

***Connection and Vulnerability:
radiobodies against the seamless flow***

(Email dialogue with Olivia Bradley-Skill in the Autumn of 2016; we agreed to let it float around online.)

OBS: Could you talk more about how (if) radio acts as your muse and a major informant in your work? Your work seems very rooted in practice and people -- how people listen ((thus the cyclical structure of your stories)), how the radio functions in our world ((the power dynamic between the announcer/listener, but also the intimacy it can bring)), how radio is a signal based medium, etc -- what drives your interest in these processes? How did you get started thinking about them? Do you still listen to the radio?

GW: Oh yes, though the radio I listen to is more the radio of edges and bleeds, rather than formats and programs. I resist the efforts of the data miners to take away those edges by eliminating the power of listeners to roll fingers along the tuning dial, in restless discovery. Since childhood, I prefer to spend my my radio time exploring the unexpected spaces in between the sponsored signals; those tidy branded and sponsored formats are way too clean for my blood.

Most of my ideas come from the completely unexpected limbo-dancers that push out through the murk, and I imagine other listeners doing the same, with my pieces as part of the vast electromagnetic swampland, on the fade into infinite decay at the very moment of broadcast. So no, I never expect a listener will hear the “whole piece”, whatever that is; I build radio plays by fragments, like your own work, with lots of ways in and out, and no attempt to clean it all up.

Power radio obliges listeners to begin with a host who tells them what they are going to hear and ends with a host telling them what they just heard. Isn't that also what a tyrant does, projecting power through the airwaves? I prefer my radio full of holes, empty of fixed messages, and yet open to the free play of imaginations that are naturally inclined towards association and adventure. So much of the prevalent trend towards tight & tidy stories drains the radio swamp of all its beautiful mysteries and poetic juices, leaving nothing behind but the desiccated, reedy voices of smug and smarmy hosts.

OBS: I read that you said radio art is all about relationships and that it has an "erotic drive" in a way that sound art does not have. Can you speak more about this? Are there different energies that exist between radio art and sound art? Are they intrinsically connected? Does the distinction even matter?

GW: The designation “radio art” often seems increasingly applied to purists, filling tight art world niches with reams of clever press releases. Against that flow, my own plays are anything but pure. Better to roam the wide open spaces with as little preliminary fanfare as possible, catching whatever ears are out here, on the fly. .

Do you read the brilliant Anne Carson? In *Eros the Bittersweet*, she writes that “human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies.” She may well have been writing about radio, and the desire to communicate through motive air-waves that might tickle the imagination in one second while delivering oblivion the next.

Radio Eros is a radio that knows all about the ubiquitous deadly vibrations, yet refuses to be moved by them, or that even transforms them into exuberant life, like a wound doctor who decides to write a score for a chorus of wounds. The brilliant Honduran fabulist Monteroso tells us that there are only three subjects: love, death and flies. Those are endlessly intermingling on air by the very nature of the space; great radio hums from out of the muddled mingle.

OBS: I also have a lot of half-baked questions about the body and how that plays in your work. I might have to come back to this one because it is really important to me but I don't know where to begin! Side note: I myself had a work in mind called "A Sonic Body: Exposure/Communication," in which I would put contact mics and record the sounds from a stethoscope on my body and stuff.. I haven't been able to do much with the ideas or actually put them into action, but all this is to say that when I read about your references to anatomized bodies/disembodied voices/radio bodies/ephemerality/etc, I am super super intrigued.

GW: You might want to have a listen to Henri Chopin, who experimented with such recordings, but I am sure you would take the ideas somewhere else. My thoughts on radio and the body are half-baked, too, the nature of the beast! My roots are in the analog age where I created bodies of sound through physical cutting with a razor blade, then taping the wounds. Using those tools, the relation was more visceral to be sure, which is why my thinking in recent years has been drifting more to the qualities of radiophonic space, and how that relates to how we think, and “be” — though the body issues are still very much alive, aloft and a love for me, too.

