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Review Essay

Vox Libris: A Review Essay

Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), ISBN: 978-1-78023-258-4 (hb).

Brandon LaBelle, *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), ISBN: 978-1-62356-188-8 (pb).



Figure 1 Two books lie on a nightstand . . .

THE SCENE: *A darkened bedroom, long past midnight.*

> *Two Books lie on a nightstand, facing one another, the front edges of their dog-eared pages intermingled like a shuffled deck of cards. Their Reader, a harried academic, tosses and turns in the bed next to them, trying in vain to get to sleep. His wife's slow breathing tells him she has dozed off.*[1] *A quiet stream of glossolalia reaches his ears from the next room: his daughter is talking in her sleep again.*[2] *He curses softly, frustrated with his insomnia and his inability to finish the review essay he is writing on the two*

1 See Connor, 33–9 and LaBelle, 75–82 on breath.

2 See LaBelle, 64–5 on glossolalia and 92–4 on sleep talk.

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books.[3] *Rolling over violently onto his side, he readjusts the sheets, clears his throat, and then tries to lie still.*[4] *In the relative quiet of the dark room, he becomes aware of the sound of two voices engaged in a hushed dialogue.*[5] *Is it the upstairs neighbours – or is he dreaming?*[6] *He can't tell. Straining to make out the muffled words, he realizes to his shock that the Books on the nightstand are* murmuring *to one another.*[7] *The book nearest to him appears to have a posh British accent; the other speaks with the flat intonations of the American heartland.*[8] *Heart pounding, he quietly retrieves his laptop from the floor and begins transcribing their conversation:*

Book #1: What is the voice?[9]

Book #2: Is not the voice always already intervening, as a sounded body that searches for its place, one that projects forward to incite response?[10]

#1: The voice is always a dream voice, and we can never speak about the experience of the voice except in the register of fantasy, desire, phantom, myth.[11]

#2: The voice is that primary event that circulates to wrap us in its sonorities, silences and rhythms, and intonations. It operates as an essential force that animates the other to bring him or her closer to me, while also prompting my own [. . .] I turn to the other, with a voice shaped by *this other one*: I speak in order to locate myself near you.[12]

#1: Even, and perhaps especially when we may speak of the materiality of the voice, we evoke imaginary substance and mythical powers.[13]

#2: [And] voicing is so pleasing precisely because it is something we create, as a fundamental exhalation, excretion – a gift, a power, an emanation brought up from within.[14]

The Reader, who has been transcribing as quietly as possible up to now, fails to stifle a burp, which resonates loudly in the dark bedroom.[15] *He grimaces in panic;*[16] *the Books fall silent.*[17] *He*

3 See Connor, 128–9 and LaBelle, 43 on cursing.

4 See LaBelle, 31–3 and Connor, 7–10 and 32–4, on the cough. See also Connor, 85–6 on mucus, and LaBelle, 44 on Yoko Ono's 'Cough Piece'.

5 See Connor, 195–6 and LaBelle, 145 on the dynamics and value of vocal dialogue.

6 See LaBelle, 91–2 on auditory hallucinations and Connor, 17 on the 'phantasm of the "living voice"'.

7 See Connor, 83 on the murmur, and 82 on inanimate objects 'talking'; see LaBelle, 48 on voices 'animat[ing] the inanimate'.

8 See LaBelle, 161–4 and Connor, 125–6 on accent.

9 Connor, 17.

10 LaBelle, 1.

11 Connor, 17.

12 LaBelle, 3.

13 Connor, 17.

14 LaBelle, 101.

15 See Connor, 70, 128, and 136, and LaBelle, 42, on belching.

16 See LaBelle, 84 on facial expressions.

17 See LaBelle ,76–7 and 140–5, and Connor, 72–3 and 200, on silenced voices.

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holds his breath, praying that they will continue.[18] *After what seems like an eternity, Book #2 resumes the conversation, uttering in a low voice:*

#2 It is my view that the mouth is unavoidable.[19]

Book #1 concurs:

#1: I cannot speak except by a joining of my mouth to yours, and to that of every other speaker of what I may recognize as my language, or perhaps any language in general. Speaking is a convocation of mouths, miming and mirroring each other.[20]

#2: The mouth is thus wrapped up in the voice, and the voice in the mouth, so much so that to theorize the performativity of the spoken is to confront the tongue, the teeth, the lips, and the throat; it is to feel the mouth as a fleshy, wet lining around each syllable, as well as a texturing orifice that marks the voice with specificity, not only in terms of accent or dialect, but also by the depth of expression so central to the body.[21]

