Intro from Jay Allison

Chenjerai took our Transom Traveling Workshop on Catalina and suddenly had to reckon with his own voice, his own identity, in the role of a public radio reporter. In his manifesto, Chenjerai confronts this question of how we sound, how we want ourselves to sound, and what’s permitted. I remember Tavis Smiley once saying, “Public radio wants me to be black, but not TOO black.” Chenjerai tackles that issue straight on — reading copy in various versions of his “self”— and examining the sound of public media, on the air and in the podcast world. These are key questions for public radio and it’s good to have them right out on the table.

Vocal Color In Public Radio

This summer during the Transom Catalina workshop, I produced my first public radio piece. While writing my script, I was suddenly gripped with a deep fear about my ability to narrate my piece. As I read the script back to myself while editing, I realized that as I was speaking aloud I was also imagining someone else’s voice saying my piece. The voice I was hearing and gradually beginning to imitate was something in between the voice of Roman Mars and Sarah Koenig. Those two very different voices have many complex and wonderful qualities. They also sound like white people. My natural voice — the voice that I most use when I am most comfortable — doesn’t sound like that. Thinking about this, I suddenly became self-conscious about the way that I instinctively alter my voice and way of speaking in certain conversational contexts, and I realized that I didn’t want to do that for my first public radio style piece.

Of course, I’m not alone in facing this challenge. Journalists of various ethnicities, genders and other identity categories intentionally or unintentionally internalize and “code-switch” (http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2013/04/08/176064688/how-code-switching-explains-the-world) to be consistent with culturally dominant “white” styles of speech and narration. As I wrote my script for my Transom workshop piece, I was struggling to imagine how my own voice would sound speaking those words. This is partially because I am an African-American male, a professor, and hip-hop artist whose voice has been shaped by black, cultural patterns of speech and oratory. I could easily imagine my more natural voice as an interviewee, or as the host of a news style podcast about “African-American issues.” (https://itunes.apple.com/podcast/kut-in-black-america/id860053842?mt=2) or even a sports or hip-hop podcast. Despite the sad and inexplicable disappearance of NPR shows like Tell Me More, I can find many examples of African-American hosts of both of those kinds of media. But in my mind’s ear, it was harder to hear my voice, that is to say my type of voice, as the narrator of the specific kind of narrative, non-fiction radio piece that I was making.
Did I Mention That I Love Public Radio?

Let me rewind a little, I love listening to podcasts and public radio. I listen to them in my car, while chopping vegetables, while I’m working out, and when I should be doing other things (writing, grading, or producing my own podcast pieces.) The voices on podcasts and public radio are informed, interesting, gentle friends. They keep me company as they share important, entertaining, and sometimes tragic stories. But the timbre, accent, inflections, rhythm, metaphors, and references of these voices reflect class, region, ethnicity, gender, and other components of identity. Meanwhile — though I don’t have the statistics handy to prove this — my impression is that very few among the hosts of popular narrative non-fiction podcasts and public radio programs — (http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/ten_years_in_your_ears/2014/12/best_podcast_episodes_ever_the_25_best_from_serial_to_the_ricky_gervais.html)— are non-white. In short, very few of these hosts speak the way that I speak. This is one reason that some of my black and brown friends refuse to listen to some of my favorite radio shows and podcast episodes despite my most impassioned evangelical efforts.

I spoke to hip-hop artist, poet, author, doctoral student, and podcast skeptic A.D. Carson about this. He and I have produced both scholarly and artistic works together, but we don’t share the love of public radio.


Now I’m not sure I agree that all podcast voices are “warm coffee voices” and A.D. is clearly not aware of, or not moved by, the many different kinds of podcast and vocal styles that do exist if you know where to look. The problem is that you do really have to know where to look (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shane-paul-neil/black-podcasts_b_2865265.html) and if you don’t, then you might only be exposed to a narrow range of voices. This is why whether we agree or not, we all know what A.D. is talking about.

To give you a sense of how this affects me, here’s what I sound like as a hip-hop artist. Although I don’t speak this way all the time, it reflects an important aspect of my personality. I wrote it after I found out that there would be no indictment in the Eric Garner case.

Listen to “Chenjerai rapping” (http://transom.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Chenjerai_Rap.mp3)

How can I bring that voice into my efforts as a radio producer?
On the other hand, here is what happened with the Transom piece. I hear more code-switch than Chenjerai on my first effort.

Listen to “Chenjerai voicing take 1” (http://transom.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Audio-Clip-3Capital-F.mp3)

Let me say I’m proud of this piece. It would be arrogant and lazy to expect my first piece to be amazing. So my issue isn’t about that. Some of what bothers me is just problems with poor writing choices. At times, I wrote in a voice that isn’t my own (Fisherman with Capital F? What does that even mean?). What bothers me most when I listen to this piece is that I’m acutely conscious of the way I’m adjusting my whole experience/method of inhabiting my personality. My voice sounds too high in pitch, all the rounded corners of my vernacular are awkwardly squared off. I’ve flattened the interesting aspects of my voice. On the suggestion of Samantha Broun and Jay Allison, I tried to rerecord part of that piece to better understand and illustrate these subtle differences.

Listen to “Chenjerai voicing take 2” (http://transom.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Audio-4-Do-over.mp3)

When I hear this rerecorded piece, I’m not sure how much more effective it is, but I feel better listening to it. My voice is calmer, but hopefully not boring. In place of “Fisherman with a Capital F,” I allowed myself to get passionate for a moment about my subject’s fishing credentials. Overall, I feel more centered and I sound like myself, rather than sounding like myself pretending to be a public radio host.

What Are We Missing Out On by Not Having Hosts Who Speak in Diverse Ways?

Different hosts with different voices tell different kinds of stories. I make this point because there are many public radio programs that go to significant lengths to include the voices of underrepresented groups. These voices most often appear as people who are interviewed, but this is not the same has having hosts with different perspective and styles of speech.

