

## Heraclitus and Sonic Thinking

**ABSTRACT** “The material Flux”; “the hidden mobility beneath”; “Sonic Logos.” Any classicist familiar with the fragments of Heraclitus would be surprised to find these concepts developed in today’s theories about sonic art from authors from different traditions such as Salomé Voegelin, Julian Henriques, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Christoph Cox. The present paper intends to open a dialogue between these authors and Heraclitus, claiming that there is an underlying connection beyond mere coincidence. Sonic thinking proposes listening as the way to access or produce a particular knowledge—one that would otherwise be too difficult or impossible to grasp. This knowledge is produced by practices such as listening and musical meditation instead of intellectual activity alone. To make the case, the authors will present a general outline of what sonic thinking entails to compare it with the relevant points in Heraclitus’s philosophy. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to provide a new sonic framework to read Heraclitus and to provide an old framework to read sonic thinking. **KEYWORDS** flux, sonic thinking, sound art, Heraclitus, practice-based

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

“The material Flux”; “The hidden mobility beneath”; “Sonic Logos.”<sup>2</sup> Any classicist familiar with the fragments of Heraclitus would be surprised to find these concepts developed in today’s theories about sonic art from authors such as Salomé Voegelin, Julian Henriques, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Christoph Cox, who stand to defy the conventions of the traditional visual paradigm in art and philosophy. The use of these concepts by these authors might be the result of mere coincidence. After all, what could be the linkage between an Ionian pre-Socratic thinker in the 6th century BCE and 21st-century sonic thinking? In this paper we claim that there is such a link. This is not an explicit link—in fact, none of these authors cite Heraclitus as a referent, but as an implicit link working at a deeper level. To the extent that a particular form of knowledge is derived from listening practices, it could be considered that Heraclitus’s philosophy is also a “listening” philosophy; that is, a philosophy that is not developed as the sitting-at-a-desk to exercise in the fashion of analytical or abstract thinking but instead by a practice that can be understood as listening or meditation just as sonic thinkers or artists do. The purpose is thus twofold: to provide a new sonic framework to read Heraclitus and to provide an old framework to read sonic thinking. In both scenarios we believe that the coincidence, at the core, is founded on the principle that knowledge is enacted in experience. There is a performative epistemology, so to speak, that permeates both Heraclitus’s wisdom then and sonic thinking today.

To do this, we will start by introducing sonic thinking. After this brief introduction, we will trace the work of some relevant voices in the field to then assess some of the

*Resonance: The Journal of Sound and Culture*, Vol. 2, Number 3, pp. 319–333. Electronic ISSN: 2688-0113 © 2021 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/res.2021.2.3.319>

features of the sonic experience in the context of sound studies and Heraclitus. As it will be shown, in Heraclitus there is an interaction between hearing, understanding, and saying that might be indicative of sonic sensibility.

## INTRODUCTION TO SONIC THINKING

Springing from avant-garde artistic practices of the 20th century, sonic experience appears as pivotal for the production of a particular form of knowledge we can label “sonic thinking.” Sonic thinking derives from listening and sound practices, as a production of knowledge that cannot be acquired via analytical, intellectual, or logical exercise alone.

After the classical-romantic period of music, the hierarchies of the tonal system begin to be eroded toward the development of musical compositions in which elements—such as harmonies, rhythms, and structure—are produced by mathematical rules and formulas, in an effort to create music that does not follow the subjective sonic hierarchies that taste would impose. A musical agenda that is succinctly exposed by Iannis Xenakis in the introduction to his book *Formalized Music*, where he states that the “qualification ‘beautiful’ or ‘ugly’ makes no sense for sound, nor for the music that derives from it; the quantity of intelligence carried by the sounds must be the true criterion of the validity of a particular music.”<sup>3</sup> Stemming from a similar impetus—of *liberating* sounds from a structure imposed on them by subjective inclinations—other artists move in a different direction. Instead of moving toward the development of formalized music, they move toward sonic practices that displace music elements altogether, providing instead an attention to sound that is not guided by musical narratives or structures—be they the result of taste or intelligence. Simply put, these artistic practices explore sound as unbound from music. As their practices shift away from musical perception and analysis, these artists start to feel more comfortable with the label of “sound artists” instead of “musicians.” From this development, sonic thinking arises as without the conceptual boundaries of music, sound appears as ample terrain to experience and experiment.

