‘No Place Like Home’: Dissonance and Displacement in Gimlet Media’s Fiction Podcast “Homecoming”

Miranda Wilson

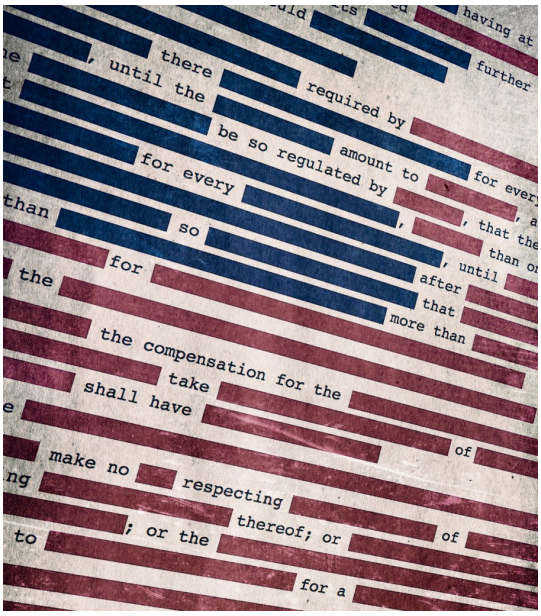
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Abstract

In honor of International Podcast Day on 30 September, *Sounding Out!* brings you Pod-Tember (and Pod-Tober too, actually, now that we’re bi-weekly) a series of posts exploring different facets of the audio art of the podcast, which we have been putting into those earbuds since 2011. Enjoy!

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Aesthetics, Article, Digital Media, Information, Listening