In August and then again in November of 2014, my wife and I traveled to Ferguson, Missouri. When we first got there in August, I remember talking to some young African-American males who lived on the street where Michael Brown was killed. I asked one why he thought that there had been such an uprising in Ferguson. In response, he reminded me that Michael Brown’s body had lain in the street for four hours (he said eight) before being picked up. Of course I had heard this before, but he made me feel it. I sat quietly for over 40 minutes and let him tell his own story his way.
His voice smoldered with conviction as he spoke. The deep resentment and frustration in his steady low tones pushed through any detachment or emotional distance that I might try to maintain. I felt the weight of Michael Brown’s body, and the weight of so many other lives in this young man’s voice. I wasn’t hearing his voice thrown in as a sound bite garnish to another host’s main dish. Instead, he was the narrator, assembling memories, images, emotions, and even speculation into his own multi-modal account. I would like to hear people who speak with voices like this young man’s voice as hosts and narrators on public radio shows and podcasts.

**The Importance of Vocal Styles**

I can offer many examples of other voices that we don’t often get to hear as hosts. I think about my colleague Marilyn an African-American female lecturer who speaks powerfully in various voices. Marilyn is from Chicago and when she speaks to me the way that she speaks at home, I learn all kinds of things about her, her family, Chicago, and life in general that don’t come across the same way when she speaks “professionally.” There’s no way to transcribe the music of her voice and that’s the point. You can only enter that world by hearing it yourself.

I also think about my Uncle Carlos. My uncle-in-law Carlos lived part of his life in Ecuador and part of it in the Bronx. I remember him reminiscing about his recently deceased dog. Many people have a version of this kind of story, but no one can tell it the way my Uncle Carlos told it. “Oh man!” He would say almost yelling at me! “You don’t understand the times that we,” (he and his dog) “got each other through!” “After he couldn’t walk so good, I would pick that dog up in my arms and carry him anywhere we need to go! You don’t get it man.” His voice — a beautiful mixture of New York and Ecuadorian English accents would cut into you. Then he would pause for long periods letting it sink in. This silence — the kind that is likely to be cut out in the editing process — was as important as his words. They were part of the unique rhythm and pace of his speech. He spoke loudly and passionately, too loudly and passionately for most public radio, but that’s the way our family communicates. I wonder what my Uncle Carlos would share with us if he were the host of a show.

**So What Do We Do?**

There are two important takeaways from all of this.

1. **Depending on who you are, and how you speak, you may not find many examples of voices and styles of storytelling that sound like yours.** It is not just about the kind of stories that non-white journalists tell. It’s also about the ways that vocal styles communicate important dimensions of human experience. When the vocal patterns of a narrow range of ethnicities quietly becomes the standard sound of a genre, we’re missing out on essential cultural information.
We’re missing out on the joyful, tragic, moments and unique dispositions that are encoded in different traditions of oratory. Fortunately, there are organizations fighting for diversity in many areas of media. ([http://www.cij.org/resources](http://www.cij.org/resources)) I recommend becoming involved with these efforts.

2. **If you’re a podcast host and your way of speaking is different from what you generally hear in radio and podcasts, produce many, many, podcasts in which you are the narrator.** As boring and cliché as it is, there is no substitute for practice, and there is actually no other way to develop your voice. I’m still working on being a more consistently productive journalist in this regard. There’s just no way around it: The more you get used to your recorded voice, and writing in your voice, the more confidence you will build.

**The Whiteness of Radio Voices**

Before I started writing this piece, this problem seemed simpler to me than it does now. That is because I was focusing on what I heard, and what I heard was the voices of white people on most popular and public radio shows and podcasts. I didn’t want to hear it, but it would jump out at me despite my efforts to ignore it. Often, (not always) when I hear non-white journalists they also seem to be adjusting their vocal style of narration and reporting to what has come to be understood as professional.

However, as I dug deeper into this problem, I realized how tied up this phenomenon is with the broader complexities of speech, region, identity and dominant culture. ([http://www.pbs.org/speak/](http://www.pbs.org/speak/))

Certainly, there are real problems with diversity that many organizations are working to address, but these problems don’t only have to do with race. In fact as I look across the landscape of popular podcasts, problems of representation regarding gender, ableism, sexual orientation, age and other parameters of ethnicity might be even worse. I’m focusing on the racial aspects of this problem because this is how I personally experience the imbalance. I’m not saying that voices and styles of speech map on to the ethnicity of the speaker in any simple way. There is no single “authentic” African-American, Latino, Asian, Native American, or white way of speaking. To say otherwise would be to participate in a reductive and inaccurate essentialism of which I want no part.

However, I do think that there is what Paulo Freire called a “dominant syntax” and flowing from that is a narrow range of public radio and podcast host voices and speech patterns that have become extremely common. Public radio has become a kind of speech community with its own norms and forms of aesthetic capital. Just as it is not very common for me to hear a radio host with a thick Southie accent, there is a whole range of vocal styles that are common in the African American, Latino, Asian American, and Native American cultures but rarely heard from hosts.
What or who is the public in public radio? Those paying attention know that the demographics of race and ethnicity are changing in the United States. The percentage of non-Hispanic whites in the U.S. population dropped to roughly 63% in 2014. Middle growth series projections estimate that by 2043 the “minority population” will constitute a numerical majority in the total U.S. population. Latinos are already the largest demographic in California. With these changing demographics come new stories, new languages, and new ways of speaking American English. The sound of public radio and podcasts must reflect this diversity if we are serious about social justice and encouraging active, constructive participation.

