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CHAPTER 2

OBJECT, PERSON, MACHINE, OR WHAT

Practical Ontologies of Voice

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It's not just that voices *sound* different. Voices *are* different. And, as I'm going to argue, they are *differently*. A crowd of protesters becomes a "human microphone," amplifying the words of a single orator into a unified, public demand—while a nearby market buzzes with the sound of private negotiations in a dozen different languages. A child solemnly recites the Qur'an with immaculate clarity, unmodified by personal caprice—while a star singer on *Arabs Got Talent* closes her eyes as she sings, expressing what are, in principle, *her* personal feelings. A skilled hunter closes his eyes and aurally scans the chorus of forest animals around him for the voice of his prey—while a devout evangelical strives to discern the voice of God in her inner chorus. We get chills from an extended melisma on a single vowel; we marvel at the expressive silence of a heretic who refuses to recant; we laugh out loud at a convincing impersonation of a politician; we pick up a poetry anthology that promises to give voice to a heretofore silent constituency; we worry about the voice of the people revealed by polls; we hearken to the voices of birds, elephants, frogs, and whales; we allow ourselves to be guided by the inner voice of reason, of self-actualization, of conventional piety.

In English, it sounds perfectly reasonable to use the word *voice* for any of these practices, and the comforting unity of the term may lull us into thinking of them all as manifestations of a single essence: *the voice*. This sense is strengthened when we discover words in other languages with similar[1] semantic fields (*vox, avāz, moksori*), and even apparently cross-cultural vocal concepts (e.g., *vox populi/avāz-e avām/minjung ŭi moksori*—"the voice of the people.") This idea of a universal voiceliness is conceptually reified by the many convincing claims, in various languages, about *the* voice. To name a few: Galen's description of the voice as a kind of reed instrument (*aulos*) (Wollock 1997, 172); Sarangadev's yogic schema of the voice proceeding through desire, vital fire (*vahni*), and subtle breath (*prāṇa*) (1991 [ca. 1250], I.3.3–4); Amanda Weidman's wide-ranging model

of the voice as a "a sonic and material phenomenon and a powerful metaphor" (2015, 232). In medicine and psychoanalysis, in the musicologies and vocal pedagogy, in moral philosophy and systems theory, we encounter claim after claim about the essential characteristics of "the voice": what it is, what it is made of, and what it does.

And yet the more we attend to screaming and singing, testimonials and silent protest, voices of prophecy and voices of the people, the harder it is to discern *the voice* as such. We are faced not only with a diversity of vocal sounds, but with a wide array of *things*: vocal processes, substances, and persons. Some *voice*-s are generated by a larynx, and some are not; some demand obedience, and some invite debate; some move through the air in waves, and some never do; some seem to be personal and expressive, and some are manifestly impersonal. Hindustani vocalists and opera singers alike speak of *losing their voice* when it comes out hoarse, but for a gathering of protesters chanting slogans in a public square, hoarseness is not by any means a loss of political voice. In a laryngologist's clinic, a hoarse voice is not the sign of a missing ("lost") larynx, but of a broken mechanism, very much *there* and in need of fixing. And for a singer-songwriter, hoarseness may even be the very mark of a *real* voice: one that is authentically hers.

There are, in other words, many perfectly ordinary ways in which a voice might be real. When we ask if that voice is *really* Nancy Ajram (or just a recording), whether we are *really* hearing the voice of our late uncle (or if the spirit medium is faking it), whether a mayor's sonorous Texan drawl is *real* (or consciously cultivated), whether voters are *really* demanding single-payer health care (or whether this is a statistical illusion), whether we *really* have a broken voice (or if it's *all in our head*), we are asking radically different questions in each case. Each requires a different kind of answer, produced through different practices: score study, laryngoscopy, polling, techniques of listening, acoustical analysis, and so on.

Vocal ontology asks after the relationship between a voice that shows up as real—as a sound might *show up* on a spectrogram, or a politician's accent might *show up* as authentically Texan to a discerning listener, or a significant political shift might *show up* in polling numbers—and the set of situated practices that make its reality available.[2] This chapter suggests ways in which particular ontological accounts of situated voices might work in a dialectic with general theories of voice. An ontological orientation to the voice should be distinguished from two close cousins that sometimes are casually called by the name "ontology": an *ontic* orientation (making claims about what the voice as such always and inherently *is*—political, material, semiotic, affective, physiological, etc.) and an *epistemological* orientation[3] (describing valid ways of knowing and representing a voice that is already ontically taken for granted: how to measure frequencies [in an acoustical world of vibrating matter], how to interpret spoken utterances [in a semiotic landscape of meaningful signs], how to locate prey [in a soundscape where sounds index other beings], etc.). Ontics and epistemology each have their place. But both begin from a voice that is already real, already *there*—a voice on which we take *perspectives* and *represent*. Reflection on *how* a particular voice *is* requires a different conceptual attitude.

