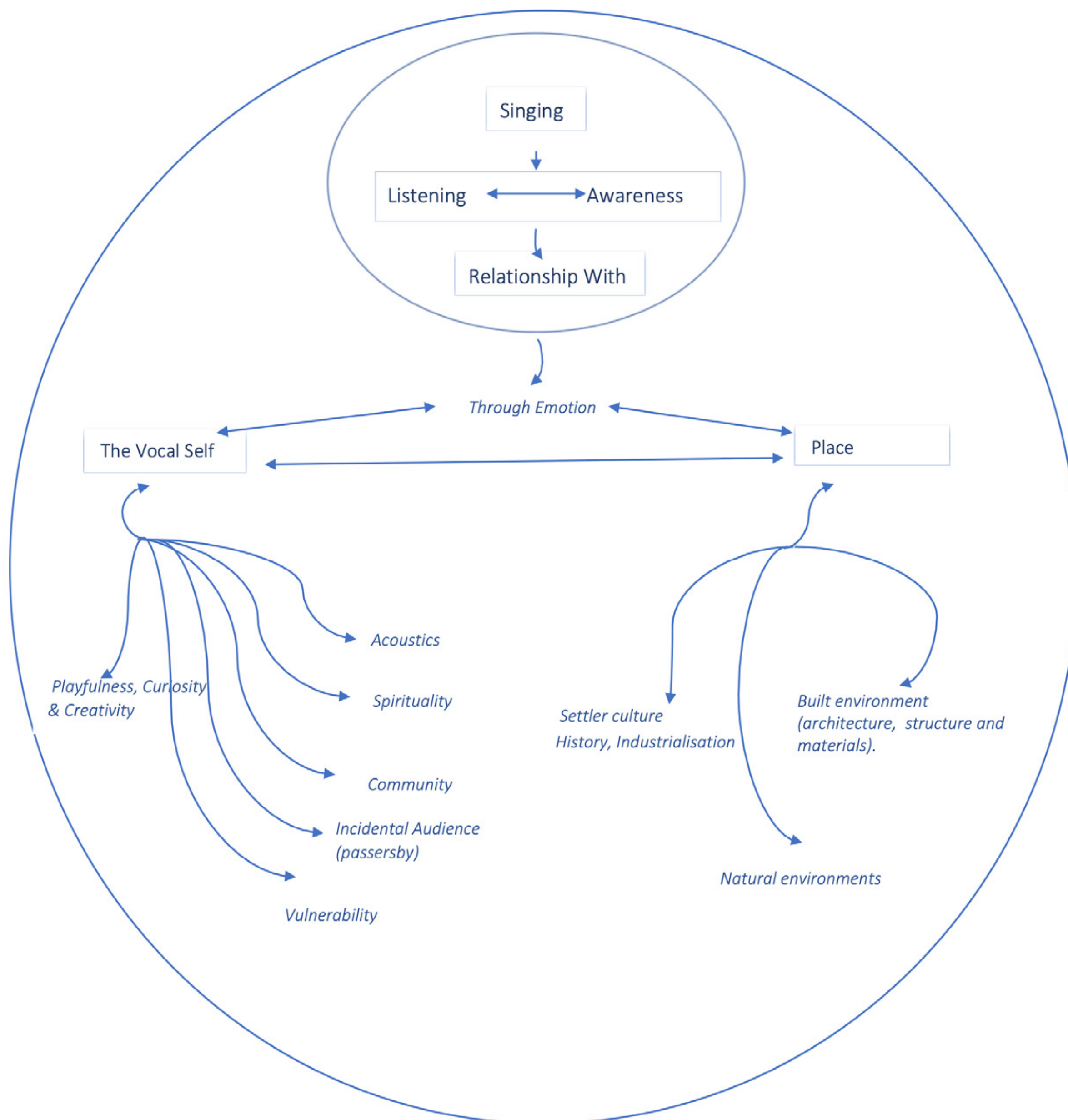

Figure 10

Analysis Diagram of The Singing Field

Three Emergent Terms

The data analysis and autoethnographic process rendered three key terms related to singers' experiences: vocal environmentalist, environmental countertransference, and xeno-song.