#1: More than anything, the mouth is a place in which something compounds with nothing, the place in which nothing is able to take place, and nonbeing to come into audible being.[22]

Book #2 riffles its pages and sighs in agreement, and the two texts fall silent.[23]

The Reader, strangely soothed by these utterances, slips off into the audible non-being of sleep, his laptop still balanced on his stomach, his hands still resting on the keyboard. His left hand twitches, improbably erasing the transcript. The little finger on his left hand unconsciously presses down on a single key, sending a snakelike string of Zs across the white expanse of the screen.[24] *A deep, resonant snore,*[25] *along with a small rivulet of drool,*[26] *issues from his slack, open mouth.*[27]

Curtain.

* * *

Voices clamour for attention wherever they are found, be it in 'real life', in art, in scholarship, or along the semi-permeable membranes and thin gauze curtains that connect and divide the

18 See Connor, 40 and Labelle, 76 on holding the breath.

19 LaBelle, 3.

20 Connor, 196.

21 LaBelle, 1.

22 Connor, 196.

23 See Labelle, 84–5 and Connor, 54–7 on the sigh.

24 See Connor, 162–93 on the letter 'z'.

25 See Connor, 122 and 162, on the snore.

26 See LaBelle, 40–1 on drool.

27 See Connor, 123–4 on the relationship between the gaping mouth and chaos, and LaBelle, 76–7 on the gaping mouth and existential horror in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers.*

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three. Of course, vocal genres (from Gregorian chant to *lieder*, from *opera buffa* to lament) have been an ongoing concern in musicology since its inception. However, as this special voice-themed issue amply demonstrates, the interdisciplinary study of voice *qua* voice – the study of voice as an entity that exceeds its instrumentality within a single genre or discipline – is an emergent practice that is still gathering momentum.[28] The two books under review here are part of this growing wave of voice-centred scholarship, and we will need to understand the general contours of that wave before we can pinpoint their positions within it and measure the energy that they contribute to it.

By the last decade of the twentieth century, the interdisciplinary rubric of 'voice studies' had coalesced into three broad and often collegial camps, all of which currently claim partial purchase on the malleable term. First, research within what might be termed 'empirical' or 'clinical' or 'applied' voice studies has drawn singers, voice coaches, laryngologists, neurobiologists, biomechanical and robotics engineers, speech pathologists, and computer scientists into exciting collaborations on a number of fronts. Neuropsychological research has revealed the neural pathways that participate in the perception, recognition, and processing of vocal sounds.[29] Recent advances in synthetic voices have significantly broadened the options of people who rely on technology to speak.[30] The fMRI has enabled the real-time examination of the discrete movements of the tongue and other elements of the vocal apparatus, which has led to a more nuanced understanding of a number of vocal pathologies.[31] Collagen matrices taken from pig larynx and studded with human stem cells are being used experimentally to facilitate the regeneration of damaged vocal fold tissue.[32] And technological developments, from sophisticated voice recognition software to post-autotune pitch correction, have spread from the tech lab and recording studio to the much more expansive world of consumer-grade digital devices.

Tracing a largely non-intersecting path through the voice, a growing number of humanities scholars are contributing to a broad investigation of vocality that can be glossed as the 'psychological', 'philosophical' or (my preferred term) 'universalist' camp of voice studies.

28 The recent establishment of new voice-centred journals (e.g., *The Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies*), the release of new edited volumes (e.g., *Voice Studies: Critical Approaches to Process, Performance and Experience,* ed. Konstantinos Thomaidis and Ben Macpherson (London and New York: Routledge, 2015)), and the upcoming publication of the *Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies* (ed. Nina Sun Eidsheim and Katherine Meizel, in press) confirm the increasing salience of 'voice studies' as an interdisciplinary rubric.

29 For a helpful overview of neuroscientific work on voice production, perception, and processing, see Diana Sidtis and Jody Kreiman, 'The Brain Behind the Voice: Cerebral Models of Voice Production and Perception', in *Foundations of Voice Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Voice Production and Perception* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 189–236.

