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Crossing Both Ways: Sarah Jones, The Moth, and the Disruptive Potential of Voice

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New Waves – Feminism, Gender, and Podcast Studies

Edited by
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Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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**Crossing Both Ways: Sarah Jones, *The Moth Radio Hour*,
and the Disruptive Potential of Voice**

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Abstract

This paper examines an episode of popular storytelling podcast *The Moth*, titled “A Walk on the West Side” (2014), in order to explicate and uncover how gender, race, and class might attach to certain voices. In this episode, Jones (a stage performer, writer, and gifted impressionist) first relates her memories of being typecast as black female stereotypes; she then tells the story of being pulled over by LAPD a few days later, under suspicion of sex work. Ultimately, Jones baffles the cops who detain her by affecting a flawless British accent, disrupting their assumptions. Her story—told on the podcast in a myriad of different voices—literally speaks class, race, and gender into being, only to challenge the fixity of these signs, showcasing the simultaneously disruptive and productive potential of speech.

Introduction

1 This article explores a short anecdote performed by solo dramatist and actor Sarah Jones, released as a part of *The Moth Radio Hour* podcast. Her story, retroactively titled “A Walk on the West Side,” follows the regular format other segments of *The Moth Radio Hour* for the most part. Like most of the podcast’s segments, her story is nonfiction, personal, and brief; it is initially recorded in front of a live audience, and it is a monologue. Like other *The Moth Radio Hour* segments, the story also denotes a significant moment in the performer’s life—in this case, a trip to Los Angeles in the late nineties, where Jones was racially profiled by both LA police and by the MTV writers who had hired her. “A Walk on the West Side,” however, differs from most *The Moth Radio Hour* stories in one important respect: Jones is a talented vocal impressionist, and as such she uses several different voices—each attached, in their own way, to very different racial, gender, and regional identities—throughout her story.

2 Though the plot of “A Walk on the West Side” is not particularly subversive on its surface, I argue that the combination of Jones’s radical polyvocality (that is, her ability to constantly shift vocal registers, and therefore to manipulate and confuse her audience) and the second life of this story (that is, its eventual shift from live storytelling performance, to pre-recorded podcast) does something much more radical than its initial premise might allow. Offering a palatable, liberal vision of respectability, representation, and inclusion, Jones allows her audience to consume her story and laugh at the stereotypes she herself uses, albeit to different purposes than the policemen

and MTV writers she rebukes. But the switch from live embodied performance to podcast allows it do something different and potentially more radical. Ultimately, I aim to prove that something changes in the shift from live performance to podcast, tracking Jones's story in order to interrogate its dual political energies. Contrasting these two formats highlights the unique ability of the latter to disrupt the very structures that Jones's comedic performance erects and relies on.

Hailing and “Multicultural” Liberal Appeal

3 On May 21, 2009, Sarah Jones took the stage at one of The Moth's regular live events. She was hardly the first to do so: The Moth, a New York City-based group whose professed goal is “to promote the art and craft of storytelling and to honor and celebrate the diversity and commonality of human experience,” (*TheMoth.org*), has been organizing storytelling events for over two decades. Since its founding in 1997, it has grown into a small movement, running over 500 happenings each year in major cities across the globe. A live Moth event is usually recorded, takes place in front of an audience, and might feature any number of performers ranging from unknown everymen to prominent names from page and stage. Jones, herself a notable luminary of the NYC theater scene, told her story at one of The Moth's “Mainstage” events. Unlike the Moth's more democratic “StorySlam” events (open-mic battles in which competitors each tell stories up to five minutes in length), Mainstage events feature five pre-selected performers in the hopes of creating “a community where entertainment and enlightenment merge” (*TheMoth.org*) in front of a ticketed audience.

4 Eventually, The Moth's widespread meet-ups inspired the popular and Peabody-award-winning public radio show *The Moth Radio Hour* produced by Jay Allison. Like many NPR programs, *The Moth Radio Hour* is now a successful weekly podcast with a wide audience, boasting over 500,000 weekly downloads, and 61 million individual episode downloads as of 2018 (*TheMoth.org*). When Jones's story, retrospectively titled “A Walk on the West Side,” showed up on *The Moth Radio Hour* RSS feed a little over a year after her initial performance, it was one of three stories specifically curated for the podcast; in this case, it was one of three selected for an episode titled “Monkeys, Calzones, and Jaywalkers.”

