



Decolonising the Voice 4: Historical Vocalities (Part One)

[00:00:20] WRITING EXERCISE

Jane Boston: Episode Four, 'Historical Vocalities'. Welcome back to Decolonising the Voice.

This is an opportunity to think more deeply about the voices in your everyday life that have had an impact on your own vocal expression, in terms of how it feels and sounds. We invite you to think about some of the ways in which the presence of certain key voices has impacted on you and allowed you to feel that your own vocal contribution in the world is more alive and active.

What do I mean by this?

The material voice (that is the tone, pitch, rhythm, pace, volume, accent, inflection and so on) is all part of an individual's expressive voice and it falls under the influence of a range of personal and social factors, including those that are part of disposition, family background, friendship groups, national civic groups, the media, and so on.

Awareness about the ways in which we hear and receive the voices in our world with their sonic imprints can be vital in providing information about how those influences make our own vocal transformations possible.

As a white, lesbian, cis voice practitioner, this awareness has been important to my own understanding of my voice in the world. Many individuals who struggle to find their voice, due to the exclusions, dispossessions, and oppressions of the dominant culture, find it helpful, like me, to identify various intersectional social and personal elements in the formation of their voice.

Deelee Dubé: Tsitsi Dangarembga, in her novel *Nervous Conditions*, is a Zimbabwean woman who has lived both in the UK and Zimbabwe. She gives particular attention to the ways in which the trauma of the war for liberation from British colonialism impacts on her experience of growing up in the UK. She identifies how her experience has been compounded by a gendered position which has led her to feel less than prepared to express herself. We can hear this in the following quote where she makes intersectional links between race, gender, and colonialism in the formation of her voice:

It became evident to me that differences between how my brother and I had been brought up had impacted on our coping strategies. Standing up for oneself, knowing what one wanted and asking for it were not part of my daughterly repertoire. I thought young women looking to take advantage of the opportunities an independent Zimbabwe offered had to be warned about this.'
(Dangarembga 2021)

Jane Boston: We would like you to consider whether the individuals that come to your mind are politicians, musicians, actors, celebrities, TV presenters, news broadcasters, researchers, writers, historians, activists or other? Are they factual or fictional, archetypal or real? Are they from national or international mainstream settings or from localised community places, or from a combination of locations?

You may find that you recognise an attitude or tonal presence, rather than an actual distinct sound in the first instance. Pause for a moment, and after you have identified what it is about them that is significant, see if you can call up their actual voice in your head.

Deelee Dubé: Take a few moments to write down a few of the key individual voices and describe each one in any combination of words, colours drawings and doodles so that you begin to engage in a dialogue with their presence and their sonics. This provides you with the beginnings of an individualised 'intersectional' public and private sonic text.



[00:05:19] LISTENING EXERCISE

Deelee Dubé: What follows is a reflective listening exercise. For example, here are a few of the names of individuals that have made a difference to my life:

Michael Jackson: A controversial figure in the contemporary music scene, but someone who nevertheless greatly influenced my formative years. From a very young age not only had I enjoyed listening to Michael Jackson's music, but also his voice as a vocalist, humanitarian, and philanthropist. His soft-spoken timbre, and rounded falsetto was what made his voice instantly recognisable to the world, but for me it had provided a source of comfort and joy that equally represented his gentle nature by heart as well as his youthful spirit.

Sarah Vaughan: Although I came to really know and understand Sassy later in my life, I felt an instant connection through her voice and vocal timbre. I also felt a certain kind of resonance, and experienced a blending of cultural identity, recognition, and resemblance in her vocal tone to my own voice quality and timbre as a vocalist. I feel that much of this could perhaps pertain to the same typical shared cultural aspects, that being of African descent. However, the honey-like, soulful and golden texture of her mid-range and spoken voice do feel familiar to me. The lower cello tones of her vocal quality and timbre were elements that I discovered in my journey to finding my own voice. This brings to mind a quote from *DownBeat Magazine* which reads:

'[Dube] exploring the cello tones that informed her bottom register (and were reminiscent of The Divine One herself)'.

Miriam Makeba: Makeba's voice transports me to a place of comfort in that it reminds me of my mother's vocal tone, timbre and spoken voice. I'm reminded of white cotton linen, an innate feeling of gentle warmth.

