

Exploring the Extra-normal Self with the Extra-normal Voice: Improvised Ritual Possession with Voice

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My singing practice explores the use of extra-normal vocal techniques to interrogate aspects of the extra-normal self. I do so in improvised, magick ritual that uses voice as its main component. I utilise a range of vocal techniques, integrated with various meditation practices, to explore types of ‘magickal consciousness’. I seek to integrate my meditation practice—mostly vipassana insight meditation—with improvised ritual work. This has led to a practice of compassionate acceptance of ‘whatever arises’ in consciousness and ‘whatever arises’ sonically as manifest through channelled vocal sounds.

I use the term extra-normal self, or extra-normal state of consciousness to reference these ways of experiencing the world as different from normal, but in contrast to the more common ‘altered states’ which suggests that somehow consciousness changes in a fundamental way. While a subtle difference, the term ‘extra’ rather than ‘altered’ feels a closer match to my experience. I borrow this term from Michael Edgerton, who uses the term ‘extra-normal’ rather than the phrase ‘extended technique’, which suggests a primacy over more common techniques.¹ Extra-normal techniques often appear alongside the more common ones and do not necessarily constitute an ‘extension’ so much as another way of singing. In Tuva and Mongolia, for example, people learn overtone singing alongside other forms of singing rather

¹ Michael Edward Edgerton, *The 21st-century Voice: Contemporary and Traditional Extra-normal Voice*, 2nd ed. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

than as an extension of these other forms of singing. For me, the extra-normal states of self represent another way of experiencing the world *alongside* the more usual states rather than 'altered' from them. Some contemporary magickians and scholars use terms like 'extraordinary' or 'unusual' for similar reasons.² My use of the term extra-normal hopefully erodes the binary distinction implicit in other terms while also still recognising the usualness—normalness—of some singing techniques as well as some states of consciousness. In my reading, extra-normal sits alongside normal in a way that reads as less 'othering' and offers an invitation to explore further. Death growls and overtone singing can become part of an open-ended repertoire of vocal sounds which one might incorporate into any singing practice. 'Meditative' or 'trance' states sit alongside our more usual ways of existing in the world—recognisably different, but always within reach. The term extra-normal also implicitly asks us to interrogate what we consider normal. This may change over time. The metal singer may consider death growls as normal and the daily meditator may come to think of trance states as normal.

A broader interest of my research centres around striving to integrate these different ways of experiencing (or manifesting in) the world. This integrative approach assumes the possibility of either a fluid moving between states or the experiencing of them concurrently, and developing one's skill in moving between or focusing on different ways of experiencing the world. This again takes inspiration from shamanic and other magick and spiritual traditions, which assert that the 'spirit world' lies alongside (or overlays) the normal world. Shamans train to visit the spirit world, at first using long rituals—often including repetitive music and sometimes including entheogens—and experienced shamans can ideally move into the 'spirit world' at will.³ Musically, I have used these kinds of practices to queer the boundaries between performing music, practising music, meditation and ritual magick to the point where they no longer seem like disparate practices. Rather, these seem like different flavours of a continuous spectrum of experiences and expressions. The work of two of my greatest musical and vocal inspirations—Tanya Tagaq (the Inuit throat singer) and Sainkho Namtchylak (the Tuvan overtone singer)—speak to similar relationships regarding the intersection of shamanism and singing.⁴ When talking about my own sound practice I often use the neologism 'musick' as a way of foregrounding these differences. Aleister Crowley (an important, though for me problematic, Western occultist) used the archaic spelling 'magick' as a way of distinguishing

² Wouter Hanegraaff, 'Entheogenic Esotericism,' in *Contemporary Esotericism*, ed. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm, 392–409 (Sheffield, England: Equinox, 2012); Julian Vayne, 'A Gnostic's Progress: A Book from Our Own Steve Dee,' *The Blog of Baphomet* (blog), 2 June 2016, <https://theblogofbaphomet.com/2016/06/02/a-agnostics-progress-a-book-from-our-own-steve-dee>; Julian Vayne, 'Contact High,' *The Blog of Baphomet* (blog), 8 May 2017, <https://theblogofbaphomet.com/2017/05/08/contact-high>.

