

# INTRODUCTION

## TOWARD EXPANSIVE LISTENING AND SONIC COMPOSING PRACTICES

*On the way to class I pass an active construction site. I can feel the sounds of the loud machinery in my chest cavity, and I am suddenly anxious. I start to walk faster toward the building where my classroom is located. When I arrive at the digital lab there are twenty-five students already in their seats—all of them staring at screens. It is quiet enough to hear the electric hum of the computers. Though I am glad to have escaped the uncomfortable construction sounds, the awkward near silence does not relieve the tension in the body. I watch the clock on the screen of my phone and wait impatiently to begin class.*



*Starbucks is bustling. The blend of hissing, clanking appliances, lively conversations, and store music creates a welcoming environment. Muffled sound is leaking from the earbuds of a woman standing in front of me, giving me an unwanted sample of her “private” sonic experience. I order my coffee and find a table in the corner. The songs on the corporate playlist sound similar—upbeat yet indistinct enough to fade into the background like unobtrusive sonic wallpaper. I barely notice the soundscape as I evaluate student projects on my laptop.*



*On the drive home from campus I listen to a podcast. There is something comforting about the acoustics of the car. The sounds from the world outside are diminished, making it seem like I am in my own listening booth. By interacting with the material features of the car, I can regulate the speaker's volume and position as well as the interior temperature. I can adjust the position of the seat to make my body feel more relaxed. Listening to this podcast in my car is a sensorially pleasing experience, and it puts me in a good mood. I pull into my driveway and continue to sit there. I do not want to tear myself away from the narrative world of the podcast or from the sonic world I am inhabiting—my customized listening cocoon.*



**THESE SONIC SCENES FROM MY** everyday life capture an important quality of sonic interactions. Though listening is often thought of as a practice that involves paying attention to audible information, sonic experiences engage much more than our ears and brains; they also affect our physical and emotional states. Indeed, all sonic encounters have subtle, sometimes powerful, effects on our bodily experiences in different situations and settings. Consider the various ways that sound influences our feelings and behaviors as we move through the world. We inhabit countless strategically designed sonic environments every day, whether or not we are aware of it: shopping malls, grocery stores, churches, hotels, restaurants, offices, parks. These acoustically designed spaces are intended to persuade us to feel or act in certain ways. For instance, the sound in a store might be employed to try to elevate our mood so we linger there longer and buy more; a hotel lobby might be intentionally loud to encourage people to talk and be social. The objects in our lives also provide sonic feedback that sometimes stirs our emotions. You can probably hear when your washing machine is on the fritz, or perhaps the sight and sound of an ice cream truck triggers a feeling of nostalgia for your childhood. Sonic encounters can be intense bodily events—like when you stand close to gigantic speakers at a concert and feel the vibrating, thumping bass in your stomach and throat. And, many technologies enable us to design personalized sonic experiences: noise-cancelling headphones, apps that reproduce the sounds of a coffee shop to help writers concentrate in their too quiet home offices, music platforms that offer customized playlists for every occasion, white noise machines that promise a better night's sleep. There is even technology that gives listeners the power to adjust and manipulate the sonic world around them in real time using two wireless earbuds and a smartphone app (*Here One*).

As these examples illustrate, engaging with sound entails much more than hearing audible information. Sonic experience is complex, varied, multisensory, and contextual.

Given the rapid development and wide accessibility of new sonic technologies and experiences, this is an opportune moment to reconsider the role of sound in rhetoric and composition—to think expansively about what it means to listen to and create with sound in the twenty-first century. There has been a huge boost in scholarship on sound by authors from across the humanities and social sciences. Yet little work has been done on how to teach students to design or participate critically in sonic interactions. The sonic boom that we are now experiencing in academia and everyday life amplifies the need for developing more extensive pedagogical approaches to sound and listening. I see this moment as an opportunity for rhetoric and composition scholars to build upon and invigorate our long disciplinary history with sound.<sup>1</sup>

*Sounding Composition* introduces a robust sonic education for rhetoric and composition—and multimodal composition in particular—by reimagining the teaching of listening to account for a broad range of sonic experiences and composing practices. To that end, in the following chapters, I develop a pedagogical framework that is based on listening and composing techniques from an eclectic mix of contemporary sound practitioners. These professionals practice what I call *multimodal listening*, or attending to the ecological relationship among sound, bodies, environments, and materials. As I will argue, multimodal listening is a practice that can help all of us take advantage of the affordances<sup>2</sup> of sound and become thoughtful, sensitive listener-composers in any setting. This book offers a capacious, explicitly embodied approach to sonic education that strives to provide teachers and students with a more holistic understanding of the sonic world.

