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**Voice**

**Voz**

**Veü**

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## Voice<sup>1</sup>

Ranging from film studies and philosophy to gender studies, music and artistic research, voice has been an important topic of concern across several areas of study in the past decades. Recently the interest in voice and what it can tell us about a variety of issues extending from subjectivity and social power to embodiment and technology, has become more systematic with the inauguration of the cross-disciplinary domain of voice studies (see e.g. Macpherson & Thomaidis 2015; Neumark, Gibson & van Leeuwen 2010, and *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*). New materialist concepts and approaches can significantly advance voice-related research since there are many resonances between key notions of new materialisms and the characteristics of and insights on voice, as developed in voice-themed research.

One central issue in voice studies has been voice's intermeshed, ontologically inseparable relationship with the body – both the (technologically extended) body that vocalizes and the bodies-minds that perceive sound. For instance, previous studies have inquired voice as intimately corporeal performance of gendered, sexual, racialized and other socially conditioned identities (e.g. Cusick 1999; Potter 1998; Eidsheim 2014) and in terms of the experiences of empathy, connection or erotic pleasure that the signs of the vocalizer's body in the voice can inspire in the perceiver (Barthes 1989; Cavarero 2005; Tarvainen 2012). New materialist lines of thinking expand these insights into the voice-body relationship. When considered through a new materialist lens, the interconnected workings of body and voice are not only about the mediation of culturally recognizable markers of identity or about how the flesh and bones of particular bodies shape the sounds and

multisensory experiences of a voice. While these are important aspects, new materialist understandings of matter as eminently active and vital, as both self-organizing and actively responsive, recast vocalizing and voice-perceiving bodies as being increasingly vibrant too. This means that they are understood as consisting of incessant physiological processes and corporeal practices in which biology and culture dynamically intermingle.

Rather than materially stable, bodies, and the voices they emit, must be conceived then as fundamentally processual and open-ended. They figure as activities and capacities that are susceptible to situation-bound, longer-term, and minute changes, which depend on a varying blend of physiological, socio-cultural and technical factors. Up until now, the voice-body connection has been examined from this kind of new materialisms-inspired perspective, for example in relation to western 'classical' singing (e.g. Tiainen 2008), laughter (Thompson & Tiainen 2017), and the transformations of body and voice experienced by trans male singers during the sex/gender reaffirmation process (Leppänen & Tiainen 2018).

Aside processuality, another attendant idea, highlighted by new materialisms-informed understandings, is that the materiality of voices and of their source bodies is never self-contained in the sense of being comprised of enclosed patterns of organization. Voices and vocalizing bodies take shape in co-constitutive relations with other material beings, such as fellow human bodies who vocalize or otherwise act and respond. Voices also unfold in co-constitutive relations with discourses and social practices that direct, valorize, and mold ways of producing voice. Indeed, voices provide an apt example of what Karen Barad has famously termed intra-action, referring to the ways in which agencies and phenomena do not precede, but rather emerge through, their

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mutual relations (e.g. Barad, 2007, p. 33). Voices themselves result from intra-actions among corporeality, sounds, technologies, particular cultural techniques, practices of vocalizing, and so forth. However, they also engender intra-actions between several feeling, acting and thinking bodies. This has been explored in recent sound and performance art, which has mobilized vocalizing as “a mode of embodied encountering” between the participants of the given occasion through inviting them to sing. The aim has been to revive and expand the participants’ sensory sensibilities and capacities to connect with other people and the wider environment (Fast 2017; 2010). This kind of art is attuned to the materiality and affective powers of voice, that is, to its ability to effect changes in the relations and states of bodies and minds. Consequently, voice comes to be understood in terms of its vibrating nature, which has a sheer physiological dimension, and as a material-energetic process that is relational and generates affective knowledge about one’s embodied existence in connection with the surrounding world. Apprehended from this angle, the materiality and affectivity of voice also have a significant ethical dimension (Fast 2017; Eidsheim 2015).

From the perspective of intra-action, it is also interesting to consider how voices, with their bodily and technological sources, intra-act with the symbolic realm in the production of language and instances of verbal communication. Voices oscillate between verbal and non-verbal sounds, expressions, and experiential spheres (Fast 2017). This is another topic of interest for new materialist considerations.

Yet another noteworthy aspect of voices in the context of new materialist thinking is the manifest way in which they confound many of the conceptual distinctions or binaries on which especially Western traditions of thought have rested, these include self/other,

individual/environment, and animate/inanimate. This characteristic of voices (and sound in general) has been noted by numerous scholars. Indeed, the blurring of inside and outside, body-mind, and other types of dichotomies is endemic to embodied vocal and listening experiences (Tarvainen 2016, p. 20; Fast 2017). What a new materialist approach can add to these considerations of voice’s transversality is an increased attention to how its relations and effects extend also to other-than-human processes and things. These might include sound processing and transmission technologies, the acoustic affordances of buildings, or wider-than-human environments and life forms. In this view, vocalizing is always entangled not only with human social contexts and environments but also with the broader material and vibrant world.

Thus, new materialist ideas and concepts – such as trans-corporeality by Stacy Alaimo (2008) or thing-power and agency of assemblages by Jane Bennett (2010) – encourage one to locate voice “within a broader nexus of relations between organic and synthetic bodies, actors, and forces” (Thompson & Tiainen 2017, p. 382). A wider-than-human perspective expands general understanding of voices and unsettles anthropocentric thinking within voice studies (Neumark 2017; Tiainen 2013). This decentering is evidenced in several contemporary art projects, which purposely situate the voice on a continuum between human and other-than-human materialities and beings. For example, American opera singer, voice artist and researcher Juliana Snapper’s projects that are focused on underwater singing explore the always broader than human conditions of human vocal experience (Eidsheim 2015, p. 27-57). Experimental sound, media and performance art project, *The Algae Opera* (2012), probes, in turn, the participation of operatic singing voice in finding forms of survival beneficial to

multiple species in the age of ecocrises  
(Tiainen 2017).

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