³ Tom Cowan, *Shamanism: As a Spiritual Practice for Daily Life* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1996); Thomas DuBois, *An Introduction to Shamanism*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964); Graham Harvey and Robert J. Wallis, *Historical Dictionary of Shamanism* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2007); Roger N. Walsh, *The Spirit of Shamanism* (Los Angeles: Mandala, 1990).

⁴ John Corbett, ed. *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994); Huun Huur Tu and Sainkho Namtchylak, *Mother-earth! Father-sky!*, 2008, Jaro Medien GmbH JARO 4281-2, CD; Sainkho Namtchylak, *Lost Rivers*, 1992, Free Music Production FMP CD 42, CD; Sainkho Namtchylak, *Аржаана. Музыкальная Сказка*, 2005, Азия+ ACD 035, CD; Sainkho Namtchylak, *Karmaland, Nuda Poesia* (Genova, Italy: Libero di Scrivere, 2006), book and CD; Tanya Tagaq, *Sinaa*, 2005, Jericho Beach Music JBM 0601, CD; Tanya Tagaq, *Auk / Blood*, 2008, Jericho Beach Music JBM0801, CD; Tanya Tagaq, *Animism*, 2014, Six Shooter Records SIX086, CD; Tanya Tagaq, *Retribution*, 2017, Six Shooter Records SIX0102, CD.

ritual magick from stage magic and I use the term ‘musick’ to draw a direct comparison between my musical (or musickal) practice and magick ritual.⁵

Over the last few years I have come to realise that I have oriented my practice around a desire for ‘authenticity’. While a deeply problematic word, I use it to refer to a sense of self-awareness and acceptance of the *subjective experience* of the moment, rather than a perhaps impossible-to-experience *objective truth*. One of the ways in which this sense of authenticity functions centres on a desire to integrate seemingly disparate aspects of one’s self. Trans theorist Kate Bornstein talks about trying to do this in her artistic practice(s):

I keep trying to *integrate* my life. I keep trying to make all the pieces into one piece. As a result, my identity becomes my body which becomes my fashion which becomes my writing style. Then I perform what I’ve written in an effort to integrate my life, and that becomes my identity, after a fashion.⁶

This sense of integrating seemingly disparate aspects of oneself has resonated deeply with my practice. The sense of ‘authenticity’ that I wish to cultivate seeks to create a space in meditation and musick to give voice to whatever arises; whether related to emotional, physiological, intellectual, spiritual or gendered aspects of my experience. I do not seek to ‘transcend the everyday,’ as rock critics Hans Weisethaunet and Ulf Lindberg propose as one way that rock music authenticity functions;⁷ rather, I seek to permeate the everyday with a sense of meditative, compassionate acceptance. I seek to erode the boundaries between the everyday and the spiritual as well as the normal and the extra-normal voice—manifesting a new baseline of normal for myself and implicitly critiquing the sense of normal for others.

I have explored various ways of practising magick for about twenty years, mostly within a chaos magick paradigm. Chaos magick constitutes a postmodern continuation of the Western esoteric tradition that privileges practical magick over its sometimes overbearing ‘cultural baggage’.⁸ I have, however, found many aspects of these Western esoteric traditions problematic (though less so in the chaos magick paradigm). Although I have taken a lot of inspiration from these practices, they also have a strong vein of patriarchal and hierarchical power dynamics as well as an arguably colonialist undercurrent to them. The classic definition of magick in the Western esoteric or occult tradition comes from Crowley: ‘asserting one’s Will on the world.’⁹ This imposition of power reads like a single-sentence manifesto for privileged male hedonism. I seek to investigate the possibilities of a magickal practice that takes inspiration from anarchism, intersectional feminism, queer, and trans theory. These political theories have infused my work with a deep interest in and commitment to nurturing ethical relationships and engaging critically with systemic power dynamics. I also seek a magickal practice that can integrate with my commitment to meditation practice. Sometimes meditation has felt like the

⁵ Crowley has had a huge influence on the Western magick tradition and particularly on chaos magick. Like many people, I find his politics problematically authoritarian, sexist and sometimes racist.

⁶ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage, 1994); emphasis original.

⁷ Hans Weisethaunet and Ulf Lindberg, ‘Authenticity Revisited: The Rock Critic and the Changing Real,’ *Popular Music and Society* 33, no. 4 (2010): 465–85.