Listen to “Tuna Fisherman” (the original piece Chenjerai produced) (http://transom.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/JOHN-TALSKY-Tuna-Fisherman.mp3)

About Chenjerai Kumanyika

Chenjerai Kumanyika is an assistant professor of popular culture at Clemson University. He is also an activist, a hip-hop artist, and an amateur journalist. He is a Board Member at Street Poets Inc. (http://www.streetpoetsinc.com/) and a news analyst at UprisingRadio (http://uprisingradio.org/home/). You can contact Chenjerai on Twitter @catchatweetdown.

Selected Comments on Vocal Color In Public Radio

Arianna Editrix

Brilliant article. I too am a huge fan of public radio though I have found that the “flat Mid-Atlantic” accent is becoming more and more prevalent on that band too. I do think that perhaps we are starting to learn that “tone” is lost on the Net, though not fast enough. I think that the contributing factors are no longer just the TV and radios, but also the abject lack of interest, on the part of American education drivers, in having children learn other languages.
By the way, I have to code switch between what I’ve come to call the “St. Louis slide” and the Southern Illinois “white bread with meth” accents as I drive back and forth across the Mississippi.

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks Arianna. I think you’re right.

Rut

For whatever it might be worth (and this you already know), your hosting voice in the second example is much more interesting, warm and intimate to me than in the first one. It IS more effective. As a listener, when I hear your voice my brain registers that it belongs to an African-American male (I am a Spaniard, so to me you sound, above all, American), but what draws me in is not the tone or what it says about you, it is “you,” as a host. And now you are there with your interviewee and I am there with you, and before you sounded like you were far away in the studio. All those differences in “tones” that the diverse ethnicities have (and not only ethnicities, procedences too, people from the north sound very different from the south) enrich the experience of listening to podcasts for me, they give me a glimpse of the real mix of people in the world. Please don’t go around spoiling it by trying to sound “professional.”

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks for this feedback Rut! I felt the same way but it can be hard to hear clearly during the moment of production. We are so close to our own voices.

Steve Young

This is an excellent and vitally important piece about a grievous flaw and shortcoming in public radio today. I work with a superb experienced print reporter who struggles with these issues in his attempts to “integrate” his Detroit “urban” voicing style and cadence with journalistic radio pieces written for mainstream public radio. As his mentor and editor, I’ve shared in his struggles. This article explores the larger cultural issues involved and gives us some possibilities for hope. Thanks!

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks Steve. And boy do we need those unique voices from Detroit! Do you find that your colleague is changing the way that he writes for radio to negotiate this? Or is it all about the vocal performance? Let’s keep the conversation going.
The View From Here (@CapRadioView)

Wow. (I’m saying that in my California, white, middle-aged lesbian voice.) Chenjerai, your post is a really generous and nuanced exploration of the intersection of many things about public radio that I’ve been working to change for years, especially as a national trainer and voice coach for public radio stations (when NPR had a training department in the 1990s). There was and still is a not-so-subtle pressure for everyone to conform to a white middle class, non-accented sound. Back then everyone sounded like Robert Siegel and Linda Wertheimer. Whomever is the dominant national voice is unconsciously held up as the sound to imitate. But as you so clearly state, “voice” is so much bigger than how one addresses the mic. I came to radio from feminist performance art and that voice just never fit into the newsroom. I spent about 20 years outside the box of the radio station regaining a voice, working on diverse media projects with a wide variety of makers/voices. I was reeled back into a station to create a documentary series featuring first-person stories of people coping with the big challenges of our times-health disparities, hunger, poverty, aging, education. First we eliminated the host entirely to begin flattening the hierarchy and let the story lead. We don’t interrupt the stories to say what we think. Listeners only hear reporters when the story needs a guide. When we do, I interview my reporters and use that for narration. This initially made them very uncomfortable. They wanted their scripted, professional storytelling. But I wanted them to acknowledge that their reporting makes them part of the story and I want to hear what they know and learned along the way. Over 3 years of practice, we’ve arrived at a vérité style that highlights the people living the stories and allows the reporters to take their role seriously and compassionately. My hope for you is that you keep on going to authentically define and contribute your real, true voice in this funny, serious and wonderful world of pubradio/podcasting or whatever the next big thing is. Maybe it will be you!

–Catherine Stifter, Senior Producer, The View From Here

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Catherine! I’m a fan of the show — I just got lost listening to the “Autism Grows Up” piece from a while back. First of all thank you for the work that you’ve put in for public radio in general. Also thank your for the inside perspective on the creativity, and fortitude that it takes to realize new possibilities. My work is cut out for me. On another note, I can only imagine dimensions of feminist and queer experience that are flattened by a patriarchal standard of professionalism in radio vocal performance.

Rose Nakad

Reading this article was very cool for me. Thank you. Years ago, after graduating, I worked for ABC radio here in (occupied) Sydney as freelance feature producer.
I had just been through the education system and was always an academically high-achieving “ethnic” and the 2nd person in my family to go to university. In many ways I was in danger of becoming an institutionally assimilated ethnic and was still confused by the “exception” phenomena that bell hooks describes so well. I was treated like a special and “liberated” or “smart” Arab girl — unlike the rest.

At the same time I never felt that comfortable at the ABC and used to hang out with the Arab security guards and cleaners. On top of that I got hounded by the zionists for particular stories I did related to Palestine. I was ready to fight for Palestine and had strategies, but the thing I didn’t know how to fight at the time and that drove me out of the ABC was the voice thing.

Recording my voice-overs took so long, because they would make me do it again and again until they got my voice to an “acceptable” ABC, or try-hard BBC sound. And mind you, I was working in the most progressive part of the whole institution with (predominately white) people that were relatively good and aware.

The worst thing: I freaked out when I listened back to my stories on air because I couldn’t hear myself. This is way beyond that initial craziness when one first hears back their voice. I use my radio and sound skills in community arts work and I know this is usually a thing people have to get used to. But hearing your voice back and not being able to recognise it, has to make you face which way you want to go when you enter those institutions.

