

## Chapter 25: Speech, Invention, and Reflection: The Composing Process of Soundwriting

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### 5. “Documenting the Mundane: Reflections on Documenting and (re)Creating Aurally” by Carolynn

“I started [to keep a journal] so I wouldn’t forget. So that in later life when I was prone to sit by the fire and look back, I’d have something clear and sure to set against my memory tricks,” I said.

“The way you see it now is no more real than the way you’ll see it then . . . What makes you think you can see anything clearly? What gives you the right to make a notebook and shake it at me in thirty years, if we’re still alive, and say you’ve got the truth?”

“I don’t care about the facts, Domino, I care about how I feel. How I feel will change, I want to remember that.”

— Jeannette Winterson

#### Genre and purpose:

Two months ago, I moved. My new apartment is 6.2 miles from my old home, a short distance in space, but a major transition: I left behind the place I had lived for seven years to move in with a partner for the first time. Generally, I capture such moments in my journal and with photos. This time, I decided to document in audio. I recorded throughout the move with the intention of turning the footage into a piece in the style of *This American Life*. I imagined I would select a series of events from my footage and conclude each one with reflections to unite them into a broader theme.

As I worked, the genre and purpose of my piece shifted. Instead of relying primarily on footage from the move and reflection, I decided to tell the whole story of our decision to live together, which required reenacting many scenes. I drew not only from the footage but from our emails. I also decided to include minimal reflection, hoping that presenting the story on its own terms would be an invitation to my future self to supply the meaning. As someone who journals, the idea of storytelling for a future self makes sense, but recognizing the value of this purpose in a new mode of composing took time.

#### The Process:

A few weeks after the move, when I listened to the footage I had collected, I felt disappointed. In “Diaries and Detritus,” Richman describes the process of “going through hours and hours of raw audio diary tapes” as “mining for gold. Ninety percent is junk, but then every so often there are little magical moments” (130). Unfortunately, my recordings left me swimming in details, but the details felt meaningless. People move all the time, and I couldn’t name what made my particular move compelling. Though Ira Glass’s reflections often give significance to what is ordinary, my attempts at reflection felt false. The experience was too recent. Furthermore, I was missing key footage: many pivotal events had happened before I started the project, and I didn’t want to interrupt intimate conversations during the move to grab the recorder, especially because of Adam’s discomfort being on tape. Roberts claims in “Finding the Poetry,” that “if I was holding a microphone, strangers would tell me the most intimate things” (120). I had the opposite experience with Adam, who would notice the red light on the recorder and mime for me to turn it off.

I began to figure out a new purpose and genre for the piece as we unpacked. [*Several sentences in this part of the reflection have been removed, as they are sensitive and personal in nature.*] Through these moments, I came to see the mundane details of our move, which had felt like an obstacle, as what would make my composition meaningful later. I decided to reimagine my piece as a story for my future self

without limiting myself to the footage I had collected. I started from the first time we broached the subject of moving in together and scripted dialogs through the entire process of how we came to share a home.

The scripting felt oddly parallel to packing. Packing required constant decisions about which things to keep or leave. The practical and beloved things were easy—I kept my forks and my favorite books—but I equivocated about many belongings. What should I do with the comfortingly familiar things that had outlived their usefulness or the artifacts my grandmother would want me to keep? I reflected on how we decide what parts of our past to continue carrying with us and how we predict what tomorrow will want when we have limited space.

Telling the story of one’s experience is a similar process of distilling: Which events fit into the arc? Which events should be preserved regardless because they may have meaning in the future? Which small details may later help tap the wellspring of memory? In writing about aural modes, Derrida argues that, “hearing immerses its subject, vision offers a perspective... hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect” (qtd. in French and Bloom). This quote draws a powerful distinction between how I imagine the story of my move would have been different as a series of journal or a written essay. A written essay would have been a more intellectualized reflection on this transition, but I aimed to create something immersive and affectual.

### **Choices and Affordances:**

Once I decided to script my story, one of the most important decisions I made was determining the overall tone of the podcast. I had imagined a sincere and contemplative tone when I was planning to limit myself to actual footage from the move along with reflections. But I worried that this tone would ring false with reenactments of scenes, as if I was trying (and failing) to pass them off as live documentation. Instead, I worked to create a playful, almost campy tone. This tone fit my genre and matched the mood of our process of moving in together, which was primarily a period of anticipation and joy. I did several things to achieve a light tone, including my choice of upbeat music and sometimes humorous scene titles. Through the podcast’s opening sentences, which state statistics on how many people move each year, I acknowledged that moving is a common occurrence. Then, through the final scene, I also expressed the value of preserving my specific experience of it, but I kept these framing moments brief to let the story speak for itself.

Selecting music was incredibly challenging because it is a tool without an equivalent when composing stories in alphabetic text. I found that music had such a strong effect that it could erase the emotional nuance of a scene’s content rather than guide it. For most scenes, I experimented with many possible background tracks before picking one that created the appropriate balance with the words. At first, I picked a different song for each dialog, but the effect was distracting and disorienting, so I experimented with grouping several dialogs into longer segments that shared the same music. I made decisions about which scenes to group based on whether they shared a dominant emotion that music could evoke. This led to the recognition of music’s power to create both emotional coherence and transition.

