Radio Alice and Italy’s Movement of 1977: polyvocality, sonority and space

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ABSTRACT

Radio Alice was a free radio station that broadcast from 1976–1977 in Bologna, Italy, and was an integral part of the left-wing, counter-cultural Movement of 1977. This article contextualises the emergence of Radio Alice in relation to the Movement of 1977; the avant-garde political magazine A/Traverso, which had been published since 1975 by the collective that founded Radio Alice; and the international history of community radio. I then show how Radio Alice’s approach to broadcasting drew from these three contexts in seeking to unseat the logic of capitalism and replace it with a celebration of desire. The station’s practice emphasised polyvocal-ity through the extensive use of telephone phone-ins and challenged language itself through surreal speech and non-linguistic vocalisation. I explore how this vocal practice expressed the station’s countercultural politics and, drawing on the work of Adriana Cavarero and Doreen Massey, I argue that it was a practice with spatial consequences. These spatial consequences became both explicit and tangible during the 1977 Bologna riots when the station was shut down live on air. Ultimately, and most broadly, I contend that as a central component of human interrelation the voice is always already implicated in the social construction of space.

As a media category, “community radio” spans a diverse range of both communication practices and ideologies. In a 1984 report for UNESCO, Peter M Lewis describes community media (which prominently includes radio) as media run by and for specific communities beyond the control of mainstream media infrastructures; a form of low-cost, self-managed, non-profit and often politicised broadcasting which may challenge dominant representations of events or draw attention to events overlooked by mainstream media, and which tends to feature significant interaction between listeners and presenters via phone-ins and other participatory practices (1984b; see also Lewis 2006). Lewis succinctly refers to community media like radio as giving a “voice to the voiceless” (2006). Of course, while the notion of marginalised groups striving to find a voice has become a standard political metaphor, radio provides one of the few contexts where this process may manifest literally. Radio gives the individual, standing alone or as a member of a group, the means to go beyond linguistic articulation and express the unique sonority of their voice. Self-evident as this observation may be, I have spelt it out because I would like to argue that the basic vocal

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The voice’s essence as an expression of unique sonority, separate from the linguistic signification that it typically serves, is the subject of Adriana Cavarero’s 2003 book *For More than One Voice* (translated into English in 2005). Cavarero describes a tension that resides within vocal utterance between *logos* and *phonos*: *logos* stands as the rational thought conveyed in utterance through the linguistic signifier, where *phonos* stands as the unique sound of each voice. Cavarero traces a consistent philosophical approach to voice with its roots in the texts of Ancient Greece and the Old Testament which privileges the logocentric while simultaneously repudiating vocal sonority; she writes that, “the embodied uniqueness that distinguishes each one of us from the other is, for the universalizing tastes of philosophy, a superfluity” so that “[t]he voice thus gets thematized as the voice in general, a sonorous emission that neglects the vocal uniqueness of the one who emits it” (2005, 9). The reduction of the voice to the purely logocentric obfuscates the fundamental reciprocity that its sonority forges between unique people, “the vocalic relation that convokes mouths to ears” (ibid, 182), and forecloses the “reciprocal communication of unique voices, whose relational nature is utterly unconcerned with the Said’s tendency to dominate” (ibid, 200). For Cavarero, “it is not a matter of overcoming or erasing speech, but rather of keeping the primary sense of speech in proximity to the relational plurality of voices that originate speech” (ibid, 210). Radio Alice – a community radio station according to the criteria laid out by Lewis above – was established by a group of young left-wing activists in Bologna who were involved with the radical magazine *A/Traverso* and who were central to the left-wing youth movement in Italy in the 1970s. The station was committed to challenging (rather than harnessing) the power of language, and it did so by extolling both polyvocality and non-linguistic modes of voice – it was a fulcrum within which a plurality of unique voices could reveal themselves and form a broad, relational network. A communique describing the station complains that

[in the first case the language [of national radio broadcasters] is univocal: the announcer’s […] In the second case, something continues to flee from language. This is manifest in outbursts of laughter, words in suspension, the word which cannot be found and which refuses to change into another one, stammering, silence. (Collective A/Traverso 1980, 131)]

In other words, the group criticised mainstream radio for denying both vocal plurality and the non-linguistic expressive potential of the voice. Unlike the sombre, presenter-controlled broadcasts put out by Italy’s state broadcaster RAI (*Radiotelevisione Italiana*), Radio Alice was notable for its freewheeling approach to radio transmission – it had no set schedule beyond the midday news headlines, used phone-ins extensively and alternated between music, poetry, dada-esque nonsense and political discussion. Luca Chiurchiù argues that the station was

part of a bigger project of re-appropriating social knowledge […] the directionality of the message and of communication had to be abolished, in fact, the message and communication themselves had to be abolished to destroy the logic imposed by the system and to remove the mechanisms of domination it placed on desire and corporeality. (2017, 133–4. My translation)
Radio Alice, in short, attacked univocality and logocentric communication as part of an ambitious political mission to alter Italian society.

In this article, I will first summarise three key contexts which contributed to the emergence of Radio Alice, so that both the station’s political-philosophical position and its praxis can be located and analysed appropriately. These are the contexts of the youth movement in Italy, the magazine A/Traverso, and the international development of community radio. Secondly, I will contend that Radio Alice’s politics were expressed principally through its focus on vocality and on the voice’s tendency to put unique people into relation. Specifically, I will argue that Radio Alice’s revolutionary efforts hinged on an attempt to use the voice to “make space” for a new model of society. This is an argument that I will advance by putting Cavarero’s philosophy into conversation with the work of geographer Doreen Massey. While Cavarero argues that the voice always already invokes human interrelation, Massey asserts that space, rather than existing as a neutral container of purely mathematical dimensions, is a social phenomenon created through human interrelations and interactions (2005). As such, as well as contributing to the historiography of Radio Alice by analysing the station in terms of its approach to voice per se, I aim to show more broadly that the voice – foundation of human relationality – may be understood as a central component in the social construction of space. Indeed, the forced closure of Radio Alice by police during the 1977 Bologna riots, which was broadcast live, emphatically demonstrates how profoundly and how concretely the voice may challenge state authority by forging insurgent and revolutionary spatial realities.