In the spirit of tracing ancient referents, we will assess Heraclitus’s philosophy against the backdrop of sonic thinking. But a note of warning is in order when we talk about “Heraclitus’s philosophy.” We might well start by recognizing that a profound sense of unsettledness emerges when trying to assign Heraclitus or his thought-fixed labels. Either tagging him with a title or fitting him into traditions or ascribing doctrines to him seems always like an unsafe bet. Was he a philosopher of nature or a traditional sage or just a *sui generis* thinker? Was he a part of the Milesian tradition of natural philosophers or the tradition of poetic wisdom? Did he elaborate a doctrine of flux or fire or Logos, or were they imposed to him later on by the tradition? We will probably never know with certainty. Uncertainty, instead, has become a sort of indissociable mark of Heraclitus’s figure and thought. If we add the problem of the material conditions of his work, we are left with fewer answers. We have only fragments of what seems already a fragmentary work, and the many attempts to arrange his work into a coherent whole prove to be problematic. But even when the evidence is scanty and fragmentary, there is a sort of uniqueness that makes

Heraclitus's philosophy distinguishable. Although undefinable, there is some characteristic unity to his thought. We believe this distinctiveness is not due to any particular theory (or the theories ascribed to him), as novel as they are; it is about what he says and the way he delivers his thought, that is, the practice his thought invites. Instead of assigning Heraclitus labels or subscribing his thought to a particular tradition or doctrine, we intend to rethink his philosophy as a practice of sonic thinking by drawing on similarities and coincidences with current sonic thinkers/artists.

Here we will convey a brief account of the main characteristics that are common in both the practices of sonic artists and thinkers and in Heraclitus's philosophy. We will go through a tradition that stems from modernist avant-garde music or art to propose listening as a practice to attain a knowledge/awareness of reality that would be otherwise impossible or almost impossible to achieve. By considering some of the most relevant voices in the area (from John Cage to Christoph Cox, from Pauline Oliveros to Salomé Voegelin), we will unfold the common characteristics of sonic arts that step outside music into what we could define as practice-based sonic thinking. With this in hand, we will establish the relevant connections with the work of Heraclitus and modern interpreters, most notably Geoffrey Kirk, Charles Kahn, Daniel Graham, and Mark Johnstone, to find out how they might engage in a fruitful dialogue.<sup>4</sup>

## THE SONIC EXPERIENCE

### The Route of Sonic Thinking

At the forefront of sonic thinking we find the notion that the experience of sound is what produces knowledge; that is, it is not that sound is the messenger of a knowledge that could be acquired elsewhere, but that the knowledge produced is only accessible via sonic experience. This procedure might be well summarized by Henriques: "My entire approach and orientation is one of thinking through sound."<sup>5</sup>

Voegelin's project of writing about sound, as exposed in her 2014 book *Sonic Possible*, "is a constant effort to access the fleeting and ephemeral, that which is barely there and yet influences all there is. Sound is the invisible layer of the world that shows its relationships, actions, and dynamics."<sup>6</sup> She notes that "sound's grammatical position as the attribute, the adjective and adverb, keeps it on the surface and holds it in a visual paradigm, when in reality its materiality is much more subterranean and mobile."<sup>7</sup> In order to access this ephemeral and subterranean materiality, sonic experience is given a priority over the intellectual construction of ideas, as listening practice is what sustains the production of knowledge—whereas the grammar of language would be unfit to address it. This practice emphasizes an interconnectedness between the hearer and the heard as listening "generates place, the field of listening, continually from my hearing of myself within the dynamic relationship of all that sounds."<sup>8</sup> It is this listening, which intertwines *my hearing* with *all* sounds, that reveals "the world in its invisibility: in the unseen movements beneath its visual organization that allow us to see its mechanism, its dynamic and structure, and the investment of its agency."<sup>9</sup>

Voegelin explains that her project is a philosophical one

whose insights contribute not only to the discourse of sound art but also to philosophy in that it expands and augments the philosophical enquiry through the mobility of sound. It is a philosophy not about objects and ideas but about the transient ephemerality of sonic materiality and subjectivity. It aims to create a philosophical experience that might not convince in terms of philosophical orthodoxies and histories but through the reader as the listener's own present experience, her simultaneity with the heard.<sup>10</sup>

Importantly, then, Voegelin's take on the sonic is not a critique of the visual per se but a critique of its practice, of "the way we look rather than what we see. There is the option of listening to the visual, listening to the thick layers that mobilize our view if we take care to confront it with a sonic sensibility. What is sought is not a blind understanding, a shutting down of what vision brings to seeing; rather, the aim is a sonico-visual understanding of the world that knows its surface but also appreciates the hidden mobility beneath."<sup>11</sup>

The importance of sonic experience as generating specific forms of knowledge is in John Cage's work put into practice by music making. For Cage, music practice becomes the field to experiment and produce knowledge about reality; musical works become a playing field for the experience of reality. From the 1950s he started to develop musical works that follow chance operations. The use of chance operations is not a decision based on a musical aim but a means "of freeing the ego from its taste and memory, its concern for profit and power, of silencing the ego so that the rest of the world has a chance to enter into the ego's own experience whether that be outside or inside."<sup>12</sup> The importance of freeing the ego becomes relevant to him as a gateway "to the enjoyment of things as they come, as they happen, rather than as they are possessed or kept or forced to be."<sup>13</sup> The ultimate knowledge he expects to produce is then a practice-based silencing of the ego in order to reach reality, or in his own words, "to sober and quiet the mind."<sup>14</sup>

