

Trans-speaking Voice-lessness: A Fictocritical Essay

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ABSTRACT: How to emerge from a condition of not-being-able-to-speak-and-not-being-heard-with-what-one-has-to-say if the nature of one's voice-lessness cannot be explored on the basis of the worldview in which one has been raised and with the methods of knowledge production in which one has been trained?

How to imagine ever coming to voice if one is unable to recognize oneself in the sex category to which one has been allocated at birth and if most listeners regard the vocal embodiment of an unambiguously female or male gender as a necessary precondition for paying attention to an utterance as (potentially intelligible, human) speech?

In this piece, I explore these and related questions via a hybrid mode of text production that I call trans-speaking. It draws on: memories entries in dictionaries and speech-language pathology textbooks; poststructuralist, posthumanist and transgender studies theories; and fictocritical writing practices. In a part imaginative, part theoretical account, a first person narrator revisits some of the scenes from their life; being addressed and spoken about; growing up in and becoming disenchanted with the medico-scientific worldview; working as a voice clinician; receiving and responding to reviewers' comments on their work; applying for a change of name and gender entry; engaging with medical approaches to gender transitioning. These textual re-enactments that are interwoven with elaborations on key theoretical concepts are designed to invite readers to consider the following suggestion: What is taken for granted in some academic and everyday discourses as the mere givenness of human properties (e.g. a person's status as a subject, their gender/sex, body, agency) are produced and transformed by an entanglement of discursive-material forces, which operate as constraints on the notion and practice of voice in its material and metaphorical senses?



KEYWORDS: Voice, trans embodiments, transgressing disciplinary boundaries, exclusionary practices, material-discursive agency

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Trans-speaking¹⁻³ voice-lessness:⁴⁻⁹ A fictocritical¹⁰ essay

1 TRANS-SPEAKING: A speaking that “explores categorical crossings, leakages, and slips of all sorts” (Stryker, Currah, & Moor, 2008, p. 11).

2 HYPHEN: “A short dash or line (-) used to connect two words together as a compound ... or to divide a word into parts for etymological or other purposes” (*The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online*, 2017).

The hyphen as it is used here “marks the difference between the implied nominalism of ‘trans’ and the explicit relationality of ‘trans-,’ which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix” (Stryker, Currah, & Moor, 2008, p. 11). Gender/sex, subjectivity, voice (in speech and writing), embodiment, disciplinary languages, practices and genres are the main analytical categories whose boundaries I will explore and transgress in this piece.

3 SPEAKING: While speech is at times understood as “the natural exercise of the vocal organs” (*OED Online*, 2017), suggesting that it is “produced by nature”, “inherent in the very constitution of a person . . . not acquired or assumed” (*ibid.*), I will make an attempt at demonstrating in this piece that speaking, writing and other modes of voice production and reception, such as, singing, humming, signing, hearing, listening and reading, are practices that cannot be unambiguously located in the realms of nature, biology or materiality or in the speaker’s body.

As phonetics – the science of speech sounds – and speech-language pathology – the field into which I teach and whose professional members are specialised in the assessment and treatment of communication difficulties (voice, speech, language, hearing) – are yet to become receptive towards critical interventions that are produced in the Humanities or Social Sciences. The discourses that are rehearsed in professional and academic practices are still based on a “naïve materialism in which ‘the body’ appears as a fleshly substrate that simply is prior to or in excess of its regulation” (Sullivan & Murray, 2009, p. 1).

Put differently, in speech-language pathology, theoretical work that is produced outside the discipline and its medico-scientific allies (such as, anatomy, physiology, phonetics, psychology, neurology, psychiatry, phoniatics and other medical specialties) is not given the attention it deserves. For instance, I doubt that the majority of my colleagues would immediately know what I mean when I say that much of the clinical research conducted in the area that currently interests me most (the intersections of notions and practices of voice and gender) is informed by traditional realist, biologically determinist and representationalist beliefs. I also do not think that any of the turns (linguistic, semiotic, interpretative, cultural) Karen Barad mentions in the introduction to her “materialist and posthumanist reworking of the notion of performativity” (2003, p. 811) have yet affected speech-language pathology or that the notions and practices of social constructivism and performativity have been exposed to sufficient scrutiny so far or that they have been widely implemented in speech-language pathology research.

While one could argue that there are a range of matters that concern speech-language pathologists, contemporary feminist and transgender studies theorists alike (e.g. discourses, practices, performances, actions, agencies, epistemologies, ontologies, materialities, to name a few), these scholars/practitioners in their diverse positionings approach these matters of concern from different angles, with

different languages/terminologies and using different material(izing) practices. While new materialist, feminist technoscience and transgender studies scholars can draw on various histories of attempts at dealing with versions of “old” materialisms, epistemologies and methodologies from within their own fields of interdisciplinary practice, speech-language pathologists and other medico-scientifically oriented voice researchers and clinicians are yet to recognize the important contribution an engagement with critical theories of any orientation could make to their practice.

This makes it hard to gather an audience or readership for work that engages with the important tasks of facilitating transdisciplinary cross-fertilization and a “refiguring [of] the material-discursive field of possibilities” (Barad, 2003, p. 823) within speech-language pathology practices. I have attempted trans-speaking in this regard – many years ago, maybe not carefully crafted enough at the time but certainly untimely, as I am able to see now – but it was dismissed by the gatekeepers of the discipline as unintelligible and not relevant for a clinical research focus.

