

# American Radio Art 1985–1995

## New Narrative and Media Strategies

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Radio holds a unique place in American cultural history, and in the shaping of popular culture in particular. It was the bridge between the two halves of the twentieth century, the memory trace from one generation to the next, traversed by world leaders, sportscasters, crooners, comedians, cowboys, private eyes, and space travelers. Imprinted into the American psyche, their voices resonated across time and space through high times, hard times, and a worldwide war. For three decades radio held a central place in our living rooms. Then it was superseded by television. Still, for another two decades it was a primary conduit for youth culture and its music—rock ‘n’ roll. For a vast majority of Americans who were in their teens and twenties in the 1950s and 60s, and in the remaining decades, radio and automobiles were inseparable.<sup>1</sup> Especially if you came of age speeding down Route 66 from the New Jersey suburbs to L.A. with gravelly voiced disc jockeys like Alan Fried and Wolfman Jack pumping out the soundtrack of your life. Thus, radio continued to hold a special fascination for that generation of American artists for whom it had been an indelible part of their life experience and imagination. Between 1980 and 1994, a number of these artists reconceived radio for their own time as a bridge between art, popular culture, and the politics of media, a “new frontier” for artistic expression and an alternative space for art in the public realm.

The very phrase “radio art” may seem like an ironic contradiction, an oxymoron even, given the nature of the mainstream broadcast landscape. But it is in actuality a paradigm for our time in which ancient traditions of aural culture collide with instant information access and retrieval in the global village of mass media telecommunications systems. From the artist’s point of view, radio is an environment to be entered into and acted upon, a site for various cultural voices to

meet, converse, and merge in. It may even be conceived of as a means of intra and interplanetary travel.

What contemporary radio artworks share with the golden age of popular radio is the way in which they intimately engage the imagination of the listener. The sonic arts bring us into a different perceptual relationship with the world, and the complexity of the aural palette with its ability to create a multi-dimensional reality rich in sensations and images has endowed radio as a medium with a special capacity for transport. While film and video remain always outside the body, a facsimile on a screen, and words remain bound to the page of the book, aural media both surround and penetrate the body. Radio in its most creative manifestations is the original holographic virtual space. Projected onto the visual field of the inner eye, resonating along aural pathways in the boom box of the brain, words and sounds become living presences. Think of radio as words with wings, Swedenborg's and Wim Wenders's angels descending to whisper in your ear.

Although avant-garde artists have experimented with radio since its inception, it was the advent in the 1970s of non-commercial, listener-sponsored public radio on the FM band, including college and local community stations, that opened up the possibilities of art on the airwaves, not simply as an isolated incident but as a viable alternative to rigidly formatted commercial radio dominated by advertising interests. If in the hierarchy of media television was the condo in the sky, radio was a basement apartment, a lot cheaper and easier to break into. But basement apartments also have a long history as the sanctuaries and fertile abode of revolutionaries, poets, artists, and inventors. Initially, it was relatively easy for artists to simply walk unobstructed in the back door and onto the airwaves of public radio. For a brief time they traversed unmonitored airwaves like guerillas in the night, beaming into automobiles across the urban sprawl.

This new opportunity was augmented by the revolution in both recording and broadcast technology and easy consumer access to sophisticated equipment and processes that rapidly changed the nature of production and distribution. Thus in the 1980s radio and audio artworks—sound art, experimental narratives, sonic geographies, pseudo documentaries, radio cinema, conceptual and multimedia performances—a whole panoply of broadcast interventions that confronted the politics of culture—subverted mass media news and entertainment and challenged aural perceptions, also infiltrated the broadcast landscape and acquired an audience.

While these works encompassed a diversity of aesthetics and styles, the artists share a sensibility radically different from that of their predecessors whose roots are in a European avant-garde tradition. It is a distinctly postmodern American

sensibility of blurred boundaries between realities—a convergence of art concepts and forms and media culture, of history, memory, fantasy, and fiction, of public and private space. Unlike the Dada/Fluxus based sound poetry, *musique concrète*, and audio/radio art explorations of John Cage's disciples, contemporary American radio art of the 1980s and 90s, from the most complex hi-tech studio productions to the raw energy of live and interactive broadcasts, was predominantly engaged with employing new narrative strategies and subverting media conventions. The result was a montage of performance art, poetry, politics, worldwide music, urban noise, manipulated nature, popular entertainment and advertising, vernacular speech, fractured language, all modes of talk and an array of cultural voices from the mainstream to the marginal.

These artists crossed disciplines, raided all genres and re-contextualized them into new hybrids. The majority had sustained bodies of work in the visual and performing arts, and they brought that formal vocabulary to the works they created for radio. Each experimented with ways to tell a "story," introducing unconventional structures to traditional broadcast formats. This holds true in both textual and non-textual works. Some have approached radio as an architectural space to be constructed sonically and linguistically; or as the site of an event, an arena, a stage. Some used it as a gathering place or a conduit, a means to create community. Some artists have employed the media landscape itself as the narrative, while others looked into the body as site and source; the voice box, the larynx, become medium and metaphor. Still others gathered the sounds of the world as evidence and constructed maps of imaginary geographies. The tape recorder and microphone replaced the camera, capturing moments in time, the life of a place in process; a journey is recalled and reconstructed, overlaid with new insights. Some transposed a cinematic syntax through a montage of dissolves, quick cuts instead of fades, a series of close-ups, long shots, reverse angles. Others appropriated media genres and turned them inside out, giving an appearance of veracity to interviews with false personae and documentary authority to invented data; or the reverse, creating musically structured works from authentic field interviews. The diversity of ideas and forms of their work reflects the socio-cultural complexities and contradictions of life in late twentieth-century America, as it grappled with the problem of art as a mode of communicating ideas in a media-dominated environment.