## WHY SONIC EDUCATION MATTERS NOW

In order to consider how we might transform pedagogical approaches to sound in rhetoric and composition, we must first reflect on how digital technologies have changed our relationship to sound and listening. More often than not, using digital technologies involves disengaging with one's immediate environment.<sup>3</sup> Sound seems to be one of the most effective and desirable modes of disengagement. This is most likely because, unlike visual media, sonic media allow us to multitask with ease. You cannot, for example, watch a movie on

your phone while walking down the street without the risk of crashing into people or objects, but listening to sonic media allows you to free up your eyes and the rest of your body. It is possible to run, type, clean, and do any number of activities while listening to music, audio books, or podcasts.

While consuming digital sound is convenient, the widespread adoption of digital audio technologies has also influenced the ways that many people are conditioned to listen. For instance, plugging in to digital devices like MP3 players and smartphones encourages people to pay attention to some sounds and ignore others; these technologies train (hearing) listeners to pay attention to the sounds being funnelled through their ears. People use digital audio technologies to create sonic boundaries around themselves, and any sound that happens to permeate their personalized sonic bubbles is a distraction. Using technologies to create private listening experiences is certainly not a novel practice. The gramophone, car radio, Walkman, and many other consumer products were employed to do this long before digital devices became available. What is new and significant about digital technologies is their pervasiveness in home, work, and public environments. It is easy and often preferable to be plugged in as much as possible. While there are many advantages to being able to access a gigantic library of sonic content at the tap of a finger, plugged-in listeners also miss out on the larger world of sound in which they are situated. In other words, digital audio technologies play a role in training people to develop selective listening habits by encouraging them to tune out the sonic environment around them. As I will argue throughout this book, too much tuning out, or selective listening, can lead to an impoverished understanding of how sound works and affects people in different environments and contexts.

In some ways, then, digital audio technologies have played a role in perpetuating restrictive listening practices. At the same time, they have enhanced listeners' capacities to consume and compose with sound. One of the key affordances of digital audio technologies is that they allow users to design and manipulate sound in ways that were once limited to professionals. By watching video tutorials or simply tinkering with software, scores of people have taught themselves to produce high quality podcasts, songs, audio documentaries, and more. Computers and tablets have become viable substitutes for professional sound studios. Listeners also have more access than ever before to downloadable audio files. Smartphones and MP3 players serve as massive storage devices that make it possible for listeners to carry their entire audio libraries in their

pockets, which they can choose to consume, organize, share, and remix. The sheer number of accessible audio files and the fact that listeners are no longer beholden to a physical medium (e.g., record, tape, CD, etc.) has profoundly changed how music and other audio is consumed as well. Because people are now able to purchase individual MP3s of songs, instead of having to buy full albums, the kind of sustained listening associated with playing an album in its entirety is becoming increasingly rare; many contemporary audio libraries are more like digital mixtapes than comprehensive collections. Generally speaking, contemporary audio technologies enable users to engage with and control sound in ways that were not possible for the average listener before the mass popularity of personal computers and mobile devices.

Bearing in mind the various ways that digital technologies have changed our relationship to sound, this cultural moment demands a listening pedagogy that takes into account the distinct sonic habits and experiences that have emerged during the twenty-first century. Clearly, digital technologies provide new avenues for teaching with sound. At the same time, our dependence on digital technologies—especially the earbudded experience of consuming digital audio—has resulted in a selective understanding of how sound works as a mode of composition and an affective, rhetorical force in the world at large. Thus, the challenge for teachers is this: How can we help students cultivate relevant listening practices that allow them to capitalize on the affordances of sound in digital contexts while retraining them to become perceptive listener-composers in any setting?

