Changing Voices: A Study of Transfeminine Vocality

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the voices of trans women are produced and experienced. I explore the various social forces that affect the production of voice, how voice affects trans women's ability to move through the world, and the steps that many trans women take to change their voices. I also examine how some trans women feel about their voices, the social systems that influence those feelings, and how that in turn affects the ways in which they speak. I argue that the social nature of voice and vocal practice can advance an understanding of trans body modification that is less concerned with medical intervention or the choices of individual trans women to pursue or reject normative standards. To do this, I use voice as an example of an adaptive and dynamic process that has high stakes for trans women and is always inseparable from its social context.

Keywords: voice; trans; vocality; vocal training

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Introduction

This project aims to examine how the voices of trans women are produced and experienced, paying particular attention to how we[1] understand our own voices, as well as how and why we change them or keep them as they are. While voice, and the production of vocal gender more broadly, can have a significant effect on trans women's lives, there is little scholarly work within the social sciences pertaining specifically to trans vocality. This gap in the literature is notable because the voice is an important site through which gender is communicated and policed. This thesis aims to address this oversight by investigating how voice affects trans women's ability to move through the world, as well as the steps that many of us take to change our voices. I also explore how some of us feel about our own voices, the social systems that influence those feelings, and how that in turn affects the ways in which we speak.

Voice can also be a productive site to examine broader conceptions of gender and trans body politics. With this in mind, I demonstrate how voice can provide insights into how trans women relate to practices of body modification outside of the context of medical or clinical practice. I explore how the social nature of voice and vocal practice can advance an understanding of gender and the body that is less concerned with how the bodies of individual trans women are positioned, or the choices of individual trans women to pursue or reject normative standards, but instead focuses on voice as a dynamic process that is always inseparable from its social context. I argue that voice can provide a more complete understanding of how trans women, as well as everyone else, relate and respond to the social forces that work to shape their bodies in ways that go beyond clinical intervention, and instead explore the complex and sometimes contradictory dynamics that emerge as we try to adapt to each moment. I argue that voice can help to counter understandings that would frame trans people and trans body modification as uniquely artificial by demonstrating how our bodies are always affected in more subtle ways through the fundamentally social production of voice. It is my hope that a more complete understanding of how trans women's voices are constructed and

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[1] I use first person pronouns to refer to trans women throughout this thesis as it reflects my own position as a trans woman writing, in part, about her own experience. With that being said, however, trans women are a diverse group of people who I cannot claim to fully represent. It is not my intention to totalize trans women as a group, but rather to express my relation to this category.

understood might allow us to better advocate for ourselves, and that this might in turn provide others with an understanding of just how complicated, and how important, vocal gender can be.

This complication is partly based on the ambiguous position of the voice, which can be understood as a flexible and dynamic social practice, a means of communication, and a highly personalized element of the body connected to a sense of self and often expressed through its association with agency or participation within a given system (Weidman 2014: 38). As trans issues have gained a greater prominence in the public imagination, we are increasingly told that trans people should be "given voice" and "make our voices heard" or that "listening to trans people" is an important and necessary act of solidarity, yet it is rarely clear how our voices are produced, nor what the act of listening truly entails. While researching, I quickly learned to temper my excitement whenever I happened across an article or book with "trans voices" in its title, as the majority of them were concerned with questions of expression, agency or representation rather than with actual vocal or listening practices. Voice, however, is more than a metaphor; it is, instead, a complicated biosocial phenomenon that has high stakes for how we are able to move through the world. Many of us worry about our voices, are attacked for our voices, or go to great lengths to alter or adapt our voices, and with this in mind, I am curious about what can be gained from taking seriously the question of how our voices are produced and what exactly is being heard when we speak.

Many trans women go to great lengths to alter their voices, for a variety of reasons that I will elaborate below. At its most basic level, vocal feminization training can be thought of as a series of loosely related practices and protocols, all of which serve to change how trans women sound, usually in order to perform the frequencies and patterns that are more commonly associated with women's voices (Davies et al. 2015). Vocal feminization practices are varied and relatively informal, at least when contrasted with the strict protocols and institutional gatekeeping that exist around more medicalized trans interventions. In lieu of these institutional pathways, trans women access a patchwork of formal and informal methods: some trans women are able to access professional speech pathologists to coach them on how to modify their voices; others rely on friends or other trans women to train them or to practice with; while many turn to the internet, where trans women can access tips, guides, interactive apps or instructional videos (Miller 2017), predominantly created by and for trans women. Throughout this

thesis, I keep my use of vocal change and vocal training intentionally broad in order to acknowledge how much its meaning can vary.

While the voices of trans women can certainly be pathologized, most vocal training is undertaken completely outside of any medical institution. In order to access gender reassignment surgery (GRS) in British Columbia, for example, trans women need to go through the paternalistic process of acquiring two assessment letters from medical professionals; however, in order for a trans woman to change her voice, she mostly just needs to start practicing. GRS and vocal training are both ways to modify the body, but while GRS requires entry into medical institutions and the approval and participation of medical professionals, vocal training is more like practicing a skill. The voice can therefore provide insights into what some trans women might do in the absence of medical gatekeeping and other institutional obstacles. Relatedly, vocal training can help to demonstrate how medical and academic approaches that focus on the trans body as a highly regulated site of clinical intervention through processes like surgery, hormones, and therapy may overlook other dynamics, such as the more subtle and everyday ways in which our bodies can be affected or shaped by social forces and relations that go beyond institutional settings and regulations.

Overall, voice is a largely undertheorized yet incredibly significant process, and in taking it seriously as a subject of analysis, we can also shine a light on an important part of many trans women's lives. Additionally, in studying voice we can learn much about gender, the body, and the social processes that shape and inform it.

Literature Review

Most existing literature on the transgender voice comes from medical fields, most notably the field of speech-language pathology. The studies that inform this literature often provide guidance or methods for speech pathologists working with trans people (Thorton 2008, Davies et al. 2015, Oates and Dacakis 2015), analyze the outcome of particular vocal training practices on trans people's wellbeing or desired vocal outcomes (Owen and Hancock, 2010, Bultynck et al. 2017, T'Sjoen et al. 2008, Hancock 2017, Gelfer and Tice 2012), or offer linguistic analyses of trans voices (Mount and Salmon 1988, Gelfer and Schofield 2000, Gelfer and Mikos 2005, Gorham-Rowan and Morris 2006). The majority of this literature also focuses on trans women specifically. While this work can offer insights into current medical best practices, models of vocal health, and the physical aspects of trans people's voices, it says little about the actual experiences of trans people, such as how trans people come to understand our voices. Questions regarding the particular challenges of working towards vocal change, or with having a voice that does not "match" one's physical appearance are not easily addressed without paying attention to the voice's social context and use. Voice is a common and important part of everyday life, as most people use their voices and hear other people's voices constantly throughout their lives. Because of this, the lack of attention that has been paid to the social elements of the trans voice stands out as a conspicuous omission. These studies also risk reifying vocal gender as a stable element of the self or assume that all trans people desire voices that neatly align with the expected vocal qualities of their identified gender, or that voices that do not align that way are somehow deficient. Lal Zimman, for example, writes that most literature on trans voices portrays

> Trans people as individuals who are working against their biology in order to imitate the purportedly naturally feminine or masculine voices of cis women or men, respectively. This naturalization erases the tremendous variability that exists in the gendered practices of cis women and men on the bases of class, ethnoracial identity, culture of origin, sexuality, or disability, to name a few (Zimman 2016: 254).

As Zimman observes, in addition to the ways in which this understanding can flatten a vast array of voices into a simplified male/female binary, this literature also tends to forward biologically deterministic understandings of the gendered voice, wherein the quality of a person's voice is largely seen to be predetermined by their assigned sex,

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which must then be overcome through vocal practice. The physical elements of the voice which are affected by biological processes, such as the correlation between the pitch of the voice and the size of the larynx, are often emphasized, while the social elements of the voice—the ways in which the voice is trained and produced often in accordance with social pressures and expectations—are treated as less significant (Zimman 2018: 3-4). This tendency to understand the voice as both stable and fundamentally biological mimics assumptions about sex and gender more broadly, effectively serving as a microcosm of the same assumptions that are often made about trans people as a group. According to this model, gender is believed to be innate, biologically predetermined, and tied to a stable and unchangeable understanding of biological sex, and any move to alter the body along gendered lines is understood to be suspect and unnatural.

This has important implications for trans women who desire to make our voices sound more feminine. Focus on pitch, for example, at the expense of other often more culturally mediated elements of the voice, is often insufficient when trying to create a voice that reliably passes (is perceived as not transgender). For example, in their discussion of the efforts that some trans women go to change their voices, Kreiman and Sidtis observe that "a female voice cannot be created by simply scaling up male vocal parameters, because culture-, accent-, and dialect-dependent cues to a speaker's sex can be essential to a successful transformation" (2011: 145). In order for our voices to be reliably interpreted as female, a variety of culturally dependent qualities will often need to be expressed. Relatedly, this also demonstrates how certain kinds of voices get framed as "natural" or unremarkable depending on how they relate to these social and cultural expectations.

Work that engages more explicitly with the social context from which trans voice emerges, as well as how trans people use and understand our voices, can help to address these problems and discrepancies by actually engaging with what voice means to us and by examining the challenges we might face outside of the confines of a clinical setting or speech pathologist's office, as well as the strategies that are deployed in gendering the voice that go beyond these clinical contexts. By focusing on the voice as dynamic, fluid, and informed by a variety of social forces, we can derive a better understanding of how the gendered voice is developed in relation to its social context, and how trans women respond and adapt to the various impositions that are placed upon our voices and our bodies.

There is some work that engages with the trans voice from a more social or qualitative perspective (Ahmed 2018, Thompson 2018, Stewart et al. 2020) as well as through the lens of sociolinguistics (Zimman 2016, 2017, 2018) within the context of speech and communication. Notably, however, the majority of the academic literature on trans vocal experience that I have found considers trans people's singing voices, or the experiences of trans people within organizations like choirs or with singing lessons or sung performances (Constansis and Foteinou 2017, Aguirre 2018, Chao 2018, Cayari 2019). While this work can certainly be useful in helping to understand some elements of the trans voice, it is insufficient when trying to understand voice in its most common context: everyday communication and conversation.

Other studies have demonstrated that voice is a cause of anxiety to many trans women, and that having a voice that does not correlate with one's gender can have very real, and often negative consequences. Studies show, for example, that trans women's self-perception around voice can have an impact on our mental health and our understanding of ourselves more generally (Hancock et al. 2011, Schmidt et al. 2018, Kennedy and Thibeault 2020). This makes the relative paucity of academic work on the voice within fields like trans studies even more striking, as voice so clearly affects the lives of many trans women every day.

Still other scholars have considered how voice can intersect with social phenomena such as race (Eidsheim 2019), gender (Schlichter 2011, Thompson 2018) and disability (Marshall 2014, Alper 2017, Sterne 2019), and while they rarely focus on trans people in particular, they demonstrate how voice cannot be disentangled from the social systems that relate to it. These systems all have an effect on the voice's production and how the voice is listened to and interpreted by others. Voice, therefore, must be understood as a fundamentally social process, both in the literal sense of how we communicate with each other and in the various social contexts in which the voice is expressed and interpreted. The actual sonic attributes of the voice will also be affected by its social position, as the quality of a person's voice—its own unique timbre, as well as intonation, rate and patterns of speech and other attributes—are all learned behaviours that reflect particular processes of socialization, or in the case of vocal training, specific movements towards the production of a particular kind of voice.

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I conceptualize vocal training and vocal change as existing within the same continuum as other forms of gendered body modification, as it involves the training of a part of the body—a person's vocal apparatus—to work differently. Vocal training often results in a significant change in how the body functions and sounds. While this sort of modification does not require surgeons or scalpels, it can still involve a very significant change to how a person's body will be understood. The ways in which the body can be contorted or changed is just as relevant to the voice as it is to other parts of the body, as voice can help to demonstrate how the body does not always require trained medical professionals for it to be meaningfully altered.

The trans body and its potential alterations have been important sites of theory and critique. Studies of trans surgeries (Sullivan 2006, Stryker and Sullivan 2009, Plemons 2017, Heyes and Lathem 2018), for example, demonstrate the social forces that may lead some trans people to change their bodies, and the multiple ways in which such change can be achieved. These interventions complicate institutional narratives around bodily change that might position trans surgeries and other forms of gendered body modification as nothing more than the pursuit of normative gender through medical intervention. These narratives are problematized by paying greater attention to the far more complicated ways in which we can relate to trans body modification and adapt to social pressures and institutional regulations as we pursue bodily alteration (Spade 2006). This work serves to interrogate and contextualize the question of what it means to change the look or sound of a person's body, often along gendered lines. For this reason, studies of technologies such as facial feminization surgery, gender reassignment surgery, or hormone replacement therapy, can all be understood as interrelated processes that exist within the same continuum as vocal training. Importantly, however, most of the studies of trans surgeries examine trans body modification as a highly regulated site of clinical practice. Recognizing vocal training as a form of body modification opens up more space to think about how the body can be shaped, adapted, and regulated through techniques and practices that exist within the dynamic context of everyday life.

