

Listening to Anohni's variously vibrating voice: studying transfeminine vocality in 21st-century popular music culture through the concept of vocal figurations

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Abstract

This article examines the work and reception of singer-songwriter Anohni to investigate sonic and discursive negotiations of transfeminine vocality in 21st-century popular music culture. Developing Haraway's concept of feminist figurations, it introduces the concept of vocal figurations, which articulates a performative, relational and multiply mediated understanding of voice, wherein gendered voice takes shape through processes of voicing and listening. I initially examine Anohni's reception to analyse how biologist, trans-exclusionary and othering discourses surrounding voice and gender inform emergent discourses of transfeminine voices in the first decades of the 21st century. Subsequently, I build on trans and queer theorisations of voice and listening to engage Anohni's variably vibrating voice as a vocal figuration that may challenge biologist and marginalising constructions of transfeminine vocality. I suggest that it may attune us to recognise all gendered voices as thoroughly situated yet changeable configurations of sounding voices, bodies, and subjects.

Introduction

In 2016, singer-songwriter and artist Anohni released her solo debut record *Hopelessness*. Formerly best known for emotive chamber pop performed with her band Antony and the Johnsons, Anohni's solo debut record marked the mainstream recognition of her identification as a transgender woman. Throughout her career, Anohni's performances have centred on her voice, which unfolds in mid-range in a warm timbral quality that is pervaded by a characteristic, continuously vibrating vocal texture. With divergent levels of sensitivity and differentiation, music critics and scholars have described Anohni's voice as different, unique and indescribable – a

quality of *difference* that has explicitly and implicitly been tied to assumptions surrounding the artist's gender and sexuality. The reception of Anohni's voice prior to and after the public recognition of her trans identity illustrates transforming narratives surrounding transgender identity in early 21st-century popular media culture, and it shows the role of cultural assumptions surrounding voice and gender in these discursive formations.

In this article, I introduce the concept of vocal figurations to theorise how voice comes to signal gender in 21st-century popular music culture through socially contingent practices of voicing and listening. I mobilise Donna Haraway's concept of feminist figurations, which she describes as entities that simultaneously inhabit the spaces of histories and stories (Haraway 2004, p. 1), and are materially and historically situated, yet a part of the imagination of people and peoples (Haraway 2004). Developing these premises for the realm of voice, vocal figurations articulate an understanding of (gendered) voice as thoroughly performative, relational and multiply mediated, and I engage with earlier work by scholars in gender, voice and popular music studies to flesh out these propositions in the theoretical discussions of this article. Subsequently, I discuss the methodological implications of the concept, which demands a critical reflection on practices of listening and calls for an analytical method that integrates the analysis of Anohni's reception and her sounding voice.

In the first part of my analysis, I analyse Anohni's reception to critically examine discursive formations surrounding the artist's voice and transfeminine voices more broadly. I identify three recurring tropes in Anohni's critical reception: the biologist equation of voice and body, the presumed conflict between voice and visual body, and the otherworldly voice. These tropes illustrate how biologist, trans-exclusionary and othering discourses of gender (and voice) in the context of slowly and partially shifting policies, discourses, and media representations of trans people in the Global North in recent years inform emergent normative discourses surrounding transfeminine voices, in the listening community (Eidsheim 2019) of 21st-century music criticism.

Countering these discursive formations, I return to Anohni's sounding voice in the second part of my analysis. I follow the lead of trans and queer theorisations of voice and listening and embodied experiences of listening to Anohni's voice towards reconsidering how Anohni's voice may 'inhabit [different] stories and histories' (Haraway 2004, p. 1) of embodied vocality than those previously outlined. I engage Anohni's vibrating voice as a vocal figuration that sounds individual and collective, trans and queer histories of singing and listening. I consider three variations of Anohni's vibrating voice through the lenses of materiality and affect and investigate how they may destabilise biologist and marginalising discourses of transfeminine voices. Through the figuration of Anohni's vibrating voice, I wish to offer the concept of vocal figurations as a tool for recognising and analysing all gendered voices as thoroughly materially and historically situated, yet dynamic and changeable.

Trans voices in popular music and emergent discursive formations

Voice is a central factor in the perception of gender that is largely naturalised owing to its corporeal production, and understood by listeners as an unmediated signature

of differently gendered bodies (Zimman 2018, p. 1). Writing in 2014, Andrew Anastasia identified the sounding voice as a key future avenue for transgender studies, urging scholars to 'listen, like musicians, to the voice qua voice – not merely as the message' (Anastasia 2014, p. 262). A growing body of research from fields including trans studies (Borck and Moore 2019), sociology (Lagos 2019), linguistics (Zimman 2018) and vocal pedagogy (Constansis 2008, 2013; Constansis and Foteinou 2017; Sims 2017) has since investigated the central role of voice in the lives of many transgender people, not only as an aspect of personal gender expression, but as a key issue of personal safety and physical and mental health. These studies reveal the social requirement for voices to become 'intelligible' (Butler 1999) within the gender binary, and they simultaneously exhibit the elasticity of individual voices to bend towards and turn away from gendered vocality in ways that challenge biologist and binary concepts of voice and gender.

In singing, the gendering of voice is additionally aesthetically mediated. For instance, in singing, pitch – a central quality in the performance and perception of gender in voice – depends on melodic structure; pitch range is generally wider and higher than in speech, and is further affected by techniques such as vibrato (Malawey 2020, p. 35). The multiply mediated character of voice in singing makes it a rich site for complex vocal negotiations of gender. In popular music studies, queer and feminist analyses have investigated how artists may use stylistic conventions, vocal technique and studio technology to perform and deconstruct gendered and sexualised vocalities (cf. Dickinson 2001; Weheliye 2002; Dame 2006; Steinskog 2008; Hawkins 2009; Jarman-Ivens 2011; Pecknold 2016; Muchitsch 2016, 2020; Meizel 2020). More recently, initial studies of transgender singers in popular music (cf. Goldin-Perschbacher 2007, 2015; Maurey 2009; Krell 2013, 2019; Jennex and Murphy 2017; Leibetseder 2017; Välimäki 2017; Pennington 2018; Baitz 2019; Geffen 2020) have begun to draw a complex map of transvocality (Constansis 2008), describing the ways in which trans voices may variously configure the relationships between voices, bodies, and subjects.