30 Rupal Patel's 'VocalID' project is at the forefront of these efforts. See Timothy Mills, H. Timothy Bunnell, and Rupal Patel, 'Towards Personalized Speech Synthesis for Augmentative and Alternative Communication', *Augmentative and Alternative Communication* 30/3 (2014), 226–36; or simply watch her TED Talk on the subject: www.ted.com/talks/rupal˙patel˙synthetic˙voices˙as˙unique˙as˙fingerprints?language=en.

31 A good introduction to dynamic MRI work on the vocal apparatus can be found on a site created by Professor John Coleman in the Oxford University Phonetics Laboratory: www.phon.ox.ac.uk/jcoleman/Dynamic˙MRI.html.

32 See, for example, E. A. Wrona et al., 'Derivation and Characterization of Porcine Vocal Fold Extracellular Matrix Scaffold', *The Laryngoscope* 00 (2015), 1–8.

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Human vocality, universalists point out, has been an object of philosophical inquiry since at least the time of Aristotle. The Greek philosopher's brief musings on voice and soul in *De Anima* form the foundation of an eclectic canon of voice-centred work that includes mythological fiction (Narcissus and Echo; Apollo and Marsyas; Odysseus and the Sirens); scholarly essays (by McLuhan, Ong, Barthes, Schaeffer, Derrida, Lacan, Althusser, Chion, Dolar, and Ihde); theatre (by Shakespeare, by Artaud), experimental music (Cage's 'Empty Words', Lucier's 'I am Sitting in a Room', Bob Ashley's operas, Diamanda Galas's singing), film (*The Great Dictator, Psycho*), performance art (Chris Burden's 'Velvet Water', Marina Abramovic's scream pieces), and even painting (the ubiquitous *Scream* by Munch). Much academic writing on the subject draws upon this canon to present voice as an aporia that encompasses but vastly exceeds the realms of speech and singing. Cast as an uncanny, slippery, transgressive entity that blurs the boundaries between interiority and exteriority, body and language, individual and society, the voice emerges as a kind of universal paradox: an 'elusive', 'strange object',[33] 'the excrement of the signifier',[34] something that is at once individual and ubiquitous, ephemeral and timeless. In short, this orientation treats the voice as an occasion to probe the complexities of the human condition. Far more than a mere vehicle for communication or art, the universalist voice is nothing less than the inimitable sound of the enigma of the self.

At the same time, a growing body of qualitative research has answered the call, issued by Steve Feld, Aaron Fox, Amanda Weidman, and others, to create a 'vocal anthropology' (Feld et al.)[35] or 'critical anthropology of voice' (Weidman), 'one that might destabilize both the representational metaphor of "voice" and the musicological discourse within which the sound and performance of voice are so often contained'.[36] Anthropological authors differ greatly from those who write within the universalist paradigm, both in substance and in tone. Substantively, their work tends to be particularist and constructivist, critiquing the assumption, common in psychoanalytic and philosophical writing, that the human voice (singular) is enveloped within a relatively unified field of transhistorical, pan- or pre-cultural metaphors – that by contemplating voice within a purportedly neutral field of introspection one can make meaningful suppositions about the significance of vocality for the species. Weidman's work is exemplary in this regard, demonstrating how the widespread equation of 'voice' with Enlightenment concepts of agency, self, and essence fails to obtain cleanly within the world of female Karnatic singing in twentieth-century South India.[37]

33 Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema,* ed. trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 1.

34 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 20.

35 Steven Feld, Aaron A. Fox, Thomas Porcello and David Samuels, 'Vocal Anthropology: From the Music of Language to the Language of Song', in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology,* ed. Alessandro Duranti (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 321–45.

36 Amanda Weidman, 'Gender and the Politics of Voice: Colonial Modernity and Classical Music in South India', *Cultural Anthropology* 18/2 (2003), 196.

37 Amanda Weidman, *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

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If the epistemological rift that separates the universalist and particularist camps is occasionally, interestingly breached, the most consistent difference between them may be stylistic. Anthropological writing on voice, concerned as it is with the production of difference within concrete vocal communities, many of them marginalized, displays a seriousness of tone that is de rigueur within contemporary ethnographic writing. By contrast, universalist writers commonly allow their prose to luxuriate within vocality's rhythms, producing playful (or, to their critics, self-indulgent) works that bear an iconic relationship to the sensual and transgressive qualities of voice that they privilege. To put it crudely, particularist writing on voice criticizes; universalist writing on voice rhapsodizes.

