

The Air Still Moves

Sonic Abundance

Episode 1: The Air Still Moves

Hosted/ Authored by Crystal VanKooten

Duration: 20:32

CRYSTAL: Welcome to “Sonic Abundance,”

[music begins, steady drum beats and rhythmic clapping on the song’s beat, and computerized keyboard melody and chords (“Pumped,” Mahar)]

a podcast that celebrates the legacy and future of Cynthia Selfe’s landmark article, “The Movement of Air.” I’m Crystal VanKooten, Associate Professor of Writing, Rhetoric, and Cultures at Michigan State University, and I’m kicking off this podcast with episode number 1, which I’ve titled “The Air Still Moves.”

[music ends (“Pumped,” Mahar); classical piano music fades in (Chopin)]

In 2009, Cynthia Selfe published “The Movement of Air, the Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composition” in *College Composition and Communication*. In the 15 years following, sound scholars within writing studies have responded to her article, answering the call that Selfe gave for attention to sound within the field. Across the eight episodes in *this* podcast, we turn our attention (and our voices) to the past to celebrate Selfe’s essay on its fifteenth anniversary,

[music fades out (Chopin)]

as well as to our current moment through sharing case studies of our soundwriting work in action.

Our collaboration on this podcast, *Sonic Abundance*, began at the Conference on College Composition and Communication - the 4 Cs - in 2024, where eight scholars presented sound projects across two panels. The theme of the conference that year was Writing Abundance, and the eight of us found an invitation within the theme to focus on sonic abundance as we celebrated Selfe’s influential work and shared in-progress soundwriting projects.

In this first episode, I reach back to Selfe’s landmark 2009 essay “The Movement of Air,” and discuss the ways in which I and others received it within Writing and Rhetoric studies. Of course, Selfe was not the only scholar in the field working on sound fifteen years ago, but she brought the call for us to pay attention to both writing and sound to the field’s flagship journal, and thus opened the gates for others to research and write about sound. Since “The Movement of Air,” scholarship on “soundwriting,” on the rhetoric of audio, on podcasting, DJ and hip hop rhetoric, multimodal composition, and how to teach with audio in the writing classroom, all of this scholarship has grown and flourished. I’ll conclude this first episode, then, by reviewing, sampling, and collaging some of this more recent work that was catalyzed by Selfe’s arguments.

I'll share this scholarship with you in two ways. First, I'll cite some things more traditionally: so I'll credit the author, I'll summarize key takeaways, or I might link the author's work to other works. Then, I'll cite by trying something new, something new-ish: I'll share an audio collage of writing and rhetoric work on sound – what I'm calling a “soundwriting literature review.” The collage provides a sampling of the sounds that have resonated across the field in the last fifteen years, and it enacts literature review in ways that ask you, the listener, to engage differently.

[music begins, steady drum beats and rhythmic clapping on the song's beat, and computerized keyboard melody and chords (“Pumped,” Mahar)]

So, I'll start with Selfe's “The Movement of Air.” In 2009, this piece sparked a moment for me as a writing teacher, but also, I might argue, for the entire field. Or perhaps Selfe simply named the moment that we were all going through and exhorted others to hear and join in. This was a moment for sound and writing,

[a high flute melody is added to the music (“Pumped,” Mahar)]

where I—and others in the field—began to understand or maybe to really believe that writing is big.

[the music fades out (“Pumped,” Mahar)]

Selfe asked us to consider writing, and composition, as involving words and images, but also as aural, and oral, heard and spoken: composing was and is a “multimodal rhetorical activity” that uses different “semiotic resources for making meaning,” and these included visuals and sounds. Writing and rhetoric could be heard, and spoken, remixed and edited,

[Crystal's voice overlaps and repeats]

remixed and edited, sung and chorded,

[Crystal's voice is doubled, and then tripled. The third track is pitched lower and plays simultaneously]

layered and rearranged and simultaneous and played back.

CRYSTAL: Selfe helped us to fully acknowledge that my writing—our students' writing—all WRITING, is multimodal. And it should include sound. Sound that for decades leading up to 2009, was often used in other spaces, and even in our writing spaces, but not fully recognized as a key aspect of what we do as writers.

So in “The Movement of Air,” Selfe made the argument that our writing—*composition's* writing—should include sound, by taking readers back through the field's history to better understand when and how writing as print-only alphabetic composition, assumed the dominant, privileged position in the field. Selfe reminded us of the “old” model

[classical piano music begins (Bach)]

of oratorical education from the 18th century, which was an education focused on things like recitation, debate, declamation – these were all activities performed out loud, with speech. But from there, the rise of industry, business, and professional affairs alongside the development of technologies like the printing press, typewriters, pens even, these all contributed to how writing and reading then became separated from speech in school and became really silent activities that people did quietly.

