

The Transom Review

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Rick Moody

About Rick Moody

Rick Moody was born in New York City. He attended Brown and Columbia universities. His first novel, *Garden State*, was the winner of the 1991 Editor's Choice Award from the Pushcart Press and was published in 1992. *The Ice Storm* was published in May 1994 by Little, Brown & Co. Foreign editions have been published in twenty countries. (A film version, directed by Ang Lee, was released by Fox Searchlight in 1997.) A collection of short fiction, *The Ring of Brightest Angels Around Heaven* was also published by Little, Brown in August 1995. The title story was the winner of the 1994 Aga Khan Award from The Paris Review. Moody's third novel, *Purple America*, was published in April 1997. Foreign editions have appeared widely. An anthology, edited with Darcey Steinke, *Joyful Noise: The New Testament Revisited*, appeared in November 1997.



Rick Moody

In 1998, Moody received the Addison Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2000, he received a Guggenheim fellowship. In 2001, he published a collection of short fiction, *Demonology*, also published in Spain, France, Brazil, Germany, Holland, Portugal, Italy, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere. In May of 2002, Little, Brown & Co issued *The Black Veil: A Memoir with Digressions*, which was a winner of the NAMU/Ken Book Award, and the PEN Martha Albrand prize for excellence in the memoir. His short fiction and journalism have been anthologized in *Best American Stories 2001*, *Best American Essays 2004*, *Year's Best Science Fiction #9*, and, multiply, in the *Pushcart Prize* anthology. His radio pieces have appeared on *The Next Big Thing* and at the Third Coast International Audio Festival. His album "Rick Moody and One Ring Zero" was released in 2004, and an album by The Wingdale Community Singers was released in 2005. His forthcoming novel is entitled *The Diviners*.

Moody is a member of the board of directors of the Corporation of Yaddo. He is the secretary of the PEN American Center. And he co-founded the Young Lions Book Award at the New York Public Library. He has taught at the State University of New York at Purchase, the Bennington College Writing Seminars, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and the New School for Social Research. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Intro from Jay Allison

Radio, compared to film, music, literature or even TV, has little history of criticism. For one thing, our erratic advance scheduling and the difficulty of appointment listening discourage the critic because their usefulness to the audience is limited. That's too bad, because we could use the feedback. Now, in the age of the Internet, when radio is increasingly archived and downloadable, criticism may have a more useful function for the listener too. Rick Moody, author of *The Ice Storm*, *Demonology*, *The Black Veil*, et. al., is a radio aficionado and sometime practitioner. As our Guest on Transom, he is offering a two-part Manifesto, laying out the ways he thinks public radio is wandering into cliché, sometimes without even knowing it and sometimes out of laziness... and sometimes, perhaps, from lack of thoughtful criticism. Parts one and two of Rick's Manifesto are available now (Literature and Radio). Later on, he will post the third and fourth parts (Syntax and Collage), in which he will suggest some avenues for change. I encourage you to read his thoughts about our use of the medium and converse with him. And while you're here, check out some of [Rick's radio/audio](#).

The Construction of Humanism in Documentary Radio

Literature

Forgive me if I employ a literary analogy, in order to talk at greater length about radio. Literature is what I know best, and I think there's some overlap between what's happening there, in literary fiction, and what's happening in radio these days. So I'll start first with books.

What's happening in literary fiction, the way I see it, is the hegemony of the formulaic.

I'm not going to name names—it doesn't do any good—but even a casual familiarity with the fiction in *The New Yorker* over the course of a few months, or a glance at the work of some of the writers who have come out of the eminent Iowa Writer's Workshop in the last ten years will indicate the presence of a rather profound homogenizing force in fiction. While the writers in question know very well how to construct a perfectly calibrated story, the fact that their work often sounds the same would lead one naturally to wonder if there isn't, by reason of homogeneity, something missing from the literature of the times.

And what's missing? Without getting too technical (and I swear I'm going to talk about radio before long), the problem arguably lies with an overreliance on the trope of the epiphany. The word "epiphany," as you probably know, comes from the Greek, *epiphanyos*, for "manifest." "Epiphany" names a feast day in the Western Church, the day on which the Magi were supposed to have appeared, the day, that is, when Christ first made himself apparent to humankind. That's the legend. And so epiphany is about revelation, understanding. The light of recognition.

So far, so good.

James Joyce was likely the first writer to turn this trope of the epiphany into a kind of a reliable literary device. There were epiphanies in fiction and poetry before, as there were epiphanies in Western culture generally. There was Saul of Tarsus become Paul the Apostle on the road to Damascus. Or: Dante first encountering Beatrice in the afterlife, somewhere near the end of the *Purgatorio*. But for Joyce it was the flash of insight into self and civilization that was the strategy. (Think about Gabriel Conroy's famous speech about snow being "general in Ireland" at the end of "The Dead.") And while everyone else in Western literature didn't immediately set out to imitate Joyce (who himself went on to think quite differently about narrative and consciousness in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*) you can see how thoroughly the epiphanic moment begins to take hold: Nick Carraway realizing that Gatsby never actually reads his books. Franny Glass keeling over at the lunch table with her collegiate boyfriend. By the end of the twentieth century, it's possible to find the epiphanic structure almost anywhere you look for it, at least in contemporary American fiction.

Herein lies the problem. The epiphany, as literary gesture, has become predictable. You can even *hear* when the epiphany comes to pass at readings by literary writers. A sort of *moo*, a softly murmured lowing of assent, sweeps through the audience. The *moo*, you see, indicates that esteem for our fellow humans has been approved.

Humanist approval is well and good, but is it a genuine response, one freely entered into, if it's utterly predictable? If literary fiction too has come to refer to one thing, a kind of a story that delivers a predictable humanist epiphany in a likeable, uncontroversial character, at a predictable point in the story, then, philosophically speaking, it is no different from genre fiction. In fact, at least in terms of its strategy and its trajectory, it's not significantly different from pornography, which of course means to do one thing economically and without fail. The themes are different, but the structure (rising action, epiphany, denouement) is the same.

Oddly, the reaction in literary circles to this turn of events—the refining of story structure into something like a formula—has been muted. You would expect a little discontent by reason of frustration. But most of the discontent has been from the die-hard realists themselves. Any vestigial modernism, these days, occasions an onslaught of Bush-era anti-intellectual witch hunting that intends to wipe out anything that remains of the old disorderly speculative impulse, as in, e.g., a recent review of Jonathan Safran Foer's work that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* :

"Pomo readers work with their writers only in the sense that volunteers from an audience work with the stage hypnotist: emptying their minds from the start, smiling through one humiliation after another, and even working up a tear or two should this abruptly be demanded of them. The hoariest plot, the tritest message—these become acceptably highbrow as long as everything is tossed out in

shreds that the reader, mentally falling on hands and knees, must piece together. Older fans of prizewinning fiction have been at the game for so long that their discernment has atrophied. Perhaps the younger ones never had much to begin with. Either way, the guilelessness that once had to be willed is now reflexive."

The situation with contemporary literature, therefore, the situation that I would have you keep in the back of your mind during the discussion that follows, is this: literary fiction becomes more and more formulaic, more resistant to heterogeneity, in pursuit of a quantifiable "humanist effect," and the critical community becomes ever more vocal and ever more hysterical about kinds of work that deviate from a normative idea about what literature is and must be.

Radio

Now let me see if I can't make a rough analogy with what's happening in contemporary radio.

Radio, these days, does, more or less, three things. It features music programming, talk radio, and a kind of documentary/news format that we generally associate with National Public Radio and its affiliates. Music seems like a natural use for radio, an unassailable use for radio, since music encourages the act of listening, and what else is radio for but listening? (You won't be surprised to hear that the kind of music radio I like to listen to on the radio is free-form, independent, or college radio, where there are no rigid playlists to speak of.) Talk radio, meanwhile, seems like an *unavoidable* use for radio, a natural and reductive but wholly explicable use for the medium. Though I don't listen to much talk radio, I do feel like Howard Stern (likewise his legion of imitators) does, actually, use the medium in a compelling and savvy way. Howard Stern is all about the transmitter and the wattage and the cars stuck in rush-hour traffic. And the fact that much of the program is improvised gives it a very American flavor. If a largely improvised radio program devoted to commuters mostly concerns breasts, pornography, celebrity, sex, flatulence, and like topics, is this surprising? Not to me it isn't. It's pitched at the basest demographic: men in their twenties and thirties. No one ever went broke betting low on the tastes of the audience in question. This Stern variety of talk radio makes a bewildering and complicated world, a world in which traditional masculinity is manifestly less infallible than it was a generation or two ago, seem smaller and more explicable. Yes, tits and ass will make your life better. Yes, your life will improve if you accept the Christ or kick some Iraqi butt. I may revile the political message of much talk radio, but I am not surprised by it.

