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EDITORIAL: Transnational Audio Storytelling: Writing the Common Language of Sound

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EDITORIAL: Transnational Audio Storytelling: Writing the Common Language of Sound

Abstract

Editorial on a special transnational issue of RadioDoc Review, curated by Dr Laura Romero and co-edited by A/Prof Siobhan McHugh. The issue features mainly sound-rich European works in languages other than English, critiqued by reviewers from four continents. It also showcases invited articles on mainstream podcasts, *The Shadows* (audio fiction) and *Serial* Season Three (crafted documentary) .

Keywords

Transnational, Diversity, Audio Feature, Audio Storytelling, Podcasting, Radio, Multiculturalism

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EDITORIAL. Transnational Audio Storytelling: Writing the Common Language of Sound

Radio has that infinite mystery, which creates the sensation of being in intimacy with the intimacy of the other, perhaps because intimacy is linked to the art of telling life (do not confuse with privacy…) because the art of telling life is nothing more than the art of living, in its boundless palette of colours: “you can live without art (…) without intimacy, it is not essential: it is only necessary to enjoy life" (Pardo, 1996).[1] I wanted (and I want to) enjoy life. Moreover: I have the commitment to do it and to celebrate it. I have two ears and a natural impulse to listen and play with audio possibilities. This is the reason for this new issue of *RadioDoc Review* (RDR), thanks to the invitation I received from Dr Siobhán McHugh, the audio storytelling enthusiast who had the brilliant idea of creating this magnificent journal. One day, following this impulse to listen and to know beyond borders (I come from a country, Spain, where audio creative audio documentaries haves not traditionally hada big support by broadcasters), I discovered RDR on the internet and started being a regular reader. Later, when I hadve finished my PhD rResearch and I was looking for post-doctoral stays, I decided to write to Siobhán, and it was from that contact, she guided me and invited me to undertake this adventure: to curate an issue about sound works mostly not in English. We both wanted to enjoy the process of listening to stories, sound intimacies that came from different places, produced in diverse languages, and to discuss it and share it.

RadioDoc Review (RDR) is an international meeting in the form of articles analysing sound works. In this case, our fundamental criterion of this call was to select intimate stories with creative sound design. Then, we invited six authors or researchers, also from different backgrounds and countries, to write about them.

On the RDR website, we registered six hundred downloads of our Call for Works. We received stories from countries including Argentina, Mexico, Germany, Denmark, France, Holland, Belgium, Israel, Poland, Spain, Portugal, UK and Australia, all of them of great quality. Each sound work was a gift that, when opened, not only invited me to experience a narrative; it also invited me to relive a particular identity and to transport myself in the storytelling way of each author. From all those stories, we had to choose only six that would be part of this multilingual and cross-border exchange between works, authors and writers. These are the selected works: *Avec le Vent*, by Jeanne Debarsy (Belgium), *Summer Rain*, by Nanna Hauge Kristensen's (Denmark), *Qualia*, by Charo Calvo (Belgium-Spain) *Scheitern ist ...* by Rilo Chmielorz (Germany), *A Very Different Time*, by Phil Smith (UK) and *Frente de Fogo*, by Isabel Meira (Portugal). All of them contain elements that caught my attention and among

[1] Pardo, J.L. (1996). *La Intimidad.* Pre-Textos, Valencia.

them we also find very different narratives: multiple roads from the classical to the experimental.

The curious thing, precisely, of this experience, is the discovery of authors, works and different ways of narrating (and in other languages) to other authors (the reviewers), seeking contrast, challenging the "algorithms" that nowadays seek to standardise. We wanted to create an authentic network where ideas flow and schemes break. Thus, we also wished to ensure that the authors/reviewers who are part of this meticulous work of analysis and writing, received audios that could be inspiring or interesting for them. The reviewers (all, incidentally, women) come from Switzerland, Spain, Portugal, Uruguay, France and Australia, and all have extensive experience in both audio production and pedagogical activity: Silvia Viñas (Radio Ambulante), Ania Mauruschat (University of Basel), Charlotte de Beauvoir (Universidad de Los Andes, Bogotá), Sophie Townsend (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), Vanessa Ribeiro Rodrigues (TSF). Well, and me!

This does not end here. Along the way, other interesting proposals emerged to be part of this issue: an article about the Prix Europa of this year (2018), written by emerging Polish scholar Natalia Kowalska. Also, a critique from Neil Verma (Northwestern University, US) of the audio fiction podcast series *The Shadows*, a production of Kaitlin Prest and Phoebe Wang for CBC (Canada). And from Jason Loviglio (University of Maryland, US), an analysis of *Serial*, Season 3, set in the courtrooms of Cleveland, Ohio.

