

**The Stakes are High:
Reflections on the class podcast Underserved and Underwater**

Sonic Abundance

Episode 05: The Stakes are High: Reflections on the class podcast Underserved and Underwater

Hosted/Authoried by Earl Brooks

Duration: 29:13

Content warning: this episode discusses racial violence, including lynching.

[intro music begins]

EARL: In October 2021, a new story went viral about a black family in Virginia Beach, Virginia, enduring racial insults from one of their neighbors. While such incidents rarely rise to the level of national attention, what was unique about this story was the neighbor's methodology of abuse. According to Jeanique Martinez, whenever members of her family left or returned to their home, sensors installed around the neighbor's house activated and triggered flashing lights, loud music, monkey noises, and what she termed quote, inward skits to describe the anti-black racist comedy recordings that featured incessant uses of racial epithets. Although the Martinez family sought assistance from local law enforcement authorities, they were told that their neighbor's behavior was neither criminally actionable nor a threat to the family's physical safety.

Though Martinez vowed that her family would not move out of their home or be cowed by their neighbors' racist antics, she had to admit that the neighbor deeply troubled her family, and the entire ordeal had left them feeling hopeless, sad, and drained. The Martinez family experienced nothing short of a sonic corollary to visual assaults by racist symbols, such as burning crosses, Nazi swastikas, or hangman nooses. This sonic attack inflicted similar white supremacist terror and intimidation.

Further, despite the dismissal of their complaint by law enforcement, the weaponization of sound is a recognized torture technique that has been applied to prisoners in American detention and interrogation facilities. While the Martinez family's experience represents an unusually explicit use of sonic anti-black racism, it nonetheless anecdotally captures an extensive history of sonic phenomena as a disfavored modality of documentation, evidence and communication within American bureaucratic institutions. In Cynthia Selfe's article, "The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Orality, and Multimodal Composing," she engages this exact history and its influence on pedagogy and composition classrooms and more broadly, the liberal arts, when she states, "the history of writing and US composition instruction, as well as its contemporary legacy, functions to limit our professional understanding of composing, as a multimodal rhetorical activity and deprive students of valuable semiotic resources for making meaning."

She describes this history as shaped by the application of scientific methods

to a wide range of legal, military, industrial, and manufacturing practices that reinforce the privileged role of visual and print information. While Selfe acknowledges cultures that have maintained traditions of multimodal communication, many of the contributions from such cultures remain at the margins of the discipline instead of at its center. Selfe's assessment was certainly correct.

However, I argue the stakes are much higher. The imperative to contend with such contributions is not simply a matter of violating an ethical commitment to inclusion, which is, of course, important, but not the central concern. In fact, there is a straight line between those contributions and the social political urgency of our current moment. Democracies across the globe are experiencing significant challenges, including political polarization, crisis of faith in institutions, and the rise of authoritarian influences. Currently, scholars and teachers from all sorts of disciplines are grappling with the central questions of how do we get here and how should we respond? Selfe's explanation of the historical turn away from other communicative modalities is relevant not only because of its support for new and exciting pedagogical strategies and technological innovation in the classroom, but because it frames a larger existential dilemma for the field of rhetoric and composition, higher education, and proponents of liberalism and small-d democracy, which have collectively fetishized an incomplete conception of critical literacy as one that is solely focused on the printed word, rational discourse, and logic-based forms of argumentation and public engagement. This critical literacy gap doesn't just imperil students' preparation for the dynamic challenges of a 21st-century workforce. It also imperils the ethos and communicative effectiveness of institutions that support and defend democracy. Any defense strategy must be multimodal and engage in psychological and emotional appeals that exceed those based in rationality and logic. This exact gap has been identified by African-American scholars and public intellectuals.

But because their contributions on this subject have largely been relegated to the overly narrow confines of racial discourse by various academic fields of study, their larger implications have been ignored to our collective detriment. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois articulated his understanding of this same dilemma when describing his personal experiences while working as an academic in Atlanta. In what follows, Du Bois describes the moment when he realized knowledge and logical arguments were not enough to convince America to abandon the practice of lynching.