The importance of musical practice as producing this specific way of knowing the world is described by Cage in relationship with his practice of *preparing* the piano. This technique changes the clear tones of the instrument to become a complex percussion kit by way of adding elements to the piano strings and body—such as pieces of paper, ribbon, nails, etc. Cage explains his first motivation for this as follows: "When I first placed objects between piano strings, it was with the desire to possess sounds (to be able to repeat them). But, as the music left my home and went from piano to piano and from pianist to pianist, it became clear that not only are two pianists essentially different from one another, but two pianos are not the same either."<sup>15</sup> This experience opened for Cage a knowledge derived from sound: "Instead of the possibility of repetition, we are faced in life with the unique qualities and characteristics of each occasion."<sup>16</sup>

A similar approach is to be found in Pauline Oliveros's score, *Sonic Meditations* of 1974. Of these music-meditations Oliveros explains that the "enhancement and development of aural sensation is one of their goals"; however, of a bigger importance is that through these meditations a "synchronization of attention and awareness" becomes

“necessary.”<sup>17</sup> According to Oliveros, attention “is focused to a point on something specific” and awareness “is broad, diffuse and inclusive” and that they are implicated in each other as “there is attention to awareness; there is awareness of attention.”<sup>18</sup> *Sonic Meditations* then are musical works that out of necessity produce the experience of *synchronization* between *attention* and *awareness*. Stating the relevance of this as an experience and not a musical aim, she affirms—written in all caps—this is “NOT A THEORY BUT AN EXPERIENCE.”<sup>19</sup>

Julian Henriques proposes that by the sonic experience of the Jamaican sound system, a knowledge of a sonic *logos* is produced. For Henriques this “sonic logos” opposes “the dominant Western philosophical tradition in which objects are defined intrinsically,” for in the sonic logos things are defined “in terms of their relationships by ratio and proportion,” as “rather than a thing in itself, a ratio is what goes on between things, as when two people are in ‘a relationship,’ as it is said.”<sup>20</sup> As the ratios and proportions of the sonic logos are given in the experience of the sound system, for Henriques the sound system is a “Philosophy in practice.”<sup>21</sup>

Independently of musical practice, some authors also draw attention to sonic experience for knowledge production. For philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, we become aware of being by listening. “If from Kant to Heidegger, the major concern of philosophy has been found in the appearance or manifestation of being, in a ‘phenomenology,’ the ultimate truth of the phenomenon (as something that appears as precisely distinct as possible from everything that has already appeared and, consequently, too, as something that disappears), shouldn’t truth ‘itself,’ as a transitivity and incessant transition of a continual coming and going, be listened to rather than seen?”<sup>22</sup> This sets an important framework in our discussion. Criticism against what has been called an “ocular model” in cultural studies or a “spectator theory of knowledge” in philosophy as controlling the narrative of the Western tradition of thought from the ancient Greeks (Parmenides onwards) is crucial to understand how the sonic model stands to supersede some of its problems or limitations.<sup>23</sup> In this particular case, according to what Jean-Luc Nancy proposes, the sonic model offers access to a reality that is continuously fluctuating. We will come back to this point when we assess Heraclitus’s theory of flux.

Similarly, philosopher Christoph Cox proposes an ontology of flux that he claims can only be revealed by the practice of sound artists. It is the practice and development of sound works that reveals the characteristics of this sonic ontology, as “over the past century or so, a new domain of sound has opened up and a new experience of sound has emerged,” which marked by “the entire history of sonic experimentation in the twentieth century” has “turned toward” an “intensive dimension of sound” that has broadened “the domain of the audible and discloses a genuine metaphysics of sound.”<sup>24</sup>

Although it would be unfair to reconcile the many theories found in the field, some underlying elements common to sonic thinking as described above are worth considering when assessing a connection with Heraclitus. Voegelin’s listening a revelation of the “unseen” phrased as the “hidden mobility beneath,” Cage’s silencing of the ego to be in accord with what happens, Nancy’s manifestation of being as a transition of coming and going, Henriques’s thesis of a “sonic logos” that reveals ratios and relationships, and

Cox's ontology of flux seem all too familiar with Heraclitus's philosophy to be discarded as mere coincidences. We will expand on this in the coming sections.

### Heraclitus and the Practice of Hearing

Approaching Heraclitus's work through the prism of sonic thinking, we would like to highlight three intertwined elements that appear in his work and that can be indicative of a sonic sensitivity: hearing, understanding, and saying. The first fragment in Diels–Kranz (DK), the longest of the entire corpus, goes as follows:

Although this account (*logos*) holds forever, men ever fail to comprehend (*axunetoi*), both before hearing it (*akousai*) and once they have heard (*akousantes*). Although all things come to pass in accordance with this account (*kata ton logon*), men are like the untried when they try such words and works as I set forth, distinguishing each according to its nature (*physis*) and telling how it is. But other men are oblivious of what they do awake, just as they are forgetful of what they do asleep. (DK B1)<sup>25</sup>

From this reading we propose a plausible thesis of “sonic practice” in Heraclitus. This could be decoded as the production of knowledge, which is the result of the interaction between understanding, saying (understood in a large sense as *logos*), and hearing (*akouein*), a recurrent theme in his writings. Traditionally, many important topics arise from this fragment. The most problematic issue concerns what seems a peculiar use of the Greek *logos*.<sup>26</sup> For us this will become clearer later in the discussion. For now, our interest is in the interaction between hearing, *logos*, and understanding that has a clear link here and elsewhere in the corpus.

