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## Voice

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*Voice is a salient category in our contemporary lives. We speak of marginalised groups 'lacking voice' and celebrate their efforts at 'raising their voices'; we are advised to listen to our 'inner voice' and be 'vocal' in our opinions. Such idioms closely associate voice with individuality, agency, and authority. Anthropologists have sought to denaturalise these associations, showing them to be the product of a particular ideology of voice that is neither universal nor inevitable. At the same time, they have also studied the effects that such associations have on imaginations of subjectivity as well as public and political life.*

*As an explicit category of conceptual and ethnographic focus, voice has entered the anthropological literature relatively recently. This entry charts out some of the principal ways in which anthropologists have approached voice, and the kind of literatures they have drawn upon to do so. It identifies the move to study sonic voices in tandem with metaphorical figures of voice as central to anthropological investigations of voice. It considers how doing so allows investigating the role of voice in the making of subjects, publics, and ideologies, as well as the impacts that sound technologies have on these processes. This entry suggests that voice is central to many key concepts in anthropology and social theory and that an explicit focus on voice is therefore of broader relevance for the discipline and beyond.*

### Introduction

Voice is a salient category in Euro-American modernity and beyond. Familiar idioms attest to its significance: we speak of marginalised groups 'lacking voice' and celebrate their efforts at 'raising their voices'; we 'give voice' to our ideas and 'have a voice' in matters of our concern; we are advised to listen to our 'inner voice' and be 'vocal' in our opinions. Such idioms closely associate voice with individuality, [agency](#), and authority. In its consideration of voice, anthropology has sought to denaturalise these associations and point to alternative ways of understanding how voice may relate to identity and agency. Instead of accepting voice as a universal category, anthropologists have shown voices – both as sound objects and as metaphors – to be culturally and [historically](#) constructed, and hence variable. This recognition has allowed for the interrogation of broader issues, including questions of agency, representation, identity, and power, from the vantage point of actual voices and vocal practices (Weidman 2014a: 38).

Voice has only emerged as an explicit focus of [ethnographic](#) research and theoretical concern to anthropologists over approximately the last two decades. Even if not explicitly, however, voice has long featured in a broad range of literatures. From a sonic and linguistic perspective, voices are the focus of studies in (ethno)musicology, linguistic anthropology, and media and technology studies.

Ethnomusicological studies, for example, show how vocal variations such as pitch, amplitude, rhythm, and melody constitute culturally specific means of aesthetic expression and social communication (e.g. Feld 1982; Urban 1988), while sociolinguistic frameworks focus on how specific grammatical aspects of speech indicate or engender social [relations](#) (e.g. Agha 2007), or how specific formal and stylistic aspects of speech cohere into recognizable types (e.g. Agha 2005; Bakhtin 1981). Fields like postcolonial theory, literary criticism, psychoanalysis, and critical theory, on the other hand, have studied voice mainly through its associations with subjectivity and representation. Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), for example, has cast lasting doubt on the empowering potentials of the endeavour to 'give voice' to the marginalised in her famous intervention 'Can the subaltern speak?', while psychoanalytically-inspired scholarship has emphasised the uncanny character of voice as both of the self (emerging from one's own body) and other to it (resonating outside the body's limits) (Chion 1999; Dolar 2006). Anthropological considerations of voice draw on this wide variety of literature in order to bring insights regarding actual voices and vocal practices to bear on critiques of voice as a representational trope.

This entry aims at outlining what a distinctively anthropological approach to the voice might entail. It traces how anthropologists have brought to bear analyses of voices' sonic and material aspects onto broader social phenomena. In this way, it explores voice both as ideologically and practically constructed and as constructive of subjects, publics, and ideologies.

### **Voice in Euro-American modernity**

The starting point of much anthropological scholarship on voice has been the attempt to destabilise a number of powerful assumptions about it. These can be summed up under two headings. First stands 'the idea of voice as guarantor of truth and self-presence, from which springs the familiar idea that the voice expresses self and identity and that agency consists in having a voice' (Weidman 2014a: 39). Linguistic anthropologist Miyako Inoue (2003: 180) has summarised this idea as 'I speak, therefore I am'. The idea here is that the voice is a direct expression of a person's intimate emotions and opinions, which renders the act of speaking an expression of human [agency](#) and, in certain contexts, [resistance](#).

