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# A sonic geography of voice: Towards an affective politics

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to extend disciplinary investigation by calling for a geography of voice and a politics of speaking and of listening. It explores the different characteristics of voices, their affective and ethico-political forces, and how they make public spaces. Through its polyphonic method of text, audio illustrations and recorded interviews with participants in radical political organization, the experience of the paper itself is a political gesture, one that invites the listener-reader to consider the histories, narratives and assumptions that underpin her own reception of them.

## Keywords

affect, labour, politics, sound, space, voice

Sound operates by forming links, groupings, and conjunctions that accentuate individual identity as a relational project. The flows of surrounding sonority can be heard to weave an individual into a larger social fabric, filling relations with local sound, sonic culture, auditory memories, and the noises that move between, contributing to the making of shared spaces. This associative and connective process of sound comes to reconfigure the spatial distinctions of inside and outside, to foster confrontations between one and another, and to infuse language with degrees of intimacy. (LaBelle, 2010: xxi)

Only the person who listens hears. (Dietze, 2000: 20)

## I Introduction

I begin this paper with an experience of the voice that illustrates both the way in which how we speak and listen is political, and the way in which voice and geography – voice and space – co-create one another.

At the time, it didn't seem like something worth talking about. We were sitting together in a hanger-like room, in a warehouse. It was blustery

outside and cold inside. We were at a meeting of a new collective to organize an upcoming demonstration, launching a campaign with casual service workers. The chairs were set up in a ring, you could see the faces of everyone around you – some you knew, others were unfamiliar. Everyone was sizing each another up. One by one, people began to introduce themselves. One by one the voices echoed around our ears. Some of them were confident, full of pep and verve, words tumbling all over themselves with enthusiasm. Some stuttered into the air, pausing and racing, staccato, nervous. Others were drawn out and understated. Some filled the space while others seemed swallowed up by it. And then, suddenly, it stopped. One person said nothing at all. A pause. Waiting. Nothing. And in that moment the room reconfigured itself around the memory of our voices, and the silence.

The voice, or lack thereof, is the most immediate means of expression; indeed, as Maurizio

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Lazzarato (2009: 1) puts it, 'affective and ethico-political forces are firstly expressed by the voice'. The voice, in its expression of affective and ethico-political forces, creates worlds. The utterances of speakers open up spaces for different ways of being through dialogue, through their anticipation of a response (Bakhtin, 1986). A geography of the voice, that is to say the ways that voices are shaped by, and shape, worlds and spaces, reveals the creative and constitutive operation of speech and language (Butler, 1997). This understanding looks to the voice, and speech, as more than a conduit for the transfer of information. Emphasized here is not only the reciprocal and active process of creating worlds and meanings, but also the extra-linguistic elements of communication: the soundings, gestures and affective transmissions that make up our different relations.

By tuning into these affective and auditory elements, this article instigates a 'sonic' and 'auditory' geography (Matless, 2005; Rodaway, 1994) of vocal utterances. It seeks to imagine an acoustic politics of the voice, an echo of what Brandon LaBelle (2010: xix) calls an 'acoustic politics of space', whereby sound becomes a method to engage in, and elaborate upon, contemporary globalized political landscapes that require more 'networked and situational' understandings (p. xviii). It does so with a very specific view to contributing to an affective politics, a politics of relation. Such a perspective is particularly cogent at a time when more and more ideological and political effects are being produced by non-ideological and affective means; when, as Brian Massumi (2002: 62) writes, 'affect contaminates empirical space through language'.<sup>1</sup>

This contribution proceeds through tracing out three distinct, yet concatenating, arguments. Beginning with the writing of Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) on the utterance, I establish that voices and their linguistic articulations are produced by, and productive of, relations, geographies and subjectivities. These are tied to projections and positions of class, race, education, culture, social value, sexuality and so forth (Boland, 2010). Departing

from common linguistic propositions that situate the listener as passive and the speaker as active (Althusser, 1977; Austin, 1975; de Saussure, 1959; Smith, 2000), I contend that listeners actively contribute to the spaces that utterances compel, emphasizing the performative nature of speaking and listening. Second, I suggest that such aspects play out in the sonic inflections of the voice, not only in their linguistic content. I pay particular attention to pace, accent and dialect, intonation, frequency, amplitude, and silence. Introducing examples from political, social and cultural fields alongside recorded interviews with participants involved in radical left organization, I show how these qualities affect our capacity to listen and to respond to one another. Finally, I assert the co-creation of space and sound. I build my proposition by expanding the trajectory in cultural geography that sees space as dynamic and political (Doel, 1999; Harvey, 1989; Massey, 2005), to show that the social, the oral and the aural are intertwined (Wood et al., 2007) and that the dialogic processes of utterances may enact different collective and public spaces.