The two books under review here contribute most powerfully to the universalist orientation within voice studies, revealing and revelling in the enigma of the voice as an essential human attribute. Although each draws insights from discrete vocal milieus (the history of Anglophone literature for Connor, the world of experimental art for LaBelle), both are less concerned with the particular dynamics of individual vocal practices than with the universal underpinnings of voice and of the bodies that produce it. Despite the manifest differences between Connor's and LaBelle's texts, both emphasize the essential, embodied materiality of the voice; both present voice as an entity that is fused to and dependent upon another (the mouth for LaBelle, language for Connor); and, to varying degrees, both regard voice as an appropriate subject for play and even whimsy. Finally, in contrast to all empirical and most anthropological treatments of voice, both frame their subject in terms of *magic*.

Steven Connor's *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters, and Other Vocalizations* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) is concerned 'not so much with *language* as with how folk apprehensions of the workings of language help to form an imaginary or even *magical conception of the voice*' (14, my emphasis). In this taut treatise (5.5" x 8.9", 201 pages of text, 21 pages of notes, no illustrations), Connor engages with the world of language by prowling around its periphery, collecting 'vocal noise' or 'quasi-locutions' that straddle the border between sense and nonsense, between intentional speech and a clearing of the throat. The book is structured taxonomically, with each chapter comprising a social and literary history of a particular sound cluster. A single example will give you a sense of the terrain Connor maps.

The chapter pithily titled 'Mmmm' commences with an assertion of a primal connection between the bilabial nasal and the physical connection between mother and child. 'When the infant's mouth is pleasurably plugged with the breast, the only way for sound to get out is through its nose', Connor explains, and the 'mmms' that result audibly blur the boundary between speaking and eating, between communication and survival. It is not arbitrary, then, that 'mmm' is the sound we use 'to express the gustatory delight in something that is actually beyond words' (72). The trans-sense quality of 'mmm' is then traced through some of its many manifestations: from 'um', the vocal performance of a pause, through to 'mum' and 'dummy', whose 'mmmms' gesture towards the mute's inability to speak. The muteness of 'mmm' brings Connor to the 'mime', and from there to an associative chain that includes 'mummery', 'mammering', 'hemming', 'humming', 'stammering'. Having quickly accumulated, over the course of a few pages, a collection of 'mmmms' that evoke

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and perform the speechless body, Connor embarks on a more sustained explication of 'the mystical vocable *Om*, or *Aum*' that includes a close reading of excerpts from the Upanishads (74–5). 'Mmmm' here functions as a kind of sonic glue, connecting the nursing infant with the 'oceanic', 'unbounded' realm of transcendental nothingness. This is also the realm of magic, another 'm' word. Among the terms that, for Connor, partake in the 'narcotic charge' of 'm' are '*myth, music, meditation*', '*mysticism, dream, imagination*', and '*numinous*' (76). (Perhaps surprisingly, the dreamy magic of the double-m'd *mushroom* did not make this list.)

The meandering maze of 'm's' continues, as the reader lurches vertiginously from 'mathematics' to 'mumbo-jumbo', from 'mummy' to 'muff-diver'. Along the way, Connor seeds his 'mmm'-musings with an extended excursus on the Kabbala, along with passing references to Samuel Coleridge, William James, Sigmund Freud, James Joyce, Dylan Thomas, John Keats, Francis Mercury Van Helmont (the seventeenth-century Flemish alchemist), John Donne, Lewis Carroll, and Fritz Lang's *M,* among others.

Brief but thoughtful discussions of nasality and humming lead to the most extended section in the chapter, on the metaphysics of the 'bull-roarer', the widely dispersed family of instruments that are twirled on a string above the head to create a 'low, pulsing, humming drone'. In Connor's treatment, which relies conspicuously on the accounts of nineteenth-century colonial ethnographers, the hum of the bull-roarer connects aboriginal peoples to the majestic terrors of the environment (e.g., earthquakes, volcanoes), the vicissitudes of weather (with the instrument's hum understood to be summoning wind), and the world of spirits. He submits the bull-roarer to a kind of ambivalent Freudian reading, in which it becomes at once the phallic symbol par excellence, both looking and sounding like the thunderous figure of the father, and the howl of what J. Layard called the 'Female Devouring Ghost' (102).

