

WRITING THE TAPE- RECORDED LIFE

K E N

C O R M I E R

This article brings together theories of autobiography and audiophony to explore how recording technologies have influenced the way we represent self. I examine the self-consciousness of the audio/autobiographer, the voice as an instrument of both language and sound, and the insights that result when the actual process of recording intercedes in autobiographical narrative.

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The phonograph, in one sense, knows more than we do ourselves.

—Thomas Edison, “The Perfected Phonograph”

The magnetic tape recorder was only just working its way into mainstream consciousness in 1958 when Samuel Beckett’s play *Krapp’s Last Tape* opened in London. Set in “the future,” Beckett’s play demonstrates a scenario in which a man, Krapp, has been recording himself each year on his birthday for at least the last forty years. Beckett, who had very little experience operating a tape recorder at the time, seems to have been drawn to the complex set of questions that derive from a technology that not only reproduces but also preserves the sound of one’s voice over time (Hayles 80). In the play, Krapp is sixty-nine years old. He sits at a table listening to a tape-recording of himself at age thirty-nine. From the tape we hear the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp, who has just finished listening to a recording he made ten or twelve years before, railing at the naïvety of his younger self; lamenting a missed opportunity for romantic love; and making bold resolutions to eat fewer bananas, drink less, and curb his libido. The present-day Krapp hunches over the reel-to-reel tape machine to listen, laughing bitterly at the foolishness of both of these former “selves.”

More than a prop, the recording machine in *Krapp’s Last Tape* provides what Katherine Hayles calls a “complex temporal layering” and a “logic of displacement and replication” allowing for the uncanny interaction between Krapp and these two manifestations of his younger self (78). Beckett’s scene shows that as soon as a voice is recorded on tape and played back, it becomes a presence both connected to and severed from the one whose body produced it in the first place. For Hayles, the dynamic that Beckett employs in *Krapp’s Last Tape* “authorizes two presences on stage: one a voice situated in a human body, the other a voice situated in a machine.^[1] The machine-voice echoes the body-voice but also differs from it, not only because of the medium that produces it but also because of the temporality registered within it. Presence and voice are thus broken apart and put together in new ways. Presence can now mean physicality or sound, and voice can be embodied in either a machine

or a body” (83). Like the written word, the recorded voice signals a temporal and spatial distance from the presence of the writer/recorder: each utterance, whether written or spoken, instantly recedes like an object in the rearview mirror of consciousness. However, unlike the written word, the recorded voice reproduces levels of meaning in its sound, its range of inflection, volume, and tone—what Roland Barthes referred to as its “grain” (“Grain” 269). More than just words, the speaking voice also makes meaning with (nonverbal) noise.² In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Beckett foresaw a time when our tape-recorded utterances would accumulate and haunt us in a manner different from our written utterances. These recorded voices would communicate with us on sensory levels unattainable through print. On the page, voice had become an abstraction, but since the advent of the phonograph, magnetic tape, and digital sound production, the abstraction has found its voice once again.

In his 1998 book *Speaking from Memory: A Guide to Autobiographical Acts and Practice*, Harold Rosen claims that because of its ability to preserve “everyday speech,” the tape recorder has posed a challenge to “those who believe that only the written language can carry the highest order of the articulation of the socio-personal self”: “For whereas autobiographical acts crop up spontaneously and die out in thin air, the tape recorder, it turns out, has made possible the highly conscious drawing out and preservation of life stories from people who have never before articulated these experiences or encountered those willing to listen to them with respect” (51). Everyday speech has traditionally been regarded as “common stuff” by practitioners of written autobiography, says Rosen, but the tape recorder reminds us that the spontaneous oral stories we tell are compositions of a type—autobiographical acts—which are at least as rhetorically complex, aesthetically compelling, and historically relevant as the printed texts we’ve come to associate with the genre (Rosen 50). It was the introduction of the portable tape recorder in the 1960s that made it possible for oral historians to begin to document everyday speech on an unprecedented scale, giving voice to populations that had long been “rendered historically voiceless” (Sharpless 28).³ And that same everyday speech has now become the focus of autobiography theorist Paul John Eakin, who claims that “autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather, as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out, autobiography structures our living” (*Living* 4). I argue that the development of audio recording technology has played an important role in autobiography’s current theoretical thrust toward orality and identity, and that we can gain a better understanding of

life writing's potential by examining the multiple levels of meaning, spoken and unspoken, that an audio presentation makes possible.

At a time when digital media is making it easier than ever to restore archival recordings, to produce and distribute high-quality audio productions, and to find and listen to audio narratives on demand, it is surprising that there has been almost no serious scholarly attention to this rich intersection of life writing and audio recording. Since the invention of the phonograph, I argue, audio recording technologies have altered and even enhanced the way we conceive of, construct, and communicate our lived experience. Consequently, these technologies can, and should, lead us to new ways of thinking about the genre of autobiography, a genre that has historically been fraught with ambiguity both in terms of its form and its rhetorical aims.

“One never knows where or how to take hold of autobiography,” writes James Olney; “there are simply no general rules available to the critic” (3). Ironically, this lack of general rules has been perpetuated by an overabundance of conflicting definitions imposed on the genre since 1956, the year Georges Gusdorf published the first ever critical article on the subject (Olney 7–8). Gusdorf, who traces the genre back to St. Augustine's *Confessions*, sees autobiography as a Western cultural phenomenon rooted in the Christian mandate to seek out and express one's secret sin. Though he touts autobiography as a “solidly established literary genre,” he makes the claim that there is “a considerable gap between the avowed plan of autobiography, which is simply to retrace the history of a life, and its deepest intentions, which are directed toward a kind of apology or theodicy of the individual being” (39). Since the tricks of memory, vanity, and self-delusion are always at play, and since the very project of autobiography is inherently paradoxical—i.e., to form a complete narrative out of a life which is still “in the process of being formed”—the end result can only be a kind of “fiction” whose truth lies “beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology, a truth of a man . . . who, for his own enchantment and that of his readers, realizes himself in the unreal” (41). This inherent contradiction compounds because, as Elizabeth Bruss points out, autobiography distinguishes itself in terms of “contextual rather than formal” features (299). This means that autobiography can tend to hop from one form to another: “There is no narrative sequence, no stipulated length, no metrical pattern, and no style that is unique to autobiography or sufficient to set it apart from biography or even fiction. To count as autobiography a text must have a certain implicit situation, a particular relationship to other texts and to the scene of its enactment” (299). Judging from these characterizations, it would seem that autobiography is more

