

# Research Memorandum Series

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In recent months, issues of oppression and justice have brought to the forefront of our social consciousness. While the killings of unarmed black citizens have been promulgated by media coverage and peaceful protests, it is paramount to recognize that issues of racism, homophobia, and misogyny saturate our culture. If we accept that certain members of our society carry more privilege than others, and that choirs hold a privileged role as culture markers/bearers, then we must also accept the responsibility of amplifying the voices of composers who belong to marginalized populations.

In this issue of the *Research Memorandum Series*, author Jace Kaholokula Saplan offers an overview of the choral works of composer Mari Esabel Valverde. A trans woman of color, Valverde belongs to one of the most marginalized populations in western society. Her voice, however, is not limited to her gender and choirs should consider the messages in her music as a whole. Valverde's choral works include themes on immigration, queer identities, and beauty in addition to her emphasis on gender identity. It is my hope that this article will help to amplify her voice and the imperative messages that she has set to music.

Matthew Bumbach, editor

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## The Choral Works of Mari Esabel Valverde: A Voice of Advocacy, Courage, and Resilience

BY DR. JACE KAHOLOKULA SAPLAN

Award-winning composer and singer Mari Esabel Valverde (she/her/hers) (b. 1987) has been commissioned by the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA), Texas Music Educators Association, Seattle Men's and Women's Choruses, and Boston Choral Ensemble among others and has appeared with Dallas Chamber Choir, Vox Humana, and Exigence Vocal Ensemble (Detroit). Ms. Valverde holds degrees from St. Olaf College, the European American Musical Alliance in Paris, France, and San Francisco Conservatory of Music. She is a member of ASCAP, ACDA, and the American Composers Forum. Her works are published by earthsongs and Walton Music and self-published. A trans woman of color, she uses her compositional output as a platform of advocacy and celebration for queer communities, people of color,

and communities not often represented within the choral arts. For more information, please visit the [composer's website](#).

### ***Our Phoenix* (2015)**

**Text:** Excerpts from "Our Dangerous Sweetness" by Amir Rabiya (they/them/theirs) (1978-)  
**For** SATB chorus, piano, and trumpet  
**Available through** <http://marivalverde.com/>

This piece features the text of a two-spirit poet. A term housed within Native American culture, *two-spirit* individuals predate the language of contemporary LGBTQ terminology. It is believed that two-spirit people have both a male and female spirit

within themselves and are blessed by their Creator to see life through the eyes of both genders. According to Valverde, knowing that 40% of trans Americans are documented to have attempted suicide and since 2015, over 20 trans Americans per year have been murdered due to their identity, this piece acknowledges the obstacles of the LGBTQ community and is an outcry for equality and awareness for the trans community.

Valverde states, “‘Our Phoenix’ is ours because we, the people, the queer population and our allies, all of us share this life-struggle. When one stripe of our rainbow is denied the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, when we are targeted and harassed, assaulted, or pushed beyond the edge of mortality, the impact comes back for everyone. We only have ourselves to hold accountable, and our response will set the tone for the generations who survive us.”

### ***When Thunder Comes* (2016)**

**Text:** Introductory sonnet from *When Thunder Comes* by J. Patrick Lewis (1942-)  
**For** SATB or SSAA chorus, piano, and optional taiko ensemble or alternate percussion  
**Available through** <http://marivalverde.com/> and [JW Pepper](#)

Composed for Minnesota’s One Voice Mixed Chorus’s concert “Queer Thunder”, the Seattle Women’s Chorus’s “Fired Up”, and the San Diego Women’s Chorus’s “Earth, Wind, and Fire,” “When Thunder Comes” is a work celebrating American Civil Rights heroes through a vibrant setting that can be done in collaboration with taiko ensemble. According to Valverde, the drums in this work symbolize a grassroots revolution—where a unified community of voices can drive out fear.

In this piece, Valverde honors an inclusive and diverse array of Civil Rights heroes. She celebrates “Sylvia Méndez, who challenged California’s justice system in a fight for racial desegregation of schools; Helen Zia, Chinese American lesbian feminist writer and activist for peace; Harvey Milk, the first openly gay elected official in California’s history and vocal gay rights advocate; and Freedom Summer’s ‘soldiers,’ who risked their lives in their movement to enfranchise black voters in Mississippi of the 1960s.”

### ***Crossing* (2017)**

**Text:** “Risk” by Amir Rabiya (1978-)  
**For** TTBB chorus and piano  
**Available through** <http://marivalverde.com/>

“Crossing” was written for the Seattle Men’s Chorus’s concert series, “Born This Way.” This piece speaks to

the risk, bravery, and courage it takes in coming out of the closet. As the text is situated around a rickety bridge, Valverde states that while some may look down from the bridge towards their demise; once one summons the courage to cross the bridge, to come out, there is “abounding love to be had and replicated.”

