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AUSTRALIA

January 2017

Empathy, ethics and aesthetics in Love + Radio

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Recommended Citation

Macklem, Michelle, Empathy, ethics and aesthetics in Love + Radio, *RadioDoc Review*, 3(1), 2017.
doi:[10.14453/rdr.v3i1.4](https://doi.org/10.14453/rdr.v3i1.4)

Empathy, ethics and aesthetics in Love + Radio

Abstract

The podcast *Love + Radio* thrives on cultivating a kind of emotional tightrope, where the listener wavers from curiosity to contempt to empathy. The episodes “Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” have stark differences, particularly in terms of sound design, but their aesthetic and production values have a coherency that is exemplary of *Love + Radio’s* style. Sound is used to distinguish between ‘Ellen,’ the subject, and ‘Jack’ her paedo-baiting alter ego. ‘Jack’ is created by pitch-shifting the voice of ‘Ellen’ down, instantly giving the story intrigue and also alluding to the clandestine nature of their work. “Jack and Ellen” is caught somewhere between a radio documentary and a swirling sample-based composition as the skilled musicality of the piece communicates a specific editorial perspective, that is perhaps a glimpse of how the producers were affected during its creation. “The Living Room”, on the other hand, is sparse and neat. Silence is used as strategically as sound. *Love + Radio’s* use of sound continues to distinguish it from most other podcasts, where music can feel slapped on, repetitive and unintentional.

The process of making a *Love + Radio* episode starts with an initial interview, then uses a first rough cut as a means of illuminating gaps and further questions in the story. Interview subjects/storytellers are re-interviewed two or three more times. *Love + Radio* is a mostly non-narrated format, but the interviewer is almost always included, however briefly. With “Jack and Ellen” the story becomes focused on the murky moral boundaries of extortion and paedophilia; it is a difficult piece because, depending on your personal morality, Ellen may seem like a pretty disreputable character. In “The Living Room”, Diane is more likeable off the top, but her voyeurism puts her in a questionable position. And it’s this tension that makes both “Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” a cut above other radio documentaries. There is no didactic purpose. But there is a genuine attempt to try to convey a facet of the human experience.

We as listeners are more likely to be empathetic towards someone of the same social and racial background. Can empathy then, be a dangerous force? Can we ever truly understand someone else’s embodied experience in the world? These are all valuable questions. Through “Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” in particular, *Love + Radio* crafts a tone that leaves the listener continually questioning the role of story in relating to other people, a force that continues to distinguish the show in the now over-abundance of confessional first-person driven podcasts.

Keywords

empathy, ethics, sound design, podcasting, interview

Empathy, Ethics and Aesthetics in Love + Radio

Love + Radio: a podcast from the Radiotopia network

“Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room”

Audio:

<http://loveandradio.org/2013/02/jack-and-ellen/>

<http://loveandradio.org/2015/03/the-living-room/>

Review by Michelle Macklem

Love + Radio is known for submerging the listener in a world totally different from their own. These long form interviews often unfold into complex stories that are divisive and difficult, creating non-prescriptive narratives that make the listener reflect on their own position relative to the story. “Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” are two episodes of *Love + Radio* that have stark differences, particularly in terms of sound design, but their aesthetic and production values have a coherency that is exemplary of *Love + Radio*’s style on the whole. *Love + Radio* thrives on cultivating a kind of emotional tightrope, where the listener wavers from curiosity to contempt to empathy through the course of an episode. As host and creator Nick van der Kolk reflected recently, “you can get a lot of good stories about mundane things. If you just dig deep enough.” *Love + Radio* unearths uncomfortable emotional depths that other podcasts merely scratch the surface of. Through “Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” in particular, *Love + Radio* crafts a tone that leaves the listener continually questioning the role of story in relating to other people, a force that continues to distinguish the show in the now over-abundance of confessional first-person driven podcasts.

