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The Affective Power of Sound: Oral History on Radio

Siobhán McHugh

Abstract: Using illustrative audio clips, this article offers insights into the historical symbiosis between oral history and radio and the relationship between orality, aurality, and affect that makes radio such a powerful medium for the spoken word. It does so through a discussion of the concept of affect as it applies to oral history on radio and through a description and analysis of crafting oral history for the radio documentary form. This article features audio excerpts from radio documentaries produced by the author. Listening to the audio portions of this article requires a means of accessing the audio excerpts through hyperlinks. See “Instructions for Multimedia Reading of the OHR,” which follows the Editor’s Introduction at the front of the journal, for further explanation on how to access this article online.

Key words: affect, aurality, documentary, orality, radio, radio production.

As a medium of dissemination for oral history, radio has not one but two main benefits: the capacity to convey the oral/aural nature of oral history and the ability to reach a potentially much wider audience than the rather self-selecting field of, for example, readers of books or visitors to museums. The latter aspect is vitally important: you don’t need to be literate to absorb oral history on radio, thus dissemination via broadcast aligns with the democratizing ideals of the discipline. Nor do you need to enjoy abundant leisure time since listening can be a secondary rather than a dedicated activity. As American broadcaster and oral history theorist David

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K. Dunaway observes, “radio travels to where people are—in their back yards, kitchens, or cars.”¹ My focus in this article, however, is on radio’s first benefit: as a sonic medium, which by harnessing signature characteristics, such as aurality, orality, and affect, can be a particularly effective format for the publication of oral history.

Oral historians come from a wide range of disciplines, and many, while appreciating radio, may have little or no production experience.² “Aurality” and “orality” can be confusing terms, and these inter-related but very different concepts must first be defined. “Aurality” means relating to the ear or the sense of hearing; in radio terms, the aural aspect of a program denotes the acoustic landscape being broadcast and the innately intimate way we absorb it. As American media analyst Susan Douglas notes, sound “envelops us, pouring into us, whether we want it to or not, including us, involving us.”³ “Orality” refers to the fact and quality of oral/verbal communication. Thus orality is a subset of aurality; it is also a defining aspect of oral history, now thankfully being reclaimed from an earlier oral history tradition that sometimes saw the actual audio recording destroyed and only an interview transcript retained.⁴ Such unwitting vandalism is posterity’s loss, for as Stephen Smith, an American producer of historical radio documentaries, notes, “the tonality and pacing of human speech carry a whole sub-text of meaning that can get lost on the printed page.”⁵ Roslyn Oades, an Australian voice-over artist and practitioner of “verbatim” theatre based on oral histories, points out the uniqueness of voice:

. . . the quality of an individual voice, carrying within it the influence of age, gender, cultural origin, education, lifestyle, psychology . . . in addition to an individual’s particular speech patterns, mannerisms, vocabulary, volume, pace, habits, creates a very distinct vocal-print . . . as unique as an individual’s fingerprint.⁶

The importance of orality is now acknowledged by oral historians.⁷ Listening to the recording, as opposed to reading a transcript, gives a sense not just of who

¹ David K. Dunaway, “Radio and Biography,” *Biography* 20, 4 (1997): 467.

² David K. Dunaway, “Radio and the Public Use of Oral History,” in *Oral History: an Interdisciplinary Anthology*, eds. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 333–46.

³ Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 30.

⁴ Stephen Smith, “Living History,” in *Reality Radio: Telling True Stories in Sound*, eds. John Biewen and Alexa Dilworth (Chapel Hill: [Durham, N.C.]: University of North Carolina Press; In association with the Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University, 2010), 144.

⁵ Smith, “Living History,” 138.

⁶ Roslyn Oades, “Stories of Love & Hate Revisited” (Paper presented at Transcultural Mappings: Emerging Issues in Comparative, Transnational and Area Studies Conference, University of Sydney, New South Wales, April 9, 2010).

⁷ Tim Bowden, “Let’s Not Throw the Baby Out with the Bathwater,” *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* 27 (2005): 63–67; Francis Good, “Voice, Ear and Text: Words, Meaning and Transcription,” *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* 22 (2000): 102–9; Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different?” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 33–35; Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

is speaking but also of the subtle dynamics and narrative rhythms of the oral history interview. As the eminent Italian oral historian and theorist Alessandro Portelli notes, the interview process is “a performance in search of a text.”⁸ Oral historians who work from a printed transcript miss out on the performance; their experience is as close to the real interview as reading *Hamlet* compares to seeing a fine actor play Hamlet. To extend the metaphor, if oral historians accept Portelli’s pithy dictum, that “audio IS the text,” then radio must surely be the stage for the performance.⁹

Using illustrative audio clips, this article offers insights into the historical symbiosis between oral history and radio and the relationship between orality, aurality, and affect that makes radio such a powerful medium for the spoken word. It does so through a description and analysis of crafting oral history for the radio documentary form, based on my internationally broadcast radio series about mixed-faith marriage in Australia from the 1920s through the 1970s, *Marrying Out*, which was conceived as both an oral history project and a radio documentary.¹⁰

Oral history on radio: a brief historical context

When the physical and aesthetic qualities of voice are married to powerful substantive content, the effect can be mesmerizing, as the radical British folksinger Ewan MacColl observed in 1958. He and BBC radio producer Charles Parker collected forty hours of interviews with workmates and family for a radio program about the heroic death of the driver of a runaway steam train, John Axon. The interviews had been gathered as background research, to be transcribed, rescripted, and voiced by actors, as was then the norm. But on listening back to the tapes, MacColl had an epiphany:

It wasn’t merely that the speech had the ring of authenticity: there was something else—the excitement of an experience re-lived and communicated without additive and without dilution. Finally, there were those extraordinary moments when the similes and metaphors burst through the speech like rockets shedding their green and crimson fire across a November sky.¹¹

⁸ Alessandro Portelli, “The Creative Aspects of Memory” (Master Class delivered at XI Vth International Oral History Conference, Sydney, New South Wales, July 11, 2006).

