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# Robin James, "The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics."

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**Robin James.** *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics*. Duke University Press 2019. 256 pp. \$99.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781478005780); \$26.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781478006640).

Some of the most influential work in sound studies has grounded modern listening practices as distinctly historical phenomena. Jonathan Sterne, for example, has demonstrated how the allegedly ‘visual’ turn of modernity was also accompanied by abstracted, privatized, and fetishized aural techniques and technologies (*The Audible Past*, Duke University Press 2003); thus sound and listening are as intertwined with ideology and power as any other form of media or perception, according to Sterne. Robin James carries forward this project in *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics* (*Sonic Episteme*). James excavates the present via the means by which hegemonic understandings of sound are complicit with the neoliberal regime of ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’; to this end the author traces an expansive set of texts, from political theory and new materialist philosophy, to pop feminism and quantum physics, additionally highlighting how challenges to this discourse have been struck from literary theory and popular music. It is an intricate and far-roaming book that can help us listen to several trends in the humanities and popular culture with more discerning eardrums.

The through-line argument of *Sonic Episteme* assembles the concepts of biopolitics, exceptionality, and phonography. Drawing on scholarship on neoliberalism, James explains how this marketizing paradigm might seem to move beyond liberal manifestations of oppression—such as sexism and racism—but how, on the contrary, neoliberalism’s mechanisms of numerical flattening smuggle power in through the back door, a sleight of hand James frequently describes in terms of sound engineering: ‘This ontology [of statistical normalization] reworks modernity’s inclusion/exclusion binary into a spectrum of flexibility and dynamism’ (13). Drawing on Michel Foucault’s late lectures, James is especially interested in the tendency of ‘neoliberal biopolitics’ (a contemporary form of control involving life itself) to reduce diverse populations to frequency ratios or bell curves, which function as forms of exclusion for those unable or unwilling to be contained by this hyper-individualist apparatus: ‘Structural barriers haven’t gone away; they’ve just been remade with different tools and layered on top of the old ones’ (13).

James then connects the mathematics of neoliberal biopolitics to a set of motifs relating to sound, an analogical operation that she identifies as the ‘sonic episteme,’ which, again drawing on Foucault, is a body of discourse that fabricates a power-laden understanding of the world (4). According to James, the sonic episteme is the vibrational equivalent of neoliberal biopolitics: ‘The sonic episteme creates qualitative versions of the same relationships that the neoliberal episteme crafts quantitatively, bringing nonquantitative phenomena in line with the same upgrades to classical liberalism that the neoliberal episteme performs quantitatively’ (3). ‘Phonographies,’ on the other hand, a concept which James borrows from Alexander Weheliye, offers a means of departing from the sonic episteme, of reaffirming sounds that the sonic episteme has tended to ignore or reject: ‘Phonographies articulate ideas, aesthetics, and relationships that exist in the frequencies perceptually coded out of the sonic episteme’s spectrum because the cost of laboring to domesticate them into something that contributes to elite status isn’t worth the benefit’ (6).

Taking Jacques Attali’s influential study *Noise* as an exemplary target, chapter 1 begins by focusing on direct intersections between economics and sound. According to James, Attali’s periodization of modern sound recording and musical consumption exemplifies the neoliberal transformations afoot in the 1970s, such as the ascendancy of probabilistic statistics, deregulation, and

financialization (29-35). Although Attali's utopian chapter on 'composition' has often been understood as a potentially emancipatory period of musical production to come, James also argues that the neoliberal logic there, by which chance and avant-garde noisiness are re-legitimated as raw materials of value extraction, merely intensifies (39). Connecting these ideas with the notion of 'cool,' James considers two pop-cultural texts that appear to refuse the neoliberal imperatives of 'cool' self-branding: Taylor Swift's song and video 'Shake It Off' and the song 'True' by Spandau Ballet. Yet, James uses these texts to further theorize the exclusionary aspect of the sonic episteme: '[Swift] appears to be breaking the rule of self-entrepreneurship, but in fact she's found a way to make even better investments in the specific self she embodies. ... Swift's unbranding financializes her whiteness' (48).

