

**Getting To The Core:
About Meredith Monk's *Facing North* and the Art of the Natural Voice¹**

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Looking out the window of my studio in the woods, I could see the slender pine trees and snowy mountain peaks of the Canadian Rockies. Elk, mule deer, squirrels, magpies, and coyotes were my occasional visitors. Toward the middle of November, it began to snow. It snowed for days at time, transforming the woods into a luminous, velvety world. Having lived in the city for many years, I realized how long it had been since I experienced the silence and stillness of that world.

I . . . began composing some a cappella vocal pieces inspired by what I was seeing and hearing.²

Meredith Monk started writing the song cycle *Facing North* for two solo voices in 1989 during a residence at the Leighton Artists' Colony in Banff in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. The New York City composer, singer, and performance artist Monk (b. 1942), famous as a pioneer of so-called extended vocal techniques, has been working with the voice as her main instrument for the last fifty years. In *Facing North*, the human voice is of central meaning. The predominantly unaccompanied voices of Monk and Robert Eén are the prominent instruments of the song cycle. Beyond being instruments, the voices have another meaningful function: They participate in the construction and representation of nature in *Facing North* on several levels. On one level, the quality

¹ This article is a combination of two lectures initially given at the conferences "Music and Nature" in Kopavagur, Iceland, and Cologne, Germany, in 2011.

² Meredith Monk, Liner Notes, in *Facing North* (ECM New Series 1482, 1992, CD).

of the two voices and the title of the cycle itself as well as the titles of the single songs serve for opening a specific realm of associations around the topic of nature. On another level, the voices in Monk's music create their very own naturalness, according to Monk's idiosyncratic notion of the "natural voice."

Representing Natural Phenomena

The individual titles of several songs of *Facing North* reflect Monk's experience of and inspiration from natural phenomena, which can be attributed to a Northern scenery: 'Northern Lights 1,' 'Chinook, Long Shadows 1,' 'Keeping Warm,' 'Northern Lights 2,' 'Chinook Whispers,' 'Arctic Bar,' 'Hocket,' and 'Long Shadows 2.' Musically, the two titles 'Chinook' and 'Chinook Whispers' are the closest to mimicking a natural phenomenon. Characteristic for the track 'Chinook' are breathy, nonverbal sounds, mostly sibilants and fricatives, which are voiced in the longer first section and unvoiced in the short second section. There is a simple, short melody in the first section, which is constantly repeated and varied. This melody is often rhythmically shifted by the two voices, which increases the swirling and spiral-like quality of the melodic pattern. The other striking variation is the change of the sound color, for example the change from the sibilant ʒ^3 to vowels, or by sliding changes of the position of the articulation of the vowels (for example: $i \rightarrow \ddot{u} \rightarrow i$; $u \rightarrow a \rightarrow u$; $ji \rightarrow ju \rightarrow jo$.) While the first section has a calm, continuous flow, the second section is very rhythmical, with a stronger focus on noise. The sounds used here are completely unvoiced: unvoiced plosives (t, k) and fricatives (s, ç). They have a whispering quality, which again stresses the breathy sound quality of the piece. The term *chinook* refers to a warm *foehn* that occurs at the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains in the USA and Canada. Regarding the music's main characteristic, the breathy sound quality, the song can be interpreted as representation or even illustration of a natural phenomenon: wind. The listener can easily imagine hearing the wind whizz and whoosh around the Rockies.

In order to find a broader contextualization and understanding of the relationship between nature and music in *Facing North*, theses and questions posed by Denise Von Glahn in "American Women and the Nature of Identity"⁴ can be applied here. Two of Von Glahn's basic assumptions are that "the United States used nature in very particular ways to help create its identity,"⁵ and that this national narrative gendered the nation explicitly as male.⁶ She therefore stresses the importance of

³ The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is used here.

⁴ Denise Von Glahn, "American Women and the Nature of Identity," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2011), 399–403.

⁵ Von Glahn, "American Women," 402.