The ways in which trans surgeries and modifications are culturally contextualized is also important here, as the practice of vocal training will be interpreted, both by the person who chooses to undertake it and the people with whom they interact, in accordance with pre-existing understandings of what it means to change a part of

oneself. This is significant because while modifications can be quite similar, they can also be read in distinctly different ways. Nikki Sulivan has noted that

> Perhaps at bottom, what procedures as diverse as mastectomies, penectomies, hormone treatments, tattooing, breast enhancement, implants, corsetry, rhinoplasty, scarification, branding, and so on, have in common, is that they all function, in varying ways and to varying degrees, to explicitly transform bodily being—they are all, in one sense at least, 'trans' practices. (Sullivan 2006: 552).

I would add vocal alteration to this list. While I do not wish to negate the specifically gendered ways in which body modification, when enacted on trans people, might be uniquely experienced or stigmatized, I find it useful to think about the similarities between these practices, and how, despite having so much in common, these forms of body modification are often understood through a "tendency to set up a dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' forms of embodiment" (553). Within this dichotomy, some modifications might be thought to symbolize agency and resistance, while others are believed to express conformity or false consciousness. The ways in which we tend to (often arbitrarily and moralistically) interpret body modification practices in relation to these larger interpretive frameworks are important for understanding the trans voice, because both trans women ourselves, and the people we encounter, will often already have particular schemas in mind regarding what body modification, and particularly trans body modification, means to them. Vocal change will always be interpreted, consciously or not, in relation to these pre-existing beliefs. The voice can help to complicate these frameworks, as an understanding of body modification that centers individual agency and choice cannot account for the voice's fundamentally social development and function.

Definitions of voice also warrant consideration, as do the ways in which voice is understood in relation to gender and other social systems. Annette Schlichter, for example, has argued that contemporary theories of gendered embodiment will frequently privilege the visual over the aural, citing how Judith Butler's examination of the drag scene neglects the sonic aspects of drag, such as lip-sync. She further argues that Butler "Collapses vocal matter into the 'discursive' and thereby precludes a closer examination of more concrete material discourse-practices that produce bodies" (Schlichter 2011: 41). I view my research partially as a contribution towards a re-centering of the material and social qualities of the voice as an important site of gendered embodiment.

The voice is often understood to be an expression of the self: a means through which some element of who we are as individuals can be conveyed. Adriana Cavarero, for example, argues that we should understand the voice in relation to a "vocal phenomenology of uniqueness", expressed as "an ontology that concerns the incarnate singularity of every existence insofar as she or he manifests her- or himself vocally" (Cavarero 2005: 7). According to this model, the voice conveys the uniqueness of each person to those who hear them. Voice here is deeply tied to the self, as it is assumed that the voice carries with it something fundamentally unique about each speaker. I find Cavarero useful here because she recognizes that the voice is more than a carrier for disembodied language; in fact, the voice itself can carry meaning, and how it emanates from the body can potentially tell us something about whomever is speaking. Voice, therefore, is also relational, as the uniqueness of each voice can be recognized and understood by a listener.

While I find Cavarero's emphasis on the materiality and specificity of the voice to be helpful, I am cautious about the assumption that the voice contains within it some kind of personal identity that others can unproblematically listen to and interpret. This understanding of the voice as a carrier of personal uniqueness assumes that the voice conveys some inner truth regarding who we are. According to this theory, a trans woman who, upon speaking, is outed for who she "really is" may reveal a kind of truth through a listener's identification of her supposedly male voice, signaling a deeper gendered interiority that contradicts other ostensibly more superficial signifiers. The idea that voice is something intrinsic to the self leaves little room for those of us who feel the need to radically alter our voices, often to make them signal something different than what they conferred before.

Other theories, however, place a greater emphasis on the voice's social development. Nina Sun Eidsheim has argued that the voice should not just be considered as a means of individual self-expression, and instead focuses on how the voice is listened to. Voice is not neutrally or passively received by a listener but is always interpreted in relation to the context through which it is produced. Voice is never stable, tied to a single person, or naturally connected to categories like race or gender. Eidsheim offers three correctives to such an understanding of voice: "Voice is not singular; it is collective"; "voice is not innate; it is cultural"; and "voice's source is not the

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singer; it is the listener" (Eidsheim 2019: 9). Voice, according to this model, is a process that, while commonly associated with individual speakers, is always enacted through multiple people, speaking, listening, and performing their understanding of voice in relation to concepts and categories that they have already internalized. Her last point, that voice is best understood as emerging from the listener, is especially pertinent:

> on the one hand, actual vocal output is determined by the speaker's listening to his or her own voice and considering how the community hears it, and by the countless concrete instances in which he or she is vocally corrected, directly or indirectly, by other people. On the other hand, regardless of the actual vocal signal emitted, listeners will produce their own assessment of what they did hear" (Eidsheim 2019: 12-13).

Voice cannot be understood as connected to the individual who produces it alone, as both the social forces that come to shape our voices, and the ways in which our voices are interpreted, must always be acknowledged. Nicholas Harkness offers a similarly social theory of speaking and listening when he refers to voice as a "phonosonic nexus," a recognition of voice as "an ongoing intersection between the phonic production, shaping, and organization of sound, on the one hand, and the sonic uptake and categorization of sound in the world, on the other" (2014: 12).

Such framing is useful for understanding the trans voice, as it unties the voice from its more common association with selfhood and individual expression, allowing us to better understand both how our voices are produced socially and how our efforts to speak differently are similarly performed in relation to those same social forces. It also recognizes that how people listen to our voices will have a profound effect on how our voices are interpreted. A trans woman's voice, for example, may be heard and understood in radically different ways depending on the listener's understanding of her gender, as well as a host of other perceived characteristics such as race, disability, or sexuality. A normatively male voice, for example, will be interpreted differently, depending on if it is presumed to be connected to a normatively male body. Because our voices emerge from our bodies, listeners make assumptions about the voice in relation to the body that is producing it, or, if no one is visible, they make assumptions about what sort of body the voice is presumed to emanate from.

Eidsheim's work on racial timbre is also helpful here:

In the same way that culturally derived systems of pitches organized into scales render a given vibrational field in tune or out of tune, a culturally derived system of race renders a given vibrational field attached to a person as a white voice, a black voice — that is, "in tune" with expected correlations between skin color and vocal timbre — or someone who sounds white or black, meaning that the vocalization did not correspond to (was "out of tune" with) the ways in which the person as a whole was taxonomized (Eidsheim 2019: 4)

The ways in which a voice is racialized, gendered, or otherwise classified are always related to assumptions made about that voice, as the voice is interpreted in different ways depending on if it is "in tune" with those beliefs. Cultural assumptions connect the sound of the voice with a person's physical appearance, and failure to meet such assumptions can result in the voice standing out more than it would otherwise or being interpreted as somehow misaligned or discordant.

Uniquely, the voice can be regarded as both a part of the body, in that it is produced by it and is often understood as being an essential part of who someone is, and as something that exists outside of the body, in that it emanates from us and literally exists outside of our bodies in the form of soundwaves, where it can also be recorded, transferred, or manipulated through technology (Sterne 2003: 343). When there is no visual evidence of a body attached to a voice (such as on a recording), a body is often imagined or assumed to exist (Eidsheim 2019: 3). This demonstrates both how entrenched the association of gender with certain vocal patterns and frequencies really is and how much work we do in assigning visual and social characteristics to the disembodied voices that we hear. Thus, we often assume that the voice carries within it some fundamental information about a person, and that we can uncritically recognize those characteristics, even when we do not know who is speaking. Observing these assumptions, and the specific ways in which people listen to voice and assign meaning to it, helps us to hear the voice as a social process.

The voice is never static, and, for everyone, continues to change over time, as it is met with new ways of speaking, environments, accents and expectations. A new job, for example, may call for someone to adopt a more traditionally authoritative speaking voice. A professor may decide to invoke a certain amount of authority through their voice while teaching a class in order to position themselves as an expert or to assert control over their classroom but might turn those vocal stylings off the moment they leave, or when they start to interact with their peers in a way that may call for a more friendly

vocal style. Regardless of how and why people change their voices, the voice shifts, sometimes in obvious ways, and sometimes in minute, almost unnoticeable ways, as we enter different environments or as we interact with different people. It is important, therefore, not to exceptionalize the trans voice or transfeminine vocal training as something unique to trans people alone. As we have seen, every voice is a trained voice, and the difference between cis and trans vocal practice is largely a matter of awareness and intent. The ways in which we speak are inseparable from how we are socialized, who we are expected to model our voices after, and the social pressures we experience around how we are supposed to sound.

Jules Gill-Peterson's writing on "The Technical Capacities of the Body" (2014) explores the ways in which all bodies maintain the capacity for a multitude of expressions. Each body, regardless of how it is categorized, maintains the capacity to be technologically and socially altered. Hormone replacement therapy for trans people, for example, while often understood as an unnatural chemical alteration, relies on the same bodily capacity for the endocrine system to absorb and distribute hormones as ostensibly more natural forms of hormone production: "the difference between synthetic hormone therapy and the endocrine system's autonomic functioning is that hormone therapy involves a subject's technological intervention upon its own body" (Gill-Peterson 2014: 407). When viewed through this lens, the exceptionalist framing of trans people as working against their own biology begins to fall apart, as we are merely manipulating our own body's technical capacities. As Gil-Peterson makes clear, all bodies are already technologically constructed and acted upon, and the human voice is one of the most obvious sites in which to observe this. All of the ways in which we send out sonic vibrations to those around us are dependent on a series of learned and imposed behaviours which are normally naturalized as a stable element of the self. Once the voice is understood as a bodily technique, the trans body loses its designation as uniquely unnatural, as this theory dispels the idea that a natural, unaltered voice can even exist. Gender, as well as race, class, sexuality and disability are all read into and imposed on the voice, and all converge into something that then is assumed to be natural for some, and unnatural for others. It is not enough, however, to observe that the voice is technologically constituted, nor is it enough to observe that we all undergo a kind of vocal training, as it is also important to pay attention to what vocal training is

encouraged and naturalized, and what vocal training is stigmatized or disallowed, as well as why specific vocal qualities become so deeply tied to specific bodies.

Considerations of such vocal fluidity can be misleading, however, if it is assumed that it is equally available to all, or if we focus so much on the body's potential for change that we negate how this plasticity can be exploited by others. All bodies have within them the technical capacity to change, yet under oppressive systems such as capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy, any potential for the human form to change is restricted by systems designed, in many ways, to hold it in place, or to specifically mold and model it to become more profitable or acquiescent. Any discussion of this malleability must account for who is actually able to change, who is pressured or forced to change, and who is fixed in place. In *Histories of the Transgender Child*, for example, Gill-Peterson notes that throughout the history of transsexual medicine,

> the racial plasticity of sex and gender was a decidedly disenfranchising object of governance from the perspective of trans children. At its institutional best, it granted access to a rigid medical model premised on binary normalization. At its institutional worst, it allowed gatekeeping clinicians to reject black and trans of color children as *not plastic enough* for the category of transsexuality, dismissing their self-knowledge of gender as delusion or homosexuality." (Gill-Peterson 2018: 5).

How trans children were racialized determined the perceived plasticity of their bodies, both in terms of who was granted access to body modification technologies, like puberty blockers and hormone replacement therapy, and how they were conceptualized by others. Children who were allowed to transition were used by the medical system explicitly because of the assumed plasticity of white children's bodies.

While some vocal training may not be connected to medical systems and the institutional gatekeeping that is implied therein, the ways in which voice is interpreted and experienced are, nevertheless, always shaped by class, race, gender, and disability. An accent, for example, can often be used to infer someone's race, ethnicity, or class position. As just one example of this, there have been studies have shown that whether or not a person's voice sounds "gay" can influence how they are treated (Fasoli and Maass 2020). While it is true that the voice is always changing, and always contextual, the question of who is pressured to change their voice and why, as well as who is actually allowed or able to change their voice, must be considered in discussions of the voice's social formation.

The lives, bodies, and experiences of trans people, and especially trans women, have long been abstracted and leveraged for political or theoretical purposes (Namaste 2009). For some queer and trans theorists, for example, we may be used to represent the subversion of gender or the mutability of the body (Stone 2006); for conservative politicians, we may also represent that same subversion, but with a negative connotation instead of a positive one; while for others, such as some strains of transphobic feminism, we may represent the normalizing force of patriarchal medicine, portraying us as either hapless victims of a patriarchal false consciousness, or as nefarious and predatory infiltrators (Raymond 1979). Regardless of how we are interpreted, whether negative or positive, the end result is the transformation of trans people into abstracted political signifiers.

