

# “You won’t break my soul”: Practicing Queer Joy and Resilience with LGBTQ+ Refugees

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article explores the practice of queer joy and resilience among LGBTQ+ refugees through participatory music and storytelling sessions facilitated in a shelter context. Grounded in the Empowering Song approach, as authors, our work centers on co-creating spaces where participants—queer and trans youth displaced by systemic violence and persecution—can engage in identity negotiation and self-expression. Through an intentional process of collaborative music-making, artistic creation, and storytelling, we investigate how participatory art fosters healing, challenges societal norms, and cultivates community solidarity.

Reflecting on our dual roles as facilitators and learners, we examine themes of identity construction, "passing," and visibility, exploring the intersections of positionality and power within these shared spaces. Drawing on rhizomatic and narrative methodologies, we articulate the complex interplay between identity, pedagogy, and the transformative potential of creative expression. Central to our enquiry is the concept of queer joy as an act of radical resistance and a strategic move toward reimagining futures beyond oppression.

By interweaving our own positionalities with the voices and creations of the participants, we highlight the relational and unpredictable nature of participatory practices. This work challenges conventional approaches to music education, emphasizing a pedagogy rooted in humility, openness, and the collective creation of knowledge. Ultimately, this article invites readers to reimagine participatory art as a dynamic site for healing, resistance, and the reclamation of marginalized narratives.

## **KEYWORDS**

forced migration; LGBTQIA+; storytelling; witnessing; identity; Empowering Song

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We went into the shelter together, as we had so many times, inhabiting what we thought was a posture of humility and openness. As we walked into the shelter common room, we carried with us a basket of art supplies – markers, construction paper, brightly colored pipe cleaners, and papier mâché masks – and a loose plan to organize our session around the negotiation of identity using the Empowering Song approach (de Quadros and Amrein, 2023). We listened deeply as the participants of the workshop – all queer and trans youth, forced to flee homes and communities that could not protect them – shared their stories, their fears, and their longing for a future free from persecution and full of joy. As facilitators, we shared some of our own stories, reflecting on our own identities – Emilie as a queer person, and André as a child refugee. By the end of the sessions, we had learned much more than we could have ever imagined about our own internalized assumptions about the practice of participatory music-making, about ourselves, and about each other. After the session, we were left wondering about the space between how people present themselves and how they are read by others (Tudor, 2017); about how some might “pass” in one context and not in another (Jespersen, 2022); and about how others may never “pass” at all (McDonald, 2021). We recognized that the concepts of “being read” and “passing” register differently for our program participants than for each of us, and we were provoked to consider the complexities of identity and position once more (Ahmed, 1999; Puar, 2007; Tudor, 2017). In this article, we narrate the participatory music and storytelling sessions described above and explore what it means to bear witness. We consider both the power of looking (hooks, 1992), and the unseen/unseeable – what is hidden in the blind spots created by positional and epistemic framing (Serano, 2007; Butler, 2009; Feagin, 2013). Our methodology is rooted in observational research, using multisensory inputs (McKechnie, 2008; Smit and Onwuegbuzie, 2018). Our narrative interweaves our self-interrogations of pedagogy and identity with the artistic and narrative work made by session participants.

We intentionally distance ourselves from the conventional structure of a typical music education article. While we acknowledge and deeply respect the value of such articles—those that follow a logical progression from a clear set of research questions to a thorough literature review, a structured methodological outline, and a detailed data analysis—we have chosen a different path. Our work is grounded in the art of narrative construction, emphasizing the power of storytelling and the transformative process of re-storying. This approach enables us to explore themes in a manner that is, at once, rhizomatic (as discussed by Deleuze and Guattari, 2013 [1980]) and world-making, inspired by Bruner (1991). Rather than adhering to a linear, methodical flow, our narrative allows for the organic and interconnected growth of ideas, much like the way rhizomes spread in multiple, unpredictable directions.

