

New Skies Above: Sense-bound and place-based songwriting as a trauma response for asylum seekers and refugees

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Abstract

There is sparse literature examining connections between songwriting and trauma overall, or specific connections between songwriting, trauma, the senses and place. This article presents a sense-bound and place-based approach to songwriting with and by asylum seekers and refugees. We facilitated a four-day songwriting workshop in Turku, Finland that incorporated trauma-informed approaches, and whose outcomes we documented through ethnography. We responded to traumas of participants involving social isolation and relocation by encouraging use of sense-bound imagery—lyrics that communicate a multisensory experience of ‘being there.’ We demonstrate that songwriting can support refugees and asylum seekers in gently connecting to difficult places, while achieving respite from trauma via positive overall musical experiences. If approached in a trauma-informed and -sensitive way, sense-bound songwriting that indirectly engages potential trauma triggers can offer a gentle path towards neutrally engaging the triggers—an essential step in trauma recovery.

Keywords

music

songwriting

trauma-informed approach

place

multisensory

asylum seekers and refugees

Introduction

Many refugees and asylum seekers face complex trauma after experiencing violence, persecution, torture and instability in their home countries, which is compounded by the trauma, stress, ambiguity and social isolation of involuntary migration, resettlement and acculturation (Hollifield et al. 2002;

Silove, Ventevogel and Rees 2017). Traumatic stress disorders can result from one highly traumatic experience, or a period in an individual's life, a community or an entire society in which a series of traumatic events occur (Gorst-Unsworth and Goldenberg 1998). People with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) often relive past traumatic event(s), and experience embodied reactions to memories or environmental stimuli that remind them of an original trauma (van der Kolk 2015). They often struggle with feeling safe in their everyday environments; the body's 'fight, flight, freeze or faint' acute stress response is chronically overstimulated (Bracha 2004).

Sufferers of posttraumatic stress disorder, for instance, often withdraw from mindfully embodied and emplaced experiences as a way of avoiding triggering stimuli, and managing associated sensory and nervous system overstimulation (Emerson, Sharma, Chaudhry and Turner 2009). Essential parts of recovering from trauma are learning ways to calm the body and mind vis-à-vis stimuli of social and physical environments (Emerson et al. 2009: 124; van der Kolk 2015), and to learn neutrally embodied ways of interacting with triggers through mind-body bridging that increases mindfulness (Nakamura et. al. 2011). In this context, places act significant triggers in their own right.

This article aims to explore music as a way to approach such holistic healing (Koen 2018) from trauma due to the possibility that music, as representational sonic expression, may allude to different human senses and connect with place (Feld 2012; Fox 2004; Stokes 1994). In light of trauma being a sensory experience that happens in a place, we introduce the potential usefulness to trauma recovery of songwriting intended to evoke as many human senses as possible—often called, when referring to song lyrics, sense-bound imagery (Jacobsen 2017)—as well as songwriting about place.

Music and the arts have been popular and growing ways of responding to trauma internationally (see e.g., Atkinson 1994; Barney and Mackinlay 2010; Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch 2017). However, apart from specific research and practices in the field of music therapy, like on therapeutic songwriting (Baker 2015; Baker, Wigram, Stott and McFerran 2008), there is sparse literature examining the connections between songwriting and trauma overall, or the specific connections between songwriting, trauma, the senses and place. A scoping literature review of musics of refugees and asylum seekers found few studies of the supportive practices that may be needed to prevent or respond to such an outcome from music participation, or ways that music can retraumatize these groups (Lenette and Sunderland 2014: 6-7).

A songwriting workshop for and with asylum seekers and refugees in Finland: Approaches to the musical practice and research

Our article presents results of a four-day songwriting intensive organized and held, in collaboration with the Finnish Red Cross, in Turku, Finland in June 2018. Like many EU countries, Finland contracts its national Red Cross to support the everyday lives of asylum seekers. The University of Helsinki funded Kristina Jacobsen and Naomi Sunderland to teach songwriting, whereas Klisala Harrison led overall event organization and fundraising while collaborating on local arrangements with Rosa Rantanen, Voluntary Services Coordinator for the Finnish Red Cross in Turku. An ecumenical community centre, *Yrjänän kohtaamispaikka*, offered, in-kind, four rooms with doors—a classroom, a library and two smaller ‘hangout spaces’—as well as a kitchen and communal space.