I bring this up because I fear that my work, if not properly contextualized within the lives of the people whose voices I am discussing, could have a similar effect—using the specific position of the trans voice in relation to other voices to make some abstract point about the construction of gender, the plasticity of the body, or the coercive nature of gender roles, without properly accounting for what this actually means for us. Vivian Namaste aptly observes, for example, how "critics in queer theory write page after page on the inherent liberation of transgressing normative sex/gender codes, but have nothing to say about the precarious position of the transsexual woman who is battered and who is unable to access women's shelters because she was not born a biological woman" (Namaste 2000: 9).

For the purposes of this study, the ways in which the voice may offer insights into the construction of gender or the theoretical disruption of gender systems means little if it does not account for the actual lives, wants, needs, and hardships of trans women ourselves. The enforcement of gender is obviously part (but not all) of the reason why trans women are often in such precarious positions, but in assigning some fundamentally liberatory or radical quality to trans voice or identity in itself, or to how that relates to vocal difference, we can undervalue the actual lives and experiences of many trans women. It is important therefore, to highlight how trans women ourselves think about voice, the impact that it can have on our lives, and the ways in which we feel about and navigate the processes of vocal change. This also entails looking into the often contested political and emotional stakes of body modification and gendered vocal

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alteration, noting how shifts in voice (and in the body more broadly) are contextualized and discussed.

Methods

In order to explore these topics, I utilize both interviews and autoethnography. This project began with the assumption that a qualitative understanding of something as personal and embodied as voice may be made more accessible through personal observation and introspection than through more traditional methods, as the actual act of speech and our connection to our voices can be very difficult to relate in full. As a method, autoethnography "seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience" (Elllis et al. 2011). This is accomplished partially by centering the researcher's own experiences as an object of analysis (Butz and Besio 2009). Autoethnography rejects notions of detached objectivity and instead positions the researcher as the subject of their own research. As I conducted my research, I tried to pay close attention to my thoughts, emotions, senses, and physical experiences, as they not only influence my research in ways that must be acknowledged, but are an integral part of the research itself (Spry 2001).

Such autoethnographic methods were fluid and changed over time with the evolving understandings of voice and how my personal vocal practice intersected with the goals of this project. For example, what started as a formal commitment to regular scheduled vocal practice became a far less rigorous process which eventually led to a total cessation of attempts to change my voice at all. These changed perspectives became an important part of my autoethnographic project, as I continued to reflect on my own vocal experiences and assumptions. When I did practice, I employed a variety of methods and techniques, such as recording my voice while I attempted to alter it, and then listening to those changes to see how I sounded and then adjust accordingly. I also searched the internet for tips and communities where I could learn more about voice, such as YouTube videos where people provided advice or techniques. I used practices like journaling and note taking, which helped me to become more mindful about how my voice was being used within everyday experience. Practicing autoethnography often meant reorienting my mind towards my voice in a way which heightened my awareness of it, making each vocal act feel more significant. Thus, the simple act of speaking and using my voice while out in the world also became an important object of analysis.

In addition to my autoethnographic work, I interviewed five trans women, asking them how they felt about their voices, what (if anything) they did to change their voices, how their voices impacted their lives, and how they felt about the concept of altering or training their voices in order to sound different. Participants were recruited through existing social networks and chain referral sampling. My interviews were semi-structured in order to allow for my research participants to discuss what interested them and to allow some flexibility regarding what we talked about, but we always discussed how their voices impacted their lives, how they thought about their voices, and what efforts, if any, they had taken to change them. I view these interviews as complementary to my autoethnographic work, in that they allowed me to get outside of my own experience in order to both decenter myself as the only subject of analysis and to position my voice and how I understand it in relation to other trans women. Sometimes the stories and perspectives of my participants resonated deeply with my own experience, while at other times they approached voice from a very different perspective. I have tried to reflect that variance of thought and experience in my analysis.

The most significant limitation regarding my study comes from its relatively small number of participants, as well as the limits of my own positionality. The majority of my participants were middle class, and all but one of them were white. This means that there are hard limits to the usefulness of my study when drawing conclusions about "trans women" as a group, as it cannot account for a variety of factors that might influence how people experience, understand and produce their voices. The purpose of this project then, is not to offer a universal and authoritative account of the trans voice, but rather to offer insight into how some of us experience it, and what that might potentially tell us about the social forces that produce and regulate our voices and how we adapt and respond to them.

The interviews occurred while I was personally focusing on my own voice, so that each interview had a real impact on my autoethnographic practice, and my autoethnography in turn influenced my interviews. The highly vocal act of carrying out an interview, and then the act of listening and transcribing my interviews afterwards, were useful for my research, both in the standard sense that I was gathering and interpreting academic data, and in the sense that they gave me ample opportunity to observe my own speaking and listening practices, as well as those of my participants. This act of self-study cannot be neatly separated from the interviews, as they each informed the

other and had an impact on how I understood and interpreted my data. While I have largely kept my two data sources separate, they continue to inform each other, as the ways in which I use my voice will always relate to the voices of others.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is divided into two chapters, with each chapter focusing on a different research method. The first chapter draws on interviews conducted with five trans women about their voices. We discussed how they feel about the process of vocal change, and how they manage their voices to navigate the complexities and obstacles that can immerge around voice in order to either construct a voice that works for them or deal with a voice that does not. This chapter uses vocal training to think about the construction and pursuit of various iterations of trans womanhood, examining how people embody the category of "woman's voice," while noting that the there is always more than one kind of "woman's voice" to embody. Here I explore how my research participants adapt to existing gendered vocal protocols, why they reject or accept them, how they decide which protocols to follow, and how these practices are shaped by broader social structures. I demonstrate how trans women can engage in subtle forms of self-making and modification as we adapt to different social contexts. I also explore the social forces and expectations that can fix our voices in place. This chapter attempts to demonstrate the ways in which voice, when understood as a social process rather than an individual characteristic, might help us to understand how the trans body and our relation to it, is always formed through social forces that go far beyond choices of individuals. Vocal change can be understood as an adaptive process that responds to the specific contexts in which we find ourselves. I have use pseudonyms throughout this chapter in order to protect the identities of my participants.

The second chapter investigates my own experience with vocal training, focusing on voice as an especially useful place to examine the various contradictions, binaries and narratives that develop around trans embodiment. I ask how I might use my own experiences in order to navigate a complicated politics of gender via the use or rejection of vocal change. I explore the ways in which voice ties into normative conceptions of gender, and how the social forces that produce the voice work to both motivate the pursuit of normative vocal femininity and constrain the voice within a very specific range of allowable characteristics. I argue that a consideration of the multifaceted nature of voice can help us gain insight into how we relate to gender norms and body modification in ways that move beyond the brittle dichotomies of assimilationist/radical, resistance/conformity, or normative/antinormative, leading to a

more complex understanding of voice, and therefore the body at large, that is always enmeshed in social processes that can exceed and complicate our understanding of how we relate to gendered expectations.

Chapter 1.

Interview: The Experience and Production of Voice

In this chapter, I explore some of the experiences of the trans women that I interviewed. I examine how they relate to their voices, how and why they decide to change or not change their voices, and how they navigate the various pressures and social forces that influence those decisions. The primary goal of this chapter is to demonstrate some of the ways in which voice is experienced and understood by trans women. I examine how this in turn affects how we are able to navigate the world, as well as how these experiences affect the sound and character of the voice itself in ways that are always related to the voice's social context.

The first, and most obvious point to note when considering the trans voice is the simple but incredibly important fact that it is greatly affected by transphobia and the pressures that result from it. There are many reasons that might motivate someone towards vocal change, from the alleviation of gender dysphoria to a simple desire to sound a certain way, but for every person that I have interviewed, the most consistent motivating factor was that voice was a means through which they could become a target for transmisogynistic discrimination or abuse, based on an awareness that if they were to change their voices, they might be able to move through the world more easily. The perceived mismatch between the sound of a person's voice and their appearance can have very real consequences.

One of my research participants, Jane, told a story that clearly illustrates many of the effects that transphobia can have on the voice. As she was going about her day, shopping for food at a grocery store, a man approached her and began talking to her in a flirtatious way that felt intrusive and inappropriate. It was clear, or at least likely from the way that he spoke, that this man believed her to be a cis woman. This relatively mundane occurrence created both a heightened sense of anxiety within her and an especially powerful focus on her voice.

Conceptions of "passing" for trans people often forward the concept as if it is a simple binary that one either does or does not accomplish, but that is not how it works in practice. It is a constant process where saying the wrong thing or sounding the wrong

way can radically recontextualize who you are in someone's mind. For Jane, her voice represented the primary vector through which that recontextualization might occur. Each word that she spoke held within it the potential to place her in more danger, or simply provided the means to bring about feelings of anxiety or fear.

This brief interaction is just one example of a process that happens to trans women throughout our lives, where we are presumed to be something and then sanctioned when we fail to live up to those presumptions. Trans women are often understood as fundamentally deceitful, the idea being that in donning the clothing, identity, or persona of the "opposite" sex, we are putting on a costume, with the explicit purpose of tricking the world into thinking we are something we are not. This understanding of trans women as deceptive can have very serious consequences, as the argument that a trans woman has "tricked" someone by simply existing in their proximity, can be used to justify violence and abuse.

Talia Mae Bettcher argues that trans people exist within a double bind where those who are recognized as trans by others (do not pass) or who openly identify themselves as trans will be seen as "pretenders": people who are (for example) "really" men who are "pretending" to be women or "playing dress up." Conversely, those who pass can be recognized as real and legitimate as long as no one knows they are trans. They are always at risk of exposure, however, as the revelation of a person's trans status will cause them to be seen as a "deceiver." When someone is recognized as trans who was previously not recognized as such, this shift in perspective will be understood as the unveiling of a hidden truth—a lie which might deserve violent retaliation. Trans people, therefore, have the option to either "disclose 'who one is' and come out as a pretender or masquerader, or refuse to disclose (be a deceiver) and run the risk of forced disclosure, the effect of which is exposure as a liar" (Bettcher 2007: 50). Bettcher also stresses that "far from mere 'stereotype' or 'ignorant misconception' this double bind between deception and pretense actually reflects the way in which transpeople can find ourselves literally 'constructed' whether we like it or not. That is, if these are somehow 'stereotypes,' then they are 'stereotypes' that we can find ourselves involuntarily animating" (Bettcher 2007: 50). This understanding of trans people can profoundly affect how we are treated, how we act, and who we are understood to be.

Because Jane's voice in the above example did not reliably pass, she risked being seen as a deceiver. Gender is often assessed visually before anything else. Most people unconsciously assign someone to a gender category within a second of seeing them, and once an assumption has been made, it then falls upon us to ensure that this belief is maintained. Voice complicates this further by being a sonic attribute within a domain that is more frequently understood as visual. A trans woman who otherwise may be able to move through public space without being perceived as trans may be outed the moment she opens her mouth. Voice then, can be thought of as a glimpse into who we really are, a lapse of the façade. As voice is normally considered a stable and essential part of a person, culturally tied to notions of authentic selfhood (Schlichter 2014), the presumed mismatch of voice and body reads like a perfect transphobic metaphor: we are always male on the inside.

The potential for Jane's voice to expose her manifested in other ways as well. For example, Jane reported that she did not feel that she could verbally rebuff her assailant because raising her voice would amplify and therefore draw further attention to it:

> It just heightened how vulnerable I feel when I'm in public, and alone in particular. And I mean that as a feminine person; as a woman, but I also mean it as a trans person, as someone who kind of in some ways defies gender expectations and is often met with hostility because of it. So, you're in this moment when you think to yourself. . . if this were my sister or my friends, or my cis friends, cis female friends going through this, my advice to them would just be to tell him to fuck off, like go mind your own business, right? But for me I don't feel like I can do that, and the reason I don't feel like I can do that is because my voice prevents me from feeling comfortable enough in that situation to stand up for myself, because I so fear his reaction if he thinks that he's been quote unquote duped.

This can be further exacerbated because assertiveness and aggression themselves are often coded as masculine. The ways in which gendered behaviors and expectations are tied to voice worked to constrain her speech and created an environment where she felt she had to be silent or at least less assertive than she otherwise might be. This demonstrates how vocal gender is not only regulated, in that it demands that the pitch or quality of a person's voice remains within a certain frequency, but also frequently ensures that those who do not exist within those frequencies must monitor or constrain other gendered behaviours. Her nonnormative voice effectively created an environment

where she felt silenced, where other forms of gender nonconformity became more difficult to perform, and where other parts of her behaviour were more greatly regulated.

Because of this bind, trans women will often employ strategies in order to minimize the potential for harm. My participants reported that they often felt that they needed to maintain a constant vigilance around their voices, meaning both that they tried to monitor their surroundings for potential dangers and that they channeled that awareness towards their voices. This awareness is connected to both the potential fluidity of the voice and the pressure that is maintained for trans women to channel that fluidity in distinctly constrained ways. Multiple people reported that their voices would become more relaxed when they were in a more comfortable environment or when talking with people whom they trusted. Similarly, some participants reported that they felt that they could not speak at all in spaces like bathrooms, where gender was more explicitly policed. Some spaces then, were literally silencing. My participants' relation to their voices shifted in accordance with their environment and being in public often required greater and more precise attention to the voice, as any vocal quality that did not meet these standards might potentially lead to exposure. Voice here, helps to demonstrate how the ways in which we relate to and embody gender and gender norms are always dependent on the social position that we find ourselves in. My participants' capacity to be recognized for who they were shifted in relation to their environment in a way that called for different forms of vocalization, and therefore different forms of embodiment.