To specify further: mapping out the situated practices from which voices emerge is a way of doing *practical ontology* (Jensen 2004; Gad et al. 2015). When we search the house for kindling and find a sheet of old newspaper, roll it up tightly, and arrange it carefully beneath dry wood, kindling not only *means* something different from the newspaper-for-reading we had in our hands earlier that week—nor, in practice, are we simply taking a different *perspective* on it—in a simple, practical sense, it *is* something different. The crackling voice of the NOAA weather service loop on a sailor's radio shows up as a voice-for-information on a sailboat in bad weather; a karate teacher's voice shows up for a student as an authoritative voice-for-obedience in the dojo. In the spirit of Annemarie Mol's now-classic account of how disease is *enacted* multiply through laboratory techniques and devices (2002), I turn here to what we might call *the voice multiple*, encountered through diverse practices and technologies of attunement, broadcasting, and reproduction. To reflect on this ontological multiplicity does not require a commitment to cosmic relativism. Just as we might speak both of physics in general and the specific physics of an airplane wing, we can speak of ontology in general (as an analytic orientation) and of a specific set of situated infrastructures and practices that disclose a coherent world of things—*an* ontology. Thus, to speak of *ontologies* in the plural is not to imply parallel universes, as though a prior, given, coherent vocal cosmos were suddenly shattered into numerous incommensurable fragments.

Though much of the controversy over the so-called "ontological turn" in the social sciences has centered around agency, multinaturalism, and world-incommensurability, practical ontology tends to remain agnostic about these metaphysical questions.[4] Rather than cloaking forms of unmarked ontic hegemony in a cosmic shroud (Thompson 2017), the goal is to foreground the practices of particular, situated listeners, holding them to account for what is disclosed. We need not predicate the prior existence of a thing called *the voice* in order to attend to any particular voice—indeed, a close attention to situated ontologies highlights ways in which the usual conceptual domain of *voice* bleeds into politics, acoustics, race, ethics, gender, music, and poetics. We need not posit the ontic existence of spirits to account for the practices that make their voices ontologically available for consultation; still less do we need to subsume them in a prior cosmic totality of economic forces, celestial hierarchies, or cultural life-worlds. As we will see, mapping ontologies onto discrete cultures is a particularly treacherous pitfall, landing us in the "cultural and cognitive essentialism which a generation of anthropologists . . . worked to discredit" (Hastrup in Gad et al. 2015, 69). Put positively, suspending our explanatory recourse to prior cultural essences (in favor of the fine details of situated vocal realness) allows us to consider the span of coherent ontological formations that operate between and beyond the commonsense borders of nations, cultures, and peoples. In many ways, this is easier to see with voices than with other classic anthropological topics that verge on the ontological (the body, nature, kinship, etc.). A broader consideration of these theoretical questions is deferred for a few more pages.

But first, in accordance with the general methodological thrust of this chapter, we turn to particulars. How many particulars? There is no limit in principle to how many vocal ontologies there may be, but we can only meaningfully consider a handful at once.

To begin from only two examples might give the impression of a dialectic resolvable in synthesis; to give three might give the impression of a closed taxonomy; to offer a world tour risks reversion to a cultural nationalist logic of vocal difference. Thus, still uncertain of what "the voice" *is*, we plunge in to five vocal situations: five geographically proximate but ontologically far-flung *voice*-s, each revealed as real in its own way by five different situated practices.

Voice 1

We begin at a political demonstration in Mumbai.[5] In March of 2016, the head of an Indian Islamic political party had publicly refused to chant the nationalist slogan "*Bhārat mātā kī jai*!" ("Victory to Mother India!," widely performed as an affirmation of identity: nationally Indian, religiously Hindu, or both). In response, members of the Shiv Sena (a nationalist party that has long advocated for the congruence of Hindu and Indian identity) had publicly called for the cancellation of citizenship for anyone who refused to chant the slogan. There were many responses to this. One that played particularly well on TV was a gathering, on March 17, of several hundred Muslims at the Makhdoom Ali Mahimi shrine, near the Arabian Sea, to chant *Bhārat Mātā kī jai* in front of the gathered news teams.