5 Jones's fame stems primarily for her acclaimed one-woman shows, which have enjoyed a steady run on Broadway since her Tony win in 2004. In addition to a Tony, her performances have garnered her an Obie, a Van Lier Literary Fellowship, a Helen Hayes Award, two Drama Desk

nominations, grants from the Lincoln Center Theater and the Ford Foundation, a “Best One Person Show” award at the HBO Aspen Comedy Arts Festival, as well as features in *Mother Jones*, *Nation*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vibe*, *Ms. Magazine* and the *Utne Reader* (Hatch 322). In each of her solo productions, Jones showcases her imitative talents. In her first production, *Surface Transit* (1998), Jones plays a heterogeneous array of people inspired by her childhood neighborhood in Queens; her second, *Women Can’t Wait!* (2002), portrays eight different women from eight different countries. In her first Broadway production, *Bridge & Tunnel* (2004), Jones casts herself as a range of diverse characters, all U.S. immigrants, whose lives converge around a poetry reading. Following her Tony win for *Bridge & Tunnel*, she went on to produce and star in *The Right to Care* (2005), an informative piece about ethnic, class, racial, and gender disparities in healthcare, and *Sell/Buy/Date* (2018) another solo performance about “the real-life experiences of people affected by the sex industry.” Her latest piece, *The Foundation* (2019), takes up the subject of philanthropy—in it, Jones plays several different characters debating how to spend a charitable budget. Described variously throughout her career as a “poet,” “playwright,” “performer,” “political activist,” and “hip-hop theater artist,” Jones summarily garners praise and critical attention for her avowed “shape-shifting ability to portray people of every age, gender and race” (Hurwitt). Though it follows a very different format and genre than Jones’s professional work, “A Walk on the West Side” also showcases Jones’s ability to switch personas through the clever deployment of different and masterfully mimicked accents, vocal registers, dialects, and attitudes.

6 In her twelve minutes on the Moth Mainstage, Jones relates a personal anecdote to the audience. True to regular Moth format, she does not read from a script, nor has she memorized lines. She just talks. The result is a performance that is charming, enthusiastic, and spontaneous; Jones’s stage presence is easy and unnerved, and her story is peppered with the “you know”s, “like”s, and “um”s typical of someone casually relating a story to a close friend. All in all, Jones doesn’t stray far from the conventions of a standard Moth performance, but for one important element: her performance is polyvocal.

7 Jones employs her talents in different ways and to different ends throughout her Moth performance. Sometimes, her accents signal a person different than herself, the Jones narrating the story. This is not itself remarkable—to be sure, many good storytellers change voices to indicate when parts of their story are in quotes or should be taken as lines of dialogue separate from the speaker’s narration. But two other types of more interesting polyvocality also appear in “A Walk

on the West Side.” Sometimes, Jones slips into a new voice without warning, throwing her audience for a loop (and, judging by their background laughter, summarily delighting them). And sometimes—most often, in fact—Jones changes voices because she herself, in the story she is recounting, switches voices. As a vocal impressionist telling a story about her life as a vocal impressionist, Jones must employ vocal impression. Her character, “Sarah Jones,” has not one identifiable voice, but many. In other words, because Jones is telling a story that is about, in many ways, the protagonist’s ability to codeswitch, she must change voices not only to create a mood or mark difference, but simply to convey information essential to the plot.

8 In “A Walk on the West Side,” Jones tells a story about being racially profiled while she is in Los Angeles during her first (and last) television film shoot. Jones begins *in media res*: she and her friend Julissa are approached by police at a West Hollywood intersection. She then quickly doubles back, rewinding to provide some context for the scene. Jones offers an overview of her theatrical work, citing her influences and explaining that her solo shows rely on an ability to channel the voices and personas of a multicultural cast of characters. While she does so, Jones laments the paucity of roles for black women that aren’t based on stereotype. She explains that she had flown out to Los Angeles from New York City after a successful casting call with MTV, having finally found a job offer that excited her: a hip-hop sketch show in which she would be able to flex her talent for impressions.

9 After this expository detour, Jones returns her audience to the Hollywood street corner, where she resumes the original story. The day before the MTV shoot, Jones’s friend Julissa leads her around on a walking tour of Los Angeles. As the women move to cross the street, two white policemen stop them and insinuate that they are both sex workers; Jones, outraged and in shock, begins yelling at them in a posh British accent. Flabbergasted, the cops panic, say they have made a mistake, and let Jones and Julissa go on their way. Jones follows this climactic scene with a sobering coda: the next day, she finds out that MTV has cast her as “a ho with multiple personalities” (9:36-38), confirming her belief that there are few if any viable options for a black female performer who wants to play diverse roles. Disappointed and angry, she refuses to film the scene and returns to New York—where, happily, she ends up producing the show that eventually leads her to Broadway renown.

