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Toward a Poetics and Pedagogy of Sound: Students as Production Engineers in the Literature Classroom

Karen Lee Osborne

Introduction

Most discussions of successful efforts to engage students in multi-modal discourses and prepare them for adapting to digital formats have focused on composition and creative writing classrooms. Cynthia Selfe, Lev Manovich and others have called for aural, visual, and other multi-modal approaches not only because of diverse learning styles and ever-changing technologies of communication, but also because these modes are important to different communities and cultures (Selfe 616). In literature classes, even if we use multi-modal assignments, the focus on writing critical analysis though a creative practice may seem more distanced from the generative aspects of “making” in a composition or creative writing classroom. This distinction, with its blurry edges, echoes the debate among digital humanities theorists between theorizing and making. I would argue that literature classrooms in the 21st Century are spaces ripe for exploring multi-modal experiences that mix up the critical and the creative, theorizing and “making.” Literature classrooms can incorporate more of what Amanda Stirling Gould calls a “makerspace learning environment” (26) so that we not only think about, but “think with” the media we use (Hayles, *How We Think* 24). Leading digital humanities scholars contend that

[t]he social, political, and ecological challenges of the 21st century demand significantly more than textual analysis or recitations of inherited content. These problems (and opportunities) will need people trained to create synthetic responses, rich with meaning and purpose, and capable of communicating in a range of appropriate media, including but not limited to print. (Burdick, Drucker, Lunenfeld, Presner, and Schnapp 25)

One of these media is sound. Compositionists and others have foregrounded aural-ity and vocal-ity as key to 21st Century approaches to writing. Scholars of language pedagogy and performance studies have written extensively about the importance of listening. Many theorists and poets have discussed the importance of sound to poetry in particular. In this essay, I will draw on such backgrounds to discuss an assignment I developed for my literature class, “Introduction to Poetry.” Using the open source recording software Audacity, teams of students worked in collaboration, reading aloud poems by a range of poets, recording the readings, enhancing them through recording software, sharing them with the class, and finally, engaging in critical reflection. In such a “makerspace environment” students experience their own discoveries about poetry (Gould 26). The process and resulting productions markedly improve students’ understanding of how sounds—including silences—function in poetry. The collaborative process engages students in the kind of deep listening that understanding poetry requires. It affords students the opportunity to engage with new media in order to experience voice in poetry as *other*, as a multidimensional, fluid construct.

Background

Columbia College Chicago is an urban, generous admissions arts and communications college. "Introduction to Poetry" is not a poetry workshop. It is one of many courses students can take to fulfill the Liberal Arts and Sciences Humanities/literature requirement. Like other literature courses, it focuses on close critical reading, analysis, and cultural contexts. I teach it with the understanding that most of the students do not have any particular knowledge of or enthusiasm for poetry when they take the class. Although some are familiar with hip hop, rap, and performance poetry—and Chicago has a thriving performance-poetry scene—the learning outcomes emphasize close reading and analysis, tending to privilege print text. However, I want my students to experience poetry both as print text and as phonotext.

Working closely with sounds helps students to understand the multiple ways in which language creates meaning. In addition to Cynthia Selfe's focus on aurality as a kind of cultural imperative, Erin Anderson calls for expanding "frameworks of orality (speech) and *aurality* (sound) to include questions of vocality (voice), as a peculiar category of sound that attends speech but also exceeds it, and as a mediated material that pushes the boundaries of human embodiment and agency." Garrett Stewart has noted that even when we read silently, we can attend to the phonotext (239). Charles Bernstein has argued for a "poetics of sound. Words [must be] returned to a sonorousness that does not require the validation of fixed images, of sight and insight, nor deny its common roots with visibility" (160). Susan Stewart suggests that we must experience the poem as "spoken sound" because sound is "feeling" and that is how the poem produces "transformations." When read aloud, the poem becomes "a living, breathing thing" (41). Drawing on Louis Zukofsky's definition of poetry as "an order of words that as movement and tone (rhythm and pitch) approaches in varying degrees the wordless art of music," Jed Rasula suggests that in the physicality of words' sounds, poetry claims its embodiment (285). But words are not the only resources of embodiment that poetry uses. Sound poets and performance poets include pauses, gestures, intonation, breath, pitch, emphases, and other techniques in their embodied practice. When we engage students in the study of poetry on the plain, old fashioned page, it is helpful to draw on vocality as embodied practice. This understanding of vocality, as Anderson defines it above, is quite different from older notions of "voice" in poetry and is consistent with postmodern theory's interest in destabilizing notions of subjectivity.