Related is a second assumption, which holds that the voice is but a channel in order to transmit a more important message (Weidman 2014a: 39). In this view, the content of the message prevails over the sonic aspects of the voice, or its form. Philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2005) has demonstrated that this tendency to listen to voices primarily for *what* they say rather than *how* they say it can be traced through some of the most influential works of Western philosophy from Plato to this day. This second assumption about the prevalence of signifying content over vocal form directly sustains the first, because it allows for imagining the voice as a transparent channel that gives immediate access to a person's inner life without having any significance itself.

Linguistic anthropologists Bauman and Briggs (2003) argue that the opposition between signifying speech and a sonic vocality outside of meaning solidified into a hierarchy during the European Enlightenment, with the former clearly valued over the latter. The speech-vocality opposition moreover became mapped onto a number of parallel dichotomies such as male versus female, [coloniser](#) versus colonised, urban versus rural, or white versus black, which, as Bauman and Briggs argue, were sustained and legitimised in this way. From this perspective, voice needs to be understood as an ideological construct that has crucially shaped the modern (post)colonial world and has contributed to legitimising [relations](#) of domination and abuse (De Certeau 1988; Inoue 2003).

In order to highlight that the way we understand and give meaning to vocal phenomena is [historically](#) and culturally constructed, and that such constructs have crucial social and political impacts, anthropologists have coined the term ‘ideology of voice.’ As defined by Amanda Weidman, ‘ideologies of voice’ are

culturally constructed ideas about the voice... [They] set the boundary for what constitutes communication, what separates language from music, and what constitutes the difference between the intelligible and the unintelligible. Ideologies of voice determine how and where we locate subjectivity and agency; they are the conditions that give sung or spoken utterances their power or constrain their potential effects (2014a: 45).

Indeed, we can trace how ideas of voice specific to Euro-American modernity have had a forming impact on knowledge production and [science](#). Take anthropology, our own discipline: its hallmark methodology of [ethnographic](#) fieldwork largely relies on soliciting informants’ voices in face-to-face encounters as a means of accessing their lifeworlds. Voice features here as an important index of authenticity and as a standard for judging the originality of anthropological works. Psychoanalysis is another example. Institutionalised since the late nineteenth century, it centrally relies on the notion that a patient’s interior life is accessible through his or her actual voice, elicited by the psychoanalyst in therapeutic sessions. We also encounter similar ideas in contemporary truth and reconciliation commissions that have been set up to uncover past wrongdoings and achieve justice. In such settings, victims’ voices are construed as a relatively unproblematic means that, when elicited, are all it takes in order to gain access to past injuries, hidden truths, and authentic suffering (Slotta 2015). Anchored in the popular conviction that ‘speaking is healing,’ truth commissions participate in a discourse that equates victimhood with [silence](#) and proposes ‘giving voice’ as a means to heal, find redemption, and bring about reconciliation (Posel 2008).

These examples highlight two issues: (1) that ideas about language, speech, and voice are not natural or universal, but historically and culturally specific constructions and (2) that such ideas have important repercussions for social and subjective life because they determine how voices are heard and recognised. How, then, are we to study the ideologies that determine how voices are produced and received?

### The sonic and material voice

In an article published in 1994, Steven Feld and Aaron A. Fox pointed out the need to develop research perspectives that would link a 'phenomenological concern with the voice as the embodiment of spoken and sung performance, and a more metaphoric sense of voice as a key representational trope for social position and power' (1994: 26). Their call makes clear that if we are to understand the role of voice in social life, it is imperative to study not only how voices routinely function as metaphors but also their sonic, embodied, and material dimensions. Concomitantly, the anthropological project of denaturalising voice crucially hinges on studying how voices are produced by discourse, physical bodies, and technologies and how these actual voices sustain, reinforce, or challenge specific figurative understandings of voice.

