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This American Voice: The Odd Timbre of a New Standard in Public Radio

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Abstract and Keywords

Over the past seventeen years *This American Life* has functioned, in part, as an investigation into, and representation and construction of an American voice. Alongside David Sedaris, Sarah Vowell, Mike Birbiglia, and the panoply of other odd timbres on the show, Glass's delivery, pitch, and tone have irked and attracted listeners. Yet what began as a voice on the margins of public radio has become a kind of exemplum for what new radio journalism in the United States sounds like. How did this happen? What can this voice and the other voices on the show tell us about contemporary US audio and radio culture? Can we hear the typicality of that American voice as representative of broader cultural shifts across the arts? And how might author Daniel Alarcón's *Radio Ambulante*, which he describes as "This American Life, but in Spanish, and transnational," alter the status of these American voices, possibly hearing how voices travel across borders to knit together an auditory culture that expands the notion of the American voice?

Keywords: BBC, David Sedaris, Ira Glass, nasal, National Public Radio, radio, Radio Ambulante, received pronunciation, Sarah Vowell, This American Life

(p. 97) WHEN National Public Radio (NPR) decided to replace Frank Tavares, who read the names and taglines of the corporation's underwriters until late in 2013, the network's vice president of programming, Eric Nuzum, described the kind of voice they were seeking. "The phrase I use is 'ambiguously genuine,'" Nuzum told *The New Yorker*'s Reeves Wiedeman (Wiedeman 2013, 23). "They sound like a real person, but they don't sound like a specific age, or as if they were from a specific region." NPR located this "ambiguously genuine" voice in Sabrina Fahri, who, as Wiedeman explains, was born in New York and "moved with her family to Singapore, Belgium, and Switzerland before eventually returning to Brooklyn to work as an actress, a journey that left her with an accent more or less from nowhere." The "genuine" voice in this instance means "a voice from nowhere," a voice that cannot be traced back, as Nuzum says, to a specific age or a specific region. To produce this voice without a trace of its time or place, Fahri, so the article suggests, had

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to move to a number of different places, and, one would think, learn a number of different languages, or speak a "global" English.[1] Circulating through polyglot international capitals of finance and diplomacy, Fahri's voice strangely loses rather than accumulates a sense of place and particularity: her accent neutralized, canceled out. Her "voice from nowhere," a voice that NPR prizes for its lack of specificity, has become, in Nuzum's estimation, an ideal vehicle to announce the names of financial sponsors supporting NPR.

The NPR corporation's selection of Fahri's voice—and Nuzum's explanation of the selection process—illustrates a number of issues key to the history of voice on the radio, in general, public radio, more specifically, and the complicated role any radio voice plays in relation to a public mission. In the following pages I will explore how these histories help situate particular innovations in public radio voice. Among the programs where one might identify such sonic transformation, I have chosen the radio program *This American Life* for its representative claim on an "American" life and voice, and what its producers, hosts, and critics often refer to as its "democratic" attitude. Moreover, since (p. 98) critics tend to agree that *This American Life* has been the single program most responsible for alterations in the sonic norms in US public radio broadcasting, and considering the program and its wildly popular offshoots—*Serial* (2014–) and *S-Town* (2017)—have broken podcasting download records, I hope to understand it as a sonic archive of changes in an "American" radio sound that help us question what it means to "sound American." In particular, the early and defining years of *This American Life* relied on a number of contributing voices—from Sarah Vowell to David Sedaris to the show's host Ira Glass—that broke from some explicit and implicit, written and unwritten norms of public radio broadcasting in the United States. These voices, in Vowell's words, "sound like they shouldn't be on the radio" (Belluck 1998). The decision to not only include such voices on the radio, but make them central to *This American Life*, indicates a shift in the sonic style and norms of public radio's "voice from nowhere," the publics those sounds hail, and the new forms of publics and counterpublics that arise as a consequence (Warner 2005).

Without falsely separating the sounds of these voices from the content of the stories they tell, I emphasize sound in the following pages to correct a remarkable inattention to vocal tone, pitch, cadence, and timbre in radio history, and aesthetic and political theory more generally.[2] The political value and weight of fairly minor sonic changes becomes audible only through close attention to the field of sounds against which what I call the "odd timbre" of *This American Life*'s early voices emerge. In some cases, hearing the meaning in these sounds also depends on the history of broadcast regulation, and the peculiar structure of radio broadcast itself. Radio, after all, burdens the voice—especially its sound—with the primary labor needed to reach an audience. Thus, in this chapter I will begin with the history of efforts to create the sound of a public radio voice in England and the United States, linking this twentieth-century struggle to a longer history of the *vox populi*, before turning to *This American Life*'s voices and the new role they play in helping develop a novel approach to the sound of the public radio voice.

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A Voice From Nowhere

In order to make audible the standards against which *This American Life* defines itself, one first needs to understand something of the history of the "voice from nowhere" praised by Nuzum. Attention to Sabrina Fahri's voice, and the microhistory of its raison d'être at NPR, brings together a number of issues in radio and voice studies that have intrigued sound engineers, linguistic anthropologists, policymakers, and critical theorists over the course of radio's history. As early as 1928, the French radio producer Paul Deharme recommended that one speak on the radio with neutral "*grey diction*" to erase the particularity of the voice, and convert one's voice into "a kind of phonograph" (Deharme 1928, 408; emphasis in original). Eight years later, the German-born media critic Rudolf Arnheim advocated a "pure sound" in radio that would eliminate any sense of place. In radio broadcasting, Arnheim argued, spatial "resonance is eliminated, out of (p. 99) a very proper feeling that the existence of the studio is not essential to the transmission and therefore has no place in the listener's consciousness" (Arnheim 1936, 143).[3] Deharme and Arnheim's comments provided guidance to voice actors and broadcasters in "the art of radio"—as Arnheim titled his book—and their statements also archive trends in audio engineering and political oratory as radio consolidated standards in the 1930s.

According to sound historian Emily Thompson, by 1932 innovations in electrical engineering and acoustic design helped erase the sound of space at Radio City Music Hall, where the use of microphones, insulation, and speakers made the spectacle on the stage sound the same from every seat in the room (Thompson 2002, 234). Thompson names this elimination, erasure, or silencing of sounds that would call attention to the difference between the place of production and the various venues of reception "The New Acoustics," an electrification of the acoustic world she argues produced "the soundscape of modernity" (5, 1). While Thompson does not engage radio production, the object of her study—Rockefeller Center—housed the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), where new technology, such as broadcast microphones, often supplied its subsidiary, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC). With such corporate synergy in mind, it is not surprising that the "erasure of space" Thompson uncovers in Radio City finds enthusiastic support in Arnheim's instructions for eliminating resonance on the radio. Both the technologies and the aesthetic guidelines participate in constructing a modern soundscape in which radio artists, engineers, and even politicians sought to make sound that seemed to come from nowhere.

In perhaps the most famous example of this innovative sonic ideology, the older media of nonelectrical devices worked together with the newly sophisticated electrical devices to drive transformations in political sound. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued his intimate "fireside chats" over the radio in the 1930s, the sensitive microphone he used required that he speak with a dental bridge to prevent his teeth from audibly whistling, and to erase any sonic marker that might amplify the actual distance between the president and the people.[4] Eliminating the sound of space enabled a new style of political oratory that shaped a nuanced democratic populism against the fanatic fascist models in continental Europe. Describing the latter, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that

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"The *Führer*'s metaphysical charisma … turned out finally to be merely the omnipresence of his radio addresses, which demonically parodies that of the divine spirit. The gigantic fact that the speech penetrates everywhere replaces its content" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002 [1944], 129). Roosevelt took a different path to his listener's ear. He turned the volume down to reach the people, understanding that with the microphone he didn't need to scream in order for his voice to reach a massive audience. His quieter speech helped create a sense that he spoke to his listeners in an intimate space, as a friend or neighbor, rather than a voice from on high.[5] In this way, the carefully designed sound of Roosevelt's voice broadcasted as the fireside chats erased the feeling of (geographical, political, and social) distance. Different tones, volumes, and pitches of voice, in these examples, both represented and helped create or consolidate specific political programs. Eventually, the mere sound of the voice could index an entire political system for listeners huddled around the radio.