While sonic and discursive formations of transvocality frequently challenge normative constructions of voice and gender, some recent discourses surrounding transmasculine and transfeminine voices have shown normative tendencies. These discursive formations rest on biologist constructions of voice, where the occurrence (for transmasculine singers) or absence (for transfeminine singers) of hormonal effects on corporeal morphology during hormone replacement therapy (Constansis 2008; Sims 2017) has informed divergent depictions of trans voices. Such emergent normative discursive formations substantiate the need for critical examinations of the powerful cultural assumptions surrounding voice and gender at large that underpin narratives of transvocality, and for research that explores the ways in which all voices become gendered through the habituation of pitch, resonance, intonation, timbre and other qualities (Pennington 2019) through culturally mediated and relational processes of singing and listening (Eidsheim 2019).

Vocal figurations: theoretical and methodological premises

I introduce the concept of vocal figurations as a tool that helps us to theorise the ways in which voices in 21st-century pop music come to signal gender through multiply mediated processes of voicing and listening. In conceptualising this term, I draw

on Donna Haraway's notion of feminist figurations, defined as entities that are at once historically situated, material and imaginary (Haraway 2004, p. 1). For Haraway, '[figurations] collect up hopes and fears and show possibilities and dangers. Both imaginary and material, [they] root peoples in stories and link them to histories' (Haraway 2004). Haraway argues that figurations, including her widely known cyborg (1991), by simultaneously inhabiting the spaces of history and imagination, may destabilise modernity's pervasive binary categories (such as man/woman, culture/nature) and thereby challenge the marginalisation of certain identities and subject positions (such as women, people of colour) resulting from these binaries. In the decades since Haraway's initial uses of figurations, cultural and academic discourse has claimed to have moved beyond these binaries and their logics of power. It has been argued that neoliberal calculus has replaced binaries of social identity with individualised logics of 'success' as articulated in the concept of resilience (James 2015, p. 11), and in academic writing, some theorists of new materialist thought have proposed a 'sonic ontology' as a way to move beyond modernity's binaries (Cox 2011).¹ In contrast, rather than conceptualising vocal sound as situated beyond sociality, signification and identity, I offer the concept of vocal figurations to theorise how voices in 21st century pop music signal gender through entanglements of their material and historical situatedness, and their simultaneous imaginary potential.²

Vocal figurations articulate three fundamental premises about the relationships between voice and gender. First, as historically situated entities, figurations express a performative understanding of voice and gender, where sonic materiality shapes through habituated and culturally mediated processes of singing and listening. Steven Connor describes the performativity of voice in terms of a reciprocal formation of voice and the voicing self, 'which simultaneously produces articulate sound, and produces [the self]' (Connor 2000, p. 3). His account of voice resonates with Judith Butler's (1999) theory of gender performativity, which describes the formation of gender through repeated and socially sanctioned behaviour. Performativity emphasises the processual nature of voice and gender (rather than understanding voice as an object) and acknowledges the social contingency and historical situatedness of figurations of gendered voice. Thus, performativity also points to the role of listeners in determining the social intelligibility of gendered voices.

Consequently, the second central premise of vocal figurations is that voice is a fundamentally relational process between historically situated acts of voicing and listening. Nina Eidsheim (2019) shows in her work on constructions of racialised timbre how vocal conventions within a 'listening community' fundamentally shape material voices and generate a feedback loop that is falsely perceived as a correlation between supposedly inert vocal qualities and conventional patterns of meaning (Eidsheim 2019, p. 19). Building on Eidsheim's work, I understand gendered conventions of vocal sound as part of the historic situatedness of vocal figurations, and I examine these conventions in my analysis of Anohni's reception within the wider context of discourses of gendered voice in early 21st-century popular music culture.

The performativity and relationality of voice condition the historic situatedness of figurations. Yet, as Haraway emphasises, figurations are simultaneously material

¹ For critiques of sonic ontologies and their risk of reinstating binaries while rendering invisible power structures, see James (2019) and Thompson (2017).

² For insightful discussions of knowledge production and the imagination, see Keeling (2019).

and imaginary, and they inhabit at once the spaces of histories and stories (Haraway 2004, p. 1). Vocal figurations similarly inhabit both of these spaces as voices in popular music are multiply mediated by personal and cultural histories of vocal technique, recording practices, conventions of genre and multimodal aspects of performance and personae. As Simon Frith has suggested, voice emerges from these mediations as a 'multiplicity' that may function as an instrument, a body, a person or a character (Frith 1998, p. 187), creating a setting where 'truth is a matter of sound conventions' (Frith 1998). Extending this idea, the multiple mediations of voices in pop music may destabilise the notion that voice is a 'truthful' sonic signature of a unified (gendered) subject more readily than other forms of voicing, and multiply possibilities for vocal negotiations of gender. In this article, I examine vocal technique as one perspective on these processes. As I will discuss, vocal technique may be employed and heard in ways that rearticulate conventions of gendered voice or facilitate listeners to imagine different mappings of voices, bodies and gendered selves.³

As performative, relational and multiply mediated formations, vocal figurations negotiate the legibility of voice within a given historic situation and the potential of destabilising cultural assumptions surrounding gender. These theoretical premises inform the methodological choices of this article, and a twofold analytical perspective onto processes of voicing and listening. I critically examine Anohni's reception in music journalism, which I conceptualise as a listening community that rests on shared conventions and (re-)produces ideas about gendered voices. I seek to investigate these conventions, trace their temporal contingency and map their positioning in relation to broader developments in public discourse surrounding trans identity and trans rights in the Global North during this period.

