

Theorizing voice: toward working *otherwise* with voices

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Abstract

This article provides an overview of the ways in which ‘voice’ has been engaged, defined and valorized in qualitative research and argues that alternative imaginings and conceptualizations of ‘voice’ are needed if we are to engage seriously with the material, embodied and contradictory dynamics of qualitative research encounters. In the paper, I argue that new materialist reconfigurings enable a productive reconceptualization of voice as a transindividual process that is not located in individual bodies but is fundamentally relational. A key focus is on how such a reconceptualization of voice can be translated into modes of qualitative praxis which allow the sociomaterial, embodied and ideological overdetermination of voices, stories and accounts to be foregrounded. I argue that analytic and representational strategies that preserve contradiction, heterogeneity, performativity, dialogicality and fleshy embodiment are central to efforts to engage and work otherwise with voices. To this end, three strategies are outlined, namely: (1) embodied listening, (2) multivocality tools and (3) tracing viscous voices. These strategies are shown, via worked examples, to be productive analytic strategies that can be utilized when trying to work *otherwise* with voices in qualitative research.

Keywords: Voice, Multivocality, New materialism, Feminist, Listening, Praxis

Introduction

In this paper, I explore, trouble and rethink the concept of ‘voice’, arguing that we need new ways of conceptualizing and working with voices in qualitative research. While assumptions about ‘voice’ underpin much of what we do as qualitative researchers, it is not often that the potentialities and pitfalls of our engagements with ‘voice/s’ are fully engaged and reflected upon (but see Jackson and Mazzei, 2009; Mazzei, 2013, 2016, 2017; St Pierre, 2008, as exceptions). All too often, we frame our work as acts of ‘giving voice’, in which it is assumed that the authentic and singular voices of participants can be unproblematically represented and disseminated through our research findings. We often carry and reiterate assumptions that articulating voice, speaking and telling are transparent acts of empowerment and agency (Lather, 2009; Malhotra and Rowe, 2013). In this paper, I trouble normative assumptions about ‘voice’, arguing that voice needs to be thought outside of narrow humanist and realist frames. However, unlike some who have argued that the concept of ‘voice’ in qualitative research is irreparably tainted and needs to be thrown out and discarded (see St Pierre, 2008), I argue instead that alternative thinking (with and about) voices is a core task for critical modes of qualitative inquiry, which aim to analyze the ways in which speech, talk, telling and other embodied acts of voicing¹ (i.e. taking a

photograph or making a collage) are entangled with (contradictory) ideologies and sociomaterial relations. Using the work of new materialist and other critical thinkers, I argue that 'voice' is not a transparent, individual or singular phenomenon. Instead, it is a slippery and paradoxical border concept – somehow being both (and yet neither) a matter of language and bodies, speech and silence, presence and absence. It is this ambiguity that is the key to the radical potentiality of voice (as theorized *otherwise*).

In this article, I provide an overview of the ways in which 'voice' has been assumed, defined and valorized in qualitative research (specifically in interview-based approaches) and argue that alternative imaginings and conceptualizations of 'voice' are needed if we are to engage seriously with the material, affective, embodied and intersectional dynamics of qualitative research encounters. To this end, I explore the ways in which new materialist reconfigurings might enable a reconceptualization of voice as a transindividual process that is not located in individual bodies but is fundamentally relational. I also ask how we can begin to work with voices in our qualitative analyses in ways that allow the sociomaterial, embodied and ideological overdetermination of stories, accounts and discourses to be foregrounded. I argue that analytic and representational strategies that preserve contradiction, heterogeneity, performativity, dialogicality and fleshy embodiment are central to efforts to practice or 'do' critical qualitative praxis. To this end, I explore three strategies, namely: (1) embodied listening, (2) multivocality tools and (3) tracing viscous voices, as useful and productive analytic strategies when trying to work *otherwise* with voices in qualitative research. I use examples drawn from my research on women's birth stories (see Chadwick, 2018) in order to illustrate my points.

Romanticization or dismissal? Voice in qualitative research

The idea of voice as an expression of authenticity, truth or socially significant meaning is fundamental to the qualitative research paradigm (St Pierre, 2008). Underlying the edifice of much of what we do as qualitative researchers is the belief that the talk that happens in research encounters – the concentrated and collective practice of putting (researcher solicited) perspectives and experiences into words – matters and can be analyzed or dissected to reveal social truths, subordinate perspectives or hidden meanings. We believe that we can translate raw, embodied and messy speech, moments of silence, hesitation, whispers, laughter, undecipherable utterances, body language, crying and interactional dynamics into written transcripts which can then be interpreted or analyzed through the lenses of various methods. Ultimately, we often hope that these analyses will 'give voice', allow the marginalized to speak, highlight 'hidden' experiences or stories and challenge mechanistic and singular approaches to truth (i.e. positivism). We believe that the pulsating, lively, embodied, fleeting and relational speech acts and 'voices' contained in research encounters can be recorded and frozen in time as 'nuggets of truth' (Woolf, 1928/1945: 5). This is the 'romance of voice' (Stephens, 2004) present in many varieties of qualitative research. Underpinning such romanticized versions of voice are liberal humanist assumptions that theorize selves as stable, essential, singular and separable from sociomaterial relations. Of course, realist and humanist approaches to qualitative research – or what St Pierre (2014: 3) refers to as 'conventional humanist qualitative methodology' and the associated 'romance with voice' – have been challenged by poststructuralist and feminist researchers since the 1990s (i.e. Lather, 1991; Fine, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 2002; Lather, 2001). Researchers have thus experimented with alternative ways of writing and

representing research (e.g. poetry, fiction, ethnodrama, autoethnography, collective writing) and have explored, via an ethics of positioning or reflexivity, their own involvements and investments in particular projects, field sites, interpretations and research encounters.