Linguistic anthropologist Judith Irvine's study of Wolof speech registers is an early study that, even if it does not explicitly conceptualise voice as such, usefully lays out how the study of actual voices can reveal understandings of voice alternative to the assumptions outlined above. Irvine (1990) describes vocal practices that run radically counter to the adroit association between voice and self posited by Euro-American ideologies of voice, and in this way highlights the latter's cultural particularity. She argues that Wolof speakers in Senegal have at their disposal two different 'registers' or styles of speaking that are connected to social status and situation. The speech of noble and upper caste Wolof is typically marked by a lack of affect, translated into linguistic features that include simple or even 'wrong' syntax, slow tempo, low volume, and a breathy voice. Lower caste Wolof and griots (bards) employ an opposing register that is marked by heightened affect, expressed through a high-pitched voice, fast and fluent speaking, and the use of complex syntax and morphology. As Irvine highlights, these registers or 'voices' are not inherent properties of individual speakers but strategically employed in order to mark *relative* status difference in a particular context (1990: 131-132). They operate as a resource available to all Wolof speakers in order to define a given situation and relationship. A noble Wolof who employs a restrained register of speech when talking to a griot might, for instance, switch into a more agitated register when asking a noble kinsman for a favour. In addition, griots often act as spokespersons for Wolof speakers of higher standing, using their own voices to express the opinions and emotions of their patrons. Voice is in such instances decoupled from a person's self and interiority. Instead it becomes a cross-individually available resource for the performance and negotiation of social status and [relations](#).

In classical anthropological fashion, Irvine presents her readers with a cultural framework that links voice and identity very differently from Euro-American models. The more recent work by Nicholas Harkness (2013) on voice and identity in the context of Evangelical Christian South Korea further investigates how specific identities or cultural tropes come to be linked to and eventually indexed by specific vocal qualities. He shows how many Christian Koreans invest enormous efforts in making their voices sound less 'rough' and 'husky', since these qualities are understood to represent a traditional, 'unclean' Korean voice that is associated with a past marked by suffering and backwardness. By listening to Christian sermons, singing in

church choirs, and participating in further musical schooling, many Koreans seek instead to acquire a voice with qualities resembling that of European classical singing; what is commonly described as a 'clean' and 'pure' voice. This requires conscious and sustained work on how singers use their vocal apparatus. The 'harsh' or 'rough' tones of traditional Korean singing are produced by pushing air through tightened vocal cords, while the 'clean' voice of Western classical singing requires an open larynx and vocal cords. These specific ways of using the vocal apparatus become mapped onto specific sound attributes (harsh, rough vs. clean) and bodily experiences (tense, painful vs. healthy, natural) with their attendant ideological connotations, such that strained vocal cords and a tense throat come to index a troubled, pre-Christian, Korean history (Harkness 2013: 92-102).

What Harkness's study demonstrates is that not only ideas about voice but also voices' sonic and embodied qualities are malleable and can become the target of conscious transformation. As such, we may understand voices, as Steven Feld and his colleagues have put it, as 'material embodiments of social ideology and experience' (Feld *et al.* 2004: 332). Materiality here refers to a voice's actual sound as well as the production and reception of this sound through bodily processes (Weidman 2014a: 40). Even if we cannot see or touch it, the sound of a voice is material insofar as it is the result of vibrations that propagate as waves through physical matter, typically air. These vibrations, in turn, are produced by our vocal cords when we speak (or sing, hum, cry, shout, etc.). When described in this way as a strictly physical and mechanical process, it may appear that the voice is simply the outcome of an objective or pre-cultural process of employing one's vocal cords. Yet, as Harkness's description begins to indicate, the way in which we employ our vocal cords and receive the sonic waves produced by others is in fact thoroughly encultured. How so? When we hear a voice, we ascribe meaning to it. We may, for instance, find it 'clean,' 'manly' or typically 'black.' Such acts of ascribing meaning to other voices influences the way we modulate our own, as we consciously or unconsciously tune our voices in relation to specific voice types or ideals. Norms, [values](#), and ideologies in this way come to bear on the production of vocal sound (Eidsheim 2011: 149).

