

Episode 25: The Pod(cast) People Speak

Run Time: 39:06

- AH: Allison Hitt (co-executive producer, host)
KS: Karrieann Soto (producer, host)
JR: Jana Rosinski (producer, host)
CD: Courtney Danforth (special guest from *KairosCast*)
HF: Harley Ferris (special guest from *KairosCast*)
CB: Casey Boyle (special guest from *PeoplePlaceThings*)
NR: Nathaniel Rivers (special guest from *PeoplePlaceThings*)
ED: Eric Detweiler (special guest from *Zeugma*)
MH: Mary Hedengren (special guest from *Mere Rhetoric*)
Kyle: Kyle Stedman (special guest from *Plugs, Play, Pedagogy*)

Cue Music: “Synergistic Effect” by morgantj

AH: You’re listening to *This Rhetorical Life*—a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Cue Music: “Scratch my Warhol (ft. Mr. Yesterday & Rey Izain)” by Scomber

Hi, everyone, and welcome to our 25th episode! [Sound effects: champagne cork popping followed by celebratory cheers] We’ve got a really exciting line-up for today’s episode to mark this momentous occasion, including a couple more hosts than we usually have. Do y’all want to take a minute to introduce yourselves?

KS: Hello all. My name is Karrieann Soto and I’ve been a part of *This Rhetorical Life* for two years now, ever since I joined CCR. Music and sound production has always been a huge interest of mine, both inside and outside of academic environments. So it’s been really fun to participate in the myriad stages of our podcast production.

JR: Hi. I’m Jana Rosinski. I’m a second-year student in CCR and haven’t quite reached my first anniversary with *This Rhetorical Life*. Cheers TRL; looking forward to many more episodes with you!

AH: And I’m Allison Hitt. This is my 4th year in CCR, and I’ve been co-executive producer of *This Rhetorical Life* with Ben Kuebrich for the last few years. I’m super pumped that we’re celebrating our 25th episode and that we were able to solicit some great contributions for the show!

JR: For today’s meta episode, we asked for contributions from other folks in the field who host and produce disciplinary podcasts. So you’re going to hear clips from Courtney Danforth and Harley Ferris who edit *KairosCast*, Casey Boyle and Nathaniel Rivers who co-produce *PeoplePlaceThings*, Eric Detweiler who helped launch *Zeugma*, Mary Hedengren who started *Mere Rhetoric*, and finally Kyle Stedman who hosts *Plugs, Play, Pedagogy*.

KS: Each of these segments will be interspersed with our own reflections about the podcast—how we got into *This Rhetorical Life* specifically and our interests in podcasts and sound more generally, so let's get started with Courtney and Harley!

[chimes]

CD: Hello from *KairosCast*!

HF: And congratulations on your 25th episode, *This Rhetorical Life*.

CD: I'm Courtney Danforth, professor of English at the College of Southern Nevada,

HF: And I'm Harley Ferris, PhD student in Rhetoric and Composition at the University of Louisville. Together, we edit *KairosCast*, a new section of *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*.

CD: Unlike *This Rhetorical Life*, podcasting is brand new for *Kairos*.

HF: Since we've only just started, we're guessing that some of you haven't yet heard about us, so we're letting you know we're here

CD: and talking about what it means to have podcasting as part of an academic journal.

HF: So Courtney,

CD: Right here!

HF: Why don't you get things started by talking about what *KairosCast* is and why it's a part of *Kairos*?

CD: Sure. *KairosCast* exists as a part of the structure of an established multimedia academic journal. While our part of *Kairos* keeps a different publication schedule and a slightly modified mission from the rest of the journal, we're trying to run the podcast elements operating by the journal systems that are already in place, so stuff like: calls for participation, editorial review, revise & resubmit, accessibility, sustainability, preservation of access. We were excited about podtext scholarship happening individually and institutionally, and, as with any other type of scholarship, knew there was a role to be played by a journal.

HF: One of the things that *KairosCast* is designed to do is to extend the conversations happening in the journal out into the *Kairos* community. Part of that includes talking about webtexts with authors, discussing best practices for coding and design, and sharing our thoughts on different topics.