4 voice: “[S]ound produced by the vibration of the vocal folds and modified by the resonators” (Nicolisi, Harryman, & Kresheck, 2004, p. 296).

“The voice carries not only linguistic meaning, but also personality traits and discrete emotions” (Tanner, 2006, p. 181).

“The voice reveals the inner self. It is a reflection of the personality of the individual” (Colton, Casper, & Leonard, 2011, p. 2).

“Through it, our size, height, weight, physique, sex, age, and occupation, often even sexual orientation, can be detected. The voice is a stethoscope, and transmits information not only about anatomical abnormalities but even illnesses” (Karpf, 2006, p. 10).

In these short passages taken from the medico-scientific voice literature, the human voice is presented as a similarly biologized but more specialized subspecies of speech. While speech is seen as capable of the “oral expression of thought or feeling” (*OED Online*, 2017), voice is “regarded as characteristic of an individual person” (*ibid.*) and capable of “represent[ing] the person or being who produces it” (*ibid.*). Voice is constructed as an instance that provides detailed and transparent insight into sub-aspects of the speaker’s prediscursively positioned identity and body, including an assessment of the speaker’s preferences

and their physical and mental condition. This unquestioned link between voice, self-expression, health and wellbeing (or lack thereof) and the oversimplified conceptualization of the components and workings of this construction are key problematics whose damaging effects I will attempt to demonstrate and destabilize in this piece.

5 SOUND: “Air wave or vibration that causes a sensory stimulation of the auditory mechanism” (Nicolisi, Harryman, & Kresheck, 2004, p. 253).

6 AUDITION: “The sense or act of hearing” (Nicolisi, Harryman, & Kresheck, 2004, p. 31).

7 HEARING: “The sense, receptive in nature through which spoken language is received by response to sound pressure waves. The ears, the auditory nerve and the brain are involved in the process of hearing” (Nicolisi, Harryman, & Kresheck, 2004, p. 127).

When following up on the implications of considering voice in the material sense as sound, it becomes apparent that the notions and practices of phonation, vibration, resonance, amplification, sensation, hearing and listening, of performance, perception, interpretation and understanding are interlaced, whereby the voice’s transmission of “essential clues about who we are” (Karpf, 2006) is interrupted, taken over by others and guided on different paths. These are the key practices that cause a disruption to the traditional notion of voice production, which is so often described as a biologically controlled or behaviourally controllable mechanism. I regard these practices and their effects as promising supports for my project of re-considering, -writing and -speaking voice-lessness.

Due to the requirements of *GJSS*, my speaking appears as writing. Rather than providing a rendering of the text in ready-made audible form, shaped by the specific configurations of one voice organ, this mode of presentation asks readers to perform the text following their own notion and practice of voice, inviting them to multiply and diversify the readings into which a piece of writing can be transformed.

8 LESSNESS: “The quality or condition of being less; inferiority” (*OED Online*, 2017).

9 VOICE-LESSNESS (A-PHONIA): “Complete loss of voice as a result of hysteria (conversion), growths, paralysis, disease, or overuse of the vocal folds” (Nicolisi, Harryman, & Kresheck, 2004, p. 335).

“Within the category of aphonia falls a considerable variety of whispers: pure or noiseless; harsh, sharp, or piercing, intermittent high-pitched squeaks and squeals; moments of normal voice” (Aronson & Bless, 2009, p. 179).

“The most extreme and incapacitating conversion voice disorder is muteness or mutism, in which the patient neither whispers nor articulates, or may articulate without exhalation. Entering the room with notebook and pencil, they write their questions and answers, and although unaware of what they are revealing, involuntarily cough, showing their normal vocal fold adduction” (ibid.).

Just as in the term “trans-speaking” also in “voice-lessness”, “the hyphen matters a great deal” (Stryker, Currah, & Moor, 2008, p. 11). At this point, it draws attention to the composite structure of a-ponia, the replaceability of its components (such as in a-phasis, a-plasia, dys-ponia, diplo-ponia, face-lessness, taste-lessness) and the mutual dependency of notions of “voice” (also commonly understood in the metaphorical senses of modes of expression or representation, point of view, control, influence and agency) and “lessness” (also: of smaller dimension, lower condition, rank) or the prefix “a-” (without, not).

Note how the “normal” tends to sneak into descriptions” of the a-ponic listed above. I read this as a (most likely inadvertent) display of the work needed to uphold the porous boundaries between (healthy) voice-d and (disordered) voice-less productions. Following on from this thought, a-ponia as it is defined in the clinical voice literature may also be conceptualized as the temporary outcome of exclusionary practices of abjection, which serve “to maintain or reinforce boundaries that are threatened” (Philipps, 2014, p. 19). Certain voices are thereby rendered “unintelligible or beyond classification” (ibid.) and their “materiality is understood not to ‘matter’” (Costera Meijer & Prins, 1998, p. 281).

From this emerge the following questions, pervading this piece right from the start. How could vibrations of air molecules of all kinds, emerging from voice production devices of any shape and form be given a discursive and audibly material life?

How could the effects of abjection be transformed into a strategic assemblage of a new mode of voicing, “regulated by different codes of intelligibility” (Stryker, 2006, p. 253)?

