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Comprehensive Exam, Topic I

Voice, Affect, and the Sensate

Introduction

This essay examines the intellectual crossings of what might broadly be termed theoretical voice studies and affect theory. From the outset, this inter/disciplinary constellation seemingly faces a definitional problem: what, exactly, is voice, and what (exactly) is affect? Throughout their respective conceptual histories, both terms have remained notoriously difficult for scholars to singularly define, as they tend to gesture less towards stable objects with consistent ontologies and more towards the very "betweenness" of the relations they circumscribe. This instability (a difficulty for some, a horizon of possibility for others) has allowed for, among other things, a spectacular diversity of theoretical approaches to the study of each. Voice studies, for example, tends to encompass work across such fields as speech pathology, literary studies, linguistics, musicology, science and technology studies, philosophy, vocal performance and pedagogy, sound studies, law, sociology, critical theory, human evolution and physiology, otolaryngology (ear/nose/throat medicine), and more, where "voice" takes on particularized and various dimensions (material, medical, affective, aural, oral, ethical, political, or otherwise) in accordance with disciplinary/methodological priorities. Affect theory, too, points to such a wide range of approaches to the nebulous collective phenomena denoted by "affect" that to approach this transdisciplinary array of work as anything like a singular "theory" is already a misstep; in many accounts, affect denotes nothing less than process, ongoingness, vitality, and/or movement itself, and to preordain or delimit its study to any one methodological domain risks missing the point entirely. This is not to say that attempts at defining either voice and/or affect are misguided or few and far between (in fact, much discursive energy has been expended doing just this, often to generative ends), but rather that these nodes of relation already outpace definitional ossification by nature of their material-conceptual modularity: "voice is not singular, it is collective," writes Nina Eidsheim (2019); "perhaps there is not a monoaffective imaginary," writes Lauren Berlant (2010).

What can voice studies learn from theories of affect, and what can theories of affect learn from voice studies? Amidst the myriad intellectual territories into which these disciplinary inclinations extend, this essay looks to triangulate instances of convergence between theorizations of vocality and questions of affect: "affective" theories of voice and "vocal" theories of affect, as it were. After briefly charting the genealogies of both theoretical voice studies and affect theory (particularly as these pertain to what is often referred to as the "affective turn" in the humanities and social sciences around the late twentieth-century), I offer an overview of recent and foundational work at these crossings that highlights the variable, multisensorial roles voice often performs and is made to perform. This overview takes the form of an (equally multisensorial) inventory, consisting of four domains within which I see "affective" scholarship on voice to predominantly operate: (1) *Aurality*, or conceptions of voice that prioritize its sonic dimensions/capacities in their angles of approach (as much work in sound and music studies tends

to lean into); (2) *Air*, theorizations of voice in its more "breathy" registers, which often think voice in relation to broader questions of atmosphere and life-sustaining (or life-denying) processes; (3) *Psyche*, work on vocality and its functions at the level of cognitive interiority, which often includes both psychoanalytic theories of voice as well as accounts of "unheard" voices (or voices "inside one's head"); and (4) *Politics*, scholarship that sees the metaphor of voice as useful for parsing questions of agency, political affect, and collective/community representation. This tactic of inventorying (without necessarily foreclosing) is one I employ in the service of, as Michel Foucault writes in the introduction to *The Order of Things*, "breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things…the thing that we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that […] is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (Foucault 1970, xv).

