

High Key Transgression: Queerness, Disability Justice, and Music to Reimagine Our Selves

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of music, Queer and trans students, and the transdisciplinary potential of maker-education for liberating students in our traditional confines of biopolitical schooling enclosures. For many disabled and Queer students, there is success with vocal training as well as radical imaginings with instrumentation to allow for non-canonical musical expression. Music education can help validate students' identities, though we often hit limitations because of financial hurdles, the white cis-heteronormative canon of music education, and other accessibility issues. Through an extensive interrogation of heteroracist ableism, we will research the determinants for students' creative potential through music as a radical instrument of reimagining and implementing theory as praxis.

Keywords: disability justice, queer students, radical pedagogy, music education, abolitionist teaching

Many educators live by the ideal that education is liberation through knowledge, knowing, and having access to meaning-making. For one of our authors, this ideal ignited an interest in education in jails and prisons as potential sites for state captives to self-actualize, build coalitions, and transgress their physical bounds abstractly, though materially, through education. Years spent in the prison basement, an odd kind of subaltern space, birthed poetry, artwork, and music that seemed to erode the violent and totalizing confines of dehumanizing carceral enclosure from inside its own walls. As abolitionists aiming to radicalize education, we often wrestle with the oppressive violence of institutions like these filtered through the hope of insurrection, believing that radical work can dismantle systems—even from the inside. It's not just education, but maker's education, art, and creation that often seem like the tools to articulate self-actualization and the empowerment necessary for liberation. Education has the potential to be an illuminating process that ushers our imaginations to articulate new ways of being that challenge the ways social norms have been levied against us.

Looking back at those years in the jail basement, the liberative potential of education has begun to look like a pillar of salt. Of all the alumni of the program, a minuscule fraction had the resources they needed to recover from their incarceration and avoid recidivism. Education had not led to better jobs or healthier networks or healing from trauma and addiction. The prison walls remained asphyxiating even beyond their physical confines in their capacity to disable those cycled through it. It became necessary to admit that education itself is not inherently liberatory. In fact, education is often a tool of socialization that keeps us confined to social norms that are heavily embedded in the heteroracism that comes to enclose and limit all of us.

For the four authors here, this realization is also filtered through a social model of disability that emphasizes the structures of systemic oppression, rather than just the identities of bodies. This framing pushes us to understand oppression as a societal problem that disables marginalized groups rather than one that limits our understanding of disability, gender and sexuality, and race as experiences biologically determined by the body. The idea of disabling environments allows us to call attention to the ways society disables us within the confines of heteroracist oppression to better prepare our students to actualize themselves beyond the limits of social norms.

In this article, we examine the intersection of creating music, Queering self-actualization, and the transdisciplinary potential of maker-education in our traditional confines of carceral and disabling

schooling. For many disabled and Queer students, great potential lies in empowering them to do their own meaning-making through technologies like vocal training to morph students' voices in gender-affirming ways, reimagining instrumentation to allow for non-canonical musical expression, and broadened perspectives for multiple neurotypes. Music education has the scaffolding to validate students' existing and emerging identities, even as this is often limited by financial hurdles, the white, cis-heteronormative canon of music education, and other accessibility issues. Through an extensive interrogation of heteroracist ableism (which we will refer to as "carcerality"), we will research the determinants of students' creative potential through music as a radical instrument of reimagining and implementation of theory as praxis.

Carcerality in Schooling

The term "abolition" is becoming ideographic in the field of education and it is often wrongfully divorced from its literal intent to dismantle prisons. Associated with a more radical than liberal approach, abolition is guided by the belief that we must entirely reimagine our social institutions rather than augment them with small acts of reform. We use "carcerality" in this piece in an intentional political respect: to highlight the organizations of humanity as filtered through anti-Black racism, compulsory cisheterosexuality, and ableism. In the vein of Damien Sojoyner's (2016) concept of enclosures, we use the term carcerality to describe the upholding of social norms articulated through heteroracism, and the ways these norms materially impact, limit, and disable our lives. This is a pertinent consideration in schooling, one of our most common socializing institutions. As abolitionists, it is necessary first to acknowledge that education and schooling are deeply carceral social institutions that reinscribe heteroracist norms rather than challenge them.