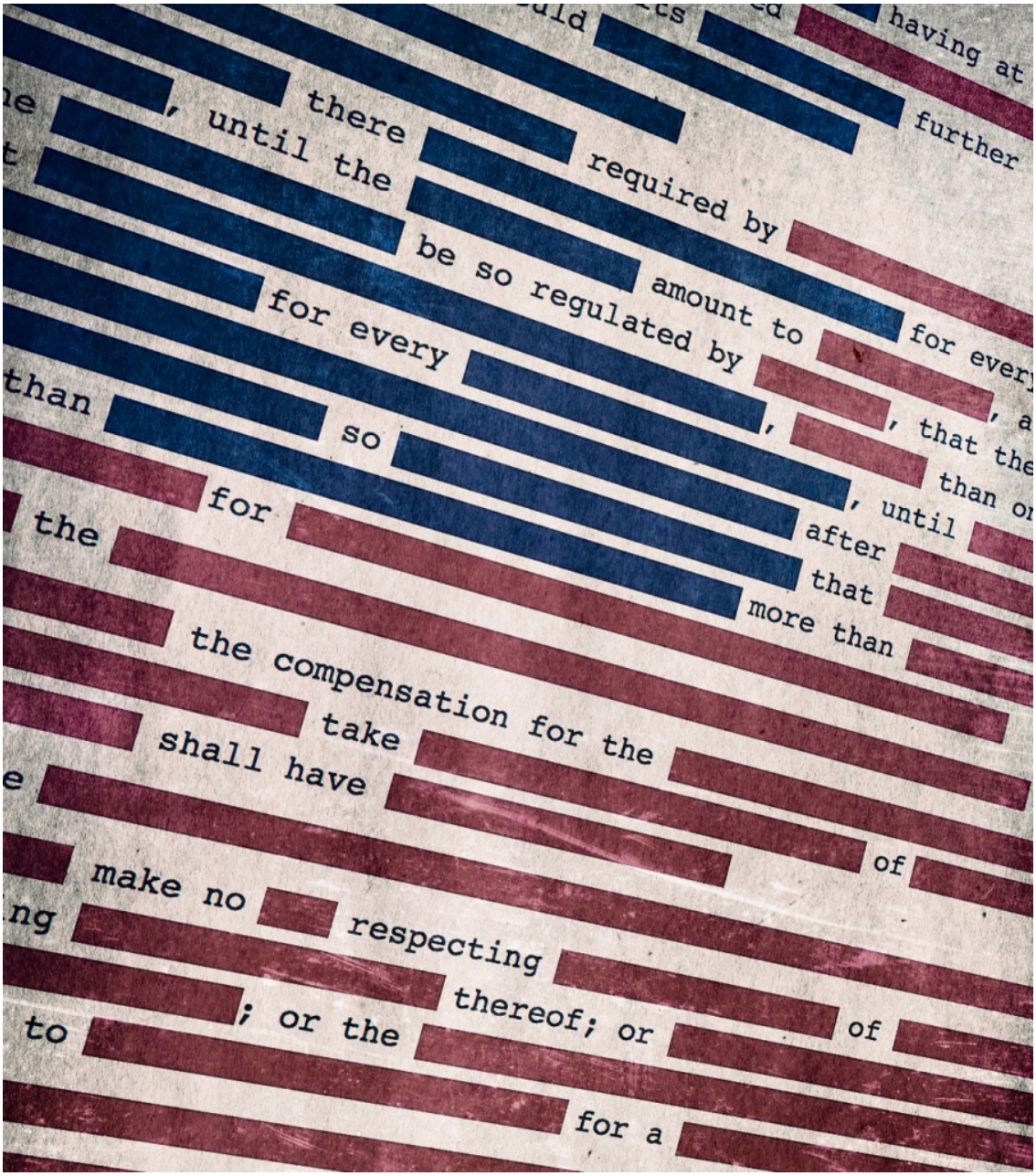


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In honor of International Podcast Day on 30 September, *Sounding Out!* brings you Pod-Tember (and Pod-Tober too, actually, now that we're bi-weekly) a series of posts exploring different facets of the audio art of the podcast, which we have been putting into those earbuds since 2011. Enjoy! –JS

Last month, Gimlet media released the audio-feature length podcast *The Final Chapters of Richard Brown Winters*, starring Catherine Keener, Parker Posey, Bobby Cannavale, Sam Waterston, and Darrell Britt-Gibson, many of the same cast members from their critically-acclaimed podcast *Homecoming,* and also co-written by Eli Horowitz, *Homecoming*'s co-creator and co-showrunner. Along with the podcast's famous move to Amazon TV in 2017, Gimlet's podcast reunion prompted me to re-listen to *Homecoming*, trying to figure out how its signature use of audio—characterized by Horowitz as "letting the scenes and the conversation create the action instead of describing the action"—propelled the series to its success in the first place.

Homecoming concerns characters connected with afictional military rehabilitation facility in Tampa, Florida, that ostensibly prepares soldiers suffering PTSD for a return for civilian life. The soldiers are subjects of an experimental drug treatment program devised by the US Defence Department-affiliated Geist Group to erase traumatic memories of combat and eliminate resistance to re-deployment. Set in a specifically post-9/11 political milieu, the series plays out in the implied real world context of multiple and on-going US foreign military interventions. *Homecoming* foregrounds the sonic/auditory modes associated with war–in particular covert electronic surveillance–working to create an atmosphere infused with suspicion, secrecy and deception. In *Homecoming*'s dissonant sonic/narrative environment 'home' is as perilous as the frontline.

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Dissonance and displacement inherent in the auditory experience are overarching themes in *Homecoming* and manifest in an atmosphere of uncertainty regarding temporality, memory, identity and ideas of "home" itself. The sonic world of *Homecoming* is infused with a sense of discord—recorded audio is subject to manipulation and misinterpretation—and the voice is a site of multiplicities that destabilise concepts of identity and reality. The podcast's pervasive "out of tune-ness" produces a heightened state of listening – a hypervigilance – both in *Homecoming*'s characters as they attempt to decipher multiple conflicting aural "intel," and in the podcast's audience as we do likewise. It is this dissonance that compels *Homecoming*'s listeners to prick up our ears and listen more keenly.

GETTING "SITUATED"

The series' distinctive non-linear, explicitly sound technology-mediated storytelling style takes the form of an "enigmatic collage" of sound artifacts: recorded therapy sessions between Heidi Bergman (Catherine Keener), a case worker/counsellor at the Homecoming facility, and Walter Cruz (Oscar Isaac), a soldier whose recovery she is monitoring; fraught phone conversations between Heidi and the heavily-compromised senior management at Geist; covert surveillance tapes of interaction at the facility between Walter and fellow soldier, Schrier (Babak Tafti), and between Walter and Heidi; and a series of voice messages ostensibly left by Walter on a mobile phone he has given to his mother.