CD: The other part of that is that we want to draw as much of the content as we can from scholars and practitioners who are participating in the kind of research and teaching that *Kairos* discusses. So we've started talking with some of our friends and colleagues who already have podcasts going, and we're promoting their shows through *KairosCast* to help build visibility for their shows and to cross-pollinate these conversations. In fact,

we're excited to announce that *This Rhetorical Life* will soon be joining the *KairosCast* network along with our other shows.

- HF: And we're putting out calls to all listeners—we want to solicit your content. Make a screencapture of a brief tutorial, record a discussion about one of our articles, or ask a colleague an interesting question. If it fits in with our mission, we want to share it with *Kairos* readers... and now, listeners. So, Courtney, speaking of listening... what's your interest in audio or podcasting?
- CD: Well, I've been an avid public radio listener since I was a kid so I came to podcasts first because it was a convenient way to listen to radio programming on my schedule and I could get access to shows that weren't broadcast on my local stations. Then, about six years ago, I had a brain injury that made it extremely difficult to read print texts for awhile, so I spent even more time reading with my ears than my eyes. In the last few years there's been a real convergence in the acceptance of multimodal composition and the availability of accessible technologies to do more of it. I've been interested in multimodal composition forever and I just started assigning more and more audio and video projects to my students. Right now I'm teaching an American Studies seminar that has students learning about audio production and producing audio essays as the term project. We're running a kind of audio blog on SoundCloud. I'm really excited about some experiments I'm doing using audio for in-class activities too.
- HF: Oh, that's great! Are the students into it?
- CD: They seem to be. I'm getting consistently better quality class discussions with a microphone than I ever have just talking. So what about you? You're a musician, right? Is that what got you started?
- HF: Maybe... I mean, I've always been obsessed with taping things. My parents had one of those portable cassette tape recorders with the slide-out handle, and the orange record button set inside the play button. I used to record all kinds of things with that: songs from my piano lessons, TV show theme songs, me reading a book. And as I got older, I acquired more sophisticated gear, and I'd experiment with direct line-in recordings and multitracking through overdubs. When I was high school, our band went into a recording studio to cut a demo, and I fell in love with all that gear. So I started college as a music major, concentrating on studio recording. Now 20 years later, I'm still recording things, though the technology has changed the process a little bit.
- CD: Just a little. And so what did you want to do with *KairosCast*?
- HF: Well, to be honest, I'm really into the production side of things. I love setting up multiple tracks and mixing a big project together. At the same time, I really care about production quality and consistency, and when *Kairos* started talking about launching a podcast, I felt like this was a section I had some specialized training for, and I knew I wanted to help. As for the content, and really, even the genre, I feel like I have a lot to learn. I always enjoy listening to podcasts when I listen to them, but I don't often make time for it. I'm working on that, though. But I love that I'm learning something new every step we take, and I think the medium of the podcast is an interesting one with unique affordances. And

KairosCast is bigger than just the podcast, with our DesignChats, Tutorials, and Chatter segments, so those will integrate nicely with this attempt to widen participation.

CD: We have big plans!

HF: Why did you want to do this with *Kairos*?

CD: I was already an assistant editor, and *Kairos* is the natural locus for podtext scholarship in the field of rhetoric/technology/pedagogy/media studies. I had ideas about something I call “tinycasts”—casual, persistent, and serial podcasting as a tool of timeliness or something. I wanted to see if we could be a congregating and galvanizing force for A/V scholarship. I’m hoping that *Kairos*’s sort of stamp of approval helps establish the legitimacy of podtext scholarship.

HF: And the podcast episodes we’ve featured in just the past several weeks since *KairosCast* has started are enough to prove their worth, in my opinion. And, as we have the personal experience to prove, it takes a lot of work.

CD: That’s true. It’s kinduv exhausting.

HF: It is. Even this short segment for *This Rhetorical Life* has totally worn me out.

CD: Seriously. I think we’d better end it.

HF: Got no choice. I’m about to collapse over here.

CD: Then we’d better say the thing. Visit kairos.technorhethoric.net/kairoscast for more information and to get on board.