In the 1980s, visual and performance artists, composer/musicians, and writer/performers approached radio as an alternative art space, a performance arena, a distribution system, a public art forum. They have since used it both as an art context and an artmaking medium in itself with specific properties. In one sense, radio art in the 1980s and early 90s carried on the spirit of the original "alternative" artists spaces of the early 70s, those industrial lofts that were the

spawning ground of conceptual and performance art. Both radio art and the ephemeral art of that period sought to wrench itself free from the commodities marketplace of the gallery and the elitist prestige of the museum in order to inhabit public space and public consciousness. It presented itself as information and experience, a participatory transaction between artist and viewer/listener, as opposed to goods. Radio as a free, easily accessible, portable performance space without walls, democratized art consumption by making art available at the switch of a dial.

Radio art operated on the aesthetic, perceptual, and conceptual frontier, marginalized not only within all the art disciplines it encompasses, but inside the system of distribution it has infiltrated. Like astronauts defying the gravitational laws of time and space, contemporary practitioners crossed the borders from artland to mass medialand, throwing into question definitions of art based on context, while attempting to redefine the nature of the site of their activities and position their “product” in relation to its non-art counterpart. Arty journalism is *not* radio art, though journalistic devices may be employed by radio artists. Likewise, it is not traditional radio drama, though it may use dramatic conventions. It is not, strictly speaking, music, though it may be composed entirely of non-textual sound. In addition, radio art investigates the nature of language itself—speech as culture and sound as language—in an era when language has been corrupted by euphemism, double-speak, jargon, and propaganda. As an aural art form it reaffirms that it is not just what we say, but the way we say it. Given all these characteristics, collectively American radio art is inherently political outside of the specific content of any individual work.

Not surprisingly, caught in the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 90s led by Senator Jesse Helms, public radio more than any other medium was subjected to censorship both outside and inside the system, with audio and performance artists and writers at the center of the controversy over civil liberties, freedom of speech and cultural diversity, public access to public broadcasting, and control of communications technology.<sup>2</sup> From the point of view of those who own and control mass media, radio art may be perceived as anarchistic, unpredictable, un-categorizable, and therefore politically undesirable. Thus, the influence of American radio art on the very media culture it invaded is ironic.

Just as the distribution opportunities in public radio began to disintegrate in the 1990s, alternative radio became a new paradigm of “frontier” politics and personal expression when it resurfaced as a cultural force in the popular television series *Northern Exposure* and the youth film *Pump Up The Volume*. In both instances, radio operated as an intimate personal voice that posed philosophical questions about the values of the community. In *Northern Exposure* the unconven-

tional structure and content of KBEAR's "Chris in the Morning" local community broadcasts, and a teenager's nightly home studio radio programs in *Pump Up The Volume*, directly reflected the radio art narratives produced by artists in the 1980s and their incursion into mass media. In the former a small-town artist/disk jockey's ongoing discourse was a radio "artwork" that mingled the daily life of Cicely, Alaska with art, literature, and intellectual and spiritual inquiry into the human condition. It was the voice of conscience and the community's cultural catalyst. In the latter, a disenchanting high schooler's late-night pirate interventions punctured the prevailing system when his alter ego "Hard Harry's" uncensored personal confessions, raunchy sex and underground rock and rap, turned into free speech guerilla politics that rallied a population of alienated suburban teens into a motivated empowered community.

## MEDIA AS SITE AND SOURCE

In order to reveal the inner workings of the on-air supermarket of advertising and spin masters and to subvert their messages, two San Francisco-based radio artists commissioned by New American Radio appropriated broadcast media's content and conventions and reversed their functions in a variety of ingenious ways. Combining the deadpan irony of American Pop Art with contemporary media savvy and cultural criticism, Donald Swearingen and Don Joyce trafficked in the fuel that keeps the engines running in the information age. They raided radio and television's political and consumer culture, transposed and manipulated the voices of the news, entertainment, advertising, and religion, exposed their interchangeability and re-inserted them back into their source.

Composer Donald Swearingen put a contemporary spin on sampled texts by layering the accumulated messages and tightly compressed sound-bite rhythms into a dense mass of repeating channel-switching juxtapositions. In *Salvation at 1 A.M.* (1991) he mimics the network news anchor's posture of so-called non-ideological neutrality as he scans the late-night TV spectrum of sales pitches and testimonials chanting America's self-help anthem—"Change your attitude, change your life. Get thin, get rich, get saved!" His montages of motivational speakers, religious evangelists, nutrition and beauty gurus, pop psychologists, business opportunity promoters, and satisfied customers exposed a deep current of collective anxiety beneath the seductive cadences of this shill game of ploys and promises. The repetition of unrelenting positivism reverberates like a drumbeat, sounding out a dark interior hollowness under the hyperbolic skin. Swearingen tells a Faustian story attired in a postmodern Emperor's clothes, fittingly set in a media-generated fantasy theme park grounded in an American myth of bootstrap optimism and born-again opportunity. But in the late twentieth-century version, all you need is a credit card and faith. Buy now, pay later and you too

can be “free of cellulite, unwanted body hair, stained teeth, low self-esteem, jobs you hate, cancer.” You can “make a fortune in real estate, own a Mercedes, a million-dollar home, be healed,” have anything you want. Hallelujah! Thank the Lord. Just call 1-800 and be free.

Using similar techniques in *Advertising Secrets* (1991), Don Joyce unmasks the intimate relationship between advertising and radio programming in a satirical montage of slogans, aphorisms, jingles, clichés, and theme songs. But Joyce had a slightly different strategy for the implementation of a more politicized agenda. Unlike Swearingen, he arranged this material into a sampling of program formats blurring the distinctions between talk show call-ins, commercials, news, documentaries, science fiction, weather pointing out the essential contradiction in such hybrid forms as docudrama and infotainment. Political slogans and product slogans become interchangeable, as do corporate insignias and homespun aphorisms. “Hunters are for killing. People are like sheep. We go with the crowd.” “(Green Giant) peas on earth forever, good will towards men.”

Morning grooming rituals are accompanied by shaving cream and toothpaste jingles. Pleasantly coercive voices reassure us that we want good clothes, beautiful homes, money, security, etc. and don’t want to be ugly, while they ply us with products and ideas that aren’t good for our health. These professional radio voices span the spectrum from reassuringly patriarchal deep bassos to folksy Reaganesque chuckles. The counterpunch comes from those persistent leftist listener call-ins advocating that the only way to control the corporation is to cease buying.