10 FICTOCRITICAL: For Kerr, fictocritical writing is a “kind of cyborg¹¹ writing which takes place somewhere in among/between criticism, autobiography and fiction ... Like the cyborg’s oxymoronic fleshly metal (for example) this kind of writing is not decisively any one thing” (Kerr, 1995, p. 94).

Smith conceptualizes fictocritical writing practices as an example of “creative-critical hybrids’ ... Such hybrid works contest the idea that creative work is only imaginative, and critical work only interpretive and discursive, and point to their symbiosis. They highlight the intellectual work that creative writing undertakes, and the way it engages with philosophical, cultural and political systems of thought. At the same time they suggest ways in which critical writing can break out of its conventions, and be enlivened through the adoption of creative writing techniques” (Smith, 2014, p. 331).

“Fictocriticism, as an alternative model of knowledge production which foregrounds issues of relativity, hybridisation, contradiction and uncertainty by defamiliarising the conventions of genre, enacts the process of thought, of learning, of writing and reading, and the ‘digestion’ (or non-digestion) of knowledge ... fictocriticism can expose the underbelly of intellectual endeavour, namely the inadequacy of language as a site of knowledge” (Brewster, 1995, p. 90).

For samples of fictocritical work, see e.g. the work listed under note 24, Barthes (2002 [1977]), DuPlessis (1990), Gibbs (2003), Kerr & Nettelbeck (1998).

The arrangement of the textual fragments that are assembled in this piece is based on an image of going hand in hand, which resonates with my commitment to a notion of text production that depends on and is sustained by an unlimited variety of previous writings, transtextual references, and allusions (see also, Scheidt, 2007). What I imagine as a continuous movement of interweaving brings closer together and dissolves the borders of what is traditionally analysed as different parts of a text (such as, footnotes, glossary and main text) and kinds of writing (such as, autobiographical, creative, and critical writing or writing in different national and disciplinary languages). This hybrid ensemble suggests a re-imagination of established writing and reading practices as a strategy of meaning making that resists a forceful disentanglement of textual weavings and upsets the tendency to organize approaches to knowledge production and representation in a hierarchical manner (which privileges the linear over the meandering, the allegedly factual over the

imaginative, and the supposedly general or universal over the idiosyncratic).

11 CYBORG: “A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (Haraway, 1991 [1985], p. 149).

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In the BEGINNING¹² there were WORDS.¹³ I do not know who uttered them first and when. Like in a game of whisper down the lane, these words were quickly passed from person to person. They were repeated so many times that it looked for a while as if they had been successful in asserting what can only be called a superficial imposition as the truth about this BODY.¹⁴ It had just left a space inside another body that is often seen as a paradise of safety and innocence even though influences of various kinds can easily pass through flesh and shape the not yet born.

The words were uttered in German and might have sounded like this in the beginning of the game of whisper down the lane: “Es ist ein Mädchen!” (“It’s a girl!”). And then these words proliferated, giving birth to other words: two given names chosen from one of the two lists compiled by my parents in anticipation, kinship terminology, pronouns, and later: formal forms of address. All referring back to the first appellation that took place in a hospital, at an earlier time understood as a “house or hostel for the reception and entertainment of pilgrims, travellers, and strangers” (*OED Online*, 2017), now, the acme of the medical gaze.

12 BEGINNING: If we consider that SPEECH ACTS¹⁵ and other SOMATECHNICAL¹⁶ forces have been around and forming us before we were born, don’t we have to abandon the idea of beginning in relation to those moments when writers lift their pens or start their computers, speakers move their hands or open their mouths, listeners lend their ears or other forms of ATTENTIVE SENSIBILITY,¹⁷ and readers direct their touch or gaze at the page?

Is the air I am about to push through this voice box not already vibrating?

Is what appears as the white page in front of me not humming with squiggles that are constantly interweaving its fibres?

Are the noises, voices, and silences that are performed in conversation not already ensnarled in ongoing processes of signification?

Who or what is making (sense of) this text?

Which forces constitute and shape the DISCURSIVE PRACTICES/ APPARATUSES 18 that are at work?

13 I: When I write or speak (including in the first person), I do so from the position of a stranger who speaks and writes from and to ΑΤΟΡΙΑ¹⁹ and for whom there is no familiarity to be found in linguistic practices. I tend to look for guidance regarding my predicament in dictionaries, searching for explanations and translations of meanings and illustrative examples.

For instance, the word “I”, so the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells me, is “used by the speaker or writer referring to himself or herself”, or refers to “a self, a person identical with oneself”, or “that which is conscious of itself” (*OED Online*, 2017).

Because I cannot recognize the subject position from which I speak in these definitions, readers and listeners need to know that it won’t be a me in these senses who speaks when I say “I”.

14 Body: Imagine, how I, the speaker, narrator, writer, stand in front of you and point with both hands to the assemblage of bones and flesh from which the speaking, the story, the writing emerge.

Why is it that I do not refer to this body as mine?

The process of writing this piece helped me realize that right from the start, (human, non-human, more-than-human, cyborgian) others have brought this body into being, shaped its form, sense, and meaning. This is how I came to know – this body is not mine, I am not this body.

