

# On Encounters, Agencies and Touch. A conversation with Brandon LaBelle



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Reading *Sonic Agency*, one of the first questions that emerges, perhaps not literally, is that *a body can be anything*. "It can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity' (Deleuze 1988). How does the body trans\*form into a *force of becoming* through the entanglement with listening and sound?

You touch upon an essential question I feel, which does hit at the core of sound studies, at least for me, and which in many ways prompted my own practice and research into sound – how to think the body by way of sound and listening. This goes back to my experiences as a drummer and playing in bands, recognizing the degree to which my body would become something else when drumming: a rhythmic entity, where it becomes hard to know where the limits of the body are. Was I in control of the rhythm, or was the rhythm in control of me? Simply holding a drum stick was to extend the arm and its capacities; it was to come into contact, an extremely physical, vibrational contact with other matter. And not only contact but an exchange of force, a collaborative intra-action constituting myself and the

drum set, *myself-as-a-drum-set*. Any musician will say, that playing requires a different state of attention, something much less conscious than you'd expect. In playing I discovered that thinking is a bodily process and is fully grounded in responsiveness – a very sensitive and nuanced craft. Such an elaboration or refiguring of the body was furthered by feeling myself as part of a greater collective action; a band is a monstrous and loving thing, and it exists under or against language – discourse within a band is never a driving or directing force, rather, sonic experience and the passion of playing are the central defining principles or material actants. The band is not necessarily a musical entity, but rather a sonic machine involved in relationality, in constituting an environment or milieu of intensity, exchange, co-creation, and revolt. All of these aspects introduced to me the particularities of sound and listening, as material – and I would say: spiritual – forces that had great impact onto the body, showing how interdependency underpins identity, and further, how the making of community can be a deeply creative and resonant thing: playing in a band I encountered directly the ways in which sound incites communal action; a common world emerges by way of listening, one that is also extremely anarchic, shaped by an ethic of direct relations, where decisions are made on the dance floor, in the space of the club, which is a space other to a dominant social order. In the club, other laws emerge, more along the lines of banditry. All of these experiences made it possible to glimpse an inherent malleability, a mutability to the order of things: that things were not fixed, static, or textual, but were energetic, contingent, processual – a sonic ontology or poetics that I find extremely helpful in contending with any form of domination. The example of the band is one of many entry points onto the topic of sonic agency and is suggestive for capturing sound and listening as a particular framework. And for approaching the sonic body as a body always already involved in its own mutation, its own living.

Regarding mutation(s), in *Raw Orality: Sound Poetry and Live Bodies* you state that “sound poetry takes pleasure and generates means for undermining the metaphysical legacy of essences, while also reproducing the notion that freedom lies through the body. In doing so, it may be said to choreograph a “relational” body: defining this space between a return to the body and its absolute decentered sonic other, sound poetry figures an unsteady constellation of coordinates for the body to occupy.” It seems to me that something similar happens with experimental practices with biomaterials, such as those of [Vanessa Lorenzo](#), [Robertina Šebjanič](#), and [Óscar Martín](#). Where, through disquieting presence(s), there is an estrangement which, in turn, is constitutive. The generation of particular encounters, as extended bodies of noise.

It is interesting to draw out connections between performative works of sound poetry and experimental practices with biomaterials. I do continue to go back to the history of sound poetry as a framework for thinking the relation between sound and language, voice, and meaning. Sound poetry historically raises this relation as a question – as a tense cultural arena, performativity, where the voice becomes a type of agent, a monster. Many sound poets focus on upsetting the ways in which language works at constituting subjectivity, making of us semiotic subjects, and how voice is mostly directed toward language as a dominant function. Sound poetry reminds us how voice is never only about language, but rather is a greater expressive force fundamental to more embodied, sensual, and relational

experiences, not to mention intimately tied to song as a vibrational and communal practice. By redirecting voice, so as to capture other forms of vocality, even the breath in all its raw and primary force, sound poetry asks us to hear another type of body, another form of subjectivity. The experimental practices you highlight, working with biomaterials and forms of biohacking, seem to also reinvent what we know of the body – especially by leading us away from the human. Bodies are also found in other forms, other species, and with other vocalities; and there emerges a greater recognition as to the matters of the body as being shared across all life-forms, planetary matters that constitute life itself. Maybe this is what sound poetry also does, yet on the level of language: making of language a matter, a vocality, a sound that is no longer the provenance of human culture or lexicality, but is equally animalistic, wild. And as you say, noisy.