Recognising the role of sonic conventions and listening communities in the formation of vocal figurations also requires that I acknowledge the cultural–somatic situatedness of my own listening. My listening has been shaped the experience of coming of age in Central Europe in the early 21st century, in a post-indie pop music landscape, amidst contradictory (post-)feminist politics and struggles for queer and trans rights, as a person assigned and identifying as a woman. Mindful of the situatedness of my own listening, I attend closely to the listening of others, who reach towards Anohni's voice from differently situated positions.

Yvon Bonenfant (2010) has theorised queer voices, vocal qualities and listening. He describes the experience of 'listening out' for queer timbres as a form of seeking, or of reaching out, a depiction that connotes touch and rests on timbre's relationship to texture. Bonenfant's theory of queer listening resonates with the concept of 'orientations' in Sara Ahmed's (2006) queer phenomenology, which describes the creation of affective patterns of meaning through direction towards and away from objects and subjects. Bonenfant argues that queer listening requires 'a sensitivity to certain qualities of timbre', and he conceptualises this sensitivity through Thomas Csordas' theory of somatic modes of attention, which describes the development of capacities of attention through our individual cultural and biological situatedness (1993, in Bonenfant 2010, p. 78). Below, I follow the lead of Anohni's own recollection

³ Vocal technique may thus be understood as a somatechnic, which Susan Stryker uses to describe the ways in which technologies form and transform bodies (Sullivan 2014, p. 187). For discussions of voice as technique and technology, see also Malawey (2020, p. 128), Peraino (2005) and Jarman-Ivens (2011).

of listening during her vocal formation at a young age and Eva Hayward's account of hearing Anohni's voice through the perspectives of changeability and her experience of transsexual embodiment, as two listenings that help trace the histories and stories inhabited by Anohni's voice.

Anohni's reception as discursive formation surrounding transvocality

Spanning more than three decades, Anohni's career has encompassed music, film, performance art and experimental theatre, and has frequently been in conversation with queer, trans and ecofeminist artistic traditions (Mallet 2019). Anohni, who was born in England but has spent most of her life in the US, has spoken about having identified as transgender from an early age (Pareles 2016), but her gender identity was only recognised beyond the queer community when she released her solo debut record *Hopelessness* under her chosen name in 2016. Starting in the late 1990s, Anohni's voice formed the centre of emotive chamber pop ballads performed with the musical project Antony and the Johnsons, whose name honours the late Black trans activist and drag performer Marsha P. Johnson. An influential figure in the fight for LGBTQ+ rights, including the Stonewall uprising in 1969, Johnson died under disputed circumstances in 1992.

After winning the British Mercury Prize for Antony and the Johnsons' sophomore record, Anohni's voice became known to a wider international public and received broad critical acclaim. Her voice was also increasingly scrutinised in relationship to Anohni's presumed gender and sexuality – negotiations that have often been described in terms of 'difference'. Erik Steinskog (2008) locates the difference of Anohni's voice in the combination of the singer's attitude to pitch, the voice's timbre and its vibrating texture, and he suggests that the combination of these qualities transgresses conventional notions of feminine and masculine voices. In the next section, I identify three recurring narratives through which critics have discussed Anohni's voice in relation to presumptions about her gender and sexuality, and I show how they reiterate queer and transphobic discursive constructions at the level of voice.

Constructing voice as biological essence

As a gendered classification system, voice typology offers insight into emergent popular discourses surrounding transfeminine vocality in 21st-century popular music culture. As Joke Dame (2006, p. 140) emphasises, voice categories such as soprano, alto and tenor are not 'sexually fixed categories', but are socially constructed and historically contingent. However, the notion of voice as an inert trace of a body remains a powerful cultural assumption, and in popular discourse surrounding voice and gender, biologist constructions of voice type and bodily morphology are continuously reiterated. Posting on an online forum that discusses the voice types of several pop singers, a user named 'Clem' writes on the topic of Anohni's voice that

Anohni is a sensitive subject. Whilst I completely respect the transgender community and would generally use the pronouns in keeping with their own gender identity, as Anohni medically still has the vocal cords of a post-pubescent male, calling her a contralto wouldn't be vocally accurate. ('Clem' 2016)

'Clem' builds their judgement on a biologist construction of voice where vocal type is interpreted as direct effect of (an assumed) corporeal morphology rather than a socially and historically situated formation. Whereas Anohni's gender identity is represented by the reference to pronouns and located at the level of the social, it is purposefully undermined through a biologist (pseudo-medical) construction of vocal cords, which are interpreted as 'still ... male'.

Situating this voice typology in relationship to Anohni's sounding voice and her broader history of reception substantiates how the classification 'tenor' illustrates a biologist construction that has little descriptive value for characterising Anohni's voice. In terms of pitch range, Anohni's voice may be classified as tenor (approx. C3 to A4), alto (approx. G3 to E5), or mezzo-soprano as it moves within the three categories' overlapping ranges.⁴ The considerable overlap between all vocal ranges emphasises the mutability of pitch (Malawey 2020, p. 63f.) and the role of other vocal and extra-vocal aspects including vocal quality and timbre, range and articulation (Eidsheim 2019, p. 106), as well as iconography and contextual knowledge (Hawkins 2009, p. 122) in the performance and perception of gender in singing.

The discursivity of the tenor classification is further substantiated by critics who characterised Anohni's voice as an alto voice type in her earlier reception (see Smith 2010), at a time when Anohni was still consistently referred to with male pronouns in mainstream publications. In juxtaposition with male personal pronouns, the descriptor 'alto' seemed to suggest that Anohni's voice was not perceived as normatively masculine, perhaps even perceived as sounding a trans sensibility. In a sense, the juxtaposition of male pronouns and the alto descriptor acknowledges the potential of Anohni's voice to dislodge the assumed ties between voice, bodily morphology and gender identity – to sound what Halberstam calls a 'politics of transitivity' (Halberstam 2018, p. 11). In contrast, the descriptor tenor – if based on Anohni's assumed biological body rather than vocal qualities – challenges Anohni's gender identity through a biologist discourse of voice.