The full workshop program prioritized musical process over product. Reflecting this processual focus, our methodology explicitly avoids use of western music theory analysis in discussions of the songs written, since songs were written using a variety of western and non-western scales and also are still works-in-progress, not finished and polished products to be dissected and analysed apart from the context in which they were written. Thus, our project builds on the assumption that musically organized sound is inseparable from social practice (Feld 1982, 1984a, 1990; Meintjes 2003; Brenneis & Feld 2004; Fox 2004; Samuels 2004). Musically, the workshop aimed to generate several demo-quality recordings of new songs made by and with asylum seekers and refugees for media sharing, but not commercial profit. Sunderland is a teacher of social workers who provided strong practical direction from a health and well-being perspective.

Participants in the workshop included asylum seekers and refugees living in Finland as well as the authors and Rantanen. The eight asylum seeker- and refugee-participants hailed from Iraq (3 people), Afghanistan/Iran (1 person), Angola (1 person), Egypt (1 person), Syria (1 person) and Venezuela (1 person). Five workshop participants were professionals and included a journalist, economics professor, biology teacher, anesthetic nurse, and a construction engineer-turned-professional orchestral violinist. The group included two high school students. The ratio of men to women was 6:2; the ages ranged from 17 to 70. The participants reflected, on an intimate scale, large 2015 increases in the EU of Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis applying for asylum (Eurostat 2016).

Over the course of the workshop, we encouraged participants to engage in multisensory and place-based approaches to songwriting. Songwriters and scholars have emphasized how the five senses encourage songwriters to tune into the sensory details that bring a listener fully into the world that an approximately three-minute song creates (Cameron 1995; Gauthier in press; Pattison 2009). Focusing only on five senses (auditory, visual, tactile, taste and smell) misses another three in the at least eight human senses that may be active in musical events (Harrison 2019). These include the vestibular (balance felt through the inner ear; sense of movement in space), proprioceptive (sensation of the body’s muscles and joints), and interoceptive (sensations related to

the physiological and physical condition of the body). The workshop facilitation, described in detail below, promoted engagement of songwriter-participants with these eight senses when writing song lyrics about particular places, in ways that felt comfortable to them. In addition, we offered a ‘mindfulness walk’ in a local park, for turning up the senses (Figure 1), and offered speech-guided mindfulness exercises around sensory awareness. Facilitators noted that sensory experiences could conjure unpleasant memories and encouraged participants to practice self-care if experiencing psychological or emotional pain.

On Day 1, participants introduced themselves by performing music, playing a recording they had created, speaking, or reading their own poetry or lyrics. Then Sunderland gave a lecture on sense-bound imagery in songwriting, drawing inspiration from a reading given by a published poet and participant, Ahmed Zaidan (2018), when he introduced himself. Participants were encouraged to make listeners feel what is conveyed to their bodies’ eight senses by song lyric examples given in the lecture and, when writing their own song lyrics in the coming days, to ‘show don’t tell’ (Pattison 2009); to use unexpected but poetic and powerful metaphors; to evoke memories, imagination, embodied and emplaced experience; to help people listen with their whole body; and to use storytelling as an easy step into sense-bound imagery in songwriting.

We ended Day 1 with an exercise that invited participants to tell stories inspired by their personal responses to the overarching question of ‘what it has been like to *arrive* here’ as well as several sub-questions (Figure 2). Sunderland reminded participants, before they replied, that they were in charge of their own experience and that everything is a choice.

As homework, we gave participants a second songwriting prompt: to write about visualizing a place that they loved, using sense-bound imagery. On Day 2, Jacobsen asked participants to write about ‘leaving’ in any way that they wanted.