Let us start by assessing the importance of hearing (*akouein*). Many critics assume that it refers exclusively to the auditive act of sense-perception, and therefore *logos* has to refer to a verbal account.<sup>27</sup> Heraclitus says that men fail to understand the eternal *logos* before and after hearing it. But how can they fail to understand it before hearing it? Kahn, for example, assumes that this is because what they fail to understand has prior existence to the words of the speaker. “This will make sense only if Heraclitus' *logos* represents a truth that has been there all along: if, like Fire, it always was and is and will be.”<sup>28</sup> This tells us a lot about *logos*. But it could also tell us something about hearing or listening; namely, that it means little without the right understanding. Importantly, this understanding grants a unique epistemological value to listening. In other words, the right understanding could refer to acknowledging listening as enacting the *logos* and not a mere messenger of a sense-independent *logos*. As Graham asserts regarding the role of sense-perception: “It appears, then, that experience is necessary for knowledge, but not sufficient. It is not enough simply to go out and experience the world. Rather, one must have some key by which to discern the meaning of experience.”<sup>29</sup>

Here Heraclitus would be denouncing those who hear with their ears only without paying enough attention; that is, those who use hearing as a mere collection of audible data that transmits a message that is independent of the act of listening. In Heraclitus we know that experience is the preferable way to access reality: “Whatever comes from sight, hearing, learning from experience: this I prefer” (DK B55).<sup>30</sup> But sense perception is

informed by *logos*; it is not the medium for understanding something foreign to them but instead produces knowledge. This thesis is supported by two other fragments: “Eyes and ears are poor witnesses for men if their souls do not understand the language” (D107) and also “Not comprehending (*axunetoi*), they hear (*akusantes*) like the deaf. The saying (*phatis*) is their witness: absent while present” (DK B34). In both instances, Heraclitus criticizes a sort of “empty hearing” whenever there is lack of a significant language and understanding of listening.<sup>31</sup> As Kahn puts it: “The paradox ‘absent while present’ confirms the sense of epistemic isolation. There seems to be an audience there, men listening, but no communication is possible, nothing gets through.”<sup>32</sup> From here, we believe hearing should be understood as an epistemically informed disposition, and not only a way to capture sensorial data. This, of course, is not to establish a priority of reason over experience or sense perception, but to establish reason from within sense perception. We think that this epistemic disposition is opened by a listening that enacts some truth—that is to say, a hearing that is a “rich” rather than a “poor” witness. “It is wise (*sophos*), listening (*akousantas*) not to me but to the report (*tou logou*), to agree (*homologein*) that all things are one (*hen panta einai*)” (DK B50). Here two coordinated actions are commended as wise (*sophos*) experience: listening the *logos* and agreeing that all is one. The *akousantas* is immersed in an all-encompassing *logos*, which clearly escapes the limits of verbal discourse. As Kirk suggests, *logos* might even have material reality; it is more like the environment, in which case a nonanalytical approach would be encouraged to wisely *listen* to it.<sup>33</sup> As a result, Heraclitus would exhort us to understand it by way of practice rather than by way of analysis. “The use of the word *sophon* emphasizes once again that the apprehension of the Logos, and the perception that all things are really one, is not a philosophical luxury, but a pragmatic necessity for men. They themselves are concerned with their surroundings, and their relations with their surroundings are obviously improved if this connection is understood.” Kirk, having studied the use of *sophon* in other fragments, then clarifies: “In its human application it always seems to apply to an intellectual and practical accord between men and their environment.”<sup>34</sup>

Concerning the sense of *logos*, a theme recurrently discussed among the commentators, we stand with Johnstone, who proposes a transversal meaning for the different uses in the following terms: “It remained the basic function of a *logos* (or simply of *logos*) to present things as being a certain way, so that they make sense as a whole and can be understood.”<sup>35</sup> To this, we would add that the *making sense* of *logos* is enacted by listening. In fact, because most people have not accepted the truth inherent to listening, that is “all is one,” they are unable to appreciate and interpret the reality witnessed by their senses.<sup>36</sup> Having accepted this truth, they will understand that there is no private thinking or discourse, but only one common to all: “Thinking (*phroneein*) is shared by all” (DK B113). The similarities between these ideas and Voegelin’s are worth noticing. As seen earlier, for Voegelin listening intertwines the self with all there is, and sound is not bound to the limits that grammar imposes on it. Note also here the similarities with Henriques’ notion discussed above about a sonic *logos* that is relational and not intrinsic.

That all is one is not just a learned truth that can be passed on, but something that should be experienced, understood, and interpreted from within each person’s soul:

“What Heraclitus is aiming for, in this interpretation, is not simply that his audience should listen to him and accept what he is saying as true, but rather that they should attend to the way the world presents itself to them in their own experience and understand things rightly for themselves.”<sup>37</sup> At this point, it is also worth remarking on the connection to notions introduced earlier, such as Voegelin’s prominence of the listener’s own experience or Cage’s emphasis on enjoying things as they happen.