(p. 100) As these examples help demonstrate, the innovations in audio engineering needed to be coupled with a belief and investment in the "neutral," "standard," and "placeless" voice. While new technology did not determine the political parameters of oratory, newly sensitive microphones and radio enabled new forms of audible speech deployed by different political actors through a variety of methods and techniques. Fascist and democratic orators had access to the same sonorous media, but shaped radio's "voice from nowhere" or "voice from everywhere" to their particular ends. While it would be mistaken to claim that a universal radio aesthetic has held sway since the emergence of broadcast in Argentina and the United States in 1920, the importance of an apparently placeless voice seems entwined with the development of the social uses of radio.[6] The importance of "the voice from nowhere" that NPR sought as recently as 2013 has remained a powerful ideal in public broadcasting, especially in the United States and England. And in order to understand the significance of a break from this standard, in order to understand what one hears when one hears a voice seemingly unfit for public radio—in other words, in order to understand the surprisingly original voices of *This American Life*—one requires a vocabulary and a series of histories to render legible these audible differences.

In the case of the political voices mentioned earlier, their transcendent or intimate qualities were taken as a nearly inevitable consequence of combining an individual voice's representative status as leader of a nation with broadcasting's new configuration of geographical distance and the experience of simultaneous listening. These voices came to their listeners already packaged as "national" voices. But how does public radio transfer this representative function to the voices of its broadcasters, who are not presidents, prime ministers, congresspeople, or parliamentarians? How does one construct the voice of public radio, and how do listeners identify such a voice? Can a voice's timbre alone index itself as linked to a specific community? How might a voice's sound entail, or participate in the creation of a new community? To return to my opening example, when Nuzum and Wiedeman hear Fahri's voice as a "voice from nowhere," as somehow placeless, we might wonder what kinds of audible markers it carries or mutes to produce such a voice. Or, remembering that the voice is not heard in a social vacuum, we might ask how the effect of a placeless voice is socially produced. What norms and standards help structure

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how Nuzum and Wiedeman hear Fahri's voice as placeless? In order to answer the more general aspects of these questions, without delving into a psychological analysis of these particular social actors, I will turn to the most widely recognized public radio voice in the twentieth century: the voice of the BBC.

BBC English and Received Pronunciation

The idea of speech without a place is often connected to a sound pattern that both popular and scholarly publications refer to as "BBC English" (Roach 2004). Now mainly (p. 101) known as "received pronunciation" (RP), in the jargon of linguistic anthropology this form of speech "is *a supra-local accent*; it is enregistered in public awareness as indexical of a speaker's class and level of education; it is *valued precisely for effacing the geographic origins of speaker*" (Agha 2003, 233; emphasis added). As Asif Agha explains here, although British listeners hear this accent as geographically "placeless," they recognize the voice as indicating a specific social class and level of education. This "enregisterment" or social understanding of BBC English or RP derives from a specific history. As Lynda Mugglestone has written, a rising interest in elocution and the publication of elocution manuals at the end of the eighteenth century helped transform British culture such that by the close of the nineteenth century "notions of a non-localized accent (and assimilation to it) had come to act as a dominant social symbol, the salient element in what the phonetician Henry Sweet defined as 'a class-dialect more than a local dialect'" (Mugglestone 1995, 5).[7] While the BBC apparently did not have an official policy or strict guidelines to delimit the tones or accents their broadcasters could use, RP's canonization at the BBC was a consequence of this accent's cultural capital within the English university system. The BBC hired graduates of Cambridge and Oxford, and these speakers dominated the BBC's national and international broadcasting.[8] Through the sheer number of listeners who heard that sound pattern, associated with a national-imperial (British) broadcasting corporation, the voices on the BBC transformed the sound of a voice associated with only 3 percent of the country's speakers, primarily located in only the elite classes in and around London, into the national-imperial standard or norm, "valued precisely for effacing the geographic origins of speaker" (Agha 2003, 234). This norm has so thoroughly permeated British society that citizens have actively protested when BBC broadcasters speak with marked or regional accents (John Honey cited in Agha 2003, 237). Recent ethnographic studies linked to these debates within the BBC about the increased use of accents not associated with the Southeastern corner of England from which RP derives, further acknowledge that the standard pronunciation on the BBC is RP (Revoir 2010). Thus, RP or BBC English demonstrates how radio can reinforce, disseminate, and thus largely produce norms and standards of voice across a large linguistic territory. What might sound like a voice without place owes its status to radio broadcasting's own fiction of placelessness, its own utopian image of voice.

As the voice scholar Anne Karpf has observed, RP has continued to spread throughout the British media system. Drawing on studies of elocutionary training for call center workers in India, Karpf notes that workers

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> must first complete a spell of "accent training" or so-called "accent neutralization" (although there's nothing neutral, of course, about the accents that the workers are trained to use) … Excellence in Indian call centers is now almost synonymous with anglicising the voice … In a nice irony, the Indian call-centre workers are expected to use an accent, with its perfectly pronounced 't's and 'p's, that many of their non-Received Pronunciation (RP) British counterparts can't achieve.
>
> (Karpf 2006, 193)[9]

(p. 102) A linguistic standard, first propagated through broadcast radio, now demands changes in the voices of employees in order to train them to speak *not* just like the callers phoning for information, but rather like the media system itself. The history behind the utterance of these workers is the creation story of the "voice from nowhere."

But is there an equivalent "placeless" accent in the United States? How does Sabrina Fahri's voice produce a sound effect that Nuzum's professional radio ear hears as if it comes from nowhere? The sociolinguist William Labov's 2005 publication of *The Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology, and Sound Change* codifies the diversity of regional accents throughout the United States, and implicitly argues against any standard American accent, or what some call "general American" (Labov 2005, 190). In interviews and publications, Labov also rejects the idea that mass media have homogenized the sound of speech in the United States: "The opposite is true. Whatever the influence of the mass media are, it doesn't affect the way we speak everyday. And the regional dialects of this country are getting more and more different, so that people in Buffalo, St. Louis and Los Angeles are now speaking much more differently from each other than they ever did" (Siegel 2006). Instead of reducing the sound of social space, Labov argues that the sound of people's voices in the United States has become *the* means to differentiate them: "Most of the important changes in American speech are not happening at the level of grammar or language—which used to be the case—but at the level of sound itself" (Labov quoted in Seabrook 2005). With so much audible diversity it seems inaccurate, if not ridiculous, to describe a voice in the United States as geographically neutral. Perhaps this is why NPR's Nuzum had to find a voice whose informal training occurred through the accumulated practice of speaking and listening with voices primarily outside the United States. As Wiedeman suggests in the comments with which I began this chapter, Fahri's voice is the opposite of RP: it is from too many places, and hence from nowhere in particular.

However, as the critics here observe, "nowhere" does not only indicate a lack of geographic place. The social space a voice can inhabit, and the social markers embedded within pronunciation can depend on class as much as region. While FDR's dental bridge allowed him to speak closer to the microphone, and thus helped make him sound closer to his listeners, Labov has argued that when the former governor of New York dropped his "r"s "it sounded upper class. But after the Second World War … with the loss of Britain's imperial status 'r'-less British speech ceased to be regarded as 'prestige speech' … and

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the dropping of 'r's became exclusively working class" (Seabrook 2005). This class change encoded in language leads Labov to conclude that New York City's "dialect is much more indicative of one's social status than of one's neighborhood. 'Although no one wants to admit this … because we're supposed to live in a classless society'" (Seabrook 2005). As Labov emphasizes here, and as Nuzum and Wiedeman's silence about class implies, tuning our ears to the sound of place often substitutes for listening to class.[10]

Of course, even the ideology of the classless society encoded in sound can serve to index place. Writing in 1950, the novelist Raymond Chandler, who settled in Los Angeles (p. 103) after a childhood spent in both the Midwestern United States and England, claimed that the sound of speech in the United States lacks class:

> The tone quality of English speech is usually overlooked. This tone quality is infinitely variable and contributes infinite meaning. The American voice is flat, toneless, and tiresome. The English tone quality makes a thinner vocabulary and a more formalized use of language capable of infinite meanings … This makes good English a class language, and that is its fatal defect.
>
> (Chandler 1995 [1950], 1014–1015)

While one might disagree with Chandler's characterization, it draws attention to the relative value attributed to overtly recognizing and associating social actors with a social class in traditional British society, versus the relative antagonism to such overt class markers in the United States.[11] NPR's Nuzum follows this insight: he listens for age and region, but not social class, which is not meant to enter the sonic contours of the US radio voice. After all, as Labov claims, to hear class as a listener in the United States stands in opposition to the norms of American listening. And yet Wiedeman hints at an interpretation of the voice from nowhere as itself the product of a certain class. We might hear his biographical summation of Fahri's voice—its travel through the global capitals of commerce and diplomacy—as not only the cosmopolitan burnishing of a global voice, but the journey of a voice produced through its accumulated circulation in those financial capitals. It could be that Nuzum hears Fahri's voice as the perfect fit for NPR's corporate underwriters because, in some sense, her voice is the sound effect of global commerce.