[intro music ends]

[swoosh sound effect]

DU BOIS: While I was there, my faith in knowledge as a solution of the Negro problem was shaken. Lynching was common. Before I went away from there, there was an average of one lynching every week for some years. And it was a terrible sort of thing. There was one case very near Atlanta in which I knew from my studies, just what had happened. It was a case of a Negro peasant not receiving his wages at the end of the season. He got in a fight with his hirer and

killed him and ran away. And then when they couldn't find him, they raised the altogether new issue that he had raped the man's wife, which was evidently just dragged in.

Well, I had a letter which I hadn't delivered to Joel Chandler Harris, the author of the Uncle Remus Tales. He was then on the Atlanta Constitution. So, I took that letter and started downtown to deliver it to him and to talk to him about this situation. And on the way down, I found that this Negro, Sam Hose, had been caught and lynched and that in the meat market, which was on the way, I had to pass, his fingers and toes were being exhibited. Well, I didn't deliver the letter. I went back to Atlanta University. And then I made up my mind that knowledge wasn't enough. That even if people were ignorant of sensual matters, which they had to know, they wouldn't correct their actions without more realization of just what the difficulties were. They had not only to know, but they had to act. And so I changed from studying the Negro problem to propaganda, to letting people know just what the Negro problem meant in what the colored people were suffering and what they were kept from doing.

[swoosh sound effect]

[music resumes]

EARL: Both Du Bois' experiences and his scholarship, such as his iconic text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, situate his engagement with the concepts of multimodality, especially sound and other sensory-oriented dimensions of communication and persuasion.

I argue that contributions like those from Du Bois are important because they link sound studies to a set of moral and ethical convictions. Ironically, scholars of disinformation and propaganda are coming to the same conclusions that Du Bois had all those years ago. For instance, consider Peter Pomerantsev's recent remarks concerning challenges facing democratic debate.

[music ends]

[swoosh sound effect]

POMERANTSEV: We have to admit those of us who dreamt of a democratic sphere, we would all debate one another based on a degree of empathy with our opponents, based on a common idea of evidence, based on telling stories to understand each other and advance society and come to decisions. This whole fantasy of a democratic public sphere, which is actually the essence of democracy.

The agora of the ancient Greek world, we have to admit those of us who dreamt of that, we've lost. It's gone. And the question right now is, can those of us who claim to defend democracy, those of us who claim to be inheritors of the spirit of the Velvet Revolution in 1989, whoever's left. The question now purely is, can we compete and can we win?

[swoosh sound effect]

[music resumes]

EARL: Elements of Pomerantsev's analyses are quite audible within the work of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and other authors of slave narratives. These writers link ideas about sound and communication to notions of freedom and liberation. However, surprisingly, few scholars have considered what these works can offer to some of our field's central methodological concerns, such as embodiment or epistemology. Although Selfe credits the quote, germinal scholarship of the new London group for identifying the aural as a rhetorical and creative source and composing messages and making meaning, writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke and Richard Wright, as well as musicians such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington address similar concerns and offer important ideas about how the black community's relationship with sound contributes something fundamental to the character and promise of America. The next generation of writers and poets such as James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka and others, as well as the first generation of black musicologists such as Eileen Jackson Southern and Samuel Floyd offer important blueprints for locating black sound studies at the forefront of questions concerning identity politics, public memory, trauma studies and a variety of other areas of contemporary social and political thought and aesthetics.

For example, in Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, readers are confronted with the plight of Pecola Breedlove, a young African-American girl in the 1940s whose growing obsession with white, Eurocentric beauty standards, blonde hair and blue eyes, leads to a form of racial self-loathing so powerful that she begins to yearn for a pair of blue eyes of her own. She wants to feel valued, seen, and adored like all the other Shirley Temples of the world, but her wish comes at the cost of her sanity.