While the poststructuralist turn in the humanities and social sciences complicated realist humanist approaches to qualitative research and essentialist conceptions of voice as inherently liberatory, it did not however always offer the nuanced theorizations of voice that might have been expected. Rather, the 'turn to language' often involved a blanket dismissal and rejection of voice-centered research and a focus on discursive formations and microscopic relations of power (see Chadwick, 2020). Furthermore, a dominant tendency in much qualitative discursive work has been the splitting of language and discourse from embodied subjects and a focus on the analysis of disembodied texts, discourses and themes, even when data originates from speaking bodies (Chadwick, 2017a). As a result, the tendency in many poststructuralist strains of qualitative praxis was to replace the 'romance with voice' with an eradication of embodied, visceral voices altogether (however, see Jackson and Mazzei, 2009, as exception). This preoccupation with discourse has been described as a form of 'discourse determinism' (see Hekman, 2010), resulting and has resulted in a widespread sense of frustration with the poststructuralist denial of bodies, embodied experiences, fleshy viscosity, sociomaterial contexts and agentic materiality (Chadwick, 2020). This frustration has contributed to the rise of 'new materialisms' in which discourse is reconceived as only one dimension of an entangled network of sociomaterial relations (see Barad, 2007). New theorizations of voice, silence, bodies and qualitative research encounters have been enabled by new materialist, decolonial and other critical frameworks (see Mazzei, 2013; Jackson and Mazzei, 2009; Malhotra and Rowe, 2013), offering possibilities for alternative engagements with voice beyond valorization or dismissal.

Thinking and working otherwise with voice

There has recently been a rethinking of voice among scholars working with post-qualitative frameworks (see Jackson and Mazzei, 2009) and new materialist theories. For example, using Deleuzian theory, Mazzei (2013) deconstructs assumptions that 'voice is produced by a unique, essentialist subject' (p. 732) and argues instead that voice 'is produced in an enactment among research-data-participants-theory-analysis' (p. 732). Furthermore, in their edited collection, Jackson and Mazzei (2009) seek to trouble 'easy' assumptions about voice and 'deconstruct the epistemological limits of voice' (p. 3). Assumptions of voice as a privileged site in which authentic selves, experiences and lives are revealed, is rejected by attempts to *think otherwise* with new materialist frameworks. Instead of a valorization of homogenous, coherent and easily categorized voices, Mazzei (2009) thus encourages us 'to seek the voice that escapes our easy classification and that does not make easy sense – the voice in the crack' (p. 48). Normative assumptions about the ontology of voice are also troubled. Voice is no longer a stable thing that resides or happens in individual bodies or is waiting submerged for a moment of emancipation/expression. Instead, thinking voice with new materialist frames allows voice to be reconceived as a transindividual process enacted in particular relational networks or 'assemblages' (see Müller, 2015; Fox and Alldred, 2015). This breaks the 'romance with voice' prevalent in humanist qualitative research and allows

us to begin to think voice in broader, heterogeneous and entangled terms (i.e. with silence,² silencing, bodies and power).

Taking critical and new materialist theorizations of voice seriously means that we can no longer analyze, categorize or dissect 'data', transcript texts or spoken language in the old ways. By 'the old ways' (see also Maclure, 2013), I refer to the tendency for qualitative researchers to homogenize, reduce and 'smooth over' the cracks, discontinuities, contradictions and ambiguities present in 'data' (Stephens, 2004). Mazzei (2009) refers to these (normalizing) tendencies as a kind of interpretive violence in which 'understandable identities' (p. 19) and clear, orderly (and publishable?) meanings are forced onto our qualitative data. She advocates being faithful to excessive, competing, troublesome and uncontainable voices and practicing what she refers to as a 'recalcitrant rhetoric' in our analyses. This amounts to a respectful attitude of 'interpretive reticence' (p. 19) in which we acknowledge the radical alterity of 'data' and the unfinalizability, partiality and entangled aspects of our own interpretations and acts of epistemic voicing. Mazzei's (2009) invocation of 'interpretive reticence' as an ethical attitude toward our data echoes Frank's (2005) problematization of 'finalizability and monologue' (p. 966) as characteristics of an unethical stance in qualitative research praxis. Drawing on Bakhtin, Frank (2005) argues instead for a dialogical approach in which voices are recognized as radically unfinalizable. This means acknowledging that we (as researchers) can never have the final word on the lives, experiences, narratives or 'truths' of others. Thus, what we *do with voices* as qualitative researchers fundamentally involves ethical matters. How do we transform or translate spoken words and embodied encounters into words or 'transcripts', how do we (ethically) code, reduce and categorize our 'data'? What do we mishear, mute or dismiss as irrelevant? How do we decide which voices to hear and highlight and which voices to ignore or secret away? What do we do with our own voice/s? How do we represent (our and other) voices in our written and spoken work and how do we deal with the (inevitable) difficulties of speaking with, to, against, and through the voices of others? These are the voice-centered ethical questions at the very heart of qualitative praxis. Acknowledging that our work often involves the analysis and classification of visceral, lively voices exposes the fine lines we walk between sense-making and 'interpretive violence' (Mazzei, 2009).