In this spirit, these domains I envision are porous, in the sense that much of the work this essay covers could (and does, in fact) inhabit multiple registers; the breath is, of course, as political as it is atmospheric (e.g. Crawley 2016; Sharpe 2016; Daughtry 2021; Tremblay 2022, etc.), the "cry" of the voice as sonic as it is psychoanalytic (e.g. Derrida 1976; Barthes 1978; Moten 2003; Dolar 2006, etc.). And, as all inventories do, these domains also necessarily exclude: due to limitations on the scope of this endeavor, work such as accounts of "writerly" voice (related to literary subjectivity), or quantitative scholarship in voice pathology, linguistics, and psychology, to name a few examples, are left out. Additionally, though interpretations of "affect" as related specifically to *the emotions* comprises a significant body of work in both the history of affect theory (particularly in more empirical fields like cognitive psychology) and in the long history of music, sound, and voice studies (like Baroque philosophies of *Affektlehren* or theories about emotional "meaning" in music, for example), for the purposes of this essay I am more concerned with work that sees affect as "not *what* something is, but how it is—or, more precisely, *how* it affects, and how it is affected by, other things" (Shaviro 2007, 8). Unabashedly muddy and often exceedingly difficult to pin down, affect in this sense is thus "found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves…" (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 1).

Vocalic Impulses: Affect Theories, Voice Studies

The intellectual wanderings that coalesce into something like a disciplinary history of affect are multiple, but affect theory as it began to take hold in the humanities throughout the 1990s and early 2000s is generally understood to have initially grounded itself in Western continental/ phenomenological thought. In part a response to the structuralist ontologies and "linguistic turns" that undergirded many twentieth-century philosophical and psychological accounts of feeling(s), theories and theorists of affect approaching the turn of the century called for the return of critical theory and cultural criticism to matters of (as well as the mattering of) the body and its embodiment, as well as aliveness, vitality, and materiality more generally (Clough 2007, 2010; Grosz 2004; Braidotti 2006, 2013; Coole and Frost 2010; Fisher 2016). Often cited as helping inaugurate such a turn to affect—or, as Gregory Seigworth and Carolyn Pedwell suggest, "not a

turn but rather a cluster of attunings!" (Seigworth and Pedwell 2023: 2)—are two essays, both published in 1995: Eve Sedgewick and Adam Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" and Brian Massumi's "The Autonomy of Affect," which mobilized, in the former's case, Silvan Tomkins's psychobiological work on differential affects (1962, see esp. Leys 2017), and, in the latter's case, Gilles Deleuze's (alongside Baruch Spinoza and Henri Bergson's) ethnological theorizations of immanence and emergence (1988). Alongside engagements with twentieth-century phenomenological thinkers (such as Eugen Fink, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sarte, Maurice-Merleau Ponty, and Simone de Beauvoir), early work in humanistic (especially poststructuralist, new materialist, and psychoanalytic) strains of affect theory would look to preoccupy itself with various recapitulations of Spinoza's oft-invoked provocation: "no one has yet determined what a body can do" ([1677] 1994). More recent scholarship on affect, however, just as often critiques, confuses, and complicates this theoretical genealogy and its intellectual delineations, and encompasses work across a wide array of disciplines that offer methodological orientations as "diverse and singularly delineated as their own highly particular encounters with bodies, affects, worlds" (Siegworth and Gregg 2013, 4). Even as work on affect has occasionally (if often unintentionally) treated its mode/subject/relation of study as a fixed object—a tendency that would, in part, lead Massumi to claim, in the preface to the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Parables for the Virtual*, "I have never identified what I do as affect studies or identified myself as an affect theorist" (Massumi 2021, xiii)—affect theory its contemporary iterations can thus be understood as "less a theory proper and more of an ongoing interdisciplinary conversation" (Stein 2019, 115).

