

Within the Wires' Intimate Fan-based Publics

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Abstract

As intimacy emerges as a key concept in podcast research, it becomes increasingly urgent to consider the multifaceted ways in which it interacts with the medium. This article advances research on podcasting intimacy by understanding intimacy as undergoing a continual process of culturally contingent negotiation and examining how podcasting participates in that negotiation. Instead of treating intimacy as an inherent part of podcasting, it demonstrates how podcasts can create intimacy and use it to form connections among members of a fan public. To do so, this article uses the first season of *Within the Wires* (2016) to show how narrative repetition constructs fan-based intimate publics. *Within the Wires* is an alternate reality fiction podcast whose first season takes the form of relaxation tapes. Throughout the podcast, the narrator repeats specific lines, phrases, and memories that the listener comes to recognize. By retooling Roland Barthes and Marianne Hirsch's work on recognition and community building in photography for use in sound research, this article develops a theoretical framework for understanding the temporalities of recognition in podcasting. Using this framework, the article posits that *Within the Wires* uses non-narrative repetition alongside its aural aesthetics to create an intimate public through recognition. The podcast extends that recognition into its monetizing paratexts, making it possible for listeners to recognize themselves and others as fans. The first section of this paper defines recognition and its relationship to time, the second considers how recognition works within the show's fandom, the third looks at recognition within *Within the Wires'* monetizing paratexts, and the final tracks how the podcast finds horror in the breakdown of this system. The article argues that *Within the Wires* presents intimacy and creates fan-based intimate publics through the experience of recognition.

Introduction

1 Richard Berry's "Podcasting: Considering the evolution of the medium and its association with the word 'radio'" claims that podcasting's "hyper-intimacy" is key to its unique mediality. It is then perhaps no surprise that much of the early scholarship on podcasting has revolved around this intimacy: from the physical closeness of earbuds (Madsen) to the importance of listening routines (Weldon), both academic and popular discourses have discussed podcasting in terms of its ability to connect people through its intimate closeness. These discussions do not present themselves in any more of a vacuum than podcasting itself does, however. Both intimacy and podcasting can be seen as cultural constructs developed through public discourse.¹ When defining podcasting in terms of its intimacy, these discourses draw on cultural definitions of what it means to be close to others and how media can create that closeness. For podcasting to be intimate, it must do intimacy: intimacy in podcasting is not a passive quality but an active process of creation and cultural negotiation. In order for a podcast to be intimate,

¹ This observation draws on Andrew Dubber's argument in *Radio in the Digital Age* that radio is best defined through "discursive frame[s] that appear to remain constant throughout the development of radio over time" instead of defined solely by its technologies (17).

a show and its listeners must work to create intimacy by forming connections with others and describing those connections in terms of their close proximity.

2 *Within the Wires* centralizes the process of creating intimacy within its storytelling. It is a serialized narrative fiction podcast from the Night Vale Presents network written by Jeffrey Cranor and Janina Matthewson and with music by Mary Epworth. Jeffrey Cranor is a co-founder of Night Vale Presents, a position which he, answering a fan question at the London Podcast Festival, said provides him with the opportunity to “greenlight [his] own stuff,” including *Within the Wires* (“Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires”). Where the podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* largely sticks to the idiom of a small-town radio station, *Within the Wires* explores the storytelling possibilities of a variety of aural media in building its fictional universe. The first season is told through relaxation tapes, the second with museum audio guides, the third through dictations to a secretary, the fourth with tape recorded letters, and an extra paywalled series through blackbox recordings. Over the course of the four main seasons, listeners learn more about the world and the relationships between a few of those who inhabit it. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the first season, in which the relaxation tapes slowly reveal that the imagined listener is captive in some kind of research facility. As the season progresses, the relationship between the narrator and listener character becomes closer and more complicated. *Within the Wires* builds this relationship, and the storyworld in general, through the use of textual repetition.

