

Mapping Trans and Gender-Expansive Choirs: Insights from an Organizational Ethnographic Exploration

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Abstract

While there has been significant attention to the experiences of trans and gender-expansive (TGX) singers within studio and cis-dominant choral contexts, there has been relatively little examination of TGX choral ecologies. This article, based on a larger organizational ethnography of TGX choirs, shares select findings which explore the interwoven and co-constitutive nature of identity, policy, pedagogy, and community in these spaces. The study used observational, reflective, interview, and focus group data collection methods with six U.S.-based TGX choirs to begin mapping TGX choral environments. Utilizing a post-structuralist lens, the study reveals the ways in which identity, policy, pedagogy, and community intertwine throughout TGX choirs and how these organizations rethink dominant choral practice. It also invites choral musicians to reconsider and reimagine choral practice beyond its cisnormative and heteronormative epistemologies.

Keywords

trans and gender-expansive, choral pedagogy, choral policy, vocal identity, gender identity, community

Introduction

As I settle into position, I can feel the buzz in the room. Singers and directors coming together before rehearsal, some setting up chairs, arranging the room; others handing out and collecting music. Chatter fills the space: salutations; hugs; exclamations; a quiet, confiding word in the corner. The director draws everyone's attention, a warm greeting, and then warm-ups begin.

—Beede, *Field Notes*, 2025

The above vignette represents my experiences during observations across 12 rehearsals in three different trans and gender-expansive (TGX) choral spaces. On the surface, the flow feels familiar to me—nearly indistinguishable from the cis-dominant groups in which I have sung, and its movements resonate with my own choral experiences. However, the reverberations have a different tenor. Below this surface of commonality, there seems to be a different desire that drives this rehearsal and inspires the musicians here. What does it mean to rehearse when one's existence is a political act? How does the structure of an organization support singers? What does pedagogy look like?

The growth in the popularity of TGX choirs is growing despite a current shift in the U.S. socio-political landscape where TGX identities are challenged, at times politically erased, and are more contested than ever. At present there are over 770 anti-trans bills in 43 states in the U.S. (translegislation.com, 2026) and experts at the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security issued a warning that the U.S. has entered the early stages of genocide against TGX Americans (2026). Despite these challenges, there has been significant growth in the number of TGX choirs, both nationally and globally, reflecting broader national trends (Ghorayshi, 2022).

In light of the political tensions in the United States, creating and preserving dedicated spaces for queer individuals is essential. These environments can support artistic growth, education, and personal development, and—most importantly—provide a safe and affirming community (MacLachlan, 2020). Among the most vulnerable to harsh new right-wing policies are trans and gender-expansive individuals (Palkki et al., 2026). TGX choral spaces may serve as a critical site for TGX community, identity development, and for the creation of TGX-focused pedagogy and policy.

In this article, drawn from a larger study (Beede, 2026), I share select insights from observations and interviews with singers and directors of TGX choirs. Scholarship on TGX singing and TGX singers' experiences in traditional cis-dominant choral spaces has grown in the last decade (e.g., Carlson, 2025; Ferrari, 2021; Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Graham, 2018; Graham, 2022; Palkki, 2020; Sauerland, 2022; Sims, 2017; Stapleton, 2024). However, there has been relatively little examination of the TGX choral environment as distinct from cis-dominant choral practice. The purpose of this article is to begin mapping how TGX choirs organize social, musical, and relational practices that support singers' participation, belonging, and identity development. Rather than presenting the findings in a linear typology, I approach them in a rhizomatic fashion through engagement with the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2014). These findings offer a glimpse into how TGX choirs may inform TGX vocal and choral pedagogies while also challenging cisnormative and heteronormative epistemologies embedded in dominant choral practice. The research question driving this inquiry is: How do identity, policy, pedagogy, and community manifest and interact within TGX choral environs?

Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

The purpose of this study was to examine TGX identities within TGX-specific choral environments. Transgender theory (Jagose, 1996; LeMaster & Stephenson, 2021) and trans-identity theory (Nagoshi et al., 2014) were utilized as frameworks to best situate the study. Data collected in this study were further examined through a post-structural lens informed by the work of Deleuze and Guattari's (1980/2014) rhizomatic thinking.