However, I mean to concern myself mainly with the third variety of radio, the documentary news part. Let's leave aside that portion of public radio programming that is merely variations on music and talk radio, i.e., "Car Talk," or "Fresh Air," or even "A Prairie Home Companion," the last of which does something radio really ought to be doing (variety) and manages to dress it up in enough nostalgia that it suddenly becomes palatable to a nation suspicious of all things new. These shows I've just mentioned are genuinely interesting. "Car Talk," especially is very interesting, although the only parts I like unstintingly are the parts that do not have to do with cars.

You hear a lot of documentary radio on NPR. It's big in the second half hour of "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered." It's often a strategy on "Marketplace." It's popular on the weekend programs. It makes up a lot of the less well-known public radio programs, such as "Living on Earth," "Studio 360," "On the Media." It's perhaps even more ubiquitous on adventurous programs like "Soundprint" or "Radio Lab."

What do I mean when I talk about documentary radio? I mean bits of programming composed of investigative pieces, where producers go out into the field, record in exotic locales (anywhere that is not a studio), meet people, and combine narrative reportage with field recordings and the voices of others. The documentary impulse means not only to describe events, but also to represent particular milieus, a windswept tundra you've never visited, or a housing project that you, middle American audience member, might shy away from venturing into.

The original concept of documentary radio is unassailable, just as the idea of mapping the globe was once unassailable, or the project of rural electrification. But like many unassailable ideas, the ascendance of the documentary, in the era of public radio, carries with it a hidden cost, and for me the hidden cost is unignorable. The cost I'm describing finds its first expression in the fact that a lot of this documentary work sounds exactly like every other radio doc you've ever heard. That is, in a medium that is largely devoted to how things sound, a medium whose vocabulary is comprised of sound, whose very language is sound, the vast majority of documentary radio pieces are nonetheless identical, featuring entirely predictable effects and entirely stylized

strategies of narrating and storytelling.

Probably some people would have arrived at this conclusion a lot sooner than I have. Theorists of the history of broadcast, for example. I am, however, slow to dissatisfaction, and especially with a resource like public radio, programming that is so much what I *do* want to hear on the radio, programming that is largely politically astute, smart, and which *does* try to give voice to the voiceless.

And yet at a certain point in the last few years I began to feel like the way the music worked (and still works) on "All Things Considered" was beginning to drive me crazy. I started to feel like the music served as a little ornamental tic in a lot of the stories. Oh, here come the *exotic sitars*, to indicate that the story is from another part of the world. Music was and is abused by "All Things Considered," notwithstanding their attempt to draw attention to the music on the web site and in their anthologies of music featured on the show. And if the regional condescension of the music (i.e., even though Bollywood films are more popular and more profitable than Hollywood films, Bollywood music is still "other" to that middle American NPR audience) is not enough, a piece of music is often boiled down to ten second or twenty seconds on a news program, whereupon it is no longer a representation of the piece from which it comes. Often a piece of music is chosen simply because it has a timely rest or a silence that will be useful for purposes of editing. Moreover, this little crumb of music is often being asked to do emotional work, to provide emotional freight, after some documentary piece, and it is thus contextually wrenched out of its setting too.

Even in shows I admire, like *This American Life*, I have come to feel that the music is used in a way that was somewhat in bad faith. Even here, music that has quite different ambitions (One Ring Zero, say, or the Tin Hat Trio, or the perennially public radio-abused Penguin Café Orchestra), is being made to ratify the wry, antic humor of some of the program's pieces. In some cases, without giving credit to the composers at all.

Soon after I began to feel that the music excerption in public radio programming was suspect, I started to feel like the sound effects, too, were heinously predictable. These field recordings occurred in spots just where they were always to be expected, and they were always *what* was expected. If it were a story about hurricanes, you would hear the wind howling by a shoreline, if the story were about construction, you would hear construction vehicles, some of them perhaps backing up and beeping in that backing up kind of way. If the setting was a housing project, you would hear the kids in the playground underneath the narrator at the opening of the piece.

Finally, even the talking heads on these documentary pieces ultimately came to seem to me just as hackneyed as the field recordings and the music. Foreordained, predictable, these sound bites remarked in just the way the reporter or producer expects them to remark. And that's without even mentioning the reporters themselves. Even the locutions of these voices is similar, with cadences that rise and fall in familiar ways, tailing up at the ends of sentences. The NPR voice is not unlike the "poetry voice" that has come to dominate all readings by American poets under forty. With the result that the reporters of public radio now largely resemble one another, such that if you do not know the number of an NPR affiliate in a strange town, all you need to do is flip around, on the left of the dial, until you hear that tone of voice.

While I admire what public radio is and has been trying to do for twenty-five years or more, I find that I have also come to disbelieve it somehow, for the simple reason that I cannot believe that all of human life and psychology, all of human events, all of human history (not to mention the lives and environment of our animal friends), can always be rendered in *exactly the same way*. Suddenly, a medium that I love, that is, because I love thinking with my ears, begins to seem deeply suspect to me.

What, I therefore ask, is documentary radio trying to do? In a way, it's trying to do exactly what contemporary fiction trying to do. It is trying to do something Aristotelian. It is trying to provoke in, the listener, you the fabled epiphany. It is trying to enact a revelation, a manifestation of the truth. It is trying to make you aware of your surroundings, by exposing you to new environments, and new subcultures, especially those you might not know about, from off in your middle American redoubt. In short, it is trying to create in you the impulse of humanism.

Humanism is a worthy goal for the literature and arts of the period. Of course. It's indisputable. The assertion of the essential dignity and value of humankind, who can argue with it? Certainly not I. The question, however, is if the goal of humanism, the assertion thereof, can survive the problem of its representation in the medium of audio. As with contemporary literature, contemporary radio has apparently found that it has to *construct* a certain rigid notion of humanism, in order to effect this humanist epiphany in you and me. And yet as soon as the construction becomes predictable, homogenized, devoid of surprise, I for one no longer hear the humanism at all. In fact, it starts to sound manipulative, controlling, condescending, perhaps even a little sinister. It's like

piece of music that has been so compressed in the studio that the dynamic variation has been entirely squeezed out of it.

(In part two, next week: suggestions for ways to use the documentary, and radio in general, more creatively...)

Miguel Macias - July 26, 2005 - # 4

When at the last edition of the Third Coast Conference, Rick Moody expressed his opinions on the way public radio documentaries were sounding all very much alike, not many reacted in the audience. I was sitting in the one of the last rows and heard very carefully what Rick meant, or at least, what I wanted those words to mean. I started clapping, not many followed. There are many radio producers, or audio producers for that matter, that don't even bother anymore with the NPR network. Some of the best, in my opinion, gave up a while ago. But they do exist. Now, Rick Moody seems to be one that didn't give up yet (and I hope will battle for a long time)...

There are certain rules, on how to construct a documentary piece for radio, that were accepted sometime ago, and I am sure were innovative at the time, and don't seem to be questioned anymore. But that is not the worst part of it... the worst part is that if you question them, you must not know what you are talking about.

One day my friend Lu, after listening to my endless complains told me a couple of things... "Miguel, I don't think these people are trying to make radio evolve, or are very concerned about the evolution of radio, or about innovation in radio... they like what they do, and they want to keep doing it"....

I suspect it has to do with economy but... I don't think it is a coincidence that innovative art, counterculture, in radio and apparently in literature is sort of difficult to find. But if the actual artists (I won't dare to call myself one, I will just call you an artist) open the possibility of assigning the quality of artistic to journalistic radio... aren't the artists setting themselves up for a fiasco where, they will never win time on the radio and on top of that... they will lose their identity as artists? ...

At a time I thought (and I still think this way in some degree) that the lack of the smallest opportunity to create innovative radio, structures, languages to communicate ideas and emotions, would never allow a new language to be developed. If the smallest trial is criticized as ineffective, how can a producer ever get to develop anything new? We do need more than one opportunity to become successful at something new! Lately I have started becoming a little more... realistic? Or pessimistic? In a recent posting addressed to Gwen Macsai I said (and please forgive me for this horrible exercise of narcissism where I am about to quote myself): "Us producers, or some of us, are beginning to not waist too much time thinking about the broadcast destination of creative radio, or radio that simply doesn't fit into the standards of public radio today. I think that independent producers could start taking a little pride and say... I am producing this piece for transom or any other great website that is publishing fantastic content. It will air on transom, it will air on the mp3 players of people, it will air on CDs that I send around. And I hope that the internet becomes independent enough, quickly enough to not have to sell out its position of lead in the evolution of radio and sound." Should we do this? Should we take some pride? Should we stop looking at NPR as the best place for creative radio? When did innovation in the arts happen within the surroundings of the establishment?

Mike Janssen - July 28, 2005 - # 6

There's great pressure these days on journalism to be presented in ways that are instantly palatable to the hypothetical archetype of the harried public-radio listener who, like a modern-day Shiva, is slurping coffee and brushing hair and dialing a cell phone and avoiding a collision with an aggressive driver. This person is not in the proper mindset for processing anything more complicated than the most straightforward of news accounts.

News execs at NPR say it's the member stations that want shorter, tauter reports. I guess the stations get this from listeners? A good question. One I should be investigating, I suppose.