3 This article analyzes the role of that repetition, arguing that it binds with the show’s aesthetic intimacy to create an intimate public through recognition. The podcast extends that recognition into its monetizing paratexts, making it possible for listeners to recognize themselves and others as listeners. The first subsection defines recognition and its relationship to time. Drawing on Roland Barthes’ and Marianne Hirsch’s work on photography, it argues that recognition is the simultaneous experience of multiple moments of time; listeners recognize a reference because they remember hearing it before. Repetition, therefore, creates a kind of recognition that is not completely tied to narrative unfolding and works within the show’s fandom to build fan-based intimate publics. The second section extends analysis of these repetitions into the show’s use of monetizing paratexts and argues that *Within the Wires*’ paratexts work as a site of repetition more than as an extension of the narrative. The third part, “Intimacy,” specifically examines how *Within the Wires* uses the aesthetics of the narrator’s voice alongside storytelling moments that relate physical and emotional closeness to intimacy, while the final section explores how that closeness turns into horror when it is not recognizable. Ultimately, *Within the Wires* presents intimacy and creates intimate fan-based publics through

the experience of recognition.

4 *Within the Wires* serves as a good case study in learning about the dynamics of recognition because of its self-reflection, but not necessary because it is more intimate than any other podcast or is doing something no other podcasts do.² Comedic callbacks are also a form of repetition that can work in similar ways and there are forms of friendship-based intimacy that can be just as powerful as *Within the Wires*' romantic overtones. While each podcast has its specific mixture of ways in which it defines itself as intimate, what relationships and historical constructs it draws from, and what spatial and temporal aspects of closeness it emphasizes, these individual forms of intimacy are, together, a negotiation of the closeness of podcasting mediation that is continually being reshaped and redefined.

Recognition

5 *Within the Wires* creates recognition by repeating lines and moments within its narrative. These repetitions are an important part of the show's storytelling and make it possible for listeners to experience what Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* calls the "prick" of recognition (47). This prick, in turn, is an important part in building an intimate public out of *Within the Wires*' listeners. By experiencing recognition within the show, listeners can imagine others listening to the same podcast, feeling recognition as they do. They can also imagine themselves as recognizable as listeners, or fans, of the show. By making recognition such a central part of their narrative structure, *Within the Wires* invites this kind of participation with its show.

6 According to Barthes, recognition is the simultaneous experience of multiple moments of time. In a picture of his mother as a little girl, he reads "at the same time *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror and anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence" (96). The instant in time the picture represents does not stand on its own. Instead, it is deeply steeped in multiple moments of time that Barthes describes as the conflation of two time references: when the photo was taken (the *this has been*) and the moment he recognizes it (the *this will be*). The photo's *this will be* comes from his memory of his mother; the future of the girl in the photo, but Barthes' past. Although the picture exists in these moments, and pricks Barthes with the recognition of these times, it does not tell

² Podcasts express intimacy in a lot of different ways. Sarah Murray's "Coming-of-age in a coming-of-age: the collective individualism of podcasting's intimate soundwork," Ania Mauruschat's "Poetics of Intimacy: Podcasting's Power to Affect," Lukasz Swiatek's "The Podcast as an Intimate Bridging Medium" and Wanning Sun and Wei Lei's "In Search of Intimacy in China: The Emergence of Advice Media for the Privatized Self" examine different kinds of podcast intimacy using different kinds of podcasts.

a story that connects them. Instead, Barthes experiences them simultaneously, outside of a developing narrative. For Barthes, it is this simultaneity that pricks him with recognition.

7 This lack of narrative connection becomes increasingly important when taken out of photography and into media that can only be understood progressively through time. Barthes compares the pricks of recognition, or the *punctum*, he experiences in photography to a haiku, an art form that, like photography, focuses on describing a single moment: “The notation of a haiku, too, is undevelopable: everything is given, without provoking the desire for or even the possibility of rhetorical expansion. In both cases we might (we must) speak of an *intense immobility* [sic]: linked to a detail” (49). Here Barthes speaks of the immobility of recognition: not only do readers experience this recognition as immobile, he argues, they have no real desire to connect it to a narrative through “rhetorical expansion” (49). Although Barthes claims that the *punctum* is particularly suited to photography because the viewer can experience the entire artwork in a single moment, his example here illustrates the limitations of that point of view (49). Readers consume haikus progressively through time just as listeners consume sound through time. I posit that the haiku remains immobile not because readers experience it in its entirety in an instant, but because the moment of recognition is instantaneous. Barthes’ use of a haiku to illustrate his point on recognition reveals that his intense immobility is not exclusive to photography and can exist in media with different relationships to time.