During Days 2 and 3, the participants wrote and rehearsed performances of three new songs based on the ‘arriving’ prompt as well as the homework prompt about a beloved place and the ‘leaving’ prompt. A group song written by all participants, ‘New Skies Above,’ arose from the arriving prompt. Two songs co-written, each by a pair of participants and respectively titled ‘Connection’ and ‘Seagulls,’ took inspiration from the various prompts together. In addition, two participants who could not create a new song due to a Finnish immigration interview, rehearsed, performed and recorded an Iraqi folk song. On Day 4, we made the demo recordings.

When working with people who have trauma backgrounds, it is important to take into account the ethics of doing so and the vulnerabilities of people who have experienced trauma. We thus took a trauma-informed approach to facilitating songwriting, in addition to following the human research ethics requirements of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity, including

regarding informed data consents and releases (provided in English and Arabic). Trauma-informed, in one definition, refers to practices open and responsive to the presence of trauma whilst not exclusively focused on it (Knight 2015). A practitioner who operates in a trauma-informed way ‘neither ignores nor dwells exclusively on the past trauma. Rather, trauma-informed practitioners are sensitive to the ways in which the client’s current difficulties can be understood in the context of the past trauma’ (ibid.: 25).

We took inspiration from the idea that creative arts therapies can be useful in “reconnecting implicit (sensory) and explicit (declarative) memories of trauma” (Malchiodi 2015: 29) including for people with PTSD (Malchiodi 2012). Such activities, building on findings in neurodevelopment, supports individuals’ abilities to self-regulate affect as well as bodily reactions in relation to traumatic experiences and memories (Malchiodi 2015). We explored what could be the role of song lyrics and to some extent musical sound, for trauma survivors, in self-regulation when encountering confronting topics.

Aspects of the workshop that enacted our trauma-informed ethics and, in particular, sensitivity to associated stress disorders, included regular and easy access to shared food and drinks—because eating and drinking creates a sense of shared sociality and reduces stress—as well as attention given to specific culture of origin; regular checking-in about level of well-being and comfort level then making any possible adjustments to increase either; and offering as much agency and choice as possible regarding decision-making in the workshop, nature of participation, and shared use of the rooms. Experiencing agency over space is unusual for asylum seekers first housed by Finland in often cramped ‘reception centres,’ whose staff highly monitor space use, but from which refugees and asylum seekers are free to come and go. We made arrangements for participant referral and support, especially Red Cross counselling, in the case of any trauma flashbacks—which the participants ultimately did not need.

We conducted ethnographic research on our work: Harrison did interviews, made audio and audiovisual recordings, and took photos (Figure 3). All authors took ethnographic fieldnotes, throughout the workshop. Sunderland, also a sound engineer, made the demo recordings while Jacobsen and Sunderland, together with the participants, made lead sheets and charts of the new songs. Harrison and Jacobsen took ethnomusicological and anthropological approaches to thematizing the ethnographic and musical materials (Barz and Cooley 2008; Spradley 2016), which included analyses of song – place relationships (Titon 2014), and generating ethnographic ‘thick’ descriptions which tend to be profoundly sense-bound (Geertz 1973; Rice 1987). The organization and carrying out of the project was an exercise in applied ethnomusicology—an ‘approach guided by principles of social responsibility, which extends the usual academic goal of

broadening and deepening knowledge and understanding toward solving concrete problems and toward working both inside and beyond typical academic contexts’ (Harrison and Pettan 2010: 1). Reflecting our ethnographic research process, we will discuss the songwriting process further via ethnographic descriptions and analyses.

A songwriting process addressing traumas of social isolation and place

Our music workshop process illustrated how a general assertion made in the literature on artistic expressions of asylum seekers and refugees—that arts can lead to therapeutic outcomes and personal change in the midst of resettlement and acculturation—can work in the specific case of songwriting. Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch 2017, for instance, interpret arts activities as a ‘temporary home.’ Thus, this workshop, and the songs participants created, acted as a home— ‘a safe haven, a place to be oneself, a container that holds and keeps’— that was ‘temporary,’ or which evoked ‘change, transformation, and bridging the old and the new’ (Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch 2017).