[music fades out (Bach)]

Yet Selfe reminded us that during this same time period, other groups outside of schools were maintaining both written and aural literacies, and these were groups like women, Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians, and they did this in churches, in their sacred ceremonies, with storytelling and in performance spaces, and through poetry and song.

Yet aurality and sound never died completely away in our composition classrooms, Selfe told us. We used sound metaphors to discuss our words, and we still do that a lot; we asked students to write about things like music; we responded to student writing with audio, and there's a whole line of scholarship about audio feedback now; and we loved to assign the oral presentation to students. And then,

[music begins, sounds of an electric drill clicking and whirring, and a screw falling to the floor. A song begins with a driving bass beat, clapping, and computerized melody ("The Grind," Mahar)]

in the 20th century, in came the digital. Well, the digital was not new, but at the very least, the digital became much more accessible. Selfe pointed to profound changes in communication forms, and practices, and the values that came with digital reading and writing technologies. Communication could now quickly cross borders. And it was easier to amplify and to transmit sound, and words, and images. Semiotic theory was expanding, and the aural was identified as a mode, as one of the modes among many. And so, some teachers in computers and writing began (or continued) to explore the use of sound as writing with assignments like podcasts, audio documentaries, and interviews.

[music fades out ("The Grind," Mahar)]

So overall, in "The Movement of Air," Selfe showed us the ways in which "U.S. composition studies has subsumed, remediated, and rediscovered aurality during the past 150 years."

And she ends her historical account by calling the field – us, and our colleagues – to pay attention to, and to value, quote

the *multiple* ways in which students compose and communicate meaning, the exciting hybrid, multimodal texts that they create—in both nondigital and digital environments—to meet their own needs in a changing world.

In response, some were skeptical,

[*classical piano music begins (Hayden)*]

and perhaps with good reason. Doug Hesse, for example, in his three-Cs response to Selfe that came out in 2010, called “The Movement of Air” piece “careful and alluring,” yet Hesse questioned the curricular space of the field: is it rhetoric slash composing or writing slash composing, he asked, seeing composition-as-rhetoric as a more capacious space for this kind of sound work Selfe was calling us all to.

[*music fades out (Hayden)*]

And whose interests do we serve, Hesse continued, asking Selfe and the field to consider the stakes of playful purposes for composition versus obligated, sanctioned purposes. Sound, he seemed to be saying, was not always required. And perhaps, it was too much fun?

[*electronic ambient music begins, and electronic beat begins (Spinningmerkaba “Angelicon”)*]

Others of us heard Selfe’s call and dove right in. Or, we were already swimming in the pool. We started – or continued – to pay attention to sounds and silences, images and words in our classes, and to compose, dare I say to write, with sounds.

[*music fades out (Spinningmerkaba “Angelicon”)*]

In their webtext “Are We There Yet?” Jim Purdy and Jennifer Marlow give us evidence of this expansion of “writing in all forms” that occurred in the late nineties and the early 2000s. Purdy and Marlow looked across the programs from the computers and writing conference during this time, and presentations at C&W that included sound, for example, occurred more frequently after 2005.

[*music begins, electronic notes ascend and descend, and rhythmic beat joins (Spinningmerkaba “Stars Below Us”)*]

Part of the increase in attention to sound and writing that we see through Purdy and Marlow’s research was the growth and explosion of podcasts and podcasting at this time. Eric Detweiler places the first podcast in 2003, and by 2005, *podcast* became the New Oxford American Dictionary’s word of the year. Podcast episodes were being distributed digitally everywhere through RSS feeds in the new, smaller MP3 format.

[*music fades out (Spinningmerkaba “Stars Below Us”)*]

Podcasts, of course, are many different things - Detweiler says that a podcast is a medium, or a way of communicating content that has many forms. He pointed out four big podcast genres in 2020: educational podcasts, interview podcasts, discussion podcasts, and narrative podcasts. What unites these different kinds of podcasts, though, is that they are digitally circulated and they are episodic. That means they have separate pieces that retain some connection to one another, even as they’re distributed separately to various audiences.

Rhet/Comp has several podcasts, including *Pedagogue*, *Rhetoricity*, *The Big Rhetorical Podcast*, and others. Charles Woods and Devin Ralston argue that these podcasts, among others in the field, are “a legitimate method of knowledge creation and circulation.” Woods and Ralston also point out that podcasts highlight feminist research values, and even make space for “new forms of thinking.” Philip Choong and Colin Bjork also research podcasts, and they’ve looked into narrative nonfiction podcasting in particular, questioning if and how it can foster social change.

