

Tracking Heteroglossia

[Sonic Abundance]

Episode [07]: [Tracking Heteroglossia]

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Duration: [17:02]

[opening music is upbeat with jazzy licks by bass guitar]

JENNIFER: You know that old question “if you could have dinner with anyone famous, who would it be?” I kinda love and hate that question. I mean there’s a part of me who wants to name a star I’m currently fangirling like one of the actors from *Stranger Things* or *Ted Lasso*, but the reality is that I always overthink my answer.

Don’t laugh, but I’d be totally jazzed to have a conversation with some philosopher like Jacques Derrida. At first, I’d probably wouldn’t know what to say but over time, eventually, I’d see his humanity, and I’d start asking about ideas that melted my brain when I was a PhD student: like deconstruction, or what is an utterance? or heteroglossia, you know. I mean we talk about scholarly writing as if we are having conversations, or as Kenneth Burke says, entering the parlor as an outsider and after a while, we understand enough of the conversation that we begin to speak. It was theories like that that I fell in love with in my graduate work. I just got so hung up on this idea of language as layered and contextual and at the same time I was really frustrated with the way we’ve historically talked about the concept of *voice* in writing. About that time, I started reading Cynthia Selfe’s 2009 article “The Movement of Air, The Breath of Meaning”, which redirected my journey into multimodality and sound.

And one rabbit hole led to another, and I landed in a world of sonic rhetorics with people like these incredible scholars in this podcast. One cool feature of doing soundwriting scholarship work is that I can literally remix recordings, sounds, their voices with mine, in a project like this one. And when I do that, let’s be honest, it hits differently.

[sound of old 8mm video camera running]

There’s an archived video on YouTube from The 1986 Linguistics of Writing Conference that took place in Glasgow. In the video, Jacques Derrida and Raymond Williams are sitting around, and they’re reflecting on the nature of having an international conference that was filmed for television. I mean, it’s something that we don’t think about in a world where everything is streamed and archived. But 1986 was a different time, so Williams says

[camera sound ends]

RAYMOND: It would be a very strange thing if one were more aware of a crew of four or five people and a camera or two than of the much more directing and commanding presence of 300 people. I mean to whom one is also responding it would be very strange if one displaced all the anxieties and problems of any

conference onto just the technology. I think people do that. I think we have to get used to it for record and so on. and uh I find I quite quickly forget it which is probably the best way of using it. [*Williams' voice fades*]

JENNIFER: The conversation between Williams and Derrida continues and then about two minutes in the conversation Derrida marks this connection:

JACQUES: We had to uh reflect on on the fact that today an International Conference had to be recorded I mean the voices have to be recorded. And the spectacle has to be recorded not only not only for uh further use or reproduction but to become conscious of this technological necessity. I mean it's uh we are speaking of of writing. And I think that film is a kind of writing is uh I mean the Linguistics of writing have to integrate the Linguistics of uh filming all sorts of recording.

JENNIFER: And now almost 4 decades later, I'm watching them sitting in their two chairs, facing one another, Derrida is in this blue-grey suit with a pipe in his right hand, catty cornered to Raymond Williams, who is sitting back in his chair, his legs are crossed and he's got this yellow button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up three quarters of the way. There are event organizers or tech support, I'm not sure who they are, coming and going from a door, carrying equipment in and out of a room. And there are at least 8 rows of chairs for spectators, conference attendees who are now all gone. It is just the two of them. And they look at one another and the camera, aware that they are engaged in a live, unscripted conversation with each other while periodically glancing at us or the *us* of 1986, very aware that there is an audience viewing this video later. They seem to have no problem having this conversation with each other. Derrida even says

JACQUES: Uh, I couldn't speak. Really, I couldn't speak when a tape recorder was on the table, and now I don't even notice it.

[*loop of begins of MUSIC, chill, loose midi loops backdrop with a slowly rising and falling melody line*]

JENNIFER: So, I wonder... how would he would feel if he knew that someone like me was going to use a sound clip his voice 38yrs later, by downloading it from a digital archive from a place called YouTube, a much different version of the television he knew, and that I would pull quotes like the one you just heard out of context to use them in a different way. It's interesting this episode was inspired by a conversations I had following a conference presentation, but I didn't have him physically present in my talk. I didn't have his voice. I referenced his work, yes. But there's something about this, this remix of voices that changes the affect of the message. They're similar conversations... but now with a few more tech toys and a little less polyester.