In this lyrical and reflective article, we engage with Richardson’s (2000 [1994]) concept of “writing as enquiry,” which allows us to approach our subject matter as both a creative and investigative process. Through this method, we describe and interpret the multi-directional participatory narratives—the rhizomes—and the inherent rhizomatic interconnectedness they create. Our intention is to invite readers into a space where traditional boundaries between research and narrative are blurred, allowing for a deeper, more immersive understanding of process and pedagogy. By embracing this layered, non-linear approach, we aim to cultivate a unique kind of scholarly engagement, one that challenges readers to reflect on their own pedagogical practices and to consider the impact of narrative as a tool for critical self-reflection and growth.

Indeed, our conclusion is not a definitive answer but rather an invitation. We encourage readers to embark on their own journey of reflection, critically examining their processes and approaches to pedagogy in a similarly open and participatory way. In doing so, we hope to foster a community of educators and researchers who are willing to explore the possibilities that lie beyond traditional frameworks, embracing the creative potential inherent in a more narrative, rhizomatic approach to knowledge and teaching.

In contexts of marginalization and displacement, finding spaces to express and explore identity can be profoundly empowering and transformative. For queer and trans youth who have been forced to leave their homes due to intolerance and persecution, opportunities to safely explore identity, self-expression, and community can serve as a foundation for healing and resilience. This paper details our experience facilitating participatory music and storytelling sessions designed to honor and amplify the voices of such youth.

Drawing on the Empowering Song approach (de Quadros and Amrein, 2023), our sessions invited participants to engage in a creative process where they could negotiate and celebrate their identities. Entering the space as facilitators, we aimed to foster an environment of mutual respect, openness, and vulnerability, sharing our own stories alongside the participants. The resulting dialogues and creations illuminated not only the complexities of identity for each participant but also the ways in which our positionalities as facilitators shaped the interactions within the group.

Through these sessions, we began to question how identity is constructed, "read," and negotiated across different contexts, a process that challenges traditional notions of "passing" and visibility (Tudor, 2017; Jespersen, 2022; McDonald, 2021). Our journey revealed both the power and limitations of bearing witness, exploring how positional and epistemic frames influence what can be seen, heard, and understood in such a deeply personal setting (Ahmed, 1999; Puar, 2007). This paper thus examines the complex interplay between identity, pedagogy, and the unseen forces that influence participatory practices in community arts, emphasizing the role of creative expression as a pathway toward healing, understanding, and allyship.

## **PART ONE – SIGUE ADELANTE**

The common room of the shelter was adorned with poems and drawings that had been temporarily affixed to sterile walls with blue painter's tape and attached with clothespins to a line strung across a bank of lockers. Together with session participants, we tried to transform the room into a creative sanctuary where we could tell stories and share songs about where we had come from and where we were going. We began the session in a circle by sharing our names, inscribing them onto crisp blank pages with brightly colored markers. Some names were old, given at birth, some new, chosen with care to reflect the selves that felt most true and reflective of each person's gender identity. We decorated the name plates with drawings and affirmations. André prompted, "Sketch or write words of things that you love about yourself or that give you joy." Some drew flowers, others speeding cars. *Música. Bailar. Las playas. Mis labios.*

Music. Dancing. The beach. My lips.

Later in the session, we constructed a melody to a line from the famous poem by Antonio Machado: “*Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar*”.

Traveler, there are no roads; you make your own path as you walk.

It seemed like an appropriate phrase to ground our session, and expansive enough to hold multiple interpretations. What would that phrase mean to a displaced person? To a queer or trans person? To a person who inhabited multiple identities?

Soon, everyone was singing and swaying together. The room was filled with a noisy and joyful energy.

After we spoke about the poem, we agreed to write our own stanzas to incorporate into our song. We handed out additional paper and markers and directed the group to tie their poems to their nameplates with a single pipe cleaner. Soon, the clothesline that held the name cards sagged with the weight of our words.

