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Sober Drag Queens, Digital Forests, and Bloated “Lesbians”
Performing Gay Identities Online

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This essay focuses on how gay podcasters, or “Qpodders,” perform their identities in “soundscape” environments. Most of the “data” presented in the report take the form of poetry, dramatic monologue, and dramatic dialogue. Using creative reporting strategies, I chronicle how Qpodders record the ambient sounds of the scenes in which they are embedded; and, as a result, I argue that, within the context of a podcast, nonverbal sounds are poetic and narrate.

Keywords: gay; identity; podcasting; soundscapes

On September 28, 2005, gay podcaster Richard Bluestein attended the first annual Podcast and Portable Media Expo in Ontario, California. Video footage of the event features Bluestein dressed as his lesbian alter ego, Madge Weinstein, a 56-year-old Jewish woman who frequently talks about yeast infections and bouts of memory loss. In one of the video casts posted on Bluestein’s website, YeastRadio.com, the performer wears a fluorescent pink muumuu, oversized glasses, five strings of pearls, and a beehive wig. Dipping an 8-inch long dildo into a plastic glass of water and back dropped by comparatively tame Podcast Expo participants, Weinstein jokes:

This is the lamest crowd ever. These people suck. They’re all fucking Republicans. It’s like they never leave the house. It’s Friday night; they’re all wearing bad pants from Sears and free t-shirts. Everyone else flew out here on Virgin first class. I flew here on fucking coach! In between two fucking ass holes! And one person kept farting! You know how farts on an airplane smell? They all smell like peanut butter and ass! (Bluestein, 2005a)

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Bluestein, as Weinstein, then interviews a number of men and women at the convention who stand in awe as the performer waves her dildo in the air and asks questions like, “How many podcasts do you produce? How big is your dick?”

Bluestein’s presence at the otherwise humdrum convention was a definite intervention. His costuming, demeanor, and wild antics queered a heteronormative event filled wall-to-wall with “fucking geeks working [her/his] last gay nerve” (Bluestein, 2005a). Bluestein’s disruption of the Podcast and Portable Media Expo intervened on the hegemonic fantasy (Schriver & Nudd, 2002, p. 203) of assumed heteronormative gender expression. Moreover, people at the convention took notice of the performer’s overt sexuality and alternative performance of gender (Friess, 2005).

Many gay-identified podcasters like Bluestein create audio and visual online (OL) performances that empower gay men. Podcasting technologies provide tools with which gay men control the production of images and sounds that represent their subjectivities. In the world of podcasting, gay men act as producers, public relations coordinators, talent, reviewers, spokespeople, and community builders.

In the summer of 2005, Bluestein created Qpodder, an interactive, OL community that connects men and women involved in the ever-growing world of digital performance. The website is a social space (Stone, 1991) insofar as it provides a place for queer podcasters and fans, or Qpodders, to congregate and discuss issues relevant to the Qpodding community. Website features include a chat room, forum, and interactive blogs. Qpodder is also a public space (Rheingold, 1993) because it promotes an identifiable community of people bonded by similar interests.

In this study, I examine the ways in which gay men utilize computer-mediated communication (CMC) as an identity workshop (Parks & Floyd, 1996) and source of play. I also study the ways in which gay podcasters performatively construct an oppositional, OL consciousness. Specifically, I utilize creative reporting techniques to illuminate performance strategies employed by Qpodders.

In the following sections, I contextualize the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the study. I then consider how the performers replicate and manipulate space and geography in their audio productions. I conclude with an examination of how the men’s OL performance tactics empower gay men and their audience members.

Creating Stigmaphile Spaces OL

Qpodder constitutes a stigmaphile space where gay men perform and affirm their identities. Warner (1999) believes that there was power in
“stigmaphile spaces,” where, according to the author, “we find a commonality with those who suffer from stigma, and in this alternative realm learn to value the very things the rest of the world despises” (p. 43). Previous studies of CMC, or technoscapes (Strine, 1998), indicate that the medium’s use by marginalized people bolsters civic participation and self-empowerment (Dertouzos, 1997; Dutta-Bergman, 2005; Elkins, 1997; Nip, 2004), provides opportunities for people to turn the “machinery of power that surrounds them into sources of play and pleasure” (McRae, 1996, p. 244), enhances a consumer’s abilities to experiment with identity-related possibilities (Myers, 1987; Parks & Floyd, 1996), and establishes virtual gay communities for queer people who lack gay bars in their geographic regions (Correll, 1995).