The best thing is that I went back to the “ethnic” suburbs and worked as an after school tutor (literacy/numeracy/arts) with Arab kids. And I’ll never forget Mohamad, who was one of the most charming but naughty kids you could ever meet. The first thing he said to me on my first day was: “Miss, why do you speak like that!”

Working out how to speak is constant — it’s about where I sit race-wise, but also about class and education. How do you avoid hypocrisy and artificiality? How do you speak critically and analytically outside academia, without dumbing things down or patronising the people you speak with? How do you create a voice (and a language) that does not lie about you and the things you have done, but that can also take you everywhere…

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Wow. You raise so many good points Rose. First let me say that your experience at ABC radio is really instructive. I hope that you can produce a piece (radio or writing) addressing this topic in that context.

Your experience really underscores how voice and style of speech are sites where dominant ideological norms can be imposed on us.
This can become even more complicated when you are dealing with controversial political issues. Meanwhile the concept of “an acceptable ABC sound” can conceal the ideological process underway. I also relate to your struggles about speech beyond radio and beyond academia. Sometimes I take the post-modern approach — accepting that there is no “authentic” voice and recognizing the ways that each speech context is a performance of sorts. I try to really be present to any pressures that I might be feeling and then speak from the most centered and powerful place that I can. Thanks! Where can we hear your work?

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Rose

Hi there Chenjerai,

… yes I agree, it is more authentic to create out of the truth and context of any given moment, rather than to carry around something defined as “authentic”. For me this is a question of form over content. And for me what makes culture/art works oppositional and free, is the struggle for their own way, their own how, their own form. I don’t think there is anything new we can say about oppression. The dismal repetition of it all calls for new ways of feeling it and sensing it and imagining how to change it — this is where I see my work as important. Anyways, if you would like to email me I can pass on some links to works I have created with others… for now I will pass this on: https://www.youtube.com/user/StudioCamps. These are multimedia works — image and sound, with an emphasis on sound… Warm Regards.

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Karen Werner

Thanks, Chenjerai! I am inspired by your manifesto and by your vision of real diversity of voices on public radio and in podcasting, particularly by the hosts. Yes! Your manifesto also reminds me that whiteness is conveyed not only in vocal style but also in narrative style — for instance, your audio clip of you rapping is a powerful piece of non-fiction radio not yet common to public radio. Do you think part of inviting a fuller range of vocal color is also inviting and playing with a fuller diversity of narrative forms and expectations?

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Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks Karen! “Inviting a fuller range of narrative styles and expectations.” Well said. Yes — I do. Although not many podcasts have explored music as a storytelling mode, I think that’s the great thing about the explosion of new podcasts. I see people pushing the boundaries in different ways to different extents. In terms of pushing expectations, I think that we sometimes forget how much radio has changed and how many different styles of media have gained widespread audiences. I think it’s good to think a little bit historically about these things.
At every phase of media development there have always been people who said: It’s too risky audiences won’t like it, etc. Sometimes they were right. Other times they were wrong. MTV resisted rap for many, many years. When Yo MTV raps first aired in its half hour format it instantly became the most popular show on the network. They eventually extended it to a full hour. It may seem like my piece is critical of Ira Glass but as you may know TAL is an example of pushing “narrative styles and expectations.” So I do think we should pay attention to what works but we should also give more things, more voices, a chance to work.

Rick Smith

Thank you, enjoyed reading your piece, well said. I’m also a big fan of public radio and share your desire to have the voice range expanded. Continue this great work!

Gary Abdullah

Just WOW, Chenjerai! As a black American and constant NPR listener, my wife and I have several ongoing conversations about the backgrounds of the voices that we hear on the air, and so much of it fits into what you’ve outlined.

One of our favorite games is to identify the ethnicity of the experts and contributors being interviewed — knowing ‘who’ they are says so much about their validity as they offer assessments and judgment, especially on aspects of minority life. One of the challenges of minorities in America is that they often aren’t the people telling their stories. So, we have many early mornings where she leans out of the bathroom to ask, “Is she black?”

Hrishikesh Hirway (@HrishiHirway)

Thanks so much for this article. It’s been (justly) all over my twitter feed. I want to share a couple thoughts I had on it.

As I mentioned, I really liked the piece and am glad for it, and this isn’t defensiveness (I don’t think. Maybe it is.), but if left me wondering: Where do I fit in? I don’t identify with in the usually binary (increasingly ternary) conversation about race and identity in America. I don’t have any experience in public radio/podcasting til starting a podcast (about music, called Song Exploder) last year. What is the “real” voice of an Indian American?

As a brown dude (who doesn’t drink coffee btw), I’m at times assumed to be white by listeners. I am not code-switching. That assumption does bother me. I’m not Anglicizing my name for an American audience. But I can’t control how it’s heard.
I grew up around two accents: my parents’ Indian accents, and the Boston accents of my white schoolmates. My sister + I sound like neither. I never made a conscious effort to sound like anyone else; this is just what happened.

Do I need to sound like Apu (thanks Hank Azaria) to represent to listeners an accurate picture of my perspective & who I am? That’s not me.

I feel like there’s an aspect that hasn’t been discussed here yet, which is the onus on the audience not to make assumptions of racial identity or ethnicity based on a voice. Thanks.

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks for your comment Hrishikesh. I think you’ve brought out a really important dimension of this whole thing — assumptions that we make about ethnicity of the speaker based on voice, and worrisome ideas about what constitutes an authentic voice for folks of various ethnicities.