Thinking otherwise with voices has to translate into what we do with voices as qualitative researchers. The challenge is thus to articulate modes of qualitative praxis that reimagine and rework, 'the epistemological [and ontological] limits of voice' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2009:3). Part of this praxis must be active efforts to resist imperatives to impose singularity and homogeneity on voices, discipline them into coherence or deny their power as material and bodily forces. Instead, following Maclure (2009), our task becomes finding ways of engaging the troublesome and trickster aspects of voice – its excesses, eruptions, polyvocality and vitalized entanglements with/through bodily sounds, movements, gestures and silences. It means recognizing and confronting (or embracing) the inevitable 'failings' and falterings of voice (see Maclure, 2009) and exploring the ways in which voice is articulated – not only via clear verbal expressions – but also through silences, non-decipherable sounds, utterances, sighs, laughter, stutters, whispers, gestures, misunderstandings and refusals.

Strategy 1: practicing embodied listening

As argued by MacLure (2009: 97), 'we need methodologies that are capable of dwelling on, and in, those very properties of voice that make it such troublesome material for research'. While we can never fill the gaps of what is (inevitably) lost as we turn sounds, speech and embodied research encounters into textual and transcribed forms, we can be attentive to these issues and acknowledge the critical role of transcription in our research interpretations (Chadwick, 2017a). We can also rethink the role of audio (visual) recordings in research praxis.

For example, in my research exploring women's birth stories (see Chadwick, 2018), I found that treating audio recordings as my 'data' (instead of written transcripts) and engaging in repeated listenings to audio files, transformed my relationship to voices and stories. I was drawn back into research encounters in a visceral, emotional and embodied way. I relived my own anxiety, was affected by the emotional intensity of stories and voices, re-experienced the painful interpersonal dynamics (of some interview encounters) and was forced to repeatedly assume the emotionally demanding role of listener (as opposed to analyst). As I engaged in practices which centered voices (as opposed to texts), I came to the following realization:

Voices are alive. Meaning crackles in-between words: in breaths, rhythms, a myriad of laughs, pauses, spaces in-between, rising and lowering pitch, snapping fingers and guttural sounds (that are difficult to convert into conventional alphabetical letters). The dance between the interviewee and myself – my interruptions, my nervous laughter, my awkwardness – hanging – suspended in questions that trail off. . . (Research diary).

Engaging in a praxis that put visceral voices at the center of analytic work meant that it became harder to mute, ignore or miss the uncontainable and excessive dimensions of voices and acts of telling. However, these listenings were extremely challenging and emotionally exhausting because I was forced to relive and dwell on/with the relational dynamics of 'difficult' or painful interviews. For example:

She repeatedly spoke over me – silencing me. It reconnected me to something I would rather have forgotten. Painful – feel pained. I don't like her much in those moments. One gets no sense of this embodied dynamic from simply reading the transcript. Listening to the tape brought things back to the full emotional experience. (Research diary)

As I 'worked with voices' by reframing embodied listening as an analytic act, foregrounding the 'data' as a set of lively and bodily sounds, silences and utterances (which worked also to intensely reinvolve the affective and relational spaces of research encounters), I realized how extensively embodied voices were actually erased via processes of transcription. I also came to appreciate that it is harder to categorize people, simplify their lives into 'themes' or reduce them to 'discourses' or 'texts' when one is seriously and actively *listening* to their voices. In efforts to rework qualitative praxis in ways which allow working *otherwise* with voices, we need to reaffirm an ethics of listening. As Frank (1995: 25) notes, 'Listening is hard, but it is also a fundamental moral act'. While we listen to participants during (a range of) research encounters, what I am suggesting here as a voice-

centered praxis is an analytic form of ‘embodied listening’ in which we treat audio recordings as our primary ‘data’ and engage them accordingly. While this still erases other (contextual, visual, tactile, sensual) elements of the research encounter as lived, it nonetheless enables a more intimate engagement with excessive/uncontainable voices than transcript texts. Listening can become a form of embodied analysis in which we use our emotions, bodies and affective histories to dwell with/on the paradoxes, movements, entanglements and trickery of voices (MacLure, 2009).