### **Voice and the making of socio-political identity**

Both Irvine and Harkness's studies highlight that the ascription of cultural meaning to voice often occurs when a number of sonic qualities become bundled into voice types, which in turn become associated with sociopolitical identities (such as the Wolof griot or the aspiring Christian Korean) or broader cultural tropes (such as modernity or sincerity) (Agha 2005; Fox 2004; Gray 2016; Keane 2011; Porcello 2002; Samuels 2004; Stokes 2010). Timbre is one category that allows for the exploration of how such processes of association occur. The term refers to the quality or 'tone colour' of an instrument or voice and is often described by highly culturally-specific words such as bright, dark, warm, harsh, creaky, husky etc. In her work on African-American opera singers, musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim (2008) argues that timbre is a key mechanism that regulates how voices are matched to bodies. Specifically, Eidsheim shows how the

common perception that ‘black’ voices have a specific ‘sound’ or timbre works to continuously reinscribe [racial](#) difference onto African-American bodies. She describes how, when training as singers, African-Americans are regularly taught to reproduce the timbre or vocal ‘sound’ expected of them, with the effect that each vocal performance further reinscribes the expected association between race and voice. This process obscures how timbre is socially constructed, rendering it a seemingly natural and innate characteristic of specific bodies. Vocal production in this way contributes to naturalising racial difference as inherent and immutable.

What this discussion exemplifies is that voice as a sonic and material entity not only *marks* existing socio-political categories, but also contributes to their *making*. This is an important claim for the anthropological project of destabilising the seemingly natural link between voice and self or identity. From this perspective, voice does not just express identities but also constitutes them. In this sense, the voice represents a disciplining force capable of generating social categories and subject positions: ‘Vocal practices, including everyday speech, song, verbal play, ritual speech, oratory, recitation, can be viewed as modes of practice and discipline that, in their repeated enactment, may performatively bring into being classed, gendered, political, ethnic, or religious subjects’ (Weidman 2014a: 44).

This also highlights that the distinction between an actual or sonic voice, on the one hand, and a metaphoric or figurative voice, on the other hand, can be but an analytical one: in social life these two aspects of voice are intricately linked, one sustaining and continuously (re)producing the other. Nicholas Harkness has expressed this idea through the term ‘phonosonic nexus,’ referring to the necessary interdependence of voice as it is phonically produced on the one hand, and sonically received, categorised, and given meaning to on the other hand (2013: 12-21). As a nexus or point of convergence, the voice links specific bodily actions (e.g. a specific way of modulating one’s voice) to specific sonic frameworks (e.g. what is considered to be a ‘clean’ voice) and ultimately to categories of social identity (e.g. a healthy and aspiring Korean Christian).

Miyako Inoue’s (2006) research on ‘Japanese women’s language,’ a feminine speech style associated with the image of urban middle-class women, further illustrates how vocal practices can generate social categories. Inoue demonstrates that such ‘women’s language’ is less a Japanese cultural tradition of ancient origin, as is commonly assumed, than a cultural construct adroitly linked to Japanese capitalist modernity. Based on [historical](#) research, Inoue reconstructs how speech styles that are today understood as distinctively feminine were largely invented at the turn of the twentieth century by male Japanese intellectuals. These intellectuals overheard speech patterns they considered to be vulgar and crude and ascribed them in their writings through quotation and reported speech to young women. Over time, this so-called ‘schoolgirl speech’ became idealised as refined rather than vulgar, and reconceptualised as a speech style befitting ideal middle-class femininity. Inoue’s study thus highlights how speech forms, even if invented, are able to create specific subject positions that people eventually come to inhabit, a process that

she calls 'indexical inversion' (2006: 51).

### **The voice as excess**

While acknowledging that the voice frequently functions as a disciplinary practice that (re)produces social categories and identities, a more psychoanalytically inspired body of literature has argued that it is impossible to ever fully discipline or capture voice. Because the voice is a sound object that lilts and sways, pitches and cracks, it asserts a presence of its own that cannot be reduced to the referential meaning expressed in speech or cultural associations that link vocal sound to socio-political categories (Nancy 2007; Schlichter 2011). In this sense, the voice may be described as 'in excess of speech and meaning' (Dolar 2006: 10). From this perspective, the singing voice is a particularly interesting object of study, because it highlights that voices have effects that go beyond the communication of meaning. In opera, for example, the voice's impact greatly relies on it surpassing or even disrupting the necessities of meaningful communication (Duncan 2004).

