



Brandon LaBelle & Konstantinos Thomaidis: Vocal Positionings

[00:00:23] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, and welcome to the Salon.

Our guests today are Brandon LaBelle and Konstantinos Thomaidis, who write extensively about the cultural politics of sound and voice. Following a few brief research interactions in the past, they engage here in their first *viva voce* exchange.

Brandon LaBelle is an artist, writer and theorist working with questions of social life, voice, acoustic justice and agency, and is currently directing the artistic research project, *Communities in Movement*, at the Department of Contemporary Art, University of Bergen, in collaboration with Klub Mama Zagreb, AMEE Madrid, and Savvy Contemporary Berlin. Brandon has a long and pioneering history as a writer and editor in sound studies and related disciplines, as well as a maker of performative installations, poetic theatre, storytelling and research actions aimed at forms of experimental community-making.

Konstantinos Thomaidis's research focuses on the development of the interdisciplinary field of voice studies. He co-founded and edits the *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* and the Routledge *Voice Studies* book series, and is the author and editor of many pivotal texts on voice across disciplines, including *Voice Studies: [Critical Approaches to Process, Performance and Experience]* (2015) and *Theatre & Voice* (2017). His recent work focuses on the notion of 'listening back' and specifically on methodologies of autobiophony and vocal archaeology, both of which are discussed in this exchange.

In this conversation, Brandon and Konstantinos discuss sound and meaning, the performativity of the self in listening and voicing, aural dramaturgies of inclusion and exclusion, and the intersections of history, politics and voice in James Webb's piece *A series of personal questions addressed to 5 litres of Nigerian crude oil* (2015) and Thomaidis's autobiophonic piece *A Voice Is. A Voice Has. A Voice Does* (2018).

The conversation was recorded on Zoom on 1st July 2020, between Berlin, Thessaloniki and London.

[00:02:45] SALON

Brandon LaBelle: Okay, Konstantinos – well, here we are! Nice to see you.

Konstantinos Thomaidis: Very good to see you. So are we ready?

BL: I think we're ready.

KT: Right. Because we have been discussing a lot about sound and dramaturgy, and particularly about beginning this conversation. I started thinking about beginnings and beginnings in sound. I don't know – the way my thinking goes is: if we are to talk about beginnings in sound, in voice, and if these beginnings have something to do with oral and aural dramaturgy, personally I have to begin by admitting that I find beginnings very powerful but also very awkward. I don't know if you agree, but they are powerful because they initiate something, particularly in sound, whatever the semantic content. Essentially a beginning tells us that whatever preceded it doesn't matter: it casts what preceded it in irrelevance or oblivion, or at least as background noise. And then also it makes promises for the future that something would follow that is a sound, a sonic episode, and that sonic episode has rules and regs because it began in sound. This is also why I find them awkward, because as a voice or as a theatre-maker, I know that a lot of the time these announcements are random or conventional. They are not in our hands – they are in the hands of the listener, of the perceiver. And also sometimes, particularly with a sound, if you begin – even though you announce the rules and regs, then sound can go in all sorts of directions and throw the book of rules and regulations out of the way. But I think at the very interconnections of awkwardness and powerfulness lies the fact that a sound beginning, or a sonic beginning, also initiates a relationship: there is something or someone that makes sound, something or someone that's going to receive it, and the reason why I don't feel too disempowered or too awkward



is because this is a conversation. So this is a common, dyadic beginning.

BL: Yes. No, I think as an artist I often have this question about also how to begin. For instance, if you step into an existing framework or context and you're in a way called upon to do something, called upon – even as we are here – to perform, then of course in a way I always feel like we've already begun with the call. I mean the call has already started the process. So in a way we can also think that we're actually not beginning here, we're just continuing with what's already started – so maybe we can enjoy that sense of being in the middle, always already in the middle, which is maybe a kind of sonic position or perspective. To think that we're always somehow – I mean, maybe sound in a sense is also something that, of course, there is a feeling of something beginning, but I always had the feeling that I'm stepping into sound, that it's, as we say, a kind of oceanic feeling.