8 *Within the Wires* reflects on the temporality of recognition in “Season 1, Cassette #6: for Oleta,” when the narrator talks about seeing someone she once knew in a park:

The memories of you did not return to me; suddenly they had never left at all, although they had not been there the moment before. I saw you, outside on an autumn day, and there you were. In my mind, iterated many times. (“Season 1, Cassette #6: for Oleta”)

In this example, the narrator’s memories of the listener character are “iterated many times,” each instance on top of the other. The memories come back “suddenly” because “they had never left at all,” “there you were, in my mind, iterated many times” (“Season 1, Cassette #6: for Oleta”). This is an instantaneous experience of past and present moments causing the narrator to recognize the other character. Like Barthes’ haiku, this temporality is intensely immobile and decidedly non-narrative. It describes a single moment of time undevelopable through narrative expansion: there is no unfolding story about how the narrator met the character, or what their lives have been like since. Everything exists in that single moment. The listener, in turn, can recognize the phrase “iterated many times” because she heard it before in previous episodes. Just like the narrator experiences recognition when she sees the other

character, the listener experiences recognition of the phrase.

9 Such experiences of recognition are important for building communities. Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint* argues that the "commodity world" surrounding intimate publics "trains women to expect to be recognizable by other members of this intimate public" by sharing what it presents to be generic stories that many within its group can relate to (5). Listeners, in this case women, recognize those stories in their own lives and feel that others can also recognize them as a member of this public. These affective publics, for Berlant, form "a kind of nebulous *communitas*" (Preface). While Berlant emphasizes the role of narrative arcs in creating this sense of belonging, non-narrative moments of recognition can fulfill a similar function. In *Family Frames*, for example, Marianne Hirsch uses Barthes' definition and the "anti-narrative wound of the *punctum*" to explore how family photo albums solidify bonds within families (54, 5). Hirsch and Valerie Smith emphasize the role of different forms of memory in creating recognition, extending her work on families to different kinds of communities. When reading a Lori Novak's self-portrait at Ellis Island, for example, she argues that the photo "shows memory to be both public and private, both individual (it is a self-portrait) and cultural (the self is shaped by, and thus conveys or represents, its group history and identity)" (2). Hirsch implicitly links these memories to the temporalities of Barthes' recognition, stating that the "present is thus composed of numerous layered temporalities that come together in Novak's projection" (2). Moments of recognition, then, do not need to work within an unfolding narrative about how a family or group has grown and evolved over the years. Instead, they can rely on a connection achieved during the intense immobility of non-narrative recognition.

10 Textual repetition in *Within the Wires* can create similarly binding moments of recognition. The community-building affordances of such moments make the show well suited to the creation of an intimate fan-based public. In *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption*, Cornel Sandvoss defines fandom itself as "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text" (8). By focusing a narrative around serialized repetition and locating the bulk of the show's affective weight within that repetition, *Within the Wires* emphasizes the regularity and emotionality Sandvoss uses to define fan engagement with media.

11 Within serial culture, recognition does not have to rely on the culturally ubiquitous stories Berlant studies, but can instead stem from the repetition of specific moments from one episode to the next. Textual repetition, either serialized or within a single episode, can create recognition because listeners experience multiple moments of time simultaneously. Jason Mittell's *Complex TV* relates temporalities similar to those of Barthes' recognition to seriality, stating that

the feeling of being surprised through the act of remembering is quite pleasurable, rewarding a viewer's knowledge base while provoking the flood of recognition stemming from the activation of such memories. Such pleasures are hard to imagine working in non-serialized formats. (Mittell 191)

While non-serial formats can prompt recognition, serial storytelling is well-suited for creating recognition by repeating information from previous episodes. These moments, be they the reflective ones of *Within the Wires* or the ubiquitous comedic callback, carry with them the ability to build fan-based publics around recognition.