Transgender Theory and Trans-Identity Theory

Choral spaces have historically organized bodies and voices through binary gender logics, essentializing gender and singing possibilities. Transgender theory provided a framework to examine the lived experience, self-determination, and the material consequences of how gender is recognized, regulated, and voiced within these systems. While it developed alongside queer theory in the early 1990s (Stryker, 2006), trans scholars from the late 1990s onwards (Prosser, 1998; Stryker, 2004) have critiqued queer theory's appropriation of TGX experiences "in the construction of critical heuristics" (LeMaster & Stephenson, 2021, p. 192). For many TGX people, transition represents a deeply embodied and transgressive act that challenges, rather than reinforces, societal norms about gender. Other trans scholars, such as Monro (2000) and Roen (2001), emphasize the necessity of addressing the embodied aspects of trans identities, which queer theory's abstraction of gender categories often overlooks.

Building upon transgender theory, trans-identity theory as proposed by Nagoshi et al. (2014), expands upon the work of Shotwell and Sangrey (2008). Nagoshi et al. explain:

In this model...embodiment is seen as an essential component of the self. Shotwell and Sangrey also explicitly argue for the role of self-construction as a narrative process and that this autonomous aspect of self exists in relation to and in interactions with the social environment. (2014, pp. 86-87)

Nagoshi and their colleagues extend Shotwell and Sangrey's work and add to it a third component: the autonomous self (p. 87). Thus, transgender identity exists in a constant, dynamic interaction between the embodied self, the self constructed from social interactions, and the autonomous self. This framework was especially useful for examining TGX choral spaces because singing places embodiment, social recognition, and agency into direct relation.

Rhizomatic Thinking and Cartography

In their introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari lay the foundation for how the reader should understand their thinking and subsequent reading of the text via the rhizome. They call into question the reproduction of knowledge based on the linear, tree-like form which does not create new ideas, but propagates a stable, hierarchical organization. In order to challenge this, they adopt the rhizome as a model. A rhizome is characterized by lateral root growth like that found in ginger or Aspen trees, "Rhizomes do not propagate by way of clearly delineated hierarchies but by underground stems in which any part may send additional shoots upward, downward, or laterally" (Adkins, 2015, p. 23). This model resists hierarchical ways of thinking instead focusing on "the middle" and connections rather than filiation.

As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe it, "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between, things, interbeing, intermezzo," and "the tree imposes the verb 'to be,' but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction, 'and...and...and...'" (p. 25). They lay forth six principles which define their rhizomatic model: (a) principle of connection, (b) principle of heterogeneity, (c) principle of multiplicity, (d) principle of asignifying rupture, (e) principle of cartography, and (f) principle of decalcomania. For the purposes of this ethnographic exploration the fifth and sixth principles (cartography and decalcomania) were my primary focus.

These two principles serve to illustrate the way in which the rhizomatic model produces new knowledge while traditional arborescent forms produce tracings. As Adkins (2015) states, "Cartography is the creation of a rhizome or 'mapping.' This is strictly opposed to decalcomania, which reproduces trees everywhere and out of everything. Deleuze and Guattari refer to this as 'tracing'" (p. 29). Essentially, Deleuze and Guattari argue that traditional formations of knowledge based on tree-like forms merely reproduce knowledge and encourage homogeneity. The non-hierarchical and non-linear connection of heterogenous elements within the rhizomatic model leads to the production of new knowledge.

Methodology

This study employed a blended ethnographic approach informed by principles from organizational ethnographic case study (Côté-Boileau et al., 2020), focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005), and multi-case study design (Thomas, 2011; Halkias et al., 2022). The study involved fieldwork, interviews, and analysis over a nine-month period. My goal was to capture the insights and experiences of TGX singers and directors in TGX choral spaces, which have largely gone unstudied. Identity, within the context of this study, was primarily considered with regard to individuals' trans and gender-expansive identity and their voice. Other identity constructs, such as race, disability, or socioeconomic status, may intersect with the research, but were not the focus of the current study. The incorporation of six U.S.-based TGX choruses (Table 1) made this one of the first national investigations of TGX ensembles, offering a snapshot of their early development and growth as well as their importance to the TGX community.

