Performance Matters

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Citer cet article

Jude, G. (2024). Yoshida Ami's Onkyō and the Persistently "Japanese" Body: Making (Electro)voice Sound. *Performance Matters*, *10*(1), 81–93. https://doi.org/10.7202/1110554ar
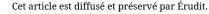
Résumé de l'article

This essay examines the experimental vocal and electronic work of Yoshida Ami in the context of the Japanese onkyō movement of the turn of the millennium, developing the concept of "plasmatic voice" that addresses the assemblage of embodied vocal performance through audio technology. Understanding vocal performance as it circulates globally through digital media networks must be perforce include transcultural analysis of race, culture, and gender, as well as other salient identity categories dependent on context. The essay also closely examines common metaphors for audio devices (such as microphones) as part of a programmatic attempt to listen deeply to human and nonhuman sounding without relying on the normative human body as the centre of analysis. Instead, a process-based approach following Jasbir Puar's combining of intersectionality alongside assemblage theory is undertaken.

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Resounding Body, Electrified

A woman standing on a low-lit stage holds a microphone close to her lips. Sound (which must be her voice yet resembles nothing that I associate with a human cry) emerges from the speakers. Small pops and wheezes, an almost inaudible, high-pitched tone—these maybe-voice sounds blend mysteriously with the sounds of the other musician, who is performing on a small, electronic device. My experience of this performance is complicated by the fact that I witness it as a video recording via laptop and headphones, over a decade after a live event that took place in a now-defunct venue in Tokyo.

The difficulties in accounting for the effects of this vocal performance indicate the ineffable ways a voice is energized and transformed when it leaves a performer's mouth to emerge from vibrating loudspeakers. Any voice is always already outside the body; there is no vocal sound without the vibration moving past the skin, leaking through and penetrating the boundaries of who we are (as well as who we think are and are thought to be). Accordingly, a voice is both in and not in a body. As listeners, we exist embodied within and across multiple cultural contexts that make it impossible to ignore the multiple materialities of body and machine.

The video recording of the performance described above was by Cosmos, Yoshida Ami's duo with Sachiko M (Cosmos 2003). Yoshida's small vocal sounds, which would otherwise be audible only at an intimate distance, emerge from speakers in the live setting: slow glottal pops, the moist separation of tongue and hard palate, the subtle burble of saliva as air is evenly pushed between bottom lip and incisors. After a silent pause, Yoshida lowers her jaw to emit a tiny high-pitched squeak as her tensed vocal folds quickly and briefly vibrate. In this minimal and methodical performance that strains to exclude all semantic, representational, and expressive content, she drains her mouth of any tendency to sing or speak.

The juicy bilabial hisses, dry squeaks, and wheezes uttered by Yoshida into the amplifying power of the PA system via microphone undergo a strange transformation in juxtaposition with Sachiko M's abstract electronic sounds. Yoshida's voice shifts between the almost disturbingly guttural and the coldly electronic, blending in with the soft clicks and short sine tones of her duo partner's electronic sound-generating device. Yoshida's unemotive, physically minimal performance style, which reflects Sachiko M's quiet gestures as she focuses on her apparatus-cum-instrument work to magnify an indeterminate aural experience that plays in the space between fleshly voice and electronic abstraction. In the performance video, the mike placed centimetres from Yoshida's mouth is an ongoing reminder of the unavoidably electronic character of her vocal work. Examination of various aspects of the context of this performance clarify how voice disembodied and transmitted through technology can be reidentified with bodily and other differences.

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My previous theorizing of what I call plasmatic voice (Jude 2018) facilitates examination of multiple in-between-nesses. Voice emerges as lungs push air past membranes and through resonating cavities, producing vibration as sound waves. The vibrating air moves a microphone's diaphragm, which transduces sound waves into variations in electrical voltage. This analogue electrical signal travels through cables to myriad devices (such as amplifiers and analogue-to-digital converters) for further processing, before being transduced from electricity back into sound waves produced by the vibrating diaphragm of a loudspeaker. Plasmatic voice provides a tool for understanding bodies and technologies as assemblages that blur conceptual binaries and demonstrate that identities are not static but performed.

Plasmatic voice is a concept that I am developing to be able to think about a voice and electricity. Plasmatic voice enables analysis of the sonic agency of humans in combination with the multiple material elements, energies, and contexts that constitute (electro)vocality. The word *plasma* invokes both a fundamental bodily fluid and an extreme state of matter in which electrons and positive ions freely move. Plasmatic voice is the complex intersection of matter, body, and vocal performances utilizing electronic technology. Approaching plasmatic voice as an assemblage allows critical analysis of voice as sounds located in sociocultural structures such as race and gender, without limiting understandings of electronically produced voice—or (electro)vocal performance—to static, essentialized identity categories. Ultimately, the assemblage of plasmatic voice also encourages posthuman thinking, as we begin to account for the complex interactions between individuals, communities, and cultures, as well as the environments and vast networks of machines that surround us.