Several recordings accompany my analysis; the reader/listener is invited to activate these mediums of text and audio simultaneously through the links provided in the soundfiles reference list. The polyphonic method used in this paper extends a desire for more convivial and caring practices of listening (Heckert, 2010) and more experimental, self-reflexive and non-representational geographical methods (Garrett, 2011; Holmes, 2009; Lorimer, 2005; Morton, 2005; Thrift, 2004). Two kinds of sound recording are present: first, recordings of speech and sound phenomena taken from a variety of archives that directly illustrate the propositions put forth; the second of each recording is a compilation of short interviews, undertaken in 2010 with constituents of the political radical left. The subjects of these recordings were chosen for their commitment to collective organization (that is, a commitment to working with others on a common political/social project), coming from campaigns around feminism, migration,

labour, gender and queer politics, permaculture and education struggles in the UK, Germany and Australia. Within much radical political organization there is an awareness of how we speak to each other, the vocabularies we use and the articulations of privilege that underlie our speech. During the recording of the interviews all eight participants were asked the following question: in a collective meeting how does pace/ accent/intonation/frequency and pitch/volume and silence affect your capacity to listen and to respond?

As a *ritournelle*, these interviews return the reader/listener to different micro-political perspectives around speaking and listening. They also operate sensually, contributing a further layer of sonic experience by inviting the reader/listener to be attentive to the qualities of the speaking voices themselves, and to reflect on her own responses in this process. By approaching the voice in this way, through the register of the sensitive and sensible, this method invokes the movement in cultural and human geography toward the affective and psycho-somatic realms (Anderson, 2005; Bondi and Davidson, 2004; Wylie, 2005).

Geography has had a notable history of bringing together sound, space and politics. This has been especially influenced by the recognition of space and landscape as productive, mutable and non-objective; as a process of writing and rewriting, so to speak (Barnes and Duncan, 1992; Cosgrove, 1984; Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988; Lefebvre, 1991). Most emphatically, poststructural, postcolonial and feminist geographers have analysed the productions of space and power, to argue that gender, class, race, education, culture and economies are inherently bound to language, knowledge production and spatiotemporality. Such discourses contest the metanarratives of the social sciences and their epistemological structures (Crang, 2005; Davies and Dwyer, 2007), including the authority of the writer herself (Doel, 1993), to argue for situated knowledges that challenge writing/speaking positions and

gender identities (Bondi, 1997). Work done on postcolonial geographies, gender and race (Blunt and Rose, 1994; Garane, 2005; Jacobs, 1994; Nash, 1994) further stresses the hegemonic apparatuses underpinning practices of mapping, to reveal the power structures and relationships that are formative of, and are shaped by, our inhabitation of spatiotemporal linguistic worlds.

Over the past 20 years, geolinguists have written the social and spatial dimensions into processes of language mapping (Breton, 1991: xv; Britain, 2004; Withers, 1982), exploring how space, time and social constructions are productive of, and produced by, languages and their usage. Scholarship on how we speak – the sounds and mechanics of our speech – identity, belonging and place have furthered this dialogue on sonic-linguistic geographies by asking questions on power formation and privilege (Boland, 2010; Mac Giolla Chríost and Thomas, 2008; Matless, 2005; Valentine et al., 2008; Watson, 2006). Elsewhere such themes have been explored through propositions for a more definitive ontology of the voice, often addressing speech and the voice from psycho-linguistic, symbolic or phenomenological registers (Cavarero, 2005; Sellers, 1994; Dolar, 2006; Idhe, 2007; Irigaray, 2004; Kristeva, 1989). Recently geographers have been focusing on sound, power and space (Gallagher, 2011), paying particular attention to issues of class, race, culture and music (Jazeel, 2005; Smith, 1994). Such a wealth of scholarship thoroughly substantiates Smith's (1994: 238) claim that 'sound is inseparable from the social landscape' and, I would argue, along with Jacques Attali (1985) and Theodore Adorno (1973, 1976), from political, cultural and economic landscapes as well.<sup>2</sup>

The spatial and sonic research of geographers has, however, been most prolific at the intersections of musicology and space (Anderson et al., 2005; Cameron and Rogalsky, 2006; Ingham, 1999; Smith, 1997; Wood, 2002). Within this growing literature, key themes have included music and political spatiality (Leyshon et al.,

1995; Revill, 2000; Smith, 1994), and musical performance in the production of space and place (Connell and Gibson, 2003; Kong, 1995; Purvis et al., 1998). The fields of acoustic ecology and soundscape studies (Schafer, 1977) have also had notable resonances for geographers, particularly those investigating natural environments, fauna and sonic ecologies (Cameron and Rogalsky, 2006; Matless, 2005; Velasco, 2000). Not only living organic environments but also artificial soundscapes, such as the noise of machinery, industry, logistics and habitation, have become desirable subjects of study, influencing a veritable force of sonic and geographical methods (Augoyard and Torque, 2005; Lorimer, 2007; Paglen et al., 2008), geographical-artistic praxes such as sound walks (Butler, 2006), field recordings (Montgomery, 2009), sound mapping projects, such as Radio Aporee (<http://radio.aporee.org>), and policy research such as DEFRA's Noise Mapping England (<http://services.defra.gov.uk/wps/portal/noise>).