Maria,<sup>1</sup> who loves football and dancing, wrote “*soy lo que quiero ser siempre*”. I am now what I always wanted to be. Monserrat had adorned her name plate with a seascape and the brightly burning sun. She wrote, “*mi vida solo me pertenece a mi*”. My life belongs only to me. Ovidio took our breath away with his words. He wrote, “*sigue Adelante, tú puedes con todo*”. Keep going, you can do everything.

*Sigue adelante*. The words hung in the air like a delicate, iridescent soap bubble, full of hope.

Keep going.

How can a people, displaced and dispossessed, blocked by walls and barriers, and subject to such violence and brutality find the courage, resilience, the dreamspace to even utter this phrase? How can one remain hopeful while experiencing or witnessing profound suffering? Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone remind us that “hope is a practice... it is something we do rather than have” (2022 [2012], p. 203, emphasis added); the repetition of Ovidio’s invocation felt like an expression of that practice and a prophetic vision for something yet-to-be.

*We’re not there yet but keep going.*

The room was still, as we read and observed the poetry each person had created, some as intimate as prayer. As we transitioned into another activity, we noted that the energy in the room had shifted inward. The stories that emerged throughout the rest of the session were poignant and troubling, hopeful, and funny. We kept coming back to our song, adding spoken word poetry between each refrain.

As we were wrapping up the session, we were surprised as the residents broke into a spontaneous dance party. On the community room television, Beyoncé’s homage to Black queer culture played on repeat: “You won’t break my soul” (2023), we sang and danced. It felt like another way of saying “*sigue adelante*”. Keep going.

As each person took a solo in the center of the pulsing circle, we took note of how, for a moment, the community practiced a resilience which bled into joyful resistance and back again. After the workshops had ended, we reflected on our aim to provide a tangible and creative way for LGBTQ+ refugees to imagine another possible world and to reclaim and tell their stories while cultivating a lasting sense of belonging. We had come into the shelter with clear ideas about the power of narrative, embodiment, creativity and so much more (de Quadros and Amrein,

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed.

2023). This experience confirmed many of those assumptions, but we found ourselves surprised by how much joy we witnessed and experienced in the shelter with our queer and trans refugee partners.

We know that radical joy is a human expression of resistance and a reminder to find beauty, light, and consolation in dark times and spaces. In an interview, adrienne maree brown suggests that,

Joy is important. It's not a guilty pleasure, it is a strategic move towards the future we all need to create. One in which our children are laughing, our children are free. They can go wherever they need to go. There are no borders holding them. That is what I am living and loving for. (Mosley, 2020, 24:05)

As with brown, we have come to see joy as a strategic move, an act of resistance. We find resonance with bergman and Montgomery, who connect joy to a capacity to imagine and create alternative worlds. They argue that:

Joy rarely feels comfortable or easy, because it transforms and reorients people and relationships. Rather than the desire to exploit, control, and direct others, it is resonant with emergent and collective capacities to do things, make things, undo painful habits, and nurture enabling ways of being together (bergman and Montgomery, 2017, p. 13).

Here, bergman and Montgomery write of joyful militancy in revolutionary anarchist spaces, but queer joy also carries a capacity to heal and nurture new ways of being together. Queer joy arises defiantly from oppression and systemic violence. This phenomenon is of particular interest to us as we move and work in queer and trans spaces like the shelters serving LGBTQ+ migrants in Tijuana; it struck us as a powerful reminder that Empowering Song is so much more than bringing participants to defined emotional states. As community music practitioners, we examine what queer joy can teach us about being with one another in ways that are both healing and radically imaginative.

