

## "Voices Made For Print: Crip Voices on the Radio"<sup>1</sup>

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Winner of the "Best Picture" Academy Award for 2010, *The King's Speech* dramatizes the struggles of Britain's King George VI (Colin Firth), a rather private man who had suffered with a speech impediment since his youth. When George suddenly finds himself elevated to the throne and called upon to reassure and guide the nation through World War II, his stammer becomes a particular liability: how can he be the symbolic voice of the nation if he cannot even control his own physical voice? The stakes couldn't be higher, with nothing less than the fate of the nation resting on the king's ability to produce "normal" speech for radio.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, with the help of an unconventional speech therapist, the king learns to conquer his stammer enough to address his subjects on BBC radio, thereby fulfilling his duty as the emblem of England's character at a time of extreme crisis.<sup>3</sup>

*The King's Speech* follows Hollywood's typical triumph-over-adversity template

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Amanda Gunn, Kate Lacey, Lisbeth Lipari, Jason Mittell, Anna Nekola, and Shawn VanCour for their contributions to this essay. The title borrows a phrase I heard in a lecture in Madison, Wisc. by National Public Radio correspondent Susan Stamberg, who joked that she had "a face made for radio and a voice made for print." For discussion of my use of the term "Crip," see below, footnote 6.

<sup>2</sup> This theme is not uncommon. For example, Lennard J. Davis has argued that the production of the ideal body (as measured against the disabled Other) is necessary to the emergence of nationalism, while Robert J. Scholnick has identified the ways in which Walt Whitman's work "promot[ed] physical health as a means of fostering national stability, control, and improvement" (249). The connection between physical health and a healthy nation is also central to the twentieth-century voice culture discussed later in this essay. Lennard J. Davis, "Bodies of Difference: Politics, Disability, and Representation," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 100–108; Robert J. Scholnick, "'How Dare a Sick Man or an Obedient Man Write Poems?' Whitman and the Dis-ease of the Perfect Body," in *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2002), 248–259.

<sup>3</sup> Tom Hooper, *The King's Speech* (Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2011).

for movies about disability (albeit with more integrity than most: although some complained that the film industry had, as usual, cast a non-disabled actor to play a disabled character, groups like The Stuttering Foundation applauded Firth's portrayal as authentic to the experience of individuals with this impediment).<sup>4</sup> But despite the predictable narrative of "overcoming," it is worth considering exactly what the king did and did not overcome. Although his stammer could be tamed, radio itself could not. Its norms and practices remained an unyielding force that refused to bow--even a little bit--before the monarch. In other words, the narrative logic of the film demands that George must adjust to radio, not vice-versa, and it is the king's speech that must be repaired. Meanwhile, the cultural institution of broadcasting, symbolized visually by a cold steel microphone looming implacably in front of him, as menacing and merciless as the T-1000 liquid metal assassin in *Terminator 2*, enjoys the ultimate triumph.

To the extent that viewers saw George's stutter, rather than radio, as his primary foe (and an informal review of online reactions suggests that was overwhelmingly the case), the film illustrates how naturalized and necessary "good" voices have become to our understanding of radio as both a technology and a cultural form. And that makes perfect sense: *of course* the voice emerging from your radio speaker should be comprehensible, intelligible, and "listenable." *Of course* it should be easy on the ears and easy to understand. It is a self-evident rule reinforced by a near-total absence of

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<sup>4</sup> Rosie Mestel, "'The King's Speech' -- a Once-in-a-lifetime Moment for the Stuttering Foundation," *Los Angeles Times Articles*, February 11, 2011, accessed September 12, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/11/news/lat-heb-the-kings-speech-a-onceinalifetime-moment-for-the-stuttering-foundation-of-america-20110211>.

exceptions. Quick: name a prominent radio personality with a significant speech impairment. In the U.S. there's Diane Rehm, a nationally syndicated public radio talk show host who suffers from spasmodic dysphonia, and then there's ... normative voices pretty much everywhere you listen. At least on American radio, the number of prominent voices that "sound disabled" can, for all intents and purposes, be counted on one finger.<sup>5</sup> Variations and degrees of "able-voicedness" occur, of course, but the overwhelming evidence suggests that radio—as a technology, as a cultural phenomenon, as a structuring force of social relations—will brook no deviation from certain standards of what counts as "a voice made for radio." If disability is a form of subalterity, then the absence of disabled or "Crip"<sup>6</sup> voices in contemporary sound media suggests yet another wrinkle to

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<sup>5</sup> This is a slight exaggeration, but only slight. For example, John "the Stutterer" Melendez was a longtime member of *The Howard Stern Show*, but his speech impediment was part of the comedy, with Melendez taking his place alongside "Gary the Retard" and "Eric the Midget" in Stern's carnivalesque "Wack Pack." By highlighting the freakery of these performers, such examples reinforce rather than challenge aural norms. In a less transgressive vein, some radio personalities such as National Public Radio reporter Louisa Lim and British comedian Jonathan Ross have minor speech impediments such as slight lisps and rhotacism, the inability to clearly pronounce r's. But individuals who have more significant vocal abnormalities—much less those who have other serious impairments that can be detected in their voices, such as muscular dystrophy or lateral sclerosis—are exceedingly rare on radio. Doubtlessly some readers will know of exceptions—and the author would appreciate learning of them—but the widespread enforcement of vocal normativity certainly holds.

<sup>6</sup> The term "Crip," analogous to the term "Queer" in queer theory and queer studies, is increasingly finding purchase in disability studies as a way to express a critical disabled subject position and oppositional political identity for people with disabilities. Like "Queer" before it, "Crip" signifies a desire to "challenge oppressive norms, build community, and maintain the practitioners' self-worth" (Sandahl 38). Writes Carrie Sandahl, "Both queering and crippling expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity, and both disarm what is painful with wicked humor" (37). Carrie Sandahl, "Queering the Crip or Crippling the Queer?: Intersections of Queer and Crip Identities in Solo Autobiographical Performance," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 9, no. 1 (2002): 25–56. As Robert McRuer (35–37) discusses, the analogy only goes so far, since the voluntary adoption of a "Crip" identity by able-bodied-identified persons, in the way that straight-identified persons can and do adopt "Queer," is both rare and inherently problematic. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). Nonetheless, the term performs important political work in establishing and signalling a critical stance for disability identities vis-à-vis normative culture, and it is in that sense that I use it in this essay.