⁶ Von Glahn, "American Women," 400.

understanding *how* this identity is defined, *whose* identity is defined in that “nature’s nation,” and *who* gets to define it. At times when a “collective national project” gendered the “United States, via its rugged, muscular, natural phenomena and the pioneer spirit”⁷, as *male*, the access to specific natural phenomena was gender-biased as well. “Encounters with large iconic sites” were rare for women—their access to nature was limited to their local environs. This also affected art about nature created by women, relating to form and content, while male composers would create symphonic works relating to large “natural wonders,” such as “Niagara Falls.”⁸ Since the generation born in the 1930s, experiential and music educational limitations for women have gradually been removed. However, for the contemporary women composers of her study,⁹ Von Glahn still depicts an “eye for the smaller aspects of nature” and an appreciation of the *intimate* relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world. Von Glahn understands *intimacy* and *kinship to nature* as a “female tradition,” in contrast to the *conquering* and *controlling* approach to the “expansive and powerful” natural phenomena of the early male spokespersons for “nature’s nation.”¹⁰

These observed dichotomous relations can be connected to a biological determinism that was developed around 1800, and which declared nature to be the basis of a gender dualism, simultaneously legitimizing this very dualism.¹¹ I will discuss the aspect of “nature as a concept,” and this biologization of gender has to be understood as such, later in this article. Important at this point is that this gender dichotomy is hierarchically structured, establishing the male as creative and fertilizing, and the female as receiving, as child-bearing, and therefore subordinated.¹² Her ability to give birth would further manifest the woman’s postulated closeness to nature, the female biology causing certain distress, evoked by an alleged unregulated animalistic female nature.¹³ Put female as associated with nature or naturalness, and male as associated with culture, and you have the perfect picture for a controlling force cultivating an unregulated, threatening nature that corresponds well with Von Glahn’s observation of

⁷ Von Glahn, “American Women,” 400.

⁸ For example, Anthony Philip Heinrich, William Henry Fry, George Frederick Bristow, and Ferde Grofé wrote symphonic compositions about Niagara Falls, the latter also turned to the Mississippi River and the Grand Canyon. Cf. Von Glahn, “American Women,” 400.

⁹ Von Glahn confines her study to US-composers, such as Amy Beach, Marion Bauer, Louise Talma, Pauline Oliveros, Joan Tower, Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, Victoria Bond, Libby Larsen, and Emily Doolittle, assuming they grew up with that national narrative around nature and gender. Cf. Denise Von Glahn, *Music and the Skillful Listener. American Women Compose the Natural World* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013). Even though Meredith Monk is not included in Von Glahn’s list, as a U.S.-born composer her work can be contextualized in the same contexts.

¹⁰ See Von Glahn, “American Women,” 400 et seq.

¹¹ See Martin Loeser, “Natur,” in *Lexikon Musik und Gender*, eds. Annette Kreuziger-Herr and Melanie Unseld (Kassel et al.: Bärenreiter, 2010), 402–404, here 403.

¹² See Loeser, “Natur.”

¹³ See Elvira Scheich, “Natur/Naturwissenschaft,” in *Metzler-Lexikon Gender Studies, Geschlechterforschung. Ansätze—Personen—Grundbegriffe*, ed. Renate Kroll (Stuttgart et al.: Metzler, 2002), 288–291, here 289.

the conquering male approach toward nature. The proclaimed female tradition of kinship to nature also matches that picture.

Her observations of a gendered approach to nature led Von Glahn to pose questions concerning nature-inspired works by US-American female composers: How do the composers conceptualize nature? How do they see themselves in relation to nature? And how do they create music to express that relationship?¹⁴ Similar questions can be posed referring to *Facing North*:

Firstly, how does Meredith Monk see herself in relation to nature, specifically, how does she “understand the essential dynamic between humanity and the rest of nature?”¹⁵ In Monk’s own words:

As I was working on the music, I had the sensation . . . —the awareness of the *fragility* of human life in relation to the forces of nature and in turn the *vulnerability* of nature itself to the indifference of human beings.¹⁶

The keywords *fragility* and *vulnerability* mark an intimate relationship between humans and the rest of nature, a relation of interdependence, which implies a responsibility for humans towards nature.¹⁷ In that context, the title is of additional interest. It is not *The North* or just *North* (such as the title *Niagara Falls*), but *Facing North*. The use of the term “facing” suggests a reference: Something or someone is *facing* a particular direction, thereby establishing a relation.