Our facilitated songwriting process worked in particular with two key themes that emerged in the Day 1 introduction and group discussion on the arriving prompt as well as follow-up interviews on those. The themes were participant experiences of social isolation or exclusion as refugees and asylum seekers in Finland, and extremely challenging experiences of forced migration from, through and to places (Harrison and Albamo 2018; Harrison and Garrido 2018; Harrison and Ibrahim 2018; Harrison and Zaidan 2018; Harrison, Al Zubaidi and Al Zubaidi 2018). We understood, from dialogue with Rantanen about Red Cross mental health services (Rantanen 2018) and from the group discussions in the workshop and our interviews with workshop participants, that the topics deeply related with traumatic experiences of migration. They were possible or even likely trauma triggers for the asylum seekers and refugees due to the perception of Finnish society being rather closed and racist (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2018: 12-13, 15, 21, 37, 40, 41, 43) as well as the often arduous and hazardous nature of recent migration journeys to Europe.

To move away from senses of social isolation and to build social connections in and around music-making, Sunderland designed a collaborative, interactive songwriting process for the group song, called ‘New Skies Above.’ The songwriting process involved many interpersonal communications as all workshop participants took part in creating, rehearsing, performing and recording the song.

Harrison and Sunderland had annotated the stories generated from participants in response to the arriving prompt on Day 1, when participants had been asked to describe arrival experiences in

as multisensory a way as possible. Participant Xavier Albamo in collaboration with Sunderland (Figures 4-5) took the lead on forging the stories into song lyrics, scoring some of these as spoken word and others to a melody by Sunderland.

Table 1 tracks how these lyricists stayed faithful to the multisensory aspects of stories of arriving offered by participants. For instance, Nora A. Al Zubaidi and Raad Obaiad Al Zubaidi shared in the group discussion about waiting for a Finnish immigration interview and decision, which was reflected in the lyric ‘go to a meeting and beg to stay’ that, in turn, includes the vestibular and proprioceptive senses. Another participant talked about reuniting with his father after a long time separate while reflecting on how silent and cold Finland is compared to his home country, Egypt, where every night people gather like it’s a festival. The lyrics traced his experience with the lines ‘Hey yah wah . . . hey yah wah the whole night is a festival,’ which reference the vestibular, proprioceptive and auditory senses. Ahmed Zaidan, from Iraq, talked about walking for days to arrive in Finland, and then leaving the place he was originally settled to go to Turku, near the ocean. Vestibular, proprioceptive, interoceptive and visual senses resonated with the lines ‘It’s a feeling of freedom / I haven’t felt for a while / A long walk to the ocean / To make new stars above.’ Albamo, from Angola, had talked about being granted a residence permit in Finland as well as how it feels to breath in clean air from the street in Finland, reflected in ‘Me and my sister got the best news today / I’m breathing a different air now.’

Table 1. Multiple senses engaged in asylum and refugee experiences, associated with trauma, recounted in lyrics of the co-written song ‘New Skies Above’

Participant (country)	Story of multisensory experience	Lyric reflecting story	Sense engaged in lyric
Nora A. Al Zubaidi and Raad Obaid Al Zubaidi (Iraq)	waiting for Finnish immigration interview and decision	‘go to a meeting and beg to stay’	vestibular, proprioceptive
Zubaidis (Iraq)	their daughter giving birth to a granddaughter, named Suma, during the workshop	‘My baby Suma is rising’	vestibular, proprioceptive
Xavier Albamo (Angola)	arrival in Finland	Verse 1	vestibular, proprioceptive, interoceptive, taste

