The Voice as Trauma Recovery: Vocal Timbre in Kesha's "Praying"

I vividly remember the first time I heard the stunning, emotional power ballad that is "Praying." Like many of us, I assumed Ke$ha—previously stylized with a dollar sign—only performed auto-tuned party anthems like "Tik Tok." In 2017, Kesha, sans dollar sign, shocked listeners with her first single in 5 years—and her first ballad *ever*—"Praying." In it, she reacts to the abuse she suffered from her former producer, Dr. Luke. In my presentation today, I will show how Kesha utilizes various registers, laryngeal positions, timbral effects, and places within the track's sonic environment to portray symptoms of trauma and recovery—including improving thought patterns, an increasing ability to connect with others, and a growing sense of emotional strength and control.

[s] In October 2014, after rehabilitation surrounding her abuse, Kesha sued Dr. Luke for sexual assault and battery, sexual and civil harassment, gender violence…and intentional infliction of emotional distress.[1] She also sued multiple companies founded by Dr. Luke for negligence, including Kemosabe Records. The body of the lawsuit explains: [s] "For the past ten years, Dr. Luke has sexually, physically, verbally, and emotionally abused Ms. Sebert to the point where Ms. Sebert nearly lost her life." [2] [s] Kesha filed a court injunction in attempts to record elsewhere, but it was denied in February 2015.[3] [s] Lacking evidence, Kesha's lawsuits ended in Dr. Luke's favor, making her bound to her six album contract with Kemosabe Records. Though devastated, she continued to make music, releasing the album *Rainbow* in August 2017, saying: [s]

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[1] Kesha Rose Sebert v. Lukasz Sebastian Gottwald a/k/a Dr. Luke, Kasz Money, Inc., Prescription Songs, LLC, Where Da Kasz At?, Kemosabe Entertainment, LLC, Kemosabe Records, LLC, and Does 1-25, BC 560466. October 2014.
[2] Kesha Rose Sebert v. Lukasz Sebastian Gottwald a/k/a Dr. Luke, October 2014.
[3] Maura Johnston, "Kesha and Dr. Luke: Everything You Need to Know to Understand the Case," *Rolling Stone*, Feb 22, 2016.

> Since those difficult and emotional days in rehab, I started imagining that one day I would put out a new record and I would call it *Rainbow*...I just held onto that idea because it was all I had. (...) This idea...is what helped me get up every day. I know that this album saved my life.[4]

Before discussing my analysis, I'd like to first provide some background. [s] The latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, or DSM-5, defines trauma as [s] "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence."[5] Trauma literally rewires the brain. Bessel van der Kolk explains that [s] "[traumatic experiences] also leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems."[6] Many scholars have discussed various effects that trauma has on survivors, and today, I'll focus on [s] negative thought patterns, perceived loss of control, and feeling disconnected from others.

[s]Voice and trauma have been connected by many scholars. Erwin Randolph Parson says, [s] "[*trauma-voice*] tells *more* about what *really* happened, and what has been broken and shattered inside than ordinary words ever can."[7] Many psychologists discuss connection of the voice and psyche, saying [s] aspects of the subconscious are expressed through vocal production and timbre, especially paired with meaningful lyrics. Alfred Wolfsohn even succeeded in treating his trauma responses—and expanding his vocal range to eight octaves—by producing extreme vocal sounds to process his feelings.

But how can we analyze this? [s] Drawing from scholarship in both voice and music theory/musicology, I provide analysis in which I rely on my own mimetic engagement as

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[4] Kesha Rose Sebert, "Kesha: 'What's Left of My Heart is Fucking Gold and No One Can Touch That,'" *Refinery29*, August 11, 2017.
[5] *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5,* 2013, (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing): 271.
[6] Bessel van der Kolk, 2014, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, (New York: Penguin Books), 1.
[7] Erwin Randolph Parson, 1999, "The Voice in Dissociation: A Group Model for Helping Victims Integrate Trauma Representational Memory," *Journal of Contemporary Psychology*, vol. 29, no. 1: 20.

a singer to provide descriptions of laryngeal positions, registers, and timbral qualities, as well as an assessment of Kesha's vocal placement within the musical environment of the song using Allan Moore's concept of "proxemics."