But there is room for art in journalism. There had better be. Or, at least, there's no reason that art and journalism need be incompatible. Both are about truth-telling and the framing of experience, no? But some smaller minds see a conflict. Picasso (I think) said that "Art is the lie that reveals truth." Meanwhile, journalists rightly recoil at the thought that they are in any way lying, and some public-radio hosts and reporters (I hear)

resist the notion that they are in any way performers.

But journalists can be artists. They can learn to think of themselves as both telling the truth and as using artistic techniques to bring truth into bolder relief without sacrificing their commitments to objectivity and fairness.

Perhaps the rise of podcasting will offer these artist-journalists a broader avenue for reaching listeners. Arty journalism--or at least the kind I'd like to hear more of--really does require a little more time, patience and quiet on the part of the listener. More than NPR's dominant style of journalism, it is appointment listening.

Cary Burkett - July 28, 2005 - # 7

Without getting into the question of whether a radio reporting style is or can be art, I think it's clear that there are qualities they have in common. And both are subject to the same forces of evolution that cause the cycles of fashion.

Public radio reporting style has evolved through a certain amount of "natural selection". What works effectively is kept and replicated, what does not work is discarded. Those who innovate a technique are replaced by those who analyze and perpetuate the successful aspects of it. This often happens on a subconscious level. A certain 'meme' develops around what is perceived as the most effective way to get across a story.

But as Rick suggests, the environment eventually changes. Those previously successful techniques become less effective because of their predictability. At some point a beneficial "mutation" from some innovative individual changes the course. Its very difference becomes an asset, sounding fresh and appealing. It starts being imitated, analyzed and replicated. Eventually it becomes the basis for a whole new style which becomes the 'meme' of the day.

But as long as the old style hasn't reached that critical mass of environmental change, such a mutation cannot take hold. It will be expunged as an aberration.

So the question is, has the general listening public reached that critical mass of environmental change with regards to the formula style of Public Radio reporting? I have strong doubts that it has. For many listeners it still has a flavor of being "different" and an "alternative" style to the sound bite approach of commercial stations. A lot of listeners have only discovered this approach in the past few years. It has yet to pale. And people have a strong tolerance for the familiar. I think it may be awhile yet before a "mutation" has a real chance to change things in any significant way.

But it does seem as if a wind of change may be starting to blow. A breeze at the moment, perhaps, but building in strength, and perhaps enough to eventually bring about that environmental change.

I look forward to Rick's ideas for innovation.

Jonathan Mitchell - July 28, 2005 - # 8

I wonder if it's a question of individual inclination and perspective. Speaking from my own perspective, I would be bored adhering to certain stylistic traits that I perceive as commonplace. In fact, the reason I work in radio in the first place is in large part BECAUSE of my interest in exploring certain ideas I have about ways of presenting narrative with sound, ideas which aren't necessarily rooted in a traditional journalistic model. My background is in music, and I feel my work is heavily influenced by all kinds of media that have surrounded me pretty much since birth. How I choose to go about doing something is a product of what I'm trying to do, and how my brain deciphers and processes my options for how to most effectively achieve that. That's going to be different for everyone, that's what makes me me and you you and anyone anyone. Some people actively seek out ways to develop that and grow stylistically and creatively, and continue to do so throughout their life. Others have different priorities and/or areas of exploration which happen to interest them more.

I see it as sort of like choosing what we will wear each day. If you think about it, we all have a very similar set of clothing options -- we can shop wherever we want (financial considerations aside). Yet if you walk down the

street, there is a really wide variety of ways that people are dressed -- it's a reflection of how we process the world as individuals, and how we perceive our role in society. How we go about achieving whatever "sound goal" we might have is similarly a function of how we see the world. I think of success as a matter of an individual's capability to anticipate how one's prospective audience will respond, or perhaps simply one's ability to make something which will be of value to prospective ears.

It seems like the question at hand is, what role does the environment play in shaping an individual's inclinations? And to what extent are the opportunities given to us limiting our creative development? Are certain perspectives being ignored out of fear?

My experience may be unusual, but I actually think that I've been encouraged by my peers and employers to do the most interesting, creative, thoughtful, provocative, unconventional, artistic work I can possibly muster up. The work of mine that I feel has been most rewarded by others is consistent with my perception of which work best achieves those goals. I don't feel public radio is adverse to this kind of work -- in fact I see it as a place where it's actually possible to thrive by doing so.

But ultimately, public radio is simply a portal -- clearly there are many other ways of getting audio work out to an audience. I really think it's a question of where one's desired audience goes for the kind of work one wants to create, and how accessible that portal is to the person who is creating the work. And while new portals can always be created, I think there's a threshold for how many an audience will tolerate. In the end, people will gravitate towards portals that they deem reliably satisfying.

Rick Moody - July 29, 2005 - # 9

I'm in agreement that there are a number of developments on the horizon that could genuinely change public radio and the radio documentary, and this is something I'm going to deal with when I post the second half of the essay. Certainly podcasting, at the present moment, seems like a potentially revolutionary change, one that could fly in the face of the brevity that the radio networks claim the listeners want. It's absolutely something to keep an eye on.

Miguel Macias - July 29, 2005 - # 10

I like to make a distinction between media professionals (anyone working in media) and journalists (a specific role in media). I would love to find more artists-journalists. But art doesn't follow many rules (or it shouldn't) and journalism does (and it should). So the challenge for those who want to merge both is a big one. When I express my concern about the opposition of art and journalism I do, not because I think that they are incompatible but because I don't think that journalism should be called art in the cases when it's not and that art should be called journalism when it is not. Both terms, in my opinion, are often used loosely. That hurts both fields. Now... Specific shows in public radio have specific limitations. But in general, I believe that radio, commercial and not commercial is very concerned with one little thing... money. Art can be and should be on the media. But what media is the best for the evolution of radio documentary? Executives are of course going to be reluctant to program formats that have not been proven effective. The only way to prove something effective is by allowing its proper development. And that development takes time. What programmer is going to risk audience and therefore money to give a good chunk of time and time overtime for new formats to be developed? That's, I guess, why the space for new formats is limited to a handful of specific shows that have their limitations as well. Jonathan posts a few very interesting questions... What role does the environment play in shaping an individual's inclinations? An impossible to determine one. But incredibly powerful. The same way that the environment plays a role in me not wearing a skirt during the summer when it would actually be extremely comfortable. And to what extent are the opportunities given to us limiting our creative development? In a great extent. Art, and media are only good when there is a certain consensus around its goodness. If someone is creating something absolutely new and brilliant but the audience does not recognize it as so... most likely the producer will give up that orientation. Are certain perspectives being ignored out of fear? I believe so. Fear of having no audience. Not many want to be an artist, or a recognized professional only at dinner time in their own home... for those who for one reason or the other don't find the way (or don't want to find it) to place their work in specific shows, a place like the internet (and in this category I include podcasting since this is not anything else than an automated system to download an MP3 into your computers) appears as a great venue for the proper development of a new language.

Michael Fitzhugh - July 31, 2005 - # 11

I think some of what you're finding most unpalatable Rick is what Allan Coukell calls "deadline radio" -- "acts and tracks" storytelling. You may have been in his session at Third Coast, but for those who weren't, you can listen to it here: <http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org/ra/brdeadline.ram> Some alternate story structures he touched on: - A solo news/analysis report from the field, painting an intimate as-I-saw it story - A you-are-there account which attempts to go beyond scene setting that shows us something with sound instead of telling us in tracks. There are few more too, including a great example of news dramatization... which reminds me, how about those fantastic Nina Totenberg dramatizations of Supreme Court reporting... reenactment as reporting?

Rick Moody - August 1, 2005 - # 12

Michael, when I was researching the essay I was listening to some archived docs in order to make sure I was up to date, and I heard this truly incredible piece on Soundprint called "Wannabes," by a disabled Australian producer. It was a piece about men (mostly men) who electively choose to remove various parts of their own bodies. The producer, whose name I'm forgetting (but I'll find it out before I post next), really foregrounded her own disability for the piece, so that there was a kind of mutual investigation going on between herself and the subjects. It was, that is, completely subjective reporting. Nothing objective about it. I thought it was some of the best documentary radio I've heard in years. And I suppose it does just what you're recommending.

Geo Beach / Tempest studios - August 1, 2005 - # 15

In Manifesto Pt 1 - Literature, Rick Moody writes, *What's happening in literary fiction is the hegemony of the formulaic. A glance at the work of some of the writers who have come out of the eminent Iowa Writer's Workshop in the last ten years will indicate the presence of a rather profound homogenizing force in fiction. The fact that their work often sounds the same would lead one naturally to wonder if there isn't, by reason of homogeneity, something missing from the literature of the times. And what's missing? The problem arguably lies with an overreliance on the trope of the epiphany.* In her essay "DOING TIME: My years in the creative-writing gulag" (*Harper's*, July 2005, p 65-71), Lynn Freed exposes some of these same issues. Discussing workshops and MFA programs, she writes, *The average MFA student is [only] familiar with contemporary fiction, particularly that which has emerged from writing programs like his own. The books [produced by the workshops] seem a little too clever, a little heavy on craft and light on substance.* ...Moody's comparison of current literature to genre writing and pornography is insightful. It represents two simultaneous contradictory impulses: 1) Form over content (pick one position from Column A, follow with one from Column B, end with money shot); and 2) an emotional rather than aesthetic evaluation of content ("I like horses, therefore I like this story about horses, even though it is a terribly-written story."). The choice of contemporary fiction as metaphor is illuminating; a subsequent post offers some explications on Moody's apt criticisms of the current state of public radio.