Just as we encourage students to approach literary texts with an openness to multiple interpretations supported by evidence, so we may invite them to think of the ways that language itself—and not some notion of a person behind the poem—creates sounds and meanings in the poem. As Octavio Paz wrote, "*the poet disappears behind his own voice*, a voice which is his because it is the voice of language, the voice of no one and of all. Whatever name we give this voice-inspiration, the unconscious, chance, accident, revelation—it is always the voice of *otherness*" (160). When my students record themselves reading a poet's poem aloud, they are engaging with *an-other* voice. Their own embodied voice adds an element of *otherness* to the language. By adding their own vocal reading of the poem's words, students are in effect stepping into that "otherness" that Paz described, becoming co-creators of a new vocal event.

As reader-oriented theory and visual culture theory both emphasize, every encounter with a visual, oral, or written text is a new event. Each encounter, each reading, is both distinct and imbricated in context. The words of the print text are fixed on the page. But each time someone reads that poem aloud, the same “statement” is uttered anew, and a new phonotext is created—a Bakhtinian “utterance” that both responds to previous utterances and takes on its own meaning and power. “Any understanding of live speech, a live utterance . . . is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another; the listener becomes the speaker.” (Bakhtin 68). Sound recording technology takes this intersubjectivity further. As Erin Anderson observes, “what we hear in digital voice is not a reproduction of the voice itself . . . but rather a representation of a voice-event” (*enculturation.net/vocality*). Recordings of poems confirm that sound is possibly the “most elusive” aspect of poetry. We forget that “each time we read the poem it sounds itself differently” (Tedlock 221). The temporal nature of each “reading” exists in tension with the relative permanence of the recording.

I am interested in what happens when students record themselves reading poems aloud, giving their own embodied voices to the poem, when they listen closely and deeply to each other’s readings and then manipulate the recordings to create distinct voice and sound events that are not merely transparent mirrors of the poem. In the first recording, the mediated voice of the student inhabits the supposed “voice” of the poem’s print text, destabilizing not only notions of the literature classroom as a purely analytical site where students only read and write about texts, but also notions of authorship and identity. The remixed recording produced by the student sound engineer complicates these notions further in a newly mediated representation; here, the listener “becomes the speaker” (Bakhtin 68). Both readers and production engineers practice a deeper, more active listening that blurs boundaries between textual analysis, recitation and creation.

Listening

When we listen to poetry, Nick Piombino contends, we must “actively participate” in the poem’s thinking, becoming co-creators of meaning. The poem’s “aural ellipses” become a kind of “holding environment within which the gaps among thought, language, and sensory experience *must be bridged by the listener*” (70, italics mine). Unfortunately, “[n]ot only is listening becoming a lost art, but there are fewer and fewer opportunities for students to learn not only how to think but also how to listen” (70).¹

1. Piombino writes, “the aural ellipses of the contemporary poem ensure that there will be spaces for invention on the part of the listener, and that the reading of the poem will not only be the public presentation of ideas, but will function as a medium for what is otherwise incommunicable between one mind and another. This is all the more important in contemporary life where there is so much talking and so little listening. Not only is listening becoming a lost art, but there are fewer and fewer opportunities to learn how to listen. Listening to nearly any television or radio talk show will prove this in a few minutes. At the same time, this avoidance is understandable, given that we live in a world that pounds everyone constantly with excruciating emotional trauma, much of it frequently presented in the media in an almost unbearably blaring and glaring manner. It should be no surprise to anyone that under these circumstances the failure to communicate, or the wish to find ways of avoiding communication, are pandemic. In such an environment, a key survival skill is the ability to sometimes turn off the external environment—to not listen.”