HF: Email us at kcast@technorhethoric.net. Let us know if you have content or even just ideas that we can help you pursue.

CD: Thanks to *This Rhetorical Life* for including us in this episode. We look forward to your next 25 episodes.

HF: I’m going to do the chimes again.

CD: But the segment’s over, and the—

[chimes]

CD: The chimes announce the start of a segment—

[chimes]

HF: I don’t even care. I like ’em.

[short pause]

CD: Are you done?

[long pause]

CD: Are you—

[chimes]

HF: I'm done.

Cue Music: "Scratch my Warhol (ft. Mr. Yesterday & Rey Izain)" by Scomber

AH: Hi, everyone. Allison here. I have to make a confession that might be a strange way to jumpstart my contribution, but here it is: I don't listen to podcasts. In the last segment, Courtney mentioned relying on audio more than written text after a brain injury, and I come to podcasting for nearly opposite reasons. I have a difficult time processing auditory information. This is why I am immensely grateful at conferences when presenters offer full-text copies or even handouts of their presentations and is also why I actively live-tweet to focus my attention. I'm a podcaster who can't listen to podcasts.

I originally came to the TRL crew on the production side of things. I had experience creating podcasts as a graduate tutor at the West Virginia University Writing Center, and I enjoyed the processes of interviewing people, framing the episodes, editing and transcribing the audio. So I came to the early planning meetings in 2012 with some production knowledge and a desire to take part in a fun collaborative project. Looking back at our very first meeting minutes, I apparently said that I wanted to take part in "short formatted things that can open up the world." [laughs] I'm not sure what that means now, but in some ways, being part of the podcast has opened up a world of accessible digital scholarship for me.

Even though I don't listen to them, I believe strongly in the value of podcasts as teaching tools, as channels for composing and producing multimodal scholarship, and as an alternative mode for constructing arguments and making accessible disciplinary knowledge.

Coming from a professional writing and disability studies background, my participation with TRL has also been very tied up in making this information as accessible as possible, from the adaptive WordPress theme we chose for our website to the full-text transcripts of every podcast. Personally, I try to make all the scholarly work I do public—posting full text copies of conference presentations to my blog and making my reading notes public. I think this is a particularly important concern for *This Rhetorical Life* as a potential resource for the field (and even for audiences beyond the field).

And maybe that's how my interest in the project comes back to taking part in something that opens up the world. Making audio accessible is important for deaf and hard of hearing audiences, and it is also useful for people who don't focus on or process audio well, people who are in a time crunch for whom skimming a transcript is more effective, or for people with unstable internet connections who may benefit more from downloading a PDF than streaming audio. By focusing on accessibility at all levels,

participating in this project has really influenced my work beyond the podcast and has made me really want to be more serious about producing and advocating for accessible digital work.

Now you'll hear from Casey Boyle and Nathaniel Rivers who recently launched a podcast that pushes on our expectations of *who* talks in podcasts. That is, instead of interviews with people, *PeoplePlaceThings* pays attention to the *situations* created by people and their things.

[*Sputnik beeps, stardust clicks*]

Cue music: "Door of Return" by Chris Grabou

[*Robotic voice: PeoplePlaceThings. PeoplePlaceThings. PeoplePlace.*]

- CB: It would seem that the podcast form would offer interesting avenues to extend and elaborate scholarship, doesn't it?
- NR: I think it's the way it fits in, fits into people's lives. We see it as another—if you treat scholarship generally or research generally as an intervention, which we hope it is—we hope it does something.
- CB: In that sense, it's not so much a intervention, is it? Because if we want to consider the podcast as sort of fitting in to someone's typical routines, then it's less of an intervention then it is perhaps a sort of pervasive—
- NR: Yeah, yes! Yeah, then maybe actually what it values is that it isn't really an intervention but almost a kind of layering *into* experience.
- CB: In this sense, the podcast... one way that I like to think about the podcast is that it's a lot like [*Saturn: loud pink noise like analog television static interrupts and blacks out the spoken word*], and instead of [REDACTED] in terms of interventions or persuasions, [REDACTED] as a sort of pervasive art. The podcast is sort of a pervasive communication—something that doesn't really stop you from doing what you're going to do anyways, something that's just kind of layered in on your walk to work, layered in on your drive.
- NR: Mhmm, and I think given what so many podcasts are about—I think particularly the ones that you and I are interested in [*stardust clicking in the background*] and that I think other podcasters we know—oftentimes those podcasts are precisely about everyday routines. They're about [REDACTED]. They're about particular manifestations of scientific research or social issues, and so oftentimes they're about what people experience, and they're experiencing those podcasts as they're experiencing oftentimes what the podcasts are about.
- CB: I like this. So it's sort of like an inversion there, whereas a lot of podcasts are about making explicit implicit notions of social space. The podcast listening experience is almost rendering explicit entertainment implicit in your daily life.