The emergence of voice studies as a formally recognized/legible mode of inquiry (at least in Western academic contexts) can be traced to similar theoretical moment, where broader "turns" to affect and embodiment in the humanities and social sciences writ large invited newfound attention to voice as a potentially generative organizing category of analysis, particularly in the critical (i.e. "New") (ethno)musicologies and sound studies of the 1990s. Alongside such disciplines, fields like vocal pedagogy and linguistics had dealt with the voice in provincial terms—in the sense that disciplinarily-specific definitions of voice motivated its capture and deployment as an object of study—but a renewed interest in the theorization of materiality and its affective performativities gave rise to a host of reconceptualizations of voice that sought to replenish its critical potential, as something more than simply sound emitted from human vocal chords (Eidsheim and Meizel 2019, xvi-xviii). Supplanting singular understandings of the voice was the more capacious category of *vocality*, which gestured toward (and continues to inform) an array of methodological approaches to the relationship between the voice as a potentially expressive/affecting/aesthetic force and its capacities to shape (and thus impinge upon) the materialities of bodies, "vocal" or otherwise (Dunn and Jones 1997; Kreiman and Sidtis 2011; Meizel 2011; Thomaidis and Macpherson 2015; Magnat 2020). In addition to works that increasingly prioritized the radical pluralities of voice and its attendant relational possibilities (many of which are touched on, and rubbed up against, below), scholarship on voice into the 2000s and beyond also saw the theoretical synthesis of millennia-long traditions of philosophizing on vocality, from Aristotelian vocal taxonomies to Barthean "grain" and geno-/pheno-songs (e.g. Cavarero 2005; Dolar 2006; Connor 2000; Kane 2015; Butler 2019, etc.).

Aurality

It can be argued that the primary conceptual location where sound (as a sensory mode or phenomenological regime) and affect (as a vital force that operates both through and in excess of materiality) meet is in theorizations of the voice. Indeed, it is not inaccurate—though it is perhaps slightly reductive—to say that sound studies (one of the closest disciplinary bedfellows of voice studies) was, at least in part, borne out of a concern to sufficiently account for the multiple affective capacities of sound and all of its relational complexities (Feld 2015; Sterne 2013; Meizel and Daughtry 2019). Voice, then, for some scholars, becomes the precise instantiation of affect in its sonorous registers; in these contexts, voice often stands in definitionally for sounds that possess an affective charge (or sound imbued with vitality, and thus a kind of subjectivity) (Weidman 2015). There is also a considerable body of literature that would refuse such easy distinctions, problematizing a priori notions of separation between the sonic and the vocal altogether (Ihde [1976] 2007; Steintrager and Chow 2019). Ontologies of voice often accompany (and remain central to) distinctions between "listening" and "hearing"; between "sound" and "noise" (Carter 2004; Nancy 2007; Attali [1977] 1985; Thompson 2017). In the long history of music studies and its allied fields, "music" itself often inhabits complementary ontological locations as well—sound charged with the capacity to "move," or sound that is infused with affective charge on account of its ability to "materially impact upon the nerves" (Lochhead, Mendieta, and Smith 2021). Music is thus often understood as something like a compound of sonic affects (Thompson and Biddle 2013, 9), and a great deal of affect theory's preferred metaphors find themselves trading in languages of music and sound: "rhythms," "resonances," "vibrations"; "consonances" and "dissonances" ("Harmonies are affects," write Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, 164).

It comes as little surprise then that a considerable volume of work on the sonorous-affective character(s) of the voice has sprung from the musico-sonic disciplines, and has included work on, to take but a few examples, **the history of vocal performance practices** (Cruz 1999; Giles 1994; Fox 2004; Bergeron 2010; Dillon 2012; Potter [1998] 2006; Dunn-Powell 2005; O'Connell 2002; Sanford 1995); **gendered and sexed voices** (Cusick 1999; Jarman-Ivens 2011; Goldin-Perschbacher 2007, 2015; Golden and Kong 2021; Hayes 2007; Labajo 2003; Bernstein et al. 2004; Freitas 2003; Bloom 2007; Pennington 2018; Eckhardt 2018; Koestenbaum 1993; Schlichter 2011); **instrumental voices and their affective presence** (Davies 2014; Hankins and Silverman 1995; Fales 2019); **opera and the vocal sublime** (Abbate 1991; Feldman 2014; Poizat 1992; Novak 2015; Blackmer and Smith 1995; Grover-Friedlander 2005; Rothman and Vincent 2000); **anthropological accounts and ethnographies of voice** (Feld et al. 2004; Feld [1982] 2012; Harkness 2014; Hirschkind 2009; Jacobsen 2017; Duchan 2012; Lomax 1976; Fales 1995; Ochoa Gautier 2014; Seeger 1987; Rahaim 2012; Weidman 2006; Pegg 1992; Beahrs 2019); **the many vocalizations present in histories of sound recording and (re)production** (Casadei 2024; Sterne 2003; Connor 2000, 2014; LaBelle 2014); **modes of listening and vocal perception** (Ihde [1976] 2007; Szendy 2008; Hirschkind 2009; Chion 1999, [1994] 2012; Helmreich 2015; Kapchan 2017; Oliveros 2005; Nancy 2007; Frühholz and Belin 2019; Sundberg 1987, 1999; Pisanski and Bryant 2019); **processes of vocal racialization** (Burdick 2009; Valliant 2002; Mann 2008; Olwage 2004; Stoever 2016; Eidsheim 2019; Reid-Brinkley 2019); **popular music and vocal timbre** (Fales 2005; Provenzano 2018; Brooks 2010, 2013; Lordi 2013; Olwage 2004; McCracken 1999; Rischar