We will return to the importance of self-driven understanding and interpretation in Heraclitus as part of the practice of listening. For now, we would like to emphasize the interaction between hearing, understanding, and saying crystallized in another fragment: “Not knowing how to listen (*akousai ouk epistamenoï*), neither can they speak (*oud’ epein*)” (DK B19). Coherent with the tone of criticism (and competition) in other pieces discussed above, this one comes to directly address those who (very literally) “do not know how to listen,” which carries as a consequence an inability to speak (or say anything meaningful). In some way this comes to close the interaction between (1) understanding, (2) hearing, and (3) saying, where (1) understanding is directed to universal and eternal *logos* that says “all is one,” which is channeled through (2) hearing as a preferred way to access truth presented either by reality or by Heraclitus, and finally (3) saying it articulated in the relevant language. From here, the whole cycle could start all over again.

## SONIC EXPERIENCE AS FLUX

### Sonic Becoming

An important feature that emerges in the practice of sonic thinking is the emphasis on becoming or process over object. A significant group of sonic thinkers privilege a description of sonic knowledge in terms of movement or flux; hence, metaphors such as “streams” or “flows” recur to capture this phenomenon, done in a way that resembles Heraclitus. Voegelin states that “sound is the thing thinging, a contingent materiality that is not captured as noun but runs as verb,”<sup>38</sup> which shares many attributes with Cage’s idea of enjoying things “as they happen, rather than as they are possessed” (quoted earlier). In the score of *Sonic Meditations* Oliveros writes that this is a kind of music that produces healing “as a stream or river whose waters offer refreshment and cleansing to those who find it.”<sup>39</sup> Henriques defines that “a sonic body is necessarily an event, as distinct from an object”<sup>40</sup> and that these sonic bodies are “enminded” bodies, inverting the more traditional approach according to which the mind has a body. Importantly, he states that time is the “mind of space” and that mind is movement.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most systematic approach to equating sound with action, event, or verb instead of fixed objects or nouns is found in Christoph Cox’s concept of the sonic flux. This flux would be “an immemorial material flow” that “precedes and exceeds” human expressions, perhaps, we might think, in the way of Heraclitean *logos*.<sup>42</sup> This material flux reveals via sound a realist and materialist metaphysics. This is achieved as for Cox “sounds exemplify” an “ontology of events and becomings” on one hand by providing an “empirical account of events and becomings as processes and alterations,” and on the other providing the experience of events and becomings in “a ‘pure,’ ‘incorporeal,’ or

'ideal' sense." This ideal sense would be evident by effects as "recurrent patterns of possibility" or effects "in the sense in which scientists speak of the 'Kelvin effect,' the 'Doppler effect,' or the 'Zeeman effect.'"43

Cox explains how sound renders the sense of becoming by making time audible: "Though all things are subject to becoming, sound plays a special role in making time audible. It manifests this natural flux more richly and more palpably than any other phenomena and reveals time in all its heterogeneous becoming." Accordingly, sound art is the privileged way to access this reality. "The art of sound is precisely the art of unleashing, cutting and shaping these flows, which are temporal or nothing at all, always manifesting the passage, the relentless becoming-other that is time."<sup>44</sup> It is certainly interesting to note how, in this context, Cox distances himself from the tradition founded by Parmenides and Zeno: "Ever since Parmenides and Plato, rationalists have been antagonistic to becoming (which confounds the category of being and the distinction between being and nonbeing) and to the natural, empirical world that relentlessly manifests it" and makes no mention of Heraclitus.<sup>45</sup>

### The Flux and the Self in Heraclitus

In line with this emphasis on becoming, we want to suggest that listening may be the privileged way to access a reality that presents itself as described by Heraclitus—that is, as flux. Even though there is little evidence to suggest that there is a theory of flux as such, apart from Plato's testimony in the *Cratylus* (401b10-e4) and the *Theaetetus* (160d5-e3), we have the evidence of some fragments that point in that direction. Let us consider some of the relevant fragments:

As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them. (D12)

One must realize that war is shared and Conflict is Justice, and that all things come to pass (and are ordained?) in accordance with conflict. (D80)

The same: living and dead, and the waking and the sleeping, and young and old. For these transposed are those, and those transposed again are these. (D88)

The way up and down is one and the same. (D60)

The god: day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger. It alters, as when mingled with perfumes, it gets named according to the pleasure of each one. (D67)

Of course, each of these fragments invites a deep and complex analysis on its own, as the scholarly debate on Heraclitus until today shows. By gathering the evidence like this, we do not intend to simplify the discussion. Nonetheless, it is beyond the scope of this paper to articulate and defend Heraclitus's theory on flux and opposites; we rather want to point to a crucial aspect common to all of these fragments that is relevant for the present analysis. Graham puts it well for us: "What is crucial in both the doctrine of flux and the unity of opposites is the lawlike relationships that obtain between opposites. Some opposites are equivalent or comparable stages of a cycle; others are hierarchically arranged so that change sustains stability and stability governs change. In either case, opposites are different sides of the same coin: they are interdependent realities."<sup>46</sup>

