# …and this is my voice: autopathophonography and the politics of variable voice

## …et voici ma voix: l'autopathophonographie et les politiques de la voix variable

Jonathan Sterne
Department of Art History and Communication Studies
McGill University
jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca

**Abstract**

This essay describes the production and theoretical context of an audio work entitled "…and this is my voice." In May and June 2010, I took recordings of my voice while on the way into external beam radiation treatments for an aggressive case of papillary thyroid cancer in my neck. I then used these recordings as the raw material for the work. This essay provides full documentation of the production process for those who may want or need something beyond the original audio work to engage with it fully, as well as a theoretical discussion of the ideology of vocal ability: the belief that voices are expressions of subjects' inner states and abilities.

Work available at: https://jonathansterne.bandcamp.com/track/and-this-is-my-voice

**Résumé**

Cet essai décrit la production et le contexte théorique d'une œuvre audio intitulée **«** ...Et voici ma voix. **»** En mai et juin 2010, j'ai réalisé des enregistrements de ma voix alors que je suivais un traitement de radiothérapie externe pour un cas agressif de cancer papillaire de la thyroïde localisé dans mon cou. Ces enregistrements constituent la matière première de l'œuvre. Le présent essai fournit une documentation complète du processus de production. Il s'adresse à tous ceux qui souhaiteraient ou auraient besoin d'informations, en complément de l'œuvre originale, pour mieux la comprendre. Il entame également une discussion théorique à propos de l'idéologie de la capacité vocale : la croyance que la voix est l'expression des états intérieurs et des capacités des individus.

**Key Words:** voice, cancer, impairment, disability, vocality

What does it mean for someone who has spent his professional life contemplating the politics of sound to acquire a vocal disability?  Strictly speaking, this is a bullshit question: a disability has no inherent meaning. And yet, as a generation of anglophone scholars of disability literature , film and art have shown us— Michael Bébubé, Lennard Davis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Simi Linton, Robert McRuer, Tom Shakespeare, Alice Wong, and countless others— disability is a magnet for meaning, for both nondisabled and disabled people alike. Meanings fly towards any disability, faster than anyone can possibly catch, where they accumulate like barnacles.

I was no exception. Starting sometime in the first decade of the 21$^{st}$ century, a particularly aggressive case of thyroid cancer ate my right recurrent laryngeal nerve. After a surgery where half my thyroid was removed, I learned that my right vocal cord was permanently paralyzed. After a second surgery to remove the rest of my thyroid, I underwent a series of radiation treatments to eradicate the rest of the cancer cells in my neck.

A paralyzed vocal cord has an effect on the sound of the voice, as well as the experience of one's own voice. Anyone is capable of reflection on their own changing body, but because of my day job, my experience came with a massive sound studies bibliography attached to it. A host of writing on "the voice"—a term whose very invocation undermines any possibility for a working concept of the human variety—have treated *the voice* as the seat of subjectivity and as a metaphor for agency, self, efficacy in the world, and the threshold between the interior of a subject and the exterior world. But what if a voice is not actually a stable thing? What if it does not fit this ableist model? In my forthcoming book *Diminished Faculties,* I call this equation of voice with agency an *ideology of vocal ability*, which is what it sounds like: the belief that the voice is an index of a subject and a subject's abilities. Consider it a mashup of Jacques Derrida's

metaphysics of presence (1973) and Tobin Siebers' ideology of ability (2008): the ideology of vocal ability imagines a singular voice—*the voice*—as the expression of an inward self that is in command of the voice; it conflates voice as a faculty of the body, and the possibility of agency—the ability to have effects in the world (for more, see Sterne 2021).

I had always been suspicious of scholars' desires to root subjectivity and agency in the voice, despite what they might claim are good etymological reasons for doing so. "Voice" and "vote" are the same word in several languages, a phenomenon that materializes the metaphor in electoral bureaucracy. But even here, the identity between voice and agency is a fantasy: I am a citizen of two countries where one's voice counts more or less based on geography: rural voters "voices" are, in this metaphor, significantly amplified over those of us who live in cities. Etymology alone is bad history, since it does not account very well for use, abuse, reception or contingency. And it can be dangerous philosophy, since it gives documented usage a normative weight where none is deserved.

For all my skepticism of the ideology of vocal ability, I still lived within it. This is how modern ideology works: the subject understands the critique of ideology, but nevertheless operates as if the ideology were true (Sloterdijk 1987, 1-7). For all my intellectual critiques of vocality, I had had a voice that I could imagine as stable. Now, like anyone with an acquired disability, I had to relearn my body and reconstruct my sense of self.

