Expressive Culture: Sounds
“Contemplating Voice”

New York University / Spring 2012

Class Instructor: Dr. J. Martin Daughtry (martin.daughtry@nyu.edu)
Class meetings: Tuesday / Thursday, 2:00-3:15, Silver 320
Preceptors: Siv Lie (sbl326@nyu.edu), Akiva Zamcheck (agz207@nyu.edu)
Daughtry ofc. hrs.: Thursdays 3:30-4:30, or by appointment
Lie ofc. hrs.: Thursdays 3:30-4:30
Zamcheck ofc. hrs.: Thursdays 3:30-4:30
Course Description:
We will spend this semester contemplating the sound and significance of the human voice. The very ubiquity of the voice makes it a somewhat elusive topic: as something that we all have, and as a sonic presence that permeates the urban soundscape, our voices are easily taken for granted. In the words of philosopher Mladen Dolar, “we constantly inhabit the universe of voices, we are continuously bombarded by voices, we have to make our daily way through a jungle of voices, and we have to use all kinds of machetes and compasses so as not to get lost.” Of course, our voices don’t just contribute noise to the sonic “jungle” in which we operate. The voice is more than sound, more even than the necessary sonic residue of communication. The character of your voice helps you and those around you understand something profound about your position as a unique individual, as a participant in various collectives, and as a member of the human species. Your ideas, your personality, your history, your fears, your affinities, your sense of humor—all of these are brought into the world by your voice.

By concentrating on the voice—by allowing ourselves to “get lost” in the voice for a time—we will gain a new appreciation for its complexity, for its power in our lives, and for the factors that condition and delimit that power. We will learn how to be attentive, generous, and critical auditors as we listen to a number of vocalists from around the world. At the same time, we will also interrogate a number of the ways in which voice is presented to us: as the result of a complex physiological process; as a vehicle for communication; as an aestheticized object; as a gendered, racialized and in other ways essentialized text; as a technologically-mediated commodity; and as a master trope for all manners of identity and agency. We will attend to voices that are raised up in protest, and voices that are directed toward healing, and in so doing learn something about the voice’s articulation with politics and ethics, violence and reconciliation. Perhaps most importantly, though, throughout this course we will use our own voices, both to generate our own critical discourse and to experience the visceral and intellectual pleasures of composing and making a chorus of sounds together.

Required text:
The majority of your readings are located in a course pack, which should be available in the campus bookstore by the beginning of week two. (I’ll send out an e-mail as soon as I hear from the course pack people.)

Additional texts and listening assignments will be made available in PDF and mp3 format on the NYU blackboard system. To access the system:

1. Go to: http://home.nyu.edu
2. Log in.
3. Click on the tab labeled “Academics.” There you’ll find a link to the course “Expressive Culture: Sounds.” Click on this link.
4. Once you’re in the site for the course, click on the tab labeled “Course Documents.”
5. Find the book excerpts, articles, or sound files that you need. All readings are organized by dates of class meetings. Each class period, you will be responsible for reading all materials in the folder with that day’s date. (For example, on January 31 you will need to come to class having read everything in the folder labeled “for January 31.”)

On a few occasions, you will be asked to screen a film or listen to a recording in the Avery Fisher Center for Music and Media, located conveniently on the second floor of the Bobst library.
**Recommended texts:**
For those of you who develop an insatiable hunger for more provocative readings on voice, please see this short list of widely-available works:


**Attendance and Participation:**
We expect you to attend all class meetings and recitation sessions, and to be an active and conscientious participant in both. If you must miss a class or a recitation, you will need to e-mail your preceptor and me before the class in question. If you miss class due to an emergency, you will need to provide us with a written explanation and some kind of documentation of the emergency. You are allowed one unexcused absence from the Tuesday/Thursday class, and one unexcused absence from your recitation; all subsequent unexcused absences will result in a reduction of your attendance/participation grade.