⁹ Portelli, “The Creative Aspects of Memory.”

¹⁰ Siobhan McHugh, *Marrying Out: Part One: Not in Front of the Altar and Marrying Out: Part Two: Between Two Worlds* (Broadcast on Hindsight program, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 11 and 18 October 2009, RTE Radio One [Ireland] 2010, Radio New Zealand 2011). Radio documentary; 2 x 53 mins. Audio and transcripts at <http://siobhanmchugh.org/marrying-out/>

¹¹ Ewan MacColl, “The Radio Ballads: How They Were Made, When and by Whom.” Retrieved 3 February 2010 from <http://www.peggyseeger.com/ballads/how-the-radio-ballads-were-made>

MacColl decided that no script could better the force and charm of the real voices. The resulting program, *The Ballad of John Axon* (1958), pioneered a highly successful radio form that artfully combined oral history, song, and “wild” (or *in situ*) sound: the “Radio Ballad.” Loosely documentary, the series dealt with the lives and preoccupations of ordinary people: fishermen, coal miners, railway workers, and road builders.

Such voices had, in fact, been broadcast before in the U.K. BBC Manchester producer Olive Shapley broadcast working men’s voices live in the 1930s, while the *People Talking* series (1953–1958) created by BBC producer Denis Mitchell featured the startlingly authentic voices of the outcast and forgotten, unmediated by a formal BBC presenter.¹² In *Lorry Harbour* (1952), a precursor to the series, Mitchell focused on long-distance lorry drivers and the sounds of their all-night transport cafes. He went on to explore the experiences of tramps, buskers, and the homeless in *The Drifter Sort* (1953), while *In Prison* (1957) allowed the voices of prisoners to reach the airwaves.¹³

Mitchell was captivated by the aural aspects of his interviews:

I try to listen to people on two levels: to what they say and—more importantly—to how they say it. It’s in the rhythms and falls of everyday speech that people reveal their truth, their quality and strength. If you like, you listen for the poetry behind the prose.¹⁴

The inclusion of ambient sound to evoke mood and develop the narrative, now associated with the 1960s renaissance of European feature producers led by Peter Leonard Braun in Germany, was used two decades earlier by the legendary American broadcaster Norman Corwin as he sought to depict the postwar era in Europe and allied countries. The resulting 1947 CBS radio documentary series *One World Flight*, comprising thirteen programs recorded in sixteen countries, included a significant oral history element, as he interviewed everyone from heads of state to ordinary people. To contextualize the oral history, Corwin recorded lively actuality, such as Italian demonstrators demanding work, Australian shearers at a sheep auction, Aboriginal traditional singing, and traffic on a Prague street. These sonic elements were anchored by his informed analysis and poetic scripting. Studs Terkel, the great American oral historian and radio personality, admired Corwin, who he termed the “bard of radio.” Terkel also acknowledged a debt to Mitchell in crafting his Prix Italia-winning program,

¹² David Cardiff and Paddy Scannell, *A Social History of British Broadcasting, 1922–’39* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 345.

¹³ Ieuan Franklin, “Folkways and Airwaves: Oral History, Community & Vernacular Radio” (PhD dissertation, Bournemouth University, 2009), 104–13.

¹⁴ Denis Mitchell cited in Franklin, “Folkways and Airwaves,” 99.

Born to Live (1958): “I was influenced by Dennis [sic] Mitchell as well as by Norman Corwin. Sounds need not have a narrator. I got that from Mitchell. Just let the ideas flow from one to the other.”¹⁵

These early radio producers recognized the value of broadcasting edited oral history. They saw how radio could benefit from the interviewing rigor and empathy shown by oral historians who seek to tap into what Terkel called the “precious metal” in an individual.¹⁶ But radio’s use of nonverbal sound (known variously as “ambient,” “environmental,” or “wild” sound) can also strongly influence the impact of oral history. Thus Bill Bunbury, veteran producer of social history features with oral history at their core for Australia’s Radio National, is conscious of more than the spoken word content when he assembles a program:

I’m interested in how the story will actually sound because I’m not doing it in a current affairs way where the important thing is the content. I’m doing it in what I call an affective way. If you make this distinction between cognitive and affective, you certainly need to know the facts but you need to hear them in a way that moves you.¹⁷

When Bunbury makes a program about the life of a ranch hand, for example, he will record various sounds that place the listener in the narrator’s world, sounds that animate and inflect the interview content:

Natural sound in a documentary—well, I can’t think of making a documentary without it. If I go to a place I collect the sound: I will open [ranch] gates, I will sit for several minutes just recording the birdsong in a place, I will go and collect cattle mustering.¹⁸

These affective sounds subliminally color how we hear the speech and how we understand the cognitive content of the oral history material. The birdsong might evoke early morning and with it a sense of calm; the sounds of cattle lowing create a mental picture of open space, in which context we absorb the ranch-hand’s words. But no two listeners will have exactly the same mental picture when they hear a sound because sound itself is subjective, as the English media studies theorist Michael Bull and English sociologist Les Back note: “Sounds are embedded with both cultural and personal meanings; sounds do not come at us merely raw.”¹⁹ Even something as “natural” as wind can have a host of meanings on

¹⁵ Studs Terkel, “Born to Live,” retrieved 10 January 2012 from <http://transom.org/?p=5163>

¹⁶ Studs Terkel, “Interviewing an Interviewer,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 127.