NR: Scholarship is designed to reach some sort of conclusion, even provisional, whereas the podcast because I think it's still anchored in a kind of entertainment model [*stardust clicking*] is actually sort of less interested in conclusions and probably also—even if it was interested—that that's sort of antithetical to the form that it's working through. You want people to keep coming back. You want them to be able to take the episode with them.

CB: Right, and that gets to the core of what a serial object can do—where can it be picked up again? Where can it be repeated again? Where can we go from here?

NR: Yeah and in many ways I think it's because there's another sort of interesting flip between something like a podcast and something like scholarship is they don't really have conclusions so much as a framework.

[*Cue music: "The Animist" by Mike Ladd*]

CB: In that sense, going back to the notion of the podcast as being sort of pervasive, right? We can think of... particularly we both come from the field of [REDACTED] and writing studies broadly speaking. Even the discipline of [REDACTED] has always been one that's been somewhat unmoored from any particular object, right? Just like the podcast itself can fit into someone's daily routines differently, [REDACTED], too, fits in differently wherever it is. So the object of [REDACTED], for instance, to ask what the object of [REDACTED] is almost is to ask the wrong question to begin with.

NR: Yes, and I think in much the same way that it would be a misguided question for a podcast.

CB: Absolutely, and “what is the scholarly worth of a podcast?” is the very same question as asking, “what is the object of [REDACTED]?”

[*Robotic voice fades in: PeoplePlaceThings. PeoplePlaceThings. PeoplePlace.*]

[*Stardust clicking.*]

Cue Music: "Scratch my Warhol (ft. Mr. Yesterday & Rey Izain)" by Scomber

AH: [*Sound effect: audio frequency glitch*] Casey and Nathaniel discussed the notion of podcast in, as, and against scholarship, and next we'll hear from Eric Detweiler who helped launch *Zeugma*, a podcast that offers video tutorials and interviews focused around the writing process.

[*electronic music plays*]

ED: Hi, this is Eric Detweiler. I'm a PhD candidate specializing in rhetoric and writing at The University of Texas at Austin. A little over two years ago, I helped launch *Zeugma*, a rhetoric and technology podcast housed in the Digital Writing and Research Lab here at UT. This meant that, like so many vulnerable podcasting souls before me, I had a number of traumatic encounters with the sound of my recorded voice. [*previous sentence echoes*

ominously] For lots of folks who do audio work, the tone and timbre of their voice is horrifying to hear. It's too low, it's too high, too monotone or too affected, too mumbly or too staccato. But for me, what threw me wasn't so much the sound of my voice as the rhetorical tics in the way I spoke.

Let me give a little context here: I think it's safe to say that one of the supposed goals of graduate school is becoming an expert in your field—whatever we mean by that. So at least in these things we call the humanities, you read and read and read and do coursework and more coursework, study for comprehensive exams, read some more, write a lot, write even more, and go up against that creature of the night that we call a dissertation.

There are positive aspects to this process, but it comes with risks. For one thing, it can turn even the least pretentious among us into a bit of a know-it-all. When much of your professional life revolves around proving yourself and your knowledge to those around you, you—well, me at least—pick up certain speech habits. I didn't realize the extent of this till I started listening back to some unscripted segments from Zeugma's early episodes. Whether I was monologuing or talking with another grad student, the segments tended to unfold something like this: *[voices in indented sequence are layered with an echo effect, ominous string music builds to a shrill peak over the course of this sequence]*

Eric Detweiler: What's interesting about this topic is it reminds me of something Kenneth Burke said—

Kendall Gerdes: It's like Jacques Lacan's "subject supposed to know"—

Eric: "Yeah, and that reminds me of a moment in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*"—

Kendall: Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech*!