Within the physical vocal mechanism, [s] there are four positions of the larynx (or voice box) that people can use to produce sound—M0–M3. The positions range from the vocal folds being short and thick in M0 to long and thin in M3. The M0 position creates vocal fry, which is used to produce the lowest notes of anyone's range.[8] Both chest and belt voice are produced in the M1 position. Chest voice, as Malawey describes, "results in rich audible harmonic overtones,"[9] with resonance felt in the chest, while belting "occurs when a singer uses chest voice in a higher pitch range."[10] The M2 position (head voice and falsetto) produces significantly fewer overtones and produces resonance in the head. Lastly, the M3 position creates the whistle tone, historically awed as a virtuosic ability, from the "Queen of the Night" aria to Mariah Carey and Ariana Grande.

[s] Another aspect of vocal analysis is the voice's position in respect to the musical environment and other instruments—especially in recorded song. [s] Allan Moore's concept of "proxemics" provides a way to analyze the perceived distance between the singer and other members of the musical experience. He details four "proxemic zones," intimate, personal, social, and public, which imply the singer's physical distance to the listener (ranging from very close to very far), connection with the surrounding musical material (from separated to integrated), vocal volume/delivery (whisper to full/shout), and address (one person to a large group of people).[11]

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[8] Ibid, 52.
[9] Ibid, 41-2
[10] Ibid, 45.
[11] Ibid, 187.

[s] My analysis of "Praying" shows how Kesha utilizes register (from extreme lows to highs) and various timbral effects (like grain, breathiness, vibrato) to portray her improving thought patterns and perceived sense of control, and how she uses a thickening in texture to convey her increasing ability to connect to others in her recovery.

[s] She begins by discussing what the active "you" (Dr. Luke) has done to her. Kesha explains how powerless he made her feel, and her positioning herself as a direct object—which grammatically depends on the subject—emphasizes her feeling of being "nothing without [him]." She only becomes the active subject in the last line to politely address him, saying "thank you." Kesha sings with low chest voice and vocal fry, representing the M1 and M0 laryngeal positions, respectively. While chest voice allows the cords to vibrate with consistency, vocal fry causes inconsistent vibrations. In the same moment she uses fry, she also sings as the antagonist's direct object. Her fry dominates the verse until she fittingly regains vocal consistency on the word "strong." It seems she uses vocal fry like sandpaper, sanding away the graininess and leaving her smooth, modal voice. In this way, she grammatically (direct object to active subject) and vocally (vocal fry to chest voice) gains strength on the word "strong." Accompanied only by the piano, Kesha's low register and quiet delivery is presented without "intervening musical material," suggesting Allan Moore's intimate zone, where the singer sounds extremely close to the listener. The intimacy with "you" can be heard, but it also sounds quite lonely and disconnected because of the perceived separation from other musical elements. [s] (VERSE 1)

[s] Her strength starts to grow in the ensuing prechorus. She calls her abuser out for "bringing the flames" and "putting her through hell." In contrast to verse 1, she more quickly gains agency in the lyrics, saying, "I had to learn how to fight for myself," in the

second line. With her newfound strength, Kesha consistently sings in her low-middle modal voice, which was too difficult in verse 1. She even allows vibrato to shine through, implying comfort and a small loss of tension and control. As synthesizer adds to the texture, Kesha sounds a bit farther from the listener, implying the "personal zone," in which Moore describes the voice as "close to the listener," but still containing separation from the environment and having "soft to medium vocals."[12] [s] (PRECHORUS)