10 On the level of plot alone, Jones’s anecdote describes a scene in which the law, entertainment media, race, gender, sexuality, class, and national/regional identity all converge. In

short: this anecdote is all about American subject formation. Nowhere is this clearer than in the pivotal scene of “A Walk on the West Side,” in which Jones and her friend Julissa are pulled over by police. In his 1968 opus *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser describes a process of political and social subject formation known commonly as interpellation. His work presents a new theory of how the state and its attending apparatuses create subjects. In this top-down model, which breaks from more traditional Marxist models, the state directly addresses its subjects; those addressed, acknowledging the hail, are thus transformed into subjects of the state. Jones and Julissa’s encounter with police almost perfectly echoes Louis Althusser’s most well-known example of interpellation. In this example, Althusser, too, describes a scene of police encounter:

I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!”

Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a subject. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him, and that ‘it was really him who was hailed’ (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle, the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed. And yet it is a strange phenomenon, and one which cannot be explained solely by ‘guilt feelings’, despite the large numbers who ‘have something on their consciences.’ (264)

Jones and Julissa, hailed by the police, are interpellated as criminal by the mere fact of their presence and outward appearance (Jones: “And so they had sort of put it together that we fit the description of some prostitutes”). In this way, their encounter also recalls Franz Fanon’s famous encounter with a young white child in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967):

Look a Negro ... Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened ... I could no longer laugh, because I already know there were legends, stories, history and above all *historicity* ... Then assailed at various points, the corporal schema crumbled its place taken by a racial epidermal schema... It was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person... I was responsible for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. (xvii)

Previous to being hailed, Fanon can potentially exist outside of history and the schemas of racist and colonial violence that accompany it. Once named, his identity is flattened, fixed, and able to

be controlled. Jones's own hailing is deeply intersectional, illustrating the myriad ways the police use visual markers to differentiate between "criminal" bodies and, by extension, arrestable persons. Visually marked as "a couple of brown girls" (6:09-6:11), the women are pulled into a semantic system of race ("What are we doing? Walking while black, maybe, or walking while Mexican—Julissa's Mexican" [4:52-4:58]), gender ("we were dressed far less provocatively than, I dare say, most of the women that I had seen since I landed at LAX" [5:59-6:05]), and class ("and you know, we were walking! And it is LA, nobody walks!" [6:11-6:13]) that aligns them with criminal sexuality and illicit labor ("you girls working tonight?" [5:44-5:47]).

11 Jones's "disgust" at the specific charge lobbed at her and her companion—sex work—reveals the limited political imagination of her story. Certainly, much of this rage is informed by Jones's repeated struggles with casting directors who continually cast black women as, in her words, "bitches and hos." Jones is, on the one hand, drawing a savvy connection, laying out for her audience how systems of media representation and law enforcement inform each other. On the other hand, Jones here still adheres to a moral code that marks some sexualities as deviant and therefore policeable. Vocalizing her offense, Jones draws the same line as her LAPD antagonists: the insult is not that sex work is considered criminal; it is that she and Julissa are assumed to be prostitutes. Though she might not intend to, Jones enforces a politics of respectability (although Jones's views on this topic have changed in the years since this story aired, at least if her later production *Sell/Buy/Date* is any indication of her political stance on sex work). This politics ultimately upholds systems of judgement that still take being "dressed...provocatively" as legitimate cause for police suspicion. In other words, Jones questions the efficacy of the deployment of these rubrics, rather than the rubrics themselves.

12 One finds a similar liberal politics in the way Jones introduces herself and her work. At the start of her story, attempting to explain her solo career, Jones tells her audience:

I did a show on Broadway called *Bridge & Tunnel*, and if you don't know it: I did characters, a lot of multicultural characters. That's what I do in my work, kind of like Whoopi Goldberg or Lilly Tomlin or Tracy Ellman; these are some of the people who really inspired me as a kid, because I just really admired their ability to transcend physical type and portray anyone they wanted—Meryl Streep, also a huge influence on me. (00:17-00:36)

For the first time, but not the last, Jones here invokes "multiculturalism," a political buzzword with a long history in the US. As Hazel Carby points out, though it is true that the rhetoric of

multicultural inclusivity has at times been employed for real material gain, appeals to multiculturalism often end up obscuring issues of systemic of material oppression (12). This often takes place in the service of what David Savran, in his discussion of the multicultural Broadway smash *Angels in America* (1992), usefully labels “liberal pluralism”:

Unable to support substantive changes in economic policy that might in fact produce a more equitable and less segregated society, [multiculturalism] instead promotes a rhetoric of pluralism and moderation. Reformist in method, it endeavors to fine tune the status quo while at the same time acknowledging (and even celebrating) the diversity of American culture. For the liberal pluralist, America is less a melting pot than a smorgasbord. He or she takes pride in the ability to consume cultural difference—now understood as a commodity, a source of boundless pleasure, an expression of an exoticized Other. And yet, for him or her, access to and participation in so-called minority cultures is entirely consumerist. . . . Liberal pluralism thus does far more than tolerate dissent. It actively enlists its aid in reaffirming a fundamentally conservative hegemony. (220)