12 *Within the Wires* creates such moments of recognition within its story world by repeating specific words and elements. In this clip from "Season 1, Cassette #1: Stress, Shoulders," for example, the narrator repeats the imagery and phrase "iterated many times":

Close your eyes.

You are in a forest. The forest is large, and you are small. The forest is immense, and you are tiny. You are in midair, and you see several things at once. To be more specific, you see the same thing, iterated many times.

You are an insect, with complex eyes and simple desires. You are erratic and frenetic. What little wind winds its way through leaves lifts and twists you to new directions.

You are naked. You are alone. You are fine. You feel fine.

You cannot see your own nakedness, for you cannot move your head to look down. Never look down!

You see every sight iterated many times, but you do not see yourself. You are uncertain if it will rain. You are uncertain how you are floating, or flying.

You see a child. She is iterated many times. ("Season 1, Cassette #1: Stress, Shoulders")

The repetition of the phrase "iterated many times" creates recognition in this passage. The different contexts of the phrase stack on top of each other, adding meanings and memories to later repetitions of the phrase. These repetitions also occur in later episodes, adding a serial component to the podcast's repetitions that further underlines the show's regularity for fan consumption.

13 This dynamic of repetition and recognition also extends into the *Within the Wires*' online fan community. The following exchange from the reddit of the show's first episode demonstrates how the repetition of the phrase "iterated many times" works within the podcast's fan community: "the repeated 'iterated many times' was a way to have 'iterated many times' iterated many times" ("Discussion: Relaxation Cassette #1"). Repetition of the phrase "iterated many times" here is most likely a joke. This joke not only adds to an insider feeling, it makes it so that later, when the podcast repeats the phrase, the listener may remember the joke along with other repetitions. This repetition, then, solidifies the relationship between fans and text.

14 Because *Within the Wires* is so dense with repetition, it leaves itself open to these kinds of moments. These moments create recognition within the podcast that extend into its fan community: they invite fans to recognize the podcast, themselves as fans, and imagine other fans able to recognize the reference, too. Through this use of repetition, then, the podcast forms the basis for the recognition needed in creating a fan-based intimate public around its content.

Monetized Repetition

15 *Within the Wires* monetizes its free-to-listen podcast by selling paratexts. These paratexts include extra content behind a paywall, posters, live performances and, to some extent, t-shirts. These products work well within the show's aesthetics of repetition because they offer listeners more time to spend with and enjoy their content without dealing with the pitfalls of content that focuses on a story with a single forward-moving plot. Instead, repetition-based paratexts give fans the chance to experience recognition that is not absolutely necessary, but nevertheless enjoyable for engaged listeners and invites them to integrate the show into different parts of their life.

16 This poster, for example, is a repetition of key themes in the text that allows listeners to experience recognition within their physical environment.

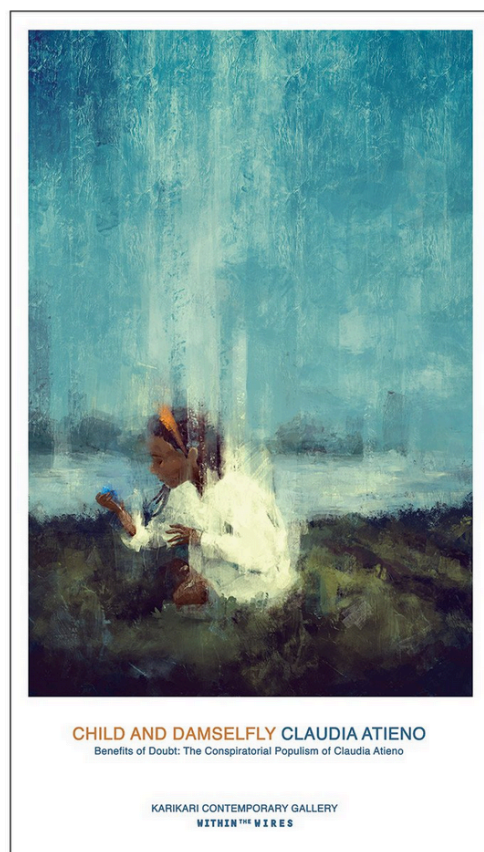


Fig. 1. Hayworth, Jessica. "Child and Damselfly Art Print," *Within the Wires*, Topatoco, <https://topatoco.com/collections/within-the-wires/products/wtw-damselfly-print>. Accessed 3 April 2020.