Beginnings

Both “Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” came into being through meta, almost mystical stories of their own. First released in 2013, “Jack and Ellen” is a murky, disturbing story that takes us behind the curtain of paedobaiting online. Producer Mooj Zadie first pitched the story to *This American Life*, but it landed with *Love + Radio*, a more appropriate fit for what the final story became. One of the most striking details about “Jack and Ellen” is how Zadie got ‘Ellen’ to do the interview in the first place, particularly since she herself understands how getting caught could mean up to 20 years in prison.

Similarly, “The Living Room” came about after the *Love + Radio* team (at the time Nick Van der Kolk and Brendan Baker) had to kill another story and were scrambling for something to take its place. Baker remarks on the serendipitous finding of Diane, the protagonist of “The Living Room”:

Nick and I were working on a totally unrelated story at the time, but had to kill it at the last minute because one of the subjects in the story started receiving threatening messages as a result of our poking around. We didn’t have any other pieces close to finished at the time, so we were scrambling to find something to replace this hole in our schedule--like, two or three days before the publishing deadline. In a stroke of luck, my roommate at the time connected me with Briana Breen.

“The Living Room”, which describes how a woman becomes obsessed with a young couple whose apartment she can see into, is billed simply thus:

“Diane’s new neighbors across the way never shut their curtains, and that was the beginning of an intimate, but very one-sided relationship.” Baker and Breen pulled the story together, making “The Living Room” both a tremendous feat in terms of storytelling and pure radio production. While “Jack and Ellen” took nine months of on-and-off production to come together, “The Living Room” was produced in less than three days. Both pieces went on to win Third Coast International Audio Festival awards in their respective years. Unusual stories often have unusual beginnings, and with *Love + Radio* being a platform for stories that actively reject conventional narratives, it is no surprise that their chase process equally denies an established approach.

Sound

Creative and boundary-pushing sound design is a distinguishing factor of *Love + Radio*. “Jack and Ellen” has a particular musicality and rhythm to it, floating the listener in and out of Ellen’s story. Sound is used to distinguish between ‘Ellen’, the subject, and ‘Jack’ her paedobaiting alter ego. ‘Jack’ is created by pitch-shifting the voice of ‘Ellen’ down, instantly giving the story intrigue and also alluding to the clandestine nature of their work. Sound essentially becomes a third character in the piece, one that sets an unsettling tone through music and effects. “Jack and Ellen” is caught somewhere between a radio documentary and a swirling sample-based composition as the skilled musicality of the piece communicates a specific editorial perspective, that is perhaps a glimpse of how the producers were affected during its creation.

“The Living Room”, on the other hand, is sparse and neat. Silence is used as strategically as sound. Restraint - both in terms of the above-mentioned production schedule - and also creative vision, is part of what makes this episode work. But although the sonic parameters of both pieces are on different planes, what makes them similar are particular production decisions. *Love + Radio* is a mostly non-narrated format, but the interviewer is almost always included, however briefly, in the piece. In both “Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” Zadie and Breen are respectively heard asking questions.

In “The Living Room”, Breen poses the question:

Breen: *Did you ever find out either of their names?*

Diane: I never have found out their names, and I looked through the local obituaries obsessively, for weeks, and there was never anyone that fit his description.

Breen’s question isn’t a necessary one to include in the piece. Diane answers Breen’s question with the inclusion of it. So this becomes another notable stylistic choice, one that purposefully propels the listener out of the first-person story, to remember that this is an interview, with two people in the room.

In “Jack and Ellen”, Zadie is heard pushing back against some of what Ellen is saying - naturally following to a degree, the line of questioning many of the listeners may be feeling at this point.

Ellen: The real life’s waiting out there for me... Now we can record the door closing to my room, and my footsteps...

Zadie: *But do you not see the connection? Or do you not see how...*

Ellen: I see the connection. That’s why I made the connection to drug dealers. Drug dealers say they make easy money and then they go to jail maybe, and then they come back and they deal more drugs, because that’s the easiest way for them to make money again.

Zadie: *Do you feel like you’re gonna follow that path?*

Ellen: I feel like I have the ability to stop. I've never had an addictive personality, but I feel like I need to have a certain amount of money before I can stop.