One unfortunate outcome of this discussion of radio voices is that it risks sounding like we’re devaluing folk with certain ways of speaking (warm coffee voices, etc.). That’s too bad because it’s precisely the opposite of what I was trying to do. I certainly would never condone any kind of practice that involves pressuring people to perform their ethnicity in ways that feel unnatural to them, etc. However, as you and I have discussed on Twitter, it’s tricky. On one hand I would never tell anyone that they sound white etc., on the other hand there are certain ways of speaking that are seen as more professional or educated and that does have something to do with racialized, regionalized, classed, and gendered speech patterns. There are times when I’ve been told that I sound white. I don’t take it as an insult (even when it is meant as one). I have to recognize that in those moments I’m subconsciously code-switching in ways that will allow me access to certain kinds of social and cultural capital. My education and experience allow me to do that and so I can make myself heard in ways that not everyone can. Many folk tell me “it’s not race, it’s class! It’s region!” But that view misses the ways that class and region are and always have been part of whiteness. Whiteness was never just about phenotype. Ask Irish-Americans about that. But I digress.

In any case, for me the point is to work to get more brown folk, women, differently abled folk, southern sounding folk, etc. in front of the mic, while simultaneously seeking out different ways of speaking that may or may not map onto ethnicity in any simple way.

Voice is its own distinct layer of diversity.

Let’s keep the conversation going and keep exploding those songs my brother!

http://songexploder.net/
Rob Rosenthal

I clearly remember the moment at the Transom Workshop on Catalina when you were voicing the tuna fisherman story. You were sitting in my hotel room with a mic in front you. I was sitting next to you, headphones on, ready to help record your narration.

You started reading. And you stopped. You looked at me and said something like “I don’t sound like that. That’s what the voices on public radio sound like. That’s not me. What should I do?”

I didn’t have a good answer.

This manifesto goes a long way to helping me find an answer. Thanks! But, I’m still confused and maybe you can help me figure it out.

On one hand, as a teacher for the Transom Workshops, part of my job — a big part — is to help people find their voice. That includes their speaking voice. On the other hand, part of my job is to try and prepare people for producing stories in public media.

What do I do when those two don’t match up? When the speaking voice of a student doesn’t align with the speaking voices in much of public media? Or, put another way, if you were me at Catalina ready to help record my narration and I said “That doesn’t sound like me,” what advice would you give me?

And, what advice do you have for all radio teachers about this question? In advance, thanks.

Chenjerai Kumanyika

I clearly remember the moment when we discussed these voice issues and you said, “Chenjerai I’ve never heard that put like that before, you should write about this.” So thanks for that!! I was tuned into my own struggles, but clearly you were aware that this was a conversation that needed to be had. I also remember how supportive you were as I recorded my vocals; you left me a lot of room to try different things out and you trusted my instincts and I think that was important.

Regarding advice to teachers, I’m a beginner at this, and of course I don’t have the answers, but here are a couple of things that I think about: I think that teaching with a variety of voices and storytelling styles is important. Of course I realize that when it comes to narrative styles there are some real boundaries in terms of what is likely to get played, but hearing different possibilities is important. I remember the first time I heard Snap Judgment. It really opened up a whole new set of options. Sometimes even hearing the vocal things people do beyond strict journalism could be helpful.
Also I realize that it’s probably not wise to suggest that on the radio we should strive for some extreme of personal comfort and shun any kind of standards or professionalism. However as a music producer, I tend to pay attention to how people speak when they feel most relaxed and or empowered. For some it might be at the dinner table, for others it might after a few drinks, for others it might be when they are trying to make a point passionately. We all have and use a powerful/effective voice somewhere. So with artists I just try to experiment with ways of bringing it out.

But again, now that we’re talking about this, I’m mainly listening to what more experienced voices have to contribute to this puzzle. Thanks!

Jay Allison

I, too, am interested in Rob Rosenthal’s question above.

Race aside, there are many versions of ourselves, certainly. How we are with our kids, at work, with friends, on the job—all those “selves” may have different voices, obviously or subtly.

Similarly, there are many kinds of radio stories — news, hosting, first-person, documentary, poetic narrative; even podcast vs. broadcast. Different kinds of stories, different voices.

So, maybe the stone dictates to the sculptor. Maybe you pick your style depending on the story. Some may be more formal or presentational; some depend on you being off the cuff. The trick is to make them both be “real.” Your personal narrative may sound different from the way you present the news.

Maybe that’s one thing to explore in teaching — finding the right voice within each person for each piece.

Of course, some people—often very talented ones—don’t have a range of voices. They have ONE. They cut every stone the same way. God bless ‘em. Others are able to communicate in lots of ways. Bless them too.

So, to Rob’s point: for each person, the question of “finding your voice” will have a different answer. There will be many different “best” voices.

The main responsibility for public radio is not to behave as if only ONE voice is the right one.
Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks for your insight Jay. I agree. In our conversations about the piece as I was composing it, you came up with the phrase “vocal color.” I liked that phrase because color is a broad enough concept to capture all of the rich textures and aspects of our voices that come from region, class, gender, personal style etc., while also gesturing toward the racial and ethnic layers of that I discussed. You are also right that this gets into complicated territory about our many selves and the way that different contexts and stories draw out different performances of power, connection, and professionalism (for some). The different ways that people have resonated and even disagreed with the piece have shown me the value of destabilizing (not throwing away) our concepts of professionalism so that we can create room for more voices. Thank you for providing the platform for this conversation.

Rose Red

I enjoyed the second piece more. Not because of sounding like a particular race or not, but because you sounded comfortable and warm, more like you cared about the subject.

Jackson

So, should we expect Arun Rath to Patank when he talks? No, he speaks English, and he does it well. Should Jad Abumrad speak in an Arab accent? No because he also speaks great English. Should Audie Cornish speak Jive? No, because she’s very smart and she knows that NPR listeners aren’t interested in listening to that. Take it for what you will, but “Black” slang is not what most people want hear from a serious interviewer. I’m from a rural place where people speak like morons, I do not talk like them, on purpose; it would make me look like a dumb hick.