On one hand, the poster can be seen as encouraging forensic fandom. It reveals that the oft-repeated fly is a “damselfly,” a gender clue that could inspire interpretations on the human character the fly represents. The audience does not need this knowledge to experience the text, though, and the show’s poetic aesthetics are not entirely driven by a solvable mystery with a concluding payoff.

17 This type of storytelling does not easily fit Mittell’s categorizations of “what is” and “what if” paratexts because it emphasizes character relationships over a strong unfolding plot. According to Mittell,

‘What Is’ transmedia seeks to extend the fiction canonically, explaining the universe with coordinated precision and hopefully expanding viewers’ understanding and appreciation of the storyworld. This narrative model encourages forensic fandom with the promise of eventual revelations once all the pieces are put together. (Mittell 314)

Within the Wires paratexts do extend the storyworld, but they do not provide revelations to figure out a mystery about how the world works. Mittell’s “What Is” texts also decentralize a show’s characters. “The majority of *Lost*’s transmedia extensions,” Mittell explains, “prioritize storyworld expansion and exploration instead of building on the program’s emotional arcs and character relationships” (Mittell 306). The “Child and Damselfly” poster does both of these things: it expands the storyworld and builds on the emotional repetition of the child and the damselfly, which is itself an important character relationship. It also adds a relationship between the subjects of the painting and the painter Claudia Atieno, who is a character from the podcast’s second season. By centering itself so fully on the characters, the poster does not entirely fit into a “What Is” paratext.

18 The poster also does not fall easily into Mittell’s “What If?” paratext, which “poses hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties, inviting viewers to imagine alternative stories and approaches to storytelling that are distinctly not to be treated as potential canon” (Mittell 315). There is nothing explicitly hypothetical about the poster at all. At the same time, though, its similarities to “What If?” paratexts lie in its character exploration. In so doing, it falls under the umbrella of centripetal transmedia, which, according to Mittell, create “extensions that coordinate character identities and constant tone with the series points to a strength[...] by downplaying plot, the extensions work by allowing viewers to spend time with the characters without encouraging the forensic attention to story as with most canonic extensions” (312). By providing more time with characters without specifically feeding into forensic fandom, the poster is similar to “What If?” paratexts, but is not hypothetical.

19 The problem with using either of these forms is that they both rely on a strongly forward

moving plot, where *Within the Wires* relies on character-centered repetition. The pleasure from these paratexts stems instead from the affective experience of recognition they provide. The prick of recognition the poster provokes is yet another repetition of a poignant moment in the text. The podcast's non-linear storytelling and focus on character relationships over plot makes it easy to incorporate such paratexts into its storytelling. This seamless incorporation is important to *Within the Wires* in part because it earns money directly from its paratexts, unlike the television that Mittell studies.

20 Instead, merchandise like this poster encourage listener-fans to extend the storyworld into their lived environments. In this sense, they work to "recapture an emotional moment" in the show as Lancasters' *Babylon 5* fans do when participating in show-themed role-play (qtd. in Sandvoss 46). In *Within the Wires*, this moment is not just recaptured, but built upon, adding layers of past experience to the recognition elicited by the consistent repetition within the podcast.

21 Live performances offer another site for repetition and recognition. During a show at the 2018 London Podcast Festival, writer Jeffery Cranor introduced the podcast thusly: "Just like, hands in the dark, who has never listened to *Within the Wires* before? Whoah, hey all. That's amazing. [With surprise, nervous laughter] Well, welcome to it. [Nervous Laughter]" ("Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires"). Even though only a handful of hands went up, Cranor's uneasy response demonstrates two things: the performance was meant as a repetition of elements of the show for an audience who had heard them before and, secondly, it served as a site of recognition where fans could recognize others in their intimate fan public and feel recognized as fans themselves.