15 SPEECH ACTS: I thank lann hornscheidt for reminding me that language, which speech-language pathologists traditionally conceive as an incorporeal and un-authored system that precedes meaning-making practices and as a trustworthy guiding force enabling communication between people, is constituted by speech acts (hornscheidt, 2012). As soon as we direct our attention at language as a doing (however, a doing that is conceptualized in the sense of the very Butlerian-Baradian performativity that informs this piece) we open a space for a critique of the normative power that the arrangements of some speech acts have managed to assume (for instance, in the shape of dictionaries, grammars, national languages,

genres, or academic disciplines) and widen our imagination of how this poststructuralist-posthumanist doing could be done differently.

16 SOMATECHNICS: The term somatechnics highlights “the notion of a chiasmatic interdependence of soma and techné: of bodily-being (or corporalities) as always already technologized and technologies as always already enfleshed” (Sullivan & Murray, 2009, p. 3).

Technés are “techniques and/or orientations (ways of seeing, [hearing, listening], knowing, feeling, moving, being, acting and so on) which are learned within a particular tradition or ontological context (are, in other words, situated) and function (often tacitly)” (Sullivan, 2012, p. 302).

“[T]echnés are not something we add or apply to the body, nor are they tools the embodied self employs to its own ends. Rather, technés are the dynamic means in and through which corporealities are crafted, that is, continuously engendered in relation to others and to a world” (Sullivan & Murray, 2009, p. 3).

17 ATTENTIVE SENSIBILITY: I thank Wibke Straube for introducing me to the notion of “attentive sensibility” as an alternative to “hearing” and for alerting me to the risk of uncritically reproducing ableist understandings of communication practices in writing when referring only to some body parts or technologies people may use to support their sense and meaning making (Straube, 2014).

Although I do not think that we have enough control over linguistic practices and their effects so that it would be possible to use language in a way that is generally perceived as inclusive of all ways of being in the world and as avoiding all forms of discrimination, marginalisation, or exclusion that are thinkable and that are enacted in everyday encounters, I consider it important to reflect on these issues and to make an attempt at addressing and responding to them in speaking and writing.

My writing will necessarily be affected by my blind spots, the matters of concern I am currently unable to take into account, the issues I have decided to spotlight, and those I cannot apprehend or show properly. The readings of this paper will, in turn, be shaped by the readers’ amplification, silencing, and distortion practices and will result in clashes with or extensions of my intentions (what I had in mind, what I wanted to say, what I think is there on the page in black and white).

The narrative that is woven into this piece picks up on this understanding of a general unreliability of speech acting and unpredictability of its effects. This condition affects all characters who appear in the paper (including the first person narrator) and all topics that are addressed and presents as a continuing challenge for all attempts at improving how we make sense and meaning, irrespective of from which subjective, theoretical, disciplinary, or professional positioning they are pursued.

18 DISCURSIVE PRACTICES/APPARATUSES:

According to Foucault, discursive practices are the local sociohistorical material conditions that enable and constrain disciplinary knowledge practices such as speaking, writing, thinking, calculating, measuring, filtering and concentrating. Discursive practices produce, rather than merely describe, the ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ of knowledge practices. (Barad, 2003, p. 819)

“For Bohr, apparatuses are particular physical arrangements that give meaning to certain concepts to the exclusion of others” (Barad, 2003, p. 819).

“Apparatuses are not pre-existing or fixed entities; they are themselves constituted through particular practices that are perpetually open to rearrangements, rearticulations, and other reworkings” (Barad, 1998, n.p.).

“[T]he material dimension of regulatory apparatuses ... is indissociable from its discursive dimension” (Barad, 1998, n.p.).

Accordingly, VOCAL APPARATUSES cannot be understood as biologically determined voice organs (as the clinical voice literature claims) but need to be reconceptualised as never fully determinable inextricably entangled discursive-material, somatechnical practices (which include speaking, listening and observations practices, such as, acoustical, perceptual and instrumental voice analyses and the norms and MATERIAL ARRANGEMENTS²⁰ that structure these). These practices constrain what counts, is produced and is heard as voice and who or what is considered a voice producer.

19 ΑΤΟΡΙΑ: “[A]topia resists description, definition, language ... every attribute is false, painful, erroneous, awkward: ... [atopia] is *unqualifiable*” (Barthes, 2002 [1977], p. 35).

20 MATERIAL ARRANGEMENTS: For instance, room acoustics, air quality, background noises, use of amplification devices, voice prostheses or hearing aids, exposure of human speakers and listeners to drugs (such as, hormones, nicotine, alcohol, ototoxic or mind-altering substances) that affect their speaking or listening performance.

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Meanwhile, the body is able to stand and walk but not yet capable of taking a stand and walking away from those material-discursive practices that threaten to limit its possible shapes and movements to a choice of two.

How to imagine ever coming to voice if one is unable to recognize oneself in the sex category to which one has been allocated at birth and if embodying an unambiguously female or male gender is widely regarded as a necessary precondition for the adoption of a subject position and consequently any form of “human” (rather than “non-human” or “monstrous”) expression? (Butler, 1999 [1990]). (In my experience, it can still be an uphill battle to argue for the use of gender diversity inclusive pronouns, such as the singular “they”, in manuscripts and author bio notes, even in spaces or in conversation with people committed to “gender inclusive” or “gender sensitive” practices).

How to avoid approaching other people by dint of the very gender binary frame, which renders abject, rejects from the discursive-material space, this body and me and in which, they, too, might not find a place for themselves? (For instance, would “my mother”, “the shop assistant”, or “the magistrate” who will appear below, prefer to be brought into being with words different from the ones I have chosen to use?)