2004; Tongson 2011; McKay 2013; Krell 2013, 2015); **voice and disability** (Stras 2006; Tonelli 2016; Oster 2006; Schwartz 2021; Straus 2011; Bakan 2018), and so on. Wherever music is invoked, questions around the affective dimensions of the voice are often not far behind.

Air

If the dimensionalities of voice as something that exists primarily *as heard* have been central to its enduring presence as an analytical force within music studies and its disciplinary kin, a growing body of scholarship has turned its attention to the ways in which vocality is tied up in questions of *exhalation* and the broader forms of relationality between bodies and atmospheres. Faced with the inescapable bind of sound's provinciality (in the sense that sound is always localized in some fashion) and contingency (in the sense that sound is only perceived as such by bodies equipped with certain sensory configurations), scholars hailing from music studies have been among those critiquing voice's sonic overdeterminations, displacing voice to registers of air—from re-readings of music history's "elemental poetics" and implication in colonial discourses of the environment (Davies 2023) to experimental, translocal stagings of the breath amidst polluted atmospheres (Niess 2022). Central to these interventions have been scholars like Martin Daughtry (2020, 2021, 2024), who has offered a consideration of voice that approaches vocality as an atmospheric phenomenon, in part to inaugurate a broader conception of vocal activity that refuses to bracket off the human from its environmental entailments. The voice in its atmospheric register, for Daughtry, "can be understood as a convergence of five processes: (1) *gaseous exchange* between conjoined environments; (2) some amount of turbulence or *atmospheric disturbance* that accompanies this exchange; (3) some amount of cross-pollution or sharing of airborne elements between these environments; (4) a potential for *durational effects* as a result of this sharing; and (5) a concomitant blurring or even *dissolution of boundaries* that separate the environments" (Daughtry 2021, section 4). On this scheme, vocality becomes a model for relationality by virtue of air's relative ubiquity, even if access to breathable air is always uneven and never universally enjoyed.

Such sensory reorientations of the voice, like Daughtry's, can be seen to emerge out of contemporary anxieties around atmospheric pollution and global pandemics, where the very act of breathing entails a vulnerability to toxic particulates and airborne pathogens. At the same time as respiration comes to be understood as a life-sustaining process, voice, here indexed by breath, is thus caught up a paradox of vitality by way of what psychoanalyst Michael Eigen refers to as a process of "negative refueling": the affective inseparability (a mix "beyond discernment") between that which nourishes and that which poisons (Eigen 1999, 2001). Jean-Thomas Tremblay foregrounds these affective tensions in his recent monograph *Breathing Aesthetics*, where he proceeds to elucidate responses to post-1970 crises of breathing from the conceit that "breathing makes life out of an orientation to death" (Tremblay 2022, 1). Despite the seeming "nowness" of concerns over climate and its atmospheric implications, Tremblay is also careful to note that death has perennially stalked the task of vocal exchange and respiration—to transduce Steven Connor (2004), "there is no voice without strain"—suggesting that "any fantasy of a past wherein breathing was strictly invigorating would be just that: a fantasy" (Tremblay 2022, 9). Scholars in Black and Native studies have been particularly attentive to the contested (and often unequally distributed)