Table 1*Participant Choirs*

<i>Chorus Name</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Abbreviation</i>
TRANScend Ambassadors	New York City, New York	TA
Transcendent Choir of Philadelphia	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	TCP
Trans Chorus of Los Angeles	Los Angeles, California	TCLA
Seattle Trans and Non-binary Choral Experience	Seattle, Washington	STANCE
Phoenix	Aurora, Colorado	Phoenix
New Voices Bay Area TIGQ Chorus	San Francisco, California	NVC

Note. For more detailed portraits of the TGX choirs, see [here](#).

The study developed through three phases which utilized observational, self-reflective, interview, and focus group methods. In phase 0, I focused on connecting with TGX choirs and establishing rapport before engaging in data collection and also distributed informed consent forms. During phase 1, I attended one live, in-person rehearsal observation with TRANScend Ambassadors, Transcendent Choir of Philadelphia, and Trans Chorus of Los Angeles. In phase 1a, two video-recorded rehearsal observations from each of the three observed choruses were gathered by me for further observation and analysis. In phase 1b, I collected one 10- to 15-minute audio self-reflection recording from a singer from each observed chorus. Then in phase 2, I explored the experiences of singers from TGX choirs through six, 60-minute individual singer interviews. For phase 2a, I explored the approaches of TGX choral directors through five, 60-minute individual director interviews. Finally, in phase 3, I engaged participants in three focus groups—two director focus groups and one singer focus group—to address the themes of identity, policy, pedagogy, and community that were revealed in prior phases. In total, the study included more than 25 hours of live and recorded rehearsal data and approximately 15 hours of interview data.

Positionality and Validity

Central to this study were the lived experiences of TGX individuals within choral spaces, a community to which I do not belong. Recognizing the scrutiny often placed on research conducted by those outside the community being studied, it is essential to address issues of both positionality and validity. As a cisgender, queer man, I do not possess the embodied experiences of TGX individuals, and I acknowledge the threads of thinking that question the validity of research performed by non-community members. I echo Talbot (2017) in reflecting on my positionality: “I am both oppressor and oppressed” (p. 8). While I do not fully comprehend the trials and experiences of TGX people, I am acutely aware of how cisgender and heterosexual ideologies have oppressed me as a queer person. This awareness, while not parallel to the TGX lived experience, inspires me to work in solidarity with the TGX choral community.

To enhance the validity of this study, I embedded several validation strategies (Creswell & Miller, 2020) within the research design. These included data collection from multiple and diverse sources; frequent member-checking prior to analytical procedures; and the use of thick, rich description throughout. I also engaged in memo-ing and reflective journaling throughout the data collection and analysis to address my biases, and to self-examine how these may have influenced the research process (Billups, 2022).

TGX Choral Cartography

In the following sections, I present identity, policy, pedagogy, and community not as discrete domains, but as intertwined and co-constitutive elements of the TGX choral environment. This cartographic approach is informed by Deleuze and Guattari's distinction between a map and a tracing (1980/2014), and allowed me to follow non-linear relations and intertwinings amongst identity, policy, pedagogy, and community. My goal is not to provide a comprehensive, linear analysis of the TGX choral space, neatly dissecting it into separate categories; instead, it is to engage in an exploration of these communities—to create a map, rather than a tracing (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980).

Community Ritual

"Have you gotten dinner yet?" a warm voice asks me as I sit in the corner of the room working on my observation notes. The first half of rehearsal for Trans Chorus of Los Angeles has just ended, and I look up from my laptop and notebook to see one of the TCLA singers smiling and inviting me to join in their rehearsal dinner. I close my laptop and notebook and make my way down the hall, where a table has been set up with a communal meal: pasta, meatballs, salads, desserts, waters, sodas. All of this is prepared, set up, and cleaned up every week by Ms. Mary. A deliberate act of community-building. The chorus spreads out through the Connie Norman Transgender Empowerment Center, finding seats on couches, chairs, stools, and even the floor. The center echoes with energized conversations.