Eric: Dramatistic pentad!

Kendall: "Laugh of the Medusa"!

Eric: Derridean hospitality!

Kendall: *The Telephone Book*!

Eric: Expressivist pedagogy!

Kendall: *The New Rhetoric*!

Eric: *The Medium is the Message*!

Kendall: Isocrates!

- ED: In short, listening back to myself left me sympathetic to a scene in the NBC sitcom *30 Rock*. Attempting to justify some questionable and potentially unethical behavior on their own parts, two of the show's characters share the following exchange:

Jack Donaghy: We may not be the best people.

Liz Lemon: But we're not the worst.

Both in Unison: Graduate students are the worst.

- ED: The experience of listening back to myself left me rethinking my relationship to knowledge, to language, to myself. More specifically, it made me want to run from the ethos of the know-it-all in my future audio work. But what other options were there? For me, one alternative came from Avital Ronell. In an interview published in issue 20.2 of

JAC: A Journal of Rhetoric, Culture, and Politics, Ronell talks about Radio Free Theory, a radio show that never quite came together: [phone rings]

[*Eric reads with a muffled telephone effect on the vocal track*] Basically, we maxed out my credit card to buy equipment, and we did ... demos for a radio show that, among other things, featured post-Freudian call-ins.... We would call authors and critics who had bashed deconstruction and say, “You’re on the air. Look, you wrote this, Did you even read this or that? What are you talking about?” Then we did little children’s evening programs. They were very sadistic: stories of Dr. Schreber for your child before bedtime.... But it never got off the ground. It was supposed to be financed by Irvine, but they were horrified when they heard it. I don’t know why. And I’m sure that sounds naïve. It would have been the *Saturday Night Live* of high theory.... We would also do radiophonic cutups that were inventive and hilarious.... Even Frank Zappa was going to help out because he thought it was “kewl.” But we couldn’t get any institutional support, so the show was put out like a cigarette. Anyway, all of that was to say that there are different types of “writing,” and some kinds of very rigorous and political inscriptions do not require that you work alone. (266) [*sound of phone hanging up*]

ED: Though I don’t have the acumen of Avital Ronell and would probably hurt my career if I started cold-calling deconstruction bashers, there’s a lot about her description of Radio Free Theory that resonates with me: the weirdness, the hilarity, the collaborative spirit, even the possible naivete. What I started to hope podcasts, and audio media more generally, might offer is a kind of writing that’s less territorialized by academic conventions—a space where a lowly grad student might be able to say, “You know, I don’t know. But isn’t this thing strange?” A space to laugh—to laugh rigorously and thoughtfully, but in a way that doesn’t often happen in the pages of print journals or conference presentations. Perhaps it could be space for remembering the kind of speculative wonderment that went all with the “*theoria*,” the Greek word that gave rise to “theory.” Or maybe not—because being allowed to not be sure, I think that’s what I’m really after here. Oh, and in the spirit of collaboration, let me thank Kendall Gerdes for helping prepare and record this segment. [*music fades up, then fades out*]

Cue Music: “Scratch my Warhol (ft. Mr. Yesterday & Rey Izain)” by Scomber

KS: Hello again, I'm Karrieann, and I would like to use Eric's introspective reflection of voice and academic *ethos* in order to explore a related tension I've had in the production of podcasts—negotiating and dealing with my accent. While this is a personal struggle, I must acknowledge that there have been efforts by scholars in rhetoric and composition to make room for, and study how best to engage with multilinguals in a context wherein Standard American English is the norm, or as Geneva Smitherman would call it, the Language of Wider Communication. To be sure, in the numerous podcasts that I've helped produced, or have been featured as a host in the past two years, several scholars that I've interviewed also demonstrate the richness and presence of multilinguals within our field. So I take comfort in the fact that I'm not alone in this preoccupation.