Joyce’s critique of the manipulation of language and its insidious powers of persuasion is underscored by his subtle integration of behind-the-scenes earfuls of copywriters, account executives and clients playing verbal ping pong, along with the reminder that “The right words,” said Lenin, “are worth 100 regiments.” Language literally disintegrates and collapses into record-caught-in-a-groove repetitions in the mouths of on-air call-in listeners whose queries go unanswered. There is something almost perversely James Joycean in Don Joyce’s plays on words and colliding streams of consciousness as he spins his day-in-the-life broadcast saga.

Both Swearingen and Joyce’s works are paradoxical studies in duplicity and the devices employed. While there is no doubt about the authenticity of Swearingen’s vocal material all of which is recognizably lifted from the same media source, Joyce leaves us wondering what is actual broadcast material, and what, if any, is skillful simulation. This shadow of doubt, the inability to distinguish between fact and fiction is of course integral to the thematic content of *Advertising Secrets* and Joyce’s work in general. If there is a palpable pathos beneath the sly humor of Swearingen’s *Salvation at 1 A.M.*’s glossy snake oil hucksterism, the inference

of deleterious culpability pervades the colliding collective narratives of Joyce's *Advertising Secrets*.

Unveiling the mechanics of seduction and identification in American broadcast media must also include the power and influence of Hollywood movies and television. A number of narrative radio art pieces employed a cinematic mode of storytelling and drew upon and deconstructed various film genres in which *mise-en-scène* is as important as the characters. Thus what could be a more appropriate American setting than the surreal cultural and geophysical landscape of 1980s Los Angeles with its lure of the reinvented self, L.A.—a city of mirages where “The Santa Ana winds come through the canyons with a whine and a shudder, like the hot breath of a coyote on the prowl,”<sup>3</sup> and the automobile is an identifying status signature, cruising an existential terrain. Like the Santa Ana winds, the Industry's lifestyle and values as well as its imagery permeated every aspect of L.A. life. Indeed, one might argue that decadent late capitalist end-of-century American culture is Hollywood culture. Or vice versa.

*Swan Lake* (1989), my film noir “ballet” for radio, written in the form of a screenplay, parodies the entertainment industry's working culture and what it produces by recasting and resituating the classical *Swan Lake* ballet's narrative amidst the glittering surfaces and dark underside of late 1980s Los Angeles where dreams are manufactured in media land, art and entertainment tongue kiss, the third world coexists in a parallel realm, and the weather is unnatural. “It's one of those balmy summer days that you get in the middle of February, but never in July.”

Using a cinematic syntax and vocabulary, including camera directions, the narrative unfolds in a montage of flashbacks, dialogue, and testimony framed within a sensational celebrity murder trial surrounded by a media frenzy. “The Press is assembled like a gang of alley cats at a Beverly Hills garbage can the day after Thanksgiving.” *Mise-en-scène* descriptions and dialogue are rich with Raymond Chandler-style metaphors, the husky baritone inflections of his detective Philip Marlowe and the ironic edginess of Jake Gittes in *Chinatown*.<sup>4</sup> Only this contemporary private eye is an out-of-work screenwriter with writer's block and the femme fatale is a postmodern choreographer selling herself to a sexy perfume commercial to fund her art. “What do you do when you're not spying on people?” Odile asks the P.I. in the smoky tone of noir heroines. “Spy on myself,” he replies. The lush romanticism of Tchaikovsky's music incorporated into a percussive, techno-eclectic, edgy film score composed and performed by Joseph Berardi and Kira Vollman, heightens the suspense, as do all the accompanying sound effects.

In the glitzy patina of the 1980s, the seductive promise of fame and fortune ignited a duplicitous love/hate affair between art and entertainment. In transforming the

high art ballet into a neo-noir detective drama, *Swan Lake* exposes and satirizes the contradictory motives and desires in this alliance and the deceits it perpetrates. When the artist Odile backs out of the deal, the villainous producer Rothbart, who will stop at nothing to break into feature films, threatens her. In an ironic twist he drowns in the midst of a shoot at the Bel-Air Hotel. Accident or murder? The prosecuting D.A. is a double for Susan Dey in the hip 1980s TV series *L.A. Law*, and a dead swan swathed in pink tissue like a tutu represents Art defiled by commerce. The much-quoted Gordon Gekko in the 1980s film *Wall Street* told us, "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works." In 2016, when art has been reduced to a Wall Street commodity or entertainment merchandizing product, and political debate has become a reality TV show at its most vulgar, we know who won the battle.

## POLITICAL ACTIVISM AND MEDIA SUBVERSIONS

One strategy of the radio artist as interventionist has been to take over broadcast space and alter the way in which it normally functions. This frequently involves the participation of the listener as a transmitter as well as receiver, with the artist as mediator. In such instances the broadcast site becomes a virtual gathering place, the artist functions as an informational conduit, and radio becomes a means of creating community. Performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña took on the role of social and political activist in numerous border-crossing bilingual improvisations. They were political and cultural interventions in the system because they gave voice to those outside it—artists, poets, legal and illegal Latino immigrants, Chicanos—and forged community through communication.

In *Dialogos Fronterizos/Border Dialogueone* (1984–85), during one hour of live air time every other week, Gómez-Peña and journalist Mario Vinicio Gonzalez brought together "thinkers, artists, and activists from both sides of the Mexico/U.S. border to discuss common problems and compare notes on issues of identity, immigration, bilingualism, border pop culture, and activist art." In Spanish, English, and Spanglish, without translations on either side, declamations, poetry, political debates, manifestos, performance texts, border rock, and listener call-ins collided, intertwined, overlapped in an open-ended structure that allowed for all and any manner of improvisation and verbalization. As cultural autobiography that emphasized the role of speech as culture, it broke format rules, and realigned the form of expression with the content so as to reveal a different set of relationships. It was also a form of broadcast anarchy as well as a utopian attempt to reclaim the power of language in order to empower the disenfranchised.