While these aspects of music and sound have garnered significant attention in the discipline, there has been comparatively little research on practices of listening-itself (Anderson, 2002; Back, 2003; Lorimer, 2007; Rodaway, 1994), as Paul Simpson (2009) notes, or language as purely sonic phenomena (not strictly as linguistic phenomena subsidiary to speech) (Boland, 2010). While the soundings of language have been thematized by scholars in sound art and concrete poetry (LaBelle and Migone, 2001), this has yet to be considerably taken up by geographers. Given the disciplinary silence on listening, vocal phenomena, and the making of worlds, this article is unique in that it foregrounds a variety of different *sounds* of our speech as it articulates space and time. It furthers geographical scholarship by examining the acoustic soundings of language from a geographical-political perspective, composing a new imagination of the voice, its sonorities and resonances, its disharmonies, cracks and silences, to offer a 'scholarship of evocation

rather than definition' (Solnit, 2001: 198) more concerned with invention than critique or taxonomy. It is this sentiment that, in the section that follows, compels me to turn specifically to Bakhtin's reading of the utterance to show how voices, and how we listen to them, reconfigure our relationships to each other and to our shared worlds.

## II The utterance and sound

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of enunciation grants the voice and utterances a compelling analysis. On the one hand, Bakhtin reinvests the word and the production of meaning with a political and social capacity for action. On the other, he offers a way of thinking about the production of subjectivity – the process of subjectivation (Butler, 1990; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Foucault, 1982).<sup>3</sup> For Bakhtin, rather than being originally interpellated as linguistic or psychological subjects, speakers *act* as possible worlds. The communicational and world-making capacities of voices exceed their capture by the words and meanings they articulate. The acoustic qualities and inflections of voices – the timbres, intonations, accents, rhythms and frequencies – impact on how we speak and listen to one another; the voice, and how we hear it, is produced by, and reproduces, codings of power, class, gender and race. As Lazarrato writes, voices:

distribute and 'name' speakers according to a protopolitical model that structures the space of the word along the lines of power relations between speakers. The voice already engages a specific mode of action of discourse that with Foucault we can call 'the action on possible actions', because it expresses evaluation, differences and values. (Lazarrato, 2009: 2)

In her canonical text, *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt (1958) asserts that speech is a privileged means by which speakers identify themselves to others, demarcating themselves as particular political subjects. This is a position not incompatible with Bakhtin's, who rejects theories of speech acts in which speaking is

active while listening and understanding is passive. He argues that all listening is in anticipation of response. This, though, varies greatly in its activity. A responsive understanding may be realized immediately in action or silently wait to announce itself in delay. For Bakhtin this is the prerogative of listening and understanding – as fully preparatory of response-reaction (Bakhtin, 1986: 69). Such a prerogative influences the operation of communication:

The speaker himself is oriented precisely toward such an actively responsive understanding ... he expects response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth ... Moreover, any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker ... And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances – his own and others' – with which his given utterances enter into one kind of relation or another. (Bakhtin, 1986: 69)

From this we may gauge how the words the speaker uses are contingent upon others – other people, contexts, situations, events and experiences. As Bakhtin goes on to explain:

The word is expressive ... but this expression does not inhere in the word itself. It originates at the point of contact between the word and actual reality, under the conditions of that real situation articulated by the individual utterance. In this case the word appears as an expression of some evaluative position of an individual person. (Bakhtin, 1986: 88).

Bakhtin's utterance is imbued with political potentiality on two fronts. First, through his emphasis on a linguistic ontology based on a constant relational interplay and reciprocity between the speaker and listener. Second, through his recognition of the 'multiplicity of the semiotic, the polyphony of matters of expression (both verbal and non-verbal), [and] the heterogeneity of linguistic and non-linguistic elements' (Lazzarato, 2009: 1), which marks a departure from speech act theories such as Austin's (1975) concept of the performative.

This regard for extra-linguistic elements, the sonic elements, makes the utterance interesting for us. Bakhtin defines an utterance as a coalescing of words, propositions and grammar – what may be referred to as 'technical signs' – and extra-linguistic 'dialogic' elements. In other words, in part, the soundings, gestures and affective exchanges expressed through language and signs but not capturable by linguistic categories. What activates words and propositions to become utterances are these 'pre-individual affective forces and social and ethico-political forces that whilst being external to language are actually inside the utterance' (Bakhtin, 1986).

The affective, social, ethical and political forces that Lazzarato speaks of, and in connection with which I also identify non-discursive elements such as intonations, speeds, pitches and resonances, demarcate various alliances, convivialities, enmities, sympathies and antipathies for Bakhtin. The affective and desiring aspects within the utterance and its expression can form new lines and networks of collaboration and collusion, or reinstate and establish patterns of domination. Because of this, the relations set up through processes of enunciation have a profoundly political significance. These processes are sounded out by the qualities of voices, which are often neglected in discussions of speech acts and communication. These qualities, however, can reveal much of sociopolitical conditions and contexts, as I now demonstrate.

### III Vocal inflections

During a talk given in New York in 2009, philosopher Franco Berardi (2009a) recounted a story about the coincidental changes in the speed of speech and forms of power through capitalism, based on the findings of Richard Robin on language learning. Robin travelled to the Soviet Union in 1987 and 1993 to record the rate of syllables emitted per second of speech by television presenters. What Robin (2007)

discovered was that the pace of speech in 1987 was considerably slower than that in 1993, three syllables per second in the former compared to six syllables per second in the latter. This was found to be the same in China and in the Middle East.