In response to this challenge, *Sounding Composition* provides a collection of possibilities for teaching students to be smart, sensitive listeners during the production of multimodal compositions and in their experiences with a variety of sonic media, environments, and objects. This book is pedagogical both because it presents practical applications for the multimodal composition classroom and because it proposes listening practices that can help anyone learn to be more reflective about their sensory interactions with the affectively rich sonic world. In a culture where being plugged in to digital devices is a common occurrence, when so much of what we pay attention to is streaming through earbuds or flashing on screens, I am calling for a reeducation of our senses—a bodily retraining that can help listeners learn to become more open to the connections among sensory modes, environments, and materials. In addition to listening in to digital content, it is time that we learn to listen up, out, through, and around.

## MORE THAN EAR-ING: MULTIMODAL LISTENING

To provide an expansive framework for sonic education, this book introduces a pedagogy based on the concept of *multimodal listening*. I define multimodal listening as the practice of attending to the sensory, contextual, and material aspects of a sonic event. Multimodal listening moves away from ear-centric approaches to sonic engagement and, instead, treats sonic experience as holistic and immersive. Unlike practices in which the listener's primary goal is to hear and interpret audible sound, multimodal listening accounts for the ecological relationship among sound, bodies, environments, and materials.

Multimodal listening is quite different from listening practices that depend upon the ears exclusively, or what I call *ear-ing*. Ear-ing involves focusing on a particular kind of audible information, such as spoken language. It is how most people interpret what it means to listen: paying attention to audible content.<sup>4</sup> Ear-ing relies on undistracted attention. In contrast, to listen multimodally, one must attend to the distractions. Instead of only homing in on specific content, multimodal listeners are attuned to how sound is connected to and intertwined with different senses, spaces, and objects. Multimodal listening allows for dispersed attention—a general openness to the sonic world and its complexities. Put differently, multimodal listening enables listeners to understand how their bodily experiences in specific contexts shape and are shaped by sound. In this sense, multimodal listening echoes the kind of nonlinear, distributed attention that is associated with digital environments; it is a practice that is aligned with the learning habits that we have already been developing via interacting with computers and mobile devices.

At first blush, *multimodal* may seem like a term that does not adequately represent the dynamic sonic experiences and listening practices I am setting out to examine. One of the limitations of the word *multimodal*, as Thomas Rickert points out, is that it “indicates various, discrete modes that are then combined” (*Ambient 142*). In other words, *multimodal* implies that there are separate modes (visual, aural, etc.) that are isolated and need to be put back together. While the separation of different modes may work on a conceptual level, it is a far cry from actual bodily interactions with the world. When one observes a plane taking off or a tree rustling in the wind, one does not experience the image, then the sound, and so on. Rather, these sensory modes are experienced simultaneously. By isolating individual modes to make meaning of

and with them, *multimodal* approaches tend to ignore how sensory modes work together, ecologically.

However, the implied separation of the senses in the term *multimodal* is in part what makes it an apt word to describe the listening pedagogy I introduce in this book. Multimodal listening pedagogy is both an acknowledgment of and a response to the fact that we have learned to attend to different sensory modes in isolation. People separate modes at the level of attention all of the time, and the privileging of particular senses is rooted in cultural learning (Classen and Howes). Sight, for instance, has historically been the dominant sensory mode in most Western cultures while hearing is considered secondary (Erlmann). Further, not everyone has access to all of the senses. Individuals with disabilities often rely on a particular sense out of necessity. For example, many blind people develop an acute sense of hearing to compensate for a lack of visual information (Bates). Because we have learned to treat the senses as discrete modes, multimodal listening pedagogy necessarily proposes practices that involve an ecological engagement with and understanding of sensory interactions. The goal of multimodal listening, which relies heavily on a conscious, heightened awareness of the body, is to reeducate people to attend to how the senses that they have access to work together to shape their unique embodied experiences. Multimodal listening pedagogy requires reflecting on one's personal sensory habits and unlearning those ingrained habits in order to approach bodily interactions with sound in more holistic ways.

