

Vocal Gender and the Gendered Soundscape: At the Intersection of Gender Studies and Sound Studies

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Abstract

Editor's Note: Welcome to *Sounding Out!*'s annual February forum! This month, we're wondering: what ideas regarding gender and sound do voices call forth? To think through this question, we've recruited several great writers who will be covering different aspects of gender and sound. Regular writer **Regina Bradley** will look at how music is gendered in Shonda Rhimes' hit show *S scandal*.

A.O.

Keywords

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Editor's Note: Welcome to *Sounding Out!*'s annual February forum! This month, we're wondering: what ideas regarding gender and sound do voices call forth? To think through this question, we've recruited several great writers who will be covering different aspects of gender and sound. Regular writer **Regina Bradley** will look at how music is gendered in Shonda Rhimes' hit show *Scandal*. **A.O. Roberts** will discuss synthesized voices and gender. **Art Blake** will share with us his reflections on how his experience shifting his voice from feminine to masculine as a transgender man intersects with his work on John Cage. **Robin James** will return to *SO!* with an analysis of how ideas of what women should sound like have roots in Greek philosophy. Me? I'll share a personal essay/analysis of what it means to be called a "loud woman."

Today we start our February forum on gender and sound with **Christine Ehrick**'s selections from her forthcoming book *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape in Latin America*. Below, she introduces us to the idea of the gendered soundscape, which she uses in her analysis on women's radio speech from the 1930s to the 1950s. She will make you think twice about the voices you hear on the radio, in podcasts, over the phone...

In the meantime, lean in, close your eyes, and let the voices whisk you away.—**Liana M. Silva**,
Managing Editor

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Several years ago, while aboard a commercial airline awaiting take off, I heard the expected sound of a voice emerging from the cockpit, transmitted via the plane's P.A. system. The voice gave passengers the usual greeting and general information about weather conditions, flight time, etc. What was unusual, and caught the otherwise distracted passengers' attention, was the fact that the voice speaking was female. People looked up from their magazines and devices not because of the "message" but because of the "medium": a voice that deviated from the standard soundscape of commercial aviation, [a field comprised mostly of men](#).

For this historian, interested in vocal gender and the female voice in particular, the incident was a fascinating demonstration of both the voice as performance of the gendered body, and the fact that the human voice can and often does communicate beyond (and sometimes despite) the words being spoken. In this essay I want to briefly discuss some of the ideas I explore more fully in my forthcoming book, a study of women/gender and golden age radio titled *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape in Latin America: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930-1950* (forthcoming, Cambridge 2015). In this book, I use the stories of five women and one radio station to explore the possibilities and limits for women's radio speech, and to pose some larger questions about vocal gender and the gendered soundscape. For this post, I present the conceptual framework that I use to understand how gender is constructed through the voice.



"DSC00814" by Flickr user jordan weaver, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Gender and sound have both been explored as categories of historical analysis, but largely in isolation from one another. The historiographical impact of gender analysis is almost too obvious to mention; suffice to say that attention to gender has altered the very questions historians ask of the past and the way we understand structures of power and historical change. More recently, historians have begun to incorporate [R. Murray Schafer's](#) concept of [the soundscape](#) and what [Jonathan Sterne](#) has called "sonic thinking" into their analysis of the past ([The Sound Studies Reader](#), 3). But not enough consideration has been given within the field of history to the ways sound may be gendered and gender sounded.

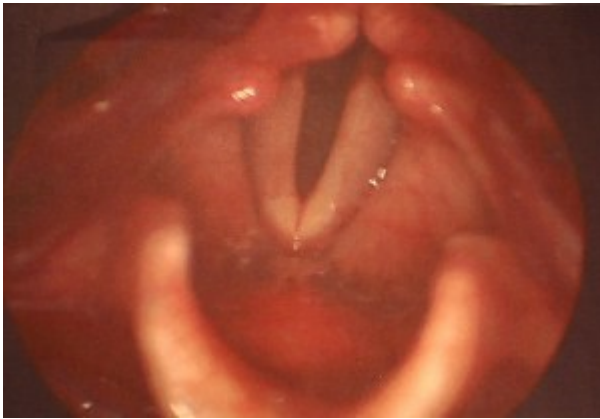
I bring these three threads together – gender, sound, and history – via the concept of the gendered soundscape. Helmi Järviluoma, Pirkko Moisala and Anni Vilkkio introduce the term in their book [Gender and Qualitative Methods](#) (2004), which asks readers to contemplate the way gender – and gendered hierarchies – may be projected and/or heard in sound environments. We not only "learn gender through the total sensorium," as they put it; gender is also represented, contested and reinforced through the aural (85). Thinking historically about gendered soundscapes can help us conceptualize sound as a space where categories of "male" and "female" are constituted within the context of particular events over time, and by extension the ways that power, inequality and agency might be expressed in the sonic realm—in other words, tuning in to sound as a signifier of power. Although many of us have been well-trained to look for gender, I consider what it means to *listen* for it.



