

Sounding Intimacy

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SONIC ESSAY TRANSCRIPT

["Romance" by Wild Flag]

Hello, my name is Ben Harley, and welcome to my sonic essay. I am a compositionist by trade; that is, I am someone who studies the different ways beings, mostly human but not exclusively, communicate with each other to create their worlds. My work predominantly deals with risk, but today I want to talk about a growing trend in the field and its relationship to a word some people may find uncomfortable. First, we are going to talk about sound, and then we are going to talk about intimacy.

["Ten Thousand Men of Harvard" by A. Putnam]

Perhaps surprisingly, sound has only recently become a common topic within the field of composition. Though humans and nonhumans often communicate sonically, sound has been widely ignored because of composition's sordid history. See, composition only got its start in the late 19th century, with many scholars pointing to Harvard's English A course as its first instantiation in the United States. As Susan Miller (1991) argues, these early composition courses, like many contemporary composition courses,

functioned as a means of enculturating students from outside the ruling elite with the misogynistic, nationalistic, and racist values of the dominant class through education in what was referred to as "correct" grammar. Students with different language practices and cultural literacies were taught to adopt the style, voice, and values of the ruling elite.

As Cynthia Selfe (2009/2014) argues, such training was focused on writing because this was seen as the most important communication practice for institutions of business, governance, manufacturing, and science during the 20th century. Composition's emphasis on writing can perhaps most clearly be seen in teachers of speech seceding from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1914. And though the field of composition has since [taken strides to] become much less colonialist—for instance, the Conference of College Composition and Communication acknowledged in 1974 that students have the right to their own language—the emphasis on writing as the privileged mode of discourse has largely remained. It was not until 2005 that NCTE (2005/2014) issued a statement of multimodal literacies expressly acknowledging the importance of "the interplay of meaning-

making systems” beyond the written (p. 17). That’s right, it was not until the 21st century that English as a discipline officially recognized the importance of other semantic channels of knowing and sharing our various ways of being in the world.

[“Eve” by The Roots]

Based on this history, it is not completely surprising that 2006 is something of a watershed moment for the discussion of sound in composition studies. While there had been some articles published prior, this is year that sound received some real attention when the disciplinary-specific journal *Computers and Composition* published a special issue titled, “Sound in/as Composition Space.” This issue didn’t much focus on sound as an independent phenomenon, but it did discuss it in relationship to music, film, and oral argumentation. Some contributors studied music to reconsider scholarly assumptions about knowledge creation, citation, and world building; others demonstrated the ways in which sound contributes to the meaning of multimodal compositions; and still others argued that sound functions as a tool for teaching rhetorical principles and helping students develop new literacies. All of the texts were rich and interesting but they didn’t explicitly address what it is that gives sound its uniquely affective affordances.

The uniqueness of sound was the focus, however, in 2011, when the disciplinary-specific journal, *Currents in Electronic*

Literacy, published an issue focused almost entirely on the ways in which sound uniquely affects people emotionally and physically. In the introduction to this issue, Diane Davis argued that sound—music specifically—is impactful “despite (or because) of its stubborn refusal to mean.” The rest of the issue builds on this idea, with scholars claiming that the field must pay attention to the differences between how sound and written texts build community and make meaning. Two years later this was the focus of another special issue devoted to sound in the journal *Harlot* where scholars used a variety of case studies to explore the ways in which sound cultivates community by connecting people, places, and things.

Since then, there has been a proliferation of composition scholarship about sound from scholars such as John B. Killoran (2013), who studies the audio responses writing instructors have recorded for their students; Jonathan W. Stone (2015), who studies John and Alan Lomax’s 1933 recordings of Black men incarcerated in Southern labor camps; Jonathan Alexander (2015), who gives a great reading of Glenn Gould’s audio documentary “The Idea of North”; Jared Sterling Colton (2016), who studies digital sampling through an ethics of care; Jean Bessette (2016), who discusses having her students create audio collages in response to listening to gay liberation radio shows; Trisha Nicole Campbell (2017), who studies digital empathy; and the team of Mary E. Hocks and Michelle Comstock (2017) who focus on teaching students to compose a variety of sound-

based multimodal projects that take advantage of the embodied and dynamic affordances of the mode. And to be honest, this is just a small sample of the compositionists studying sound right now. I actually feel quite bad for all of the great scholars I didn't list here, but there are too many to name. That's how hot of a topic sound is right now.

I mean, in the last five months Steph Ceraso (2018) wrote a book on sonic pedagogies, Byron Hawk (2018) wrote a book on composition as a quasi-object that uses musical examples, and Courtney S. Danforth, Kyle D. Stedman, and Michael J. Farris (2018) published a collection on teaching soundwriting. There was even a Symposium on Sound, Rhetoric, and Writing in Nashville this year where a bunch of compositionists got together and shared their scholarship with one another. Sound is becoming quite the subject in a discipline that once ignored it in favor of an almost exclusive focus on alphabetic written texts.