Turesky and Crisman conceptualize queer joy as the practice of “taking joy in one’s own identity, an identity constituted from all that is antithetical to heteropatriarchal culture, [that] also disrupts the comfort of that culture...” (2023, p. 270). Disruption is an important feature of queer joy, and one we witnessed in the shelter on numerous occasions in a variety of manifestations, some more visible than others. In one session, we took note of how certain participants spoke with great animation and very loudly, commanding attention from all in the room; in another, we noted how certain participants refused certain activities, defying group agreements about how we would use our time together. In every session, there were participants who presented themselves in counter-normative attire and makeup. Many had gender affirming body modifications, piercings, or visible tattoos. These disruptions were small claims to social power and capital in the workshop space and were often practiced in defiance of the rigid social mores of the outside world.

As in our prison work (de Quadros and Amrein, 2023), we realized that shelter spaces can be disciplinary spaces for many. They are, in fact, considered adjacent to carceral sites like prisons or detention facilities, even as they provide humanitarian relief (Plotnikova, 2022; Oliver, 2017). We found ourselves asking why participants should comply with any of our requests, artistic or otherwise. Going into carceral spaces such as prisons and shelters helped us to recognize the disciplinary aspects of mainstream arts education, where learners are socialized into compliance. We did not want our practice to be one more source of discipline for

people who have been disciplined, surveilled, and punished at disproportionate rates.

Disruption unsettles the status quo and names the violence and oppression that are often hiding in plain sight. Disruption can also offer new ways of creating political and material realities. We resonate with Defebaugh who describes the yet-to-be nature of nonbinary and trans identities as

not nonbinary as in somewhere in between, but somewhere else altogether: somewhere beyond. Not trans as in strictly transgender or transexual, but trans as in transcendent: rising above and existing outside of constrictions and constraints (2022, para. 3).

Drawing on scholarship on Black joy (see, for example, Lu and Steele, 2019; Bonilla-Silva, 2019), Turesky and Crisman note that, unlike dominant social groups, “subjected groups can use pleasure and joy as a form of resistance, maintaining some degree of protected space, freedom, and humanity” (2023, p. 270). Queer and trans affinity spaces, like the shelter common room in Tijuana, can provide this type of protection. Bergdorf argues that

We need to understand the importance of creating our own spaces and frameworks and allowing a space where we can communicate, where we can learn, where we can access community, where we can express joy, and we need to understand why that is necessary. I think that there’s such a will to assimilate within so many marginalized communities and be part of the frameworks that already exist without acknowledging that they are harmful to us (Defebaugh, 2022, para. 21).

Not all queer and trans affinity spaces are spaces of disruption and joy, however. We are mindful of the power of normalization, even when it surrounds happiness and joy. Love warns of the regimes of normalcy that impose compulsory happiness on LGBTQ+ people in the United States. She notes:

In the era of gay normalisation, gays and lesbians not only have to be like everybody else (get married, raise kids, mow the grass, etc.), they have to look and feel good doing it. Such demands are the effect, in part, of the general American premium on cheerfulness: being a 'gay American,' like being any kind of American, means being a cheerful American.' For gay Americans, the pressure to appear in good spirits is even greater... Given this climate of emotional conformism, it makes sense to ask whether gays and lesbians still have the right to be unhappy (2007, p. 54).

We see this expectation of emotional conformism extending beyond the borders of the United States, of course. The queer and trans participants in our sessions experience brutality, abandonment, and exclusion beyond our own imaginations (see, for example, Castañeda Romero and Cardona Huerta, 2019; Valenzuela Barreras and Anguiano-Téllez, 2022). They have every reason to feel all kinds of emotions about what they have experienced. In our sessions, some chose to share their experiences with astonishing vulnerability, and many reverted to a cheerful affect soon after sharing. We wonder about whether this phenomenon is, in fact, evidence of how queer and trans migrants feel compelled to perform the compulsory happiness described above, or if this is just a functional sociality practiced by people living in close quarters. It is difficult to know.

In our experience as activists and community musicians, we have learned a great deal from creating a space for listening and resistance, and we continue to learn

from our participants about how to practice radical honesty, safety, and care. Though we were outsiders, we were invited to sit with participants' profound suffering and their militant joy, accompanying them as they "keep going" towards a world beyond our wildest imaginations.