the result of following a set of personal impulses than adhering to a set of generic rules: put simply, *I want to write about myself*. Even Philippe Lejeune, whose efforts to define the genre of autobiography precisely are unparalleled in the field, would agree, if only obliquely. In his 1973 essay “The Autobiographical Pact,” Lejeune famously defined autobiography as a “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality”; however, he also added the caveat that only two conditions are absolutely necessary: 1) that “the author (whose name refers to a real person) and the narrator are identical” and 2) that “the narrator and the principal character are identical” (“The Autobiographical Pact” 4–5). Add to these two essential conditions the calls of Harold Rosen and Eakin to include the spoken word in the autobiographical discourse, and we can begin to understand the essential role that recording technology can play not only in the preservation of autobiographical utterances but also in the way we conceive, compose, and craft such utterances.

Interestingly, Lejeune himself made reference to the newer phenomenon of “lives collected on tape” as a legitimate form of autobiography in his 1982 essay “Autobiographical Pact (bis)” (“The Autobiographical Pact (bis)” 122). Now extolling the virtues of “vagueness” as an indispensable condition in the proper functioning of the generic vocabulary, he points to an early definition from Louis Gustave Vapereau’s 1876 *Dictionnaire universel des littérateurs* in which “autobiography” is described as a “literary work, novel, poem, philosophical treatise, etc., whose author intended, secretly or admittedly, to recount his life, to expose his thoughts or to describe his feelings” (qtd. in “The Autobiographical Pact (bis)” 123). It is the vagueness of this “outdated” definition that makes it adaptable to a more modern, technology-driven context. The list of possible forms that that autobiography can take is diverse (“literary work, novel, poem, philosophical treatise”), and the “etc.” included at the end opens the field to a wide array of heretofore unimagined formal possibilities. There is also no requirement that the autobiography be retrospective or even story-based: one may “recount his life” or on the other hand simply “expose his thoughts” or “describe his feelings.” In this way, Vapereau renders moot the many overlapping sub-genres we have come to know: memoir, familiar essay, self-portrait, and diary can all be included in his definition of autobiography.

Perhaps the most radical proposition in Vapereau’s definition—and this is the one Lejeune feels most pressed to address—is that autobiography may be composed either “secretly or admittedly.” The danger here is an inevitable blurring of genres, a world where

fiction and autobiography could become indistinguishable. “Who will determine the intention of the author, if it is secret?” Lejeune asks. His answer: “The reader, of course” (“The Autobiographical Pact (bis)” 123). For Lejeune, Vapereau’s definition signals not only “a new kind of writing, [but also] the emergence of a new *way of reading*” (123). By shifting the burden of interpretation onto the reader, Vapereau’s definition effectively addresses the dichotomy between “life” and “writing.” Since the two can never be identical, and one can never stand in for the other, it is always only a matter of degrees: no fiction is one-hundred percent fiction, and no nonfiction is entirely devoid of fabricated detail. Vapereau’s definition is useful, I argue, because it attempts to embrace, rather than stamp out, the ambiguity inherent in any attempt at life writing, and it emphasizes the genre’s contextual, rather than formal, features. To compose autobiographically is to express one’s reality; to express one’s reality is to activate the imagination. Vapereau’s definition predates the generic confusion we have come to associate with autobiographical writing, and its vagueness is its greatest virtue. Extending his definition, Vapereau even acknowledges that autobiographical texts are probably best understood as a form of fiction: “Autobiography leaves a lot of room to fantasy, and the one who is writing is not at all obliged to be exact about the facts” (qtd. in “The Autobiographical Pact (bis)” 123). By emphasizing what an author “intend[s]” rather than what he finally produces, and by stressing the blurry line between fact and fiction, Vapereau manages to predict and accommodate postmodernism’s critique of the existence of, and therefore any plausible expression of, a coherent, unified self. No autobiography can accurately represent a self, but every autobiography can certainly be counted as an attempt to “recount,” “expose,” or “describe” some aspect of how one experiences selfhood.

I would like to embrace the thrust of Vapereau’s definition of autobiography and apply it to works that have been conceived and rendered as audio pieces. Rather than seek some essential representation of self in the recorded voice, I focus mainly on the ways in which the *process* of audio recording can reveal something about our persistent impulse to express that sense of self. This process becomes especially evident when the recording machine interjects its own noises, clicks, pops, and hisses; when the narrator consciously operates and wrestles with the recording equipment (or even the *idea* of the recording equipment); and when external noise bleeds into and contends with the narrator’s recorded voice. I begin my discussion of audio/autobiography by considering the present-day phenomenon of “audio lifelogging,” tracing its roots back to the