The Sound of the Public/the Voice of America/ Vox Populi/Vox Vitreus

I have taken this somewhat circuitous route to the voices of *This American Life* in order to frame the specific field-changing qualities of these voices, and to make their originality legible as a particular innovation in representative speech. If Fahri's voice has acquired neutrality in Nuzum's ears, the voices of *This American Life* have just the opposite effect on most critics. And if Fahri's voice should sound like it comes from nowhere, the representative function of the voices on *This American Life* relies on these voices registering with listeners as a sonic image of pluralism, an America that corresponds to Labov's di-

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verse atlas. Unique, casual, and demotic, as the program's title announces, these voices aim to depict a sonorous archive of everyday American life.

Despite the seemingly straightforward aim of this project, the national and cultural adjective "American," and the program's distribution by Public Radio International across many NPR stations return to and revise the problem of the broadcasting voice (p. 104) raised with RP or Farhri's voice.[12] Specifically, listening to *This American Life* raises the questions: how does a program represent a nation through the voice, and how does it define a public or publics?[13] Has NPR constructed its own version of a "standard American" tone, a US version of RP? If so, does *This American Life* share in that tone, or challenge it? And, perhaps most importantly for the present volume, what can we glean from the sound of the radio voice alone? What methodologies, technologies, and techniques of analysis and interpretation would best approach a study of the odd timbre of *This American Life*?

By focusing on the voices of host Ira Glass and a select group of contributors to *This American Life*, I am perhaps sidestepping the very difference that defines the show against other broadcast journalism: the sounds of *other* people's voices. Introducing a segment about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that was rebroadcast for the program's five-hundredth episode, Glass remarks,

> I remember when we put that show together. You know, we all knew there had already been lots of coverage of Katrina everywhere. And we thought the one thing that we could do was that …' Til then, when you heard from people in New Orleans in the news it was mostly in tiny little sound bites. And we thought the one contribution we could make was just let people talk longer. You know, it's easier to connect emotionally when you hear more.
>
> (Glass 2013a)

"Middle of Somewhere," the story to which Glass refers here, is just one example of how *This American Life* attempts to create a public voice and a public emotional connection by turning the microphone over to people other than its reporters. And yet, while I recognize that much of the show's storytelling depends on field reporting and interviews with a variety of different subjects from throughout the country, and sometimes beyond, I begin with the show's most famous voice—that of its host, Ira Glass—in order to approach these questions through the show's own logic, and the one voice heard in nearly every episode the program has broadcast.

Glass has foregrounded these questions of voice and public, and self-reflexively built them into the programming since the show first aired on Chicago's WBEZ on November 17, 1995 as *Your Radio Playhouse*. On that first episode, Joe Franklin, the legendary television and radio talk show host, tells Glass, "Your voice … I've heard so much about the sparkle, about the energy in your voice. The voice, on radio especially, is everything" (Glass 1995). "Sparkle" is not an adjective that has since been applied to Glass's voice by media critics and sound scholars. Later commentators have described his

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voice as imbued with a "precious, adenoidal charm" (Loviglio); "too nasal, muffled, verging on meek" (Rainey); "crackly and, at times, uncomfortably intimate" (Sela); and "casual" (Belluck). None of these characteristics of his voice match what one critic calls "the softly authoritative cadence that NPR so enjoys in its news readers" (Sela), or "the knowledgeable and comfortable anchorman who sounds as if he knows more than he says" (Looker, quoted in Vowell 1996, 66). The features that make, or at least at one time made Glass's voice unique on radio, and that have drawn him both praise (p. 105) and scorn, seem nearly opposite to the bright and shiny character in Franklin's adjective —"sparkle"—which more closely relates to Glass's name than the qualities of his voice. However, attention to the adjectives in Franklin's brief attempt to frame how we hear that voice might miss the point. One might argue that the primary function of Franklin's voice's presence on the show is to link his praise of Glass to a whole pantheon of talk show hosts—Johnny Carson,David Letterman, Jay Leno, Conan O'Brien—whom Franklin has coached throughout his career. Franklin's praise—the sound of his voice alone—implicitly inserts Ira Glass into this list of talk show royalty.

On the other hand, the transitive property of Franklin's voice—metonymically bestowing future success on Glass's voice through its past success with other hosts—might also miss the mark, insofar as it aims at a popular audience and a traditional format that Glass's show seems to eschew. Where Franklin values "sparkle," Glass's listeners have preferred what they consider "nasal" and "crackly," and in the negotiation of these adjectives different publics begin to form. However, before pursuing the implications of these differences further, it is worth noting how Franklin's later return to the show helps clarify these questions of sound, representation, and the creation of different publics. While Franklin insists that "the voice is everything" on *Your Radio Playhouse*'s first episode, when he is invited back on the show for the first episode of *This American Life* on March 21, 1996, he has changed his tune: "The name is everything," he tells Glass (Glass 1996). The latter mentions some alternative titles ("America Whatever," "Ira Glass and His Radio Cowboys," "Glass House," "Glasnost," "Radiolicious"), but when he comes to "This American Life" Franklin pauses, and then definitively tells him that it is the best he has heard. Why? "The name is everything. Look at Marilyn Monroe," Franklin says. "Marilyn Monroe told me that the important thing in a name is the vowel sound—the A-E-I-O or U … At least you've got one. You've got the sound 'I.' Life. Life. The name is everything." When Glass protests that there is an "i" in "this," Franklin replies, "not the A-I-O-U sound. It's gotta be … It's a soft, it's a soft, it's a soft 'i.' It's gotta' be a hard 'I,' like the word, like the noun 'I.' You know what I'm saying? It's gotta' be the sound of A-E-I-O or U." Thus, for Franklin, the *sound* of the name is everything. First, a series of phonemes, and only second, a semantic artifact, *This American Life* comes to us as a self-consciously constructed project about sound and naming, sound and identity, sound and representation. Franklin's reference to Marilyn Monroe only further emphasizes the program as the familiar construction of Americana: the celebrity who invents her name and identity because of its sound becomes another model for Glass's attempt to both represent and invent American life through sound.

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Without overstating Franklin's folk wisdom, it should be noted that the vowel sounds he singles out have phonetic significance that link sound and name. What Franklin calls the hard "I" in "life" is, as he says, "the noun 'I,'" and the same "I" one hears in "Ira," or what the International Phonetic Alphabet identifies as the dipthong "aɪ." Vowels like /aɪ/ carry information about the vocal tract—as opposed to less information-rich consonants or fricatives—and provide some of the key signals to begin to help listeners—machine and human—distinguish one speaker from another (Trevisan et al. 2005).[14] Furthermore, vowel formants, the main resonating pockets that increase the intensity or (p. 106) volume of frequencies within the vocal tract, help create the vocal color or timbre that textures a voice. Franklin, with his acute ear for the broadcasting voice, hears how the specific vowel sound in *This American Life* will carry resonating force for the show's future audience, and link the host's name with the program's title.[15]

When Joe Franklin tells Ira Glass "the voice is everything," and then, six months later, "the name is everything," he does not contradict himself. Rather, he identifies the project of *This American Life*: to produce a representative *sonic* portrait of life in the United States. Changing the name to *This American Life* inserts the program in a familiar and fraught project to find a representative voice for the United States, or the more hubristic, imperial, and myopic "America." Naming the program *This American Life* ostensibly turns the show away from the theatrical overtones of *Your Radio Playhouse*, and towards the documentary impulse that primarily brings audiences stories from people's lives, rather than intended fictions or interviews with celebrity or political figures. At the same time, this impulse, and the invocation of "American" in the show's title, pulls the program into a long historical debate about political and cultural representation that has been attached to the democratic project in the United States since its inception.