Secondly, how does Monk conceptualize nature? The composition *Facing North* is inspired by the specific landscape of the Canadian Rockies, as described by Monk in the liner notes. Thus her source of inspiration is the observation and experience of local environs.¹⁸ However, this is just an initial point. Taking it a step further, she conceptualizes a more general, more abstract idea of “the

¹⁴ See Scheich, “Natur/Naturwissenschaft,” 402.

¹⁵ See Scheich, “Natur/Naturwissenschaft,” 403.

¹⁶ Monk, liner notes, *Facing North* [italics added].

¹⁷ This responsibility is evident in *On Behalf of Nature*, which was Monk’s latest project at the time this article was written, and which she described as “a meditation on the environment.” She wrote: “[The project] will focus attention on what we, as a society, are in danger of losing. In our current world of limited natural resources, I have been contemplating a response. How can an artist evoke the interdependency that exists between us and the natural world? How can we speak for something that can’t be heard? . . . I’m currently drawing additional inspiration from work by writers who have sounded the alarm about the precarious state of our global ecology.” (Meredith Monk, <http://community.icontact.com/p/meredithmonk/newsletters/2006wrapup/posts/bring-to-life-meredith-monks-on-behalf-of-nature-with-a-matching-gift>, accessed 5 May, 2011). In a further description: “Monk and her acclaimed Vocal Ensemble create a liminal space where human, natural and spiritual elements are woven into a delicate whole, in order to illuminate the interconnection and interdependency of us all.” (<http://meredithmonk.org/currentrep/onbehalfnature.html>, accessed 16 January, 2013).

¹⁸ Similarly, Monk’s “Songs from the Hill” (Meredith Monk, *Songs from the Hill/ Tablet*), composed in New Mexico in 1976, had been developed under the impression of very specific landscapes Cf. Monk in Sarah Cahill, *Radical Connections: Meredith Monk and Björk* (radio interview with Meredith Monk and Björk at the American Music Center, 2005).

North,”¹⁹ referring to “northern landscapes,” “northern climes,” possibly associating the concept with the entire northern hemisphere.²⁰ This means an unspecific area of expansiveness beyond the local environs. Monk associates a distinct characteristic with “the North,” however unspecific it might be:

As I worked, I tried to evoke the elemental, bracing *clarity* of the northern landscape.²¹

Associations in general, as well as a broader abstraction of the idea of “the North,” seem central for conceptualizing *Facing North*, which become evident in the titles of songs such as *Long Shadows* or *Keeping Warm*. “I realized then that ‘north’ is also a state of mind,”²² Monk continues, carrying the abstraction to a level where “the North” gets detached from landscapes and environmental impressions. Add Monk’s formulation of “the north in ‘all of us,’”²³ the abstract concept of “the North” stresses the potential for associations with specific characteristics or qualities, like *clarity*, and their potential transfer into other spheres, for instance the realm of music. *Clarity* is the essential association that Monk transfers into the composition of *Facing North* as a formal aspect. This leads directly to the final question.