invention of the phonograph and examining its practitioners' claims that the process is somehow capable of capturing "real life." Next, I perform an autobiographical reading of Herb Morrison's 1936 eyewitness account of the Hindenburg disaster, a recording that has generally been regarded as a documentary of the disaster rather than an autobiographical account of the witness-narrator. In my discussion, I will examine the way Morrison's discourse shifts from journalistic detachment to personal crisis as he performs a kind of unintentional autobiographical act as a result of becoming involved in a cataclysmic event. To my knowledge, Morrison's recording has never been read as autobiography, probably because Morrison never set out to create a piece about himself. The preservation of his unexpected autobiographical act was made possible by the portable Presto disc cutter he used to record his report, since it could inscribe his voice in real time as he spoke. Morrison's report illustrates the audio recorder's power to capture those moments that diverge into autobiography, away from the speaker's expectations. Then, I discuss a piece from Joe Richman's *Radio Diaries* series, "Josh in New York City: Living with Tourette's." The piece is the result of a year-long collaboration between subject and producer that achieves much of its intimacy by exposing the process of audio tape recording. The collaborative aspect of the piece calls for further inquiry into the definition of *autobiography*, since both the diarist and the producer have a hand in composing the life portrait that we hear. Like Morrison, Richman captures spontaneous moments that allow the listener to get caught up in the autobiographical experience of the piece. Unlike Morrison's unintentionally personal recording, however, Richman's work relies heavily on post-production techniques like cutting and overdubbing. In this way, Richman edges more toward the traditional realm of written autobiography, assembling Josh's audio clips to form an intimate, revelatory narrative arc. Though these two examples of audio/autobiography differ in terms of their recording techniques and aesthetic goals, they both illustrate at least four common thematic threads: the increased self-awareness that recording equipment elicits in a speaker; the way a voice conveys meaning through both language and sound; the broad array of sounds (intentional/unintentional) and events (planned/unplanned) that an open microphone tends to capture; and the profound insights that can result when the actual process of sound recording intercedes in the narrative. These four common threads can broaden our understanding of autobiography as a genre, I argue, since they all help to illuminate the contingencies embedded within the impulse to tell life stories.

Sneaking Up on the Self

When Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in the 1860s, he believed that one of its primary functions would be to record telephone calls, thus transforming an instrument of “simple conversational chit-chat” into a “means of perfect record” (“The Phonograph” 535). In 1878, after tinkering with it for more than ten years, Edison predicted that the phonograph would “teach us to be careful what we say—for it imparts to us the gift of hearing ourselves as others hear us” (“The Perfected” 650). One of the benefits of recording technology, he concluded, would be its power to exert a “decidedly moral influence” on its users by making them accountable for what they said (650). For Edison, the phonograph was a moral watchdog because it could act as a kind of tattletale, threatening to broadcast over a loudspeaker one’s private, unguarded, and ugly pronouncements. According to this logic, one had better forego lying, cursing, and gossiping because a phonograph might be listening from the next room.

Especially insidious is our tendency to regard the audio record with a certain textual authority: unlike lived experience, which transpires in real time and decays into memory, a recording is subject to rigorous examination via repeated listenings. But even if the phonograph does record the sounds of one’s activities and words, what guarantee is there that listeners will accurately interpret all that they hear? While early reviewers of the phonograph generally greeted Edison’s invention with high praise and astonishment, some were distrustful from the start. In 1878, for example, audience members at a showcase in Indianapolis were said to inquire whether the phonograph “was destined to invade all privacy and furnish the very walls with ears” (“The Amusement”). In 1895 Robert Ganthony published a poem entitled “The Phonograph” that posed a scenario in which two innocent people are put into a compromising position because of an audio recording. The man, in possession of a new phonograph, decides to record himself pretending to woo an imaginary lover, speaking seductively to her and showering her with kisses. In the midst of his performance, a young maidservant, Jane, enters the room; shocked at the sounds she hears, she beseeches, “Oh, sir, how can you? What are you doing?” It suddenly dawns on the man that what he has recorded is bound to rouse suspicion:

“Oh, Jane!” I exclaimed, “there is mischief a-brewing.
 How could you with such indiscretion address me,
 Why not in some silent way seek to repress me?
 As soon as your mistress comes home from her walking

This horrid machine will set to a-talking;
 The things will be lively 'tween you and your missis,
 For when, after 'darling' and hundreds of kisses,
 Your voice exclaims, 'Oh, sir!' and 'what are you doing,'
 She'll be sure to suppose it was *you* I was wooing." (16–24)

This example demonstrates that a secret recording will not necessarily reveal the private truth behind the public façade. Under the right conditions, such recordings are capable of generating entirely new narratives, presenting a mix of sounds and utterances that make it difficult or even impossible for listeners accurately to interpret events as they occurred. Furthermore, this humorous piece, written for a general audience not intimately familiar with the technology of audio recording, reveals that even at this early stage the phonograph was being perceived as a possible threat to the privacy of everyday people. The maidservant Jane understands that no matter how vociferously she and the young man protest, they will never be able to undo the suspicion that the phonograph recording raises. Wielding her broom, she knocks the machine off the table and dashes it to pieces. Problem solved.

As Randall Patnode has shown in his article “Anxieties of the Self: *The New York Tribune's* Radio Stories and the Fictional Imagination, 1925–1926,” the introduction of recording and broadcast technologies caused a mix of wonder and nervousness in early listening audiences. Patnode looks at a series of fictional radio stories published in the *New York Tribune* from 1925 to 1926 that sometimes portray these new technologies as a threat to an individual's ability to control his own narrative. The idea that an open microphone could eavesdrop on secret conversations, for example, was unsettling because it could lift one's private remarks out of their larger context and, in an instant, broadcast them to a massive listening audience. In these *Tribune* stories, the voices that emit from phonograph or radio speakers are just as likely to misinform as they are to inform (Patnode).

