Chapter 5. Disabling Soundwriting: Sonic Rhetorics Meet Disability Pedagogy

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Transcript writing *is* soundwriting. Caption writing *is* soundwriting. This is what I impress upon my students when I teach audio composition in digital media composing courses. The materials in this chapter take that claim seriously and work toward imagining what it means to *disable* soundwriting.

I do not use the term *disabling* to mean a lack or deficiency—as it has historically been used as an adjective such as in "she has a disabling condition." Instead, I mean to use *disabling* as a transitive verb, a strategic and intentional method for taking pride in productively disabling something else, centering disability experience in the creation of audio. *Disabling* soundwriting means making audio more accessible while simultaneously drawing attention to the ways it can and has been used to exclude disabled audiences from soundwriting processes and products. It means breaking down the oppressive structures that have removed disabled people from the soundwriting process and rebuilding sonic rhetorics and digital media pedagogy to not only offer ways for including disabled experience—but also to celebrate and accept disabled ways of soundwriting as a gain to the digital media composing process.

The assignments, examples, reflection, and readings shared in this chapter work to move students and instructors in digital media composing courses closer to *disabling* their soundwriting. They are designed to be presented over the course of at least a five-week unit on soundwriting in an introductory digital media composing course. The suggested readings are included to help supplement the technical soundwriting texts or samples an instructor may use in their course in order to help the class prioritize transcribing or captioning as a central, rhetorical element of the soundwriting process. They can be used to "add on" a disability unit in any digital composing course, but they work best if disability and *disabling*, as a method for soundwriting, are highlighted and prioritized throughout the unit. The point of the sequence of assignments—which include a Soundscape Remix Assignment and a Final Sound Project—is to both offer students space to practice soundwriting, supporting the use of tools and skills in the technical production of sound, and offer students time to interrogate and explore soundwriting from different angles, prioritizing diverse experiences with sound by transmediating soundwriting across aural and textual environments.

The objective of the first assignment—the Soundscape Remix—is to introduce students to soundwriting, the ethics of remix culture, and the technical skills

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used in producing soundwriting. In class, we consider current and historical implications and examples of sound remix culture and question its ethical use and relationship to cultural appropriation. From these discussions, students begin exploring and producing a remix of their choosing as a way to practice soundwriting skills, generic conventions of citing audio, and developing an artist statement. I like this assignment because it allows students to jump into soundwriting without having a strong catalog of originally produced materials from the start. They can begin thinking globally about the rhetoric of soundwriting without getting too bogged down at the start with the lengthy process of collecting and producing their own assets.

The final unit assignment—the Final Sound Project—builds upon the remix assignment by then focusing on the objective of disabling soundwriting. In class, we reflect on the Soundscape Remix and the stories students worked to achieve with their remixes. We then work to break these open—analyzing the messages these and other soundwritings tell to specific, as well as exclusionary, audiences. Working with the texts like those included as suggested readings in this chapter, the class shifts to consider how soundwriting might be rebuilt with access and disability in mind. Then, working primarily from material recorded or produced on their own, students craft their Final Sound Projects.

I like this assignment because inevitably we come to a point in class when someone asks, "Who is responsible for making soundwriting accessible?" I like to expand on that question to ask, "What affordances do producers of soundwriting have when making their work accessible?" Because producers of soundwriting are so often *not* asked to make their work accessible, I flip this question to make students consider what is lost when access is not situated as an essential part of the soundwriting process. Whose experience gets to count when soundwriting? And who gets to have access to the stories and messages—the rich rhetorical environments—that soundwriting creates?

I ground a conversation on disabling soundwriting as one that is fundamentally about centering disability in the production of soundwriting, and I use these assignments to highlight that message. Because captioning and transcribing are as rhetorical and complex as the other elements of soundwriting, producers of sound should likewise be prepared to transmediate the emotion and messages of their sounds into text. Not only because it's the right thing to do. But also because teaching students to produce sound without teaching them how to transcribe or caption can miss the forest for the trees. It's not only that students can produce compelling stories and arguments through sound, but also that they can articulate why and how those stories and arguments work. Effective captions convey both the heard elements of a sound and are crafted in such a way as to convey an effect as well. When captions and sounds support each other, that is truly effective soundwriting.