Thirdly, how does Monk create music to express the relationship to and the concept of nature? I quoted *clarity* as Monk’s essential association with the northern landscape, which she transfers as a quality into her composition. Concerning *Facing North*, she writes:

In each piece I tried for a clear and simple structure which would allow for primal yet transparent vocal qualities.²⁴

There is indeed a certain structural clarity and simplicity apparent in the voices, which feature a light, simple, often declamatory tone, and as little art song technique as possible, allowing for an individual color. Adding to this the transparent instrumentation of two predominantly a-cappella voices, these are the striking characteristics of *Facing North*, creating very intimate chamber music. The

¹⁹ Reading through this text again a few years after writing it, it seems important to me to emphasise that this concept of “the North” is by no means conceptualized as part of a dualism as in the Global North versus the Global South. I hope it becomes evident throughout the argument that the concept of “the North” here is built around notions of climate and nature.

²⁰ Meredith Monk, *Liner Notes, Songs from the Hill / Tablet* (Mainz: Wergo Spectrum, SM 1022-50 / LC 0846, 1979/1989).

²¹ Monk, *Liner Notes, Songs from the Hill / Tablet* (italics added).

²² Monk, *Liner Notes, Songs from the Hill / Tablet*.

²³ Monk, *Liner Notes, Songs from the Hill / Tablet*.

²⁴ Monk, *Liner Notes, Songs from the Hill / Tablet*.

intimacy of the bare voices reflects the vulnerability and fragility with which Monk defined the relation between nature and humans. Her “clear and simple structures” are achieved in ‘Chinook,’ manifested, for example, in the simple, short melody that is constantly varied and repeated, as well as in the two clearly divided sections of voiced and unvoiced sounds. Similar structures appear in the other songs: simple, short patterns that gain complexity and variety through their repetition throughout the songs themselves as well as throughout the song cycle.²⁵

Regarding Von Glahn’s stated confrontation of a “female tradition,” meaning an “intimate relation” or a “kinship to nature” versus a male, controlling approach to “expansive” natural phenomena, *Facing North* belongs on both sides, or in-between: As mentioned previously, the concept of nature in *Facing North* goes well beyond the described local environs toward an undefined expansive “North,” as in northern climes or in the “north in all of us.” Then again, the instrumentation of the music, the bare voices, produces an intimacy, affiliating *Facing North* to Von Glahn’s stated “female tradition.” However, this explanation alone would be one-sided. For Monk, being a spiritual, zen-oriented person, these factors may influence her notion and relation to nature at least as much as her socialization as a woman.

Concept: Nature

Another aspect of the relation between nature and voices in *Facing North*, as mentioned above, is that the voices create their own naturalness. In regard to the “Art of the Natural Voice,” two meanings can be attributed to the word “art:” artificiality and artistry, that is, the cultural construction of the “natural voice” as well as its artistry in the work of Meredith Monk as it relates to her notion of the natural voice.

By understanding nature not in terms of ecology or environment, but rather as a concept of a world view that reflects assumptions of culturally specific models of reality,²⁶ the comprehension of what is natural unfolds as historically and culturally alterable. Historically effective concepts of nature, such as the understanding of nature as an antonym to culture, relate to the very materiality of phenomena and to a certain primal quality of things: to an unmodified, unbiased essence, an authenticity, truth or core. The human being, understood as a “creature of nature,” plays a prominent

²⁵ Many titles indicate the recurrence of musical material: ‘Northern Lights 1’ and ‘Northern Lights 2,’ ‘Chinook’ and ‘Chinook Whispers,’ ‘Long Shadows 1’ and ‘Long Shadows 2.’ The songs are not repeated as such, but their material (melodic or rhythmic patterns, vocal techniques or sound qualities) recurs, differently worked on and re-contextualized. The recurrence also stresses the cycle-quality of the song-cycle.

Incidentally, ‘Chinook’ and ‘Chinook Whispers’ are the two songs in the cycle which are closest to a representation of a natural phenomenon, as shown in the short analysis at the beginning.