Yet the popular notion that a secret recording device can capture a person's unselfconscious—and thus true—utterances persists into the twenty-first century. Proponents of the “life-logging” and “e-Memory” movements, for example, have claimed that unselfconscious recordings can preserve a sampling of “real life,” whereas self-conscious recordings tend to elicit something more like a performance. In a 2007 article entitled “On the Record, All the Time,” investigative reporter Scott Carlson examines the contemporary phenomenon of audio lifelogging by volunteering to wear a digital voice recorder like

an amulet around his neck for a few weeks to record continuously all the events of his life. According to Carlson, lifelogging researchers in the corporate, academic, and governmental arenas foresee a day when this type of recording is the norm, when the accumulated experiences of a lifetime—what we now call memory—will comprise a searchable database that we can use to understand ourselves better and to make more effective choices moving forward. The impulse to record one's daily experience, says Carlson, springs from the concept of a "memex," or memory extender, which American scientist Vannevar Bush proposed in a 1945 *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled "As We May Think." Bush envisioned a day when scientists would wear "little cameras on their heads to record lab work," preserving "thousands of pages a day in microfilm" (qtd. in Carlson). Today, digital networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have mainstreamed the concept of storing one's memories on a media cloud, but the actual practice of twenty-four-hour-a-day self-surveillance has remained largely a phenomenon of researchers in technology corporations and the academy.

As part of his research, Carlson self-records. Upon starting his experiment, Carlson first notices a change in his own behavior: "I never really forgot that the recorder was on, and now and then I sensed that I was talking differently, as if to a crowd. I consciously avoided saying things that might be deemed politically incorrect or downright gross." As Edison had predicted more than a century before, the voice recorder indeed "teach[es] us to watch what we say." But Carlson discovers there is much more to it than that: the recorder actually has a flattening effect on his personality, inhibiting him from being who he is and inspiring him to perform a carefully crafted version of himself for the device. When he finally puts the recorder away one Sunday, Carlson feels "liberated in a way that is hard to describe. . . . I found myself pacing the house and whispering to no one—something I often do when I'm alone and trying to work out ideas for stories I'm writing. I realized I rarely did this when I had the recorder on. It was like I was afraid someone would catch me acting schizophrenic." The manner in which Carlson refashions himself in the presence of the recorder raises some important questions about the very purpose of lifelogging. According to law professor Jeffrey Rosen, "If the goal of the lifeloggers is to record real life in intimate and formal contexts, they would have to be defeated in some respects because the candor would dry up" (qtd. in Carlson). The risk, then, is that a logged life will amount to a sham, more log than life. The vast stores of data will be an accumulation of mere surfaces, and the "real life" will be forced to retreat, to remain lurking somewhere in the silences between bursts of self-conscious articulation.

But if lifeloggers are not recording real life, then what exactly are they recording? If Scott Carlson responds to the presence of an audio device by tempering his language and ceasing to whisper to himself, then aren't those choices reflective of his own values and personal habits? Surely that "performance" contains a thread of candor and says something real about the manner in which he responds to his environment. On the other hand, consider the lifelogger who adamantly persists in his usual idiom despite the discomfort created by the recorder. Does his conscious determination to capture the honesty of his existence make his performance more or less real than the other? When asked to comment on the way recording devices may alter the behavior of those who are being recorded, audio life-logger Daniel P. W. Ellis said: "It's a bit of a problem because of course you'd want to record information on how they behave when they're not being recorded, which is a contradiction. My hope is that if recording becomes commonplace and everyone does it, then there won't be these two states of you knowing either you're onstage or you're not onstage. It will just be regular life, and everyone will behave as they do anyway" ("Live").

I would like to argue that Ellis's impulse to ignore or somehow veil the act of recording is a gaping flaw in the ideology of life-logging, and it is bound to lead to some general misunderstanding of not only the materials collected through such means, but also the very process of self-construction that we actively participate in as we live in the stream of time. The idea that I can trick myself into thinking that I am not recording myself, and that once that trick has been successful that I will then be performing something that can be called "regular life," is a deception. I would like to make the alternative claim that the act of recording myself is a part of my experience, and it is an act that brings up all sorts of potentially fruitful questions about the nature of my existence, my relationship with myself, my interest in knowing who I am, my impulses to investigate, and my trust or distrust of technologies that make a record of my activities. Most importantly, the act of recording insists that I question my determination to craft an autobiographical narrative of my daily life, whether that be in real time as I live, or retrospectively as I listen to, edit, and assemble the audio records that I may have collected, transforming them in to a coherent narrative that reveals something about me as a logger of my own life. In other words, Carlson's realization that he acted a certain way when the recorder was on is not necessarily an obstacle to overcome in order for this process to reveal something about self. On the contrary, I would argue that it is one of the most important aspects of the audio/autobiographical process that promises to reveal

the most about the self that is engaged in such a process. One major mistake that the life-loggers make is to assume that the surveillance model of electronic recording is the one that will help produce an understanding about memory and the self. I argue that a more literary model should be employed, since narrative is the model most closely engaged with the process of crafting and sustaining an idea of self. The questions that confound the lifeloggers—Am I capturing “real life” or “regular life”? Am I acting like I’m on stage, or am I presenting a human experience as it truly happens?—are the same questions that have occupied modern scholars and practitioners of autobiography for more than a century, and, more than the mass of audio data that they collect, it is this persistent questioning which promises to reveal something substantial about the experience of selfhood. As Eakin suggests, such projects are not capable of giving us an accurate representation of ourselves, but they can “teach us about the ways in which individuals in a particular culture experience their sense of being ‘I’—and, in some instructive cases . . . their sense of not being an ‘I’” (*How* 4). While lifelogging may be the most obvious example of a current attempt to capture the self on tape, it is by no means the only, nor the most effective, means of composing an audio/autobiography.

Announcer to Subject: Herb Morrison’s Autobiographical Act

When lifeloggers make an audio log, they aim to capture a spoken record of their thoughts and feelings at a particular moment in time, but what they often overlook is that they are also capturing a specific performance geared toward the audio device itself. The voice that they hear played back is a voice that speaks specifically to *be* played back. It is a voice pouring its contents into a container. Though it strives to be spontaneous, this voice does not, and cannot, take for granted its own ephemerality. On the contrary, it strives to make the impermanent permanent, to ensnare what are normally fleeting moments so that they can be subjected to multiple listenings and close analysis. Like written language, the audio recording separates utterance from presence, and so the process of recording one’s voice hybridizes written composition and spontaneous speech. In fact, the audio recording may be the best place to study how autobiography can crop up in works in seemingly unrelated disciplines, such as journalism.