In 'Mmmm', and throughout *Beyond Words* generally, Connor is attempting a delicate operation. On the one hand, he argues forcefully against the pure arbitrariness of language; it is clear that the nasality of the 'm' and the buzzy, zigzaggy zest of the 'z' have some exclusive affordances that prevent them from being fully interchangeable. On the other, he emphatically resists any kind of simplistic argument about the iconicity of language. While the resemblance of certain phonemes to their referents remains a theme throughout *Beyond Words*, Connor stresses that the relationship between the two is radically contingent. In other words, he locates the iconicity of language not (or not exclusively) within actual empirical similarities between signifier and signified, but within an ongoing, cumulative sense of appropriateness that is at its core social, and, more specifically, aesthetic. The *phonaesthetic clusters* that he analyses accrue over time within linguistic (read: vocal) communities, and amount to a kind of collective 'magical thinking' that ends up performing the linkage between sound and sense into existence (76–7). 'Like many other forms of magical thinking', Connor states, 'it is a form of error that bends things into its image, insisting itself into a kind of truth'. With respect to 'mmmm', his is a subtle but vital distinction:

> I am arguing, not for the simple actuality of the effects of the bilabial nasal, considered as what Margaret Magnus calls a 'god in the word', or consonantal 'archetype', but

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> for the reality of the fact that we seem, in our uses of and attitudes towards language, to assume this actuality. (104)

The magic of vocality is thus the product of voices over time, working their way around and through the mother tongue. Nearly forty years after Barthes' famous essay, Connor has figured out a way to bring us back, productively, to the grain of the voice.

The magic in Brandon LaBelle's *Lexicon of the Mouth: Poetics and Politics of Voice and the Oral Imaginary* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014, 6.1" x 9.1", 189 pages of text, 15 pages of notes, eight well-chosen black-and-white illustrations) is of a decidedly different character. LaBelle is less interested than Connor in the archaeology of the voice-in-language and the charged aura that envelops phonemes over centuries; the vocal legerdemain he is after is more acute, immediate, and overpowering – it is phenomenological rather than historical, it issues not from the historicized word but from the lived body. In part, it is the heady sensation that the animate mouth experiences when a voice spills out of it:

> Singing draws the energies of the body outward, to fill the chest, to ring the mouth, and to flood the nasal cavity with vibration. The entire body seems to stand up, resounding with tonality, whether real or imagined, tuned or not. *What I'm interested in is the mouth in the midst of such pleasure.* This special instant of orality. What seems to mark this moment are the intensities by which body and sound unite to capture us in a certain weave, a *magic* found at the center of speech, for are not all words waiting to be sung? To resonate in a union of body and spirit, between each other, and toward collectivity? (49, my emphasis)

In the end, though, this kind of vocal magic is only a small part of the puzzle. In fact, the voice, as his book's title indicates and this quote hints, is really a second-order or late-stage concern for LaBelle. The *mouth* is the most immediate target of his investigation, and the magic that lurks within it is darker, danker, closer to a nineteenth-century freak show than to a well-lit David Copperfield production. Here, LaBelle takes his cues from physiology – for while the mouth *is* the orifice of choice for voice, vocalizing is not its only or even its main job: the mouth is, first and foremost, a vicious, viscous, sharp-toothed machine that chops up the world into bite-sized pieces and sends them inward, where they are transformed into the corporeal self. Or better: LaBelle's mouth is a 'monster' (16) that sits on your face, baring its teeth, biting, belching, and licking its way into aggressive, gustatory, and erotic relationships. The core animality of the mouth is explored through philosophical reflections, as well as through examinations of a large number of contemporary artworks. Brief descriptions of three of the latter will give you a sense of LaBelle's project.

Among a number of works that will not be found in standard music textbooks is *Disappearer – Shirt That Passed Through My Body* (1998–99), by Charles LaBelle, an American conceptual artist based in Hong Kong. (Interestingly, although this is not mentioned in the book, he appears to be the author's older brother.) A black-and-white photograph of the artwork in question leaves the reader with the initial impression that it is an ordinary man's dress shirt, displayed on a mannequin's torso. A closer look reveals that the shirt is made up of small

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squares of fabric that have been sewn together, and that one square – on the front, midway up, opposite the buttons – is missing. LaBelle (the author) reveals that LaBelle (the artist) cut the shirt up into 597 squares and then systematically ingested them, 'retrieved' them 'at the other end', and then sewed them back together. In the words of the artist, '"I put something in my mouth quite aside from any nutritive need or gustatory aggression but only for the pleasure of a play of surfaces meeting, the acknowledgement that I am here."' In the words of the author, this piece 'locates the mouth firmly at the center of our existential being' (36). *The Disappearer* performs a core function of the mouth that LaBelle returns to periodically throughout the text: it is the uncanny portal that joins exterior to interior, part to whole, transforming all entities that pass through its toothy gates:

> A mysterious union of brutal violation and generative production thus defines the mouth, which ultimately captures the oral as that very place where the abject of the fragment and the sublime of the whole are never so far apart. (38)

Compared to this, the screaming vocal performances of Marina Abramovic (e.g., *AAA-AAA*, *Freeing the Voice*) seem almost quaint. Alongside discussions of Abramovic's more famous scream works, LaBelle gives a close reading of the more obscure piece *Scream (Guernica)* (2010) by James Webb. This Spartan multimedia work is installed in a Johannesburg gallery space that is empty, save for (1) a velvet rope that keeps the crowd a safe distance away from (2) a small framed certificate of permission from the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, and (3) a set of hidden speakers projecting the amplified voices of the Museum's staff, who were recorded screaming while standing in front of Picasso's *Guernica*, one of the Museum's most famous holdings. For LaBelle, the scream 'aims itself at the [absent] artwork to force a tension between the image and the brutality it seeks to depict'. The scream disrupts, it opens a fissure in the relationship between signified and signifier. Its capacity to do this, to 'charge the public realm with a particular resonance', makes it political:

> The scream is mobilized as a means to unsettle the static image through a force of voice and its extreme audibility – to draw out its history in relation to the present, and to instigate a reflection on today's political situation. (59)

Not all of the mouth's politics require high volumes, however. *Hysteria* (1997), a video work by Sam Taylor-Johnson, evokes the 'intensely social sonority' of the laugh (116) while remaining perfectly – and disconcertingly – silent. LaBelle uses his discussion of this eight-minute piece to introduce a chapter on the politics of laughter, and the 'psychic, emotional, sexual, and social energy' it contains (121). In *Hysteria,* an extreme close-up shot captures a young blonde woman (who is in fact Taylor-Johnson) convulsing with laughter in barely detectable slow motion. Her eyes are scrunched shut, her head tossed back, her mouth open so wide the viewer can count her fillings. As the shot continues, her eyes well with tears, her lips begin to tremble, and the laugh appears to morph into something closer to a cry or scream of pain. In the absence of sound or context, the viewer becomes an ambivalent witness to a subject who has been hijacked by a laugh, and to a laugh that has laughed itself into a sinister shape. Erasing the boundary between pleasure and pain, between intent and reflex, *Hysteria*,

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like many of the conceptual artworks LaBelle discusses, is a hard piece to watch to the end. For LaBelle, the piece 'uncovers the laugh as an extremely excessive mouth movement; so completely does the body collapse from its own convulsing energy. At some point in watching the video, I certainly wonder: *will she die of laughter?*' (115)

Through discussions of these and a great number of other conceptual artworks, *Lexicon of the Mouth* radically defamiliarizes the oral cavity. The ultimate goal of this operation is to force a wholesale re-examination of voice. In the end, however, LaBelle asks more questions of voice than he can possibly answer, and does little to fill in the contours of a future vocality that is aware of its foundations in the animality of the mouth. Nonetheless, his treatise, like Connor's, provides ample material for interdisciplinary voice scholars to chew on, ingest, digest, and otherwise process.

So, in the end, where does this leave us? What can be said about *Lexicon* and *Beyond Words* as a pair?

First, the books' trajectories through the universalist vocal canon coincide, but only partially. Figures who appear in both works include Artaud, Barthes, Dolar, Freud, Jakobson, McLuhan, Sapir, Serres, and Connor himself.[38] *Lexicon* excludes the perspectives of a number of people who are important presences in *Beyond Words*, such as Aristotle, Darwin, Galas, Gould, Joyce, Lucier, Peirce, Plato, Shakespeare, and Stockhausen. And *Beyond Words* steers clear of a number of usual suspects who are central presences in *Lexicon*, such as Abramovic, Althusser, Cavarero, Deleuze, Derrida, Goffman, Irigaray, Khlebnikov, Kristeva, Lacan, Munch, and Ono. It also bears mentioning that neither text elects to engage with Abbate, Briggs and Bauman, Eidsheim, Feld, Fox, Frith, Goehr, Harkness, Hirschkind, Kunreuther, Minks, Olwage, Samuels, Seeger, Tomlinson, Weheliye, Weidman, or virtually any of the many interdisciplinary voice scholars who paved the way for, and help constitute the primary readership of, these works.

