

IS THIS MY REAL VOICE? IS THIS JUST FANTASY?

a lexicon-broadcast to rethink the voice

by Ermis Christodoulou

Introduction

"Why am I reading about particles?

*Why would observations about alliances in the micro realm
convey a kind of legitimacy to our theories on sociality?*

The analogy is imprecise!"

(Harry Dodge. My Meteorite: Or, Without the Random There Can Be No New Thing, 2020)

Lately, I become more and more fascinated by all the contingencies this analogy might hold. How scale can work on and for things has turned out to be a question that I very often return. Scale, I feel, can be a very interesting tool to open up new and exciting pathways and to agitate the ways we think about our bodies, and we navigate the world. There is immense potential for expanding our knowledge if we allow ourselves to closely observe the various alliances in the micro (and/or nano) realm.

During my first year in this master's programme, I began to artistically examine the notion of transgender embodiment through different interpretative and intellectual lenses, and by magnifying several parameters anchored to it I tried to re-imagine the body. Through a set of performative experiments, I gradually set the focal point of my artistic research onto the voice and the range of possibilities that can emerge from the vocal organ, since "voice-body is not inert image - spectre, wraith, or indolently wreathing smoke. It is tense and braced with a kind of life" (Connor, 2008, p. 298). I'm captivated by the abundance of meaning that lies there and by the mere fact that we don't yet know what a voice can *be* and *do*. This onto-epistemological aspect of the voice feeds my curiosity both as a scientist and an artist. Voice for me is an attractive niche where art, science, technology, and philosophy are intermingled, and its full range can be stretched throughout the discursive entanglement of flesh-knowledge-politic. In her book *For more than one voice: Toward a philosophy of vocal expression*, Cavarero argues that:

The play between vocal emission and acoustic perception necessarily involves the internal organs. It implicates a correspondence with the fleshy cavity that alludes to the deep body, the most bodily part of the body. The impalpability of sonorous vibrations, which is as colorless as the air, comes out of a wet mouth and arises from the red of the flesh. (Cavarero, 2005, p.4)

whereas LaBelle in the *Lexicon of the mouth: Poetics and politics of voice and the oral imaginary*, states:

The voice is such an effective and sensual material precisely because it comes from the mouth; it rises from the chest, up into the throat to shudder the vocal cords, to appear (for surely, it appears!) in and then from out of the mouth, rippling behind the facial muscles, the nasal passage, and along the jaw. (LaBelle, 2014, p.4)

Both of them shed light on how voice is tightly connected to matter. Matter in turn is inextricably associated to science; the vibrations are subjected to the laws of physics, the diaphragm and the vocal folds are made of muscles with complex biochemical properties, the structure of the vocal tract is studied by anatomy. What are then the possibilities that these relationships engender? And what if we alter the scale that we look at them? Furthermore,

As my voice leaves me, it takes part of my body with it—the sound of its own production; and as it enters you it tickles your tympanum and disrupts the tiny hairs in your ear. It is also distinctly, not bodily, operating in the space between two bodies as sound waves; it must make the journey from my body to yours and exist at some point in this “no man’s land.”(Jarman-Ivens, 2011, p. 3)

The voice carries traces of a body and personality traits, and leaks information about them. Throughout its trajectory to reach another body, it is being (re-)interpreted and given multiple meanings. The “no man’s land”, i.e., the space between the vocalizing and the voice-perceiving bodies, is a territory that is regulated by complex sociopolitical canons. As Connor elegantly described it, “for you, it comes from me. For me, it goes out from me. Between this coming from and going towards lie all the problems and astonishments of the dissociated voice” (Connor, 2000, p. 3). I approach this riddle through the prism of gender and identity; I’m very intrigued by this process of separation of the voice from one’s self, its in-between journey, and how this disembodied sound can be then linked back to the subjectivity that produced it.