We take for granted that we know how to listen. Yet it's hard to truly grasp sounds in poetry by listening passively to others read or to a teacher explaining how sounds work. I suggest that my students experiment with reading a poem aloud as though they do not know English, just to listen for the sounds. It can be a challenge for native speakers to defamiliarize the language in order to hear it as sounds. When I designed the recording assignment, I sought to encourage such defamiliarization. When you prepare to record yourself reading, you begin to listen deeply. What seemed like something easy at first—all I have to do is read this poem aloud and record it—becomes more challenging in the doing. In my Audacity recording assignment, students practiced listening to themselves and to each other. This deeper listening helps them to hear the aural ellipses as well as the sounds of poetry and to more actively participate in the poem's thinking (Piombino 70). Because the software is free, the assignment can be used in almost any class with occasional access to a computer lab or can be adapted so students record at home.

Methodology

I have often used the textbook *Western Wind*, despite its reliance on well-known and widely anthologized poems, because it is easy to supplement with more recent poems, and its discussions of craft are among the most helpful anywhere.² I use handouts of poems by poets who visit campus or who visit my class. Students work with *Western Wind*'s scale of vowel sounds and frequencies, the groups of consonant sounds, and effects. I caution students against reductive applications of sounds and meanings. The book can be a little too neat in its claims. Specific consonant sounds don't always convey a particular meaning. But the text shows how the accumulation of sounds throughout a line or groups of lines can be more significant than we may consciously realize. Having poets visit class or playing audio or video recordings of poets reading their work dramatizes this. My students collaborate in pairs on the book's exercises and explain to the class how sounds work in selected lines of poetry. At the beginning of every class, a student plays a YouTube video of a favorite song and then discusses how the lyrics contain examples of metaphor or other aspects of poetry we studied. Students recognize that the music creates much of the experience. It is more challenging for them to hear the music

Later, discussing Clark Coolidge's poem "These" from the collection *Space*, Piombino writes, "[T]he reader is encouraged to try sounding out these words internally or aloud. A few minutes of relaxed experimentation should make it obvious that it is nearly impossible to focus on listening to these words without attempting to fill in the gaps. Although the end result of the experiment will probably not lead to a grammatically clear sequence of statements, specific and identifiable sound images will emerge. The poem provides a sound and visual structure for innumerable possible variations. It is in this sense that this work is so apt as a holding environment within which the reader may co-create his or her own version of the poem while sounding it out within the aural ellipses of the given text. To read and particularly to hear this type of work read by the poet encourages the listener or reader to participate actively in the performative aspect of the work. The reader or listener is invited to become a participant in the creation of the poem's overall aesthetic context and its meaning."

2. All poems mentioned in this essay are in the text *Western Wind*, except for those separately cited.

that is inside language itself, in the sonic characteristics of vowels and consonants and near rhymes and other effects that the poems produce.

In summer 2014, our department purchased enough unidirectional microphones for a classroom of students and installed Audacity open source recording software on all the computers in one of the labs. I took a workshop with my colleague Ryan Trauman on using Audacity in writing classes and knew immediately that I wanted to try it in my literature classes that fall. Because Audacity is free, I encouraged students with home computers to download and install it if they did not already have recording software such as Garage Band. But students do not need to do anything outside of the recording and editing sessions in the lab. I give a brief demonstration in our regular “smart” classroom before our visits to the lab. I also create a demo recording of myself reading Louise Bogan’s poem “Night,” with a background track of Chopin’s Prelude in E Minor on the piano.