Vocal environmentalist: This was the first term I developed, in order to describe my own experience of feeling a change in my relationship to the environment after dozens of EVE experiences.

Environmental countertransference: This term describes the feeling of knowing something about a place because we sang in it. One very concrete example of this experience took place when I sang in the caves near a village called Morwenstow when on my walk around the South West Coast Path in Cornwall, England. Although I did not have any knowledge of the history of the area, the caves elicited strong feelings of grief. It was only that evening, when settling in at my lodgings for the night, that I learned that that cove had been the site of the most shipwrecks on the Cornish coast.

Xeno-song: This term offered me a way of describing the emotion-driven singing that seemed to happen when a singer was given permission to use their voice in any way they saw fit. I adapted the word from philosopher Roland Barthes (1985) who, when discussing the "grain" of the voice, coined the terms "pheno-song" and "geno-song," referring to that which is difficult to describe in the essence of the singing voice. He describes it as "hearing the body" in the voice (181). He adapted his terms from linguist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva (1986) who originally created the terms "phenotext" and "genotext" to refer to that similar elusiveness in text. In turn, I have adopted their terms, adding the concept of "xeno-song," meaning "other-song," referring to the sounds that we *leave out* of our singing vocabulary. The sounds that we leave out are not just melodic sounds, but any sound—including screaming, wailing, clicking, popping, etc. Vocal improvisers have used the term *soundsinging* (Tonelli, 2020a) to describe this full-spectrum use of the voice, and my use of xeno-song draws on such practices.

Free Vocal Improvisation: Extralinguistics

To grasp the depth of vocal improvisation traditions from which xeno-song derives, I will examine them briefly here. Free vocal improvisation, broadly defined, is the use of the voice in any way that it can be used. It does not necessarily mean there is a melody, although there may be. It may not be based on tones or pitch at all. The term *extralinguistics* is often used when describing the full range of expression one uses when communicating, "refer[ing] to anything in the world outside language that is relevant to the utterance" (Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar, n.d.). In a wider sense, this term includes such elements as gesture, body language, and sign language.

When singing, embracing extralinguistics means that we can use traditional elements of music such as melody, harmony, rhythm, and timbre. In addition, though, it can include percussive elements such as clicking or popping, dental sounds such as hissing, or the use of consonants such as "t-t-t-t-t" or "k-k-k-k." It could be based on emotional elements such as wailing, roaring, laughing, or growling. It can include shouting, sneezing, coughing, crying, panting, clicking, or buzzing. If it can be articulated, it can be included in vocal improvisatory expression.

There are a range of performers, composers, and scholars who work with extralinguistics. R. Murray Schafer calls it "raw vocable sound" (1970, 1). He seeks to break vocal tradition in what he calls a "desperation" for people to use the whole voice in order to overcome inhibition and "to find the personality of each individual voiceprint" (1). Vocal improviser and researcher Christopher Tonelli (2020a) encourages the use of a full range of vocal possibilities when singing. He welcomes these sounds into his practice to break away from the use of "pure" pitches (3). Tonelli says that they are, in fact, valid, important, and powerful extensions of the singing voice (4). I could not agree more.

Paul Dutton began his career as a sound poet who added his poetry to improvisational music ensembles. He was the performer who coined the now widely-used term soundsinging to describe the use of extralinguistics in his vocal improvisation (Tonelli, 2017). Dutton

uses soundsinging in choirs, in small groups, and in his solo work. Phil Minton, another soundsinger, leads a vocal improvisation choir called The Feral Choir (Tonelli, 2020b). He includes bodily sounds in his singing such as retching, vomiting sounds, and burping. Christine Duncan, a singer based in Toronto, also uses an extensive range of sounds in her solo singing and with the choir she leads, The Element Choir (Sofar Sounds, 2018). Maggie Nicols, originally a jazz singer, began using a wide range of improvisational vocal sounds early in her career. She can be heard singing with Minton, Dutton, and others in small group settings. In addition, we can hear this kind of singing in the creative sounds of Gabriel Dharmoo (http://gabrieldharmoo.org), Sarah Albu (https://www.sarahalbu.com), and Kathy Kennedy (https://kathykennedy.ca), all of whom reside in Montreal. In their performances, there are no limits to the sounds they use.