All of this work on podcasting has paved the way for this podcast, *Sonic Abundance*, where we demonstrate the rhetoric and composition of sound, as well as ask you to listen.

But before I ask you to listen to my sonic lit review collage, which is coming up, I’ll first ask you to take a listen to a student voice from my own writing classroom. I will never forget one assignment I gave in an undergraduate Writing and Rhetoric Podcasting class in the fall of 2021, where I asked students to practice combining voices. The existence of this podcasting class, which was situated within a Writing and Rhetoric major, is even more evidence of Selfe’s legacy and the rise of soundwriting after “The Movement of Air.” I had the great privilege to spend an entire semester with undergraduate students listening to and writing with sound, and these kinds of courses are now fairly common at many of our universities.

So in fall 2021, my podcasting students had just read Selfe’s article, and then I provided them with a recording of myself reading out the article’s concluding statement. And their task was to combine my voice reading the quote from Selfe with their own voice reading the quote, and then they were supposed to overlap the voices, our voices together, but also to have our voices speak separately. And this would be a useful audio-editing practice activity, I planned and thought, and it was a chance for students to move their writing off of the page and into our ears. I will never forget this assignment because of the student responses that I got. They were so wonderful. And I want to share one sample for you today. So here's the first 30 seconds of former student Justin Lamb's response to this assignment.

[Justin's audio response begins. The voices speak simultaneously, with electronic music in the background that continues.]

JUSTIN and CRYSTAL: In this world, we face some wickedly complex communicative tasks.

CRYSTAL: *[in left channel only]* To make our collective way with any hope for success,

JUSTIN: *[in right channel only]* to create a different set of global and local relations than currently exists,

[Justin's voice intensifies and gets louder, sounding intense, raspy, and angry.]

Crystal's voice continues reading the quote in the background, interspersed with Justin's voice.

JUSTIN and CRYSTAL: We will need all available means of persuasion, all available dimensions, all available approaches, not simply those limited to the two dimensional space of a printed page, page, page, page, page [*overlapping*].

[The word page is repeated in Justin's voice only in rapid succession, overlapping itself].

JUSTIN: We will need all available means of persuasion, all available dimensions, page, page, page [*overlapping*].

CRYSTAL: [*voice overlapping with Justin's*] to create a different set of global and local relations than currently exists. . .

[Justin's audio response concludes.]

CRYSTAL: I don't think I've laughed so hard as I did that day when I first heard this response. I loved it. I laughed, and I loved it, because it was funny, and brilliant, and it demonstrated writing – big writing, soundwriting. Complex, thoughtful, engaged writing. Multimodal writing. I, and my students, Justin, we were definitely having too much fun.

[music begins, steady drum beats and rhythmic clapping on the song's beat, and computerized keyboard melody and chords ("Pumped," Mahar)]

I'd like to close this opening episode of *Sonic Abundance* with a sound collage, where we can listen a little more to some other ways that we have all responded to Selfe's call to pay more attention to sound. In the collage, instead of listening to articulated connections between sources through spoken words, you'll hear sounds together, juxtaposed. Some of these sounds will seem to go together, and others might not.

[music fades away ("Pumped" Mahar)]

Some may be expected; and others will be unfamiliar or surprising. Instead of hearing me summarize what I took away from an article, you'll instead hear small portions of an article that I sequenced with parts of other sound works. My hope is that the collage requires you to listen, and listen to this scholarship carefully - for similarities, for differences, for themes, both in the qualities of the sounds, and in their content. It might also be helpful if you would like to listen to the collage with the transcript. where you can read along and find information like who is speaking and the references for all of the pieces that I sample.

[music begins again, steady drum beats and rhythmic clapping on the song's beat, and computerized keyboard melody and chords ("Pumped," Mahar)]

So let's listen together, and I hope you keep listening - to our students and their soundwriting, and to the seven other fantastic episodes coming up next in our podcast, *Sonic Abundance*.

[Audio collage begins. Sound excerpts of Daniel Keller, "Lord of the Machines: Reading Human Computer Relationships," from Cynthia L. Selfe, "The Movement of Air, The Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing," remixed by Justin Lamb]

JUSTIN LAMB AND CRYSTAL VANKOOTEN: [from Justin Lamb's response to Crystal VanKooten's Podcasting assignment] In this world, we face some wickedly complex communicative tasks. . .