A quick note on how I use the terms *captioning* and *transcribing*: In my research, which investigates the composing practices of disability service speech-

to-text writers, I tend to find professionals use the term *transcript* to mean something that works toward a different rhetorical goal than the sound(s) it translates. A transcript, for example, is usually crafted to be experienced separately from the context in which the sounds it translates are originally performed. A *caption*, by contrast, articulates the pressing need to perform sounds and alphabetic text together in real time. Because I view them as integral to the kind of soundwriting I teach, I use the term *captions* here and with my students to impress a political orientation toward the relationship that exists between sounds and captions which support each other toward a shared rhetorical goal.

Assignments and Assignment Sequence

The following material is introduced over a five-week unit on soundwriting. I start the unit with a mix of theoretical discussion of soundwriting with instruction in the practical use of an audio editor. I demo a couple different tools, like Audacity (because it's free) and GarageBand (because my department has access to iPads that students can check out without paying for the hardware or software), but the assignments are adaptable to a range of scenarios in which students can use any audio creation and editing tools to compose aurally. For departments without access to these resources, for example, the assignment could be adjusted to have students use smart phones and the app Anchor.

The first assignment, the Soundscape Remix, is due in week 3 of the unit. A draft of the Sound Project is due in week 4, and the final Sound Project is due in week 5. Readings, instruction in soundwriting software, and discussion of captioning are interspersed with studio hours that allow students to work on their projects in class. I have provided some suggested readings in the chapter's appendix.

Soundscape Remix Assignment

> The Soundscape Remix is a project in which you will demonstrate your developing skill in editing audio using Audacity. For full points for the project, you will clip, layer, trim, amplify, and/or otherwise alter in some meaningful way one found or existing sound. This "found or existing sound" could be a song, podcast clip, speech, announcement, or any other existing aural artifact.
>
> Submit your project as a finished MP3, WAV, or AAC file, not an AUD file or other software-specific file type that requires use of sound-editing software to open. An overview of exporting files to MP3 in Audacity, as well as links to downloading the LAME file required to do so, are available in the online Audacity manual.
>
> With your uploaded remixed sound file, also include a very brief (at least 100 words, though more if you choose) artist statement that explains the changes you made to your soundscape and why you were interested in making these changes or what effect you feel the added changes has on the original sound.

You will also use your artist statement to appropriately cite the source(s) you've used in your remix.

Sound Project Assignment

For this project, you will draw upon your skills and understanding of composing with sound to answer the question: "What digitally created sound do I need to make?" This differs from the question of what you want to make in that it asks you to apply your developing skills in digital media production to a current topic or issue of importance to you and/or the communities of which you are a part. This project will have you seek out, with the aid of the journal of audio and visual assets you have been keeping all semester, elements of your surroundings that you want to explore in more depth through the remixing, editing, and creation of digital sound. You may choose, but do not need, to use this project to extend or transmediate other projects completed in this class, including the Soundscape Remix.

Directions

For this project, you will submit three items:

- your digitally created sound,
- captions/a transcript for your sound, and
- an accompanying artist statement of 100–250 words.

Your digital sound may be a single created sound production, an extended remixed work, or a collection of sound productions that connect in some meaningful way. Submit your sound(s) as MP3, WAV, MIDI, or AAC files.

Your artist statement should address how you approached the question of what digitally created sound you needed to make, what tools you used to create and edit your sound production, and what decisions related to sonic rhetoric you explored and employed when crafting your sound. In other words, your artist statement will act as your description of what you hoped to achieve with the creation of your sound and what elements of your process and crafting of your sound help you to achieve it. Some sample artist statements (and some guidelines you may find helpful) can be found on this list of eight sample artist statements.

Your transcript, on the other hand, should be viewed as an extension of your sound production and a translation of it as an aural production into captions. As the composer of your sound(s), you are especially empowered to craft a transmediation of your work that is as artistic, factual, or experimental as your aural sound(s). The goal of transcription is to translate the aural, hearing setting of a production into a visual, textual environment in order to make it more accessible to people who would otherwise have little to no access to it. Its goal is not necessarily to capture in detail all of the elements of a soundscape but rather to bring attention to the important or salient rhetorical and narrative moves of a soundscape, what makes it interesting, what's important about it, and/or what it conveys. Some additional tips for transcription, as well as some examples, can be found on this starter kit for creating captions.