—Beede, Field Notes, 2025

This is more than a dinner invitation. It is a ritual of care; a weekly reweaving of community that helps hold the chorus together. Here, music is only part of the story. Just as important are these kinds of rituals that sustain singers outside the score: a shared meal, conversation, camaraderie. They are not incidental, but intentional practices that bind the ensemble together. This meal is just one manifestation of community and care; one of many that I observed and heard about in conversations. Such rituals serve as pillars of many TGX choirs because of the impact they have on members. In a world that continually minoritizes and excludes TGX persons, these gatherings are a source of stability, affirmation, and nourishment.

TCLA's mid-rehearsal meal builds upon a tradition of intentional community care that has been at the group's core since its founding. During my interview with TCLA Artistic Director (AD) Abby Hall, they elaborated further:

So, that mid-rehearsal meal started with the founding artistic director, Lindsey...The whole reason for that meal was, one, we didn't know who in our community was unhoused or homeless, and if they were having a sufficient meal. It's also representing family and community...we need time to break bread, sit and talk with each other. Just sit and kiki for a little bit, catch up with people, because everybody goes about their lives after this rehearsal. That meal is to give you strength to get through from Monday to Saturday. Some of them [chorus members] might go out and have a great week, and some of them might end up being misgendered and having a really shitty week, but they know that on Sunday, they can come here; they can sing, eat, and go home happy. (Director Interview)

It is evident that food and ritual bind the TCLA community together just as much as music does. In fact, Hall has asked the chorus members if they wanted to eliminate the dinner to shorten their Sunday evening rehearsals, a suggestion they adamantly declined. Community is integral to the operations of this chorus; rehearsal is not a purely musical labor, but one that incorporates care and love.

Ritual as Policy

As I observed and collected data on TCLA and Transcendent Choir of Philadelphia (TCP), community time emerged as a prominent theme. The rituals of community operate as soft policy in both choruses; unspoken customs that are integral to each group (Schmidt, 2020). These soft policies are a form of infrastructure for relational experiences in these choirs—born of community needs and relationships—they function as unspoken community contracts or understandings of how the chorus community functions together. TCLA, for instance, has no written requirement for a community meal in their member handbook; while a mid-rehearsal break is discussed, the only mention of a meal can be found in the guidelines and responsibilities of “Fifth Section” members. That this shared meal goes largely unmentioned belies its importance to the organization.

Examining the rituals of TCP through the same lens reveal similar soft policies. As a newly formed chorus in the 2024-2025 season, TCP had yet to develop a membership handbook or policy document. This was at the top of Kociba’s agenda as they prepared for the 2025-2026 season:

This is a goal that I have for this coming season, to have a singer handbook to make decisions on commonly asked questions...the only things that we have in writing are the precedent that we’ve set with every single email that we’ve sent this season. We are aware that that sets a precedent. (Director Interview)

Aspects of TCP’s rehearsals, like “good-news” and “floor time,”—researcher assigned names for aspects of their rehearsal breaks—are thus positioned as potential soft-policy elements that may exist outside of a more formal handbook. These moments of community time may stabilize what might otherwise be tenuous organizational arrangements and may further develop trust and cohesion amongst participants. Through these rituals, an informal governance structure begins to take shape and the labor of emotional connection making is built into the organizational structure. These rituals further substantiate the notion that TGX choral spaces are not just music-making spaces, but communities of care that surpass the music.

Policy Framing Boundaries

In addition to these soft policies, TGX choral spaces that I visited are also sites of hard-policy development. While soft policies often shape a choir’s inner workings and interactions, the hard policies—namely, formal rules and expectations—help to more clearly define the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion of the TGX choral environment.

Attire

All of the TGX ensembles included in this study had some sort of guidelines for their members’ attire during concerts. Most choruses simply stipulated that performers dress in “concert black” as a base, with colored accents that varied by group or concert need. For instance, the policy at TCLA and NVC is for members to wear black bottoms and a top in any color of the trans flag, while TCP opted for “concert black with floral accents” to evoke floral arrangements for their Trans Day of Remembrance memorial concert. The singers in Phoenix had more expressive freedom: “We perform in black with red, yellow, or orange accents,” Bullington, Phoenix AD, explained. “There’s a lot of latitude. Some people wear bright orange pants, and some people wear a tiny hat or scarf” (Director Focus Group 2).