Although Morrison's novel has become an important part of the American literary canon, it also offers a contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversation on sound and aurality. In a verbal altercation between Pecola and Maureen, another young African-American girl described in the text as a quote, high yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back unquote. Maureen ends the argument by calling Pecola and her friends, sisters Claudia and Frida, quote, black and ugly. The stinging impact of Maureen's racial insults momentarily stunned the girls before the narrative voice switches back to Claudia's analysis of the dramatic episode.

And I quote here from the text: We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute, and if anything could be believed, she was, then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the marine pearls of the world. End quote.

However, unlike Claudia and Frida, Pecola does not possess the discursive tools

to challenge those quote unquote honey voices or the hegemonic discourses of beauty and desirability that lend Maureen's insults so much weight. Throughout the novel, Pecola is portrayed as someone who listens to insults and verbal attacks, and when she does speak, she's misunderstood, ignored, and unheard.

Morrison's Pecola serves as a stark warning about the dangers and vulnerabilities awaiting those without the tools to deconstruct harmful or erroneous discourses. In fact, Morrison points to a dangerous incoherence that arises when American citizens, including students, lack these critical skills:

[music ends]

[swoosh sound effect]

MORRISON: Some part of the culture and its language, whether it's words of music or style or what have you, is not just interesting to and compelling to a large part of its population, is important to me. But more important is that America is incoherent without it. And I think now there is a readership that understands that the literature of America is incoherent without the contribution of and within Black writers in the same way that you can't talk about American music. If it's indigenous, it is incoherent if you take out all of Black musicians and the Black music they have produced.

[swoosh sound effect]

[music resumes]

EARL: Morrison's texts call attention to a tradition of multimodal, multi-sensorial critical literacy that she calls, quote unquote, truth in timbre, which means the truth in the story lies not only in its facts, but in its telling, its sounds, its phrasings, and its tones. Not wholly unlike Morrison's Pecola, our students need the skills to, as Selfe argues, quote, use semiotic resources to think critically, to explore, and to solve problems, unquote. Morrison's conception of truth and timbre, a continuation of African diasporic meaning-making traditions, undergirds my pedagogy in creating the podcast with UMBC students. The purpose of the podcast is to provide students with an opportunity to explore the impacts of climate change and severe weather through the medium of sound. The clip I'm sharing features commentary and interviews about a flood that took place in Maryland in 2018. While communities with higher degrees of affluence received extensive news coverage and resources, working class communities of color in Baltimore were overlooked by local media outlets and received very little initial support. One of those communities was only minutes away from campus. So, the students and I were able to visit the flood site and interview a local church pastor, Michael Martin, who led the communal response. In preparation for the podcast, not only were students exposed to the kinds of best practices that are discussed in our field scholarship on student podcasting, but a considerable portion of the course was dedicated to reading and listening to diverse forms of sound study scholarship, including works produced by some of the musicians and writers mentioned earlier. While the podcast was

a success, more important were the connections students made between their narrative choices, the thoughts and expectations of community partners and interviewees, the real-world applications of state and local policies, and their critical reflections on their own beliefs and values.

[swoosh sound effect]

[new music begins]

STUDENT NARRATOR: A tale of two floods and two cities, one that got the help it needed and one that had to fend for itself. This is Underserved Underwater, episode one.

COLLAGE OF VOICES AND NEWS CLIPS: The power of that rushing water washing cars away as they were toys...

The water just keeps coming and quite frankly there's nowhere for it to go...

Flood water rammed cars into buildings and tore up pavement...

The water bursts through the door tossing 8 foot long display cases like dollhouse furniture...

Not even two years later, a vibrant city once again thrown into turmoil...

Every time it rains here, the community hard stops...

After all that resilience, to have this happen again, it's just terrible...

And as climate change continues to warm the planet, we could see even more storms of this strength...

[music slowly fades out]

[rain sounds]

STUDENT NARRATOR: On July 30th, 2016, the area surrounding historic Ellicott City was hit with a devastating flash flood. To make matters worse, another severe flood struck the city just two years later, on May 27th, 2018. Maryland Governor Larry Hogan declared a state of emergency that Sunday afternoon as water levels rose to 17.8 feet. The flooding took out several homes and local businesses in the Ellicott City area. According to official reports, 96 % of the businesses on the Main Street area were affected. The cause of the flooding was the almost 9 inches of rain that poured down all at once, amounting to about two months worth of rain buildup.