Zadie is heard off-mic, another deliberate decision. Having the interviewer speak off-mic recalls Nick van der Kolk's citing of virtuoso documentary film maker Errol Morris, and also the documentary-driven aesthetics of *Love + Radio* on the whole. Sound-wise, the decision disrupts the listener's experience a bit, bringing them out of the moment of the story and reminding listeners that this is an edited, produced, even slightly self-reflexive piece. Baker says the choice to do this is intentional:

...having an interview question appear off mic and with some more physical distance and more reverberant room reflection can work as a reminder that the otherwise deadened "radiophonic space" is an illusion--that we recorded this in a physical space at a particular place and time, that there's someone prompting the discussion, asking follow-up questions, offering pushback, mediating the interview. When the interviewer asks a question off mic, the effect is sort of kind of like zooming out the camera, or cutting from a close-up shot to a wide-angle lens for a moment.

In creative-driven radio, comparisons to film often abound. Here, thinking about the microphone as a camera sets up a dynamic perspective that actively seeks to bring the experience out of a studio or dry setting and into the reality of a physical space.

Representation

Love + Radio is known for its producers collecting hours and hours of tape. The process of making a *Love + Radio* episode starts with an initial interview, then uses a first rough cut as a means of illuminating gaps and further questions in the story. Interview subjects/ storytellers are re-interviewed two or three more times. This process is often opaque to the listener, which creates a compelling thread between interview subject/storyteller, producer and listener. One where the producer becomes a conduit for a version of the story that has been reshaped and tightened into a specific format.

With "Jack and Ellen" the story becomes focused on the murky moral boundaries of extortion and paedophilia, offering the audience a perspective

that is likely unheard anywhere else. Listening to “Jack and Ellen” does not make one rest easy afterwards; it is a difficult piece because, depending on your personal morality, Ellen may seem like a pretty disreputable character. In “The Living Room”, Diane is more likeable off the top, but her voyeurism puts her in a questionable position. All to say, both of these characters are more multi-layered than the conventional narrative radio story structure generally allows. As a listener, one flip flops from curiosity to disgust to compassion, among many other emotions, during the course of these episodes.

It is important to note that specific production decisions go into crafting these stories -where the ‘truth’ of how these interview subjects/storytellers are represented rests on the enormous power of the producer. Whittling down hours of tape into a coherent story means that depth and details are lost. In theorist Linda Alcott’s influential piece “The Problem of Speaking For Others”, she illustrates the value of being cognisant of who is speaking and who is listening: “who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said; in fact what is said turns out to change according to who is speaking and who is listening.” For the purposes of radio documentary making, I would add the importance of who is producing to the equation of speaking and listening. Perhaps here, it is better to turn to an understanding of emotional honesty than truth. Baker notes how he approaches truth and honesty in documentary making:

As an editor of documentary art, I always want to represent my best understanding of truth, knowing that I’m always working with subjective perspectives. So I want to edit the piece in a way that feels intellectually and emotionally honest, and fair to my subject. I want the subject to listen to the final piece and say, “you really captured me”. And I care about the audience trusting me to portray my best understanding of the truth. That said, I also want to give the audience credit for being sophisticated enough to draw their own conclusions and react to the piece in a variety of ways. The necessary tension of portraying “truth” in a way that is open-ended enough for people to have their own emotional and intellectual reaction is the great tension of documentary art.

And it’s this tension that makes both “Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” a cut above other radio documentaries. How I, as listener, perceive the ‘truth’ of these characters will inherently differ greatly from another listener with a completely different subjectivity. There is no right or correct conclusion to

come to with either of these episodes. There is no didactic purpose. But there is a genuine attempt to try to convey a facet of the human experience.

Empathy

“Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” decline prescriptive and reductive narratives, instead offering multi-dimensional portraits of their subjects/storytellers. The topic of empathy has been all over the podcast and radio sphere lately, a kind of buzz word that’s used as a blanket term for trying to understand what documenting individual experiences means. And empathy is a common theme in “Jack and Ellen” and “The Living Room” both in terms of how Ellen and Diane consider their situations, and how listeners engage with these stories.