Taking one of the most controversial contemporary issues, that is, identity, I am particularly interested in the notion of the *unhomely moments* (Bhabba) in relation to the estrangement that occurs in active listening. In the encounter with “other” sonic agencies; when the body is an extension, an intensity of vectors and fragments, *unhomed from identity*. The project of Adriana Knouf is a clear example of becoming a stranger through your voice. Adriana not only breaks with the notion of origin, with the notion of the “real” voice but also allows us to think about what we have agreed to call *bio-sonic-agencies*. In this case, voice alteration is not through electronic manipulation but through biopharmacological manipulation. Biopolitical devices that simultaneously perform the voice and hack identity. Do you consider that a “new” sonic materiality is emerging here?

Through our work on *bio-sonic-agencies*, we have been rethinking how to understand agency, as well as sonic materiality. One of the key ways of capturing sonic agency is through the voice, if we think of how the voice performs within any scene of social movement action or political struggle and debate. To speak and to be heard are essential performances or capacities that allow for social and legal recognition. Here sonic agency accents the ways in which agency often proceeds and is constituted by a sonic material and imaginary. Sound, in short, dramatically contributes to the working through of relations of equality. As we’ve been already suggesting though, sound additionally extends beyond language, and therefore, agency is also expressed and mobilized through other matters and means, from rhythms that punctuate collective movements to the vibrational commoning that allows for more affective caring and mutual support. Sonic materiality is matter that may energize and interrupt, support and mend, assist and annoy, and is therefore deeply malleable and rather uncontrollable. If agency is often what underpins the articulations of an identity, to find the capacity for naming or renaming, for articulating a position, sound certainly gives identity a potent weapon. Yet, there is also something more – something less about “myself” and more about “relationalities”, as sound is nothing but relational. So, sound also leads us somewhere else, bringing us in tune with processes of recognition, as well as with that which is unrecognizable – the foreign, the strange, the unfamiliar. In moving to bio-sonic-agencies, I do think we move into an arena where identity is not necessarily as articulated, or rather, it steps back from wielding such a defining force; bio-sonic-agencies seem less about claiming identity within an arena of human sociality, of human ordering, and rather, moves us into arenas of ecological and biological entanglements, strange compositions and alliances,

material assemblages and sympoietic worlding. Maybe we find this in the example you point at, with Adriana Knouf. A biochemical and biopolitical – and what I would also call: *bioacoustic* question or materiality. Bioacoustics raises the question as to how we conceptualize life by way of sound and hearing; how certain auditory norms govern ways of sounding and listening, especially in terms of what we come to recognize as life and nonlife. Here, I do feel we need to think about listening, or we need to position listening as key. *Bio-sonic-agencies* move listening into territories that are sounded and unsounded, sounded otherwise, through plants and animals, air and water, soil and seed, and that require speculative modes of listening. Listening is often called upon to enable engaging across human and nonhuman worlds, as what connects bodies and things, matter, and energy – listening as an ecology of attention in support of greater compassion, co-passion, sympathies, and mobilizations. If we were able to bring such listening back into struggles over identity which seem to plague the human world, to follow listening as what interrupts as well as educates on how my body is never truly my own, I think we would have less need for politics because I would never know myself as such – doesn't politics begin by positioning the body as culturally unique, the body as a (racial, gendered, ethnic, familial) possession, either by others or by oneself, rather than something that is radically of nature? and which therefore incites struggles over recognition? "To know thyself" seems like the ultimate political command or ruse. I'm not so much interested in the question "who am I?" or what can I become? Rather, I tend to ask: "who are you?" and what can we do together? I would say, this is the position of the listener.

With projects like Adriana's, we think not only of presences but also of absences and latencies. If we conceive *the unheard* as a coming community in terms of togetherness and interdependence, active listening as political positioning against the relegation of multiple agencies to the condition of subalternity, Would it be a possibility to articulate an amalgam of agencies? a multiplicity of agencies? An emancipatory amalgam that goes beyond the modern western subject?

I think you are right in mapping out this possibility, of capturing a sonic ontology that is more ontogenetic, more poetic, or emergent, and how this suggests another type of subject. A sonic subject or world is figured along these lines we are pursuing, from strangerhood and being unhomed to interrupted identity and bio-sonic-agencies. I think what we begin to articulate is a subject *in doubt*: if seeing is believing, then listening is doubting. This is something we find in Michel Chion and his theories of the voice-over in cinema; for Chion, the voice-over, or *acousmêtre*, is an uncertain voice, a voice that trembles the image – it is a voice that both wields an authority while being untrustworthy. How is it possible to fully trust this voice whose face we do not see, whose body is always already elsewhere, on the edges of legibility? Chion helps us recognize how sound, in general, is untrustworthy because it is by nature unfixed from a body – it is always extending away from origin (*it is never quite a body*); and therefore it is always on the side of the uncanny. I think we might follow this here, to appreciate how sound, in throwing the world into doubt, also places us in the present, demands that we engage with the world in such a way that gives room for doubt, and therefore, imagination, the invisible. I think in doing so we may arrive at a subjectivity that,

in doubting itself, accepts the fact that things are beyond one's control, and that solving problems can never be undertaken purely by way of rationality.