Given that the area is very urban, the surrounding land was not able to handle the immense torrent of precipitation. Governor Hogan reported that it was like a once-every-1,000-year flood, and yet, it happened twice in two years. He continued to report on the aftermath of the flood, saying how it was so devastating because of how people have centered their lives around this area, and they had to go through a similar disruptive experience twice in such a small amount of time.

[rain sounds end]

Moreover, thanks to his state of emergency declaration, Ellicott City received much attention and support from the state of Maryland in its rebuilding efforts. But with all the commotion around Ellicott City, local neighborhoods that were also affected by the flood were neglected, including a Baltimore City neighborhood just a few miles away, Irvington. According to the topographical map of Baltimore City and adjacent parts of Maryland, Irvington is at a lower elevation, around 250 to 300 feet, compared to nearby areas.

Certain parts of Baltimore City and Ellicott City, which is prone to flooding, are at higher elevations than Irvington, around 300 to 450 feet. As a result, with heavy downpour, the rainwater could run off to nearby areas of lower elevation, including onto Irvington.

[piano music]

STUDENT NARRATOR: Irvington is a large, close-knit community located in southwest Baltimore City. It's very close to the UMBC area, and it's just a few miles down the street from Ellicott City. The neighborhood consists of a mixture of single-family homes, apartments, and traditional row homes, and it is centered around a small business district. The population of Irvington is predominantly black and only around 5,000 residents.

STUDENT NARRATOR: The neighborhood has been brought together during the times of grief after the flooding by Stillmeadow Community Fellowship. The church became a resource for the community when Ellicott City received the full attention and support it needed from the state government, while the Irvington community largely had to fend for itself. Pastor Michael Martin of Stillmeadow completely changed the outlook for his community members after the flood.

STUDENT NARRATOR: Prior to moving to Maryland, Pastor Michael Martin started a Learning to Live Fellowship in Inglewood, California. Additionally, he served on the pastoral team at Oceanside Christian Fellowship in El Segundo, California. After moving to Maryland, Pastor Michael joined the Stillmeadow Community Fellowship and now serves as Senior Pastor. Let's hear from him now:

[lo-fi hip hop music]

[music ends]

[acoustic guitar music]

MICHAEL: I came here from sunny California to pastor this church. the denomination I'm a part of is not a community active, right? They are about the church. My background, right, has some of that in it, but still, so I came in for the church. The flood, before that I told the congregation, like six or seven months before that, we needed to be more outward-looking and be community-oriented and care about people in the community. Then they just came to us

on rafts and boats and you know, they were just here. And all of a sudden, the other, the flood before, five years before, whatever it was our doors stay shut. We didn't have any involvement whatsoever. There's no anything. People in the community didn't even know whether we were open or not. But this one, our doors are wide open. We're leading the calls. Instead of waiting on the city, these three pastors, these three churches work together. And so then that gives you some, some, that gives you some voice, right? So now our church is more engaged and caring. And now this community thinks we're a community church. We weren't . That was not how they thought at all.

And so it was almost like for me, for us, like God demanded of us that we practice what we preach by being out there with people and helping them where they were and where they were was, we're scared of this water coming down again, we're tired of our homes being flooded, we don't know who to call.

STUDENT NARRATOR: As explained by Pastor Michael, in local communities having supportive groups such as the church are extremely important in gaining trust and providing the proper aid to let community in need.

[music ends]

MICHAEL: One, people in the community like, they're listening to you, Reverend. Okay, all right. Two, you got a place to meet. Three, you've done something for the community that elected officials know need to get done and know that they should be a part of. And so you have access to them because you have something in the, you have a fish in the water or you have a dog in that hunt. You have a dog in that race, right?

