

Emily Cedar
www.emilyjoycedar.com
<http://lovemesomedesign.wordpress.com>

Immersion

As a freshman in college, I had no idea what the course, Sound and Storytelling, would entail. I signed up for it because I had always had a deep passion for music, and I had limited options of what classes would fit into my schedule. This class would change the way I think about narrative and how storytelling would shape my artwork for the next four years. It became a driving force to pursue the adventure of sound art. My sound piece centers on immersive physical and emotional experiences, specifically anxiety and depression within college students.

During the course of this class, I was introduced to a number of sound artists who inspired me; one of the most significant was Jake Warga. His sound piece, "Home From Africa: 13 Symptoms of Peace Corp Withdrawal, illustrates an interesting way of telling a story that resembles an audio tour.

<http://transom.org/sounds/20011218.warga.jenafir.mp3>

He hooks listeners from the start by providing enough contextual information (setting, character, and background information) to situate his listeners. However, he lets his audience know that there are many unanswered questions that he will attempt to answer with the help of his main speaker, Jennifer. This technique creates anticipation and a strong desire to listen closely. I wanted to draw from this technique and use it in my own work so that people might be excited to hear my stories.

Warga also provides details that plant visuals in the listeners' minds. He does this by carefully choosing tape that contains simple and truthful language. While Jennifer speaks, one gets a sense that she is not only telling the truth, but that she is sharing experiences that have influenced how she perceives the world around her, and also how she has personally developed from her time in Africa. By explaining the various differences between her lifestyle in Africa and her life in America, listeners are able to grasp what type of person Jennifer is without having to know

her entire life story. This is captivating and lets the audience feel like they are being told something important; it is almost as if they are being told a secret. The audience is able to connect with Jennifer in a more personal way without ever having met her. The sense of connecting with an individual I have never met was a strong aspect of this work that I wanted to imitate in my own sound work. According to radio producer, Alex Chadwick, "The human voice is the most intimate medium with which one communicates and radio acts as catalyst for that medium." I feel audio is the best means of achieving this connectivity.

Just as Jake Warga used his sound art to bridge a gap between a story about which he cared deeply, and his listeners, I too felt a strong desire to form a connection between an audience and a subject about which I felt passionate. Last year, I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression. After arriving at this realization, I reluctantly started talking to others about what I was going through, mostly my close friends. To my surprise, I was not the only one experiencing these feelings.

After researching mental health disorders, I realized anyone is susceptible to feeling alone, unworthy, or sad. Comedians, actors, and revered politicians such as Jim Carrey, Halle Berry, and Abraham Lincoln have been diagnosed with anxiety or depression. Thirty percent of college students reported feeling "so depressed that it was difficult to function." Forty-four percent of Americans never report their symptoms or experiences with depression. I felt myself wanting to talk to people more openly about these issues. I thought that getting people to feel comfortable in sharing their experiences of anxiety and depression, that we could help one another heal or at the very least, cope with our mental anxieties. The best way I could think to reach out to a broad audience was through an audio podcast. This podcast could reach a wide variety of people, while letting my speakers remain anonymous.

The process of interviewing different people was a journey of its own. The questions I asked and how I chose to ask them played a huge role in the speaker's response. I started by asking questions such as, "What is something silly that you worry about?" and "What is something simple that makes you happy?" which afforded only shorter, surface level answers. I refined the

questions so that I interviewed people with the following prompt, “Describe your worst mental breakdown or moment of worst anxiety.” This series of interviews lead to several dead ends since I did not want just a single isolated incident, or just one day. I wanted to hear about a progression through time and how the different stages of a person’s life contributed to that chain of events. Also, I was not after only one person’s perspective, I wanted variety. I searched for differences in background, voice, gender, and coping methods. One thing I did want to be similar was the speakers’ ages. I found that college age individuals embodied a vulnerable, insecure tone that would be most appropriate for the piece. Older people demonstrated a more confident perspective on their lives and were too far removed from their earlier experiences of insecurity and fear.

One work I used as source of inspiration for how to combine multiple voices to tell one story came from a podcast broadcasted on HowSound, called The Séance, produced by Bob Carlson.