A voice typology based on assumptions about vocal cords rather than vocal quality exemplifies a biologist discourse of voice and gender, wherein puberty marks a crucial stage during which male-identified voices undergo irreversible physical changes that result in the (equally irreversible) lowering of pitch (Eidsheim 2019, p. 220). This discourse resonates with those surrounding transmasculine and transfeminine voices based on medico-hormonal constructions of voice and gender. Voice masculinisation during HRT is characterised as a dynamic process that entails physical transformations as testosterone typically has thickening effects on vocal cords (Constansis 2008, p. 15) and affects the sounding voice in terms of a lowering of pitch, timbral changes (Constansis and Foteinou 2017, p. 8) and a (temporary) limitation of range (Sims 2017). In contrast, once a male-assigned voice has passed through puberty, estrogen has no comparable physical effects on corporeal morphology (Sims 2017, p. 374). As illustrated in the above voice type classification, this difference has informed characterisations of transfeminine voices as fundamentally static and biologically determined.

Biologist constructions of voice type in the context of transfeminine singers posit transfeminine and transmasculine voices in opposition to each other, and

⁴ Tenor, alto and mezzo-soprano vocal ranges additionally overlap with the countertenor range (E3 to E5), which is, however, not as relevant for Anohni as the singer rarely applies the falsetto technique that is characteristic for countertenor voices.

perpetuate the notion that transgender identity is necessarily oriented towards binary identifications. They thus submit trans voices to chrono-normative scripts of trans identity built around medical transition (see Snorton and Haritaworn 2013; Spade 2006, 2015)⁵ and render genderqueer, non-binary and other gender-variant trans identifications invisible (Spade 2015). They also silence the multiple ways in which transvocality may resonate with, amplify or reconfigure these identifications and conceal the inextricable ways in which not only transfeminine voices, but all gendered voices, become habituated through processes of voicing (Pennington 2019).

Initial academic studies have challenged biologist discourses of transvocality by exploring the multiple and diverse figurations of voice by transfeminine singers in musical practices such as in performances by Indian hijra singers (Roy 2016), popular music (Välimäki 2017) and Western art music (Sims 2017). Likewise, a rich body of online video tutorials for voice feminisation created by and for trans women forcefully illustrates how transfeminine singers can substantially retrain a wide range of vocal aspects including resonance and muscle memory in ways that create meaningfully altered vocal qualities through physical reconfigurations.⁶

Positing voice against body

Whereas the tenor classification constructs a purportedly direct biological link between Anohni's voice and her assumed body, a second recurring trope of reception posits Anohni's voice and body in conflict, through depictions of the artist's physical appearance. These modes of reception appear to follow opposite logics, but I suggest that they both work to arrest the potential of Anohni's voice to destabilise normative configurations of voice, body, and gender – in other words, its transitive potential. Depictions of Anohni's physical appearance are most common in music journalism in the first decade of the 21st century and often follow a recurring template. In almost identical ways, critics depict Anohni's visual appearance in clearly gendered language; discussing attributes such as body size and shape, facial features, and hair length and texture, these accounts construe Anohni's gender presentation as simultaneously non-masculine and inadequately feminine. Typically placed at the beginning of an article, these descriptions shape the text's narrative about the artist's persona and voice. The opening lines of a *Rolling Stone* feature following an Antony and the Johnsons show at New York's Apollo Theater in October 2009 exemplifies this template:

Like James Brown, Antony knows how to make an entrance – though in his case, it involved wearing what looked like a full-length white wedding dress. Antony is six-feet-two, with a moon-shaped face, soft features and stringy hair that hangs to his shoulders. (Binelli 2009)

While the decisively gendered and derogatory tone of this depiction is evident, photos taken at the performance further substantiate Binelli's interpretive bias. A

⁵ Embodiments of transvocality are further multiplied in the context of changing medicolegal regulations that may enable trans youth to begin medical transitions during or before puberty, potentially informing processes of voice masculinisation and feminisation that may differ greatly from trans men and women who transition as adults (Malawey 2020, p. 66).

⁶ For insightful elaborations on the retraining of resonance and muscle memory in voice feminisation, see for instance the YouTube channel *TransVoiceLessons* by Zheanna Erose, which had over 120k followers in March 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/c/TransVoiceLessons/featured>.

cream-colored long-sleeved dress ornamented with loops and drapes of plastic cords, Anohni's stage costume reminds me of Art Nouveau-inspired shapes or a deconstructed Roman toga. Within the context of pop music, the look is reminiscent of the futuristic costumes associated with Björk.⁷ In short, describing the design as a wedding dress is a stretch heavy with gendered meaning, as is Binelli's derogatory depiction of Anohni's hair, which clashes with the artist's dark, wavy bob.

The prevalence of these kinds of depictions of Anohni's physical appearance by critics is illustrated by two other examples from the early 21st century. Jon Hodgman's feature for *The New York Times Magazine* and John Robinson's article for *The Guardian*, both written in 2005, include characterisations that are strikingly similar to Binelli's. While Hodgman (2005) writes about 'the long brunette hair extensions' and the 'straight Karen Carpenter hair⁸ framing [Anohni's] gentle, full-moon face', Robinson (2005) claims that Anohni attracts attention in a hotel lobby as 'it's not every day you see a tall man wearing a long black wig, with accompanying lace hairnet'.

In combination, characterisations of the stereotypically masculine size of Anohni's body, the stereotypically feminine round shape of her body and soft facial features, her stereotypically feminine long but thin, 'stringy' or 'fake' hair resonate with a particular transphobic portrayal of trans women that Julia Serano (2013) identifies as the figure of the 'pathetic transsexual'. As Serano explains, the figure and its opposite, the 'deceptive transsexual', form a dual discursive structure that perpetuates the trans-exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) position that all trans women are 'truly' men, but differ in their ability to 'deceive' others by passing as women: 'Pathetic' transsexuals [are construed to] want to be female, but their masculine appearances and mannerisms always give them away' (Serano 2013, p. 228). Serano argues that this dual trope renders visible the interlocking of transphobic and misogynistic discourse in popular media culture as it defines femininity exclusively in terms of narrow ideals of physical appearance (Serano 2013, p. 231). Serano's theory also provides a helpful lens for thinking about the function of derogatory depictions of Anohni's physique vis-à-vis descriptions of her voice.