For the second track, I simply recorded myself playing the piano using the voice memo feature on my phone and then imported the file into Audacity. I am an intermediate-level pianist, and I have terrible performance anxiety whenever I am asked to play in front of friends. I would not have been so bold as to play in front of my students, but somehow, recording a background track for a great poem allowed me to risk being a bit more vulnerable. My students saw that I was willing to take risks along with them. My demo voice track was full of flaws because I didn’t do much editing. It showed that I am no expert and that if I could figure out how to do it, then they could. I also edited a student recording and played another piece as background. Students saw that I had paid careful attention to the reading and had given some thought to the second track, thus demonstrating the kind of deep listening I was asking them to do. It was also a way of showing the respect for students’ work that we want them to show each other. I ascribe to what Ryan Trauman has written of his approach to risk and experimentation in using new media technologies:

Sometimes I underestimate the workload or complexity of assignment[s]. . . . And in other instances, my students make it clear that I hadn’t challenged them nearly enough in putting these writing tools to use. But rather than see these mistakes as failures or shortcomings, I work to foreground them for my students as a practice of experimentation. As an instance where I can learn as much from them as they are learning from me. . . . The more I learn from them, and the more they see what they have to offer my own growth as a teacher and writer, the more willing they are to join me in that spirit of experimentation, risk, and reflection.

During the first part of the assignment, each student practiced reading a chosen poem aloud in the days before the recording session. I suggested they select short poems that could be read in about three minutes because sound files are large and longer recordings are difficult to upload. They listened to recordings and to visiting poets. They discussed what they noticed about poems after hearing them that they did not notice after reading the text. They noticed such elements as shifts in pace, tone, and volume, as well as pauses. For example, after listening to a recording of Dylan Thomas reading “Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night,” students noticed how his voice grew softer and more plaintive in the final stanza, a departure from the harsher tone and louder volume of his voice in the earlier stanzas.

The purpose of the students' own reading was not necessarily to "perform" in an exaggerated sense but to demonstrate awareness of their chosen poem's nuances, the power of its language and sounds. Pacing, pronunciation, dynamics, and tone all could be elements of their individual readings. I wanted them to inhabit the language of the poem, to transform the language through the "otherness" of their own voice. At the first visit to the lab, each student recorded a reading of the poem they chose, saved it as an mp3 or wav file, and then uploaded it to our online course site on Moodle. Their partner could then download the file and work on it at home or in our next two visits to the lab. Some students spent much more time outside of class working on their edited files. The production engineers used such enhancements as pauses, noise reduction, pacing, dynamics and fades, as well as adding tracks including sound effects or musical accompaniment. They wrote production notes reflecting on why they made the choices they made in editing the files. Later, the class listened to the recordings and discussed them.

Results

As the teacher, I could not predict what kinds of readings or recordings the students would produce. And the readers who turned their voice tracks over to their partners could not predict what their partners would produce in the final recording. That risk is part of the messy, unpredictable spirit of experimentation that Trauman describes. Students discovered that the insights of a collaborating partner can be invaluable in multi-modal projects. These teams of readers and production engineers created a newly embodied text in recorded sound. You can listen to some of these recordings at: https://soundcloud.com/kosborne-22547485/sets/poetry_recordings_literature_classes.

Students had at least two opportunities to practice deep listening in the assignment. First, they listened carefully to themselves as they practiced reading before recording the poem they had chosen. Then they listened to their own recording before making initial edits or starting over before saving a file for their partner to edit. Recording raises the stakes and creates a kind of circulation anxiety. As readers, because they knew their classmates would listen closely to their recording, the students took pains to truly engage with the language. But the most powerful listening happened when students edited their partner's files. Research on language learning shows that listeners who have "a real need for understanding, because it is associated with their other goals (social, educational, professional, or personal), will be more highly involved" (Kemp 386). This applies to the listeners in my literature class as well. The production engineers had a specific goal, and they were motivated to pay close attention to the first recording. As one student said, "Of course I had my own vibes about what the speaker in the poem was trying to convey, and I appreciated hearing another person's take on the poem. JB's reading was very strong." Students often decided to go back and re-read the print text of a poem after hearing another student's voice track: "I read the poem multiple times to see where I wanted to change effects, and the more I read it out loud, the more I found things we've learned

in class coming out at me. Connotations of words stuck out, and the vowel sounds/frequencies played a role in my manipulation of CS's voice."³