⁸ David V. Barrett, ‘Chaos Magick,’ in *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*, ed. Peter Clarke (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 105–6.

⁹ Aleister Crowley, Mary Desti, and Leila Waddell, *Magick: Liber Aba, Book Four, Parts I–IV*, 2nd rev. ed. (San Francisco, CA: Weiser Books, 2008).

opposite of Crowley's definition of magick, a one-sentence manifesto for meditation perhaps reading: 'accept whatever arises'. At times, it has felt impossible to integrate the two practices of 'accepting what arises' and 'asserting my Will on the world'; it has seemed that they stand in opposition as two alternate, mutually exclusive paths that I might take.

My first real breakthrough in terms of how I practised these two seemingly disparate spiritual paths came with exploring improvised ritual work. Influenced in part by the works of Antero Alli and reading more about shamanic traditions and how open-ended these practices seem—in distinction to the results-orientated Western occult paradigm—I started exploring a less formulaic magick practice.¹⁰ With this came the realisation that I could easily integrate a meditative attention to these improvised works. Using a meditative awareness in my improvising musick practice, I rarely have discursive thoughts and I allow musick to 'speak through me' in a 'flow state' or, as I usually frame it, give voice to whatever arises.¹¹ This kind of awareness sits easily alongside improvised ritual work. Rather than creating a formula for a ritual, planning everything out, writing a script—ideally in an ancient language—and going through these steps, doing the poses, making the gestures, saying the incantations, I instead begin with an intent to explore a particular experience. I invite an experience with an archetypal form, for example, and allow it to resonate through my voice and in my physical and emotional states. Inviting a deeper experience of 'anger', for example, might manifest with physical sensations of heat and heightened energy, and manifest aggressive screams and growls. These experiences have ranged from: invoking particular archetypal forms (or 'gods') and exploring how these resonate within me; inviting emotional states to manifest more fully so that I might feel through them more deeply (if I feel I have some 'unprocessed' emotions); to more open explorations in 'magickal consciousness'. The invitations constitute the entirety of the 'scripted' section of my ritual. The experience of it flows freely from this invitation and I strive to maintain a Buddhist 'witness' style awareness throughout 'whatever arises'.

Shamanic practices in part appeal because of their open-ended nature—most shamanic traditions do not have an 'end goal' in the way that Buddhism does (the individual Awakens, all sentient beings Awaken). While shamans will often have an intent in their work—to facilitate a good hunt, or help heal an individual—the process has a much more collaborative and exploratory feel. Rather than performing a scripted set of actions with a set outcome in mind—as a classic Western occultist might practice—most shamanic traditions acknowledge that their work has an element of negotiation with spirits, rather than commanding them, or 'asserting one's Will over them'. Descriptions of shamanic traditions often include unexpected plot twists. For example, the shaman might discover additional reasons for the person's sickness which require further ritual, or they may encounter unfriendly spirits. This sense of collaboration—and negotiation—sits much better with my personal politics than much of the Western occult tradition. Siberian Shamanic workings have a particular aesthetic appeal for

¹⁰ Antero Alli, *All Rites Reversed?!: Ritual Technology for Self-initiation* (Oakland, CA: Falcon Press, 1987); Antero Alli, *Towards an Archeology of the Soul: A Paratheatrical Workbook* (Berkeley, CA: Vertical Pool, 2003); Antero Alli, *The Eight-circuit Brain: Navigational Strategies for the Energetic Body* (Tempe, AZ: The Original Falcon Press, 2014).

¹¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996); Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

me, through their use of drums, rattles, and their close association with throat singing (also called *khoomei* or *khoomii*; spellings vary considerably), one of the first singing techniques that I learnt.¹² The exploration of timbre in this music as well as drone, repetition and a more expansive sense of the present moment particularly appeal to my practice and sit very comfortably in an improvising context.