*Multimodal* also serves as a tactical term. Like Matthew Kirschenbaum, I understand *tactical* to be an insistence "on the reality of circumstances in which it [the term tactical] is unabashedly deployed to get things done" (415). The frequent use of the term *multimodal*, as well as the serious consideration it has been given in rhetoric and composition scholarship, has helped to facilitate and justify new pedagogical approaches and innovative courses in many composition and rhetoric programs. In addition, scholarship on multimodality and the journals and conferences that continue to encourage its production have enabled scholars to receive legitimate recognition for their nontraditional work, such as nonprint-based projects. What *multimodal* offers as a tactical term, then, is a way to connect multimodal listening pedagogy to the well-known corpus of scholarship on multimodality that has allowed people to take risks—"to get things done"—in rhetoric and composition (415). Multimodal listening pedagogy provides teacher-scholars with a familiar touchstone that can help them validate the unfamiliar, experimental kinds of sonic composing and listening practices that I recommend in this book.

Lastly, using the term *multimodal* to describe the listening pedagogy I am proposing will add momentum to critical discussions about multimodality in the field. In recent years scholars have been pushing conceptions of multimodality by moving beyond strictly digital environments and accounting for the distinct affordances of different modes and materials.<sup>5</sup> *Sounding Composition* extends this exciting work by offering a nuanced, body-centric pedagogy. Specifically, this book attempts to expand how multimodality is defined in the discipline by arguing that multisensory experience needs to play a central role in how multimodal composition is understood and practiced. In this way, my project resonates with Kristin Arola and Anne Wysocki's collection, *Composing (Media)=Composing (Embodiment)*, which lays the groundwork for "wider sensuous engagements in writing classrooms" (8).<sup>6</sup> I believe that a deeper focus on sound and listening can move the field toward more sensuous and capacious multimodal pedagogies. Indeed, a rigorous examination of any single mode will inevitably expose that mode's *multimodal-ness*; as I will show, sound is always connected to and experienced with multiple senses. To further clarify how this book contributes to ongoing disciplinary conversations, I want to turn briefly to a discussion of how multimodal listening diverges from typical uses of multimodality in rhetoric and composition.

## REIMAGINING MULTIMODALITY VIA MULTIMODAL LISTENING

My choice to emphasize the role of bodily experience in multimodality differs from the majority of scholarship on the subject. Leading scholars of multimodality—namely the New London Group, including Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen—discuss multimodal communication practices through a semiotic framework (Cope and Kalantzis). The end goal of this research is meaning-making. As Kress writes in *Multimodality*, "There are domains beyond the reach of language, where it is insufficient, where semiotic-conceptual work has to be and is done by means of other modes" (15). Although scholarship about multimodality acknowledges modes that are extradiscursive, the ultimate pursuit of meaning-making positions multimodal approaches in the same realm as the discursive—a realm where objects are analyzed and interpreted.<sup>7</sup>

The semiotic framework introduced by the New London Group has had a powerful influence on conceptions of multimodality in rhetoric and composition. In 2005, Cynthia Selfe and Gail Hawisher dedicated a special issue



of *Computers and Composition* to Kress's work, and Selfe's adoption of the term *multimodal* in her own teaching and research has popularized the New London Group's approach to multimodality in the field (Lauer). The National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE) Position Statement on Multimodal Literacies, for instance, defines multimodal literacies as the "integration of multiple modes of communication and expression that can enhance or transform the meaning of the work beyond illustration or decoration" ("NCTE"). In fact, many publications that inform the ways that rhetoric and composition scholars understand and teach multimodality stress the fundamental role of meaning-making: Lutkewitte's *Multimodal Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*; Bowen and Whithaus's *Multimodal Literacies and Emerging Genres*; Arola, Sheppard, and Ball's *Writer/Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects*; and Selfe's *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, among others. The aforementioned scholarship has been essential to the growth of multimodal composition in the discipline, as well as my own research and teaching. Together, this body of work has redefined how composition is practiced and taught, making it possible (and legitimate) to design innovative assignments and projects that go beyond alphabetic text.

