

Unit 7: Reflections; Setting up Voice as Knowledge & Identity

Feb. 19

We began lecture by noting by taking stock of things we have accomplished in Units 4, 5, and 6:

We have explored media texts and understood how they mediate our relationship to others in the world, and how they construct stories that shape our experience with voice and our access to others' voices.

We have thought about the making of a voice and the physical labor involved in disciplining our bodies to create vocal craft. But an extreme vocal craft like opera also revealed to us the ways in which the voice and body of a singer is the site through which *culture* is materialized and expressed.

We also explored how performing in language or singing in song is more than conveying just words, but how words are getting expressed in special way, using vocal timbre, gesture, and composition to create the dynamic and complex realms of both thinking and feeling.

Reflections

The next part of lecture was aimed at doing reflective work, individually (with students writing down things from this course that have been important to you), and then collectively in discussion.

Live vs. Mediated

We discussed the importance of the lived experience versus the documented representation that becomes mediated experience. We used filmed opera to make that point and to contrast to our *own* recent experience of live laboring voices.

We applied that idea to our ethnographic procedures and the extent to which our mini-ethnographies also rendered a mediation of that live experience. We asked the question:

What were the challenges, short-comings, and experience of re-presenting that lived reality?

Composition

Like many moments of our performed voices, songs are also **compositions**: they are often written or planned in advance—designed, structured, and ordered. We made the distinction:

Voices as raw and improvised * * * Voices as composed and curated

And then we asked:

What happens when rich forms of lived culture (with voices and bodies) are being documented and subjected to representational formats?

We used the case of Disney's *Moana*, "Opetaiia Foa'i":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubZrAmRxy_M

And ways the company worked hard to display their efforts to approach the use of indigenous and folk voices right:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmn7eBCrd98>

We cannot forget how art forms that involve voice in all the combined processes of raw improvisational powers, and curated and constructed representations often have this commercial element that shadows. For *Moana*, the goal was to combine traditional South Pacific culture with pop and Broadway sensibilities:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fRdwJch6uo>

Like a song, *Moana* is a composition – it is *reframed* and distanced away from anything raw, relationally authentic, and its voices are thus filtered and channeled to create a representation of a voice, a story, a feeling.

We also saw, however, how indigenous peoples who represent South Pacific cultures did not find that story authentic or representative of their culture; if anything, they at times found it offensive, or very disappointing.

This example formed a critical segue into discussion of identity:

Often times when we engage with voices—in media, in film, in music, on stage, in video, we are also encountering a cultural production that is composed and curated, complicating vocal agency and vocal identity.

Setting up Voice and Identity

In our remaining discussion we took stock of ideas and concepts we have been building all quarter, to understand how voices—as sound objects and metaphors—are culturally and historically constructed.

- We often give certain voices that we associate with certain identities (of gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) a certain sound
- We may think those descriptors are neutral: dark, harsh, husky, etc.
- But, when doing so, we are often re-inscribing difference or a process of ‘othering’ onto vocal bodies
- We tend to categorize these sounds to specific types of performance
- And, in that process, we make vocal sound “natural” and innate rather than cultural inscribed

Whether in speech or song, voices often perform these inscriptions (sometimes by convention, sometimes by force, or by institutions and other influences that shape those performances), which then just continue to reinforce those inscriptions.

"Vocal practices, including everyday speech, song, verbal play, ritual speech, oratory, recitation, can be viewed as modes of practice and discipline that, in their repeated enactment, may performatively bring into being classed, gendered, political, ethnic, or religious subjects." Amanda Weidman (2014).