The title *This American Life* raises questions about "lending" or "giving" a voice to the people, about the role of "representative" speech, and the inherent authority, and potential tyranny of the public-sponsored broadcast voice. Critics such as Jay Fliegelman, Jason Frank, Christopher Looby, and Nancy Ruttenburg, among others, have identified how seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century public speech, political rhetoric, poetry, and narrative fiction in the United States worked through the potentially uncontainable expressive power of the *vox populi*, or what Ruttenburg calls the voice of "democratic personality" (Fliegelman 1993; Frank 2010; Looby 1996; Ruttenbburg 1998; Slauter 2009).[16] According to these studies, the idea of an American life and the American nation arises through the voice.[17] Unable to appeal to a common ethnic identity or a sense of inevitable nationality—what Looby calls the "blood loyalty or immemorial facticity" that bolstered concepts of European nationhood—the United States founders turned to the spoken word (Looby 1996, 4). The Declaration of Independence, Fliegelman reminds us, "was written to be read aloud. Part of its own agenda as a 'declaration' was to 'publish and declare' (with the former verb carrying the contemporary sense of 'to announce formally and publicly') that 'these colonies … are free'" (Fliegelman 1993, 25). Democracy inhered in the vocal utterance because the voice, unlike print, did not separate the literate from the illiterate. The *public* voice made itself available to a wide community of listeners, rather than segregating an audience into those who could gain access to a speech or a

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book because of class, "birth, office, or occupation," and those who were barred from hearing it on these same grounds (26). A voice in public, addressed to the people, also carried possible affiliation or contamination with the voice of the people, who were there to contest or join in with a speaker.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter, one could trace the history of such public speech in the United States and its connection to the *vox populi* and the question of representative democracy from Jefferson to talk radio.[18] I invoke the history here in order to consider how "public radio" in the United States particularizes the idea and practice of (p. 107) the people's voice. For if the radical potential in the public voice as the people's voice first emerged in the seventeenth-century American colonies, public radio was only established relatively late in the history of US democracy and even US broadcasting. Public radio, in an approximation of its present form in the United States, was legislated into existence at the close of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society with the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, and the 1971 debut of NPR's flagship program *All Things Considered*.[19] From its first broadcast, this public radio had a sound that emphasized the public. According to the radio historian Susan Douglas, *All Things Considered*

> revived the sort of eyewitness account pioneered by CBS in the late 1930s and exploited ambient sounds and on-the-spot interviews to create a you-are-there feel. The reportorial style demanded dimensional listening … The hallmark of *All Things Considered*, in addition to the length and depth of its news stories, was its inventive and playful use of sound. Ambient sound—of distant gunshots, of sirens, of crickets at night, of children at a playground—were standard features of all stories, evoking place and mood.
>
> (Douglas 2004, 321–323)

Contrary to the "erasure of space" characteristic of much radio broadcasting, the program's emphasis on ambient sound, interviews with everyday people, and "dimensional listening" that required listeners to orient themselves in the sonic space of the broadcast made the sound of public space inherent to the mission of public radio. It is from this idea of public radio—as a sound and a structural encounter with the voice of the people—that *This American Life* emerges. Some of the apparent innovation of *This American Life*, in other words, pertains more to its return to NPR's founding moments than a dramatic break with public radio's history in the United States.

However, the structure of representing the voice of the people is only one aspect of the democratic project and its particular instantiation through public radio. For all of the interest in the voice of the people in political theory, there is very little attention in these studies to the sound of those voices. Despite Thomas Jefferson's affection for the "familiar style" in rhetoric, or John Durham Peters's recognition that styles of talk on US radio in the early 1930s included "a tonal shift toward snugger modes of address" (Peters 1999, 217), theorists rarely engage the importance of *sound* in shaping the significance of the *vox populi*.[20] While "voice" in most critical formulations still primarily means an identifiable, patterned, and thus repeatable verbal (written or spoken) token, which we might al-

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so call a "register," or a "style," I am interested in the sound of the voice, and the notoriously amorphous concept of "timbre": the tonal color that helps the ear distinguish between voices.[21] These apparently nonsemantic aspects of the voice—the contours of the sonic envelope rather than the *logos* within it—also participate in the formation of publics. I have already described how such a representative voice emerges as a standard in BBC English, and it could be noted how other forms of state-sponsored radio sought to regulate tone in order to produce a more limited spectrum of available pitches and speech patterns.[22] Conscious of such molds, the early years of *This American Life* paid particular attention to the voices of its commentators, and it is to the sonic quality—the pitch, tone, (p. 108) and timbre of Ira Glass and his most frequent early contributors—rather than the structural role of *the* voice, through which we can better understand how *This American Life* hails listeners and constructs a new vocal model for public radio in the United States.

Already in the first episode of *Your Radio Playhouse*, Glass's mother Shirley poses a similar question: "Who is your target audience?" (Glass 1995). Shirley Glass proceeds to voice her concern that her son's program is "in danger of appealing to a narrow range of listeners if it becomes uh, uh, a little too, um … I don't know what words to use." Glass offers "artsy," and his mother confirms: "Artsy. Yeah. [Laughs]." Shirley Glass's question, which uses the vocabulary of advertising and Nielsen ratings, identifies *Your Radio Playhouse* as sending signals that would narrow the broadcast audience. To pose her question in another discursive register, we might ask to which publics or counterpublics does this public radio program appeal? And, in striving to represent American life, do Ira Glass and the show's other frequent contributing voices make the vocal sound of *This American Life* into an imitable standard?

Given the program's early and ongoing self-reflexivity, it should not surprise us that in the January 11, 2013 episode Ira Glass seems to ask and think through these very questions (Glass 2013b). As with nearly every episode of *This American Life*, "Doppelgängers"—the week's theme—begins with Ira Glass's voice. Except that it doesn't. What the listening audience might hear as Glass's voice is actually that of the comedian Fred Armisen impersonating Glass. As the two dialogue, Glass trains Armisen to perfect his mimicry: "Do I sound that nasal?" Glass asks, and Armisen resignedly responds, "Maybe."[23] Implicitly, the two also train the listening audience to discern the nuanced differences that make up the Glass effect: what is perceived as the nasality, and the measured cadence and low volume delivery that characterize Glass's voice.[24]

Rendered in musical notation, Armisen's impersonation helps bring out the particulars of Glass's rhythm and tone.[25] In Figure 6.1, bars one and two in the first system show Armisen, followed by Glass in bar three, and Armisen's correction in bar four. Surprisingly, Glass's pitch is several notes lower than Armisen's initial impression. What Glass and Armisen call the "nasal" quality in Glass's voice—recognized by them both in row four—leads Armisen to imagine a higher pitch—an illusion shared by many critics—that he only retunes upon hearing Glass speak again. Armisen's eventual "pitch perfect" impression in bar four is impressive, but more remarkable is the still recognizable difference of his

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voice when it is heard. This residue beyond pitch marks the complex physiological and social difference inherent in the problem of timbre (Fales 2002).[26] Although Armisen can mimic tone and rhythm—those sonic elements that distinguish one voice from another, even when tuned to the same pitch—Glass's timbral individuality escapes both Armisen and the musical transcription. While other tools, such as spectrogram analysis, can help render legible nonmelodious aspects of the voice, what matters most at this moment is how Armisen transforms Ira Glass's voice into an identifiable character study.

(p. 113) *Figure 6.1* The musician David Steinberg's melodic transcription of Fred Armisen's impersonation of and conversation with Ira Glass on the January 11, 2013 episode of *This American Life*.

Rather than allow his voice to serve as a conduit, a delivery device for content and meaning, Ira Glass turns his voice into an object in this exchange.[27] In addition, his dialogue with Armisen demonstrates that the show has recognized the genre of its voice, a (p. 109) voice with its own rules of use that help identify it as impressionable, insofar as it makes an impression on its audience—it is not merely any voice—and in the sense that one can copy it by shaping one's own voice to its sonic contours.