**The Movement of 1977**

Radio Alice was embedded in the youth movement which developed in Italy in the 1970s, particularly in the northern and central regions of the country. In turn, the youth movement represented the legacy of the 1968 student and workers’ protests that spread through Italy as they did in many other countries around the world. In Italy, the 1968 movement was triggered practically by overcrowding and institutional inadequacy in the country’s higher education system, and more generally by a distrust of the country’s socio-economic restructuring following its mass industrial modernisation in the late 1950s and early 1960s (a moment often referred to as the “boom”, or the “economic miracle”). As Paul Ginsborg notes, “[m]any of the school and university students of the mid and late sixties were less than convinced by the values that had become predominant in the Italy of the ‘economic miracle’ – individualism, the all-conquering power of technocracy, the exaltation of the nuclear family. Consumerism, too, seemed an ambiguous blessing” (Ginsborg 1990, 300). University occupations began in Trento in late 1967 and spread across the country in 1968 (ibid, 303–4). In the latter months of 1968 and into 1969 the student protestors interacted increasingly with workers and the movement spread into factories, leading to strikes and occasional violence, particularly during the “hot autumn” of 1969. Already by 1969, the protest movement was establishing an independence from the traditional channels of labour representation – Italy’s well-established Communist party (the PCI, Partito Communista Italiano) failed to play a leading role in events, as did the Socialist party (the PSI, Partito Socialista Italiano) which was anyway declining as a major political force (Lumley 1990, 28–9). Lumley traces the use of the term “workers’ autonomy” to this period, explaining that the phrase was understood to mean:
autonomy from capital (the refusal of workers to define their need and demands according to capital’s need for labour power subordinate to the rhythms of the production process), and autonomy from external organizations (workers’ independence from the parties and unions which were seen to be subservient to capital). As such, it represented the most absolute and essentialist conception of social movement. (ibid, 38)

In the struggle to effect real change, both workers and students began to look to each other rather than to unions or political parties, and this autonomous approach to social struggle characterised much of what followed the 1968 protests (ibid, 45).

Lumley argues that a wide constellation of political movements sprang from 1968 and remained active throughout the 1970s: “it was the students’ and workers’ movements which provided the models which other movements attempted to replicate, revise or break away from” (1990, 27). In the history of Radio Alice, key amongst these was the youth movement which has since become known as the Movement of 1977 due to the rioting of that year with which it is associated (see below). The Movement of 1977 had many facets, and included student and feminist groups, but was largely anchored in a proliferation of “proletarian youth groups” (Lumley 1990, 296). Like their 1968 forebears, the youth movement continued to operate independently from official channels of protest, being “[d]isaffected from traditional politics, often unable or unwilling to find more than marginal or occasional work, desiring above all to ’stare insieme’ (’be together’) and enjoy themselves” (Ginsborg 1990, 381. Italics in original). In the place of mainstream political parties, extra-parliamentary groups on the far left, such as Lotta Continua (Continuous Struggle) and Potere Operaio (Workers’ Power), became rallying points for the Movement and particularly its more revolutionary contingents. Indeed, Ginsborg argues that the Movement of 1977 can be broken into two broad camps, an irreverent and creative countercultural sub-group that used art, poetry and music to experiment with new approaches to social organisation, and a more militant autonomist sub-group that was dedicated to the use of violence in the pursuit of its revolutionary aims (ibid, 382). The overlap between these two groups was considerable, however.

Amongst the range of practices carried out by groups within the Movement, “auto-reduction” was common and meant that individuals “autonomously reduced” the prices of movies, theaters and restaurants (that is, they paid what their politics required – a third or a fourth of the usual price)” (Berardi 1980, 157; see also Ginsborg 1990, 382). Squatting was also widespread, and Lumley estimates that 1500 units of public housing, along with additional premises of other types, were occupied by February 1976 (1990, 299–300). He goes on:

[i]n the squats relationships were given priority as ends in themselves. Particular importance was attached to “being together” (stare insieme), and to the exploration of interpersonal dynamics through consciousness-raising. Most activities were pleasure-oriented, with special emphasis on active participation and “creativity”. (ibid, 300. Italics in original)

Creative and non-productive togetherness was further explored through music concerts, such as an 18,000-person event held in Milan’s Lambro Park in 1976 (Berardi 1980, 156). These activities united the creative, countercultural wing and the militant wing of the Movement, expressing their shared rejection of a social order dominated by the alienating logic of capitalist production in favour of one which privileged the satisfaction of individual desire (Lumley 1990, 301).
Ultimately, the Movement of 1977 was cut short and by the early 1980s had largely evaporated. This was principally due to the growth of terrorist factions within the Movement and their increasing recourse to violence from the mid-1970s onwards, which culminated in the kidnapping and murder of Christian Democrat (Democrazia Cristiana) politician and former prime minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse) in 1978 (see Berardi 1980, 161–2; Lumley 1990, 279–93). The use of political violence proved deeply divisive within the Movement, which was anyway struggling to effect lasting social change, and many began to turn away from collective action. Its ultimate demise notwithstanding, the Movement of 1977 represents a socio-spatial project that was intent on altering the ways in which people inhabited certain sites and the kinds of interactions and interrelations that took place there. Doreen Massey, whose work is discussed in more depth below, argues that “[t]he spatial in its role of bringing distinct temporalities [i.e. individual narratives] into new configurations sets off new social processes” (2005, 71). By challenging established models of human interaction and decoupling them from the logic of capitalism, the Movement of 1977’s practice positioned space as the battleground upon which social reconfiguration and change was to be sought. I will argue that Radio Alice’s style of broadcasting represented the intersection of this spatial project and with the related project of challenging language’s power to uphold existing social structures. In turning to the latter, I will now briefly consider A/Traverso, the magazine from which Radio Alice developed.

A/Traverso

Since the early 1960s, small, political and aesthetically avant-garde magazines had been vital to Italy’s protest movements, providing a degree of internal communications in the face of the movements’ increasing autonomy from centralised organisational structures (see Chiurchiù 2017, 11). Franco “Bifo” Berardi, a leading figure in the Movement of 1977 and, specifically, in the A/Traverso collective, writes (with Marco Jacquemet and Gianfranco Vitali) that the mimeograph-printed media had already proved instrumental to the 1968 protests and “made informal, wild, and independent consciousness-raising capillary actions possible” (2009, 76). Quaderni rossi (Red Notebooks) was founded in 1961 and featured the involvement of major Marxist thinkers including Toni Negri, and it is identified by Chiurchiù, in his 2017 history of A/Traverso, as Italy’s first countercultural magazine. Quaderni rossi only lasted for six issues but influenced those magazines that followed it in its focus on individual needs as a route towards forging a workers’ consciousness, as well as its theoretical tenor (Chiurchiù 2017, 14–6). Those magazines that followed were often produced on an ad hoc basis and short-lived but Chiurchiù argues that in spite of their often limited circulation, “it is certain that these magazines were the privileged means of information exchange within this environment of change” as they not only offered alternative perspectives on Italian politics but engaged in linguistic experiments that borrowed techniques from avant-garde poetry and manifest the Movement’s drive to “be together” on the basis of human desires rather than on the basis of capitalist production (ibid, 38. My translation).