The image of the river ever flowing, the transversal presence of conflict, and the oscillation of opposites are recurrent themes. Taken together these do not necessarily make a doctrine or theory of flux, but they surely offer key aspects in Heraclitus's cosmic conception as flux, movement, or change. Plato might have been a good witness when he recognized flux as a key element in Heraclitus's project, but his testimony cannot be relied upon to assess the implications of flux. For example, in the *Theaetetus* he uses Heraclitus's theory blended with Protagoras's relativism (*Theaet.* 160d5-e3) to show that change is destructive, to the point that nothing remains the same and therefore nothing can be named. But this idea vanishes as soon as we read Heraclitus's own conception of *kosmos*: "The ordering (*kosmos*), the same for all, no god nor man has made, but it ever was and is and will be: fire everliving, kindled in measures and in measures going out" (DK B30). This concept of *kosmos* has at least three characteristics: It is non-created (eternal), it is (like) fire, and it is ignited and quenched by measure. Heraclitus's theory of flux, if there is such a thing, is aligned with *kosmos*; that is, order, not *chaos*. "Heraclitus's *kosmos* is lawlike, and lawlike at several levels of description. There is constant change, and most substances eventually perish. But the perishable changeable substances are continuants, which can be traced through time so long as they persist—right up to the moment when they are replaced by other things."<sup>47</sup> Heraclitus seems to have anticipated that this would not be understood by everyone: "They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre" (DK B51). Certainly Plato would have been part of the group of those who do not understand how a thing agrees at variance with itself.

When reading Heraclitus, we have to be careful not to assess him by parameters alien to his thought, such as the principle of non-contradiction.<sup>48</sup> "In general, what we see in Heraclitus is not a conflation of opposites into an identity, but a series of subtle analyses revealing the interconnectedness of contrary states in life and in the world. There is no need to impute to him a logical fallacy. Opposites are a reality, and their interconnections are real, but the correlative opposites are not identical to each other."<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that it is unfair to assess Heraclitus by logical parameters, not because his thought is "non-logical" or "pre-logical" but because he proposes a different model altogether, which is neither guided by visual metaphors or dichotomies like "appearance" and "reality" nor governed by a tension between sensorial data and the laws of reason, a line of thought more akin to the lineage of Parmenides and Aristotle.<sup>50</sup> He proposes a holistic model of thinking, where there is no opposition between different psychological functions, and reality presents itself as one continuum that flows. Apart from the knowledge of an ever-flowing reality, consonant with Heraclitus's proposal there is also one further aspect that merits mention: self-knowledge. It is a theme that emerges more than once in Heraclitus's writings. See, for example, "I went in search of myself" (DK B101) and "It belongs to all men to know themselves and to think well" (DK B116). This resonates with Nancy's notion of listening as the most basic manifestation of being we mentioned earlier.

In addition to showing the influence of oracular and gnomic wisdom in Heraclitus's thought, these fragments on self-knowledge are philosophically relevant. Many critics have warned about the importance of inner perception or introspection and the structural

parallel between the soul and the *kosmos* in Heraclitus: “The experience that we have of the cosmos, via the senses, has for Heraclitus to be interpreted in the light of the experience we have of our own selves, via introspection.”<sup>51</sup> We would like to add one further ingredient that emerges from the present analysis. As already mentioned, self-knowledge is a central topic in Socratic philosophy. But its treatment in Plato seems to be restricted to a narrative pervaded by the visual metaphor, which fails to offer a nonmediated contact with oneself. As it is clear from *Alcibiades I* (133b9; 133c1-2), self-knowledge is always mediated (by an image, by others, or by god). A totally different thing happens when embracing the sonic model. Indeed, we continuously live the experience of hearing ourselves (our own voice) but never of seeing ourselves (unless by means of reflection). See how Belifante, concerning Nancy, describes it: “To be listening is to be always stretching, reaching toward the self, moving both toward the Other and into one’s own body. Unlike the sense of self received through ocular reflection, this self is always already mobile, spreading away whilst incessantly referring back. It is an echoing image (felt throughout the body) rather than one perceived externally as visual mimesis.”<sup>52</sup>

## SONIC EXPERIENCE AND OBSCURITY

### Between Reality and Sonic Fiction

As knowledge produced through sonic experience is given in the ephemeral, in flux and change, sonic thinking is prone to *sonic fiction*. That is to say, to “tangle true with false” as through the “resonance of the self in listening,” the hearer and the heard are “always ready to be reverse.”<sup>53</sup> Sonic fiction is a concept that Kodwo Eshun develops in relation to listening to Black music. Succinctly, the notion of sonic fiction for him accentuates music’s “unreality principle.”<sup>54</sup> Holger Schulze expands the concept as operating “in the zone of sensory imagination and theories. Sonic fictions enable critics and writers to use imaginary worlds, theoretical fictions and generative concepts by thinking sonically in general.”<sup>55</sup>