Several other participants told similar stories, noting that they were afraid of situations where they might have to raise their voices or that they worried that they might lose control over their voices in situations where they might become angry or afraid. Another participant, Ella, mentioned, for example, that "whenever I get angry, I can feel some of the control slip from my voice, and people kind of home in on that." The need to maintain precise control, as well as the ways that losing control can also be gendered, meant that voice sometimes limited their self-expression in ways that went beyond the pressure for their voice to maintain a certain pitch or quality. Others noted that vocal expressions that were more difficult to manage or that felt less explicitly under their control, such as when they laughed or coughed, were sources of anxiety because such actions might become a site where they could be exposed.

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This correlates with Stewart, Oates and O'Halloran's study of trans women's experiences with voice in sport (Stewart et al. 2020), finding that trans women in sport projecting their voices more loudly, as well as associated vocal fatigue and shortness of breath, were factors that made it more difficult for them to maintain their voices within a more typically female range. Some of their participants stated that they would stop talking under those circumstances and resort to nonverbal communication instead (82). Voice, as I argued earlier, is always dependent on its social context, and trans women are often very aware of this and will take steps to ensure that they remain in control of their voices, even when that means not speaking at all.

While experiences of transphobia related to voice often arise from a clash between visual and aural signifiers of gender, some trans women can partially rely on visual cues in order to contextualize their voices and to assert their gender regardless of how they sound. Even if someone has a more typically masculine voice, the way that they dress or style themselves can still send signals about how they might want to be gendered (Borsel et al. 2001). In situations where people have to rely exclusively on sonic signifiers, however, the voice has to stand on its own as a gendered object. The ways in which the voice is simultaneously both produced by the body, and exists outside of it, as well as the belief that the voice contains some fundamental insight into who we are, means that the people who hear our voices will often automatically make assumptions about a voice despite knowing very little about who is speaking (Eidsheim 2019: 3). Voice, when untethered, at least in theory, from the body that produces it, is consequently given even more power than it normally does to define who a person is.

In this regard, the vast majority of my participants reported at least some trepidation or anxiety around talking on the phone, and some would try their best to avoid phone calls whenever possible. One participant, Alyssa, noted that this experience is very common among trans people, stating that "the number of people I know who have had to hang up the phone because the people who they are talking to on the other end don't believe they are who they say they are, is a huge number of people." This was especially true in situations where they were talking to someone they did not know. Phone calls from strangers, such as telemarketers or representatives of banks or other companies, often involve the use of more formal and gendered language (Sir, Mr., etc.) which can be especially painful to hear, and this can be complicated by the fact that, as my participant Jane noted, unlike when people are misgendered in other contexts, there

is a good chance that the person doing the misgendering is trying to be respectful, instead of intentionally and transphobically misgendering someone in order to hurt them. This changes the social dynamic at play and might make it more difficult for some trans women to assert themselves.

As vocal gender is often understood to be a stable and unchanging element of the body, the perceived failure to align oneself vocally with gendered expectations can also be read as especially fraudulent or deceptive. Another participant, Sarah, reported that she had previously been locked out of her bank account and several other participants stated that they knew trans people who had experienced the same thing. The perceived mismatch between the sound of their voices and the name or gender attached to their accounts led people to assume that they were not who they said they were. Jane also reported more subtle inferences that the person she was talking to thought she was a man, because they would use vocal speech patterns and language choices that she associated with how men would talk to her before she transitioned. This was also difficult because it sometimes felt like she was being temporarily drawn back into a social role that she had worked hard to leave behind.

This demonstrates the potential for the voice to tell us something about a speaker and the common assumption that it tells us more than it really can. Cavarero mentions a scenario wherein using the telephone "one asks me 'who is it?'—and I respond without hesitation 'it's me,' or 'it is 'I.'' The depersonalized function of the pronouns 'I' or 'me'—highlighted here by the fact that the speaker does not show her face—gets immediately annulled by the unmistakable uniqueness of the voice." (Cavarero 2005: 175). There is some truth to this statement, as our voices are often recognizable to those who know us well, but we often attribute far more to the voice than it can actually relate. The people who locked Sarah out of her bank account assumed that her voice was conveying some truth about who she was, but they were incorrect. This demonstrates not only the effects of assumptions about vocal stereotypes or expectations, but the deeper notion that the voice is a more fundamental expression of the self, one that can override other signals, including the stated identity of the person who is speaking. Her protests that she was, in fact, who she said she was, were no match for the presumed truth of the voice.

My participants, however, demonstrated an understanding of voice and gender that was often significantly more complicated. In general, they understood their voices in ways that went beyond a simple binary movement from male to female. Vocal training was often thought of less as a strict dichotomy between passing and not passing, or masculinity and femininity (although both those binaries were important and had an effect), but rather as an array of interrelated characteristics that they could choose to pursue or not depending on what they wanted and what they thought they could achieve. Trans women can be quite specific about our vocal goals, and these goals can vary greatly from person to person. One of my research participants, Lauren, for example, was more concerned with how the subtle intonations of her voice would be read than with vocal pitch. Other people were not concerned with intonation but were focused on other qualities like pitch or timbre. While many of my participants wanted their voices to pass as cis, the ways in which they envisioned changing their voices tended to vary significantly.

My participant, Alyssa, told me about the time she attended a free group vocal training session in Vancouver. While she was originally interested in attending and mentioned that she had waited over a year to access it, she felt uncomfortable when she attended the class, in part because the person teaching the course moved beyond what she felt was appropriate. She was mostly fine when discussing or practicing changes to vocal attributes like pitch but began to feel more uncomfortable when the instructor started to discuss concepts like word choices and vocal patterns which to her seemed to be reinforcing a narrow view of gendered voice and behaviour. Sarah mentioned the same program, saying "I don't like cis people telling me how to be a trans woman or how to be a woman. It bothers me." The perceived power relations between a cis vocal instructor and their trans students worked to make the program feel uncomfortable. Alyssa also mentioned that this discomfort helped to produce feelings of resistance to the program itself and an unwillingness to do the exercises and homework that came with it, because they did not adequately address her ability to craft her own voice on her terms.

Voice once again helps to show how even when people pursue what could be considered a more normative form of embodiment, they can still go about that pursuit in a variety of different ways, and still find capacities to resist some elements of that process or to accept or reject various impositions based their own comfort, as well as

what they deem to be necessary or important for themselves. Our voices are always shaped to some degree in relation to normative social expectations but never in a way that is completely totalizing.

This expressed discomfort contradicts the emphasis of much speech pathology literature, where a singular "female voice" containing all the elements normally aligned with that voice is often assumed to be the goal for all (Zimman 2016). Many trans women will target very specific elements of the voice that they are unhappy with and are quite cognisant of what they like and dislike about their voices. Rather than viewing vocal gender as a simple binary with a male voice on one side and a female voice on the other, the trans women I interviewed maintained an awareness of the specific sonic attributes that concerned them and those that did not. This is noteworthy because it recontextualizes vocal training away from a simple move from one gendered pole to another. People can fashion their voices in relation to both their individual desires and their awareness of what specific vocal attributes are more likely to be interpreted by others as a problem. This also shows how variable the voice can be, and how binary thinking may negate how the various attributes of the voice are diverse, rather than being neatly clustered around two obviously gendered positions. As Zimman argues, "Trans voices demand a reframing of the gendered voice as a fluid set of multidimensional styles rather than a static property determined by speaker sex." (2017: 341).

This example also demonstrates that while some changes may be desirable in theory, the manner in which they are delivered is crucial and failure to account for this may result in some people feeling uncomfortable or ceasing the training process entirely, even if they might otherwise be interested. Alyssa also mentioned that she may have felt differently about the vocal training program had the instructor placed a greater emphasis on people's ability to fashion a voice that is right for them. An understanding of vocal gender as more dynamic and multifaceted might have helped the program to retain people like Alyssa, who maintained an interest in vocal change but had specific beliefs and goals about how she wanted to pursue it.

My participants' understanding of their voices was not, however, always related to concealing their trans identity or aligning themselves with an expected female register. Jane, for example, felt conflicted about changing her voice, in part because she felt that

her voice was a key means to communicate her queer and trans identity to other people. Because she usually visually passed as cis, she appreciated that she could use her voice to confer a part of her identity that may have otherwise remained hidden unless explicitly stated. Her ability to express that part of herself was important to her both politically and socially, as she believed it was valuable to be out and visible in the world as a trans person. Therefore, while the voice can be a site of anxiety for many, it also holds within it the potential to express trans identity or gender nonconformity through vocal difference. Here, voice can help signal a part of the self to others in order to express a shared identity to other trans people or act as a political display in order to demonstrate to the world that trans people (or more specifically trans women with gender nonconforming voices) can and do exist in public spaces.

This kind of sentiment is mirrored in some trans political theorizing, perhaps most famously in Sandy Stone's "The Empire Strikes Back: a Posttransexual Manifesto", which argues against the totalizing category of the medicalized transsexual: a category that, for Stone, subsumes the "emergent polyvocalities" (Stone 2006: 229) that might otherwise exist if trans people were able to perform gender on our own terms. In making this argument, Stone writes that trans people should "forgo passing, to be consciously 'read,' to read oneself aloud" (232). Nonnormative voice here can be seen as potentially transformative or useful, as voice can be a means to forward an understanding of gender or identity that is less explicitly tied to normative expectations. Thus, the ability to vocally signal a specifically trans identity can be meaningful, as voice can allow trans some people to demonstrate what might be an important part of who they are. Other participants were similarly interested in resisting vocal change because they understood that very real normative pressures were influencing their decisions.

This feeling was conflicted for Jane, however, because there were several other contexts where that same expression of her identity could be dangerous and unwelcome. She was uncertain about vocal training, but intended to pursue it eventually, because while she would in some ways like to be more easily known as trans, there were many other contexts where that same knowledge could be used against her. As Ella similarly stated, passing "erases that aspect of my identity but also gives me safety. . . but it also puts me in incredible danger. So, it's very much a double-edged sword."

Voice, for all my participants, was contextual, with each situation often calling for varied kinds of vocalization. Their ability to feel like they could express themselves and engage in the kind of political expression that some of them wanted to convey relied on the existence of spaces and social relationships that allowed for it. Spaces that were trans inclusive, or at least not actively hostile, effectively produced an environment where a larger array of vocal styles could exist. Voice helps to show how a very real part of who we are and how we express ourselves is dependent on the social spaces we occupy and the capacity of those spaces to provide some form of recognition. This relates to the voice's position as a social process, rather than a static individual characteristic, as the ways in which the voice is listened to and interpreted by others, had a significant effect on the production of my participants' voices. This suggests that our understanding of vocal gender is incomplete if we consider it as simply a matter of self-expression.

These contradictory social pressures exacerbated conflicted feelings around voice and the prospect of vocal change, as the question of whether vocal training was right for Jane had to account for how it would function in multiple environments. Like many of my participants, she expressed a feeling of "stubbornness" about changing her voice, particularly because she maintained an awareness that she would largely be altering her voice due to social pressures from outside herself, stating that "if that shit didn't happen at the supermarket, or on the bus, or on the train or on the phone or wherever, if people didn't react to me as if I were either a trans person a freak or even a man which to me is similarly uncomfortable, then I probably wouldn't care that much." She understood that her primary motivation for vocal change was to avoid discrimination, harassment, or misgendering. Because of this, she felt less inclined to pursue vocal training than other forms of aesthetic or bodily modification that could, at least for her, be more easily connected to forms of self-expression.

Vocal change felt different for some of my participants than other forms of body modification or aesthetic change, such as hormones or alterations in dress which could be more easily associated with conceptions of bodily and social realignment. The fact that despite this, Jane intended to eventually change her voice is another example of how the voices of my participants can be channeled towards particular kinds of speech and sound by a society that only accepts certain kinds of voices, from certain kinds of people. While there is nothing wrong with changing our voices in order to move through

the world more easily, it is important to note that any understanding of choice or self-expression will always be influenced by a narrow range of allowable gendered vocal options. This again demonstrates how voice can provide an understanding of body modification that goes beyond individual choice through clinical intervention. Voice was not stable element of the self that could simply be realized through vocal training or easily expressed through a decision to keep the voice unchanged. Instead, it was a part of the body that could be subtly shifted in relation to potential dangers and incentives in ways that complicated notions of expression or intent.