In this article, I examine the work of Yoshida Ami as a case study in how vocal performance through digital media networks complicates, and is complicated by, understandings of race, culture, and gender. I examine experimental music performances by Yoshida in which she uses a basic audio set-up—microphone, amplifier, and loudspeakers—to amplify small movements of her throat and mouth. I juxtapose her stated aim to create vocal sound devoid of semantic meaning with Western critical writing that relocates Yoshida within the essentialized identity of a Japanese woman. Finally, I suggest that instances of plasmatic voice—that is, human voice that sounds via electricity—may be best understood as transcultural assemblages comprised of human and nonhuman elements.

Yoshida Ami: Amplifying (in) Context

Critical reception of Yoshida's work provides an example of how an artist's body can provide a metaphorical filter, colouring listeners' perceptions of the voice's bare sound. Since Yoshida first emerged as an artist in the globally influential yet relatively obscure *onkyō* scene in Tokyo in the early 2000s, her music has resisted established or easily identifiable performance categories. This absence of clear genre markers, not to mention lyrics or melodies, allows examination of (electro)voice at its most elemental.

In 2003, Yoshida burst onto the international electronic music scene, sharing the prestigious Grand Prix Ars Electronica for Digital Musics with Sachiko M and Kawasaki Utah for a double album CD release (Astro Twin and Cosmos 2002) that documented two live duo performances: Yoshida with Kawasaki as Astro Twin, and Yoshida with Sachiko M as Cosmos (*Computer Music Journal* 2004, 7–8). This international acclaim came at the apex of the short-lived onkyō movement, in which all three performers were involved. Of her compatriots, she was the only vocal performer; other onkyō artists associated with this largely urban Japanese movement were electronic musicians. The performance I describe at the beginning of this article was recorded at

the 2nd International Amplify Festival, held in Tokyo in October of 2002, on the cusp of that breakthrough.

According to her artist statement on the Improvised Music from Japan (2001) website, "Ami Yoshida strives for a barely audible sound that is perceived as sound itself rather than as vocalization." Central to Yoshida's particular project is amplification and the often-unexamined ways it changes vocal sound. Her process is simple; she uses the PA system to foreground the materiality of the vocal apparatus—lips, teeth, tongue, cheeks, soft and hard palate, nasal pharynx, and larynx.

She developed her so-called "howling voice" style (Improvised Music from Japan 2001) immersed in the milieu of the Tokyo-based onkyō experimental sound scene in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Japanese musicians such as Nakamura Toshimaru and Sachiko M had developed stripped-down techniques of (mis)using basic electronic equipment, such as Nakamura's no-input mixing board.[1] In the performance video described above, Sachiko M uses her no-input sampler without any audio samples, instead engaging the built-in test tones and incidental switch noises. In using instruments' stripped-down self-noise, these musicians aimed to improvise sound without reference to any recognized musical vocabulary, as these "empty" instruments "metaphorize onkyō's incommensurability with historical narratives of musical style and performance" (Novak 2010, 45).

Yoshida applied these musical ideas to her vocal practice, aiming to empty her vocalizations of any association or emotion and abstract them into pure sound—"sound itself." Yet the voice emerging from a body is difficult to strip of meaning, if only the significance of "the particular voice of So-and-so." Moreover, the incidental sounds of a moving mouth evince a visceral response, but one sensed via personal and cultural frames. Through her physical control and aesthetic restraint, Yoshida creates vocal sounds that, because they downplay meaning and emotive expression, exist in tenuous relation to systems of signification such as language and genre. As performer and composer, she then excises those sounds from any narrative trajectory or song structure so that they can be experienced in isolation. The slow pace of the performed presentation of the sounds allows the audience time to notice that what should be familiar bodily vibrations are actually, in the absence of passion or loss of control, quite strange. That Yoshida's mouth sounds become at times indistinguishable from Sachiko M's audio electronics points to her vocal symbiosis with sounding machines and illustrates the usefulness of assemblage as a critical tool. Here, Yoshida's voice can only be heard through the complex materiality of electromechanical networks—that is, as plasmatic voice.

From Proximal Vibrations to Transnational Networks

What is now referred to as the onkyō movement was a loose alliance of performers playing in Tokyo in the early 2000s. Their shared aesthetic practice developed in a small Tokyo venue called Off Site and became influential in free improvisation and electronic music scenes worldwide. Ethnomusicologist David Novak (2010) describes onkyō as "internationally famous for improvised performances that emphasize emptiness and stillness, and for the extremely sparse use of sound material" (36). Anthropologist Lorraine Plourde (2008) characterizes the movement's hallmark quietness as springing from the physical and sociocultural conditions of the crowded urban spaces of Tokyo—as much locational exigency as cultural specificity. Novak (2010) concurs, saying that onkyō was both a Japanese and a transnational phenomenon, existing as part of the "discursive circulation of popular music between Japan and North America and Europe" (36).