A/Traverso was first published in Bologna in 1975 by the collective bearing the same name and came out intermittently whenever enough material was ready, but with an estimated 8,000 copies distributed in Bologna, it was one of the highest-profile
countercultural publications of the period (Chiurchiù 2017, 39). The terms *attraverso* and *a traverso* both translate as “through” in English and mark the magazine’s desire to go “through the looking glass” of language – a reference to Lewis Carroll’s 1871 novel of that name (see Lewis 1984a, 144). Chiurchiù explains that *A/Traverso* pursued revolution through the merger of a Marxist political theory inspired by Mao (who presented an apparent alternative to the ineffectual communism of the PCI) and avant-garde modes of expression that took their lead from surrealism, dada and situationism (ibid, 40, 55). The collective was also influenced significantly by post-structural thought, including that of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. From these thinkers, the contributors to *A/Traverso* took the idea that post-industrial capitalism did not simply control the masses through direct intervention in their lives, but did so by shaping individuals’ very perception of reality (ibid, 34). In turn, the *A/Traverso* collective believed that capitalism exerted this control principally through language. Felix Guattari writes (in relation to the free radio movement which continued the aims of magazines like *A/Traverso*), that “[t]he language of official media is traceable to the police languages of the managerial milieu and the university […] only those who are masters of a licit speech have the right to act” (1993). At a more fundamental level, Berardi, Jacquemet and Vitali write that the Movement approached language and communication “as symbolic production related to the shaping of the social imaginary, that is – to the ocean of images, feelings, expectations, desires and motivations through which social meanings were produced and reproduced” (2009, 80). A radical attempt to alter society must, therefore, be waged at the level of language itself – through a reconfiguration of who is able to express themselves and, crucially, how. In Chiurchiù’s summation, *A/Traverso* was an attempt “to initiate revolution by rupturing the language obligatorily imposed by a system that, through it [language], lives and reproduces itself” (2017, 39. My translation). *A/Traverso* did not just communicate a revolutionary message, but used communication as a revolutionary message.

The magazine sought to literally rewrite reality, to determine afresh what could be written, thought and done by the revolutionary subject (see ibid, 85). Though little of *A/Traverso*’s printed output has survived, its mission of exploding accepted semiotic codes is clearly apparent in the cover page of an issue from September 1977. The page is orientated in portrait and topped with a piece of surreal poetry which appears to spill down the right-hand side. Indeed, it is difficult to tell where the poem ends and other pieces of text begin – around 20 fragments of script either typewritten or cut from other publications are arranged as a chaotic collage across the rest of the page, un-bordered, often overlapping each other and occasionally positioned diagonally. (Here the magazine displays its stylistic indebtedness to British punk magazines of the 1970s [Berardi interviewed on Ràdio Web Macba podcast 2014].) The fragments are no more than a line or two each, and include sentences in French, German and English as well as Italian. This polylingual hodgepodge itself undermines the idea that a single language can claim any sort of universal perspective on the world and the decontextualising brevity of each individual fragment divorces the linguistic signifier from any clear or direct link to a signified object of concept. Furthermore, words themselves are often cut up and separated across the page, or partly obscured by overlapping cuttings so that the integrity of the written word itself is brought into question. The statement being made by *A/Traverso* here resides in the overall effect of the page. Language is broken and no longer manifests
a representational system capable of reflecting a supposedly objective reality. Instead, it becomes a sort of visual Tower of Babel, an entropic free play of signifiers rendered fluid and malleable in their estrangement from any determining logic.

In place of logic (which its contributors took to be determined by the priorities of capitalist production), A/Traverso privileged desire. The term “desire” appears frequently in writing produced by and about the Movement of 1977, and has its basis in the work of Deleuze and Guattari who draw on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to discuss the term extensively in their work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* ([1972] 1983). Though a full account of Deleuze and Guattari’s theories is beyond the scope of this article, desire as broadly understood by the Movement can be defined as a person’s embodied drives; needs and urges that create and destroy themselves with no regard for logic or order, but which capitalism constantly strives to discipline and fold into the flows of production (see Chiurchiù 2017, 93). As mentioned above, A/Traverso identified language as the foundation of this disciplinary system, and the explosion of the linguistic evidenced by the magazine’s September 1977 cover page is thus an effort to break desire out of its semiotic jail. Ultimately, once language and desire could be united new models of space and society would become a possibility as desire provides a basis for human togetherness and interrelation. Guattari writes that:

/language of desire […] have an unstoppable tendency to lead straight to action; they begin by “touching”, by causing laughter, by provoking, and then they make one want to “go towards”, towards those who speak and towards those stakes that concern them.

(1993)

Here, the links between A/Traverso’s practice and Cavarero’s philosophy of voice, written 30 years later, begin to appear. She writes that, “[t]he sphere of the vocal implies the ontological plane and anchors it to the existence of singular beings who invoke one another contextually. From the maternal scene onwards, the voice manifests the *unique being* of each human being” (2005, 173. Italics in original). Like “languages of desire”, the voice both establishes the contingent uniqueness of each human and, having done so, draws humans together by establishing relationality. In fact, as the human’s primary means of expressing emotional or corporeal extremis – in moments of pain or arousal, for instance – vocal sonority itself is perhaps the articulation of desire in its purest form. In this sense, it is entirely logical that A/Traverso should have led to the establishment of a radio station, and before tracing that process I will briefly turn to one final contextual framework: the global growth of community radio.

**Community radio**

Having been refined into a viable communication medium by Guglielmo Marconi, radio may well be classified as an Italian invention. However, its proliferation and development is a global story. Such is also true for the history of community radio which, as mentioned in the introduction to this article, Peter M Lewis defines (within the broader scope of community media) as being produced by and for a specific and often geographically localised community. Community radio often features significant audience participation in programming and tends to be produced on a low-cost and self-managed basis with the
aim of offering content and information overlooked or explicitly marginalised by mainstream media (for a detailed discussion of this definition see Lewis 1984b, 1–7; see also 1984a; King 2016, 18–20).

Alongside Lewis, Gretchen King has chronicled the history of community radio defined in this way. King begins by identifying an “experimental” phase in the development of radio which lasted roughly from 1900–1940. She writes that, during this period,

among the early radio broadcasters reclaiming radio technology intermittently and temporarily were individuals not affiliated with the state or commercial broadcasters. For example, in North America, thousands of radio hobbyists and hundreds of radio clubs on both sides of the United States-Canada border jammed the radio dial. (2016, 21)

From 1940 onwards, community radio became a more elaborate and coherent project; King explains that during the 1940s “community radio advocates began to set up their own more permanent infrastructure” as evidenced by the birth of community stations in the United States and in South America (ibid; see also Lewis 1984b, 17–19). As the twentieth century went on, community radio developed more political, even militant, dimensions and played an important, clandestine role in mid-century guerrilla conflicts in Algeria and Cuba (Raboy 1993, 129–31). During the 1970s and 1980s, as equipment became more accessible and countercultural movements possessing political worldviews not accounted for by mainstream media expanded, community radio stations began to multiply across Europe (as well as North and South America, Africa and elsewhere). To offer two examples, Lewis states that there were 23 such local stations operating in Sweden in 1977 (some in minority languages) and 187 in Yugoslavia by 1973 (1984b, 95–9; for a list of community radio stations operating in Europe at this time see King 2016, 26). Throughout the 1970s, community radio continued to play an important political role in France and during the Portuguese revolution (Lewis 2006, 18), while further afield indigenous communities in Canada also began to found community radio stations in the middle of that decade (King 2016, 26). However, it was Italy that experienced the most profound explosion of community radio in the post-war period. The key driver behind the Italian explosion of free radio (community radio not allied to state or mainstream media structures) was a sequence of Constitutional Court rulings in the mid-1970s that declared RAI’s monopoly on the airwaves illegal and opened the way for the unrestricted establishment of independent radio stations across the country (Lumley 1990, 304). A total of 800 stations were operating within a year (ibid) and by 1978 that number had officially climbed to 2275 (Lewis 1984b, 96).