KT: Or in a way that you are invited to step into something by sound or in sound. Because you mentioned 'in the middle', I was wondering what are you, now, in the middle of in terms of research? I mean, we've read the books but I do wonder what have you been doing now?

BL: Yes – I could share a few things that I'm in the middle of or slowly getting towards the middle. There's a couple. One is a sort of research project, an artistic research project, that's under the title *Social Acoustics: Communities in Movement*.

This is the title of the project and there's different sides to it, but it's based at the art academy at the University of Bergen where I'm working. Essentially the project would be – in the very broad sense – it looks towards sound, listening and questions of community. Or in a way how sound and listening facilitate or even complicate situations of togetherness, or as you already point to, those relationships that sound makes possible. So this has also led me to the notion that I'm focusing on also in writing that we may call 'acoustic justice'. I've been writing about acoustic justice, extending from that research into social acoustics. In a way I'm taking the question of acoustics quite directly to think about architectures, to think about environments, to think about the built environment, the acoustic shapes around us that in a way, enable sound to occur. So I'm thinking very much, in a way, less about a sound object and more about the conditions that enable that sound object to take place. So for me this is a kind of acoustic perspective, an acoustic approach. Then from there, you know, ideas about social acoustics, about how, for instance, even the ways in which the voice relies upon certain acoustic parameters or certain acoustic conditions that in a way are also not only physical but they're also social, they're also institutional, they're also about history and about culture. The kind of acoustic supports that enable, for instance, oneself to speak within certain contexts. So how we in a way find support, how we in a way orient ourselves acoustically and through certain acoustic constructs. This is how I'm approaching acoustic justice and thinking about social acoustics, which in way then leads me to questions about orientation and also certain kinds of practices – so how do we practice acoustics, not so much in terms of a design strategy or even as a professional practice, but really as an everyday practice? What kinds of acoustic gestures, acoustic practices, acoustic acts that we make in a way to facilitate or in a way to engage with the ways in which sound is already distributed? Acoustics is somehow also for me about the distribution of sound, the movements and circulations of sound, and of course the meanings that are carried with those sounds. I'm researching that and also trying to get into certain practices, so I'm very much thinking artistically about how to unfold this research, and I'm doing that in a very collaborative manner. I'm trying to create collaborative, collective situations in a range of different contexts and spaces to then in a way explore that mode of togetherness, explore modes of togetherness and, not think so much about what sounds we are making but, again, what kind of acoustic arrangements are we constructing to enable that togetherness to take shape? I'm really playing with that in a very speculative manner, so I'm really enjoying also thinking about togetherness in a very experimental, poetic and speculative manner. One modality that I'm focusing on now is around the formation or the form of the party – so I'm thinking about parties as social, acoustic, performative constructs through which and within which very unclear and poetic and complex forms of sociality take place. So I'm thinking of the party as a space for community-making. I'm going to be making three parties in Madrid, starting in October. So I'll be sure to send you an invitation and you can join us for one of the parties!

KT: I would very much hope to do so! And actually the notion of invitation to a party brings me back to a lot of the things that you mentioned including orientation, architecture, justice, togetherness, and that



kind of invitation that brings you to the party, and the sonicity and the acoustic properties of the party. Because an invitation is inclusion, but by virtue of including there is also exclusion, which is such a prime example of togetherness and parting, in a way, isn't it?

BL: Yeah. No, that's very true. That's part of that complexity that I want to engage with, that sense of the party as a scene of membership: as a space that is in a way intensely social, intensely territorial sometimes, but that is also in a way on the way to its own undoing. I'm interested in the party as a space of excess, as a space of festivity, and that can always fragment, be disrupted, you know? It's an unstable sociality, and I want to play with that and explore that to think about what kinds of community might we find here, or might we imagine, or might we speculate about? So, this also made me think very much – I mean I know you're also very involved with questions about dramaturgy, performativity – so I was curious [about] how you might also think a little bit, or what are you working on at the moment, Konstantinos?