In conceptualising the voice as excess, this body of literature has primarily been concerned with deconstructing Western metaphysical assumptions that accord primacy to signification, rationality, and the [mind](#). From an anthropological point of view, however, this literature at times problematically ascribes a universal, pre-cultural quality to the voice's disruptive potential. In this context, Ana Maria Ochoa Gautier's (2014) study of aurality in nineteenth-century Colombia usefully grounds assertions about vocal excess through a meticulous historical study. Ochoa Gautier argues that in nineteenth-century Colombia – a newly independent state keen to craft a national [citizenry](#) out of multiple constituencies – the voice was construed as ambiguously standing between nature and culture. This rendered it a central mechanism for determining where the boundary between these two realms ought to be drawn, and consequently also for how the categories of non-human and human, primitive and civilised, were to be distinguished. Various European and Colombian [scientists](#) and intellectuals, for instance, repeatedly described the sounds produced by the boat rowers of the Magdalena River, who were of mixed African and Amerindian descent and used rhythmic stamping and call-response vocal patterns to coordinate their [labour](#), as 'howls' resembling the sounds of [animals](#). Ochoa Gautier shows that linguistic policies like the standardization of pronunciation and orthography were employed by Colombian elites as a means to tame and hominise such 'barbaric' voices in order to forge 'proper' citizens for the new state. Yet she insists that such projects to discipline ostensibly untamed voices were never fully successful, since some voices refused or failed to conform to the standards laid out for them. It is in this failure or refusal to conform to disciplinary frameworks that Ochoa Gautier locates vocal excess.

### **Sound technologies and the mediated voice**

So far we have looked at how sonic voices are shaped by and shape in turn the representations through



which people make sense of them. What we have not taken into consideration yet is how voices are, in their capacity as sound objects, inherently mediated: at the very minimum, they rely on air as a mediator that transmits sound waves. Many of the voices we encounter in our daily lives are mediated by more complicated technologies, though: radios transmit distant voices into our living rooms, microphones amplify them to reach large audiences, tape recorders render them durable and re-playable, while [digital](#) programmes modify them. From an anthropological perspective these technologies are of interest because they highlight a condition that characterises all voices, whether technologically mediated or not: that voices are able to circulate separately from the (human) bodies that produce them. This ability throws up the question of how circulating voices ought to be matched to their origins. Ideologies of voice determine what kinds of answers people will find to that question and where they consequently locate subjectivity and [agency](#). In this sense, studying sound technologies can be a particularly productive entry point for studying reigning ideologies of voice.

Yet while separability as a condition characterises all voices, sound technologies allow voices to circulate independently of their origins in unprecedented ways. As such, they are capable of bringing about novel social formations; an aspect that much anthropological work has focused on. What kinds of anxieties and what kinds of desires does the heightened circulation and amplification of voices engender? How are reigning ideologies of voice able to accommodate such new forms of vocal circulation, and how might they transform in order to give meaning to new technological phenomena? These are some of the questions that anthropologists as well as scholars from neighbouring disciplines have asked (Fisher 2016; Gitelman 1999; Kunreuther 2010; Spitulnik 1998; Stokes 2009; Weheliye 2005; Weidman 2003).

In studying technologically-mediated voices, anthropologists have drawn from insights produced by media and technology studies regarding the capacity of technologies to create new subjects, publics, and forms of authority and discipline. In particular, social and cultural [histories](#) of modern sound technologies such as the radio, gramophone, or telephone have proven useful resources for anthropological inquiries (Connor 1997; Erlmann 2004; Frith 1996; Gitelman 1999; Sterne 2003). Particularly influential in how to approach the role of technologies in transforming vocal ideology and practice has been the work of media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1990), who argues that the notion of an 'inner voice' associated with subjective interiority was the outcome of new pedagogical practices (such as silent reading) connected to changing family organization and reading practices in eighteenth-century Europe.