Many of the thousands of free radio stations established in Italy were small and short-lived, but across the board they catered to the full spectrum of political and cultural values, with some representing major components of the Movement of 1977 and its development of collective action. Radio Alice is perhaps the best remembered, alongside other Marxist and countercultural left-wing stations such as Radio Populare, Radio Città Futura and Radio Onda Rossa. However, in addition to its specific significance in the context of Italy’s social history, the Italian experience of free radio must be remembered as a particularly vibrant exemplar of wider, global trends in the development and practice of community radio broadcasting. Lewis argues that
[c]ommunity radio since the latter half of the 20th century has set itself the mission […] of giving a “voice to the voiceless.” This has meant more than simply widening the range of speakers and interviewees heard on the radio: it has meant handing over the microphone, the tape recorder, and the studio to nonprofessionals. (2006, 16)

The global growth of community radio represents a bi- (or multi-) directional form of practice which stands in opposition to the unidirectional nature of mainstream broadcasting. The proliferation of community radio stations embedded within and responding to the contingencies of specific and localised social contexts, and often involving a plurality of contributors drawn from those contexts, fashions radio broadcasting as a conversational act. As such, the act of “giving voice” to the marginalised should not be understood here as (just) metaphorical, as the act of conferring political agency onto those otherwise denied it. Rather, the literal expression and intermixing of uniquely sonorous voices on a community-wide scale must be borne in mind at the same time. Cavarero – whose work draws heavily on that of Hannah Arendt – writes that “what is really at issue in speech, in my view, is a vocalic relation that convokes mouths to ears, making the uniqueness of the voices vibrate in their resonance” (2005, 182). Furthermore, the voice, as the foundation of interaction, empowers both the group and the individual because “[p]ower is generated by interaction […] It lasts as long as the time and space of active relation” (ibid, 196). In this sense, community radio’s practice of “giving voice” to marginal groups is simultaneously both literal and metaphorical. By facilitating the community-wide interrelation of distinct voices, community radio forms a crucible within which social networks, community cohesion and thus political agency may be generated. In this way, perhaps the phrase “community radio” can be read in two ways: it is radio generated by a community, but it is also, potentially, radio that generates communities. Certainly, by continuing A/Traverso’s challenge to language and providing a means by which the Movement of 1977 in Bologna could collectively and vocally express itself in terms of desire, Radio Alice allowed the mixing of individual voices to produce a radical sense of community, with concrete spatial and political consequences.

Radio Alice

Having outlined the key contextual frameworks from which Radio Alice emerged, for the rest of this article I would like to explore the station’s approach to broadcasting, and the political consequences of its practice. The station was set up by Berardi and other leading members of the A/Traverso collective alongside the magazine, and began broadcasting on 8 February 1976, from an apartment at 41 Via di Pratello in Bologna. Berardi, Jacquemet and Vitali explain clearly how from its inception Radio Alice reified the principles of both the Movement of 1977 and of community radio:

the real battle was not over content and social consensus, but rather over the creation of new technologies, interfaces and social linkages […] it was not a matter of recovering revolutionary truth against bourgeois lies […] It was about acting on the social imaginary, circulating plays of fantasy, of flows of desire capable of destabilising the dominant message of work, order and discipline. (2009, 80)

Like A/Traverso, Radio Alice represented a revolutionary effort to liberate desire from its political containment, a way of allowing members of the Movement to “be together”
and a way of harnessing technology for the creation of new communal structures. This was an effort that refused to meet capitalist hegemony on its own terms by arguing for change in the content of the messages it transmitted, choosing rather to change the terms of engagement entirely and strike through the form of those messages. Berardi and his colleagues continue, “[t]he purpose of independent communication was [...] the construction of a process of autonomous expression, capable of confronting, entangling and contaminating other meaning-producing processes” (ibid). In doing so, and in accordance with the wider principles of community radio, Radio Alice strove to cohere new social networks not beholden to the organisational logic of the dominant social order but rooted in a paradigm of imagination and creativity. This theoretical project resulted in a practice with two distinguishing features: an emphasis on uncensored, live phone-ins, and an incredibly fluid approach to language (which the station carried over from A/Traverso). There was no set schedule and broadcasts instead constituted a freewheeling mix of reports, interviews, political statements and discussion, music, poetry, and dada-esque nonsense dialogues (Berardi interviewed on Ràdio Web Macba podcast 2014; Eco 1995, 231). Unfortunately, Radio Alice’s approach to broadcasting means that little of what it put out was recorded and is available for study today (a point stressed repeatedly on the Radio Alice website mentioned below). However, through the memoirs of those involved with the station and through those recordings which do exist – many of which have been collected at radioalice.org – it is possible to generate an overview of its practice.3

The live telephone phone-in was central to Radio Alice’s broadcasting and a manifestation of the station’s belief that it was necessary “to destroy the relationship between broadcast and circulation, to dissolve the rigid division between listeners and producers” (Berardi, Jacquemet, and Vitali 2009, 81). By insistently fusing the telephone and the radio the station thumbed its nose at the notion of professional journalism. Through this model – soon to be widely replicated – events could be reported as they happened by anyone with access to a phone booth and the station more generally became a sort of virtual soapbox, a public platform for anyone who felt they had something to say (see ibid). Indeed, the semiotician and writer Umberto Eco – who was based in Bologna and taught many members of the Movement at the city’s university – celebrated the station as “a transparent filter for the voices coming from outside” and “a stream of consciousness [...] which unfurls in the listener’s ears” (1995, 228). The unfiltered nature of Radio Alice’s phone-ins was in stark opposition to the “completely stifling and one-way” nature of RAI’s broadcasting which only ever employed carefully marshalled and censored phone-ins (Downing 2001, 293, 1980, 207). One consequence was that threats to the station were often broadcast live on-air, such as one call that exclaimed, “[f]ilthy communists, we’ll make you pay dearly for this radio station, we know who you are” (cited in Berardi, Jacquemet, and Vitali 2009, 81). As well as underscoring the station’s commitment to polyvocality, calls like this suggest that Radio Alice’s broadcasts were reaching a wide range of listeners beyond the Movement’s core members. Indeed, Chiurchiù claims that the station was heard by young autonomists, old workers, students and even housewives (2017, 133), and more concretely Berardi has claimed its audience counted 40,000 listeners (Berardi interviewed on Ràdio Web Macba podcast 2014), a huge number for Bologna, which had a population of around 750,000 in 1976 (macrotrends.net).4 However,
the few recorded phone calls to the station and the central importance which the station assumed during the 1977 Bologna riots (see below) suggest that Radio Alice’s listeners were predominantly young, male members of the Movement.5