In thinking together about the question of *bio-sonic-agencies*, are we infusing language with sonic materiality? Are *bio-sonic-agencies* breaking the channels of signification?

These are really important and challenging questions. I do think in approaching bio-sonic-agencies, and the acoustic dimension – an acoustic poetics – language does become much more material, more sonic, vibrational, and signification is less grounded in a metaphysics of truth. At the same time, I'm hesitant to always position language or signification as what stands outside the body, and which is all-too-easily implicated in questions of dominance or subjectification. While there is clearly a truth to this, in terms of language wielding an interpellative force, and that can act to delimit the movements or aspirations of people – language as a force of law – it is also clear that language comes from within: it is not only an external subjectifying force, but also a matter of the body: language as instinct. We teach ourselves language just as much as it is taught to us. Bio-sonic-agencies bring us close to this material base of language, maybe close to a natureculture approach or perspective?

It might be helpful to think further about the acoustic or auditory norms that direct listening in certain ways, that train listening to hear as meaningful that which falls in line with particular norms or grooves; so it could be said that certain practices, gestures, or acts work at interrupting or refiguring auditory norms, so as to enable other ways of listening, other ways of capturing forms of meaning from language, and attending to that which sounds otherwise. How do we create the conditions for language to be more or less than it is? To allow language to transition? What kinds of gestures may we perform so as to support others in speaking and being heard, to tell what has not yet been told, to sound otherwise? In this way, it seems important to do things that enable the circulation of stories, such as enacting forms of translation, or crafting ecologies of attention through which we can extend listening – where listening might modulate the borders between sense and nonsense, what is deemed legible and illegible. Where listening becomes a form of activism. Here, I think of listening as an "extra-sense", which can give way to the "extra-relational", a relationality that goes further, that allows for the unrecognizable as such: where I do not need to always recognize what I hear, and further, where I do not necessarily speak for others, rather give my body, my voice so others may speak. This is where true power lies.

Taking the contributions of Santiago López Petitt in *Horror vacui. The crossing of the Night of the Century*, we could say that *bio-sonic-agencies* manage to wrest from the indefinite play of order and disorder some space-time in which the will to live can unfold without (re)producing order. That in *bio-sonic-agencies* the interstitial potentiality emerges as an event.

I am always struck by that feeling that sound pulls me away from myself; as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, listening is always listening *to the other*. So sound always places me in-between, on the edge of being. This is the essential lesson sound often shows, and which I do think becomes operative in all types of sonic expressions and acts – the possibility of acting upon



the fixity of things. By being on the edge, we are also in constant touch. Here, again, voice or vocality can be heard as that fundamental sound we make, which explicitly acts upon things, which presses and pulls at the in-between – the baby’s cry is paramount here, as an example, this sound that demands response: that makes me move, that sets the world moving. Do we not learn from sound and listening how life is movement, and where movements are always of more than one body? Even within Deaf culture, sound is experienced as a question of movement, as vibrational and tactile, and listening attunes to the animate, from the movement of leaves to the hands that sign. The interstitial, as you say, emerges as an event, as a space of inhabitation, or cohabitation. I might say, that listening puts one *beside oneself*, both spatially, this being alongside oneself, in-between, as well as being undone, a fraying, an annoyance even – sound violates the border, and in that sense, it may show us how to live as a border, a threshold, always in touch.

Brandon LaBelle is an artist, writer, and theorist working with sound culture, voice, and questions of agency. He develops and presents artistic projects within a range of international contexts, often working collaboratively and in public. This leads to performative installations, poetic theater, and research actions aimed at forms of experimental community making. Works include “The Impossible School”, Klub Mama, Zagreb (2020), “The Open Body”, Museum of Solidarity, Santiago (2019), “The Other Citizen”, Club Transmediale, Berlin (2019), “The Autonomous Odyssey”, Kunsthall 3,14 Bergen (2018), “The Ungovernable”, Documenta 14, Athens (2017), “Oficina de Autonomia”, Ybakatu, Curitiba (2017), “The Hobo Subject”, Gallery Forum, Zagreb (2016), and “The Living School”, South London Gallery (2016). He is the author of *Acoustic Justice* (2021), *The Other Citizen* (2020), *Sonic Agency* (2018), among others. He is editor of *Errant Bodies Press*, Berlin, and Professor at the Department of Contemporary Art, University of Bergen.

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