One of the earliest, and best, examples of an autobiographical act cropping up on a recording machine is radio personality Herb Morrison’s eye-witness account of the Hindenburg disaster in Lakehurst, New Jersey, on May 6, 1937. The audio report was recorded on a portable Presto disc cutter for broadcast at a later time, a practice

considered experimental in an era when all of the national networks favored live reporting. Morrison, who hosted a news and entertainment show for farmers in rural Illinois, believed that prerecorded reports could be an effective tool for covering historic events (Miller 69, Lichy 710). A couple of months before the Hindenburg landing, Morrison had reported on flood damage to Illinois farms from the vantage point of a plane supplied by American Airlines. The airline, impressed at the publicity that such reports could garner, invited Morrison and sound engineer Charlie Nehlson to cover the Hindenburg's first transatlantic flight of the 1937 season. Morrison jumped at the opportunity, agreeing to pepper his journalistic observations with frequent nods to his sponsor: "Incidentally," he remarks within the first minute of his report, "American Airlines is the only airline in the US which makes connections with the Hindenburg."

"How do you do everyone!" Morrison begins his report, addressing the audience with a formal, stagey discourse. He clearly establishes his role as eyewitness reporter, introducing Nehlson, who is "here at my side working the controls" and disclosing his geographical location ("the Naval Airbase at Lakehurst, New Jersey"). He mentions his purpose, which will be to describe the "landing of the mammoth airship *Hindenburg*." When he explains the airship crew's rationale for making landings either in the morning or the evening, Morrison speaks in language that sounds like polished prose, including didactic platitudes to reinforce his observations: "Now those are ideal times . . . when the weather conditions are proven to be most satisfactory. In other words, nothing is left to chance or made subject to unnecessary risk. Safety comes first, as it always should." Morrison frequently uses the second-person point of view ("It's a fine crew of men, if you've ever seen one"), distancing his own perspective to allow listeners to feel as if they are experiencing this themselves. At one point he performs a kind of audio tour of the interior of the Hindenburg: "After a walk through the ship, you're ready to rest for you've covered a great amount of space and you realize you've traveled a great distance." To serve the interests of his corporate sponsors, Morrison makes his listeners the protagonist of this narrative as he walks them through this larger-than-life setting, subordinating his own narrative point of view and blending into the background.

When the Hindenburg approaches the mooring mast for its landing, Morrison steps outside of the airbase to cover the landing. Listeners hear the recording device turn off and then back on as Morrison speaks from his new vantage point. The background sound transforms from an echoing interior to a more crisp-sounding exterior, and Morrison's voice betrays a growing excitement as his language heightens:

“Well here it comes, ladies and gentlemen, we’re outside of the hangar, and what a great sight it is, a thrilling one. It’s a marvelous sight. . . . The mighty diesel motors just roared, the propellers biting into the air and throwing it back into a gale-like whirlpool. . . . The sun is striking the windows of the observation deck on the eastward side and sparkling like glittering jewels on a background of black velvet.” He describes the activity of the landing crew on the field as “a moving mass of cooperative action.” He says, “The ship is gliding majestically toward us like some great feather” and manages one last plug for American Airlines, describing the multiple airplanes waiting on the field to transport the Hindenburg’s passengers “to all points of the United States once they get the [Hindenburg] moored.”

Yet what begins as a highly controlled, consummately professional example of spoken journalism and corporate promotion suddenly transforms into a wrenchingly unscripted expression of disbelief and personal trauma when the Hindenburg bursts into flames before Morrison’s eyes. In an instant, his knack for metaphor and detailed visual description give way to shortness of breath, emotional outbursts, and moments of utter speechlessness. The conceit of Morrison’s journalistic style is exposed, as are the actual mechanics of audio recording when the explosion jars the stylus on the disc cutter. As a result of the impact, Morrison’s initial reactions are recorded at a much lower volume level for about six seconds until Nehlson is able to restore the stylus to its proper position. Morrison is likewise bumped from the groove of his journalistic style as a result of the explosion. His determination to capture this moment in history does not diminish, but the objective distance he was so careful to maintain breaks down completely. In an instant, Morrison transforms from being the observer of an event to being the subject of an event. No longer reciting his measured and ornamental descriptions from a safe and measured remove, he frantically barks at Nehlson: “Get this, Charlie! Get this, Charlie!” John Toland, in his book *The Great Dirigibles*, describes Morrison’s voice as “agonized” and claims that he trails off “into incoherence” (322). However, I argue that Morrison’s frantic narration is far from incoherent, and that in fact it captures a kind of coherence that the written word simply could not. What we hear is a dramatic shift in discourse, not from coherence to incoherence, but from the conceit of journalism to a spontaneous attempt at representing a lived experience. “Even when Morrison reports on the failure of language to describe,” writes Edward Miller, “he is indeed speaking and is successful in describing the inexpressibility of the event around him” (72). No longer able to call on his knowledge of the Hindenburg’s structural design or the routine systems

of the landing crew, Morrison is forced to report strictly from what Miller calls “a knowledge of proximity, a knowledge of history as it is happening, a purported liveness” (62). More than an eyewitness, Morrison is a participant in the events surrounding the Hindenburg’s crash—the event has become an important chapter in his own autobiography. When he chokes back tears and apologizes for his inability to speak, Morrison communicates the overwhelming magnitude of the moment he experiences. At times, he abandons the technique of speaking directly to his audience, turning instead to Nehlson and exclaiming, “Charlie, that’s terrible.” By breaking the narrative contract he had set up at the beginning of his report, Morrison draws back the curtain to reveal the contingencies embedded within the process of crafting narrative, blurring the line between the construction of narrative and the construction of self. Morrison continues to guide his audience through the scene, only now he does it through a less deliberately constructed first-person narrative point of view. What the juxtaposition of these two divergent rhetorical modes reveals is that Morrison has been speaking autobiographically all along, first by crafting ornamental descriptions of his surroundings peppered with promotional plugs, and then by articulating his experience amidst the flames and chaos of the Hindenburg’s crash. Though one of these modes may seem more genuinely autobiographical than the other, both are essential to understanding the way Morrison’s performance of self is contingent upon his circumstances. When he cries his iconic “Oh, the humanity” into the microphone, what we hear is the poignant synthesis of these two rhetorical selves—poised journalist and panicked participant—uttering a phrase both eloquent and sincere whose true power lies in the gasping, mournful tones in which it is delivered.