Alongside its commitment to polyvocality and to dissolving the distinction between reporter and listener, Radio Alice continued A/Traverso’s challenge to language. To be clear, Radio Alice did not abandon language and it relied on verbal communication during phone-ins, reports and discussions, but during such conversations the status of the spoken word, and its ability to represent any sort of objective, universal reality was constantly called into question. In the first instance, an early A/Traverso communique attacks established radio because “dialects and accents are not tolerated” – RAI’s broadcasts, for example, were typically read in standard Italian and with neutral accents (Collective A/Traverso 1980, 131). The recordings grouped on radioalice.org, however, often feature very heavy Bolognese accents. The effect was to redouble the station’s dissolution of the authorial reporter, and Umberto Eco writes that

[t]he independent radios have replaced the standard Italian of the state radio with local accents. The result is that the audience is surprised. Announcers speaking the same way as the inhabitants of your town destroy the feeling of the of the radio as being a kind of official” voice. (1995, 226)

The return of regional sonority and, at times, dialectical speech to the voice granted speech a vernacular quality, it was a marking of speech with geographical and cultural specificity.6 In other words, the presence of accents and dialect in Radio Alice’s broadcasts functioned to destabilise notions of linguistic universality, a subtle shift in emphasis from the abstraction of logos to the materiality of phonos. Cavarero writes that in the logos-centric paradigm which dominates human thinking, “[t]hat which each voice as voice signifies – namely, the uniqueness and the relationality that the vocal manifests – does not even get proposed as a matter for reflection [so that logos] gravitates increasingly toward the universal” (2005, 42–43. Italics in original). The accented voice in particular, however, forces such reflection. It is the contingent voice, the voice always already tied to and conveying a specific context – both socio-geographically and personally – over and above the universal claims of the words which it utters. In this way, and in concert with its extensive use of phone-ins, the presence of accents rendered Radio Alice a radio of specific voices rather than a radio of generic words.

The station’s interest in the regional sonority of the voice was twinned with its extensive use of wordplay that, as with the textual practice of A/Traverso, destabilised the integrity of language more overtly. In continuity with the magazine’s “Mao-dadaist” theoretical position, the language transmitted by Radio Alice, both from the studio and via phone-ins, was employed fluidly. Marco Briziarelli explains that

the radio speaker would hijack the original meaning of a given cultural artefact or literary reference in order to subvert its original connection/reason to exist […] détournement represented a way to assert free imagination and spontaneity against an instrumental language of institutional politics and commodities advertising. (2016, 355)

Language was not used to question dominant accounts of events so much as to question its own ability to objectively account for events. In other words, Radio Alice staged an implosion of language, a self-destructive aural circle in which language was
employed primarily to foreground its own shortcomings. This approach often spilled over into outright surrealism – in a communiqué, the station’s organisers claimed that:

Radio Alice will give a voice to anyone who loves mimosa and believes in paradise; hates violence but strikes the wicked; believes they’re Napoleon but knows they could just as well be aftershave; who laughs like the flowers. (Collective A/Traverso cited in Lumley 1990, 305)

As with A/Traverso’s use of cut-out fragments of text, such surrealism decoupled signifiers and signifieds, with the result that the former came to float free and lost the semiotic stability that underpinned their presumed ability to reflect objective reality. This surrealism was evident in calls to the station too – during a protest one listener phoned in to say that the fire brigade’s water supply had been cut by the police: “now they can’t put out the fires anymore. That’s what I heard with my little blue ears” (cited in Berardi, Jacquemet, and Vitali 2009, 85). On other occasions irony was employed to more subtly challenge the linguistic reflection of reality – one caller phoned in to say that the police had used tear gas during a protest:

Caller: There is also a breeze that blows the tear gas back towards the police, in fact we have the breeze at our backs, there is beautiful sunshine and the air is sweet and very fresh …

Alice: Ah, wonderful, its springtime! (cited in ibid).

The station was also notable for its use of profanity:

Caller: Now, let me tell you that you’re extremely uncouth because on the radio, or TV, you don’t insult people, understand? Among other things, you also cursed.

Alice: Yeah, yeah, right now who gives a fuck? […] outside on the street they’re shooting us. I’ll just go change the music (cited in ibid, 86).

In fact, obscenity was an important facet of Radio Alice’s approach to language since it operated as a corollary to desire; the obscene is that which has been repressed, rendered invisible and inaudible in everyday language, as capitalist logic disavows the non-productive flows of human desire. Similarly, it is often in outbursts of profanity, whatever the cause, that desire finds its expression (Chirchiù 2017, 136). As the station’s organisers phrased it in a communiqué, “[l]anguage, when it is freed from the sublimations, which reduce it to the code and makes desire and the body speak, is obscene” (Collective A/Traverso 1980, 130). Profanity, that is, was another technique through which desire could be freed from the jail of language.

However, Radio Alice pushed beyond language in its mission to vocalise desire. In an approach that foreshadowed Cavarero’s later work on the voice, the station was keen to employ pure vocal sonority as a way of counteracting the power of logocentric language. The above communiqué continues: “Alice hisses, yells, contemplates, interrupts herself, pulls […] The new subject is collective and does not speak. Or speaks when it wants to” (ibid, 131–2). Hissing, yelling, an aversion to speech: Radio Alice’s attempts to “[i]nterrupt the language of machines, of the work-ethic, of productivity” behind capitalist hegemony led to moments in which language itself was left behind as a communicative structure (ibid, 132). Indeed, the station’s surviving recordings present a blur of voices on the edge
of the semantic, often tipping over into the non-linguistic, or what Berardi, Jacquemet and Vitali describe as “the mixing of lyrical and hysterical tones” (2009, 79). Discussions amongst presenters in the studio and between callers and presenters often feature extended bouts of laughter, the impulsive repetition of words to the point of meaninglessness, poetry, musical interludes, mouth sounds and the “dead air” of voices fallen silent, and phone-ins from protestors during skirmishes (see below) featured screams and (linguistically) incomprehensible shouts. As a form of community radio, Radio Alice undoubtedly gave a “voice to the voiceless” – the A/Traverso communique refers to “the voice of those pushed aside” (1980, 131) – and it did so using a conception of voice which operated independently from language. The station figured a platform through which members of the Movement could pursue their ambition of building a social network organised through desire rather than the logic of production by collectively challenging the language that underpinned that logic. What resulted was the opportunity for unique voices – accented, poetic, singing, laughing or screaming – to relate to one another not as a homogenous mass but as, in Berardi, Jacquemet and Vitali’s words, “a storm of singularities that expressed themselves on different levels” (2009, 78–79).

