

Galilee and Jerusalem,” long before it was viewed as “European” in any way (331). Finally, O’Connor concludes by calling the reader to look to what is now called Palestine for further context. O’Connor reminds us that Jesus himself once lived in that region and would be described today as “a person of color,” and a Jew “who sang the psalms at Passover” and “chanted the scripture in the synagogue” (335). Thus, when we speak of Christianity, we must not lose sight of the origins of its very namesake, as O’Connor confirms the “vast majority of Christians in the Americas (and worldwide) do not share Jesus’s Jewishness” (335).

I enjoyed reading this book throughout 2021, and I think it will intrigue readers from a variety of contexts. These chapters would be useful in a variety of classroom environments, whether for undergraduate or graduate students studying sacred or American musical expressions. Scholars of American sacred music will also find this book stimulating in the variety of methodological approaches it considers. In addition to the scholarly and educational contexts in which this book would be useful, I imagine it would also prove meaningful for curious readers beyond an academic context.

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The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics

By Robin James. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

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The Sonic Episteme, by philosopher Robin James, is a rewarding and challenging book. It is not necessarily a book *about* music, but rather an exploration of how dominant ideas about the nature of sound have been used to structure arguments about power and identity, and thus how those narratives can enable or foreclose ways of imagining the world. James is particularly interested in how ideas about sound have been used to bolster neoliberal political ideologies. James positions popular music as part of this larger conversation, showing how pop songs and performances do theoretical work that is on par with the work of theorists, writers, and researchers, and can thus contribute to, refute, or sound out alternatives to neoliberalism.

What James dubs “the sonic episteme” is a framework that emerges across various bodies of philosophical, political, economic, and scientific literature. James argues that authors whose work constitutes the sonic episteme use ideas about acoustic resonance to quantify otherwise non-quantifiable phenomena—phenomena that range from soundness of mind to the nature of time and space in our universe. Some of the writers that James engages with argue that thinking about sound—in contrast to language or the visual—provides an alternative to systems of domination. James shows, however, that in many cases this appeal to sound and resonance upholds and reinforces the market logic (i.e., as James explains it, the assumption that all facets of life, including its non-economic aspects, are best treated as though they are private markets) that structures neoliberal political systems and causes

inequality. James looks to Black feminist political theory and the work of musicians like Beyoncé, Rihanna, and others as alternatives to the sonic episteme.

In each of five chapters, James analyzes how different authors structure their arguments about sound using concepts of acoustic resonance, and how the way they discuss sound advances white supremacist and patriarchal capitalism. Chapter 1 reframes Jacques Attali's theoretical text *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, revealing that Attali's concept of repetition is an elucidation of neo-liberal biopolitics.¹ James argues that his concept of composition is not the solution to the alienation of labor that he envisions, but rather is a means of deriving value from leisure. James then delves into songs by Spandau Ballet and Taylor Swift, which reveal how Attali's ideas ultimately domesticate noise and dissent.

James's Chapter 2 takes on the philosophies of voice advanced by three political philosophers, Jacques Rancière, Fred Evans, and Adriana Cavarero, the latter of whom writes from an explicitly feminist perspective.² These authors frame voice as an inclusive framework that "[rescues] Western liberal democratic theory from the errors that speech- and vision-centrism have supposedly baked into its foundation." (55) While Cavarero and Evans argue that understanding subjectivity through voice can accommodate a wider range of differences, James reveals how their frameworks merely advance a model of democratic consensus that does not have space for voices that dissent. James identifies two alternatives. The first lies in Devonya Havis's concept of sounding.³ Havis, a scholar of critical philosophies of race, bases her notion of sounding on Black vernacular storytelling practices. James argues that it draws attention to the "rhythms and rationalities" that are otherwise made inaudible and imperceptible by dominant political ontologies that marginalize Black and queer expression (77). James tracks how a second alternative conception of sound emerges in critical and literary theorist Alexander Weheliye's engagement with Hortense Spillers's Black feminist notion of pornotroping which, Weheliye argues, produces queer sexualities.⁴ Finally, James looks to Rihanna's "Bitch Better Have My Money" (2015) to demonstrate how artists use sounding as a technique for depicting a different kind of reality.