As radical pedagogues, we are interested in interrogating and alleviating the confines of carceral schooling, and we believe that Queerness and disability are vital concepts to guide this work. Using "Queer" as a verb has a long tradition of challenging social norms around sexuality or gender and in all aspects of how we are socialized to care for and empathize with one another. Queering is the process by which we interrogate the ways social norms are used to dehumanize marginalized folks so that the mistreatment at the crux of oppression seems natural and justifiable. We see this often in the characterization of disability as burdensome, tragic, void, beyond the arc of progress, and something that needs to be cured or eradicated. However, the process of Queering reframes disability as a chance to reconstruct what we think the limits, and therefore, potentials, of our bodies are. Instead of thinking of disabled bodies as deviant or lacking, we are instead focusing on how systems and institutions limit and confine us. For our students, this is a vital examination, as schooling is meant to be universal, and should provide students of various neurotypes, nationalities, and identities with opportunities to learn. For this venture, Queering, or the commitment to care for people marginalized by oppression, is a necessary framework for thinking through the radical reimagining of schooling and studentship.

Limiting the Body

While it would transitively make sense that creative fields like art and music aid students in creating their ideal self-actualizations, like any other discipline, these fields are not untouched by restrictive norms, canons, and conventions. Carcerality is characterized by the need to contain, trap, name, dissect, and manipulate bodies into more socially legible and acceptable forms. This kind of conformity incontestably impacts music education. Compulsory cisheterosexuality disables students by various means, whether they are using instruments to make sound or using their bodies as instruments.

In music education, gender norms particularly are often heavily policed and protected as canonical performance standards. The ways bodies are filtered through a lens that falsely links gender performance to the desirability of the body in a heterosexual gaze has both ableist and capitalist implications. At once, these norms articulate performers' value through a presumptive fitness of the body that is deeply ingrained in gender norms that privilege masculinity as a stronger and more capable embodiment. Additionally, compulsory heterosexuality dictates performers' bodily awareness as femme and Queer bodies are more likely to be sexualized under a masculinist gaze. The blatant carcerality is apparent in the way the body is expected to be contained and made to

perform in regulated and conformed ways that fail to be gender-affirming, conscious of disability, or in line with how students view and hope to project themselves.

Supposedly “classical” gender norms are often articulated through an assumption of bodily fitness that is heavily gendered, sexualized, and fatphobic. For us, this policing has emerged in everything from being told we need to get “in shape” upon seeing our bodies without knowing anything about our fitness, to being asked to do physical exercises or movements that exacerbate chronic pain. Additionally, for some of our femme authors, this has also manifested in a hypervisible bodily awareness around how our bodies are sexualized, particularly in professional performance attire codes that aim to cover breasts, butts, hips, and other sexualized spheres of the body. These norms contribute to a lack of explicit protection and encouragement for our students to be openly queer and curtail their expression of self. Even the most well-meaning educators can be unsure of how to cultivate safe environments for Queer and neurodivergent students, as this practice has not traditionally been modeled for them. This can directly affect students through violent misgendering and deadnaming, as well as the indirect implications that come to dictate privilege in the vein of gender norms.

Gendering instruments and the bodies that control them additionally assigns value to student performers, through a marketable capitalist lens, that rewards conventional presentations of gender, sexuality, and presumptive bodily fitness. Often, cis-masculine performers are seen as more creative, able, and commercially successful. The potential for masculine musicians to generate a following and cultivate a demographic is also highly racialized so nonwhite students’ failures are attributed to stereotypes about laziness, ability, and talent. In a system of capitalism, performers and musicians are treated as resources and if they appear and sound “right” to the eyes and ears of authority dictates their perceived ability to draw in a broad demographic. These conventions limit bodies and their capabilities for performing in alignment with cultural assimilation, which only perpetuates the norms of heteroracist ableism.

Capitalism not only limits bodies but the spaces that host them. For more than one of us, music education has required a lot of financial backing, from taking excessive amounts of classes and zero-credit courses to paying out-of-pocket to comply with dress and makeup codes, to application fees and travel costs. This gatekeeping affects students and families, not only due to the literal wealth needed to pursue musical training but also whose access is considered valuable within neurotype and gender norms. This sentiment amplifies when considering the ableism that keeps disabled students from reaching higher education and from having equitable classroom time with their K–12 peers. In a world where composers are overwhelmingly white, cis, heterosexual, and male, students do not see representations of their own identities. In this sense, a disabling environment is created in which carcerality dictates who is welcome in a space, and who is truly contributing to it. Music students’ selves are abbreviated to the confines of class and resource access, cisgender heteronormativity, whiteness, and a particular neurotype and dexterity. This severely limits our bodies instead of allowing us to radically imagine the potential of our embodiments.