Due to its small size and proximity to neighbours, the Off Site venue encouraged performers to play quietly. Furthermore, the venue's location in the densely urbanized area of Shinjuku meant that musicians had to contend with unceasing environmental sounds during their sets. As Plourde (2008) points out, the cramped conditions in the venue reflected conditions common across Tokyo (274). Onkyō combined a focus on listeners' modes of listening with accommodation of non-intentional environmental sounds coming from outside the venue, requiring a physically disciplined practice of quiet, intensive listening on the part of the audience, and extreme restraint by performers (274).

As Plourde (2008) found in her interviews with Japanese fans, local audience-informants valued this intensive listening practice. They described onkyō as a genre that must be "directly and physically experienced" in order to "'enter the music'" (287). For fans, attending live performances at Off Site was a demanding attentional experience, requiring "concentration, comprehension, endurance, tension, awareness or consciousness" (285). Thus, "the atmosphere and subtleties of the performance become oppressive to the point that it produces a heightened awareness of space and sensation of time" (286).

And yet, as a listener outside of that spatial-temporal context, I can only ever hear this music as a recorded artifact of its original performance, since the musicians involved in onkyō moved on to new aesthetic explorations after Off Site, the movement's physical nexus, closed in 2005. Watching a video recording (whether alone or with others), I cannot experience the physical tension of amplified sounds in acoustic balance with incidental noises from within and outside the performance space. As Plourde (2008) notes, the sonic choices of the musicians and overall character of the music arose under the influence of architectural contexts and performance conditions of live shows that cannot be recreated in mediated listening conditions, underlining the crucial importance of physical locale and co-present embodied listeners (274).

This focus on the material and sonic conditions of the typical onkyō performance serves as a corrective to foreign critics and fans who tended to "elide the material conditions of Tokyo housing, architecture, and the everyday urban soundscape" in linking onkyō with stereotypically Japanese aesthetic elements such as *ma*—links denied by nearly every practitioner's account (Plourde 2008, 273). Furthermore, once the music entered global circulation (both through recordings and in live performances at venues in Europe and North America), its significance once again shifted with the changes in context. Different listening conditions, audiences, and discursive languages foregrounded—and even circumscribed—the Japanese musicians' identities and practice.

Onkyō's international success highlighted (differences in) culture, as media circulation enabled radical decontextualization of this originally site-specific form. Although practitioners of the genre (who themselves tended to resist any genre categorization) repeatedly disavowed the essentialized "Japaneseness" of their sound, this did not deter (Western) listeners from debating the ostensibly "Zen" character of onkyō (Novak 2010, 52). Other international fans defended the artists' right to self-definition, with one commenting on an online discussion board that it is "at least mildly racist to cite Zen Buddhism when the artists have gone out of their way to tell you otherwise" (qtd. in Novak 2010, 55). However, from onkyō's inception, some Japanese artists involved were perhaps more aware of the stakes—as Novak's analysis of the movement's decidedly unofficial moniker makes clear.

The word *onkyō*, the technical term for sound as an acoustic phenomenon, is also a term widely associated with a well-known Japanese brand of high-end audio equipment called Onkyo.[2] As a descriptor, some artists' choice of the term *onkyō* to describe their experimental music movement

indicated an avoidance of genre, musical history, and stylistic markers in favour of the more objective associations of audio technology. This in turn implied a clear and conscious link with twentieth-century experimentalism and free improvisation. However, despite this gesture toward cultural neutrality through the symbol of scientific objectivism, the fact that the term *onkyō* remained untranslated reflects the movement's markedness in transnational contexts. Similar to other experimental music movements, onkyō musicians sought to avoid generic specificity, but the term's "untranslatedness became evidence for its Japaneseness, as an abstract general term for sound was reinterpreted as a signifier for cultural particularity" (Novak 2010, 42). Yet, rather than onkyō being either Japanese or Western, Novak suggests that, as "a transnational coproduction of Japanese cultural difference" (37), onkyō was in fact <u>both</u> Japanese <u>and</u> Western.

Indeed onkyō as a stylistic movement typifies the situation of contemporary experimental music in Japan—a situation that provides the opportunity for productive reflection upon the problems with an international musical community that presents itself as a universal, progressive alternative to established classical music: "Both 'improvisation' and 'experimental music' are presented as ideal intercultural forms, new open-form languages that allow unhindered access for all participants, who could experiment globally in a tabula rasa with no culturally imposed rules. But such visions often overlook historical environments of miscommunication, untranslation, and the brokerage of cultural difference, all of which determine the natural space of creative music making in modern Japan" (Novak 2010, 53).