22 During the performance, listeners followed the show's relaxation tape inspired breathing exercises alongside each other and responded to prompts in unison.

Matthewson: Say aloud the following: my shoulders are stone

Audience: [hesitant at first] My shoulders are stone

Matthewson: My shoulders are sod

Audience: [not hesitant] My shoulders are sod

Matthewson: Hold your shoulders up beside your ears, tense and angry [almost the entire audience does this] Lower your shoulders [almost the entire audience does this] Let them slip back down like beads of water on the side of a chilled glass. Let your right shoulder fall away. Say aloud: My right shoulder slides down my ribs to my waist. It is free now, but separate from my body it is meaningless [laughter begins] it is just a shoulder out of context lying upon the ground, my shoulder is useless and alone. Say all of that aloud [light laughter, music stops for a moment of silence, group laughter, some people start trying to say it but not in chorus, light laughter] Good. [Almost breaks character, a more joyful tone, and group laughter] Now say aloud: my left shoulder is in its place,

it does not miss my right shoulder because it did not know my right shoulder had ever existed and now it is separate and alone lying upon the ground and it is not missed in the way a brother or sister is not missed because after age ten there are no brothers or sisters and before age 10 nothing can be remembered. Say all of that aloud. [Light giggle] Great [no pause at all, laughter]. (“Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires”)

Not only is this part of the performance a repetition from the show’s first episode, which most of the audience had already heard, it is a repetition that recasts their reactions as part of an intimate listening public. The choral response to relaxation tape prompts sonically binds the voices of audience members together, performing an intimate closeness between members of the fan public. The podcast then plays with the intimate closeness of these repetitions by asking the audience to repeat texts so long it is impossible them to respond. In setting up moments of recognition, then taking them away, *Within the Wires* is playing with the power of repetition to form bonds between people in its live audience just as it does in its podcast. The social awkwardness that leads to the podcast’s horror is here cause for humor.

23 Importantly, both of these examples are monetizing paratexts. It is possible to listen to the podcast and understand it without these texts; they are not valuable because they provide additional, necessary information. Listeners do spend money on them, though, so they are adding value. The valuable experience the paratexts provide is one of recognition among members of an intimate fan-based public. This repetition can take many different forms, but it generally fulfills the purpose of creating moments of recognition that connect the listener to its intimate fan public. Posters and live shows are two examples of these, but T-shirts and social media also give listeners the opportunity to be recognized by others. Even if they are not recognized, the feeling that one could be is a key part of participation in an intimate public.

Intimacy

24 *Within the Wires* connects recognition to an aesthetics of intimacy by associating it with emotionally close personal relationships and physical closeness along the lines of Horton and Wohl’s concept of “extreme parasociability.” In doing so, it connects members of its fan-based listening public through mutual, intimate recognition of narrative repetition. The following example demonstrates how the text relates to physical and emotional closeness:

You are holding hands with this girl. You are looking into her eyes, which are so different to yours. You are looking at her face, which is so different to yours, and you are seeing yourself iterated twice in two blue pools. This girl knows you. This girl sees you, properly, completely. Maybe she still sees you today,

right now. You are breathing together. She is breathing out into you, and into herself that which you are breathing out. (“Season 1, Cassette #4: Sadness, Lungs”)

This is an intimate moment, in part, because “you” are physically close to the girl. “You” hold hands, look into her eyes, and share her breath. The breath breaks down the binary between the two bodies as it traverses between them. There’s also an emotional closeness here: she sees you; you tell her you will never forget her. This is someone you know very well.