It must also be said that neither text is terribly preoccupied, or even seriously interested, in vocal music. LaBelle's most overt foray into music, which takes place in the final chapter of the book ('Whistling'), amounts to a concise but vague discussion of Messiaen's interest in birdsong. Aside from this, the text confines itself to the briefest snapshots of relevant works (e.g., Robert Ashley's *Automatic Writing*, Runhild Gammelsaeter's *Amplicon*). LaBelle is concerned with the musicality of the mouth in an abstract sense, but brackets out the conventionally musical in favour of experimental sound art. As for Connor, he has more to say about ablaut reduplification than he does about conventional singing. (This despite a quite beautiful musing on the musicalization of sobbing ('Tears in the Voice'), and an affecting riff on the hum that veers occasionally into the realm of the musical or quasi-musical, such as Glenn Gould's *The Idea of North.*)

The lack of emphasis on musical voices does not compromise the conceptual integrity of these books; it is simply a choice the authors made. By contrast, the failure of *Lexicon* and *Beyond Words* to grapple meaningfully with the subject of difference is a real weakness. We occupy a world of radical vocal inequality, where some voices drown out others, where

38 NB: Connor does not cite LaBelle in *Lexicon.*

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marginalized voices are sometimes heard but seldom heeded, and where voice is a lamentably common vector for enacting and perpetuating symbolic and psychological violence.[39] In such a world, the presentation of vocality as either monolithic and singular (the abstraction 'Voice') or atomized and fractal (a perfect democracy of unique 'voices') obscures the variegated political terrain upon which vocal emissions are made and interpreted. Within this context, Connor's choice to buttress his arguments about the bull-roarer, and about aboriginal lifeways more broadly, with an uncritical reading of Frazer's *Golden Bough* (originally published in 1890) and other nineteenth-century texts is notable. In *Beyond Words,* non-Western voices and the communities that surround them remain as exotic and titillating as they were for Frazer's Victorian readership. Placed in an unchanging ethnographic present, the living anachronisms who play the bull-roarer are all mashed together – Kurnai, Kaitish, and other Australian peoples; Zunis from New Mexico – because they are interchangeable. They are deployed solely to microscopically buttress Connor's argument – about the metaphysical richness of the hum – without ever being in a position to challenge it.

As for LaBelle, when he discusses the mouth as 'unquestionably tied to the monstrous', and cavalierly uses the infamous 1997 'ear biting' fight between Mike Tyson and Evander Holifield to justify this claim, he fails to mention the racialized terrain on which this incident was discussed at the time and subsequently. By ignoring it, LaBelle misses a golden opportunity to illuminate the processes by which some mouths are socially coded as more 'beastly' than others, some bodies as more 'impelled by violence' than others.[40]

This is the drawback of the universalist approach: its grand, overarching theories tend to elide systemic inequalities, marginalized communities, and cultural difference. It is no surprise, then, that discourses on the gendered, sexed, classed, and racialized dimensions of voice find no purchase in either book. Given the grand ambitions of the two authors, this lacuna is to their detriment. Having said this, to present this weakness as a reason to not engage with the books would be churlish and a mistake. Readers should appreciate *Beyond Words* and *Lexicon* for what they are, and for what they do accomplish – and their accomplishments, as I hope to have demonstrated, are substantial.

As writers, Connor and LaBelle are masters of erudition and evocation. They clearly care about style, and give as much attention to the sound of their prose as to the soundness of their arguments. Connor is the more playful of the two, winking and nudging the reader as he spins yarns that share the same characteristics as the phonemes he investigates. LaBelle's work is more earnest, but also more adventurous; his colonization of the oral cavity is so thorough that it will be years before a scholar can enter it without acknowledging him when they step over the teeth and onto the tongue. In either case, both authors' prose is not so much dense or opaque as it is conspicuously *luscious.* Reading these books feels like eating a big plate of chocolate mousse: each page provides the reader with an opportunity to linger, savouring its richness – but to read the books through to the end is to risk exhausting one's

39 Cf. J. Martin Daughtry, 'Afterword: From Voice to Violence and Back Again', in *Music, Politics, and Violence,* ed. Kip Pegley and Susan Fast (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 243–64.

