



Decolonising the Voice 6: Tonalities and Tunes

[00:00:20] INTRODUCTION

Jane Boston: Welcome back to 'Decolonising the Voice'.

Please find yourself a comfortable, settled place as you take part in a brief writing exercise in response to the questions that will follow about the sonic materiality of your voice.

First though, a brief introduction. Podcasts one to five touched on subtle variations of the same idea – that the voice is comprised of a profound mix of personal, physiological, social, and cultural factors – and that it is never one thing. We have found it very helpful to consider that the voice is always in a state of being formed: no sooner sounded than it shifts again due to the influence of another set of variables. There is never just one fixed moment we can call the voice, but a series of ever-changing vocal signals that spring from different intentions and receive different responses.

This podcast asks that you reflect in detail on the tonality of the voice and the tunes or melodies it gives rise to.

It is important to clarify what the term 'tone' refers to, as it has arisen more than once in the previous podcasts. Gillyanne Kayes (and Jeremy Fisher) in their book *This is a Voice*, defines tone as being the same as the term 'timbre' which she defines as: 'The quality and tone of voice used when we sing and speak, denoting mood and emotion' (Fisher and Kayes 2016: 188).

With this in mind we can consider that the tone of the voice conveys not just the emotions and mood of the speaker but also the social, cultural, and physiological memory.

This broadcast is interested in exploring the ways in which tonal qualities in the voices we hear have an impact on the voices we express. We suggest it is important to challenge and resist dominant cultural vibrations, particularly in relation to the marginalised voice.

As US Scholar Nina Eidsheim says in her article about the pitch of the voice: it is subject to 'literal' social restrictions (Eidsheim 2012). By means of the exertion of social pressures that can reach into the physical fleshly and skeletal arrangements of the body, the tone of the voice gets subject to social constructions. They literally shape us.

Poet Selina Nwulu writes about the importance of better understanding how society imposes its dominant values on our own vocal shape and how resistance to those values, where they damage our individual capacity, is critical. She writes – and I quote – 'to understand the sweet spot between the personal and the political, how to talk about something difficult in a way that is engaging.' She goes on: 'My motivation is to talk about politics, race, climate change, the social injustices that surround us, but in a way that is beautiful and personal (Nwulu in Flood and Cain 2021).

In the hard work to decolonise the voice, Nwulu's words are important to hold on to.

Deelee Dubé: The recording you are about to hear is a poem titled 'A Strange Kind of Beauty' written and spoken by the Young Poet Laureate, Selina Nwulu in 2015.

[00:04:03 to 00:06:33] 'A Strange Kind of Beauty' by Selina Nwulu, read by the author

Deelee Dubé: 'A Strange Kind of Beauty' by Selina Nwulu, Young Poet Laureate for London 2015/16 is a poem commissioned by A New Direction, London's flagship cultural education agency, as a response to the challenges young Londoners face in engaging and contributing to the creative and cultural life of their city.



In this poem, we can hear in her fantastical words the significance of a ‘helix of hybrid noises, words, neon colours and shapes’ in the lives of young Global Majority Londoners. We hear in Nwulu’s personal and direct tone, how a re-positioned perspective, more relevant to a white de-centred view of the world, gives new ‘shape’ to young Londoners’ lives so that ‘wherever they go, they will not live less’. The fusion of personal tonality and imaginative content offers heartfelt resistance in the wider interests of decolonising the voice.

[00:08:00] WRITING EXERCISE – Tonalities

Deelee Dubé: Next up I have 3 questions for you to think about.

1. How would you describe the tonal quality of the voices around you that have given you the most emotional support in your life journey?

For example, I tend to respond to warm, clear, unthreatening, encouraging and inspiring tones – a voice that holds me up and does not silence. Some people struggle to offer the tone of support, voices that don’t oppress us. It is so easy for the voice to shift into the area of making someone feeling down-trodden or oppressed. When I speak to certain people that isn’t always evident/present and I don’t always get the elevation that I need in that given moment. I tend to seek what I need from different sources – certain people, like friends – and believe that the impact on us is created by what we hear, who we speak to and who we listen to. The sonics have an impact and if I happen to not be feeling on top of it, I know who not to go to. After all, we are what we hear and receive.

2. How would you describe the quality of the voices around you that have given you the most courage?

3. How would you describe the voices around you that have given you the most inspiration?

Take a few moments to write down your thoughts about the questions I’ve just proposed to you.