In most examples, disparaging depictions of Anohni's visual appearance are positioned against her sounding voice. Binelli (2009) claims that '[p]eople are often struck by [Antony's] size, especially in contrast to his voice, a haunting moan quavering with vibrato that recalls Nina Simone but really has few precedents'. This specific wording suggests that Anohni's voice is not only perceived as 'haunting' because of its sonic quality, but because it sounds the fraught relationships between voice, body and gender.⁹ I propose that through their placement ahead of descriptions of her voice, the depictions of Anohni's physical appearance take on an ordering function with regards to these assumed relationships. By prescribing a visual representation of Anohni's body, they work to arrest the ability of Anohni's voice to conjure 'vocalic bodies', imagined bodies that sounding voices invoke in listeners' minds

⁷ For photos of the stage costume, see: <https://www.brooklynvegan.com/antony-the-john-13/>.

⁸ The invocation of singer Karen Carpenter, who died from the consequences of anorexia, is particularly striking in this account, especially in contrast to the undertones of fatphobia in the depictions of Anohni's physical appearance.

⁹ The comparison of Anohni's voice to Nina Simone's also raises critical questions surrounding the intersections of vocal qualities, gender, and race, which are beyond the scope of this article.

(Connor 2000, pp. 35–36), that may destabilise normative discourses of voice and gender. Derogatory depictions of Anohni's physical appearance arguably function to make listeners aware of Anohni's failure to visibly embody femininity, thereby cancelling out the possibly transitive power of Anohni's voice (or, in the derogatory wording of the discourse described by Serano, to 'deceive' her listeners).

Whereas the biologist construction of vocal type perpetuates a trans-exclusionary discourse of transfeminine identity through equating voice with an assumed biological body, disparaging portrayals of Anohni's physique arguably arrest the transitive quality of the artist's voice by positioning it in contrast to – yet still intertwined with – her visual body. These narrative constructions embody different ideas about what determines gender – assumed corporeal morphology in one case, and stereotypically feminine physical appearance in the other – but both ultimately make judgements about Anohni's gender that resonate with derogatory TERF depictions of trans women as 'truly' men, who intrude female spaces and bodies (Stone 2006).

First propagated in some (primarily white) radical feminist circles in the 1970s, TERF discourse manifested in two music-related examples: in her trans-exclusionary writing white radical feminist Janice Raymond directly targeted the trans artist and media theorist Sandy Stone, whose 'Posttranssexual Manifesto' (Stone 2006) is today widely regarded as a founding text for trans studies scholarship (Raymond 1979, p. 114). Owing to boycotts resulting from Raymond's publication, Stone was forced to leave the lesbian record label Olivia Records, where she had been working as a sound engineer since the mid 1970s. The propagation of trans-exclusionary sentiments often expressed through the slogan 'womyn-born-womyn' also led to the exclusion of trans women from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in the 1990s (Koyama 2006).

An extended chronological study of depictions of Anohni's physical appearance in music journalism shows that openly transphobic portrayals have vanished, but challenges simplistic narratives of progress regarding popular media discourse surrounding trans identity in the 21st century. In a rare recent depiction of Anohni's physical appearance, Ben Beaumont-Thomas (2016) describes Anohni in a feature for *The Guardian* in terms of 'delicacy' and 'childlikeness': 'At more than 6ft tall, Anohni could easily be lumbering, but she's delicate, and doodling on a notepad as we talk, she has the quiet, snuffly quality of a child missing school'. Whereas the tone of the depiction is not openly transphobic, it still centres Anohni's physical appearance in a way that suggests a tension to her gender identity, and it still fails to depict Anohni as an (adult) woman.

Other recent cultural writing exemplifies the emergence of new normative discursive formations surrounding trans identity. For instance, in a 2016 album review for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, at a time when Anohni's trans identity had become recognised in the mainstream, Andrew Purcell (2016) admits to having (unsuccessfully) asked Anohni about hormone replacement therapy, before he perfunctorily acknowledges the continued marginalisation of transgender people. This example illustrates how the public recognition of Anohni's gender identity as well as the increasing visibility of some trans people in popular media have displayed new levels of intrusiveness. These discursive shifts are situated in the broader context of emergent transnormative discourse, including the creation of normative medicalised scripts of transitioning (Stryker and Aizura 2013, p. 7).

Constructing the voice as otherworldly

A third recurring formula in depictions of Anohni's voice in her critical reception is the notion of otherworldliness, which arguably most strongly illustrates the difficulty of submitting Anohni's voice to a normative binary gendered vocality. Critics have widely embraced the trope of otherworldliness and have associated Anohni's sounding voice with various forms of divinity, angels and sublime nature. Illustrating this trope, Hua Hsu (2016) describes Anohni's voice in a review of *Hopelessness* published in *The New Yorker* as

an instrument that, like that of her sometime collaborator Björk, is impossible to forget, a sublime wonder that calls to mind Boy George, Nina Simone, and what I imagine a radiant, healing crystal sounds like.

The example shows how the trope of otherworldliness is generally used to depict Anohni's voice in favourable terms. Considered from a generous point of view, the trope of otherworldliness as associated with Anohni's voice in recent depictions may indicate discursive shifts within the listening community of 21st century pop music journalism, in the broader context of growing public awareness for the struggle for trans rights and the increasing visibility of some trans individuals in popular culture. These depictions may be read as a popular counterpart to the development of posthumanist theories in transgender studies, which seek to destabilise normative ideas about human embodiment and subjectivity (Stryker and Aizura 2013, p. 4).