Albamo (Angola)	being granted residence permit and the cold, clean air that Albamo breathes from the street in Finland when he arrives	'Me and my sister got the best news today / I'm breathing a different air now'	interoceptive
Djamiww (Afghanistan/Iran)	girlfriend forgives him after he buys her flowers	'She's mad / no answer there when I call her phone / So sad / tired of fighting I buy a rose'	vestibular, proprioceptive, interoceptive, auditory
Vanessa Garrido (Venezuela)	"cinnamon" and "coffee" smell of Helsinki and Finland experienced upon arrival	'It's the smell of the coffee, it's your cinnamon smile'	smell
Garrido (Venezuela)	the joy she felt watching her baby boy and husband riding a new bike the day before	'I watch my baby boy / This is the moment I always dreamed of'	interoceptive
Fouad Ibrahim (Syria)	somewhat negative memory of Finland – being unlucky during bus driving lessons in that every time it is his turn to drive, something goes wrong so he cannot (e.g., bus breaks down)	negative bus memory is transformed into a discussion of leaving or staying in a new place: 'That's it, I'm going to take the first bus and disappear outta here / Oh no, the bus doesn't work / It's like the universe is saying to me... / Stay'	vestibular, proprioceptive

anonymous youth (Egypt)	positive memory of home country – vibrant street life	‘I meet my father / We’ve been living separate lives / He gives me a hug’	vestibular, proprioceptive
anonymous youth (Egypt)	reuniting with father after a long time separate reflecting on how silent and cold Finland is compared with his home country where every night people gather and it’s like a festival	‘Hey yah wah . . . hey yah wah the whole night is a festival’	vestibular, proprioceptive, auditory
Ahmed Zaidan (Iraq)	Walking for days to arrive in Finland, then leaving the place he was originally settled in to go to Turku near the ocean. He remembered looking up to see the stars while standing by the ocean and feeling a sense of freedom at last.	‘It’s a feeling of freedom I haven’t felt for a while A long walk to the ocean To make new stars above’	vestibular, proprioceptive, interoceptive, visual

Participant Amir Alizade or Djamiww (Figure 6) created a background track of pre-recorded beats plus instrumental and vocal sounds sampled from workshop participants. All participants presented the song, as well as other newly created songs (Figure 7), in an informal concert-in-the-round on Day 3.

The concert, open only to other participants and those who had been present at the community centre throughout the week, was also process- rather than product-based. Rather than being placed at the end of the workshop, the concert concluded in group discussions and inputs about further developing the new songs in advance of recording sessions on Day 4 (Figures 8-10). For recording ‘New Skies Above,’ participants collaborated in singing, spoken word, instrumental performance, deejay work and recording production and engineering. After the workshop, everyone

kept in contact regarding choices about song track mastering and sharing, mostly via a Facebook Group called ‘New Skies Above Songwriting Collective – Turku Finland. Recordings were featured on University of Helsinki websites and a community program planned for Radio Robin Hood in Turku. Some of us met socially.

The theme of social isolation and its opposite, social connection, emerged also as central in the creative process and texts of one of the two co-written songs each created by a pair of participants. On Day 2, Jacobsen paired as co-writers Vanessa Garrido—a violinist who had played professionally in Venezuela’s Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra—and Fouad Ibrahim—an exquisite *saz* player from the Kurdish-speaking portion of northwestern Syria. For Days 2 and 3, Garrido and Ibrahim worked hard to find a musical and thematic connection. Their differences were considerable: Ibrahim was playing Arabic *maqamat* (singular: *maqam*—a type of scale) on the microtonal Kurdish *saz* that, due to new pegs for the stringed instrument, often refused to stay in tune. Arabic maqams are based on a scale of seven notes that repeat at the octave, as compared to the twelve notes of an equally tempered (classical) scale. This means that notes in a maqam may or may not correspond with semitones (whole steps and half-steps) within the western classical scale. Ibrahim is self-taught and operates in oral tradition to the extent that he does not name the notes or chord-names in the maqams in which he plays. Garrido, trained as a violinist in equally tempered scales of Western art music, had not worked with Arabic music before, and played primarily by reading music rather than by ear. Linguistically, they used English as a lingua franca, whereas Kurdish is Ibrahim’s mother tongue and Venezuelan Spanish is Garrido’s. They had never met prior to the workshop.