[*loop stops, sound of Victrola ambient in background*]

Through the art of audio editing, I've downloaded, imported, edited and tracked their voices with mine into this episode, layering audio from a YouTube video

recording of a recording of their talk four decades ago with my recording today, which is still fixed in the time I'm recording now—it's spring 2026 in western NC—though as you listen it may seem like *you're* now as you listen to my voice for the first time, wherever and whenever you are.

ROBIN: Holy semantics, Batman.

[*sound of talkback switch in a recording studio crescendos then fades*]

JENNIFER: Recording our voices is no longer novel. Early audio recordings largely archived voices for later generations to hear, like this YouTube video is doing. But since, we've moving beyond transcribing a moment as it happened. Beyond archive. We're doing more than recording now, we're soundwriting, a term Kyle Stedman, Courtney Danforth & Michael Faris define as “manipulating recorded sound and making something new from it.” And the artifacts we create, resonate. I mean, well, it's complicated.

Take remixing or sampling, for example. Remixing is a kind of sonic collage, except it unfolds over time instead of all at once. When we take a sound from one thing and track and layer it with others, we're blending more than sounds. We're tracking contexts, the larger worlds from which they were born and rebirthing them with these new sonic siblings. So, when we listen to these sounds, we're taken back to a time when we first heard it, alongside this time when we're hearing it again, and we begin the work of deciphering the dissonance between the original genre and its time and place and this new one, tracking alongside these other lived experiences and connotations. That site of listening, the uh moment when we're encountering the remix is filled with emotional responses to what we're hearing and feeling. It's what Steph Ceraso calls an “affective mode of communication.” Something like a song, layered alongside a student voice speaking out about political dissonance, brings together pop culture and academia in a really unique way. I mean It's a mash-up of worlds that doesn't normally co-exist.

Soundwriting and remix provides the kind of rhetorical sovereignty that Cynthia Selfe was arguing for in her 2009 article. She defines that sovereignty as “the rights and responsibilities that students have to identify their own communicative needs and to represent their own identities, to select the right tools for the communicative contexts within which they operate, and to think critically and carefully about the meaning that they and others compose.” One cool feature that I love about the soundwriting movement since Selfe's piece has been the publication of digital scholarship that includes student work.

Since 2009, our options for publishing digital scholarship have continued to expand, which has made space for multimodal scholarship. One of those collections, if you're not familiar with it, is *Amplifying Soundwriting*, published by the WAC Clearinghouse, and it features this piece titled “Trump Trap Mix” by a student named Abbey. She produced it as part of Ben Harley's sonic collage assignment. Abbey explains in her reflection that this piece is a critique of Donald Trump and his initial primary campaign. As a traditional conservative who also valued

diversity and inclusivity, Abbey was baffled and upset by how Trump's hateful rhetoric was bringing him such success in the polls.

When I think about Selfe's argument for the value of sound as a mode of expression that empowers student agency, I can't stop thinking about Abbey's piece. What interests me most about this piece is how she tracks the voices of Rod Sterling, Donald Trump, a campaign supporter, Jimmy Fallon and Miram Witcher alongside this music by Lil Wayne and Kendrick Lamar and the theme music from *The Twilight Zone*. Let's listen

DONALD: "where are you from?"

WOMAN: I'm from Columbia.

DONALD: Columbia.

DONALD: And is this a set up? Did I ever meet you before? Huh?

WOMAN: I'm Hispanic and I vote for Mr. Trump. Yes, Mr. Trump. We love you, Mr. Trump. We love you all the way to the White House.