## **PART TWO – SE HACE CAMINO AL ANDAR**

On another wall in the shelter common room, we sketched out a narrative map in order to identify common contours in our journeys. On one cabinet under a sheet of paper with the word "antes" on it, we wrote out emotive keywords reflecting how we felt about where we had come from. *Before*. On another, under the word "*ahora*", we wrote about the day-to-day life in the shelter and the emotional challenges of waiting for an asylum claim to be processed. "*Ahora*". Now. To the right of each of these word clouds we drew a meandering path on a large sheet of paper to symbolize the non-linearity of the journey. A journey from there and then to here and now. A journey from here and now into the unknown and unknowable future.

"What was the *desencadenante* that provoked you to start your journey? What was the trigger that set you on this path?" we asked.

For some of the participants, the words we listed under "Antes" were reason enough to flee.

*Dolor*. Pain.

*Violencia*. Violence.

*Sufrimiento*. Suffering.

For others, there were specific events that had provoked a departure, an exodus from a home place. One participant related a story about an experience with abuse; another told of threats of extortion and violence by family members and friends. Others spoke of longing for safety and security as their motives for leaving. After the participants shared, André described his own experience of forced displacement and fugitivity (see, for example, de Quadros and Amrein, 2023; Amrein and de Quadros, 2023; de Quadros, 2023; de Quadros, et al, 2021; de Quadros, 2020).

After listening to these stories, we gathered in a circle and repeated our session refrain – more slowly this time.

*Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.*

The group decided that we needed to do something physical to clear the air. We began with a walking meditation, with André narrating. "Let's go on a walk", he instructed. Keep your eyes soft and focused downward. Participants moved from the center of the room to the periphery, avoiding collisions with other walkers as best as they were able. Some moved in circles, others in lines. Move in a different direction, André invited. The room was mostly quiet, as the group walked without any sense of destination, one foot in front of the other. After a while, André brought us back into the center of the room, inviting us to join hands in a circle.

Next up – games. We played one where each person got a turn to offer a gesture and sound that would then be passed around the circle from participant to participant. We tried to play zip-zap-zop, another improvisational circle game that involved quick decision-making and reflexes, but the game quickly devolved into giggles and chaos. To draw the group back into a creative frame of mind, André asked for five volunteers to pose in a tableau. Everyone took a turn acting various emotions and scenarios unrelated to the previous activities. Eventually, Emilie

asked the group to think back to the story-mapping session and to embody some of the words from the worksheets on the wall.

*Engaño.* Deception.

*Reconciliación.* Reconciliation.

*Añoranza.* Yearning.

Each person bent and twisted their body into how the given word felt to them. Arms reaching out from Pedro's expanding torso – knees bending and pressing into the floor as Ana's frame collapsed inward, each body holding countless stories and aspirations waiting to be told.

At the end of the exercise, we divided the participants into small groups and set them to the task of telling a story with their bodies and with sound – one of their own, or a composite story about the next phase of their journeys. Before they set to work, one participant made reference to the myth of the happy ending and wondered how to resist oversimplifying what might lie ahead. We had a thoughtful conversation about preparing for the upcoming challenges they may face as asylum seekers, and how we might incorporate these challenges into their scenes. Once each group felt satisfied that they understood the task, they moved into various spaces in the shelter to collaborate on their scenes. After about twenty minutes, they returned and shared what they had created. We watched as each of the small groups invited the community to bear witness to their dreams and fears about the future.

As practitioners, this exercise always brings a set of questions to the fore. How might the body help us tell our stories, integrating trauma into the healing process? How might our stories allow us to make meaning out of our experiences and create space for possibility? These questions have informed our practice in profound ways and have certainly provoked critiques of mainstream approaches to music education (de Quadros and Amrein, 2023). Within queer refugee spaces, these questions and critiques take on even more resonance, as the queer and trans refugee body is a territory subject to unique forms of biopolitical violation, exploitation, and discipline (Aizura, 2014).