As an entanglement of reality and imagination there cannot be a general consensus on what sonic experience’s knowledge can mean in absolute terms. Therefore, we can draw an agreement brought by sonic thinking precisely in that it does not leave us with a clear and demarcated object but with a certain openness to the illogical, the undefined, the unknown, or, in the present context, Heraclitus’s obscurity. Brandon LaBelle states that “noise can be understood to fundamentally *multiply perspectives*. In other words, there is always a sound outside the frame of a particular listening, which often interferes or occurs to the side, and that immediately becomes part of the experience. To put it differently: Sound promises the outside, continually introducing the possibility of a second space, one that may materialize through a simple change of perspective.”<sup>56</sup> Listening opens us up to “hear other possibilities that are probable too, but which, for reasons of ideology power and coincidence do not take equal part in the production of knowledge, reality, value, and truth.”<sup>57</sup>

### Riddle and Reality

Every attempt at reading Heraclitus’s book is an attempt at reconstruction. Because from Aristotle onwards he is so often aligned with the Milesians, we have tended to read him

and use the tools to analyze his work as a philosopher of nature. From there, we are invited to seek key elements of his thought, assessing them in their explicative quality (fire as *arche*, for example). Of course, this is not a fruitless project, but it is limited in scope, mainly because it relies on the expectation of getting a descriptive discourse. We know this expectation can be easily frustrated when reading Heraclitus's fragments. Although there is an attempt to offer an account of *physis*, a project in line with the Milesians, Heraclitus is also part of an older tradition, where the poet is the *sophos*.<sup>58</sup> We might as well consider Heraclitus as part of an agonistic tradition in which claims of wisdom are performed and expressed by poetic utterances. Even when Heraclitus did not write in verse, his writing style and use of language has the aphoristic and gnomic form characteristic of proverbial sayings, a distinguishable form in the tradition of the seven sages.<sup>59</sup> The aesthetics of Heraclitus's writings bears on the analysis. As Eugene Fink warns at the beginning of his seminar with Heidegger: "The language of Heraclitus has an inner ambiguity and multidimensionality, so that we cannot give it any unambiguous reference. It moves from gnomic, sentential, and ambiguous-sounding expression to an extreme flight of thought."<sup>60</sup> This is why Kahn suggests reading him in line with the tradition of archaic poetry: "I think we can best imagine the structure of Heraclitus' work on the analogy of the great choral odes, with their fluid but carefully articulated movement from image to aphorism, from myth to riddle to contemporary allusion."<sup>61</sup> Here Kahn also notices the importance of its didactic purpose centered around the maxim *hen panta einai*, "all things are one": "The content of this perfectly general formula seems to have been filled in by a chain of statements linked together not by logical argument but by interlocking ideas, imagery, and verbal echoes."<sup>62</sup> Speaking of "verbal echoes," it might be relevant for the present analysis to consider Heraclitus's interest in the sonority of words. Let us illustrate this with an example chosen by James Warren: "Greater deaths take by lot greater destinies" (DK B25) "transliterated into English script, reads as follows: '*moroi mezones mezonas moiras lanchanousi*.' It has clearly been designed as an intriguing and aesthetically pleasing linguistic unit. We might notice: the repeated 'm' introducing the first four words; the juxtaposition of the two forms of the word for 'greater' (*mezones/mezonas*); the rhyming '*mezonas moiras*' and '*moroi moiras*.'"<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Graham: "If we attend to Heraclitus' language we see that syntactical ambiguity is more than an accident: it is a common technique he uses to enrich his words and to infuse them with a unique verbal complexity like that of poetry."<sup>64</sup> In tracing patterns of the alphabetization process in ancient Greek thought, Eric Havelock has called this use of syntax "performative" as opposed to "logical."<sup>65</sup> From here we can think that the didactic purpose is not only conveyed by the central message *hen panta einai*, as Khan says; it is also something that the very literary style and use of language bring out for his audience, who are invited to actively engage by interpreting. "It is most likely that this tactic was chosen because Heraclitus is committed to the view that what matters is that each of his readers should come to their own considered understanding of things, rather than take on views simply through his own authority."<sup>66</sup> Or, in the context of sonic thinking, the reader should have the experience to acquire knowledge, rather than processing it intellectually or logically.