¹⁷ Bill Bunbury interviewed in Gail Phillips and Mia Lindgren, *Australian Broadcast Journalism* (South Melbourne, Australia; Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 89.

¹⁸ Bunbury interview.

¹⁹ Les Back and Michael Bull, *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 9.

radio. As the German philosopher and musicologist Theodor Adorno observes, “We can tell whether we are happy by the sound of the wind. It warns the unhappy man of the fragility of his house, hounding his shallow sleep and violent dreams. To the happy man, it is the song of his protectedness: its furious howling concedes that it has power over him no longer.”²⁰ If sound itself can influence our mood and understanding, it makes sense that the infinite modulations of the voice and the expressiveness of the spoken word may also elicit an emotional response distinct from the meaning of the words themselves. In other words, audio is a powerful source of affect.

Affect and the power of voice

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines “affect” as “to touch the feelings of; move emotionally” (the verb form) and as “emotion or desire as influencing behavior” (the noun form). Understanding this seemingly simple, but actually quite complex, concept has spawned an interdisciplinary field of research: affect studies and affect theory. Many disciplines, from psychology and neuroscience to media and cultural studies, are engaged in an exploration of these visceral forces that profoundly influence thought and behavior. In any discussion of affect, three key words recur: feelings, mood, and emotion.

In the fields of medicine and psychiatry, affect means the communication of one person’s emotional state to another. The doctor or psychiatrist observes a patient’s tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions, all of which provide clues to the patient’s affect. An agitated or overwrought person might have “dramatic” affect; a happy or serene person would be described as having “positive” affect. An autistic child who shows little or no emotion may be described as having a “flattening of affect.” A key concept here, which applies in both oral history and listening-to-radio settings, is that one person exudes affect and another person picks it up.

Psychology offers its own definition of affect. Eminent Australian psychologist Joseph P. Forgas suggests that “one commonly accepted view is that affect is a broad and inclusive concept referring to both moods and emotions.”²¹ He differentiates between moods and emotions thus: moods are “relatively low-intensity, diffuse and enduring affective states that have no salient antecedent cause and therefore little cognitive content (such as feeling good or feeling bad, being in a good or a bad mood).”²² Emotions, by contrast, are “more

²⁰Theodor Adorno, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 49.

²¹ Joseph P. Forgas, *Feeling and Thinking: The Role of Affect in Social Cognition*, ed. Joseph P. Forgas (Paris: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

²² Forgas, *Feeling and Thinking*, 6.

shortlived, intense phenomena and usually have a highly accessible and salient cause, as well as clear, prototypical cognitive content (e.g., disgust, anger, or fear).²³ Thus the moment of being fired might make one experience the emotion of anger, but a generalized mood of feeling low could persist for days or weeks afterward.

Psychologists are particularly interested in the interplay between affect and cognition. Until the 1980s, psychologists commonly considered feelings to be the enemy of thinking: they were “noisome irrational agents in the decision-making process,” as psychologist Masanao Toda put it.²⁴ But more recent research in the field demonstrates that openness to feelings is considered “a useful and even necessary adjunct to rationality.”²⁵ Intriguingly, Forgas has shown that mood directly affects cognitive ability, a negative mood increasing perceptiveness.²⁶ Happiness has many benefits, but it can cloud critical thinking, leading to gullibility. As Forgas notes, in the last three decades, psychology has shifted from discussing the paradigm of “cold, affect-less ideation” to a point where “affect seems to influence every aspect of mental life.”²⁷

The pioneering Californian neuroscientist Antonio Damasio likewise embraces the links: “. . . feelings are just as cognitive as other precepts. They are the result of a most curious physiological arrangement that has turned the brain into the body’s captive audience.”²⁸ While Forgas conflates moods, emotions, and feelings as affect, American cultural theorist Eric Shouse distinguishes between affect, as being quantitative, and feelings, as being qualitative. “Without affect, feelings do not ‘feel’ because they have no intensity,” Shouse explains.²⁹ He draws a distinction between feelings, emotions, and affect:

Feelings are *personal* and *biographical*, emotions are *social*, and affects are *prepersonal* . . . A feeling is a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labelled . . . An emotion is the projection/display of a feeling. Unlike feelings, the display of emotion can be either genuine or feigned . . . An affect is a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential . . . It is what determines the intensity (quantity) of a feeling (quality). . . .³⁰

²³ Forgas, *Feeling and Thinking*, 6.

²⁴ Masanao Toda, “Emotion in Decision-making,” *Acta Psychologica*, 45 (1980): 133.

²⁵ Forgas, *Feeling and Thinking*, 1.

²⁶ Joseph P. Forgas in *Handbook of Affect and Social Cognition*, ed. Joseph P. Forgas (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001), 302.

²⁷ Forgas, *Feeling and Thinking*, 4; Forgas, *Handbook*, xv.

²⁸ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York; London: G.P. Putnam, Picador, 1994), xvii.

²⁹ Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect,” *M/C Journal* 8, no. 6 (2005), 5. Retrieved 9 November 2010 at <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>

³⁰ Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect,” 5.

As social animals, human beings know instinctively that feeling, mood, and emotion are energetically intertwined. Public speakers can gauge whether an audience is welcoming (“warm”) or hostile (“you could cut the atmosphere with a knife”). Sulky teenagers are masters of “vibing” and “attitude;” they can emanate suffocating resentment without word or gesture. What is happening here, according to the late Australian humanities theorist Teresa Brennan, is “the transmission of affect.” But Brennan also emphasizes the cognitive, and even more so *evaluative*, nature of affect: “By an affect, I mean the physiological shift accompanying a judgment.”³¹ Brennan thus brings together both the physical and mental aspects of affect: the body registers a reaction as the brain delivers an interpretation.