However, given the long history of otherworldliness as a descriptor for voices and singers considered non-normative in terms of gender and sexuality, including the association of trans singers with ghostliness (Meizel 2020, pp. 147–59), it risks reinscribing stereotypes of otherness. Examples of voices commonly framed as otherworldly include male falsetto voices (and, to a lesser extent, voices moving in the female head register), male countertenor and castrato voices, as well as female contralto voices – all of which have been perceived to destabilise binary and heteronormative constructions of voice, gender, and sexuality.¹⁰

The angelic voice is a particular trope within this larger sonic discourse of gendered and sexually othered voices that is typically coded as white and androgynous and has also been used to describe Anohni's voice. Typically associated with male high, particularly falsetto, voices,¹¹ the description of Anohni's voice, which moves primarily within the mid-range, as angelic, does little to describe its vocal qualities. Where descriptors like this lose specificity, their primary function appears discursive – they code voices and singers in terms of gender and sexuality in ways that risk perpetuating stereotypical discourses surrounding queer and transgender identities. At worst, the attachment of such descriptors not only to voices, but to singers, risks reinscribing the historical depiction of queer and trans people as non-human (Steinskog, 2008).

¹⁰ For discussions of otherworldliness and gendered and sexual otherness in vocal performance, see also Feldman (2019), Royster (2012) and Jarman-Ivens (2011).

¹¹ Other associations connected to falsetto voices include connotations with sublime nature, agelessness, childlikeness, and utopia (Koelz 2013), all characterisations that have been used to describe Anohni's voice. As Joke Dame has explained, castrati singers were also frequently described as angelic, artificial and non-human, contrasting with depictions of their voices in stereotypically masculine terms (Dame 2006).

Biologist, trans-exclusionary, and othering discourses surrounding voice and gender have informed Anohni's reception and reinforced the characterisation of her voice as a biologically essential signature of her body, in contrast to her body, and as exceeding human embodiment at large. Whereas these constructions have in turn bolstered trans-exclusionary discursive formations, the tensions and contradictions between the three narratives render visible the elusive relationships between voice, body, and gender. Shifting conventions within the listening community of 21st-century music journalism illustrate how popular discourse surrounding transgender identity evolves in the context of increasing (partial) visibility of trans people in media and increasing public debate about trans rights policies (Stryker and Aizura 2013, p. 6), although many trans individuals and communities remain disproportionately vulnerable to violence and discrimination.

In the context of such contested developments, discursive formations shape reality. They may work as what Halberstam (2018) calls 'fixing gestures of naming', formations that risk producing new normative narratives. My analysis shows how broader cultural assumptions surrounding voice, gender, and trans and queer identities inform discursive formations surrounding transvocality, in turn reinstating normative ideas surrounding trans identity at the level of voice. These findings substantiate the need for problematising biologist concepts of voice and gender and for thoroughly examining the cultural, technical, and aesthetic mediation of voice in 21st-century pop music. For vocal teachers, scholars, writers, and listeners to better understand these processes is a prerequisite for challenging emergent normative and marginalising discursive formations surrounding transvocality and becoming better attuned to the various ways trans singers' vocal figurations may map the relationships between voice, body, and subject.

Engaging the vocal figuration of Anohni's variously vibrating voice

In October 2020, Anohni released a live recording of Bob Dylan's 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'. Set to the subdued score of a plucked pattern on acoustic guitar, Anohni's vocal performance diverges from the sobering matter-of-factness of Dylan's as the heightened affective character of Anohni's voice pierces through the thick noise and distortion of clipping effects. Bending the otherwise instantly recognisable timbre of Anohni's voice towards overdrive, what remains of her vocal characteristics on this recording is the distinct texture of her voice – the continuous vibrating and trembling effects pervading the artist's every performance.

Throughout Anohni's career, her vibrating voice has toggled between three variations: intensely fluctuating variations of pitch and loudness that seem to sound a body in effort and movement; periodically vibrating and deliberately placed stylistic ornaments; and an irregularly trembling vibrating voice that conveys an intense affectivity. In the remainder of this article, I follow the lead of trans and queer theorisations of voice and practices of listening towards analysing these formations. I study the configurations of materiality and affect emerging through Anohni's variably vibrating voice to examine the ways these configurations may sound transitive mappings of voice, body and subject.

Perhaps above all else, vocal vibrato calls forth a body in motion, the oscillating tone being a sonic signature of muscular contractions in the larynx and variations in subglottal pressure (Sundberg 1994, p. 45). Resonating with this common notion,

composer Eduardo R. Miranda suggests that '[vibrato] is the message that our brain uses to interpret the sound as being produced by the body of a human being' (Young 2015, p. 148, in Malawey 2020, p. 37). Research on vibrato generally distinguishes between two variations of vibrato in singing. The first form, common in trained Western operatic voices, is produced primarily through contractions of the cricothyroid muscle, and is characterised above all through modulations in frequency, although modulations in amplitude also occur (Sundberg 1994, p. 54). This variation is believed to develop 'quasi automatically' during operatic voice training (Sundberg 1994, p. 45), and has been described as 'natural vibrato', as a supposedly innate effect of the 'right' vocal training (cf. Seashore 1931, 1937).

The 'natural vibrato' discourse of the Western art music tradition is generally contrasted with a second variation of vibrato that is typically produced through variations in subglottal pressure and is common in popular music (Sundberg 1994, p. 56). Not emerging 'naturally' from operatic training, but an effect of deliberate variations in muscular pressure, vocal pedagogues in the Western art music tradition have considered the vibrato based on subglottal variation to be an aesthetically less valuable and 'artificial' form (Seashore 1931, p. 623). The notion of artificiality is also connected to assumptions surrounding emotivity: whereas the 'natural vibrato' of the operatic tradition has been considered a primary means of conveying emotion in singing (Ekholm et al. 1998; Howes et al., 2004), the variation common in popular music has been associated with the performance of an inauthentic or excessive emotivity – a mode of performance that has been coded as stereotypically feminine, 'unmanly' (cf. Seashore 1931, 1937), and queer (Hawkins 2009).

The various and contested discursive formations surrounding vibrato voice render it a productive analytic for investigating how voices come to signal gender through material and discursive configurations of vocal technique. I analyse three variations of vibrating and trembling in Anohni's work through the figuration I call the 'vibrating voice'. The term articulates a broad understanding of vibration and trembling effects in singing that includes, but is not limited to, the narrower aesthetic discourse of 'vibrato voice'.