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Jackson,

As your comments illustrate, there is ignorance and ugliness everywhere. However people from rural places that you think sound like morons have important things to say. Personally, I appreciate learning different “slang” and regional ways of speaking. There is history, poetry, humor, and yes, wisdom in those ways of speaking. America appreciates this too. As a hip-hop artist, I watch new terms that we invented make their way into the mainstream and sometimes into the dictionary on a daily basis. Don’t worry though. We’ll twerk it out. — Dr. K
Chenjerai: Thank you for such a deep, layered, honest exploration here. The warmth and presence of YOU in the second take is striking when placed in comparison. What a gift (to listener/reader and to you as artist) to share authentic insights in your authentic voice. I love the nuances and possibilities here. By making the switch and the code visible/audible, by peeling away layers and narrating your thinking and feeling for us, you do us all a real justice. We all have varying public presentations of self. There are so many avenues of empathy available. The work you do offers a chance to genuinely stop, slow down and invite folks into your experience. Sharing this with my students offers a lesson in so many of the big-ticket items we need to be exploring as a community and country. I’m grateful you put this out here.

Chenjerai Kumanyika

“There are so many avenues of empathy available.” Beautifully said.

Greg McIsaac

I liked the short second take on Mr. Kumanyika’s Transom story better than the first take, although both were brief snippets. It might be interesting to hear the whole story, or a significant segment of it, redone in a voice that is more comfortable to Mr. Kumanyika.

When assuming a role in a large organization, such as public radio or a university, I think there is a natural tendency for some people to try to “fit in”. One way to do this is to copy people who have been successful in the same role. When I became a teacher, I copied the style and mannerisms of some of my favorite teachers. It was the best I could do at the time, or so I thought, but it wasn’t a good fit for me or the students. With time and student feedback, I developed a teaching style that I think better connected with the students, which was my goal. But it wasn’t the same voice I would use with family or friends.

In taking on a role of providing information and/or guidance to “the public”, I think many of us develop somewhat different voices and personas to address different roles, audiences and situations, and it takes some work to develop a voice that is appropriate to different audiences. I’m glad to see Mr. Kumanyika and NPR having this conversation and getting feedback so that y’all might better reach a wide audience and communicate more effectively with them.

S.J.

I think saying something sounds “white” or “black” is pretty dang presumptuous, stereotyping and judgmental.
If meaning is conveyed effectively, is that “black,” or “white”, or maybe … good use of language? By the way, slang can get to the truth, but it is also often an easy way to avoid having to explain yourself.

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks for your comments. I actually agree with quite a bit of what you are saying here S.J. so I try to tread carefully when talking about the whiteness of voices while also trying to touch on a reality that I think is real. There are certain ways of speaking that you just don’t hear very often on public radio, and I think that has something (not everything) to do with race. On the idea that slang can get to the truth or be used to avoid having to explain yourself, I completely agree. Of course as an academic who is fluent in many types of English, I can say with confidence that people can use all kinds of English including proper English to avoid explaining themselves. If you’ve ever heard a politician speak perhaps you would agree:

Jeff Clothier

I believe it is next to impossible to be guilty of racism from a minority point of view, but I believe you, Mr. Kumanyika, are close to managing it.

Racism, that is, toward your fellow black people.

Do you believe actor Ron Canada sounds too “white” in his many big and small screen roles? He doesn’t sound like you. How about Idris Elba? Does he sound “British black” to your ethnocentric ears? James-Earl Jones?

Or how about long-time WOI of Ames, Iowa public radio broadcaster Hollis Monroe? His programming and announcing of classical music was warm, erudite, highly professional, respectful both of the music and his audience, an Iowa treasure many here sorely miss.

Had you heard him, you would have noted a distinct absence of both standard Iowa dialect as well as black urban vernacular. Would you have accused him of inauthenticity, I wonder, or of sounding white?

As a broadcaster, it is not all about you. It is about your audience. It is your responsibility to make yourself understood and approachable to a diverse audience which requires not a particular ethnic or demographic patois, but a happy medium — a *standard*.

As a white Iowan who has dabbled in broadcasting and loves public radio, I would never insist on sounding the same on-air as I might at home. That isn’t inauthenticity it’s professionalism.
Finally, if it is your contention that Black Americans are incapable of benefiting from the kind of unique content public radio offers unless it is offered in hip-hop lingo. How is that not racist?

Char W

I completely agree with your post. My post is currently awaiting moderation. I am Afro-American. I grew up hearing, too often, from other Blacks — how I sound “White” or I am “acting” White. My diction can not change the color of my skin.

Jeff Clothier

That is kind, Char. Thank you.

One of my favorite NPR reporters is Mandelit del Barco. As she delivers her fascinating stories, clearly and professionally, in a neutral diction that I’m sure can be understood from South Boston to South L.A., what comes through is not inauthenticity or an attempt at passing as white, but a passion for communication and journalism.

And when she signs off her stories, she proudly pronounces her name in a natural, unaffected and authentic Spanish accent that is music to the ear.

Respect to her for doing what she does so well.

Dani

While I do understand what you’re saying, I think this represents back dated approach to radio journalism.

Contemporary radio stories have more emphasis on personality and the individualities of the host — Sarah Koenig being as important to the content of Serial as her subjects, for instance. Authenticity of voice is becoming more appealing than professionalism. And whether you agree with this shift or not, it is obviously striking a chord with audiences, and bringing a renewed popularity to radio. With this new style, it does become more important (though, of course, it should have always been a priority) to have a variety of dialects and a variety of walks of life. Not only for the obvious reasons of representing the diversity of the country, and the audience, but also because I think this thirst for more personal radio came from a desire for something fresh, and it won’t stay fresh too long if everybody sounds like Ira Glass.
Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks for the Hollis Monroe recommendation; I look forward to finding a way to become familiar.