For Berardi (2009b: 112–113) this reflected something of the shift in ideological governance, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of capitalist Russia. Prior to the fall of socialism, the presenter had only to reassure her audience through her assertion of the communist state but, with the introduction of capitalism, competition and advertising proliferated. This, argued Berardi, illustrated the difference between the modern consensus-based power, founded on the sharing and persuasion of a common ideological framework, goal and truth, and the more contemporary forms, involving the saturation of the communicative and receiving faculties. In other words, it marked a shift from consensus-based to saturation-based forms of power and governance. The doubling of the pace of speech, then, became an everyday, auditory enactment of changed sociopolitical conditions, and their playing out through corporeal and communicative rhythms.

Not only the speed of speech but also its accent and regional dialect illuminates micro- and macro-political conditions. Mladen Dolar (2006: 20) notes that ‘the official language is deeply wrought by the class division; there is a constant “linguistic class struggle” which underlies its constitution’. Geographers have pointed to the ways in which ‘styles of voice belong to the landscape’ (Matless, 2005: 747) and the ‘moral, political, and cultural judgements’ (Boland, 2010: 4) that define the kinds of sounds that compose a particular dialect, leading to ‘sonic exclusion’ (Matless, 2005: 747) or inclusion. What is heard as accent or dialect is imbued with sociopolitical connotations – the normative accent and dialect becomes inaudible and ‘loses’ its alien timbre, while the foreign accent or dialect draws attention to the materiality of the speaker, her

geographical background, class, race, nationality and education (BBC, 2008) for instance, which might remain unseen.

This was apparent during the 2010 Australian Federal Election when political commentators began to question the motivation behind perceived changes in the voice of Labor leader Julia Gillard. As Janet Albrechtsen from the conservative newspaper *The Australian* put it:

Start with something so basic it barely gets a mention. That voice. Gillard’s accent is curious. Especially if, like her, you grew up in Adelaide, had a working-class background and went to public schools. I’m often asked why I don’t sound like Gillard. Easy. No one in Adelaide sounds like Gillard ... Could she have manufactured those broad nasal vowels, so different even from her Adelaide-accented sister, to fit her political emergence within Labor’s left-wing factions? You feel so cynical even suggesting it. Yet, *The Australian’s* Helen Trinca remembers speaking to Gillard in the early 1980s when, as a student leader, she sounded ‘middle class and well spoken’. (Albrechtsen, 2010).

Albrechtsen was not alone in her observation. Aidan Wilson from the leftist cult publication *Crikey* wryly commented that ‘it’s lucky for us that ... the NSW Labor Party’s Right-wing faction have gifted us with a new PM whose voice serves as a linguistic discussion point’ (Wilson, 2010). Like or dislike of voice aside, what is significant are the implications drawn from the accent. As Albrechtsen continued:

To follow Gillard’s rising political ambitions, you need only follow her changing accent ... The changing voice is only interesting as a symbol of Gillard’s broader modus operandi; she can live with factional twists, philosophical contradictions and policy inconsistencies, so long as one thing remains constant: she gets what she wants. (Albrechtsen, 2010)

Of course Gillard is not the only politician to have her ‘code-switching’ (Nilep, 2006) tendencies challenged in the public realm, where the implications of sociolinguistic phenomena have

come to represent wider political dissonance. During the 2008 American presidential elections President Barack Obama was criticized for adopting a 'black' dialect in his addresses to predominantly black constituencies at the same time that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid was accusing him in private of speaking 'white' (Beam, 2010; Cilliza, 2010). As Gillard's did for class, Obama's phonological identity functioned to reinstate racial signification when the plane of the visual had lost some of its novelty.

The line of attention given to the accent and dialect might prompt us to wonder what this suggests of the reality of parliamentary politics? Is it symptomatic of a condition in which 'individuals are elected primarily on the basis of their personality, voice and any other factors as opposed to a party being elected in the basis of policy'? (Wilson, 2010). Potentially, yes, at least more so than we might care to admit, especially if we follow Brian Massumi's concept of affect. Analysing the curious popularity of Ronald Reagan, Massumi argues that rather than being based on ideological coherence, experience or charisma, Reagan epitomized the power of dysfunction and interruption. He was capable of producing 'ideological effects by non-ideological means' (Massumi, 2002: 41), endemic to a particular era of capitalism, typified, as seen in the discussion of pace previously, by a speeding up, a jerkiness and a saturation.

The breaks and disruptions that the accent or dialect provides within an affective economy can be argued for in the same way. Whether interpreted as artificial or not, the accent or dialect can act as a distraction that modulates and arrests the flow of information and intervenes in the mode of listening, in the same way that a phonological mispronunciation, a lisp or stutter can cause a double take or confusion in a conversation. At the same time, the rogue accent is rendered knowable and codified, it becomes the basis for extrapolation of various conceptualizations, prejudices and narratives of identity, as seen in the instances above. In

radical political organization, this can act to elevate or degrade the speaker through her exoticization or connection to an imagined authentic subject position, with both positive and negative associations depending on her presumed origin and background, and the relation of this background to the political context she is participative of.

