

Listening to Poetry in the Radio Archive

Lisa Hollenbach

Lisa Hollenbach is assistant professor of English at Oklahoma State University. With the support of a 2013–2014 CLIR-Mellon fellowship, she conducted original source research on the recording and broadcasting of post-1945 American poetry by independent radio stations and record labels, visiting eleven archives in the United States, including the Pacifica Radio Archives in Los Angeles, the Archive for New Poetry at the University of California, San Diego, and the University of Maryland Mass Media and Culture Collections. Her first book, *Poetry FM: American Poetry and Radio Counterculture*, was published by the University of Iowa Press in 2023. Other scholarly publications related to this research have appeared in *American Literature*, *Modernism/modernity Print Plus*, and *The Oxford Handbook of Twentieth-Century American Literature*.

In September 2013, at the beginning of my CLIR-Mellon fellowship year, I spent several weeks at the Pacifica Radio Archives in Los Angeles, California, listening to archival radio recordings of poets and poetry. The first listener-supported public radio network in the United States, Pacifica Radio was founded in 1946 by a group of pacifists and poets; it first went on the air on Berkeley station KPFA-FM in 1949. It later expanded to four more independent stations (KPFK-FM in Los Angeles, WBAI-FM in New York, KPFT-FM in Houston, and WPFW-FM in Washington, DC), all of which are still broadcasting today.

When I arrived at the Pacifica Radio Archives, I knew that Pacifica had attracted many poets to its stations over the years. I also knew that the audio archive, housed above Pacifica station KPFK, included among its estimated 100,000 original recordings a sizable collection of historic poetry programming. I hoped that I would find material for the last chapter of my dissertation, and I did, thanks to the archival staff who helped me to find uncatalogued recordings, taught me how to use and even digitize reel-to-reel tapes, and generously shared their desk space with me. My experience at the Pacifica Radio Archives ended up determining both the direction of my research after the completion of my PhD and the subject of my book, *Poetry FM: American Poetry and Radio Counterculture*. Over the last decade, I have also seen public and scholarly interest in the histories of radio and poetry performance blossom, as new digital collections have emerged alongside a growing awareness of the need to preserve the decaying audio materials and under-resourced collections that document an endangered sonic heritage. Here, I briefly survey some of these trends as they affect the interdisciplinary study of

radio and literature and share a few insights from my own experiences of listening to—and teaching with—poetry in the radio archive.

Recent Trends in US Radio Preservation and Research

It is an exciting time to study radio in the United States, and this is especially true for those of us interested in expanding knowledge about American radio's cultural history beyond the so-called "golden age" of the 1930s–1940s. More than a century after the onset of mass broadcasting, there is now a growing awareness of the vital urgency of preserving radio and recorded sound histories. CLIR has been a leader in these efforts by administering the *Recordings at Risk* and *Digitizing Hidden Collections* grant programs and by publishing reports on recorded sound preservation (e.g., Council on Library and Information Resources and Library of Congress 2010). In 2014, the Library of Congress established the Radio Preservation Task Force (RPTF) "to facilitate preservation of, research on, and educational uses of radio recordings held by archiving institutions and private collectors in the United States" (Library of Congress Radio Preservation Task Force). The RPTF has been instrumental in shifting the tide in radio preservation by building a consortium of researchers and archivists and by launching two digital humanities projects: the Sound Collections Database (a publicly searchable catalog of radio collections in the US) and the Sound Submissions Project (which will preserve donated digitized radio recordings in the Library of Congress's permanent digital archive). In the academic field of radio studies, the past decade has seen a reciprocal wave of new research, much of which has increasingly focused on recovering diverse radio histories, including BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and women's radio histories; local and community radio histories; transnational and postcolonial radio histories; and early radio histories as well as more recent histories of internet radio and podcasting.

These promising trends in the digital preservation and accessibility of historic audio, however, are countered by more worrying signs that reflect the ongoing challenges facing recorded sound archives, especially independent and community-based collections. Consider just one example from my area of research. In 2016, the Pacifica Foundation, responding to the network's serious debt crisis, instituted major budget cuts and staff layoffs at the Pacifica Radio Archives. These cuts led to Director Brian DeShazor's resignation and to the collapse of collaborative grant-funded initiatives that had been focused on cataloging and digitizing the archive's vast collection of reel-to-reel master audiotapes, which document more than seventy years of public radio history. The larger radio preservation community responded with alarm, and the leaders of the RPTF and the National Federation of Community Broadcasters issued open letters calling for Pacifica to transfer its

irreplaceable audio collection to an educational institution (Aguilar 2016; Shepperd 2016). As of 2022, however, the Pacifica Radio Archives is still maintained on a shoestring budget by a small, dedicated staff at its original location at the KPFF studios. Pacifica's continuing debt crisis puts the future of this collection at risk, and the archives' under-resourced *status quo* limits accessibility to one of the largest and most significant audio collections of radio history, social movement history, and, I would argue, literary history in the United States. I remain hopeful that collaborative efforts by scholars, archivists, communities, creators, and institutions like CLIR and the RPTF can improve the outlook for recorded sound and radio archives, including the Pacifica Radio Archives.

Poetry Out of the Radio Archive

My own research is situated in the growing interdisciplinary subfield of literary radio studies, which explores intersections between literature and radio. In *Poetry FM: American Poetry and Radio Counterculture*, I tell the story of how poets helped to make Pacifica Radio into a progressive, alternative radio network by bringing experimental and radical poetry onto its airwaves. In the post-World War II United States, many poets sought to liberate poetry from the printed page and from the classroom by embracing poetry's oral roots and by utilizing new media to engage public audiences. *Poetry FM* argues that this renaissance in oral poetics both influenced and was influenced by the simultaneous emergence of public, underground, and community FM radio stations in the 1950s through the 1970s. Drawing on my research at the Pacifica Radio Archives and other media and literary archives, I highlight key moments and broadcasts from Pacifica's rich history of poetry broadcasting, including Allen Ginsberg's first radio performance of "Howl" for Berkeley station KPFA in 1956; Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka's early appearances on New York station WBAI in the 1960s; and poets' involvement in the groundbreaking feminist, gay and lesbian, and so-called "Third World" radio collectives that formed at Pacifica stations in the 1970s.

Listening to poetry in the radio archive changed the way I approach literary history, encouraging me to see (and hear) twentieth- and twenty-first century poetry as a multimedia genre that is embedded in political and social life in ways that belie dominant, perennial claims about the supposed cultural irrelevance of modern poetry. My research has also transformed my approach to teaching poetry. I conclude with one example. In an undergraduate course I teach at Oklahoma State University called "Listening to Contemporary Poetry," students collaborate over the course of the semester to produce a podcast series about post-1950 American poetry in performance. They explore digital collections of poetry recordings, conduct original and secondary source

research, learn skills in digital audio production and audio storytelling, and practice various methods for interpreting an audio text, including experimenting with “deformances” that technically manipulate a recording in order to open interpretive possibilities (MacArthur and Miller 2016). In the process, they become participants in a literary radio history that for more than a century has used audio media to circulate the sound of poetry. In my view, preserving literary radio histories is thus vital not only for remembering the past but for inspiring future creative possibilities.

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