the question of whether the subaltern can speak.<sup>7</sup>

In those rare instances when someone with a speech impediment does make it onto the radio, the reaction can be cruel. As a poster to one of several Internet threads devoted to Diane Rehm's voice wrote, "I know she has a medical condition and I have great sympathy for her but aarrghh! Her voice is awful. Someone please take the microphone away from her." Added another, "To me this is like keeping a player on the [Washington] Wizards [basketball team] who's lost a leg. I don't get it."<sup>8</sup> A similar thread on a different forum brought out the same complaints: "Sorry if I'm violating the ADA[Americans with Disabilities Act] or being prejudiced [*sic*] here, but I have no idea how a woman who speaks like that gets a job in radio."<sup>9</sup> Then there is the "Get Diane Rehm Off the Radio" Facebook group with comments such as "[I]t's like listening to someone get run over by a car every time she talks."<sup>10</sup> Other radio hosts with significantly less noticeable speech variances than Rehm's come in for similarly harsh treatment. In a

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<sup>7</sup> Routine discrimination against people with disabilities has long been an obvious fact of existence in most industrialized societies, but this refers as well to the social and cultural subalternity of "disability identities," which has become a well established tenet of critical disability studies. In this sense, the subordination of people with disabilities extends well beyond routine political discrimination and silencing, not to mention the normalization of able-bodiedness that produces a ubiquitously disabling built environment, to the shaping of subjectivity itself. As Alison Kafer writes, "[U]nder a system of compulsory able-bodiedness ... a disability identity is to be avoided at all costs" (80). Alison Kafer, "Compulsory Bodies: Reflections on Heterosexuality and Able-bodiedness," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 3 (2003), 77-89. For more on the subalternity of disability, see Lauri Umansky and Paul K. Longmore, "Introduction: Disability History: From the Margins to the Mainstream," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Lauri Umansky and Paul K. Longmore (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 33-57. The question of "can the subaltern speak" is, of course, from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

<sup>8</sup> "Diane Rehm's Voice," Web Forum, *DC Urban Moms and Dads*, accessed September 12, 2012, <http://www.dcurbanmom.com/jforum/posts/list/60/129230.page>.

<sup>9</sup> "Keeping It in 'The Family,'" Web Forum, *MetaFilter*, June 24, 2008, accessed September 12, 2012, <http://www.metafilter.com/72761/Keeping-it-in-The-Family>.

<sup>10</sup> "Get Diane Rehm Off The Radio," Facebook Page, *Facebook*, January 26, 2011, accessed September 12, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Get-Diane-Rehm-Off-The-Radio/155613797822938>.

thread on "Most Annoying NPR Voice," commenters nominated WNYC's Lorraine Mattox, who supposedly "has [a] problem with t's in final syllables"; "the lispy health/medical reporter" Joanne Silberner with her "Thindy [Cindy] Brady sibilance," and Louisa Lim, the Beijing-based correspondent, who was described as "a Baba Wawa Elmer Fudd mashup" (a reference to iconic U.S. journalist Barbara Walters, whose soft r's were famously mocked by comedienne Gilda Radner in her "Baba Wawa" impersonations on *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970s).<sup>11</sup> To be fair, several posters chimed in on these threads to defend Rehm and the others, but the fact remains that a powerful proscription on non-normative voices on the radio is widely enforced, not just by the professional broadcast industry but also by many listeners.

This proscription, perhaps precisely because it appears so self-evident, has not been sufficiently investigated by scholars in either disability studies or radio studies. Much work has been done on visual representations of disability, but studies of the aural representation of disability (or its absence), and the complex dynamics of normalization in sonic media, remain a significant gap in the literature. Therefore, this chapter seeks to denaturalize the hegemony of aural able-bodiedness that has long appeared so obvious, investigating the ideological operations that might contribute to the absence of Crip voices on the radio. Doing so reveals the overwhelming ocularcentricity of present scholarship on disability and representation, but more importantly it reveals much about both radio sound and social constructions of disability. In the intersection of radio and

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<sup>11</sup> "Most Annoying NPR Voice," Web Forum, *The Data Lounge*, May 2010, accessed September 12, 2012, <http://www.dataounge.com/cgi-bin/iowa/ajax.html?t=9224876#page:showThread,9224876>.

disability, then, we can learn more about the cultural meanings of both. Specifically I argue that the confluence of three ideological threads—the sight/sound dichotomy, the dominant understanding of radio as an "intimate" medium, and our enculturated responses to disability—make the aural (more so than the visual) representation of disability a particularly fraught process that results in extraordinarily restrictive norms for the voices that may speak on the radio. Adding these ideological operations of sound, radio, and disability to the political-economic underpinnings of the radio industry, we can see that the "compulsory able-voicedness"<sup>12</sup> of contemporary radio is effectively overdetermined. Nonetheless, while it is probably unreasonable to expect that people with vocal disabilities will be welcomed into professional radio anytime soon, I argue that the promise of new distribution models creates the potential for more Crip voices to be heard, even if their ability to actually get a hearing depends ultimately on questions of communicative ethics.

### **Good Voices, Good Bodies**

From the beginnings of voice broadcasting, radio practitioners have been preoccupied with vocal quality. These concerns emerged, as Shawn VanCour has discussed, within a broader "voice culture" in the early twentieth century in which a wide range of experts offered guidance on how to maximize the effectiveness of one's speaking voice. This training usually emphasized the proper discipline of one's body (breath

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<sup>12</sup> I adapted this term from Robert McRuer's "compulsory able-bodiedness," which itself is an adaptation of Adrienne Rich's idea of "compulsory heterosexuality." See McRuer, *Crip Theory*; Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer, 1980): 631-660.

control, enunciation, volume, etc.), establishing early the connection between vocal normativity and able-bodiedness. A good voice, it was widely maintained, was one that signified a healthy body, and it was incumbent upon the speaker to eradicate any trace of infirmity including "undue digestive disturbance," "muscular twitchings," "fatigability," "long bones," or "sagging stomach."<sup>13</sup> In an era preoccupied with vigor and vitality, one had to learn to avoid sounding even minimally disabled.