["Station to Station" by David Bowie]

Too a large extent all of this scholarship invokes and investigates the idea that sound is a particularly affective communicative mode that uniquely impacts bodies and connects them to the larger world. The scholarship asks why and how sound affects us so impactfully. Of course, these questions are inherently unanswerable, but by providing arguments, compositionists learn a little bit more about how sound works both

communicatively and extra-communicatively, how people use it, and how we might teach students to compose with it. So, in the spirit of churning this question around, I would like to hazard a brief argument here as to what it is that makes sound so meaningful for so many. I am going to provide a way of thinking about sound that might help us think about why it evokes such joy, pleasure, sadness, pain, and fright. In short, I am just going to say that sound is intimate.

I should note here that between the time I originally wrote this piece and it being published, the cultural theorist Dominic Pettman released a book called *Sonic Intimacy* (2017) that, as the title indicates, deals explicitly with this same topic. It is a wonderful book that argues that the voice is what creates intimacy, both fleeting and lasting, among human and nonhuman actors in ways that are both constructive and destructive. My argument is similar to his except that he focuses on the ways in which humans can attune to different voices, whereas I focus on the ways in which sound as a material medium intrinsically impacts the human. Ultimately, we both argue for an understanding of sound as vibrations that permeate bodies, demonstrating their connection to one another in a shared world, but the ways we get there are quite different.

["Embers" by the Kilimanjaro Dark Jazz Ensemble]

Intimacy is a really old word. It comes from the Latin *intimus*, which means

inmost, deepest, or most profound. Interestingly, it is also related to the Latin word *intus*, which simply means within, and that prefix *in*, in the Latin word *intus*, literally translates into *in*, in English. So when something is *intimate* it means that it is within us either physically, or emotionally, or cognitively, or whatever. And you can see this internality continue as the word evolves in the seventeenth century to refer to something essential or intrinsic. At this time, it also comes to refer to a close connection, union, or familiarity such as being intimately acquainted with someone. In the twentieth century it gets its colloquial meanings as a reference to women's undergarments and the act of sex, and in all of these iterations it never really loses this idea of closeness, of being near, with, or within.

Sound is, by its very nature, intimate. It enters our ears and bodies, it resonates in our chests, it puts us into the mindset of others, and it breaks down borders between individuals. When we speak, sound resonates deep within our bodies through our throats into the air and the bodies of others. This is intimacy. And contemporary scholarship on sound serves to demonstrate the different ways in which it is intimate: communally, cognitively, emotionally, psychologically, and materially.

["Be Thankful for What You Got" by William DeVaughn]

The intimacy of sound helps to build community. In his sonic memoir of the

1960s, John F. Barber (2013) discusses the ways in which the sounds of that decade changed who he was and how we grew to see the world. The emotions and expressions of others that entered his body through his television changed who he was and made him a member of a society. In a more embodied example, Erin Rand (2014) discusses how the LGBTQ activist training event, Camp Courage, used structured storytelling, clapping, and chanting to build a sense of community. By having people create embodied sounds together, the camp helped them identify with one another as a collective.

["The Ecstatics" by Explosions in the Sky]

The intimacy of sound is also cognitive; as sound enters our brains, it impacts how they operate. A group of researchers led by Robin W. Wilkins (2014) demonstrated that when people listened to their favorite songs—regardless of genre, presence or absence of lyrics, tonal quality, regardless of all these things—when people listened to their favorite songs circuits in the brain involving memory, self-awareness, and social emotion consolidation started connecting in astounding ways. In other words, when listening to music they like—regardless of what type of music it is—people are more capable of recalling the past, imagining the future, discovering new possibilities, and analyzing their own emotions.

Interestingly, this is not true when people listen to music they dislike. Neural circuits are literally composed differently

depending on whether or not the listener enjoys the music. The listener, their experiences, and the music co-create the neural pathways of the individual's brain, and the researchers speculate that sound could drastically alter how brain networks are organized. At least this all seems possible for the 21 young adults on which the experiment was conducted. These folks didn't seem to represent a very neurodiverse population, and obviously, there is need for more research, but the work does suggest that sound intrinsically coproduces who we are in a very intimate way.