The footage that aired that day (on several TV channels and Internet media outlets, for example *India News* and F3 news)[6] begins with a series of rapid establishing shots, both visible and audible. The Indian flag is raised, we hear a brass band playing the Indian national anthem, and the camera pans quickly across several legible indices of Islam: a minaret, green-and-white painted buildings, a crowd of men singing the national anthem with white caps and neatly-trimmed beards. Within seconds, it is clear just where we are and whose voices we are hearing. After the national anthem, the performance of the slogan begins. A solo voice calls out "*Bhārat Mātā kī*" and the crowd responds "*jai!*" They repeat this several times before moving on to other songs and slogans. In case there was any doubt left about what we are meant to be hearing, the title of the videos posted on YouTube, and the comments of the news anchors who comment on it, make it clear: "Muslims raised the slogan [*nāra lagāyā*] *Bharat Mata ki jai* at the Mahim shrine"; "Muslims will fly tricolour [flag], chant 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' in Mumbai dargah"; and so on.

If the voice of this crowd were simply a bearer of information, or a series of vibrations, or an instantiation of cultural conventions, this would not be a newsworthy event at all. Schoolchildren all over India recite *Bhārat Mātā kī jai* every day, and news crews do not roll up to broadcast it. But this event is not a tautological affirmation of identity ("we Indians are Indian"). It shows up as a performative *defiance* of a prior performance of not-chanting enjoined upon Indian Muslims. It becomes a newsworthy political event only to the degree that the voice shows up as the voice of a

particular constituency, broadcast in the midst of a mass-mediated controversy about voicing citizenship, within a discursive field dominated by a Hindu-Muslim binary. Its performative work is not the sum of its innumerable phonetic or political or physiological or melodic features. Its power depends not just on what it *means*, but on a network of practices and sedimented infrastructures that make it what it *is* in the first place.

Voice 2

Later, only a few hundred feet away, a smaller group of elite Sufis gather in the *khānqah* (lodge) of the same shrine complex for a very different kind of ritual, one which has been held regularly for centuries, in various places and political climates: a *mahfil-e samā*. In gatherings like this across South Asia, *qawwāls* sing poems for accomplished members of the Chisti Sufi brotherhood. But these qawwāls do not take center stage at a mahfil-e samā; often, there is no stage for them at all. Pride of place goes to a prominent spiritual authority, presiding over the occasion in silence, in the manner of a king observing a performance at court. Nor, for all of their technical skill and sensitivity, are the qawwāl-s the authors of the special, mystical content of the poems—they are merely the vehicles. When all goes well, the poems sung by the qawwāl may reach the heart of an initiated Sufi who has been prepared by his master for listening. For a listener whose heart is properly attuned to this inner content, the voice of the qawwāl delivers a secret message that leads them through successive stages of emotional intensity and finally into *wajd* or spiritual ecstasy (see Qureshi 2006 [1986], 118–122). But this is an extraordinary occurrence; most listeners, even those who are enthusiastic connoisseurs of mystical poetry, do not go into *wajd*. They may savor the poetry, they may even be deeply moved, but, for the moment at least, the inner content remains obscure.

Whether anyone goes into *wajd* or not, this voice *is* something other than a public performance of identity. It is not a source of information, or a performance of political identity, or an expression of the qawwāl's personal feelings. It is a voice-for-*samā*: a voice for disciplined listening that leads to ecstasy. Surely, uninitiated listeners hearing qawwāli at an outdoor gathering in a public area of the shrine may encounter the voice of a *qawwāl* as artistry for enjoyment, as melodic patterns for classification, or even (were one to drag the proper equipment along), as acoustic waveforms for analysis. But a closed, elite *mahfil-e samā* is directed toward spiritual elites for whom the voice in the room *is* something utterly different. No linguistic competence, no music theoretic insight, no amount of acoustic, grammatical or political analysis will reveal its content. Through proper comportment, through received Chisti techniques of listening, and above all through the mysteries of blessing passed through a spiritual lineage, the secret borne by this voice shows up to some but not to others.

Voice 3

A few kilometers north, we encounter a radically different vocal ontology that, confusingly enough, is also called by the name "Sufi." An immaculately dressed superstar sings a classical poem of mystical devotion into a microphone on a brilliantly lit stage. This is a concert, not a ritual for the benefit of spiritual elites. This is a pop star, not a qawwāl, and he certainly is not trying to bring anyone into *wajd*. His voice is sweet and melodious, the kind that gives you chills. *Anyone* might be moved by such a beautiful voice, and this availability to "anyone" is part of what makes it what it is. It is a voice-for-appreciation, a voice-for-applauding, a voice-for-authenticity.