Strategy 2: using multivocality tools

Exploring the potentialities of listening as a form of embodied analysis is one way in which we can begin to foreground corporeal and excessive voices in our analytic work. Another strategy is playing with ‘multivocality tools’ drawn from methodologies such as the Listening Guide (see Gilligan et al., 2003). In this analytic method, voice and self are theorized as multivocal and the work of analysis involves tracing the different, polyvocal and potentially contradictory ways in which interview participants speak about the self. This mode of listening is facilitated by the use of ‘I poems’ – an analytic technique in which the use of the ‘I voice’ is traced throughout transcript texts.³ ‘I statements’ or articulations are then used to form stream-of-consciousness type poems, which highlight the ways in which participants speak or voice the self. The goals of the method are to foreground individual subjectivity and to explore the different voices, resonances and echoes used to talk about a particular experience, subject or event. While the original methodology is rooted in realist and humanist assumptions about selves/voices (see Chadwick, 2017b) the multivocality tools of the Listening Guide do nonetheless offer us a way of tracing the complex and contradictory *movements* of voices as stories are told and enacted. As a result, we are able to work with voices (via these analytic tools) as emergent processes rather than static and univocal essences.

In my work on women’s birth stories (Chadwick, 2018), I constructed ‘I poems’ and other kinds of ‘pronoun poems’ (centering the use of the words ‘it’, ‘they’, ‘you’ and ‘me’) from transcript texts and used these poems as an alternative form of representing data/speech. I constructed these poems in conjunction with embodied listenings to (recorded) voices as a way of tuning into the ways in which different kinds of voices (i.e. judgmental/moralistic voice; muted voice; voice of *jouissance*) sounded or materialized differently (i.e. as hesitant, filled with gaps and pauses or high-pitched and fast-moving). The ‘I poems’ also offered a way of representing longer chunks of speech in manageable forms and allowing contradictory and multiple voices to be represented as jostling, interruptive and co-occurring (or contrapuntal to use the Gilliganesque term). In order to illustrate my points, I will draw on an example from my research on women’s birth stories. In particular, I focus on the telling of an elective cesarean birth told by a woman that I will identify only as ‘H’.⁴

I had two lengthy (2-hour) conversations with H about her experiences and perspectives of (first-time) pregnancy and birth. We spoke initially when she was approximately 7 months pregnant and again about 6 weeks after she had given birth. H was a successful business executive and both of our conversations took place at the top of a high-rise building (her workplace) in the city. In our first conversation, I hardly had an opportunity to speak or ask any questions as H proceeded to give a detailed set of explanations and justifications for her decision to have an elective cesarean section (with no

medical indicators). Her telling was structured as a series of moves and countermoves between multiple sets of moral, phallogocentric, medicalized and feminist voices. At the same time, her telling veered between a predominant sense of forceful and agentic power (which came through in the ways she spoke and orchestrated the conversation) and smaller, little moments of hesitancy, doubt and faltering (in which speech trailed off or gaps of silence overtook certainty). About 3 months later, we met again to talk about her birth experience and it is this telling that I will focus on here.

In telling her cesarean story, H told a fundamentally contradictory birth narrative characterized by two competing voices, namely what I have called a ‘restitution voice’ and a ‘fleshy voice’. These two voices told cesarean birth as radically different. In the one version, elective cesarean section was ‘no big deal’, definitely the right decision and a case of being fine, having the surgery and being fine again (see Frank, 1995, for an overview of restitution narratives). When spoken through another voice – a voice linked more intimately to bodily and lived experience, the cesarean section was told as awful, horrific and traumatic. I use a narrative poem below as a way of representing the jostling movement between these two narrative voices (see Table 1 for transcription notation details).

Table 1. Transcription notation.

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Massive (bold) | Words spoken loudly |
| ... | Speech trails off |
| Good thing (italic) | Words spoken slowly for effect |
| Definitely (underlined) | Words that are emphasized |
| Tiny | Words spoken slowly and loudly |
| ^^Oh my word^^ | Words spoken with laughter in voice |
| OH NO | Words shouted out |
| [name removed] (square brackets) | Explanatory material |

High expectations

I was very excited
 I was never nervous
 I was just excited
 I’d never thought
 I’m having an operation
 I just thought
 I’m having a baby

Becoming a patient

And then
 We booked in
 And
 And then
 They said
 Then they come in
 And they
 And they
 In-between
 I was
 I was having a birthday!

I started getting very excited
And then
They came
They put me on the trolley
And they took me
And then
They said
And then
And then
He injected it
Then he did the spinal
And then
And then
I was in
And then
I started going numb
And um
Then
And then
They covered me
And then
And
And then

Fleshy voice

I didn't know
I mean
I started going numb
You go numb immediately
I was under
I was going
I was
I went numb
I thought
You start feeling numb
You can't
I could
I could
But
But
I was
I couldn't
I couldn't feel
And then
I couldn't control
I was a dead pound of flesh

Restitution voice

And. . . (silence)

Anyway
But that was fine
It's not painful at all
It's just
It's weird

Fleshy voice

And then
I think
I might
I felt like
I started feeling sleepy
I thought
I'm not
I want
I'm completely aware
I can talk
But
I'm feeling like
I had a bottle of wine
And – (pause) and
My breathing um – (pause)
I was breathing
I was like
It felt like
I was watching a movie
I was watching
I wasn't there

Restitution voice

I won't do it any different
I'll still do it
I'd still rather do that
I now can know
I've been through it
But everything was fine

Fleshy voice

I said
I can't at all
I would
But I didn't at all
I didn't feel anything
Nothing
I didn't feel at all
I must say
I dunno
I was a bit out of it