Many of my participants were also unsure about the source of their motivations around their vocal change. Those who knew that they wanted to sound different, or those who had already started to alter their voices, maintained an awareness that they were often compelled to change their voices, not because it aligned with their self-identity but because of the realities of transmisogyny. In other words, some of my participants were unsure if their motivations arose from a desire for self-expression and bodily realignment or as a means to avoid discrimination. This uncertainty created feelings of unease. Alyssa expressed this ambivalence: "I think some of that resistance [to changing her voice] for me is just that I feel like in a way if I work on that stuff, it's kind of a certain level of capitulation, capitulating. And I also feel like the norm, like you know societal expectations need to change." She wanted to resist normative gender expectations and knew that part of why she was considering vocal change stemmed from them, but she was still unsure about what to do because her voice was still a part of herself that could expose her to harm. This tension between social expectations and notions of personal self-expression was common among my participants. Alyssa similarly mentioned that, "I still want to sound like myself. I don't want to sound or feel like I am pretending to be someone other than who I am." While she did suggest that vocal change could be a means to align a person's voice with their conception of themselves, she was also aware that, on some level, she was being pressured to change a part of herself. This made her feel both uncertain and resistant to the concept of intentional vocal change.

A consistent reason given by those participants who had decided not to attempt vocal change was simply the amount of work it takes to alter how the voice sounds. Vocal training is a process that often requires a steady investment of time, energy, and often money. A number of my research participants cited "laziness" or a lack of will or

energy as a reason for why they had not changed their voices. This resistance is based on the reality of the difficult work involved in making such changes, as gender is something that takes real effort to enact (West and Zimmerman 1987). This is particularly true for trans people, who often find ourselves in situations where we must "consciously negotiate the discordance between sex, gender, and sex category" (Connell 2010: 47). Vocal training makes the work of gender and the process of performing it more obvious, as it takes processes that are often thought of as natural and innate and exposes the work that goes into them. One of the problems that some of my participants faced with voice is how effortless it is expected to be. As stated earlier, voice is often regarded as just another part of the body—a stable innate element of the self that is considered to be more biological than cultural (Zimman 2018). Because of this, the process of working on voice and learning how to use it more deliberately, while also reorienting it along gendered lines, that are presumed to be even more unmovable, can be difficult, not only because it takes constant practice but also because failure to perform voice properly means failing at something that is expected to be effortless and innate. Failure to correctly perform vocal femininity means exposing the work that needs to be done. Sarah was explicitly aware of this expectation, stating that, "one of the reasons why I don't want to work on my voice consciously is that I resent it. I wish I didn't have to. The more I have to work on it the faker I am, you know? The more undeserving I am." While it is true that all of our voices are trained, only sometimes is that training made obvious. It is easy to internalize those expectations when they are constantly present in your life. Voice demonstrates the potential of the body to change and produce a variety of different expressions, and to radically shift along gendered lines, but it also demonstrates just how much this potential is constrained by systems that work to hold us in place.

The specific ways in which trans women are interpreted by others are also important to consider. In his study on the voices of transmasculine people, Zimman notes that his participants tended to emphasize the importance of testosterone's masculinizing effect on their voices and deemphasize or disavow the more intentional processes of vocal training. Zimman argues that this tendency is informed by "the naturalization of vocal pitch as determined by hormonal sex, the valorization of bio-medical interventions over behavioral changes, and the idea that femininity is achieved through artifice, while masculinity is characterized by an absence of effort" (Zimman

2016: 260). The resistance that some of my participants felt towards actively working on their voices might mirror some of Zimman's observations, as the construction of femininity as more artificial than masculinity might be especially felt by trans women, as trans womanhood is already understood fundamentally artificial in itself (Serano 2009). While all gender, and all gendered voices more specifically may be socially constructed, trans people are often seen as uniquely unnatural in ways that can have very real consequences. As Bettcher puts it, "trans people are constructed *as constructions*. . . If all the world's a stage on which we all play a part, trans individuals play actors" (Bettcher 2014: 398). Even if we accept the assumption that all gendered vocal behaviour is influenced by social factors, the specific ways in which some people are constructed as natural and others are not can profoundly affect every aspect of our lives.

The act of intentionally working on voice can heighten this association by drawing attention to the effort involved in realizing and producing gendered difference, an effort that is present for all of us but is rarely made so explicit. Sarah noted that her resistance to formal training was partially due to how the act of vocal training might be viewed negatively and produced negative feelings in her: "I found it pathetic. I didn't want to be the poor pathetic trans lady going to vocal training. . . I wanted to learn it on my own." The exceptionalist understanding of artificiality described above helped to disincentivize my participant from vocal training, as did the stigma that exists around doing that kind of vocal work. This effectively produces another double bind, similar to the one described by Bettcher: if we work on our voices, then they are rendered fraudulent due to how the work involved is highlighted, and if we do not, we are rendered similarly inauthentic due to the perceived mismatch of gendered signifiers that are expected to be congruent. Either way, the construction of trans women as uniquely artificial is maintained.

The amount of time, energy, and effort that vocal training requires manifested in other ways as well. Vocal training often entails spending hours practicing while paying meticulous attention to every detail of the voice. Additionally, voice might be a significant site of gender dysphoria for some trans women which might make it very difficult to focus on it for long periods of time. Maintaining a high level of attention towards a part of yourself that you might already dislike or feel distressed by can require a significant amount of emotional effort. It should, therefore, not be surprising that many trans women simply lack the time and energy to pursue vocal training, especially when they might already feel conflicted about their voices for other reasons. This also means that trans

women with more free time or fewer obligations might also find vocal training easier to manage.

The process of working on the gendered voice is not, however, limited to the specific act of vocal practice or training but can affect all elements of everyday social interaction. If a trans woman chooses not to train her voice, she might instead have to do the work involved in monitoring her voice, training herself to recognize when it is safe to speak and when silence might be necessary. This means that simply existing in public often requires effort. Trans women often choose to either do the work of vocal training or the work entailed by constantly monitoring surroundings and modulating the voice in relation to the environment. Either way, a greater amount of effort is required.

Economic factors were also cited as an important consideration. On one level, vocal training is freely available, as there are an abundance of guides, forums and videos on the internet that can help those who wish to work on their voices; in theory, it has always been possible to observe one's voice and change it. Especially when compared to expensive procedures like facial feminization surgery, the voice is clearly a more economically accessible site of bodily change. Access to vocal change, however, is still stratified in that it does take a significant amount of time and effort to achieve, and because some people may struggle more than others to get their voices where they want them to be.

Wealthier trans women, however, can greatly expedite this process by accessing vocal therapy or even vocal feminization surgeries which are not affordable for most trans women. Several of my participants cited the high cost of seeing a speech pathologist as a reason for why they had not pursued speech therapy. While some elements of trans healthcare are either government funded or covered by private insurance plans, vocal training is far less likely to be considered as an element of trans healthcare than surgeries like GRS. Vocal training with a professional speech therapist is one of the most obvious means to help trans people change their voices, but it was simply too expensive or inaccessible for the majority of my participants. Including speech therapy as a recognized feature of trans healthcare that is covered and free under a system of socialized medicine could allow for more people to feel more comfortable with their voices and move through the world more easily.

Likewise, those who are less economically secure may face acute pressure to change their voices in order to secure work and associated financial security. Trans people are already at a disadvantage at securing employment (James et al. 2015: 139-147), and whether our voices pass as "authentically" female can easily influence whether we get hired or are able to maintain a job without experiencing harassment. This is just one more form of pressure put upon trans people to change our voices, and importantly it is one that is economically stratified. Who is able to change their voice more easily, and who is able to not change it due to their relative security when compared to other trans people, are both questions that must be considered when discussing trans voice.

Several of my research participants had largely given up on the prospect of vocal training. Some of them had tried to take voice lessons in the past, while others never tried to begin with. I am interested in this kind of relatively resigned acceptance of vocal gender nonconformity. We all might, on some abstract level, have the ability to radically alter how we sound, but the constraints on our ability to make those changes can be nearly insurmountable. There is often a strong tension between the desire to change and the restrictions that are placed upon our bodies. This means that accounts of transition must not reduce people's relation to body modification and vocal change to a simple matter of choice, and definitely not a choice between resistance and conformity. Our relation to gender is often deeply constrained by economic and social conditions (Namaste 2009: 19-20) and this means that people often have a relation to gendered embodiment based on a complicated compromise between who they actually are in the present, what they want in the future, and what they have accepted they cannot have. Voice makes this tension obvious because it is simultaneously an element of the body that is highly flexible, and one that is frequently fixed in place.

As we have seen, the voice is neither a static essential element of the body nor a free and flexible site where the malleability of the body can be invoked as a site of gendered autonomy. It is instead a place where some amount of effort can be expended, in relation to one's specific social position, in order to either change a part of oneself to some extent, decide not to change at all, or accept an inability to do so. An understanding of the gendered voice is incomplete if it does not account for those of us who are getting by with a voice that does not work for us, does not align with our understanding of ourselves, and makes our lives more difficult. Sarah, for example, stated that "I love myself but I hate my voice," and this sort of positionality might be

common given how difficult vocal training can be, and how significantly our voices can affect our lives. We should not assume that people's voices are already aligned with how they want them to sound, or with a comfortable self-identity.

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate how and why the voice is a significant concern for the trans women I interviewed and the considerable effect it had on how they went about their lives. This took the form of both the transphobia they experienced around voice, and the tensions that they felt between the pressure they were under to modify their voices in order to move through the world more easily, as well as the pressures that they experienced that worked to fix their voices as they were. Vocal change is both incentivised, as the feminization of the voice can align the body more closely with gendered expectations, and disincentivized, in that the work that is necessary to align the voice with those expectations is in itself marked as deviant and artificial, while also being economically inaccessible to many. Beyond these forces, many trans women simply do not wish to change their voices for a variety of legitimate personal reasons, such as a desire to express a part of their identity or resist normative expectations, or a belief that vocal change simply is not worth the effort. Trans women, therefore, find ourselves in the often ambivalent position of functioning in a world where every voice comes with its own set of problems. Thus, voice carries high stakes for trans women, as it has a direct impact on when and how we are able to speak.

A deeper understanding of voice as a social process helps to reveal how our bodies and behaviours are always positioned in ways that go far beyond acts of individual self-expression or simple dichotomies of resistance and conformity. The ways in which our voices are listened to and interpreted by both others and ourselves can serve to restrain the voice, and the behaviour of the person who is speaking, in specifically gendered ways. Conversely, the social and dynamic nature of the voice means that trans women can shift our voices in subtle ways that go beyond simple male/female vocal binaries. In all respects, the voice can demonstrate how the trans body and trans body modification can function in a way that goes beyond the pursuit of specific clinical interventions, and instead manifests constantly in more subtle and contextual ways throughout our lives, as we move through different environments.

This also demonstrates the ways in which our voices, and our bodies more broadly, are always shaped in relation to social forces that go far beyond the medical.

Vocal training is an adaptive and contextual process that depends as much on specific social contexts and the listening practices of others as it does on individual choice or self-expression. Voice shows us how we might express ourselves in a multitude of different ways, and how that capacity for expression is restricted by the social pressures that our placed upon it, and how we are dependent on others to recognize us and the vocal work that we perform. Any account of trans vocality, or more broadly, the trans body as a whole, must account for all of these complex, and sometimes contradictory dynamics.

Chapter 2.

Autoethnography: Voice, Norms, and How we Change Ourselves

Vocal training is an awkward process, one that I have largely abandoned. This is partially due to a recent realization that, while my voice is still not where I would like it to be, it normally is not something that is likely to out me either. With that in mind, I decided that my current voice was good enough—at least for now. Over the course of my research, however, I tried, and mostly failed, to significantly change how I sounded. One of the reasons I was not successful was that my actual attempts were often unfocused. Like some of my research participants, I found it difficult to process some of the conflicted feelings and contradictory pressures that vocal training produced. I can think back, for example, to the nights I spent making strange noises into a recording app on my phone, trying my best to feel how every part of my voice was being used while I contorted it into new and uncomfortable positions. This sort of practice will inevitably generate many thoughts and emotions, but when you are sitting alone in your apartment making "m" sounds into your phone in an embarrassing attempt to change a part of yourself, the question of "why am I even doing this?" will often be the first to arise.

When I think about this question, it always reminds me of how contested bodily change, and the transfeminine body writ large, really are: how every change we make is scrutinized, politicized, or mined for other people's gender theories (Namaste 2009). All bodies are political in some respect, but not everyone has their body painstakingly mapped out and theoretically dissected, nor are they moralized about as evidence of "good" or "bad" embodiment or gender politics to nearly the same degree.