An indication of the soundscape created by the station is offered on the “Nastri” (“tapes”) section of radioalice.org. This page collects extended section from three “continuous tapes” – tapes that were broadcast by the station when no presenters were available to staff the studio. As the text above the clips explains, these tapes were intended to be aired late at night and provided hypnotic relief to the “sleepless and desiring”, though due to the erratic nature of the station’s scheduling the frequency and the timing of their broadcast could vary considerably (radioalice.org). Despite being slightly unusual for the station in that they constitute pre-recorded content, the tapes seem to distil Radio Alice’s approach to voice and sonority. Seven minutes into the file titled “Natro Lungo 1” (“Continuous Tape 1”) the recording cuts from music to the middle of a conversation between a group of young men. The men speak with extremely strong accents from the Emilia-Romagna region (within which Bologna sits) and appear to be discussing a prank – it is unclear whether it is real or imagined – where they have replicated or will replicate a scene using cardboard cutouts of the people involved as a way of confusing passers-by. Again, it is unclear whether the scene they are referring to relates to a film, a real event or something else. The fact that their topic of conversation is so unclear grants the exchange an oneiric surrealism that deeply undermines the logos-centric value of their words, and the frequent dissolution of their conversation into laughter rather brings the sheer sonority of their voices and their performance of vocal reciprocity per se to the forefront. A similar effect can be detected on the “Ugo Bastianini” track on the “Suoni” (“sounds”) page, in which a group of musicians try to record a performance but slip from song into laughter and groans as one of them makes a mistake. The deconstruction of language is even more marked in the third file on the “Nastri” page (“Nastro Lungo 2”) when eleven minutes into the recording the tape begins to alternate rapidly between fragments of discordant sounds, each of which is often only a few seconds long (this section lasts around five minutes). The clips include snatches of sirens, renaissance music, songs of various styles, chants, sped-up and incomprehensible speech, telephone calls, laughter and sections of what seem to be radio adverts taken from other stations. The result is a chaotic and oneiric cacophony which is almost unsettling in its
frenetic presentation of aural contrasts. In a real sense, this tape figures an aural equivalent of the *A/Traverso* cover page discussed above – the dissection of the speech act into seconds-long snatches of voice is akin to the magazine’s use of cut-out fragments of written text, and like the magazine’s use of collage the tape’s juxtaposition of fragments of voice and sound decouple the spoken signifier from any identifiable signified. The result is that the voice becomes a form of pure sound, pure phonos, and the words it speaks are significant only in terms of the sounds they help it to make. Ultimately, the tape manifests the voice of desire as it was conceived by Radio Alice – the voice is presented as a primal force that, like desire, is in constant flux, creating and destroying itself with no heed for accepted logic. These recordings, then, distil an approach to voice that lay at the heart of Radio Alice’s broadcasting and that can be detected in much of its practice (if rarely, perhaps, in as extreme a form as the “Nastro Lungo 2” example). Crucially, this vocal project did not simply constitute a theoretical experiment – the 1977 Bologna riots proved that Radio Alice’s was an approach to radio broadcasting with concrete spatial, and political, consequences.

**The Bologna riots**

In turning to the spatial ramification of Radio Alice’s practice, I would like to consider the significance of the voice to the human perception of space by putting Cavarero’s writing on the voice into conversation with the spatial theory of geographer Doreen Massey. Cavarero herself says little about space in *For More than One Voice*, engaging the concept only briefly when she summarises the thinking of Hannah Arendt:

> for Arendt the political lies purely in the relational space between human beings who are unique and therefore plural. The faculty of speech is political because by speaking to one another in a relational space and communicating themselves, men at the same time communicate the political nature of this space. (2005, 192)

Cavarero’s interest, of course, resides specifically in how the voice underpins relationality and the political potential of this fact, rather than in its specific spatial dimensions or consequences. Nonetheless, the latent spatial implications of *For More than One Voice* can be extrapolated if it is read alongside Massey’s roughly contemporaneous *For Space* (2005).

More explicitly than Cavarero, Massey argues for a confluence of the political and the spatial, arguing that the way in which space in conceived, “can be an essential element in the imaginative structure which enables in the first place an opening up to the very sphere of the political” (2005, 9). Subsequently, she argues that it is necessary to uproot space from that constellation of concepts in which it has so unquestioningly so often been embedded (stasis; closure; representation) and to settle it among another set of ideas (heterogeneity; relationality; coevalness … liveness indeed) where it releases a more challenging political landscape. (ibid, 13. Ellipses in original)

Massey’s study can be boiled down to three core propositions which she lays out carefully:
First, that we recognise space as the product of interrelations; as constructed through interactions […] Second, that we understand space as the sphere of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity […] Third, that we recognise space as always under construction. (ibid, 9. Italics in original)

Space for Massey constitutes what may be termed a form of social reality – a particular perception of the material world which is collectively experienced and acted upon.7 Space, so understood, operates on a far more profound level than Euclidean geometry, and is both the product and the precondition of social interaction. She argues repeatedly that to reduce space to height, width and depth and to treat it as a neutral container in which temporal events play out is to ignore the openness and contingency that gives it its social and thus political potential. This oversight “in turn enables the existence of only one history, one voice, one speaking position” (ibid, 41). When space is conceived monolithically it can only be accounted for in one way. To conceive space not in terms of an a priori set of dimensions but in terms of the human intersections and interactions that take place within those dimensions, however, is to understand space as a dynamic force which is constantly in flux and which cannot be accounted for definitively. Rather, space can only ever be accounted for in terms of a set of human interactions taking place at a given site at a given time; “it will be always unfinished and open. This arena of space is not firm ground on which to stand” (ibid, 107). Though space in this sense must coincide with a set of objective dimensional coordinates, it manifests foremost a subjective (and always already provisional) phenomenon determined “through [the] practices of material engagement” enacted within those coordinates (ibid, 61).8

Massey’s references to “voice” and “speaking position” are relevant to this discussion, of course. Cavarero’s Arendtian interest in the polis as “a space created by acting and speaking together” (2005, 204) understands such a space as dependent on the reciprocal nature of vocal interaction in the literal sense, and she coins the term “absolute local” to refer to the “taking-place of politics that has no predefined borders, nor any fixed or sacred confines. […] It extends as far as the interactive space that is generated by reciprocal communication” (ibid). This concept coincides neatly with Massey’s argument that space itself is defined not by borders but by “the sphere of relations […] which poses the question of the social, and thus of the political” (2005, 99). If space is the product of human interrelation, and human interrelation is inherent in the reciprocity of the voice, then it becomes apparent that the voice is always implicated in the social construction of space. The voice, in this sense, “makes space”. In other words, when human beings interact vocally they establish an interrelation of unique singularities and in so doing create, in that moment, space as a contingent, lived social experience. Furthermore, if the voice can thus be said to “make space”, vocal technology like the telephone and the radio can be conceived as technologies that do not so much collapse space (as is often suggested) but, in the sense in which space is conceived by Massey and Cavarero, facilitate its creation. In fact, Cavarero suggests as much when she writes that such technologies “annul” distance,

but they do not negate the material relationality of the vocalic. Although this may seem obvious, it evokes that model of active relation – in a space shared by those present […] that Arendt calls politics, and that could take the name of an absolute local. (2005, 208–9)
Vocal technology does not annihilate space, but rather frees it from its association with dimensional geometry to both display and facilitate its interpersonal constitution.