Performances on Qpodder.com also comprise a form of rhetorical marginality (Gilbert, 2004). Rhetorical marginality refers to performative instances in which cultural others comment on oppressive systems by using marginality as a “site of resistance” (Gilbert, 2004, p. 5). The rhetorical strategy can be likened to “strategic essentialism” (Irigaray, 1990/1995; Spivak, 1988) or the belief that some essentializing modes of expression prove more politically enabling than disempowering. I compare rhetorical marginality to strategic essentialism because many of the men I mention in this report engaged in performance tactics that many may find homophobic, misogynistic, classist, racist, and ethnocentric. My aim is to demonstrate a few ways in which the podcasts can be read as performances that challenge and disrupt more than they perpetuate systems of oppression.

Guided by these identity-related insights, I ask the following questions: How do gay podcasters renegotiate conventional notions of space and geography? What strategies do Qpodders utilize to perform marginalization? Specifically, how do the men repeat marginalizing communication with a difference? How do the men bolster systems of marginalization?

I focus primarily on podcasts produced by Richard Bluestein (http://www.yeastradio.com), Wanda Wisdom (http://www.luckybitchradio.com), Fausto Fernós (http://www.feastoffools.net), and John Ong (http://onglinepodcast.com/feed.xml). I chose the men as my primary data sources because the four men represent different demographics and, therefore, constitute a range of gay male identities: John Ong is a Malaysian American male in his mid-20s; Richard Bluestein, also known as Madge Weinstein (see Figure 1), is a White, Jewish, U.S. American man in his late 30s who performs the role of a lesbian woman; Wanda Wisdom (see Figure 1) is a 31-year-old, White, U.S. American, sober drag queen; Fausto Fernós is a Puerto Rican American in his mid-30s.
After I collected data in the form of 100 transcribed podcast episodes and 100 single-spaced, typed pages of podcast feedback, I engaged in “creative analytical practices” (Richardson, 2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Specifically, I picked out data that I found particularly intriguing, evocative, and/or complicated and discovered ways to rearticulate the information through the use of creative writing. On a few occasions, for example, I transcribed Madge Weinstein’s monologues as dialogue, finding ways to bifurcate the persona. The practice helped me highlight the ways that the Madge persona sometimes struggles against Richard Bluestein, the man’s body that the character inhabits. Richardson (2000) calls the bifurcation exercise “ethnographic drama”; she claims that, “When the material to be displayed is intractable, unruly, multisited, and emotionally laden, drama is more likely to recapture the experience than is standard writing” (p. 934). At other times, I present data in poetic form. Richardson (2000) suggests that, “Writing up [data] as poems, honoring the speaker’s pauses, repetitions, alliterations, narrative strategies, rhythms, and so on, may actually better represent the speaker than the practice of quoting in prose snippets” (p. 933). Given the performative frame of the sites I analyze, creative analytical practices proved to be a provocative means to explore the data I accumulated.
In the following section, I present data in the form of prose, poetry, and drama. The creative rerenderings I showcase performatively situate podcast performances in a language that replicates the performers’ and medium’s theatricality. The analysis focuses on how a number of Qpodders construct audio topographies; audio topography, also known as a soundscape or soundseeing, references a performance in which ambient sounds, dialogue, and narration are concomitantly employed to heighten the vicarious and multidimensional feel of a podcast.

Performing Soundscapes

Bluestein’s Madge Weinstein is something of a pioneer in the creation of audio topographies. The performer’s first soundscape features the Madge character defecating into a toilet. The link to the audio file reads, “Madge makes internet her story as she becomes the first person to take a shit on a podcast” (Bluestein, 2004). In an effort to capture Madge’s unique sense of comic timing, the transcription that follows is written in the form of a poetic and comedic monologue.