Thus, although the presence of audio recording equipment may inspire self-consciousness, it is that very self-consciousness that works to reveal something about the way we structure our own life narratives. A microphone tends to capture an entire soundscape around the voice it records, a context of background noises and reverberations that color our interpretations of what is said. As listeners hear in the case of Morrison, the speaker’s environment can sometimes overwhelm his recording session, forcing him to reframe and redirect his narrative as he reacts to an unpredictable series of events. Rather than inhibit him, though, the microphone provides a focal point for Morrison’s autobiographical act. What his seminal, eyewitness recording finally demonstrates is the human impulse to contain lived experience within autobiographical narrative, even through intense, chaotic events that might otherwise leave us speechless.

The Process of Performing Self: Joe Richman's *Radio Diaries*

Joe Richman's acclaimed *Radio Diaries* project, ongoing since 1996, goes a long way toward debunking the notion of the microphone's inhibiting effect on personal expression; instead, it highlights the complex and sometimes counterintuitive ways that voice recording intersects with autobiography and actually illuminates the ways people work to construct identity. Richman's *Teenage Diaries* series, for example, presents its subjects with a high degree of intimacy, giving listeners a sense of proximity and access that can sometimes feel uncomfortably close. This intimacy is carefully crafted through recording and editing strategies that work not only to highlight the diarist's sometimes-clunky audio journaling process, but also to mask the producer's role as co-author. Rather than record a series of interviews or tag along with his subjects as they live through their daily routines, Richman puts audio equipment into their hands and allows them to make their own audio journals over the span of an entire year. This long-term approach guarantees a mountain of material to work with, and it helps the diarist to become comfortable with the process of recording her own voice and environment. As each tape is completed throughout the year, Richman listens to the material and discusses it with the diarist; these discussions cover everything from technical advice on how best to use the equipment, to suggestions as to which of several life experiences will make the most compelling stories. Such a collaborative process helps Richman get to know his diarist both on- and off-tape, build a sense of mutual trust over time, and purposely pursue the most promising narrative threads as they emerge—to hone in on those settings, characters, and conflicts in the diarist's life that convey a winning combination of authenticity and listenability. In this way, Richman nurtures the autobiographical narrative of his subject, ultimately producing a ten- to fifteen-minute piece from forty to eighty hours of raw tape.

Because we usually assume that the author and subject of an autobiography are one and the same, the idea of collaborative autobiography can be controversial. In "Experiencing Collaborative Autobiography," Kathleen Boardman describes her undergraduate students' troubled responses to "cowritten, ghostwritten, as-told-to, and other collaborative texts" (201). Such autobiographies, she says, "challenge . . . their assumptions about truth and autonomy" (201). Boardman works to dispel the notion that *living a life* and *writing a life* are somehow the same process, citing Lejeune who claims: "Collaboration blurs in a disturbing way the question of responsibility, and even damages the notion of identity. The model and the writer both

tend to believe that they are the principal, if not the only, ‘author’ of the text And it is true that the ‘life’ in question belongs to both of them—but perhaps also, for the same reason, belongs neither to one nor to the other. Would not the literary and social form of the life story, which preexisted their undertaking, be the ‘author’ to both of them?” (qtd. in Boardman 204). Echoing Foucault, who famously asked (after Beckett), “What difference does it make who is speaking?” Lejeune privileges the concept of a preexistent “life story” over our post-Romantic obsession with subjectivity and authorship (Foucault 120). It is in this collaborative spirit that Richman crafts his *Radio Diaries*, allowing the question of authorship to remain ambiguous so that the stories, spontaneously spoken into a tape recorder and accumulated over the course of months, can begin to define a new type of autobiography, one that exists outside both the cult of the author and the primacy of the written word.

One of Richman’s most striking *Teenage Diaries*, “Josh in New York City: Growing Up with Tourette’s,” first aired on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered* in 1996. In the piece, Josh Cutler describes how living with Tourette’s Syndrome complicates his adolescent existence. As in all of Richman’s *Radio Diaries*, the subject’s relationship to his recording equipment plays a conspicuous role in the piece. Josh is a high-energy, witty sixteen-year-old who struggles to be natural, to express something of his true self on tape, despite the sometimes troubling, sometimes exhilarating awareness that he is exposing his life to a faceless radio audience. “Let me do the introduction now,” he says and then affects a comical announcer’s voice as he rattles off his name and some basic facts about his family. Josh performs for the microphone, crafting his identity for a larger audience even as he highlights the absurdity of this endeavor by distorting his voice into an ironic grotesque. In moments like these, the recording equipment seems to thwart Josh from simply being himself, but interestingly, the way in which Josh manages this tension, the way he rides the line between “real Josh” and “radio Josh,” reveals something essential about the way we are expected to “author” our own life stories.