As VanCour explains, radio introduced important new complications into this voice culture, since the electronic mediation of the voice, not to mention the cultural shifts engendered by new sound technologies, rendered many previously held notions of the "good voice" newly problematic. No longer was the ability to project a strong and robust voice paramount; instead, radio demanded that the speaker maintain a steady volume and learn to trade oratorical flourishes for intimacy. These strategies for voice broadcasting (also illustrated in *The King's Speech* when a BBC announcer goes through an elaborate routine of gargling, misting his throat, etc.) were still rooted in the proper discipline of the body, but now it was in the service of successfully adapting to the technology:

Radio speakers throughout this decade were not only cautioned to guard against casual drops in volume that could prove as damaging as the acoustic excesses of traditional oratory, but were also warned that broadcasting required far greater attention to enunciation and a much

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<sup>13</sup> Shawn Gary VanCour, "The Sounds of 'Radio': Aesthetic Formations of 1920s American Broadcasting" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin--Madison, 2008), 120.

slower speaking rate than that used in normal conversation. Achieving the "natural" style, in other words, required disciplined effort and special care.<sup>14</sup>

Scholars have examined various aspects of the shift from unmediated to mediated uses of the good voice. Allison McCracken, for example, has focused on changes in singing technique (as the microphone ushered in the age of crooning), while Emily Thompson has described the importance of constant volume to effective radio speaking.<sup>15</sup> Speakers who failed to adapt to this new vocal style were frequently described using the language of moral character flaws, with references to those who had developed "bad habits" or who were simply "lip-lazy." This, too, was part of the broader voice culture in which it was widely believed that "speech is a revelation of personality," as one speech expert put it in 1920, and that a problematic voice indicated a problematic character.<sup>16</sup>

In discussing these transformations, it is common to argue that technology has increasingly separated the body from the voice, with the trope of "disembodiment" looming large. In a key early work on radio, Rudolf Arnheim wrote eloquently of "voices

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<sup>14</sup> Vancour, "The Sounds of 'Radio,'" 390.

<sup>15</sup> Allison McCracken, "God's Gift to Us Girls': Crooning, Gender, and the Re-Creation of American Popular Song, 1928-1933," *American Music* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 1999): 365-395; Emily Ann Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002). See also Vancour, "The Sounds of 'Radio,'" and Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931*, *History of the American Cinema* 4 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Qtd. in Vancour, "The Sounds of 'Radio,'" 408. It is important to note that, in addition to being a time of particular hostility to immigrants, racial and ethnic Others, political dissidents, and so on, this was also the era of the "ugly laws" restricting the rights and freedoms of persons with disabilities. In other words, the enforcement of normative ideas about the voice-body-character connection fell particularly hard on people with non-normative bodies. See Susan Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York University Press, 2009).



without bodies"<sup>17</sup> and this theme has remained constant ever since, e.g. as Anne Karpf recently wrote, the telephone was "the first technology to disembody the voice—to transport someone's voice without the accompaniment of their body"<sup>18</sup> However, while it is obviously true in a simple sense that radio transmits disembodied voices, this habit of thinking about radio masks the important ways that voices continue to reference and produce bodies, even as the body-voice relationship grows more complicated through mediation. As scholars of the Internet are currently (re)discovering, the visual absence of a body does not result in meaningful "disembodiment" but instead produces a body through signifiers other than the visual.<sup>19</sup> Written, heard, pictured, or imagined bodily markers such as race, gender, class, region, age, and sexuality signify certain kinds of bodies; the absence of such markers tends to produce the "normal" body, which in contemporary Western societies is usually understood to default to whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, middle-classness, etc.

Radio studies has been especially effective in tracing how the voice has produced different kinds of bodies for performing different kinds of cultural work. In the case of race and ethnicity in early radio, for example, Michele Hilmes demonstrates the centrality of the aural signification of blackness to the construction of a hegemonically white American national identity. Early radio programs frequently invoked race using

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<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936).

<sup>18</sup> Anne Karpf, *The Human Voice: How This Extraordinary Instrument Reveals Essential Clues About Who We Are* (Bloomsbury USA, 2006), 234–5.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Cameron Bailey, "Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace," in *Reading Digital Culture*, ed. David Trend, *Keywords in Cultural Studies* 4 (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2001), 334–346; Michael Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 377–401.

established sonically transmittable stereotypes—accents, speech patterns, distinctive vocabularies, routinized themes, etc.—borrowed from vaudeville and other cultural forms. Writes Hilmes, "*Here* is blackness on radio: marked by minstrel dialect, second-class citizen traits, cultural incompetence." Noting that radio's "blindness" did not prevent broadcasters from evoking non-white bodies in order to shore up norms of white cultural privilege, Hilmes argues, "[B]y setting up only this category of representation as 'black,' radio engineered its freedom to categorize *all other* representations as white."<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the disconnect between the body signified by the voice and the "real" body of the speaker introduced new instabilities into the use of the voice as an index of a person's body, not to mention their character; Elana Razlogova has used the term "racial ventriloquism" to describe this phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> As Jason Loviglio writes, "White men who 'sounded black,' straight men who 'sounded queer,' Americans who 'sounded foreign,' and men and women, boys and girls, who sounded like each other—all these performances evoked intense pleasure and anxiety precisely because they seemed to put fixed social identities into play in highly public ways."<sup>22</sup>

Taken as a whole, this scholarship demonstrates the problems with imagining that radio is a medium for channeling "disembodied" voices, as if it could fail to produce bodies or could somehow produce "identity-neutral" bodies. To take Hilmes' key

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<sup>20</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 93.

<sup>21</sup> Elena Razlogova, *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (University Of Minnesota Press, 2005), xviii.

example, the white actors of the immensely popular *Amos 'n' Andy* might not have been primarily signifying *their own* bodies, but that does not make the resulting sounds "disembodied." Instead, their voices were inescapably attached to bodies; the twist is simply that those bodies were, among other things, black and working-class. In other words, semiotics supplies the bodies that the technology renders invisible. Hilmes makes one error, however, in claiming that "[r]adio might have developed as a medium in which race was simply absent,"<sup>23</sup> since the absence of overt markers of racial identity would not actually have absented race or produced some kind of race-neutrality. Instead, in the racially overdetermined American context, radio simply would have produced—and in fact usually did produce—a default whiteness, even without the explicit production of blackness as its Other.<sup>24</sup> Despite the common-sense notion of disembodiment, radio cannot *not* signify racially marked bodies.