Intonation works in a similar manner to make the sonic qualities of the voice present, 'for the particular tone of the voice, its particular melody and modulation, its cadence and inflection, can decide the meaning' (Dolar, 2006: 21). The shades of intonation, the affective resonances that tone can transmit, can derail the easy reception of linguistic content. Tone is a trickster of speech; the intervention of intonation may contradict or subvert the words spoken, it can express unexpected or seemingly unwarranted sarcasm, humour, irony, irritation, joy. Like accent, intonation can be codified, its contribution to the meaning of what is said can be picked up by the listener and absorbed into the dialogic exchange. The intonation of the utterance can act powerfully to shape the rhythm of communication, and the relations of cooperation, power and alliance between speakers.

Simultaneously, the fundamental frequency or pitch, and volume of the voice affects relations between speakers. Higher-pitched and softer voices are usually perceived as more feminine than lower-pitched, louder voices. This has consequences for assumptions on sexuality (for instance, the male with the higher-pitched voice is stereotyped as effeminate and passive) and attractiveness, as was made evident in an article published by the *New York Times* examining the recent phenomenon of GPS love: where GPS users develop feelings for their automatic vocal guides (Feiler, 2010). The conclusion of the article was partially drawn from an increase in lewd commentary posted by fans to sites like *gpspassion.com* and *pdastreet.com* on their favourite voices, Australian Karen say,



or American Jill, voices that Garry Maddox (2010) dubbed as ‘the other women’. This went far beyond the rhetorical – as the anecdote of an incident where a television actor was caught out by his wife alone in his car pleasuring himself to ‘the dulcet tones of the automated voice system’ – shows (Maddox, 2010).

The popularity and allure of these GPS voices reveal more than a base humour, especially on the level of the technopolitical. According to Professor Clifford I. Nass, a communications expert and commercial consultant, the implementation of female over male voices signals a rising confidence in such technologies. When the device first appeared in cars, manufacturers preferred male voices, because these seemingly commanded more respect. ‘When the key dimension is competence, the male voice is better’, explained Nass, ‘when the key dimension is likeability, the female voice is better’ (Feiler, 2010). What this reveals are the economies around technological innovation and dissemination, especially their correlation to particularly gendered modes of labour. It shows the presence of ‘soft’ skills critical to contemporary communicative work, friendliness being one of the key indicators of emotional and interpersonal intelligence harvested by managerial and entrepreneurial capitalism (Dowling, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2008; Hochschild, 1983; Thrift, 2006).

Indeed, studies done on pitch found that individuals attribute positive traits such as warmth, honesty, likeability and success to those with voices perceived to be more attractive (Berry, 1990; Zuckerman and Driver, 1989). A similar study has shown that individuals alter vocal characteristics when speaking with someone they are or are not attracted to, for instance by lowering or raising the frequency of their voice, an alteration that can be picked up by the listener (Hughes et al., 2010). This has particular political consequences, as the relations underpinning the collaborative dynamic are affected by the often unspoken interpersonal attractions

and aversions of those working collectively, which are nonetheless expressed through the frequency of the uttering voice.

As already mentioned, the amplitude of the voice works together with pitch to articulate affective and sociopolitical velocities. The vibrational frequency of the voice has undeniable effects. Take, for example, the voice of Adolf Hitler. Hitler himself remarked that his conquering of Germany was crucially aided by the use of the loudspeaker, and his voice was a treasured property of the Nazi Party (Prochnik, 2010: 69). According to one speech expert, Hitler’s voice registered at 228 vibrations (the frequency of an expression of anger vibrating at around 220) – his voice was literally a sonic stun, somewhat like the state produced by an air-horn or unexpected alarm (Prochnik, 2010). As Leni Riefenstahl described, on hearing, it his voice inspired in her an ‘almost apocalyptic vision’ (Prochnik, 2010: 86). The capacity of volume to drive such a response requires us to take seriously the psychic, emotional and physical effects that acoustic emissions can engender, and to consider ‘the acoustical thrust of speaking’ (LaBelle, 2010) as capable of performing acts of threat or violence (Butler, 1997).

In the same way that the sonic waves emitted by a loud voice may colonize space, a quiet voice may recede and get lost in the room. Indeed quiet, or at the most extreme, silence can be a virulent political expression of refusal. Silence has historically functioned as an inspirational and creative force. ‘It’s better to be silent and to be rather than speak and not to be’, proclaimed Bishop Ignatius in *Language in the Confessions of Augustine* (Burton, 2007). The choice to be silent rather than having no coherent ‘being’ was made by Achilles in Homer’s epic *Iliad*. Achilles, slighted by Agamemnon, retaliated by refusing to speak and withdrew from battle with his comrades in the Achaean army. Silence operated as a counterattack, a stance against a perceived encroaching authority; it presented a condition rather than an

action. Against the impotence and powerlessness of silence attributed in the Homeric epic, the silence of the Aeschylean Achilles was a stratagem, a weapon against the imposition of will from outside influences. It was a refusal to participate and perform – it functioned as a conscious provocation against what is expected and demanded, a refusal to be possessed, by enacting a sovereign re-singularization. But it was also indicative of an incapacity to find words capable of expressing internal turbulence.

It is apparent that the refusal to reciprocate or participate through a refusal to speak does not need to indicate a passive lack of voice, a disconnection or disassociation, but can be an active stance of negation. Silence, as John Cage demonstrated in his piece 4'33', is anything but devoid. In his three-movement composition, rather than playing their instruments the orchestra was instructed by Cage to remain still; in recordings what is then heard are the sounds made by the orchestra moving about, the audience shuffling, coughing, laughing at times, even the echoes of the recording devices themselves. What Cage confronted was the impossibility of ever attaining silence by demonstrating that even in the absence of noise or music, a soundscape is nonetheless present.

