



The Performative Power of Vocality

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BOOK REVIEW

The Performative Power of Vocality, by Virginie Magnat, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019, 260 pp., \$39.16 US (paperback), ISBN 9781032082585

Part of the Routledge Voice Studies series, Virginie Magnat's monograph *The Performative Power of Vocality* aims to investigate vocality, defined as the "sonorous substance of the lived voice" (xiii). This understanding of vocality moves beyond conventional and potentially limiting Western approaches to voice currently taught in theatre and performance studies programs in university and conservatories—many of which rely on logocentric perspectives. Placing voice as a subject of critical inquiry, Magnat uses cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approaches to vocality and, in doing so, offers alternatives to the leading mainstream pedagogies. The core of her research centers on oral vocal traditions from diverse populations as a means of exploring "non-verbal, non-semantic, non-discursive material and affective efficacy of vocality" (xiii). The book documents how Magnat's research moved beyond established methods to include more radical and emergent approaches in a quest to view the field of vocality through the lens of "embodied knowledge, creativity and well-being grounded in process, practice and place [...] as a form of social and political agency" (xvii).

The book opens with "Performance Embodiment and Vocality," which introduces us to Magnat's research partners for the project: five graduate students from the University of BC and a seven-member Indigenous Advisory Committee. This group held a series of cross-cultural and intergenerational community gatherings called "Honoring Cultural Diversity through Collective Vocal Practice." Conceived in part to engage with the 94 "Calls to Action" issued by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, it was created to;

build opportunities to engage in cross-cultural and intergenerational exchange through collective vocal practice grounded in different vocal traditions, as a way of supporting expressions of cultural sovereignty and self-determination while promoting inclusivity, diversity, and solidarity as the core values of a healthy multicultural society. (5)

Throughout the chapter, the reader is offered a window into workshops, gatherings, and singing circles through written testimonials from the twelve collaborators, predominantly from Indigenous communities in Canada, but including visiting Māori and Hawaiian scholars. Guided by the theme of "resonance as a practice of ritual engagement" (xv), the shared reflections offer insight into how the act of embodied vocalizing influences not only the active participants, but also the audience who bears witness to the experience.

In this chapter, Magnat, a Grotowski scholar, also introduces us to Zygmunt Molik, a voice specialist from Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theatre with whom she studied and a key practitioner featured in her research on embodied vocality. Further, she describes a key thread of her embodied inquiry into vocality by employing her ancestors as research partners through investigations into her own European cultural lineage. Raised in a French working-class family with origins in rural communities in Occitania, she became the first in her family to attend university, and she was compelled to explore her dual identity, which includes both her

cultural heritage—her family and her Occitan roots—and the French philosophers she designates as her intellectual ancestors. This section particularly demonstrates Magnat's commitment to research grounded in embodied knowledge.

Chapter 2, "Reclaiming Presence for the Lived Voice," takes the reader on an imaginary visit to ancient Greece for a "performative ethnographic encounter" (70). Here, Magnat's innovative methodologies shine through an engaging re-imagining of the voices of ancient Greek philosophers challenging Italian philosopher, Adriana Cavarero, by examining the problem of focusing on the semantic rather than the somatic. This narrative includes appearances by Roland Barthes, Antonin Artaud, and Jacques Derrida in investigations of text, speech, and song.

In "Exploring (K)new Paradigms," Chapter 3 interrogates a more radical framework for research on vocality by engaging with neuroscience's affect theory and quantum physics to forge connections between the physical and metaphysical. She challenges the reader to scrutinize performance processes "beyond body-mind dualism" (133) and consider reciprocal relationships between human beings and their natural environment. Of note are the written contributions of Indigenous scholars Vine Deloria Jr. and Manulani Aluli-Meyer, who present an interpretation of quantum physics that includes the integral nature of materiality and spirituality.

Chapter 4, "Vocality as Source, Resource, and Potentiality" probes what is often considered an unavoidable connection between speaking and singing. An examination of American Musicologist Gary Tomlinson's hypothesis of "the co-evolutionary biocultural emergence of music and language" (190) circles back to Magnat's own cultural origins by introducing Pèire Boissière, a singer of Occitan vocal music, an orally transmitted tradition passed down through generations. In a most satisfying conclusion, we are brought into a circle of Indigenous drummers and singers in Canada where Magnat and the Occitan singer Manu Théron are invited to participate in the drum and song circle. Here, she shares just how vulnerable it was to perform the songs of her ancestors and reveals that—in sharing her own history through song—it was "[as] if my ancestors, having heard my call, had consented to rescue me, along with their vocal tradition, by coming to sit in the circle among us" (219). Her reflection on the experience perfectly sums up the spirit of relationality and reciprocity, by revealing her personal history running through the whole of her research.

In the Afterword, the author builds on the creative, experimental, and innovative methods first explored in Chapter 2, re-imagining and re-theatricalizing voices of the past. However, in this case, the voices of the past mingle with contemporary voices as she writes what she dubs a "Mystory" set in "an imaginary interdisciplinary symposium situated in the liminal space-time of this Afterword" (224). In what is possibly the most entertaining chapter, the reader gets the chance to crash an academic symposium in which a multitude of figures make appearances, including (but not limited to) Cavarero, Derrida, Artaud, Grotowski, an unidentified neuroscientist, a graduate student, and Magnat herself.

At a time when many voice practitioners are striving to decolonize their studios, classrooms, pedagogy, and practice, Magnat has provided us with a concrete example of how, through embodied inquiry, the dominant Eurocentric systems of the academy may be decentralized in voice training and performance studies. This volume proves that Western and Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies exist not only in conversation, but also potentially merge into new methodologies. Radical, innovative, and thought-provoking, *The Performative Power of Vocality* would be valuable to both researchers and artist-scholars committed to the decolonization of vocality, and it will serve as an important model for a new way forward in the field of voice studies.

Notes on contributor



Shannon Holmes, PhD, is an actor, singer, theatre-maker, director, educator, and scholar. She holds a BFA in theatre performance with a minor in music from Concordia University, an MFA in interdisciplinary art from Goddard College and a PhD in drama and theatre arts from the University of Birmingham, UK. She is trained in a broad range of voice, acting, and dance methods, including *bel canto*, extended vocal technique, contact improvisation, and Fitzmaurice Voicework. Her practice-as-research centers on developing cross-disciplinary methods that disrupt the dividing line between the disciplines of speech and singing to mobilize new tools for performers.

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