If examining race on the radio illustrates the problems of positing voices without bodies, examining gender helps reveal which embodied voices are allowed to speak and with which kinds of cultural authority. Early discussions of women's voices on the radio often sought to exclude them on the basis of intelligibility, with several studies claiming to empirically prove that women's voices could not be deciphered as easily as men's. One such study, from 1927, asserted, "Women's higher fundamental tone ... produces only one-half as many audible overtones as a man's voice ... It thus appears that nature has so

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<sup>23</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> For more on the discursive production of whiteness, see Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (University Of Minnesota Press, 1993).

designed woman's speech that it is always most effective when it is of soft and well modulated tone."<sup>25</sup> Informal (and perhaps less than entirely scientific) polls of listeners seemed to confirm the greater suitability of men's voices for radio, such as a 1926 survey by New York NBC station WJZ that showed an overwhelming 100-to-1 split in favor of male announcers.<sup>26</sup> Again, such preferences were widely understood as an inevitable technological bias of radio itself, rather than the imposition of cultural norms; as *Radio Broadcast* explained, "[M]ost receiving sets do not reproduce perfectly the higher notes. A man's voice 'takes' better. It has more volume. ... Men are naturally better fitted for the average assignment of the broadcast announcer."<sup>27</sup> From our contemporary vantage point, such explanations are self-evidently problematic. As Anne McKay points out, vocal characteristics such as pitch and volume are themselves enculturated, and it is easy to see the preference for "soft and well modulated" female voices as reflecting social attitudes about appropriate roles for women more generally.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Michele Hilmes and others have explored the ease with which anxieties about women's figurative voices in the public sphere gave rise to conventional wisdom about the undesirability of women's literal voices on the radio.<sup>29</sup> In other words, vocal qualities of transmissibility, intelligibility, and listenability all function in dialog with—even as proxies for—the

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<sup>25</sup> Qtd. in Anne McKay, "Speaking Up: Voice Amplification and Women's Struggle for Public Expression," in *Technology and Women's Voices: Keeping in Touch*, ed. Cheri Kramarae (New York: Routledge, 1988), 192.

<sup>26</sup> John Wallace, "The Listeners' Point of View: Who and Where the Infants Really Are in Radio," *Radio Broadcast* 10, no. 1 (November 1926), 44.

<sup>27</sup> Wallace, "The Listeners' Point of View," 45.

<sup>28</sup> McKay, "Speaking Up."

<sup>29</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, especially 130–50.

cultural value of the gendered bodies for which any given voice is an indexical signifier.

The foregoing demonstrates the degree to which ideas about what constitutes a "voice made for radio" were, from the beginning, inseparable from the cultural politics of race, gender, class, and other axes of social difference. Moreover, in studies of visual culture, this co-articulation of representations of bodies and the cultural work those bodies perform is, at this point, already well established. Yet too often the trope of disembodiment masks analogous operations in the realm of sound culture. For the purposes of this study, one particular axis of social difference is particularly salient: for nearly a century, ideas about the good radio voice have produced a default able-bodiedness on the airwaves that works to render disability inaudible—and thus invisible. Just as radio cannot *not* signify race but can only silence racial alterity in its production of unmarked (read: white) bodies, so too can radio not *not* signify dis/ability: the absence of markers of disability does not produce non-bodies, but instead produces non-*disabled* bodies even in the near total absence of disabled Others.

This power of the "normal" voice to produce a "normal" body is illustrated by a regular feature on the BBC's *Ouch!* podcast, a monthly talk show focusing, appropriately enough, on disability issues. The feature is called "Vegetable, Vegetable, or Vegetable," a variation on the game "Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral" (better known in the U.S. as "Twenty Questions"). In each episode, a listener with a different condition (e.g. multiple sclerosis, dwarfism, paraplegia) calls in, and the show's hosts ask yes-or-no questions in order to guess what that condition might be. The name of the game, by (self-)mocking

people with disabilities as "vegetables," indicates the podcast's playful and irreverent tone, but what is interesting here is the way that the game is premised entirely on the absence of sonic indicators of disability: if the nature of the caller's disability could be detected in their voice (e.g. the dysarthria common to cerebral palsy, the speech delay common to Down syndrome), then the game wouldn't really work. Instead, the performance of vocal normativity is required to produce a non-disabled body that will then become semantically (rather than sonically) marked as "disabled." This happens quite literally since, as part of the ritual reading of the rules during each episode, callers must affirmatively identify themselves as disabled before the questioning can proceed: "To take part in this intrusive and unpleasant game, the rules clearly state that you have to be disabled. [Caller's name], are you disabled?" As soon as the caller says "yes," a disconnect is established between the unmarked (i.e. normal) radio body produced by the voice and the abnormal physical body of the speaker, enabling the hosts to begin solving the mystery of this person who sounds normal but is in fact disabled.

### **Aesthetics, Power, and Intimacy**

To summarize my argument thus far, despite the trope of "disembodiment," voices, bodies, and identities all travel together through the ether, perhaps unmoored from and only loosely correlated with the speaker's "actual" body and identity, but nonetheless entering the world of representation and therefore, importantly, the world of political effectivity. The question then arises: why is it that so few of those sonically represented bodies on the radio—regardless of the ways that they signify race, gender,

class, or region--happen to also signify disability?

As mentioned above, there is no shortage of self-evident reasons why non-disabled voices thoroughly dominate radio, not least of which is the commercial imperative: broadcasters want listeners to stay tuned, therefore they find speakers and speaking styles that audiences are willing to listen to, with voices that listeners can easily understand and find pleasing to the ear. While undoubtedly sensible as a matter of capitalist logic, however, we need to question the aesthetic reasoning at the root of this supposedly listener-centered approach to speaker selection as well as the idea that "pleasing to the ear" is somehow a sufficient explanation for the absence of disabled voices on the radio. The key problem is that, as Lawrence Grossberg has pointed out (and as the above discussion of female broadcasters illustrates), aesthetics and affect are not easily disentangled from the larger ideological context within which they emerge; instead, "affect always demands that ideology legitimate the fact that [some] differences and not others matter."<sup>30</sup> Shawn VanCour suggests that the affective character of radio voices "might be perhaps more productively viewed not as unraveling operations of discourse but instead forming their explicit target, as that aspect of voice which ideology works to legitimize and imbue with special cultural meaning or value."<sup>31</sup> The target here, it seems clear, is the ideology of "compulsory able-bodiedness" and the rejection of disability identities. Writes Tobin Siebers, "The ideology of ability stands ready to attack

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<sup>30</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (Routledge, 1992), 82.

<sup>31</sup> VanCour, "The Sounds of 'Radio,'" 491.

any desire to know and to accept the disabled body in its current state."<sup>32</sup> We cannot begin to expand the range of permitted voices on radio without simultaneously undermining the ideologies of ability and disability that disqualify those voices in the first place.

