

Yellow Rain and The Sound of the Matter: Kalia Yang's Sonorous Objection to Radiolab

Justin Eckstein

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Abstract

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Keywords

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The critically acclaimed WNYC program *Radiolab* found itself embroiled in a controversy for its recent broadcast segment “Yellow Rain.” Released on September 24, 2012 as part of the episode entitled “[The Fact of the Matter](#),” the 20 minute segment “Yellow Rain” recounted the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of the Hmong by the Viet Cong and the Pathet Lao after the United States left Vietnam and the subsequent debates surrounding the chemical weapon called “yellow rain.

The episode pitted the witnessing of Eng Yang, a survivor and documenter of the genocide—whom producer Pat Walters describes as the “Hmong guy” at one point—and his niece, award-winning writer [Kao Kalia Yang](#)—referred to only as “Kalia” by hosts [Robert Krulwich](#) and [Jad Abumrad](#)—against the research of university scientists and the relentless questioning of Krulwich.

Following the episode's broadcast, many listeners and critics argued that *Radiolab's* treatment of their the Yangs was Orientalist and unethical. Jea, writing on *Radiolab's* “[Yellow Rain](#)” [comment page](#) suggested “Ms. Yang and her uncle were dismissed and even reduced to pawns in the larger scheme of *RadioLab's* agenda.” Others, such as Bob Collins, writing for *Minnesota Public Radio* worried that “the story appeared [...]to invalidate the Hmong loss and suffering in Laos.” Aaron, a commentor on [Current Magazine's coverage of the controversy called Radiolab's coverage](#) “inexcusable science, nothing close to journalism, and if only ‘a story,’ one that cements erroneous ideas in the minds of its listeners.” [Kirti Kamboj, writing for Hyphen](#), a magazine dedicated to Asian American arts, culture, and politics, described the episode as “heartbreaking,” “utterly infuriating,” and an exemplar of “Orientalist, ethnocentric framing” designed to privilege Western knowledge.

From my perspective as a scholar of rhetoric, communication, and debate, to call *Radiolab's* game rigged would be an understatement. The interview was not conducted on an even playing field and it smacks of a white Western privilege that the writers and producers failed to fully acknowledge even in their on-air discussion following the interview. *Radiolab* determined the questions, edited the exchange, and retained the capacity to both frame and amend the discussion (there is a debate concerning whether or not the Yangs knew the questions prior to the interview—this discussion can be found [here](#), *Radiolab's* response [here](#) , and answer to *Radiolab's* claims [here](#).).

In addition to the whether or not *Radiolab* misrepresented the Yangs and downplayed the mass murder of the Hmong in their pursuit of “truth,” I find that this episode is important for the insights it contains into argumentative invention, journalism, and new media ethics, all sparked by the grain of Kalia Yang's voice in response to Krulwich's questions. I argue that Kalia's sounded distress functioned as what I call a “sonorous objection,” instigating the critique of *Radiolab's* tactics. Borrowing from argumentation theory, an objection describes an argument that draws the context of an argumentative exchange into view. Research on objections has most often examined the use of visual images, such as the controversy sparked by the [photographs coming from of Abu Ghraib](#). In this short piece, I will wed prior research on objections with theories about sound to argue that Kalia used the grain of her voice to call out—and call into question—the opaque assumptions that governed the interview and its reception.



Kao Kalia Yang, Image courtesy of the Fox Cities Book Festival

"Yellow Rain" recalls the Hmong genocide following the Vietnam War. The Hmong were recruited by the CIA to help disrupt supply lines to Ho Chi Minh City (or Saigon). After American troops withdrew, the Viet Cong and the Pathet Lao persecuted the Hmong for aiding the US. The communists attacked the Hmong, eradicating villages and blanketing populations with a sticky, yellow substance. Attempting to escape systemic annihilation, the Hmong receded into the jungle, where many [still reside today](#). Some of the Hmong that were able to escape brought with them leaves covered in the yellow stuff, which they gave to local aid workers. These workers then shipped the samples back to the United States where labs diagnosed it as a chemical agent known as "yellow rain." A concerned Reagan administration reasoned that only the Soviet Union had the technical capacity to produce such a weapon. As a result, Reagan restarted the United States' then-dormant Chemical and Biological Weapons (CBW) program. *Radiolab's* hosts, Abumrad and Krulwich take issue with this narrative; troubling the assertion that yellow rain was in fact a chemical weapon and insinuating that Reagan used the Hmong incident as an excuse to start producing CBWs.