Moira Stewart: I recall feeling rather intrigued by the sound of Moira Stewart's spoken voice, which I often heard during the 9 o'clock BBC News broadcast before bedtime. As a child I often wondered where she'd gotten her voice from, because she looked similar to me in appearance, but sounded rather distinctive and unique. Her voice sounded eloquently English, but was quite dark in timbre and texture, which created a picture of velvet opulence personified through her voice. If I had to assign a colour to her voice I would describe is a luxurious purple. Her vocal texture feels like stroking my hand against the rich woven fabric of a velvety surface (only in the opposite direction).

Trever McDonald: Watching the ITV News bulletin, I remember news Broadcaster, Trevor MacDonald being another key figure in my childhood years. His vocal quality had a distinctive, roundedness to it, and a highly recognizable vocal texture. He spoke eloquently with stern inflections, and his professional spoken voice stood out and sounded relatively familiar as a prominent Black British male figure within the mainstream media.

As a seven-year-old, I remember feeling quite drawn to a number of female vocalists such as Whitney Houston, Sade Adu, Tina Turner, Janet Jackson, Mariah Carey and Madonna, amongst others. All these key popular figures, besides being female, did represent something to me. The aforementioned singing voices bear significant contrasts in style, sound, register and tone with Whitney Houston's powerful, gospel driven singing voice, to Sade's aspirate, earthy, and dark nuanced tone and register. It is perhaps these various unique qualities and contrasts in vocal sounds that drew me in and influenced my younger self in an impactful way, particularly where my singing voice and vocal expression was concerned, and of course that appeal was coupled with their music.

I should highlight my tendency to cross-use between the terms tone and timbre interchangeably. Through a vocalist's lens, they somewhat seem to be seen as one and the same.



I invite you to listen to the following voices of individuals involved in the historical struggle for recognition of their place, rights and identity in the UK, the USA and Africa.

Please listen to the ways in which the tone, the pace, the rhythm of their voices, as well as the content of their message, has an impact on you and is described.

For example, in my case, I visualise Nelson Mandela's vocal colour as Brown. His diction/ phrasing/ vernacular/ dialect as South African/ Colonial RP/ English, eloquent, authoritative, direct, confident, assertive and bold. His quality of tone as rounded, lower register, grounded, resonant, moderately slow, but clear gradual and collected in spoken rhythmic pace.

In the following recording you will hear Winnie Mandela make a remark, where she states that 'he has the type of voice you can't say no to, when he asks you for a favour, he is in fact giving you a command in a very polite way'.

When I listen to Nelson Mandela speak, I often find it quite reminiscent of the sound of my grandmother's voice. That may be for several reasons pertaining to the fact that they shared the same homeland in Southern Africa, where there is a certain way of speaking that kind of reflects authoritativeness.

[00:14:47 to 00:15:55] Winnie Mandela quote from documentary *Mandela: Son of Africa, Father of a Nation* (1996)

[00:15:55 to 00:17:09] Extract from Stina Dabrowski's 1994 interview with Nelson Mandela

[00:17:10 to 00:18:31] Extract from Nelson Mandela's 'I am prepared to die' speech

Deelee Dubé: Now you know more about the ways in which you listen to voice, particularly to identify any habits in your responses, please take time to listen and note your feelings about the speakers coming up in the following episode Five.

Episode Five will continue with US author and poet James Baldwin. Following that is the American poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, followed by UK rapper and activist AKALA and finally Zambian native and chief executive of Christian Aid, Amanda Khozi Mukwashi.

Clips Summary

[00:14:47 to 00:15:55] Winnie Mandela quote from documentary *Mandela: Son of Africa, Father of a Nation* (1996)

[00:15:55 to 00:17:09] Extract from Stina Dabrowski's 1994 interview with Nelson Mandela

[00:17:10 to 00:18:31] Extract from Nelson Mandela's 'I am prepared to die' speech

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Notes

1. The term 'intersectional' was used by Kimberle Crenshaw to problematise the differentiation between gender and race in the lived experience of women of colour. See Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Colour', *Stanford Law Review* 46 (3): 1241-1299 as quoted on p20 *Act as a Feminist Towards a Critical Acting Pedagogy* by Lisa Peck: London: Routledge, 2021: 20).

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