CRYSTAL VANKOOTEN: To make our collective way with any hope for success. . .

JUSTIN LAMB: To create a different set of global and local relations than currently exists. . .

[composition fades to the background as Kyle begins to speak]

KYLE STEDMAN: [from Courtney S. Danforth, Kyle D. Stedman, and Michael J. Faris, "Preface," *Soundwriting Pedagogies*] There's a lot going on right now with sound in rhetoric and composition studies. This book zeros in on one specific aspect of that groundswell of interest. . .

[music begins, *The Coup's "Strange Arithmetic"* from Michael Burns, Timothy R. Dougherty, Ben Kuebrich, and Yanira Rodríguez, *Conversation 2: "Did We Move?"* in *Soundwriting and Resistance: Toward a Pedagogy for Liberation*]

KYLE STEDMAN: . . . using sound in writing studies pedagogy.

LIBERTY BELL: [from Bump Halbritter and Julie Lindquist, "Sleight of Ear: Voice, Voices, and Ethics of Voicing"] Why did you study writing?

BEN KUEBRICH: In this track, we use our experiences teaching with hip-hop. . .

[voices overlapping]

BUMP HALBRITTER: Are you interviewing me?

LIBERTY BELL: I am interviewing you.

BUMP HALBRITTER: Ok.

BEN KUEBRICH: . . . to theorize about the place of hip-hop as content and/or theory in a composition classroom.

[music begins, Kyle Stedman's "Marconi (Instrumental)" from Courtney S. Danforth and Kyle D. Stedman, "Extras" in the Introduction to *Soundwriting Pedagogies*]

BUMP HALBRITTER: You see I'm trying to make this movie with this really exciting young woman. . .

LIBERTY BELL: Uh-huh?

BUMP HALBRITTER: and she keeps turning the camera on me.

LIBERTY BELL: Oh, for real?

JULIE LINDQUIST: *[laughs]*

BUMP HALBRITTER: Yeah, for real. I'm trying to figure out, if I give her a camera . . .

JON STONE: *[from Jonathan W. Stone, "Composing the Sonic Sacred"]* You've just heard a collage of voices.

BUMP HALBRITTER: and say, go show me. . .

JON STONE: Folks on podcasts talking about the process of religious doubt and questioning.

[Sound of ice cream truck, from Cecilia Valenzuela and Magnolia Landa-Posas, "Audio Voice: A Relational, Subaltern Praxis of Listening to Testimonios and Composing with Sound"]

BUMP HALBRITTER: Show me the stuff the world needs to see about your life

JON STONE: The various tracks in this project will center on these podcast voices.

CECILIA VALENZUELA: You want a *paleta*?

LIBERTY BELL: When I tell you, If you give me a camera, I'll show you the world.

[continued sound of ice cream truck]

MAGNOLIA LANDA-POSAS: No... *[snickering]* My mom used to always scare me with the big trucks, it's like, "Te roban!" I could only go and get it from *el paletero*, like, literally the small ones. . .

CECILIA VALENZUELA: *[laughing loudly]* Te roban!

MAGNOLIA LANDA-POSAS: They're not the big trucks 'cause they were like, "They'll pull you in y te roban!" But, you know, they traumatize you when you're little.

JEREMY CUSHMAN: *[from Jeremy Cushman and Shannon Kelly, "Recasting Writing, Voicing Bodies: Podcasts across a Writing Program"]* You know, what I hope this chapter really does is encourage programmatic risk.

MICHELLE KIM: *[from Jennifer Sano-Franchini, Margaret Fernandes, Jonathan Adams, and Michelle Kim, "Sounding Out in a PWI: Circulating*

Asian American Sound for Institutional Change”] We also had this amazing Filipina rap song at the end. . .

JEREMY CUSHMAN: . . . to importantly surface that writing in audio is so much different than simply writing with audio.

SHANNON KELLY: All of which holds open space for what's possible when teaching podcasts across a writing program.

[*Sebastian and Lucius "Antidote" song: Percussive verifone fades out*]

MAGGIE FERNANDES: I mean we listened to Ruby Ibarra. . .

MICHELLE KIM: Yes! Yes.

[*music begins, "Us," by Ruby Ibarra, featuring Rocky Rivera, Klassy, and Faith Santilla*]

SONG LYRICS: “Island woman rise, walang makakatigil. Brown, brown woman, rise, alamin ang yung ugat”]

MAGGIE FERNANDES: and I think we had a really interesting conversation about how what she was doing with rap was kind of different from some of the things that Awkwafina does.

