

Chapter 3: Elements of Sound: Three Scaffolded Assignments

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featuring the work of Averi Ager, D'Arcee Neal, and Dorian Blue

2. "The Execution" by D'Arcee Neal

In this audio narrative example, titled "The Execution," D'Arcee Neal remediates one of his poems, using sound effects and music to illustrate the story told by the poem's speaker.

Artist Statement

When I was looking for things to work on, I was thinking about voiceover work on top of famous poetry, but I figured a lot of that already exists and I wanted to do something original. I remembered that I keep a lot of my creative work in Google Drive, so I went looking through some old work from undergrad and thought this would be the perfect starter project.

"The Execution" was written when I was studying about Victorian idealism during the Romantic period in literary history, and I know at the time, I was reading a lot of Charlotte and Emily Bronte, and so I remember thinking, these women are portrayed from one side as being particularly mean, but we really never get to hear what they're thinking and so that's what the poem is supposed to represent.

When I was doing the audio collage, in my mind I was thinking, "I want this to be a little a miniature audio movie." You should see and feel the images in your head as you're listening to the work because that's what I do with written work, so I'm inviting the reader to experience work the same way I do. I was trying to invoke a sense of dread because even though the words aren't particularly menacing, and the tone isn't overly mean, the understanding is that this is a social execution and this person whoever they are, is leaving the house specifically for this terrible purpose, which is to ruin this woman's life. I would like to think people aren't as malicious as this poem makes them out to be, but I've seen and heard of circumstances very similar to this one, and I think it's very much a problem that particularly women seem to face.

Working on this project required multiple pieces and large amounts of time. Because there's so much on the internet, what's taxing is finding the right noise at the right location for the right scene. I imagine it's very similar to what directors in films do. It's why they require take after take because you're looking for something very particular each time you do it, but with audio, it's very specific. So it wasn't just looking for someone walking on gravel. It was looking for someone on gravel walking in a very particular way that summed up what was matching in my head as the appropriate noise for the scene. Coupled with that, background music is extremely important. Because I wasn't even sure if I wanted music in the poem at all, I had to listen to a lot of things before I made a decision whether something was going to work. I had even pulled other cues thinking the story was going to go in a different way but ultimately decided against it, once I put something in and listened or took other things out and stretched and manipulated what I had.

What I want people to understand is the impact even suggestion has. The people in this piece never officially say anything to the woman directly. Only the "executioner" (most likely Maggie Smith of Downton) does that. But it was the association of them being there, the gathering of people who wanted to talk bad about her, that made the situation worse. And that was the feeling I was trying to convey.

Transcript

Narrator: The Execution

Did you hear? Aren't you excited?

[door opens and closes]

I hear there is to be an execution.

[menacing, metallic drone repeats throughout, crickets chirping throughout]

[voices whispering quietly]

I heard from my neighbor, who told her cousin, who whispered to her boss, as she wrote to her daughter that today is finally the day. If you ask me, it's about time they put her out. That thing has been an abomination since we saw her. Always on the edge. The edge of town, the edge of her mind. I think she likes it there.

But who's to say what she likes? I mean, we already know. Everyone knows. When you turn her way, the air is pungent, sour with lies. Lies she tells? I don't know. I only know what I hear. And I hear there's going to be an execution.

[loud metallic drone]

Everyone gathers round her house.

[crunching of footsteps on gravel, low murmur of conversation]

There's the sequins, cottons, laces, and even the silks. They stop long enough to savor the wind. There she is. Helpless. Coweringly folded inward, as if to shield herself from the truth. The truth that she's— she's—

My mouth stings with the word. 'Tis not ladylike to say that. That's what mother says. If only she could see this.

This, animal. Has she no sense? Whose loyalties has she to herself?

[baby fussing]

With this, baby. This almond-colored, mocha-latte anomaly.

“White,” murmurs the coloreds. What do they know? It is another ink blot. Years of doing laundry, yet they don't know a stain when they see it? How can the thought be entertained? The very idea is beyond lunacy. “Black,” we say. Obviously.

[whispers, laughter, cries]

And the execution starts. The laces step forward, spewing lashing tongues, slicing her mind. The sequins come next, throwing heavy accusations that break her will. The cottons follow then, smothering her breath in moist rumors.

She is still. Unmoving, but alive.

Finally the executioner arrives, silk blowing in the breeze. Everyone is silent. She says one word and the village stops.

[silence]

“Whore.”

[metallic drone, crickets, conversation, quietly crunching footsteps]

And the blade comes down, severing her mind as she crumples below us and our connection to her. We move away. The job finished, the destruction complete. We all agree; it is not very ladylike. But what a perfect Sunday afternoon for an execution.

References

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