In a way, it is surprising that Cavarero makes no reference to Italy’s free radio stations. Indeed, Radio Alice’s emphasis on vocal plurality and the sonority of the voice per se rendered it a potent technology for the creation of politicised space as she and, more overtly, Massey conceive it. This became abundantly clear during the Bologna riots, which began after the student activist and Lotta Continua member Francesco Lorussso was shot dead during clashes with Bologna’s police on 11 March 1977. The intense rioting that followed lasted until the following day and Radio Alice took on a central role in the unfolding events. Berardi describes that station as the “walkie-talkie” of the riots (2010); protestors would listen to the station using portable radios as the situation unfolded and, in Briziarelli’s words,

militants called to describe the events, to denounce police violence, and to coordinate the manoeuvres of the protesters; parents called to ask information about their children; even the police and state officers called in to urge the station to stop covering the protests. (2016, 356)

As Berardi and his co-writers describe it:

[t]he radio-telephone hybrid […] provided the possibility of live accounts during the riots. The calls, broadcast live, alternated with long musical interludes and the commentary of the radio anchor, creating an audio tapestry where multiple radio genres blended in a continuous mix of voices, screams, music and excited statements. (2009, 83)

This account is telling in how it describes the fluid interchange of information as inextricable from an interchange of sonorous modes. While the constant flow of information into and out of the station hinged, naturally, on verbal exchange, the unavoidably provisional nature of the verbal information proffered was still “baked into” the broadcast utterances by the sonority that marked each as being specific to the experience of a certain person in a certain space at a certain time. In other words, no call was definitive; each was a single, unique voice feeding into a wider relational network which in turn manifested a fluid, collective representation of the riots. Each voice was never more or less than a piece in a type of aural jigsaw puzzle.

During the riots, Radio Alice’s function as a crucible for the auditory interaction of unique human beings took on a very tangible importance. This interaction allowed the riots to be understood (and the plural term riots suggests as much) as an interwoven composite of the distinct events experienced by distinct participants. Unsurprisingly, Berardi, Jacquemet and Vitali use a sonorous metaphor to describe this effect: “it became impossible to distinguish between the voices of the radio station and the callers, which merged into a choral ‘we’” (2009, 89). With this metaphor, Berardi and his colleagues are not claiming that the voices passing through the station lost their uniqueness or distinction, but that like a choir they formed a plurality of unique voices that achieved a secondary, collective presence. What they describe, in fact, harmonises with Cavarero’s description of the absolute local, an “interactive [and thus political] space that is generated by reciprocal communication” (2005, 204). Indeed, Lewis argues that those calling Italian free radio stations “don’t telephone simply to give their personal opinion, but they make then call a political intervention” (1984a, 144). Radio Alice’s role as facilitator in the construction of politicised space becomes clear in one broadcast by the station:
Alice: Let’s remember that for every incident that has occurred, incidents which the state television drew attention to tonight, such as the fires, the destruction of the newspaper office [...] the attack on the Fiat office [...] all the comrades assume full responsibility for them. Everyone took part in this enormous collective effort [...] because what happened today was a violent demonstration decided on by everyone. (cited in Berardi, Jacquemet, and Vitali 2009, 89)

Unlike the state media’s supposed focus on static events, Radio Alice accounts for the rioting as a communal process. What is at stake here is space as constructed by and through the evolving actions and interactions of the Movement, and specifically space that has been created through the interrelation of voices calling in to the station, of which this broadcast functions as a sort of precis. This is a revolutionary space that has its own history (that of a collective effort), its own orientating sites (the newspaper office, the Fiat factory) and its own trajectories of action (the violent demonstration). The chorus of voices which has woven these components into a whole is therefore generative of a spatial reality; as the foundation of human interrelation, Radio Alice’s many voices “made space” with politically tangible consequences.

Furthermore, as the Movement shaped Bologna’s space on their own terms they gained the capacity to control it at a concrete level:

Alice: Listen, do you know if … if there’s a way out there on Via San Donato? If there’s–
Caller: A way out through San Donato? Not really.
Alice: Basically–
Caller: Via Zamboni is blocked.
Alice: All blocked.
Caller: Also you can’t go through the ring.
Alice: Is the demonstration there?
Caller: Nope, no demonstration.
Alice: Where are the comrades?
Caller: The comrades are in the little streets behind Piazza Verdi (cited in ibid 2009, 88).

This call, which is typical of many collected by Berardi, Jacquemet and Vitali, demonstrates how Bologna’s various streets and sites were aligned and realigned into a specific – if always provisional – spatial whole through the trajectories traced by the rioters in the city, as well as through the interaction of voices via the station. The aural jigsaw puzzle formed through the accumulation of calls like this, and their interaction as a wider plurality, therefore became a sort of sonorous or vocal map of Bologna during the two days of rioting. This was a vocal map characterised, as the above extract demonstrates, by the overtly provisional nature of each of its constituent voices, but this was precisely its power. Each voice spoke the experience of a certain persona at a certain coordinate in each moment, and those experiences could change in a matter of metres or of minutes. The vocal map of Bologna was thus a responsive map that evolved in real time according to changes in the realities expressed by its constituent voices. Radio Alice constructed
space as space is understood by Massey – as a lived reality that results from specific human interactions over and above the mathematical dimensions in which those interactions take place. In line with Massey’s third proposition, the space constructed by and through Radio Alice was a constant work in progress, never finished, constantly being deconstructed and reconstructed. Radio itself was revealed as a spatial technology – it was the interchange through which voices could intersect and interrelate in the construction of this space. Ultimately, Radio Alice’s vocal map of Bologna, an ongoing relation of unique and uniquely placed voices, was not simply a theoretical experiment; it commanded Bologna’s spatial constitution and hence staged a concrete challenge to its institutional authorities.