In describing her performances and characters as “multicultural,” Jones appeals to her audience’s liberal pluralist sensibilities, arguing for an acceptable, even desirable, diversity, but again not necessarily critiquing the systems that produce drastic disparities and exclusion in the first place. Jones’s shout-out to Goldberg, Tomlin, Ellman, and Streep relays a similar message. Her dream team is diverse in some ways (the women she names are both black and white, British and American), and homogenous in others (they are all rich, famous, and powerful women at the top of their game). This balance means that Jones’s list, like her story’s politics, can be easily accepted by her upper-middle-class, center-left audience of public radio listeners—it does not directly threaten their modes of understanding, judging, or maintaining power.

Polyvocality, Intersectionality, and Subversion

13 With every vocal impression, Jones both exploits and exposes her audience’s linguistic biases. About a minute into her story, Jones shows off her talent for impressions for the first time, seamlessly switching between her perky, higher-pitched starting voice into a very different register. She does so while describing the circumstances that led her to fly to LA (from here onward, italics indicate the moments where Jones changes her voice):

A couple of weeks earlier I had gotten word that MTV wanted me to star in a sketch comedy show they were doing, and I was really over-the-top excited about this, it was huge, it was a really big deal for me, I was like, “Oh my god, this is AMAZING!” Okay, well, it was the nineties, the late nineties, and it was a hip-hop sketch show, so I was probably more

like, “*Yo, this is gonna be dope, this is gonna be fresh,*” it was probably more like that, but the point was this was MTV, this was a very big deal. (1:13-1:40)

Dropping her voice to a much lower register, slowing her speaking pace, and employing specific jargon (“Yo,” “dope,” “fresh”) that set her speech squarely in the world of “late nineties hip-hop,” Jones affects the black male bravado of the artists with whom she will be working (“it was gonna be like, you know, rapper-slash-actor types, Mos Def and people like that... all of that machismo” [8:41-8:45]). Here, Jones offers the audience a teaser of what she is capable of, containing the impression in quotes. Setting the “black” voice up as performative codeswitching based on circumstance—i.e., being hired as a writer/actress on a hip-hop show—Jones differentiates her ‘original’ speaking voice as oppositional to the stereotypical swagger she performs. Not “Oh my god, this is amazing!” (high, feminine register) but “Yo, this is gonna be dope; this is gonna be fresh” (low, masculine register). Jones also demonstrates a keen awareness of her own racial performance, couched in a self-deprecating acknowledgement of her ‘hip-hop voice’ as façade. This sets up one voice (her starting voice) as an origin point or true voice, and the other voices as moments of disruption or deviance. Her audience appreciates it, and reacts with laughter: the joke, after all, plays into and with what psychologist John Baugh calls “linguistic profiling,” judgement and discrimination based on the sound of a voice; in his words, “the auditory equivalent of ‘racial profiling’” (155). Even as Jones tropes these linguistic stereotypes, though, she cannot entirely separate herself from them: in the context of her story, she is not quoting others, she is quoting herself—more accurately she is offering a humorous corrective to a previous impression of herself. As such, even in this short moment, Jones also potentially highlights the messy ambiguities of identity as it is linked to performance.

14 Very soon afterward, Jones again shifts her voice, this time while describing the experience of her higher education:

but the point was this was MTV, this was a very big deal, and this was a very gratifying thing in particular because I had been trying to get something like this, you know auditioning and things, ever since I had come home from Bryn Mawr college where I had dropped out—well, *one doesn't 'drop out' of Bryn Mawr College, rather one, I would say, one defers indefinitely, uh, in order to embark on a journey of, uh, non-linear, lifelong learning*—so, that’s what I was doing, and had I found my way back to new York, where I was stumbling around and I stumbled into the writing and performing scene. (1:40-2:11)

This time, Jones’s accent switches to a languid, lilting affair commonly associated with New England bluebloods—the very same set who might, for example, send their children and money

to Bryn Mawr. Jones speaks in a vaguely transatlantic accent, invoking a long history of American speech patterns marked by class divide and aspiration (Fallows). Here, Jones's voice is class critique, and her joke once again elicits a knowing audience laugh. The joke is clearly on the college's wealthy patrons, whose refusal to say the phrase "drop out" reference longstanding stereotypes of repressed rich WASPs. But yet again, it is hard to tell where Jones ends and the 'other' begins. Not only is this switch unconfined to quotes, instead operating more like free and indirect discourse; it also implicates her in its narrative message. The joke is once again partly on her, for attending Bryn Mawr in the first place.