Against this rich background, I situate my research in the intersection of new-materialism, post-humanism, phenomenology, and queer studies, under the broad umbrella-concept of somatechnics. In the following lexicon, I attempt to develop five key terms that encapsulate its core ideas. By revisiting past works and by synthesizing and refining my theoretical toolbox, I aim to

generate a framework within which my (future) research practices reside. Now, tune in, sit back, and enjoy the broadcast.

Aphonia as in not-being-able-to-speak

"Your circuit's dead, there's something wrong"

(David Bowie, Space Oddity)

For a considerable amount of time, and for the biggest part of my adult life, I had been experiencing the following condition: my voice-generator circuit was seemed to be either dead or (in the best-case scenario) severely flawed. In other words, I was feeling incapable of producing vocal signals, and even when I did, they wouldn't match the voice I perceived as being my own. This very inconvenient, surprisingly self-imposed, voiceless state, which from now on I will call *aphonia*, was/is attributed to my transgender identity. Artistically, I first tried to trace this troubled relationship with my voice through a podcast that I created (Christodoulou, 2022a). There, I talk about the existence of three distinct voices: the physical one produced by my vocal cords and that was completely unrelatable to me, the imaginary/desired one in my head, and the one that reaches the listener's ear and is subjected to their perception.

The scholar writings of lecturer and researcher of speech pathology David Azul, explore these interactions between voice, communication, and sociocultural belonging. He writes, "voice is constructed as an instance that provides detailed and transparent insight into sub-aspects of the speaker's prediscursively positioned identity and body" (Azul, 2018, p. 110). Stahmer, likewise, underlines the capability of the voice to render several parameters of the human body audible (Stahmer, 2009). The fact that just through speaking,

the entirety of one's gender characteristics is exposed to the public domain and is subsequently (mis-)identified, was a peculiarly intense arrangement for me to undergo. Aphonia, thus, was for a while a way to resist all these unwanted inscriptions on what my voice was supposed to be, and to survive the complexities of social life.

The *phantomatter*: of fantasies & visions

*"In sleep he sang to me
In dreams he came
That voice which calls to me
And speaks my name"
(from The Phantom of the Opera)*

What I achieved through aphonia was to render my voice unintelligible, and thus beyond classification. Its materiality wouldn't 'matter' anymore because it was intentionally erased. But something that is not there doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. The idea of *phantoms* started emerging as an essential theoretical path to describe how bodies could exceed both conceptual and material strictures. Phenomenology, in close relation to post-structuralism, offered me a creative alternative to expand my perception of the body and voice. By reading the *Bodies of water: Posthuman feminist phenomenology* (Neimanis, 2017), I became particularly curious towards an understanding of embodiment based on "politics of location", by thinking, for example, 'where is my voice? Where and when does that voice cease to be?'. With the term *phantomatter*, I seek to describe the phenomenally absence of the voice no more as an impediment, but as a new mode of "being-in-the-world" (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). It emerges from the tight entwinement of body

and world and opens up a conversation about the voice's ontological sense from within the lived experience.

I had already experimented artistically, influenced by the idea of the Merleau-Pontian phantom limb, earlier in the year, with The Supersoma Lecture (Christodoulou, 2022c). The work was a blend of theory, biography, lecture, and performance, dealing with a perception of the embodied self, far beyond a robust integrity: an always under-construction bodily becoming. The supersoma that was presented during the lecture was a conceptual body-model that aimed to stretch the bounds of materiality and that was equipped, amongst others, with a phantom dick. This synthetic body was walking a tightrope between two worlds; it was a product of both social reality and imagination. In that sense, the *phantomatter* that the voice is made of, however abstract and fantastical, it still underlies a fundamental aspect of human consciousness that craves to agitate and re-envision the order of things.