Madge: Maybe I do have to shit.
Let’s try shitting.
Oy vey! Let me take off my panties.
Oh, God! There’s a doodie stripe.
I need to mention what happens when you eat high fiber cereal. Unfortunately, you shit bricks. The highest fiber cereal is, of course, Fiber One with twenty-five grams per cup, I believe. Maybe you can hear my sissy coming out.
The microphone picks up what sounds like flatulence.
That was a little fart, a precursor to the doodie.
I’m out of toilet paper.
Oh! I think something is going to come out.
I feel a little cramping.
This is the first bowel movement on a podcast. This is actually quite important.
Madge lets out a shriek reminiscent of Hollywood’s portrayal of a pterodactyl’s mating call.
I’m going to put the microphone close the toilet so you can hear.
It’s coming out, I think.
I can feel it.
I’m crowing. There’s no
turning back at this point.
Come on, push.
It’s coming. If you hear a plop,
that’s the one.
This is just like one of those gynecological movies where you see
pussy on public television.
Audiences hear the unmistakable sound of feces falling into a toilet.
That’s exciting!
The first bowel movement on a podcast. (Bluestein, 2004)

I begin my examination of soundscapes by referencing Bluestein’s out-
landish audio topography because the seemingly grotesque performance
exemplifies Warner’s description of stigmaphile spaces. Bluestein’s Madge
is a character who “values the very things the rest of the world despises”
(Warner, 1999, p. 43). She transforms mundane activities into exciting
monologues, spinning crap (in its most literal sense) into comedic dynamite.
Many may not appreciate the significance of Madge’s doodie sound-
scape. The performance challenges even the loosest standards of decency.
Not getting the joke may say something about a listener’s ability to grasp
the ethos of an alternative sign system that relishes in double entendre and
the profane. Using Warner’s conceptualization of stigmaphile spaces as a
filtering mechanism I consider, in the next several pages, how Qpodders
employ rhetorical marginality in five soundscapes environments.

Tactical Performances of Rhetorical Marginality

During a trip to Hollywood, Richard Bluestein recorded an episode of
Yeast Radio cohosted by Berbecia Clemons. Like Bluestein’s Madge,
Berbecia performs audio drag, or is a gay male performer who adopts an
over-the-top female persona. In Berbecia’s guest appearance on Yeast
Radio, she describes herself using the following alliterative tagline:

I am Berbecia Clemons, a
big, black, bloated,
bisexual, bipolar,
overweight blacktress.
Join me as I
peel open the pussy lips of Hollywood and
peek inside. (Bluestein, 2005c)
The episode chronicles a Hollywood Hills road trip in which the two “ladies” document a soundseeing adventure. In the world of podcasting, soundseeing, or a soundscape, works something like sightseeing. Rather than look at Hollywood’s lush topography, Yeast Radio listeners hear the site as Madge and Berbecia describe the scene’s tar pits, winding streets, and rolling hills. The recording is muffled in such a way that the audio authentically replicates the hum of wind most people hear when driving in their cars. Unlike audio recordings one may hear on the radio, the performers do not stop recording when they encounter a technical problem that disrupts the flow of the program. When a driver in front of the men slams on his brakes, the podcasters squeal in a high pitch, prompting Madge to scream, “Slow down! We’re going to die” (Bluestein, 2005c).

Scatological humor complements the messiness of the recording. At the beginning of the episode, Madge asks Berbecia why canals run down the hills. Berbecia explains that, “The canals are there so that the water has a place to roll off” (Bluestein, 2005d).

“Oh,” Madge responds, “they’re like ‘golden showers,’” or sexual experiences in which people pee on one another.

Berbecia explains to Madge that, “You’ve got some big Hollywood stars with big cocks on them and they start peeing down the hillside and houses start slipping down” (Bluestein, 2005c).

As the two make their way out of the Hills and into the gay Mecca that is West Hollywood, Madge, in her distinctive, over-articulated Jewish accent bemoans the fact that they have yet to come in contact with “one transvestite, not one John Travolta” (Bluestein, 2005c). Then, as if cued by a script, Berbecia corrects Madge. Like a queer Abbott and Costello, the two Qpodders participate in the following exchange:

**Berbecia:** We just passed street hustlers and crack whores!
**Madge:** I see “trannie” hookers.

*After a brief pause, Berbecia increases her volume as if she is screaming at somebody located outside of the car.*

**Berbecia:** What y’all doin’?
**Richard:** We’re interviewing people for a radio show.

*An indistinctive voice mumbles a reply too low to be picked up by the performers’ microphone.*

**Berbecia:** She says she wants a room. Bitch, get off your high horse and come down to Earth. There are prostitutes out here who are like, “We’re not going to be interviewed. We need a place to live.”