After listening deeply, and often after re-reading the poem, the production engineers worked with the tools in Audacity to bring forth a meaningful co-created text. They decided what to add, remove, enhance, modulate, or adjust. More was at stake for them than just their own success or failure. They wanted to enhance their partner's embodied voice recording. In nearly every example, the production engineer improved the original voice track.

Aural Ellipses: Making Space(s) in a Makerspace Environment

Although some students may be experienced performance poets, actors or readers, most tend to speed up because they are nervous. Student editors usually added spaces to the original track or slowed down the tempo, providing the silences that help to enhance sounds and that allow a line of poetry to sink in on the listener. Understanding words as resources of embodiment—but not the only resources of embodiment—is central to creating a more multidimensional experience of the poem when we make recordings. CJ, for example, wrote that for his partner's reading of Dickinson's, he "spaced the vocal out over a long span of time. I think I nearly doubled the length of the original file with the use of silence."

NP found that a few lines in his partner's reading of Brandi Homan's "Wichita" had "too much" space, so he trimmed these spaces "ever so slightly." Yet also in this recording, he decided to slow the tempo because "For me, 'Wichita' is a throwback poem to a time when things were slower-paced. . . . So I decreased the overall speed of the poem by 10 per cent. After a few listens, I was convinced that this was a great fit. It makes the reader sound older and wiser when reflecting back on her mother's past." But NP wasn't done. Because for most of the reading he was hearing his partner's voice at a slower tempo, "I felt I should add a few tracks of her at normal pace for comparison." He copied the final line of the poem into two separate, staggered tracks, creating a "round" or "canon-like" effect, "as if to emulate the end of a movie flashback before its return to the current setting." The main track "slows in linear fashion, similar to a 'ritardando' in music," which, combined with the other two tracks of the final line, "lets the listeners know that the poem and the flashback are done."

Other Aspects of Editing the Embodied "Voice-event"

Even with fairly good unidirectional microphones, novices will often hold the mic too close or in a position that emphasizes plosives and stops and overwhelms other sounds. Accordingly, students such as CJ—with a bit more recording experience and the technical language to express it—used compression to "help minimize the peaks and valleys and produce a more rounded sound." As he worked on his partner's reading of Hart Crane's "My Grandmother's Love Letters," he decided to "raise the overall signal without distortion so the voice comes through more clearly" while the undesired other

3. Initials rather than pseudonyms will be used to refer to students whose production notes are cited.

sounds picked up by the microphone didn't. Then CJ added an equalizer to take out "everything below 200Hz and above about 12.5 kHz. Filtering out the low frequencies minimizes the plosive action, and the high filter takes some unwanted sharpness out. I also boosted 5 kHz to make the consonants more discernable, emphasizing the enunciation of each word." CJ shows that this, too, is a way to analyze and interpret poetry.

Other production editors were lucky with their reader's original voice tracks. BT had a deep, resonant, masculine voice. His reading of Dickinson's "Narrow Fellow" emphasized the "s" sounds throughout the poem. The "s" sounds are there in the text, for example in the line "His notice sudden is." BT's reading of "grass" drew out the "s" sound so long that it performed the snake's slithering, making the snake's *otherness* palpable. BT's embodied vocality of masculinity recontextualized the poem. In BT's reading, the poem becomes more than the witty punning of its title. BT's confident, clear enunciation and deliberate pacing, enhanced by his sound-production partner's adjustments to the tempo, liberated the poem from the image many readers have of Dickinson's speakers, based on oversimplified, narrow notions about the author. BT's rich bass brought out the poem's deeper currents, destabilizing Dickinson's identity, and an unexpected wildness came through.