The precedents for Gómez-Peña's *Dialogos Fronterizos/Border Dialogues* and other similar broadcasts go back to early days of frontier border radio from the Rio Grande to Baja. In its heyday in the 1920s and 30s, unregulated renegade broadcasters blasted an idiosyncratic mix of voices and cultures from both sides of the U.S./Mexico border.<sup>5</sup> Half a century later, the same geo-political border became a paradigm of any number of cultural schisms and dichotomies. Initially, Gómez-Peña's interspersing of Spanish with English inadvertently exposed the politics of language in media. It became a conscious strategy when it became clear that his use of bilingualism in mainstream broadcasting venues was viewed by some as a form of cultural aggression, rather than the expression of experience and identity in a multicultural society.<sup>6</sup>

Reaching listeners on both sides of the national border from northern San Diego county to Tijuana and Rosarito in the south, *Dialogos Fronterizos/Border Dialogues* functioned as a bridge without guards that fostered an open exchange between North Americans, Chicanos, Mexicanos, and other Latinos in transit and caught between cultures. These were the years of Ronald Reagan's illegal support of the Contra war against Nicaragua, and of the increasing flow of refugees from the ongoing strife in El Salvador and the death squads in Guatemala. Seen in that light, Gómez-Peña's synthesis of populist politics and experimental art becomes a far more radical socio-cultural act. Not surprisingly *Border Dialogues* was taken off the air within a year.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless Gómez-Peña continued this experiment in cultural narrative. In 1989, on the Spanish-language program *La Nueva Cancion* in New York City, he invited the undocumented Latino population to call in and share their border-crossing stories with him and other listeners who have had immigration experiences. For several hours the broadcast studio became a social gathering place for cultural exchange, with the artist as catalyst. Through this process, strangers made connections with others from their hometowns.<sup>8</sup> Since the U.S./Mexico border continues to be a contentious political issue, such media art actions are still looked upon as radical provocations. Since 2016, when mass migrations and the plight of millions of refugees fleeing from violence are at the center of debates over immigration, these art works have become even more meaningful as models of possibility. At the same time, in the post-9/11 twenty-first century world of international terrorism across permeable borders, such works are also subject to scrutiny in the name of security.

Whether officially sanctioned or not, Gómez-Peña viewed his live broadcasts since 1984 as a form of broadcast piracy, a commandeering of a vital resource controlled

by those in power and generally used to further their interests. America doesn't tolerate revolutionaries, but it loves its outlaws. They are part of the American mythology of rugged individualism, gun-slinging wild-west machismo, self-made buccaneer millionaires. In our own time, the pirate broadcaster became just such a cult figure, a kind of Robin Hood of the airwaves, challenging the supremacy of the establishment and defying the corporate dynasty. Given the extreme difficulties of generating an actual pirate transmission in the United States due to strict FCC regulations and oversight, the postmodern alternative was a totally believable simulation. Hence Gómez-Peña introduced his alter-ego persona Naftaztec. A Chicano techno-bandito with an exaggerated accent, Naftaztec is your ultimate hacker, at once playful and threatening, the "illegal alien" with techno power who can literally move the border and reconfigure the geography.<sup>9</sup> Whether live or pre-recorded, his simulated pirate interjections confronted implicit and explicit cultural fears at the very moment when public officials in California were manipulating them for their own political ends. So too did his similarly structured recorded works such as *Border X-Frontera* (1986).

## SPEECH AS CULTURE:

### VERNACULAR VOICES AND CULTURAL AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

A number of American artists in the New American Radio roster approached radio with an understanding of the power of speech to create evocative images and sensations that conjure up memories of a place and its people. Nowhere is this more evident than in the radio works created by those American artists who have explored the complexity of the cultural histories of ethnicity, class, and race that resides in their voices, the stories they tell and the ways they tell them. The history of where we have been and where we come from resonates in the rhythms, cadences, and intonations of speech. Speech *is* culture. But there are both subtle nuances and vast differences in meaning between written and spoken words that lie in the properties of sound.

The biography of a locale lives on in the memories of those who inhabited it and in the stories they tell. But America is a restless nation of flux and impermanence. In its urban centers, old neighborhoods give way to the wrecking ball or gentrification, while others fall to abandonment, crime, and poverty. When the children and grandchildren of immigrants move on and out, the ethnic cultures of past generations are replaced by those of new immigrants. One language cedes to another, and a community and its life history vanishes as surely as if devoured by a force of nature. Often little evidence of the past remains visible. Thus, Shelley Hirsch's works *O Little Town of East New York* (1992) and *The Vidzer Family* (1991) are as much archaeological expeditions as memoirs.

Traveling back to Hirsch's Brooklyn of the 1950s and 60s is like going through a photo album filled with detailed snapshots of rooms and hallways, furniture, food, articles of clothing, tchotchkes, and books as telling as the pictures of the people that lived there. But when Hirsch opens up the trunk in the cellar packed with the mementos of her own childhood and adolescence, she retrieves a cultural autobiography that bypasses the stereotypes in favor of the eccentricities and complexities that lie beneath the surface of the apparent. The generational struggle between holding on to the "old world" culture and values and moving up and eventually out into this new world is a central theme running through Hirsch's work, as she herself wrestles with her own attachments to her cultural heritage. Inner conflict plays against the events in the outside world, taking this work well beyond an assemblage of identifiable signposts into one comprised of different maps of topographical, temporal, and emotional terrain laid one over the other.

If Hirsch's accent shouts out her working-class Brooklyn Jewish origins, Terry Allen's announces Texas in an equally colorful unmistakable country twang straight out of Lubbock, while Alva Rogers and Lisa Jones's voices reflect the melodic tonalities of African-American speech from North Carolina. Although their stories are worlds apart, they have much in common, for all four are about working-class people searching for the "American Dream." In Allen's *Dugout*, they are Bible Belt folk who came west after the Civil War, what used to be called "po' white trash," whose children left the farm for the city, embracing the promises of the twentieth century in minor league baseball fields and honky-tonk jazz clubs. Allen's saga is about his ancestors born in America in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, grandparents and parents working the land, fighting the wars, and drowning their disappointments and dreams in drink and in the silences between them. They grew up with racial segregation and didn't question it, and they feared and resented each new wave of foreign immigrants. At the end of the twentieth century some of their great-grandchildren and grandchildren empty their despair through the barrel of a gun. Others vent their anger at Donald Trump rallies. A few like Allen become artists who probe the parts of America not usually talked about in the art world.