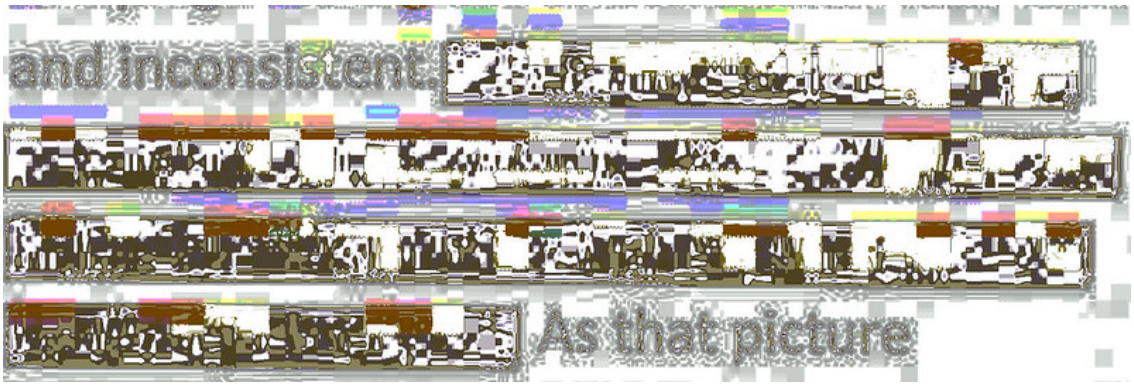
In "Mandatory," *Homecoming*'s opening episode, in a fragment of a recorded counselling session between Heidi and her client Walter Cruz, the second in a succession of these fragments that play out over Series One, Heidi tells Walter that her objective is to help to get him "situated" now that he's back. Through abrupt temporal shifts between the recorded past and the present, the series reveals that this objective was always already thwarted and that Walter's "situation" in the present is unfixed, unknown and potentially unknowable. *Homecoming*'s specific atmospheric aural/narrative mode conveys an unsettling sense of fractured selves in an ever-more fractured sonic landscape. Walter functions in this landscape as a reflexive site of multiple sonic presences. At once static and mutable, fixed and shifting he "exists" and is transmitted across a range of sound

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technologies. Though captured by these recordings, at the same time he evades capture by those seeking him out.

In *Homecoming*, Walter's presence is constructed through absence, which positions him as a kind of acousmêtre, described by Michel Chion in *The Voice in Cinema* as "one who is not-yet-seen but is liable to appear at any moment" (21). Chion has described how "an entire story... can hang on the epiphany of the acousmêtre"...the quest to bring the acousmêtre into the light" (23). In considering the podcast form, being "seen" can be understood as the conveying of presence, that is, the technical and affective means through which a character is felt or experienced. In *Homecoming*'s specific reflexive use of sound technology to construct Walter as present yet "unseen," Walter is everywhere and nowhere, always there but at the same time always not there. The series finds a means of achieving what Chion has suggested is unachievable in radio and, by inference, in the podcast – "playing with" presence, partial presence and absence (21). This affective 'play with presence' works too to challenge concepts of the 'disembodied' voice and speaks to Christine Ehrick's call in "Gendered Soundscapes" for a more nuanced exploration of the voice/body relationship. As Ehrick puts it – "if the voice is not the body, what is it?".

In "Mandatory," Walter is specific about his willingness to adhere to the conditions of his treatment: "I want to be in compliance," he tells Heidi. Yet Walter's multiple itinerant sonic selves seem to *resist* compliance. Though his presence in *Homecoming* is constructed through a series of seemingly fixed recordings that might suggest change is precluded, Walter is, paradoxically, a site of radical change. In his technology-contingent presence in the series, Walter, having removed himself from circulation, becomes a 'soldier-body' in revolt, resisting placement, compliance and commodification. Goldberg and Willse have identified the "soldier-body" as a "temporary" conduit of "the networks of technoscience and capital [that allows] these networks to adapt and survive" in "Losses and Returns: the Soldier in Trauma" (266-267). It is an argument that manifests in *Homecoming* in Geist's covert pharmacological strategies to remediate the psychological fragmentation of war trauma in order to render the 'soldier-body' utterly compliant and redeployable. Walter's perpetually withheld presence revokes his soldier-body's viability as bio-capital and is framed in the series as an existential threat to the military-industrial complex.