Silencing Radio Alice

Owing to its central role in the riots, Radio Alice was forcibly shut down by police on 12 March 1977 – the second day of rioting. As Eco argues, “it is not just by chance that Radio Alice was closed down while other radios continue broadcasting songs of the resistance or folk protest music in a calmer and more museum-like atmosphere” (1995, 226) – the spatial advantage that the station had handed the protestors had apparently exerted too much influence over the course of the riots. The police invasion of the station’s studio was broadcast live, and has become something of a sacred text in the history of free radio. Given the overtly spatial nature of Radio Alice’s political intervention into the riot, it is telling to note the spatial dynamics at play in the final broadcast. The recording hosted on radioalice.org begins as the police are banging on the door of the studio and the four presenters inside are broadcasting requests for assistance to lawyers and other free radio stations. The four presenters are spread throughout the studio and the proximity of each voice to the microphone is signalled by their various levels of volume and reverberation. This, along with accompanying sounds of furniture being moved, gives spatial depth to the soundscape of the studio – each voice represents a body occupying a unique point within it. Phones ring frequently, and the presenters keep broadcasting their SOS calls: “Again, a plea from Radio Alice. Radio Alice has the police at the door. Please, our comrades from the Legal Defense Collective, please hurry here” (cited in Berardi, Jacquemet, and Vitali 2009, 90). In this way, and in keeping with the station’s overall ethos, the studio as a site occupied by unique bodies is put into relation with other such sites. Meanwhile, the muffled banging and shouting of the police can be heard intermittently in the background. This loud but stifled noise forms a literal wall of sound around the studio as if attempting to compress the spatial extension of Radio Alice’s presence.

Unsurprisingly, the fight over spatial limits that takes place during the studio invasion also figures a conflict of vocal modes. The four presenters have distinct vocal pitches and timbres, which are exacerbated by the shouting which occupies much of the recording and the fact that one presenter, thinking as he speaks, often loses the thread of his sentences and turns words into non-linguistic sounds. For example, his statement, transcribed by Berardi and co-writers as “[t]here’s four of us here at the station, and … Nothing …” (ibid, 92), begins with a long sigh and, as he thinks, “e” (“and”) becomes “ehhhhhhh”. Heavy breathing, laughter and even musical interludes also punctuate the broadcast. This chorus of four voices figures the sort of interwoven, sonorous plurality which Radio Alice had privileged from its inception. Meanwhile, the muffled shouts of the police form a homogenous noise which is singular and
undifferentiated, the monolithic voice of institutional authority and/or, perhaps, the univocal voice of the logocentric discourse that underpins institutional authority. Hence, Radio Alice’s final recording represents a conflict which is both a battle for control over space and, at the same time, a battle of opposed vocal paradigms.

The final seconds of the recording demonstrate the total interweaving of these two simultaneous battles:

Alice 3: They’re in.

Alice 2: They’re here. They’ve come in, they’ve come in.

Alice 3: They’re here, they’re here.

Alice 2: They’ve come in, they’ve come in, we have our hands up. They’ve come in, we have our hands up.

Alice 3: Look, they’re taking off my mic.

Alice 2: They’re taking off my mic. We have our hands up, they say that this is a place of – (cited in ibid, 93)

The police invasion presents a breaching of Radio Alice’s space of personal interaction (“they’re in”) by institutional authority and a disciplining of how that space may be occupied by human bodies ("we have our hands up"). It also presents an attack on how that space may be constructed and sustained by the presenters’ voices – “they’re taking off my mic”. As such, where Radio Alice had imbricated, with political effect, the particularity of the human voice and the dynamic aural representation of space, so the political backlash can be heard as a simultaneous attack on both these fronts. The poetic serendipity of the very last, interrupted utterance on the tape – “they say that this is a place of--” – could well stand as the station’s epitaph: it is the vocal articulation of a space constructed by and through the station’s broadcasting, and when the tape cuts off here it seems apparent that this is precisely what Bologna’s institutional authorities felt compelled to eradicate.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have attempted to briefly contextualise Radio Alice within the history of Italy’s Movement of 1977 (including that of the magazine *A/Traverso*) and the international development of community radio. My argument has been that the station translated the Movement’s privileging of desire into a vocal practice that emphasised polyvocality and that used a range of techniques to challenge the primacy of the spoken word which the Movement believed, stymied desire and upheld the logic of capitalist production. I further aimed to show that Radio Alice’s vocal practice was a specifically spatial practice in that the station’s emphasis on vocal interrelation engendered social linkages within the Movement and therefore allowed the Movement to “make space” for itself in a manner which became explicit during the Bologna riots of 1977. Most broadly, I have aimed to show that, as a central component of human interrelation, the voice is always already implicated in the construction of space as a social reality. The history and fate of Radio Alice makes clear that
the voice’s power to construct space is both tangible and potentially radical – in acquiring a voice, the “voiceless” gain not just a means of expression, but a means of insurgency.

Notes

1. For a full account written in English, see Ginsborg (1990, 210–53).
2. Many free radio stations had been operating illegally before the ruling (see Berardi, Jacquemet, and Vitali 2009, 77).
3. radioalice.org provides a rich collection of archival material relating to the station and its history. The site’s content (all in Italian) is of high value to those interested in the station’s practice and ethos. From the main landing page, the left-hand menu offers curated text and sound-based sources under various headings. “Voci” (“voices”) includes recordings of calls made to the station during the Bologna riots (see below), many of which evidence the changeable and frenetic nature of the events in the speakers’ tones as well as their words. “Suoni” (“sounds”) includes a collection of recordings – mostly musical – which were released on cassette after the station’s closure. Some of these recordings were taken from Radio Alice’s broadcasts while others were recorded after it was shut down by police. The “Programmi” (“programmes”) section includes four short recordings of music and speech which were recorded during broadcast and which include renaissance music and surreal spoken-word excerpts including a reading (in Italian) of Francis Picabia’s “Dada Cannibalistic Manifesto” (1920). (The text at the top of the page laments the lack of recordings that have survived of the station’s programmes). The “Nastri” (“tapes”) section includes three longer clips from some of the “continuous tapes” that were broadcast by the station when no one was available to staff it live (see below). The rest of the site compiles text and video resources connected to the station.
4. It is, however, impossible to verify this claim.
5. Feminist groups were also involved with the station, but often found themselves marginalised. See Berardi interviewed on Ràdio Web Macba podcast 2014.
6. The persistence of Italian dialects is a consequence of the country’s relatively recent unification (1861) and has been a thorn in the side of ideological moves towards Italian cultural unity throughout the peninsula’s history. Mussolini’s regime was particularly aggressive in promoting Florentine Tuscan as the national language, and curbing the use of other dialects in cinema, literature and radio. By the 1970s, this national language had taken root, particularly in the centre and north of the country, but the speaking of dialect was (and is) still fundamental to many Italians’ strong sense of regional identity (which often trumps national identity).
7. The terminology here is mine.
8. Massey’s approach to space resonates significantly with (and references) that of Henri Lefebvre, who similarly argues that space is socially constructed in The Production of Space ([1974] 1991). Lefebvre, however, lays far more specific emphasis on the role of capitalist political economics in this process, and provides an extensive taxonomy of spatial categories that result from his theories.
9. Notably, Bologna’s local government was controlled by the PCI during this period, which further fuelled a sense that the institutional left had become a fundamentally conservative force and that radical, autonomous action was the only viable path towards political change.
10. Interestingly, the recording and preservation of the final broadcast is often attributed to the police themselves, who seem to have been taping Radio Alice’s broadcasts during the riot for later use as evidence against its organisers (Red Notes 1978, 30).

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