The fact that Josh suffers from Tourette’s Syndrome makes him an especially compelling audio diarist. Tourette’s causes involuntary vocal outbursts, or tics, and Josh spends a great deal of energy and concentration suppressing his until he can finally let them out at the end of each day in the comfort of his home. Some of the most intimate moments of the piece are the recordings of Josh’s tics, which reverberate as if from a distance. As we listen to the grunts and screams, Josh explains in voice-over narration: “I have lots of different kinds of tics. There’s coprolalia where you just start screaming profanity for

no reason. And echolalia where you hear something or see something and you just have to repeat it. Like if you see something on TV.” Overlaying Josh’s involuntary tics with his controlled, precise speech is an effective way to illustrate the divergent forms of expression that someone with Tourette’s always struggles to balance. By mixing two different audio/autobiographical tracks, Richman presents a fuller picture of the physical division Josh suffers. This audio mix conveys a level of audio/autobiographical authenticity that a single recording or a more traditional oral history would not. The narrative of Tourette’s is in large part a narrative of suppression, but the autobiographical project that Josh enacts gives him the license not only to speak about his condition but to bring its offending outbursts to the surface, and to inscribe them in the context of a literary endeavor. Though Josh never seems reluctant to share the outbursts in his diary, he does anticipate the kind of reaction that listeners might have after hearing it for themselves. “I control what comes out of my ass better than what comes out of my mouth,” he says in his characteristic disarming manner. “But, the last thing I want people to think is, ‘Oh, poor Josh.’ It’s not like I’m in a wheelchair or I have snot dribbling down my chin. I really just don’t want anyone to be feeling sorry for me. This is not a Sally Struthers commercial.” By invoking Sally Struthers, Josh ironically places his radio diary in the tradition of mainstream media sound-bites, perhaps sending a signal to the show’s producer, a clue to the type of image he wants to project.

At one point in the diary, Josh attempts to record some observations on the difficulty of living with Tourette’s when his mother calls his name from the hall. He stops midstream and shouts, “This is my radio show, thank you!” He lowers his voice and explains, “Sorry about that. That was my mom.” Raising his voice again, he asks, “You’re not listening at the door, are you? Okay.” Because of the conceit of the diary format, the listener is invited into a privileged, intimate space, one that excludes even Josh’s mother. Turning away from the microphone, Josh wards off the intruder and barks out a demand for privacy; he then brings the microphone close to his lips and speaks in a lower volume, as if sharing a secret. When Josh turns and shouts, we hear slight reverberations that indicate the space and dimensions of his room, but when he speaks softly into the microphone Josh’s voice fills the sonic spectrum, detaching itself from any specific indication of environment and seeming to move entirely into the sound space of the listener. The incidental noise that the microphone captures indicates the multiplicity of autobiographical spaces that we all occupy, some which signal the compositional aspects of life writing, and others which give a sense of life in process.

Unlike the voyeur, we do not overhear Josh's diary, we do not pull it from beneath a mattress and greedily take in a line or two before nervously restoring it. On the contrary, we are put into the position of the tape recorder, and thus the diary itself; we become the vessel into which Josh pours his thoughts, no matter how stilted, contrived, genuine, or intimate. On the other hand, Josh speaks to himself at least as much as he does to us. All autobiographical acts are in one sense a way of reifying our existence, of leaving our mark, and in this way Josh, himself, is both the speaker and the listening audience. Josh proudly records a couple of telephone "crank calls," glad to make a record of his sharp wit and to show how easily he can play on the gullibility of a store manager or school administrator. "Let's see how this came out," says Josh at one point before switching off the machine, and in that moment we imagine him listening back to the tape, attending to the sound of his own voice the way one scrutinizes a reflection in the mirror. The fascination we feel for Josh is akin to the fascination he feels for himself. We do not listen to Josh, but rather, like Josh, we listen back to a recording of Josh, and our fascination lies somewhere in that process of reflection, of representation. We recognize in his performance for the tape machine something of the way we perform ourselves *for ourselves, within ourselves*. The desire for "playback" is an autobiographical impulse satisfied by the recording machine.

Yet while Josh is remarkably comfortable recording his radio diary at home, he is reluctant to bring the tape machine to school, where he assumes his friends will "just look at me as, like, some loser" with a microphone. On the contrary, when he does bring the machine to school, he finds that his classmates are enthusiastic to participate: "They all jumped at the chance to be on the radio. I had to ward people off." Josh asks his friends direct questions about how they understand his Tourette's, and they answer without hesitation. "Well, I see that you have uncontrollable outbursts," says one friend, "and well, sometimes they're funny, amusing, but most of the time just a pain in the ass because we gotta put up with you cursing and yelling and running around." A voice in the background pleads, "Be nice," but Josh emphatically wards off the intrusion: "It's OK, just say what you think." Josh discovers that his peers have quite a lot to say about the way his condition manifests itself, and they do so with an instinctive combination of directness and delicacy. In this instance, the recording device plays a liberating, not an inhibiting, role as it provides the impetus for Josh's friends finally to give their own utterance to their long-suppressed feelings regarding his condition. In fact, it is through the very process of recording that Josh at last de-

mystifies the social taboos around his Tourette's and breaks through the isolating silence that can be so personally devastating, especially to an adolescent.

Nonetheless, in the end it is Richman, not Josh, who sifts through a year's worth of tape (roughly eighty hours) and boils it all down to the twelve-minute segment that the radio audience will hear. The original broadcast transcript indicates that the piece was "written and recorded by 16-year-old Josh Cutler, and produced by Joe Richman," though it is probably more accurate to say that each of them wrote it himself. More than co-authors, Cutler and Richman are each responsible for composing a distinct kind of autobiography—one lived and told, the other developed and shaped into a documentary. Yet this is not necessarily a divergence from autobiographical parameters. Rather, this collaborative venture might be seen as epitomizing the very nature of autobiography, which as Lejeune argues, always involves multiple authorial consciousnesses:

A person is always *several* people when he is writing, even all alone, even his own life. . . . By relatively isolating the roles, the collaborative autobiography calls into question again the belief in a unity that underlies, in the autobiographical genre, the notion of author and that of person. We can divide the work in this way only because it is in fact always divided in this way, even when the people who are writing fail to recognize this, because they assume the different roles themselves. Anyone who decides to write his life story acts as if he were his own ghostwriter. ("The Autobiography" 188)

The role that each "author" plays is at once distinct and ambiguous: it is Josh who makes direct references to the process of recording while the tape rolls ("The low battery sign's on the tape recorder. Gonna have to replace it soon") and who struggles with the mortifying idea of bringing the equipment to school ("I just assumed that they would just look at me as, like, some loser bringing a microphone into school"), but it is Richman who decides to include such bits, consciously emphasizing Josh's sometimes awkward relationship with the machinery along with the story itself.