["Yellow Rain," on Radiolab.](#)

"Yellow Rain" progressed like many other segments of *Radiolab*. Abumrad and Krulwich began by recounting the story of the Hmong from the perspective of retired CIA agent Merle Prebbenow and the Yangs. Next, they interview Harvard professor [Matthew Meselson](#) and Cornell professor [Thomas Seeley](#), using their testimony to suggest that "yellow rain" was actually bees releasing their bowels en masse after hibernation. Then Abumrad and Krulwich brought this provocative hypothesis to the Yangs. Here, the show intensifies, the music fades, and Krulwich begins to question the Yangs, "as if he were a cross-examining attorney" according to Bob Collins, [blogger for Minnesota Public Radio](#). As the interview goes on, Krulwich's tone increasingly stiffens as he repeats a similar line of questioning: "But, as far as I can tell," Krulwich asserts, "your uncle didn't see the bee pollen fall, your uncle didn't see a plane, all of this is hearsay."

Kalia's voice beings to fray:

My uncle says for the last twenty years he didn't know that anyone was interested in the deaths of the Hmong people. He agreed to do this interview because you were interested. What happened to the Hmong happened, and the world has been uninterested for the last twenty years. He agreed because you were interested. That the story would be heard and the Hmong deaths would be documented and recognized. That's why he agreed to the interview, that the Hmong heart is broken and our leaders have been silenced, and what we know has been questioned again and again is not a surprise to him, or to me. I agreed to the interview for the same reason, that Radiolab was interested in the Hmong story, that they were interested in documenting the deaths that happened. There was so much that was not told. Everybody knows that chemical warfare was being used. How do you create bombs if not with chemicals? We can play the semantics game, we can, but I'm not interested, my uncle is not interested. We have lost too much heart, and too many people in the process. I, I think the interview is done [This is Kalia's transcription of her statements, from [Hyphen](#)].

Kalia reflects on her experience with *Radiolab* [in a post for Hyphen](#), characterizing the interview as more of an interrogation. I add an additional layer: that of the deliberative exchange. While it is certainly true that there was a great discrepancy between the interlocutors, both parties adduced reasons for their respective positions producing an argumentative encounter that challenged the norms that govern discourse and language.

In the above quotation, Kalia claims that *Radiolab* ambushed her and their meeting occurred under a pretense of telling the Hmong story. She then rhetorically situates her interlocutor within a broader history of silencing the Hmong. While it may be tempting to look at the *Radiolab* interview as an isolated event, Kalia's arguments cast it as another iteration of the Hmong being discounted. We cannot, in other words, cleave "Yellow Rain" from a history of oppression.



August 2004, Image by Flickr User Awning

Additionally, Kalia chides *Radiolab*'s concerns, calling them a "semantics game." Here, both the use of semantics and game is instructive. Semantics speaks to the trivial nature of Krulwich's questions. His focus on yellow rain and its dubious status as a chemical weapon obfuscates the fact that weapons were used against the Hmong. Or, to reformulate Kalia's argument, *Radiolab* is trading purely in language and ignoring the material reality of her people. The invocation of game is also important because it suggests that Krulwich does not understand the historical gravity of his actions. And, perhaps more importantly, that *Radiolab* is not taking the incident seriously. These arguments coalesce to trouble the assumption that the interview –and the inclusion of the Yang's voices–was fair, equal, and inclusive. This culminates in Kalia wresting her agency from this context by ending the interview.

