Chapter 7. Electrate Anti-Definition Sound Collage and Transduction

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Introduction: Electracy and Sound Collage

For nearly two decades, scholars have reimagined traditional, literate writing for the digital and new media (Selfe, 2004; Writing in Digital Environments Research Center Collective, 2005; Wysocki, 2004), the network (Yancey, 2009), the postmodern (Dobrin, 2011; Johnson-Eilola, 2004), and the participatory (Arroyo, 2013). Perhaps the best realization of postmodern composition, Gregory Ulmer's (2003) electracy theory operates in a third apparatus—an alternative to orality and literacy—that values associative logic, juxtaposition, and appropriation and functions as a "digital prosthesis," opening up communicative possibilities in electronic spaces (p. 145). Electracy embraces fragmentation, multiplicity of meaning, and remix culture and clashes with the traditional hallmarks of literacy: certainty, clarity, and linearity. It promotes playful experimentation as we think and compose through new media rather than with it. Electracy, continually in a state of being invented in theory and praxis, provides composition and rhetoric instructors a framework for modern writing, one that can be fragmented, multimodal, and nonlinear. Yet few pedagogical applications exist, particularly at the first-year and community college levels. In this chapter of *Amplifying Soundwriting*, I share my Electrate Anti-Definition Sound Collage and Transduction assignment to bridge the wide gap in the composition classroom between the literate and electrate while welcoming a new, sonic composition. This electrate sound assignment asks students to gather audio fragments that collectively capture the many perspectives of an abstract word; the resulting collage serves as a springboard for their literate definition essays. Thinking through sound with a playful, electrate approach promotes creativity and a diversity of perspectives as students brainstorm their own definitions.

In "A New Composition, a 21st Century Pedagogy, and the Rhetoric of Music," Crystal VanKooten (2011) proposed, "Composition instructors [should] adopt a new definition of composition that is characterized by multiplicity, participation, and convergence, a definition that foregrounds *all* rhetorical choices available to 21st century composers, but in particular the rhetoric of music" ("New Terminologies" section). VanKooten's call for a postmodern, sonic approach to writing that is suitable for today's students with the affordances of composing audio advances many of the goals of electracy theory. The texts begin to look less like

literate creations in the verbal with certainty, directness, and originality as central hallmarks. VanKooten's new composition—with a focus on sound—privileges the student experimenting as DJ or rapper, splicing and cutting, remixing and reimagining, embracing rupture and plurality of meaning, fitting Michael Jarrett's (2007) "rapsthetic" (p. 74). The Electrate Anti-Definition Sound Collage and Transduction exercise grants students the ability to enter that mindset as composers while still working toward literate course competencies; it encourages the remix and plurality of meaning by taking the opposite approach to the standard first stasis assignment: the definition essay.

In writing definitions of debatable, abstract terms, students inevitably consult dictionaries and authoritative voices to set parameters and purge what a term is not. They practice brevity and craft concise statements confirming the aspects and qualities of their topic. In the literate apparatus and rhetorical practice, this activity satisfies the first category of stasis theory, as per the modern adaptation by Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor (1985). Though the definition essay remains in my composition class, students prepare for it by seeking many different voices and sounds related to that term; they develop a collage rather than an argument. In the electrate apparatus and new composition, definitions are inverted and ambiguity is foregrounded. In *Internet Invention*, Ulmer (2003) encouraged multiplicity and open-endedness of meaning, articulation instead of straightforward composition. Jeff Rice (2007) converted the anti-definition into an exercise that turns to other disciplines and reviews how the initial area of study changes based on different meanings.

My Electrate Anti-Definition Sound Collage and Transduction explores how the anti-definition fits in VanKooten's (2011) new, sound-based definition of composition. Students are asked as listeners/composers to work with a plurality of meanings and privilege no single definition, "voice," or mood more than another. In doing so, they might recover what is usually purged when defining in the literate apparatus. Students are encouraged to manipulate, experiment, and play with sounds to gain an understanding of nuance, juxtaposition, and articulation in the digital age. Their choices of fragments that represent and/or evoke all that a term can mean vary greatly, from the straightforward (e.g., verbal definitions from news clips or interviews, excerpts from readings) to the implied (e.g., clips of songs, television shows) to the abstract (e.g., noise, ambience). Rather than limit students, I supported the inclusion of any and all sounds that connect to their terms. As students gather fragments, stitch together and juxtapose the parts, and thinking through and with sound, they push themselves outside of their comfort zones and experience a new composition.