*Berbecia’s focus returns to the person outside of the car.*

**Berbecia:** Are there a lot of prostitutes out here?
Bluestein laughs in a masculine cackle more man than Madge.

Richard: What did she say?

Berbecia: She ignored us and said something in Spanish.

Berbecia continues her conversation with the prostitutes.

Berbecia: Hey! Hey, girl! Look at that booty! Work it, whore! Work, whore. Come over here and just tell us your name, girl. Pop it, bitch! Pop it! Wait a minute. Her pimp’s coming. We’ve got to get out of here. (Bluestein, 2005c)

“See,” Berbecia continues into the microphone, “Madge is very isolated. She couldn’t hang with those prostitutes. If she started interviewing those prostitutes, they would have busted her in her mouth and went on about their bid-ness” (Bluestein, 2005c).

The further the two performers drive away from what sounds like a dangerous and exciting West Hollywood scene the more Bluestein’s intonations morph back into the Madge Weinstein persona.

When Bluestein lowered the pitch of his voice and dropped the Madge act, he showcased his ability to improvise performances of self in relation to various settings and people who, as he perceives, may or may not read the Madge performance as a thoughtful challenge to heteronormative sensibilities. Bluestein’s enactment of Madge is strategic. He employs rhetorical marginality via the Madge persona when heteronormative settings may, in his mind, be called into question. Unlike talking to presumably heterosexual men wearing Dockers and polo shirts at the Podcast and Portable Media Expo, interacting with transsexual prostitutes on the streets of West Hollywood may justify little cause for a queer intervention on Bluestein’s part.

Shifts in and out of the Weinstein persona also emerged salient when Bluestein traveled to Camp Casey and joined Cindy Sheehan and the Gold Star Mothers of America to participate in antiwar protests. In the following transcribed dialogue, note the ways in which Bluestein’s enactments of self and Madge are discontinuous and fractured:

Voice of Protest Organizer: We really need everyone’s help to clean up everything. Put everything in the trashcans. Help straighten up the chairs.

Richard: Hi, this is Madge.

Voice of Protest Organizer: . . . and look to the ground for pieces of . . .

Richard: . . . and I am in Camp Casey . . .

Voice of Protest Organizer: . . . area as pristine as we found it.

Richard: It’s my second night here. It’s Saturday.

Women’s voices banter in the background.

Richard: Somebody just announced that we’re supposed to clean. I don’t clean my house, so I’m not going to clean this tent. I’m under this huge tent...
that, a week ago, was used as a fundraising tent for George Bush. Because, you know, he needs more money.

A man yells unintelligible commands in the background. Women’s voices continue to dominate the audio backdrop of the soundscape. As the cacophony of sounds grows increasingly distant, Bluestein slowly and slightly alters his voice to sound more like Madge.

**Madge:** Gentle audience, I feel deep, deep, deep sorrow and sadness. The recording abruptly stops. A small click is heard. Bluestein’s voice hits high pitches and trips over the pronunciation of words in a dialect more characteristic of Madge’s natural speaking style than Bluestein’s.

**Madge:** I’m at the Marriott Courtyard and they have a Book of Moron in the drawer. Today, they played Taps. They built a whole cemetery today—like a mini-Arlington National Cemetery with all the crosses. And I don’t think it was all the dead people but there sure were a lot. You have to see how many people died. And those are just the Ameri-cunts. This is the first time in history that the U.S. government doesn’t give out numbers for civilian casualties in a time of war. They’re not even counting.

A long pause.

**Richard:** Really, I have nothing left to say. (Bluestein, 2005d)

Despite introducing himself as Madge at the start of the show, Bluestein’s vocal performance at Camp Casey lacks the campy feel of typical Madge performances. It is only when Bluestein returns to the privacy of his hotel room that we hear vocal intonations and an accent that signify the presence of Madge Weinstein. Downplaying Madge at the protest site may have been a tactical move on Bluestein’s part. The Qpodder is an active and vocal antiwar advocate who, on his podcast, frequently documents Sheehan’s work. In October of 2006, Bluestein (2006) even interviewed Sheehan for a special episode of *Yeast Radio*.

