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WOMEN AS ANIMAL, WOMEN AS ALIEN: RECLAIMING WOMEN'S DEMONIC VOICES

“Voices are produced by bodies: but can also themselves produce bodies”.

STEVEN CONNOR, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*

In “Why Not Our Voices?” (Lane, 2016a), I investigated some of the ways in which women artists were using voice in their sound work to challenge historical and contemporary cultural assumptions about women’s voices. This chapter investigates more deeply how women are made alien or “othered” by society, that is, separated out from the normative, tacitly conceptualised as white, human, and male, through the reception of their material voices.

Central to this act of alienation is the historical imperative to silence women’s voices in the public sphere. In her public lecture tracing the construc-

tion of the (male) “voice of authority”, British classicist Mary Beard tells us that right from the beginning of writing in western culture there is evidence that “an integral part of growing up, as a man, is learning to take control of public utterance and to silence the female of the species” (2014). Beard also cites the first example in Western literature of a man telling woman to shut up, which is in *The Odyssey* when Telemachus, son of Penelope and Odysseus, tells his mother that speech is a man’s business.

Women’s voices are silenced and demonised in many ways. One of the most common is through

pitch. Low speaking voices signify authority and in order to gain authority it is accepted that women need to learn how to speak more like a man (Garber, 2012). In order to effect an acoustic transition between gender binaries, women need to become, if not a “speaking proto-man” and certainly not a “sounding woman”, then something somewhere in between: a vocal gender neutrality that does not upset or threaten. On the other hand, women with relatively high-pitched speaking voices tend to be seen as attractive, by men in particular, with voice pitch indicating her average oestrogen levels and maybe advertising her state of health and fertility (O’Luanigh, 2010).

High singing voices, however, are seen as “other worldly” when deviating from the normative low male voice, for example, the voices of the boy soprano or the male castrati. When attached to a recognisably female gendered body, high pitched voices can be accepted if they are characterised as either the epitome of purity (often referred to as “the voice of an angel”), or as an unthreatening, friendly alien, such as the blue Diva Plavalaguna, a famous and revered operatic performer in the film *The Fifth Element* (1997). More commonly, however, they are considered horrific, shrill, and demonic, and a number of contemporary women sound artists and experimental musicians have lent their voices to film to create these atmospheres (examples include Diamanda Galas [*A Nightmare On Elm Street*, 1985 and *The Conjuring*, 2013], Joan La Barbara [*Alien*, 1979], and Katalin Ladik [*Berberian Sound Studio*, 2012]).

The voice seems to be at once inherently human, but also potentially troubling to such a slippery category. The voice in joy, the voice in love, the voice in labour (both work and procreation), the voice in pain, the voice in misery

– *these intimate yet often impersonal sounds threaten to expose the human being as an animal, a monster or even an alien* (PETTMAN, 2017, p. 5).

Another way that this alienation is achieved is through the likening of women to animals, comparing them with all that is lowly and venial. Journalist Sally Feldman tells us how, “they screech like fishwives, laugh like drains, shriek like hyenas, nag like sirens, cackle like hens” (Feldman, 2008). The comparison of women with animals is deep rooted in British culture, where the phrase “you silly old moo” (“moo” standing in here for “cow”) entered common parlance through the popular BBC television situation comedy *Till Death Us Do Part*, aired from 1965 to 1975. Apparently “moo” was not scripted but came out when the actor forgot the line “silly old mare”. In the English language the term for a female dog, wolf, fox, or otter (“bitch”) is widespread as a term of abuse for a person, usually a woman, who is seen as belligerent, unreasonable, malicious, or is just standing up for themselves. In the Spanish language, the the word “zorra”, the name for a female fox, is used similarly, though it has overtones relating to women’s sexual availability.

More recently, Donald Trump has been called out on his sexist behaviour by Megyn Kelly from US Fox News, who reminded him: “You have called women you don’t like ‘fat pigs’, ‘dogs’, ‘slobs’, and ‘disgusting animals’”. Trump laughed off the question, claiming he doesn’t “have the time for total political correctness”. Later, Trump called Kelly HYPERLINK “<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/629553612839124992>” a “bimbo” and said that he “didn’t recognise” the remarks she was referencing (Bahadur, 2016).

In *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2015), Carol J.

Adams uses the idea of the “absent referent” to interweave her theory of the links between the oppression of women and of animals.

Behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of an animal whose place the meat takes. The “absent referent” is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. The function of the absent referent is to keep our “meat” separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep out “moo” or “cluck” or “baa” away from the meat, to keep something being seen as someone (ADAMS, 2015, p. xxiv).

Intrinsic to this is the idea that the animal has a voice – a “moo” or “cluck” or “baa” – and that voice is one of the things that keeps it “being seen as ‘someone’”. When that voice is taken away the animal becomes “something”, i.e. meat, or a foodstuff to be consumed.

Mary Beard tells us of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,

... that extraordinary mythological epic about people changing shape (and probably the most influential work of literature on Western art after the Bible) – repeatedly returns to the idea of the silencing of women in the process of their transformation. Poor Io is turned into a cow by Jupiter, so she cannot talk but only moo (2014).

Beard goes on to quote the American novelist Henry James, who writes about,

the polluting, contagious and socially destructive effect of women’s voices ... Under Ameri-

can women’s influence, he insisted, language risks becoming a “generalised mumble or jumble, a tongueless slobber or snarl or whine”; it will sound like “the moo of the cow, the bray of the ass, and the bark of the dog” (2014).

Here women are not merely likened to animals in order to devalue and undermine them. They are silenced by being turned into animals, unable to speak words only “a tongueless slobber or snarl or whine”, just as animals are themselves silenced, unable to voice their own distinctive “moo” or “cluck” or “baa”, to be turned into meat. This separation of the voice from its body, whether it is the voice of the woman or the voice of the animal, somehow allows the body to be thought of as something else.

Adams links this silencing, and the control of the silenced bodies of women or animals, firmly to sexual politics and patriarchy:

the way gender politics is structured into our world is related to how we view animals, especially animals who are consumed. Patriarchy is a gender system that is implicit in human/animal relationships ... Manhood is constructed in our culture, in part, by access to meat eating and control of other bodies (1990, pp. xxvi-xxvii).

In the same way that separating the body from the voice allows the body to be thought of as something else, separating voice from the body also allows the voice to be thought of something else.

The beautiful, unearthly, alien and seductive voices of the mythological half-woman, half-bird sirens belie their horrible appearance and murderous qualities. Sailors have to block their ears with beeswax in order not to hear them. Surely, when

these hapless men hear the siren song they imagine and are forced to seek out altogether more attractive singers? Maybe, here again, we can see the operation of the “absent referent”, in this case it is a beautiful woman referred to and imagined through the reception of a beautiful voice. Thus, the disembodied voice has the power to produce an imaginary body in the mind’s ear of the listener and, as American scholar Lauren Berlant has theorised, “desire is only secondarily about relations between bodies, and primarily about voices and the intimate attachments they engender” (Pettman, 2017, p. 27).

In *Sonic Intimacy*, Pettman quotes a tweet about the American director Spike Jonze’s film *Her* (2013). In the film, Theodore, played by Joaquin Phoenix, falls in love with Samantha, his computer operating system: “I’d say *Her* is a movie about [the education of] an interesting woman who falls in love with a man who, though sweet, is mired in biology” (2017, p. 13). Samantha, voiced by Scarlet Johansson, is primarily a disembodied voice, although certainly in possession of a personality, as she says herself:

Samantha: What makes me me is my ability to grow through my experiences, so basically in every moment I’m evolving, just like you.

Theodore: Well, you seem like a person but you’re just a voice in a computer.

Samantha: I can understand how the limited perspective of a non-artificial mind might perceive it that way (Her, 2014).

The promise of the disembodied voice is its ability (and, in the case of the sirens, its liability), to take any form in the mind of the listener. Just as the sirens voices are high, beautiful, and pure, Johansson’s is breathy, husky, and sexy, conforming to

what we imagine to be a normative image of an attractive potential female lover for the heterosexual male. Anne Karpf tells us that,

The case of the breathy voices is particularly interesting. In sexual intimacy because hormonal factors change the copiousness and consistency of lubricating mucus in the larynx, making it vibrate less efficiently, the voices of both men and women become breathy. Breathly voice has therefore come to be associated with sexiness (2007, p. 168).

But what of sound artists deliberately changing their voices to create a different body from the one that they possess in the mind of the listener. The most obvious and celebrated example must be Laurie Anderson’s use of the “voice of authority”:

The Nova Convention¹ was the first time I used the Harmoniser to alter my voice. This is a digital filter that I tuned to drop the pitch of my voice so that I sounded like a man. The Machismo surrounding Burroughs was thick and this filter was my weapon, my defence. It was the first time I used an audio mask, and being in drag was thrilling! (Goldberg, 2000, p. 58).