Sample Student Projects

1. Untitled Project by Courtney Anderson: In this first example, Courtney Anderson explores creating music and creatively captioning her produced sounds.[1]
2. "Welcome to OSU" by Joe Matts: Joe Matts similarly explores tools for music creation, setting a different mood and exploring diverse ways to caption those sounds.
3. Untitled Project by Bryant Cauley. In this next example, Bryant Cauley explores mixing together sound effects to simulate the sounds of drinking while driving.
4. "Virginia Woolf as an EDM Song" by Kristen Cerne: Kristen Cerne explores vocal manipulation tools to convey a new take on a classic poem.
5. "Dayton" by Cat Dotson: Cat Dotson shares her literacy narrative, focusing on the power of her own voice in both the audio and transcript. The narrative was created as part of a larger project focusing on her experiences growing up and living in Dayton, Ohio.
6. Untitled Project by Carmen Greiner: Finally, Carmen Greiner creates a powerful mashup of vocal performance and spoken word commemorating Black lives lost to police brutality.

Reflection

[Introduction sounds of voices echoing in a classroom. It's difficult to pick out what anyone is saying, as if the cacophony of sounds is heard while walking down a hallway, and the classroom is only just heard while passing by. Suddenly, a voice carries over the others while the room quiets down. It speaks: "Morning, everyone. Happy Tuesday. Our main objective for today is to talk more about your sound projects and mixing audio layers." The sound fades out as it leads into main narration.]

Chad Iwertz Duffy: These are the sounds of my class. I'm Chad Iwertz Duffy, and that was me teaching at Ohio State, where I completed my Ph.D. in rhetoric, composition, and literacy.[2] I study the rhetoric of transcription, the composing practices of disability service transcribers, and I bring that background into the assignment I'm giving students in that audio clip and that I've shared with you in this chapter. That assignment is all about getting my students to think about

1. Six student examples (audio files and descriptive transcripts) can be found on the book's companion website.

2. The audio version of Chad Iwertz Duffy's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

how captioning is a deeply rhetorical and artistic process. Just like soundwriting is. Crafting captions is also about creating access to multimodal work, and the assignment I give students teaches access in a way that I hope helps students see that accessible captions are complex and beautiful—kind of like their audio projects. Captions have an aesthetic of their own, and I want to stress that it's important for composers of audio to participate in the process of crafting captions. Because they know best what the purpose, audience, meaning, and significance of that audio is—and captions need that kind of expertise to influence their creation, too.

I first assigned the audio project in a digital media composing class. I had previously had a couple years of experience working for Ohio State University's Digital Media Project and Digital Media and Composition Institute. In those positions, I taught a lot of Audacity. A lot of Audacity. But I noticed that a lot of the complex multimodal composing processes that I'd teach using Audacity were ones that were not always easy to translate into a caption. How might you caption the following audio, for example?

[A student sample is played. The student wrote these captions as follows.]

Virginia Woolf as an EDM Song

Clear, distant voice: And then the body, who had been silent up to now, began its song almost at first as low as the rush of the wheels.

[Drumbeat begins.]

Deep voice: Eggs and bacon toast and tea

High-pitched voice: And red currant jelly

Deep voice: Eggs and bacon toast and tea

Clear voice with slight echo: With coffee to follow with coffee to follow

[Second drumbeat is added.]

Fuzzy voice: Fire and a bath fire and a bath

Deep voice: Eggs and bacon toast and tea

High-pitched voice: And red currant jelly

Fuzzy voice: Fire and a bath Fire and a bath

High-pitched voice: And red currant jelly

Deep voice: Eggs and bacon toast and tea

Echoed voice: And then to bed

[Both drumbeats end.]

> **Clear, distant voice**: And the rest of the journey was performed in the delicious society of my own body.