Similarly, TA generally utilize black attire on the bottom, paired with a top in the color of each person’s choice from their branding guide: “Whatever makes you feel particularly good, acceptable in your own personal experience, whatever it happens to be” (Graham, Director Focus Group 2). However, TA goes a step further than the other choirs, having created a “look book” for performances outside of their regularly planned schedule.

These context-specific approaches to attire policy align with many of the recommendations from recent scholars (Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Sauerland, 2018) based on their work with TGX individuals. More importantly, these approaches ground attire policy recommendations within choral settings of TGX individuals. As shown here to varying degrees, choral attire operates as a hard policy within these groups, determining performance eligibility.

Accessibility

Beyond attire, policies can help to define the inclusiveness and accessibility of TGX spaces. STANCE, for instance, had a strict masking requirement for members during rehearsals and performances. STANCE AD Adamson elaborated on this rule during our interview, explaining that all STANCE members—with the exception of Adamson and soloists while they are singing alone—rehearse and perform in a pre-approved face mask, which helps to mitigate the transmission of COVID-19 and other airborne illnesses. Beyond the performers, all audience members at STANCE concerts must also be masked. NVC has a similar practice:

We require everyone to prove [COVID-19] vaccination to be a part of the choir. Every indoor event, rehearsals and otherwise, is a masked event. We realize for a number of people in our choir, just us masking was not enough for them to be safe in that environment. So, we had a lengthy, and at times a pretty hard, decision-making process; but ultimately, we decided that any concert that was our concert, that we were putting on from our organization would be an outdoor concert every time. (Director Focus Group 2)

In addition to these masking requirements, accessibility emerged as another area in which TGX choruses may formalize expectations through hard policy. This was particularly evident at TA and its parent organization Transcend Choral & Community Foundation (TCCMF). In response to concerns raised by singers, Graham developed an accessibility and accommodation policy. The document outlines the ways in which the ensembles under the TCCMF umbrella work to support participants who might need special accommodations to be part of the chorus. This document also sets forth expectations for chorus members and their participation in the ensemble, and states what “reasonable accommodations” might look like.

Accommodations and accessibility can also go beyond the physical needs of singers. A number of community choruses, for instance, require their members to pay regular dues. Many of the TGX choruses in this study with such policies, however, provide additional financial support to singers who may struggle to meet this requirement. For their part, TA and TCLA offer scholarships, payment plans, and sliding-scale membership fees to ensure that TGX singers can remain involved in their ensembles. Phoenix AD Bullington elaborated further on his organization’s similar policies:

One of the biggest challenges we have as a group is just the incredible amount of instability in trans people’s lives. So, we don’t have a lot of dues requirements, attendance requirements, those kinds of things, because I do not want to set people up with expectations that they would not be able to meet. Many of our members get their food from SNAP, have rent subsidies, and have Medicaid, so the level of stress and the level of just general distraction and lack of capacity from holding all of those things has made it a challenge for the organization, because our individual members are so under stress and strain. (Director Focus Group 2)

These forms of health-related, financial, and organizational support are critical for TGX persons, who statistically face greater discrimination in employment, housing, health care, credit, and financial aid (Paying an Unfair Price, 2015). They also resonate with recommendations from music education accessibility scholars like Hammel & Hourigan (2017) and Salvador (2013). Here, the ways TGX choral organizations must strive to both meet the community needs of marginalized trans singers and balance their artistic and advocacy goals can be observed.