25 In understanding the *Within the Wires*’ intimacy, it is important to note that these moments, not the story, carry the podcast’s affective weight and points to an aesthetics of Horton and Wohl’s “extreme para-sociability.” In their insightful, but dated, 1956 article “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance,” Horton and Wohl describe parasocial interaction as both “intimacy at a distance” and “the simulacrum of conversational give and take.” In extreme parasocial interaction, personae adopt types of interaction associated with very close relationships. As an example, they use the radio program *The Lonesome Gal*, explaining

The outline of the program was simplicity itself... She was exactly as represented, apparently a lonesome girl, but without a name or a history. Her entire performance consisted of an unbroken monologue unembarrassed by plot, climax, or denouement... The Lonesome Gal simply spoke in a throaty, unctuous voice whose suggestive sexiness belied the seeming modesty of her words.

From the first, the Lonesome Gal took a strongly intimate line, almost as if she were addressing a lover in the utter privacy of some hidden rendezvous:

‘Darling, you look so tired, and a little put out about something this evening. . . . You are worried, I feel it Lover, you need rest . . . rest and someone who understands you. Come, lie down on the couch, relax, I want to stroke your hair gently ... I am with you now, always with you. You are never alone, you must never forget that you mean everything to me, that I live only for you, your Lonesome Gal.’

The similarities between *The Lonesome Gal* and season one of *Within the Wires* are manifold: low feminine voices, suggested eroticism, an unbroken monologue, a voice without name or history (at the beginning, at least). They’re also similar, from this clip, in how they directly address the listener: they tell her what to do (lay down, relax) and that she will never be alone. They also both allude to physical proximity, even touch. The podcast clearly incorporates elements of this “extreme” intimacy into its aesthetics.

26 This intimacy binds itself to the references in the show. When the podcast repeats references, it does so in an intimate environment. Some of these references refer to specifically close moments. Others are rendered intimate through the show’s general aesthetic. What is

interesting, though, is that the intimacy of this “prick” includes times when listeners recognize themselves and each other. It is embedded in one of those layers of recognition, creating a shared intimate past among listeners of the show. In this way, the fan public surrounding *Within the Wires* can be classified as specifically intimate.

Horror

27 *Within the Wires*, often classified in popular reviews as “horror” and “creepy” (Romano, Grant), finds horror in its uncomfortable intimacy. In a Q&A session during the London Podcast Festival, Jeffery Cranor explains his inspiration for the podcast as the uncomfortable intimacy of certain kinds of audio:

I ordered a whole bunch of really old relaxation cassettes and autogenic exercise cassettes on eBay, um, and they’re really, really upsetting to listen to. Like, I don’t know, just think about somebody you kind of, like think about a co-worker you kind of know and just see if you can sit and stare them directly in the eyes quietly for like thirty straight seconds, like it’s that level of discomfort, like, the type of like intimacy these tapes want to have with you (Cranor, Epworth, and Matthewson “Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires”).

Instead of intimacy and discomfort being opposites, Cranor explores here the discomfort of an intimacy that lacks deep personal connection.

28 Within the podcast, this discomfort occurs, in part, when the narrator demands that the listener recognize something she is incapable of recognizing. In continuing the previous excerpt from “Season 1, Cassette #4: Sadness, Lungs,” the comforting intimacy of sharing breaths transitions into something more terrifying:

You are breathing together. She is breathing out into you, and into herself that which you are breathing out. You are telling her you will never forget her. You are not imagining how you could ever forget her. She is not imagining how you could ever forget her! Did you forget her? What have you done with your life? (“Season 1, Cassette #4: Sadness, Lungs”)

29 In this clip, it sounds like the narrator is the girl and she is upset “you” do not recognize her. The breakdown of the system of recognition occurs between the past and present. The listener cannot recognize the girl because she cannot experience her past memories of the girl. The podcast gives the listener what should be the “present” in a moment of recognition, but does not supply enough of a “past” to create the recognition. The horror comes from the failure of this moment. Later in the episode, this breakdown of recognition transforms the intimacy of sharing breaths into the creepiness of sharing breaths with someone who you do not know, but who knows you, who you cannot see, but who sees you. Without recognition, intimacy is scary.