<http://howsound.org/2012/10/the-seance/>

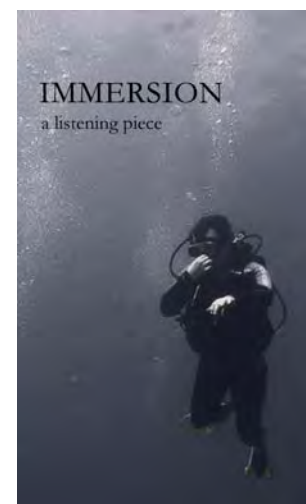
There is one main character, or voice throughout, but the supporting voices add to the details and framing of the story in an effective way. As the main character guides listeners through the major events of the séance, minor characters add supporting details, such as how the characters know and relate to one another. Hearing from multiple people of different genders and backgrounds made the narrative not only seem more convincing, but also more intriguing. The distinctness of each individual’s voice enhanced the uniqueness of each perspective. It seemed as though Carlson had carefully chosen characters that would communicate what he wanted to say for his podcast.

I chose my three speakers (who wish to remain anonymous) because I knew they would tell me the truth; I trusted them. I also knew that they trusted me, and that they would reveal their secrets. These three speakers had willingly opened up to me and because of their honesty and excitement about the project, their voices and stories seemed genuine and real. This process of immediate discovery is something I revel in and want to continue. I wanted my three speakers to

walk me through their journeys, so that by the end of the piece, listeners could experience some sense of closure.

I started by individually talking to three friends about my own experiences with anxiety and depression. Their responses were shocking and inspiring. One friend told me that I sounded like I was telling his story. Another asked me to interview him that day so he could share his story with me. I asked them to tell how their symptoms began, what they went through during that period of time, and how they coped with their depression and anxiety. I also asked them to talk about their current mental states and how the insecurities they once felt still affect them on a daily basis. I had not known that these people had experienced similar feelings, and I probably never would have known had I not interviewed them for this project. During those conversations, we felt a connection to one another, that by sharing these stories we were less alone in our anxieties. There was someone else out there who could empathize with how I was feeling, and that felt really great.

Their experiences evoked a sense of suffocation, almost like drowning. I drew a parallel between these feelings and my own encounters of isolation while scuba diving. Although I enjoy diving, I have also felt an overwhelming sense of pressure while descending into deep areas of the ocean. Based on my own experiences with anxiety and depression, I was able to connect these seemingly separate entities to form a narrative driven by the downward descent of a dive and the sinking feeling of depression. While I was depressed, it often felt as if the pressure at the bottom of the sea was compressing my body; all I wanted to do was rise to the surface. This struggle taught me that there is no clear answer to finding happiness, but there can be small instances of hope that let me know I am not alone. I wanted to communicate this point to my audience through my narration by illustrating an encounter with a sea turtle. This turtle's "cracked shell" is meant to symbolize that nothing and no one is ever perfect, but life can still be beautiful and worth living.



While writing my narration, I thought about my own journey and how it relates to those of my speakers. There were a few questions I asked myself that fueled my desire to create the sound

piece. Do other people experience feelings of aloneness? Do others feel as if they are drowning or suffocating? By interviewing the three main characters of my piece, I not only learned new ways of coping with my mental illness, but I was able to empathize with these people with whom I shared a new bond.

I drew parallels between the awkward and disorienting sensations of entering the water while scuba diving and the confusing and overwhelming feelings of depression using the following text.

The weight of your tank tilts backward as your heavy gear pulls you downward. The air of your buoyancy compensator squeezes your chest to keep you afloat. It's hard to gain a sense of balance as the waves bob you up and down. You feel disoriented and you're not really sure what's happening.

I decided to use my own voice as a form of narration to guide the listener through each journey. In doing this, I could be a constant, recognizable layer of the work that shaped the arc of the narrative. I wanted to act as a common thread that tied the stories together, as well as develop and expand upon the dive metaphor. I also saw this as a way to engage the audience as to why this piece is meaningful to me, which involved addressing my own interest and experiences with anxiety and depression. Although I do not tell my entire story, I feel that letting the audience know this was and still is a big part of my life will be important in connecting why these stories are meaningful and why others should hear about this topic.