Another producer edited her partner's recording of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130, "My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun," using the de-essing tool on the word "mistress." She also "fiddled with" the word "damasked" because the reader had not pronounced it clearly. In the end, she wrote, the edits of "'damasked' didn't work, so I tried to quiet it a bit." She added pauses, slowed the tempo of a few lines and adjusted volume: "'breasts are dun' became softer as did 'in her cheeks' and 'ground' while 'Her lips red' became louder." These adjustments show that while it is not always possible to make a great final recording from a flawed voice track, working with such challenges generates valuable experience in thinking with—and not just about—new media and its impact on helping students learn about poetry.

Sound Effects as Resources of Embodiment in Editing the Voice-Event

Brandi Homan's poem "Wichita" is a wonderful poem for teaching sounds. I provided a handout of this poem earlier in the semester, and we worked closely with Homan's use of consonant sounds, vowel sounds, and other matters. The speaker imagines the day her parents met. The poem begins with a scene of the speaker's mother riveting, "gunning metal into metal" at the Boeing plant in the early 1960s. In one recording, the editor added the sound of a loud machine accompanying the word "riveting" and a motorcycle revving to accompany that description at the end of the poem. Another student used the "fade in effect to suggest trying to start a motorcycle engine." Sometimes students discovered it was wise to resist adding obvious sound effects that merely echo the sounds already being performed in the language of the poem, and instead they added less predictable effects that amplified or even contradicted the meaning. For example, TG edited the line "Her tan cowboy boots pointing/ upward," using the "invert" effect. "This is a play on words," TG wrote, "because instead of the pitch pointing upwards, the invert effect points the pitch downward. The cowboy boots are actually pointing downward if you listen closely."

I enjoy assigning Lee Ann Roripaugh's prose poem "Imprint" for its powerful imagery and sounds as well. The fact that it is a prose poem helps students to understand the many resources within a print text for sound beyond such obvious indicators as line breaks and rhyme. They must listen closely for assonance, alliteration, vowel frequencies, consonant types, and other sonic nuances. In one recording of "Imprint," production partner JH used the equalizer and other tools. He filtered out lower frequencies. He adjusted the volume manually for each line and added "some plated reverb" to "fit the tone of someone sitting at a window, thinking out loud to themselves." Another student producer added a range of effects to his partner's recording of "Imprint." His production notes demonstrate the kind of active listening it takes to truly hear a voice track in order to make decisions about how to enhance it with sound effects:

The plosives in 'Ping and Pinch' and 'leaf prints' all created a dynamic emphasis on the sounds. The S's in 'Japanese Beetles,' 'Toy's Stutter,' and 'Rescinded' , , created a watery-sounding atmosphere that I tried to enhance. I tried to emulate these sounds as best I could with sound effects and still capture the essence of the poem. When it came to certain visuals like the beetles and cicadas in the beginning of the poem I searched for sounds of metallic stuttering or crawling to draw the reader in and allow them to visualize better the storyline of the poem. The goal of my editing was to create this movie type atmosphere so that the reader can literally feel the sounds of the words and imagine better what the narrator is saying. For example when he says 'chilled rain' I added a sound like ice cold rain hitting a surface. One of my favorite effects is the fade under the phrase 'The imprint of your body fading...too quickly...from my bed....' This was a great way to get the reader to visualize the fading of the imprint with the fading sound effect enhancing the words.

Production editor AJ added sound effects ranging from water flowing to footsteps to the recording of Naomi Shihab Nye's poem "Famous." His editing helped to dramatize each of the poem's scenes effectively without seeming superfluous or gimmicky. "Famous" explores otherness as it critiques our obsession with celebrity by re-contextualizing the word "famous" not as mass adulation but rather as the intrinsic value of everyone and everything. In this poem, perspective is all. "Famous" is in the eye of the beholder. Everything and everyone is other, and the poem's short stanzas list of vivid examples: "The river is famous to the fish" and "[t]he loud voice is famous to silence" and "[t]he tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek." The poem is often pointed in its connotations of value: "The boot is famous to the earth/more famous than the dress shoe, / which is famous only to floors." By the end of the poem, the speaker announces her own desire to be famous, but not in the way most of us would think. Her aim is to be what she thinks we should value instead of our attraction to being "famous."