"Untitled" by Flickr user Observe The Banana, CC BY-NC 2.0

The soundscape, of course, is not only gendered; other aspects of social hierarchy, such as race, class and sexuality, are also performed and perceived in the aural realm. Greg Goodale's analysis in *Sonic Persuasion: Reading Sound in the Recorded Age* (2011) of "the race of sound," which argues that sound constructs rather than simply reiterating race, provides a useful framework for understanding both what we might call the gender of sound and the ways gender and race might intersect in the soundscape (76-105). As we learn to become more "ear-oriented" scholars, in other words, we come to perceive power, oppression, and agency in entirely new ways.

One of the most immediately gendered sound categories is the human voice, a richly historical convergence of human biology, technology and culture. We can and do hear gender in most human vocalizations; linguists seem to agree that, when listening to adult (non-elderly) voices speaking above a whisper "gender determination is usually a simple task" (See, for example, David Puts, Steven Gaulin and Katherine Verdolini in "[Dominance and the Evolution of Sexual Dimorphism in Human Voice Pitch](#)" and Michael Jessen in "[Speaker Classification in Forensic Phonetics and Acoustics](#)"). When we hear a voice without visual referent, as in the airplane example above or when listening to the radio, we immediately tend to classify the voices as "male" or "female."



"my vocal cords." by Flickr user Dan Simpson,
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Voice differences have roots in biological sex difference. With the onset of puberty, the larynx is enlarged and vocal folds increase in length and in thickness, resulting in a decrease in frequency (Hz) of vocal fold vibration and thus a lowering of voice pitch. But while bodies classified as biologically female experience about a one-half octave average drop in voice pitch with puberty, biological males tend to experience a full octave average drop in pitch, with the result being that adult male voices tend to operate within a lower frequency range than female voices. However, gendered constructions of the human voice vary widely over time and place.

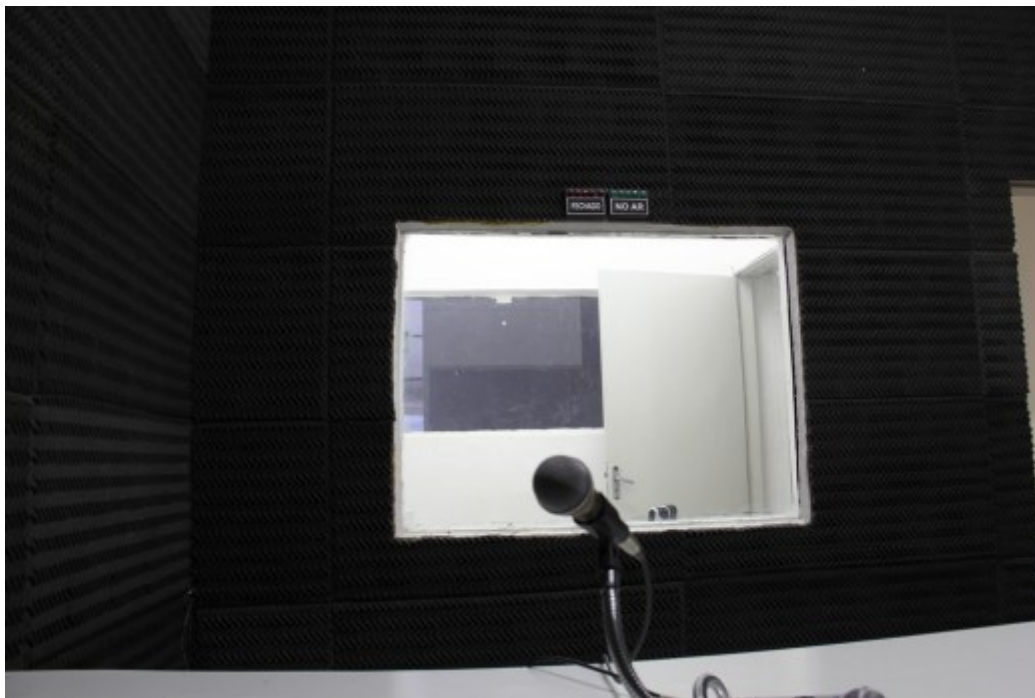
Biology (body size, hormonal secretions, age, and other physiological factors) is no way destiny when it comes to the human voice. Linguists distinguish between "anatomical voice quality features," which in essence set the parameters of comfortable pitch range given a person's vocal anatomy (the range outside of which is difficult to easily maintain one's speaking voice) and "voice quality settings," which refers to where someone places their voice within that range (See Monique Adriana Johanna Biemans' thesis, [Gender variation in voice quality](#).) Bound to some degree by these physiological parameters, humans can and do place their voices in ways that are consistent with the performative aspects of gender, and voice pitch is both highly variable and subject to cultural/historical framing and self-fashioning (For more on this subject, see Anne Karpf, [The Human Voice: How this Extraordinary Instrument Reveals Essential Clues About Who We Are](#), 2006). Thus like other aspects of gender, voice is culturally and historically constructed and performative.