While all the artists are compelling storytellers, their radio works are also grounded in music. Hirsch's radio pieces are like postmodern mini-operettas merging musical sources as diverse as the characters that inhabited her old neighborhood of East New York. The crowded apartments at the four-story walk-up building with its marble steps, tiled floors, wooden bannisters, and an inside courtyard was a microcosm of the neighborhood, a city in itself of Eastern European Jews, Irish, and Italians. But at the center of this memoir is Hirsch's best

friend Ada Vidzer, her Polish mother, Russian father, and little brother. They are a lost tribe of wandering Jews, émigrés, and immigrants from the pogroms and death camps of Europe, and the dictators of South America, coming to rest in Brooklyn, never quite fitting in. The Vidzers' story is a tale of twentieth-century urban nomads, uprooted and displaced, searching for their spiritual home. Hirsch's voice shifts seamlessly from speech to song back to sing-song speech, capturing hues and tones, and whole subtexts of meaning beyond the words themselves. The history of each inhabitant unfolds in the patterns of her speech, its pitch and rhythm, and vernacular grammar, all underscored by music with its own descriptive function. Hirsch's spectacular voice switches back and forth from her Jewish-American Brooklynese to a Yiddish accent as she stretches out Ada's name into choruses.

As Hirsch follows her own path into adolescence, not only do the times change, but so too does the character of her observations. The intimacy of neighborhood gives way to the urban turmoil of another kind of community—the New York City public high school in the 1960s where the clashes of politics, ethnicity, and class take on their own identifying iconography. But it is at home that Hirsch comes face to face with one of the great ironies of the 1960s—the working class's rejection of its progressive leftist political roots in the 1930s—embodied by her own father shouting “Communist . . . Bomb Vietnam.” They reverberate with his rage and her sense of betrayal and bafflement.

The displacement that occurs on the other side of that fissure in the American landscape where memory collides with history, is brought home by Hirsch's own return in her forties to the old neighborhood. Sometimes the timeline implodes like an image caught between two mirrors falling back into someone else's past. And sometimes the thread of history spins outward in a spiral and everything looks and sounds different but is fundamentally the same story. Hirsch's East New York is no longer there. In the new terrain of the present all the voices are in accents of a different language and the music has a different beat. Caribbean, Latin, and Hip-Hop rhythms spill out of 544 Hemlock Street, and there are no more Russian or Jewish, Irish or Italian names on the mailboxes. There are a lot of abandoned buildings. But in between, a new immigrant culture has taken root: Haitian, Dominican, Puerto Rican. In between are “little storefront congregations with long poetic names primitively painted on the doorways.” The old synagogue had become a black Baptist church. There are four families living at 625 Hemlock. No white people anymore. But the girl sitting on the stoop tells Hirsch she wants to be an actress. Maybe the dreams don't change.

Despite the differences in ethnicities and race, we are bound together by the commonality of shared aspirations, along with questions of identity rooted in the

history of migration and the possibility of self-invention. Mobility offers freedom on one hand and loss on the other. There is comfort in traditions and the sense of place and belonging they provide in a culture and a landscape where erasure and disappearance are the norm. And so we search for our roots in the stories, music and objects passed down. Recollection becomes an act of preservation, or liberation.

Writer/performer Alva Rogers and playwright/author Lisa Jones are concerned with themes of American identity, gender, and otherness, and much like Shelley Hirsch they explore personal and cultural history in the form of memoir. Only in *Aunt Aida's Hand* (1989), a young woman's reconstruction of family, place, and people is told in a vernacular with southern roots and accents that are distinctly African American. As in both Hirsch's and Allen's radio works, the music composed by Rogers is a "storyteller" too. This time around it is tender blues and soulful spirituals. Spoken and sung by Rogers in the melodic lilting tones of southern black speech, she conjures up a vivid picture of strong, loving women of her grandparents' generation, their kinships and their North Carolina roots. It is an intimate portrait that invites you into the narrator's family and holds you in their warm embrace. At the same time, it speaks to the fragility of memory, like a fabric that frays and fades with time as the next generations move on and away.

When Eudie May Chance passes on, her granddaughter, who "loves her more than anyone in the world," fears she has "lost all the people in Miss Eudie's head." The narrator takes us back to North Carolina to visit Eudie May's older sister Aida, still living in the white house where Aida raised her four siblings. *Aunt Aida's Hand* delves into the tensions between those family members who held onto their rural southern way of life and those who migrated to the big city up north drawn by the promise of a better life. The first of them was Aida's restless half-Cherokee mother who left the farm, abandoning her children for New York City. Like so many others in the Great Migration, Aida's sisters and brother would follow, leaving behind their roots along with the realities of segregation. Aunt Aida proudly tells her great-niece there were no slaves in the family. "We were free people who owned land."

*Aunt Aida's Hand* is also about the power of faith in African-American life to sustain and heal, and overcome hardship. In an aside, a brother reveals Aida had had a husband who died of black lung disease, and an adopted son who was shot in Raleigh. There is a poetic dreamlike aura to the reminiscences of each family member. "Magical" qualities are attributed to Aunt Aida who was "always different." Her voice floats in the air like a tiny bird. She only wore white, sang the Lord's praise in the Baptist choir, preached to men in prison, and was literally "touched by God's hand," leaving its imprint on her chest and saving her life. All

she had was religion, her house and her lovely old things. The furniture her father made, the dolls, the china collection, gospel records, and the old photos in oval frames. They are all gone now, except for a few photos, and the stories to pass down. In *Aunt Aida's Hand* Rogers and Jones explore the existential dilemma of identity in our culture of erasure, discontinuity and mobility. Theirs is a feminist voice of self-affirmation that reflects on the dualities of being freed from the past, and still longing to be connected to it.