Brennan is intrigued by how affect moderates the relationship between the individual and the environment, between the biological and the social. She postulates that if Person A emits an affect of, say, anxiety, Person B will pick up on that anxiety, but clothe it in a particular meaning that relates to Person B’s experiences. For example, Person A may be anxious due to a looming examination; Person B acquires the permeating affect of anxiety but relates it to something in his/her own history: an unpaid bill, perhaps, or an unwell child. Brennan further explains:

The point is that, even if I am picking up on your affect, the linguistic and visual content, meaning the thoughts I attach to that affect, remain my own: they remain the product of the particular historical conjunction of words and experiences I represent. The thoughts are not necessarily tied to the affects they appear to evoke. One may as well say that the affects evoke the thoughts.³²

Brennan sees feelings much as Shouse does: as “sensations that have found the right match in words.”³³ Thus the relationship between thought and affect that Brennan points to is one in which we inflect the affects we receive from others with aspects of our own personal history and concerns.

Trauma studies offer a further insight into affect. Oral historians who have interviewed victims of trauma or torture report being deeply affected by the listening experience. American folklorist Mark Klempner described his response to interviewing a Holocaust survivor about the murder of her family: “I go blank and numb, not knowing how to respond to suffering of such magnitude. I feel cheap somehow, that I am hearing these things so casually, that is, upon just having met her.”³⁴ Journalists also recount strong reactions

³¹ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5.

³² Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 7.

³³ Brennan, *Transmission of Affect*, 5.

³⁴ Mark Klempner, “Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma,” *Oral History Review*, 27, 2 (2000): 67, accessed 9 April 2012. doi:10.1093/ohr/27.2.67

to hearing first-hand accounts of disturbing events. Australian radio documentary maker Mia Lindgren, who interviewed victims of asbestos poisoning over a period of years, found herself shaken by the experience, despite having covered “hard” stories of illness, death, and violence before, all with relative equanimity. But those interviews involved spending limited time with interviewees and moving briskly to the next deadline, whereas her relationship with victims of asbestosis was longer term and based on trust and the interviews more in-depth. In such a situation, she felt the suffering of the interviewees more keenly, something she believes other investigative journalists have experienced. She postulates that “even though the journalists have not themselves experienced the trauma, listening to victims recall events during interviews can make the journalists absorb the emotions and therefore feel as if they have experienced the event themselves.”³⁵ It is this direct communication of affect which oral history is so well placed to deliver. Such interviewer responses confirm the emotional impact that simply listening to a painful personal experience can have, and they suggest that affect is likely to be involved, though the exact mechanism by which this occurs may not be fully understood.

How, then, might affect theory help us understand and appreciate the broadcasting of oral history? An affecting testimony will also arouse strong feelings in the listener, which will, in turn, influence how the listener processes the story and evaluates its meaning (cognition). Put simply, the affective power of sound and voice, combined with the intimacy of the listening process, means we can be moved by listening to oral history; this, in turn, affects how we absorb and retain its content, as well as how we judge that content. Moreover, when an informant narrates an experience in an affecting way (i.e., with palpable emotion), listeners will register the emotion through the prism of their own lived experiences; we can infer that this personalization will confer added impact. All of these aspects of affect theory help us understand the impact of oral history and its aural dissemination.

The power of voice: *Minefields and Miniskirts*

In 1993, I produced a radio documentary, *Minefields and Miniskirts*, about Australian women’s experiences of the Vietnam War.³⁶ Among the most memorable voices in the program was that of a journalist, Jan Graham, who spent ten years in Vietnam covering the war. Listeners on car radios recounted how they

³⁵ Mia Lindgren, “Journalism as Research: Developing Radio Documentary Theory from Practice” (PhD dissertation, Murdoch University, 2011), 115.

³⁶ Siobhan McHugh, *Minefields and Miniskirts* (Broadcast on Talking History program, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 16 April–21 May 1993). Radio documentary; 6 x 30 mins.

had to pull off the road, as they could not focus on driving because they were so immersed in her harrowing story. Whenever I have observed a class or workshop listening to this clip, I have never failed to see listeners moved to tears, a very visible sign of affect. Jan had been travelling with an American G.I. on his last day “in-country.” On his way to the airport, the soldier ducked into a paddy field to check out a suspicious movement. When Jan followed after him, she found he had been blown up by a mine. She cradled his mutilated body, and during the fifteen minutes it took him to die, in his shocked state, he mistook her for the wife he had been on his way home to see and proclaimed his eternal love for her. Jan describes the scene and reenacts the conversation. The tape is virtually unedited; some pauses were shortened for broadcast as the tension was judged to be unbearable.

Go To Audio Excerpt 1 / Jan Graham / (3:22)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_01_JanGraham.mp4

Jan’s voice conveys a level of emotion impossible to replicate in print, as I discovered when the interview was published in 1993 in my book *Minefields and Miniskirts*.³⁷ While reading Jan’s experience still makes a considerable impact, when asked which version had the more power, students and conference delegates to whom I have distributed the print and audio versions over the years have unanimously selected the audio. In 2005, when a new edition of my book appeared, I rendered the interview in “poetic” form, breaking up the sentences with white space to replicate the vocal rhythms.³⁸ This version is generally considered by readers to be more faithful to the audio, although still not as powerful as when heard (fig. 1).