Valverde states, “During my clinic rehearsal in preparation for the premiere, I asked the singers to name things that made them “tremble”. Their responses included ‘receiving a phone call from my mom at 2 AM,’ ‘walking home at night and being followed,’ and ‘being approached in a bar by a group of men asking “Are you gay?”’ I reassured them, ‘If you do not allow yourself to be vulnerable, you will not do my piece justice.’”

### ***Border Lines* (2017)**

**Text:** “Maps” by Yesenia Montilla (1974-)  
**For** SATB chorus and guitar or cello  
**Available through** <http://marivalverde.com/>

“Border Lines” was composed for Adam State University’s “Exploring Equity through Music” project entitled, “An Immigrant’s Tale: Hopes, Dreams, and Fears in an Uncertain Time.” This work welcomed a collaboration with Afro-Latina poet Yesenia Montilla who is known for her work in creating awareness and advocacy for the Latinx community in America. “Border Lines” is a work composed in dedication to and with empathy for immigrants who were separated from their families due to xenophobia.

According to Valverde, the words of Montilla “call out the arbitrary nature of geopolitical borders and implore all of us to unify at our roots in our common humanity. The music is inspired in meter and melody by Central American folk song; and the guitar, a common denominator in a variety of folk traditions, portrays the undulations of ‘el río’ as the narrative unfolds, expressing a clear yearning for belonging.”

### **Other Selected Works:**

#### **From Walton Music**

#### ***Patterns on the Snow***

**Text:** May Sarton (1912-1995)  
**For** SSAA chorus and piano

#### ***Les Papillons***

**Text:** Théophile Gautier (1811-1872)  
**For** SSA chorus and piano

#### ***Sérénade italienne***

**Text:** Paul Bourget (1852-1935)  
**For** TBB chorus and piano

### ***Hébé***

Text: Louise Ackermann (1813-1890)  
For SSA chorus and piano or harp

### ***Le Colibri***

Text: Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894)  
For SSA chorus and piano

### **From earthsongs**

#### ***The Cloths of Heaven***

Text: William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)  
For SATB or SSA chorus and piano or string ensemble and harp

### **Final Thoughts**

Now more than ever, meaningful advocacy is primed within collaborative intersections. Valverde's willingness to model bravery as a trans woman of color creates a platform that provides a voice for marginalized communities and an opportunity to foster empathy and allyship through song. As our choral art continues to unpack silenced histories and current conflicts; as we celebrate inclusivity within our communities, I hope that you consider championing these and other works from Mari Esabel Valverde, whose voice provides us with an opportunity to welcome empathy, connections, and community in our rehearsals.

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## **About the Author**

Dr. Jace Kaholokula Saplan serves as the Director of Choral Activities and Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Dr. Saplan received his Bachelor of Arts in Music from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, his Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction from Concordia University-Portland, his Master of Music in Choral Conducting from the University of Oregon, and his Doctor of Musical Arts in Choral Conducting with cognates in Music Education and Ethnomusicology from the University of Miami Frost School of Music.

Known for his work in celebrating the intersection between Hawaiian music and choral performance, he is the artistic director of Nā Wai Chamber Choir, a professional vocal ensemble based in Hawai'i dedicated to the preservation and propagation of Hawaiian choral music. Under his direction, Nā Wai has commissioned and mentored emerging Native Hawaiian composers and conductors, toured throughout rural Hawaiian communities, and led workshops on the performance of Hawaiian choral music at schools and universities throughout the country.

Prior to his appointment to the University of Hawai'i and Hamilton College, Dr. Saplan served as the chorus master for the Frost Opera Program at the University of Miami where he prepared a number of contemporary works such as Golijov's *Ainadamar*,

*Kuster's Old Presque Isle* (done in collaboration with the John Duffy Composer's Institute and the Virginia Arts Festival), and a premiere work by Grammy-nominated composer Shawn Crouch. He also served as an instructor of choral music at Florida International University where he directed of the FIU Master Chorale and taught courses in undergraduate and graduate choral conducting.

His work in preparing choruses and as a festival clinician are vast, resulting in performances at Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Hall, The Oregon Bach Festival, Old South Church (Boston), Church of the Holy Trinity (Philadelphia), La Madeline (France), and the Harrogate Music Festival (UK).

Dr. Saplan's research focuses on the performance practice of Queen Lili'uokalani's choral compositions; multicultural perspectives in the choral rehearsal; intersections of choral pedagogy, gender, and sexuality in communities of color; and Native Hawaiian agency in music. His scholarship on these topics have also led him to lead clinics at the state, regional, and national level for the American Choral Directors Association, National Association for Music Educators, National Collegiate Choral Organization, and the LGBTQ Studies in Music Education Conference. He is a frequent clinician and adjudicator for state, regional, and national conferences and festivals.