A central assumption made in designing this activity is that it requires minimal technical skill and no inclusion of students' own perspectives. Students are encouraged to compose their collages, consisting entirely of others' definitions, using free software like Audacity, but those who are not comfortable or unable to craft a sound collage are provided visual and multimodal alternatives

that still fall within the electrate apparatus. The conscious decision to remain flexible in this assignment was made with accessibility concerns and my target audience of community college students—often low-income, minority, and/or first-generation students, many of whom are food insecure, housing insecure, or even homeless ("Community College Facts," n.d.)—in mind. The assignment is not weighted heavily in the course, and ample workshop time is provided in class.

The next activity in the sequence, prior to the literate definition essay, is an act of transduction, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen's (2006) term for a translation of material between semiotic modes (e.g., video to text, audio to image). Students transform their sonic electrate collages to another mode, such as writing, justifying their choices of modal translation and analyzing the affordances and limitations of sound. This activity serves as brainstorming for the literate definition essay and guides students to reflect on their choices in any modality when communicating, either in the literate or electrate apparatus.

Assignment: Anti-Definition Sound Collage and Transduction

Length: 15 seconds to 3 minutes

File type: WAV or MP3 preferred; any form accepted

(Anti-)Definitions

Our first instinct when looking up a word's definition is to turn to authoritative written sources like dictionaries and textbooks or collaborative websites like Wikipedia. We trust that these definitions are correct and accepted by others as they have been standardized by a consensus of experts. Definitions serve an important role in communication as they help us understand new ideas and ensure we're on the same page with each other.

However, these established parameters to a term ultimately purge voices and perspectives that might otherwise fit a broader or different definition of that abstract term or concept. Definitions can serve as the foundation of arguments; we cannot agree to actions to solve a problem if we do not agree on what something is. For example, when a life begins differs greatly depending on whom you ask: it varies from conception to first brain activity to birth. Without considering the variety of perspectives, we might not have a complete understanding of the term.

In this activity, we're going to embrace uncertainty and try to complicate the definition of an abstract term through anti-definition. Your goal will be to promote a plurality of meaning rather than one of certainty.

Sound Collage

Though you might associate writing with verbal texts, composition takes many forms, including audio, video, oral, and visual. We engage various forms of

composition on a daily basis: watching TV, engaging social media, and listening to the radio. Later this semester, you will craft a multimodal digital storytelling project.

But first, we'll start with sounds. In this activity, you're going to create a sound collage, a blend of sounds and audio clips that evoke or speak to your term. What does "freedom" sound like to different people? What audio captures "success" for most?

Overview of Assignment

In your two-page definition essay (Essay #1), you are writing a compelling and unique argument for your own definition of a debatable, abstract term. You'll use negation, comparison, and contrast as definition tactics to shape your own term. Here, you'll discover the parameters of your own definition by searching for others.

For this invention activity, you will gather a variety of sound fragments that represent your abstract word. Consider these the "other voices" that define the term. The sounds could be straightforward (e.g., verbal definitions from interviews, friends and family, or news clips, excerpts from texts), implied (e.g., parts of songs, TV, or movies, everyday conversation), or abstract (e.g., noise, ambience).

How to Proceed

This assignment requires no inclusion of your own perspective or composition in your own words; look for OTHERS' representations of your abstract term for Essay #1. However, you might creatively and playfully juxtapose definitions or test the limits of a sound collage by experimenting with editing. Aim not to privilege any voice over another.

I recommend using the free, open-source software Audacity to piece together your sound clips, but you're welcome to utilize any software with which you feel comfortable. Most smartphones allow for voice memo recording, and you could simply record video if you'd like.

Your sound collage can be anywhere from 15 seconds to 3 minutes. Files types WAV and MP3 are preferred, but any format will be accepted.

NOTE: If you are not comfortable or unable to use audio software, you are welcome to complete this collage as a visual one through Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, Prezi, Pinterest, a poster board, or any form that you please. The central idea here still applies: you're looking for various images or written passages that define the same term.