KT: I have to say that, very much in line with what you were proposing, I'm always interested in questions of community and togetherness, of the vocal in-between, who listens, who offers the voice, who dramaturgs the encounter. In the past I have mostly dealt with the cultural politics of training – how these invitations are embedded in the kinds of sounds that are allowed for a voice to make in different systems of thought and different systems of practices. At the moment I'm trying to challenge some of my own biases, or let's say – inclinations, and as a theatre person I tend to be preoccupied with the present, the present of the encounter quite a lot. So in order to help myself think of voice and sound otherwise, I have been developing for the last couple of years a project which I've provisionally called 'Listening Back'. So I wonder what kinds of sounds spill over from the past in the present, how do we deal with these sounds? Essentially the project has two strands. The first one – we have started talking a little bit about that – is the notion of autobiophony. It's a project on vocal autobiography. How we come to have a voice, how our voices are constructs and processes and unfoldings and events rather than one thing? How do we narrate that story to ourselves? How do we narrate that story to others? And how can we do that in voice and through voice? So this takes the form of both performances and workshops. And secondly, the other strand is dealing a little less with the immediate past and more with pasts that are pre-recording technology. The question I'm asking is how do we retrieve voices that have been considered irrevocably lost? So if the first part I conceived of as vocal autobiography, autobiophony, then the second one is vocal archaeology. More specifically, at the moment I'm listening in to vocality in Ancient Greece because a lot of the research tells us that the musical and vocal parameters have been lost to us. But I'm thinking: 'But we have a large archive of other types of documentation. How did voice spill over into these archives and how can we use them to reimagine and perhaps reenact these voices?' As you said, a lot of the time we tend to forget that these sounds are co-devised with the ideologies and the perspectives, philosophies on sound. So already through what we know about what was prominent ideologically in Ancient Greece about sound and voice, we can start thinking that this was related to the practice of voice. So this is where I am at the moment. In many ways, listening to some of the sounds that you shared or the ideas that you shared, I felt that this sort of speaks to this idea of the personal and the communal, of the collective history and how they are co-dramaturged in sound and through sound. I was wondering, would you like to play your sonic cue?

BL: Yes. No – I can come to that. I mean, maybe I just wanted to make a quick response to hearing what you've been working on and this question also of how we listen to a voice from the past or how we engage with a vocal archive or – I mean I think it made me very much think about the general performativity of the voice, and the ways in which, as we know, the ways in which the voice is often called upon to authentically represent oneself or to authenticate oneself through the voice. So how the voice has this power to really complete me as a subject, or to stand in for me, or to carry me into the world and into relationships. At the same we know that incredible, uncanny feeling or sense of the voice always being also not me. The voice is something that – even now as I'm speaking with you there's a feeling that my voice is somehow in this media network that is connecting us and that is also being recorded right now for another kind of archive – and so my voice is also not me, it's also separate from me. All these kinds of wonderful things that we know about the voice. So it made me think a little bit about how you listen to these voices from the past. Or we may also project certain desires or wishes onto the voice: that we want this voice to be something, to either tell us a truth or to tell us something about the past, or to give us access to something that we can't find otherwise. So it's also interesting



how these voices position us as listeners, these recorded voices – we want something with them, from them, they also position us as listeners. I'm curious also about that relationship.