From this shamanic work, I started moving towards more channelling or possession work (universally applicable distinctions between these terms tend to break down when one reads broadly enough).¹³ My possession work owes a lot to the work of Demitria Monde Thraam's work with the 'demon' Choronzon, as well as Tibetan Buddhist Chöd ritual as explicated by Tsultrim Allione.¹⁴ Chöd ritual works with the idea of feeding your demons loving kindness, rather than trying to fight them or repress them. As Allione frames it, a 'demon' can mean an actual sentient spirit, but it can also refer to something like 'your anger towards your former partner' or any kind of 'negative energy' that one might 'allow to speak'. Work on Internal Family System Theory by Richard C. Schwartz, and similar work by Carl Jung in the Western psychological tradition explores similar methodologies, recognising the 'subdivided nature of mind'.¹⁵ Schwartz also recognises his theory's own similarities to some forms of shamanic healing.¹⁶ Allione presents a structured way of working through these interactions, which I have followed and found very useful, but I have expanded my practice to have a more open-ended approach and collaborative relationship with these 'demons'. This practice takes inspiration from Thraam's work with Choronzon. Choronzon traditionally finds representation in the Western occult tradition as a terrifying demon that one must confront and overcome before 'crossing the abyss', an important challenge on the path to accomplishing the Great Work of Western occultism; approximately equivalent to the 'knowledge of sufferings' or 'dark night of the soul' in mystical Christianity and Buddhist traditions.¹⁷ But Thraam reframes her relationship with Choronzon as one of respect with a desire for understanding and mutual

¹² Theodore Levin and Valentina Süzükei, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006); Galina Lindquist, 'Healers, Leaders and Entrepreneurs: Shamanic Revival in Southern Siberia,' *Culture and Religion* 6, no. 2 (2005): 263–85; Carole Pegg, 'Mongolian Conceptualizations of Overtone Singing,' *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 1 (1992): 31–54; Carole Pegg, *Mongolian Music, Dance & Oral Narrative* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); Carole Pegg and E. Yamaeva, 'Sensing "Place": Performance, Oral Tradition, and Improvisation in the Hidden Temples of Mountain Altai,' *Oral Tradition* 27, no. 2 (2012): 291–318; Mark van Tongeren, *Overtone Singing: Physics and Metaphysics of Harmonics in East and West*, The Harmonic Series (Amsterdam: Fusica, 2002).

¹³ For a good overview of this issue see Thomas DuBois, *An Introduction to Shamanism*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 129.

¹⁴ Demitria Monde Thraam, 'Choronzon's Grinnoire,' *Choronzon.info*, <http://choronzon.info/grinnoire>; Thraam and Rune Logix, 'Dmt, Choronzon, and the 333 Current,' *Rune Logix*, http://www.runelogix.typepad.com/my_weblog/2005/11/demitria_monde_.html; Tsultrim Allione, *Feeding Your Demons: Ancient Wisdom for Resolving Inner Conflict* (London: Hay House, 2008).

¹⁵ Richard C Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Therapy* (London: The Guilford Press, 1995), 2.

¹⁶ Schwartz, *Internal Family Systems Therapy*, 4.

¹⁷ Alan Chapman, *Advanced Magick for Beginners* (London: Aeon Books, 2008); Alan Chapman and Duncan Barford, *The Blood of the Saints* (London: Heptarchia, 2009); Alan Chapman and Duncan Barford, *The Urn* (London: Heptarchia, 2009); Alan Chapman and Duncan Barford, *A Desert of Roses* (London: Heptarchia, 2010); Daniel M. Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha: An Unusually Hardcore Dharma Book* (London: Aeon Books, 2008); Chögyam Trungpa, *The Path of Individual Liberation* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2013); St John of the Cross, *The Essential St John of the Cross: Ascent of Mount Carmel, Dark Night of the Soul, a Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and Twenty Poems* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008).

benefit. She chastises Crowley and others for their macho, combative approach to working with this entity.¹⁸

I came across Thraam's writing and music soon after entering my own 'dark night of the soul' or 'abyss' and as I still feel some attachment to the Western occult tradition—particularly the meditation-infused chaos magick reworking of it as presented by Duncan Barford and Alan Chapman—I felt moved to do some work with Choronzon.¹⁹ Thraam's work really resonated with me. Thraam reframes this 'demon' as the personification of a force or an archetypal experience that the magickian or shaman experiences. Choronzon thus emerges as a potential ally and teacher rather than a dark force to destroy. This approach also presents creative and aesthetic possibilities that have a real vitality to them. Thraam named her band Choronzon and credits them as a member, as did P. Emmerson Williams, who also had a band called Choronzon. When they discovered each other, Thraam and Williams fused their projects and continue to release under this name, together and individually, always listing Choronzon as a member and sometimes crediting them with orchestrating the entire project.²⁰