Transduction

Once sound collages are completed, I would like for you to reflect on the affordances and limitations of using audio to capture meaning. Try to recreate your collage in another modality (writing, visuals). You might, for example, create a visual collage of images that best capture the sounds in your project. We will discuss in class what is gained and what is lost in this act of transduction, a translation of material between modes of communication.

Examples

Because of the nascency of this project, only a few examples exist. We will, however, listen to a few in class as inspiration for how you might tackle the project. We will also have workshop time in class to gather sounds and explore the Audacity program.

Sample Student Projects

1. "Family" by Ryan Jamerson: In the first example, Ryan Jamerson contrasts a popular 1970s song with her own version of family at home: her seven dogs.[3]
2. "Love" by Kyleigh Klima: The second example, a lengthy mashup of voices from coworkers, children, friends, and family with Ed Sheeran's "Give Me Love" in the background, Kyleigh Klima shows the many perspectives of love.
3. "Success" by Rachael Gauley. This unorthodox third example, Rachael Gauley's blend of sounds relating to "success," looks to videogames, champagne, and nature.
4. "Art" by Francesa "Chris" Laverghetta: In her 2.5-minute collage of voices discussing artistry, Francesca "Chris" Laverghetta blends a variety of confident definitions and inquiries regarding the boundaries of art.
5. "Accomplishment" by Cristina Babiuc: Though brief, Cristina Babiuc's 46-second project becomes increasingly abstract: from a comedic take on making the bed to police sirens, a grocery checkout, and birds chirping.
6. "Happiness" by Katelyn Gable: Demonstrating the various sounds of success, Katelyn Gable contrasts the abstract—seagulls at the beach—with the overt—Pharrell Williams's smash hit "Happy."

Reflection

[Instrumental excerpt of Sonic Youth's 2004 track "I Love You Golden Blue." A blend of different sounds and effects created by guitars, bass, and percussion simultaneously create an insect swarm-like effect. Fades to background.]

A cacophonous swarm of insects and annoying noises or a symphony of hypnotic bliss?[4] The fluttering, droning noises at the start of Sonic Youth's 2004 track "I Love You Golden Blue" encapsulate the band's proclivity for dissonance and

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

4.   The audio version of Thomas M. Geary's reflection can be found on the book's companion website.

multiple voices emerging at once while capturing what so many love—and hate—about their music.

This shroud of sound also serves as the inspiration for my Electrate Anti-Definition Sound Collage assignment.

["I Love You Golden Blue" returns to forefront briefly and fades out.]

["Electronic Music Track X1" by frankum (2018) enters in background. Soft jazzy notes accompany an insistent bass synth and a steady drumbeat with cymbals.]

My name is Tom Geary, and I'm a full professor of English at Tidewater Community College in Virginia Beach. For several years now, I've experimented with blending Gregory Ulmer's (2003) electracy theory into my instruction. Electracy, which Ulmer refers to as a third communicative apparatus to orality and literacy, embraces fragmentation, multiplicity of meaning, remix culture, and associative logic. It promotes playful experimentation as we think and compose through new media rather than with it.

In many ways, however, it clashes with the traditional hallmarks of the literate apparatus: certainty, clarity, and linearity. It runs counter to some course learning outcomes in my first-year composition course. Electracy is also perhaps a bit complicated for the first-year student, particularly at the community college level where questions about access are more prominent.

To blend the electrate with the literate—a soft transition of sorts that introduces students to the key qualities of electrate thinking while still satisfying literate course competencies—I developed an Electrate Anti-Definition Sound Collage project: an invention exercise that builds upon Ulmer's (2003) and Jeff Rice's (2007) anti-definition activities. This sound collage project promotes plurality of meaning—an inversion of the same definition essay assignment in the same class—and exposes students to a different approach to finding sources, including what some might consider noise.

["Electronic Music Track X1" by frankum fades out.]

[a glitching, chaotic computer sound while the user is attempting to stream video (toiletrolltube, 2008)]

In this reflection, I will share the purpose of the assignment, analyze a couple of student collages, discuss how the assignment benefitted those students, identify challenges in implementing a sound collage assignment, and share further inquiries regarding the future of the assignment.

["Ambient Wave 3—(Harmonics)" by deleted_user_2731495 (2018a) enters in background. Droning notes with subtle variations whoosh at what sounds like a slow-motion pace.]