I can only thank all the participants: all the authors who sent in their works, the reviewers and especially my co-editor Siobhán McHugh for this experience. And of course, you, listeners and readers. I really hope you like this publication full of sonorous accents.

Have fun!

Laura Romero Valldecabres,
Valencia, Spain.

NOTE from the CO-EDITOR:

In a world of increasing media silos where like speaks to like, this issue of *RadioDoc Review* reaffirms the importance of diversity in audio storytelling. As background, and acknowledging that podcasting is a broad field which includes only a small slice of crafted storytelling: in the US, podcast hosts have traditionally been over-represented by the demographic of educated, affluent, white males and ten years ago, the podcast audience was 73% white (Edison Research 2018). But in 2018, podcast hosts and content are more diverse and the proportion of white listeners in the US is pro-rata to the population, at around 59%. Interestingly, the number of Asian-American listeners, though still small, has risen steeply, from 2 to 7%.

The need to diversify the producers of podcasts and audio works has been recognised by scholarship initiatives at organisations such as Transom.org, Third Coast Audio and Spotify, which has run First Nations residential podcast training schemes in the US, UK and Australia. In June 2018, Google teamed with PRX (Public Radio Exchange, a US organisation) to launch a fund that will support bringing under-represented voices to podcasting, by running competitions in 2018 and 2019. The co-chair is Amit Doshi, CEO of IVM Podcasts in India, and the selection panel includes people of refreshingly diverse ethnic backgrounds.

In 2018, France held its first podcast festival and at the Global Editors Network summit in Lisbon in June, journalists and senior editors from many backgrounds, from Japan to Latin America, attended a crowded workshop run by myself and Rob Greenlee of Voxnest on the nature of the audio medium and the practicalities of making a podcast. It always amazes me how media professionals such as print and video journalists often overlook the enormously powerful aspects of audio. So many seem to undervalue audio as the poor orphan cousin of television: television without pictures. After a session where I seduce them with sound, they no longer think that way! Each medium has distinct strengths and weaknesses, I remind them, and to understand audio, you need to appreciate its temporal, porous nature, ability to co-create mental images in listeners, its visceral, affective power and the invisible architecture and alchemy of mixing layers of sound and voice.

Such qualities are referenced with deep insight by our reviewers in this issue. The works range from sound art and experimental reportage to highly anticipated mainstream podcasts such as *The Shadows* and *Serial* Season 3. In his penetrating critique of *The Shadows*, Neil Verma offers a structured meditation on six conventions that make audio fiction different from audio drama or features: deliberately naive themes that become allegories; temporal reversion or 'queer temporality'; use of bodily sound; multiplications of the voice; use of objects to orient sound; and a fascination with exquisite moments.

In his analysis of *Serial* S3, Jason Loviglio, who has previously articulated shortcomings in aspects of American public radio productions, finds much to celebrate. If you think *Serial* may have already had its share of attention, think again. In the West and the Anglo podsphere, its 320+ million downloads over the first two series have certainly attracted a lot of column inches. Thus, when I was running a Power of Podcasting workshop recently for Asian broadcasters, I hesitated to bore them by playing an excerpt. But when I asked what they knew about *Serial*, one replied – and it wasn't a joke – "it's something you eat for breakfast".

That was an enlightening moment. What is old hat in one corner is fresh and new in another. That workshop revealed much to me. One young Chinese broadcaster, asked to record his personal take on his visit to Australia by combining narration with found sound for a short 'audio postcard', did a polished job. 'I think this is the most beautiful campus I've ever seen', he ended, a tribute to the leafy surrounds of the University of Wollongong. But what he said next came as a real surprise: 'That's the first time I've ever used the term "I" in a production.' It turned out he normally used the more formal 'one'. In China, seventy years of communism has shunted the individual off centre-stage, but increasing globalisation and market-driven reform is seeing a growing 'privatisation of the self', which is starting to manifest in many ways and will soon, I have no doubt, find expression in new podcast forms.

I am researching cultural preferences for audio storytelling in a collaboration with the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU), whose members in 57 countries broadcast to over half the world. They are shaped by complex social, political and historical factors, just as the more established European, British, Australian or American traditions of making sound works are. But even my short time so far with ABU broadcasters, observing their reaction to hearing a wide range of audio works of diverse genres and origins, has convinced me of one thing: personal storytelling affects us all – and sound crosses all borders.

My deep thanks to the indefatigable Laura Romero for her passion and persistence in bringing these works and their reviewers together, and to all the scholars and practitioners who have contributed to this issue.

Siobhán McHugh
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