A deliberate silence, then, like that of Achilles, overflows with an excess of what could be said but that which the speaker will not grant sound to. It explodes with possible thoughts and positions, remaining always in suspense. Silence does not leave a space to be filled but rather it fills space, it impregnates the room, which vibrates in anticipation. It can prompt the most intense of responses, and can profoundly derail the dialogic rhythm. Paolo Virno (2004) distinguishes the systems of contemporary capitalist labour as being contingent on the communicative and mental faculties. At a time of 'cognitive' capitalism when 'the mind is at work in so many innovations, languages and communicative relations' (Berardi, 2009b: 34), silence can be a refusal of labour, in the

sense spoken about here, it can be a denial to participate in the social reproduction on which political self-organization relies.

Silence, thus, can be a refusal to participate, to work and to engage. It can be a strategy for a perceived flight from the human realm of language. It can also, though, mark the impossibility of translation and the limitations of language, masking confusion, fear, introversion, exhaustion, and sadness, the vocalization of which becomes blocked and prohibited by the speaker from release into the sphere of the collective.

#### IV Voices and the making of worlds

If, as I have shown, there is no possibility for silence, then we are always already inhabiting soundscapes and shared fields of auditory interaction; let us now return to Bakhtin to examine how these vocal inflections correspond to the creation of new worlds and public realms. As introduced earlier, our entrance into dialogic spaces is tied to the utterance for Bakhtin, which singularizes and actualizes the potential of language. The timbres, intonations, paces and frequencies of voices underpin the creation and expression of the affective and sociopolitical forces that mobilize the utterance. Unlike other theories of speech acts, Bakhtin posits the receiver of the utterance as crucially engaged through her comprehension and her response-reaction to what is said. He writes:

when the listener perceives and understands the meaning ... of speech, he simultaneously takes an active, responsive attitude to it. He either agrees or disagrees with it (completely or partially), augments it, applies it, prepares for its execution and so on. And the listener adopts this responsive attitude for the entire duration of the process of listening and understanding, from the very beginning – sometimes literally from the speaker's first word. (Bakhtin, 1986: 68)

This active role of the listener is why, for Bakhtin, 'the speech act is an action on the possible action of others that starts from the

ethico-political dimension and the affective dimension of the relation with the other' (Lazzarato, 2009: 5). This is seen as an agonistic position: the utterance operates as a struggle between those participating in it, structuring the field of action of others.

The spaces that produce, and are produced through, the utterance are public as the utterance is never only individual but in a field of relations with others. As we have seen, vocal inflections, as much as vocabularies, are imprinted with, and can intervene in, the circuits and flows of power in these public spaces. These dynamics of domination and cooperation, 'modulate and influence ... modes of expression', that is to say the voice is deployed in geographies of complicity, sympathy, antagonism, defiance, and so on (Lazzarato, 2009: 2). This echoes what Jean-Luc Nancy ascribes to listening and sound in the formation of subjects and spaces, when he proposes that:

to listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me: it opens up inside me as well as outside and it is through such a double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a 'self' can take place. (Nancy, 2007: 14)

Bakhtin understands voices and utterances as creating, unmaking and recreating worlds precisely because the composition of the utterance is dialogic, event-based and simultaneously informed by the conditions of both the speaker and the recipient. Utterances are deeply infused with social, political, cultural and economic histories and contexts. To think of the spaces and worlds that the soundings of voices make and are made by, we must consider at least two planes, the spatial-material and the relational, which are both addressed in Nancy's (2007) treatise on listening. These coincide with one another but they are not fully coextensive; as Brandon LaBelle explains:

sound sets into relief the properties of a given space, its materiality and characteristics, through

reverberation and reflection, and, in turn, these characteristics affect the given sound and how it is heard. There is a complexity to this that overrides simple acoustics and filters into a psychology of the imagination. (LaBelle, 2006: 123)

LaBelle's comment illustrates the intertwining of the spatial and the relational, at the same time as it indicates the role of the imaginary. The voice, its inflections and resonances, both fills space and is filled by the spaces into which it is projected, to set into motion worlds that encompass physical, psychic, emotional and affective geographies (Thrift and Dewsbury, 2000).

### *I Material acoustic worlds*

On the material level it is useful to address what Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter (2007: 2) refer to as aural architectures: the 'composite of numerous surfaces, objects and geometries' of a given environment. Sounds require space and air for their form, which means they 'take shape on different scales of space' just as they do different temporal scales (Roads, 2001: 39). This is how spaces manifest sound, even if the sound energy does not originate from the space itself; this occurs through reverberation and reflection – spaces, through their material densities and gaps, modulate and refract sounds and voices in peculiar ways. This occurs too on the level of bodies, the bodily cavity being an anatomical acoustic chamber through which the sound of the voice is shaped.