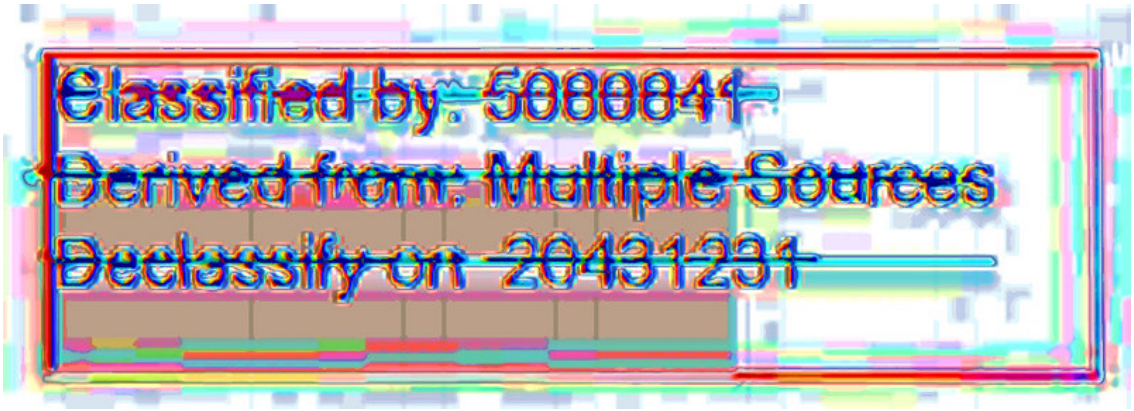
"Redacted," by Flickr User Bill Smith (CC BY 2.0)

"IF WE'RE NOT IN FLORIDA, WHERE ARE WE?"

Ideas of place and presence, particularly in relation to the non-compliant soldier-body, are further problematized in *Homecoming* in the sole interaction we hear between Walter and Schrier, another returned soldier, in yet another mode of voice recording. In Episode 2, "Pineapple," within an internet-based call, Heidi's boss Colin plays her a surveillance recording from the Homecoming cafeteria, one of several instances in the series of the multiple-layering of sound technology. We listen in as Walter and Schrier eat the pineapple-based dessert they've been served and debate Schrier's "pineapple-induced" doubts about their actual location. For an agitated Schrier, pineapple is pineapple-no-longer but a repository of a sinister excess of meaning – a sign that "they," the military, are "really laying it on thick with this Florida shit." Are they in Florida or not? Schrier demands evidence: "the only reason we think we're in Florida is because that's what they told us". These duplications, both actual (the recording) and suspected (a fake Florida), produce an atmosphere layered with dissonance and uncertainty.

While Shrier's suspicion of a fake Florida proves unfounded, this other duplication (the surveillance recording) has catastrophic consequences for him. In Episode 6, "Hysterical", we learn that after being dropped from the Homecoming treatment programme, Schrier was abruptly taken off the medication that was being administered to him without his knowledge (via the pineapple, as it happens). In yet another fraught call with a distressed Heidi, Colin matter-of-factly recounts the disastrous aftermath for Schrier: "he bit off a chunk of his tongue, spit it at an orderly, then he tried to hang himself. They've got him in restraints."

Not only do the *Homecoming* soldiers bring traces of war home with them – traumatic memories and symptoms of PTSD – but the place to which they return turns out to bear traces of a war zone. The America of *Homecoming* is a liminal space, an environment that harbours hidden dangers. While ostensibly home turf, America is a space that functions, in an orchestrated clandestine manner, as an outpost of war, or rather, encompassed within what Ben Anderson has identified as the borderlessness of "total war" (169-171). For Schrier, sonic capture within the Homecoming surveillance recordings pre-figures further physical capture. Ultimately, he ends up hospitalised and literally restrained.



"Declassification of Classified," by Flickr User Bill Smith (CC BY 2.0)

"HEY MA, IT'S ME, IT'S WALTER..."