Even for those cheering in the front row, this voice is not the sort of thing that brings *wajd*. Just as an ornamental leather-bound book high up on a shelf in a dentist's waiting room is not a book-for-studying, this is not a voice-for-*samā*. This is all about the singer; they are hearing *his* voice, cheering for *him*. Though the song has clear Muslim devotional lyrical references, this voice stands outside of the authoritative hierarchies of any Sufi brotherhood in particular. It is produced and heard as *his* voice, an expression of sincere, personal feelings freely revealed—in principle—to any listener.

Voice 4

Just down the road at a recording studio, a playback singer has just finished recording the title song of a film, and the recording engineer turns to his computer and works his magic. He clicks and zooms in on her voice—a long purple rectangle framing a white waveform—making it so large that it takes up half of his computer monitor. He expertly trims away the sounds of inhalations between phrases, cuts and pastes particularly excellent parts over mistakes, and extends a long */a/* by clicking and dragging. Once the track is assembled, he painstakingly adjusts the EQ, compression, and reverb to give it the proper shine and texture.

Working on the voice in this way is like repairing and buffing a wrought-iron railing. As long as the engineer is working on a digital audio workstation, he is not dealing with the track as a digital file, consisting of 1s and 0s. But neither is he dealing with an organ of cartilage and muscle, nor with a ritual performative, nor with a carrier of an esoteric meaning, nor even an expression of the singer's personal subjectivity. The voice at hand in the course of mixing is a peculiar kind of object: durable, changeable, subject to trimming, cutting, pasting, extension, enhancement, and, crucially, reproduction.

Voice 5

A bit further south, in a wealthy enclave near Shivaji Park, a voice clinic sees a steady stream of clients. The clinician here treats singers from nearly every public vocal world in India, from highly sought-after film singers to reciters of the Qur'ān. Her office is brightly lit by fluorescent lights and fragrant with disinfectant. Here, through the use of various techniques, instruments, and heuristics, the voice shows up vividly as a mechanism in the throat made of muscle, bone, and cartilage, subject to various states of health and disease. To one patient, she prescribes six daily glasses of water and a week of vocal rest; to another, she prescribes surgery to remove a nodule.

When the voice doctor tells a client how to take care of her voice, how to avoid wearing down the voice, how to repair damage to the voice, she is talking about a fleshy organ: a thing that swells, that develops nodules, that functions and malfunctions and can be repaired. Though like a "vocal track" this voice is in some sense an object, it is not a sound object to be shortened, lengthened, cut or pasted. It is alive, self-repairing, whole, subject to health and disease, hydration and dehydration, like the whole organic body of which it is a part. Just as important, this voice also shows up as the rare and special kind of thing for which a doctor bears a direct ethical responsibility.

Practical Ontologies of Voice

Here we are faced not only with five different-*sounding* voices, with different "traits," as they might appear if they were presented in quick succession in audio clips. Moving from situation to situation, in practice we are faced with five radically different sorts of *thing*. Just as a rock star yelling "I love you!" to a gathered crowd is an entirely different sort of *thing* than a lover whispering it to his beloved for the first time, so too is the amplified voice of a "Sufi" superstar in a music hall an entirely different thing than the voice of a qawwāl at a *mahfil-e samā*. This is not a matter of simply taking a *perspective* on an acoustic signal. Each of these voices already shows up to us as real through a specific constellation of interwoven practices and infrastructures.

For an isolated vocal track to show up for editing, we need a soundproof booth, we need headphones, we need microphone technique, we need the discipline to sing at the right moment and remain quiet at others. For a collective vocal performance of citizenship to show up, we need a set of legal-institutional formations that afford nationality, we need camera techniques, we need a leader to coordinate a crowd to chant in unison, we need a national public tuned into mass media and the cultural logic of nationalism. For laryngeal physiology to show up, we need to shine a bright light down into the dark cavern of the throat, we need a special camera, we need a screen to see the image,

we need the imaginative faculty to map the image on to a normative anatomy. The diagnosis of a glottal closure disorder requires a very particular attunement: to equipment, to learned practices of measurement, and to an unambiguous, unreflective sense of physiological norms and aberrance. A skilled vocal diagnosis (like virtuosic teasing, like transcription, like a cultivated receptivity to opera) requires habits of discernment and imagination honed over years of practice. It is not that laryngologists hold out any hope about arriving at a fixed, complete "objective" totality (looking at an image of the larynx, we ignore the glare from stray flecks of mucus; the image is always a bit blurrier than we like; we do not know or care how *many* water molecules are in the vocal folds). Neither are we arbitrarily inventing "subjective" fantasies (we can certainly be verifiably right or wrong about a laryngeal nodule, tonal intervals, about phonetics, sincerity, and any number of other vocal realities). Unlike an arbitrary act of willful fantasy, working within a vocal reality includes the possibility of being surprised: a voice can show up quite differently than we *think* it should. But no "voice" shows up for us as real in the first place without the infrastructure, situation, habits, and practices that make it available.