My TRL folks have also been extremely supportive and encourage me to embrace mi acento, *pero hay veces que yo lo que quiero es hablar espanol boricua*. But alas, the rhetorical situation and contexts in which our podcasts are meant to circulate do target a largely English speaking majority. And this leads me to why I'm doing this. If we want to go way back, the main reason I am doing my PhD in the continental US is because there isn't a lot of scholarship on rhetoric about Puerto Ricans by Puerto Ricans, at least not in English. Similarly, in the production of episodes, I try to connect the topics we discuss with whatever exigence I can identify that would help give voice to marginalized groups. A sense of purpose, then, is a main motivation for embracing the uncomfortable experience of having to repeat myself, or re-record my section of an interview in order to clarify the articulation of a question, or just because I can't seem to get the pronunciation of a word right. "*Unique New York. Unique New York.*" [Sound effect: Will Ferrell as Ron Burgundy from Anchorman]

I am very happy to have been part of the past 25 episodes of *This Rhetorical Life* and have definitely learned a lot in the process. Starting with helping Ben co-host the podcast on Occupy Wall Street, to my interviews with feminist scholars such as Krista Ratcliffe and Gesa Kirsch, and my fellow Latina Cristina Ramirez, bringing in my WGS transnational feminist mentor Dana Olwan to participate in a panel with Rebecca Dingo, and Eileen Schell responding for our podcast event a few years back...I've been able to engage with scholars and their scholarship in ways that I did not even think possible.

Coming up we'll have Mary Hedengren talking about her initial experiences with podcasting, even though she had not initially considered herself "new media" qualified for the job. I hear ya, Mary...

MH: I'm Mary Hedengren and I'm the host of a podcast called *Mere Rhetoric*, which is, as we say every episode, "a podcast for beginners and insiders about the ideas, people and movements who have shaped rhetorical history." And the story of *Mere Rhetoric* spans from when I was a beginner to when I became an insider. I have always listened to podcasts and when, as an undergrad, I started getting into rhetoric, it bothered me that there wasn't any general interest podcast about rhetoric. There were classes that had been recorded and there were interviews, but not something like *The Psych Files* for psychology or *Freakonomics Radio* for economics.
By the time I was in my PhD program, it was really bothering me, mostly because I was reading for my field exam and finding that short, Wikipedia-article-length synapses of what I was reading helped me focus the ideas of these major theorists. I made in-depth notes myself, but wanted something I could listen to that would distill some of the information.

I even asked my friend Jeff, who's a new media guy, really savvy, "Why isn't there a general interest rhetoric podcast?"

"I don't know," he said.

“One of you guys should make one,” I said. By “you guys,” I meant the digital rhetoric folk, the people who really knew the technology. It took me a couple of years to realize, “hey I could be one of you guys.”

I don’t see myself as a digital rhetoric expert. At BYU, my alma mater, I was in the new media group under Gideon Burton, who created Silva Rhetoricea, a great online resource for rhetoric terms, but because it wasn’t a major focus of my research, I never categorized myself as a new media person.

I guess it’s a little like how I started using screencasts to give my students feedback. Chris Anson gave me the idea. He used to give students feedback on a cassette tape—can you imagine?—and is a big advocate for how actually hearing a human voice transforms the relationship between the student and instructor. And, besides, it’s easier to talk than to write fast and clearly. I started doing screencasts for all of my student feedback and really enjoy it. But I remember once, on my mid semester evaluations, one of the questions I asked my students was “how has the instructor used technology in the course” and one student responded. “She doesn’t use technology.” That actually got me really excited. I had tried using Twitter, sword for peer review, blogs, and often got resistance from students, but these students didn’t see a screen capture, where they just had to press play as technology. It has become as invisible to them as the email I sent or the online system for recording grades. It had become as invisible a technology as writing.

I think that’s where we’re headed in the future. People like me, who aren’t “digital media” people are going to start realizing that podcasts, screencasts, things like are tools that can help you achieve a goal and that you don’t have to be a technology expert to use it.