Amanda Weidman's (2003, 2006) research on Indian Karnatic music illustrates how a focus on sound technologies and their effects allows for the unearthing of a particular 'politics of voice' and its centrality for discourses of modernity, nation, and authenticity. Weidman argues that Karnatic music is not, as is often claimed, an ancient Indian cultural tradition that predated British [colonialism](#). Instead, she shows how its codification as 'classical' emerged from the colonial encounter and the ideals of cultural authenticity it produced. Modern sound recording technologies were crucial in shaping these ideals by



introducing previously unavailable notions of sound fidelity. Before the introduction of such technologies, Karnatic musical practice had largely relied on face-to-face encounters between musical masters and disciples, performers and listeners. Recording technologies like the gramophone, which were widespread in India by the middle of the twentieth century, profoundly transformed these practices and the social [relations](#) they sustained. The gramophone posed a threat to the authority of musical masters, because it took the monopoly of music teaching and performance out of their hands. Disciples and aficionados no longer relied on the personal encounter with masters, because they could now listen to recordings whenever and wherever they wanted. At the same time, recordings became a new standard for judging the fidelity of performers to what could now be conceived of as 'classical' musical originals. These new standards regarding musical fidelity, Weidman argues, paved the way for an entirely new social sense of fidelity to tradition and loyalty to one's roots (2006: 246). Ideas of national heritage and cultural authenticity are, from this perspective, fundamentally intertwined with the history of sound recording technologies.

Another aspect of Weidman's (2007) research demonstrates how sound technologies can formatively shape ideologies of gender through the politics of voice they sustain. The codification of Karnatic music in the early twentieth-century centrally relied on crafting a class of women performers who would fit ideals of middle-class feminine respectability that became current at the same time. This required, in particular, distinguishing women singers and [dancers](#) of 'classical' music from *devadasis*, musicians and dancers who did service at Hindu temples and were sometimes romantically or sexually involved with their male patrons. Simultaneously, with the emergence of the respectable, middle-class 'family woman,' lower-class *devadasis* became stigmatised as prostitutes. In this context, the availability of sound recording opened up a new avenue for high-status Brahmin women to become involved in musical performance. Because gramophone records allowed women to be heard without their bodies being seen, 'it provided a way to sing for the public without appearing in public and jeopardizing their respectability' (Weidman 2007: 140). In addition, the technology of the microphone created a new sense of intimacy between singer and listener, which sustained understandings of the voice as a pure and natural expression of interiority, thereby further dissociating it from the performer's body (Stokes 2009). Sound technologies like the gramophone and the microphone in this way created the conditions that allowed linking a notion of 'natural' or 'pure' voice with the chaste female body. As such, they contributed to shaping an ideology of the female voice that sustained specific notions of femininity and embodiment.

### **Public voices and intimate publics**

Weidman's work shows how sound technologies do not 'just' amplify, record, or transmit voices, but that in doing so they profoundly influence how voices are able to sustain notions like authenticity and feminine respectability, which in turn powerfully shape social reality. Because they greatly amplify the circulation of

voices, sound technologies also crucially shape public spheres. Laura Kunreuther's (2014) work on the central role that different figures of voice have played in the recent history of Nepal demonstrates this aspect in [ethnographic](#) depth. Kunreuther notes that the liberalization of Nepal's political system and economy since 1990 has introduced a liberal discourse of voice, which associates voice with political participation, consciousness, and [agency](#). This political sense of voice, she argues, relies upon and produces a second figure of voice – 'intimate voice' – that is associated with interior feeling, emotional directness, and authentic communication. Yet paradoxically, as Kunreuther shows, this intimate voice is in many ways an effect of publically- and technologically-mediated interactions (see also Porcello 2002).

Kunreuther (2014: 124-214; also Kunreuther 2006, 2010) examines FM radio stations as one crucial site where this happens. FM radio began broadcasting in Nepal six years after the adoption of parliamentary [democracy](#) in 1990. In contrast to the state-controlled Radio Nepal broadcasting nation-wide on AM airwaves, FM stations are more local in scope, privately owned and commercially run. Crucially, moreover, they are not allowed to cover political content. Kunreuther nevertheless identifies these radio stations as having political effects, because they contribute to creating the kinds of subjects befitting the newly created liberal political sphere. Locally anchored, they support a high degree of interaction between radio hosts and listeners, and often directly broadcast their listeners' voices. For listeners, this creates an image of the radio as a transparent and direct form of communication. FM radio broadcasts also employ mainly informal and unrehearsed speech, emphasise personal life-stories, and feature as platforms for the sharing of listeners' private thoughts and feelings. One radio show, for example, asks listeners to send in letters with their personal stories, some of which the show's host then presents on air. Kunreuther argues that such shows educate their listeners to present their private lives in a public form, in this way shaping new subjectivities that are marked at once by a sense of interiority and a desire to [share](#) such interiority in public. By thus creating 'intimate publics,' FM radio stations, even though not explicitly political, are crucial for perpetuating a politics of voice that thrives on notions of immediacy, transparency, and participation and feeds into larger trends of political and economic liberalization.