The aesthetic argument against disabled voices runs into further difficulty when we consider how the normative limits of aural culture are at such marked variance with the thirst for bodily non-normativity we find in visual culture: from Victorian-era freak shows to today's film and television programs of all genres, representations of both real and fantastical non-normative bodies are in perpetual demand. This is especially true of horror and comedy but can also be routinely observed in drama, reality television, and other genres (e.g. Dr. Weaver's hip dysplasia on *ER*, wheelchair-user Artie Abrams on *Glee*, Gregory House on *House, M.D.*, the entirety of shows like *The Biggest Loser* or *Rollin' With Zach*; the list is endless). Furthermore, the difference between the relative frequency of visual representations and the relative paucity of aural representations of non-normative bodies also extends to the soundtrack: except in the realm of comedy (e.g. the variety of disabled misfits on *South Park*), surprisingly few characters have speech impediments, strong aural correlates to their physical disability, or impairments that produce vocal difference: they are disproportionately Crips without Crip voices. In other words, disabled and other non-normative bodies are everywhere you look, but almost nowhere you listen.<sup>33</sup> The decline of fictional radio obviously accounts for much of the

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<sup>32</sup> Tobin Anthony Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 26.

<sup>33</sup> Noteworthy among the rare exceptions to this rule are characters on *Deadwood* and *Breaking Bad* with



narrowness of U.S. sound culture,<sup>34</sup> but this does not in itself explain the popular fascination with (or tolerance for) visual representations of disability as compared to aural representations.

Visual representations of disability have received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years, with the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson especially influential. In a widely cited essay, Garland-Thomson presents a taxonomy of how persons with disabilities are routinely depicted: the *wondrous* mode that seeks to inspire awe at the accomplishments of persons with disabilities, the *sentimental* mode that invites pity at their plight, the *exotic* mode that sensationalizes or eroticizes physical difference, and the *realistic* mode that normalizes and regularizes the disabled figure.<sup>35</sup> These

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cerebral palsy, played by actors who have CP in real life (Geri Jewell and RJ Mitte, respectively). Interestingly, Mitte plays the character with a more pronounced dysarthria than he himself speaks with off-screen, suggesting a conscious effort to use vocal non-normativity to emphasize the character's disability. The other major exception, characters with Down syndrome (a condition that often includes among its symptoms alalia, or speech delay), are usually played by actors with Down syndrome, including such prominent actors as Andrea Friedman (*Saving Grace*, *Law & Order*, *ER*, *Life Goes On*, and voice work for *Family Guy*), Chris Burke (the Golden-Globe nominated actor who, in *Life Goes On*, played the first major television character with Down syndrome), and Lauren Potter, who plays a cheerleader on *Glee*. I thank Jason Mittell for pointing me to these exceptions in an email exchange.

<sup>34</sup> Like accent and timbre, vocal disability was a convenient and widely used tool for quickly and easily conveying specificities of character to radio audiences. As such, the so-called "golden age" of radio might also have witnessed the greatest number of voices on the airwaves that "sounded disabled," at least in the U.S. Once again, however, such representations could hardly be considered consistently progressive blows for inclusivity and tolerance. Many, such as the creative range of lisps and stutters employed by Mel Blanc, were standard targets of comedic ridicule, while in dramatic radio, the use of non-normative voices could be equally problematic: the broken voice as indexical of a broken soul. As with physical deformities on stage and screen going back at least to *Richard III*, vocal impairment in radio drama routinely signalled moral degeneracy and spiritual defectiveness: "slow talking" suggested stupidity, lisps (say, as used by Peter Lorre) indicated villainy, and so on. The other great use for lisps, of course, was as a signifier of homosexuality, itself widely seen as a form of mental disability and perversion. In other words, even in the broader vocal culture of fictional radio, the meanings of vocal non-normativity overwhelmingly perpetuated the subalternity of persons with disabilities. See also Robin Larsen and Beth Haller, "The Case of *Freaks*: Public Reception of Real Disability," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 164-172; Matthew Murray, "The Tendency to Deprave and Corrupt Morals': Regulation and Irregular Sexuality in Golden Age Radio Comedy," in *Radio Reader: Essays in the Cultural History of Radio*, ed. Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio (New York: Routledge, 2002), 135-156. My thanks to Jason Loviglio for this insight.

<sup>35</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled: Visual Rhetorics of Disability in Popular

representational strategies have, according to Garland-Thomson, a common quality: "In representing disability, the visualization of impairment, never the functional experience of it, defines the category of disability."<sup>36</sup> Additionally, such visual representations provide the viewer with a critical distance on physical abnormality and a safe space from which to observe it: "In this sense, disability exists for the viewer to recognize and contemplate, not to express the effect it has on the person with a disability."<sup>37</sup>

Central to this analysis is Garland-Thomson's understanding of the power relations that inform the act of staring, which she defines as "an intense form of looking that enacts a relationship of spectator and spectacle between two people."<sup>38</sup> This asymmetry between (normalized) viewer and (abnormalized) viewee is deeply enculturated and remains the dominant mode of looking at disability in Western culture: "Even children learn very early that disability is a potent form of embodied difference that warrants looking.... Staring is the social relationship that constitutes disability identity and gives meaning to impairment by marking it as aberrant."<sup>39</sup> At the same time, however, staring is "a form of inappropriate looking in modernity" and currently considered rude at best—the public display of "freaks" that was common in the Victorian era seems barbaric and dehumanizing today—which makes the disabled body "a visual paradox: it is at once to-be-looked-at and not-to-be-looked-at."<sup>40</sup>

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Photography," in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives*, ed. Lauri Umansky and Paul K. Longmore (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 338–346.

<sup>36</sup> Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled," 346.

<sup>37</sup> Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled," 346.

<sup>38</sup> Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled," 346.

<sup>39</sup> Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled," 346.–7.

<sup>40</sup> Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled," 347.

It is, of course, a mark of some degree of progressive social change that older norms of interpersonal interactions with persons with disabilities—interactions predicated on the unquestioned right of the "normal" to openly objectify the "abnormal"—have become more problematic in contemporary society. However, such power relations live on through mediated encounters with disability such as photography, film, and television, sites where disability can be observed and contemplated without stigma or rebuke, where normalcy can be constructed in its difference from the to-be-looked-at bodies of persons with disabilities. Our relations to disability thus continue to be characterized by the impermeable logic of normalization: we are made "normal" in and through our communicative relation to the "abnormal" body. In this sense, visual representations of disability perpetuate "a system that produces subjects by differentiating and marking bodies" in order to imbue some of those bodies—those marked as normal—with greater social and cultural power.<sup>41</sup> Related to the theory of the male gaze, which proposes that conventions of representing gendered bodies put the viewer into a relatively empowered masculine subject position predicated on norms of male desire, Garland-Thomson argues that conventions of depicting disability empower viewers by inviting them—through the process of destigmatized staring at physical abnormality—into an able-bodied subject position that structurally secures the starrer's empowered normalcy and the staree's disempowered deviance and abjection.