Movement, effort, and the material voice

A first variation of Anohni's vibrating voice, and one of the most common in the singer's substantive body of work, is illustrated at the onset of Anohni's 2016 song 'Drone Bomb Me'. After several measures of a sparse instrumental intro, Anohni's voice initially rings out through a drawn-out rendition of the song's hook line, 'love, drone bomb me': contrasting with the line's minimal melodic alterations, Anohni's voice trembles continuously, rapidly and in a somewhat strained oscillation of pitch and loudness that appears to render audible pervasive variations in subglottal pressure. Considered alongside Miranda's suggestion that the vibrato voice sounds a human body, the trembling texture of Anohni's voice may be understood as a persistently material signature of a human body in constant movement and effort. The material vibrating voice takes on political meaning against the backdrop of popular discourses of reception that have discursively disembodied and dehumanised Anohni's voice, and sexually and gendered othered voices more broadly.

Materiality has long been a key word in the study of voice, informed by the broad reception of Roland Barthes' (1977) influential essay 'The grain of the voice'

that introduced the concept of the grain as a sonic trace of a singer's material body that becomes audible in the relationship of voice and language.¹² More recently, research has challenged Barthes' notion that voices may either have or lack grain as an essentialising quality, and has moved towards examining the ways in which vocal technique, aesthetic norms and studio technology may produce effects of materiality that are coded in terms of gender (cf. Muchitsch 2016, 2020). Anohni has spoken about her own vocal formation in terms that suggest an orientation towards voices that may decentre the assumed ties between voice and binary gender performance through vocal qualities that foreground certain materiality effects that sound a body in movement and effort.

Describing the voice of the British singer Alison Moyet, who performed with the synthpop band Yazoo in the 1980s, Anohni recalls such a queer, or transitive, sensation in Moyet's voice: 'She really sang the shit out of those songs, and I had no idea whether it was a man or a woman singing, because the voice was so strong and so rooted' (Robinson 2005). Anohni's recollection resonates with Bonenfant's theorisation of queer listening as a sensorial process that rests on the cultural situation and somatic modes of each listener. Culturally-somatically positioned, Anohni's listening to Moyet's voice may be understood as a transitive form of affective 'sense-making' (Papacharrissi 2015, p. 15), the 'reaching toward' a voice that challenges the assumed ties between gendered voice, body, and subject.

Theorised as relational process between voicing and listening, Anohni's vibrating voice shows how gendered voice materialises through somatic and cultural mediation. The vibrating voice thus embodies a relational and situated understanding of materiality that differs from accounts of vocal materiality that define it in opposition to cultural mediation. Representing the latter approach, Dana Baitz proposes a materialist phenomenology of the transsexual body, in which she argues for distinguishing physical changes to the vocal tract of transsexual singers from 'the social performance of gender and the psychic constitution of sex' (Baitz 2019, p. 21). Baitz engages materiality as a political modality that emphasises the lived embodied experience of transsexual people against the backdrop of trans-exclusionary misrepresentations of performative concepts of gender. However, I concur with Gayle Salomon (2010), who emphasises the need to remain critical of the notion that that we have 'unmediated access' to the materiality of the body. While Salomon argues for seeking other ways to 'mark the specificity of trans bodies and subjectivities' that 'resist the temptation to define that specificity in resolutely material terms' (Salomon 2010, p. 1), I suggest that materiality can offer a way towards better understanding formations of gendered voice, if considered as a productive process that forms in entanglement with a singer's social situation, rather than detached from it.

In an analysis of 'Cripple and the Starfish', a song Anohni released with Antony and the Johnsons in 2000,¹³ trans studies scholar Eva Hayward proposes such a situated account of materiality through the notion of changeability. Hayward describes changeability as 'intrinsic to the transsexual body, at once its subject, its substance

¹² In popular music studies, the reception of Barthes has contributed to the idealisation of certain (typically white, male) voices and vocal performances (typically within rock and other masculine-coded styles) – deemed 'more bodily' and therefore more authentic and aesthetically valuable – in opposition to other (typically feminised and sexually othered) voices.

¹³ I am referring here to the album version of 'Cripple and the Starfish,' released on Antony and the Johnsons' self-titled 2000 record.

and its limit' (Hayward 2013, p. 74) and locates this sensation of changeability not only in the song's textual and instrumental characteristics, but also in the texture of Anohni's vibrating voice (Hayward 2013, p. 68). Whereas Hayward identifies a transitive sensibility of changeability in the material qualities of Anohni's voice, she does not define it against or apart from cultural mediation. Rather, she suggests that Anohni's vibrating voice sounds 'a body pliant to a point, flexible within limits, constrained by language, articulation, flesh, history, and bone' (Hayward 2013, p. 74), which articulates a socially and historically situated account of materiality.

Listening to Anohni's vibrating voice alongside both her own recollections of Moyet's transitive vocal quality and Hayward's material and situated account of changeability as a trans(sexual) sensibility leads towards a theorisation of transvocality that destabilises biologist narratives of voice and gender. Through the figuration of Anohni's vibrating voice, we can understand how gendered voice materialises through somatically and culturally mediated processes of voicing and listening.

Aestheticised vibrato, intensified emotivity and affective modalities

Affect presents a second lens with which to study Anohni's vibrating voice, as the broader cultural history of vibrato voice as vocal technique and ornamentation has been saturated with various and sometimes conflicting cultural discourses of gender and sexuality. Whereas vibrato is widely considered a tool for conveying emotion in singing, it has been associated with contrasting affective states that include power and control *and* loss of control as well as ease *and* grief (Malawey 2020, p. 38), and that have been coded in terms of gender and sexuality. To consider the complex affective codes attached to vibrato voice, I return to 'Cripple and the Starfish'.