While at Camp Casey, Bluestein may have had to abandon more brash performances of Madge to honor the legacy of fallen soldiers and murdered civilians. Within the confines of Bluestein’s hotel room, a more subdued Madge (but a vocal performance that suggests Madge nonetheless) reflects on her day at Camp Casey. As emotion begins to overtake the performer, he, once again, breaks the audio drag performance frame and closes the show as Richard Bluestein. The scene-specific performances chronicled in Bluestein’s soundscapes are fascinating exercises in identity improvisation and queer possibility.

**Reading Subjectively, Living Vicariously**

Qpodders also produced international audio topographies. Fausto Fernós, host of the *Feast of Fools* podcast, took his show to Puerto Rico, where he
and Marc Felion, his boyfriend, recorded a Puerto Rican rainforest soundscape. While listening to the episode, audience members hear the exotic sounds of birds chirping and tree frogs singing high-pitched tunes. The two men then dialogue about their scenic backdrop. Fausto begins the conversation by asking:

**Fausto:** Isn’t this a beautiful sound? These are sounds from the El Yunque Caribbean National Forest in Puerto Rico. Can you hear the little tree frog that sings all night long? When I think of Puerto Rico, I think of this sound. God, it’s wet.

**Marc:** It’s a moist forest.

**Fausto:** It’s wet and hot and moist. Even though it’s four o’clock in the afternoon, it’s very dark. The trees in the rainforest try to suck up all the light. All these plants have evolved to make the best of dark conditions. Most people couldn’t have them as houseplants. They need constant watering and nutrition. (Bluestein, 2006)

As a gay listener of the show, I could not help but compare Fausto’s description of the rainforest to my own experiences as a marginalized person. Like the plants of which he paints a mental picture, I know the burden of making the best of dark conditions. One might claim that I read too much into the Qpodder’s words. Reading too much into the soundscape is, perhaps, the point of the performance. Fausto and Marc begin their conversation in a manner that lends itself to multiple readings. When Marc calls the forest moist and Fausto suggests that the setting is hot and moist, the men coyly hint at a sexually charged interpretation of their surroundings, or a complementary appraisal of the rainforest that runs alongside more mundane readings of the geography. Through a careful and playful use of metaphor, the men queer the landscape and, in doing so, encourage audience members to take what they will from the soundscape.

More than advocate multiple readings of the performance, the men utilize audio and computer technologies to performatively render the country and culture in which they are embedded. Throughout the soundseeing trek into the rainforest, Fernós and Felion (2006) played music native to Puerto Rico and recommended that listeners check out a number of artists from the region including Francisco Loza, Hector Lavoe, Ardnaxela Alexandra, and Balún. The Feast of Fools website includes links to the artists’ Web pages. The hypertext links work like a modified scratch-and-sniff book for listeners of the show who also visit the website—modified because scratch is replaced by a click of the mouse and soundscapes and links to music become digital sensory mechanisms.
Using CMC, Fernós and Felion manipulate sense, space, and geography. They record sounds of the region. Their dialogue adds narrative and metaphorical texture to the landscape. By showcasing the sounds of Puerto Rico, the podcasters perform an act of “cultural transference” (McKenzie, 2001). Performance theorist Jon McKenzie (2001) uses the term “cultural transference” to describe cross-pollinations of cultures that occur in an increasingly globalized world. The scholar pays careful attention to the impact of new technologies in relation to international exchange. Referencing Foucault’s genealogy of discipline, he writes:

> While disciplinary mechanisms produce unified subjects through a series of institutions (school, factory, prison, hospital), each with its own discrete archive of statements and practices, performative power blurs the borders of social institutions by connecting and sharing digital archives. Financial information, criminal records, medical files, and school transcripts once stored in separate metal file cabinets are now being uploaded to silicon databases and electronically networked. (p. 6)

Podcasts add to the digital archive to which McKenzie refers. Portions of Puerto Rico, for example, have been recorded by Qpodders, commented on, and digitally disseminated.

Many queer-identified critics rightfully complain that the purview of gay performance tends to reflect White, upper-class, and U.S.-based subjectivities (Warner, 1999). International soundscapes casuistically stretch the scope of cultural representation in terms of geography and race. Gay, White, upper-class, and U.S.-based podcast consumers are, through podcasting technology, afforded opportunities to enter into a digitized stigmaphile space where they are encouraged to consider the performative import of foreign environments.