MICHELLE KIM: Mmhmm.

[*sound of static, tape rewinding, from Jennifer J. Buckner and Kirsten Daley, "A Hearing Teacher and a Deaf Student Negotiate Sound"*]

DISTORTED VOICE: [*from Buckner and Daley*] . . . that a deaf/hard of hearing student is registered for your Multimodal Composition class.

[*electric flutters sound*]

[*music begins, the instrumental to "Liquid Swords" by the GZA; this is the song that Rapsody samples from for "Ibtihaj." It features repeated, rhythmic keyboard chords played one after the other over a beat, playing one chord eight times and then another chord eight times before repeating.*]

TODD CRAIG: [*from Todd Craig, "How Eve Saved My Soul": Sonic Lineage as the Prequel to the Playlist Project*] And that kind of spawned how this idea of sonic lineage comes—this kind of thinking around what different elements sonically, visually connect to a song in the present day.

JENNIFER BUCKNER: [*overlapping voices*] I mean how do you teach sound, without. . . well, sound?

[*Sound of static noise, no voices. Then static noise stops. Silence.*]

TODD CRAIG: And how far back does that lineage travel?

JENNIFER BUCKNER: And I couldn't see how to move forward.

[A brief moment of silence]

[music begins (Carson, "Sticks and Stones")]

A.D. CARSON: [rapping] Yes, yes.

GRANDPA RON: [from Steph Ceraso, "Foreward (and Backward)"] Well do you have something to say, Stephanie?

TODDLER STEPH: Nah, I wanna just listen.

GRANDPA RON: You wanna just listen?

TODDLER STEPH: Yeah to the music.

GRANDPA RON: Ohhh. To the music.

A.D. CARSON: [rapping] Now that we see the broken bodies and bones . . .
[song continues]

STEPHANY BRAVO: [from Stephany Bravo, "Test-Test-Testimonialista: Stories of Sound, Space, Place, and the Body in Compton"] Refugees of a World on Fire. . .

A.D. CARSON: [rapping] the bruises of the battered, not from sticks and stones but from the results of what we've long been taught could never hurt us . . . [song continues]

STEPHANY BRAVO: My parents made home on the corner of El Segundo y La Santa Fe, in an apartment building which housed a predominantly Latino community.

TANYA RODRIGUE: [from Tanya K. Rodrigue, "Speech, Invention, and Reflection: The Composing Process of Soundwriting"] I want them to learn about rhetoric and writing in general, sonic rhetoric in particular, sonic composing processes . . .

STEPHANY BRAVO: My father, a Mexicano from Irapuato, Guanajuato was 27 years old then. Almost my age now.

TANYA RODRIGUE: . . . and perhaps most importantly, how one goes about learning something entirely new and composing in a foreign mode . . .

STEPHANY BRAVO: A tall and slender man whose white skin turned red from all those weekdays and weekends of working at *la llantera* for less than minimum wage. [Bravo's voice continues and fades out, overlapping]

TANYA RODRIGUE: . . . so it made sense to craft a flexible soundwriting assignment that emphasizes the process of writing and then to create an assessment mechanism that measures learning.

[song fades out (Carson)]

STEPH CERASO: Here we are, more than a decade later, and teaching with sound no longer feels radical.

[*music begins, "Music and Writing: The Closest We Get to Magic," from Sarah Snyder, Holly Hassel, Mark Blaauw-Hara, Jacob Babb, and Harley Ferris, "Come Together, Right Now: How the Compositional Affordances of Music Shed Light on Community, Identity, and Pedagogy (A Symposium)"*]

STEPH CERASO: In fact, it's now commonplace —soundscapes, voice, hip-hop pedagogy, remix, audio tours, oral histories, archives, listening, access, and more—is a testament to the health and continual growth of sonic work in writing and rhetoric.

HARLEY FERRIS [*singing*]: And now it's probably not news that it's all about moves and rhetorical situations. . .

JUSTIN LAMB AND CRYSTAL VANKOOTEN: In this world, we face some wickedly complex communicative tasks.

CRYSTAL VANKOOTEN: To make our collective way with any hope for success. . .

JUSTIN LAMB: To create a different set of global and local relations than currently exists. . .

JUSTIN LAMB: . . . all available approaches, not simply those limited to the two-dimensional space of a printed page.

[*Sound excerpts of Daniel Keller, "Lord of the Machines: Reading Human Computer Relationships," from Cynthia L. Selfe, "The Movement of Air, The Breath of Meaning: Aurality and Multimodal Composing," remixed by Justin Lamb*]

[*End of Transcript*]

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