So why, then, did I spend all this time sitting in my apartment, practicing my speech and feeling embarrassed despite no one being around to hear? There are several answers, and none of them feel sufficient. My problem with trying to write about "why I'm doing this" is that none of the allowable narratives feel like they fully explain my motivations. I think about how, for example, when discussing why I felt the need to change my voice, the acceptable reasons feel limited to safety, recognition, and the alleviation of gender dysphoria. All of these are important, and all of them have

motivated my decisions, but another very important reason is a simple desire to sound "good," to sound "feminine" or "like a woman." Obviously, these desires can be problematized, in that these qualities are always going to be informed by oppressive systems, but that knowledge does little if anything to change how I feel. I am not interested in ignoring the oppressive and constricting ways in which something as potentially dynamic as the gendered voice is constrained into a very narrow register, but I do want to explore what we do once we have already decided that this pursuit is something we want to try, and how we navigate and relate to these feelings once we have them. Recognition that a given feeling or action is motivated or structured by an oppressive system often does little to change how we relate to it (Chu 2018).

Trans exceptionalism undoubtedly plays a role here. We see this play out in discussions of trans surgeries, where, despite clearly being comparable to plastic surgeries frequently pursued by cis people, they become recontextualized, at least in popular trans discourse, as strictly medical procedures (Lathem 2017, Heyes and Lathem 2018). It is assumed that they are performed not in the pursuit of any sort of beauty norm but to combat the symptoms of gender dysphoria or reduce the risk of violence or misgendering from a transphobic society (Dubov and Fraenkel, 2018). To be clear, all these effects are very real, and I am not suggesting that trans surgeries are not, at least in part, medical procedures, or that those reasons are unimportant (especially when nonmedical framings can be used to deny us healthcare), but they are always complicated by messier questions around aesthetic norms and judgments. The medical and the cosmetic cannot be so easily separated. Heyes and Lathem observe, for example, that "both trans and cosmetic surgeries are justified or withheld within health-care systems using the language of medical necessity" (Heyes and Lathem 2018: 185). If that is true, then medical necessity alone cannot account for our relation to bodily and vocal alteration which are too multiple and complicated to be reduced to a single narrative. I find it doubtful that all trans women who get surgeries care only about dysphoria or safety and not at all about their relation to broader cosmetic norms and expectations (Chu and Drager 2019).

Despite being less explicitly connected to medical institutions, vocal training operates along similar lines, as it involves the alteration of the body, at least in part, in relation to gendered codes and expectations. Voice differs from medical procedures in interesting ways, however, because with the exception of speech pathology, it is largely

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outside of the purview of medical systems, and perhaps most importantly, medical gatekeeping. For the most part, then, voice is not medicalized in the same way, although having a voice that is not aligned with gendered expectations can still be pathologized. In other words, the focus we often put around the normalizing power of medicine might obscure how a bodily alteration like vocal change and the normative processes that inform it can occur within the more minute details of our lives.

It is important to note, however, that cosmetic does not (or at least should not) mean unimportant, frivolous, or vain. The fact that things like facial feminization surgery, GRS, and vocal training are not strictly medical and are often tied up in notions of beauty and aesthetics does not diminish their significant effects on our lives. How we look or sound can matter in very tangible ways, as does our ability to pass, or more broadly, to feel comfortable with our bodies and how we are treated. Having a voice that passes, for example, might help a person feel safe in public space when they might otherwise be targeted. With this being said, however, labeling a bodily alteration as "cosmetic" in practice can also signal to insurance companies or healthcare providers that it can be easily dismissed or can serve as excuse for people to be denied coverage. These procedures are both medical and cosmetic, not one or the other.

I bring this up, because we should not have to appeal to medicine for the need or desire to alter our bodies to be respected, as a deeper acceptance of such bodily autonomy will do more for trans and cis people alike than the positioning of trans women as a uniquely medicalized identity group. This is just as true for voice as it is for surgeries. Obviously, this autonomy may be unequally exercised, so work must be done to provide trans body modification to all who would benefit from it. Supporting trans women's access to gender reassignment surgeries, while moralizing about the cosmetic surgeries that cis women often seek out, however, is fundamentally trans exceptionalist, even when couched in a language of trans positivity that argues that trans surgeries are medically necessary. The fact that we are sometimes discouraged from acknowledging this is very telling. When I think about how difficult it is for me to articulate something as simple as a connection to a beauty norm, I think about how strongly the spectre of transmisogynistic stereotypes of narcissistic vain and brainwashed trans women who unwittingly conform to and reinforce patriarchal gender roles (Raymond 1979) still haunts and pressures us to tell these stories in order to absolve ourselves of blame for something we should never have had to apologize for. We should not have to signal our

own oppression in order for the changes we make to our bodies to be legitimate, and while oppression obviously exists and dysphoria is a very real, and at times, debilitating feeling, it is not something we should have to prove or perform.

I am interested in this contradiction between multiple expected narratives because I feel it in my own ambiguous relation to vocal change, and it is echoed in the responses of some of my participants: feelings of being pulled in multiple directions, of not knowing where our desires come from, and of never quite knowing what to do. Sometimes, it feels like we are changing due to pressures from society as opposed to for ourselves. I certainly felt that as I was practicing; if I did create a new voice, it felt like I would be creating a new version of myself. If I answered a phone call from someone who had not seen or heard me in some time, they might not recognize who I was, and there is something both frightening and appealing about that prospect.

I do not want to disregard any of these discomforts or mixed feelings, as very real constraints can be placed on us which restrict what might otherwise be a broad array of bodily possibilities. Additionally, it simply does not feel good to be pressured to inhabit our bodies in ways that we might otherwise not. I wonder, however, if we could gain something from recognizing that our bodies are never *not* already molded by social pressures and restrictive norms in many other ways (Butler 1993: 2), and that in focusing on the specifically transgender aspect of this pressure we may be inadvertently exceptionalizing transness as something set apart from other aspects of ourselves.

Vocal training is a clear example of this, as all voices are trained and molded by social forces, but only some are recognized as constructed. The social position of trans women might cause us to face greater adversity around voice, but in viewing vocal training as uniquely "trans" we might inadvertently reinforce the notion that trans women are uniquely artificial. Voice helps to counter trans exceptionalist framings, as it demonstrates how all bodies and all voices are produced in relation to existing social forces. Voice helps to show how our bodies are constantly modified in relation to normative expectations from the moment we are born; there is, therefore, no reason to view the vocal practices that trans women sometimes engage in as especially artificial or normative.

The fact that all voices are trained, however, does not mean that we all experience voice the same way. There is, for example, a certain quality of some trans women's voices that I sometimes feel bad for noticing but notice nonetheless, and I often hear it in myself. I have spent considerable time over the course of my research listening to my voice and the voices of others, and this has heightened my awareness. This kind of voice does not necessarily sound masculine, or in the same register as the average cis man, nor does it provoke the average person to gasp and exclaim that they would never have guessed you were trans. You can tell a person has put some effort into vocal alteration, but they are not quite there yet. Perhaps they like the current sound of their voice, or perhaps they do not care about it as long as they can get through the day without being harassed; or perhaps they care very deeply about the state of their voice but do not know what to do about it. Either way, I think about that voice quite frequently. It sounds like how I often experience transness: moving towards something but never reaching it, putting a noticeable effort into a process that is expected to be effortless, or simply falling at something as basic as speech. It is not failure for everyone, of course, but it can feel like it when your goal is to sound more in line with some unattainable average that (as it is for everyone else) is forever out of reach. I have spent considerable time listening to recordings of my voice, and it often reminds me of this disconnect. It is common for people, regardless of gender, to not like hearing the sound of their own voice. There is something about the gap between how we sound in our heads and how other people hear us that feels disconcerting. It just does not sound quite right, yet it is also how we sound to everyone but ourselves. This feels symbolic of much of the trans experience: you do not always get to look or sound the way you feel you should.

As I attempt to work on my voice, I sometimes find myself thinking about how easy it would be to reinterpret my various inactions, including my failure to sufficiently modify my voice, as some sort of principled stand against the gender binary, but at least for me that would be a lie. What keeps me from aligning my voice and body more closely with those of cis women is ironically the same transphobia that punishes intentional gender nonconformity. I experience the fear of doing femininity incorrectly, the fear of looking like a cheap imitation, and the fear of seeming not less authentic, but less practiced and well trained. What I really fear is not sounding like a man but sounding like a trans woman: sounding like a person who has not yet learned or mastered the performance of womanhood. An awareness of the constructed and unattainable nature

of that category does little to affect my desire to pursue it. And more importantly, it does nothing to prevent the sanctions that fall on those who more obviously fail to actualize it. Of course, no one is actually able to perform gender correctly—that's how norms work—but for trans women, both the pursuit and rejection of normative standards are punished more severely. Not altering our voices can create a break with what should be a gendered continuity of the body between visual and aural signifiers, while trying to alter our voices always carries with it the possibility of exposure, or at least the possibility of audibly failing at what is expected to come naturally.

In "After Trans Studies" Andrea Long Chu writes that "the most powerful intervention scholars working in trans studies can make, at this juncture within the academy, is to defend the claim that transness requires that we understand, as we never have before, what it means to be attached to a norm—by desire, by habit, by survival" (Chu and Drager 2019: 108). I agree with this claim because it feels like the only way I know how to write about my experience. To claim otherwise would be to disavow a primary force through which my transness manifests. For me, attachment towards some standard of normative femininity is not some obstacle that I need to overcome; it is a large part of what being a trans woman actually is. I am not trying to make a universal claim here, but when I read accounts of trans womanhood that center around identity in the abstract, rather than specific forms of bodily and social realignment, I struggle to relate. And since gender categories like "woman" are always going to be informed by norms, trans identity is always going to be deeply connected to how we relate to them. Because of this, trans womanhood is largely about moving towards (or at least in relation to) the unavoidably normative category of "woman". I am fully aware, however, of the impossibility of actually attaining some fully normative female embodiment; I am not a cis woman, and even if I were, they do not get to fully align with the norm either—no one does. As Judith Butler argues, gender is "a norm that can never be fully internalized; 'the internal' is a surface signification, and gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody" (Butler 1999: 179). But what then does it mean to feel compelled to try anyway? What does it mean to know that all these things are not only impossible to achieve, but created and maintained through patriarchy, white supremacy, and a fundamentally restrictive and coercive binary gender system? I am interested, in other words, in what happens when we fully know all this, yet still feel compelled to pursue the norm regardless, "by desire, by habit, by survival."

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To take this impulse seriously, we may need to account for the downward movement that feels inherent to trans womanhood. We are a group of people who, whether due to dysphoria, desire, self-identity, social positioning, or some other reason, have moved directly down a social hierarchy. I feel like I understand on some level why so many feminists have struggled to include, or actively resisted the inclusion of trans women into their spaces or politics, their suspicions motivated in part by the question of why anyone would actively want to be a woman. I chose that very thing, and I still wonder that myself: why anyone would willingly move towards a subject position informed so much by oppression under patriarchy feels like a reasonable question, and with that in mind I understand (but do not sympathize with) the conclusion that we are nefarious interlopers, sexual predators, or suffering from a gendered false consciousness that makes us unable to differentiate between womanhood and femininity. None of these beliefs are accurate, but they may be motivated in part by an understanding that privilege is not something people often give up willingly. Sometimes, when I attempt to train my voice, I think about the studies I have read that conclude that women's voices are taken less seriously, scrutinized more heavily, and are more likely to go unheard (Cameron 2006). I know all this, but it does not stop me. Of course, when you are a trans woman, it is normally still an improvement to have your voice understood as belonging to a woman. After all, any power or authority that is given to a masculine voice is lost when it is seen to emanate from the "wrong" sort of body, but it still reminds me of the absurdity of my broader goal.

A trans politics that recognizes this might stop looking for answers and stop making excuses for why we do what we do or want what we want. Perhaps transness really is just a means of dealing with gender, a way to carve out a space within a gendered system where, for whatever reason, gender feels a little less restrictive or a little less painful. Where life under gender is easier to live. Viewing trans women this way would mean viewing us as neither complicit dupes of a gendered system or fearless gender warriors, boldly subverting gender norms in order to bring the system down. Both views are just another way to objectify us. Instead, we can think of transness through a lens of survival and imperfection, viewing us as people who will sometimes let you down; as people who transition just because it feels right, or at least is better than the alternatives. The first step towards including trans women within any radical gender

politics is recognizing that there is nothing fundamentally radical about transness. Including us within any movement or politics means meeting us where we are.

All of what I described is true on some level for everyone. We are always living in relation to gender norms that will exceed and shape our bodies, though not always to the same extent. Voice makes this obvious as it is a process that we all engage in; one that is both constantly in flux, and always dependent on the listening practices of others (Eidsheim 2019). Voice demonstrates how we are never fully in control of who we are.