"I Love You Golden Blue"—and in particular the 2-minute instrumental

opening—has always stuck with me. Like so many other Sonic Youth songs and other sound artists like Brian Eno and Crys Cole, this excerpt contains a multiplicity of voices—a collection of sounds and noises simultaneously working in unison to build an alarm-like effect. It feels electrate, or at least approaching that apparatus. And it seems like it's trying to define something or capture a mood: an awakening, or perhaps an epiphany. It's an annoying ringing but also one that is comforting. It's ambiguous and multivalent. Though it contrasts with the rest of the song's love elegy whispered by Kim Gordon, the track's opening is a wall of sound that pulls in—or perhaps pushes away—the listener while constructing multiple moods at the same time.

In designing the Electrate Anti-Definition Sound Collage project, I wanted students to seek that essence: ambiguity, plurality of voices, and open-endedness instead of one definitive, literate meaning. Their collages could take the abstract approach with noises alone or blend in any number of sounds: people's voices, excerpts of songs, dogs barking—really, whatever ways others might define the term of their choice. I wanted them to find the other definitions that would establish the parameters of their own in their literate definition essay assignment, but I wanted those to be in a different mode than they're used to researching.

["Ambient Wave 3—(Harmonics)" by deleted_user_2731495 ends.]

The assignment is simple, really. Students gather sounds that evoke a term. Then they compile, remix, or contrast those sounds creatively. It's a low-stakes, playful exploration meant to serve as an invention exercise for the essay, in which students define that same abstract term uniquely to them. The collage can take many forms, and in two semesters of teaching the assignment, I've received projects with a range from *[a woman saying "wow" (yugi16dm, 2015)]* to *[a horn sound that typically signals failure in a game show (TaranP, 2016)]*. Yet all avoid one clear definition and aim for the electrate.

Here's one student project that juxtaposes various types of sounds related to her term "good person." Cristina Babiuc's collage becomes increasingly abstract: from a comedic take on making the bed to police sirens, a grocery checkout, and birds chirping.

["Accomplishment" inserted here.]

> **Man** (perhaps Admiral William H. McRaven): If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed. *[Audience laughs]* If you make your bed every morning, you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task. And another. And another . . .

[police sirens]

*[Unintelligible brief phrase from a woman on an intercom radio—
possibly "Here, here.")*

[slapping noise of object striking a surface]

*[regularly timed beeps with background talking from an employee at a
grocery store]*

Clerk: Price on three.

[birds chirping]

*["Filtered Piano Looped 1 – (90bpm)" by deleted_user_2731495 (2018b)
enters. A piano loop of very few notes rises and falls in a consistent
pattern.]*

In this collage, Cristina forgoes direct definition and truly captures the spirit
of the assignment. She shows instead of tells and engages the listener with sounds
that vaguely capture what it sounds like to hear a "good person": a policewom-
an, a grocery store clerk assisting a customer. The opening advice taken from
Admiral William H. McRaven doesn't directly speak to goodness in humanity,
but it emphasizes the small things in life making a difference. This quotation sets
the tone for the rest of the collage. Caring for animals and nature in general can
be a "small thing" but it makes someone a good person. Assisting a customer or
co-worker is a "small thing" but it makes a difference.

Though Cristina found a thematic thread for each of her sounds and didn't in-
clude examples contrary to it, her sound collage served as a springboard to a success-
ful definition essay. Her argument about good people used some of these examples
but added components of selflessness and sacrifice. Her sound fragments functioned
as other views of "good person" that closely contrasted with her own definition.

Other student projects looked to establish the complexity of a term through
primarily verbal descriptions. Chris Laverghetta blends a variety of confident
definitions and inquiries regarding the boundaries of art, artists, and artistry with
sounds made in the process of creating art.

["Filtered Piano Looped 1 – (90bpm)" by deleted_user_2731495 ends.]

["Art" excerpt inserted here.]

Man: *[fades in]* And here, colors to do everything. And by its
simplification, a grander style to things, is to be suggestive here
first of rest, or of sleep in general. In a word, looking at the pic-
ture ought to rest the brain or rather the imagination. *[fades out]*

[pencil quickly and rigorously striking paper or canvas]

Man: *[fades in]* Art flows from the soul, twists through the con-
sciousness, and decorates life with its beauty.

