Autobiophony as Wellbeing[1]
By Dr Konstantinos Thomaidis

When attempting to formulate a response for today's session, I found myself listening-in to
the complex, sophisticated areas of query we were provided with
in a way that resembles the photographic negative:
in the foreground, this rich list of questions
each one grappling with specific interlacings of voice pedagogy and wellbeing,
and in the background,
the looping refrain of one subsuming question mark:
is there *any* aspect of voice training not entangled with wellbeing?

- The vocal techniques we embrace in the studio are imbricated with wellbeing—
  ranging from the health-inclined perspective to the ecstatic, the intersubjective, the
  transgressive;
- The structure, sequence and pacing of activities is also a form of wellbeing;
- Our modes of address—to the individual trainee, to sub-groups, to the ensemble, to
  fellow tutors—are enacting versions of wellbeing;
- Our choice of material—texts, music, songs, props, architectures and spatial
  configurations—and what we choose to materialize in the studio—ideas, values,
  ideologies, traditions, conventions, aesthetics, forms of relating—can be generative or
  inhibitive of wellbeing;
- The frames of inclusion/exclusion within which we operate—who gets to be in the
  studio in the first place and whom we consider to be the presumed or aspirational
  voicer towards whom our training is inclined—
  frames which we can perpetuate, resist one voicing at a time or dismantle with
  sweeping vocal gestures—
  these frames betray the sociality of wellbeingness.

For the purposes of today's position statements, I'll attempt to outline a practice I have
introduced in my studio modules (and beyond) in the last 4 years,
a practice that was not explicitly designed with wellbeing in mind,

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[1] Part of the Roundtable Discussion on Voice & Well-Being, hosted by the "Culture, Creativity, Health and Well-being Cluster" (UBC – University of Exeter), 18 February 2021.

& I did not necessarily expect to be linked to wellbeing,

although I should have, given the above framework.

The way, however, students responded to it, developed and integrated it with their own practice, and deployed it in the studio

emphatically underscored its qualities and potential as wellbeing praxis.

This is the practice of narrating the makings of one's voice,

of sharing one's vocal autobiography

in voice and through voice,

a practice I have called *autobiophony*.

In 2017, I opened both my studio modules,

(a second-year module on vocal technique and a third-year module on voice and sound dramaturgy),

with a devised monologue:

I narrated my vocal past,

key episodes in my vocal development.

This included growing up disfluent,

the complexities of moving between languages,

sonic racialization, accentism,

the pleasures of aesthetic voicing,

celebrating or grieving in song.

The piece deployed a wide range of vocal techniques

ranging from multilingualism, creative sur-titling, microphone amplification, prerecorded vocality, artificial voicing, etc,

and devices

--and, crucially, interactive activities and brief workshops in between scenes

encouraging student audiences to listen back, recreate, and find nonintrusive ways to share their vocal autobiographies.

The monologue was an opening gesture pretending it was about the teacher's autobiophony,

whereas it was designed as an invitation for the trainees' autobiophonies.

Although my intention was to make audible, from the outset of the training,

my personal interests in vocality & vocal positionality

and establish a background against which the intersections of selfhood and voicing would be interrogated throughout the year,

it came as a surprise how much students were intrigued by autobiophony

and how often they framed it as a mechanism of care,

of looking after the self

and each other.

For the last 4 years, we have co-devised autobiophonic exercises such as:

- sharing one's autobiophony using all vocal and sonic possibilities *apart from verbal means*;
- choosing a voice-buddy for the duration of the term, imagining each other's vocal history and enacting it back to them through vocal sculptures and sonic choreographies;
- creating the autobiophonies of characters from plays in which the students are involved, and experimenting in a continuum from trainee autobiophony to character autobiophony—without assuming that either end of the continuum is fixed, reified, finalized;
- co-devising group autobiophonies, group vocal histories, a sort of ongoing memory-building choir;
- using vocal histories as material for final presentations, essay-writing, or dissertation topics.

According to formal and informal feedback, engaging with autobiophony revealed that coming to voice is always a process,

and in some cases, such a revelation became a mechanism of working against pre-established assumptions about one's voice

and for recognizing in each other's voice

its processual, context-specific and materially historicized character.

It also reconfigured my role as the vocal authority in the room, allowing vocal development to be more of a dialogue between vocal positionalities and vocal histories – a sort of co-training.

I'll pause here, because I know we have limited time

and, also, because this practice-research is still in-the-making,

it's emergent and, therefore, vulnerable.

So let me close by saying:

One aspect of such, and other similar processes,

that I find more and more linked to voice training and wellbeing

is the **relational character** of such vocal narration

(we narrate our vocal histories, hope to be heard, to be narrated-back and to narrate-back)

This relation character embraces voice

as always voicing-with, voicing-towards, voicing-across,

And this links to the genesis of a persistent question:

If we are to consider voice training *as a wellbeing practice*,

how does our pedagogy entangle both voicing and wellbeing

as collaborative endeavours,

as inclining the self to an allo-centric ethics,

as sustaining a commitment to radical in-betweenness?

Many thanks,

Konstantinos