I think
I dunno
I could talk
But
I felt like
I'm breathing *slower and slower*
I'm thinking
'Am I gonna die?'
'Am I gonna be okay?'
----Laughter-----

Restitution voice

But everything was obviously fine

Fleshy voice

And then
They lifted him out
I was relieved
I didn't
I heard
I didn't know
And then suddenly
They lifted him up
And then
I only saw
I knew
I looked
And
I dunno
I looked
It didn't feel like my baby
I looked
I thought
I don't know
I said
'Oh cute'
I said
I think
I think
I said
'Oh cute'
I was like looking
I smiled
And then
And then
And then
I could
I looked at him
I felt so weird

I felt like
I dunno

Restitution voice

It was a very fine procedure
I mean
I was glad
I was
I was

Fleshy voice

But um
I dunno
It felt like
I was watching
I mean
And then
They took him
And then
I was relieved
I didn't want
I was not coping
I didn't feel
I was feeling horrible

Restitution voice

I was
Everything was fine
They said
I recovered

Fleshy voice

I started shaking
I started shaking
I didn't like that
My body went into shock
It was fine
I was just shaking
I wasn't cold
I was just shaking
I just wanted to become
A human being again
You know
I couldn't move
I had to
You can't move
It's too sore

You're lying there
It's bleeding
It's horrible
I thought
I dunno
I'm gonna
I'm immobile
I couldn't move
And then

Restitution voice

I
The next day
I got up
It was nothing
I realized
I got up
It was fine
I was fine
I walked
I put
I washed
I got
I got up and out
I was fine
I fed him
I changed him
It was fine
I got up
I felt better
I could
I looked
I spoke
It dawned on me
I requested
I said
I wanted
I was
I went
I
I
I said
I think
I took him home
But I was fine
I was fine.

This narrative poem shows H's telling as a shifting movement between two contradictory voices, namely: a restitution voice ('it was fine') and a fleshy voice of distress ('it was terrifying and horrible'). Tracing the 'I voices' in H's telling shows that this was not a

coherent birth story told by a homogenous, stable or singular voice. As H spoke about the visceral lived experience of her cesarean section, her 'I voice' is characterized by a sense of absence ('I wasn't there'), loss of feeling and embodied capacity ('I couldn't feel') and dislocation ('I was a bit out of it'). Her 'I voice' is also marked by uncertainty and lack of clear knowing. This is demonstrated by the repeated articulation of 'I dunno' throughout her telling. As she puts the bodily and emotional experience of the cesarean into words, it is told as a frightening, disembodied and alienating event in which she felt removed from her body, detached from her baby and feared that she might die. As she spoke in this voice, H used several metaphors to try and articulate bodily experience; she also spoke in a flat tone throughout in which her words were expressed in an almost 'deadened' fashion. As she speaks about lived experience, her telling is constantly interrupted by another voice, which reinscribes the event as 'no big deal' and is marked by the repeated refrain of 'it was fine'. When speaking in this voice, H emphasizes the fact that the cesarean was 'not painful at all' and that the whole experience was unproblematic, smooth and 'fine'. In speaking this version of events, she justifies and reconfirms her decision to have an elective caesarean as the right choice. This voice – which I have labeled as a 'restitution voice', ultimately reiterates a medicalized view in which lived fleshy experience is denied and birth is judged by its 'outcome'. H tries to both reiterate a medicalized view (cesarean surgery is no big deal) *and* tell her embodied experience – as a result, the telling is a movement between (at least) two contradictory voices. The gap/s between these voices are never sutured in her telling. Thus, despite her 'horrible' experience, she does not reject medicalized, surgical birth but is compelled to keep reiterating that she made the right decision. She does not speak about or try and explain why her lived experience was distressing or disappointing. As a result, 'there is a hole in the telling' (Frank, 1995: 102) that traces around the unsutured and *unspoken* wound of disappointment and, failed expectations and loss. When represented as a movement of contradictory voices (inscribing both presence/meaning and the absence of meaning/sense), H's story escapes any attempts at homogenization or disciplining into generic 'themes'. Her voices are always *more than* and excessive to our attempts to extract truth or orderly meaning.

I use H's birth story as a brief example of how working with 'multivocality tools' can facilitate the tracing of different 'I voices' within talk and tellings. As her story illustrates, these voices can be contradictory and incommensurable – the task of the qualitative researcher thus becomes as much about tracing absences, gaps and silences (what is not said or explained and why) as about tracing voices. As a result, contradiction and absence become points of analysis rather than troublesome features that require 'smoothing over' (see Chadwick, 2018).