At the beginning of the project, I used a zoom recorder to collect interviews. I took those recordings and put them into Garageband to do my basic editing. If more detailed editing needed to be done, I used Soundtrack Pro. I discovered that the sound quality from these recordings was insufficient and decided I needed to record in a more professional, soundproof setting. The audio studio at the University of Michigan's Duderstadt Library was a perfect fit for the voice recording I would conduct. After transcribing roughly four hours of audio from the first round of interviews, I organized a full day to have my three speakers come to the audio studio for a second round of more focused interviews. Transcribing the audio interviews helped me, as well as my speakers, to decide what information was best to rerecord or expand upon, and what material we could

eliminate. I hired performing arts technology student, Billy Cedar, to assist with sound engineering so that all technical aspects of the recording would be as high quality as possible.

Another challenge I faced was organization and deciding what was really important to drive the story and what would be important to the listener. When I listened to tape from the recording session and did not know if something was essential or not, I asked myself a series of questions: What is the purpose of the story? Why do I care about this? Will the listener care about this? And my greatest challenge – how do I make them care? That often meant editing an hour and a half of an interview and making that segment one and a half minutes. Radio producer, Alex Chadwick, says, “Anything you can remember reading or hearing before... you have to take that material out.” He states that when writing for radio, one should stay away from “off the shelf phrases”, or in other words, do not use clichés or familiar language.

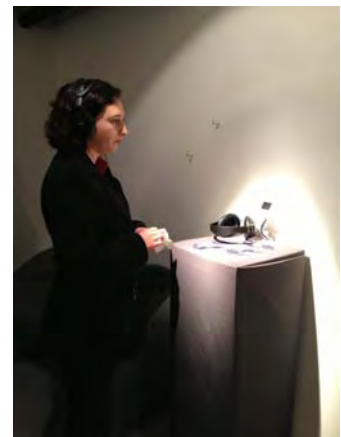
I took Chadwick’s advice seriously and decided to use the original material I had recorded earlier in the year that was of lower sound quality. Although meant using sound that was nowhere near acoustically perfect, the recordings were much more genuine and conveyed the speakers ideas in an honest and emotional tone. Recording in the advanced audio studio was a great experiment in which I prompted an individual to retell a story, however, this resulted in stories that sounded scripted and somewhat fake. I was willing to compromise the quality of the sound to save the authenticity of each narrative.

There were some methods of editing that I used to make the audio clearer and cleaner such as adjusting the gain, cross fading tracks, adjusting the EQ, or balance of the vocals, and applied different filters to minimize room noise. By applying a subtle echo effect to my narration, my voice is distinguished from those of the other speakers. Adjusting the EQ and using a low pass filter helped to make the two males’ voices clearer and more separate from one another. This way, listeners are able to tell the difference between the two and know that there are two males and one female, as opposed to only one male and one female. Cross fading tracks provided smooth transitions from one character to the next and softened abrupt endings of phrases that I had cut from larger sections of audio.

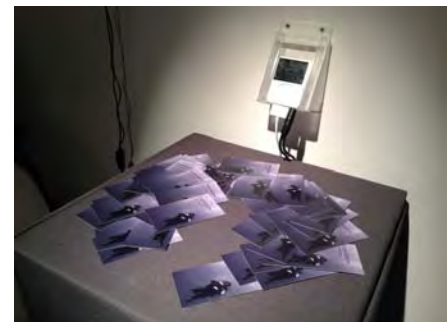
It is important that the audience feels comfortable while listening to this piece. A dark setting and cushioned seats is the most appropriate way for listeners to sit back and focus on what is being played. Since the piece revolves around the idea of connecting people who feel as if they are alone, a large theater where people are sitting only inches away from the person to their left or right seemed an ideal venue for the work. Although listeners do not have the advantage of putting on their own pair of headphones and controlling a play or pause button, they have the opportunity to feel immersed in a powerful narrative that will let them feel connected to the speaker telling the story, as well as to the person sitting next to them.