KT: It's very interesting because I tend to agree with you, and I have to admit I'm rather suspicious of the idea that voice is just a means to authenticity and [to] completing the subject. And as you said, the way the voice performs – I love the phrasing you used: 'It's also not I.' Because when I either work in rehearsal or with students – I teach voice dramaturgy – a lot of the time we dwell on the relationship of the voice to the I: what it says about the person emitting that voice. The first step is to start thinking about the listener and what the impact of the listener or the listening situation or the listening circumstance might be on the voice. As you said, the expectation, the desire. And sometimes I like to ask: 'This is the first person and the second person, what about the third person, the dramaturgy of the third person – what voices?' In a sense now, our dialogue voices, our communication voices – it speaks masses of the circumstances, the past, and the embeddedness of ourselves in specific milieus. So in a way, I think you are perfectly right when we, for example when we talk about the 'I', the subject or the person and the voice, a lot of the time we hear the 'it', the desire. We hear what we would like to hear in that voice, or what voice is despite the voice.

BL: Yeah, that's a nice perspective – something to think about. Yes, maybe I can play this audio?

KT: That's fantastic. Thank you, yes.

BL: As something to bounce off of a little bit. Maybe I can just introduce it a little bit: this is a work by an artist, James Webb, originally from Cape Town and now based in Stockholm. I follow James' work, and part of his work always or often engages with the voice and situations of listening and also often, music. So I was very struck by this recent work, its title is *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to Five Litres of Nigerian Crude Oil*. So it's an installation up right now in Cape Town, and it consists of a plinth on top of which is a sort of a plexi-cube, inside of which is five litres of crude oil taken from Nigeria. And then I think James understands the scenography as a viewer facing the cube of oil and there being an audio speaker hanging from the ceiling, just behind the viewer, through which this audio piece is then playing. So one is, in a way, looking at this cube while hearing this audio behind them. So I'll just play the audio.

[00:22:39 to 00:25:19] Excerpt from *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to 5 Litres of Nigerian Crude Oil* (2015)

BL: Okay, so that's actually an excerpt, it's a much longer audio, there's around 100 questions I believe. But it's part of a series that James is doing where he addresses inanimate objects and often in different contexts. Sometimes finding these objects in existing museums or bringing an object into a gallery space, as in this case.

KT: This is such a powerful piece and I immediately want to ask a couple of questions about, first of all, about the dramaturgy, the making of the piece, its inner structure. The first thing that strikes me – and you already started talking about it – is the use of the list as a sonic device. We have a list of questions – and I'm immediately thinking of Umberto Eco [2009] who talks about two types of lists. One is the inventory, the one that has all the items – it's a catalogue. And the other one is the poetic list, which is the infinite list, the one that alludes to a list that will carry on going and going. So if we use this as a point of reference, what do you think this piece does: does it include all the questions or does it open up to the poetic?

BL: Well, I think that's a wonderful observation or point. I think clearly we're probably on the poetic list in terms of there bring an infinite array of questions that one could ask. And it's interesting that James – I think he makes this clear in the title of the series – it's always personal questions, he calls them 'personal questions'. So I find it also really – I mean maybe in this list of questions that in a way attempt to be personal, attempt to make a personal relationship with an inanimate object, which I think absolutely brings us into a poetic framework in terms of trying to instigate a conversation here. So I think that's quite essential in the work, in terms of how do we address an object?

KT: This human-more-than-human relationship is fascinating in terms of listening dramaturgy because immediately, through the title and the structure of the piece, you have two kinds of listeners. You have the person who attends the gallery and then you have the object posited as a listener – so what do you think the piece asks of its listener or its listeners?



BL: No, that's really nice. Yes, there's different positions of listening that the work performatively insights or conjures, making the object a listener. And then in a way we are maybe eavesdroppers onto this conversation that's happening between the voice and the object – we are placed between those two things, in the middle, really. Maybe we're there to witness, to ear-witness this imaginary conversation, or this poetic framework, in which we might begin to hear that object as a kind of imaginary.