We have been working in refugee shelters serving LGBTQ+ migrants since 2020, using the Empowering Song approach in two-day *encuentros* filled with participatory music, theatre, and art-making, conviviality, and political consciousness-raising. Each *encuentro* included shared meals and unstructured time for conversation and spontaneous creativity. In 2023 and 2024, we added weekly meetings to our portfolio of offerings in Tijuana, co-facilitated by our local collaborator, Dzaya Castillo. Throughout the project, our experiences with participants affirmed much of what we wrote about in *Empowering Song: Music Education from the Margins* (de Quadros and Amrein, 2023), deepening our thinking about practice in at least one significant way. Having practiced Empowering Song and theorized about it, we had some internalized assumptions about what we would be doing in our sessions. We had ideas about what we might do each morning, how we might collaborate in the evenings. We had a vocabulary of exercises that we thought might be useful as we went about the work of creating together. But, in each of our sessions with our queer and trans migrant partners, those exercises were set aside, and new ones were created collaboratively.

Since *Empowering Song* was published, we have received numerous requests for something more practical, for a recipe book of sorts with specific tools that one could use in prisons or hospitals, in shelters or detention centers. We have been

reluctant to answer, as each context and community is unique. What works in one context will likely not work in another. To put it another way, Empowering Song is not a method. Our work in the Tijuana shelter confirms this – just when we thought we had the right tools to use in a particular moment, we realized with our participants that we needed to create a new tool together. Indeed, there are no roads, we make a path as we walk.

Empowering Song is a pedagogy rooted in the coproduction and comobilization of knowledge. While there is certainly a growing emphasis on responsivity within mainstream approaches to music education and community music (see, for example, McWilliam, 2009; Abramo and Reynolds, 2015; Bylica and Baumann, 2022), our approach diverges from responsive pedagogies in two important ways. First, Empowering Song troubles the notion of bi-directionality in the learning space. Rather than flowing linearly between teacher and student in a cycle of stimulus and response, knowledge and power move fluidly, rhizomatically among all present. We discuss this to some extent in Chapter Six of *Empowering Song* in our consideration of monologue and dialogue. Secondly, Empowering Song resists the idea that a specific outcome is necessary or desirable in learning; we are committed to moving in the direction of the unknown and unknowable.

To resist these aspects of responsivity is to relinquish control of the learning space, and so much of mainstream music education is deeply invested in maintaining control – control of classrooms, control of student behavior, control of what and by what methods students learn. We resonate with Akomolafe who urges us to slow down, to “[think] deeply about our efforts to save, to rush in, and do” (2018, para. 35). We feel an ever-present tension to come up with a plan before entering the shelter, knowing full well that we will abandon the plan early on. We feel anxiety rise as we let go of imagined outcomes, only to be astonished by the unimaginable work that the community creates. For those of us working with Empowering Song, this practice of humility is amongst the most confronting to our own music education backgrounds – backgrounds that value decisiveness, expertise, and authority.

To relinquish control in this way can be a powerful political act of accompaniment, engendering solidarity, belonging, and a sense of interdependence within community spaces (Watkins, 2019). Accompaniment of this kind – without a predetermined destination in mind – can create the necessary conditions for deep and sustained relationship aligned with what del Rio and Loggins refer to as a philosophy of joining:

To join is to invite and engage mindfully in community... with a reflexive openness to the radical potential of connection prior to the work of collaboration. Joining requires an openness to change... which is vitally important when joining with those from underrepresented perspectives, distressed communities, subaltern groups, and others who have not set the existing terms of ‘partnership (2019, p. 43).