Most of my work with Choronzon involves resonating my ventricular folds, a style that I have not come across in my reading or listening. I discovered this technique while trying to sing kagyraa, a Tuvan and Mongolian technique (similar to a Tibetan chant technique) whereby the ventricular folds are resonated in parallel with the vocal folds.²¹ This style came into its own through my workings with Choronzon, providing a distinct voice with an 'otherworldly' or 'underworldly' feel, and they have sung or spoken in this style on numerous occasions.²² Working with Choronzon has also pushed my exploration of silence to new extremes, most acutely in the Residence Workings that I performed in 2017.²³ My ritual possession by Choronzon in this series consisted mostly of sitting in silence and contemplating the profound loneliness that I feel at times in my spiritual path and the impossibility of sharing the experiential knowledge of the dark night of the soul.

Possession work has another appeal in the visceral nature of the experience. Having 'lived in my head' for many years (and suffered from depression for much of that time) I felt drawn to explore a more embodied, physical practice. In hindsight, this also feels like part of the broader magickal work of transitioning gender and manifesting more presently in my body

¹⁸ Thraam and Rune Logix, 'Dmt, Choronzon, and the 333 Current.'

¹⁹ Chapman, *Advanced Magick*; Chapman and Barford, *The Blood of the Saints*; Chapman and Barford, *The Urn*; Chapman and Barford, *A Desert of Roses*.

²⁰ Thraam and P. Emmerson Williams, 'Discography,' *Choronzon.org*, <http://choronzon.org/discography>.

²¹ Jonathan Cope, *How to 'Khöömei' and Other Overtone Singing Styles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Sven Grawunder, *On the Physiology of Voice Production in South-Siberian Throat Singing: Analysis of Acoustic and Electrophysiological Evidences* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2008); Per-Åke Lindestad, Maria Södersten, Björn Merker, and Svante Granqvist, 'Voice Source Characteristics in Mongolian "Throat Singing" Studied with High-speed Imaging Technique, Acoustic Spectra, and Inverse Filtering,' *Journal of Voice* 15, no. 1 (2001): 78–85; Ken-Ichi Sakakibara, Hiroshi Imagawa, Tomoko Konishi, Kazumasa Kondo, Emi Zuiki Murano, Masanobu Kumada, and Seiji Niimi, 'Vocal Fold and False Vocal Fold Vibrations in Throat Singing and Synthesis of Khöömei,' in *Proceedings of the 2001 International Computer Music Conference*, ed. Andrew Schloss, Roger B. Dannenberg and Peter F. Driessen (San Francisco: International Computer Music Association, 2001), 135–8; van Tongeren, *Overtone Singing*.

²² Multiple recordings of this can be found in my *Daily Sketches* project, particularly from late 2014 to early 2015. See Sage Musick, 'Daily Sketches,' *Sage Musick*, <https://sagemusick.bandcamp.com>, 2014–ongoing.

²³ Sage Pbbbt, *four nights of invocation (the Residence Workings)*, 2017, Residence, Digital, <https://residenceseries.bandcamp.com/album/2-sage-pbbbt-four-nights-of-invocation-the-residence-workings>.

and gender. I have also struggled with visualisation in my practice. Working with sound, the body, and visceral experiences has allowed me to explore a magickal practice that felt like it played to my strengths, easily integrating with, and feeding into my creative practices. Through possession or channelling work, I can invite an experience and then facilitate an open-ended exploration of this experience, witnessing whatever occurred with meditative awareness. Insight meditation—my main meditative practice—consists of feeling sensations in the body, recognising that they all have the same qualities of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-identity. They cannot provide lasting happiness due to their transient nature, and we can observe them, so they do not constitute ‘us’. The use of the term ‘witness’ offers a useful model for this kind of awareness.²⁴