15 In some ways, these first two impressions, at once Jones and not-Jones, provide signposts for some kind of middle-of-the-road: a real narrator that the audience can trust, associated with the body of the 'Sarah Jones' up on stage. Read this way, Jones's vocal strategies align with her story's centrist politics. Having demonstrated that she is not quite hip-hop MTV, but not quite Bryn Mawr either, Jones can establish her first speaking voice as appropriately 'neutral' middle-ground. As if offering an explanation for this strategy, Jones then goes on to explain her frustration with typecasting:

Now the only problem was, a lot of people in casting didn't know what to do about me and all my multicultural cast of characters; they really would have preferred it if I could do, um, celebrity impressions, or at the very least they'd hope that I could stick to urban characters. Urban, um, from the 'hood.' Rather than the multicultural range I was doing. And that really didn't work for me because part of the reason I had started writing in the first place was I was frustrated with the dearth of well-rounded images on television for someone like myself. It's fair to say that I felt like there was some stuff on TV that was demeaning, one-dimensional, stereotypes of, you know, ethnic people, and then you know, the limited roles for women, and then on top of that if you're a black girl, it was like, *giiirl, you better learn how to talk like this, oh and you better get yo'self a chiropractor girl so you can go play "Neck-Rollin' Bitch Numba One" and "Neck-Rollin' Ho Numba Two," and not injure yo' neck!* (2:27-3:18)

It is here, at minute 3:08, that Jones first 'comes out' as a "black girl." Significantly, she does this via a chain of ever-more-specific, ever-less-euphemistic terms, mocking the coded language used by many a casting director: first "urban," then "hood," then "ethnic," then finally "black." And it is at this moment, immediately after her own self-naming, that Jones shifts vocal registers for a third time. Here, Jones speaks in exaggerated version of AAVE (African American Vernacular English), smacking her lips and punching her words as she does so. She and the audience laugh.

16 But Jones’s laughter now is decidedly less comfortable than that of her appreciative spectators. Her discomfort is perhaps born of the fact that, in this instance, it is genuinely unclear what in particular her audience finds funny: the stereotype itself, or its hyperbolic critique. In calling out the entertainment industry for its refusal to cast black women or anything other than “bitches and hos”, Jones references two historically recurring stereotypes of black women that have long haunted the US cultural imaginary: what Carolyn West and others have called the “Sapphire” and “Jezebel” stereotypes, respectively. While the “Jezebel” figure is primarily characterized as “sexually promiscuous and immoral” (294), the “Sapphire” stereotype embodies the “hostile, nagging Black woman” (296). Caught between a rock and a hard place—between playing a bitch/Sapphire or a ho/Jezebel—Jones both demands and enacts alternative options. But the question remains: is Jones exploiting, or subverting here?

17 At this point, again as if to answer these nagging questions, Jones shifts strategies once again. Here, Jones showcases three voices: 1) her beginning, ‘neutral’ voice, 2) her “Jewish grandma” voice, and 3) her “Indian” voice:

I felt like this was a whole different thing like, with MTV, they had come to me and they had said “Wow, we really love your characters, and we know you have these urban characters and that’s great but we know you have this other stuff you have this whole range—is it true you do a Jewish grandmother? We’d love to see that! And I thought, *“Wow, this is wonderful! Thank you so much! Finally, somebody cares about me! You know, finally!”* and I said *“This is fantastic, you know I would love to be in your program, I’m so flattered,”* and, um, it was wonderful, we had a lovely audition together, and they, you know, they really let me play, they wanted to meet all my different characters, you know they wanted to meet my French character and my Russian character, Indian, you know anything that *was unexpected, they wanted to hear that, right? They just did not want to hear the same thing that you are typically going to hear, they wanted something fresh and new, and I was very excited about that because that’s what I was trying to give them. So it was kind of like this really thrilling thing that was happening to me and I was like “Wow, that was awesome,”* so then, now I found myself in LA. (3:28-4:23)