["Shake it Off" by Taylor Swift]

Keeping in mind what it can do to our brains, it is no wonder that people experience such an emotional closeness to music. Neuroscientists like Daniel Levitin (2006) discuss how since music connects memory, emotion, and language centers in the brain, we are literally experiencing patterns—or grooves—as pleasure, pain, and memory. Sadly, academics don't talk much about emotions; historically, it's not our strong suit. Instead we talk about affect, which can be similar to emotion, but is definitely not the same thing. For this reason, I argue that some of the best writing and theorizing about emotional closeness to music comes from music critics. Carl Wilson (2007) discussing how the saccharin guitar pop of Buddy Holly invokes the feelings of being with his ex-wife when they first started dating, Tavi Gevinson (2013) discussing how the music of Taylor Swift made her feel like she was

an average eighth-grade girl instead of someone sacrificing her childhood to a fashion blog, or John Darnielle (2008) discussing how Black Sabbath was the only thing that made sense to him during a stay at a youth psychiatric hospital. These texts are testaments to the ways in which music makes us feel—how it helps us experience and understand our own, personal emotions. They are testaments to the ways in which sounds co-create the identities of their audiences. This is not surprising to compositionists, seeing as scholars in our field such as Jenny Rice (2005) and Laurie Gries (2015) have studied the ways in which written and visual texts co-create and reassemble the publics through which they circulate. If the critics are to be believed, sound also rearticulates us, if not as publics, at least as individuals.

["Call Me Star" by All Them Witches]

If emotions are psychological, then it's no surprise that there has been much discussion about how sound affects us psychologically. Roland Barthes (1985) claimed that by listening to others we are empathizing, and through empathy we are able to recognize their innermost desires. He went so far as to claim, "to recognize this desire implies that one enters it, ultimately finding oneself there" (p. 256). Through listening to the voices of others we project ourselves onto the Other's desires and succumb to them; as such, we risk both re-creating the desires of others in our own image and replacing our own desires with theirs. Listening carries the

risk of synthesis: the risk of consubstantiality.

This synthesis is similar to what the rhetorician Kenneth Burke (1950/2001) referred to as *identification*, where, through their joined interests, people become “substantially one,” that is they become simultaneously independent entities and parts of a larger whole (p. 1325). Unlike Burkean identification, however, Barthes’s listening is sonic, intimate, and affective. While Burke argues that people are persuaded to identify with one another through a myriad of small repeating signals that he refers to as a “body of identifications” (p. 1328), Barthes argues that it is specifically the voice of the Other that threatens to subsume the listener through empathy, regardless of whether or not they share interests with the speaker. The relocation of the self into the desires of the Other is not based on shared interests but rather on an extra-discursive empathy enabled by the materiality of sound.

[“Sleep” by Godspeed! You Black Emperor]

Sound is not abstract; it is physical and material, which means that it intimately interacts with us in tangible ways. As Veit Erlmann (2015) notes, the resonant quality of sound has been a staple of Western philosophy for centuries because it shows how the vibrations of the world enter into our ears and brains, and how the vibrations of our own bodies resonate not only inside of us but also outside of us.

Resonance makes us question our being solitary, independent subjects. Steph Ceraso’s (2014) work on listening as something that occurs viscerally in our bodies, auditorily in our ears, visually through our eyes, and psychologically in our anticipation should similarly make us question not only how we hear but also how separated we are from what we hear. The multiple ways our bodies interact with sound blurs the border between the inside and the outside—the us and the not us. Sound demonstrates our porous nature and our being in the world.

[“For You Pleasure” by Roxy Music]

This is intimacy. The world flows into us via sound waves, permeating our borders, and changing how we think, feel, and act both individually and collectively. Sound acts on us, changing how we understand ourselves and our relationships with others. Sure, we are individual subjects, but sound helps us to realize the ways in which we are also intimately connected to and co-produced by our world and the other human and nonhuman actors who have coproduced it, are coproducing it, and will coproduce it. Material sound and the acts of both hearing and being heard connect humans through space and time.

This is not an abstract connection but a material reality that moves through our bodies changing how we socialize, think, feel, and act. New materialists such as Stacy Alaimo (2010), Karen Barad (2017), Jane Bennett (2009), and Bruno Latour

(2005) have all argued in different ways that our social worlds are composed through the actions and interactions among material bodies, including those of humans. They argue that the world moves through us, composing us as we simultaneously compose it; the intimate nature of sound—the ways in which it literally moves through, reverberates off, and is absorbed by bodies—makes this connection salient.

It is significant that sound is not merely a material actor in the world but one that interacts with us in a particularly intimate fashion. Sound represents not just a relationship *to* the world but a *close* relationship *with* the world. As such it is a communicative mode, a semiotic channel, and a way of engaging one another that allows not only for persuasion but also for rearticulation of who we are in relation to ourselves and a whole assembled host of others. This intimate nature makes sound a particularly powerful communicative force, capable of great things both constructive and destructive—both unifying and divisive. Contemporary compositionists are fortunate to work in a time where their discipline once again considers it within its purview to study such a force instead of reifying a version of alphabetic writing honed to the specifications of the corporate ruling classes of the twentieth century. By acknowledging that sound is important, teachers can begin to once again help their students ethically and productively utilize it to meaningfully engage and coproduce their worlds. As we do so, we should

remember that sound's intimacy is its power—its closeness makes it impactful.

Thank you for listening.

["Romance" by Wild Flag]

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