²⁶ See Annegreth Horatschek, “Natur,” in *Metzler-Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie: Ansätze–Personen–Grundbegriffe*, 4th rev. and exp. ed. Ansgar Nünning, 4th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2008), 529.

role in these concepts. The human body represents its very own materiality,²⁷ as does the voice, being a function of the body. Notions of a “natural voice” stress its physicality on the one hand—its individuality, which makes every voice as unique as a fingerprint. On the other hand, this can be interpreted as proof that the voice is a primal force that can unfold the truth about a person.²⁸ However, as media philosopher Sybille Krämer summarizes, “[a]lready the ‘natural’ voice is medially constructed and profoundly defined by cultural artifacts and stagings.”²⁹ As much as, for example, gender studies have taught us that the body cannot be understood as an ahistorical entity, neither can the voice. Historically changing concepts of body or gender have a major impact on the construction of the voice. Contemporary research on the voice, especially approaches in cultural and gender studies, stresses the historicity and cultural alterability of the human voice.³⁰

Modern anatomic knowledge about the voice teaches us to understand the physicality of the voice and the multiple body parts that participate in forming the voice: the breathing apparatus (lungs), the sound generator (the larynx, the vocal chords), the resonator (the vocal tract: mouth, throat, nose cavities), and the articulators (palate, tongue, lips, teeth).³¹ One might understand this as the body in the voice—its corporality. However, it is only through somatic activity that the voice is actually created.

²⁷ See Martin Loeser, “Natur,” in *Lexikon Musik und Gender*, eds. Annette Kreuziger-Herr and Melanie Unseld (Kassel et al.: Bärenreiter, 2010), 402.

²⁸ Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus describes various historical concepts of a natural voice understood as “index mentis.” See Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, *Stimme und Sprechkünste im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001), 15.

²⁹ Arbeitsgruppe “Medien” (Ulrike Bohle, Nadia Ghattas, Sybille Krämer et al.), “Arbeitsgruppe Medien: Über das Zusammenspiel Von ‘Medialität’ und ‘Performativität,’” *Paragrana* 13, no. 1 (2004), 129–186, here 163. [translated by Kohl] Also Thomas Kopfermann points out that “[s]peech is not a natural anthropological constant, but quintessentially a historical cultural technique. Voice cannot to be isolated out of this complex context as an alleged natural substrate, and then naively trained or awakened (to naturality) separately, to then, refined and cured, resend it into the historical-communicative context.” Thomas Kopfermann, “Natürlich? Künstlich? Historisch!,” in *Phänomen Stimme—Natürliche Veranlagung oder kulturelle Formung (6. Internationale Stuttgarter Stimmtage 2006: Thomas Kopfermann zum Gedenken)*, ed. Hellmut K. Geißner (St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 2008), 23–30; here 26 [translated by Kohl].

³⁰ Musicologist Rebecca Grotjahn, for instance, shows how to understand the body and with it the human voice as an historical phenomena: “The reception of the body has no status of material reality beyond linguistic and medially transmitted ‘images of bodies’. [...B]odyconcepts are basic components of historic mentalities, because the categories that structure the reception of the body [associating: the voice, Kohl] are learned and conveyed, and their applicability depends on common notions of the constitution, organization and structure of the world.” See Rebecca Grotjahn, “Die Singstimmen scheiden sich ihrer Natur nach in zwei große Kategorien: Die Konstruktion des Stimmgeschlechts als historischer Prozess,” in *Puppen, Huren, Roboter. Körper der Moderne in der Musik zwischen 1900 und 1930*, eds. Sabine Meine and Katharina Hottmann (Schliengen: Edition Argus, 2005), 34–57, here 35 [translated by Kohl].

³¹ See for example Michael Edward Edgerton, *The 21st-Century Voice: Contemporary and Traditional Extra-Normal Voice*, (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004); Peter-Michael Fischer, *Die Stimme des Sängers: Analyse ihrer Funktion und Leistung: Geschichte und Methodik der Stimmbildung* (Stuttgart et al.: Metzler, 1993); Jacob Smith, *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 2008); Johan Sundberg, *Die Wissenschaft von der Singstimme* (Bonn: Orpheus-Verlag/Verlag für Systematische Musikwissenschaft, 1997); Theda Weber-Lucks, *Körperstimmen: Vokale Performancekunst als neue musikalische Gattung* (Berlin: Technische Universität Ph.D, 2005/2008).