I want to be famous to shuffling men
who smile while crossing streets,
sticky children in grocery lines,
famous as the one who smiled back.

In these lines, the speaker emphasizes the intersubjectivity and reciprocity that we can construct in language, and those emphases require active attention (or listening) to others. She wants to be famous "to" shuffling men, not to millions of people, and not, we

could add, to CEOs or kings or presidents. The “shuffling men” and “sticky children” are the others we too often do not pay attention to, do not see and hear. She sees them and will be “the one who smiled back” at them. In the final stanza, the speaker announces that she wants to be famous

. . . in the way a pulley is famous,
Or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular,
But because it never forgot what it could do.

Pulleys and buttonholes do things; they function. Everyone has value and a function. We don’t need to be or do anything “spectacular.” If we pay attention, if we listen, if we live as though we value our connection to others, then we, too, can be “famous” to someone or something—and that’s the only fame that matters.

The fluid reading AJ’s partner did transformed the poem’s celebration of otherness into an even more lyrical experience. AJ’s editing heightened the echoes of “s” sounds and enhanced his partner’s intonation, amplifying idea shifts in the language. In his edited version, we heard “the boot is famous to the earth, /more famous than the dress shoe” steadily and then he inserted a pause. He lowered the volume slightly and speeded up the tempo a bit in the next line, “which is famous only to floors.” The effect was to make the line sound like more of an afterthought or an aside. In the poem’s final lines, the reader’s voice was fairly soft on the beginning of “I want to be famous,” reinforcing the poem’s focus on attending to otherness rather than becoming lost in self-absorption. Her vocality and AJ’s editing intensified not “I want to be famous” but rather the “to,” specifically the “shuffling men” and “sticky children” with whom she interacts. AJ added sound effects that not only mirrored such elements as the river and the boots and the dress shoes, but also established a relation among the sounds themselves. The poem became an audio world, with each sound relating to other sounds as well as silences embodied the kind of “famous *to*” that the poem celebrates.

Adding Music as a Background Track

When poet Tony Triglio visited our class, he read several poems and answered questions. Both in his demeanor and his speaking voice, Tony projects a quietude consistent with his Buddhist practice and philosophy. The speaker in “Evidence” experiences anxiety and some altitude sickness when he climbs a mountain in Colorado. Tony’s soft voice and understated reading in class worked well in conveying the disorientation at high altitude and the speaker’s imagination of dangers there, especially wildlife that might be lurking. When the speaker finds evidence of other humans in the ashes of a fire, the poem makes no grand claims, but suggests unsettling implications.

SI’s voice-track reading Tony Triglio’s poem “Evidence” was also very clear and effective. The pitch of SI’s voice is only a bit higher than Tony’s, and she enunciated each syllable with an undeniable yet not excessive gravitas. She commanded the poem, reading the declarative sentences with a combination of restraint and stately conviction, increasing or lowering volume to indicate emphasis, as in the lines:

. . . . These are places where,

in the dark, I trust the country road
ends somewhere, clean air to kill for.

She spoke evenly, emphasizing the “s” sound in “place,” the vowel sound in “dark” and “trust” in the first two lines, and in the beginning of the final line, but her crisp enunciation of the “k” sounds in “clean air to kill for” struck us like a sudden stab of power in reserve.

Her production editor did very few adjustments to SI’s voice. But he added a somewhat atonal and low-pitched electronic music track. The low pitch of the electronic music projected the spoken words into sharper relief and co-created meaning by intensifying the sense of isolation and discovery in the scene. The clarity of each action and image spoken by S became significant beyond the surface content of the words. When we listened to SI’s reading of the lines “Everything we do without permission/ feels like theft,” the lines bit into the air and the entire class seemed to sit up straighter in their seats. We had read these same lines in the print text and had listened to Tony read them. Yet the otherness of SI’s voice, together with the electronic music track that enhanced the eeriness of the setting, created a new experience of this poem we thought we already knew.