With facilitator guidance, these songwriters made their shared story into a fairy tale, narrated in the third-person, both tools that gave them distance from their subjects, while writing musical ‘bridges’¹ in specific maqams that acted as transitions between verse and chorus (using maqam *kurd*) as well as the song’s introduction and ending (using maqam *hijaz*). Stylistically, Garrido used her classical ear training to match pitches with Ibrahim’s instrument, creating a beautiful, lively repeating instrumental ‘riff’² on the violin using Arabic-inflected turns and ornamentation, which Ibrahim accommodated by learning to play some major chords (the *saz* is set up to play primarily minor chords) to supply the chords Garrido heard in parts of the song. Garrido sang the song, developing her singing voice over the course of the week: on the final recording they made of the song, she is singing, full-voiced and full of vibrato and expressivity, alternating deftly between singing and violin performance.

As Garrido later reflected, once they established a connection with one another and with the group, the song, which had been a long time in coming, flowed from that:

Between Tuesday and Thursday, the hope goes, and come...but I started to feel connecting with my partner and also with all the crew...so I began to feel...’oh this is possible....’ I ‘re-learned’ that the wonderful energy of music can really connecting people of any races, languages, and cultures...and the end of the day everything it’s about to let it happen...and flow...resistances out and just be available to make beauty together. (Jacobsen and Garrido 2018)

That connection, in turn, created an original, inimitable and unique musical meeting of the minds in song, in which the central thematic of the Chorus reflects that many differences they surmounted in order to co-write a song: connection with self, with others, with place, and the connection that making music with someone else can create:

We need connection
 Our souls are crying out
 Our souls are empty
 We need connection
 Our souls are crying out
 Our souls are empty
 We need to know
 We are not alone

In ‘Connection,’ Garrido and Imbrahim also expressed their own experiences of coming to Finland and the social isolation they faced. This cemented their connection to one another while reaffirming their connection to themselves as artists and musicians as well as other listeners in the group.

Workshop participants gave highly positive and self-reflexive comments about the workshop afterwards, such as ‘I feel good and I’m happy,’ ‘I felt very comfortable,’ ‘I feel overjoyed’ and ‘I was very thrilled to benefit.’ As the workshop progressed, participants visibly displayed happiness, confidence and lack-of-stress, for instance smiles and open and relaxed body postures (Figure 11). As a group, we demonstrated increased levels of social connection with one another through easy chatting and taking group selfies (Figures 12). Increased interpersonal comfort-levels were evident—also hugging, caring for one another through offering food or drink of the home country, and dancing together in celebration and joy at the play-back of one song recording. While this doesn’t necessarily contribute anything new to the refugee health and music

literature (detailed in Sunderland et al. 2015), it does show that as facilitators, we enabled a positive musical and social experience alongside dealing with potential trauma triggers via songwriting themes. We also stimulated nervous system reactions rooted in positive socialization (the myelinated vagus response), rather than a flight or fright response (of the sympathetic nervous system) or freeze reaction (of the unmyelinated vagus) (see Porges 2010).

Avoiding re-traumatization is important when using trauma-informed approaches (Huckshorn and LeBel 2013: 65-69). When issues of isolation and displacement came up in the musical process, the participants could practice self-care regarding how or if they decided to engage. They could practice self-agency to focus on a possible trauma trigger or, alternatively, on the other benefits of the songwriting workshop—enjoying making music, building songwriting skills, recording a demo, or sharing stories, food, coffee and sociality.

We had made the three songwriting prompts on ‘arriving,’ a ‘beloved place’ and ‘leaving’ abstract so as to minimize risk of re-traumatization. This further facilitated self-directed engagements with traumatic issues, a strategy used at a nearby crisis centre in Turku. Rantanen comment that the abstract songwriting prompts enabled

people to handle the things that they have experienced if they want to. It allows them to look back but it allows them to look forward. It allows them to be in this time, so it gives a lot of space. I think it’s extremely important that especially in this case that you don’t force people to look back like what is your home. Because a lot of time this is very traumatic because it’s the thing that you lost. So, it’s good because it allows a lot. I think it’s also very interesting that even when you’re very careful not to bring up certain things, they still arise, but they arise on the terms of the people, which is the good, I think, shows that there is some good social work background. So people do have this common factor, experience, but it comes up on their terms, how they want to deal with it. (Harrison and Rantanen 2018)

Approaching potential triggers indirectly allowed songs to serve as ‘safe containers’ in and through which participants interacted and built relationships in Finland.

