Listen All Around

Sonic Abundance

Episode 02: Listen All Around

Hosted/Authored by Abigail Lambke

Duration: 24:01

[*Music: Lee Rosevere, "Evening Glow"*]

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: Hey, listen up! Listen down? Listen all around.

Ahh, listening. You are doing it right now! Check mark. Good job. You're done.

Just kidding. You're listening all wrong. Let me tell you how to listen. Ok - also kidding. This isn't about right and wrong.

Hello, this is Abigail Lambke, and in my episode, I am going to talk about listening because listening still gets the short end of the composition stick, trailing behind writing, reading, and speaking. That might be linked to listening's connection with sound, which itself hasn't long been a concentration in composition. That's the issue Cindy Selfe (2009) highlighted in 2009, and one that 15 years of sonic rhetoricians have worked to rectify.

And yet, rereading through Selfe's (2009) article, it strikes me that while Selfe focuses on *sound*, she hardly mentions listening, a skill I now find a necessity for a sonic-informed rhetorical practice or pedagogy. Selfe asks readers to leave the text and listen to sonic pieces, and she quotes from Krista Radcliffe's fundamental *Rhetoric of Listening*. But she does not explain listening or emphasize that it can be taught or *should* be taught. When discussing the history of education as a more oral endeavor in centuries past, she focuses on speaking and producing oratory, not listening to or understanding it (p. 620). In the contemporary era, she focuses on sound as a "compositional modality" (p. 632). Throughout, her focus is more on *deploying* the available means of persuasion, that of the producing, not the consuming (p. 626). Still, listening is more than consuming, isn't it? Listening isn't just being a passive container, because listeners, people, the audience, we are not passive containers. We are active, we are busy, we are full of prior information.

But to really achieve aurality in the classroom, we need more than sound and the production of sonic compositions. We need to listen to them, interiorize them, and understand their dimensions. We need intentional, thoughtful, theorized listening. In this episode, that is my focus: listening as an ability that needs continual cultivation in both rhetorical scholars and composition students. I'll draw from scholarship by bell hooks, Lispeth Lipari, and Cheryl Glenn in expressing my hope for an academic future that values aurality as Selfe (2009) proposed, and also listens to that aurality.

[Music: Lee Rosevere, "Puzzle Pieces"]

But first, journey back with me about 15 years. I, like many sonic rhetoricians, found Selfe's 2009 article in Cs groundbreaking. At the time I was a graduate student focused on Fr. Walter J. Ong, and her piece was the perfect bridge between my concentration on Ong's "secondary orality" and what was happening - or what I wanted to happen - in my composition courses.

The article directly influenced my pedagogy. 2011 was the first year I assigned audio essays to First Year Comp students. Inspired by Selfe, and attempting to practice what I preach, I created my first audio essay and sought to publish it. I knew that to teach it I had to practice creating something in the medium of sound instead of text, practice delivering work with my voice, practice setting my voice next to others. Through trial and error, I taught myself - and then my students - mechanics of recording and editing, the practice of drafting pieces to be read, and the joy of adding music and sound effects. This was all very important for my scholarly and pedagogical development, but looking back, it left out something just as important: listening.

When I compare my sonic-based pedagogy now, in 2026, to that from 2011, what has changed the most is my approach to listening. I now integrate listening exercises and have students practice listening and comparing their listening practices. We listen before we start a sonic project. We listen to drafts. And when the final versions are done, we hold a listening party. Even when students find it incredibly uncomfortable to listen to their own voices, they are always interested in listening to their classmates'. Such emphasis on listening has enriched my courses and my understanding of my students, their compositions, and the world more broadly. But this listening doesn't just happen, and it isn't just in one form. It needs to be cultivated and taught in order to have real benefits.

[*Music: Lee Rosevere, "Start the Day"*]

My main contention in this episode is that compositionists need to teach listening. Why? The obvious answer is that listening is multifaceted, that listening is as much a cultural construction as it is an individual experience. The only way to know this, to understand it, is to listen to a variety of voices and experiences, and then to listen to others listening to those voices and experiences. Because, as trite as it sounds, not everyone hears something the same way, especially when it comes to voices.