We are a large group, which may lead you to believe that your attendance and participation don’t really matter. Nothing could be further from the truth. In order for this experimental class to be successful, we will need your full, wholehearted participation in the course and all its activities. You will need to complete all reading, listening, and writing assignments before class. You should come to your recitation session prepared to discuss the issues of the week, and to relate those issues to material discussed in previous weeks. We will also expect you to lend your voices to several minutes of vocal exercises that will be conducted in class each week. Let me be clear: you do not need to have any singing experience or musical experience of any kind to take this course. You must, however, be willing to put aside your inhibitions and participate fully in all vocal exercises and compositional experiments. The sounds that we make may not be pretty, but they will teach us something about the voices that are making them. (If you are physically unable to make sounds with your voice, please see us after the first class session and we will give you additional assignments to compensate.)

**Reading and Listening Assignments:**
Before each class, you will need to digest a small number of articles, book chapters, and/or listening or video examples. Some of the readings are quite challenging; others are very light and straightforward. You will need to read all of these pieces critically, but also generously. The point of reading them is to walk away with some useful new insights, not (or not only) to tear the author’s argument to shreds. We will discuss some of the readings in class; others will serve more as background information. As for the listening examples, they are every bit as important as the written texts, and will require your fully attentive, critical, and generous ear.

**Writing Assignments:**
In this class, we will be working with two types of composition. The first (which we will for convenience’s sake call “little c” composition) involves the production of academic and other forms of prose. Your composition assignments are designed to give you experience in the
conventions of academic composition and the thought-processes that precede, accompany, and follow it. The second (which we will call “big-C” Composition) involves the production of instructions (in prose, in musical notation, in graphic representation systems) for the arrangement of sounds in time and space. (Some people call this arrangement of sounds “music.”) One way to explain the relationship between these two genres of writing is to say that your “little-c” compositions will help you develop your ability to think about sound and about voice, while your “big C” Composition assignments will help you develop your ability to think in sound and in voice. We will, however, do our best to blur the boundaries between these two compositional types.

“Composition” assignments:

Over the course of the semester, nearly every week, you will be making extremely short (10-20 seconds) experimental recordings of voices in your life. Also, in conversation with me and the preceptors, you will compose three longer experimental Compositions for voice. These Compositions will be due at the beginning of class on Tuesday, February 28, Tuesday, March 27th, and Tuesday, April 24. Once again, you are not expected to be able to read music or to have had any formal musical training before taking this course; the Compositions can use prose description or other methods of visual representation to transmit instructions to the performers. While not all of your Compositions will be performed, we contend that the act of thinking about the voice from a composer’s perspective will be valuable in its own right. The Compositions you write will not be judged on their beauty (you will not be writing “songs”), but on their ability to illuminate a quality or aspect of the human voice that is poorly understood. In short, we encourage you to think of these Compositions not only as “works of art” (although they will be works of art) but also as tools, as instruments that you use to increase your understanding of the voice you produce and the voices that surround you.

“composition” assignments:

One of the goals of the Morse Academic Plan is to train you in the art of writing. Indeed, no skill that you learn in college will be of greater use to you in the long run than the ability to construct a cogent argument and express it clearly in prose. With this in mind, you will be writing three short essays in this class, which will be due at the beginning of class on Tuesday, February 14, Thursday, March 8, and Tuesday, April 17. Detailed instructions for these essays will be given in advance of their due dates. We encourage you to approach these compositions with an eye toward clarity, but also with an ear toward beauty: read your essay aloud, slowly, several times. Make sure that it sounds like you want it to sound. In short, treat these writing exercises as if they were vocal Compositions, as if they were art, where every note, every brushstroke is intentional.

Quizzes:

Sporadic, unannounced quizzes will be provided to give you an extra incentive to read the course materials before coming to class. There will be no final exam for this course, however.