The physical spaces or geographies in which social and cultural politics become organized and collective in certain modes, the places of meetings, affect what kinds of voices are heard and how, just as the space-time of meetings change the nature of place. From community centres to squatted social centres, from university classrooms and auditoriums to living rooms, from an outdoor camp or a union office to a Skype conference, the spaces in which political conversation and the performative

praxes of political organization occur vary in dimension, architecture and temporality. It is imperative to recognize the reciprocal dynamics of voices and the spaces in which they become, and make, present, because, in the words of Nancy (2007: 13), ‘the sonorous present is the result of space-time: it spreads through space, or rather it opens a space that is its own, the very spreading out of its resonance, its expansion and its reverberation’.

The same can be said for voices. The places in which organization occurs affect participation through differential inclusion, both in terms of a desire to be present and in terms of accessibility. Indeed a space or place may act as a ‘dispositif’ for the production of specific kinds of vocal utterances.<sup>4</sup> This is why, as David Matless (2005: 747) proposes, ‘sonic geographical understanding alerts us to the contested values, the precarious balances ... which make up place’. The material geographies of buildings, rooms and activist camps necessitate a capacity for mobility, for traveling to and from somewhere. While not spatially fixed, online arenas also require the capacity for access to technologies and skills that enable participation. These sites are steeped in histories and currents of power (Wood et al., 2007); the ways that people engage with, or participate within, spaces hinge on the associations they ascribe to them, the affects and psychic-emotional experiences they have, or project they may have, within them (Anderson, 2005; Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960). Such experiences are informed by relations of class, of education, of sociocultural affiliation (Blunt and Rose, 1994), for instance, and may play out in desires for engagement or disengagement. How these spaces are perceived varies with the different experiences of the individual and the collective, but it is clear that architectures may have particular design elements conducive to producing specific states.

Along with these codings of a particular site, architectural features, or lack thereof, impact upon the disposition and mood of an event

through spatial acoustic qualities. As Blesser and Salter (2007: 11) note, ‘auditory spatial awareness ... influences our social behaviour. Some spaces emphasize aural privacy or aggravate loneliness; others reinforce social cohesion’. The size of a room or space and its volumic capacity, its resonant cavities, its density, its formal or informal feel and function, the arrangement of furniture or objects, all contribute to how the voice moves within it, the kinds of utterances that are likely to be made and the ways in which we listen and respond to one another.

## 2 Relational sonic spaces

Worlds are made out of these spaces in part through the conversations had within them. The imaginaries that these worlds produce and are produced by map spatial acoustics into a plane of the relational. As Nancy (2007: 17) writes, ‘the sonorous place, space and place – and taking-place – as sonority, is not a place where the subject comes to make himself heard ... on the contrary, it is a place that becomes a subject insofar as sound resounds there’.

Along a complementary trajectory, Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift (2000: 3) assert that spaces are not pre-configured vessels for activity but must be seen ‘as process and in process (that is space and time combined in becoming)’. The conception of space as open to different creative, imaginary and desiring becomings is viable when we apprehend space as processual and transversal. This line of thought has signalled a paradigm shift in disciplinary understandings of space, especially with respect to political geographies. For Doreen Massey (2005), the recognition of these qualities to space marks an important departure from positions that frame space as an inert, static and hence apolitical realm, situated in opposition to classical notions of time (Laclau, 1990). Against such claims, Massey and David Harvey (1989) have argued for a political economy of space that complicates relationships of space

and time by accentuating its conflictive and multivalent nature. Through offering different conceptions of space, such propositions reject the dualism in narratives of linear historicity that separate the spaces and times of capitalist alienation and accumulation (labour/leisure, private/public, etc). Furthermore, they demonstrate the permeation of capitalist relations into all levels of production, from the affective to the biopolitical to the institutional. Thinking space in this way significantly extends the proposition that space and the spatial are implicated in the production of history, and thereby implicated in the production of politics (Massey, 1993: 146), and, as I have argued, in the production of voice and sound.

By naming the relationship between the spatial and the political as productive, what is opened out is a need to read space 'as constructed out of interrelations, as the simultaneous coexistence of social interrelations and interactions at all spatial scales, from the most local level to the most global' (Massey, 1993: 155). As Doel (1999: 136) adds, when we interpret space as active and dynamic, 'the integrity of space is no longer simply given'; spatial integrity is now seen as 'a contingent and local effect of pinning down the differential network of traces within which spatialization is inscribed' (p. 136). Following Massey and Doel, we see how a consideration of space as something absolute, fixed and immobile fatally neglects its productive capabilities. What is also neglected is the active role played by the spatial in the configuration of the social, in subjectivities and identities. This has explicitly political consequences for 'by shaping social interaction and mobility, the materiality of space also shapes the nature and possibility of contention' (Leitner et al., 2008: 161).

An acknowledgement of the active nature of space does not, however, privilege the spatial. As Massey qualifies, the social equally and mutually inscribes the spatial dimension: the social and the spatial inextricably realize one another. This is a synchronous movement that

Michael Keith and Steve Pile (1993: 6) conjure with the term 'spatiality'. The spatial and the social are thus co-implicated realms, not static but always becoming – becoming out of consequence and bringing new consequences to light. As Massey (1993: 146) puts it, 'the social and the spatial are inseparable and ... the spatial form of the social has causal effectivity'.

