Book Review: *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics*


At the intersection of continental philosophy, popular music studies, and sound studies, *The Sonic Episteme* sets out to explore the unproductive and productive ways of thinking through and with sound. This includes the production of sound, sensing sound, listening to sound, and using the language and terminology of sound and sonic experience as metaphor not only to talk about non-musical things, but also as a way of translating technical and mathematical phenomena or concepts. Over the course of *The Sonic Episteme*, James draws from an array of philosophers and theorists, musical texts, and sound events to illustrate instances where “sound” is deployed as a rationale or a way of describing inclusion and exclusion, consensus/harmony and discord/dissonance, and welcome forms of sounding (or consonance) vs. unwanted sounding (or noise). The sonic episteme relies on using sound and sound-based rules to categorize and distinguish belonging and difference in relation to society, personhood, and materiality, and in doing so continues to reproduce systemic bias, marginalization, and support of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In the sonic episteme, James explains, sound is overly romanticized in these contexts where sound and the nature and experience of sonic phenomena have the ability to render complex theories and practices unrelated to sound and aural culture into something that a non-expert audience can parse out. Sound is a phenomenon and experience that connects us, that is relatable, but it is uncritically positioned by some theorists as something pure without social, political, and contextual baggage. In the first chapter, James shows how music studies have uncritically centered Jacques Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* to understand how people use concepts of acoustic resonance as an analog for neoliberal capitalism. What is noise and to whom? Who distinguishes noise from music? With *The Sonic Episteme*, James intervenes upon sound by asking us to think more critically, inclusively, and ethically with and about it. This book joins a growing body of literature in contemporary music studies and neoliberalism and biopolitics and expands upon James’s previous work, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (2015).

Sound is never just sound. James builds on Alexander Weheliye’s notion of “phonographies” by listening closely to contemporary music by Rihanna, Beyoncé, and
Taylor Swift and identifying the political and material ontologies that place popular recordings in direct dialogue with academic texts. In doing so, James highlights the inherent subjectivity and lived experience that is bound up in sonic experience and music. She proposes alternative texts and approaches that deliberately avoid using romanticized concepts of sound that ignore sound’s malleability to whiteness and patriarchy that exclude specific communities of listeners and their approaches to sound and resonance. She argues that these “phonographies” use models of sound that account for the impact of white supremacist thought and practice (and ways of listening, sounding, and approaching sound).

Throughout The Sonic Episteme James identifies and applies alternative models of sound that are less oppressive because they prioritize the aesthetic, social, political, and philosophical priorities of non-white listeners and are grounded in quotidian moments of listening and sounding. James demonstrates for her readers that philosophy and theory are practiced in everyday contexts, even when these vernacular approaches are not legible to academic philosophy and theory. In chapter two, James turns her attention to continental philosophers who have adopted political ontologies modelled on voice. She examines Jacques Rancière’s critique of neoliberalism, or what he refers as “consensus postdemocracy,” and the work of Adriana Cavarero and Fred Evans, who use vocal metaphors and ontologies to discuss voice as a site of universal inclusion. They continue, however, to use acoustically resonant sound to exclude specific voices, bodies, and ways of sounding. For instance, James illustrates, Cavarero’s vocal politics and Evans’s multivoice body separate “populations who make noise at an insufficient or incorrect frequency” (69). To have a voice is frequently used as a proxy for belonging to a political group or community. But according to James, we risk bypassing a diversity of expression that includes non-white or non-normate personhood by universalizing the voice. A person might have a voice that is inaudible to someone who occupies a position of privilege. Or perhaps a voice expresses itself in an alternative modality, like American Sign Language-signed songs.

The Sonic Episteme’s topical and methodological breadth makes it a productive and useful addition to the field of popular music studies. Across its five chapters, James surveys and examines how social theorists and philosophers of diverse backgrounds have taken a range of approaches to using the language of sound, resonance, listening, and music to translate technical, mathematical, and social ideals and trends into something that is relatable and legible to the general public. James pulls from philosophy, feminist theory, critical race theory, black studies, popular music studies, and sound studies “to build a project that speaks to audiences from all these fields but ultimately avoids discussions of ‘how is this paper philosophy?’” (18). For example, in chapter two James draws on Devonya Havis’s concept of “sounding,” which emerged from black feminist lived

experience and vernacular philosophy as a way to challenge the devaluation and exclusion of black communities’ everyday sonic knowledge production.3

One of the most valuable contributions James makes is her close readings of songs and their related music videos. Her precise use of language, her nuanced interpretation of instrumentation, and the strategies she uses to guide the reader through the significant structural moments in each text to enhance her argument are venerable models for popular music analysis. Songs such as Taylor Swift’s “Shake It Off,” Rihanna’s “Bitch Better Have My Money,” and Beyoncé’s “Hold Up” do not exist purely as sonic texts. They circulate in multisensory ways in the contemporary mediascape. In chapter one, James engages with Shannon Winnubst’s theories of “neoliberal aestheticization of difference” and the “biopolitics of cool” (40) to compare Spandau Ballet’s “True” and Taylor Swift’s “Shake It Off” as analytic texts. In the music video for “Shake It Off” Swift performs “uncool” choreographic failure as part of Swift’s “personal unbranding (intentionally devaluing one’s human capital)” (38). As Swift muddles her way through various genres of dance, some of which are racially coded, she performs an alternative mode of being that challenges coolness’s restraints and limitations. But this position is only available to Swift because of her whiteness. “Uncool” is therefore an insufficient solution or alternative to neoliberalism because it is exclusively available to white, privileged subjects. When non-white artists fail to perform cool or deliberately perform the uncool, these artists are not viewed as transgressive or pushing against the neoliberal norm. It is instead a category failure that openly discriminates against them. In her analysis of “Shake It Off,” James challenges readers to reflect on who has the privilege to fail and learn from failure in contemporary society.

In The Sonic Episteme, James accepts that scholars use pop music to represent broader social phenomena because of its widespread appeal. But that does not make music a neutral, uncomplicated, and universalizing force. Music is not inherently something that diverse groups of people can collectively relate to. It is simultaneously a site of exclusion, violence, and marginalization and something enjoyed that brings people together. All translations, however, are not made equal, and James provides phonographic alternatives to the sonic episteme, drawing from black feminist sound studies and popular music by black feminist artists that are largely excluded from dominant philosophical discourse on resonance, neoliberalism, and biopolitics.

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