KT: And do you think – because I'm fascinated by methodologies of eavesdropping and overhearing or ear-witnessing as you posited them – and I didn't immediately think of this when I listened to the piece but now it makes perfect sense to me. I do wonder because there are some very personal questions and some, how should I call them, inserts of history when they asked: 'What were you doing when Ken Saro-Wiwa was hanged or was executed?' What do you think are the ethics or the politics that come with this ear-witnessing in this case?

BL: One of the things that James describes in the work is he talks about the oil representing – or is there a way in which we can understand this object as somehow stemming or arising from the 'psyche of the Earth', he calls it. This material that is literally extracted from below, pulled out from the centre of the Earth, as James says, 'from the unconscious of the Earth'. So what might it tell us about that? It's a carrier of all that geological history, it's a carrier of all those, as we know, economic and political forces that surround it. So I think there is definitely an implied political perspective in that work. But I think James is also really interested to hover around a lot of different areas. So I would in a way hesitate to force it to be political even though quite clearly there's an awareness of the politics around that object that James is working with.

KT: And I think that this ambivalence or multi-valence is very audible in – what was the question, 'What have you been told about your value?', which is so individuated and subject-making, and at the same time so political, isn't it?

[*Laughter.*]

BL: Yes. It's as if the object is innocent: it didn't do anything! So I mean, yes it's interesting as soon as that object gets personified or it starts to – the address personifies it or in a way evokes it as a subject, which is very much part of that performativity of the voice that we can think about the way it calls us into being. So here in a way the address is kind of conjuring or calling that object into a state of subjectivity.

KT: Yes. Sorry. You–

BL: I only wanted to bring up the idea of the puppet to think about the inanimate object that speaks. It often speaks through us, you know, sort of throwing certain kinds of, again, certain desires or literally throwing the voice onto it and in a way animating the inanimate by trying to hear what may come back to us.

KT: And in the process of doing that, something I felt was that normally the object is something to be handled or to be assigned value by the human – but in this case because it was addressed as a listener, therefore potentially as a speaker, as a responder, it could give us the right answers. I started thinking that if I assumed that I know the answers, or if I rehearsed answers on its behalf, I would be wrong. Therefore I was longing, or had this voice envy, for the voice of the oil, if that makes sense. Because it would know and I wouldn't.

BL: Yes. There's also that wonderful ten seconds of silence between each question. This framework in which we might begin to hear that voice, in which our longing for that voice to appear or to emerge occurs within that silence. So I think that silence is also very essential, isn't it?

KT: Yes: how do we emerge from that? And also – correct me because I think I'm about to cite you [LaBelle 2014] – you term these gaps, these pauses, that exemplify the longing for speaking as the unvoice, the substratum where voices have happened before their audible, before we break into audibility. I sensed that the gaps dramaturgically operated in this way. Would you say so?

BL: That's a nice – yes. I didn't think about that but yes, absolutely. We might consider the unvoice precisely in this kind of situation, in this conversation that is happening, that sort of submerged voice that is always, in a way, on the verge of emerging, or on the verge of taking place but stays below or



stays under audibility or expression.

KT: And what an engaging way to exemplify that through oil!

BL: Konstantinos, do you want to move onto your sonic cue, or the audio you would like to share? Is this a good moment for that or would you like to stay with the unvoice?

KT: Yes. I'm happy to extend these questions of the unvoice – what is voiced and not voiced, or where is agency, where is value? I'll quickly introduce it just because I find this very embarrassing. It's a practice-as-research piece, autobiophony. It's a performance-lecture that I have been performing for the last three years called *A Voice Is. A Voice Has. A Voice Does*. It includes episodes from how my voice came to be about. Essentially the piece and the performance-lecture was not about my voice – I wasn't really interested in that. It was about the audiences participating because there are lots of participatory tasks into thinking about their own vocal autobiographies. And different vocal episodes reflect on different aspects of that history. This is one of the final scenes – the piece has ten scenes and this is the ninth one. Just before there were a couple of scenes about surgery and therapy because I grew up dysfluent. The scene just before that was a scene about audible racism and how you are racialised in voice as a foreigner. Because I felt in devising this that I couldn't speak anymore, what happens is you hear this – what you are about to hear – and a recorded voice. So this is roughly how the piece ends.