OBS: Your response triggers another thought about technology and tools (razor cutting, tapes, etc.). I've never cut together tape like that, but there is a huge nostalgia that we often tend to place on older analog technologies. Can you talk more about your 'tools', physical v. digital media/technologies, if you have nostalgia for clunkier technologies, and how changing technologies have changed the focus of your muse?

GW: It's not any sort of nostalgia; it's more that when some technologies become commercially obsolete or marginalized, they become more available for art. For example, when photography came along, many artists did not toss away their paints and brushes. I continue to work in a hybrid studio, both analog and digital, and use whatever tools are right for what I am trying to achieve in the particular production. I'm delighted that cassettes and vinyl are making a comeback, as they are both ideal formats for artist releases.

If you can find access to an old analog Otari with a splicing block, and a reel of 1/4" tape, give it a try! I miss the kinesis within analog studios which led to less perfectionism and more free play, to be sure, but no nostalgia. How do you produce your beautiful fragments and collages?

OBS: I am trying to accumulate more technologies and stuff to play around with, but I currently mainly use the program Audacity on my computer. I usually record things through my phone or through my computer and then have a ton of different channels that I fade between and/or distort through Audacity. I have been wanting to experiment and was going to get a MIDI controller from my brother, who is more technically savvy in most regards, but he's been slow to send it (he lives in California). Audacity is free so it can be clunky, but I sort of enjoy that. Also, I'm getting a better handle on the whole thing with more practice, so I'm getting more comfortable with the clunkiness and don't notice it as much anymore.

GW: Yes clunky is better than “seamless”. Beware of all software that pretends to do your thinking for you. I liked the Otari's for their own heavy kind of clunkiness. The half-inch four track I owned was built like a stone stove, and weighed the part. The editing blocks were lovely objects in themselves: perfectly grooved, to the precision of a sushi chef's knife, and in that groove, the cuts would come, and the splices smoothed. I used a tie rack stolen from my father's closet as a way to organize my fragments, tagged on the end like toes in a morgue; then the final montage came in a kinetic frenzy, the key being not to listen back too soon, to let the rawness ripen and seep. In the end, there might be more shavings for rhythm or distance, yet I taught myself to trust the meanings that were hiding inside the cut.

I no longer work on those wonderfully clunky Otaris, no, but I remember the fine lessons taught in that operating theatre, and I keep the tie rack handy to keep me honest when I want to digitally cheat. There are other ways to keep process playful and loose, and push back against the airless stuffiness that is encouraged and encoded inside the digital domain, that dryly infinite series of 0's and 1's, the tidy mathematics that lead to mind-numbing beginning/middle/end “story” shows: recording out in the world, keeping the body in the mix; use toy and other instruments (I have dozens, few of which I can play well, but all of which make music, in their own way); avoid anything even remotely affiliated with a sample library, unless you want to modulate the original into something completely other; keep discarded devices such as cassette players and phonographs at hand, for sometimes nothing but the needle or cassette hiss will do the trick.

OBS: Could you talk about the process of making *Wireless Imagination*? Your purpose in writing it and how it came together?

GW: Douglas Kahn and I shared a frustration with how difficult it was to situate sound and radio within the arts, back in the 1980s That seems strange now, since sound art and even radio to some extent have had much more acceptance within the art world, but at that time there was little understanding or acceptance of sound and radio art as autonomous practices distinct from electronic music, or neo-Cagean performance experiments. There were all sorts of radio/tape practices in play, but they were at the extreme margin of the art world, even in NYC.

We never intended nor pretended to be comprehensive, and there are large holes in the book, no question. We wanted to open a discourse and try to crack open the scopophilic hegemony, just a

little, and let some of the sound waves in. Do you think it succeeds, in that regard, as a reader twenty-five years later?