Xeno-song goes beyond soundsinging or the use of extralinguistics, however. It also refers to the emotion behind the use of those sounds. We see this frequently as music therapists in the unusual voices of those we work with—the one who yells, the one who buzzes their lips, the one who uses only vocal fry. For this reason, I think that xeno-song is an important concept for music therapists, as we need to be comfortable with any way that people make sound.

In the Words of the Participants

Through singing in place, the six performers (including myself) experienced personal change and awareness of place. We could not always articulate the essence of our experiences in words, though we tried to. Ellen said,

> The singing changed me. Because it became one more thing. The leaves and the wind and the raindrops and the sun and the wood chips under my feet are all external to me. But once I tried to interact with those factors, I became another factor. . . . Singing made the experience more cohesive. It made me more of a partner instead of an observer" (exit interview with author, August 25, 2020).

Frances explained, "It always brings me into how complex the natural world is and how I'm only a tiny part of that. . . . In fact, there's so much more that we are unaware of most of the time, that is deeply, deeply flowing within us" (exit interview with author, August 26, 2020).

For Kelly-Anne, it was a particularly emotional experience: "*The Singing Field* was this beautiful way of bringing my internal experience outside. It empowered me to use my voice in all sorts of ways to wake up, express joy, experience emotion, and to have them flow" (exit interview with author, August 24, 2020). For Cait: "It seemed like we all entered with an idea of what we expected to hear and then we left with a changed perspective on the other side" (exit interview with author, August 24, 2020). And for Helen:

> The environment felt like it was listening, which may be my imagination, but the living plants and animals undoubtedly perceived the singing at some level. I was quieter and more respectful of being in their place, a visitor, perhaps welcomed, but not necessarily. I was listening to the life and responding, echoing, joining in. Listening and singing in *The Singing Field* is like a new form of art. I feel like a beginner sounding out the environment, finding what sounds work when and where, by listening and feeling (exit interview with author, August 26, 2020).

All of us noticed that sense of intensification that Jean-Luc Nancy refers to.

What Is Next?

A Pilot Project

Currently, I am creating a model of group practice called Environmentally Engaged Music Therapy. As I write this, I am beginning new research, entitled "Singing Toward Personal and Community Change: Environmental Vocal Exploration (EVE) Enters the Music Therapy Session." This emerging research focuses on the development of a workshop using the approach outlined in *The Singing Field* above, but extending the ritualistic opening and closing. I plan to take people to different kinds of places for a series of sing events, focusing

on how singing in place allows for both personal and group transformation within a small research community. What might happen if we sang at a vehicle graveyard? A human graveyard? In canoes on the water?

My research question will be: Is environmental vocal exploration a valid tool for personal and community change in the music therapy setting? I will continue to use ethnographic and research-creation methodologies, but this new study will not be autoethnographic. This pilot project may become a case study that I will use in my development of the EVE concept as a music therapy model.

Other Uses of EVE

Beyond the use of EVE as performance practice (as was the case for my dissertation) and as a music therapy practice (as is the case for this new research), I am currently involved in a study that uses EVE as a mindfulness practice. The study is entitled "The Effectiveness of Mindfulness Training on the Experience of Music Performance Anxiety in Young Adult Musicians," and the principal investigator is Dr. Gilles Comeau of the University of Ottawa Music and Health Research Institute (Stanson et.al., 2022). Just as soundwalking can be a practice of awareness or an educational tool, EVE can be used as a mindfulness modality: for community groups or for choral groups (such as the Ottawa Youth Choir, who I was privileged to lead through EVE experiences in spring of 2022), it can be a way to connect people to each other; it can be an educational tool in school settings to raise awareness of the self in relation to surrounding environments; and it can raise awareness in support of environmental activism.

Final Words

That is where the river has taken me over these past two years. I have felt the flow—there is no question about that. Through this research, I have indeed come to a new place and I hope that what I have shared here contributes to your safe passage towards a new place of engaging with the voice as a listening practice, towards considering that listening in music-making means

that we do it together, that we do it at the same time. I hope your new place includes voicing in environments as you seek new awareness of your self and the places you are in.

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