Mere Rhetoric now gets over 1,500 downloads a month. We’ve done episodes about Kant and Stephen North, about forensic rhetoric and about pro gymnas mata. Many of the episodes begin as a stub from those field exam notes I took. It’s been exciting to see the positive feedback for the podcast, but some of my favorite comments are like this one, from Jessica, who was in my Master’s program. Jessica writes, “I’ve been really enjoying your podcast. And have incidentally learned how to use a podcast, a skill that had previously eluded me...” I got to make a podcast, the podcast that I wanted to listen to, and since there are people who have similar interests in rhetorical history, they’re beginning to become as comfortable with listening to podcasts as I am—slowly—becoming comfortable with making them. The process of becoming comfortable with this technology has made me what I never thought I’d be in digital media—an insider.

JR: [Sound effect: ambient signal noise as background to speech] Jana here. I started listening to podcasts a few years back when I was spending much of my time commuting by car. [Sound effect: highway driving] I would fill my iPod with episodes of *Radiolab*, *99% Invisible*, and assorted music casts to serve as soundtrack to the long stretches of grey Metro Detroit highway and jaw clenching traffic. I put on an episode of *Radiolab* called “Solid as a Rock” in which the hosts interview Jim Holt on his book *Why Does the World Exist? An Existential Detective Story*. Holt pushed on the conception of the universe as solid/physical matter to consider the material stuff of the world as less solid—

what we can put our fingers on resembles something more like a thought, a mathematical equation, or an ethereal cloud instead of fitted blocks. I pulled off at the next exit, parked at a gas station, pulled out a napkin, and begin to write notes:

“And what of time/situation? How do ideas shift, decompose, remain, fade? In the field are little/big events, hiccups/hydrogen bombs of energy—stuff comes into existence. And then what? We need networks, energy transitions/traces (balanced equations?), shadows of ideas (Roland Barthes—that which has been). Structure without rigidity. Reality is a flux of information.”

I was writing out how to define the field of rhetoric and composition from an exploration of the empty space of matter. This wasn’t an anomaly. No matter where I was or what I was doing the podcast didn’t remain in the background—it created space, *chora*, a material environment. I would find myself transfixed in place, paused or pulled from that which occupied me to something like a flow state. I realized that I couldn’t merely listen to the podcast episodes—I wasn’t tuning in, I was *attuning to*.

Writer William Burroughs developed a concept of *media being*, that he described as an individual who mixes and is mixed, who composes with media by commutating, appropriating, visualizing, and chorally structuring knowledge. Podcasts are not just sound, but ambient compositions of voice, music, sound effects, silence, the materials and environments of making, circulation, and the spaces created for mixing and being mixed.

Now we’ll hear from Kyle Stedman as he reflects on making sonic compositions with known materials and their capabilities to become strange, surprising, in their remixing.

Kyle: This is Kyle Stedman from Rockford University. I’m the host of [Plugs, Play, Pedagogy](#). I want to talk about composing with sound when there are only limited sounds available.

[Sound effect from Freesound.org, Pogotron, “Tape recorder.wav”]: <http://www.freesound.org/people/Pogotron/sounds/61075/>

Kyle: I recently listened to an old blue cassette tape that I used throughout high school to record all kinds of crazy stuff. I would make up these characters and stories and then perform them on tape, with music and sound effects interspersed with all the voices I would make. I recorded it all on a two-cassette karaoke machine that had two mic inputs, allowing me to jack in sounds from any CD, tape, movie, or video game I had in the house. And back then, in the mid-to-late 90s, I had a pretty good sense of exactly what sounds I had available to me—in other words, what the available means for composition were. I would always turn to a few standard places for background music when I needed a certain mood—and since I usually wanted a *creepy* mood, I would use the soundtracks to the games *Quake* and *Descent II* and the *Star Trek: First Contact* soundtrack, or maybe something from Nine Inch Nails.

[Excerpt from my old blue tape: creepy music, maybe Nine Inch Nails but maybe not, with voices saying, “Mop the floor!” “I don’t want to!” “Harness the horses!” “I don’t want to!”]

Kyle: Beyond music, I had a single sound effects tape, with all its selections listed in the liner notes—you just had to fast forward and rewind until you found the one you wanted. I was a weird high schooler, so I used it mostly for screams and car crashes.