OBS: Correct me if I'm wrong, but there are (still) so few books on radio art, experimental radio, and sound art! Especially stuff that is poetic and has an artistic lens, rather than technical and mathematical. In that regard, I find the book super essential and important. You can never capture everything in one book, so I didn't go into it expecting to learn about every radio utterance, but I thought it did a great job of rooting the reader in the history while also pondering thought provoking theoretical questions. For the same ambiguous and strange fascination I have with the ways you incorporate the body into your work, Charles Grivel's piece "The Phonograph's Horned Mouth" was so so intriguing to me.

One entry point into a conversation about the body / sound / radio: I think that when I'm listening to the radio, I'm searching for an abstract form of human connection that feels special and somewhat intimate (without having to feel like pal, without being 'safe' -- this can include pure noise and pure silence) -- which is increased by the local-ness of radio, the ephemeral/live nature of it, the programming, and the mic style of the host. And, from another angle, my fascination with the body also comes from this interest in human connection and vulnerability -- rather than the biological/medical definitions/classifications of bodies, I'm interested in my aging parents, the different ways I carry myself as I get older and used to my body, and how listening to people's bodies can be a vulnerable act (putting your ear to their chest, even a stethoscope...).

So often the ways in which we approach the body and radio waves/sound can be so technical, limited, and far removed from how we actually experience and feel. Do you view your work as an intervention to these constructs?

GW: Yes, the technical aspects leave me cold, and all good radio plays or outcasts seek heat. Radio is the ideal medium for the exploration of bodies, desires, vulnerabilities and feelings because the medium in all its slippery wetness is perfectly at home with uncertainty, ambiguity, sudden jumps and rips, entropy and disintegration, so much a part of our identities though we spend endless hours in attempts to suppress those dimensions of our convoluted human selves.

OBS: I've seen you reference the power of imagination and creativity in building new worlds / better futures. I love the author Octavia Butler, who has a book entitled *Parable of the Sower*. The book is set in 2025, where everything is expensive, bleak, and dangerous. A young teenage woman tries to carve out a future that looks entirely different from the past and the present that her community is familiar with and through this process, she starts thinking of how she will start her own religion. The book inspires individual agency, imagination, hope, and power in the midst of a bleak landscape, and I wonder if you could talk about this theme in relation to the radio soundscape. What would you say to young radio artists, as well as the radio establishment, about the future of radio and how we can make it better?

GW: Well, at least with regards to so-called public radio, I proposed years ago that a mere two percent of station revenues be reserved for the establishment of artists in residence at every station; I did not get many takers on that idea, but I still believe that something along those lines would be a low-cost initiative that would have a strong and immediate impact on both content and aesthetic.

OBS: I read about this and was going to mention it to you. This is such a good idea..... I wonder why it isn't in place. I would absolutely love it if things like that existed. How do we go about starting that?

GW: The root problem: public radio at some point (different people would date the change differently; for me it began in the late 1980s) abandoned its own founding values and embraced what would eventually become ossified into a neoliberal business model where creativity was feared and most resources were sucked up into the compensation packages for top management and marketing, leaving those who loved exploring the medium marginalized into tiny little “art slots” or out in the cold. Those managers will say that their flattening of the space into easily digested modules of vapid nothingness, highly suitable for corporate sponsorship, is vindicated by the expansion of raw numbers of listeners; yet that listening has become thinner, and less passionate, and I suspect that if the plug is eventually pulled on the whole enterprise, very few people will have loved those stations deeply enough to actually fight for them. Sadly, in years to come, we may have the chance to find out!

I know the talent is out there, large numbers of very capable and creative young audio artists and radiomakers such as yourself, with no place to go that pays even a modest stipend. So, if the system is closed to fresh talent, then the alternative path is starting something new, or joining with the handful of smaller community stations (such as in the wonderful Radia network) that are open to more adventurous work, fresh directions outside the stale formats of aesthetically dead “story” shows. What you sensing among your peers? Do you think there might be energy to start something new?