Anderson’s use of the “voice of authority” or “voice of control”, which later transforms into the character Fenway Bergamot (featured on the cover of *Homeland*, her 2010 album), is a voice of rebellion. “The voice started out as the voice of a pompous windbag. It was fun to tweak people who are always telling you what to do” (Novak, 2015, p. 138). Freeing her artistically, socially, and politically, she says of this voice, “any kind of stupid thing that I wouldn’t do in front of people, I can have Fenway do” (ibid.). So Anderson uses this vocal drag to help

her think like a man, to inhabit the mind/body of a man through her technologised, transformed voice.

Anderson's play with gender binaries seems to be surprisingly rare within contemporary sound arts practice. Music, however, furnishes a wider selection of examples of aspects of vocal drag. Composers of early and Baroque music often wrote for the counter tenor or adult male falsetto and some contemporary counter tenors, such as the Brazilian Ney Matogrosso and the German Klaus Nomi, developed performance personas that strive to appear "genderless" and non-normative. In popular music, the use of the male falsetto (for example, Tiny Tim, Chet Baker, Little Richard, Brian Wilson, Justin Timberlake, Frank Ocean) is in some cases coupled with playing with ambiguous gender roles, e.g. Sylvester, Prince, Esquerita. Brian Wilson of the American band The Beach Boys,

gave up singing falsetto because he felt that he sounded "like a little girl ... a sick chick". Al Jardine later theorised that Brian purposely ravaged his voice with cigarettes and drugs to get a rougher, more "manly" voice, like his brother Dennis (Segretto, 2012).

Recent independent artists such as Swedish duo The Knife and British experimental musician Planningtorock have used technology to transform their vocal pitch. Planningtorock has said about her own vocal work with a lowered voice that she is playing with the "idea of queering sonics, making non-heteronormative music" (Williams, 2014).

These examples are all situated firmly within music making, whereas there seem to be few people working within sound art that have consistently changed their own speaking voice in order to deliberately adopt a new persona, whether another

gender or another species, through the use of technology or otherwise. While Anderson uses technology to make herself her own ventriloquist's dummy, still controlled by her "straight" persona, performance and lip sync artist Dickie Beau "performs" to the speeches and voice of another, silently mouth-ing their words and operating a kind of reverse ventriloquism. The technique of speaking or ventriloquising another person's words, breaking the link between sound and appearance to deliberately mismatch voice or words and body are familiar in contemporary sound works using the voice.

In her film *Voicings* (2011), Laura Malacart uses this technique to invite the listener to reflect upon their own prejudices when listening to people speaking English as a second language. The work uses the written accounts of refugees to the UK as scripts, which the professional actors and language coaches learn in order to deliver them in as convincing a manner as possible. Its power lies in the slippage between the professional speaking voices with their perfect English enunciation, the language full of syntactical and grammatical errors contained in the refugees' accounts, and the bodily appearances of the readers. In this case, the play is not with gender but with ethnicity and racial identity (Lane, 2016b).

In her writings about the ubiquitous recorded voice of control heard in public service announcements in the UK, academic and writer Nina Power observes that,

The petty everyday fused forms of multiple female stereotypes: the manipulator of banal information, the carer, the mother, the secretary, the careful one, the one supposed to be concerned about safety, haunt the mechanised female voice, and the words this voice is forced to speak (2013).

In previous writings I have observed how female sound artists have adopted and used some of these stereotypical female personas in their work (2016a), taking on and potentially gently parodying normative social views of women. Anderson's gendered vocal play seems at once to belong to a part of a previous decade of less theorised and complex gender identities, and to be technologically and artistically innovative. For Nina Power

the androgynous sonics of the still human but perfectly genderless, hint at another world entirely: a world not of heavily sexed coercion

and control, but of a world in which words are less servants of domination than opportunities for experimentation, of the music of words themselves (2013).

I would expand that to include other species and matter, and add human "coercion and control".

As sound arts practice expands and as the thinking about gendered power relationships, but also about those between species and matter, develops and refines, I suggest there is an urgent need for artists to interrogate the relationships between voice, language, technology, gender, and species.

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1 The Nova Convention was a two-day festival celebrating the work of William Burroughs. It took place in New York in 1978 and included performances by Kathy Acker, John Cage, Philip Glass, Timothy Leary, Susan Sontag, Patti Smith, and Frank Zappa.