Geo Beach / Tempest studios - August 1, 2005 - # 16

In Manifesto Pt 1 - Radio, Rick Moody writes, *In a medium that is largely devoted to how things sound, a medium whose vocabulary is comprised of sound, who[se] very language is sound, the vast majority of documentary radio pieces are nonetheless identical, featuring entirely predictable effects and entirely stylized strategies of narrating and storytelling.* Five years ago at PRPD, outgoing ATC producer Ellen Weiss said, "I was getting kind of tired of hearing pieces start with the sound of gravel -- or starting with sound at all. Obviously it was predictable, and it wasn't very interesting." There's been some progress under Chris Turpin at ATC, but *Morning Edition* has devolved into morning television. And, compared to other industries and media, the changes have been infinitesimal and glacial, Sisyphean against the monolith of 635 Mass Ave. Moody continues, incisively, *Even the talking heads on these documentary pieces ultimately came to seem to me just as hackneyed as the field recordings and the music.*

Foreordained, predictable, these sound bites remarked in just the way the reporter or producer expects them to remark. I addressed these and other issues of authorship as opposed to production in an essay for the Winter 2005 edition of *AIRSPACE: The Quarterly Journal for Public Radio Producers*, "In the beginning was the word" (p. 11-- <http://www.airmedia.org/airspace/pdf/Winter2005.pdf>)

The precarious nature of writing in public radio is today most evident in commentary [the ultimate "talking head"space]. Once unique and a strength, commentary has become a weak spot throughout the industry, a place not just of missing the boat, but of drowning. There are the old dogs and the funny accents, mouthing text that when reviewed for actual content is flatter than paper. There are the "usual suspects" - the analysts from the *LA Times* and CNN, and, well, you know. Because you've already heard it all before.

The problem isn't ameliorated by "commentators" chosen for geographic-gender-racial-economic-differentlyabled-generational "diversity" but whose ideas are in fact threadbare and retreaded. A slick biography doesn't redress the problem of public radio recycling and rebroadcasting Dead Whitebread Mailorder "thought". It merely masks it.

Ultimately, Moody concludes,

I find that I have come to disbelieve public radio somehow, for the simple reason that I cannot believe that all of human life and psychology, all of human events, all of human history (not to mention the lives and environment of our animal friends), can always be rendered in exactly the same way.

That "exact way" is precisely the triumph of form over content, just as the humanism Moody parses is the "emotional content" that rules what makes its way past gatekeepers and onto public radio. We need what Nieman Foundation curator Robert Giles identified as "fresh idea[s] as" an unflinching caution against the structure of daily journalism, where the tendency is to sum up today's news with a neat conclusion".

What's curious is that the public radio audience is perhaps more adept than any other at erasing artificial boundaries between journalism and art.

Geo Beach / Tempest studios - August 1, 2005 - # 17

Miguel Macias rightly brings art into consideration but dismisses the prospects on broadcast radio. Cary Burkett posits a "critical mass of environmental change" but doubts it yet pertains. That's empirically correct, though it seems NPR branding has not just sewn a label on alternative radio but altered its very fabric. Listeners may simultaneously prefer public radio to commercial fare while deploring the (remarkably unlikelike) predictability. Michael Fitzhugh recommends Allan Coukell, which is sound advice. But most cogently, Mike Janssen writes on "Art vs. journalism" and declares, "There is room for art in journalism. There had better be." This of course is the mantra which underpins the narrative journalism movement. In his wonderful book about "fish-eating, whiskey, death, and rebirth" in Fulton Fish Market (*Old Mr. Flood*) Joseph Mitchell clarified that he "wanted these stories to be truthful rather than factual, but they are solidly based on facts. I am obliged to half the people in the market for helping me get these facts." Truthful rather than factual. Those who know Joseph Mitchell's detailed reportage at the *New Yorker* understanding there's more fact in his fiction than in most contemporary journalism. And, now that Fulton Fish Market is vanished, what will you read to know the truth of the place? No recitation of data will tell the story like Old Mr. Flood. Could it possibly happen today in public radio? Evidently not nearly enough - hardly at all, else Moody wouldn't critique and others concur. But happily, it has happened today in public radio, on NPR's *All Things Considered* , in fact, and you must listen to Long Haul Productions' "The Lord God Bird" (<http://prx.org/pieces/5182>) to begin imagining new ways "there had better be."

"The Lord God Bird" works at the nexus of news and art, an amalgam which personifies the core values of public radio listeners. The ivory-billed woodpecker affords the peg for this piece about "a place where you can call a wrong number and talk for five minutes", but in truth that's just the excuse for a human look at what "news" means to people, like us, making their way on the

planet. Straight journalism has failed so often in this essential storytelling, and Collison, Meister, and Stevens succeed so heartfully, one can hope other producers will be emboldened and other gatekeepers admonished. <http://prx.org/reviews/4061>

Jonathan Mitchell - August 2, 2005 - # 18

...I think the best way to critique something is through action. No one's holding a gun to anyone's head and making them produce crappy radio. Just do the best you can. Who cares if Joe Gatekeeper doesn't want it? Move on. Find someone who does. How do you get someone to pay attention? This is a question every artist in every discipline has been faced with since, like, FOREVER. Am I missing something by thinking this way? Or am I somehow missing the point of this discussion? Having said that, I found your essay really insightful, especially the analogies to literature clichés. Seems like in large part you're talking about avoiding clichés, and posing the question, "at what point does something become a cliché?" In general, I wish it were easier to find really deep criticism of radio, the way it permeates the worlds of literature, music, and the other arts. If I were to complain about anything missing from radio right now, that tops my list.

Rick Moody - August 4, 2005 - # 19

I admire your spirit and enthusiasm. I do not entirely share your blind trust in the notion that "if it speaks to people it will find its audience." Simply because I think institutional power is always lazy. And I feel the same way about books these days, where many good manuscripts, in my view, are going unpublished (I'm thinking of any number of my best students here). However, there are signs of change (and I swear part two is done and will be posted soon), and being positive and pro-active does, without a doubt, create opportunities, and that's to be admired greatly. Jay Allison, by the way, reminds me to mention low-wattage FM, which is definitely promising!

Jonathan Mitchell - August 4, 2005 - # 20

I guess what I'm saying is that if one's goal is simply to get their work out there, I don't feel a strong need to rely too heavily on traditional, institutional models for distribution, when all you really need to do is make a copy and give it to someone. However, I'll admit that distribution on a mass scale is a different story. I actually produced a radio piece in 2003 that made a point similar to the one you're making. (Actually, it's a profile of a documentary that made that point, which isn't exactly the same thing, but anyway...) It was about a film called "Stone Reader", directed by Mark Moscovitz. It's about how great books get forgotten. He talks about the book "The Stones of Summer" by Dow Mossman (which eventually got republished because of the film). in case you're interested, the piece is here: <http://www.wnyc.org/studio360/showfundraiser03.html> it's not an earth-shattering piece from a radio documentary perspective (as I said it's a short doc about a long doc), but the piece does not use narration so it takes a somewhat unconventional approach to the subject matter, and I think his story is interesting. As a point of comparison, it may be interesting to note that one of the big NPR daily magazines ran a story about the same film, and handled it in a much more conventional way (2-way interview w/clips), so listening to the two pieces side by side may make for a good comparison of different ways to cover the same thing using two different stylistic approaches. the npr version can be heard here: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1301685>

Edgar Rust - August 4, 2005 - # 21

Is it possible that part of what's going on with NPR is that it's suffering under this country's academic honor roll?...I'd lay a fair bet that most of your current NPR decision-makers are former school paper editors, secretaries general of model U.N.'s, debate club captains, A/V department problem solvers, and similarly feathered folks. Which I'm not saying is bad, but I am suggesting such folk were often cliquish (as most of us were in our own ways) in high school and that they stand a fair chance of bringing certain us-and-them notions and values--wittingly or not--out in their profession. And, further, that maybe this plays into the homogeneity

you're seeing. I do only know a handful of NPR folk on which I'm pinning this possibly very unfair stereotype, but I ask if this doesn't maybe explain why Car Talk (Click & Clack I bet weren't 4.0ers, even if they are in Cambridge) and Prairie Home Companion (not being exactly high brow) seem so relatively interesting to you...I guess I'm just suggesting what we hear is partly attributable to another case of class insularity--or at least blinkeredness--choking off what's supposed to be an outlet for the voices of the public, including those other kids in the back rows of their high school classrooms.

