

Holly Patch/Tomke König

Trans* Vocality: lived experience, singing bodies, and joyful politics

Abstract: In this article, we argue that with critical feminist materialisms, it is possible to develop what we have already learned so far from poststructural gender deconstructivism while also asking what can yet be learned from bodies, experience, and materiality. We continue to reject essentialist understandings of gender but maintain that there is a need to emphasize the material dimension of lived experiences. ‘Voice’ is ‘material relationality’ that has not yet received enough attention despite its centrality to political pursuits. In tracing the voice and its relation to materialisms, phenomenology, and poststructuralism, we frame ‘vocality’ as an embodied and lived phenomenon, developing a theoretical lens for the purpose of investigating the enactment of trans* vocality. This phenomenological, materialist approach turns to the lived experiences of transgender and non-binary singers to both ground theory on gender and understand what is political about trans* vocality in singing. Using material from an ongoing research project, we seek to show how the constitution of singing subjects is political and, additionally, how through singing – a kind of ‘sensuous knowledge’ – trans* vocal expression can be a joyful resource for politicization and social change.

Keywords: voice, transgender, singing, feminist phenomenology, materiality.

Trans* Vocality: Leibliches Erleben, singende Körper und lustvolle Politiken

Zusammenfassung: Wir argumentieren in diesem Artikel, dass es mit Critical Feminist Materialisms möglich ist, die materielle Dimension geschlechtlicher Existenzweisen in empirische Untersuchungen mit einzubeziehen, ohne in essentialistische Annahmen einer natürlichen Bestimmtheit von Geschlecht zurück zu fallen. Poststrukturalistische Geschlechterforschung soll mit dem Fokus auf leibliches Erleben, Körper und Materialität weiterentwickelt werden. Vor dem Hintergrund von Materialisms, Phänomenologie und Poststrukturalismus verstehen wir Stimme als materielle Relationalität. Als solche hat sie bislang in feministischer Forschung zu wenig Aufmerksamkeit erhalten. ‘Vocality’ wird in dieser Perspektive als ein verkörpertes und gelebtes Phänomen verstanden. Wir kombinieren diese drei theoretischen Ansätze, um empirisch untersuchen zu können, wie trans* vocality aktiv gelebt und erlebt wird. Ein besonderer Fokus liegt dabei auf der politischen Dimension von trans* vocality. Hierfür greifen wir auf das empirische Material eines laufenden Forschungsprojektes zurück. In den narrativen Interviews mit transgender und nicht-binären Sänger*innen sowie in teilnehmenden Beobachtungen von Transgender-Chören zeigt sich die politische Dimension der Konstitution von singenden Subjekten und darüber hinaus, wie im Singen Körperwissen und trans*vokale Ausdrucksweisen zur lustvollen Ressource in politischen Kämpfen werden.

Schlagwörter: Stimme, Transgender, Singen, feministische Phänomenologie, Materialität.

*To sing is an expression of your being,
a being which is becoming.*

– Maria Callas

Theoretical Frame: Bringing Together Materialisms, Phenomenology, and Poststructuralism to Investigate Trans* Vocality

With critical feminist materialisms, it is possible to develop what we have already learned from poststructural gender deconstructivism while also asking what can yet be learned from bodies, experience, and materiality. ‘Voice’ is ‘material relationality’ that has not yet received enough attention despite its centrality to political pursuits. In this paper, we trace the voice and its relation to materialism, phenomenology, and poststructuralism. Framing ‘vocality’ as an embodied and lived phenomenon, we develop a theoretical lens for the purpose of investigating the enactment of agency of trans* vocality. This phenomenological, materialist approach turns to the lived experiences of transgender and non-binary singers to ground theory on gender as well as to understand what is political about trans* vocality in singing. Using material from an ongoing research project, we seek to show how the constitution of singing subjects is political and, additionally, how through singing – a kind of ‘sensuous knowledge’ – trans* vocal expression can be a joyful resource for politicism and social change.

Voice and vocality

We are used to thinking about the concept of ‘voice’ when it comes to the theorization of subjectivities and politics, epistemological reconstructions of herstories, and language and meaning. Voice becomes more intricate, however, when we tether it back to the embodied speaker or singer interacting with other likewise embodied and situated others. In this paper, we present how materialisms and phenomenology pick up on and account for these aspects of the voice. In approaching ‘vocality’ as a phenomenon in the Baradian sense, whereby “*phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting ‘agencies’*” (Barad 2007: 139, emphasis in original), vocality¹ is the phenomenon that encompasses yet is irreducible to the following (non-exhaustive) intra-acting aspects of the vocal: physical, physiological, biological, representational, constructed, embodied, performative, and lived. It is “through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter – in both senses of the word” (ibid.: 140), and our goal in this paper is to outline some of the specificities of how the phenomenon of trans* vocality comes to matter. The lived experience of voice is central to our purposes, because “[v]oice and vocality are not just metaphorical and performative, not only symbols and cultural constructs” (Fisher 2010: 89). Taking up feminist phenomenology, our aim is “to retrieve, and re-emphasize the importance of, the ‘phenomenological roots of voice,’ in pointing towards a comprehensive experiential account of the imminent [sic], living voice,” one that

“explore[s] all facets and features of the phenomena and experience of voice and vocality, from the expressive to the embodied material voice” (ibid.).

Materialisms and phenomenology each offer tools for attending to the materiality of vocality. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully tease out the points where phenomenology and materialisms diverge, but we do seek to highlight where they might complement each other in order to give a fuller account of what is actively going on in trans* vocality. Additionally, they each offer ways for thinking through what is political about the materiality of trans* vocality.

We tend to agree with Stephanie Clare that

from an agential realist perspective, politics concerns what becomes materialized, what bodies come to emerge. This understanding of politics is aligned with a form of poststructuralist politics that, rather than seeking to represent subjects, investigates the power relations that constitute the subject, displacing the question of politics from the power relations between subjects to the power relations that go into the subject’s constitution (2016: 66).

We acknowledge singing as a physical, physiological process (by and of a subject) that materializes vocal bodies. Trans* singers, then, are engaging with the power involved in determining what bodies emerge. Their vocal bodies are materializing; their embodied voices come to matter and mean something. In conceptualizing vocality as a phenomenon, we can understand *trans** vocality as an example of “dynamic (re)configurings of the world” (Barad 2003: 816) through which the distinction of *trans** vocality from vocality in the general sense gets drawn. There is no ontological trans* voice, but in trans* people enacting singing – and thereby determining the phenomenon of trans* vocality – the trans*ness of the singing comes to matter and trans* singers become subjects. Barad proposes that “[i]t is only through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate and that particular articulations become meaningful” (2007: 148). When it comes to singing – a human, embodied, lived experience – the specificities and properties of these vocal beings are part of this intra-activity. Given our focus on trans* and non-binary singers, as subjects constituted through singing, and choruses, where singers are coming together in a space in order to make a collective voice matter, we speak of singing trans* vocality as embodied trans* being *in* and *of* the world.

For our empirical interests, we give particular emphasis to the phenomenological take on vocal embodiment, because

[i]n addition to focusing on the way power constitutes and is reproduced by bodies, phenomenological studies emphasize the active, self-transformative, practical aspects of corporeality as it participates in relationships of power. (Coole/Frost 2010: 19)

The political is to be found not in the bodily material itself, but in its relationship to power, for us here as regards the gender order and the livability of lives.