[00:36:24 to 00:41:39] Excerpt from *A Voice Is. A Voice Has. A Voice Does*. (2018)

BL: Okay. Well, thank you for sharing that.

KT: Thank you for listening.

BL: There's so many kind of wonderful layers in such a very simple audio collage, or audio piece. There's a few things that we could unfold but I was very much struck about this relationship to music that seems to be one of the layers, one of the threads in that narrative. I find it really so powerful, the ways in which that lullaby becomes a carrier both of something extremely personal and also something that speaks to a larger cultural, collective, social, history, identity. So I find that this is – in a way, maybe we could spend a moment to think a little bit about music in that sense as an incredible emotional archive. Something that is so close to us – where we think: 'This melody, this lullaby, is really so much for me, it's almost for me, it's intimate to my experience.' While at the same time there's many children, adults, singing this melody, singing this lullaby in so many homes and in so many – the way in which it travels, it migrates, and it represents or it captures a cultural community. So I'm extremely just moved and touched and fascinated by that musical dynamic that you seem to point at in the work.

KT: Thank you very much for this and especially that last word that you used, 'dynamic', and just before that, 'migration'. The lullaby came about in the piece as a sort of resolution: that sense of being very intimate and held sonically and that had to do with a lot what preceded this scene. I wasn't aware of its other functions until the moment I started using it in rehearsal. Rehearsal is a kind of knowledge, a kind of dissection. When I had to posit the lullaby for an audience I thought I would do some research and this is when you realise that it comes with a story: as you say, there are other people that have heard it, that it has travelled a specific journey. You always thought it's so personal that it's unrepeatable – and it is! That doesn't negate its personal qualities. I have performed the piece in cases where there have been Greeks or people of Greek origin in the audience and I had people humming along and this is also another interesting experience because of course it's a loop and you are also getting entrained in that. It carries a value: it carries a value of its culture and, in a way, it also carries a value of the now-moment, the now-moment of that culture as it speaks to the past-moment of the culture. I hear the recording now and I know it's wrong, but I keep it because this is how the piece was devised. I'm talking about my grandmother as an 'immigrant' because this is roughly the translation of the term used in Greek, but she was a refugee, a war refugee. So for me, as I listen to this, and it struck me during performance, why I avoided the term, why I didn't want to posit her as a refugee, why I used that other word, why I keep that other word? And I don't have an answer. It has to do with linguistic ambiguity, but also there is a sense of: 'Do I listen back and reconnect to that traumatic past in a moment which – all the trauma associated with being a refugee is so prominent and so in excess?' Perhaps it has to do with that. I'm not quite sure.

BL: Yes. This is of course a very strong, another layer in the piece is this relationship to a personal



history, a history of migration, a history of conflicts. So it's also surrounding the very personal quality of even how you share this lullaby, you share this recording. But at the same time you also have this distance, you address yourself indirectly. You present to us this character, Konstantinos, and the narratives, I'm also very struck by that, how you also show something very close but also from this performative distancing, or – can you say something about that?