natures of air and the breath. Christina Sharpe, for example, locates asphyxiation as an ordering condition of Blackness amidst histories of racial violence against people of color, from the drowning of enslaved people thrown overboard in the Middle Passage to the murders of Eric Garner, Elijah McClain, and George Floyd by white police officers (Sharpe 2016, 109; Taibbi 2017, 104). Their collective last words, "I can't breathe," have since become rallying cries for Black liberation, which Ashon Crawley in *Blackpentacostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* reads as a refusal to acquiesce to the conditions and institutions that perpetuate the negation of Black life (Crawley 2016). Lundy Braun, too, reminds us that lung capacity, across colonial contexts in India and the United States, operated as one of the means to justify the enslavement of Black and brown people (Braun 2014, 13, 26); Lindsey Dillon and Julie Sze contend that anti-Blackness circulates as "particulate matter" (Dillon and Sze 2016); and Kirsten Simmons has written of the difficulties of breathing amidst the "settler atmospheres" of U.S. militarism, industrialism, and capitalism (Simmons 2017), which require forms of resistance akin to what Franz Fanon in his account of the Algerian War has called "combat breathing" (Fanon, [1959] 1965, 65). Fanon's words from *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952] 1967), if in an abridged form, also found renewed circulation and purchase amidst social media networks during the Black Lives Matter protests: "We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe" (see Dillon and Sze 2016).

Psyche

Undergirding many "canonical" theoretical texts in voice studies are understandings of vocality that engage with its affective forces at the level of the sub/unconscious, particularly (though of course not exclusively) from the vantage of psychoanalysis. Mladen Dolar's *A Voice and Nothing More* (2006) has proven to be one of the more influential interventions in this regard, offering a portrait of vocal affect that grounds itself in the Lacanian assertion that the voice is the embodiment of the psychoanalytic object (Lacan's *objet petit a*) par excellence, where the voice—always in excess of bodies (the "physics" of the voice), languages (the "linguistics" of the voice"), and sounds—functions as a voice-object, and thus object-cause of desire (Dolar 2006; Feldman and Zeitlin 2019). Dolar's work, which dialogues with (and attempts to redress) prior philosophies of voice—most prominently, Jacques Derrida's theorizations of phonocentrism and the "silent" inner voice of the subject, which itself was a response to pervasive ontologies of vocal "presence" in the history of Western philosophical thought (1967)—has since been picked up, played with, and rethought by a vast array of voice scholars (e.g. Jarman-Ivens 2011; MacKendrick 2016; Gunn 2005; Kawashima 2015; Myres 2016; Kendrick 2017). Additionally, the psychoacoustic phenomenon of the "cry" (what Aristotle would call *phonè*), has also featured heavily in theorizations of voice's (seemingly) "pre-cognitive" impulses, ranging from work on the (often gendered) sublimity of the voice in opera studies (Poizat 1992) to the ethical-affective imperatives that attend to human interpellations of nonhuman vocalizations (Wong 2021). Synthesizing Marxist political economy, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Black feminist thought, Fred Moten reads the cry of the Black voice—from Frederick Douglass's recounting of his Aunt Hester's vicious beating, to the performative vocalizations of James Brown and Abby Lincoln—as residing "in the break," where, in the "erotics of the cut, submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation," Black radical traditions of aesthetic/cultural production and performance thus

interrupt "the foundations of the science of value" and confound processes of object-commodification (Moten 2003, 26, 32).