First, if there’s one thing I’ve learned from white people it’s how not to respond when you’re accused of racism. So rather than attempt to prove that I’m not racist, I’ll welcome your questions as an opportunity to reflect on the aspects of my own assumptions and attitudes that might be problematic. I attempted to wrestle with that in my piece, particularly under the subheading “the whiteness of radio voices.” I encourage you to reread that section, since you have so sloppily misrepresented some of my ideas.

We see things differently on many of your points, but for now I’ll focus in on your idea of “a happy medium” which for you is “not an ethnic or demographic patois.” Reading this, I couldn’t help but think of an email that I received from Bill Siemering, the author of the original mission for NPR. Bill gave me permission to share part of it here: “In the original mission for NPR I wrote: ‘It would not substitute superficial blandness for genuine diversity of regions, values, and cultural and ethnic minorities which comprise American society; it would speak with many voices and many dialects. ...[It should] increase the pleasure of living in a pluralistic society. ...it will regard the individual differences with respect and joy rather than derision and hate.’ So if that intention was realized, you would have been hearing many voices like your own, speaking naturally, not with some white voice model in the background.”

Both content and spirit of what Bill wrote seems so much more open and different from your vision.

Dave Magill

Mr. Clothier, I think Mr. Kumanyik is just hoping to tweak the controls a little bit. Your response, complete with ammunition and reinterpretations, is telling. Perhaps all of us may benefit from a slight broadening of the airwaves. That includes letting a bit of our own regional voices to cross borders. You spoke of respect for the audience. That is an idea that can lead in many different directions. Who is the audience? Does that change the nature of, and reason for, ‘respect’? Respect for who they are or respect for what they/we are capable of? The national dominance of the ‘happy’ medium has costs as well as benefits, as you know. And yes, African Americans, including linguists, have a range of opinions on this issue, and don’t all make the same choices in their daily personal/public lives or their ideology.

I am a white Canadian. Grew up in Ontario, now live in Pennsylvania.
Fred Knapp

One element that seems missing from this discussion is class. A long time ago, I met up with some Britishers from Yorkshire who explained to me that when they went for a job interview, they spoke “the King’s English,” which was far different from what they spoke at home. As a middle-aged white guy, I do find it a momentary barrier to have to “translate” more hip-hop speech into terms more familiar to me. At the same time, I find the content of “a guy who’s caught tens of thousands of fish” more informative than “a fisherman with a capital F.” Vive la difference!

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks Fred!!! Yes class is an extremely important part of this. Of course when we talk about whiteness historically, class is not separate from whiteness or blackness (both social constructs with real material effects) but part of those concepts. Both in Europe and America the false conflation of ethnic groups that we call white was really a promise that certain powerful groups offered to other groups (and never quite fulfilled for most of them). The simple way of saying this is that speaking in a southern accent is both lower class and blacker than speaking with a northeastern dialect.

Tens of thousands of fish was probably just better writing. 😊

Mel Janecka

Hi Chenjerai,

I heard your story on KUOW in Seattle a few days ago. I didn’t catch your name at the time, but then saw your story here.

You talked about your fear of speaking in your own way and shared how the story might be different if told more traditionally. I just wanted to tell you, I really want to hear your stories in your voice. It’s lovely and real. It can be scary to put it all out there for the world to hear, but we all need to hear all the voices.

Take care.

Char W

I heard your segment on NPR. [Challenging the Whiteness of Public Radio](http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2015/01/29/382437460/challenging-the-whiteness-of-public-radio) I disagree with you. And this has been an issue within the Afro-American community for possible at least a century.
I am told (from grandparents, etc., not textbooks) that the “code-switching” began during slavery so that their Masters would not know they were planning on escaping and continues to this day in order to still keep Caucasians from understanding what Blacks are discussing. For too many years growing up, I have heard Blacks talk a certain way and Whites talk a different way. For too many years growing up, I have been accused of “acting” and “talking white.” When one sits and listens to others describe what this means, it quickly becomes clear they are perpetuating stereotypes. While African Americans do have their own language or dialect, just like rural Whites, neither, right or wrong, is associated with being that of someone who is educated. Runin’ is not in the dictionary; Running is. Chenjerai, and others like you, are perpetuating that in order to retain our Black culture, we must speak in a Black way. Kojo has been able to achieve the opposite. His diction and pronunciation is accurate, but his culture and ethnicity rings true in his show. There is so much more to our culture than our language (and yes language is part of every culture). If your logic is correct then every Latino who speaks English is no longer of Hispanic decent. (As well as every Native American, Chinese American, etc.) We are still of African decent, we still have an amazing history and an even more amazing future, our language is still passed on. I hear it in the students that I teach as well as in other ethnicities due to Urban Dictionary. But there is so much more to us than this dialect. And yes, we need to continue to learn both, and switch between them depending on our audience. Or we can make a choice, to redefine what it means to be African American. Because regardless of the words and the intonation that I use or don’t use, some people will still only see me as a light-skinned African American woman. Your experiences as a Black male (an endangered species) will still come through in your voice; in your topics. And this will never change.

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Thanks for your comments Char. I would encourage you to read my article more closely as you seem to have misunderstood most of what I’m saying. The instances where you are attributing something to me that I didn’t say are so numerous that it would be too much for me to list them all. I do think that we disagree on the fundamental point of what to do about different dialects. My take is, include more, embrace them. It is part of what diversity means. From a pragmatic standpoint, I agree that minorities have to learn the dominant syntax. In 2043 that will apply to white people. It already should in California. I just think there’s room for different ways of speaking. Some folk will have to join the rest of us in operating beyond their comfort zones. People do this all the time in other parts of the world where you can’t travel for more than 100 miles without crossing into another culture. By the way, the term “bling” is in the dictionary so I encourage you to start using that phrase immediately.