To illustrate this, I'll turn to the illustrious scholar writer feminist bell hooks. Here is hooks in a public dialog with Melissa Harris-Perry, discussing interpretations of Black women's voices (The New School, 2013). First, some set up. Melissa Harris-Perry hosted a TV show on MSNBC. In 2012, while discussing class mobility with the guest Monica Mehta, Harris-Perry forcefully talked about the risks of poverty. I'm going to play you a clip. And as you listen, listen to her voice, but also listen to yourself. What assumptions are you making based on her voice and its intonation? How might you characterize her voice or reaction? Here she is:

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: Seriously, what in the world is riskier than being a poor person in America? I live in a neighborhood where people are shot on my street corner. I live in a neighborhood where people have to figure out how to get their kid into school cuz maybe it'll be a good school and maybe it won't. I am sick of the idea that being wealthy is risky (Dennis, 2012).

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: These words and the emotion behind them were listened to in different ways by different people. And for bell hooks, some different interpretations are based in Harris-Parry being a Black woman. She says:

BELL HOOKS: And so part of what we wanna talk about is has there been a meaningful, concrete change in how we hear, think and feel about the Black woman's voice? Because many of you may have seen the show where Melissa is talking, was she an economist? (The New School, 2013)

MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY: Ah, uh-huh. - Yes, I think that is the official title of what Ms Mehta is. (The New School, 2013)

BELL HOOKS: And I was so impressed myself and it was like a love moment for me when Melissa just, you know, really boldly put out there what we know to be real and true. (The New School, 2013)

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: But the way that hooks listened to the interchange was not the way others did. She explains hearing and reacting to their reactions:

BELL HOOKS: And then, I was so stunned when I kept hearing from people, oh, you know, she really lost it. And I was and I thought - kept thinking, oh, if this was Charlie Rose, if this was any number of white men who would just boldly speak their truth, she didn't raise her voice in any way. There was for me, no sense of aggression. But once again, she was turned into the *angry* Black woman, not the insightful, brilliant Black woman who just threw down in such a way that it created a sense of awe. [*clapping in the background*] And so that then gave me pause in thinking about, on one hand, has there been a shift or are we still pushing against a certain characterization of the Black female voice? (The New School, 2013)

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: So while hooks listens to Harris-Perry putting out there what was "real and true" with "no sense of aggression," others listen to someone who has "really lost it" and an "angry Black woman" (The New School, 2013). Now, you likely formed your own impression of Harris-Perry in the small sample I provided. None of the listeners - including hooks or you - are passive containers, they are interpreters, and they are interpreting both through an individual perspective and a cultural one.

There are many factors that feed into how we listen to voices, in this case the voice of an impassioned Black woman. But one factor has to do with whose voices we are used to listening to. Hooks calls this out in her response. If we are used to listening to white men speaking their truth in an aggressive way, then that sounds normal and natural, while other people doing something rhetorically similar can feel aggressive and angry. Part of this is about whose voices - and

I mean actual spoken voices - we are putting in our ears. Now, I want to note that this example is from 2012, only a few years after Selfe's article, and long before the emphasis or the deemphasis of DEI. My point about listening - or lack of listening - is not new. It is ongoing.

Hooks (1994) also addresses listening and voice in her pedagogical work, including the seminal *Teaching to Transgress*. She writes there of assigning in-class writing that is then read aloud by every student, while all students listen, an exercise that "highlights experience without privileging the voices of students from any particular group" (p. 84). In a dialog with Ron Scapp, they discuss how students are often comfortable listening to teachers, but not always other students. Hooks writes, "In regard to pedagogical practices we must intervene to alter the existing pedagogical structure and to teach students *how to listen, how to hear one another*" (p. 150). Importantly, that type of listening is not ingrained, it is taught and cultivated through both teaching and scholarship. The first step toward listening is to offer students a variety of voices, including their own and those of their peers.

[*Music: "Lee Rosevere, "Quirky Small Town Characters"*]

Listening might seem to be the most natural human ability - it is one a fetus can do at 28 weeks gestation. But there are different forms of listening. All too often American culture encourages us to practice what Lispeth Lipari (Think ND, 2021) calls "tactical listening" or listening with the purpose of response. But listening can be relearned and retaught, if we pay attention to it, and not just with our ears, but our entire bodies. In *Listening, Thinking, Being,* Lipari (2014) writes "what if our ears aren't really in our heads, but are our whole body? What if our entire body is one giant listening organ, one great resonating chamber? What if we are, in some sense, all ears?" (p. 30).