Some of my first possession or channelling experiences involved a shamanic, animal spirit or archetype. These rituals facilitated ways of experiencing the world that I had not previously had. My body felt different, I had significantly different sensory and emotional experiences, as well as often feeling a more intense connection to the spirit or dream world. These experiences felt different from what I normally experienced. They might simply have occurred because I created a space for myself to experience different things. I remain deeply agnostic about the ‘objective truth’ of these experiences, while also privileging the subjective experience. This ‘radical agnosticism’ owes a lot to the writings of Robert Anton Wilson and functions similarly to a ‘suspension of disbelief’ but in a more creative and open-ended way.²⁵ This does not require so much a ‘suspension’, rather an embracing of various perspectives and world views, and developing an understanding of how these affect one’s experiences without requiring an investment in an objective truth. Privileging the subjective experience of feeling the presence of a spirit does not, therefore, demand any claims about the objective world. Analysing these experiences within different frameworks—all of which work equally well to explain them—facilitates non-attachment to these modes of understanding and allows for a more diverse range of explorations.

I did a lot of work with Choronzon over several years, alongside thinking, feeling, and meditating through aspects of the dark night of the soul. My work with Choronzon had a very clear focus on ‘mutual aid and solidarity’ (core tenants of social anarchism). Whenever I invoked them I had the explicit intent of inviting them to experience corporeal form for some time and to listen to whatever they had to share or could offer to teach me. If this spirit, demon, or archetypal form had a function—to show sentient beings the illusory nature of ego—then it seemed sensible to allow them to present their teachings to me in whatever way they found useful. An open-ended invitation to ‘share’ felt like an efficient and friendly way of instigating an exchange.

Some Western occultists (particularly those following Crowley) might find this kind of approach dangerous and foolish. The idea of inviting a ‘demon’ in to one’s mind, body, or both, to do as they will sits in contradistinction to the Crowleian ideal. My practice frames these

²⁴ Duncan Barford, *Handbook for the Recently Enlightened* (London: Heptarchia, 2011); Chapman, *Advanced Magick*; Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*; Ken Wilber, *Integral Meditation: Mindfulness as a Path to Grow Up, Wake Up, and Show Up in Your Life* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2016).

²⁵ Robert Anton Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger: Final Secret of the Illuminati* (Las Vegas: New Falcon Publications, 1977); Robert Anton Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger II: Down to Earth* (Tempe: New Falcon, 1991); Robert Anton Wilson, *Cosmic Trigger III: My Life after Death* (Tempe: New Falcon, 1995).

kinds of interactions in a mode that may be closer to a Buddhist approach. Even if we assume that Choronzon—or any other spirit or entity—has ill-intent, a Buddhist-informed point of view sees these intents as arising from the suffering of this entity.²⁶ They desire to harm because of their own suffering, and they deserve our love and compassion. This has led me to frame my possession or channelling work as ‘accepting what arises’ or even ‘loving what arises’.

‘Loving what arises’ feels like a subtle change in my practice in the last few years. Some writers on meditation talk about acceptance as the main practice, particularly those influenced by the Hinayana (Theravādan) traditions of meditation or those seeking to establish a secular meditation practice.²⁷ Buddhism has always included practices of ‘loving kindness’ (*mettābhavana* in the Theravādan tradition), but in Theravādan Buddhism this has remained a separate practice from *insight meditation* (paying attention to the three characteristics of all phenomena, the practice of which leads to Awakening).²⁸ Some teachers of or writers on meditation include a sense of love or compassion for oneself or others while practising insight meditation. These approaches have perhaps taken influence from some Mahayana (or Vajrayana) practices, which include more ‘magickal’ practices such as assuming the forms of different bodhisattvas to manifest desirable attributes. In my own practice, I have noticed an at first subtle shift from ‘accepting what arises’ to having compassion and love for myself in the present moment. This comes from observing sensations arising and passing away and developing the understanding over many years that we have no control over these experiences. From this comes compassion for oneself, and compassion for that which arises, as one realises that other responses have no logical basis. This understanding has infused my possession (or channelling) work. I have always framed it theoretically as ethically engaged, but increasingly I have realised that I have the intention of—and that I practise—compassion for ‘whatever arises’, or for whatever manifests.