What keeps me from asking the people I encounter: How do you position yourself with regards to this unwieldy and problematic categorisation called gender and how would you like me to address and refer to you?

What keeps us from adding a question to that effect (understood as genuine inquiry) to our repertoire of courtesy rituals (as it is increasingly implemented at conferences and workshops dedicated to gender diversity but not yet regularly practised in the everyday encounters I have witnessed so far)?

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“Sie ist ein Mädchen” (“She is a girl”). My mother corrects the sales strategy of a shop assistant who has spent the last minute telling us that the jacket I have cho-

sen is just the right thing for a boy to wear because it is so durable. The shop assistant blushes and apologises many times before she says that the jacket is also great to wear for girls who like playing sports.

In writing, I see myself wearing this padded hooded jacket and its summer version, a security uniform made from tough cotton, day and night. I reconfigure the image of these jackets as a whole body armour which I had hoped would help ward off or at least cushion the incessant blows that were dealt to my emerging sense of the kind of creature I imagined myself to be. At the time, I had no access to concepts, theories, words, discursive figurations or physical arrangements that would have been potentially suitable for countering these blows (that palmed themselves off as merely linguistic) on kindred terms.

Instead, I resorted to using those textile fabrics that I believed to consist of fixed substances as protective bandages to help heal the wounds I had already sustained and to add a tough layer onto my sensitive skin to prevent future assaults from affecting me too deeply.

Today, I know that no matter how solid the outward layer one puts on appears, it won't offer protection against the piercing exclusionary effects of bigenderism and cisnormativity. Also, inevitably, toughening one's bodily surface will further constrain the range of one's possible shapes and movements and aggravate one's sense of being trapped in a cage some of whose bars one has forged oneself.

This is what I see as the core of the issue: The widespread habit of binarily gendering people's bodies/voices the instance they come into sight/within earshot and of simultaneously extending this classification to the entire person in their past, present, and future embodiments.

What do we ourselves know about the sex chromosomes, hormone levels, distribution and functioning of hormone receptors, on which the sexual differentiation of our bodies and voices is said to depend (see e.g. Abitbol, 2006)?

What do we know about what other people make of us?

What is it that makes people feel so confident of their own assumptions and expectations in relation to other people's somatechnical positionings and configurations that they think they can afford to continue – without hesitation – with the customary practice of maling or femaling the other?

What else is left of someone, one might ask, that is not affected by this violent imposition?

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At that time, I am still young enough to hold my mother's hand for support and protection. It is a speech-language pathologist's and a medical doctor's wife's hand of which I believe that it will guarantee the safeguarding of my health for the rest of my life. However, this childhood belief notwithstanding, a protracted encounter with a complex network of forces (impossible to say on the spot from where they originated and of which nature they were) infests this body and me with voice-lessness (a-phonia).

Had this body-mind (as voice organ) been affected in such a way that its delicate components had gotten deranged, damaged, destabilised, reducing its voice to no more than a puff?

Had the various possible phonees²¹ (e.g. listeners, readers, but also recording, acoustic analysis and inspection devices that are used to visualize larynges and the functioning of vocal folds) failed to attend to and make sense of the fluctuations of air molecules that have been emanating from this body's mouth?

Or was this voice inaudible due to "one vast, composite act of invalidation and erasure" (Stryker, 2006, pp. 250–251)?

21 PHONEE: invented word: some-one/thing who/which is exposed to vocal sounds

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Plot summary: Twenty years of not-being-heard-with-what-I-had-to-say make me follow my mother's model. I enrol in speech-language pathology and later specialise in what this profession regards as "voice disorders". Since then I have found myself being preoccupied with scrutinizing the motives for this precarious decision.

Had my mother been successful in passing on to me her uncompromising desire for helping others?

Had I hoped to gain the skills for one day being able to rid the world from a-phonia?

Or had speech-language pathology seen in me the ideal candidate for the position of mouthpiece of medico-scientism and succeeded in enlisting me?

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After 20 years of participant observation I can report that working in the field of hu-

man communication sciences is the perfect choice for any body wanting to keep their voice-lessness as is. Because medico-scientific voice researchers and clinicians are required to keep up the appearance of an objective and unaffected stance towards what they encounter,²² they are compelled to put a jacket on and cover their faces with a mask that traps unscientific utterances and neutralizes them in a stream of white noise that emerges from its front. While a text-to-speech engine instructs research participants or clients to execute vocal tasks, the voice specialist takes a seat behind a fortress of technical equipment that will take recordings and calculate acoustical properties of those aspects of the medico-scientific construct of the human voice that are measurable with the help of computer software.²³

22 This belief in objectivity in the traditional sense goes so far that using the first person singular “I” to refer to the author of a paper is considered inappropriate in many speech-language pathology journals. Compliance with this rule will be enforced by the editing team and may become the decisive factor whether or not a manuscript (even if it has already been accepted) will be published.

23 How to emerge from a condition of not-being-able-to-speak-and-not-being-heard-with-what-one-has-to-say if the nature of one’s voice-lessness cannot be explored with the methods of knowledge production in which one has been trained and if the promises of one’s coming to voice cannot be accommodated within the constraints of the worldview according to which one has been raised?