Strategy 3: tracing viscous voices

Taking new materialism seriously means a refusal to theorize voice as a 'thing', essence or stability and a shift toward a conceptualization of *voicing* as an embodied, sociomaterial, sensual and relational process. But how do we work with voices as embodied and sociomaterial processes in qualitative research? How do we trace 'voicing' as a transindividual process that happens between bodies, locations, affective and discursive histories? Tuana's (2008) concept of 'viscous porosity' is useful here. She uses this 'conceptual metaphor' as a way of thinking about the relational processes of becoming in which subjects, events and phenomena are not stable essences but 'constituted out of

relationality' (Tuana, 2008: 188). Emphasizing viscosity underlines the importance of attending to the in-betweenness of 'things' give that it is 'neither fluid nor solid' (193–194). 'Porosity' highlights the unstable and permeable boundaries between things. 'Viscous porosity' allows us to think and work with the strange quality of voice as neither one thing or another (i.e. body or language, speech or silence) but as 'intermediate between them' (Tuana, 2008: 194). It also speaks to voices as sites in which the radical permeability between bodies, ideologies, selves, sociocultural relations, machines and biologies are enacted. As argued by Tuana (2008: 189), 'we must attend to this porosity and to the in-between of the complex interrelations from which phenomena emerge'. Our focus thus shifts from seeking an authentic or normative voice and/or hoping to 'give voice' to tracing the 'emergent interplay' of voices in the making (Tuana, 2008: 189). Such a practice potentially works against the erasure or reification of differences and the erasure of what is difficult to hear or transform into clear and orderly meaning. In what follows I use a birth story, told by a woman I refer to as J, to explore the ways in which we might engage in analytic praxis which traces the 'emergent interplay' (Tuana, 2008: 189) and 'viscous porosity' of voicing as a process in which sociomaterial realities, moral interpellations, fleshy bodies, self-other dynamics and multiple 'I positions' become vitalized and entangled.

J's story was hard to listen to on many levels. While she was speaking (in a small room in the middle of an overcrowded and noisy informal settlement), we were surrounded by an array of disruptive sounds, noises, bodies and voices. During the interview, I struggled to concentrate and hear what J was saying. My struggle to hear (and relate to) her were exacerbated by her distinctive style of speaking in which words, sounds and utterances poured out in voluble excess and via a fast-paced style of speech. J's voice/s thus troubled me and I later found listening to the audio recording of her telling extremely difficult (emotionally and analytically). It was not just her embodied voice that was difficult to listen to – J's story was also hard to hear. This was a story inscribing the everyday world/s of a young single black mother living in poverty with little financial or familial support.⁵ Her story told of physical and emotional violence, attempted suicide, substance abuse and extreme hardships (hunger, cold and the absence of everyday comforts). At the same time, she was upbeat and energetic, responding enthusiastically both to me and the research project. In what follows, I present chunks of our interview encounter as a narrative 'I poem', using it to illustrate the ways in which voicing can be thought and engaged as a form of dynamic and unpredictable interplay (Tuana, 2008) between selves, material conditions, fleshy bodies, moral imperatives and dominant discourses.

R

At what point did you go to the clinic?

J

I wasn't *there* [at clinic]

I was shy

I was afraid also

I told X [name removed]

That was my main reason

I didn't go book [for the birth]

I didn't

I didn't have kimbies [nappies]

I didn't have baby clothes

I was well off before

What are people gonna say if
I uh (*) gonna *give birth* like that?

J
They're [nurses] RUDE
They will just tell you
They will say
You did that [have sex] *lekker*
They will
I remember [from previous birth]
I was supposed to
walk up and down
They were sitting
They were sitting
You say the pain is coming
You go get on the bed
They will **shout** at you
Rude remarks
They will
They will
They're gonna treat me like that
I was scared
I've got three children also
They're gonna say
They're RUDE man
That's why
I don't want to [give birth at clinic]

J
Pains were coming
I was standing
I went
They're still coming
And then
There's pressure
I'm standing
My mom said I'm in labor
'I'm gonna take you'
I try not to
I come here
I was sitting
I had jeans on
I was shouting
The neighbors came
I was sitting
'**Come, come** to the doctor'
They
They don't **understand**
I didn't want to go
<**they're gonna skel me out**> [shout]
I was

I started
I feel the
It's the head
^^I still feel here IN FRONT pressing^^
They said
'Come, let's still do it now'
They say
They said
'No come!'
I was pressing
I feel just a head
I feel **the body**
I'm saying
I'm praying
I'm standing up
They say
The child is out
R
Weren't they [medical staff] angry?
J
They were
'Why didn't you come?'
I was
I know
I'm gonna
I have to be honest
I was
I
So I
I
I'm not gonna lie to you
I didn't
I can't remember what
I said
I was
I just
I thought they were gonna skel [shout] me
I say
I said
Let me bring my full responsibility
To my kids
Not like in my pregnancy
'Tomorrow I'm gonna book'
'I'm gonna book'

J
^^I'm very glad^^ (both laugh)
^^I'M VERY GLAD IT HAPPENED HERE^^
I'm very glad
I had a lot of support
It was a nice experience

You would have had the pain there
They would've walked up and down
They will ignore you
I had that experience before
They will ignore you
It's almost like
'You don't talk the truth'
'you don't know when the baby is gonna come'
That kind of stuff
But it was good
It was good
But it's life and death also
You or the child.