40 LaBelle, 17.

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palate. I have assigned single chapters of both books in an undergraduate voice course this year, and walked away with the sense that my students and I could converse for a week on the first five pages of 'Cry, Scream, Shout, Sing' (LaBelle) or 'Ahem' (Connor). At the same time, the unrelenting sumptuousness and allusiveness of the prose may prove too much for many student readers, if not for their professors. For this reason, and because neither book's argument is cumulative, anyone assigning the books for a class may want to consider breaking them up and spreading them out over the course of the semester.

Before closing, I feel obligated to say a quick word about the outward appearance of these volumes. The books' covers – their epithelia, if you will – could not be more different from one another. The paperback version of *Lexicon of the Mouth* features an enigmatic line drawing on the front that turns out to be 'a digital waveform representation of the words "Get here", as spoken by a resident of Toxteth, South Liverpool'.[41] The image is part of Imogen Stidworthy's *Topography of a Voice* (2008–09), a print work that LaBelle discusses in chapter 11 of *Lexicon.* The sensual curves of the image are visually arresting, even before one discovers that they were generated by a voice; through this image, *Lexicon*'s cover beckons the reader into an engagement with the substance of the text. By contrast, the dust jacket of the hardbound *Beyond Words* offers a gross misrepresentation of the thoughtful book it protects. Set on a sky-blue background, the title is printed in a cartoonish Courier-esque font, in white, yellow, and (on the spine) neon pink. Two stock images of fingertips grip text bubbles, one of which says 'Grrrr', the other, 'Mmmm', in clashing colours and fonts. The overall impression the cover art leaves is that *Beyond Words* is nothing more than an amusing piece of celebratory pop non-fiction, something along the lines of journalist Anne Karpf's light but engaging *The Human Voice* – or worse, a collection of funny anecdotes suitable for toilet reading.[42] My hope is that discerning readers won't be put off by the cover and will give Connor's challenging text a second look.

* * *

All books are utterance archives: they preserve their authors' ephemeral inner vocalizations by converting them into the relatively stable format of the written word. At the same time, books are powerful oral filtration devices, eliminating their authors' stutters, drying up their spittle, smoothing out the rough edges of their inner voices, abstracting their smelly, noisy bodies into ethereal authorial spectres. These two books, with their focus on the materiality of orality, attempt precisely the opposite. They are unruly and imperfect, at times outrageous. But it is this very outrageousness that forces aside the curtain of the typeset page to reveal the monstrous mouth and trembling tongue of LaBelle, and the clamorous chorus of linguistic alchemists who animate Connor's corpus. Read together, *Lexicon* and *Beyond Words* add depth to the interdisciplinary conversation on voice, and provide a new and powerful set of questions about voice's dual imbrications with language and the body. Their shared emphasis on the

41 See the full citation on the back flap of the book.

42 New York: Bloomsbury, 2006.

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corporeality, theatricality, affective richness, and essential playfulness of vocality – along with the productive tension that their differences create – makes them ideal conversational partners. If you read them in tandem, before going to bed, you may experience, as I did, the fleeting sensation that these two books about voice are in *literal* dialogue with one another – that these two magical mouth-treatises are locked in some sort of virtual-but-visceral call and response.

* * *

With the Curtain still down and the snores of the Reader and his wife still audible, the Books' erudite conversation appears to have devolved into something more primal and erotic. Still bound together, breathing heavily, they wrestle, their vocal emissions intermingling into a single stream of paralinguistic sound until, exhausted, they join the crepitatious chorus of the sleepers next to them.

Book #2: Whistle.[43]
Book #1: Hiss.[44]
#2: Laugh![45]
#1: Grrr!![46]
#2: Gasp, growl, grunt, sigh, yawn – [47]
#1: Mmmm.[48]
#2: Kiss, lick, suck?[49]
#1: Pprrpffrrppffff – [50]
#2: (Murmur, whisper.)[51]
#1: Zzzz . . . [52]

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43 LaBelle, chapter 12. (From here to the end all punctuation is mine.)
44 Connor, chapter 3.
45 LaBelle, chapter 8.
46 Connor, chapter 6.
47 LaBelle, chapter 5.
48 Connor, chapter 5.
49 LaBelle, chapter 7.
50 Connor, chapter 7.
51 LaBelle, chapter 10.
52 Connor, chapter 9.

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