Moreover, audience responses indicate that the Feast of Fools soundscape allowed listeners to vicariously experience Puerto Rico. A listener named David remarked that the Feast of Fools Puerto Rican soundseeing adventure reminded him of a visit he took to Costa Rica several years ago. He commented that he “was able to walk through one or two of their lush cloud forests. So this episode made [him] feel nostalgic for that place, but it also made [him] want to visit Puerto Rico” (quoted in Fernós & Felion, 2006). The audience member also indicated that he enjoyed the pictures Fernós took and posted to the Feast of Fools website, because it gave him an opportunity to “experience [Puerto Rico] vicariously.”

Other podcasters use soundscapes to recreate settings closer to home. In the following section, I consider the performative implications of audio topographies that record more mundane activities.
Chronicling the Seemingly Mundane

*Lucky Bitch Radio* host Wanda Wisdom utilizes soundscapes to document her “struggles with alcohol and journey through recovery” (Wisdom, 2006). The Qpodder’s ever-pleasant voice contains a slight lilt that effortlessly shifts from deep to high pitches. Wanda is not a Qpodder who feels the need to fill in or edit out uncomfortable silences. She sometimes tells stories at a snail’s pace. It is not uncommon for the podcaster to have multiple pauses in a single sentence. Take, for example, a soundseeing trip she recorded while walking through the snowy streets of Minneapolis. In an effort to capture Wisdom’s disjointed speaking style, I document the ambient sound of her feet trudging their way through the snow.

Wanda: Hello, it’s me, Wanda Wisdom. *Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch.* I am your drag queen hostess. *Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch.* I am coming to you live from Minneapolis—*Scrunch, scrunch*—where’s it’s around five degrees. *Scrunch, scrunch.* I thought I would take my microphone out—*scrunch, scrunch*—for a little walkie-poo. *Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch.* I am retarded—*scrunch*—and crazy—*scrunch*—for walking outside in weather that would literally—*scrunch, scrunch, scrunch*—freeze any exposed skin. *Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch.* I’m walking right now—*scrunch, scrunch*—through my neighborhood. *Scrunch, scrunch.* That’s why you can hear—*scrunch*—snow—*scrunch*—underneath me. *Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch.* It’s very creepy, very dark—*scrunch*—and snowy. *The groan of a large truck’s exhaust is heard traveling by Wanda.* For those of you who may be listening for the first time—*scrunch, scrunch*—I’m a 30-year-old drag queen living on the edge of urbanity. *Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch, scrunch.* It’s very eerie looking. *It looks like the forest—*scrunch*—that—*scrunch*—Little Red Riding Hood had to—*scrunch*—skip her way through before she was swallowed whole by a—*scrunch, scrunch, scrunch*—big, bad wolf. *Scrunch, scrunch, scrunch, scrunch, scrunch.* (Wisdom, 2005)

Wisdom’s walk through the Minneapolis snow sounds laborious. As the snow scrunched underneath her feet, she described her surroundings as creepy, dark, and eerie. The Qpodder’s reference to Little Red Riding Hood heightens the dark tone of the performance. Like the girl in the children’s story, Wisdom walked down menacing paths that may have hosted an assortment of homophobic wolves.

Qpodders know the dangers of urbanity. Seven months prior to Wisdom’s snowy soundscape, Jason Smith, a gay photographer who had been featured on *Yeast Radio* and *Feast of Fools*, and his boyfriend were
viciously attacked in the Lincoln Park area of Chicago. The three men who injured Smith and his boyfriend began the beating by screaming antigay epithets (Bluestein, 2005b). Matt Blender, a Qpodder who produces Okay So Radio and frequently appears as a guest on Yeast Radio, was mugged and had two fingers broken while walking down a street in Chicago’s gay district. Blender’s (2006) Qpodder profile explains that he “lived a sheltered life until [he] moved to the big, bad city of Chicago.” Blender’s reference to the “big, bad city of Chicago” is similar to descriptions of “big, bad wolves” in tales like Little Red Riding Hood and The Three Little Pigs. As a side note, I too have been mugged at gunpoint while walking through Chicago’s and Houston’s gay districts. These stories are made all the more salient by other publicized reports of antigay violence. Only weeks before New York’s 2006 Pride festival, Singer Kevin Aviance underwent surgery for a broken jaw after a group of seven men beat the gay man on a New York street; passer-bys ignored the assault.