What I want to suggest, however, is that there is more to multimodality than the search for meaning. Multimodality should not be treated only as an enhanced hermeneutic or as a category that is subsumed by hermeneutics. Alongside and in addition to semiotic approaches to multimodality, it is necessary to adopt approaches that take up the affective, bodily, *lived* experience of multimodality. The multimodal listening pedagogy I describe in this book extends previous scholarship on multimodality by offering sonic practices that encompass the semiotic and the bodily aspects of multimodal experiences, which I see as inseparable. While many scholars of multimodality—including Kristie Fleckenstein, Christina Haas, and Patricia Dunn—have foregrounded the role of the body in relation to writing and images, I contend that a more acute attention to the body in relation to listening and sonic composing can result in roomier, explicitly sensory multimodal pedagogies.

This book uniquely contributes to scholarship on multimodality in rhetoric and composition by showing that sound is an ideal mode for exploring the multisensory nature of multimodal interaction. Interactions between sound and the body depend on vibration, which can serve as "a basis for thinking about relations between the senses" (Trower 5). Low sound frequencies (below 20 Hz) produce vibrations that are felt (e.g., the tactile experience of feeling the pulsing bass blasting from a passing car). It is also possible to see sound. Sonic vibrations from a band playing at a restaurant might disturb the water in

your glass. Even the simple act of seeing the source of a sound you hear and/or feel can play a role in shaping your listening experience. Instead of emulating the typical ways that multimodality has been approached in the field by isolating and examining particular modes in order to make meaning, throughout this book I will demonstrate that sound is an especially effective—and affective—mode for understanding how the senses work together *ecologically* in multimodal experience.

## **SOUNDING BODIES, ENVIRONMENTS, AND OBJECTS**

My choice to use the word *sounding* in the title and chapter titles for this book is strategic. *Sounding* signifies that sound is being made or emitted from someone or something. The fact that *sounding* is a verb, that it implies action, is pertinent to the arguments I make in *Sounding Composition*. The listening pedagogy I propose does not simply ask students to make meaning of sound as if it were a passive object of study. Rather, in multimodal listening pedagogy, engaging with sound involves experiencing and attending to the senses as they are activated by sound; it entails treating sonic events as physical encounters. Multimodal listening pedagogy is also associated with action in that it is aimed at helping students produce sonic compositions. The action of *sounding*, Julian Henriques writes, “encompasses everything, everyone and all the activities that go into the making of sound” (xxix). Similarly, multimodal listening pedagogy encompasses the range of activities associated with sonic production; it connects listening with making and doing things with sound.

The activity of *sounding* is integral to Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this book, which focus on different kinds of sound practitioners: a deaf percussionist; acoustic designers; and automotive acoustic engineers, respectively. I have chosen these distinctive practitioners because they each demonstrate a particular kind of *sounding* that amplifies a key attribute of multimodal listening. Chapter 2 examines the body-centric listening and composing practices of deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie, concentrating specifically on how multisensory approaches to listening can inform multimodal composing projects. Chapter 3 explores acoustic designers’ practices for engaging with and composing sonic environments to offer an ecological understanding of multimodal composition. And Chapter 4 turns to automotive acoustic engineers—and product designers in general—to consider how the sonic practices used for enhancing human relationships with designed objects can inform our everyday interactions with

things. Together, this three-part investigation of sound in relation to the *body*, the *environment*, and *objects* lays out the foundational concepts and practices for multimodal listening pedagogy. To be clear, I am not calling attention to the practices of sound professionals so that they can be replicated exactly in the classroom. I instead offer these extradisciplinary practices as heuristics for reimagining listening pedagogy to help teachers and students cultivate productive habits that can be applied to multimodal projects and sonic experiences in their own lives.