I have worked with some ‘dark’ archetypes and my vocal work sometimes has transgressive, dark, or confrontational aspects to it, both for myself as well as for some audience members. I do have the intention in this work to go to the ‘dark places’, or to experience the difficult things, but in doing so, bring a sense of acceptance and a sense of compassion to these experiences. I have no desire to perform confronting, transgressive musick for the sake of it, for shock value, or to trigger people. My work does, however, take inspiration from some forms of musick and spirituality that sometimes manifest in very problematic ways. I have taken inspiration from left-hand path spiritual traditions and some elements of black metal, such as the desire to explore extremes, the investigation of transgression, and the antinomianist stance. ‘Left-hand path’ as understood in the Western esoteric context, can refer to privileging the ‘subjective experience’ over the ‘objective world’ leading to a practice oriented on changing the objective world to align with one’s subjective desires. This sits in contradistinction to the ‘right hand

²⁶ See, for example, Bhikkhu Bodhi, *In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 35–6; Trungpa, *The Path of Individual Liberation*, 406–19.

²⁷ Dan Harris, *10% Happier: How I Tamed the Voice in My Head, Reduced Stress without Losing My Edge, and Found Self-help that Actually Works—A True Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014); Sam Harris, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012); Sam Harris, ‘Sam Harris on “Free Will”’, YouTube Video, 1:18:51, posted by ‘Skeptic,’ 27 Mar. 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCofmZIC72g>; Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014); Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*.

²⁸ The three characteristics are, according to Ingram, ‘impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and no-self ... They are the stuff from which ultimate insight at all levels comes, pure and simple ... To really understand them is to be enlightened.’ *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha*, 37.

path' which realises an 'objective truth' and demands a reorientation of the subjective to fit with this truth.²⁹ Antinomianism refers to any anti-authoritarian or anti-dogmatic practice. It constitutes one of the key components of left-hand path practices. The problem with some of the identities that form around such stances comes from a lack of engagement with the socio-political power structures that individuals function within. I feel particularly interested in inhabiting an antinomianist stance as a queer, trans woman, given that some expressions of these stances can read like the hedonism of the privileged at the expense of those who have less privilege precisely because of the normative and authoritarian systems antinomianist positions nominally critique. I take seriously the implicit pluralism of a left-hand path belief system, but I also seek to critique the supposed binary of left- and right-hand path practices. My use of meditation and investment in the possibilities that some models (such as the model of 'Awakening' or 'Enlightenment') offer to any practitioner undermines the notion of a completely autonomous self.

My work challenges the hegemony of phallogocentric music by both offering an alternative, embodied (and gendered) practice, as well as directly critiquing the normative, results-orientated, supposedly autonomous self. I take inspiration here from the insights of J. Jack Halberstam.³⁰ Amongst other, equally insightful provocations, Halberstam asserts that, 'if taken seriously, unbecoming may have its political equivalent in an anarchic refusal of coherence and proscriptive forms of agency.'³¹ Halberstam discusses masochism as a tool for disengaging with patriarchal systems of oppression. While I do not read my own work as masochistic, the political potential of Halberstam's reading resonates with my own exploration of the extra-normal self and a critique of an unmarked, white male author(ity). This sits in contrast with the work of John Cage, for example, another musician with an investment in meditation, but whose work sits comfortably in the Western paradigm of male-dominated high art music. While Cage's exploration of chance compositions and other meditation-inspired practices seeks to limit the ego's presence in the work—implicitly setting it free of any sociopolitical 'constraints'—my work uses my body, personality, and idiosyncratic personal history as the raw materials to 'give voice' to, situating these in a cultural, historical and sociopolitical context. My meditative practice can accept the facts of my queerness, trans-ness, my physical body, and all of my idiosyncrasies. These form an important part of the political nature of my work: a radical, fundamentally compassionate acceptance of 'whatever arises'.

Another aspect of my practice which some more traditionally minded Western occultists might find problematic or dangerous has to do with the clear framing of ritual work—keeping everything 'in the circle'. Creating a space for ritual work has central importance in many spiritual practices and I value grounding and centring work in my own practice. Some traditions including the Western occult, however, place an importance on banishing as well. Banishing functions to cleanse a space of spirits or external influences so that none of the ritual energy creeps out of the ritual space into the everyday life of the magickian. This makes sense within this paradigm—if you summon a demon and demand things of them you do not want that

²⁹ Stephen E. Flowers, *Lords of the Left-hand Path: Forbidden Practices and Spiritual Heresies* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2012).