J's birth story is a multivocal, contradictory and often resistant response to my initial question, 'At what point did you go to the clinic?' With this question, I bring into being or 'vitalize' a medical script of pregnancy and birth, which assumes that all pregnant women will (and should) report to healthcare facilities to confirm and get appropriate 'care' for their pregnancies. As a response to my (ideological) framing, she voices her story (of a birth outside the medical system) as a tale of trying to escape her positioning as a 'bad mother' who is poor, black, pregnant with her third baby, unmarried and has no baby supplies to take to the clinic when she gives birth. Her poverty marks her in ways that she does not like. She knows that she will be framed as a 'problem' in the healthcare clinic (see Chadwick, 2017c). Multiple sociomaterial modes of oppression thus function as powerful entangled forces shaping her voice (and story) in particular ways. J resists the oppressed identity of 'the poor black unmarried mother' by avoiding and rejecting the localized medical script (i.e. book in and report to the clinic for birth). J also counters her positioning as a 'bad mother' by framing medical healthcare providers as the problem (i.e. they are rude, violent and abusive). J goes on to narrate her birth experience as an intensely fleshy event in which her vocalized telling teems with bodily eruptions (shouting, laughing, loud speech, high-pitched speech) in which she is the center of a neighborly hub of others who support her but also constantly interrupt her experience to plead with her to report to healthcare services. These neighbors thus function as 'normalizing voices' in her story, indicating the ways in which others try and enforce her compliance with normative medicalized scripts. After her birth at home, J did report to the local clinic so that she and the baby could be 'checked'. My response to this is to ask her, 'Weren't they angry?' With this question, I (inadvertently) position J as someone who has done something 'wrong'. She responds to this positioning of self as morally dubious through multiple contradictory voices – one that affirms that she was wrong and irresponsible in her actions and another that asserts that she was right, that she had a good birth (which would not have happened at the clinic) and that it is 'they' – the medical staff – that are the problem (and not her).

A process-oriented analysis of J's birth story (facilitated by the 'I poem') shows the jostling voices contained within any one telling. J does not voice her birth experience as a homogenous, stable experience standing outside of relations with others, the interview encounter, sociomaterial positionings, concrete contexts and the fleshy body. Instead she speaks (and makes voice) as a dynamic response to a multiple set of 'emergent relations' (Tuana, 2008: 189). Her voice is not one and it is not self-contained. Instead, it shows 'viscous porosity' (Tuana, 2008) as it shifts, morphs and changes according to certain modes

of questioning and sociomaterial positionings. As she tells and ‘makes voice’, she uses an array of imaginary voices (the nurses, her mother, the neighbors) to enact her own positioning as a social problem (the poor single multiparous mother). J then moves to negotiate this positioning via another complex array of voices in which she attempts to escape a stigmatized and oppressed identity by naming medical violence within the clinic and positioning medical staff as problems. My own voice as the interviewer also works to position her in problematic ways and results in her having to negotiate the moral dilemma of her (in my framing) dubious decision to birth at home with no caregiver. J responds to this moral dilemma by invoking contradictory response voices – one that counters and asserts that she was right and that her birth was good because she gave birth at home – and another that affirms that she was wrong and did act as an irresponsible or ‘bad’ mother.

J’s birth story shows the extent to which, ‘each voice [is] the site of multiple voices’ (Frank, 2005: 972). It also demonstrates voicing *as a process* involving the contradictory entanglement of dialogical relations, power dynamics, fleshy energies, ideological currents and sociomaterial formations. A birth story thus becomes visible as a ‘material-semiotic’ (Haraway, 1997; see also Frank, 2010) configuration rather than a static description of ‘truth’ or pure experience. Focusing on acts of voicing as a transindividual process that incorporates other voices, moral interpellations, sociomaterial positionings and fleshy bodies, opens us to the realization that voices are radically permeable and porous entities (Chadwick, 2020). We make voices and enact forms of (contradictory) enunciation only in relation to other voices, concrete material realities and intersubjective responses and encounters. Thus, the voices that we make in encounters do not finally and essentially ‘belong’ to us but are produced in interaction with a complex set of sociomaterial, bodily and discursive relations (Alcoff, 1991; see Chadwick, 2020).

Conclusion

This paper argues that despite its limitations, ‘voice’ should be recognized and engaged as a critical concept in qualitative praxis. Normative assumptions about voice as a source or harbinger of authenticity, liberation or empowerment were troubled as I traced possibilities for thinking voice *otherwise*. I argued that thinking voice otherwise, recognizing that qualitative praxis involves the messy and ethically fraught business of ‘working with voices’ and findings ways of engaging alternative conceptualizations of voice in our analytic and representational practices, are key to reimaging critical qualitative research and building counter-knowledges. Using critical and new materialist frameworks, I proposed that we move away from conceptualizations of voice as a static, self-contained and individual ‘thing’ and advocated a shift to thinking about practices of voicing in which ‘making voices’ emerges as a process involving ‘emergent relations’ (Tuana, 2008: 189). This involves a shift from thinking about separate essences to tracing the processes by which ‘things’ are made (Tuana, 2008). At its crux, this is one of the defining features of new materialist ontologies. In this paper, I argued for a reconceptualization of voice as a transindividual process that is not self-contained in individual bodies but is fundamentally relational, dialogic and porous across bodies, selves, ideological and sociomaterial relations. I also explored the question of how we can begin to translate thinking voices otherwise into concrete ways of ‘working with voices’ in qualitative praxis.