But how far can that copy travel? To whom is it recognizable? And, again, to which publics does it appeal? As Armisen, one of the stars on *Saturday Night Live* from 2002 to 2013 and the cocreator and star of the television show *Portlandia*, works on perfecting his impression, he offers a possible answer. In his conversation with Glass, Armisen reveals that he had pitched a parody about Glass and *This American Life* to *Saturday Night Live*'s producers, but that it was ultimately rejected because its object, the voice of Ira Glass, was not recognizable to enough viewers: it wasn't famous enough for the SNL audience to recognize the parody. Armisen's revelation delimits the public reach of Glass's voice. Years before the *This American Life* spinoff *Serial* podcast would become a *Saturday Night Live* parody hit, Armisen's story makes clear that the "public" of public radio is distinct from the general public of *Saturday Night Live*, and that Glass's voice falls outside a certain threshold of popular culture in the United States.[28] However, including this story on *This American Life* is not a merely self-effacing gesture. For the limited reach of Glass's voice, the limitation of its public, is the very limit that helps create that voice's ac-

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tual public. The failure to be heard by one group only increases that voice's relevance to another group.

Shirley Glass, in the show's first episode, only worries about the limits, the too-narrow confines of that voice. Borrowing the language of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture, one might say that she does not consider the *distinction* of such a voice, nor the *cultural capital* (p. 110) it entails. In Bourdieu's terms, the *Saturday Night Live*' producers' rejection of Glass's voice produces that voice's "distinctive *value* from its negative relationship with the coexisting position-takings corresponding to the different positions" (Bourdieu 1993, 30).[29] Thus Glass's voice, along with the show's other early voices, such as those of Sarah Vowell and David Sedaris, who helped cement *This American Life*'s vocal sound, create and shape their particular public against already existing expectations of the mainstream, and against the norms of the public radio voice.[30] To return to a quote near the beginning of this chapter, Sarah Vowell says, "Most of the voices [on *This American Life*] sound like they shouldn't be on the radio" (Belluck 1998). This negative aesthetic, which Vowell carries in her own voice, self-described as that of a "snotty 6-year-old" (Belluck 1998), clarifies that the show's cultural capital derives from these misfit sounds adamantly inappropriate for the norms of public radio.[31]

Vowell, herself a keen critic of public radio and the voice, has helped formulate in her listening diary *Radio On* (1996) the sonic ground against which *This American Life* distinguishes itself. Just six months before the first episode of *Your Radio Playhouse*, in a long entry from May 1995, Vowell laments NPR's loss of a sound she defines as "play made audible," and "an un-newsy obsession with beauty" in exchange for "bare-voiced reportage" (Vowell 1996: 67–68). In her critique she reserves praise for Ira Glass, "one of NPR's most interesting commentator/producers," and "a tape of [David] Sedaris's Ira Glass-produced commentaries," which she finds conspicuously absent from an NPR "greatest-hits collection" (68). Listening to the tape, Vowell relishes the shift from the *Morning Edition* host to Sedaris, as "the move from familiar announcer to voice-out-of-nowhere" (70). Unlike the voice of presidential oratory, or Sabrina Fahri's apparent neutrality, Sedaris's voice comes from nowhere because of its uncanny strangeness. What Vowell identifies as his "boyish nasal timbre," Sedaris himself has called his "excitable tone and high, girlish pitch."[32] Other commentators have noted "his quiet, nasal voice" (Lyall 2008), "pleasingly strange" (Minor 2013), similar to "a woodsprite's airy tones" (Loviglio 2007), and "like no other human's," marked by an "odd pitch and slightly singsongy quirkiness" that make it "hard to place the speaker as younger or older, male or female" (Haber 2013). Young, ageless, strange, mythical, inhuman, and ambiguously gendered, Sedaris's voice challenges classifications. Yet it is through listening to Sedaris that Vowell, thrilled by his odd timbre, helps define herself against a public who fails to hear how she hears:

> I was so surprised and delighted by the combination of deadpan delivery, sick humor, and childlike pathos, that when I got to work and that hour of *Morning Edition* rolled around again, I forced my museum coworkers to listen. They didn't laugh, though one woman managed to mutter, "Weird." I began questioning if the

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> museum career was such a hot idea for me after all. Did I really want to spend the rest of my professional life working with people who didn't laugh at jokes about syphilis and torture spoken by a sarcastic but lovable apartment cleaner on vacation? (69)

A totem and a taboo, Sedaris's voice makes clear to Vowell the type of voice and the kind of listening that she values. Her coworkers' rejection of that voice as simply "weird" (p. 111) confirms the negative aesthetic she will pursue on *This American Life*: a program for voices—Sedaris's among them—that "sound like they shouldn't be on the radio."

Vowell's commentary, in both her book and interviews, give a semantic shape to tone and timbre; her statements help us hear social meaning in sound. This discursive labeling provides one means to talk about the sound of a voice, and one way to think about how voices both represent and create publics through sound on *This American Life*. It also demonstrates how the specific sound of voices on the program might serve to help entail new forms of speech on public radio. At least implicitly, Vowell hears Sedaris, praises his voice, and then eventually goes to work on *This American Life* alongside him. Even within the context of the story in *Radio On*, sound and sense converge in Vowell's hearing of Sedaris, and their combination enables a change in the social field.

To borrow from the jargon of linguistic anthropology, we might think of the story Vowell tells about listening to Sedaris and trying to share that listening with her coworkers as a "metapragmatic" event.[33] Certain sonic markers in Sedaris's voice point to or index aspects of a social world, such as expected social roles, including gender and sexual identity, or norms in register, such as speaking with shock or disgust about syphilis and torture, rather than with "deadpan delivery." The pragmatic markers in the voice would be those changes in pitch or volume that would index the social space without changing the object of reference. The metapragmatics come into play when Vowell labels how changes in Sedaris's tone construct different communities, and explains how she uses the shared listening to that voice to define herself and her own hopeful community against the limits of another social world. "Weird," the linguistic token applied to Sedaris's voice by Vowell's coworker, clarifies the borders of these social spaces in stark and familiar terms: Vowell's story clarifies her affiliation with the "weird" against the museum workers' implicit "normal." While sounds might be heard differently by different listeners, the stories about these sounds and the eventual sedimentation of those stories into cultural norms reveals the process by which vocal timbre, pitch, and tone come to organize social space.[34]

The "weird" or "odd" sound of Sedaris's voice initiates Vowell into the nascent radio community that she will help define under the banner of *This American Life*. Perhaps the key to this community comes in the only description of Sedaris's voice that addresses its sound with any specificity: Vowell's approximation of the physical sound of his "boyish nasal timbre." Connecting such sound with a general trend in the evolving acoustics of NPR voices, Jason Loviglio remarks that Ira Glass has "found great success with a voice far higher in pitch than is typically found in broadcasting and with some of the same precious, adenoidal charm" as David Sedaris (Loviglio 2007, 71). To Loviglio's ear, both

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"sound as if they are speaking from their throats and through their noses, a gentle honking, rather than in the stentorian diaphragmatic speech typical of US male broadcasters, from Edward R. Murrow to Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather. These voices, in short, project a softer masculinity than is typical in American broadcast journalism" (71).[35] The sound of Sedaris and Glass's voices, in Loviglio's understanding, participate in a more general historical shift within public radio, wherein "low-pitched, monotone women's (p. 112) voices and high-pitched and pitch-variable men's voices" "function as crucial 'sound effects' for conveying the tricky cultural work of NPR," which "prides itself both on its inside-the-beltway access and its typically American populist fascination with the textured amateurism of the local, the real, the everyday" (Loviglio 2007, 73). The sound of the voice, in this case, marks an epochal shift in norms of gender and sexuality that both represents and actively negotiates the field of political ideology.