There are layered tracks here, sounds and distortions that need representation, changes in pitch and tempo, echo—overall what feels to me to be a playfulness in expression that just wouldn't come across without similarly creative captions. The audio is dynamic. Doesn't it also seem like it should have dynamically written or expressed captions?

I wanted to focus my assignment on that process of writing captions as dynamic. You might be thinking at this point, "Well, aren't captions all written the same way? There are standards for writing captions that can be taught and standardized and regulated." And that's true—there are several standardized methods for writing quality captions. And that has an important purpose. Regulating methods and methodologies for writing captions (which I study in depth in my dissertation—*[an almost humorous echo effect is added for the following phrase:]* coming out soon!—can ensure that disabled people who depend on captions for access in otherwise inaccessible environments (including audio-rich or complex environments) receive a quality of access that can be the difference between inclusion and exclusion. And that's important.

But I want to play around in this assignment with imagining not just what disability inclusion would look like when captions are provided by a service provider. I want composers of audio to accept disability as a gain to their composing process. What story is being told with their audio? What arguments are they making? What does that soundwriting do? Captions shouldn't just be routes to access the "true" (and I'm using air quotes there) soundwriting artifact. They can also be used to translate and participate in those quintessential soundwriting questions as well. Multimodal means many, varied ways of effectively communicating. Sound is one mode, and captioning is another. Both are valid in this assignment as multimodal ways of composing soundwriting. That's right—captioning *is* soundwriting. I want students to take that seriously and consider—both theoretically and practically—what composing captions can mean to the rhetorical and artistic processes of composing with sound.

So this assignment is a place to start on that big quest of having students use captions to center and pride disability as part of their effective soundwriting practice. Some scholars, like M. Remi Yergeau (2014), Amy Vidali (2015), and Elizabeth Brewer (2016) might call this practice *disabling*.

> *[A new voice is heard, slightly distorted from its recording in a large lecture space.]*
>
> > **M. Remi Yergeau**: So I want to disable all things, but I want us to really consider to whom are we writing, for whom are coding and tagging and passing legislation, and where are the disabled people? (Yergeau, 2014)

Chad: That's Yergeau giving a keynote at the 2014 Computers and Writing conference in Pullman, Washington. The presentation is called "Disable All the Things," and in that talk Yergeau argues that, taking a *[Yergeau's voice is layered into the following, which is also spoken by Chad]* "cue from Mia Mingus, disabling all the things involves toppling myriad oppressive structures. It involves more than retrofitting, or applying metaphorical band-aids. It involves catapulting like a velociraptor through a Lego tower. Knock all that shit over, and then maybe melt it in your backyard with a blowtorch" (Yergeau, 2014).

As I continue to teach captioning and access in digital media classes and assign projects like the ones I'm sharing with you, I want to emphasize—maybe even more—captioning as a way of world building and world destroying. Captions have often been situated as a way to build bridges to original content. They're retroffited onto existing soundwriting to make them more accessible. But I want my students to use them like Yergeau imagines a dinosaur in the backyard. How can captions explode a composer's soundwriting? How can they draw out what's important about composing with sound and be the center of our attention—be made so important and participatory to the product that they are essential—not retrofitted—in the composing process?

I don't know if my assignment does all that yet, and actually I'm pretty sure it doesn't yet. But I think it's starting to get close, especially in how is forces student composers to think about artist statements and captions differently. Some of what I've argued for here may be important to include in an artist statement, but I think it's essential to distinguish the two. I encourage students to see artist statements as describing what they hoped to achieve with the creation of their soundwriting and what elements of their process helped them achieve it. Captions, on the other hand, should be viewed as an extension and participation in the effectiveness of their sound production—a way of translating or transmediating (and not just describing) their work that is as artistic, factual, or experimental as the audio portion of their soundwriting.

[Light, airy music begins to play, which signals the reflection is coming to an end (JekK, 2014).]

So that is one way I'm intervening into this larger conversation with this assignment. I hope that it may be helpful to you as you continue to intervene with me more.

[Music continues for a few second, and then fades out.]

Acknowledgment

JekK's (2014) "First" was used with a license purchased through Jamendo.

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Appendix: Some Suggested Readings

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