Affect studies make it clear why this is so. Jan narrates a highly emotional circumstance, an example of what Forgas identifies as “short-lived, intense phenomena” with a “highly accessible and salient cause.”³⁹ This is communicated aurally to listeners by the many and changing tonal aspects of her voice: her taut delivery, her uneven breathing, her gulps and sniffles as she struggles to describe what happened. These, in turn, trigger an affective resonance with listeners. Gradually, as Lindgren notes, we absorb Jan’s emotion and come to feel, second hand, the intensity of her first-hand pain. Moreover, since by its nature audio does not permit skimming over words or darting forward to a later passage the way print does, we are forced to listen to Jan in real time. Such a listening

³⁷ Siobhan McHugh, *Minefields and Miniskirts*, 1st ed. (Sydney: Doubleday, 1993), 78–79.

³⁸ Siobhan McHugh, *Minefields and Miniskirts*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Lothian, 2005). My online essay, “The Power of Voice,” *Sidebar*, Transom Public Radio, 2011, showcases the two published print versions. See <http://transom.org/?p=15508>

³⁹ See note 23.

So I just cradled what was left of his body, torso and head, and cuddled him. And he thought I was his wife, who he was going home to see, to be with for the rest of his life.
(From the first edition of *Minefields and Miniskirts*, 1993)

So I just cradled
what was left of his body
torso and head
and cuddled him.

And he thought I was his wife
who he was going home to see
to be with
for the rest of his life.
(From the second edition of *Minefields and Miniskirts*, 2005)

Fig. 1. Sample text from the two print versions of Jan Graham’s story.

experience begins to approximate the interview setting whereby, as Lindgren notes, interviewers “absorb the emotions [of the interviewee] and therefore feel as if they have experienced the events themselves.”⁴⁰

Of course, not all oral history material is as gripping as Jan Graham’s traumatic encounter. How, then, can we effectively present the less dramatic aspects of a narrated life, the simpler but still telling experiences and reminiscences, the low-key reflections and minutiae of the human condition? And how can voice be combined with other sound elements, including music, to make for effective radio broadcasts? Audio excerpts from the oral history-based radio series *Marrying Out* examine my attempt to achieve this.

The power of voice, sound, and music: *Marrying Out*

Marrying Out, which aired in 2009, concerns itself with the themes of mixed-religion marriage, sectarianism, and family conflict in Australia from the 1920s to the 1970s.⁴¹ The multicultural nation that Australia is today did not emerge until after the Second World War, when large numbers of European immigrants arrived. Up to the 1960s, nonindigenous or “white” Australia was polarized between an Anglo-Protestant establishment and an Irish Catholic underclass, openly barred from employment in much of the private sector. New immigrants and younger generations are largely unaware of Australia’s sectarian past. I felt it was important to acknowledge the struggle of this first ethnic

⁴⁰ See note 35.

⁴¹ A total of fifty interviews were recorded for the program, of which thirty-five were oral histories conducted to the archiving standards of the National Library of Australia (the others were more journalistic in approach, sometimes recorded over the phone due to logistics). Audio and transcripts available at <http://siobhanmchugh.org/marrying-out/>

minority (to which I belong), firstly, because it was being written out of history, and secondly, because its ultimate overcoming of discrimination might serve as inspiration to currently marginalized groups. Exploring the social hierarchy through the lens of “mixed marriage” allowed me to address political, cultural, and religious contexts, as well as to chart romance and fascinating family narratives, thereby maximizing its appeal for public radio by fulfilling what Dunaway calls the radio producer’s “duty to entertain.”⁴²

A radio documentary is a blend of art and journalism that hinges on storytelling through sound. To craft a radio program, documentary makers identify intersections between multiple oral history interviews and collate them, along with affective auditory elements such as ambient sound and music, so that the assembled items unfold as a seamless, cogent, and compelling narrative, one that also delivers an accurate representation of the topic and an aesthetically pleasing listening experience. Different producers might create entirely different radio works out of the same core materials, according to which interview excerpts they choose to include and how they arrange and accompany them with other sounds. “Selection is the heart of art,” observes Dunaway.⁴³

The cull

The first issue for any media producer is culling. As documentary maker and oral historian Charles Hardy III observes, “the need to cut wonderful material to fit into standardized radio time slots is something that all documentarians producing for broadcast must do.”⁴⁴ Even with the generous two-hour allocation I had for the two parts of *Marrying Out*, some forty hours of tape had to come down to about 1.5 hours of edited speech. I applied the principles of affect theory: that is, I sought to portray “facts with feeling,” as Bunbury puts it, in lay language. “Facts of course have their place, but what’s enduring about the human condition is the feeling that goes with the fact.”⁴⁵ I selected those narrators whose voices were engaging and expressive and whose delivery was laden with emotional nuance, so as to maximize the affective resonance with listeners. Both verbal and nonverbal elements are important, or, as Brennan so evocatively puts it, “sensations that have found the right match in words.”⁴⁶

⁴² Dunaway, “Radio and the Public Use of Oral History,” 340.

⁴³ Dunaway, “Radio and the Public Use of Oral History,” 343.

⁴⁴ Charles Hardy III, “I can almost see the lights of home ~ a field trip to Harlan County, Kentucky,” *Journal for Multi-Media History* [online] 2 (1999). Retrieved 8 March 2007 at <http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol2no1/lightshardy.html>

⁴⁵ Bill Bunbury with Barbara Farrant, “Fact and Feeling: the Work of Bill Bunbury Part 1,” *Word of Mouth: Oral History Association of Australia, South Australian Branch Newsletter* 7 (1985), 10.

⁴⁶ See note 33.

Marrying Out contains many sad and wistful stories that are balanced with more light-hearted perspectives in order to provide contrast in the narrative. One is a short anecdote, recounted by Gay Wilson, a Catholic married to a Protestant, about how her duplicitous mother-in-law sought to discern her grandchild's religion (was he being raised a Catholic or a Protestant?) by asking him what color shoes his mother had bought for him. (At the time, Catholics and Protestants wore different colored shoes to school.)