A few more policies:

Due dates:
Due dates for your written projects are not flexible. We will allow for late submissions only under the most extreme circumstances. (N.B.: Computer problems do not constitute extreme circumstances. Be sure to back up your work regularly so that you always have a copy in the
To request an extension for an assignment, a legitimate excuse must be submitted in writing before the assignment is due. The request must be accompanied by written evidence, such as a note from your doctor, along with his or her contact information. We will then decide if an extension is warranted. To avoid problems, please plan ahead and begin working on the composition and writing projects as early as you can.

**Grading distribution**

- Attendance, participation, weekly assignments: 30%
- Quizzes: 10%
- “composition” projects: 30%
- “Composition” projects: 30%

**Integrity of Scholarship**

We take it on faith that you are all honest, industrious, and ethical students. (We will also make it our business to explain our understanding of honest, industrious, ethical work. Of course, if our assumptions are proven false—if you engage in plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty—the repercussions will be serious. For more information on NYU’s policies regarding academic integrity, please see this website: http://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/academic-integrity-for-students-at-nyu.html.)

**Status of the Preceptors**

The preceptors for this course are brilliant graduate students who will soon be professors themselves. The recitation sessions and composition workshops that they lead are a central part of this course. Their evaluations of your written work and classroom participation will constitute the bulk of your grade. More importantly, they are on hand to answer your questions, help you learn how to become better writers, thinkers, composers, and performers, and to make sure that your experience this semester is rich and positive. I trust that you will work closely with them, learn from them, and treat them with respect.

**Status of This Syllabus**

This syllabus is a working document. As the semester progresses, we may make changes to readings, assignments and due dates to reflect the needs of the group and the schedules of guest lecturers. Updated versions of the syllabus will be posted on the blackboard site and mentioned in class.

**TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE**

**Introduction: core issues and theoretical frames**

(Week 1: Tuesday, January 24; Thursday, January 26)

**Materials:**


**Theme 1: Voice and the body as a locus of expressive culture**

(Week 2: Tuesday, January 31; Thursday, February 2  
Week 3: Tuesday, February 7; Thursday, February 9)

**Materials:**

“Anatomy and Physiology of Voice Production” (Voiceproblem.org).


---

**Theme 2: Voice and the construction, maintenance, and subversion of identities**

(Week 4: Tuesday, February 14; Thursday, February 16  
Week 5: Tuesday, February 21; Thursday, February 23)

[2/14—Special guest: Pamela Z, composer and performance artist]

***composition #1 (essay) due 2/14***

**Materials:**
Watch and peruse the website of “Race: The Power of an Illusion”: [www.pbs.org/race](http://www.pbs.org/race)


Theme 3: Voice and technological mediation

(Week 6: Tuesday, February 28; Thursday, March 1
Week 7: Tuesday, March 6; Thursday, March 8)

***Composition #1 (music) due 2/28***
***composition #2 (essay) due 3/8***

Materials:


Week 8: Tuesday, March 13; Thursday, March 15 NO CLASSES

Theme 4: Voice and human agency

(Week 9: Tuesday, March 20; Thursday, March 22
Week 10: Tuesday, March 27; Thursday, March 29)

***Composition #2 (music) due 3/27***

[3/29—Special guest: Lisa Sokolov, Tisch arts professor and founder, Embodied Voice Work]

Materials:

FILM: Soundtrack for a Revolution


Theme 5: Voice as an instrument of play and creativity

Week 11: Tuesday, April 3; Thursday, April 5
Week 12: Tuesday, April 10; Thursday, April 12

[Special Guest: Dr. Stephen Miles, composer, music theorist, and Provost, New College of Florida]

Materials:

Conclusions: Contemplating voice

Week 13: Tuesday, April 17; Thursday, April 19
Week 14: Tuesday, April 24; Thursday, April 26

Rehearsal, performance, writing, building, playing

***composition #3 (essay) due 4/17***
***Composition #3 (music) due 4/24***

Week 15: Tuesday, May 1; Thursday, May 3

Concluding gestures