KT: Yes. This is – because it's a performance-lecture and there are Q&As – this is actually a point of contention. I've had very interesting discussions about the third person. That returns us to intentions of dramaturgy and reception of dramaturgy, and how they intermingle. So the reason why – there are a few reasons why I chose the third person. I am sitting onstage when I perform and there is the tape recorder and you hear my grandmother from another speaker and all that. So the narrator is somebody else. Up to then you had me voicing or doing things. So it's clearly showing: 'Okay, the narrator is somebody else.' The second thing was – it was a sort of admitting to the listeners that I may have been presenting my vocal history, my vocal autobiography, inviting you to engage in tasks and think about your own vocal history, but it's performative, it's theatrical. I sort of say: 'First I had to devise the persona Konstantinos, and choose what he wanted to narrate or say', because obviously there are things I don't want to share in a performance. And thirdly it was slightly therapeutic to think of what has happened to him because, as I said, most of it is slightly comedic and energetic but the scenes that precede that had to do with me growing up as a dysfluent kid and then racism and how I was perceived sonically in sound. So I wanted to say: 'This is what happened to him. I want to take a moment to breathe.' Now, a lot of people get that and actually I had a few emails saying: 'It was fascinating to think of myself and my voice in the third person because it was easier for me to understand things about my voice if I think of it in the third person.' But I also had people saying: 'Oh, in my culture using the third person is rude', or: 'In my culture the third person is used by the monarch or the oligarch.' [Laughter.] So, of course, this initiates a very interesting discussion about cultural background and what it does, because where I come from it doesn't connote that. Even in English you say: 'One has to', which is slightly 'the abstract' but normally it means 'I', or 'I'm thinking like this'. Also because I studied French, I have in my mind the 'on', which is a sort of 'we', I don't know how else to describe it. How did you feel about the third person, Brandon?

BL: No, I think it's very effective because it brought me back to this feeling of, again, the ways in which things that are so personal and so intimate and so defining of our own selves, often are actually something that is incredibly shared, also. There's the kinds of ways in which our stories, the particularities of those stories, also speak towards larger cultural, historical stories. So I felt you positioning yourself in this third person was a nice play between the sentimentality of the work and the larger question that you point us to. So we're, in a way, asked to hear both these things which I thought was really beautiful. At the same time I was also really curious about the ways in which you also unite your voice with your grandmother. We're also constantly hearing her as you're speaking, or as the narrator is speaking, also through this tape recorder from your own past, so it's another historical layer. But I was struck by this duet that's going on.

KT: That's a very interesting question because it was there at the beginning, and then it sort of disappears as you perform something for a while. So it's great to bring it back to the forefront. At the time, because it's practice-as-research, there were questions around selfhood and personhood and vocal development that informed the making of the piece. I was reading a lot about this dynamic between the personal and the cultural – I think it was in your book where you talk about this idea that the personal and the very intimate even, the voice of conscience, is always contaminated by what you have heard and been told about your voice. So even internality cannot be thought of as separate to externality and vice versa. So one way is to think about this duet with grandmother. The second thing is that I have been toying with this idea – and that's a dramaturgical device as well as perhaps a theoretical device – of the 'vocal assemblage'. That as you voice you might be thinking about your voice because you do a kind of reduction: 'Okay, here is Konstantinos' voice', but at the same time you hear Brandon's silence or the way he will respond, and you hear the technology and you hear the devices. So it's always co-constituted, it's co-devised. Because it's so personal and it is my voice and I also sing that lullaby, et cetera, et cetera, it has informed, I guess, my vocal development. I know that it's internal/external, if that makes sense?



BL: Yes. No, that's wonderful. I really love this idea of the 'vocal assemblage' because I think that's what you called it?

KT: Yes.

BL: Yes. This co-constitution and maybe this takes us back a bit to the earlier reflection about the performance of the voice being 'me and not me', being 'I and not I'. The way in which the voice authenticates us. And it makes me think about Adriana Cavarero [2005] and her insistence on the voice giving a certain articulation to the uniqueness of oneself. You know, she really focuses on this question of uniqueness: that the voice is particularly able to forefront, to bring forward. And I kind of always hesitate in her argument around that because I feel – again going back to this idea of the vocal assemblage – the ways in which the voice, again as you say, reflects so much about things around our bodies, things around our subjectivities. And the voice in a way, as you say, brings all these things together and assembles them. And so I wonder, in a way, about this idea of uniqueness that she points us at and if that's really a correct term or if there's another way to think – I mean I appreciate what she's getting at, but I also hesitate around this idea of uniqueness.