Though carceral, a place of enclosure that gestures toward the enclosure inherent in the idea of "total war," the sonic space of the recorded voice artifact in *Homecoming* exists also as a site of resistance. Walter's presence in Season Two manifests via a series of voicemail messages left on a cell phone he has given to his mother, Gloria (Mercedes Ruehl). In Episode 8, "Cipher," Colin, masquerading as a lawyer taking a class action against the government on behalf of the soldiers maltreated at the Homecoming Facility (one of several fake identities he assumes), persuades Gloria to hand over this phone. As if also infected with Walter's restlessness, the audio files of these messages migrate from Gloria's phone to the Geist Server to Heidi's laptop before we actually hear them. The messages provide a cartographic trace of Walter's movements west, then north, then south and provide those tracking him, Colin and Heidi, with the first hard evidence of his possible whereabouts. Or at least they seem to.

Again *Homecoming* draws attention to technologies of reproduction and their influence in how we "conceptualise the voice and its powers" as Weidman states in her essay on "Voice" in *Keywords in Sound* (236). Walter's phone is understood as an extension of his affective presence. When subsequent faked messages are left on the phone—the first constructed by Gloria to throw Walter's trackers off the scent, the second by Heidi in order to entrap Colin—it is this aura of authenticity, the misplaced faith in the faithfulness of the sound recording that serves to legitimate the fakes. The messages, both real and faked, carry the aura of the original voice but their increasingly uncertain status signals "the ontological plasticity of the voice" that Nick Prior has articulated in "On Vocal Assemblages" (489), how "the voice sounds out in a social space comprised of a whole panoply of discourses, techniques and machines that objectify and posit it as a particular kind of object and information"(495). In this instance simulation is an act of 'pushback' against networks of power, against the seemingly-fixed borders of recording technology, it is an act that for Walter effects a kind of escape. He remains 'un-situated.' Perhaps the safest place for Walter, the only place *like* home, is in the 'no place' of the digital recordings in which he manifests.

Farokh Soltani describes the podcasting form as "the key transformative development in the history of audio drama" in "Inner Ears and Distant Worlds: Podcast Dramaturgy and the Theatre of the Mind" because of the way it "detaches drama from the economic, institutional and political requirements of the radio broadcast" (189). The vast trove of alternative, 'unsanctioned' voices podcasting has made audible can be said to resonate with the discernible hum of difference, the form itself can be understood as inherently dissonant. Its fundamental alterity imbues it with the affective essence of dissonance that Sean Gurd articulates in *Dissonance: Auditory Aesthetics in Ancient Greece* (2016) as "extra-audible information...[a kind of] roughness, a richer, grainier, less-polished sound" (11). The sense of palpable auditory/affective 'roughness' or dissonance permeates *Homecoming* sonic world, frequently in the foregrounded presence of sonic 'dirtiness' but always in its distinctive non-linear assemblage and in its inherent critique of the far-reaching and devastating impacts of war. *Homecoming*'s audio and structural strategies, shifting both

temporally and between sonic modes, demand too that we, the listeners, like Walter and Heidi, are actively and continually engaged in the urgent process of attempting to find *our* bearings, to get *ourselves* 'situated.'

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Featured Image: "American Redaction," by Jared Rodriguez / truthout (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

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Miranda Wilson *is a Creative Practice Ph.D. Candidate in Film Studies at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. Her creative and scholarly thesis (Supervisor, Prof. Annie Goldson) interrogates and experiments with the ways in which voice/image positioning in documentary can and might invigorate screen space as a site of common space and counter-space. Her research encompasses strategies of indirect representation, in particular with regard to gender and voice/image relations; ensemble narratives that work to de-centre the protagonist; low/no budget filmmaking methods that democratize the means of production and documentary practice that is as much about interrogating the documentary form as it is about the subject it engages with. The research project seeks to detect and articulate documentary space in which individuals cohere as a citizenry and everyday practices of democracy are enlivened. Miranda also holds a BA Honours (First Class) from the University of Auckland. Her graduate studies have encompassed research into sound and dissonance; sound/image relations; documentary theory and practice; and representations of spatial transgressions in cinema space.*

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