Loviglio might be correct about the changing sound of gender on NPR, and his investigation into these voices as "sound effects" of cultural change harmonizes with my own interest in reading the sound of *This American Life*'s voices as both symptom and effect of a changing public. However, his reference to "the rubber-duck-voiced Sarah Vowell" (Loviglio 2007, 76) reveals the limits of his conclusions. Vowell's inclusion in the *This American Life* cohort reminds us that alongside questions of gender, these voices—the "boyish nasal timbre" (Sedaris), "precious adenoidal charm" (Glass), and "snotty 6-year old" (Vowell)—share what folk discourses identify as a "nasal" and childlike quality Loviglio identifies as "pitch variable," but which we can also hear as returning the sound of "play made audible" Vowell recalls from NPR's early years. This "new nasal" sound—which phonetic experts tell us is not "nasal" in any technical sense, but which cultural critics, radio announcers, and "folk" theories continue to identify as "nasal"—is non-normative, rebellious, quirky, and anti-authoritarian.[36] It deflates the "stentorian," or loud and warrior-like sound of classic male broadcasting, or the engineered sound of presidential "authority and masculinity," which Jonathan Sterne has identified as "thick, deep, and sharp, but not too nasal" (Sterne 2008, 83). Within this cohort Glass's voice both participates in this new nasal sound and, with its casual cadence, inviting pauses, and lower volume delivery, links his own voice with another tradition of US oratory, from Jefferson to FDR, meant to create an "intimate public."[37] As the show's host, the sound of his voice serves as an auditory bridge between the older forms of oratory and the more extreme, and rarely intimate volumes of Sedaris or Vowell. These latter voices disturb and estrange the norms of public broadcasting, approaching a no-man's-land between what Sianne Ngai calls the "cute" or the "zany": simultaneously repulsive and attractive in their childlike pitch (Vowell has since voiced the animated superhero teen Violet Parr in the 2004 film *The Incredibles*), and sonically and socially precarious as their vocal sounds challenge norms of gender, sexuality, and even age (Ngai 2012).[38]

In their quirkiness—a term whose history conjures both an unexpected sound, witty remark, and a general oddity, eccentricity, or sharp and sudden twitch away from sonic-social normativity—these voices clear new ground or open new social-acoustic space for an American public unaligned with the traditional broadcast voice of authority.[39] They announce new ways to sound against the constraining definitions of speech pathologies,

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rhetorical manuals, and professional voice trainers. And yet alongside this cultural opening, their odd timbres also sonorously efface questions of region and class, thereby allowing them to fit into the democratic project of voice in the United States.[40]

Coda: New Standards

The nasal, childlike, and sometimes childish character that the aforementioned listeners hear in some of *This American Life*'s contributing voices participates in a changing political culture that emphasizes inclusiveness, challenging the very categories of gender and sexuality without calling attention to the regional or class background of those voices. However, the ambition of this sound can sometimes conflict with the showrunner's statements. In Ira Glass's words, the show's appeal to an audience of over one million listeners derives from a new normal based on the class origins of its producers: "We don't try to guess what the audience will like. We simply put on what we like. We're all suburban kids. We feel we have the most normal tastes in the world. We think: If we like it, other people will like it" (Anstead 2006, 43). Statements like this, which normalize and universalize a class experience and perspective, threaten to undermine the democratic and pluralist ambitions of the program, and render an especially narrow vision of American life. The show's expansion and constriction of available social roles, and hence the available publics within public radio that Glass alludes to here, reveals some of the ongoing barriers connected to class and race in the shifting footing of *This American Life*'s imagining and construction of new publics through sound.

But does the "new nasality" actually contribute to reinforcing broader exclusions in public radio? Recent work in linguistic anthropology claims that nasality indexes "whiteness," implicitly—and with adamant "nonaggressiveness"—drawing racial boundaries through sound.[41] Additionally, NPR—often the outlet for, if not the distributor of *This American Life*—has faced increased criticism for its lack of racial diversity, leading its executives to strategize how "to bring in more diverse voices to reflect the rich diversity of this country," and its ombudsman, Edward Schumacher-Matos, to ask, "to 'sound like America,' does NPR need a staff that more closely mirrors the total demographic weight of each ethnic and minority group?" (Schumacher-Matos 2012). (His own answer was a qualified negative.)

The voices from the early contributors to *This American Life* cannot resolve these tensions, and, in many ways, their chief value has been that creative and critical function of unsettling and estranging any potentially normal encounter with the voice. (One need listen no further than David Sedaris's comic impersonation of Billie Holiday singing the Oscar Meyer theme song for a sonic event that troubles the borders of race, gender, and sexuality) (Glass 1998). Furthermore, any valuation of those voices should account for the impact they have had on other voices. For instance, Glynn Washington, the African American host of NPR's *Snap Judgment*, has said that Ira Glass's voice brought him into radio, and that the way to continue diversifying the public of public radio is to continue hiring diverse hosts to form and share new perspectives.[42] Regardless of the scholarly claims

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linking nasality and whiteness, Glass's voice, in this lived encounter, directly helped change the racial makeup of NPR and introduced new perspectives and voices to the public corporation's airwaves.

(p. 114) Similarly, Daniel Alarcón, the novelist and cofounder of Public Radio International's *Radio Ambulante*, describes that radio program as "*This American Life*, but in Spanish, and transnational" (Alarcón 2014a).[43] Alarcón, who has joked that he might "sound like a bad Latin version of Ira Glass," finds a particular significance in the sound of radio voices:

> I got into radio after my first novel came out, and I was asked to do a radio documentary. And I did all the interviews, and wrote a bunch of the script. It was edited without me. And I think the piece that came out is great. But one thing that bothered me was a lot of the Spanish voices were left out. What you lose in a voiceover sometimes is the nuance. You lose the energy in the, in the, in the accent. You lose the inventiveness in the actual word choice. You also lose the placement of silences, and the humor; you know? A lot of times you'll lose the humor. You start to really appreciate the beauty of all those different ways of speaking. I didn't want those Spanish-language voices to get cut.
>
> (Alarcón 2014b)

While something of what Alarcón says here relates to general problems of translation—word choice and the nuance of language—much of it pertains to the sound of those voices alone. Alarcón helped establish *Radio Ambulante* to make sure those sounds are not lost, and to remind listeners how much information—emotion, humor, place—is contained in a voice's sound. Bringing the model of *This American Life* to the Americas—including the United States—archives and represents a new version of what it means to sound American. With *Radio Ambulante*, the new legacy of Glass, Sedaris, and Vowell's odd timbres might be to reimagine the very sonic cartography of American voices.

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Notes:

(1.) For more on the phenomenon of "global English" see Raley (2012). See also McArthur (2001).

(2.) Ethnomusicology, linguistic anthropology, media theory, and especially the new interdisciplinary field of sound studies have all contributed to helping us understand the political and cultural importance of sound. Mladen Dolar's remarkable *A Voice and Nothing More*, however, is more representative of a long and hegemonic tradition of psychoanalytic theory—and poststructuralist theory in general—which has failed to account for the voice's sounds as something more than epiphenomena, or an abstract "surplus" that troubles the "logos" (Dolar 2006). A brief list of voice and radio theorists whose writing re-

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flects an intense interest in the sound of the voice would include Alejandra Bronfman, Ashon Crawley, Susan Douglas, Christine Ehrick, Steven Feld, Nicholas Harkness, Michelle Hilmes, Charles Hirschkind, Jason Loviglio, Mara Mills, John Durham Peters, R. Murray Schaeffer, Jonathan Sterne, Jennifer Stoever, Thomas Streeter, and Neil Verma.

(3.) “The listener rather restricts himself to the reception of pure sound, which comes to him through the loudspeaker” (Arnheim 1936, 142).

(4.) According to Tom Lubin, Roosevelt used the Western Electric 618A dynamic microphone made in 1934 at Bell Labs (9). See Howard (2010). Jason Loviglio mentions FDR’s dental bridge in *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-mediated Democracy* (2005). Hitler used a Neuman microphone. See Lyden (2008).

(5.) See Loviglio (2005, 4–7).

(6.) For more on the contest to claim responsibility for the first radio broadcast—as distinct from the first radio transmission of any kind—see Claxton (2007) and Matallana (2006).

(7.) “It is this creation of a set of nonlocalized and supra-regional norms, or of what can be seen as a set of ‘standard pronunciation features’ which provides a major focus of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as writers on the language endeavoured to supplant the heterogeneities of actual usage in terms of accent with the homogeneity of the ‘correct’ way to speak, regularly asserting the assumed values of the monolithic and the unlinear as they did so” (Mugglestone 1995, 5).

(8.) D. L. LeMahieu observes that Sir John Reith, the head of the BBC from 1922 to 1938, “deeply regretted not having a degree from Oxford or Cambridge, and hired a disproportionate number of his lieutenants from those institutions. Announcers were expected to speak with a proper accent, and in the early years of the BBC wore full evening dress while broadcasting” (LeMahieu 1988, 183).