KT: I think it would be very interesting to have Adriana here because I think she would definitely agree with you. I was at a conference – and I must admit that I know Adriana personally and we have worked together and we have conducted interviews [2018] as well. There was a 70th celebration of her work and there was a conference and the very first thing that she said when she went on stage was: 'Please correct me. Please tell me where I'm wrong because this is how philosophy is done.' So, I think these days – because we have talked a little bit with Adriana about accent and about, of course, how this is not just the personal and it's also the political and social – she does agree. The way I understand it is that she comes to this idea of uniqueness from the perspective of a feminist discourse in the '80s and '90s – and I'm also thinking of bell hooks [1986] when she says: 'I'm going to talk back in order to find my own voice and listen to myself speak' – where claiming a voice for certain minority groups is a process of saying that: 'I am an individual worth of having a value.' So I think Adriana, even at that conference, recognised that there are these perspectives that she didn't discuss. My feeling is that she comes from that perspective of not uniqueness as assumed and posited but, for some minority groups as a claim to – which I think, the way I hear it, is exactly what you're saying. Because claiming a voice is a process of acknowledging the fact that you don't have one unique voice to begin with, isn't it?

BL: Yes, I think that's a really important perspective to hang onto and to remember, particularly if we think about many different examples, but currently all the different protests and activities that are emerging particularly out of the United States, in which clearly there is a necessity not only to understand these voices as claiming a certain kind of agency, but also, in a way, demanding that we hear them. So there is also the flipside to that agency of the voice, which is also the ways in which listening also performs a certain kind of agency, or participates in the claiming of that agency. And this is also something that I try to work out when I get into acoustic justice, which is also to say that, for instance, we may claim and argue for the freedom of speech, for instance, and the right for free expression, all of which are so vital and so essential and so important. At the same time I'm really, really interested to think about the freedom of listening also as a right, and how that right participates in that field of politics or in that field of agency.

KT: Yes, I'm immediately thinking of current examples – or even not current examples because there is a long lineage of examples – the way you are perceived in sound can actually have material effects, as you say. If somebody posits through your sound, your voice as worth – having been acknowledged as a leading voice, right? Because you mentioned your project, it's such a complex project, and because you bring together notions of architecture and sound and orientation and politics and justice, I wonder as well – drawing to a close of this discussion – are there any thoughts or perhaps an idea, or an exercise to extend this podcast, to leave our listeners with – related somehow to this, that you'd like to share?

BL: Yeah, that's an interesting question. I don't necessarily have a specific exercise or task, but I think maybe it can be within this discussion and within this larger project, which really talks about voice and orality – is to really think about listening as a position of agency. And so maybe it can be interesting to propose to others as they walk away from listening to us, to carry their listening with them back into daily life, into their contexts, and to just reflect a little bit upon how their listening is a form of enactment



that impacts onto those around them. So again, to think oneself as a listener as being a certain agent within one's environment, how you might perform listening in a more concerted effort.

KT: I think I will try this a little bit more. Perhaps we can also ask our listeners. just extending exactly what you were saying, to make a list, or be made more aware of the listening habits or listening circumstances that are currently rejigged or disrupted, and how they feel about them. I'm thinking a lot of the time you hear the noisy neighbour and it annoys you, but now in an environment of enclosure, I love hearing that other people are there. So I'm thinking: 'What are the listening practices that you have changed, or the changing values you're assigning to them?'

BL: Well, let's leave it at that! I think that's a good proposal.

KT: Thank you very much, Brandon. I thoroughly enjoyed that.

BL: Thank you, Konstantinos.

Transcription by Tom Colley

Clips Summary

[00:22:39 to 00:25:19] *A Series of Personal Questions Addressed to 5 Litres of Nigerian Crude Oil* (2015)

[00:36:24 to 00:41:39] *A Voice Is. A Voice Has. A Voice Does.* (2018)

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