Some of these attentional practices are so habitual that they become invisible. The work necessary to attend to a friend's utterance as a *request* is usually unconscious in one's mother tongue, but it becomes more obvious when contending with background noise; it can be downright exhausting when trying to have a conversation in an unfamiliar language. When transcribing a singing voice, an ontology of tones (in which every vocal utterance shows up as a sequence of discrete notes) seems perfectly natural. In the course of transcribing a vocal line, we may pick out a sequence of tones on the piano without ever doubting that the "voice" we thereby come to know is made of notes. Even speech, screaming, and weeping—which ordinarily do not show up as tones—can be analyzed as pitch sequences.[7] But anyone who has struggled their way through a course in ear training can attest to how much training it takes to hear a sung melody as a sequence of notes. These notes show up as vividly real to a specially disciplined and privileged few—but to most they do not show up at all.

Note that situations are not necessarily *contexts*.[8] At the moment we are calling out the name of a missing child, aurally scanning our surroundings for her voice, we would never say that we are "in the context of a search." Just so, singing *at* a mahfil, *for* attentive listeners is not the same as singing "in the context of listeners," much less "in the context of India"—a *context* is assigned after the fact, in reflection, by constituting a voice as a text for interpretation in a context. We certainly can find "contexts" for interpretation wherever we textualize performances—for example, transcribing a recording of a senate hearing, after the fact, trying to make sense of what someone's utterance might have *meant*. But to conceive of a voice "in a context" already entails an implicit ontological commitment to the voice as a text-for-interpretation, freely sliding in and among different contexts. Of the vocal ontologies sketched out earlier, only a vocal track, in the course of editing it, shows up as anything like an invariant text to be interpreted in various contexts; at times, tightly scripted speech or song may as well. But to foist this text-centered ontology indiscriminately onto all voices (to reduce *all* vocal situations to contexts)

would be to foreclose crucial political, ethical, and conceptual possibilities: defiance, indeterminacy, noise, improvisation, performativity, spirit possession, imitation.

Vocal ontologies each offer something quite different in turn to a situated actor, but never all at once. There is no reason to expect that there will be a shared essence, or a lowest common denominator among these innumerable realnesses—not materiality, not vibration, not divinity, not individual personhood. This much is counterintuitive. It certainly seems natural to imagine that the voice has its origin in the physiology of the larynx. But even leaving aside physiological diversity (bird syrinxes, cricket elytra, dolphin bursae), not everything we call "voice" *has* a physiology in the first place. As Richard Wolf teaches us (2014), the "voice in the drum" disclosed so vividly to devout listeners has no larynx, lips, or tongue. Nor does the "voice of the people" that we discover through polls, ballots, and statistical analysis. Nor, even, in practice, does a vocal track. A related (but ontically distinct) commonsense approach holds that all voices are essentially made of vibrations. Again, this is true of some voices, but not all. Some Naqshbandi sufi-s, for example, counsel their disciples that the silent, inner repetition of devotional formulas is more effective than doing so audibly. The egalitarian stream of anti-caste politics inflected by the songs of Kabir is fueled by an ontology of voice in which an unconditioned, nonvibrational *shabd* (word) is equally at the heart of each human being, regardless of caste, in which the conditional hummings and babblings of singing and speaking, with beginnings, end, and media, are only secondary by-products. One who "hears voices" in his room at night cannot take readings of their pitch or formant patterns—but these are voices nonetheless. The voices that psychologists call "auditory vocal hallucinations" do not show up to those who hear them as neatly located in the head; for those who hear them, they are no more hearing hallucinations than a violinist is hearing nerve impulses when she plays. The maddening, prophetic power of such a voice lies precisely in its ontology: it does not show up as "inner speech" generated by the self, but as a voice out there in the world, with its own agency. Tanya Luhrmann's work demonstrates that these voices are neither acoustical nor purely fanciful; they are situated and coherent, made real through enculturated habits of attention and listening (Luhrmann et al. 2015). Nor do all voices communicate a message. Speech therapists and laryngologists work hard to systematically listen for a particular kind of pure voice free of semantic meaning, local belongings, or aesthetic standards. The now common practice of listening to a singer's voice (say, Fairuz or Fischer-Dieskau) as an object of wordless aesthetic pleasure reveals a voice as a "senseless play of sensuality" (Dolar 2006, 43). The power of glossolalia, the affective intensity of inchoate wailing, the numinous aura of chant in a liturgical language which one does not fully understand—these all depend on the presence of a voice that *is* something other than a message.