As audio technology increasingly facilitates global circulation of listening and sounding objects and practices without addressing significant local differences in reception and deployment, the case of onkyō suggests a rethinking of "the mapping of cultural difference onto categories of sound and performance" (Novak 2010, 51). In the case of Yoshida and her compatriots, they were placed in the double bind of being heard as archetypally "Japanese" even as they produced what they themselves understood to be contemporary experimental music—sound often created in collaboration with non-Japanese musicians in international venues. This double bind points toward the persistent underlying Orientalist biases and assumptions of experimental music theory and practice described by musician and music writer John Corbett (2000): "In close conjunction with the rhetoric of experimentation, we find an associated set of tropes clustered around the idea of exploration and discovery. . . . This notion of discovery or exploration helps undergird the idea that the composer is engaging in a value-free, experimental endeavor, even as it allows us to suggest the colonialist impulse submerged in its rhetoric" (166).

Yoshida's work may represent an alternative to the colonialist notion of *exploration,* harkening back to the etymological origins of the word as *sending out a cry into unknown spaces.* Nonetheless, this radical potential is buried in reception of her work that doubly marks her as a "Japanese female" vocalist. These externally ascribed racial and gender identities reinscribe her voice with an ostensible bodily essence. Yoshida set out to distill her vocalizations into "sound itself"—but ensuring that international audiences perceive it as such is not necessarily possible, as exemplified in Aaron Cassidy's 2013 critical reading of her work.

(Not) Really Listening: Identifying Voice with Body

In the case of Yoshida Ami, the confusion about "Japaneseness" in discussions of onkyō seems to be compounded by her gender. In an essay on noise in experimental vocal performance, composer and audio technology scholar Aaron Cassidy (2013) proposes that vocal noise practice is a transgression of personal identity. Yoshida is among the artists whose work is analyzed to support his argument; yet Cassidy's claim that vocal noise erases individuality is undercut by his

emphasis on Yoshida's ostensibly essential otherness. In this section, I closely examine the argument's contradictions to suggest how the concept of plasmatic voice may be useful in unpacking the complicated relationship of voice and body in increasingly technologized global sociocultural contexts.

For Cassidy, the voice "in its normal state"[3] communicates a vocalist's unique identity (2013, 49). In contrast, a voice can also produce noise, according to the technical definition of noise as sound consisting of random frequency components at equal intensity. Spectral noise may be best exemplified by the white noise[4] of a waterfall. This should be understood in contrast to sound waves that oscillate at stable rates—what is typically described as the sensation of pitch.

Key to this claim are the acoustically noisy voiceless consonants of speech—that is, phonemes such as *s* or *k* which are produced without vibration of the larynx. Such consonants, since they are made in the mouth rather than in the throat, "require very little of the body for resonance" (Cassidy 2013, 49).[5] Following this logic, the performer's bodily identity is sonically present only in voiced sounds, that is, those sounds that originate in the larynx, since such sounds resonate in the internal spaces of the head, throat, and chest before emerging from the mouth (and, to a lesser extent, the nose). To Cassidy's ear, the noise of a voiceless consonant is the same regardless of who enunciates it—as he puts it, "The difference between my 's' and your 's' is minimal" (49).[6] In contrast, the resonating space of the vocal tract, being uniquely sized and shaped in each person, endows each person's voice "its identifiable connection with its emitter," whereas consonantal noises "sidestep this resonance and thus this identification" (50).

Cassidy (2013) asserts that, since the "guttural grinding, clicks, hisses, and grumbles" of experimental vocalists do not engage the resonant spaces of the body, such sounds are not only linguistically but also metaphorically "voiceless"—that is, unidentifiable as to their origin in a specific person's body. Thus, noisy sounds emitted by experimental vocalists result in "performed erasure of identity" (50). In other words, the vocalist whose work foregrounds spectrally noisy, non-pitched sounds elides not just their individual personality but even their own body.

Even as the experimental vocalist's body is on the verge of disappearance, Cassidy reifies Yoshida as "a short Japanese woman" in contrast to his own physicality as a "tall Caucasian male" (2013, 51)—which, despite its (ostensible) categorical difference, can "manage to make similar sounds" (51). Vocal noise is relocated from the consonant-producing mouth to a "microscopically small physical space" that is "tiny, compressed, pressurized [and deep in] the recesses of the throat" (51). With this sudden focal shift, it becomes unclear how Yoshida's guttural noises manage to emerge from a vague and miniscule interior bodily space unscathed enough by her (Japanese female) bodily resonance to sound like Cassidy's (Caucasian male) vocal noise-making.