The Construction of Humanism in Documentary Radio (Part Two)

Syntax

I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means for it; the desire is there; the things to be known are infinite; the people who can employ themselves at this task exist. Why do we suffer? From too little: from channels that are too narrow, skimpy, quasi-monopolistic, insufficient. There is no point in adopting a protectionist attitude, to prevent "bad" information from invading and suffocating the "good." Rather, we must multiply the paths and the possibility of comings and goings.

--Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher"

What is to be done?

One rejoinder to my earlier remarks would of course be to say that the documentary form in contemporary radio adheres to a certain *syntax*. That is, a certain deployment of field recording and spot music and talking heads is the very syntax that documentary requires to do its job. Literature requires nouns and verbs and modifiers to do its job, radio requires talking heads and field recordings. This may be true, up to a point. However, when you listen to earlier periods of radio, you find a much greater tolerance for discontinuous elements, for longer quotations from the speaking subjects in the pieces, a triumph of languor over brevity, a willingness to let field recordings *be* field recordings. Genuine sound effects, wonder, fiction, all of these things had their essential roles in radio, in contrast to what we find now.

Which is to say that if, arguably, there are syntactical elements to a documentary approach, then these syntactical elements are not fixed in nature, but rather fluctuate according to the fashion of a moment. This is especially true, it seems to me, in the blind adherence to brevity. When I was at the Third Coast Audio Festival last year, I heard more than one producer say that one of the great dangers of radio is that someone might *turn the dial*. Every documentary program needs to be alert to this possibility that an A.D.D.-afflicted listener might, in the end, give this dial a spin. In this way do we give away our the whole notion of pacing to the most impatient among us. The remarks of speakers in various documentary pieces are made ever shorter, until there is no complexity of character constructed in the piece, and no room for any idea that takes longer than a few seconds to argue. Of course, you do this long enough and the listener will no longer know that there is another way of rendering the human voice in the act of speaking.

A second rejoinder might be to point out that print journalism, too, has its clichés (the *New York Times*, for example, just ran its annual or biennial summer photograph of children frolicking in the spume of an open hydrant). It has its hackneyed stylings, as does television news (the bastard child of the documentary arts), as does documentary cinema. Why pick on radio? The answer to this question is simply that I pick on radio because I *care*. And it is no rationale to say that because other media want for imagination and creativity that radio should somehow be exempted or be held to the same low standard that we might use to judge the nightly news on network television.

Having attempted to dispense with some of the criticisms, therefore, I would like to move onto some suggestions.

My first idea about how to improve radio programming is therefore to stop worrying so much about people turning the dial. If you are intending to represent humanism, if you are trying to depict people as they talk and think, these abbreviations are doing a disservice to your intention, because human life is not lived in minute-and-a-half segments. In human life, changes can arise dramatically, but they can also take place imperceptibly, over years.

Another prejudice at the Third Coast Festival had to do with fidelity to the truth. The documentarians had, in my experience, an almost cult-like belief that there is such a thing as objective truth in documentary radio, that a

tape recording can be identical with an event or narrative or *out there* in the world, when in fact a recording, objectively speaking, is just some ones and zeroes on a memory chip. It can't be otherwise. And since perfect fidelity is impossible in this medium, since an apple is an apple and an orange is an orange, why is not subjectivity just as good? At least on occasion? This was part of the idea, it seems to me, in the early incarnations of *This American Life*. That a powerful personality, and a strong idea about the tragicomedy of the world can be just as "true" as the hard news.

Furthermore, if perfect fidelity is impossible, then why can't a mix of a straight-ahead documentary approach and *art* be a part of public radio. The public radio world certainly tolerates documentary work *about* art and artists and writers (these profiles being among the more formulaic spots in public radio programming), but it certainly isn't very good at collaborating with art. For example, one of the best programs out of WNYC in New York, *The Next Big Thing*, perennial winner of awards, and a show that younger producers have looked to with reverence and awe, had its wings clipped this year by its parent station, ostensibly for budgetary reasons. *The Next Big Thing* (for which I contributed a number of pieces), had a big, voracious appetite for the non-linear, the unusual, the artful. It embraced recordings of people skating in Wollman Rink without voice over at all, or long memoirs about Allen Ginsberg that seemed non-critical of his unusual romantic life, it embraced Jonathan Ames playing cards with his great aunt, etc. This seemed to me just the direction to go in.

Avoid brevity, celebrate fiction. These are two of my morsels of advice, and my third bit of advice is deliberately reverse foreground and background. The way a news story always sits on some mulch of background information. Why does it have to be like this? There's not an objective reason, beyond syntactical fashion, when oftentimes the background is the information that people need to hear. It's the mediation of the reporter's voice that is often the big lie. Accordingly, the humans in the piece can't be human, can't prompt the humanist epiphany, unless they're allowed to appear without editorial intercession.

A fourth suggestion, along similar lines, would be to make the music central to the work, perhaps even "diegetic," to use the cinematic term. Let the music endanger or preclude the narration. Because the narration, ideally, is really just a kind of music, seen in the correct light, and its privileged position is, as I've said, arbitrary. If the privileged position of content-oriented language is disturbed, new kinds of ideas are generated, and new possibilities for meaning.

Which leads me to venture a suggestion about language itself. Language, words, the music of language are what documentary news is made of (in part), the same language that makes poetry or excellent prose, or drama, etc. Why so dull and flat? And here we are obliged to recall the original section of this manifesto, the section about literature. It's hard not to conclude that just as there is a resistance to musical prose in contemporary writing there is a resistance in radio to an artful or even marginally creative use of language, as well. In addition to the humanist epiphany, which radio tries to summon in just the way the apocryphal monkey taps on the button in the corner in cage in order that he might procure his opiates, radio and literature both, in their mainstream evocations, rely on a diminished idea of language.

My suggestion is to think *against* the content-oriented language that is used for most documentary radio, and to try to think a little bit about how a more encyclopedic, kaleidoscopic language mirrors the more encyclopedic and kaleidoscopic world. A language of celebration and mutability is more about the human spirit than an ostensibly objective news language that is not, in fact, objective at all. And, of course, the narrower the vocabulary, the narrower the horizons ahead of us in the landscape, for all of us. The fewer words we use, the simpler sentences, the more difficult it becomes later to call up the complex means to render a more complicated world.

So, as regards documentaries: avoid brevity, celebrate fiction, abbreviate the role of the narrator, play with foreground and background, make music central, utilize the spirit of the arts, make the language sing. *Play in general*. At one time, radio was noted for drama and serial narrative. At one time, people gathered around the radio to hear the weekly updates of serial fiction programs. It's unlikely this will ever happen in the same way again, but does that mean that radio must abdicate its former glory entirely?

Collage

There are many glimmers of hope, I think.

There is, on the one hand, the hegemony of the formulaic in public radio. There is the wiping out of shows that feature alternatives, like *The Next Big Thing*. Obviously, I find these developments dispiriting. But there are

glimmers of hope.

The revolution has to come from out of the mainstream. The mainstream is controlled by money, power, and politics, and as such is suspect. At one point, "Morning Edition," was the revolution, but as with many revolutions, it got soft, and it began accepting a repetition of tried and true programming ideas, instead of looking to the margins of radio for the possibility of ongoing innovation. Of course, the industry leader has no reason to change, no matter what the field, unless there is genuine pressure from another direction.

And maybe there is pressure. I'm thinking not only of the Web, where sites like Kenny Goldsmith's UbuWeb (and of course Transom) serve as repository for new sounds and new ways of thinking about audio. And there is Internet radio in general. And there is satellite radio, which, at least for the moment, is willing to investigate niche-programming opportunities long forsaken for by the dinosaurs of Infinity, Clear Channel, and National Public Radio. But I'm also thinking of podcasting, which is used regularly on the Transom site, and elsewhere. The iPod makes inevitable, or at least very likely, certain new ways of listening. For one, the iPod listener is in control of the *when* and *where* of the broadcast, with the result that the listening can take place when the audience is maximally equipped for concentration and receptivity. Second, the iPod listener in most cases is extremely tolerant of collage-oriented programming, since he or she probably makes regular use of the *shuffle* capability on his or her device. Certain commercial radio formats are already said to be catering to this temperament of the iPod habitué. How would a public radio programmer think like an iPod user?

Well, first, this programmer, this documentarian, might be thinking more creatively about collage and about non-linearity. The iPod arrives at a moment when sampling, in Hip Hop and electronica, have become regular parts of culture. Culture, in this era, is recombinant, and it is probably recombinant because (in a time of global interdependence) there is no difference between the cultures of the developing world and the industrialized world. Culture is all thrown together now, and as with the stew of subatomic particles that makes up matter and the fundamental forces, little bits of things are always annihilating their opposites, existing only briefly enough to leave traces and allusions behind. This collage-oriented and non-linear way of viewing the world, therefore, is the humanism of this moment, it's how the people live and breathe, and if documentary radio would harness the spirit of humanism, it would capture it in the style in which this humanism is lived.