Voice and Identity

A TGX singer's relationship to their voice can be a complex matter (Challacombe, 2025; Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Graham, 2019; Palkki, 2020). Some, like Kathryn from TCLA, might not experience dysphoria in singing a vocal part that doesn't align with traditionally gendered norms. During our interview, I asked her if TCLA had influenced her exploration of her trans identity. She replied:

I think it's been more of a 'you know who you are and all that. Let's let other people see who you are, too,' as opposed to it being a big influence on who I am...I think it didn't have such a huge influence on me in terms of who I was, but more it allowed me to show other people, you can just be who you are without worrying about all the nuances that society places on you and expectations for who you should be. I think that's been a really helpful part of my development. (Singer Interview)

As we continued our conversation, Kathryn reminisced about her audition and acceptance into TCLA, recalling the joyful feeling it gave her: "...The nice thing was they accepted me as baritone, which was not like most places. Most places you go, 'Oh, you're a woman, you have to sing alto, or at least high tenor or something'" (Singer Interview). Through this dialogue, Kathryn articulated an integrated sense of self in which her gender identity and vocal identity coexist, as she embraces her voice both as a baritone and as a trans woman. She takes pride in her baritone voice, and is excited to use it to contribute to TCLA.

Ellianna, of TCLA, however, described having a slightly more complex relationship with her voice. For her, it was important for her vocal identity to align with traditional notions of gendered vocal parts:

I was auditioning for Abby and a couple other folks [for TCLA], and they do, like, a range check. Abby was like, 'I guess you could sing any part you want, but what do you feel comfortable in?' And I was like, 'Well, I've been singing tenor a lot.' And they [Abby] said, 'Girl, there's an alto in there, you need to let her out.' And I was like, 'Okay, okay, I'll do that.' And just the same way that the shift from bass to tenor had felt, like, freeing—this was that, but even more. It is just the vocal production is such a visceral thing that to me, it feels impossible to disassociate that from identity. (Singer Interview)

Ellianna's story here showcases the way in which she experiences gender euphoria when her vocal identity and her gender identity are in harmony.

Jesse, a TCP singer, presented an example of a vocal identity that has evolved throughout their gender journey:

I think one of the things that's been interesting for me, and one of the things when I first was sort of coming into my identity as a non-binary person, I made a really hard turn to super-masculinity, and it was sort of, like, anything that had any hint of fem I had to reject in order to be, like, 'I don't identify as a woman.' And it's been really enriching to come back around to, 'Actually, that's not for me. I don't identify as a man,' and so it feels very authentic to find aspects of what would be kind of encultured as femininity that feel good to me. One of those things is singing as a soprano, but singing as a soprano in a space where it's like, 'Okay, people who can sing high, come together over here and sing high notes.' I do like the way my voice sounds when I'm singing those high notes, and there's not dysphoria in that now. (Singer Interview)

Here, Jesse speaks of their ongoing relationship with their voice and the ways in which they have struggled with gendered aspects of singing. Jesse grappled with their feminine presentation, and sought to construct a more masculine intrapersonal experience: pursuing a more masculine presentation, and turning away from feminine-coded aspects. Now, in TCP, they are revisiting their vocal and gender identity and reconciling their vocal range, gender identity, and gender presentation—for example, by embracing some of these aspects of "encultured femininity," and enjoying singing in their soprano voice. In this example, the interactions between the embodied self, the socially-constructed self, and the autonomous self from trans-identity theory can be observed.

While Jesse's narrative is one of an evolving reengagement with their voice, Blake's (TA) relational arc revealed a more complex and differently storied engagement. Here, Blake elaborated on his relationship with his vocal identity:

I think I really liked the genders of choral singing...before I knew I was trans, being able to identify not as a gender, but as a soprano. I think in many ways, voice parts become their own identities, and thereby their own genders. And you have ways of knowing it...knowing what to stereotype about a soprano, or what you expect of them. And anything that was expected or stereotyped of a soprano, I liked; I was about that. I was like, 'This is accurate and true. You can say whatever you want about me. It's true and it applies to me, and that's fine and I'm okay with it.' And that was very freeing in a way. So, I think I enjoyed, oddly, the escape from gender that identifying as my voice type provided. (Singer Interview)

As a singer in TA, Blake no longer feels a strong connection to a vocal part like he did before transitioning. This is in large part because of the pedagogical approach Graham uses with TA singers, as Blake explained:

I feel less connected to a voice part now, especially because TRANScend doesn't really use voice parts. So, it's difficult for me to identify as a tenor, or to use that as a sort of a route of identification in the way that I did with soprano. (Singer Interview)

Blake's current disengagement from a fixed voice-part identification may reflect both his personal gender journey and the alternative voicing approach employed in TA. This shift underscores the role of choral pedagogy not merely in accommodating identity, but in actively reshaping how vocal identities are experienced and understood.