There has also been, in recent years, increased interest in vocal phenomena that are heard *inside one's head*. Psychoanalysis has a long history of theorizing such voices via conceptualizations of the superego, for example (e.g. Dolar's "ethical voice," or the "voice of conscience"), and affect theorists have interrogated constructions of a personal "inner voice." Lauren Berlant has written that, "You forget when you learned to *use your inside voice*—it just seems like the default mode, even to write in it. But it is never the end of the story […] This inside voice signals the labor-intensive, cumulative arrival of an intimately embodied landscape of exterior encounters" (2011, 52). The ways in which such "intimately embodied landscape[s] of exterior encounters" inform the vocality of the psyche is a problematic taken up by Martin Daughtry, for example, in his conceptualization of the auditory imagination and its "involuntary musical imagery" (like the catchy "earworm") as an ethnographic field site, and thus a "palimpsestic ecosystem of interconnection and difference" (Daughtry 2022). With a similar ethos, work on subvocal speech and auditory hallucinations (Genuth and Jorgensen 2006) as well as projects that have looked to rethink normative pathologizations of voice-hearing (Cho 2008; Blackman 2012) have attempted to take seriously the experiencing of hearing voices that neither seem to emanate from a readily identifiable material source nor consist in the more commonly felt phenomenologies of internal dialogue or inner speech.

Conclusion: Politics

Where to begin—and where to end—with the political (tour de) force that is the voice? From Aristotle's assertions that humans are vocal, and thus political, animals to (neo)liberal humanist appeals to democratic individuality, metaphorical deployments of and claims to voice as a signifier of agential self-representation are so ubiquitous as to be banal. Most popular understandings and nationalistic deployments of the voice qua the collective will of a people can be traced to the work of Johann Gottfried Herder (1807), and continues to be put to use in contemporary political discourses as an equally essentializing and empowering force (Meizel and Daughtry 2019, 193). To "find one's voice" suggests a self-reflexive process of examining (and thus coming to terms with) one's interiority, and the ventriloquizing act of "giving voice" to those whose "voices" have been obscured or marginalized conjures up questions of power and discursive legibility (who gets to speak, and under what circumstances?). To "have a voice," under these dominant metaphors, is to possess both the means and capacity to participate in political life, and thus be heard as coherent, as "making sense." Such metaphors, of course, presume speech (*logos*) to be the ordering principle of democratic involvement, and a requirement for subjectivity more broadly. Eva Meijer reminds us that being able to speak has, throughout the long history of Western humanistic-philosophical thought, been seen as necessary for rational deliberation (Habermas 1981), for participation in a (hypothetical) social contract (Rawls 1971), for democratic action (Rancière 2007), for collective intentional action (Pepper 2016), and for other forms of political participation (Meijer 2019: 3; Moreno 2013). As many scholars (of "voice" and otherwise) have noted, this is dangerous for a number of reasons, not least that hegemonic definitions of voice (as

that which is legible, or "makes sense") are always contingent, and often serve to strategically exclude any voices deemed "undesirable," or those not even recognized as voices in the first place.

I find then, in my own work, solace in the proliferation of vocal theorists and theories of vocality that refuse an easy retreat to the political commitments of humanism (and thus logos) as they (ever-carefully) listen to their respective objects/relations/affects. For some in animal studies and the environmental humanities, this materializes through radical expansions (and explosions) of the category of voice, where a recalibration of the human sensorium to "the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors" (Ghosh 2016: 30) allows for the possibility of staying response-able (Haraway 2008, 2016; Barad 2007; Stengers 2014; Tsing 2015) to the "sum total of cacophonous, heterogenous, incommensurate, and unsythesizeable sounds of the postnatural world" (Pettman 2017: 8). For others in sound studies, this has involved shrugging off the anthropocentric (Mundy 2018), colonial (Ochoa Gautier 2014) and fleshy (Medina 2023) postures of the ear, sometimes even to the end of rendering it unrecognizable as such. The specific configuration of one's affective attachments notwithstanding, I am convinced that what productive theorizations of the voice require is the willingness to radically reimagine what might be understood as "vocal" while at once pitting the category of vocality *against itself*, a gambit that necessitates as much methodological patience as it does intractability. And so, amidst the unceasing swirls and shimmerings of voices: let us listen more, and less, and more sensitively!

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