That phrase is a cliche - "all ears" - but it is also a difficult ideal to achieve, because much of what Lipari urges runs contrary to what we've been told to do as composition or rhetoric scholars. She writes, "in contrast to rhetorical eloquence, which is itself a form of mastery, to *be listening* is to refuse to control or master. It is to hold lightly, if to hold at all. Actually, it is not to hold, not to grasp. No grasping, no holding. Being." (p. 103). This is difficult for those of us who teach composition, in which we work to encourage some measure of mastery of rhetorical eloquence in text production. Listening seems to run counter to that. Furthermore, to relate back to the bell hooks example, it is all too easy for us to practice rhetorical mastery, to engage with the argument, to push back. It can be more difficult, but rewarding, to practice being with Harris-Perry when she speaks and is heard in different ways, or to be with bell hooks as she encounters those different interpretations and then asks about the characterization of the Black voice. Lipari, in her argument for listening pushes back against rhetorical eloquence in itself, instead urging for being instead.

Lipari (Think ND, 2021) offers some directives on how to practice listening in her talk, "The Freedom to Listen." Let's hear from her

LISPETH LIPARI: So, from an individual perspective, commitment to the freedom of listening requires both inner and outer awareness an understanding of one's own limitations and a recognition of the complexity of listening itself (Think ND, 2021).

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: This freedom is a contrast to the freedom of speech, and it isn't about voicing your ideas, fighting back, or rhetorical mastery. It is about being with ideas. She continues

LISPETH LIPARI: This doesn't mean tactical listening in order to win an argument but democratic listening. Listening that appreciates the plurality of perspectives that make up a robust democracy (Think ND, 2021).

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: And necessarily, perspectives you do not share, and perhaps might never share. That can be difficult. But Lipari tells us to start from within, in a way that is akin to hooks' (1994) practice with her students. She continues

LISPETH LIPARI: The freedom to listen to others to truly listen begins with the freedom to listen

to ourselves to cultivate discernment about what our thoughts and ideas are arising what we are responding to, to what feelings and body sensations we're feeling and to what habitual patterns of meaning making we are reinforcing, to what assumptions or preconceptions are back lying behind our understanding. We may be a tabla rasa at the beginning of life, but our blank slate quickly becomes filled with the words of others because learning language because we learn language from the outside in (Think ND, 2021).

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: I asked you to do a measure of this when I inserted the Harris-Perry clip earlier in this episode. Lipari's (2014; Think ND, 2021) type of listening, I'd argue, has a place in the composition classroom. To understand what we understand, to communicate it in writing or voice or any available means of persuasion, we have to look from the inside out. This can mean hearing our own reaction to a voice, setting those reactions next to other reactions, and teasing out how that makes meaning.

[*Music: Lee Rosevere "Where Was I"*]

Listening in this way takes time and energy. It is not fast or immediate. Lipari's (2014) form of listening is pretty inefficient and it isn't the shortest path anywhere. It probably won't help you win arguments or tighten your prose, or advance your prestige. These reasons might make it unpopular with the current mindset of productivity and speed. But for those reasons, among others, I classify this type of listening as a practice of rhetorical feminism.

Cheryl Glenn (2018) begins *Rhetorical Feminism and this Thing Called Hope* by distinguishing between masculinist rhetoric and feminist rhetoric. When she was entering the field in the 80s and 90s, she writes, "nearly all the rhetoricians

were men, and rhetoric was a wholly masculinized field, with a scholarly focus on rhetoric that was political, agonistic, aristocratic, and persuasive" (p. 1).

We could also add that the emphasis was on written work, ideally where you critiqued a prominent idea in a monograph. With rhetorical feminism, Glenn (2018) synthesizes an alternative to that agonistic model. Glenn writes, "We hoped that rhetorical study would come to embrace such foundational feminist concepts as openness, authentic dialogue and deliberation, interrogation of the status quo, collaboration, respect, and progress…. The feminist values of inclusivity and representation could be realized, if only rhetoricians would learn how to appreciate the vast variety of people and practices that tactically embody rhetoric every single day" (p. 1).

Now, when I entered the field in the 2010s, there had been some change. There were many more women, particularly teaching composition. Feminist rhetoricians had started a popular conference, academic journals, and had robust communities. But, those of us who dream the dream of rhetorical feminism want more. Feminist rhetoric is a respected *subfield* of rhetoric. But feminism is always an add-on, never a basis. What if all rhetorical work was also a practice of rhetorical feminism? What if rhetorical study was always about authentic dialog, collaboration and respect, not one-upping each other or searching for the holes in each others' scholarship.