(9.) For an earlier moment in radio history about the peculiar alignment of English and Indian sonic publics see Orwell (1968).

(10.) Michael North has noted how the standard language movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States sought to both regiment the class aspects of US social life, and to marginalize speech forms associated with specific ethnic and racial groups. See North (1998).

(11.) A 1972 National Opinion Poll in England asked, “‘Which of the two of these would you say are most important in being able to tell which class a person is?’ The largest group of respondents (33%) rated, ‘The way they speak’ as the most important factor. Other studies have focused on accent in particular … These experiments indicate that Britons view accents in terms of a stratified model of speaker rank” (Agha 2003, 240).

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(12.) Since May 28, 2014, *This American Life* has distributed the show itself through PRX. In a message posted by Ira Glass on the show's blog, Glass emphasized this decision as a further democratization of the program: "What [PRX is] about is the democratization of public radio. Making it easy for you or any newcomer to get their work into the hands of program directors … When you get tired of being a listener and decide to make your own show, seriously, you should give them a look" (Glass 2014).

(13.) The valence of these terms here and throughout this chapter refer to both the notion of the "public" in "public radio," and the theoretical complexity of publics argued for by Warner (2005).

(14.) The limitations of voiceprint identification have been usefully critiqued by a number of scholars. See especially Sterne (2008).

(15.) I am indebted to Steven Rings for guiding me through some of these linguistic problems.

(16.) Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) has been taken up by several of these thinkers as a chosen site to work through the changing formation of representative speech and the popular voice in the early United States. For a reading of the text that situates it within a history of ventriloquism and media theory see Connor (2001).

(17.) Commenting on the voice's role in the foundation of the United States, Looby claims, "Precisely because the new nation's self-image was characterized by its difference from a traditional (quasi-natural) conception of the nation, indeed by the conscious recognition of its historical contingency that was produced by the abrupt performativity of its inception, vocal utterance has served, in telling instances, as a privileged figure for the making of the United States. This figuration has occasionally taken the odd form of an improbable claim that the United States was actually 'spoken into being' … For the moment let me just say that I take this strange trope to register in a particularly condensed form the more widespread American sense of nation fabrication as an intentional act of linguistic creation, the belief that the nation was made out of words. The question of whether such a linguistically grounded nation is best figured as *written* or *spoken* is not, for many writers of the period, a foregone conclusion but, on the contrary, a live issue of some consequence. To anticipate a bit: since the new United States, by all accounts, manifestly lacked the kind of legitimacy and stability that might be expected of a nation that was grounded in blood loyalty or immemorial facticity—since its legitimacy was explicitly grounded in an appeal to rational interest, not visceral passion—*voice* embodied a certain legitimating charisma that print could not" (Looby 1996, 3–4).

In different terms, Jason Frank, like Ruttenburg, argues for the centrality of a theological and secular combination in early democratic politics: "Both democratic history and democratic theory demonstrate that the people are a political *claim*, an act of political subjectification, not a pre-given, unified, or naturally bounded empirical reality. In the United States the power of claims to speak in the people's name derives in part from a constitutive surplus inherited from the revolutionary era, from the fact that since the Revolution

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the people have been at once enacted through representation—how could it be otherwise?—and in excess of any particular representation. This dilemma illuminates the significance and theological resonance of popular voice: *vox populi*, *vox Dei*. The authority of vox populi derives from its continually reiterated but never fully realized reference to the sovereign people beyond representation, beyond the law, the spirit beyond the letter, the Word beyond words—the mystical foundations of authority. The postrevolutionary people are at once enacted through representational claims and forever escaping the political and legal boundaries inscribed by those claims" (Frank 2010, 3).

(18.) Nancy Ruttenburg's work already traces the influence of what she names "democratic personality" from the seventeenth century through the end of the nineteenth century. A radical theological utterance that joins *vox dei* and *vox populi* in the first and second Great Awakenings, Ruttenburg's "democratic personality" names the speech form in which disenfranchised subjects, such as women or slaves, claiming to serve as simple conduits for the voice of God, gained authority to publicly condemn the most powerful figures within a community (Ruttenburg 1998, 16 and 24). The history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature in the United States, from Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798) through Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855–1892) and Melville's *Billy Budd* (1891 [1924]), is the taming of this form of speech and then its eventual reirruption in Melville's writing. We find these issues continuing with a difference with the development of radio technology. Radio broadcasting, with its ability to make private voices audible to a massive number of listeners, transformed that history, and made a voice "public" in a previously unthinkable manner. Early DXers, who built personal radio transmitters and receivers to communicate with strangers across tremendous distances, encountered their own voices and those of others in the newly public space of the ether. However, when governments across the globe intervened to regulate the crowded airwaves in order to reduce signal interference in the late 1920s, and the commercial radio format consolidated itself in the United States in the early 1930s, the DXers gave way to populist cultural and political figures including demagogues like Father Coughlin and Huey Long, for whom speaking *to* a massive number of people was often confused with speaking *for* or in the voice of the people. New versions of the popular voice arose in pirate broadcasting and resistance to commercial networks, including extraordinary cases like Robert F. and Mabel Williams's "Radio Free Dixie" broadcasts from Havana, Cuba to the southern United States. Finally, call-in shows and "talk radio," however one-sided the format might be in practice, offered another iteration of the voice of the people. "In the very early years of radio, characterized by 'DXing' (ham radio code for distance signaling), when listeners tried to tune in stations from as far away as possible, people didn't have to imagine their compatriots several states away—they heard them, with all their differences and similarities, on the air" (Douglas 2004, 24–5). See also Brinkley (1983). On the consolidation of commercial radio in the United States see Streeter (1996), Tyson (2001), and Barker (2002).

(19.) For more on the early history of NPR see Looker quoted in Vowell (1996) and Douglas (2004).

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(20.) Fliegelman, attentively reading the elocutionary texts of the period, observes Jefferson's affection for the "familiar style" of rhetoric against "the elevated" and "the middling," and notes that an influential text on rhetoric insisted that "'an affected artificial manner of speaking' … give way to one in which 'the tones of public speaking' were 'formed upon' the 'tones of sensible and animated conversation,' in which prepared texts should always appear extemporaneous, and in which the public realm, in ways that problematically blurred the distinction between them, should be modeled more and more on the private" (Fliegelman 1993, 27).

(21.) For more on the difficulties of defining timbre, see Fales (2002).

(22.) One notable case is Juan Domingo Perón's government in Argentina, which forbade specific tones during his first term as president. See Matallana (2006).

(23.) As I explain elsewhere in this chapter, Glass's voice is not "nasal" in any technical or medical sense. However, critics tend to use this term to define his voice, and, as we see in their conversation around Armisen's impersonation, Glass and Armisen hear what they call a "nasal" sound to be key to Glass's voice. (Glass, notably, challenges how "nasal" his voice might be.) One of the readers for this volume as well as one of the volume's editors suggested that calling Glass's voice "nasal," with a pejorative meaning, might be related to anti-Semitic discourse, conscious or not. Glass's own discussion of his voice emphasizes both a self-deprecating identification of ethnic heritage—"I'm just a whiny Jew" ("Distinctive")—and an everyday, casual delivery: "You should never say a sentence on the air that you couldn't say in a normal dinner conversation" (Glass 2010, 55). Nazi propaganda during the Third Reich often pointed to not only a physical stereotype of Jewish noses, but suggested that a Jew "talks through his nose" (this description can be found, for example, in a children's book by Julius Streicher titled *Der Giftpilz*, published in 1938). It's worth pointing out that the same adjective, "nasal," is frequently—and, again, technically incorrectly—applied to the voices of David Sedaris and Sarah Vowell, neither of whom identify as ethnically or culturally Jewish. However, the pejorative racialized associations, deeply embedded in Western culture, may still be at work in the discourse about their voices.