In the context of extended periods of waiting, this type of connection can act as an anchor for the displaced. Migrants around the world experience “forced waiting, imposed by bordering practices with consequences of destabilising of lives and bodies” (Khosravi, 2020, p. 203); storytelling, music-making, and other modalities of human expression can provide counter-stabilization and ameliorate some of the negative social impacts of border policies and procedures. Indeed, we argue that Empowering Song is a practice of “revolutionary unwaiting [...] that opens doors for resistance, for refusing” (Khosravi, 2021, p. 47).

For LGBTQ+ migrants, resistance and refusal are doubly significant since sexuality and gender are policed and legislated in many countries around the world. As Aastha D notes in their introduction to "Queer Refusal,"

Queerness remains a site of disobedience...To speak of disobedience is to speak to the rules: to examine where they came from, who wrote them, who is policed by them, and what would happen if one was to defy them. Heteropatriarchy makes rules that queerness disobeys, and defiance...is a place where culture is created and vitality thrives (2022, p. 81).

The Empowering Song approach is rooted in defiance, disobedience, refusal, and revolutionary togetherness. By embracing the unknown and unknowable, prioritizing the co-creation of knowledge, and valuing the process over predetermined outcomes, we open doors to new possibilities and transformative change within and beyond the shelter walls.

At the end of the session, we gathered in one final circle to sing through our song – *Caminante, no hay camino*. Unexpectedly, one of the participants broke away from the group and started walking around the room, just as we had earlier in the day. A walking meditation.

Soon others broke away as well, each moving through space in their own time, singing and walking with down-turned eyes. After a while, one singer took the hand of another and walked back towards the center of the room. We closed the session there, squeezing hands and embracing as we reflected on our session theme. Yes, we create the path as we walk, and we are fortunate to walk with one another on this journey, even for a short while.

### **A REFLECTIVE GAZE**

In concluding, this article serves as both a record and a reflection of our experiences in facilitating participatory music and storytelling sessions with queer and trans youth. Our journey with the participants illuminated the delicate, often unseen layers of identity and positionality that frame each of us, revealing the intricate and deeply personal facets that individuals bring into shared spaces. Each session became a canvas where participants expressed their multifaceted identities, engaging in acts of vulnerability and openness that fostered trust and solidarity. Through the acts of sharing, listening, and creating together, we observed how complex identities shape interactions and interpretations in ways that are empowering, unpredictable, and at times challenging. These moments of connection underscored the transformative power of storytelling and music as tools for self-expression and community building. They allowed participants not only to navigate and affirm their identities but also to envision and construct supportive networks. Ultimately, these sessions were more than artistic activities; they became spaces of self-discovery, affirmation, and collective resilience that echoed the larger significance of inclusive and participatory arts in supporting queer and trans youth.

Our own self-reflections revealed a heightened awareness of the assumptions we bring to our practice and a deeper understanding of the powerful impact of bearing witness to others' lived experiences. By engaging in these sessions, we not only sought to support the participants in their exploration of identity and resilience but also found ourselves navigating questions of our own identity and assumptions. This process underscored the importance of humility and openness in participatory work, emphasizing that true allyship requires an ongoing commitment to understanding and supporting diverse experiences.

Ultimately, this article invites readers to reflect on the transformative potential of participatory art as a dynamic and powerful tool for exploring identity, challenging societal norms, and fostering inclusive spaces where individuals can reclaim agency over their own narratives. By engaging directly with artists and participants, this form of arts-making creates unique opportunities for personal and collective storytelling, enabling voices that are often marginalized to be heard and valued. Through this work, we are reminded that each act of listening, witnessing, and sharing can build pathways toward greater empathy and solidarity. It illustrates how creative expression, when shared in a communal context, has the potential not only to illuminate diverse experiences but also to connect people across differences. In this way, participatory arts-making underscores the essential role of creativity in cultivating communities that are inclusive, empowering, and deeply engaged with social issues. This form of artistic engagement becomes a call to action, encouraging each person to see themselves as an integral part of a larger, interconnected world where stories and identities are woven together to form a richer social fabric.

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