Chapter 3 takes on materialist feminism, revealing once more how a purportedly liberatory framework reproduces neoliberalism's power inequities. James turns her attention to work by psychoanalyst theorist Elizabeth Grosz, political theorist Jane Bennett, and feminist theorist of science Karen Barad, offering a critique of their conceptualization of material bodies, vibration, consonance, and dissonance.⁵ As a contrast to these materialist feminist frameworks, James proposes looking to two alternative takes on vibration introduced by Black feminist scholars. The first of these is the concept of the wake, as developed by literary scholar Christina Sharpe, which depicts the ongoing, rippling aftereffects of slavery. The second is the notion of "choreosonics," developed by scholar of Blackness and religion Ashon Crawley, which offers an understanding of vibration grounded in Black religious practices.⁶ These concepts provide James with ways of seeing and hearing the kinds of vibrations, expressions, and experiences that are discounted under white supremacy, particularly knowledge and ways of seeing

¹Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

²See Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Fred Evans, *The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); and Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

³Devonya Havis, "Now, How Do You Sound? Considering a Different Philosophical Praxis," *Hypatia* 29, no. 1 (2014): 237–52.

⁴Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014) and *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁵Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Elizabeth Grosz, *Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶Ashon Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

the world developed by Black women. James shows how Beyoncé's "Hold Up" (2016) sounds out the frameworks articulated by Sharpe and Crawley.

In Chapter 4, James connects *Sophrosyne*—the ancient Greek notion of well-being—to the "chill" musical aesthetics that emerged in pop music post-2010, asking powerful questions about how consonance and consensus map onto notions of chill and calm, how the notion of chill is gendered and racialized, and how the ideal of chillness, like *Sophrosyne*, can be used to delegitimize dissent. James further argues that Black feminist theorist Kathrine McKittrick's notion of "demonic calculus" refutes the notion of chill as ideal, and demonstrates that Beyoncé's strategic use of repetition on *Lemonade* (2016) results in imbalanced musical forms that refuse normative calmness.⁷

James's Chapter 5 is a compelling contribution to feminist science and technology studies, in which she reveals the troubling implications of string theory and social physics—bodies of work often assumed to be apolitical. In James's analysis, the mathematical notion of acoustic resonance used as a normalizing principle in these disciplines means that frequencies that fall within a particular normative frame are seen as legitimate while those that exceed those limits and exist, as James puts it, "in the red," are rejected. Under the guise of scientific objectivity, James argues, these conclusions are taken to represent the natural reality of the universe, normalizing the idea that anything or anyone that falls outside of a norm has only themselves to blame: They have not worked hard enough to fit. The writing of McKittrick and Weheliye, and songs by Rihanna, reveal how Black musics willfully occupy the space "in the red" to articulate other possibilities.

The Sonic Episteme offers a convincingly articulated argument that suggests possibilities for further considering the conditions in which the music James dissects was made. James addresses the practices of pop music production and marketing briefly: In footnote 71 she explains that a pop star like Rihanna can be understood as a collective project created by the performer in collaboration with others in the industry such as composers, choreographers, producers, directors, stylists, and marketers (189). James's discussions of music could have incorporated more engagement with this idea of collective creation and the complexity of how pop music is produced. For instance, the often unequal power relationships between pop stars, their collaborators, and music industry leaders might shape the extent to which a performance enforces or rejects neoliberal politics. I am also eager to think through how the sonic episteme shapes studio practices, songwriting and composition, choreography, and other elements of pop performance.

Thinking through the ways that James's sonic episteme shapes the spaces, contexts, and institutions where we make music is one of the most compelling applications for her argument. As a scholar of voice, I find that *The Sonic Episteme* enriches my understanding of how and why listeners come to value certain voices over others, how loudness is valued in some voices but not others, and that the fact of an audible voice is not necessarily a sign of liberation in and of itself. While James's work is concerned with the conceptual application of ideas of resonance and voice, it has implications for those of us who study the very literal ways that singing happens. For instance, we might ask how neoliberal notions of democratic consensus and harmony manifest in vocal training, in choir practices, or in the ways that voices are recorded. James's argument challenges scholars who purport to do liberatory work in fields such as musicology and music theory, sound studies, performance studies, gender studies, and political philosophy and its subfields to see the limits that our understanding of resonance creates. *The Sonic Episteme* promises to be an important addition to graduate syllabi and should push music scholars and practitioners to see how our ideas about the nature of sound might hamper our efforts to reshape the places, settings, and institutions where we make music.

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⁷Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) and "Mathematics Black Life," *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 16–28.