Again, Jones plays to and against the audience’s linguistic biases. She assumes that when audiences hear her lapse into a new, distinctive prosody, they will understand that by “Jewish,” Jones actually references a much more specific identity associated with the speech pattern (Nozowitz). In this case, “Jewish grandma” comes to stand in for a myriad of other identifications beyond ethnicity, including gender (female), race (white), age (senior), class (working/middle), and region (the New York metropole). The signifier “Jewish grandma” is, again, deeply intersectional, and as such its political purchase is ambiguous. Does the shorthand term “Jewish

grandma” collapse these myriad intersections of identity, eschewing a multipronged analysis of complicated subjecthood in favor of an easy stereotype? Or does it instead allow for an analysis of these many intersections, containing them cleverly in one sonic demonstration, with faith that her audience will get it? Similarly, Jones presumes that audiences will know that by “Indian,” she means “Indian immigrant”; in fact Jones’s Indian accent exemplifies what Shilpa S. Davé helpfully terms “brown voice,” a “specific racializing trait among South Asian Americans in Hollywood productions, which simultaneously connotes both foreignness and familiarity because the accent is identified with an English-speaking identity and hence offers some cultural privileges of assimilating into American culture” (41). Tellingly, this impression elicits one of the biggest laughs of the evening—a laugh, notably, quite unlike the slightly uncomfortable scattered giggles elicited by the “Jewish grandma” voice. Outside of the academy, too, brown voice made headlines after Indian-American comedian Aziz Ansari stated in several public interviews that he refused to do “the Indian accent,” despite being repeatedly asked by casting directors (Saad). Somewhat oddly, Jones’s own refusal to play into stereotypes of black women does not seem to extend to other categories of person. And yet once again her framing complicates the issue of self and other in a way that also subverts, or at least muddies, stereotype. These next two vocal impressions are decidedly different than her first three, in that they are not contained to quotes at all. In fact, Jones transitions between these voices without referring to the switch, obliquely naming the accent while still blurring the divide between the speaking narrator and the “characters” she can “do.”

18 The subversive elements already present in the three impressions described above comes to a head in Jones’s final vocal impression, which is yet again slightly different in that it is part of the actual narrative climax of her story. After a long detour through her past, Jones brings her audience back to the Los Angeles street corner:

I remember thinking, I was so incensed, “This is disgusting! Like how can they think they can treat people like this? How could you think you could treat someone this way, how could you do this?” and that’s what was going through my mind. But what actually came out of my mouth was *“This is disgusting! Who do you think you are? How do you think you can get away with this? This is outrageous! I’m gonna get on the line straight away to my agent!”* and *this is the accent that was coming out of my mouth. Okay, but wait wait wait, so, what’s important about this, okay, is the fact that, if you know my work and you know my characters they really all come from my childhood, okay, I come from a multiracial, multicultural family and we, you know, my neighbors my friends all these diverse people, that’s where my accents come from that’s where my people come from, and long before I brought them onstage, you know, these were all people whose accents I sometimes found I would use in a given situation if I thought it could be helpful. And, I*

will tell you, that you know a British accent has a certain impact on people! It stops them; it arrests them, if you will. (6:25-7:31)

In Jones's run-in with the LAPD, her British accent exposes the policemen's inherent racism. Britishness, associated with both whiteness and the ruling class, disrupts the cops' previous read of Jones and African American and therefore lower-class/criminal/sexually deviant.

Power, Authenticity, Voice

19 In the story's retelling, though, Jones's British accent also serves another purpose. As in the above examples, the accent continues long after Jones is ostensibly 'quoting' herself—her exterior outburst, at first clearly delineated from the monologue in her "mind," soon becomes indistinguishable from her interior monologue, as she continues to tell the audience her personal family history in the same British accent. This is important because Jones's personal history grants her credibility (consider, for example, the *Encyclopedia of African-American Writing* [2009]'s biographical explanation for her supernatural imitative abilities: "Because Sarah Jones's father was a medical doctor in the military, she and her family moved often. To adapt, she quickly picked up the local speech patterns and gestures" [Hatch, 322]). In an ironic display of vocal promiscuity, Jones cleverly relates her personal bona fides—the very multicultural backstory which bolsters her own 'authenticity'—in a voice that is not 'her own.' The result is a shrewd rejection of authenticity, followed by the admission that sometimes a voice can be "helpful," in that it grants Jones power that would normally be reserved for white people (the power, for example, to "arrest").

20 Given Jones's claim to the 'reality' of her characters, it is surprising that one pioneering performer is conspicuously missing from Jones's list of influences. In terms of approach, Jones's dramatic *oeuvre* perhaps most closely resembles that of Anna Deavere Smith, whose one-woman shows ushered in a renaissance of American "verbatim theatre," a sub-genre of documentary theater characterized by a strict adherence to the words of actual people as they related them to the playwright in interviews, ethnographies, etc. Of her productions, the most famous of which is *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994), a solo act that tells the story of the Los Angeles uprisings in the wake of the Rodney King trial. In each performance of *Twilight*, Smith acts as a mouthpiece for the testimony of various "real" subjects, relaying word-for-word renditions of responses from a diverse range of actual interviewees, all with different backgrounds and perspectives. In the course of the evening, Smith plays a white truck driver, a Korean liquor store owner, the former

head of the Black Panther Party, a Panamanian shooting victim, a partially dead Mexican sculptor, a white Hollywood agent, several jurors in the Rodney King trial, two ex-gang members, and the chief of the LAPD, among several others. Throughout the performance, the solo performer of *Twilight* must rely on their own acting chops to convey a variety of personalities.