The medico-scientific worldview with its inherent binary classification practices is firmly built into the observation and analysis instruments that are part of everyday clinical practice. For instance, some types of acoustical analysis software will only run if voice samples have been (automatically or manually) categorized as either female or male prior to the analysis. This setting triggers the uploading of sex specific normative ranges, which limit the variability of measurements and shape the interpretation of the data. In other words, these examples of material-discursive entanglements that produce medico-scientific vocal apparatuses demonstrate how the silencing of any attempts at trans-speaking is further amplified by systematically prioritizing the seemingly classifiable, regular and observable over the unruly and open-ended and by continuing to rely on flawed methods to the exclusion of other more suitable techniques.²⁴

This is a form of voice-lessness (of which several examples are woven into this piece) that does not appear in speech-language pathology dictionaries and textbooks because its cause cannot be attributed to a malfunction of the speaker's psyche or their vocal folds (as suggested in the first quote listed under note 9). In fact, it appears unrelated to the voice producer as they are commonly understood, namely, as an entity from which that which we call "voice" emerges. Rather, this condition of voice-lessness seems to be imposed by the phonees, those who/which are exposed to vocal productions that have originated from elsewhere. Such phonee-imposed voice-lessness is characterized by the phonees' inability or refusal to acknowledge the presence and relevance of an utterance, by the phonees' lack of capacity or willingness to make sense of vibrations that have reached their senses.

24 For instance, as Zimman (2017) and Azul (2016) demonstrate, when research on gender diverse people's voices is based on the participants' subjective positionings in terms of gender and sexuality it becomes apparent that heteronormative standards will not do justice to the diversity of identities that can be encountered in this imagined community. Instead, research approaches are needed that seek to attend to the complexities of the participants' sociocultural positionings and to their preferences regarding how they wish to be perceived and addressed by others in encounters.

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I worked in speech-language pathology for ten years without being worried by theoretical, methodological, or ethical concerns. It was only when I decided to approach a research topic that was close to my heart, calling it bashfully "the vocal situation of so-called female-to-male transsexuals" (Scheidt, Kob, & Neuschaefer-Rube, 2003), that I noticed that I could not take it any more.

I am still unable to trace back the exact course of events. Somehow, the very normative practices (such as, naming, gendering, measuring, analysing, observing, diagnosing) that constitute a big part of a speech-language pathologist's bread-and-butter business had turned into fists around this body's heart, throat, and brain and began to affect me. My jacket and facemask that had merged with the rest of this body over the years may have sustained capillary cracks; for in-

stance, as a symptom of old age or through spontaneous disintegration. Rhizomatic pathways to and from those hybrid forces that my protective clothing was meant to ward off may have opened up, transforming my sensitivity.

I thought: While other people seem to have direct access to what they may call “their core” – an imaginary entity located inside their bodies, which holds together the various threads of their subjective positionings, and which has magically created its own language that is both easily speakable and intelligible to all – I am stuck between three types of voice-lessness: motionless silence, copying the patterns of words and modes of presenting oneself to the world I see and hear other people enacting (but in which I cannot recognize myself) and being silenced.

I thought: I as thought will never have a voice.

(How) could I assemble linguistic-material forms and formations in which I could recognize myself (however briefly)?

Whatever I have/want to say and whichever mode of signification I have devised, I will need to engage with questions and enactments of materiality, embodiment, intelligibility, openness and responsiveness in order to give the speech act a chance of coming to sound.

(How) could I imagine/facilitate material-discursive vocal agency?

*

Let me mobilize as a preliminary response to these concerns a retrospective assemblage of memories that are partly engraved in this body’s flesh and blood, partly recorded in audible and readable form.²⁵

25 See, Azul (2011a, 2011b, 2009) and Scheidt (2008).

I have decided to put these memories to sound again, here and now, reiterated, re-signified, re-materialized. I approach this focussed re-encounter hesitantly because I know that attending to some of the sources on which I could draw might re-quicken and restore to overwhelming power those pathologizing forces I have attempted to put under erasure during the last ten years.

My Goliath are binary classification practices – painting a world of hierarchical oppositions of male versus female, normal versus abnormal, mind versus body, voice versus writing, fact versus fiction, and science versus theory – and biologi-

cally determinist perspectives according to which gender, body, and voice are defined by unambiguously physical forces. My stones are a range of currently debated feminist theories that unhinge the Goliath, my sling is a hybrid mode of text production that draws on memories, theories and imagination.

How to make a strong case for writing, speaking, and performance practices that bring the autobiographical, creative, and critical together and follow shifting theoretical positionings, if approaches to research that do not fit in established epistemological boxes are still relegated to the realm of the inappropriate in many parts of the academic world?

Due to the outright rejection of the “I” (see note 22) there is no point in submitting such work to the speech-language pathology journals I have approached so far. From my experience, even publication outlets whose governing bodies are open to the “I” and supportive of creative practice as research might consider such kinds of trans-speaking submissions as:

- a) not performative enough or
- b) not creative enough or
- c) not goal-directed enough or
- d) not providing enough guidance for the reader or
- e) not fictional enough or
- f) not scholarly enough or
- g) not theoretical enough or
- h) as not engaging sufficiently with the existing literature with which the piece resonates (for instance, reviewers of this essay in its earlier versions have pointed me to: Bakhtin’s work; queer linguistics; speech act theory; feminist and psychoanalytic theories; as examples of literature to which I have not referred explicitly but which would be suited to expand the points I am trying to make).

In addition, most publication outlets only accept printable work and exclude moving creative practices, such as, sound and film.