Furthermore, the significance of the normative categories of race and gender in this passage is reserved solely for Yoshida. Although the nationality of some other artists is mentioned, for example, "British vocalist Phil Minton" (Cassidy 2013, 37), and gender pronouns make clear the artists' (presumed) gender identities, none of the other performers whose work Cassidy analyzes are delineated by race and gender. Thus, the double bind of marked identity categories hinders both Yoshida's innovative experimentation and Cassidy's critical listening.

Despite the ostensibly depersonalized disembodiment of Yoshida's noisy vocalizations, analysis rooted in essentialist identity frameworks cannot avoid reanchoring a voice in its "proper (Japanese female) place." In this approach, even as experimental vocal sound aims to achieve an

"intentional elimination of personality" (Cassidy 2013, 50) through a vocal practice of "'No-one-ness'" (52), Yoshida's noise filtered through such a listening approach ultimately points back to its bodily point of origin marked as other from the listener. The desire to hear ways that "vocalization rejects the limits of the self" (53)—a resounding with the onkyō striving for "sound itself"—is at odds with identity-based critical reception of Yoshida's work. The centrality in some Western discursive contexts of the Japanese female performer's non-white non-maleness illustrates how discourses of bodily identity can cling to any instance of plasmatic voice. Discursive contexts must thus be considered as potentially critical components of the assemblage of plasmatic voice. Decentring identity categories is just the first step in understanding how the concept of plasmatic voice may critically reshape resounding bodies.

The Limits of Prosthetic Logic

Throughout the development of audio communications technology, audio devices have been described as prosthetic devices that expand fundamental human capacity (Mills 2012). In this prosthetic logic, a microphone, for example, quantitatively increases the power of a vocalist's live performance. When audio technology is analyzed as part of vocal performances, it is seen as something separable and thus optional. The microphone, symbolizing the chain of multiple interventions entailed by electrical amplification, is treated as merely a separable, optional device, distinct from the natural human voice.

Prosthesis in this sense treats the (vibrating) body as a fixed and bounded entity, the function of which can be simply augmented by the addition of devices, without any qualitative change to the nature of either the body or the technology. Media scholar Dianne Currier (2002) takes aim at the view of technology as prosthesis, asserting that "whatever permutations arise from a prosthetic encounter between bodies and technologies, they remain bound within the logic of identity or sameness that structures all binary oppositions" (529). Such a view limits analysis of technology's roles and effects, since the prosthetic equation relies upon "a self-identical and unified self" as its assumed starting point, to which is added a non-self or "'non-body' force or entity" (530).

Thus, prosthetic logic stymies understanding of anything beyond detachable technological modules added to a stable human subject. The diffuse character of audio networks such as PA systems, for example, cannot be accounted for in prosthetic logic. Furthermore, the ways that human vocalists adjust their own voices in response to the lively interventions of a PA system in particular acoustic contexts and architectural spaces (e.g., speaking quietly to avoid the squeal of feedback in a resonant room) go largely ignored. Yoshida's active interactions with amplification systems indicate something more complex—and far more radical—than prosthesis.

Cultural anthropologist Sarah Jain (1999) observes how the trope of prosthesis reifies normative understandings of individual bodies, writing, "If the prosthesis presumes an enhancement to the 'natural' body . . . , then bodies and prostheses are already naturalized rather than being understood as socially constructed" (39). Arbitrarily limiting analysis of experimental vocalists, such that "the only extension of the voice that appears in the repertoire . . . is the microphone" (Cassidy 35), relies on prosthetic logic to naturalize amplification as simultaneously underline distinct from technologically "modified" (35) voices yet also unremarkably underline part of the range of an "unadorned" voice (35). These contradictory descriptors (how can voice be simultaneously modified and unadorned?) illustrate how blurry, and blurring, the notion of prosthetic extension can be.

In contrast, understanding (electro)vocal performances through the assemblage of plasmatic voice, we can flexibly foreground the elements that are pertinent to analysis in any given context—including things such as the discursive culture of listeners—beyond the voice of the performer or even the audio technologies used in the performance. Rather than limiting analysis to essentialized categories of structural identity, assemblage theory (mutually informed by complex and nuanced understandings of identity in context) can further analysis of plasmatic voice in performance. Assemblage provides an alternative to prosthetic understandings of audio technology, which normalize the (able) human body and fix it within hierarchical systems of power. In the next section, I examine some fundamental nonhuman elements of the assemblage of plasmatic voice—the basic technologies required to amplify and record, which can be obscured by prosthetic logic.