The work of Steven Connor supplies another perspective on this process in his

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<sup>41</sup> Garland-Thomson, "Seeing the Disabled," 348.

analysis of the construction of the modern self, particularly with regard to sight versus sound. Drawing on Heidegger, Martin Jay, and others, Connor argues that the privileging of vision is integral to a modernist understanding of the self:

Visualism signifies distance, differentiation and domination; the control which modernity exercises over nature depends upon that experience of the world as separate from myself, and my self-definition in the act of separation, which vision seems to promote. Where knowing is associated so overwhelmingly with seeing, then the will-to-self-knowing of the epistemized self has unavoidably taken a scopic form.<sup>42</sup>

In contrast to this condition of modernity in which knowing equals seeing, the condition of postmodernity is one in which increasing suspicion of the visual (e.g. Foucault's critique of surveillance) and the rise of man-made "noise" (including technologies of sound reproduction such as the telephone, phonograph, and radio) undermine the ocularcentrism of modernity in favor of subjective experiences "formed around the auditory rather than the visual, or at least formed in a certain contest between the two."<sup>43</sup>

The problem that Connor identifies in this production of a postmodern self is that sound alone is too disorganized and too dependent on the other senses to provide a stable basis for self-knowledge in the way that sight once could under conditions of modernity.

Drawing on Michael Chion, Connor notes that sound—perhaps for historical reasons—is perceived as insufficient in itself, always requiring completion and confirmation by sight

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<sup>42</sup> Steven Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1996), 203–4.

<sup>43</sup> Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," 205.

and the other senses.<sup>44</sup> This insufficiency makes the auditory importantly different from the visual: "We ask of a sound, 'What was that?', meaning 'Who was that?', or 'Where did that come from?' We do not naturally ask of an image 'What sound does this make?'"<sup>45</sup> Additionally, sound's particular ability to dissolve boundaries—"to pervade and to integrate objects and entities that the eye kept separate"<sup>46</sup>—problematizes the relations of separation between self and other that the modern "I/eye" had so assiduously constructed. Together, the insufficiency and pervasiveness of sound mean that the auditory, to a greater degree than the visual, is capable of threatening and even destabilizing the self unless it can be meaningfully captured, organized, and socially ordered.

Importantly, this organization of auditory information is inseparable from questions of social power, since the resources available for making sense of sound are not just psychic but also social and cultural. Connor uses the example of Kaja Silverman's work on sound in film,<sup>47</sup> which demonstrates that male voices are relatively more self-sufficient and less dependent on the visual than female voices: male voices can speak outside the frame of the film as the narrator or as a controlling voiceover, while female voices are required to be made visible on screen.<sup>48</sup> In other words, the relative sufficiency of sound as a basis for understanding the world—and thus the self—is never independent of the meaning-making processes through which it can be organized, and thus never

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<sup>44</sup> Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," 220.

<sup>45</sup> Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," 213.

<sup>46</sup> Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," 207.

<sup>47</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>48</sup> Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," 219.

independent of questions of social and cultural power. Writes Connor, "[I]t is in the passage [from disorganized to organized sound] that the self is formed, in a process in which power and pleasure are intricately interwoven."<sup>49</sup>

To bring this back to the question of Crip voices on the radio, it is important to note that, like gender and race, dis/ability is one of the modes of social power through which we organize sound and thus the self. This insight alone goes a long way toward understanding the differences between visual and aural representations of disability: sound complicates the processes of distancing and self-other separation that characterize our relations to persons with disabilities in the visual realm. But I want to argue further that *radio* sound in particular challenges our cultural strategies for relating to disabled Others, that radio itself—not just as pure aural stimulus but also as a culturally and historically specific institution—must be considered an important constitutive element in how we organize sound and integrate the auditory world into our sense of self. Voices on the radio, that is to say, are not merely encountered as "voices," but also as "on the radio," and thus the meanings of what radio is, its proper and legitimate position in our lives, and our relation to it as a medium for knowing the world and ourselves are integral to the ways in which radio sound and social power interrelate.

In this regard, the most salient aspect of radio as a cultural institution for issues of vocal alterity is not its commercialism, nor its nationalism, nor its status as a state-regulated public good, but rather its "intimacy." For nearly a century, radio has been

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<sup>49</sup> Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," 215.

constructed as the "intimate" medium, the communications technology that feels most personal and through which we establish the closest, most intimate, most emotional bonds. As Marshall McLuhan put it, "Radio affects most intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. That is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience."<sup>50</sup> Multiple features of radio and various byproducts of the affordances of the technology help underwrite these feelings of intimacy: the ability of radio waves to cross boundaries in order to enter the privacy of the home, the amplification technology that allows more conversational speaking styles or intimate singing styles that mimic interpersonal communication, the pervasiveness of sound itself as an omnipresent and inescapable form of sensory input. But radio's intimacy was also a deliberate creation: from the earliest days of broadcasting, radio practitioners have actively sought to cultivate "a sense of spontaneity and sincerity, enabling listeners to enjoy an illusion of direct and intimate conversation that transcended radio's limitations as a medium of one-way mass delivery"<sup>51</sup> Successful announcers and DJs "sought to sound familiar, intimate"<sup>52</sup> in order to reach people at a remarkably personal level, while crooning "helped create and maintain an illusion that listeners' relationships to singers and other broadcasting individuals were unmediated, personal."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), 299. See also Timothy D. Taylor, "Music and the Rise of Radio in 1920s America: Technological Imperialism, Socialization, and the Transformation of Intimacy," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 22, no. 4 (October 2002): 425–443; Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio And The American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); VanCour, "The Sounds of 'Radio'"; Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public*; Paddy Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>51</sup> VanCour, "The Sounds of 'Radio,'" 383.

<sup>52</sup> Douglas, *Listening In*, 31.

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, "Music and the Rise of Radio," 437.

From the audience's perspective, they often succeeded: as Susan Douglas writes in her history of radio listening, "Maybe it was the darkness, the solitude, or being in bed, but the intimacy of this experience remains vivid; listeners had a deeply private, personal bond with radio."<sup>54</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this production of intimacy was complicated, not least because these close interpersonal bonds were potentially felt by millions simultaneously; as Jason Loviglio points out, radio's address was both private *and* public, "peculiarly intimate *and* national."<sup>55</sup> Additionally, John Durham Peters notes that the "yearning for contact" that helps structure radio listening must forever be frustrated, since the human condition is one of always-incomplete communication.<sup>56</sup> Finally, as Paddy Scannell points out, other media forms would also have strong claims on the discourse of intimacy; he mentions that the cinematic close-up and the hand-written letter are potentially as "intimate" as radio.<sup>57</sup> This suggests that radio's privileged reputation as the intimate medium is not inherent in the technology itself or the phenomenology of sound but rather has been actively produced and asserted for so long and with such success that we have subsumed them into our listening practices: expectations of intimacy are integral to how we encounter and relate to radio. Although the industry has undergone significant transformations in the twenty-first century, radio's construction as intimate and personal remains potent today and a hallmark of the medium's distinctiveness in the landscape of

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<sup>54</sup> Douglas, *Listening In*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public*, xxv (emphasis added).