I crafted the audio piece with the intention of having no visuals or other sensory compliments, so that it could feel larger than life. My desire is for the audio to surround the listeners and stand on its own. When one closes his eyes, his sight is gone, however, his other senses are heightened. By placing people in the dark Michigan Theater with a black screen in front of them, I am manually closing their eyes and heightening their other senses. Jad Abumrad, host of the show Radiolab, feels that a story should be an experience, not just information. While listening to a story, he wants to feel “wrapped up in it” and the story should feel “epic, larger than life”.

Although the audio is best suited in the theater, I also installed an iPod, two pairs of headphones, one headphone splitter, two chairs, a pedestal and business cards advertising the online link to the podcast. I chose to install my work in the gallery so that the piece can reach as many people as possible. Even if passersby do not listen to the full piece while sitting in the gallery, my hope is that they will take a card so they can experience the work at home.



My aim in cataloguing a shared human experience and in presenting these issues through storytelling is so that the audience can feel connected with one another, as well as the speakers of the piece without ever having met the characters.



My desire is for the listener to start in one place with the story and after having listened to it, arrive somewhere different. Producer, Alex Chadwick, says, "A story should feel like it grew." I want my story to grow in a way that allows people to walk out of the Michigan Theater with a new perspective of what depression and anxiety can feel like.



Transcript from Sound Piece

Check your pressure gauge, spit into your mask (sound of spitting), adjust buoyancy compensator device, take a deep breath (breathe)

The weight of your tank tilts backward as your heavy gear pulls you downward. The air of your buoyancy compensator squeezes your chest to keep you afloat. It's hard to gain a sense of balance as the waves bob you up and down. You feel disoriented and you're not really sure what's happening.

I had just graduated and had one of the most stressful semesters of my life and I was ready for the next thing and there was nothing there

I got to school and everything was fine, going well, had friends, had plan, I had everything I thought I needed, everything was perfect on paper

I was at a place where I was so emotionally (PAUSE) just dead. (PAUSE) that I wanted to feel something

When you descend underwater, one thing that seems to change more than anything - is pressure. Your ears begin to pop, your mask squeezes your face, your body is compressed
I am on a journey of my own. I'm trying to make sense of my own anxiety, my own depression. I keep telling myself things will get better, but I'm starting to wonder if I might be wrong.

I remember standing out on my balcony and just looking down and I knew that it wasn't that high but I kept on thinking what is the highest building in this town

I wanted everything to be great, I wanted my mind to be in the positive mindset it was when I got there but school soon changed it and everything was flipped, and the fact that I couldn't control that anymore... that's what scared me, that's what overwhelmed me, that's why I had to come home

The deeper you dive, the less control you have over yourself. Your breathing is shallow
Reaching the bottom means you've descended to the highest point of pressure.

I literally left my house, didn't tell my roommates where I was going and I just walked into woods and I just broke down and just cried and I just I couldn't control it anymore.

and so, remembering how it felt to get my tattoo and remembering how good it felt to (PAUSE) feel pain... I decided to start cutting,

And I just tried to get everything out and still after just half an hour in the woods and just punching trees, and my hands were cut up and finally I came back in room, and I looked at where I was living, I threw mirror across the room, I flipped my bed over, I pulled out every drawer, dumped out all my stuff, flipped my desk, and uh started punching the wall, by the way I was drunk as hell at this moment

The first times I did it, it destroyed me

And so I laid in bed for a solid week, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. I just laid there.

I would cry over the fact that I had done it, I would cry over the fact that so many people wouldn't be okay with me doing it, there would be scars, eventually somebody would see the scars, but at the same time, I was just so happy to be feeling something

As I hover over vibrant, purple coral, something brushes against my fin. I turn around to see a green sea turtle. He's floating in front of me, gliding in the still water. As he swims toward me, I reach my hand out to pet its cracked shell.

When I woke up, and I just kinda looked around at my room... that's when I realized (PAUSE) I need to do something different

You don't feel like you're drowning, you feel like I'm swimming and it feels good.

I'm neutrally buoyant, even if just for a moment, all is still.

What I went through gave me a power over myself that I never had before.

There are lots of ways you can experience a dive, but the best is when you rise above the surface and all you want is to go back down to the bottom again. Depression isn't like that – you go down, sometimes really far down, and if you can find the strength to come up for air... you don't ever wanna be below the surface again.

I take a deep inhale and start to rise slowly.

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