All of Richman's *Radio Diaries* highlight the recording process, and in this way the series illustrates the nuts-and-bolts aspect of attempting to express the self through creative means. In "Fictions of Self: The End of Autobiography," Michael Sprinker claims that "The origin and the end of autobiography converge in the very act of writing . . . for no autobiography can take place except within the

boundaries of a writing where concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text” (342). In Richman’s *Radio Diaries* series, that sense of struggle and collapse is actually audible in the stops, starts, playbacks, and misgivings that his subjects endure while going through the highly self-conscious process of collecting audio over a year’s time. The result is a series of stories that are not autobiographies in the traditional sense, but rather documents of the way we persist in attempting to represent our experience as autobiography, to convey that sense of “I” that we feel so strongly, despite our inability to truly nail it down.

Looking Ahead: A Murmuring Collage of Selves

When we speak our stories aloud, we are simultaneously the composers and performers of our autobiographies. When we record our stories on an audio machine, we purport to find a listening audience outside the range of our voices and beyond the spans of our lives. In fact, our recorded voices may gain an even more powerful sense of “presence” than our spoken voices over time since they can become increasingly familiar and credible through repeated playbacks and distribution over broadcast channels. In “The Phonograph’s Horned Mouth,” Charles Grivel argues that the emergence of recorded sound, with its promise to preserve human voices for posterity, called into question the very notion that presence was contingent on spatial and chronological proximity: “What is real is not what I articulate, nor its impression, but its substantive mechanical reproduction: the phonograph completes the reality of the sign—thanks to it, the truth returns to simulacrum. It speaks to me much better than I myself could: it still expresses itself when I am already silent: you will listen to me in it after I am gone” (44). The voice uttered from a person’s lips in the present is far more ephemeral and open to misrepresentation than the voice repeated over a set of speakers, and yet the tape-recorded voice is naturally more manipulable, more susceptible to cuts, edits, enhancements, or erasures. When it emerges from the production studio, my final, crafted utterance is just as much the result of a process of *listening* as of speaking. Audiophonic artist Gregory Whitehead has described the process of voice editing as cutting on an “autopsy table,” insisting that “we cannot find our voice just by using it” (92). Through the process of audio production, says Whitehead, we can rediscover the voice by dissecting it and then “stitch[ing] it back together” (92). The recorded voice, then, not only outlasts its speaker, but it also has the potential to be reanimated in any number of forms—it can keep

saying new things. Not only that, but it can be set in dialogue with recorded voices from the distant past or future, juxtaposed with music or noise it had never before encountered, or reframed by entirely new narrative scripts. It can be amplified through headphones or speakers, sent out over the airwaves to enter the bodies of listeners, vibrating their eardrums.

Each voice carries a distinct sound that is, in its own way, as autobiographical as the stories it tells. More often than not, the content of an audio narrative provides, in Roland Barthes's terms, mere "studium," while the cadences and rhythms of the speech, the cracking voice, the unsettling background noise, or the clicks and pops of the recording apparatus, supply the "punctum" of the piece—that which can hold the listener's entire body in a state of mesmeric suspension.⁴ A collection of tape-recorded moments represents not only an accumulation of sounds but, as Jacques Attali has pointed out, a "stockpiling of . . . time" (qtd. in Spinelli 5). When all these bits of time are gathered and mixed into one shared moment, they compete for the listener's attention. The ear can either listen generally to the blur of noise, or foreground any one of the sounds over the rest. The result, unachievable in written narrative, is a kind of palimpsest of language and sound, a murmuring collage of selves, plucked from various points in time. This process of conflation can point the way toward new modes of autobiography. As methods of media production and consumption continue to evolve, so must our conceptions of narrative and our assumptions about how lives can and should be represented. Audio recording technology broke the spell of the almighty printed word, re-introducing us to the power of orality and leading contemporary critics like Eakin to reconceive autobiography as "a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out" (*Living* 4). However, I claim that, more than mere storytellers, we are the editors and producers of our life stories. The manipulations and transformations made possible by digital media are simply reflective of the complex ways in which our minds work and rework the material of our lives. Not only do I tell my story in sound, I stack the competing narratives one on top of the other, and the unique cacophony that results is a story unto itself.

Quinnipiac University

Notes

1. Actually, there is a third presence that Hayles does not mention here: the machine voice to which the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp has just finished listening. We (and Krapp) do not hear this voice; we

only hear *about* it. Though this voice has been captured on tape, it remains silent and ephemeral in the play. It points, perhaps, to one flaw in the ideology of tape-voice preservation: as the hours of tape accumulate, we become less capable of listening to them in their entirety. After all, the recorded voice amounts to an accumulation of time, and one must spend that time over again if one is to listen.

2. “The pure sound of the word,” wrote Rudolf Arnheim, “is the mother earth from which the spoken word of art must never break loose, even when it disappears into the far heights of word-meaning” (28). Russian futurist Velimir Khlebnikov contended that individual speech sounds such as “*sh, m, v, etc.*” embody a “series of universal truths passing before the predawn of our soul” (152).

3. The advent of digital recording and editing technologies have only made the process more accessible, while the opportunities for sharing and distributing materials have increased exponentially.

4. In his study of the narrative power of photographs, Barthes distinguishes between the mere information that a photograph conveys (“studium”) and the striking detail that can lash out of a photograph and arrest the viewer’s attention (“punctum”).

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