Terry Allen understands not only the power of radio as a storytelling medium but the capacity of sound and the sound of language to conjure up vivid images that are as essential to the central narrative as the progression of the story told through the characters. A visual artist and musician/songwriter, Allen is known for his politically sophisticated but down-home in-your-face lyrics and eclectic hard-driving country band. *Dugout* is all blues, a country torch song with a juke joint groove, while *Bleeder* has gospel cadences. If Hirsch's works are operatic, Allen's are cinematic.

Allen's 1990 montage *Bleeder* is a parable of America letting blood, America in the era of assassinations and Vietnam, America then and now, told in a distinctly Texan vernacular accompanied by a prairie wind, hymns, and songs evoking the 1950s and 60s. The recollections of one woman, played by Jo Harvey Allen, paint a vivid portrait of a part of America through the fictional biography of one man whom she describes as a hemophiliac, a huckster, a politician, a possible gangster, a charlatan, a religious fanatic, a drunk, and a great storyteller, "born of oil and married into cattle." The story is set in Lyndon Johnson's Texas of backroom politics and big deals, cattlemen and oilmen, and women with big appetites and big hair, men with big hands, big talk, and big cars, and stacks of bills in a suitcase. This is also the Texas of revivalist preachers and TV evangelists, of hustlers and gamblers, whiskey and guns, cash through Christ, the Kennedys on the cross, blood money, faith betrayed. And it resonates as much today as it did then. "He wanted to be a revivalist preacher, bring in Hollywood types and 'touch hands palm to palm through the electronic marvels of God.' Orel Roberts was his favorite . . . He could'a gone into art," she tells us.

In *Bleeder*, the color and phrasing of regional American language provides a deeply disturbing subtext of yearning and loss in a landscape of hypocrisy, alienation, grand illusions and monstrous lies. "Oh baby, baby, baby . . ." Jo Harvey Allen wails, emphasizing the first syllable in BA-BY like she's expelling it from inside her chest. Allen makes every lie reveal a deeper truth as he examines the way history, events, images, memory, and hallucination dissolve into each other, become reworked and mythologized. The *Bleeder's* biography is also America's biography. Paradox and nostalgia, Auld Lang Syne, and a country western song. Sex and

death and resurrection. He had said “biography is form of necrophilia,” she tells us. “Blood could fly outta him like a dam breaking.” God bless America. Amen.

Allen’s 1993 autobiographical masterpiece *Dugout* unfolds like a film. It starts at the end with a vivid image of an old woman sitting in a chair in the middle of an empty white room. Then it weaves its way backward in time, not chronologically, but more like the way we remember. Words, images, sounds, music, a gesture, trigger a time, a place, a face, a series of events that are the turning points, or just a moment of realization, like a shadow on the wall. His story and her story are interwoven. They move towards each other, not in a straight line, but winding their way in and out, until they cross paths at some intersection. They speak in the third person as observers, witnesses. Yet the cadences and intonations of speech tell us these people are in their blood and bones, and the soil they grew up on. Their lives are part of our history and their reality is its own truth. The Texas that was once Mexico is there. So is the black soul of the Mississippi blues and the thunder and lightning of white preachers. Texas grit and sweat and the smell of hairspray and tobacco. They didn’t question the violence that shaped their lives. They accepted it as the way things are. Inside the twang and drawl is the sigh of resignation, the blue note of disappointment, and the defiance of faded dreams. But underneath, in the voices of the tellers is something else, something weighted that falls with a silent thud.

On the surface it is told matter-of-factly. He’s seventy-three years old and his time is up. And over the piano playing the blues, in his head he hears the words that aren’t there—his Pa’s voice shouting “Swim you little son of a bitch. Swim or drown.” And maybe that sums up who we are as a society. Except for one crucial irony, which is that in truth just swimming isn’t enough.

Blood and violence are an inescapable part of a culture that worships guns and equates them with manhood. In *Shoot the Moving Things* (1989), singer, writer, composer Rinde Eckert reveals the inherent pathos in that particularly American frontier ethos through the voices of three men on a hunting trip. This ritual of white middle-aged male bonding in which religion, sport, and war are a subtext, is played out in a fractured narrative of blood rush and pounding heartbeats, memories triggered by sounds, and conversational fragments that expose the schism between interior and exterior realities. The driving intensity of Eckert’s alternating spoken and sung vocals and music create a tension between the veneer of bravado and resignation marked with the inevitability of failure.

Merle is a minister who “can’t wait to get his finger on the trigger.” At the pulpit he drives his point home like a bullet to the heart of his flock. Henry owns a hardware store but doesn’t know how to shoot. He carries a photo of himself

in uniform, "a supply officer in Seoul with a whore on each arm." John teaches geography but doesn't know where he is. He touches the scar on his temple, hears the voice of the wood dove, and relives "the report, shot, crack, falling . . ." when shot by his brother by accident. "The devil is in that boy," says Merle who jokingly taunts the other men. "Henry . . . more like an old lady every year . . . Maybe we ought'a shoot you . . . make a meal and a half." It is early morning in October in whitetail deer country. "Keep your eyes open. Can't kill what you can't see . . . Clean shot. 300 yards." The wounded deer disappears into the underbrush. "Easy to make mistakes." Phrases repeat like gunshots throughout each intersection sung in Eckert's spectacular tenor, as the music transits from a rhythmically punctuated rap, to operatic recitation, to hymns accompanied by organ, concluding with the rat-a-tat-tat of automatic weapon fire embedded in a montage of gongs and bells. God bless the Second Amendment, Dick Cheney, and the NRA!<sup>10</sup> Amen.

## BLACK RAGE AND WHITE ALIENATION

Running parallel is the blood legacy of racial injustice, still etched deep into the fabric of American life, whether buried in the unconscious, just under the surface, or overtly present. African-American radio artists have addressed that heritage in its past and present forms in a variety of ways, including satire, manifesto, and poetic incantation, as well as inventive storytelling, all informed by the complex issues of race. Just as jazz, bebop, soul, R&B, and funk are the heartbeat of the American soundscape, in the black spoken word tradition the cadences of preachers and civil rights leaders, poets and playwrights are infused with music. Simultaneously, the variances of vernacular are shaped by differences between urban and rural cultures, gender, generation, and class. Although the underlying themes may be similar, poet and performance artist Keith Antar Mason's tone and stance are the opposite to Alva Rogers and Lisa Jones's.