³⁰ J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

³¹ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 136.

demon roaming around and doing things of its own volition. Within my idiosyncratic pseudo-Buddhist chaos magick practice, this does not make much sense. If one reads these forces as aspects of oneself, then banishing them looks suspiciously like suppressing aspects of one's own consciousness and heavily codifying how these different parts of one's self can find expression. I have much more interest in exploring the possibilities of consciousness—including in ritual and musickal work—and in trying to integrate these aspects into my everyday life. Meditating every day on a cushion seems like a great start, but the real challenge and benefits of meditation come from allowing this kind of awareness to percolate throughout one's life. Similarly, I feel that accessing 'ritual space' has had profound benefits for me in broadening my experience, accessing different kinds of creativity, and ways of creating meaning in the world. Integrating these possible ways of experiencing the world feels like a great challenge and in some ways the real challenge of walking the magickal or shamanic path.

If one reads the invoked forces as actual sentient entities, then banishing them reads like asserting your power over them. This does not seem like the basis of a healthy relationship. I strive to have relationships with these spirits (or aspects of myself) based on trust, compassion, and mutual aid. I have trusted that they will not harm me and have tried to have an open heart and cultivate compassion for whatever arises. Many contemporary Satanic or left-hand path practitioners of demonology or invocation express scepticism about the usefulness or ethics of banishing. They read this as disrespectful of the spirits or forces that they seek to invite into their lives.³² That said, on very few occasions I have performed grounding rituals at the end of possession or channelling work when I felt unsafe or overwhelmed. I think of these more as grounding rituals than explicit banishing rituals—I have not ever asked (or demanded) that an entity leave, but the sense of coming back to oneself physically and emotionally perhaps has a similar effect of letting go of other energies. So far, this has felt like a way of processing some quite intense experiences while also remaining as open as possible to as much as possible.

In the last few years, another challenge has arisen. I have noticed that while my ritual practice seeks to explore ways of experiencing a world that I felt unbalanced in, my writing practice sometimes feels less integrated into other ways of experiencing the world than my ritual, singing, meditative, or other practices. I find it harder to move between a writerly, intellectual experience of the world and other modes of being. This feels strange, as I have felt very comfortable with writing for most of my life. I have also become increasingly aware of a tendency towards neurosis in my experience of writing, which is markedly different from my embodied, meditative sound practice. I have also transitioned gender over the last few years, and the newfound comfort in my emotional and physical states has felt profoundly liberating and life-affirming. I have documented this ritual act of visceral and emotive metamorphosis in my Daily Sketches³³ singing practice, and it feels inextricably interwoven with my practice

³² Venus Satanus, 'Should Satanists Use Satanic Banishing Rituals?', *Spiritual Satanist*, <https://www.spiritualsatanist.com/essays/magic/banishing.html>; Diane Vera, 'Banishing Rituals, Grounding, and Other Beginning/End-of-Ritual Markers,' *Theistic Satanism: The New Satanisms of the Era of the Internet*, <http://theisticsatanism.com/rituals/standard/banishing.html>.

³³ My 'Daily Sketches' project, under the moniker 'Sage Musick,' consists of daily recordings of improvisation with voice. They have often included recordings of explicit ritual and magickal work and nearly always in meditative or trance states. This (ongoing) project functions as a record of my journey(s) though I feel wary about asserting that this might translate to the listener. Sage Musick, 'Daily Sketches,' *Sage Musick*, <https://sagemusick.bandcamp.com>.

of meditation—paying close attention to physical sensations and singing, giving voice to whatever arises. The compassion that I have practised for myself over the last few years as part of this process resonates through my music and singing. In distinction to this, however, my writing practice has come to feel somewhat disengaged, abstract, and perhaps even normative. Certainly, it has become quite differentiated from my physical, embodied singing and ritual practice. To engage with this, I have started some tentative explorations into writing in trance states, improvising writerly work and exploring channelling texts. These challenges feel like a continuation of a broad project of accepting myself and my experiences of the world and striving to have a deep, all-embracing compassion for myself and others. All of this I continue to explore giving voice to, in a singing practice not afraid to go to the dark places, but that strives to resonate compassion through the world.

About the Author

Sage J. Harlow recently completed her PhD at WAAPA. She performs under the moniker Sage Pbbbt as a vocalist and ritualist (SagePbbbt.com). Her practice takes influence from Tuvan, Mongolian and Inuit sound cultures; chaos magick; feminist, queer and trans praxis.