In search of a common vocal essence, we may even try to find metaphoric linkages between separate things called by the name "voice." We may, for example, speculate that having a "voice" in politics is an abstraction thinkable only by means of a concrete image: a person speaking publicly, vocally exerting power by rendering an individual will audible. But any such origin myth puts us right back where we started, generalizing a vocal function from a particular situation. Think of a ritual public abdication, or an

enforced pledge of allegiance, or a national apology—the expression of individual will is by no means the essential political function of the voice. Conversely, think of a silent protest, or the determined refusal to chant *Bhārat Mātā kī jai*, or dropping a ballot in a box—not-speaking can be a powerful means of political voicing. This is why each politics of the voice turns out again and again to be *a* politics of voice. To insist on a single, ahistorical primal scene of vocal politics is not only conceptually misleading; it is politically impoverishing as well.

Anthropological Ontics, Ethnographic Ontology

This focused attention to vocal particularities at the expense of a general theory of voice is admittedly a bit disorienting at first. But ethnography, like history, has always been a gadfly for supposedly universal anthropologies: of gender, of the gift, of ethics, of music—deferring the comfort of a totalizing ontic scheme by returning us to practices, reminding us that even the things that show up for us most vividly are disclosed by particular situations. All of us find ourselves from beginning to end in one situation or another: yelling across a schoolyard, listening closely to a staged performance, slowing down and playing back a section of a recording for transcription, singing along at a demonstration. Even a recording of a voice, no matter how detached it may seem in relation to an originary moment of voicing,[9] shows up *for* somebody, played through particular speakers, in a room of a particular size, for a particular occasion. Perhaps the listener really is bracketing its source and medium through some form of disciplined reduced listening.[10] But to the extent that it is shows up as a *voice*, it always shows up in a situation (though again of a rather different kind than "the voice of Etta James," or "the voice of Egypt" presented by a curatorial approach to a canon of recordings).

So is it enough to stop there, with a dizzying array of ethnographic particulars? Since there is always another situation around the corner, should we abandon the anthropological project of wide-ranging conceptual synthesis for the ethnographic project of finding exceptions? Is it enough to simply say that voices are irreducibly local and plural and walk away?

Of course not. We can't account ethnographically or historically for particular voices without *some* provisional ontic scaffolding—some sense of what is really there—any more than we can take fieldnotes without a language. But, just as we have learned to do with practices of writing, we can be mindful of the limits of ontic predication and tack back and forth between description and reflection. When we read that voice is "a phenomenon that lies at the intersection of music, sound, embodiment, subjectivity and collective identity" (Weidman 2011, 13) or that "it is always the body social that is enunciated in and through the voice" (Feld et al. 2004, 341), we need not latch onto either one as an ontic account of a vocal essence that transcends situations. But neither are

these just arbitrary fantasies. Rather, well-constructed ontic formulations serve as practical rules of thumb, casting light on some situations and shadows on others, providing a schematic accounting of ontological types, explicating our own implicit analytic and theoretical choices, and even offering the possibility of provisionally tracing ontological formations that reach beyond particular places and times.

Locating Vocal Ontologies

As we have seen in the five vocal ontologies sketched out earlier, there are very often incommensurable ontologies of voice in the same city, in the same room, even for the same person. But a fine-grained focus on the situated revelation of voices does not require a commitment to individualist subjectivism, or a fragmented relativism of incommensurable perspectives. Quite the opposite: stances and infrastructures that offer voices are always already relational, already shared, already social (Berger 2009, 97). Nor is this sociality freely relativistic. To be sure, as with the putative *cultures* of postwar anthropology, social scientists face the temptation to assign characteristic ontological worlds to nations and peoples.[11] But the groupist identification of voices with quasi-social totalities only obstructs our ontological view of these socialities.

