Research in English literature typically emphasizes how authors act upon audiences; I am accustomed to tracking down obscure definitions or allusions to decode how their embedded meanings impact the text and its readers. To conduct research for this project, however, I spent more time tracing how we, viewers, reviewers, readers, and listeners, impact the creation of the text and, in effect, its author. My project, “‘Let’s exchange the experience’: Kate Bush’s Bodily Metamorphoses in Lyric and Voice”, grapples with the relationships between text, author, and audience, with how a sexist commodity culture can lead a woman artist to alter her art and her body to escape that culture’s demands. To do so, I drew from sources in many different disciplines, including economics, the philosophy of language, history, sociology, and, of course, literature.

My first major research challenge was choosing my primary sources, since multiple “canonical” versions of Kate Bush’s lyrics exist. A poem’s or a song’s visual arrangement — its line breaks, its stanza sizes — affects it analytically, so deciding whether to consult Bush’s book, How To Be Invisible, or the lyric booklets in her CDs was a choice I had to make almost immediately. Because Bush frames her book as a kind of poetic reimagining of her songs from the spoken to the written word, I mostly deferred to it for textual analysis. However, some songs, like “Babooshka,” were not in the book, leading me to consult the booklets instead. If I could go back, I would have liked to discuss Bush’s stylistic changes from booklets to book in light of my thesis.

Another key challenge for my research was the lack of scholarly secondary sources about Kate Bush, particularly in literary criticism. Because Bush is a popular, contemporary, living artist, much of the critical work on her thus far has been journalistic; fansites and fanzines abound with commentary on her work, but rarely consider its formal elements. Finally, there is much more scholarly work on Bush as a cultural (or pop-cultural) phenomenon rather than as an author, so to make my argument, I borrowed theoretical frameworks from women’s studies and the philosophy of language and applied them to Bush’s work. More generally, since literary criticism has been slow to accommodate popular music into its fold, my hope is that by continuing to pursue research on contemporary women musicians, I am able to push
the field towards including more lyricists, particularly in a cultural moment focused on embodied experience.

Wellesley’s wealth of fully-digitized music reviews and interviews was invaluable to my research process and helped me explore new sources which held particular weight in context with my project — and were especially useful when the campus went remote halfway through my project. My dual focus on Bush’s lyrics and embodied vocal performances of those lyrics led me to push past reading transcriptions of Bush’s interviews to also spend time listening to them in their audio formats. Bush’s tone, pauses, and laughter — joyful or uncomfortable — brought new texture to her words and to what I was able to glean from the interviews. For an English major whose research projects typically deal with pre-World War II texts, exploring audio interviews and navigating Internet fan culture were new experiences for me. Over time, Bush gave fewer and fewer interviews (she now rarely makes public appearances), and from placing these interviews and music reviews in conversation with Bush’s evolving lyrical strategies, my project’s central thesis emerged.

I altered my project from my original vision, a “pure” literary-critical analysis of Bush’s lyrics as standalone works, to include more detail about the circumstances under which Bush made her music and to focus on her voicing strategy for two reasons: first, because the trend I saw emerging from analyzing her lyrics alongside her public treatment seemed too important to ignore — women have always made their art beneath patriarchal eyes, and Bush found her own way of playing tricks on those eyes. And second because, as I dutifully scanned her lyrics and attempted to pick them apart, I found myself singing and doing the voices. Before we set out deciphering ink marks on paper, literature students are always told that what we do began as an oral tradition, inseparable from the bodies who make the language. To do Bush’s work justice, I needed to explore how she experienced the tension between the body and the ink, and to do it on terms that gave her music its due in both forms.