To this end, I proposed ‘embodied listening’, multivocality tools and the practice of tracing ‘viscous voices’ as analytic strategies or ways of working *otherwise* with voices. First,

I argued that voice-centered praxis should be founded on a reappraisal of the status and role of audio-recorded voices in our research projects. Via a set of reflections on previous research that focused on women's birth stories, I argued that listening to audio-recorded voices can function as a powerful type of embodied analytic practice which refuses the easy categorization (via transcript texts) of lively and fleshy voices and resists the muting and erasure of excessive aspects of voices, speech and interactional research encounters. Engaging in a praxis that puts visceral voices at the center of analytic work is an important (yet partial and limited) step toward 'working with voices' in more ethical and 'interpretively reticent' ways (Mazzei, 2009). Multivocality tools were also proposed as a strategy for working with voices. Methodological tools drawn from the Listening Guide (Gilligan et al., 2003) such as, for example, 'I poems' (as both analytic and representational practices) were presented as potentially productive tools for tracing, identifying and representing contradictory voices within narratives or talk. The final methodological strategy proposed was the idea of tracing 'viscous voices' and was drawn from the new materialist concept of 'viscous porosity' outlined by Nancy Tuana (2008). In this analytic reading strategy, the aim is to explore 'voicing' as a shifting, mutable and permeable process that happens between bodies, ideologies, sociomaterial positions, dialogical encounters and fleshy, affective currents. Using narrative poetry as representational device, I showed how 'voice' does not materialize as stable, self-contained or unitary but is always in response, in relation, and characterized by a jostling movement of multiple imagined, real, moral, and fleshy voices.

Thinking voice *otherwise* means that we can no longer analyze, categorize or dissect 'data', transcript texts or spoken language in ways that reinscribe singularity, homogeneity and the flattening of differences and contradictions. To this end, in this paper I have suggested a number of ways in which we (as qualitative researchers) can begin to 'work with voices' in ways that recognize and respect plurality, contradiction, fleshy energies and ambiguity. These strategies are just an admittedly limited beginning in the project to develop voice-centered methodologies (see Chadwick, 2020) that grapple and engage with voicing as a sociomaterial process involving contradictory and multiple, 'interruptive energies' and that seeks 'to introduce difference and complication into writing and method' (MacLure, 2009: 110).

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Footnotes

¹Questions of voice in relation to modes of qualitative inquiry such as visual methods and arts-based modalities (i.e. digital storytelling) are important areas of exploration. This article however focuses specifically on voice-centered modes of analysis in relation to interview encounters and material.

²There have recently been rich retheorizations of the relationship between voice and silence that have questioned standard binary assumptions that voice and silence are mutually exclusive processes (see Malhotra and Rowe, 2013). Furthermore, interesting efforts to work analytically with

silence/s have also been advanced by qualitative researchers (see Morison and Macleod, 2014; Murray and Durrheim, 2019).

³.Constructing 'I poems' is an analytic strategy drawn from the Listening Guide (see Gilligan et al., 2003) in which the analyst works through transcripts and sections of transcript talk by highlighting or underlining the use of the 'I' pronoun (along with adjacent words/phrases). These are then pulled out of the transcript and placed onto separate lines so that they form a kind of 'poem' or stream of consciousness tracing or documentation of the ways in which the narrator uses and talks about the 'I' voice. These 'I poems' are used to identify different 'voices' within the story being told. In my experimentation with 'I poems', I also traced the use of other pronouns – such as 'they', 'it', 'you' and 'we'. Please see Gilligan et al. (2003) for more information about the process of constructing 'I poems'.

⁴.I decided to use only initials in this article as modes of identification in order to resist the reproduction of any easy sense of 'authenticity' in the analysis. Following Kamala Visweswaran (1994), who argues that we need to pay greater attention to 'practices of naming' in qualitative research praxis, initials are used to resist authenticity, comfortable interpretations and the reproduction of a 'realist' narrative and also to underline the unfinalizability of research participants (see Frank, 2005, 2010).

⁵.It is important to reflect on the broader implications of working with 'marginalized' voices, particularly as a white, middle-class researcher. Using voice-centric modes of analysis, in which interview encounters are represented as dialogical and performative enactments, throws intersubjective tensions, disconnections and differences into sharp relief. Within this analytic framework, interview encounters and practices of voicing are regarded as relational and transindividual enactments. There is thus no easy appropriation or 'extraction' of (authentic and self-contained) marginalized voices. Instead, in voice-centered analysis, points of disconnection and misunderstanding (as products of difference) potentially become nodes of analysis to be traced and engaged. Nonetheless, as outlined by Alcoff (1991) the 'problem of speaking for others' is a substantial one particularly when there are substantial (historical, racialized, socioeconomic) power differentials between researcher/participant. In the interview encounter with J, I was profoundly uncomfortable because of the stark differences between us. This discomfort shaped the interview encounter and undoubtedly my analyses of her story. As part of a voice-centric analysis, the objective is to work with these discomforts and to work towards (as described by Alcoff, 1991) 'speaking with' the participant (rather than speaking for or about them). Using dialogical and poetic representations is one strategy whereby a process of 'speaking with' is inaugurated.

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Biographies

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