To put it aphoristically: the horizon of an ontological formation is not the boundary of a nation. In the first place, vocal ontologies often stretch far beyond political boundaries. The vocal ontology of *samā* is available to elite sufis across the Islamicate cosmopolis, including speakers of Indic, Turkish, Persianate, and Arabic vernaculars, inflected by al-Ghazali's prescriptions for ethical listening, shaped by discourses of Qur'anic revelation, cultivated in a vast network of Sufi shrines and lodges. The cosmopolitan ontology of voice in which singing is to be savored in a dark and quiet concert hall, to be enjoyed as leisurely entertainment, as sensuously beautiful above all else, is part of what has made *dhrupad* available for the enjoyment of concertgoers in Europe. The transnational circulation of Bollywood movies, from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, has naturalized the vocal identity of playback singer and film actor, so that Lata Mangeshkar's voice shows up as embodied rather than acousmatic, blending seamlessly with the character on screen. The emergence of the popular, ubiquitous voices of recording stars in the 1920s and 1930s was scaffolded by transnational infrastructures, trade networks, and practices of listening (Denning 2015).

In the second place, nations (and cities and locales in general) are ontologically diverse. All five of the "voices" I cited earlier—and dozens more—are within a few kilometers of each other. In Bangkok, in Delhi, in Beirut, in a tiny Minnesotan farm town, a short walk reveals a range of competing vocal ontologies: a friend greets us and we respond, a vendor calls out to advertise his wares, grocery shoppers hum along with a love song, a news anchor on TV addresses a national public. Each of us moves fluidly among broad (if finite) repertoires of vocal ontologies.

Thus, were we to try to sketch them on a map, vocal ontologies would seem to be both bigger than nation-states (by virtue of their transnational span) and smaller than nation-states (by nature of the ontological diversity that obtains even in the same city). This apparent paradox is a consequence of trying to locate voices (which have widely various spatialities) on a master cartographic frame, a two-dimensional surface quilted with nation-state-shaped cultures (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). But starting from apparently small-scale, situated vocal ontologies may well reveal common *voice*-s that reach beyond commonsense racial, national, civilizational totalities. It opens up the neoliberal contours of a transnational Reality TV ontological formation that discloses a measureable substance called vocal *talent* distributed unpredictably among individuals; to hear something of the inimitable majesty that Qur'anic recitation has even for non-Arab Muslims and non-Muslim Arabs; to identify the contestations of authenticity within a widely dispersed sphere of hip hop vocal cosmopolitanism. All of this requires us to think beyond national borders for identifying ontological formations.

Indeterminacy and The Vocal Politics of What

Much of the foregoing has highlighted the stark differences between discrete vocal ontologies. This might lead us to think of a dazzlingly variegated museum of ontology, in which each voice is presented with perfect clarity in a glass display case, in which we can stroll seamlessly from real voice to real voice (here is a voice-for-*samā*, and here is a vocal mechanism, and here is a vocal track) serially assured of each in turn. But to think only in terms of ontological certainty would be misleading.

Think of how much time we spend in puzzlement about voices. Think of a bad phone connection, of an awkward conversation in a new language, of a failed ear-training exam, of ventriloquism, of a magisterial ethnographic voice that seems to put words in its subjects mouths, of jokes[12] that rely on ambiguity about what an utterance *is*. Laryngoscopic images and spectrograms are never as clear as we want them to be, and it is often hard to tell if we *really* see what we think we see at first try. Recording engineers know that fidelity is always finite, that every microphone introduces artifacts, and mix albums with their ears alive to the indeterminate edges of audibility. Evangelicals trying to hear the voice of God spend years training themselves to sort through many other inner voices, learning to discern a clear divine message (Luhrmann 2012, 131). Like any perceptual encounter, an indeterminate vocal haze "sets a kind of muddled problem for [the] body to solve," in which, through turning knobs, squinting, holding our breath, moving closer to a sound source, listening in particular way, or other situated practices of vocal discernment, we try to "find the attitude which will provide it with the means of becoming determinate, of showing up" (Merleau-Ponty 2002 [1945], 248–249).

Even when we do find an attitude that provisionally renders a voice determinate, we never quite arrive at a seamless world of vocal being once and for all. The totalizing certainty of an all-encompassing mode of being in which everything has a place is just one extreme pole of an ontological continuum. Our dance along this continuum, in which our ontic expectations are unpredictably undercut, is precisely what affords vocal rapport with an other (Levinas 1979 [1961], 201) that is never fully graspable.[13] This dance of ontological indeterminacy also opens up questions about vocal dynamics: how we shift from one voice to another, from one situation to another, from one voice-revealing infrastructure to another.