And these somatic activities must be trained. The philosopher and drama theorist Doris Kolesch indicates:

To obtain a voice—both tangibly and metaphorically speaking—a person has to obtain language. Hearing other voices and their language(s) precedes the usage of the own voice, these tones and sounds influence the modes of articulation, intonation and modulation as well as pace and volume of speech.³²

A voice's origin is thus dependent on the language in which it is trained, including the utterances one learns to be appropriate for certain situations and emotions.³³ Transferentially speaking, different singing styles and techniques can be understood as languages. Here, the training of the voice and the dependency of the actual sound of the voice on relevant techniques and styles become even more obvious.

While contemporary academic engagement with the voice more or less agrees on the context-related convertibility and dependency of the voice, even of the *natural* voice, the concept of the “natural voice” has its own history as an ideal in the arts. Throughout art history, there have been numerous descriptions and claims regarding the natural voice. Specific features of the singing voice marked as “natural” have been speech-related; in general, such features have been an effortless use of the voice, a clarity in sound and diction, and a concept of the voice as an “index mentis.”³⁴ The actual sound of this natural voice would be very different depending on time and place, and on whatever is contemporarily regarded as “normal” and “natural.”

Constructing naturalness, the tradition of the art-ideal of the natural voice links to a further intended meaning of the “Art of the Natural Voice”: the artistry of the natural voice. Concerning Meredith Monk's *Facing North*, Monk has a very specific notion of the human voice that ties in with a tradition of the art/nature ideal: a notion of the voice as a primal force. Monk's notion of the “natural voice” serves as tool or propulsion for creating her art—her vocal music.

Monk's notion of a natural voice, indeed connected to her engagement with nature, goes beyond that and refers to perceived pre-cultural qualities of the voice:

³² Doris Kolesch, “Wer sehen will, muss hören. Stimmlichkeit und Visualität in der Gegenwartskunst,” in *Stimme: Annäherung an ein Phänomen*, eds. Doris Kolesch and Sybille Krämer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 40–64, here 52 [translated by Kohl].

³³ See Trevor Wishart, *On Sonic Art* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1996). Roland Barthes highlighted these two voice-defining factors, body and language, some forty years ago in his essay “The grain of the voice,” in Roland Barthes, *Der entgegenkommende und der stumpfe Sinn* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990).

³⁴ See Owen Jander, Ellen T. Harris, David Fallows, and John Potter, “Singing,” in *Grove Music Online* (<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/25869>, accessed 1 November, 2019); Meyer-Kalkus, *Stimme und Sprechkünste im 20. Jahrhundert*; Kopfermann, “Natürlich? Künstlich? Historisch!”

It's a continual excavation process, you could say. It's like being an archeologist of your own instrument as a kind of microcosm of the human voice, of human utterance, of sound itself. By digging into my own voice I'm uncovering feelings and energies for which we don't have words—it's like shades of feeling, early human utterance, and essential human nature. . . . I think about that 'empty' space a lot. That emptiness is what allows for something to actually evolve in a natural way. I've had to learn that over the years—because one of the traps of being an artist is to always want to be creating, always wanting to produce. . . . That inner voice has both gentleness and clarity. So to get to authenticity, you really keep going down to the bone, to the honesty, and the inevitability of something.³⁵

This notion of a natural or pre-cultural voice suggests the possibility of uncovering an unbiased core of an individual, with the voice being this very core. Referring to the dichotomization of gender mentioned before in this article, that associates naturalness or pre-culturalness as female, it would be easy to interpret this notion as a gendered (femaleness constructing) concept of voice, an alleged female preverbalness exemplified in the nonverbalness of the title *Chinook*. Interestingly, Monk understands this vocal core as ungendered, or better as multi-gendered:

I always think . . . that each of our voices has many voices within it, so I think that within my voice I have male, female, I have young, old, middle aged, . . . and I think that all of us actually have that.³⁶