For me, working in audio in sound and in voice and listening is one way that I attempt much of what Glenn (2018) suggests. That includes, openness, deliberation, respect, inclusivity and representation. Now, while this type of listening isn't going to win your points in the agnostic masculinized space, and as I said before, it isn't particularly efficient, it does have benefits. It allows access to new ways of thinking, new insight, new people, different voices. It is inclusive, it's active. And finally, it is forward facing. It is hopeful. The type of listening I'm talking about can develop a deeper understanding of the world, the people in it, and how they understand relations to one another.

Hope means to always be moving toward the better thing - to be able to see it and work toward it, even if we don't achieve it. Hope means integrating these practices into scholarship and teaching, expecting not all of our students to pay attention - but some. Expecting not all of the scholarly audience to "get it" - but some. Let's listen to Glenn (NCTE, 2019) talk about hope with respect to rhetoric and teaching. This is from her 2019 acceptance speech after being awarded the Exemplar Award at 4Cs.

CHERYL GLENN: We're the teachers who believe that rhetoric should do something, should make the world a better place. And our students come to us with the same hope we have long held for our own better-educated selves: that education—that our teaching and their learning—will change their lives (NCTE, 2019).

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: This hope is one I hear in Selfe's (2009) article, too. There is a hope that composition should be about more than writing, that we

could respect students' "penchant for listening to and producing sound," (p. 617) that we could stop limiting ourselves in study and teaching. Selfe's emphasis on "both/and" instead of "either/or" (p. 618) is an act of hope, a way to make the world a better place.

In cynical times, hope feels far away. But teaching, learning, and listening can all be connected with hope, an inclusive hope. In Glenn's (NCTE, 2019) speech, she constructs a metaphor of composition teachers as villagers and emphasizes the changes in the field over the years:

CHERYL GLENN: The teachers in our village continue to guide and inspire us all. They have founded the 4Cs (and then all the caucuses and SIGs within the 4Cs); pioneered graduate programs in rhetoric and composition; established Basic Writing programs, ESL programs, undergraduate and graduate writing centers; argued for the importance of reading, speaking, silence, listening, performance, and virtue to our work. Our teachers have demanded respect for vernaculars, dialects, and languages; extolled the value of writing across the curriculum and of transfer; demonstrated the significance of identities, emotions, and experiences to every rhetorical transaction; and opened up histories and practices of rhetoric across genders, sexualities, abilities, ethnicities, and cultures both here and around the world (NCTE, 2019).

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: These are real changes that have made a real difference. One change Glenn (NCTE, 2019) calls attention to is modality, a change that Selfe (2009) was very much a part of. Such changes only come from hope that something can change. Such hope is in our students, too. Glenn continues:

CHERYL GLENN: Even those students from the most impoverished backgrounds come to us with one hope, one dream in mind: that their lives might be better than their parents', that the lives of their own children might be better than theirs so far have been. For these reasons, we villagers spend our days, nights, and weekends working to help our students claim their authority, their agency, their rhetorical power. Their acts of writing—and our acts of teaching—are acts of hope (NCTE, 2019).

ABIGAIL LAMBKE: For Glenn (NCTE, 2019), hope is fundamental to the act of teaching writing and rhetoric, and this hope can spill over into scholarship as well. Our hope is for change - that we will have access to more types of scholarship than our predecessors, and that we can pass these values on to our students. That is a hope that Selfe's (2009) original article had, too, a hope that we can meet the demands of the moment and not be mired in the needs of the past. Selfe ends the article talking about the "wickedly complex communicative tasks" we face, writing "To make our collective way with any hope of success, to create a different set of global and local relations than currently exists, 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" (p. 645). That sentiment is no less true now than 15 years ago.

I would add, though, to really navigate those complex communicative tasks,

and to create new relations, we need to do more than communicate or produce rhetoric. We need to learn and teach how to listen to the rhetoric and the differing voices around us. We need to learn and be with those voices, not necessarily to classify, master, or rebut them, but to listen to them in a state of openness and receptivity. I hope you can practice this type of listening with the other episodes in this podcast series and then bring it to your students.

Thank you for listening. Good-bye.

[*End of Transcript*]

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Backing Music

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