The vocal apparatus is a matter of matter

*"Trust I seek and I find in you
Every day for us something new
Open mind for a different view
And nothing else matters"
(Metallica, Nothing Else Matters)*

And all of a sudden, matter began to matter. What was remarkable with the introduction of the above-outlined post-structuralist, phenomenological approach was the slow erosion of the boundary between *my* self, the essentialist subject ("I",) that contains *my* voice and from which *my* voice

emanates, towards the feminist post-human “trans-corporeal subject” as introduced by Stacy Alaimo (Alaimo, 2018), and the “leaky, permeable, and intercorporeal” (Neimanis, 2017) body and, by extension, voice, in terms of both matter and meaning. My first-year’s final performance *it’s a supercritical voice!* (Christodoulou, 2022b) was an initial experimentation towards a new materialist understanding of the voice or, in other words, towards a performative understanding of the material-discursive practice of voicing, what Karen Barad would phrase as “how matter comes to matter” (Barad, 2003). The work was a mixed-media lecture-performance that explored the gendering of the voice, where voice was imagined as a supercritical fluid,

[...] a substance that combines both gas- and liquid-like properties. In other words, it is a highly-compressed and heated fluid that simultaneously acts as a gas and a liquid, a materiality that is temporarily situated in such an environment that promotes transformation, multiplicity, and generation of new possibilities. (Christodoulou, 2022b)

By appropriating scientific language, I attempted to trace the relationship between matter and meaning, as elements that are not separate from each other, but rather intertwined. The voice, thus, became an experimental device, a meaning-making instrument, an apparatus. In this sense, the *vocal apparatus* is defined as a complex configuration that is fuel by “ethico-onto-epistemological” (Barad, 2007) inquiries, and generates “situated knowledge” (Haraway, 1988) embedded in, and thus affected by, the particular space-time.

According to Barad, “apparatuses are the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering; they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (Barad, 2007, p. 148), whereas when Agamben tries to define what an apparatus is, he goes back to a 1977 interview in which Michel Foucault states, “the apparatus is precisely this: a set of strategies of the relations of forces supporting, and supported by, certain types of knowledge”

(Agamben, 2009, p. 2). In this respect, the *vocal apparatus* that I examine takes shape “in co-constitutive relations with other material beings, discourses and social practices” (Fast and Tiainen, 2018). I’m particularly engaged with the question of how the human, material, *vocal apparatus* (i.e., the complex anatomical system by which air is transformed into sound) can be informed by new materialist views and actively respond to the existing modes of knowing and being. That is to say, how, in the ethico-political context that it is situated and by encountering its wider environment, it could potentially generate onto-epistemological knowledge.

The *nanovoice*: engineering meaning in nanoscale

*“The things that we've learnt are no longer enough
No language, just sound, that's all we need know”
(Joy Division, Transmission)*

I have already referred to the importance of scale when examining a specific material property. I am very convinced that by zooming-in to the realm of interest, we will always find ourselves in front of new and unexpected modalities, functions, and characteristics, eventually admitting that what we already know is no longer enough. Therefore, I eagerly welcomed what the notion of microperformativity seems to afford to the artistic field and more specifically to performance practices (Hauser and Strecker, 2020), and I’m willing to go even further and to envision the voice through the lenses of nanotechnology. Welcome to the *nanovoice*!

I’ve been trained as a chemist, and for the last seven years I’ve been specialized in nanotechnology, developing novel drug delivery systems in nanoscale. I’ve spent many lab hours trying to fabricate nanoparticles with the

size of few hundred nanometers that can effectively deliver drugs to a targeted body area. What I've learned after all is that these, undetectable by the human eye, particles exhibit significantly different chemical and physical properties to their larger material counterparts, and that the large surface to volume ratio is a significant factor that controls their properties. Now, how can all these be useful in the context of artistic research? I do not know with any certainty yet. However, I'm very confident that by trying to encapsulate the material conditions of the voice into tiny particles, in other words, if we aim for a large sound to diameter ratio, a brand-new world will appear. *Nanovoice* is simultaneously a metaphor and a vision for the future. It is inspired by the call to think "living politics from, with and through the body" and "the relation of nano- and micropolitics to macropolitics" (Plotegher, Zechner and Hansen, 2014, p. 11, 13), when all major politics and grand narratives that act on our bodies, organize, and conform them seem to fail. Postmodern literary critic N. Katherine Hayles underlines how nanotechnology has become a crucial source for the projection of imaginary spaces:

Humans have always had a difficult time trying to understand what appears not to follow the "normal" course of nature (beasts and weird races), as well as what is not visible. Nanoscience encompasses both, since in the nano world particles are not visible to the human eye and behave differently than large-scaled matter. (Hayles, 2004, p. 42)

The invisible represents a marginal space outside the borders of the physical, an immaterial non-place. *Nanovoice*, then, arises from this state of seeming immateriality as an emergent potentiality. It invites for an entirely new way of hearing, beyond the known to the more-than-human, and renders "speculation on the future an almost inherent aspect of thinking" (Milburn, 2008, p. 6) by urging us, for example, to imagine all the microtensions and microtonalities, the assemblages of forces and particles, and the imperceptible vibrations and frequencies that occur over there.

Trans-mission: a somatechnological approach to the gendered voice

*"And everything I had to know
I heard it on my radio"
(Queen, Radio Ga Ga)*

What is the essence of what this voice would like to communicate and how's the radio relevant to all that? Until now, this lexicon seems to head towards what Mazzei would call "voice without a subject" (Mazzei, 2016). My intention is to spend the last part of it to re-connect everything that was analyzed before with gender, and more specifically the gendered body and subjectivity, and place it under the umbrella-theory of somatechnics. Voice, so to say, will be viewed as the radio link between not only matter and meaning, but also gender and sociality. Just like Alaimo's "trans-corporeal subject is generated through and entangled with biological, technological, economic, social, political and other systems, processes, and events, at vastly different scales" (Alaimo, 2018, p. 436), I would like to suggest that the *trans-mission* of the voice through a radio setup is directly correlated with "somatic-political technologies" (Preciado, 2008), which are in turn inextricably linked to systems of power/knowledge that form and transform it. The radio *trans-mission*, to put it differently, becomes here the performative paradigm that exposes the central issue of the gender-ness of the voice.

Years ago, feminist theorist and biologist, Donna Haraway very eloquently condensed the entangled relationship of the human body and technoscience into the phrase "we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (Haraway, 1991, p. 150). This technologization of the embodied subjectivity is also highlighted by the concept of "somatechnics" (Sullivan, 2014), i.e., *soma* and *techné*. In that sense, the term *trans-mission*

refers to an artistic and research experiment that investigates how voice (as *soma*) and the technology of gender are interdependent. There is something that I find particularly interesting, and inherently queer, in the disembodied voice coming from a radio (and the recorded voice in general). What I'm eager to further suggest is how *trans-mission* can suspend the process of identification and keep the possibility for multiple gender identities to co-exist in the third space, the one between the speaker's mouth and the listener's ear, open. In this way, in all voice's comings and goings, I hope that I will move a bit closer towards what is for me crucial, my very personal (trans-)mission: to reclaim this voice as mine.

Conclusion

A lot is already known about the voice. However, as Ursula Le Guin would wonder, "can we go on from what we know now, or does what we know now keep us from learning what we need to know?" (Popova, 2016). In the present lexicon, I attempted to summarize and interconnect a few notions that provide vast input in voice-related research. The lexicon itself was conceived as a radio broadcast, where the voice, dissociated from the body, plays the central role. The voice, sometimes inaudible or unintelligible, other times by being a phantom or encapsulated into tiny particles, slips out of the vocal apparatus, follows a wave-mediated trans-mission, and reaches the ear. Everything is now already known and heard on the radio - how we then move on to what we need to know? It is my hope that the voice(s) that will emerge from my artistic practice will unsettle the existing knowledge and lead to thrilling places.

That's all for now, but there's more to come. Thank you for tuning into -
E.C.

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