30 These moments come across as particularly unexpected because *Within the Wires* often gives its audience past moments for recognition. Even though the contours of horror are continually changing, Kendall R. Phillips notes in *Projected Fears* that this kind of “violation of an audience’s expectations contributes to their experience of terror” (5). When speaking of influential horror films, Phillips writes that “these films connected to existing cultural drifts and directions in such peculiarly poignant ways as to be recognized as somehow ‘true’” (5). As *Within the Wires* continues, the truth in its script slowly reveals itself. In the last episode of the first season, the narrator tells the listener character she has escaped the facility she has been confined to and has fled to a seaside cottage. The episode, like the rest of the show, reflects on its mediality: the relaxation tape format highlights the centrality of the podcast’s aurality while the narrator explains how she is covering up the listener character’s escape by destroying all recorded traces of the event:

Once I have cleaned all the footage of all the rooms and corridors I have been in, once I have replaced certain key tapes with generic footage, old footage that could come from any day, any normal day when nothing really happened, and once I have destroyed every cassette I have created, and once I have made sure that any details about me the Institute has on file are...inaccurate, then I will be able to leave. (“Season 1, Cassette #10: Horopito”)

These recordings as well as the narrator’s ability to manipulate them and, by extension, manipulate what appears to be the truth of the situation, serve as a reminder of the fallibility of media and puts into question the narrator’s trustworthiness. The listener’s entire experience of the text and its associated storyworld to this point has been told through this unreliable narrator. Even the listener character’s understanding of the situation is formed through the narrator’s attempts to reconstruct her memory. The listener character needs to decide whether to stay in the cottage and trust the narrator, or to leave into an unknown world. Anticipating this need, the narrator says:

I like to envision how you spend your days, because it stops me from picturing what I am afraid of – that you are not there at all. That you have taken your freedom and used it to go elsewhere, somewhere other than this cottage by a sea, so far away from where you lived, from where you have ever been. That you have decided you cannot trust me, and do not want to know me properly again. That you have decided to find your own way, where I cannot follow. I envision myself understanding why you would do this. (“Season 1, Cassette #10: Horopito”)

The podcast thus confronts the listener with the unreliability of its own intimacy by leaving its ending ambiguous. The season’s direct address leads to a slippage between the listener and the character of the listener. Both must decide here whether or not to trust the narrator. It is unclear

if their relationship was really close or if the narrator manipulated the listener character's memories the same way she manipulated the past when covering up the escape. This uncomfortable lack of trust does not make the podcast less intimate, it is just a reminder that intimacy can be forced and "upsetting" (Cranor, Epworth, and Matthewson, "Night Vale Presents: Within the Wires"). In framing its horror around the failure of recognition, *Within the Wires* creates discomfort from the same intimacy it works to create.

Conclusion

31 Philips observes that "an influential horror film does not necessarily create a certain pattern of anxiety or fear within a culture. Instead, elements within the film resonate—connect in some sympathetic manner—to trends within broader culture" (6). In centering its storytelling on forms of mediated intimacy, *Within the Wires* creates, critiques, and plays with broader cultural concern over the role of media in connecting members of society. At the same time, it uses its own storytelling techniques to build parasocial and fan-based intimate publics around its podcast. These techniques include its use of repetition to create moments of recognition, which occurs within each episode of the podcast and extends through the show's serialization and paratexts. This recognition does not rely on the narrative unfolding of specific plotlines, but on the repetition of key words, phrases, and sounds. The poignancy of these repetitions is key to the podcast's aesthetics and by centering them within the text, *Within the Wires* creates an intimate fan public based on listening and recognition. One of the ways in which the podcast makes money, selling paratexts, earns revenue by creating different contexts for repetition that listeners can incorporate into different aspects of their lives. Live events, T-shirts, and other merchandise invite listeners to feel recognizable as a member of the show's listening public. These forms of monetization work within the podcast's aesthetics: the show presents them as intimate, close, and recognizable. *Within the Wires'* use of voice and parasociability further codes this recognition in terms intimacy. At the same time, the podcast uses horror to highlight the strength of the bonds it has formed by questioning how much their mediation makes them untrustworthy or potentially manipulative. In doing so, *Within the Wires* speaks to both the power of podcasting to build communities and to larger cultural anxiety about what it means to be intimate and the extent to which media in general, and podcasting specifically, create intimacy.

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