However, an exclusive focus on language ignores the intersecting effects of histories–personal, interpersonal and social–sounds, cultures, moods, and affects. Indeed, the grain of Kalia's voice operates as an affective vector. Teresa Brenna, in [The Transmission of Affect](#), explains, vocal rhythm "is a tool in the expression of agency, just as words are. It can literally convey the tone of an utterance, and in this sense, it does unite word and affect"(70). Different vocal inflections invoke both biographic and cultural histories, as the body attempts to discern meaning. Political theorist [William Connolly](#), in *Neuropolitics*, calls this space between sound and meaning the virtual register of memory. Virtual memory describes a background below conscious recollection that discerns sensory data, like sound, and renders it intelligible (24). We often see this register at work when we watch a movie, as different scenes are stored below the level of reflection and are called up to interpret a scene. Virtual memory is recursive, folding in present experiences to help guide future encounters and using previous encounters to make sense of the present. Thus the rhythm of Kalia's voice guides the entrainment of affect by drawing on listeners' previous encounters with similar sounds. This process infuses listeners' perceptions and resulted in what commentators called "painful" and "emotional."

While Kalia's words claim *Radiolab* ambushed her and her uncle, the grain of her voice draws the unequal distribution of power into sharp relief. Her vocal cracks resonated with listeners, imparting an intense, visceral experience and [provoking an outcry](#). One listener, Mathew Saleses [sums up the response](#): "Every time I listen to this, I start to cry. Every time. About ten times now." It demonstrates that Kalia was through reasoning with Krulwich; his use of Western science to discredit indigenous knowledge made sincere argumentation impossible. Her cry was not only an act of resistance, but also an objection that troubled *Radiolab*'s claims of journalistic excellence, highlighting vexing issues with editing and story construction.



Robert Krulwich and Jad Abumrad, Image by Flickr User Carlos Gomez

In argumentation parlance, Kalia's voice operated as an "objection." In "[Entanglements of Consumption](#)," argumentation scholars Kathryn M. Olson and G. Thomas Goodnight (1994) explain how an objection functions within an argumentative encounter: "absent a common agreement as to the means of reaching consensus, debate over the 'truth' of an asserted claim is set aside, in whole or in part, and challenges are raised as to the acceptability of the communicative context within which the argument is offered as secured"(251). That is, when deliberation occurs within a shared context—agreed upon values, goals, rules, and facts—the argument progresses smoothly. However, when there is a disjunction between interlocutors, such as in "Yellow Rain" where both parties disagree on basic facts, hegemonic beliefs take precedence. Objections function to evidence this differential, making both parties (and often an audience) aware of this gap. As such, objections are not concerned with refuting previous claims—the way that Kalia states neither she nor her uncle are interested in having a semantic debate—but questions the very context—and the conditions—of the debate itself.

Despite *Radiolab*'s attempts to fetishize her voice to evidence the "fact of the matter" and the "complicated nature of truth," Kalia's voice retained her agency. Through the invocation of the sonorous objection, she eluded capture and demonstrated the unequal terrain of the interview. Her pain enveloped the listener, leaving a resonance that *Radiolab* listener [Cecilia Yang](#) called "painful to listen to" in her personal blog. As Olson and Goodnight remind us, objections arise in a repressive context, when people are denied a voice. For Kalia, histories of racism and colonialism infused the argumentative encounter, making it impossible for her to "reason," a framework she exposes as a stacked game. As such, her sonorous objection functioned to evidence this disparity, while directing the listener's attention to her cause. Just as the pictures of prisoners coming out of Abu Ghraib incited outrage about U.S. imperialism and violence, Kalia's sonorous objection provoked a conversation about the Hmong, *Radiolab*, and the ethics of journalism in the new media age.

Justin Eckstein is a doctoral candidate and former director of debate at the University of Denver. His work explores the intersection of listening, affect, and argumentation. Justin's writing has appeared in [Argumentation & Advocacy](#), [Relevant Rhetoric](#), and [Argumentation in Context](#). Currently, he is writing his dissertation on the micropolitics of podcasting in the post-deliberative moment.