However, as Smith and Dean argue, there is every reason to be hopeful that the range of the acceptable will continue to be widened, because it is increasingly recognized that academic practice would reap important benefits from this move: “The turn to creative practice is one of the most exciting and revolutionary developments to occur in the university within the last two decades and is currently

accelerating in influence. It is bringing with it dynamic new ways of thinking about research and new methodologies for conducting it, a raised awareness of the different kinds of knowledge that creative practice can convey and an illuminating body of information about the creative process. As higher education become more accepting of creative work and its existing and potential relationships to research, we also see changes in the formation of university departments, in the way conferences are conducted, and in styles of academic writing and modes of evaluation” (Smith & Dean, 2009, p. 1).

The rise of “autoethnography” as a qualitative research method (e.g. Adams, Ellis, & Holman Stones, 2015), the emergence of the field of “performative social science” (e.g. special issue in *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2008, 9(2), <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/10>), and textbooks such as, Kara (2015) and Lykke (2014), provide further examples of a recent trend towards opening up academic practice for alternative approaches to knowledge production.

*

I have scraped off those layers of skin that were once discernible as my jacket and facemask and decide to challenge one of Goliath’s myriad offsprings: the inextricable linkage in German law of given name and sex category and the unwieldy body of rules that restrict the possibilities for German nationals to request changes to these original designations.

In the so-called “general administrative regulation for the law about the change of family names and given names”, part two: “change of given names”, section three: “choice of new given names” it says: “For people of male sex only male given names are permissible, for people of female sex only female given names” (see for the wording of these regulations in German: http://www.verwaltungsvorschriften-im-internet.de/bsvwvbund_11081980_VII31331317.htm).

Imagine the predicament of people whose bodies cannot be unambiguously classified as male or female via traditional medico-scientific inspection practices (inter* people); or of those, like me, whose bodies were thought to be easily classifiable at birth but who do not identify with the sex that has been registered on their birth certificate. The former have been treated by German law until recently as if they do not exist²⁶ and the latter continue to be considered special cases for which

a special law has been invented, the “law about the change of given names and the determination of sex membership in special cases”, commonly abbreviated to: “transsexuals’ law”.²⁷ (From the law’s abbreviated name it cannot be decided whether it is meant to be a body of rules to enable or to restrict the movements of those to whom it applies).

26 Recent legislative changes in Germany (effective from November 2013) prescribe that parents of children whose genitals appear ambiguous at birth and are not immediately made unambiguous via medical intervention have to leave the question of the child’s gender/sex unanswered in birth registration documents. Inter* activists have pointed out that this rule is tantamount to a coercive outing of these children and bears the risk of increasing rather than reducing discrimination of inter* people (see e.g. Ghattas, 2013, pp. 69–72).

27 See the wording of the transsexuals’ law in German: <http://www.dgti.org/tsgrecht.html?id=70>

According to the transsexuals’ law a request for a name change that also involves a change of the name’s assigned sex category will only be granted if the applicant can convince a magistrate of the following:

- 1) that they do not any more identify with the sex that is registered on their birth certificate but with the “other” sex;
- 2) that they have felt compelled for at least three years to live in accordance with their beliefs; and
- 3) that there is a high degree of probability that the sense of belonging to the other sex won’t change again.

*

What was I to do?

At the time when I first contemplated queering those conservative forces that had restricted my movements during my entire life, my situation (as seen from my subjective perspective) did not comply with the requirements of the transsexuals’ law, because:

- 1) I had never identified with how the people around me defined the bounda-

ries of an acceptable expression of membership of the female or the male sex;

- 2) I had only just started to get an idea of what my own beliefs were;
- 3) I had always found it too hard to follow the reasoning of probability theory.

In hindsight I consider it a mixed blessing that I succeeded in convincing the magistrate that he was obliged to apply the privileges that come with the transsexuals' law to me. For, while I thoroughly enjoy being called by a name I have chosen myself, a name, whose meaning implies that whenever I am called or referred to a high degree of fondness for me ("Beloved!") is expressed (at least nominally), the change of gender entry in my birth certificate meant merely that I was granted permission to transition from one misfitting categorization to the other.

What is more, sex reassignment in Germany came at the time at a high cost.²⁸ It required the applicant to consent to having their reproductive organs cut out of their body as if excising a tumour and to other bits and pieces being scraped together from elsewhere in order to construct an appearance that the surgeon considered the best possible approximation of a normal looking male or female body. After such surgeries, people might experience complications, such as, infections, tearing or necrosis of tissue, problems with urination, traditional forms of sexual intercourse or the capacity to experience sexual pleasure and may require ongoing medical care for the rest of their lives (see e.g. Sutcliffe et al., 2009 and Wierckx et al., 2011).

28 See the ruling by the German Federal Constitutional Court from January 2011, in which the requirement to be made infertile and to have had sex reassignment surgery prior to a legal gender change was declared unconstitutional:

<http://www.bundesverfassungsgericht.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2011/bvg11-007.html>.

*

Interim report

It has now been fifteen years since I have subjected this body to several steps of the medical approach to female-to-male transsexualism as it was prescribed in Germany at the time.

At first, I was sometimes able to briefly look at this body when I stood naked in front of a mirror.

On some days, when I attached a silicone cock and some facial hair, flexed some muscles, and hardened my gaze, I even managed to trick myself into seeing (for seconds) the appearance of a viable subject/body (and it gave me a kick²⁹).