Engaging place was a challenging aspect of songwriting work for and with asylum seekers and refugees, though. A placed association of music can be positive, or possibly mentally dangerous for trauma survivors, and such associations are often made at first sound, almost instantaneously. For example, after hearing a performance of a traditional Iraqi folksong performed by Iraqi compatriots in the workshop, Zaidan said that he felt the song was beautiful and nostalgic but how, for him, it didn’t belong in Turku, Finland; rather, it should be performed in its nation of origin,

Iraq. Zaidan then reflected on the role of Iraqi songs in his wellness self-care. Each time he hears a song from his home country, he said, he is ‘immediately among palm trees,’ transported to that place suddenly and irrevocably. Sometimes, however, he can’t go there emotionally; on those days, he needs to avoid listening to, or over-hearing, the songs and music genres that take him there. Engaging with songs and sound therefore allowed participants to cultivate a deepened and more explicit self-awareness about sound as a form of self-care.

‘New Skies Above,’ in being written around experiences of arriving in Finland, conveyed impressions of arriving, and Finland as a potential trauma trigger (Figure 13). Verse 1, for example, tells about Albamo’s arrival in Finland, with words evoking the following senses: vestibular, proprioceptive, interoceptive and taste. Reflectively writing these multisensory lyrics emerged from Albamo remembering ‘being there.’

Co-writing songs in pairs, which included much one-on-one guidance from Jacobsen, offered further opportunities for addressing traumatic places, or not, as that felt safe to participants. When writing Verse 2 of ‘Connection,’ Vanessa Garrido thus described a multisensory experience and memory of being in her now burned-down apartment in Caracas, Venezuela:

And from her window she can see
 Blue sky and flying birds
 Inside the smell of anise
 Morning light across the floor
 Ávila mountain old man protector
 Loves to listen to her play ...

The apartment had a ‘very beautiful view,’ she recalled. When Garrido wrote the lyrics, she imagined herself playing violin for nature—‘for my mountain, for birds, for clouds’—and for herself in her ‘happy place’ (Harrison and Garrido 2018). Like ‘New Skies Above,’ these lyrics of ‘Connection’ engaged visual, vestibular, smell, auditory and proprioceptive senses, as Garrido recalled playing her violin in a city from which she was displaced. By contrast, ‘Connection’ co-writer Fouad Imbrahim felt most comfortable writing about being in a fictional and inspirational place to him—performing saz onstage.

These artists did not write song lyrics through which they could be personally identified and named. The abstract quality of songwriting prompts (Goldberg 1980), including ours, produces songs intended to resonate with human experience more broadly. Songs take the particular and make it universal (Jacobsen in Siegesmund & Cahnmann-Taylor 2017: 117). We engaged with this

when facilitating self-directed engagement with likely trauma triggers via sense-bound songwriting within a trauma-informed workshop that emphasized collaborative artmaking, psychological and emotional safety and self-care.

Conclusion

This article documented trauma-informed songwriting practices that were sense-bound and place-based, as well as their results, in a workshop offered to asylum seeker and refugee artists in Turku, Finland. Our approach to collaborative songwriting, especially the ways in which it dealt with traumatic topics of social isolation and relocation, resulted in participants engaging indirectly with these potential trigger-topics in non-threatening embodied ways.