Assemblage: Mouth to Microphone to Public Address System

Plasmatic voice approaches (electro)vocal performance without naturalizing the normative human body as the centre of analysis. This follows feminist elaborations of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of assemblage, which suggest refocusing analysis on flows and linkages rather than on fixed and preexisting entities. As feminist theorist Dianne Currier (2003) observes, "In each assemblage the particles, intensities, forces and flows of components meet with and link with the forces and flows of the other components: the resultant distribution of these meetings constitutes the assemblage" (325). The scale and configuration of assemblages are variable since there is no presupposition of the preexisting (or enduring) identity of either an assemblage or its components. This allows a flexible approach that engages multiple viewpoints aimed at understanding process, as we inquire into what things *do* rather than what they are: "What productive capacities for connection and linkage, for differing, move things? What becomings do they enter into and how can this movement to be thought as movement, rather than arrested and identified?" (Currier 2003, 332).

Perhaps the best place to start teasing apart elements of plasmatic voice is with the relationship between the two key components of this assemblage—the voice and the microphone. The microphone (sound transducer) provides for the voice (sound source) its key point of entry into any further transductions and electronic sound transformations. Sound studies scholar Brandon LaBelle, in his extended writing on the mouth, passes over what is typically considered voice's typical originary nexus, the larynx, in favour of the oral. This move expands the range of noises for consideration beyond typical distinctions of meaningful speech, expressive singing, and extraneous noise. As LaBelle (2014) queries: "Might the voice be thought of more as a tension—a tensed link, a flexed respiration, and equally, a struggle to constitute the body, rather than a disembodied sound? Not so much an object, but rather a primary production of a body?" (5). The mouth here emits the sounds of embodied/embodying vibration as a call into what exists beyond the body, crying out into the unknown as an ex-plor-ation. But if voice is, by definition, that which humans perceive as a sound from a body's mouth, what vibration is and is not included as part of that sounding body? Media scholar N. Katherine Hayles (1999) argues that the notion of body as a normative discursive construct is in constant interplay with processes of embodiment that people experience and enact. These processes cannot be extricated from hegemonic norms in specific contexts of "place, time, physiology, and culture" (196), but neither can sounding bodies be limited to mere reactions against norms and circumstances.

An utterance flows from the mouth on the breath, existing neither exclusively inside nor outside, yet nonetheless of a body—and potentially involving many others, since a voice's vibrations hail other listening ears. Consideration of both the liminality and the relationality of voice challenges the notion of individual(ist) human identity as bounded and fixed—while resounding with and

echoing back from social categories like gender, race, and nationality: "To utter is to immediately participate, to be enclosed within structures that bind us to others and to which we are held accountable; to modulate these structures, to press in on them as one is impressed, imprinted, enfolded within and against others and the logic of relations" (LaBelle 2014, 185).

One basic inter-component relation in the plasmatic voice assemblage flows between the microphone and the public address system, better known as the PA. The microphone (or mike)—usually handheld but sometimes on a stand—often symbolizes plasmatic voice; in fact, a major American manufacturer of audio equipment—amplifiers, loudspeakers, and microphones—is called Electro-Voice. Held to the mouth, perhaps even touching the lips, the microphone is the link of the nonhuman chain of technology that is physically closest to the human body. This is because, in order to selectively highlight the sound waves made by the voice and foreground the voice in its embedding sonic environment, most microphones must be very close to the mouth emitting the sound.[7]

The microphone vibrates with sound waves, transducing into electrical signal the vibrations that emanate from a vocalist's mouth: "The microphone is a silent device, not producing sound but picking up vibrations with its diaphragm. It is designed to respond to any mechanical vibrations, mostly transferred as air pressure waves, and as long as these sounds are within the limits of its capabilities to respond, the microphone is able to transduce them into electrical signal" (Van Eck 2017, 55). Yet despite its symbolic power, a microphone is only one link in a chain of electronic devices used to produce audio, arranged to facilitate electrical signal flow.

Fundamental to any discussion of voice and electronic sound is the transductive network that makes up the PA, or so-called sound reinforcement, system. The existence of any electronic sound requires a loudspeaker, a transducer that vibrates to produce sound waves: "The loudspeaker is a sounding device. It produces sound through the movements of its diaphragm, which are triggered by the electrical signal received by the loudspeaker. The loudspeaker itself has no way to verify if this electrical current is meant to be turned into sound or not. It merely moves its diaphragm analogue to the current, within the range of its material possibilities. Like the microphone, the loudspeaker diaphragm vibrates according to the limits of its frequency and amplitude range" (Van Eck 2017, 55). A PA system will never exactly replicate the vibrations that shimmer the air in front of its microphone input. Any transducer system will amplify or attenuate certain input frequencies, depending on its material design, even adding frequency components that were not part of the original acoustic sound.

One example of this is the proximity effect. One type of microphone called a dynamic mike disproportionately boosts lower frequencies of a sound source that is very close to its diaphragm, making the amplified voice sound "deeper" than it "really" is. Similarly, due to the noise generated by electrical components within the audio system as a whole, there is no complete silence in a PA system—unless it is turned off. Due to this phenomenon, called the noise floor, any acoustic sound entering the system requires a certain level of amplification just to be heard above the incidental hiss of the system's functioning itself.