21 Like Smith, Jones's polyvocal performances also raise questions of the authenticity of the voice, the ethics of mimicry, and the ways sonic expectation attaches to certain bodies. Like Smith, Jones places her racial drama in 1990s Los Angeles. The notable difference between the two artists—that is, the fact that Jones's theatrical performance makes no claim to documentary—might allow Jones to sidestep these questions of authenticity. But the existence of “A Walk on the West Side,” a work of *non-fiction*, raises an interesting question: what happens to these debates when Jones speaks ‘as herself’ (that is, when she tells a story about something she actually experienced), and still employs the same stylistic strategies of vocal impression and codeswitching that she did when speaking “as others”?

22 While Jones's Broadway and off-Broadway performances are primarily fiction, their realist themes and formal similarities to Smith's one-woman documentary theater mean that they are nonetheless still haunted by the same questions of reality, fidelity, and testimony evoked by a piece like *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. As Rosemary Weatherston brilliantly lays out in her article “‘The True Words of Real People’: Documenting the Myth of the Real in Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*,” Smith's work has the dual capacity to shatter an audience's preconceived notions of “the relations between speech rhythms and the construction of individual identity,” while at the same time enforcing paradigms of “informant/informee” that largely shape US ideas of identity and difference (194). Praised as a “living documentary” by virtue of her expert acting abilities (marked primarily by an obsessive attention to realist modes of speech), Smith becomes a credible source of difference and the ‘truth’ of difference. Weatherston writes that, consistently, audience and critical responses to Smith's work declared an “astonished and heartfelt conviction that Smith—a light-skinned, African American woman—had been able objectively and accurately to recreate the singular experiences and subjectivities of an entire spectrum of men, women, Jews, Blacks, rich, poor, young, old, scholars, housewives, and street rappers” (192). Jones adopts many of Smith's same principals and techniques in her own (mostly fictional) solo shows, employing different accents, comportments, dialects, and vocal ranges to signal each different character. Like Smith, Jones has largely avoided criticism of her method as potentially

“an oppressive form of appropriation” (193), instead garnering praise for her ‘multicultural’ solo shows.

23 Despite its route through the ugly world of blatant police harassment and racism in entertainment media, “A Walk on the West Side” ends on a note of triumph. In the last minute of her performance, Jones closes with the following:

And so I left. I went back to New York, I went back to the theater, and I kept writing and performing the stuff that I thought was compelling, and, you know, I wondered a lot whether I had really made a mistake. And I have to say that, one thing that helped was eventually I met Whoopi—not only met, but got to work alongside—Whoopi, and Tracy, and Lilly... and as for Meryl... I was at a benefit performing one night and she saw me, and she was so generous with me, she said, “I’d like to help you,” and she agreed to put her name on my show, and help *Bridge & Tunnel* get to off-Broadway, and then to Broadway, and win a Tony. And you know I look at all of that and I think: I don’t know if that happens in LA, but that is the kind of thing that happens in New York City, where jaywalking is considered high art. Thank you. (10:55-11:52)

As she returns to the right coast and the right city, racism seems contained to the bad place of Los Angeles, replaced by a rosy, New York metropolitan multiculturalism in which creative works like hers are possible. Her feel-good conclusion is smart storytelling, in that it gives her imagined audience of liberal-leaning public radio listeners a happy ending. But the all-too-neat conclusion of “A Walk on the West Side” obscures the much more radical potential at the heart of Jones’s performance.

24 Key to this potential is Jones’s bizarre and brilliant entanglement of medium and message. Voice, it turns out, is the subject of the story itself: when the story is told via the voice, things are bound to get messy. As the start of this article makes clear, the power of Jones’s solo stage work often relies on her uncanny ability to present one way and sound another, subverting audience expectations (and, in turn, revealing audience prejudice). In other words, by mimicking a range of accents while remaining one embodied person, Jones draws attention to a disconnect between the audience’s assumptions about aesthetic markers of race, gender, sexuality, or class, and those same identity categories’ sonic markers. Once her performance moves from the stage to *The Moth Radio Hour*, however, the trick needs tweaking: without a body to “present,” the voice in Jones’s story works much like the voice in one of Baugh’s experiments, in that it serves as the primary marker of race, class, gender, or sexuality.