I recapitulate Smith’s, Blender’s, and Aviance’s narratives to contextualize Wisdom’s soundseeing walk through Minneapolis. Many gay listeners of the show can identify with the dangers inherent in performing simple, public tasks, like walking down the street. By recording the sounds of her environment, Wisdom lends a sense of immediacy to an event many people in our culture may take for granted. The MP3 recording also works as a mode of counter surveillance, a strategy similar to one employed by members of ACT UP in the 1980s. Whereas ACT UP participants filmed protest events to document police abuses, Wisdom’s soundscape serves as an audio report that could legitimize her narrative should she be “swallowed whole by a big, bad wolf.” To modify McRae (1996), Wisdom turns the “machinery of power” (p. 244) that surrounds her into a source of play, pleasure, and surveillance.

Whereas Wisdom’s audio topography illuminates the gay-related dangers of seemingly mundane activities, John Ong’s soundscapes are comparatively less urgent. His soundseeing excursions include trips to Ikea (Ong, 2005d), Mall of America (Ong, 2005c), Target (Ong, 2005e), Costco (Ong, 2005a), and the neighborhood grocery store (Ong, 2005b). While recording soundscapes, Ong is even less prone to narrate than Wisdom. But Ong’s soundseeing performances are not “empty.” Ambient sounds add texture to his scenic backdrop. The sounds narrate. To capture the ways in which ambient sounds help tell Ong’s story, I report a portion of his Target soundscape in the form of poetry:

Wind blows into the microphone;
its bluster sounds like a piece of paper
in a state of perpetual rip.
Grocery cart metal clanks in the distance.
Further away, a car sputters from a low to high pitch, indicating that the driver changed gears.
The rattle, shake of a grocery cart grows in volume.
A man cheerfully greets a friend with a boisterous, “Hey!”
The “hey” fades into an echo existence.
Suddenly, the wind stops blowing.
Ong jokes, “Hopefully I won’t set off the alarm.”
I picture Ong walking through the sliding and electronic glass doors of Target.
“Thump, thump; beep, beep.”
Like a symphony of consumerism, cashiers play their registers.
“Beep, beep; thump.”
“I see Krispy Kreme,” Ong whispers.
“Krispy Kreme,” he quips, “is one of my downfalls.” (Ong, 2005e)

The performative power of Ong’s soundscape is found in its documentation of the mundane aspects of gay life. Portrayals of gay people in the mass media tend to sensationalize gay events and lifestyles (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Dow, 2001; Gross, 1994; Keller, 2002; Shugart, 2003; Walters, 2001). Digitally disseminating podcasts in which gay men perform routine activities (e.g., shopping at Target) promotes a sense of identification among those who may be put off by reports of gay life that myopically focus on gay sex acts and transgressive behavior.

Conclusions and Implications

The stigmaphile space (Warner, 1999) established by Qpodders is significant for three key reasons. First, soundscapes showcase a Qpodder’s ability to improvise in surroundings over which they have little control. Bluestein’s enactment of Madge, for example, was largely dependent on the performer’s context. Whereas the Madge persona took center stage (so to speak) at the Podcast and Portable Media Expo, Bluestein appeared to downplay the campy performance when he interacted with transsexual prostitutes on a West Hollywood street.

In the context of this report, queer improvisation is conceptualized as a form rhetorical marginality, or a tactical performance of gay identity that reimagines the signifying capacity of space and place. Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community employ similar tactics when negotiating homosexual disclosure in hostile environments (Fisher,
2003). Fisher (2003) convincingly speaks to the empowering capabilities of this practice when she writes:

Here, space is created, used, and customized by active “poachers” who remake it to be what they need at any given moment and according to each situation. Inhabited by those who have no “place,” space is an opportunistic site filled with tactical movements that can subvert and divert the dominant order of society. (p. 182)

Documenting strategic performance of gay identity within the context of a podcast allows members of marginalized communities who lack affirming institutions of identification in their immediate regions to witness performance tactics in practice and in situ. As Bluestein falls in and out of the Madge persona, audiences are exposed to fluid and fragmented representations of self, as self relates to perceived danger and potential transgression. Specifically, the soundscape works as an “identity workshop” (Parks & Floyd, 1996) in which the Qpodder experiments with rhetorical marginality and identity-related possibilities.