In the ninety-nine short, untitled tracks of her 2003 solo release, *Tiger Thrush*, Yoshida delves deeply into what she calls "garbage-like" sounds (qtd. in Gottschalk 2016, 196) of both voice and audio technology, making clear the symbiotic relation of the two in her work. She recorded the album at her home using relatively simple (compared to a professional studio recording) audio equipment. Yoshida's approach avoided naturalizing these devices as transparent documentary media; instead, she overtly utilized the machines' own noisy sonic qualities as ad hoc compositional tools. Although the first few tracks lead me to believe that I am listening to the

tiny, intimate, raw (and perhaps even "natural") sounds of Yoshida's own throat and mouth, within the first minute of the album, Yoshida's unconventional use of amplification, recording, and playback devices bring the electronic apparatus equally into my aural awareness. On track 12, for example, her hypnotic use of looping (repeated playback of short, recorded segments) sweeps away any illusion that I am hearing a fleshly human voice, while at the same time retaining a sonic link to the narrowly focused vocal technique and the limited frequency range of previous tracks.

Yoshida's use of rapid stereo panning—first on track 5 then sporadically later on the album—achieves a similarly defamiliarizing effect, as her laryngeal squeaks and salivary hisses switch suddenly from right to left channel.[8] Yoshida also distorts the recorded sound by increasing the volume sensitivity of the microphone input (as on track 58). In subsequent tracks, the volume level is lower, but (as in the sequence of tracks 66–71) alternating densities of sound, sudden silences, machinic repetitions, and an often intense quality of vocalization result in my peculiar sensation of having completely lost track of whether what I am hearing is extremely quiet or extremely loud. As the end of the album approaches, the sounds again become more sparse and identifiably organic, yet no less engaging. For instance, the three-and-a-half minutes of track 91, which starts as a juicy microphone kiss—which in other contexts might seem ridiculously expressive—continues past the point of dryness, in the last twenty seconds resembling a faint digital blipping.

Throughout the sixty-eight minutes of *Tiger Thrush*, Yoshida engages with not only the apparatus of her sounding body but also the characteristic sounds of the basic audio electronics at her disposal. If her 2003 Cosmos performance with Sachiko M illustrates ways in which vocal sound can blend with (and even be mistaken for) electronic sounds, *Tiger Thrush* is a clear statement that, in assemblages of plasmatic voice, the elements of voice and audio media can only ever sound together.

Carried by electrical currents, plasmatic voice appears unmoored, leaving the body further behind than ever before possible. Yet flesh also inheres in plasmatic voice, not merely the resonating body of the singer, nor even only the resounding bodies of listeners, but also the force of contexts that shape what we know about/as bodies. Add to these components the physical materiality of audio technology: microphone, speakers, cables, wires—all enlivened by the extra-organismic charge of electricity. The assemblage of one's listening to a voice encompasses an audio system, an acoustic context, the vocalist's culture/community and musical/generic practices, vocal and visual semiotic signs such as costumes and movement. Even my own individual embodiment and positionality may be germane to analysis of plasmatic voice.

Even though plasmatic voice flows through a nervous system at the speed of electrical impulses—much faster than sonic vibration propagates through air, flesh, or any other medium—human embodiment still demands a radical localization of listening, such that I not only listen to the sound object as it exists/ed in a time and place distinct from my own, but also attune to my own processes of being as I vibrate in sympathy with sounds that exist in the extensive present. This includes exploring—not in the colonializing sense, but as the older meaning of the term ("sending out a cry") implies.

Voice through audio technology, or what I call plasmatic voice, has multiple effects. Audio recordings shift my relation to sound in enculturated space and time. What happened in a different place and a time now past is made momentarily present in my own sphere, enlivened via electronic mediation. Analysis of the radical expansiveness of plasmatic voice requires a

similar flexibility of thought and attunement to the embodied senses, both encompassing and surpassing notions of structural identity.

Assemblage and Intersectional Identity: "*Not a Thing, but a Doing*"[9]

Queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2012), commenting on Kimberlé Crenshaw's influential notion of intersectionality (which engages the metaphor of the traffic intersection to illustrate how multiple sociocultural identities interact), reiterates the processual nature of identities in lived experience: "Identification is a process; identity is an encounter, an event, an accident, in fact. Identities are multicausal, multidirectional, liminal; traces aren't always self-evident. The problem of how the two preexisting roads come into being notwithstanding, there is emphasis on motion rather than gridlock, on how the halting of motion produces the demand to locate" (59). According to Puar, the theory of intersectionality posits that "all identities are lived and experienced as intersectional—in such a way that identity categories themselves are cut through and unstable— and that all subjects are intersectional whether or not they recognize themselves as such" (52). Puar argues that identities should thus be considered "events, actions, and encounters between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects" (58). Indeed, many deployments of identity naturalize marked identity, locating it in particular bodies, and thereby reinscribe the systems of oppression that intersectional analysis aims to combat.