Kate

You have a lovely voice Mr. K
Just Listening

I’ve got to take issue with mourning the loss of *Tell Me More*. The show was part of my daily NPR lineup when I lived in DC, so I spent a lot of time with Michel Martin. Martin consistently sounded the least prepared of all the regular hosts. It was not unusual for her to inaccurately quote a guest and simply gloss over the point with no apology or real acknowledgement, even after being corrected. Sometimes it led to badgering. It was sad. Contextually and thematically, the show approached important issues, but the execution just lacked the same effort we’ve come to expect from our nationally syndicated shows. And I’m not trying to comment on superficial polish: this is about conducting a level of research and preparation that respects both guest and audience. That’s a basic requisite for primetime.

But I totally get the thrust of the piece, and completely agree.

And shout out to Glynn Washington. I’d listen to that guy talk about anything.

imcuriousaboutpeople

Mr. Kumanyika —
I love your voice. You remind me of my lovely in-laws and all of the rest of my husband’s family, and you make this white woman less lonely for the sound of voices other than white ones.

Dawn

Thank you for this article. Brilliantly stated. I am an armature public radio listener, NPR is really all I know (many of the various shows) and will listen to that over music many days. I found your article looking for the piece they did yesterday on Empire.

Voice, where we find it and how we use it so that we are listened to. And to we avoid code switching and let others decide if the will listen or not. That’s what you affirm for me and should remind the reader of. Deep!!! Good stuff!! Reminds me of story called Triangulism in [Lisa] Delpits book *The Skin That We Speak*.

Michael

I am getting very tired of hearing about the need of “diversity” of pronunciation at public radio. The most depressive is the focus on eliminating any trace of “whiteness” represented by the society. I am an immigrant myself. When I came to Canada 28 years ago, I spent most of my free time listening to CBC. I learned English before coming to Canada (mostly in Britain) but wanted to learn about Canada as quickly as possible. I wanted to sound “neutral” in Canada. I could learn Canadian English, thanks to CBC.
I do not want to hear different voices and accents. Enough of this “pleasing of every immigrant” approach.

__________________________

Chenjerai Kumanyika

Michael, although I am not an immigrant, I understand your frustration to some degree. As an African-American, my parents struggled to teach me “proper” English so that I would be able to succeed in this society. (Then I spent some significant time in the U.K. and learned that there is no such thing as proper English). I am glad that I have the option to speak in different ways.

Even Paulo Freire said that it was necessary for marginalized people to learn the dominant syntax. But Freire also said that the marginalized and colonized people learn that their way of speaking is wrong and ugly. He disagreed and said that it was beautiful and necessary. This is the problem. Which version of Canadian English gets to be the standard? Does that standard stay fixed even as Canadian demographics change? Is there only room for one kind of Canadian English? Does diversity mean that we can live and work to build America and Canada but our cultures must never transform these countries in any foundational or recognizable way? What is the price of that choice?

Hosts on the Canadian radio show Q wrestled with these questions when I appeared on the show and it seemed to me that the answers are not simple. I learned quite a bit from listening. So I relate to your frustration and I speak from a position of linguistic privilege. But I think that learning a new culture also means embracing and contributing to its complexity and diversity. Slowly the society and media institutions must reflect that unless we want to reproduce sonic neocolonialism. That’s just my take.

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Samantha Broun

Chenjerai’s piece has (thankfully) spread beyond Transom. We thought we’d list some of the places that picked up and continued this conversation:

BuzzFeed:  

All Things Considered:  

Twitter Chat (at #PubRadioVoice):  
Weekend Edition:
http://www.npr.org/2015/01/31/382851532/the-in!te-whiteness-of-public-radio-voices

NPR Code Switch:
http://www.npr.org/blogs/codeswitch/2015/01/30/382612791/is-there-a-pubradiovoice-that-sounds-like-america

The Washington Post:

The Association of Independents in Radio: http://airmediaworks.org/blog/reading-list-these-are-not-white-men-talking http://airmediaworks.org/blog/playlist-no-code-switching-required

More from Buzzfeed:
http://www.buzzfeed.com/juliafurlan/turn-up-for-podcasts
About Transom
What We're Trying To Do

Transom.org channels new work and voices to public radio through the Internet, and discusses that work, and encourages more. Transom is a performance space, an open editorial session, an audition stage, a library, and a hangout. Our purpose is to pass the baton of mission and good practice in public media.

We invite Guests to come write about their work here to 1) keep the perspective changing so we're not stuck in one way of hearing, 2) let us in on the thoughts of creative minds, and 3) foster a critical and editorial dialog about radio work, a rare thing. Our Discussion Boards give us a place to talk it all over.

We accept submissions for featured audio pieces and for "Sidebar" entries.
- Sidbars are short (500 words or so) essays, rants, opinion pieces, useful advice, etc.
- Submitted audio can be stories, sound portraits, interviews, found sound, non-fiction pieces, audio art, whatever, as long as it's good listening. Material may be submitted by anyone, anywhere--by citizens with stories to tell, by radio producers trying new styles, by writers and artists wanting to experiment with radio.

We're looking for things that are less heard, different angles, new voices, new ways of telling, and any other good pieces that haven’t found another way onto public radio. Editors evaluate material more by what it does than what it is. Some questions they’ll consider:
- On the air, would it keep you by your radio until it’s over?
- Is the maker someone of talent who should be encouraged?
- Does it push the boundary of conventional radio in an exciting way?
- Will it provoke fruitful discussion online?

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Atlantic Public Media administers Transom.org. APM is a non-profit organization based in Woods Hole, Massachusetts that has as its mission "to serve public broadcasting through training and mentorship, and through support for creative and experimental approaches to program production and distribution." APM has been the creative force behind projects like the Public Radio Exchange (prx.org), The Moth Radio Hour, This I Believe, and others. APM is the founding group for WCAI, the public radio service for Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, and Nantucket. Transom.org receives funding from the Ford Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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