Documenting the changing sound of my voice as I underwent external beam radiation provided a unique opportunity to do that. External beam radiation is a normal part of treatment protocols for some cancers, but thyroid cancer isn't one of them. There were all sorts of risks. Alongside some permanent side effects, there were some more or less guaranteed temporary side

effects: difficulty swallowing, destruction of the voice, pain, fatigue. Some people described it as "the most painful experience of their lives." I was not looking forward to it.

But alongside inspiring fear, the effects on my voice piqued my interest. I decided to hold onto that. During my first year of cancer treatments in 2009-10, I had spent some time, when I felt up with it, developing a series of experimental audio works I called the *Cancerscapes* (available at https://jonathansterne.bandcamp.com/releases ). Based on some of the more high-concept soundscape recordings made by artists within and without the World Soundscape Project, they were each attempts to make sense of some aspect of what I was going through. Each took a fragment of a sound—sometimes from a field recording, sometimes from a piece of audio I was already working with for other purposes—and distended it, opened it out, and turned it into an artificial soundscape. But the cancerscapes were also a meditative practice because in making them, at any given time, I practiced a singular kind of attention, letting a sound be and unfold.

"…and this is my voice" was undertaken without much of a plan for what would come out in the end. I decided to record my voice each day as I went into the hospital and build a piece from it. I imagined, in the tradition of durational body art, that the result would be a linear disintegration of my voice over the course of the recordings. But life is not so neat as an artist's intention. From day to day, my voice ebbed and flowed. To morph a phrase from Tamar Tembeck (2016: 2), I had produced a time-series of autopathophonographies. In Tembeck's work on autopathographic photography, she describes a type of selfie of ill health that "serves to acknowledge the impact of illness or treatments on the subject. These autopathographic images are often circulated for the benefit of peer education [and] their intended audience is not limited to communities with a confirmed interest in a particular health condition" (2016: 2). In my case,

I was dealing with illness and disability at once, and was originally producing the recordings as a centering practice. However, their presence here, along with the exhibition for the *Vibe* conference, produces the "peer education" function: the arranged and edited recordings condense the variation of a voice from six weeks to ten minutes.

It is my hope that listeners to the piece will reflect critically on their ideas of what a voice is. Does the ebb and flow of my voice over six weeks convey a state of my body? Sure it does. But does it *express* my inner subjectivity? Absolutely not. There is no correlation at all between the sound on the recordings and my mood or my intention, beyond my intent to record my voice according to the rules I had set out for the piece.

I would love it if the circulation of "...and this is my voice" in this venue and others fulfills the educational role that Tembeck identifies. In particular, it would be wonderful if it became one possible occasion for readers and listeners to challenge whatever formal or informal beliefs they may hold in an ideology of vocal ability, in any correspondence between the sound of the voice, a subject's intentions, its inner state, and its potential political efficacy. But the author is dead, and the artist's intention does not determine the meaning of the work. In that case, I hope this more didactic text might help carry some of that burden on its own, along with my other writings on the voice, knowing full well that they might do so apart from whatever and however the recording I made might signify.

### Additional explanation of the work:

"…and this is my voice" is a work of time-lapse phonography. In May and June 2010, I took recordings of my voice while on the way into external beam radiation treatments for an aggressive case of papillary thyroid cancer in my neck. I expected that it would work like time-

lapse photography and the result would reveal my voice decaying over a series of 30 treatments. Instead, it ebbs and flows. I overlaid a narration track and processed some other sounds in the center channel. It is arranged like a multichannel work, but for stereo.

Each day, as I entered the hospital, I recorded myself into the phone speaking the following sentence—words in brackets are instructions that I completed.

"It is [day, date] I have [number of] treatments left . . . and this is my voice."

It sounded like this: "It's Thursday, May 13th, and I have 28 treatments left … and this is my voice."

In assembling the piece, I also added the below commentary (which I did not follow exactly), which is interspersed within my assembly of each recording made upon entrance to the hospital, and processed sounds:

1. Now, it is May 2010. I have embarked on 30 treatments of external beam radiation. They are not painful, but the cumulative effect is. I am told that my voice will again be reduced to a hoarse whisper, but that it will recover.

2. I decided to track its state each day as I enter the hospital for my treatment. The ambiance changes. Sometimes I am walking, sometimes I am standing.