In another recording of the poem “Wichita,” editor DM wrote that because the poem alludes to Del Shannon’s song “Runaway,” he added part of the song at the end to evoke the “seductive feeling and the longing” as a mechanic looks after a woman who gets on her motorcycle and rides off—“She is the runaway that he’ll eventually chase.” DM also created his own remix of the song, a more melancholy version, for the first two thirds of the poem, before switching into the “more upbeat tones” of the Shannon song at the end. He borrowed some chord progressions and “slowed it down” in his remix. He wrote that “when I changed from G minor to F, I tried to underscore the questioning tone of the [poem’s] line ‘Was it Peggy beside her’ and then I changed back to the other chords” to make it “more of a love song.”

Editors of recordings of “Imprint” also added background tracks. JH added a piano track he composed to his partner’s recording of “Imprint” to reinforce the tone of solitary reflection. CJ’s production editor added a classical music track to CJ’s voice recording of “Imprint” because despite the clarity and evenness of the voice, his editor thought the recording still “lacked the emotion that the speaker was actually feeling. I chose ‘Poem op. 41. No. 4’ by Zdenek Fibich because the song really embodies the love, longing and loss felt in ‘Imprint.’”

Another student composed and performed a guitar solo to accompany his partner’s reading of a Dickinson poem. It worked well because we could hear the music clearly, yet it did not overwhelm the voice track. In other edited recordings, we found the music was almost inaudible when played through the classroom speakers. We learned that it’s a good idea to test your remixed recordings through speakers and not just headphones. But this discussion also led us to think more critically about the importance of finding balance in the voice recording and any other tracks. The students realized it is not always necessary to add sounds. The edited voice recording itself often functioned as a resource of embodiment, defamiliarizing and evoking otherness in the language, creating a sensory experience beyond the printed words.

Reprise

If, as Selfe suggests, “the primary work of *any* classroom is to help students use semi-otic resources to think critically, to explore, and to solve problems,” then the Audacity recording assignment was effective (644). My students and I are not recording experts, nor are most of us musicians, but our participation in the messy, experimental process of makerspace and approaching poetry as both print text and phonotext was instructive. In future classes, I will help students prepare for this assignment by listening to more examples of previous recordings so that we can discuss the specifics of mic placement, tempo, pitch, and other matters. I will prepare students for what problems can arise in adding background tracks. Both readers and production engineers must discuss in greater detail how they think the voice-event of this performance and edited recording adds to our understanding of the poem in comparison to reading the poem on the page.

Chris McRae’s approach to listening in performance studies can apply to almost any collaborative process: “As a musician, I often find myself listening to learn from other musicians. I listen to their performances, to their musical styles, and to their stories. The examples of other performers always serve, for me, as important lessons. I also know that the best way for me to understand these musical lessons fully is *through my own embodied practice*” (273, italics mine).

Like McRae, my students found that the best way to understand how the sounds of poetry work was through their own embodied practice. By listening deeply to others read, and by creating their own readings, my students paid not only the poems but *one another* closer attention. They learned from hearing the *other* in the voice of poetry. While at first apprehensive, they seemed to take delight in working creatively to make each other’s recordings more interesting and effective. Engaging in multi-modal practice to create newly mediated texts changed my students’ relationship to reading and writing about poetry. They wrote stronger critical essays analyzing sounds in poetry as a result of this experience. Seeing literature and writing as “something that emerges from an interaction with tools not only calls into question the solitary author but also allows us to think and write across disciplinary boundaries.” (Brown 133) When students experience poems and language as meaning that requires their own co-creation by listening actively, when they make meaning through their collaborative interaction with the recording tools, they not only are thinking with new media; they are also making deeper connections among writing, reading, listening, and the transformations that each affords.



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