Graham spoke to this issue from the teacher/director perspective, providing valuable insight into the effect that voice teachers and choral directors can have on TGX singers:

Teachers do not fully understand, and particularly voice teachers do not fully understand, the longevity or the depth of the impact that they have on their students and their clients, for good or for not good. More specifically, voice teachers have access and have a power in shaping the development of a person internally in ways that even therapists cannot, because voice is part of yourself. It's part of your core identity, it's part of your narrative, and anything that changes your voice changes you as a person at your molecular level. (Director Interview)

Taken together, these narratives reveal that vocal identity is often intertwined with one's overall identity conceptualization. This connection can be seen beyond the TGX choral space, as singers often display deeply rooted identification with a particular voice type; when those concepts are challenged or changed, it can lead to significant cognitive stress. Considering that, the impact of voice teachers and choral directors in fostering their singers' vocal identity should never be discounted.

These narratives begin to illuminate the complex relationship between vocal and gender identities that many TGX singers may have. For some, there is no dissonance between vocal and gender identities, while others may prioritize their consonance; meanwhile, still other individuals may experience the two as an ongoing dynamism that is still in fluctuation.

Pedagogical Orientations

In TGX choirs, pedagogy extended beyond vocal technique to include psychological care, repertoire selection, and lyrical adaptation. A significant concern reflected in each of the directors' pedagogical approaches was the mental or psychological well-being of TGX singers. During our conversations, they acknowledged the web of care that must accompany their directing of a TGX choir, and how that affects their singers' vocal abilities. Kociba (TCP) framed this as a mission to create a supportive environment that valued and encouraged singers beyond their utility to the chorus:

But I think in terms of pedagogy, it's almost a hundred percent about creating an environment of comfort. So, I have singers who are in treble sections right now, and they just started on testosterone a month ago. So, they're looking to me, like, 'Is that okay?' And I'm like, 'Yeah, more altos will come. It's fine.' It's like they're worried that they're going to let down the group if their voice changes, but I'm like, 'That's the point! That's why we're here, so that our voice can do and be what it needs to be'...I think that creating an environment of comfort will always come first in my mind before technique. (Director Interview)

For Kociba, it is clear that an approach built on community and care is essential to their choral pedagogy at TCP. This is a foundation upon which they can vocally co-explore and support their TGX singers. In a similar way, Hall (TCLA) recognizes and focuses on the importance of mindset for their TGX singers. When I prompted them to describe their approach to vocal training in a diverse ensemble of changed, changing, and unchanged voices, they said,

The biggest for us is mental confidence. It sounds crazy because it doesn't deal immediately with the voice, but if your mindset is to hate your voice while it is transitioning...then it is hard to sing because you are going to criticize [your voice] every step of the way. You have to release the voice that you knew and embrace the voice you have now. (Director Interview)

Here, Hall illuminates the singer-centered approach that is essential to their TGX choral pedagogy. For Graham, this pedagogy is not grounded in just community and care, but in a cognitive realm that examines seriously the psychological needs of his singers:

When we talk about this in the context of training in choir, it is not enough to feel, 'I've made a secure environment for my singers.' Your singers have to experience an active process of emotional regulation and practice using their voice in a regulated way. (Director Interview)

Graham's strategy for addressing TGX singers' psychological needs blends aspects of polyvagal theory, window of tolerance, and trauma-informed pedagogy into his TGX choral pedagogy. Though each director approaches this from a different orientation, they all highlight the importance of psychological care of and for TGX singers. Graham utilizes a science-informed lens, while Hall focuses more on a singer's relationship with their voice, vocal identity, and gender identity. Finally, Kociba's lens encourages us to think about the psycho-social needs of choir members from an environmental perspective.