In addition to selecting music, I also manipulated the music to interact with the voice track. I created loops so that I could match the length of the music to the length of a dialog or align a crescendo with a specific moment of dialog. For example, in my favorite scene of the chaos as Adam and I are unpacking, I timed the crescendo of the music to match the height of our chaotic, layered dialog. I then timed the music to end precisely when we clink our glasses together to toast our progress in unpacking. In the moment after our glasses clink, we speak without a background track. The sudden shift conveys how, when we paused our chaotic unpacking, we were able to see our progress toward a more orderly home: from many overlapping sounds, the scene becomes two, clean voices. In the scene of my final night in my old apartment, I also speak without background. Hearing the voice on its own in that scene is also a contrast to most of the podcast. I hoped that by using only my voice, I would shift the listener from being immersed in the experience of a scene to focusing on the content of the words being spoken because this is one of the few reflective moments.

Music also provided a powerful way to signal the passage of time. Instead of signaling time change with phrases like “ten min later” or with visuals like a paragraph break, I signaled the passage of time using short clips of music between dialog. For example, in the scene of finding the apartment, three seconds of music between the sound of car doors opening and car doors closing help to establish that my sister and I had gone to view the apartment and returned. In general, I discovered that time works differently in an aural composition than an alphabetic text. In alphabetic text, the reader has much more control over pacing: they can pause to look around the room or to reread. In an aural composition, the composer controls the pacing because a listener is unlikely to pause or rewind. I had to be conscious of when a silence, or stretch of music without the voice track, would be necessary and satisfying to allow the listener to process versus when it would be jarring or distracting. These silences were particularly powerful between scenes in which the emotional tenor changed dramatically.

One of the affordance of aural composition that I enjoyed the most was the ability to evoke setting more directly than in alphabetical text. I was particularly aware of the value of sound effects in creating setting because my voice tracks were recorded from a script, and contained no background noise. I had to choose which sounds to include and when. In some scenes, the sound effects were quite subtle. For example, in the scene when I speak to my sister while packing, I added the sound of cell phone static; a listener may not consciously notice this sound despite its effect of recreating the experience of a phone call.

In other scenes, the sound effects helped to suggest not only setting but also action and the passage of time. For example, in the scene when I first visited the apartment, I added the noise of car blinkers, an engine, and car doors. The sound of the car door opening and closing suggested the moment of walking into the apartment and then signaled our return after viewing the apartment. When I imagine how I might have documented this same scene in writing, it is hard to imagine that I would include details as mundane as, “Erica and I got to the apartment by driving and when we arrived we had to look for parking.” Yet this same detail, conveyed through a sound effect, captures part of the experience of finding my new home that I imagine will be evocative to my future self. As the quote from Derrida states, hearing is affective and immersive. In other words, sound effects allow us to enter a setting with more immediacy than a description of a setting might. In addition, sound allowed me convey setting and plot simultaneously, which a novel cannot do. Although theater allows for simultaneous setting and action, no set can rival the set of the mind and memory, which can be less detailed yet more affecting.

### **Reflections on myself as a writer:**

This project led me to realize several of my preferences as a writer. First, one of the biggest challenges in creating my podcast was the inherently collaborative nature of an aural composition. If I had simply written an alphabetic narrative about moving, I could have completed the whole project alone, drawing on my memory to write sentences and then crafting them into my intended effect. Instead, I was dependent on the voices of others. One of my biggest obstacles was getting Adam comfortable with the inclusion of his voice, which is so central to the story. In addition, for an alphabetic text, I would have simply relied on my own descriptive ability to create mood, but in my podcast, I drew heavily on the work of musicians who made their music available online. The painstaking process of testing many audio tracks deepened my consciousness of the emotional affect I wanted in each segment. While my dependence on others was occasionally frustrating, the constraints ultimately led me to think more deeply about my purpose than I may have writing in solitude.

During the stage of splicing together my footage and adding music, silences, and sound effects, I found aural composition to be similar to writing poetry and code. I would create a small segment, listen, evaluate the effect, then make a very small adjustment and test again. This iterative testing reminded me of changing lines of code and rerunning the program or rereading a poem to judge the emotional impact of a small shift in word choice or structure. I found this way of composing engrossing and at times tedious. Mostly, it helped me to feel that composition can be a process of play and experimentation rather than one of avoiding mistakes in pursuit of correctness.

Overall, it was exciting to compose in sound because it was unfamiliar and therefore sensitized me to aspects of my experience that I typically would not consciously consider. I usually rely heavily on alphabetic text to make sense of my experience, and I consider myself a person who is most comfortable using words and visuals, not sounds. But a typed essay about my move would be much more of an intellectual documentation. I am glad that I will have my podcast as an artifact of this period of my life because I believe the audio will cause me to recollect how I felt and my state of being, not by describing it but by evoking it.

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