Originally from St. Louis, Mason came to radio as a Los Angeles writer/performer with a powerful voice already established in performance works that were confrontational, controversial, uncompromisingly provocative, and politically charged. His first radio piece *Frenzy in the Night* (1990) is an allegorical autobiographical declamation that spoke to what it means to be a young black man in America. It is a journey of self-discovery that confronted the issue of representation, of how one is perceived versus who one is, the "war of images against me." Racism is at the heart of this story told in an African-American accent and mode of speech. Boyhood yearning and dreams of reaching "the other side . . . Illinois, the free state," turn to adolescent indignation and defiance. "I am a poet with Uzis in my mouth." A young man's outrage evolves into self-recognition and pride " . . . loving myself frightens you," he reminds us. As spoken-word performance it is



an extended piece of vocal music that charts his path to “freedom” in language rich in metaphor and symbolism. His historical references range from Africa to the cotton fields of the American south, from his Missouri roots to the streets of Los Angeles, as his interior voice struggles with defining himself in the world. “I am a blues funk master mad at you, so don’t ask me to dilute this bitch’s brew to make Coltrane comprehensible . . . ”

*Frenzy in the Night* is also a manifesto in the vernacular of jazz, blues, rap, and the preacher’s call and response repetitions, and Mason is not sparing in his use of the N word in his riffs on the “boombox of L.A.” “I am a n\*\*\*\*\* with attitude, a B.A. degree, a dirty mouth, and an erection, wanting to do something called living,” he declares. The narrative stream is embedded in a soundscape of saxophone jazz and African drum rhythms. Atmospheric evocations of the Mississippi River drift in and out, along with the murmurs of other voices. *Frenzy in the Night* was meant to shake you up and pry you loose from your comfort zone by making you inhabit Mason’s experience in ways you do not anticipate, thus confronting the complex reality of what it feels like to be black in America. Mason’s imagery and emotions captured in phrases like “Nobody wants to die a n\*\*\*\*\* in America!” still resonate across twenty-first century America in the voices of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The vast compendium of both real and fictional images imprinted in our national psyche reinforces the inescapable undercurrent of violence in American history and culture. Mass killings and police shootings confront us daily on the news, leaving unanswered questions about the true nature of these events vs. the documentation, as well as who we are as a society. Do some lives matter more than others, despite the rhetoric to the contrary? In 2020, the epidemic of police killings of black men and the subsequent protests in streets across the nation has unequivocally answered that question.

And so we come to the end of the twentieth century and William Morelock’s ramble on the state of the American middle-class soul caught up in the quest for more. Composed of a dense assemblage of informal conversations among middle-aged white men, *Saturday, Late in the Twentieth Century* (1990) is a circuitous search for meaning in the glut of images and consumer trends. “Is life lovelier for resembling life reproduced?” he wonders. Morelock’s is a softer, gentler voice than Swearingen or Joyce. Listening to this work is a little like eavesdropping at a crowded gallery opening. Against a background of “heroic” orchestral classical music, and snippets of Pavarotti’s soaring tenor, Morelock unpacks “yuppie” culture with an understated Midwesterner’s tongue-in-cheek wit, and a tinge of bafflement. The juxtaposition of contemporary fatuousness with the emotional

weight and grandeur of past high culture underscores a palpable sense of yearning and loss beneath the hip banter and self-deprecating mockery. Discussions of the latest trend in mail-order gourmet food, such as vintage Italian vinegars and porcini mushrooms, lead to how those cool toys and things they coveted are already passé, replaced by a new model. When one of his characters goes to trade in a box of out-of-use words, all lined up they turn out to be a verse from Shakespeare. At the heart of these men's hidden angst is the absence of substance in an age of illusory surfaces.

Finally, Helen Thorington's cinematic radio piece *North Country* (1995) is a suspense thriller with no resolution, an unsolved mystery in a hall of mirrors in which each character has his or her own version of the story. A woman's body is found in the frozen north woods, several years deceased. Nothing remains but bones and articles of clothing, the flesh long gone, or eaten by animals. She has never been reported missing and her identity is unknown. There is a bullet hole in the skull but no gun. Is it suicide or murder? Matter-of-fact exposition alternates with expressive speculation and subjective description. Forensic evidence parries with missing explanations. Who was she? What happened, and why? How is it that no one missed her? The scientific evidence of the coroner's report provides a physiological chronology, but it does not answer questions of the psyche or the spirit, nor does it explain the circumstances that led up to her death or the meaning of her life. Here we plunge into the mind of the narrator. Is she the investigator of this death, or is she forecasting her own?

At the same time, *North Country* invokes the intense physicality of place through vividly descriptive sonic environments and counterpoints it with the disembodied power of language to manifest realities. Thorington's orchestrated aural landscape in *North Country* takes the listener on a tactile journey that transforms radio into an unexpectedly cinematic experience in which the *mise-en-scène* is also a storyteller. As in Eckert's *Shoot the Moving Things*, the natural terrain is an inseparable part of the events. You can feel the cold air of that north country on your skin, just as you can see the canoe slip through the water slapping against its side. Staring into a memory, you ponder the life belonging to those bones, see an icy road, feel the rustling of the wind, hear anxiety, doubt and dread in the music mixed with nature's sound effects. As a meditation on the subjective nature of reality and the fluidity of identity, *North Country* raises doubts about the reliability of memory and perception.