Puar's emphasis on identification as a <u>process</u> in time and space helps facilitate understanding of how it is that onkyō artists, for example, identified as Japanese (and female) in some contexts but at the same time rejected labelling of their work as "Zen" or other stereotypically Japanese cultural and aesthetic associations.

Taking identity to be a fixed ontological marker has given rise to a situation in which increasingly fine distinctions between increasing numbers of identity categories result in a "problematic reinvestment in the humanist subject" (Puar 2012, 55). As a result, rigid categories of difference must be increasingly finely parsed, as "'difference' produces new subjects of inquiry that then infinitely multiply exclusion in order to promote inclusion" (55). Puar suggests that engaging the theory of intersectionality alongside assemblage theory may be an effective panacea to the contradiction inherent to identity theory.

Puar points out that Deleuze and Guattari's influential term *assemblage*, translated from the French *agencement*, originally meant *design*, *layout*, *organization*, *arrangement*, and (perhaps most importantly) *relations*. The notion of assemblage as a theoretical term should thus be understood as refocusing analysis, from fixed content to tendencies: "relations of force, connection, resonance, and patterning [that] give rise to concepts" (Puar 2012, 57). The human body as an object is thereby not only "de-privilege[d] . . . as a discrete organic thing" (2012, 57) but also emplaced within relational networks of human and nonhuman agents and forces. Utilizing assemblage theory in performance analysis entails a shift from valuing "what things are" to "what things do" (Currier 2002, 534). Furthermore, since spatiotemporal conditions of varying scales are also part of an assemblage, analysis requires context-specific modes of thinking (Currier 2003, 326). "Becoming," as opposed to "being," also challenges the notion of a fixed or essential self, promoting process-based understandings (Currier 2003, 333–34). In my digitally distanced listening, Yoshida's (electro)voice performs this plasmatic becoming, as she resounds through and with material flows of electronic sound technology, resisting the limitations of both conventional systems of vocal signification and oppressive structures of sociocultural identification.

Howling Voice, Body to Body: A Postscript

In November 2019, at Tokyo's venerable Ftarri venue, I finally got the chance to hear Yoshida perform live. Compared to the recordings I have listened closely to during the past several years, her glottal screech in person feels unbelievably loud. It sonically resembles a scream, yet is not one, as it emerges and sustains without the crucial expressive components of a scream. The sound is drained of all its usual emotional significance. What is left if complex waves of harmonics that peak into noise as the loudest moments of each exhaled breath emerge from her truly operatic level of vocal fry. The experience brings forth an alarming sense of utter presence, as her voice emerges from a frame that remains completely still and unmoving. Yoshida has complete—and completely unique—mastery of her artistic howls, whose arcs do not fall in pitch or volume as her breath fades through the phrase. Yoshida Ami's howling voice is a guttural scream analyzed under the microscope of audio technology. Her mouth and her microphone invite the resounding openness of our (and others') ears, hearts, and minds.

Notes

1. This is an audio mixing board set up with cables connecting inputs directly to outputs, producing waves of feedback within the device, which can be manipulated by the performer.

2. The more neutral, general-use term for sound is *oto*.

3. The term is left undefined, but presumably indicating a voice engaged in transactional speech.

4. Even the sound of random noise can be distinguished, depending on the proportions of frequency elements. Different types of noise—white, pink, brown, and grey—all lack periodic oscillation but with intensities of different proportions relative to human sensitivity to sound.

5. This claim is inaccurate, as some languages—standard Japanese among them—utilize the category of voiceless resonants, also called voiceless sonorants or voiceless vowels, in which the vocal tract audibly shapes (i.e., resonates) an unvoiced consonant. One example would be the initial *u* in *sukiyaki*.

6. A claim I resist since, after many of hours of speech therapy at age six to correct a lateral lisp, I know from experience that there actually are many ways to pronounce an *s*—some more sociolinguistically acceptable than others.

7. An exception is the shotgun microphone, which is designed to focus in a narrow, cone-like pattern aimed toward a further spatial field.

8. My first thought upon hearing sound in only one headphone—"Is there something wrong with the equipment?"—hovers at edges of this entire album. As a female who has often had my own technical expertise questioned at concert set-ups, I appreciate Yoshida's boldness in inviting such doubts. I feel she is implicitly thumbing her nose at the hierarchy of technical expertise.

9. Barad (2003, 822); italics in original.

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