OBS: I have a few good friends who are really into this kind of stuff. I don't know if they'll end up pursuing it because it's hard to find many avenues and, as you say, an exciting community where things are happening. I am doing my best trying to find options and community and opportunities to explore. I sometimes get frustrated because I have some friends in the music department at Princeton but they can be classically-minded, where things can quickly sound too formal and rigid (not always true, but there is often an assumed barrier of entry). On the other hand, I have a couple of friends who are interested in public radio and have internships at NPR stations, which are often much more journalistic than I am really truly interested in. So, I'm still looking for opportunities where the two paths meet and can have the freedom to do what I want to do. I really loved DJing at WPRB and am still trying to look to recapture that feeling of improvisation, collage, and, truthfully, playing music that was new to me and that I would come to love. So, I am hoping that there is energy to start something new soon!

From your perspective, do you think that there is more room for adventurous programming than there used to be, or has the flexibility for off-beat/non-standard formats lessened over the years? What has been your experience in terms of the radio soundscape over the years?

GW: My roots are in the cassette underground of the 1980s, where the room for adventure was infinite. To my ears, the most negative change over the past twenty years has been the predominance of “story” shows that all have a fixed idea about a “good” story; and if a listener does not get the point of the sudden sentimental epiphany, not to worry, for the host will take her by the hand and lead her to the promised land. Through time, these formats have become ever more formulaic, and the different shows tend to echo each other in all sorts of self-affirming ways, and before you know it, from this format-foundry, we have a censorious and lethal canon, and that canon aims to kill everything that sounds like something else, something that cannot be mapped into tidy, phony epiphanies.

OBS: Do you have specific artists that were influential in allowing yourself to realize that what you wanted to do was possible? It's often the case for me that after a few months of fumbling in the dark with a vague idea / interest, I find an artist / album that either reaffirms my own interests and gives me the confidence to keep pursuing my own work, or throws me into new dimensions by the revolutionary quality of their work. Some examples of this are, the post-punk French goddess Lizzy Mercier Descloux (what a moment it was when I found out music could sound like that!! It really influenced my musical direction and what I thought was possible.)

GW: Oh yes, Hard Boiled Babe, shockingly good. Do you ever listen to early Nina Hagen? And I was addicted to The Slits (Cut) in the 80s.

OBS: And, more recently, the artist Bora Yoon, who is a grad student at Princeton and whose album "Sunken Cathedral" gave me a lot of confidence / inspiration about how to move forward with my own work. Both of them acted as catalysts and informants that helped me to realize my own desire / capability to make something myself, so I wonder if you have had moments like that with different artists that you heard when you were just starting to make your own work or even more recently.

GW: Yes, towards the very beginning, an early experience of Meredith Monk, from a distance of about eight feet, that was incredibly freeing for my own thinking about voice, since I had been singing in tight classical styles since the age of eight. Steve Reich's tape piece “Come Out” (which is in its 50th anniversary this year) left me thinking in silence for a very long time, as I came to grips with some surprising fresh understanding of what I was supposed to be doing; all my work over the years with loops, entropy and transfiguration descends from that day. Sun Ra: a huge influence while I was at Haverford College, escaping to those wild, ritualistic and otherworldly concerts in West Philly. Delia Derbyshire in her “Falling” and “Love Without Sound”; her pure, intuitive feel for an autonomous phono/radiophonic space. Harry Parch, for the kinesis and unabashed idiosyncrasy, gave early strength to just start bushwhacking out in the electromagnetic wilderness.

Tape-beatles always caught my ear, as did the Residents, and Tangerine Dream for the loopy rhythms. Coltrane for his fearless inhabitation of the familiar to make it strange — his improv on *My Favorite Things*, *Live at the Village Vanguard Again*, melting a slab of white bread into something of such dark and irresistible beauty. I tried to transcribe his solo on that recording while in college, and almost went insane before realizing how foolish the idea was. Then there would be the theater and literary influences, oh my, the list would become very long, but my love for Melville, Poe and that peerless telegraph-artist Emily Dickinson is no secret. They are actually the first true American radio artists (and Ahab the first shock jock), for my blood; it simply took a few years for the technology to catch up to their electrified intelligence.