To return to the sonic and the transversal between the material-spatial and imaginary planes, we can see how the political, spatial, social and acoustic act in relation to one another. Writing about spaces for musical performance, Wood et al. (2007: 873) affirm that 'performing places are material spaces with specific histories, locations, and fabrications. They provide acoustical contexts that are irretrievably entangled into particular social, cultural, economic, and political frames'. Simultaneously, they suggest that 'music shapes and creates space through both its acoustic properties and its cultural codes (through the symbolic structures embedded within the way these sounds are assembled)' (p. 872). Like the sites of musical performance, the spaces of meetings are spaces of elocution and acoustic communication steeped in codings, narratives and histories, where space, politics and the oral/aural produce one another.

## **V Conclusion: an evocation for attentive listening**

A geographical engagement with the voice is well positioned to explore the sounds and spaces of politics and how they affect our capacities to listen and to respond to one another. The starting point for this article has been the observation that our lives are saturated with the soundings of our own voices and the voices around us. These voices create, and are created by, space and place, by the material and virtual environments we are embedded within and move through. The voice, as Lazzarato (2009) argues, expresses affective and ethico-political forces. How we say things, and not just what

we say, has significant effects on our capacities to listen and respond to one another, effects that also play out on the level of the political. Human and cultural geographers have had a history of engaging sound, language, politics and writing with relation to space (Smith, 1994) although this has not significantly addressed practices of listening or the *soundings* of the voice. For this reason, I have sought to expand the field of inquiry by composing a sonic geography of the voice, exploring not only the soundings of the voice through textual and audio analysis, but the co-creations of voices and spaces. I have done this with a specific intention, to discover the implications that the voice and space may have for an affective politics.

The implications that may be drawn for such a politics is clear if we understand our vocal enunciations as produced by, and productive of, relations, geographies and subjectivities. Sound has significant resonances for a contemporary politics (Revill, 2000; Smith, 2000); the social, the spatial, the oral and the aural are deeply co-constitutive. In speaking and listening we create public dialogic spaces (Bakhtin, 1986); we create worlds. Qualities such as pace, accent and dialect, intonation, frequency, amplitude and silence, invoke and reveal ways of being in these worlds, of class, gender, race, education and privilege. This plays out across macro- and micro-political registers, illustrated by the normative judgements and ‘sonic exclusions’ (Matless, 2005) that vocal soundings institute; we begin to recognize that not only the content but also the sounds of our speech have political consequences, as the conversations with participants in radical left organization further recall.

What this paper hopes to instantiate is an acoustic politics of the voice. I have proposed a theory of the voice that is also a theory of an affective and performative geo-politics, which has been, at the same time, the issue of an evocation, what Nancy (2007: 20) describes as ‘a call and, in the call, breath, exhalation, inspiration and expiration’. This appeal is for a

praxis of attentive listening, not only to the content of speech, but to its soundings, to be aware of the ways in which class, economics, culture, race, and gender affect our communication. If we consider the voice and its soundings of expression that cannot be contained by the structures of linguistics, we can consider the complex lines of communication transmitted through speech. Dynamics of power and how we relate to one another find an articulation through the voice, they shape the voice and they affect the capacity for listening and response. The inflections and modulations of the voice contain forces that we must become more conscious of. In his discussions of avant-garde sound poetry, Felix Guattari (1995: 89) writes that as discordant sounds of the voice break and interrupt the expected rhythms of speech, they also break and interrupt a normalized capitalist subjectivation, they act as a means of re-singularization and renewal. If an acknowledgement is made of the illocutionary power of vocal characteristics and the social, political and ethical forces they contain, then what is required is a dedication and attention to the soundings of our speech, perhaps at times autonomous from its content – especially when what is desired is the opening of new spaces that can challenge the capitalist appropriations of communication and discourse, to find ways for us to speak in common, with conviviality and with care.

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## Notes

1. It is imperative to be clear about what Massumi understands as affect, not to be conflated with emotion. He writes (2002: 28) that ‘an emotion is a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal ... affect is unqualified ... it is not ownable or recognizable’. He goes on to qualify that ‘affects are virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them. The autonomy of affect is ... its openness. Affect is autonomous to the degree in which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is’ (p. 35).
2. Perhaps its most sinister permutation is the deployment of sound and acoustics by the military industrial complex, studies of which have revealed the appearance of sonic warfare (Goodman, 2010), directional sound advertising (Guttenberg, 2007) and auditory surveillance (Zbikowski, 2002).
3. Subjectivation signifies the ongoing formation of subjects through power, whereby individuals are understood as autonomous while at the same time being subjected to biopolitical, social, historical, cultural and economic institutions and apparatuses. The importance of this double movement of being formed by and formative of is highlighted by Franco Berardi (2005) when he writes that the subject ‘does not pre-exist history, it does not pre-exist the social process. Neither does it precede the power formations or the political subjectivation that founds autonomy. There is no subject, but subjectivation’.
4. I understand the term *dispositif* or structuring device following its use by Franco Berardi – reconfiguring Michel Foucault (1982) and Gilles Deleuze (1992) – in his text ‘The image *dispositif*’, wherein he states ‘By the word *dispositif* I refer to a semiotic engine able to act as the paradigm of a series of events, behaviours, narrations, and projections modelling social reality’ (Berardi, 2005: 67).

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