[s] Her vocal consistency continues as she sings "I hope you're somewhere prayin'." However, when she sings "falling on your knees," "knees" stands out in breathy tone, sounding as though her voice—like her knees—has been knocked out from under her. Here, her vocal strength mirrors her emotional strength, giving out on this provocative word which can imply both praying and sexual submission. Though it depicts mostly strength and security, the chorus may also be directed back at herself, implying her own guilt and shame. These feelings are emphasized by a return to Moore's intimate zone, with just voice and piano for the first half of the chorus. Directly before she sings, "I hope you find your peace," back-up vocalists enter singing "ooh" behind her. Significantly, this time she is more connected to human voices and not just synthesizer. [s] (CHORUS)

[s] Kesha begins verse 2, saying "I'm proud of who I am." Vocal fry is not nearly as present here as in verse 1, but still appears in a couple of places. On the final phrase, a registral shift emphasizes, "you were wrong and now the best is yet to come." Synthesizer adds to the texture earlier than in the previous verse, giving her aural support, or connection to the other musical material, for her registral shift and emphasizing another move to the "personal zone." As she pulls her voice into this higher register, still keeping

[12] Allan Moore, 2013, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*, 187.

M1 position, she brings with her aspects of her lower sounds. Some words sound grainy and rough—similar to the vocal fry—as she seems to overdrive her voice. While this section shows both lyrical and vocal strength, she does slip into breathy sound on "wrong," portraying Kesha's hesitancy in her accusation. To end the verse, she dramatically leans into the grainy belt on the final word, "come," as she gets ready to continue in the new, higher register. [s] (VERSE 2)

[s] Another verse follows. Her words are active and strong, explicitly stating "I can make it on my own," and "I don't need you." Ironically, the agency and strength in these lyrics is not heard in her vocal timbre as she falls into breathy falsetto voice, produced with the M2 position, sounding timid and afraid. Even with lyrical strength, her timbre provides doubt that she actually believes these words. It seems that though her new register implies a mental shift, she now must build new forms of strength in this place. To do so, she again uses grainy voice to begin "I," which seems to incite her vocal strength. Fittingly, she finds her vocal strength at the same she lyrically finds her emotional strength, similar to verse 1. She does continue to overblow her belt, causing her voice to break on "rain" and "oh." However, she does not revert back to her breathy falsetto and instead pushes through and attempts strength, even when it is difficult. As her voice becomes louder and more present in the verse's second half, and as back-up vocalists and strings thicken the texture, the song now implies Moore's "social zone." The synthesizer, backup vocals, and strings support her new higher register. Her vocal placement becomes more connected to the other musical material, and they seem to tell her, "you're not alone; we're here with you." This fuller texture helps to support her while she threatens, "when I'm finished, they won't even know your name" in her grainy belt. [s] (VERSE 3)

[s] In the prechorus and chorus, Kesha continues in her new register, singing an octave higher than before. She sings with her belt and grainy belt in M1 position, settling into her more-supported vocal strength. This time her grainy belt emphasizes the words "I," "myself," and "truth I could tell," emphasizing words relating to herself and showing her growing emotional strength. Her feelings of connection are even more aurally present in the chorus. While the strings disappear, a bass drum enters to reinforce a strong beat. The back-up vocalists sing in a choir with Kesha on the lyrics—not just supporting "ooh"—and provide an even stronger aural sense of community. Back-up choirs are very common in power ballads and gospel music, and this texture encourages other voices to sing with her and invites connection through mimetic engagement. In its new register, the chorus enters what Moore calls the "public zone." While her lyrics are the same as before, the chorus now seems like it could be vaguely addressed to anyone, serving as an open message for any and all abusers. This is especially pertinent when lyrics are sung by the listener at home, therefore directly addressing these lyrics to their own abuser(s) through mimetic engagement. As Kesha sings in the new "public zone," she stays in her belt voice, and overdrives only on "prayin,'" "changin'," and "I hope." She doesn't revert back to breathiness as in the previous chorus, and instead uses graininess to prepare for the bridge with strength. [s] (PC & CHORUS)