Affirmation in Meaning-Making

As with those holding identities marginalized by structures of oppression, our realities become our political investments. For many people of color, embracing Blackness and nonwhiteness becomes a means of empowerment in the face of fatal and state-sanctioned racism. For Queer folks, resisting the narrative that care and ethics must be filtered through a cisheteronormative hierarchy of romance becomes a political investment in treating everyone with empathy and humanity. And for us as disabled educators and learners committed to disability justice, an ableist world that denotes disability as a void or lack in the body is an opportunity to articulate a radical framework that explores our untapped bodily potential.

Music education presents an opportunity for students to self-actualize in tandem with exploring their artistic creations. As educators, it is our job to build avenues for self-expression and realization rather than normalizing our students. We must be deeply invested in exposing and dismantling carceral norms as they are reinscribed in institutions like education and academia. And while we understand that identities are based on social constructions, ontology is crucial to understanding the material

impacts social constructions have on us and how they come to disable us. We are not so naive to think we can truly ever transcend these norms but we advocate empowerment and humanization in transgressing them. While we are limited to what we can change about our bodies, changing our embodiments is a creative and flexible praxis all of us engage in as we come to know ourselves better through our experiences. Radical creative praxis that is designed to challenge the hard boundaries and enclosures of carcerality may not directly change our social position, but it does offer us a plane in which we can pluralize our understandings of our own humanity and potential.

Particularly in the vein of performance, music students can push back at the highly gendered dimensions of classic music training in a process of self-making and crowd affirmation. One example of this is vocal exploration, a process many people use for gender affirmation, and one rooted in choral training. In Kevin Dorman's (2020) experience as a trans voice trainer, vocal training has the dual purpose of helping a student develop their instrument while using vocal exploration to define students' voices, cadences, tones, and gendered performances. This process entails training to increase vocal flexibility and stamina and finding a new vocal mix starting with breathing exercises to open up the voice. Different-sized resonance cavities can affect pitches, and there are ways to shape the mouth to modify resonance. For many students, this work can affirm their genders, or their transgression of gender beyond the traditional carceral confines that limit gender to strictly masculine or feminine. Rather than being limited by the carceral confines of bodily ideals, this offers a kind of progressive potential to construct and test out an ideal or aspirational sense of self.

In a similar vein to how we can use our bodily performances to cultivate and affirm ourselves, we can also create space that allows bodies to realize their potential, beyond the boundaries of carceral conventions that dictate how music is made and performed. This is an especially precious space for neurodivergent and disabled students who can still create without the conventional dexterity and performance norms of classic music training limiting their capacities. As the education system has historically demanded silence from deviant bodies, different responses to music and different ways of utilizing instruments offer students space to negotiate their bodyminds with their environments. This expression is enhanced by a voluntary nature of learning, where the learner feels comfortable and unjudged in order to create. This deeply contrasts the standards of classic music education, which enforce the idea that the only way to feel good about creating is through being as close to canonical perfection as possible. In an effort to normalize the diversity of neurotypes and pathways to thought, queering instrumentation allows a means of self-actualization in an inaccessible space. This may seem like a small allowance, but this ontologically radicalizes what knowledge is, who has access to it, and who creates it, in ways that directly impact our students' sense of self and our carceral schooling norms.

Conclusion

In the Global North, being an educator is viewed as forging a person, shaping them into new things. Particularly in our system of schooling, the body and mind are what we reflexively seek to change and adapt to our cultural norms, but as radical educators, we see learning as a collaboration. When education is used to coerce students into accepting realities that cross their line of autonomy, we risk our students accepting visions of themselves that are damaging and untrue. There is so much possibility in education. We can push for a more collective understanding of learning as a transgressive and transformative praxis, beyond the norms of cultural socialization and obedience. We have a great opportunity to acknowledge the carceral limitations of schooling and seek to imagine them differently. Learning and teaching must be mutually constructed and open to the many spheres of being that each person might possess. There are too many ways of being for there to be one way of learning and teaching.

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