Go To Audio Excerpt 2 / Gay Wilson / (0:28)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_02_Gay_Wilson.mp4

Gay Wilson conveys a warm affect through the slight laugh in her voice at the start, and how she feels about the incident is further conveyed through her emphatic delivery. Her deepish voice is pleasant on the ear, and the story is fluently told. The sounds of children playing and the old-fashioned school bell heighten the affect by evoking the listener's subjective childhood experiences. The school playground effects were recorded extraneously by me and layered in to function as a bridge from another character, to evoke context, and to allow the material to "breathe" (i.e., to provide auditory space around Gay's words so that the listener has time to absorb their meaning). As Brennan tells us, the listener picks up on these nostalgic sounds of childhood and inflects them with their own lived experience, which in turn primes the listener to absorb the cognitive content: that a child was used in a grandmother's scheme.

Another light-hearted perspective emerged from the story of "the fastest wedding," told by Harry Griffiths. He describes how his Protestant father wed his Catholic mother, Florence Duffy, in 1928. Until 1966, the Catholic Church relegated "mixed marriages" to a no-frills affair on the sacristy or the side altar, deliberately withholding the splendors of the Catholic Nuptial Mass from these "inferior" couples. This rule rankled hugely with informants, but Harry Griffith provided a humorous take on the religious ritual.

Go To Audio Excerpt 3 / Harry Griffiths / (0:48)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_03_HarryGriffiths.mp4

Harry's was a novel reaction, which I underscored by having a fiddler play an accelerated version of *Here Comes the Bride*. The imperfect audio quality of Harry's recording is compensated for by his lively, irreverent tone. Harry's expressive delivery and suppressed snort of laughter at the end build the affect. His evident relish invites us, as listeners, to share his delight. The amusement he feels at the speedy ceremony ("get this over and done with *quick!*") is playfully accentuated by having a fiddler play the normally formal

air *Here Comes the Bride* at a galloping pace, adding a touch of ironic humor to complement Harry's delight. As listeners, we pick up on the synergistic blending of amused voice, cheeky attitude, and musical wit, which together create a positive affect in us.

Sometimes, it is the power of the unadorned voice that most effectively elicits affect, as is the case with Susan Timmins's story of being placed in an orphanage. Susan's mother, Julia O'Brien, came from a large and unusually wealthy Catholic family. When Julia eloped in the 1920s with Errol White, the local Protestant mechanic, her father banished her from the home and refused to allow her name to be mentioned again. Susan was two when Julia died giving birth to Susan's brother in the 1940s. Neither side of the family would help Errol, and he had to place Susan and her brother in an orphanage. Decades later, an O'Brien relative made contact and Errol assembled the family for a reconciliatory dinner. From listener feedback, Susan's transition, from the urbane observer of her family history to the heartbroken woman recalling her father's despair at losing his wife and children, was one of the most remembered moments in the series.

Go To Audio Excerpt 4 / Susan Timmins / (1:16)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_04_SusanTimmins.mp4

Affect theory suggests that listeners have a strong response to this excerpt for various reasons. Firstly, the readily apparent intensity of her distress, as Brennan notes, provokes a similarly strong affective response in the listener. Secondly, affect will be increased, Brennan tells us, if listeners personally relate to the events. Susan's experience of childhood rejection was much more extreme than most children experience; nonetheless, the pain of parental rejection, on some level, is a common experience. These are increased by the effect of Susan's sudden breakdown as she tells her story and especially by the way that we as listeners are, as with Jan Graham's story, forced to listen in real time. We share her changing mood, conveyed not only by her words but also by the rising agitation evident in her breathing and the fits and starts of her speech. And all the more so because these tonal elements accompany her relating her own empathy for her father's situation. She thereby encourages a similar affective response from listeners. In the pact of intimacy that is the nature of listening, we accompany Susan on the journey, as she gets ambushed by emotion.

Crafting

Radio production requires careful crafting. It needs the editor's skill at honing and filleting a long interview and then sequencing it so that it unfolds as a

compelling narrative. There is also the importance of pacing and chaptering, of varying texture, but also of not being too wedded to clever production effects. As Dunaway reminds us, “a collection of arias does not an aria make. Nor do brilliant bits of sound, endlessly switched back and forth, make a program.”⁴⁷ I settled for a complex opening montage for each of the two programs, designed to seduce the listener into staying the course, while giving an indication through interview “grabs” (short, punchy excerpts) of the themes to be addressed. Each montage was three to four minutes long. The rest of the program takes a more conventional narrative shape, showcasing individual stories and providing factual background, but the opening is meant to be a sensual experience, what Dunaway calls the “holistic aperçu.”⁴⁸ The carefully chosen music, interview “grabs,” and dramatizations aim to evoke subliminal thoughts, even personal memories, as well as conscious absorption of the actual words. As affect theory teaches us, when we can make a connection to our own experience, we will take in more at both a cognitive and emotional level. The pointillism of the montage tees up the larger narrative arc, as British media studies scholar Andrew Higson points out: “At an intellectual level, the function of montage construction for the documentary movement is the ability to hold in play several different scenes of action (and indeed different times) at the same moment: in other words to construct a much broader, more extended diegetic world.”⁴⁹

Go To Audio Excerpt 5 / Opening Montage, *MARRYING OUT* / (3:03)
http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_05_MarryingOut_opening.mp4

There is a reason for every montage element and its placement. The clips needed to be brief, but it was important not to compromise editorial integrity (i.e., they could not be so decontextualized as to misrepresent the truth). As Dunaway notes, “preparing a program for the general public involves a constant battle between historical content and its presentation in an effective moving manner.”⁵⁰ The speaker in the first grab establishes that the problem was, in majority Protestant Australia, “marrying a Catholic.” The second reinforces the point that religious discrimination was widespread in Australia and that Irish Catholics were its target. The third tells us this happened as late as the 1960s and recalls schoolyard taunts: “that ‘Catholic dog, Catholic dog’ thing.” The story of the sympathy card (which is another part of Gay Wilson’s interview used in the program) never fails to make people draw breath when I have played it

⁴⁷ David K Dunaway, “Digital Radio Production: Towards an Aesthetic,” *New Media Society* 2, no. 29 (2000): 42.