[Sound effect: a woman screaming. I have no idea what the name of the tape is where this effect came from, so long ago, and I no longer have the original—just this excerpt from my old blue tape.]

Kyle: From my parents, I had a box full of tapes of old sermons that I could also intersperse with other sounds.

[Sound effect: excerpt from my old blue tape, with various odd sounds ending in a preachery voice saying, “But really, I only had one question!”]

Kyle: And I knew the dialogue from a couple of movies really well—*The Goonies*, *Back to the Future*, *Pulp Fiction*—so I knew I could get the line I needed from them if necessary if I cued up the VCR and plugged the trusty karaoke machine into the audio out jack, tape ready to record the second I unpause it.

Listening to these old compositions now, I’m most struck by the aptness of these sonic choices for background music and sounds. These are rapid-fire compositions; they change mood quickly; there’s always a new piece of music or sound to back up my nasally high-school voice. When I listen now, I wonder, *I don’t remember ever getting held up on details when I made these—I mean, I almost never did second takes, because recording to tape sounded so much better if you hit pause at the end of a segment instead of hitting stop and rewinding and then trying to pause again at the exact right place. But without getting stuck on details, how did I know that this would be the right sound effect, that this would be the right background music?*

Because today, I would agonize. I would comb freesound.org for sound effects, listening to option after option—just like I did when looking for the tape sounds I played earlier. I would skim Creative-Commons-licensed music at Jamendo and at Soundcloud for an entire day, letting it play in the background while I do other work, but with part of my mind focused on deciding on the most perfect background music ever. If I let it, this can be a never-ending search these days—there’s that much sound available online.

But in high school, I already knew what I had. They were cataloged in my brain from multiple listens and relistens. And since my options were fewer, I was able to push through and make things happen. I remember this time when a friend came over to record a 10th-grade English project with me: it was a dramatic reading of a scene from *Antigone*. He kept asking if a recording choice was right, if we had other options, but I would barge ahead, sure of myself (and also not very good at negotiating in 10th grade, anyway). We’d read the next few lines in the book, and I’d say, “Oh, I know exactly what we need for that” and then grab the sources, I’d prep them, and then we’d read our lines over them.

[Clip from my old blue tape, with lines from Antigone read with background music: Creon says, “And the city proposes to teach me how to rule?” Haman: “Ah! Who is it talking like a boy now?”]

Kyle: Then, without even listening to what we had done, we would push on to the next few lines, and I’d announce how we’d do *these* two—and we’d do them, too.

[Another clip from Antigone: Creon: “Every word you say is for her.” Haman: “And for you. And for me. And for the gods under the earth.” Creon: “You’ll never marry her while she lives!” Haman: “Then she must die. But her death will cause another.”]

Kyle: There was no pre-planning. It was in-the-moment sonic composition, buttressed by this mental grasp of what was available. And I think that made it exciting—that feeling that I could plow forward confident that the result would be amazing. And part of that confidence came from a confidence in my knowledge of the sounds in the house. In 10th grade, that was maybe the thing in life I was *most* confident about.

I’m not sure what point I’m trying to make with all this. When I compose sonic scholarship and my podcast these days, I think I’d rather have things the way they are now, rather than then, especially when faced with the ease of digital audio editing and the open access we have to almost any recorded sound we can imagine. But I’m also nostalgic for the old days. I miss that confidence, that complete knowledge of the sounds around me. It makes me want to shut out everything new, even if just for a little while, and focus on the albums and sounds I have now, to know and understand them—not just as objects on their own, but as objects that I can take in new directions. Because that’s how sound works, right? You combine it, add to it, watch it grow in directions you didn’t even expect.

Cue Music: “Scratch my Warhol (ft. Mr. Yesterday & Rey Izain)” by Scomber

KS: Thank you to our fellow podcasters who sent in such great contributions to this special episode, thank all of you for listening, and thanks to my fellow This Rhetorical Lifers for generally being awesome.

Cue Music: “Synergistic Effect” by morgantj

AH: *This Rhetorical Life* is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric program at Syracuse University. Executive producers of *This Rhetorical Life* are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Tamara Issak, Karrieann Soto, and Jana Rosinski.