Next, anyone who has access to Qpodder performances can, as a Feast of Fools listener claimed, “vicariously experience” multiple, complementary, and contradictory expressions of gay lives as they are performed in spaces as isolated as a Puerto Rican rainforest. By digitally reproducing sounds and promoting artists native to Puerto Rico, Fernós and Felion encourage audience members to consider multiple significations of subjectivity (e.g., non-U.S.-based) and queer interpretations of environments (e.g., the El Yunque Caribbean National Forest as a metaphor for alternative sexuality) that run alongside more mundane readings of landscape.

Finally, Qpodder soundscapes challenge conventional understandings of the mundane. Wanda Wisdom’s audio topography of a Minneapolis street performatively calls attention to gay-related dangers present when gay men perform even the most mundane tasks. Podcasting technology also allows Qpodders to distribute information about gay hate crimes. Unfortunately, antigay hate crime tales are woefully under- and misreported in the mass media (Dunbar & Molina, 2004; Quist & Wiegand, 2002). Podcast-disseminated news of gay bashings and soundscapes that chronicle the dangers of performing mundane activities work in an iterative fashion. The dual approach is a digital form of rhetorical marginality that extends feminist traditions of consciousness raising. Moreover, by recording mundane activities, Qpodders like John Ong prove that sex acts comprise a very small portion of gay men’s lives. Because day-to-day events (e.g., trips to Cosco and
Target) lack sensationalistic appeal, digital performances of mundane activities may promote a sense of identification between sexually conservative people and gay men.

OL performances empower gay men in other ways. In digital worlds, gay men act as talent, promoters, and community builders. OL media allow gay performers to maximize control over global methods of production. Currently, issues of queer-related representation are growing increasingly relevant and political. Straight actors routinely play gay characters in films and television shows. In the United States, queer people pay taxes but lack sufficient legal protection (e.g., the “Defense” of Marriage Act). Queer people desperately need and deserve adequate modes of self-representation that are grounded in and have an investment in self. My argument is not simply about vague notions of authenticity or the belief in an identity-based essence. I take issue with current trends in mass mediated depictions of gay life because I believe media are powerful instruments in instigating social change.

The situation is made all the more complex when I think of how much queer talent goes untapped in our culture. Most talented gay people who want to entertain are, by economic necessity, forced to improvise, do drag, create solo plays, write blogs, start podcasts, write poetry—basically, engage in any artistic activity that allows queer individuals to employ their talents, drives, and innovations to create opportunities to speak, to express, to live.

Performance theorists, media scholars, and activists may find the investigation helpful for a number of reasons. Podcast listeners turn to alternative forms of media to both supplement and replace mass mediated methods of consumption. The performances I mention in this report provide views into gay life that remain largely absent from television shows, movies, popular magazines, and newspapers. Because podcasts empower marginalized people to share “absent topics” (Park-Fuller, 2000), I see great potential in a merge between media studies, performance studies, and action research.

Action research is a form of applied study in which academic insiders work with people and organizations, cocreate and foster communities, and improve communication among participants (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The current investigation may be used as a springboard to launch action research studies in which performance and media scholars work with activist organizations in an effort to communicate their messages to a wider audience via podcast technologies. Theoretical insight as to how new forms of OL media can be marketed to alternative audiences would likely prove indispensable to activist organizations and performance and media scholars who may want to forge action research connections with advocacy groups.
LGBTQ scholars and activists may also find the study significant because podcasts allow queer people in communities that lack gay bars and LGBTQ organizations to participate in digital forums. Gay activists may choose to focus on the role podcasts play in gay male affirmation. If, for example, gay teen suicide is partially due to a lack of identifiable gay people in one’s life (Corey, 1998), podcasts could work as a mode of outreach. The constructs I mention in this report may also help LGBTQ activists in their endeavors to empower gay men.

CMC allows gay men from all over the world to communicate with one another and share stories of marginalization and empowerment. Qpodders call attention to and challenge perceived marginalization through the use of narratives and soundscapes. Queer podcasters perform the drama of their shifting subjectivities and tensions; in doing so, they legitimize themselves, and invite the personal into the realm of the public.

References


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