⁴⁸ Dunaway, “Digital Radio Production,” 39.

⁴⁹ Andrew Higson, “Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to the Film: The Documentary-Realist Tradition,” in *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, ed. Charles Barr (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 78.

⁵⁰ Dunaway, “Radio and the Public Use of Oral History,” 341.

to live audiences. Unlike Susan Timmins, whose disintegration caused us to feel empathy with her pain, it is the *controlled* anger in Gay's voice that conveys to us her disgust at her uncle's vicious inscription: "I thought, I'll never speak to you again, I ripped up the card. I thought, how dare he say that to me in my grief?" The next grab brings in a Protestant point of view and addresses the difficulties of two people trying to negotiate different faiths. The final speaker makes the point that the bigotry wasn't actually about religion, but identity: Catholics were the "other" in this Protestant world. The narrator (me) finally arrives, and I make clear that I am no disinterested observer. Together, heard in an affective audio bed, these short extracts build feeling, adding up to more than the sum of their parts. "The radio auteur hears the whole from the fragments," observes Dunaway. "Radio is an editor's medium the way film is the director's."⁵¹

Components are also deployed on aesthetic grounds. The opening music, *Bells of the Angelus*, is chosen for its heartfelt evocation of Irish Catholicism. The boy soprano suggests the innocence of childhood and children growing up in a mixed marriage. The gong at the start of the first grab gives a sonorous introduction to the first speaker. An actor whispers the sectarian taunts in the background when they are mentioned in an interview grab, so as to suggest vicious words swirling in memory. Because these taunts are referred to by many of the informants and clearly had a strong impact, I use them as a *leitmotif* in the series. Then the music switches to *Here Comes the Bride*, aural shorthand for marriage, and the stentorian minister proclaims the marriage rites. The minister is there partly to reinforce the marriage theme, partly to break up the speech grabs, and partly because his glorious articulation of those timeless words provides acoustic texture. The music shifts to a resonant instrumental version of the defiant anthem of tribal Irish Catholic Australia, *Faith of Our Fathers*, guaranteed to elicit primal and nostalgic responses in listening Catholics aged over fifty. The entire montage seeks to balance information and emotion as a creative audio work, aiming to achieve what Forgas described as "the delicate interplay between cognition and affect."⁵²

Exposition

Exposition, or the interpolation of the factual framework of the program, has to be handled carefully on radio. Narration works best when it is short, simple, and not overliteral. It also needs to be acoustically pleasant. In *Marrying Out*, a somewhat longer narration was necessary to explain the 700-year-old troubled colonial context behind the mixed marriages. I introduced the narration by resurrecting the sectarian taunts in a new form. I had my teenage son and his friends

⁵¹ Dunaway, "Digital Radio Production," 42.

⁵² Forgas, *Feeling and Thinking*, 1–2.

raucously “perform” them, in order to provide an energetic change of pace, mood, and aural texture and as a contrast to my lengthy historical exposition, about to unfold. This segment of the program begins with John Haynes’s story of his family boycotting his wedding, moves to the teenage taunts, transitions to the relatively long narration, and ends with a reading, performed by an actor, about the sense of discrimination felt by Catholics as “shadows on the mind,” “not truly of the real Australia.”⁵³ The passage is written by a prominent historian of Irish-Australia, Patrick O’Farrell, who is, ironically, no friend of oral history.⁵⁴

Go To Audio Excerpt 6 / John Haynes / (2:23)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_06_Haynes.mp4

The wedding bells that accompany John’s voice at the beginning of this segment are an acoustic embellishment intended to initiate a low-level affective resonance by evoking memories of happy occasions, thereby contrasting with John’s emphatic description of his family’s boycott. The teenagers’ hilarity, in turn, creates a surprising contrast in mood. As audio, it is an engaging acoustic bridge, while its content, the taunts, work at a different level. As these present-day schoolchildren belted out the words that had inflicted such hurt on earlier generations, instead of conveying bile and bigotry, they dissolved into spontaneous laughter at the supposed viciousness of the phrases. For them the words held no hatred because their generation had never encountered such religious prejudice. Affect theory tells us that by conveying their own humorous feelings, the children connected emotionally with listeners, which in turn would make listeners more disposed to absorb the cognitive content of both the taunts and the accompanying narration. According to Brennan and Shouse, those listeners who personally remember such epithets will absorb the affect charge of the taunts; for others, it provides historical information in an easily digested form, absorbed more easily due to the affect caused by the laughter. Soulful Irish fiddle music is played under O’Farrell’s words to represent the objects of the taunts, namely Irish Catholics; the music is designed to reflect and convey the hurt and unease felt by beleaguered Catholics in Australia. The synergistic power of music and voice together heightens the intensity and affective power.

⁵³ Patrick O’Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1987), 295.

⁵⁴ O’Farrell wrote: “The basic problem with oral testimony about the past is that its truth (when it is true) is not primarily about what happened or how things were, but about how the past has been recollected . . . we move straight away into the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity” (Patrick O’Farrell, *Quadrant*, 23, no. 148 (1979): 5.) Before his death in 2003, O’Farrell was researching sectarianism. He had written to me in support of my use of oral history in radio documentaries and I like to think he would not have been displeased to be included in *Marrying Out*.