25 As is the case with all the stories that make it to *The Moth Radio Hour*’s handpicked weekly selection, Jones’s story arrived in listener’s earbuds stripped of its initial milieu. On the most

obvious level, in its podcast form, *The Moth* is no longer being delivered live, a key distinction between podcasts and much of talk radio. If performance asserts “embodiment and interconnection in time, space, and place,” with artists representing themselves “in the process of *being and doing*, and these acts take place in a cultural context for a public to witness” (Stiles 75), the recording of Jones’s stage performance fails to fit the definition of “performance” as it is understood in art criticism and other disciplines. These critical understandings of performance tend to focus on the interaction between the body/action of the artist, and her interpreting audience. In the words of Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson:

Performing the body in (or as) the work of art, as so many artists have done over the last three-and-half decades, exposes the fact that interpretation does not come ‘naturally’ at the moment of making contact with the artwork (any more than the artist ‘naturally’ injects her intentions or emotional affect into the forms of the work in a finalized or determinable way at the moment of creation). At the same time, such a performance of the body of the artist also points to the fact that the interaction among subjects, as mediated through the artwork (which in this case ‘is’ the artist), is hardly unaffected by the work’s institutional and discursive stagings and more broadly construed social and political situations. (3)

In other words, theories of performance emphasize immediacy and embodiment, both of which are more or less absent from the podcast medium. While vestiges of the original context such as audience reactions (laughter, applause, interested chatter, etc.) certainly remain, *The Moth Radio Hour* listeners lack access to any of the physical trappings that accompany a live show: a stage, a seat, a venue, other audience members, and—most importantly for the purposes of this article—the body of the performer herself.

26 Because there is no body to offer “clues” as to Jones’s identity (race, gender, etc.), the assumed connection between identity and a set of physically visible markers is thrown into question. Unbound by a bodily referent, the speaker’s voice gains primary authority when it comes to signifying identity. Without a body to which it can attach, the voice must not only provide explicit narrative context on the level of spoken word relaying the plot of the story; it must also, importantly, provide implicit extra-narrative context clues as to the identity and position of the narrator. As we have seen, these clues can take the form of dialect, intonation, inflection, and a myriad of other vocal markers. Searching for auditory clues on which to found their mental ‘picture’ of Jones, audience members are forced to linguistically profile her. But what happens when the listener is given many different clues, and those clues are constantly changing?

Conclusion

27 The podcast format, distinguished by its absence of the usual visual cues by which the audience might make assumptions about Jones's identity, allows her to cleverly manipulate her audience. I assert that the absence of a speaking body in the podcast medium, in combination with Jones's shifting accents, ultimately disrupts the idea of an 'original' or 'authentic' voice for Jones. Indeed, as I have shown above, the 'neutrality' her original speaking voice has been *carefully constructed* as a middle ground via its opposition to a myriad of named 'Other' voices. As such, it is not 'neutral' at all. To put it bluntly: by many accounts, in the beginning of her story, Jones 'sounds white' (Farhi). To many podcast listeners unfamiliar with Jones and her work, the speaking voice she presents to might not read as attached to the "black girl" she later confesses herself to be, a quarter of the way through her story. In this way, Jones's podcast audience may well accidentally enact a scene complementary to, not identical with, the climactic scene of her story. On the Hollywood street corner, white policemen interpellate Jones as "criminal" based on her physical appearance, only to have their racist assumptions called out by an accent whose sound challenges their rubrics of identity. In their private listening headphones, podcast consumers might well interpellate Jones as non-black based on the sound of her voice, only to have their racist assumptions called out not by Jones's physical appearance, but by both her coming out as a "black girl" at minute 3:08, and by her repeated codeswitching. Certainly, Jones's ability to *change* her voice confuses the audience (in other words: with each shift in accent, the audience has the rug pulled out from underneath them, again and again) but that is not the most significant aspect of her performance. Rather, is the absence of an *original* and fully legible voice, that gives her performance a radical potential. The audience has tried to hail her, and she has escaped.

28 Jones's performances (on the stage, but even more obviously in our earbuds) make clear that any discussion of race, gender, sexuality, or class that conceives of these identity categories as solely visual constructions is severely limited in its scope. More importantly, the fact that Jones repeatedly flaunts her mastery of these markers—that the entire point of her story is, in some ways, that she can bend them to her will—wrests interpolative power from her unseeing audience. Her surface narrative—steeped in the language of liberal and representational politics—cannot fully tame the more radical, destabilizing implication of her own vocal promiscuity: namely, that the rubrics that her audiences uses to construct the identities she references (be they "Neck-Rolling Ho Numba One" or "Jewish grandma") are unstable and unfounded to begin with.

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