In order to initiate this kind of reimagination, I provide different pathways and possibilities for teaching with sound throughout the book. Each of the three chapters mentioned above is followed by a related interchapter that includes an example assignment, a pedagogical discussion, student work, and resources for teaching. I refer to these interchapters as *Reverberations*. A *reverberation* is an acoustic design term for the persistence of sound in an environment after the original source of the sound has ceased. It is a phenomenon that occurs when reflections from the original sound blend together and linger in a space (Brooks 21). Likewise, the assignments I provide represent the persistence and blending together of ideas from each chapter after it has ended. On a larger scale, I hope that these assignments will reverberate in classrooms as they are adopted and modified by teachers long after they have read this book. The Reverberation interchapters are also enriched by a correlating website ([www.stephceraso.com/reverberations](http://www.stephceraso.com/reverberations)) that features media from the example student projects referred to in the text. Traditionally, teaching materials in books are relegated to appendices. However, my decision to position the Reverberation interchapters throughout the book has to do with emphasis. Moving them to the end of the book might signal that they are not as important as the main chapters—that they are an afterthought. Yet, these concrete pedagogical discussions deserve as much attention as the discussions of case studies and scholarship. I take seriously the notion that both classroom practices and research should be approached with the same degree of care and thoughtfulness. Thus, I have tried to enact this concept through the book's structure.

The primary audience for *Sounding Composition* includes teachers, scholars, and students of rhetoric and composition who have an interest in sound and multimodal composition pedagogy. While pedagogy is the central theme, this book has much to offer beyond pedagogical theory and applications. For instance, the case studies and everyday examples woven throughout the core chapters are relevant to the growing number of scholars interested in sonic rhetorics, or the ways that sound—in conjunction with other elements of an

environment or interaction—operates as a material, affective force that influences listeners' bodily states, moods, thoughts, and actions. Audiences from other disciplinary subfields might also find different parts of the book useful. Rhetoric and composition scholars concerned with feminist rhetorical work on listening and embodiment, as well as scholars interested in disability studies, may be drawn to the exploration of deafness and multisensory sonic experiences in Chapter 2. Indeed, issues of accessibility in relation to sound and multimodal composition are discussed throughout the book. Scholars of spatial rhetorics might find significant the emphasis in Chapter 3 on the strategic design of sonic environments. And, the focus in Chapter 4 on the use of sound in product design could be informative for rhetoric and composition scholars interested in materiality/material rhetorics or design more generally.

In addition to multiple audiences in rhetoric and composition, this book is meant to be a resource for teachers, scholars, and students from a variety of academic disciplines that deal with sound, listening, multimodality, multimedia, and digital production. Most notably, readers associated with the field of sound studies constitute an important secondary audience for this book. In Chapter 1, I elaborate on how the main arguments of *Sounding Composition* have been influenced by sound studies work and pinpoint a number of scholarly areas that can bring together the fields of rhetoric and composition and sound studies in more explicit ways.

Sound plays an undeniable role in shaping experiences of all kinds. As educators, we cannot afford to ignore sound or brush it off as less attention-worthy than the visual. There is a genuine need for new pedagogical approaches that can help students cultivate critical listening and sonic composing practices in both scholarly contexts and in their daily lives. Thus, I conclude the book with a discussion about how multimodal listening pedagogy can contribute to a twenty-first century sonic education that is relevant to everyone—not just a particular field or discipline.

*Sounding Composition* loudly calls attention to the importance of listening in what has become a “plug-in and tune-out” society. It offers ways to sharpen and invigorate students' engagement with digital audio technologies while teaching them to be attuned listeners in their everyday interactions with the world. Implementing the multimodal listening pedagogy I propose in this book requires a willingness to treat the body as a real site of intellectual work rather than just a house for the mind. This pedagogy asks teachers and students to listen generously and expansively; to regard sound as a locus of inquiry as opposed to content to be mined for meaning; to embrace experimentation

and unfamiliar sonic practices. Ultimately, the ideas I share in this book are intended to create a *BOOM* that will shake and unsettle disciplinary approaches to sound and listening. My hope is that this felt noise will result in a more imaginative, inclusive, and transformative sonic education. Like sound itself, the pedagogical suggestions and practices I offer are malleable and should be revised or altered to meet the needs of different disciplines, teachers, and students. In short, this book should be played with, not simply read. I want to encourage readers to sample, mangle, hack, remix, and reinvent its contents.