3. Diaphonic speech is a symptom of vocal cord paralysis. The voice happens when the two vocal cords meet. If they do not quite meet and resonate together, the speaking voice splits in two. Harmony in a single throat.

4. I am told that my body will take the treatment better if I get my heart rate up beforehand. I walk briskly to a more distant metro station each morning. Then briskly to the hospital. I sometimes arrive out of breath.

5. The microphone conceals some subtleties. I'm sure my voice sounds fine. Even normal. But it is not. For one thing, it is easily damaged if I do too much talking.

6. I made these recording expecting a certain regularity. But life intervenes. Holidays happen, techs have conferences. Six weeks spread into seven. The x-ray machine breaks. I show up once for no treatment at all.

7. The treatment happens the same time every day: 12:30pm. I change to an early morning so I can attend convocation on the 3rd of June. The hospital is quiet. Later in the day, I will listen to my chancellor give a speech to graduates about personal responsibility. He tells us that we are all in control of our health.

8. You would think that it would be easy to keep count. After all, I am counting here, in my blog, and on my chalkboard at home. And yet, I often have to think. Sometimes I get it wrong.

9. My dry throat makes a dry run. My voice comes and goes.

10. Listen to the number five, and you can hear my voice fail me. My friends sometimes ask me how my French is coming. I tell them I'm working on speaking English.

11. I expected more dramatic evidence of decline, to lose my voice altogether. It is weak, but it holds on to the end. Three weeks later, I would start a search for normal.

Each recording also captures background sounds. Later, when I produced the actual piece that you can hear, I sampled small bits of the sound that were around my voice, and processed them in various ways. They are smeared and distended through a process called granular sampling, which allows for independent distortion of time and pitch. This allows you to hear the inner texture of a sound more deeply: like a microscope for sounds. These granulated sounds were run through echoes—some discernable like a distant echo, echo, echo, and some

like the ambience of a room. One way to describe the echo effect on the grains is that it's like

pouring water onto a drying watercolour painting. Or, to keep the grain metaphor, like pouring

water onto a sand mandala.

This is how I laid out "…and this is my voice" in a program called Ableton Live. I

arranged the recordings, set up the tools for processing the sound, and then performed the piece

in real time several times until I was happy with the result. I then made minor edits to the

recorded performance, and finally, hired a mastering engineer to prepare the recording for

distribution. Note that the screenshot below is from me opening the file in 2019, which was the

first time I had looked at it in probably nine years. The recorded version you can hear was

performed in real time on 3 October 2010, in an earlier version of Live.



**Figure 1: Ableton Live set for "…and this is my voice."**

The image above is a picture of a graphical interface for Ableton Live, a program that turns a computer into a real-time performance instrument. Most of the screen is taken up with a grid: some columns are filled with markers for files that can be played one at a time. Each column is a different channel that can be mixed down. For this piece, I used twelve, though it is rare that more than more than 1-2 sounds are playing at once. The far-left column (channel 1), has numbered files descending from top to bottom, where the number corresponds to how many treatments I have remaining according to what was in the audio recording. The next 3 columns are not full; they contain recordings of processed bits of ambient sound. The word "Riverrun" refers to a granular sampler that no longer works with modern operating systems, which was the tool I used for processing. The Riverrun program was named for Barry Truax's *Riverrun,* which was the first real-time granular composition in 1988. After the 3 Riverrun columns, there is an empty column, then two channels with scattered recordings of the narration that plays in the piece, then a gap, then four columns that appear empty, but are actually used for more processing: they are destinations to which I can route sound from the first 8 channels, and each has a different time-based sound effect on it, adding echo or reverberation. At the bottom of each column is four circles, representing knobs that send sound to other channels, and balance between the left and right speakers for stereo. At the very bottom of each column is a numbered button that lights up when sound is on, and a vertical slider that is used to set overall volume for the channel. There are more small details in this image, but these are the main controls I used to make the piece.

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     York: Vintage Books, 2020.

**Bio:** Jonathan Sterne teaches in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at
McGill University. He is author of *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of
Impairment* (Duke, 2021), *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Duke 2012), *The Audible Past:
Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke, 2003); and numerous articles on media,
technologies and the politics of culture. He is also editor of *The Sound Studies Reader*
(Routledge, 2012) and co-editor of *The Participatory Condition in the Digital Age* (Minnesota,
2016). Currently, he is writing about artificial intelligence and culture, and with coauthor Mara
Mills, he is at work on a book called *Tuning Time: Histories of Sound and Speed*. Visit his
website at http://sterneworks.org.