That I choose to pursue these more normative social positions does not mean that I am somehow free of coercion. It is impossible to separate anything I have just described from a deeply exploitative social system that allows for a very narrow range of embodied possibilities. This environment also influences and creates our desires and affects any impulse that we may have to change. When I decided to train my voice, I was not freely choosing to embark on a personal transformative journey, nor was I only motivated by an overwhelming trans impulse or excruciating dysphoria. All of these things informed my decision, but I was also making a calculation, intentionally or not, about how adjusting my voice might positively affect my life and mitigate some of the forces that discipline my body when I fail to orient myself towards gendered sonic expectations. Any pursuit of vocal change, regardless of my motivations, remains inseparable from these constraints. My heightened awareness only serves to complicate these feelings, further separating me from any understanding of myself as a free and autonomous subject. Narratives of transition that center the manifestation of authenticity or the discovery and establishment of a "true self" (e.g. Rubin 2003: 149-151, Carter 2006) often fail to account for just how little any of this is truly within our control. Regarding what sort of bodily change is permissible, whether for my voice or any other part of myself, there is only a narrow range of allowable options if I do not want to compromise my security, or if I want to be recognizable to those around me. It even feels as if there is a narrow range of possibilities that I am capable of imagining at all. One thing I almost appreciate about the voice is just how literal this narrowness is. The allowable forms of embodiment are measurable in decibels: a small range of frequencies taken out of a much larger spectrum.

Vocal training may be better understood as both an expression of agency, insofar as successful training should allow me to navigate the world more easily, and of

disempowerment, both because as trans women we are moving towards a less empowered subject position, and because we often have little choice in the matter, if we need our voices to pass in order to keep our jobs or avoid being harassed. Voice makes it clear that any attempt to split the bodily practices of trans women into a dichotomy of empowering/disempowering is bound to contradict itself.

It is also worth noting that for trans women, both the pursuit and rejection of normative aesthetic standards are scrutinized more severely. As I have detailed in the previous chapter, trans exceptionalism means that trans body modification is always understood as fundamentally more unnatural and artificial. When I listen to the unique timbre of my voice, or when I try to understand how my pitch compares those around me, I am always incredibly aware of this. The act of vocal practice works to heighten the contradictions inherent in having to work towards what is expected to be natural. If I do not change my voice, then it is seen as unnatural due to the mismatch of my expressed gender and what my body is "supposed" to sound like. But if I do change my voice, then the fact that I consciously altered it renders it unnatural again, regardless of how much I aspire towards some normative gendered goal. Understandings of trans body modification as an exclusively normalizing process miss all of this, as the question of what even is normative is always dependent on social contexts. As Bettcher argues,

> Whether one is viewed as a 'gender rebel' depends on interpretation. If one were viewed as a man, then one's gender presentation would be read as a form of 'gender bending' if one wears a skirt. But if that same person is viewed as a woman, then her gender presentation would not be construed as misaligned with her status. The key is whether genitalia are viewed as necessary to one's normative gender status. Since in trans subcultural practices, they are not, then in trans subculture normative social status is reassigned in a very real way: what would count as gender non-normative (in the mainstream) is entirely normative (in the subculture) (Bettcher 2012: 242).

Whether I am viewed as a woman or as a man pretending to be a woman will in turn influence interpretations of my voice and whether I am understood to be subverting or resisting gendered expectations. Regardless of how we understand ourselves, we often simultaneously resist one imposed gender norm while we pursue another.

Critiques of normativity do not fully work for trans women because they often assume that there is agreement about that norms we should be held to. This is complicated by the fact that we are still expected to provide justifications for the ways in

which we change our bodies that further differentiate us from the norm even as we align ourselves with it in other ways. I could, for example, appeal to my own medicalization by referencing the clinical dysphoria that my current voice might produce, or I could appeal to the systemic oppression trans women experience if we do not or cannot blend in, and therefore justify my need to change my body by differentiating myself as a member of a minoritized population. Either way, we differentiate ourselves from normative femininity even as we move towards it through distinctly nonnormative appeals to the norm (Chu and Drager 2019: 107-108), either through medical pathologization or by positioning ourselves as a vulnerable identity group in need of protection. Any understanding of bodily change, therefore, must account for the position from which it is pursued. I felt this contradiction when I tried to train my voice. As I sat in my apartment making strange noises to myself, or speaking in frequencies that felt unnatural to me, I was aware of just how bizarre it felt and how peculiar it would appear to others, as I tried to make myself sound more normal, and less remarkable. Voice is a particularly powerful site to observe this kind of exceptionalism because vocal modification is a process that everyone engages in, yet it can be rendered as exceptional because of the specific positionality of the person who is speaking.

Many aspire towards normative femininity but are unable to meet their goals. I think of myself, for example, and how I want my voice to sound more feminine but have yet to actualize it. A better example still may be the people who desire medical transition but are unable to do so for economic reasons. These people are sometimes lumped together with those who do not want to medically transition at all, often through some invocation of the idea that we must divest ourselves from medical framings of transness for the sake of those who cannot or do not want to medically transition (e.g. Vipond 2015: 34, Johnson 2016: 486, Malatino 2019: 641). It is argued that since medical transition is expensive and inaccessible to many, and this inaccessibility is further stratified along lines such as race, gender, and geography, then we should, therefore, resist the standards and narratives that reinforce the medical model as the only legitimate form of trans experience. At the same time, it will also be argued that many trans people have no interest in medical intervention at all, and that framings of transness as strictly medical work to marginalize these people. Both of these statements are true, but I find the frequent collapsing of these two categories to be troubling, because they are often two distinct groups of people, who might have very different

solutions to their problems. The latter group would certainly benefit from the demedicalization of transness, but the former group would clearly be helped more by the expansion and decommodification of trans healthcare. When we encounter a system where there are many who want, for example, GRS, but are unable to access it for economic reasons, we should work to ensure that we change that system so that they can receive it, rather than settling for shifts in narrative. To do otherwise is to leave the existing material inequality intact, and instead concern ourselves with expressing that inequality in a more inclusive manner. The more helpful move here is not the shifting of discourse but the redistribution of resources.

I raise this point because I want to draw attention to the fact that wanting a different voice, while maintaining one's current voice, or accepting that you lack the time, money, or energy to change your voice, can be very different from learning to love and accept it. I am still tied to the feminine voice because it is something I aspire towards. It affects how I speak, when I feel silenced, and how I relate to myself as a person. Some of my research participants were similarly stuck in the less romantic position of wanting a different voice but not having one, or of going through the at times painful process of learning and accepting that they might never sound the way they want. I am curious about what we owe these people, who are rendered nonnormative not by choice, not as resistance, but through a relation with a norm that they cannot embody, despite how much they may want to. I want to leave space for people who are getting by in this sort of messy and sometimes unflattering position, and I would argue that many of them might be better served, again, with access to the material means to pursue the changes that they want to make.

Chu has argued for an understanding of transness that is centered around "the notion that transition expresses not the truth of an identity but the force of a desire. This would require understanding transness as a matter not of who one *is*, but of what one *wants*" (Chu 2018). I find this framing of transition helpful because it leaves space for a kind of affective connection to things that we might not currently embody. I can want a different voice than I have, and that can have a very real impact on how I experience and relate to the world, both because it can serve as a powerful impetus for bodily and social change and because even if I do not achieve those changes, I still maintain a relation to that which I do not have. In my own case, the actual process of movement towards a different voice has stopped, but that connection is still meaningful in itself.

Transition often feels like envisioning a version of yourself that you would like to embody, and then seeing how close you can get to it. We all have ideals that we pursue, and we then try to figure out how to get by in the space between what we want and what we can realistically hope to achieve (Chu and Drager 2019: 107). This can manifest through both the desire to use voice as a means to express trans identity or resistance to gender norms and being unable to do so due to the high costs that vocal gender nonconformity can entail, or wanting a voice that passes perfectly, and being unable to do so due to the potential economic, social and emotional costs of vocal training. Either way we are trying our best to alter or manage a part of ourselves while existing within a system that can be incredibly hostile to whatever we choose to do. Our voices will always be produced in relation to this context.

Trans people can be very adaptive regarding how we pursue what we need or want, as is revealed in the history of trans people practicing and performing false stories about their lives and desires that conform to acceptable medicalized narratives in order to access medical treatment (Spade 2006, Stone 2006). Trans medicine has consistently restricted access to trans people who are white, straight, and are believed to correctly perform to a binary gender role in accordance with the expectations of their doctors. Because of this, trans people often need to know how to perform these narratives, regardless of their actual relation to them. Dean Spade, for example, writes of a "self-conscious strategy of deployment of the transsexual narrative by people who do not believe in the gender fictions produced by such a narrative, and who seek to occupy ambiguous gender positions in resistance to norms of gender rigidity" (Spade 2006: 326). This is notable both because it demonstrates that the actual subjectivities and goals of trans people are far broader than what is seen or noted by the medical establishment and because it shows that trans people are able to strategically shift how we embody normative gender roles at different times, for different reasons. It makes me think about the times in my life, and those reported by many of my participants, when we suddenly assert more control over our voices, especially in situations when passing feels more essential, or when we need to demonstrate to those around us that we are not a threat. I became more mindful of this throughout my research: how an interaction with a stranger might lead my voice to jump several octaves or acquire a cheerful intonation so that I might signal to those around me that I am who I say I am. We may choose to train our voices, but sometimes vocal modification feels more like a reflex or as an instinctive

move towards safety motivated by a need to ensure that we are not radically recontextualized as someone different then who we appear to be. There is an intentionality to the narrative that Spade provides, as he is seeking to demonstrate that trans people are not hapless victims of a normative medicalized false consciousness. However, notions of autonomy, authenticity, and intent get muddled here because who I am, or how I sound, will vary contextually depending on where I am, what I need to access, and how safe I feel at any given time. Voice shows how the relationship of trans women to the norm is never fixed. It shifts in response to our environment.

Questions of vocal change also relate to broader discussions about what it means to obscure qualities that can easily identify or mark a person as trans or gender nonconforming. My own experience of vocal training brought these questions to the fore because vocal training, and the circumstances of my research more broadly, put me in a position where I was focusing on my voice both physically, as I tried to manipulate it in new ways, and psychologically, as that focus would eventually lead me to consider how those changes could be interpreted and understood by others. Since the voice can easily draw attention to some trans women and requires persistent effort in order to change, it may be useful to examine the relationship between vocal or bodily change and the political position of the trans body more broadly.

 A strain of trans politics argues for the importance of trans visibility (visibility here being a metaphor that also covers audibility and recognition more generally), and this often takes the form of advocacy for things like positive media representation and against actions that may obscure us or align us more closely with cis people. Vocal change here could be understood as a movement towards erasing an element of one's self that would otherwise mark one as trans, and therefore as an assimilationist means to align oneself more closely with the current social order. Attaining a more feminine voice could then be seen as a way to maintain a level of invisibility that might detract from these political goals.

Visibility is often celebrated within the mainstream as fundamentally positive. Whether advocating for representation in media or in government and state agencies, the general principle holds that it is good for trans people to be out and proud in the world (David 2017: 28-30). I agree that there are benefits to increased visibility, at least for some of us. Certainly, increased knowledge and awareness about trans people within

the general public, and the academy more specifically, have allowed me to write this thesis in the first person with far less trepidation than I might otherwise feel, but as Mia Fischer points out,

> When LGBT organizations and thinkers continue to tout institutional representation as the primary site through which social progress, legal reform, and the full incorporation of queer and trans people into U.S. citizenship may be achieved, they not only fail to recognize the increased surveillance and harm produced by such visibility but ignore how these strivings for equality render queer and trans people themselves complicit in the bio- and necropolitical management of the security state (Fischer 2019: 178-179).

To be seen, heard, or recognized as transgender then, is to find oneself in the position where one might be more easily managed or controlled, and to advocate for visibility and recognition may have the unintended consequence of manifesting this control more swiftly and severely.

Increased visibility can also inadvertently produce violent conservative backlash, such as the passage of "bathroom bills" in the USA that effectively criminalize trans people's use of public washrooms, and with them their access to public space (Fischer 2019: 5). Importantly, this negative effect will usually fall more strongly on those who are the most marginalized, such as poor or racialized trans people. Additionally, "despite the public's increased interest in trans people and a broader consciousness about their existence, media portrayals often continue to stereotype or fetishize them rather than providing in-depth or critical coverage of issues trans people face in society." (Fischer 2019: 2). Even though visibility and representation appear beneficial, they are mostly helpful to those who can afford to ignore those potential harms and prioritize something as comparatively unimportant as seeing someone who looks or sounds like them on television over the actual material gains that we might fight for, or real resistance to the systems that affect us.

Voice can further complicate this kind of politics because it demonstrates how little agency we often have regarding when we are heard or how we are listened to. As we have seen, a multitude of factors pressure us to change our voices or keep them as they are. The notion that it is helpful to be recognized as trans, or more specifically recognized as having a "trans voice" is dependent on the existence of spaces and social relations through which voice and identity can be expressed without fear of social reprisal. Until these become common, we often need to be strategic about when and

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how we are heard. Visibility as a political imperative does not adequately address how our voices can be listened to and interpreted by others in ways that are often outside of our control. While people's goals regarding vocal change are multiple, and the ways in which we go about it can vary significantly, my own reason for vocal change was explicitly connected to making myself less visible, because there were very real advantages to doing so, and very few incentives not to. The socially dependent nature of voice shows that If trans people are to be "given voice," we must first acquire a position within society where it is useful, or at least not dangerous, to be heard.