These are hopeful developments, developments that put radio back in the hands of the user, that empower the listener with respect to the medium of radio, instead of leaving this listener passive at the apprehension of an increasingly successful, but increasingly detached public radio, one that is, in fact, estranged from the lives of its listeners. The collage-oriented nature of *The Next Big Thing*, *Radio Lab*, and *Soundprint* suggests what's going to happen next, but if radio outlets on the Web can make themselves felt to a larger public, the results in the future are even more potentially interesting. For documentary makers on the ground the possibilities ahead may well be far more exciting than they are now.

Jackson Braider - August 5, 2005 - # 25

...I love the way Rick gently lobs a hand grenade among pubrad devotees. I admire the desire of colleagues to protect the people who speak to us. So let me start with a simple question: how do you define the line between noise and content in your reporting?

Rick Moody - August 5, 2005 - # 26

I love noise. Or maybe I don't believe such a thing exists. If you listen properly, as I believe John Cage said on a number of occasions, everything sounds beautiful. I could go on this way at great length, but then I would, for certain, be missing the great virtue of much of Cage's output: compaction.

Chris Ho - August 7, 2005 - # 27

We seem to be at a point in time where we are lingering in a post-postmodern funk. The pendulum between the

necessity of substance and the purity of form can only reach so far before it swings back. And round and round we go.

In the wake of this motion, the devices we discover become adopted and implemented until the new tarnishes once again to the norm...but this action keeps our little slice of 'now' from gathering too much grass.

Brecht's attempt to satirize the ultimate form of his time led to his creation of the "Threepenny Opera"; the musical score poked at the convention with a discord of profanity, and his sets created a space which he hoped would remove the 'fourth wall' of the play.

But much to his chagrin, songs like "Mac the Knife" made it into the popular consciousness. People simply liked the tune. Brecht saw this as a failure, but this failure resulted in an extremely popular play that we now hold up to the light as modernism.

Dale Short - August 9, 2005 - # 28

...The true avant-garde in any field serves an important function, but how much of it remains relevant and memorable as art? To me, it's not a question of WHETHER to shape material, but of recognizing how much shaping is too much, and seeing warning signs that we're overdoing or underdoing that orderliness. I'd be interested in hearing your suggestions as to spotting those red flags, and also more examples of radio pieces (and of fiction, for that matter) that you and others feel is productively pushing the envelope in that regard. I've learned a lot from the samples posted so far. Also, could you please elaborate on two suggestions you make in Part 2: "A willingness to let field recordings BE field recordings" and "think against content-oriented language"?

Rick Moody - August 12, 2005 - # 29

...I imagine that letting field recordings BE involves less intrusion, less editing, less context. In the unedited long version of the essay, I spoke a little bit about the theory of the "long take" in cinema, and how this syntactical notion was meant to approximate how we see things in life. (Another good example might be the excellent documentaries of Frederick Wiseman.) I mean something similar: if a recording of kids playing at the housing project doesn't have the guy speaking over it about how violent the project is, well, then you learn something much more interesting about these kids. The kids are no longer wallpaper and can conceivably be seen in some more true light.

Content-oriented language is language that believes that it has no style. There really is no such language. But for the sake of argument, let's say that there kind of IS a flat, unornamented NPR house style for narration. To the extent that this is true, this style is about slaying language, dumbing it down, making it less than it actually is in all its glory, both high and low. I am advocating avoiding dumbing down the language. I am advocating grandiosity and solecism and poetry and colloquialism.

Laura Vitale - August 13, 2005 - # 30

As a beginning producer who has found herself wondering if there is a place for ambitious but "artsy" work in the current radio climate, this discussion has been educational and uplifting.

As educated and uplifted as I am now, though, I still feel ignorant about outlets for creative work in the US and internationally. The Next Big Thing was where I looked first for creative work, but it died...

Jonathan Mitchell writes that he has faith that good work will find an audience. Rick, maybe you disagree, but producers like me don't really have a choice but to make stuff without a possibility for broadcast. Do you disagree? Where should I pitch my weirdo ideas? Jonathan, which are these audiences that have ultimately received your experiments? I'd love to find more potential outlets for creative work, whether it's in NY or some corner of Europe.

I thought that the Audible Picture Show was an exciting part of the last Third Coast Festival. <http://www.221.pair.com/mhulse/audiblepictureshow.html> Thanks to all who have posted.

Dale Short - August 13, 2005 - # 31

In addition to the resources here at Transom, I've found the Public Radio Exchange (www.prx.org) a good place to hear a wide range of producers' work, traditional and otherwise. You can upload samples of your stories, and stations audition and license them for a modest fee. The Association of Independents in Radio (www.airmedia.org) is a great clearinghouse for places to pitch your ideas.

Like you, I hated to see "The Next Big Thing" bite the dust. Two other shows I listen to with interest, though they're not necessarily as up-front experimental as TNBT, are PRI's "Weekend America" (available as podcast, www.weekendamerica.org) and "Studio 360" (www.studio360.org). I'm told that both are very receptive to pitches from new talent.

Jonathan Mitchell - August 14, 2005 - # 32

in response to Laura Vitale's questions/comments...

I think it all depends on the nature of the work you want to create, and your expectations for who might want to hear it.

You could always start your own website or blog, and advertise it by putting a link at the bottom of your emails. Link to friends' sites from yours, and have them link to yours in return. This might generate a small audience among friends, especially if you update your site regularly. As examples, check out these blogs by radio producers:

- <http://notetheslantoftheovals.blogspot.com/>
- <http://brokenbulb.org/>
- <http://www.toeradio.org/>

And there are great website venues (that you probably already know about): Transom, Third Coast, and Hearing Voices are some of my favorites. The content on these sites is curated, so you can't just put things up there. But the stuff that's there is always worth hearing.

Another promising resource is PRX, where stations might choose to license your piece (although the money you'd get is negligible, a token really). It's also a great place to get feedback from people you've never met, which I feel helps in developing a sense of community. It also puts your work in a place trafficked by all kinds of radio folks, so you never know who might hear it.

If you'd like to get your work aired on a show, a lot of them take pitches. The thing with shows is, they tend to have a fairly defined sense of purpose. They have an idea of what their audience wants and expects, and they will need you to conform to that if your work is to be of any use to them (and rightly so, in my opinion). Some people find conforming to a show's needs to be too limiting, and it probably is for what they really want to do. I happen to enjoy the challenge. When working for a particular show, the more you know about it's needs, the better off you are. It also takes having a good sense of what you have to offer, and how you can turn that into something useful for the show you're pitching.

John Barth - August 15, 2005 - # 34

I'll second the pitch for PRX (I work there) (prx.org)--we delight when pieces and docs come in that push sound, push structure, composition and style and open ears to new ways of listening. Sadly, there is--as Rick points out--an NPR sound that IS flat, boring and smug (my words).

It is sad that so many older NPR listeners refer back to the brilliance of Robert Krulwich. Quick, point out someone on NPR now who has that ear, that courage to upend 'established' style and look and hear the world in a different way (and in a defining way).

I get asked frequently to coach, edit and shape producers. It is very uncomfortable. I don't have a lock on this stuff--I can help people become better reporters and perhaps better producers (getting people to just LISTEN is a challenge). But a new producer has to have the courage within themselves to define the world, reveal their feelings--construct the complex and engaging world. It doesn't all fit in a linear narrative.

As the traditional broadcast outlets for new radio work shrink (really, is there a difference between the sound and approaches of NPR and MPR?), producers who are very creative need to reset their ideas of success. Getting on NPR isn't it, if I can be so bold. Finding a station, a listener, an editor, a podcast, an outlet (like PRX) that permits you the range of production vision is THE most important goal.

There was a story on NPR yesterday or today about Rwanda wanting to become an information economy. I'm sorry, but the whole story seemed absurd--and cruel. I thought "who sold the government on this nonsense when people need to eat, need clean water, schools, roads..." And then I wondered why the producer (a very good one) and layers of editors didn't ask harder questions, too. The story was so straight it felt like a piece of propaganda. As does much of what I hear.

Good radio, really good radio, demands risk, authorship (and that is where the art comes in), courage. An audience won't always follow. But integrity is never about who takes notice of what YOU do.

Jackson Braider - August 15, 2005 - # 35

The Rwandan piece was surreal. In a land where the real is tenuous, the notion of building a virtual, service economy transcends the absurd.

Then again, we (and no doubt other listeners as well) came away with this feeling, so maybe the producer was doing his job, albeit in a very nuanced sort of way...

Having said all that, it feels as if programs and programming entities are rushing headlong into the concoction of "successful" "branding" through the quick establishment of particular "formulae" that identify the produced content as part of the "branded" program...

Here's the weird thing: proponents of "branding" think that it is the formula that's important, as if the formula had something to do with content. But as the bards show us, formula merely covers the transitions between the bits of content.

There is a point where the formula, the brand become little more than noise -- and I'm not talking about the sound of a great party, either.