<sup>56</sup> John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 212.

<sup>57</sup> Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life*, 64, 70.



communications technologies.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to join a broader philosophical or psychological discussion of what might be meant by intimacy, the concept clearly has to do with intersubjective relations--sociologist Niklas Luhmann suggests the phrase "interpersonal interpenetration"<sup>58</sup>—with connotations of privacy, personal space, dialogue, privileged self-revelation, affinity, and domesticity, not to mention love, passion, and sexuality. In writings on radio and intimacy, it is clear that authors usually have in mind the bond that the listener feels with the speaker on the radio, a connection that produces the illusion of an unmediated, one-on-one experience. However, the intimacy that results from the speaker-listener bond is not necessarily a relationship between equals: aside from simple star power or the gendered norms that could structure the relationship between masculinized/male broadcasters and feminized/female listeners, the radio host often functioned as a more knowledgeable compatriot, a trusted guide leading the listener into mysterious worlds, unfamiliar musics, and exotic cultures.<sup>59</sup> Even the common-sense understanding of speaking as "active" and listening as "passive" structurally positions the broadcaster as dominant. In other words, radio's intimacy is rooted in multiple overlapping asymmetrical relationships that tendentially privilege and empower the speaker.

The construction of radio as intimate has two implications for the listener encountering vocal non-normativity. First, it reinforces the structural subordination of the

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<sup>58</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986), 161.

<sup>59</sup> Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 62; Douglas, *Listening In*, Chapter 9.

listener to the speaker, which inverts the culturally conditioned relations of dominance and subordination in the starrer-staree relationship characteristic of disability in visual culture. Whereas vision and the politics of staring allow the viewer to adopt a distanced position of normalcy vis-à-vis an abnormal other, radio sound offers no such subject position from which the listener can achieve empowerment, distance, or psychic separation from the disabled body. Second, the expectation of intimacy conditions listening practices based on the illusion of disintermediation and interpenetration of self and other, and this mimicry of interpersonal communication troubles the processes of normalization by which we typically separate our "normal" selves from "abnormal" others. As Connor argues, sound in general makes us particularly vulnerable to alterity<sup>60</sup>; since radio sound in particular gets filtered through listening practices of interpersonal intimacy, that vulnerability is heightened and intensified, making the alterity of disability *too close, too pervasive*. Our strategies of distancing and objectification that, in the visual and interpersonal realms, permit us to reassure ourselves of the boundaries of self and other, normalcy and abnormalcy, are destabilized by sound in general and our particular expectations of the medium of radio and its role in our lives. In this way, the social production of radio intimacy is inseparable from the compulsory able-voicedness that dominates it. The structural relations of empowerment and disempowerment that allow us to keep non-normative bodies at arms length in the visual realm are inverted in the auditory realm, making the Crip voice with its significations of a Crip body

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<sup>60</sup> Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," 209.

inseparable from a self that demands its exclusion. The radio listener, unable to maintain a safe distance from the sound of disability, instead refuses to listen at all.

### **On the Political Economy of Crip Voices**

If vocal non-normativity in radio sound challenges or even threatens audiences and enculturated listening practices, what conditions or institutions might we identify as potential fulcrums for progressive change toward a less restrictive voice culture? The unfortunate answer is that, both on the basis of the analysis above and on the evidence of radio today, this is not primarily a political economic question that can be easily addressed through changes in funding or regulatory structures.

The primary argument for a political economic explanation for pervasive able-voicedness is the simple fact of commercial radio itself as it currently exists: with the exception of comic foils for "morning-zoo" type radio shows, people with vocal disabilities are unlikely to enjoy a hiring boom in commercial radio any time soon. Professional practice, advertiser demands, and audience expectations all conspire against experimentation with non-normative voices. In contrast, public radio and alternative distribution methods such as podcasting offer somewhat more promise. Jason Loviglio has analyzed National Public Radio as a site where one can find a wider range of permitted voices, including atypically masculine-sounding female voices such as Susan Stamberg, queer voices such as David Sedaris, anomalous voices such as the "rubber-duck-voiced Sarah Vowell," and other speakers whose vocal qualities would be

unwelcome on most commercial stations.<sup>61</sup> Loviglio persuasively argues that these voices are an important part of the cultural work that NPR performs, but they are also reflective of an economic model that benefits in multiple ways from public radio sounding different than commercial radio. After all, this is the institution that kept Diane Rehm on the air—even took her show to national distribution—even as her spasmodic dysphonia was intensifying.<sup>62</sup> In this light, the Internet thread that I referenced above as evidence of listener intolerance for non-normative voices ("Most Annoying NPR Voice") is at the same time indicative of public radio's openness to putting these speakers on the air in the first place.

Nonetheless, Rehm remains—even in the universe of public radio—almost unique in her ability to maintain a career on radio with an overtly Crip voice. Other non-commercial and public interest broadcasting outlets are similarly constrained by vocal norms. For example, Mary Pat O'Malley has analyzed the program *Outside the Box*, a show for and about persons with disabilities on the Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ. She found that, in two years of the program, only one episode featured communication impairment as a topic, and in the fifteen episodes on a wide range of topics that she analyzed in depth, not a single guest with a speech impairment was interviewed.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, *Ouch!*, the BBC's disability-themed show, is significantly better at including non-normative voices; although the main hosts—all persons with disabilities

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<sup>61</sup> Jason Loviglio, "Sound Effects: Gender, Voice and the Cultural Work of NPR," *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 5, no. 2 & 3 (2007): 76.

<sup>62</sup> Diane Rehm, *Finding My Voice* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 189–201.

<sup>63</sup> Mary Pat O'Malley, "Voices of Disability on the Radio," *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders* 43, no. 1 (May-June 2008): 18–29.

themselves—have quite "good" radio voices, the show occasionally thematizes vocal disabilities and not infrequently features guests with speech impediments. While other BBC Radio programs will occasionally include performers such as Francesca Martinez (a comedienne with cerebral palsy), these are not regular gigs, and it is noteworthy that even *Ouch!* has been "demoted" from on-air broadcast to Internet-only podcast, suggesting that the BBC's commitment to disability issues and disabled voices is far from secure.