And so, that's what really changed. I became a community advocate or community leader by kind of default. And so, that church came along slowly. And there's the Maryland State Insurance people, or here's this advocacy or this service in the city or this, that and the other. The church up here I just mentioned, Miracle City, they got their denomination to give them \$200,000 to do micro loans—hmm-mm, micro grants to individuals. Because, you know, it isn't just flooded, your heater is gone, your furnace is gone, your washing machine is gone, your dryer is gone. You see what I'm saying? There's different, and insurance doesn't cover everything. And so they did these micro gifts and help people get back on their feet.

STUDENT NARRATOR: As previously mentioned, the storms that flooded Irvington were the same ones that flooded Ellicott City in 2016 and 2018, the latter of which receiving local and national news coverage and ample government support. However, that level of attention was not given to surrounding neighborhoods, including Irvington.

[lo-fi hip hop music]

MICHAEL: I know one thing, that Television Hill is what's called the area where most of the local stations are here in Baltimore and they're in the city of Baltimore. Ellicott city is in Howard County, right? You got to go out of

Baltimore through for the most part, Baltimore County to get to Ellicott City, which houses, which is housed in, in Howard County. We're in the same city as these outlets, both print and TV and stuff and they had to kind of go past us to get to them. I'm not going to call it racism, but we're majority African-American and they're majority not. They're majority majority. And so we're a, you know, middle-income, lower-middle income, most times called working class community and Ellicott City is not.

And so again, I don't have to use R words, but I can use B words for bias and I can use C words for comfort level. And I can use another word, I words, identification. It's so much easier, right, to feel for people who look like you or feel like you or sound like you, you identify, right? And so I think a lot of our challenge is about being able to identify with everybody, as opposed to just those who look like us or sound like us.

STUDENT NARRATOR: Speaking with Pastor Michael provided us with a great background of Irvington and the floods and a perspective from someone who both experienced them and worked to restore the damages they caused. We greatly appreciate the chance to speak with Pastor Michael to get a better understanding of how the floods, as well as the limited attention, affected the community of Irvington. We also spoke with Dr. Jeffrey Davis, who gave some perspective on human rights and how that may relate to why Irvington did not receive the same support as Ellicott City.

STUDENT NARRATOR: Dr. Jeffrey Davis is a professor of political science at UMBC. Prior to serving as faculty, he practiced law for several years before earning his PhD. He currently teaches classes on human and civil rights, as well as international law. Dr. Davis researches human rights violations and works for the city of Baltimore. His work includes the allocation of funding, inequalities in resource and education, and the history of city laws. In his segment, Dr. Davis addresses human rights and the acts of environmental justice, as well as the patterns behind human rights issues regarding Baltimore and the United States as a whole. International law in individual countries have human rights set in place to protect the civil liberties of each individual. Many pertain to the right to live, right to freedom, and right to safety, which could include human rights relating to environmental protection.

DAVIS: There are human rights laws that are directly applicable to harm inflicted by the climate change. International human rights law not only restricts governments from violating rights, but it obligates governments to protect rights and to promote rights. And that means taking reasonable concrete steps to protect all of our fundamental human rights, including something as drastic as the right to life, which obviously could be put in danger from serious storms and other effects of climate change, flooding for example, and all the way down to the right to basic health care, the right to basic subsistence and things like that. So, this obligation to protect and promote rights I think mandates that governments on the local, state and national level take concrete steps to ameliorate the effects of climate change.

STUDENT NARRATOR: We thank Pastor Michael and Dr. Davis for their time. We're going to leave it there for now. Stay tuned to learn more about the impacts of the floods on the Irvington community on the next episode of Underserved Underwater.

COLLAGE OF VOICES AND NEWS CLIPS: Well Ryan, it's not over with yet. We're looking at a pattern of rain that we've been stuck in for over 2 1/2 weeks...

Angry storm water invading Ellicott City, Maryland. Floods rushing down Main Street Sunday...

You can see the force of the water as it came barreling down this hill, tearing up the sidewalk throwing roots and debris...

Actually know a lot of people that work down here, and a lot of them were trapped on like the second and third story of floors because they couldn't get out...

Right here this is an alleyway, the alleyway is...

[voice becomes indistinct and fades out]

[music fades out]

[End of Transcript]