[00:10:10] LISTENING EXERCISE – Tonalities

Deelee Dubé: Please listen to the following examples of a range of tonal vocal qualities drawn from a variety of cultural backgrounds, pick out your top three and write down some of the reasons why you have chosen them.

Please use any terms that help you to define your choices about the tone of voice and, if it helps to use terms drawn from the field of voice, that is great.

Think about noticing any tonal features in the type of voice that impacts on you in a positive way and those patterns and characteristics that sit more negatively. We might, for example, use terms that refer to features that are perceived to be warmer, or harsher, sharper, or softer.

Try not to be too judgmental about your answers but let them arise so that you can gain a deeper understanding about the ways in which you listen and respond to the voices around you – those close, those near, and those far.

Next up is a selection of five live recordings for you to choose your top three from.

This first recording is of a poem written and narrated by award-winning South African Theatre Practitioner, slam poet and writer Koleka Putuma. In her powerful expression, it is apparent that her theatre context gives rise to a vocal range informed by a wide breadth of tonality, volume, pitch movement and emphasis.

[00:12:08 to 00:14:37] Extract from ‘Voices from within’ TEDx talk by Koleka Putuma



In this next recording by American poet and musician activist Gil Scott Heron, it is notable that the influence of blues musicianship and the specific literary legacy of the Harlem Renaissance informs his rich spoken exchange with a live audience. He sounds tonally vibrant when speaking to the values of US Black literary inheritance and vivid in his claims to its importance to his identity and that of other audience members.

[00:15:19 to 00:17:59] Extract from ‘On blues and poetry’ by Gil Scott Heron

In this third recording we hear the racist tones of the media interview in which it sounds as if Sidney Poitier is being hounded by the one dimensionality of his interviewers rather than being celebrated for his career. It is significant that the media sound attacking in their tone – monotoned; and Poitier sounds on the defensive tonally; not able to express the full range of his vocal capacity when he responds: Why are you guys on hand for bad news?

[00:18:53 to 00:21:17] Extract from ‘Reporters Ask Sidney Poitier His Views on Race (1968)’

In this clip we hear the full richness of Shakespearean content meeting contemporary Black vocalicity in ways that are reminiscent of the voice we heard earlier by Putema in a South African theatrical context. The theatre context seems to give permission for a fuller spectrum of tonality than that expressed in an ordinary spoken context.

[00:21:45 to 00:23:28] Extract from ‘What determines who we are?’ TEDx talk by Adjoa Andoh

In this final clip of Refilwe Pieterse, we hear the tonal agonies present in the magnitude of racism in her performance of the poem ‘Black Child’. In the range of spoken sounds utilised, Pieterse evokes a vocal resistance that reaches well above the bar of everyday conversation and evokes the realms of opportunity afforded by the mobilisation of theatre actions.

[00:23:59 to 00:26:25] ‘Black Child’ by Selaelo Maredi, performed by Refilwe Pieterse

Think about the tonal quality in the voices that you have just heard as they set up specific kinds of vibrations and seem – as if – to enable different embodied sensations in you as you listen. Write down any standout observations about the following areas:

- a) Settled internal feelings of comfort and ease in the mind
- b) Sensations of physical relaxation and restoration to support you in your day to day
- c) Sensations of excitement on the breath that equate to curiosity and hope about the future.

[00:27:25] WRITING EXERCISE –Tunes

Jane Boston: Now you are experienced in noting down descriptions of the voices around you, we offer one final writing exercise where you can write down in your notebook the pitch movement patterns and emphasis patterns in your own voice.

Think about your own spoken tune as if it were a melody or song and allow yourself to let it go where it wants to go in a free form way at this moment without concerning yourself with communicating to anyone specific. Sing it out and enjoy sustaining it in ways that you wouldn’t normally do in your spoken life.

Draw your connections and links on a visual voice map where colour and lines allow you to make visual comparisons and differences with the vocal patterns of two influential speakers in your life. Who are they in terms of the tune they bring? Can you identify anything about its movement as pitch that has stood out?

Finally, write down any word associations that come to mind as you think about the voices that make you feel most vocally joyful and expansive and reflect whether there is anything about these voices that allows you to feel vocally free.



Deelee Dubé: Relax and notice the breath. Stretch and shake out, and give yourself a few minutes to notice your feelings and sensations in the body before you go back to your day.

Clips Summary

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