Logical within her concept of the primal voice, excavating its primal quality will reveal its pre-gendersocialized core, a conclusion that somewhat paradoxically ties in quite well with a deconstructivist gender approach. Musically speaking, the idea of an unbiased, authentic voice allows for liberation, to a certain extent, from musical conventions. In attempting to unfold the pre-cultural voice, specific vocal traditions, styles, and techniques are neglected in favor of stressing experiments with the voice, with sounds and modes of production. Furthermore, when involving other singers, the diversity of possible individual vocal modes of production and sound characteristics are embraced.

Singing 'Chinook,' Monk and Een concentrate on sounds that make the body audible, the work of the mouth, the tongue, the teeth, the breath, "strict basic utterances."³⁷ Thus they emphasize the

³⁵ Monk in Mountain Record, "Authentic Voice: An Interview with Meredith Monk," *Mountain Record. The Zen Practitioner's Journal* XXII, no. 4 (Summer 2004). Additionally, confer the documentary film Babeth VanLoo, *Meredith Monk. Inner Voice*, BOS (a Buddhist Broadcasting Foundation production) (New York, NY: First Run Features, 2010).

³⁶ Monk in Meredith Monk, Jeffrey Books, Bill Mockeh, "The Composer's Voice, Meredith Monk," Meredith Monk in Interview with Jeffrey Books and Bill Mockeh, Minnesota Public Radio (5 June, 1994).

³⁷ See Cahill, *Interview with Meredith Monk and Björk*.

physicality of the vocal sound production. Remembering that the human voice is the only musical instrument that is merely and completely corporal, the fact that the two voices are the only instruments in *Facing North* further stresses the aspect of physicality. It is interesting to note that there is no text used during the entire song cycle. Neglecting language, which accounts for a cultural rather than a natural phenomenon, and which is so formative for the individual, suggests a pre-cultural quality of the voice.³⁸ It further puts the focus even more on the non-linguistic levels of the vocals, on the sounds and the materiality of the voices, and their modes of production. Moreover, it is a conscious decision to do so. Firstly, the often declamatory style of the singing has a speech-related quality; secondly, the clarity and simplicity of the singing imply an effortlessness, and, finally, the absence of standardized art song technique stresses the individuality of the voices. All these characteristics are conformable with historical ideals of the natural voice. In deciding for and accentuating these characteristics, the “natural,” “pre-cultural” voice is musically created. This is what can be referred to as the artistry of the natural voice: creating and using a specific musical, vocal language which concentrates on the sound quality rather than on a linguistic level to produce meaning, and therefore on a genuine musical category.

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Far from negating the fact that the human voice, similar to any other part of the body, is more or less the same for every human being, it remains important to stress that the voice only becomes a voice by using the corresponding organs: a somatic action that trains and forms certain vocal skills. Other certain vocal skills may lie dormant. Rejecting certain cultural conventions of modes of vocal sound production, in favor of focusing on more abandoned vocal skills, produce sounds that seem “uncultivated.” These sounds therefore seem primal, pure, or unbiased due to the fact that they are rather unfamiliar. Concentrating on sound qualities, modes of production, timbres, the physicality, and the individuality of voices requires vocal training. What Monk seems to understand as the “uncovering” of the primal forces of the voice is work—hard work. It is the cultural action of the artist, her expertise, capacity, competence, authority, her creativity, her fantasy, her deed that creates these specific vocal sounds and the music she creates with them. She is not a re-producer of pre-cultural essence, but a creative producer and re-producer of culturally produced meaning. Monk is creative in producing a

³⁸ Confer Doris Kolesch’s valuation that the “‘primal’ voice existed before speech and is completely autonomous to it seems to me like a romanticising fiction.” Kolesch, “Wer sehen will, muss hören,” 52 et seq. [translated by Kohl]

certain concept of nature, in creating specific voices, and creative in producing a vocal music that has the potential to shake the listener to the core.