Dramatization

In *Marrying Out*, I took some dramatic license, writing occasional short scenes to include additional historical information, or sometimes simply to distill a long-winded interview and provide textural relief from a monotone voice. Such was the case with the story of Gwen (surname withheld) who recalled how the local Catholic priest harassed her and her Catholic husband, Phil, to raise their child a Catholic, after their marriage in her Methodist church. Gwen begins the story in her own words, and then a musical bridge shifts to a dramatized encounter between a young Gwen, Phil, and the priest. The script, performed by actors, is based on Gwen's interview transcript. By bringing the real Gwen in again to conclude and acknowledge the scene, I signal that we have been listening to the young Gwen.

Go To Audio Excerpt 7/Gwen/(1:12)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_07_Gwen_priest.mp4

Good actors can, of course, deliberately generate affect, as did the one who played the bullying priest, with his vitriolic delivery. Interestingly, however, the testimony of an ordinary individual can outweigh an actor's professional skill, when the emotion is genuinely expressed and spontaneously generated in the interview setting. I observed this when I used an actress to read a letter, written in the 1960s by Kaye Ambrose to her future mother-in-law. In it, she describes how she and her fiancé, John, kept breaking off their relationship, anticipating the problems ahead, but their love for each other kept bringing them back together. They would end up very happily married for nearly forty years. Kaye offered to read the letter onto the tape. But as she does so, she is overcome, gets a catch in her voice, and stifles sobs. She apologizes, explaining that she is emotional because John has only recently died. I later recorded an actor reading the same letter. Kaye's version is immensely more powerful, so the actor's reading was discarded.

Go To Audio Excerpt 8A/Kaye reads her own letter/(1:01)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_08A_Kaye_letter.mp4

Go To Audio Excerpt 8B/Actor reads Kaye's letter/(0:31)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_08B_Actor_reads_Kayes_letter.mp4

The difference in affect between the two signals not only the power of voice in oral history but also the subtlety entailed in the transmission of affect.

As Shouse notes, “the display of emotion can be either genuine or feigned.”⁵⁵ It may well be that we, as listeners attuned to the power of voice in oral history, favor the genuine over the acted.

Music

Music is a crucial part of *Marrying Out*. I commissioned an accomplished musician, Thomas Fitzgerald, to play culturally redolent pieces on violin, viola, and piano and to compose musical phrases as interpretations of emotions expressed in the series. I supplemented this with religious and archival music designed to provide a cultural “badge” for a speaker or to evoke nostalgic atmosphere. Fitzgerald provided short riffs and phrases, sometimes recording alternate versions: a deliberately dissonant version of *Here Comes the Bride* for a story of marital conflict, or a pizzicato version of *Faith of Our Fathers*, plucked on a violin string, to serve as punctuation between segments. He also wrote a beautiful waltz in the Irish/Appalachian spirit of the *Ashokan Farewell* in Ken Burns’s television documentary *The Civil War*. It builds from a gentle start to a tender, enveloping sadness. I use it to end both programs, and only there; it is too powerful to use anywhere else. It gives a wonderful sense of resolution, as well as highlighting the poignancy and reflective nature of the concluding spoken word excerpts from interviewees John and Helen Haynes. Their story provides a good example of a simple treatment of oral history for radio. Listeners had a taste of their story earlier, when John revealed that his father threatened to disinherit him if he married Helen. The outcome was deliberately left hanging to maintain narrative tension. Over these four minutes, John and Helen unfold the sad story of their estrangement from John’s father, in segments underscored by Fitzgerald’s at first spare and then emotive music. Unlike the more complex audio architecture that opened the program, this concluding segment achieves its force by harnessing the affective power of heartfelt spoken word and aching melody, in synergistic partnership.

Go To Audio Excerpt 9/John and Helen Haynes/(4:02)

http://ohr.oxfordjournals.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1093/ohr/ohs092/-/DC1/OHR_39_2_McHugh_audio_09_Haynes_ending_Pt1_with-music.mp4

Affect theory tells us that music moves us through bodily sensations rather than through any defined “meaning.” As British cultural theorist Jeremy Gilbert puts it:

⁵⁵ See note 30.

Music has *physical effects* which can be identified, described and discussed but which are not the same thing as it having *meanings*, and any attempt to understand how music works in culture must . . . be able to say something about those effects without trying to collapse them into meanings.⁵⁶

As Gilbert says, music elicits a powerful response at a noncognitive, emotional level, a characteristic exploited in diverse musical genres in *Marrying Out*. Much the same can be said for the power of voice (both the spoken word and other tonal aspect of voice) and sound more generally. A well-produced radio documentary seeks to harness the affective power of all that we can hear.

Conclusion

By using radio's affinity with the transmission of oral history, oral history acquires enhanced aesthetic appeal, affective power, and greater public impact. This fulfils the oral historian's duty to disseminate as well as preserve oral history and to ensure that oral history is accessible to a broad range of people, not only to scholars. Radio can provide a more authentic experience of oral history because it can relay the oral and aural characteristics of the interview along with the inherent content. Listening in real time to an interview creates a pact of intimacy between speaker and listener and an accompanying sense of "liveness" not found in print. Oral history that reveals a narrator's strong feelings and emotions will engender strong affective resonances in listeners and thus be retained. If well crafted as storytelling through sound, using sound's own affective power, oral history on radio can be elevated to an art form that can move, inform, and delight its audience. In so doing, it achieves one of the discipline's defining aims, to connect past and present lives.

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⁵⁶ Jeremy Gilbert, "Signifying Nothing: 'Culture', 'Discourse' and the Sociality of Affect." *Culture Machine* (online) 6. (2004). Retrieved 23 November 2010 from <http://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/8/7>