In “Jack and Ellen” empathy comes up in relation to how Ellen sees her complicitness in the process of outing and extorting paedophiles:

Ellen: So I didn’t really wanna exploit that fear, and that made it hard to not feel guilty. But then I thought about how I was posing as a 15-year-old boy luring older men and that just because I felt empathy for this man, I couldn’t just skip him, because every other case was gonna be similar. If I felt empathy for everyone, I wouldn’t make any money. I never in the threat letters included “Hey, you’re gay and no one knows, and I’m gonna tell them.” It was just given. He is not only a closeted gay man, he’s a closeted paedophile. They can be a dad, they can be a doctor, they can be gay, but they all still wanna have sex with children. That’s what I had to keep in mind to allow myself not to feel too shitty about what I was doing.

As a gay woman herself, Ellen feels some sort of tangled sympathy for outing these people, but not enough to stop. Rejecting the idea of being empathetic towards them in any way, Ellen is a successful con artist because she attempts to put a wall up between her emotional response and her actions. This makes Ellen a difficult character to connect and empathise with as a listener.

Off the top, Diane is a much more sympathetic character. For one, what she’s doing isn’t necessarily illegal, although voyeurism is culturally taboo. While Diane has an intense emotional connection to the couple living in that apartment, she’s still never actually met them. Diane is a witness to the young

man's final moments and then goes into the street once his body is being taken away:

Diane: I had no place to be there. And they looked at me... I remember the coroner's assistant looking at me like I was a sort of a rubber necker in the street, looking at this grisly scene. And I realized that's what I was. I had no place to be there, and suddenly it all felt so perverse.

Diane cries when she sees the young man die. There is a sense of love between herself and the young people in the apartment, one that she notes is very "maternal". But at the same time, Diane takes on a certain level of their grief. She did not directly experience any of this pain and yet she cares so deeply. Here, the question of empathy comes up again.

Humour me for a moment on the topic of empathy, where we, as the listeners are more likely to be empathetic towards someone of the same social and racial background. Diane is a more empathetic character for myself because she articulates a critical understanding of voyeurism, one that she has some pretty complicated feelings towards. Whereas, I feel more distance towards Ellen. She's young, less able to critically reflect - or really admit to it anyways - and less articulate. She also happens to be a woman of colour. Do I have an unconscious bias here - likely. Can empathy then, be a dangerous force?

I'm choosing to define empathy here as Barack Obama once did, as having the ability to put oneself in another's shoes. I for one, first balked at the idea of being against something that seemed so at the core of documentary and radio making. But there's been some compelling arguments lately on empathy and how our own biases play into who we empathise with, which is notably people who are young, attractive and overwhelmingly white. It also legitimises a somewhat selfish perspective about feeling someone else's pain, for example, 'I feel your pain, ergo your pain is important.' Where does that leave us with radio documentaries then? A medium that is a proponent of first-person storytelling and the concept of letting listeners step into a world not their own?

This is by no means an attempt to tarnish great and emergent podcast criticism, but rather to present an alternative perspective that questions why we listen to narrative-driven audio in the first place. Do I listen to podcasts to be put in the metaphorical shoes of another? To feel the pain/ suffering/

experience of an individual outside of myself? Can we ever truly understand someone else's embodied experience in the world? These are all questions that I've started asking myself, and I believe, valuable ones that other documentary makers and listeners need to start thinking about as well.

Conclusion

"Jack and Ellen" and "The Living Room" are innovative radio documentaries both in terms of content and form. "Jack and Ellen" captures the emotional discomfort of experiencing a character that has a considerably murky morality. "The Living Room" creates a kind of screen in the mind of the listener that enables them to project their own emotional response to Diane's actions. Both pieces are inclusive of the style of *Love + Radio* in general, allowing the listener space to judge, waver and re-evaluate during the course of an episode. *Love + Radio's* use of sound continues to distinguish it from most other podcasts, where music can feel slapped on, repetitive and unintentional. These episodes also serve as a jumping off point into the difficult ethics around documentary making and why we consume radio/podcasts and produce them in the first place. As the proliferation of podcasts continues and the influence of other mediums like film, television and fiction are folded in, I hope we can continue to have conversations around what it means to document the human experience.

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