Rick Moody - August 15, 2005 - # 36

Hey you guys, the conversation has taken a nice turn in my absence. I was, to explain my silence, taking a workshop on the voice with Meredith Monk, up in Rhinebeck. This experience got me thinking quite a bit. Maybe it got me thinking because Monk's whole approach was founded on the notion of listening more carefully. For example, she kept saying about vocal collaboration, "If you can hear yourself you're singing too loud." She also emphasized that what she does has to be orally transmitted (it can't be notated in the usual way that music is preserved). All of this got me thinking more about what's "human" in radio recordings, and my flash of insight was in the form of a hatred of perfect audio fidelity. My recognition, that is, was that I would have included a little more of a critique of the notion of "fidelity" and "good tape" in my manifesto had I had more time to think all of this through more. Or, to put it another way, ProTools and high-end audio equipment, etc., create a standardized sound to radio these days (compression on NPR is a good example: you find the signal really, really compressed, and that means less drama, as I see it), that is not at all a perfect transmission of the initial event being recorded. "Good" audio is just another idea of how to render or represent "reality." I would therefore make a plea for the idea of "bad" audio. A little bit of hiss, more dynamics, the

occasional "bad" edit, as a metaphor for the arbitrariness of "good" audio. The likeliness of this happening, I imagine, is nill, but just as the Beats, in the first-thought-best-thought way, spawned the idea of the beauty of the mistake in literature, so it might be possible to mount a defense of the "mistake" in realm of radio reportage as a way of rendering the human more human.

In the meantime, a lot of very interesting points have been made in my absence, and I agree with Dale who I believe extolled the virtue of "Weekend America." A very good show.

kimberly kinchen - August 15, 2005 - # 37

...As an aspiring producer, I appreciate a lot of what's been said here. I think I'm still in the sort of learning the rules stage, and curious about how to break them and get away with it.

But, as a listener, I'm less appreciative. No one has really mentioned The Listener, and how to tap into what listeners like, want, expect. I remain really disappointed that TAL removed its discussion boards, and I will never buy the reasons that decision was made. (I think when someone agrees to be interviewed, they implicitly agree to put themselves into the sometimes mean light of public opinion and whatever consequences that brings. The lack of willingness of more and more of us to do that is part of what's wrong with us right now) More to the point I'm trying to get at is that the kind of discussions that happened on that board could be seen as a sort of instant listener response system, where you potentially get very rich sense of the experience you're giving your listener...I'm talking [about] what pieces draw the most interesting, strongest or complex reactions, even if from relatively few listeners? Discussion boards seem like one way to get at that.

So, my question to Rick Moody and the rest is - how do you listen to your listeners, and how can public radio listen to its listeners?

Rick Moody - August 15, 2005 - # 38

Don DeLillo said once he didn't have an ideal reader, he had a set of standards. That's good enough for me. If you treat the audience like they are brilliant and engaged, they will respond in kind. The more responsibility you give them, the better they will feel about their participation in the process. The contrary notion: deracinating by reason of anxiety, well, we know where that leads.

Eric Vos - August 16, 2005 - # 41

Schindler's List employed dramatic music. As if we needed a cue to realize "oh, this is the dramatic moment." As if we could have failed to appreciate the loss of six million plus souls sans wrenching violins. NPR's musical cues and crunching gravel are merely just another articulation of those artistic fears. As if the listener isn't going to get it unless you hurl it at his head. Really hard.

If you look to the heady days of radio, despite the awe inspiring audio special effects employed, so much was demanded of the listener. Each man, woman and child, all of whom were glued to crackling radios, were asked to summon up entire worlds. Without the listener's imagination, their participation, this once loved medium would have never captured the country's imagination. Radio today seems to have no concept of the immense skill employed by all those pre-t.v. radio junkies. Or frankly what drew them to the radio. Think of Symphony Space and their readings. So good and employs so little but for good stories and listener's imagination.

Modern literature seems to have fallen into the same place. Many of the revered magazines now read like People. Hiaasen's newest best seller requires little more than the reader turning the friggin page. Read the simple tale of an old man fishing off Cuba and all you can do is ask questions. As if the author receded and asked the reader to do all the heavy lifting. Additionally, many are sick of the Milan Kunderian style. Give us the story and let us ask the profound questions. Don't wrap it all in desperately intense articulated insights. Stop holding my brains hand! We don't need deep wordy insights which we may later quote at cocktail parties.

Pretty pictures are nice to look at. Yet, abstract impressionism begs us "come find me." It screams "I'm nothing without you." I think your grade school teacher called it "audience participation."

Break your medium down to the bare essentials. Let the listener construct the rest. Give us half the story. Our finishing touches will amaze you. Ask us and we will come. Don't you dare whine of us being multi-taskers and unable to settle in. That is a sad cliché which ignores the thousands of people stranded in their cars, which are idling in their driveways, in fear of missing their favorite radio show. A show which seems more and more intent on abandoning us.

Rick Moody - August 16, 2005 - # 42

I suppose I haven't said enough how impressive this conversation has been to me. I'm grateful for it, you guys. I like Eric's plea above. I agree with its substance and its form too.

Miguel Macias - August 19, 2005 - # 46

...I join the group of fans of Eric. And for one reason in particular. He attacked what I think is one of the fundamental problems with public radio documentary... the content. We could talk forever about the endless number of clichés that are used in the form of these pieces. But I have heard pieces that do not use those clichés and that are terribly disappointing as well... why? It's a difficult topic to talk about, I believe. How do you measure the complexity on the content of a piece?...

In my opinion radio documentaries are particularly unrevealing these days. They do not offer original ideas, or surprising approaches to topics. Reporters investigate and investigate more, conduct interviews and find out about all "the facts" (interesting concept this one of the "the facts"). But that is what I would call the first stage in the production of a piece. That is the stage where you find out what you can read in a book, or what others can tell you about something, what experts know or what you can "prove" (another interesting concept this one of "proving"). But how many times do we get to listen to a piece that offers a theory, a perspective created by the producer? The producer who has done a unique research, who has been in unique places, unique situations, analyze in unique ways, talk to unique people, go beyond the "facts" and say what they actually think. Something that provides an insight and encourages discussion and more thinking...

David Shorr - August 20, 2005 - # 47

...I have spent an entire career in the echo chamber of people just like myself who think about international issues all day (and offer pearls of wisdom to the media). With the way things are going, some of us have woken up to the need to engage the public more effectively and try to bring them along with us.

A year ago, a new resource on communicating about intl. policy was published called "The US in the World." The report highlighted the sizable gap between specialists and the general public and offered advice on how to overcome it. I recognized myself as part of the problem immediately.

So here I am now, trying to hone a message having to do with the big current push to reform the UN. It's complicated stuff I have to tell ya -- I sort of yearn for the days of US-Soviet arms control, a much simpler narrative.

All of which to say that I applaud Rick's plea for diversity and creativity, but I've become convinced that it's not unreasonable to ask folks like me to make their point in, say, less than a minute.

I'm sure this will provoke responses about not respecting my audience of fellow Americans, but I think it's rather a question of not being presumptuous. My organization (The Stanley Foundation) happens to be a producer of radio documentaries (in another department), and my counterpart in our communications department said the way for a wonk to talk to the public is to "strip out the process stuff" -- i.e. all the details of the negotiations... An editor I work with at The Globalist web journal says, "we don't talk about 'dumbing down,'

we prefer to think of it as being straightforward."

Rick Moody - August 20, 2005 - # 48

I suppose my problem with the question of audience is that I have two distinct and perhaps opposed responses to it.

One reply, and I'm just going to be completely honest about it, is the Nabokovian response, and that response is, frankly, audience be damned. Nabokov, I think, would have said that it was not his job to provide easy access for those who are underexposed to art. It was the job of those who are underexposed to bone up. This may, on the face of it, seem like an elitist position, but if so, then Michelangelo and Nijinsky and Stein and Woolf and, well, Ernie Kovacs were elitists, and while this may be true, had they not bothered to be uncompromising we would all be the less for it.

The contrary position, in fact, the notion that there is some ideal audience member out there who is so fearful and liable to TURN THE DIAL that we must do whatever we can to appeal to him or her, actually appears to me to be the MORE elitist position, because this position elects to know the truth about people in all cases. This position is, strictly speaking, condescending, because it imagines that we, the programmers, are up here at some lofty level, and those guys down there, the audience, need to be given a soft surface to land on, sort of the way a parent would walk the house babyproofing it for a two-year-old. Not a level playing field, any way you diagram it, and, hence, condescending.

Another angle: audience is brilliant and wants more. Audience is not ill-informed, sentimental, attention-deficit-disordered, but, rather, responds incredibly well to being treated with dignity and respect, which, for example, the ugly music they always use on the Story Corps pieces, does not do. What happens if you assume that your audience is hungry for new textures, for formal diversity, for range, in what they listen to?

This, in a way, would be my reply to David Shorr (with whom, full disclosure, I went to college). Yes, it's true that your radio documentaries, if you are a pundit, might be direct and straightforward if they would be "effective" and "tendentious." But fortunately not all of radio is about persuasion, nor does it need be. That rhetorical mode is just one possibility, as I have been saying, and if it can more often be just one mode among others, it will have force for being less predictable.