JENNIFER: When I hear Abbey's piece, I have this affective response that has me completely immersed in the sonic collage. I have been known to forget when I'm listening to something like this that I'm actually sitting in my office at work because I'm so overwhelmed with my emotions. And I don't know about you, but I just don't get that response too often when reading words. I know. I know. I'm listening to recorded sounds that aren't Abbey's literal voice but it feels like the combination of this media mashup IS her voice, you know, something Kathleen Yancey references as "using voice to talk specifically about what and how a writer knows, about the capacity of a writer through "voice" to reveal... the epistemology of a specific culture." (qtd in Selfe)

Part of our epistemology in the 2020s is a way of knowing that includes using sonic tools to create remixed narratives. And these sounds, I don't know about you, but they are really affecting me. Today's technology makes it possible to *write with sound* because we use open-source tools that let us download, upload, layer, track, fade, and distort existing sounds alongside our voices. Such moments of layering sound and language, time and place, they have these wavelengths that reach all the way back to the 1930s when philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin coined the concept "heteroglossia."

ALEXA: According to an Alexa answers contributor, hetero is a prefix that means other or different. It is often used to describe something that is different from its partner or pair. The prefix glossa refers to the tongue or language as it symbolizes communication and cultural diversity.

JENNIFER: Language reflects social ideologies, ways of thinking and being in the world tying us to our past, our present, and our social horizons. And these different tongues reflect our cultural beliefs and practices. They're part of

worlds outside of our physical tongues, tongues of social groups, “professional” and “generic” tongues, tongues of generations.

Now, Bakhtin is exploring the idea of heteroglossia with respect to the novel. I’m going to use it to turn up the volume on soundwriting.

Abby’s Trump Trap Mix reflects the contradictions she witnessed during the 2016 presidential campaign, sampling from primary sources to bring dissonant voices in dialogue with one another. Voices that didn’t talk with each other in *real* time but now volley between the music of rappers associated with the campaign to Trump to an enthusiastic supporter at a rally.

And this sampling functions as a piece that, well, it exceeds genre. I mean, is it argument? Or sonic poetry? Or does its place with respect to genre even matter? Let’s listen to a little bit more.

[*twilight zone theme song intro*] This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area we call the twilight zone.

DONALD: Are you running? Are you not running? [*in the background cheers, laughter*] I am officially running [*voice is distorted*] for President of the United States.

[*opening music of L’il Wayne’s “A Milli” plays in the backdrop, percussive beat and repetition of ‘a milli’*]

DONALD: I’m really I’m really I’m really I’m really I’m I’m really rich.

JENNIFER: There is dissonance in this sampling, it’s creating this cacophony, this hyperbolic commentary that materializes heteroglossia in a new media stratification of voices.

And in a perhaps an even more strange illustration of the layers of time of the utterance, we find ourselves having listened to Abby’s piece in a similarly dissonant political moment. At least I am. I am recording this episode. in Spring of 2026, following Trump’s first year in his second term as president. And let’s be honest, this is a political, historic moment in our country which could be an episode of the *Twilight Zone*.

In 2024, we earwitnessed pop culture remixes of Trumpisms from his third presidential campaign that turned into songs like this.

[*sound of a remix starts, opens with steel drums, spoken word volleys between Donald Trump’s voice distorted and remix artist with interludes of whoas and meows*]

DONALD: They’re eating the dogs, whoa whoa whoa whoa. . . They’re eating the cats, meow, meow, meow, meow..They’re eating the pets (remix artist joins with harmony) of the people that live there.

JENNIFER: Maybe you remember this quote from the 2024 presidential debate where Trump referenced immigrants eating dogs and cats in Springfield, Ohio.

Well, that clip went viral in remixes like the one you just heard by The Kiffness. Even if you didn't hear the original quote, you are listening, now, to this episode after its publication. And these sounds are going to carry with them a new kind of social significance, a significance I can't anticipate based on the events that will continue to unfold in Trump's second presidential term. These artifacts do provide fascinating evidence of the complex significance of remix.

RAYMOND: this movement, a sort of import and export of ideas and writing, always takes place within certain social situations of which we have to become conscious

[loop of begins of MUSIC, chill, loose midi loops backdrop with a slowly rising and falling melody line]

JENNIFER: Williams reminds us that language is deeply contextualized. I think we also have to become conscious of the ways that sound is layered, moments and time, contexts in the present, past and unanticipated futures of replays. That sonic remix is heteroglossia made material, tracking multiverses of possibility in worlds where potential for expression and significance are never fixed. And, hey, in this world, we get to invite anyone we want to the party to have a conversation.

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