With her vocal performance enveloped in an orchestral score, Anohni initially employs vibrato more subtly and selectively than usual, placing it as a stylistic ornament on the final notes of each line. Different from the intensely trembling voice of 'Drone Bomb Me', this second variation of Anohni's vibrating voice approximates the 'natural vibrato' discourse: in its controlled, aestheticised quality it appears to be a deliberate stylistic ornament that enhances the performance's emotive effect. Towards the end of the song (04'45"), Anohni's vocal performance grows in affective intensity as the controlled vibrato gives way to a third recurring variation. With a rapidly and intensely trembling and seemingly more irregular vibrating vocal texture, this variation creates the effect of a heightened affectivity that spills over the edges of the carefully measured ornamentation of the song's opening.

To be sure, the latter two variations of vibrato – and their associated performances of emotivity – are not to be understood as more or less 'natural', but they belong to different sonic discourses. Taking inspiration from African American soul as well as the French chanson tradition of the mid-20th century, the rapidly and intensely trembling vibrato illustrated in the closing of 'Cripple and the Starfish' had in the 1980s become a core element in the vocal performances of some branches of British synth-pop. Performed in abundance, it contributed to a queer vocal sensibility that has become associated with the performances of gay singers such as Marc Almond and Boy George, whom Anohni has described as formative vocal inspiration (Hawkins 2009, p. 114). She recalls a visceral affectivity upon listening to synthpop vocal performances at a young age:

Singers of that period, you listened to them and they almost made you sick with feelings [...] Even as a young kid you sit around crying to music. There's something about it that stirs your heart. (Robinson 2005)

Anohni's elaborations add an element of reciprocity to Bonenfant's description of queer listening as a form of touch: in her recollection, she reaches out to these voices through listening, while the singers' voices reach out to her – they 'stir her heart'. Anohni describes the process of being touched through listening in strongly affective terms that recall Bonenfant's characterisation of listening and voicing as sensorial prerequisites for social existence and belonging.

In Bonenfant's account, the notion of queer listening as a form of touch rests on the association between timbre and texture (2010, p. 75). This relationship between touch and texture emerges in Anohni's recollection of listening, as it is the vibrating texture of other voices that reaches towards Anohni through listening. It also materialises in her own vibrating voice, its continuously trembling vocal texture pervading its very timbre. Anohni has described her own vocal formation as the process of translating the experience of intense emotivity upon listening into her own singing:

I would literally be sitting there crying and singing all the time [...] The goal for me at that age was just to be as close to crying as I could be while I was singing. (Original article no longer retrievable, cited in Purcell 2016)¹⁴

Anohni's elaborations resonate with Eidsheim's description of vocal formation through 'habituated micro-vocal maneuvers [...] [which habituate] flesh, muscles, and ligaments, leading to an altered vocal apparatus that, in turn, leads to altered sounds' (2019, p. 41). Through listening, Anohni oriented herself towards a heightened sense of affectivity that she experienced in certain voices and vocal qualities, which in turn materialised through her own singing.

The queer vocal sensibility of heightened affectivity that Anohni located in the synthpop singers of her youth is also vividly present in Antony and the Johnsons' 'Hope There's Someone' (2005). Set to the minimalist score of a piano, acoustic instruments and backing vocals, Anohni's voice initially unfolds in a subdued emotive character. Following an A B A B A A C structure, a rapid and irregular trembling vocal effect successively intensifies and is strongly present during the B parts of the song's verse section (from 0'25" and 01'16", respectively), where Anohni's voice surges to falsetto and harmonises on doubled vocal tracks in a pervasively trembling texture. Whereas the deliberate ornamentation in the first half of 'Cripple and the Starfish' performs a controlled emotivity that resonates with the aesthetic discourse of vibrato voice, the rapid and irregular trembling of 'Hope There's Someone' sounds the individual and collective stories and histories of a queer vocal sensibility of heightened affectivity.

The habituated material voice is deeply meaningful, not least with regards to what it is perceived to signal about a singer's gender, and Anohni's own recollections of her vocal formation speak to the ways in which her material voice formed by stretching towards transitively gendered and queer vocalities in ways that can be deeply pleasurable. At times, Anohni's vibrating voice bends towards queer vocal

¹⁴ Anohni's recollections of the intensely affective character of her voice resonate with the powerful cultural assumption that music is intrinsically tied to emotion and plays a crucial role in affective 'mood management' (DeNora 2000).

sensibilities, at times it sounds a transitive quality that complicates notions of binary gendered voice, and perhaps sometimes, for a few fluctuations, it sounds a body in movement and effort that casts gendered vocality into sharp relief.

Conclusion

In this article, I have introduced the concept of vocal figurations to examine the formation of gendered voices through practices of singing and listening in popular music culture. As I have demonstrated in my analysis, vocal figurations articulate a thoroughly performative, relational and multiply mediated understanding of voice that emphasises the relational and socially contingent character of voice, while simultaneously acknowledging its potential to destabilise normative and marginalising discourses of gendered voice.

Analysing the reception of Anohni in the first two decades of the 21st century, I have critically examined how biologist, trans-exclusionary, and gendered and sexually othering discourses surrounding transgender identity have informed normative and marginalising discursive constructions surrounding transfeminine voices. My findings indicate that discourses surrounding transgender identity in popular music and media culture have transformed in the first decades of the 21st century. Yet whereas openly transphobic depictions are no longer commonplace, some emergent discursive formations continue to define transgender identity in biologist terms or shape new normative medicalised ideas of trans identity and transition.

I subsequently engaged with trans and queer theorisations and experiences of voice and listening to consider Anohni's variously vibrating voice as a vocal figuration that may destabilise normative and marginalising discourses of trans(feminine) vocality. I have argued that paying close attention to trans and queer experiences of listening can attune us to hearing Anohni's vibrating voice as a vocal figuration that sounds a transvocality that is somatically and culturally situated, embodied yet alterable. With the concept of vocal figurations, I thus wish to offer a tool for further theorisations of voice and gender that engages with the responsibilities and possibilities of studying voices as performative, relational, and multiply mediated, and that may lead towards better understanding the various configurations of gendered voices, bodies, and subjects in 21st-century pop music.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Elizabeth Gould, Robin James, Lars Berglund and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for helpful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this article.

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