In chapter 2 James shifts focus toward proponents of the sonic episteme working in the area of political theory. Drawing on both Jacques Rancière and Jonathan Sterne, she focuses on Adriana Cavarero's and Fred Evans's postmodernist promotions of voice and sound as a more progressive medium/sense than text and vision. James claims that these thinkers, despite their good intentions of critiquing hierarchical political models, have in fact '[left] plenty of room open for other kinds of power relations—like neoliberalism and biopolitics' (66). In the case of Cavarero, the distinction between *noise* and *voice* is used to filter out 'nonhuman' sounds from democratic participation (71). Meanwhile, Evans's embrace of 'vocal hybridity' over 'purity' articulates the sonic episteme's baked-in exclusivity: 'Because they don't fit this definition of hybridity, nonelite traditions may register as their own kinds of exclusivity or purity, a commitment to one's own minority culture because one can't or won't adapt to the language of the global elite' (73). Black feminist thinkers riffing on the idea of 'sounding'—which 'feigns complicity with dominant narratives and also works "in the red," beyond the reach of these narratives' perception' (75)—make up the latter third or so of the chapter. The writings of Weheliye, Devonya Havis, and Audre Lorde are featured; but particularly fascinating is James's interpretation of Rhianna's 'BBHMM' song and video, which 'tunes into a register of existence ... where black women have full political status because personhood takes the form of something that's not private property' (86).

The critical dexterity demonstrated in the first two chapters is managed, and takes on radically different shapes and fields, throughout the remainder of the book. Chapter 3 examines how the writings of Jane Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz, and Karen Barad use sonic imagery to illustrate the 'calculative rationality' of neoliberal biopolitics via their broadly sympathetic celebrations of messy matter over abstracted representation (88-110). However, whereas feminist new materialism harnesses 'newness' in order to brand against older and less neoliberalism-friendly theoretical traditions, James also amplifies the work of Christina Sharpe, Ashon Crawley, and Beyoncé, who articulate materialisms pointing outside the 'white (cis, hetero, able-bodied)' marketplace of philosophical scholarship production (113). The final two chapters examine more mainstream targets as contributors to the sonic episteme. In chapter 4, feminist discourses of (sonic) self-discipline, unpacked through an update of Plato's concept of *sophrosyne*, are juxtaposed with Katherine McKittrick's 'demonic calculus,' a poetic mode posing alternative forms of expression unrecognizable by the neoliberal regime. Finally, chapter 5 examines popular writings about string theory, finding again in this field convergent epistemological operations that re-entrench the neoliberal-biopolitical paradigm of 'acoustic resonance.'

As a whole, James's book marshals an impressive combination of close textual analysis and sustained critical argumentation, engaging with both academic, poetical-critical, and popular texts. Yet, as James states in the book's short conclusion, her treatment of pop culture is not meant to show how such texts can also achieve 'Philosophy'; her selection of authors and case studies is itself part

of the broader argument, which seeks to find non-exclusionary ways of thinking and sounding outside of the sonic episteme in which ‘Philosophy’ proper has taken part (181). Additionally, the range of discrete subfields covered can sometimes make the contours of the ‘sonic episteme’ feel unwieldy or intimidating to follow, but James’s text is clearly and generously written, often signaling to the reader where they have come from and where they are headed. And her rich engagement with numerous theorists and artists of color remains a welcome intervention within the disciplines of both philosophy and sound studies.

One difficulty in the broader argument, however, has to do with the reasoning by which some thinkers or texts are framed as ‘constituents’ of the sonic episteme as opposed to ‘phonographic’ challenges. For example, Attali is flagged as a constituent of the sonic episteme, whereas Rihanna challenges it. Yet, in the case of Attali at least, his volume *Noise* unfolds concepts of sound and noise as mutable, including those dominant and even yet-to-come in the neoliberal epoch. In other words, Attali’s book might just as convincingly be positioned as a conceptual challenge to the sonic episteme’s tendency to naturalize neoliberal sound as physical rather than historical. This is perhaps a minor quibble, but I do wonder also about the degree to which James’s binary division of texts—into either ‘radical/acceptable’ or ‘conservative/guilty’—perhaps re-inscribes aspects of the reductive compression of the sonic episteme so richly examined, otherwise, throughout the book. Perhaps one could counter that James is merely occupying the sonic episteme’s audio circuitry.

Nonetheless, *The Sonic Episteme* is a rich, persuasive, and stimulating study that takes to task, in often unexpected ways, numerous approaches and authors currently fashionable in critical theory. This text should be required reading for researchers in the areas of sound and cultural studies. But it might also prove useful for musicians and artists seeking to receive frequencies often excluded by neoliberal capitalism’s—and, as James shows, Philosophy’s—standard array of inputs.

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