Other calls for visibility are more concerned with the behaviours, bodies, and public personas of trans people ourselves. Usually, this framing is produced through some kind of invocation to resist normative or ostensibly assimilationist pressures, "forgo[ing] passing, to be consciously 'read,' to read oneself aloud" (Stone 2006: 232). The notion that "passing" or the desire to blend in is somehow assimilationist, however, rests on the assumption that in order to remain authentic or politically useful, the bodies of trans women should be visible, discernable and discretely separated from those of cis women, and that trans women carry within us a fundamental expectation to perform gender nonconformity and subversion. In an effort to leverage some political potential out of the trans body, this discourse effectively traps us within another role, one which forecloses many gendered and bodily possibilities, can be less safe, and less aligned with the actual desires and goals of many trans people. Sandy Stone writes that "passing means the denial of mixture" (Stone 2006: 231), yet sometimes mixture is denied to us just as much when we are expected to be constantly separate, readable, and interpretable. The ambiguity that derives from the ability for some of us to blend in, as well as our ability to alter how we sound in relation to our environment, is replaced by an imperative to remain located as a knowable and discrete identity group. It is as if a person's position as trans should be always be legible, and it is assumed that this legibility does some kind of inherent anti-oppressive or feminist work.

This conception can be flattering, but it only serves to objectify us in a different way, conflating our existence in a world that is often hostile to us with some kind of grand political statement. It also erroneously assumes that we can dismantle something as deep and powerful as the gender binary through individual acts of gender expression or subversion, prioritizing the brief disruption of the gendered order (but never its actual

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dismantlement) over the actual lives of trans people. Namaste demonstrates the limits of this sort of thinking when she writes that

> as a social worker, I cannot gain access to hormones for a transsexual in prison by arguing that she is a gender revolutionary, critically disrupting the patriarchal values of our phallocentric culture. Rather, it is in situating her as a transsexual and in advocating for institutional policies concerning transsexual prisoners that the situation can be resolved" (Namaste 2005: 22).

To put it simply, our actual needs should always be placed above our symbolic utility.

This sort of political framing can also potentially serve the interests of a system that views trans women as infiltrators. It might assuage the paranoia that exists around the idea of "men" sneaking into women's spaces, and how a trans politics that places a moral value on trans people's visibility and legibility as trans inadvertently serves to placate those anxieties rather than confront them. The ability of some of us to move between gender categories, to blend in and to inhabit and perform our gender as women, generates anxiety for many. Vocal training within this context can better understood as a way to move into spaces where we might otherwise be denied access, and as a means through which we might trouble or complicate these more rigid categories through the voice's inherent ability to change.

Of course, the ability to pass is not available to all of us. Toby Beauchamp, for example, notes that "going stealth" (trans slang for concealing one's trans status from those around them) is only available for some because of the ways that "normative, nonthreatening gender is read through ideals of whiteness, economic privilege, able-bodiedness and heterosexuality" (Beauchamp 2019: 49). Because the structure of our society and the means through which passing can be achieved are stratified, there are real advantages in positioning oneself as a normative, passable, transsexual. Conversely, however, those of us who are more secure can afford to stand out. To offer just one example, the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey from the National Center for Transgender Equality shows that 23% of trans people surveyed had experienced housing discrimination, such as being evicted from their homes or being denied a home for being transgender (James et al. 2015: 176), and 9% of respondents reported having been thrown out of a shelter because the staff discovered they were trans (176). It stands to reason that an effective way to avoid housing discrimination would be to conceal one's trans status and that the imperative to do so will be felt more deeply by

those who are in a more economically precarious position, where housing and employment are both more difficult to acquire and to hold onto. Both the ability to blend in and make oneself known carry their own risks. Understandings of trans deception are also still in play here, and discovery as trans can still be heavily sanctioned, especially if one's trans status was previously unknown (Bettcher 2007). Because of this, vocal training may be an important skill to develop in order to avoid detection and the discrimination or violence that can accompany it. Additionally, the relative accessibility of vocal training in comparison to more medicalized or clinical interventions might make it an especially useful site of bodily change.

On a more personal level, many trans people may simply want to remain invisible, as being recognized as trans can be a distinctly negative experience, especially when we put work into ensuring that this recognition does not occur. For example, my primary reason to stop vocal training was because I decided that my voice is not something that was likely to communicate my trans status to those who did not already know me. I am aware of the many ways in which a more normatively feminine voice can allow me to exist in public space more easily, and how the safety that an ideal vocal femininity might afford me is reliant on my ability to ensure that my trans identity remains concealed.

More generally, any trans woman who has felt a twinge of sadness upon being clocked as trans when she spoke and thought she was passing will understand that the recognition of trans identity is not unambiguously positive. Recognition as our identified gender can often be more important than recognition as trans, and in fact, to be recognized as trans often entails being recognized as a more acceptable target for violence or abuse, as well as the negation of our gender (Bettcher 2007). This connects to my own experience pursuing a more normatively female voice, sometimes at the expense of the expression of trans identity. When we notice this discrepancy, rather than arguing that any desire to not be seen and recognized as trans is some sort of moral or political failing, we might consider who is helped and who is harmed by an insistence on equating equality with how often other people "hear our voices." Recognition as trans, as a woman, and definitely as a trans woman all carry with them the potential for harm, regardless of how symbolically useful that recognition may be. The simple fact that I and so many others work so hard to ensure that our voices are not "heard" is evidence of this. The ways in which voice is so dependent on the listening practices of others means

that any understanding of vocal change, or body modification more broadly, must account for the social context that we exist within, and this context might trouble or override other notions of self-expression or self-identity.

As we have seen, vocal change engages so many contradictory ideas that a simplistic assimilationist/resistant model cannot support. Each of the themes that I have touched on in this chapter involve the tensions, false binaries, and contradictions that vocal training can produce and demonstrate. The intentional work on the self involved in vocal training is always related to both the social systems that we find ourselves within and the broader political and social contexts that relate to them. The voice is particularly interesting here because it is an accessible site of change, at least in comparison to surgeries and other forms of body modification that involve institutional gatekeeping, yet it is still formed and produced in relation to normative pressures and expectations that we must learn how to navigate.

In the first chapter, I demonstrated some of the ways in which my participants related to voice; how they thought about it, experienced it, and how voice and the expectations that exist around it worked to structure their lives, as well as how they adapted their voices in contextual and complex ways. In this chapter, I used my own experience to connect those insights to both a broader politics and a more contested emotional terrain. In both, I have attempted to show how our relation to the voice, and what it means to change it, are more complex than they may first appear. Some of us change our voices explicitly to allow ourselves to embody a kind of normative femininity, while others only change our voices because of social pressures and incentives that such change might provide. Others have no interest in vocal change or appreciate the fact that voice can be a means to express queer or trans identity. Some of us want to sound different from how we currently sound but are kept from doing so for social, economic, or emotional reasons. Voice can tell us much about how we change and adapt our bodies every day and throughout our lives in relation to the social formations that we live within. Our relation to our voices, and to the gender norms that relate to and inform them, are multiple, and all must be accounted for if we are to truly understand our motivations, as well as the social context of our lives.

Conclusion

Despite being often overlooked as a site of bodily change, voice is not only something that can be greatly important to the lives of many people but is also something that can tell us much about gender and the body. The voice's fluid, social, and embodied qualities help to demonstrate the position of the bodies of trans people more broadly and reveal how our bodies are molded by the everyday social systems that we find ourselves within. Society can shape our bodies just as sharply as any surgeon, and it often cuts with no regard for self-identity or personal choice. This understanding is important because it opens space to consider the actual effects of the social systems we live within and how they work to shape who we become. If we cede accounts of bodily change to medical or clinical intervention alone, we ignore a significant site of bodily alteration. We also might also forward a brittle and binary model where our relation to body modifications and the gender norms that inform them can be understood as an individual choice to pursue and reject specific medical practices, or through a simplistic lens of resistance or compliance, decided in relation to either some sense of individual self-expression or the coercive effects of gender norms. This sort of framing fails to account for the subtle shifts—some in our control, many not—that happen to the bodies and voices of everyone, regardless of gender, throughout our lives.

Voice helps to demonstrate how any potential for bodily and social change is constrained by systems that hold it in place or to mold it in very specific ways. Paradoxically, while voice can convey a vast range of sounds, the actual utilization of its capacity to drastically change is so rare that it is rendered remarkable through its absence. The relative fixedness of voice despite its capacity for change demonstrates the power of normative expectations to keep our bodies as they are or to funnel any fluidity our bodies may have into a far more narrow register. People can and do resist these pressures, sometimes in obvious ways, and sometimes in a manner that is far more subtle, but regardless of how we respond to it the pressure remains. Trans women, like everyone else, must navigate and make sense of these processes and the norms that inform them.

These moves can be contextual and often contradictory, with different environments and circumstances calling for a different relation to the norm. Regardless,

however, the multiple ways in which trans women relate to voice and vocal change show how we are not dupes of a gendered false consciousness and conversely, how nothing about trans identity or trans voice is inherently subversive. Instead, it is a process derived from its circumstances, where people shift and adapt their voices to meet their needs in different ways. Voice demonstrates the limits of any sort of understanding that would qualify expressions of trans identity, or the gendered alteration of the body as just one thing. Voice is not some site of resistance where gender norms can be meaningfully rebuffed through expression of vocal gender nonconformity, nor is it as place where people are simply forced or duped into expressing those norms. It is instead, a place where people can subtly and contextually shift their bodies in relation to their environment in ways that, like voice itself, are never static.

Our voices are developed in relation to the regulatory norms that are placed upon them, a process that begins even before we start to speak. Vocal training often involves the intentional pursuit of those norms in order to secure a form of recognition and might offer some degree of safety or support. Vocal training is not, however, merely a static reorientation of the self towards a more normative or acceptable position. Voice and vocal training demonstrate a far more dynamic process through which people try their best to adapt to shifting social relations that cannot be confined to the realm of medicine, nor simple binaries of resistance and compliance. This is partially because voice is a process where how it is heard and recognized by others is just as, if not more important than the voice itself. Trans women, like everyone else, need to make sense of a process where recognition for who we are is largely outside of our control.

Voice is remarkable in part because of how completely banal it is. Trans vocal training's significance comes largely from how it takes a very common process—the shifting of the voice's attributes along gendered lines—and makes it noteworthy simply because it is being undertaken by the wrong sort of person. This does not mean that trans people do not often face unique problems in relation to voice through that assumed mismatch, but it does demonstrate how there is nothing particularly "trans" about trans body modification. Vocal modification happens every day for everyone, sometimes intentionally through rigorous practice, and sometimes automatically as we move through and adapt our bodies in relation to different environments. Voice demonstrates the limits of any politics or theory that would take trans identity as a stable starting point, as assigning a trans character to any of the vocal processes I have described only

serves to further exceptionalize and isolate a process that is in many ways defined by its fluid and relational features. Such qualities will always exceed any identity categories that we might assign or relate to them. Voices can be rendered deviant based on a relationship to gendered expectations that often maps onto conceptions of "transness," but "the trans voice" as a discrete and knowable object does not exist. Voice helps to demonstrate how all people are constantly shifting and adapting their voices in relation to gendered standards and expectations, so it makes little sense to view trans vocal training, or trans body modification in general, as particularly unique, even as we acknowledge how trans people can be especially stigmatized in relation to it.

When considering voice, it is important to recognize and account for the fact that some people may not sound how you might expect, as many people, cis or trans, will not have voices that neatly map onto gendered vocal expectations. It is equally important to allow those who desire to change their voices the capacity to do so. Some people will be better served by lowering the restrictive expectations that we often maintain around voice, while others will be helped more by breaking down the idea that voice, as well as the body at large, is a fixed and stable object that is always at its most pure or authentic state when it remains unchanged. The voice does not have an authentic state to maintain or return to. Trans women often find ourselves within an impossible bind regarding vocal change and body modification, where every option is marked as deviant and artificial, but the social and interdependent nature of the voice helps to demonstrate the potential for our voices to be heard differently. Vocal training is not a process whereby we move from our original, biological voice to some uniquely constructed alternative. Instead, it simply moves us from one already trained and constructed vocal process to another. Despite how awkward it can feel, how much work it can take, or how much it can be stigmatized, all vocal training really amounts to is the reorientation of the pre-existing capacities of our bodies towards a new position.

Voice matters most of all, however, due to the simple fact that it has a direct impact on the lives of many people. My research clearly demonstrates how the sound of a person's voice can mean the difference between danger and safety, and between recognition of who one is or as something else entirely. It is therefore important to understand voice as a significant site of bodily expression and change, and to provide material support for those who desire to change their voices. While the voice can and does exceed the limits of the medical as it applies to bodily change, vocal training with

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speech pathologists should nonetheless be recognized as an important part of trans healthcare and be provided to those who want it.

Voice is a complex social process where gender is both policed and realized. Voice shows us how we are constantly enmeshed in practices of speaking and listening, and in that recognition, we might begin to build capacities to hear each other differently.

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