29 kick: “A blow or knock with the foot;

a grave or humbling set-back; an expression of severe criticism or disapproval; opposition, objection, repugnance;

a jerk, jolt; jerking motion. Hence, a pulse or surge of electricity capable of producing a jerk in a detecting or measuring instrument;

a strong or sharp stimulant effect ... ; a thrill, excitement, pleasure; a feeling of marked enjoyment or the cause of such enjoyment; ... to be excited or pleased by, to enjoy; ... , purely for pleasure or excitement, freq. recklessly or irresponsibly;

an interest or enthusiasm, esp. one that is temporary; a fashion, fad” (*OED Online*, 2017).

On most days, however, I averted my eyes quickly and got dressed as fast as I could. I knew that my earlier predicament had remained unchanged: This body was not mine. I was not this body.

Listening to the vibrations of air molecules that emerged from this body’s mouth echoed the reflections on the mirror image. This voice, amplified via reverberations from the bathroom tiles, the vocal fold muscles thickened from testosterone treatment, the mucosa sluggish from caffeine and alcohol-induced dehydration and irritated from inhaled smoke particles, the air moving slowly and slightly irregular through this exerted throat, was not mine. I was not this voice.

I seemed stuck “between the pains of two violations, the mark of gender and the unlivability of its absence” (Stryker, 2006, p. 253). The CREATURE³⁰ I saw in the mirror and the gruff I heard in the echo, were not the PERSON³¹ I had – for a while – wanted to become.

30 CREATURE: “A created thing or being; a product of creative action; a creation;

a human being; a person, an individual. With modifying word indicating the type of person, and esp. expressing admiration, affection, compassion, or com-

miseration;

a reprehensible or despicable person;

a living or animate being; an animal, often as distinct from a person;

a person who owes his or her fortune and position, and remains subservient

to,

a patron; a person who is ready to do another's bidding; a puppet, a cat's paw"

(*OED Online*, 2017).

31 PERSON: "A role or character assumed in real life, or in a play, etc.; a part, function, or office; a persona; a semblance or guise;

an individual human being; a man, woman, or child;

a man or woman of high rank, distinction, or importance; a personage;

a human being, as distinguished from an animal, thing, etc. In later use also: an individual regarded as having human rights, dignity, or worth;

in general philosophical sense: a conscious or rational being" (*OED Online*, 2017).

*

While having succeeded in claiming the legal right to be addressed as "Herr" ("Mr") rather than "Frau" ("Ms/Mrs") is regarded by some the maximally possible step a person can take to transform their life, for me, subjecting myself to the violent forces of sex reassignment constituted no more than an initial exploratory operation in my long-term project of investigating the possibilities of coming to voice on my terms, of becoming my take on "David".

Home a-phonia remedy trial: Proposal for a personal explorative inquiry

(taken from: *Ephemeral cookery for the trans-speaking voice clinician*, chapter 1: Taking care of oneself before contemplating taking care of others)

Will this body become my body in the moment when I begin caressing its scars and other deviations from famous (marble) models and feel grateful for and say yes to the imperfections and ambiguities that my treatment was unable to erase?

How to embrace and disarm the “attribution of monstrosity” (Stryker, 2006, p. 245) that seems to emerge from everywhere (mirrors, walls, thoughts, utterances, silences, stares, structural exclusions)?

How to reclaim a “somatechnics of perception” (Sullivan, 2012) that allows me to “speak... in my personal voice ... assert my worth ... and redefine a life worth living” (Stryker, 2006, p. 256)?

How to transform my staggering between nostalgic alliances with dictionary definitions, the simplicity of scientific epistemologies, the promises of contemporary feminisms and artistic research into an ode to linguistic, disciplinary and representational homelessness?

How to bring up the strength to refuse any alignment other than with the choir of the raffish?

Method.

- 1: Take off silicone cock
- 2: Shred
- 3: Turn into personal lubricant
- 4: Enjoy!
- 5: Dispose of categorizations
- 6: Turn statues into marbles
- 7: Flood interactional space with utopian sensibilities
- 8: Keep the balls rolling

*

While this is how I see things, my profession and its predominant discourses continue to build their strongholds. We have to, so they say, conduct large-scale research trials with the gender identity and sex development disordered populations in order to find the most effective methods of voice feminization or masculinization. With the help of early endocrinological intervention, it has already become possible to enable a smooth transition from young people’s sexless prepubertal voices to normal adult voices in the reassigned gender. In the foreseeable future, so they might say some time soon, we will be able to 3D print standard-sized male or female voice organs and implant them into suitable pharyngo-laryngectomized throats in a simple organ replacement procedure.

I do not applaud when I bear witness to announcements of this kind. I do not raise my glass to celebrate million dollar grants my colleagues might win from government initiatives, pharmaceutical or biofabrication companies. Instead, I break with the rules of politeness and go back to my office for an intimate encounter with those forces that have always already both violated and enabled me. I put these hands on this body, hum a tune (mmm mmm mmm mmm mmm mmmmm, ¡ay! ¡ay! ¡ay! ¡ay! ¡ay! ¡ayyy!) and convert the vibrations I sense to scribbles on paper which I will make available, some day in the future, for audiences, like the readership of this journal, in order to stage a further joint attempt at diversifying approaches to knowledge production and re-presentation.

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