Unfortunately, then, the few public service institutions and programs that have demonstrated awareness of and sensitivity to disability issues are still far from expanding the voice culture of radio in any sustained and significant way.

Finally, it is already a truism that Internet distribution has opened up radio production to a wider range of voices and topics, and there is no shortage of disability-related radio documentaries and podcasts. This suggests that amateur and cottage production might step up and fill the gap left by professional broadcasters, although an informal sampling of the current podcast offerings on iTunes reveals that most of these programs are hosted by normatively voiced individuals and overwhelmingly feature normatively voiced guests. Even if that were to change, the more important problem with investing our hopes in amateur and DIY Internet distribution is that it allows Crip voices to remain marginalized within the radio ecosystem. Many of the disability podcasts available appear to have ceased production after a handful of episodes, suggesting that—like many short-lived attempts at podcasting on any topic—the absence of secure funding sources is a major stumbling block to sustained production. Disability-themed shows face

an additional hurdle in that, insofar as hosts and guests are themselves disabled, the practical challenges of maintaining a regular schedule of audio production can often be multiplied exponentially. It will be an extraordinary moment if a cottage-produced podcast brings greater vocal non-normativity with any regularity to more than the smallest of audiences. In short, the progressively greater inclusion of Crip voices in radio is unlikely to result from tinkering with the funding or distribution models currently available.

### **Conclusion: Crip Voices and the Implications for Communication Ethics**

"[L]istening is the invisible and inaudible enactment of the ethical relation itself; on it, everything depends."<sup>64</sup>

I have argued in this essay that the problem of Crip voices on radio is primarily one of inadequate distance to alterity: sound, especially as filtered through "the intimate medium," disturbs and frustrates our cultural strategies for relating to disability. Our enculturated engagement with radio sound allows no position from which to normalize the listener through separation from the abnormal/disabled speaker, inverting the processes that dominate our encounter with disability in visual culture. We have no place to stand, so to speak, from which to allow the non-normative voice to reassure us of our own normalcy. Furthermore, I have made the pessimistic claim that we cannot expect

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<sup>64</sup> Lisbeth Lipari, "Rhetoric's Other: Levinas, Listening, and the Ethical Response," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 45, no. 3 (2012): 242.

changes in the political economy of radio production and consumption to meaningfully address this disabling character of our social construction of radio. Perhaps the slow, difficult process of ideological struggle will continue to chip away at the subalterity of disability and reshape social meanings of impairment for the better, ultimately resulting in a diminishment of compulsory able-voicedness. Even this more optimistic position, however, must measure progressive change in decades.

If a more immediate change is to occur, it will have to emerge first and foremost from a recalibration of our communicative ethics. A brief anecdote should illustrate the issue: I once heard a student complain about one of his teachers, a South Asian woman with the British-influenced accent common on the Indian subcontinent, "I can't understand a word she's saying." Since the teacher's English was impeccable, it was obvious that the problem was not in *her* speaking, but in *his* hearing: all he could see was racial and gender difference, and thus all he could hear was unintelligibility. To understand her—and therefore to learn from her—what he really needed to do was adjust his listening.

The absence of Crip voices on the radio, similarly, is not primarily a technological problem, an aesthetic problem, or even a political economic problem. It is a social problem and derives above all from deeply rooted processes of normalization and ideologies of ability that marginalize and subordinate persons with disabilities. Clearly, no approach that fails to address social and cultural inequality along the lines of dis/ability can claim to offer a "solution" that will enable the disabled subaltern voice to

speak. Nonetheless, the realm of communication ethics does offer insights into, at the very least, an individualized response to Crip voices, one particularly suited to the affordances of radio itself and the centrality of listening to its operations. As Lisbeth Lipari has argued, "[T]he relation with alterity in communication ethics is enacted primarily through the process of listening, rather than speaking. What interrupts our dialogic engagement is not speaking, but the failure to listen for the other's alterity."<sup>65</sup> According to Lipari, what differentiates listening from hearing is the act of opening oneself to let the other in, "an enactment of responsibility made manifest through our posture of receptivity."<sup>66</sup> Lipari points out that, despite the pervasive understanding of listening as a passive activity subordinate to speaking, one that is supposed to be transparent, uncomplicated, and even "easy," listening--especially ethical listening that is open to the voice and experience of the other--is a challenging and often difficult act but one that in fact *enables* speech.<sup>67</sup>

Kate Lacey, although not writing from the perspective of communication ethics, has discussed the historical specificity of listening practices and has called for greater attention to the plurality of possible listening positions.<sup>68</sup> By reconstituting the absence of

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<sup>65</sup> Lisbeth Lipari, "Listening for the Other: Ethical Implications of the Buber-Levinas Encounter," *Communication Theory* 14, no. 2 (2004): 137.

<sup>66</sup> Lipari, "Listening for the Other."

<sup>67</sup> Lisbeth Lipari, "Rhetoric's Other." See also Lisbeth Lipari, "Listening Otherwise: The Voice of Ethics," *International Journal of Listening* 23 (2009): 44-59. Additionally, Amanda Gunn has proposed the term "invitational listening," an adaptation of Foss and Griffin's "invitational rhetoric," as a way to capture the ethical relations inherent in the act of listening and the primacy of listening in communicating across difference. Amanda Gunn, conversations with the author, 2012; Sonja K. Foss and Cynthia L. Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric," *Communication Monographs* 62 (March 1995): 1-18.

<sup>68</sup> Kate Lacey, "Towards a Periodization of Listening: Radio and Modern Life," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (2000): 279-288.



Crip voices as a problem of listening, rather than speaking, we might be able to begin redefining our enculturated responses to sound, radio, and difference that, as argued above, make sonic representations of disability so fraught. For, whatever else it might be, the absence of Crip voices on the radio represents a refusal to listen to difference and a failure to engage humanistically with persons with disabilities. Rethinking the relations between speaker and listener from the perspective of the contingency of listening practices, then, suggests that a hegemonic able-bodied listening position is not the only one available to us, and that alternative modes of organizing sound in the constitution of self-other relations is possible. And we *know* it is possible. After all, amid all the complaints online about Diane Rehm—the creatively cruel metaphors for her voice and the wiseass Facebook pages calling for her dismissal—you will also find comments like this one: "A melodious voice is NOT a requirement. A mind is. She's got one. I actually like that she speaks slowly, she makes everyone slow down and think. It's quite a concept."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> "Diane Rehm's Voice."