For people who experience trauma, sense-bound songwriting offers an opportunity to mindfully be in the body. Sense-bound songwriting on topics associated with place can, with asylum seekers and refugees, result in their writing vivid lyrics that activate and convey their multisensory experiences of ‘being there’ in traumatic experiences. Trauma is approached as a whole-body sensation, but the many-sided nature of music means that participants can choose to focus on other aspects of music-making too. Participants can choose to encounter trauma gently, partially, and as they are ready. Addressing triggers via writing lyrics may be combined with different and positive musical expressions and encounters, increasing the likelihood of an overall embodied experience perceived as highly supportive, as we witnessed in Turku. Thus, we demonstrated that songwriting can support refugees and asylum seekers in relating with difficult places and achieving respite from trauma and associated challenges, within a current global crisis around forced and involuntary migration.

Endnotes

1. A bridge is the section of a song that ‘bridges’ sung verses and choruses and only occurs once in the song. In popular music, it’s sometimes referred to as the C-part.
2. A riff is a short, repeating musical idea or motif.

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Figure 1. A mindfulness walk for turning up the senses at a park in Turku, Finland. © Klisala Harrison 2018

Figure 2. PowerPoint slide of the arriving prompt by Naomi Sunderland.

What has it been like to arrive here?

While paying attention to the senses we have discussed think about a story you can share on the following:

- What is your strongest or most favourite memory of when you first arrived here in Turku?
- What is your strongest or most favourite memory after you had been here for a little while?
- What is your strongest or most favourite memory from yesterday or this morning?

Figure 3. Klisala Harrison prepares to make audiovisual recordings. © Kristina Jacobsen 2018

Figures 4-5. Naomi Sunderland and Xavier Albamo thematize participant responses to the arriving prompt, then Albamo takes the lead on writing lyrics for ‘New Skies Above.’ © Klisala Harrison 2018

Figure 6. Djamiww creates beats for the group song. © Klisala Harrison 2018

Figure 7. At the concert, Fouad Ibrahim and Vanessa Garrido perform their co-write, ‘Connection.’ © Klisala Harrison 2018

Figure 8. Singers record vocals for the group song, ‘New Skies Above.’ © Klisala Harrison 2018

Figure 9. Albamo, after coaching from Author 2, is about to record spoken word for the group song. © Klisala Harrison 2018

Figure 10. Sunderland is our sound engineer. © Klisala Harrison 2018

Figure 11. Fouad Ibrahim after songwriting and recording. © Klisala Harrison 2018

Figure 12. Group selfie. © Fouad Ibrahim 2018

Figure 13. ‘New Skies Above’ song lyrics

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Verse 1 – spoken word

Life, life, life, it's what you make it
Everyday everyday everyday it's a struggle
Everyday everyday is a new day
OK December 4, I will never forget
My sister and I outside of a police station
All my life I hated the police
But here I am praying to see a police car
It's 4 degrees out here, cold as hell
I feel pain in my legs, my hands about to freeze
I can barely move oh I wish I could have a coffee now
Bad memories come to my head
Will somebody come to rescue us?
I don't know
Can you relate?
A big word but it feels like an empty space
It's like a theatre when everyone is anxious to clap

Chorus 1 – sung

Clap hands
Suddenly this is my everyday
Clap hands
Go to a meeting and beg to stay
She's mad
no answer there when I call her phone
So sad
tired of fighting I buy a rose
[spoken word]
That's it, I'm going to take the first bus and disappear outta here
Oh no, the bus doesn't work
It's like the universe is saying to me...
Stay

Verse 2 – spoken word

Hey yah wah the best day of my life
Me and my sister got the best news today
I'm breathing a different air now
I meet my father
We've been living separate lives
He gives me a hug
I watch my baby boy
This is the moment I always dreamed of when I was a boy
Hey yah wah the whole night is a festival
And now I have a reason to smile

Bridge – sung

It's the smell of the coffee
It's your cinnamon smile
It's a feeling of freedom
I haven't felt for a while
A long walk to the ocean
To make new stars above
My baby Suma is rising
Our generation of love

Chorus 2 – sung

Clap hands
I can't wait for the sun again
Clap hands
The smell of the coffee and cinnamon
Clap hands the noon is dark and the night is light
Clap hands
I walked all the way to see this sight
Clap hands
Here is the place we call our home
Clap hands
[spoken]
Now, we have a reason to smile