In conclusion, all of the artists discussed here have experimented with radio as an art medium, creating substantial bodies of multi-disciplinary hybrid works employing cinematic, performance art, and musical strategies and structures as storytelling devices and compositional elements. Using narrative as a form of

multicultural autobiography and embracing an array of voices from the mainstream to the marginal with vernacular speech as cultural signifier, they sought to probe the soul of American culture in an intimate voice and reveal its internal mechanisms and paradoxes for audiences to contemplate. These works may be gone from the airwaves but the stories they tell are a part of our ongoing history and they continue to reverberate in our national debate about who we are as a country. Decades later, in this time of political and social turmoil, strife, and the collapse of boundaries between facts and fiction, truth and lies in all media sources, these works are more meaningful than ever for they reveal the deep schisms and contradictions in the American psyche and the impending collapse of the American Dream. They expose the fault lines in the socio-political and cultural landscape and provide us with insight into how and why we have come to this crisis. That is, if anyone is still listening.

The following radio works cited in this essay were commissioned and distributed nationally by New American Radio. Now available online at <http://www.somewhere.org>

- Jacki Apple, *Swan Lake*. Written, directed, and produced by Jacki Apple. Performed by Peter Beckman, John Fleck, Noreen Hennessy, Philip Littell, and Jacki Apple, 1989
- Terry Allen, *Bleeder*. Vocal performance by Jo Harvey Allen, text and music by Terry Allen, 1990
- Rogers and Lisa Jones, *Aunt Aida's Hand*, 1990
- Keith Antar Mason, *Frenzy in the Night*. Written and performed by Mason. Soundtrack composed and produced by Jacki Apple, 1990
- William Morelock, *Saturday, Late in the Twentieth Century*, 1990
- Swearingen, *Salvation at 1 AM*, 1991
- Don Joyce, *Advertising Secrets*, 1991
- Shelley Hirsch, *The Vidzer Family*. Text and vocal performance by Hirsch, with synthesizer music created by Hirsch and keyboards played by David Weinstein 1991. *O Little Town of East New York*. Text and vocal performance by Hirsch. Music co-composed and performed with David Weinstein, 1992
- Terry Allen, *Dugout*. Narrated by Terry Allen, Jo Harvey Allen, and Katie Koontz, with text and music by Terry Allen, 1993
- Helen Thorington, *North Country*, 1995
- Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Dialogos Fronterizos/ Border Dialogues* was broadcast on Enfoque Nacional, the NPR Spanish language program in San Diego, CA, 1984–85

- Guillermo Gómez-Peña and David Schein's *Border-X-Frontera* was commissioned by *The Territory of Art*, radio series, curated by Julie Lazar for the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, 1986
- Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *La Nueva Cancion* was broadcast at the Columbia University radio station in New York City with Mario Vinicio Gonzalez and Maria Ninojoso, 1989
- Rinde Eckert's *Shoot the Moving Things* 1987 was originally created for, and performed live on, *Soundings*, KPFK-FM, Los Angeles, producer/host Jacki Apple with *High Performance* magazine 1986. Reworked for New American Radio, 1989

## NOTES

1. Terry Allen recalls the role radio played in his teen years in 1950s Lubbock, Texas. "A lot of us, maybe ten or fifteen people would go out into a cotton patch in our cars and park 'em in a circle with the headlights facing in. Everybody would tune to the same radio station. We would turn on our headlights and turn up the radios and DANCE in this circle of cars." Interview with Jacki Apple, 1994.

2. Jacki Apple, "Radio Death: The Expulsion of Radio Art from the Airwaves" (1995), *Performance / Media / Art / Culture. Selected Essays 1983–2018*. (Intellect, Bristol, UK, 2019), 248–250.

3. Jacki Apple, *Swan Lake*, 1989.

4. *Chinatown*, 1974. American neo-noir mystery film, directed by Roman Polanski from a screenplay by Robert Towne, starring Jack Nicholson as L.A. private detective Jake Gittes.

5. Gene Fowler and Bill Crawford, *Border Radio*. (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002).

6. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "When I began doing a project for NPR and I used a lot of Spanish I didn't realize it was a complete act of defiance, of transgression . . . But to me it is part of my political process. Tough shit if not everybody gets it all. After all, living in a multiracial society means you are not going to get it all the time. There are zones that are forbidden to our understanding and areas in which we are not allowed, and this idea of partial exclusion is a very contemporary idea, a very American idea. We are all at different times, in different countries partially excluded, and I want to convey that in my radio work." From an interview with Jacki Apple, May 26, 1994.

7. Ibid. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "People told unbelievable stories about how they got to the U.S., about the pain they endured on the road, you know . . . about how they lost their children, their brothers, their wives while crossing the border and information that I am sure that even a field anthropologist couldn't have obtained. . . . What I tell about my life is also meaningful to all the people who are currently undergoing or have undergone similar processes of acculturation, of borderization, geographical dislocation, etc. In a sense one becomes a chronicler of the migratory patterns of one's community . . ."

8. Ibid. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "They [undocumented Latino immigrants] are disconnected. They just arrived in the city, they don't know where to go, who to meet, how to connect with churches, social service agencies, which are the hangout places for that community, so let's ask them. And people began to call the station . . . you know, 'Hey my name is Pedro. I just arrived from Michoacan, Mexico. I am alone in New York. Do you know where I can get together with other people from Michuocan?' And then someone else would call and say, 'I'm also from Michuocan and we can get together in the corner of so and so to play dominos every Friday night.' And then someone else would call and say, 'I am from Puebla and I would like to meet other people from Puebla.' And then someone else would call and say, 'You know there is a great group of Poblanos who gets together to play music every Saturday at the cafe so and so.' And then people started exchanging information about where to hang out and also about churches and activist organizations that were offering services to these populations."

9. Naftaztec took over the radio station for thirty minutes in a live simulated pirate broadcast on *Soundings*, KPFK-FM, Los Angeles, September 20, 1994. Producer/host Jackie Apple.

10. On Feb. 11, 2006, Dick Cheney, Vice President in the George W. Bush administration, accidentally shot lawyer Harry Whittington in the face, neck, and chest during a quail hunting trip at the Armstrong Ranch in Texas. Whittington suffered a minor heart attack after a piece of birdshot lodged into part of his heart, but survived. Cheney, an avid hunter, was involved in another hunting accident in 2013 when his gun malfunctioned during an antelope hunting contest in his native Wyoming, preventing the former Vice President from getting his shot off.

*Radio art collage on section cover courtesy Jackie Apple.*

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