[s] In the bridge, Kesha describes praying for her abuser, hoping that he will "see the light," before leaving this to God to forgive. While she goes through this difficult step, listeners can sense her feelings of disconnection as the texture drops back to piano, voice, and back-up vocalists on "ooh." She has not lost all of her connections, as her back-up voices remain, but it is a noticeable shift from the previous "public zone." She has some breathiness at the beginning, but seems to be able to hold herself up now, without the

assistance of the other musical material. She continues using mostly smooth belt, with some grainy belt. She then vocally soars to F6 in her whistle register, switching into her M3 position, and hands the main melody over to the choir. This moment represents her transcendence. She not only leaves *him* behind, but also leaves *listeners* behind, as most people cannot overtly mimetically engage with this vocal moment. [s] (BRIDGE)

[s] The final chorus begins underneath Kesha's whistle-tone transcendence. It returns to Moore's "public zone," with the same texture as the previous chorus. She joins back in after her whistle note, and sings along in her belt voice. She uses her grainy belt voice to emphasize "I hope," "peace," and "falling," portraying her ultimate goal of peace for herself. However, on the final word, "prayin'," she sounds breathy and insecure, but also possibly tired of holding stress. In the final moment of the song, her timbre portrays weakness, ending the song admitting that she is not "fixed," nor "finished" with her healing. This is further represented by a drop in texture as all other musical material cuts out and she and the piano finish alone. While she ends disconnected from her musical environment, she does not imply the same "intimate zone" of the beginning. Even though the ending portrays an imperfect recovery, it still shows a journey. [s] (CHORUS)

[s] Many listeners have been powerfully affected by this song. One listener writes,

> [s] The weight that these lyrics carry echoes far beyond Kesha's own struggles—it's the dead letter in the nightstand that survivors could never send, the hours of roleplaying exercises in therapy. It's the opportunity to say something to a person who has caused such profound pain, to prove that survivors have voices despite abusers attempts to silence them…the power in "Praying" comes from the light shown on the trauma itself, that if her trauma was real enough to be spoken out loud, maybe mine was too.[13]

[13] Jacqueline Boucher, "Kesha's New Music and Its Impact of Survivors of Sexual Trauma," *The Mary Sue,* August 2017.

[s] However, it is not only Kesha's lyrics that elicit this powerful response. Kesha's range and timbre in "Praying" embody her trauma processing, through which her subconscious thoughts find an outlet. Not only can listeners sense and mimetically engage with these shifts, [s] but Kesha's comments have shown that she found therapeutic benefit in writing and making this album. She says, [s] "I'm looking at this record and as [sic] myself, and as this whole journey as, I'm a new artist. Like the first time anyone is getting to know me."[14] Rabbi Lionel Blue, a student/patient of Alfred Wolfsohn's vocal therapy, said, [s] "it was never a process of taking apart, but of putting together all the pieces into a whole, a whole that I had never experienced before—and this whole was me."[15] While I am in no way making claims that Kesha would have known about Wolfsohn's teachings, these quotes raise the question, does vocal production itself actually provide insight into the psyche, and does it help heal trauma?

Throughout "Praying," there are two large registral shifts that mark important lyrical moments and her improving thought patterns, timbral nuances that show small-scale changes in her emotional control, and various proxemic shifts that portray her building ability to connect to others. In examining how Kesha's voice portrays her journey through trauma recovery in "Praying," I hope to provide a deeper understanding of vocal expression in popular songs and in doing so, provide insight into trauma's effects and how they can be embodied in the voice. [s] Thank you.

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[14] Kesha Rose Sebert, *Rainbow: The Film,* (Magic Seed Productions, 2018), documentary, 31 minutes.
[15] Paul Newham, "Jung and Alfred Wolfsohn: Analytical psychology and the singing voice," *Journal of Analytical Psychology,* 37 (1992): 330.