There's a loophole in all of this, and that is that I think it's impossible not to write, make art, produce, do almost anything, without thinking about SOME ideal listener/reader/viewer. I think without this you are in a vacuum. I remember seeing the great novelist Stanley Elkin interviewed one time. He was asked who his ideal reader was, and he answered William Gass. So now you know it! Stanley Elkin novels were written so that William Gass would be amused. Among other things.

Therefore, I believe that everyone thinks about audience a little bit. And when I was making "Pirate Radio," I did. In fact, there's an interesting story here (which will come up at this year's Third Coast Festival, because they're using "Pirate Station" as a test case for a session on editing). The producer/genius I worked with on the piece, Sherre DeLys (you should all go search out some of her work), came up with a first cut of the piece that was so dense with sound and texture that it was a little bit hard to hear the story itself, because it was so heavily illustrated by what was going on. Some of this ornament was oblique too. Fascinatingly oblique, but still oblique. I actually LOVED Sherre's "Antipodean" mix of the piece, but I DID think that it was worth trying to see if a little more silence (a resource I have not described enough in these remarks), a little more air, wouldn't make the piece tell its story even better. This was also the feeling of the excellent Emily Botein at The Next Big Thing, and the two of us, Emily and I, went and sweated over a computer for a morning remixing some of all the great work that Sherre had done. In the end, we went with the American mix for the broadcast, because it let John Lurie, the reader, out into the open some, and because, when compressed, some of Sherre's brilliant effects were going to be hard to make out on a car radio.

I don't happen to think the result is sentimental, or easy, or anything else, especially since, above, someone has posted wondering if I thought anyone who wasn't acquainted with pirate radio would get the piece at all. But I did compromise, a little bit, in the production of "Pirate Station. In retrospect, I very much like BOTH mixes, and I am working on a new piece with Sherre right now, in which we have gone even further along the difficulty axis than we did on "Pirate Station."

Let it never be said that all compromise is useless, because if you don't compromise, ever, you never learn anything. And audience be damned.

Jonathan Mitchell - August 21, 2005 - # 49

I think of myself as being a member of many different audiences. I have a kind of "sphere of taste" that overlaps with other peoples' spheres, but never completely covers the same area as another person. Where it overlaps with lots of people is where an audience exists. But the trick is I can never know where exactly another person's sphere is, I can only sense it by listening to other people's work and ideas. But if I can manage to intuitively sense where that audience hovers, I can work with it, play into it, subvert it, even contradict it if I choose. The key for me is in identifying personally with the role of audience.

Eric Vos - August 23, 2005 - # 53

First, there is nary a story one may tell which we have not heard. You may not trump past tragedies or injustices. There is no story of joy we have not seen in one form or another. In sum, we have heard and seen it all. Sorry.

Yet, your telling of a new story provides you with a chance to help us see the stories of our past, and future, in new and unique ways. The narrator may want to see his/herself as a ground breaking cubist. The same human face with a new simplified interpretation.

It was interesting to see some people were concerned about the audience "feedback." I suspect that must be a concern. Yet, if you worry about the audience, when you create, who are you worrying about? Is there a particular person, a face, an ethnicity or a socio-economic strata? You are the "artist" and you should be the only voice during the creative process and not let "us" constrain you. Do not worry - your voice is our voice. The rainbow of data, which we have all received, has entered your senses and will now flow out in new pure light - which is unique to the artist. Please do not see "rainbow" as some floral idea. Rather, think of it as data, which is broken up, and returned to purity by the artist who acts as a reverse prism. If you allow the audience to interfere, you diminish your voice and litter the work with faceless persons and their supposed expectations.

Free yourself of us. It is this freedom, and simplicity, which will create the perfection. That is why simplicity is key - for it creates a common language and idea which we may all glom onto. You are taking the mass of confusion, the rainbow, and reworking it into simplicity, pure light.

Think of your new story as a Roseta Stone to our past and future. It is scary no doubt. Yet, the greater the leap the farther you will take us with you...

Aaron Sarver - August 17, 2005 - # 44

Just wondering a bit more about the audience question, not so much about standards or what NPR listeners are used to in terms of tone, but about cultural references and how they may alienate or pull in your audience. I listened to your wonderful piece "Pirate Station" at a gathering and afterwards the conversation drifted into wondering how an NPR audience would relate, or not, to the piece. Most of the group had in some form been involved in pirate radio, but I assume a vast majority of Morning Edition folks don't have a pirate radio background and therefore don't relate to the piece in the way our group did and miss most of what makes the piece great: namely the humor and wonderful sounds that pirate radio produces, accidentally or not. And how does specific cultural knowledge by groups of people affect your decisions when making a piece for a general audience?...How do you make decisions about pieces when you have an audience of 3 or 4 generations that have a vastly different reference points for understanding American culture?

danielferri - September 7, 2005 - # 61

I'm finding this discussion of the audience a bit wearing. The audience is what it is.

Art does not depend on an audience, communication does. Art is too selfish to accept compromise, but if we want to communicate we must either meet the audience where they are or create work so compelling it takes them for a ride. No one owes us their ears, we are asking to borrow them.

Public radio has created new audiences; ATC, Prairie Home, This American Life, all created new audiences for radio by doing something good that engaged the audience in a way they had not been engaged before.

We don't learn by thinking about the audience, we learn by thinking about the work and what it can do to the human spirit. Good work creates good audiences.

Rick, when I heard "The Boys Came In" on the radio my body couldn't decide whether to dance, cry or piss my pants with joy that something could transport me so, through a boyhood, through a family, through the linking of one generation to the next.

How did you turn words on a page into sounds that made a middle aged man weep? How did you twist one media into another to make something so lovely?

How did it get made? How does it get from pencil to Pro Tools?

How did the work happen? Huh?

Rick Moody - September 8, 2005 - # 62

..."Boys" was produced for "The Next Big Thing," Dean Olsher's excellent radio program, and probably because Dean asked me what I would do on radio if I could do anything. My answer to this was that I would collaborate with Meredith Monk, the excellent extended-vocal range composer, whom I have admired for many years. (It's worth saying here that if Dean had not approached me, I probably wouldn't be here shooting my mouth off about radio at all. One thing led to another and I have done a number of radio pieces since, with much enthusiasm, and in a great spirit of learning.)

The story "Boys" already existed at this point, having appeared in my short fiction collection, DEMONOLOGY (Little, Brown, 2000). I figured it would be a good text for radio, for the simple reason that like a few other things I have written, it is all about sound, perhaps as much as it is about content.

Once we selected the text, Dean broached the idea to Meredith, whom I knew a tiny bit, and she said that it would be fine for us to use existing recordings of her work, but that she was too busy to write anything new. However, a few days later, Meredith called back to say that she had sketched out a few small things on 4-track, using the word "boys" and if we wanted to go into the studio to record them, that would be fine.

I decided at this point that I didn't want to be the reader of the text for the recording, because in truth the story is narrated (in a very elusive way) by the mother of the boys who are its protagonists. So I contacted the best woman reader of fiction I know, Julia Slavin (whose recent novel CARNIVORE DIET you should all read). She became the voice of the mother. We recorded Julia reading the story, and then I roughed out some ideas on Acid (my only sound editing program at that point) as to how we might use Meredith's existing stuff underneath some of Julia's reading.

Then Dean, Meredith, Meredith's engineer Scott (I think that was his name), and I all went into the studio together, and we did a marathon six-hour session, in which Meredith amazingly recorded three short multi-tracked pieces of herself singing (and playing Jew's Harp), and we did a rough mix of the whole, which Dean and Emily Botein (his producer) then tweaked slightly for broadcast. For my own part, it was a magical night, because I got to watch Meredith Monk up close. It was also my first prolonged experience with Pro-Tools in the studio. Therefore: a gigantic learning experience. I take some credit for the overall sound of the piece, because I had a lot of ideas about how the existing Monk pieces might go under the text, as alternatives to the new recordings we did that night, which only totaled up to a couple of minutes. Having said this, it was a manifestly collaborative piece, with me serving as neophyte.

In retrospect, it's a radio piece that I am quite proud of. I always like the mix of the comic and the melancholic. And I like how some of the sound kind does an ersatz-descriptive thing that reminds me of old time radio drama. In fact, "Boys" sounds to me now like a slightly post-modern take on radio drama, which is good, as far as I'm concerned.

Rick Moody - September 30, 2005 - # 64

Jay has alerted me that this thread is now going to end officially. So let this be my punctuation mark. I had a great time on here, and I learned a ton, and the whole exchange really helped me to articulate my feelings about radio. I haven't exactly changed my mind about anything. Not at all, in fact. But I certainly learned a lot about how others think about these issues, and that was exciting and energizing. I'm working on a couple of new radio pieces, one with Sherre DeLys, as well as a sort of series of pieces with a couple of great younger producers, Ann Heppermann and Kara Oehler. These projects have been much informed with the back and forth of the above. And one last observation: even the disagreements and moments of snark have been a lot more collegial here than in the book world. I thank you all for listening, understanding, and considering.