(24.) As early interviews with Glass make clear, his cadence is the result of his own punctilious postproduction editing: "The casual cadence belies the excruciating care with which the show is produced. Mr. Glass spent years developing his style, and he writes out his words beforehand. In each story, he manipulates pauses so they underscore an arresting image" (Belluck 1998). An article in the parody newspaper *The Onion* renders Glass's cadence in print through an overabundance of commas to underscore these pauses: "When we finished, I have to tell you, I felt something I never expected: a profound sense of contentment—maybe even relief," Glass said. "Afterwards, the other producers and I sat around for a long while, remarking on how interesting and strange it was to finally complete the study, and how perhaps it is, in some way, symbolic of life in general" ("'This American Life'"). Finally, the lower volume delivery that helps characterize Glass's voice

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has been interpreted by some critics as "'muffled"' (Rainey 2010) and others as "that sincere, in-the-same-room-as-you voice" (Coburn 2007).

(25.) I am indebted to David Steinberg for his extraordinary efforts in transcribing the voices of Armisen, Glass, Sedaris, and Vowell into musical notation.

(26.) See Fales (2002).

(27.) See Dolar (2006) for a psychoanalytic and poststructuralist approach to what he names, following Lacan, "the object voice."

(28.) Hosted by *This American Life* producer Sarah Koenig, who also coproduced the show with fellow *This American Life* producer Julie Snyder, *Serial* became the most downloaded podcast in that form's brief history. See Carr (2014).

The *Saturday Night Live* parody is "Christmas Serial: Saturday Night Live," *YouTube*, December 21, 2014 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ATXbJjuZqbc).

(29.) Bourdieu (1993). Bourdieu's writings have been applied to hipster subculture by Mark Grief (2010).

(30.) The epochal shift in tone norms has been the focus of a recent debate concerning female use of "vocal fry" and the standards of male NPR broadcasters. In response to an episode of *Slate*'s *Lexicon Valley*, cohosted by Bob Garfield, who also cohosts the WNYC program *On the Media*, Amanda Hess writes, "I suspect that the spread of 'creaky voice' makes Garfield so mad because it represents the downfall of his own mode of communication, which is swiftly being replaced by the patterns and preferences of 11-year-old girls." She adds, "Of course, young women could work to flatten their speech patterns to conform to Garfield's own NPRish affectation, which one commenter describes as 'Richard Pryor making fun of WASPs'" (Hess 2013). Vocal fry stands in contrast to NPR and marks a change in generational sonic norms of speech. As Hess states, "A 2011 *Science* investigation into vocal fry confirms that the vocal creak is not a universally-reviled tic. *Science* cites a study conducted by speech scientist Nassima Abdelli-Beruh of Long Island University, who observed the creak in two-thirds of the college women she sampled. She also found that 'young students tend to use it when they get together,' with the speech pattern functioning as a 'social link between members of a group' … Garfield may be satisfied to learn that Abdelli-Beruh 'does not hear vocal fry on National Public Radio, which targets an older audience.'" I would only add that the so-called nasal tones of Glass, Sedaris, and Vowell performed an earlier modification and challenge to generational and corporate sonic norms on public radio in the United States (Hess 2013). I am indebted to Steven Rings for alerting me to Hess's response.

(31.) Vowell's negative approach, which often invokes Nirvana, the Velvet Underground, and other bands considered part of the proto or postpunk genealogy, occasionally places *This American Life* and her own thoughts on radio into a long line of negative aesthetics best encapsulated in the writings of Greil Marcus (1990) and Jon Savage (2005).

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(32.) Sedaris's charming, funny, and sad recollection of speech therapy classes he was forced to attend as a fifth-grader reveals his early awareness of his voice as an object. He describes how the therapist alienates him from his voice and marks his voice as culturally and sexually non-normative: "'One of the *s* e day *s* I'm going to have to hang a *s* ign on that door,' Agent Samson used to say. She was probably thinking along the lines of SPEECH THERAPY LAB, though a more appropriate marker would have read FUTURE HOMOSEXUALS OF AMERICA. We knocked ourselves out trying to fit in but were ultimately betrayed by our tongues … Thanks to Agent Samson's tape recorder, I, along with the others, now had a clear sense of what I actually sounded like. There was the lisp, of course, but more troubling was my voice itself, with its excitable tone and high, girlish pitch. I'd hear myself ordering lunch in the cafeteria, and the sound would turn my stomach. How could anyone stand to listen to me?" (Sedaris 2000).

(33.) Linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein has developed the language of metapragmatics across a number of articles. See Silverstein (1976). For the implications of Silverstein's work in literary theory see Lucey (2006).

(34.) For more on the pragmatic and metapragmatic uses of language see Lucey (2010).

(35.) For more on how "softness" can function as a sonic sensuousness that becomes a generalized cultural marker or "qualisign" for changing gender relationships, see Harkness (2013).

(36.) Jody Kreiman states, "I think what people usually hear when they say a voice is 'nasal' is that there is a difference in the shape of the voice source spectrum." According to Kreiman, what Sedaris and Vowell's voices share, especially in contrast to a speaker like Dan Rather, is that the former voices have "more energy in the higher harmonics." Similarly, what Glass and Armisen identify as "nasal" in Armisen's impersonation of Glass, Kreiman identifies as a change in the shape of the larynx, mouth and vocal tract, but nothing that phoneticians would identify as physiologically "nasal." Much of Kreiman's work has been dedicated to moving away from the inadequate and even confusing descriptive tradition for categorizing voices inherited from the Greeks and Romans, and constructing a means to quantify the sonic patterns of vocal speech. What I am calling the "new nasal" sound here identifies what nonscientific listeners categorize as "nasal" voices (Kreiman, personal communication, July 3, 2015). See also Kreiman et al. (2007).

(37.) See Fliegelman (1993), Durham Peters (1999), and Loviglio (2005) for more on this tradition. I borrow the term "intimate public" from Loviglio's *Radio's Intimate Public*.

(38.) The voices of Sedaris and Vowell, in particular, might also be identified as sharing something of a period style from the decades of the 1990s and early 2000s, the sonorous correlate for what James Wood has identified as "hysterical realism" in fiction (Wood 2000).

(39.) Nicholas Harkness has named this indelible connection of the physiological and cultural "the literal phonosonic voice—the 'voice voice'—that emerges from vibrations and

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resonance in the vocal tract," and the "tropic extension of the voice" (Harkness, 2014, 77). The first "is the site in which the phonic production and organization of sound intersect with the sonic uptake and categorization of sound in the world," and the second "describes an alignment to, or taking up of, a kind of perspective or moral stance in respect of semiotic text. It is the expression of an interest in relation to, or explicitly against other interests in the social world" (77). The various resonances of "quirkiness" or "quirk" can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary.

(40.) Nasality—the common trait popularly identified across these voices—poses particular difficulties for phonologists, and for those social linguists and linguistic anthropologists concerned with studying its possible social functions. Recent work in these fields has aligned nasality with the social type of the "nerd," and with "whiteness." Thus, these voices also might delimit the racial and social field of their potential publics through their very pitches (Bucholtz 2001; Podesva et al. 2013).

(41.) See Bucholtz (2001) and Podesva et al. (2013).

(42.) A recent profile on Washington begins as follows:

"I had a girlfriend," he continues, "and we kept fighting and breaking up." They were living in Michigan and had planned a relationship-saving trip to Canada. "And on the way out of Ann Arbor, this show comes on—it's this guy I had never heard before, a dude named Ira Glass. I was like, 'Whoa!' and she was like, 'Turn this noise off right away!'" That was the epiphany Washington needed. "I was like, 'Stop the car.' I knew right then the relationship was not going to work." That was 1997, when *This American Life*, Glass's public radio show, was just two years old, and people were beginning to suspect that his style of curated storytelling might be radio's next big thing. Now Washington, a proud student of Glass's, is the next big thing."

The profile closes with Washington's diagnosis of NPR's diversity: "At industry conferences, he is constantly asked how to bring 'diversity' to public-radio listenership. He's getting sick of this question. 'This is what you do,' he told me. 'You *hire* the people you're trying to reach'" (Openheimer 2013).

(43.) In an interview with Alarcón on WNYC's program *On the Media*, cohost Bob Garfield played clips of Ira Glass's introduction to *This American Life* alongside Alarcón's introduction to *Radio Ambulante*. In response, Alarcón said, "If I sound like a bad Latin version of Ira Glass, it's not because I'm trying to emulate him. It's because I feel very uncomfortable in front of the microphone. So, I'm working on that. And my apologies to Mr. Glass" (Alarcón 2014a).

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