Conceptualizing the voice as a sonic expression of the gendered body requires revisiting both the tendency of feminist scholars to equate "women's voice" with writing or discourse, and the tendency of some media scholars to refer to voices without immediate visual referent (in film, radio) as "disembodied." In their Introduction to [Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture](#) (1997), Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones concisely articulate the challenge for scholars interested in the sonic/acoustic dimensions of women's voices:

Feminists have used the word "voice" to refer to a wide range of aspirations: cultural agency, political enfranchisement, sexual autonomy, and expressive freedom, all of which have been historically denied to women. In this context, "voice" has become a metaphor for textual

authority...This metaphor has become so pervasive, so intrinsic to feminist discourse that it makes us too easily forget (or repress) the concrete physical dimensions of the female voice upon which this metaphor was based. (1)

Thinking about voice in terms of vocal gender brings us to the complex relationship between voice and body. The concept of disembodiment conveys the sometimes uncanny effect of hearing (especially female) voices without an immediately discernible source. It also underscores the destabilizing effect of these unseen female voices liberated thus from patriarchy's specular regime. Yet to refer to voices from an unseen source as "disembodied" is to suggest that the voice is somehow separate from the body, a problematic formulation.



"Untitled" by Flickr user Luci Correia, CC BY 2.0

Simply: if the voice is not the body, what is it? Even when it travels over long distances (via telephone or radio, for example) and/or if its source remains out of sight, the body is there, present via the sound vibrations it produces. Stepping away from concepts like disembodiment frees us to explore the nuances of the relationship between the voice and the body, and the presence of gendered bodies in the soundscape, particularly with regard to the vertiginous relationships between bodies and voices that are gendered female.

Gender and history impact how we read the tone, velocity and pitch of the voice, but they also shape parameters of where and when particular voices are invited to speak or expected to remain silent. And here of course we encounter the ways gender hierarchy is expressed and constructed in the acoustic/vocal arena, as well as racial categorization. Kathleen Hall Jamieson puts it succinctly in *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (1990): "History has many themes. One of them is that women should be quiet" (67). While by no means absent, women's voices have remained largely outside of the realm of what Schafer calls "signal":

sounds listened to consciously and that often convey messages and/of authority. Just as other aspects of gender inequality become naturalized, patriarchy tunes our ears to listen to certain voices differently. In these formulations, women's voices are thus subject to categorization as "noise" or "unwanted sound" (see Mike Goldsmith, *Discord: The Story of Noise*) and therefore dissonant, disruptive, and potentially dangerous.

The discomfort (or dissonance) with women's voices, especially women's voices speaking publicly and/or with authority, carried over into and shaped the history of radio, making early and golden age broadcasting an ideal venue for an historical exploration of gender and voice. What did it mean to hear women's voices on the radio? How did radio rework the gendered dimensions of public and private space, and by extension the place of the female voice in the public sphere?

The emergence of radio in the early twentieth century was part of a larger revolution in human communication which Walter Ong termed in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing the Word* (1983) a "secondary orality," an historical moment which reawakened older oral traditions and communal listening in a very different historical and technological context (3). It also reawakened a focus on the human voice, with all of its implications for the gendered soundscape.



"Jane Hoffman, Tobey Weinberg, Ruth Goodman, and Amelia Romano read for a radio broadcast about the Triangle Fire" by Flickr user Kheel Center, CC BY 2.0

In many parts of the world, the rise of radio also coincided with an upsurge in feminist politics and discourses calling for women's full citizenship and other related matters. As Kate Lacey notes in *Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio and the Public Sphere 1923-1945* (1997), "the arrival of radio heralded the modern era of mass communication, while women's enfranchisement confirmed the onset of mass politics in the twentieth century." Researching the history of women

and radio – and particularly the sometimes hostile reactions to women’s radio voices – led me to appreciate the ways gender is performed and perceived via the voice, and from there into larger questions about the way social hierarchies – of gender, but also of race/ethnicity, class and sexuality – are reproduced and challenged within the sonic realm.

In this way we can better begin to contemplate the historical significance of women’s radio speech in understanding the sonic construction of gender. Depending on content and context, these voices carried the potential to not only challenge taboos on women’s oratory, but to assert the female body into spaces from which it had previously been excluded—like the cockpits (can’t help but note the name here) of commercial airliners.

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Featured image: “ateliers claus – 140522 – monophonic – Radio Femmes Fatales” by Flickr user fabonthemoon, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

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Christine Ehrick is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Louisville. Her second book, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape in Latin America: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930-1950* will be published by Cambridge University Press in Fall 2015. This book explores women’s presence and especially their voices – on the airwaves in the two leading South American radio markets of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Her current work looks at comedy, gender and voice, with a focus on mid-twentieth century Argentine comedians Niní Marshall and Tomás Simari.

Thanks to Cambridge UP for allowing me to use some excerpts from the forthcoming book in this essay.

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