Further, attending to the friction between practical ontologies of voice opens up what Annemarie Mol calls a "politics of what" (2002, 172). It allows us to recognize and account for commonsense vocal-ontological formations, the practices that constitute them, the workings of power that make them seem obvious, and the contestations that pit them against each other. It is precisely this ontological indeterminacy that makes possible the emergence of a singer—say, Umm Kulthum, Lata Mangeshkar, Zeki Müren, Lee Greenwood—whose voice, through the magic of mass media, may show up convincingly as a voice-of-a-person, as a voice-of-a-nation, or even, binaurally, as both at once (cf. Danielson 1998; Srivasta 2004; Stokes 2010). A parallel ontological ambiguity between human and nonhuman voice seems likewise to have generated distinctive colonial forms of aurality in nineteenth-century Colombia (Ochoa Gautier 2014). None of these indeterminate *voice*-s resolves into to a single, monolithic cultural meaning; none balloons into the universal anything-and-everything of "the voice." The question of what a voice *is* is at the heart of the matter. Practical ontology thus offers a way into vocal politics without retreating into the soundscapic realism of a given acoustical world *or* into the individualist subjectivism where one hears whatsoever one wills. A voice may, after all, be palpably, publicly *real* without being inevitable.

Notes

1. The semantic fields of these words are by no means identical. As Nicholas Harkness (2013, 11) points out, Korean phoneticists tend to use the word *ŭmsŏng* rather than *moksori*; Laura Kunreuther likewise points out that *avāz* has a rather different range of semantic possibilities than *vox*, including, for example, noise (2016).
2. As used here, "showing up" and "disclosure" are two sides of the same ontological coin. A set of situated practices *discloses* a world of real things; a thing in a world *shows up* as real (becomes available for editing or contemplation, registers as an intelligible utterance, gains personhood, authoritatively commands a listener) by virtue of these situated practices. This much follows Hubert Dreyfus's now-canonical English rendering of Heidegger's term *Begegnen* (1991, x; 1996[1927]). As we will see, however, Dreyfus's acceptance of Heidegger's assignment of basic ontological moods (*Grundstimmung*) to nations—by which Japanese babies are brought up in a consistently ontologically distinct way from American babies, for example (61), and thus live in a homogeneous, sealed-off cultural world—will not work for a rigorous, ethnographically grounded vocal ontology.

3. Steven Feld's catchy term "acoustemology," though glossed as "acoustic epistemology," often reaches deeper than ways of knowing a world that is simply given (Feld, 2015). Approaching a recording as raw "data" may indeed encourage an analysis grounded in an apparently given text, thus collapsing the ontological into the merely epistemological. But acoustemology may also verge on the ontological to the extent that it is concerned with world-disclosure rather than simply ways of knowing or representing a given world.
4. On agency see Kipnis (2015); on multinaturalism see Viveiros de Castro (2004); on world-disclosure and incommensurability see Kompridis (2006, 239).
5. Known officially as Bombay prior to 1995, and unofficially even now by many of the city's residents. There is no neutral way to cite this city's name, particularly when communal identity is at issue.
6. See also F3 News, Mumbai, March 17, 2016.
7. Cf. Diana Deutsch's "Sometimes Behave So Strangely," or Alvin Lucier's "I Am Sitting in a Room," both of which derive their uncanny power from the ontological gray area between hearing words and hearing tones.
8. There is, of course, a familiar tradition in the social sciences of calling situations "contexts," going back at least to Malinowski's "contexts of situations" (1946 [1923], 306).
9. For more on the apparent detachment of source and sound, and whether this is a pathological ("schizophonic,") or normative ("rhizophonic") condition, see Stanyek and Piekut (2010). I would add, however, that the acoustical propagation of vibrations (by virtue of which, as Piekut and Stanyek point out, sound-as-vibration is *always* heard at some physical distance from its source) is a rather different issue than the appearances of sound as ontologically distinct from a source—either through acousmatics or reduced listening.
10. For a thorough treatment of this listening practice stretching from Husserl through Pierre Schaeffer and Michael Chion, see Kane (2014).
11. This is one of the most disturbing sociological assumptions of Heidegger's Nazi-period ontology: that each civilization has a characteristic, consistent ontological mood (*Grundstimmung*) that persists on the scale of centuries (for a sympathetic summary, see Dreyfus [1991, 170]). For a summary of critiques of such ontological "worlds" congruent with peoples see Gad et al. (2015).
12. "To give two examples: the "*che bella voce*!" joke in Dolar (2006), in which a voice-as-command is conveniently taken to be a voice-as-aesthetic-object; and the oft-recycled "nobody here but us chickens!", which hinges on the absurd friction between what the utterance *claims* and what it evidently *is* (3). See also Gourard's "eerie" phonographic tricks in Kane (2014, 183–185).
13. See Rahaim (2017) for a reading of Levinas that treats vocal and musical action as a possible vehicle for rapport that preserves metaphysical alterity.

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