Daniel Fisher's (2016) ethnography of Aboriginal radio production in Australia similarly highlights how radio technology is capable of sustaining intimate networks of kinship and relatedness, here in the face of an Aboriginal reality marked by violent [colonization](#), displacement, and assimilationist government. One way in which this happens is through request shows, where listeners call in to request a particular song and dedicate it to kin dispersed across immense distances, often as a result of incarceration or other forms of governmental intervention (Fisher 2016: 43-79). Older ideas of kinship are 'mediatized' by these radio programmes in distinctly modern ways as the sound of country music and the voices of callers, radio hosts, and singers conjoin to address a geographically dispersed yet collectively imagined Indigenous public. While these programmes do not feature explicitly 'Aboriginal' content – both hosts and callers speak in English and callers generally request American-inflected blues and country music – they nevertheless

sustain a distinct Indigenous public sphere by evoking characteristically Aboriginal networks of relation and address.

As both Kunreuther and Fisher explore in detail how the practices of radio broadcasting render the voice an object of technical as much as [bureaucratic](#) intervention, their work usefully highlights that the seemingly immediate and transparent radio-broadcast voice is in fact the outcome of complex processes of technological as well as governmental mediation. This draws attention to the fact that the material practices, technologies, and institutions through which voices become audible crucially determine how voices are understood and heard. This insight usefully challenges prevailing notions of orality as more direct, sincere, or transparent than writing; what [historian](#) of technology Jonathan Sterne has called 'the audio-visual litany' (2003: 15-19). Opposing the ear to the eye, hearing to writing, this 'litany' is a powerful Euro-American assumption that posits the oral/aural as more immediate and hence more 'authentic' than the [visual](#). As a discipline, anthropology has long seen itself responsible for studying so-called 'oral societies.' Showing the immense complexity of cultural and literary production, memorial techniques, and ideologies brought forth by these societies, anthropologists have gone a long way in challenging stereotypes about oral societies being ostensibly simple or primitive (e.g. Barber 2007; Finnegan 2007). The emerging anthropology of voice equally contributes to dispelling engrained stereotypes about the oral. It does so, however, by approaching orality not as opposed to technologies of writing, inscription, and recording, but as fundamentally mediated by and intertwined with these technologies. Such an approach promises to be productive for challenging not only the oral-visual, hearing-writing divide, but a whole series of dichotomies that regularly get mapped onto it, including nature versus culture, body versus [mind](#), primitive versus civilised, female versus male, etc.

### **Conclusion: The wider relevance of voice**

The anthropological record shows that voice is a salient category in many communities and repeatedly functions as a potent metaphor in relation to questions of power, [agency](#), and subjectivity, though in ways that are neither uniform, nor predictable. Given this salience, anthropological studies of voice and vocal practices carry relevance for other subfields of anthropology and the social sciences. What renders such studies particularly productive is the move of considering metaphors of voice in tandem with actually sounding voices. This allows anthropologists to complicate common understandings of voice as a means of empowerment and agency and to [ethnographically](#) ground broader concepts in social theory to which voice is central yet remains unexplored.

Attention to vocal practice, for instance, can be a productive starting point for challenging [human rights](#) projects that seek to 'give voice' to the powerless by exploring the often ambiguous and contradictory effects that such projects produce. An analysis of the relation between material voices and their metaphorical mobilization in political struggle is also important for understanding how social movements

are or are not able to make their voices ‘matter’ (Faudree 2013; Minks 2013). Considering the impact of technological mediation on the circulation and uptake of voices, moreover, appears imperative for our grasp of how social media and new technologies shape new subjectivities and practices of social interaction. More broadly, this points to the reframing of voice under conditions of [neoliberalism](#). Neoliberal policy tends to position voice in a framework of choice, creativity, freedom, and transparency (Kunreuther 2010; Weidman 2014b). Anthropological attention to the actual vocal practices that such claims enable and foreclose promises important insights into how neoliberal discourse and practice shape subjects and determine frames of action.

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