Repertoire Selection and Adaptation

Repertoire plays a pivotal role in the advocacy work of TGX choirs, and the lyrics are more frequently scrutinized to those ends than might be found in cis-dominant choirs. Directors acknowledged that they had to maintain a critical eye toward the challenge level of the music to ensure it remained inclusive of singers' abilities for their TGX choruses. Both Adamson and Kociba cited their use of repertoire for their groups that ranged in difficulty from middle-school to early collegiate and community-college levels. Given their inclusive nature, many TGX choirs attract singers across a broad spectrum of prior experience: from professionals with music degrees to first-time choristers. Directors thus have to select repertoire that balances both musical accessibility and musical interest for all of their members. This approach does create some challenges for more experienced singers. As John from STANCE commented, "In order to be maximally inclusive, we are singing stuff that I realistically could probably learn in a month" (Singer Focus Group).

Compared to the other choruses, this repertoire-selection issue is mitigated in some ways for Phoenix choir because of their practice of writing much of their own music. Over their nearly decade-long existence, the choir has produced eight original pieces and two children's plays written primarily by its members. These customized pieces are often a better fit for the chorus, having been created precisely with their TGX performing body in mind. Similarly, Graham has spent much of his time as AD for TA rewriting or adjusting the music to be inclusive

of his ensemble composition. "I change keys, I flip parts, I compress parts," he commented. "I move things from part to part as is necessary" (Director Interview). Graham's practice aligns with recent recommendations from Hirner (2022) regarding TGX inclusive choral practices through vocal line recombination.

Kociba highlighted another important consideration in the repertoire selection: the character of pieces. As they explained,

My main tool this past season has been the text, so I read the text, and I look for things that can be interpreted as having queer themes...but there are pieces that I have found where the text might point to an unnecessary, antiquated gender role. That's obviously out, because I'm not about that, and I think it would be out of character for us to sing a piece like that. (Director Interview)

Here, Kociba illustrates how TGX choir directors must closely scrutinize the lyrics and character of each piece they consider, ensuring that they do not expose singers to the antiquated or harmful gender roles often portrayed in music (Graham, 2019; Garrett & Palkki, 2021). This sometimes involves considerations related to sacred texts and their theological relationship to TGX identities. Sometimes, lyrical adaptation can help address these issues; with other songs, it ends up being impossible.

Directors' specific attention to language and terminology could be seen in their alteration of song lyrics to better represent their TGX singers. "We started replacing those words with what we would like to hear," Hall explained. "Like, we just did 'Lean on Me,' and instead of 'call on your brother,' I changed it to 'call on each other'" (Director Focus Group 1). Hall's statement resonates with Blake's perspective about choral writing, "It doesn't change the fact that the way that music was written and envisioned was for people in gendered contexts" (Individual Interview). The vast majority of music in print, with the exception of a few pieces written by TGX composers, is written for cisnormative choruses, and the lyrics lend themselves to that context. It makes sense, then, that TGX choirs might freely adjust some words, as Hall does, to better reflect their TGX experience.

Conclusion

Collectively, this early mapping of TGX choral environments reveal the complex interweavings of identity, policy, pedagogy, and community. Community rituals like shared meals become integral policy elements; these policy frameworks also act as guides for how vocal and gender identities are navigated; identity informs the pedagogical decision-making of directors; and repertoire becomes a site where meaning, TGX embodiment, and community converge. These domains should not, and I argue cannot, be separated.

Rather than understanding TGX choirs as adaptations of cis-dominant choral practice, this cartography suggests that they are their own sites of choral knowledge-making. Their practices invite us to reconsider how ensemble structures address singer identity, how policies shape participation, how pedagogy responds to singers' embodied lives, and how community becomes part of musical practice itself. TGX choirs offer more than refuge and representation. They are models for reimagining choral practice beyond cisnormative assumptions about voice, gender, belonging, and musical value.

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Acknowledgement: I wish to extend my sincerest thanks to the directors and singers of the TGX choirs involved in this study. All of you are doing amazing work that intersects music and community building and are pioneers in what choral music can be for the profession.