Woman: It's this object, and you can lose yourself in the wonderfulness of the object, but then the object goes away and stops being an object. It just becomes a window, or a mirror. And that's what, uh, work has become gradually. *[slowly fades out]* It's changed.

[erasing from a paper or canvas]

["Cosmic Glow" by Andrewkn (2017) enters. A pattern of electronic beep-and-boop sounds steadily pace a track that has flourishes of synth in the background.]

Unlike the previous example, which felt like a collection of loosely related sounds, Chris's collage is like entering a Burkean parlor room: The variety of voices—none weighted more than another—pull the listener in different directions before she enters her own opinion. Here, art rests the brain. It twists the consciousness. It becomes the object. It emerges from our soul. In her collage, Chris illustrates the profound nature of art but also the varying descriptions and purposes.

Chris's anti-definition collage resulted not only in a thoughtful positioning of her voice in the larger debate about how to define artist but sparked her interest in narrating a powerful digital story animated project on underrepresentation of women, minorities, and LGBTQA in the film industry. Her confidence in composing with sound gained in this collage assignment resulted in an interest in further explorations of audio projects, particularly animated stories and podcasts.

Though these two student samples were successful immersions into electrate sound composition, the assignment was not always well received or met with enthusiasm and interest. Obstacles preventing students from completing the assignment became apparent in its very first planned iteration as I had a deaf student enrolled in my class and another student without access to the internet except when on campus. Accessibility concerns were certainly in mind when I designed the assignment, but I had not anticipated that an entire lesson on soundwriting would be scrapped to ensure awareness of all students' needs so early. It was the right choice, and it led to further contemplation of the assignment.

To accommodate students with accessibility, access, or comfort concerns, I offer an alternative multimodal or visual collage that follows the same process but replaces sound with images, video, text, or any other modality. The principles of the assignment remain the same, but sound is replaced with whatever the student prefers: a PowerPoint, a poster board, a website.

This flexibility is also of the utmost importance for my student population. Community college students are more likely to deal with food and housing insecurity, be first generation college students, and struggle with access to the most up-to-date hardware and software. While this sort of flexibility in curricular design may be a necessity for community college students, it should also be considered a best practice for instruction in any context.

Other alterations made to the assignment include making it a minor part of the overall class grade—freeing any expectations or stress accompanying a potentially confusing, new form of composition—and minimizing or eliminating any references to electracy altogether. So long as the principles are foregrounded, students can skip reading dense theoretical work.

["Cosmic Glow" by Andrewkn ends.]

["Electronic Dance Loop 02" by frankum (2015) enters. An upbeat dance track with the repeated vocal "Dancing" chugs along.]

Further inquiries regarding the future of the assignment include how to dive into questions of bodily affect and sound without losing focus of the definition essay assignment, how to properly tie in electracy without overwhelming first-year students, and how to tackle questions of copyright and citation, especially as I encourage more remixing of material. Ulmer promotes free exploration of experimental work and remix in the electrate apparatus without concerns about plagiarism, but that could be a problem for students new to the college experience.

With further refinement and attention to students' needs, I hope the sound collage opens students' ears to the planet of sound and broadens their perspective. I hope that it eases in electracy and introduces what Crystal VanKooten (2011) refers to as a "new composition" that foregrounds music and sound. It's just a first step, but I hope it results in a successful move toward soundwriting.

["Electronic Dance Loop 02" by frankum ends.]

["Success" excerpt inserted here]

[cut to champagne bottle popping open]

[champagne being poured]

[clink of glasses]

[Nature sounds. Birds sing in background as a helicopter flies by.]

Fair Use Statement

In this project, I use clips from one audio work—Sonic Youth's (2004) "I Love You Golden Blue"—that is protected by U.S. copyright law. However, I believe I have a fair use defense to use those works without permission for these reasons:

1. The purpose and character of my use is to use these clips as part of my scholarly project, transforming their character from the purpose for which their creator originally made them.
2. The nature of the copyrighted pieces is more "creative" or artistic, in which case this factor could weigh against me.

3. I only used a small amount of each clip, and when possible in the context of my argument, I used clips that did not represent the core, most substantial part of the original copyrighted work.

4. As an audio clip repurposed for teaching and scholarship purposes, there is no chance that my use will infringe on the potential market for this copyrighted work. To encourage others to legally purchase the original work, I include full citation information that others can follow if they want to buy it.

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