## CONCLUSION

In this investigation we have attempted to open a dialogue between some of the main voices of recent sonic thinking and Heraclitus's philosophy. We established that sonic thinking posits the sonic experience of listening as a way to acquire knowledge that otherwise would be unattainable. Importantly, this knowledge—as given by practice, with emphasis on becoming over being and expressed as an entanglement of reality and fiction—privileges interconnectedness and interaction of things, where experience, reality, and fiction are part of a continuum. In the same way that sonic thinking has provided us with a framework to understand the importance of listening and its relationship with flux in Heraclitus, Heraclitus has provided a model that intertwines a unique understanding of *logos* with saying and listening that might provide new paths to sonic thinking and its expression in writing. Sonic thinking teaches us that Heraclitus's characteristic obscurity and the fragmentary and enigmatic nature of his philosophy could perhaps be embraced by a sensitivity that reads his work as a score for the experience of *logos*, a wisdom that can only be attained through listening. With this, we might have found that his philosophy fits a sonic model that embraces multiplicity and evanescent objectivity, as given by performative knowledge instead of prescriptive reasoning. Likewise, this turn to Heraclitus provides a rich patch for further research, as it proposes that traits of sonic thinking's methodology are to be found in pre-Socratic thinking practices. ■

---

TRINIDAD SILVA is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy, Universidad Alberto Hurtado, Santiago, Chile. She completed her undergraduate degree in philosophy (2008) at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago. She holds an MA degree (2011) and a PhD (2017) from University College of London (UCL), Department of Greek and Latin, and specializes in ancient philosophy, particularly Plato. She has taught courses in her area at UCL and Universidad de Barcelona (UB) and has published articles in different areas of ancient philosophy and nonfiction books for children.

GREGORIO FONTAINE (a.k.a Gregorio Fontén) holds a PhD in sonic arts (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2019). His dissertation, "Vacilar: The Entanglement of Self-expression and Its Outside," proposes vacilar as a Latin American sonic sensitivity. Currently he lives in Valparaíso, Chile, and holds a postdoctoral research position at the Art Institute of Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, developing sound installations and expanding the vacilar research further.

## NOTES

1. The writing and submission of this article were part of a larger research project at the Universidad Alberto Hurtado in Chile: Proyecto Conicyt PAI Convocatoria Nacional Subvención a Instalación en la Academia Convocatoria año 2018 PAI77180035.
2. "Hidden mobility" is in Salomé Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds: Hearing the Continuum Of Sound* (New York; London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5; "material flux" is in Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); "sonic logos" is in Julian Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing* (New York; London: Continuum, 2011), 254–56.
3. Iannis Xenakis, *Formalized Music: Thought and Mathematics in Music*, rev. ed. (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon, 1992), ix.
4. Geoffrey Kirk, *The Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954); Charles Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: A New Arrangement and Translation of the Fragments with Literary and Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Mark Johnstone, "On 'Logos' in Heraclitus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient*

*Philosophy*, Vol. 47 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Daniel Graham, "Heraclitus: Flux, Order, and Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*, eds. P. Curd and D. W. Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 169–88; and Daniel Graham, "Heraclitus," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Fall 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/heraclitus/> (accessed January 5, 2021).

5. Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, xvii.
6. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 2.
7. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 2.
8. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 3.
9. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 3.
10. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 5.
11. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 5.
12. John Cage, *Empty Words: Writings '73-'78* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 5.
13. Cage, *Empty Words*, 8.
14. John Cage, *An Autobiographical Statement*, retrieved from [johncage.org](http://johncage.org) (accessed January 9, 2020).
15. Cage, *Empty Words*, 8.
16. Cage, *Empty Words*, 8.
17. Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People: Collected Writings 1963–1980* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1984), 141.
18. Oliveros, *Software for People*, 139.
19. Oliveros, *Software for People*, 149.
20. Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 254–56.
21. Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 275.
22. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 3–4.
23. "The spectator theory of knowledge" is the name given by philosopher John Dewey to describe the passiveness of thinking and theory as contemplation.
24. Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 138.
25. The edition and translation used here is that of Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*.
26. The different positions on this are summarized by Johnstone, "On 'Logos' in Heraclitus," 3–12.
27. This is the reading of those who advocate for a "simple view" according to Johnstone, "On 'Logos,'" such as M. L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 124–29; John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 4th ed. (London: Black, 1930), 133 n.1.; and Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1982), 59.
28. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 98.
29. Graham, "Heraclitus: Flux, Order, and Knowledge," 176.
30. According to DK B101a, the sense of hearing is less reliable than sight.
31. The Greek refers to the language of the barbarian; that is, a language alien to us.
32. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 101.
33. Kirk, *The Cosmic Fragments*, 68–70.
34. Kirk, *The Cosmic Fragments*, 71.
35. Johnstone, "On 'Logos' in Heraclitus," 17.
36. It is worth noting that this opens up an interpretation of Cage's work in relationship to early German Romanticism, a connection that could be further explored elsewhere as it could be argued that there is a romantic primacy in his work.
37. Johnstone, "On 'Logos' in Heraclitus," 24–25.
38. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 2.
39. Oliveros, *Sonic Meditations*.
40. Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, 19.

41. Henriques, *Sonic Bodies*, cf. 253.
42. Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 2.
43. Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 34.
44. Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 169.
45. Cox, *Sonic Flux*, 169.
46. Graham, "Heraclitus: Flux, Order, and Knowledge," 176.
47. David Wiggins, "Heraclitus' Conceptions of Flux, Fire and Material Persistence," in *Language and Logos: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, eds. M. Schofield and M. Nussbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 24.
48. Like Jonathan Barnes does, qualifying his thought as fallacious (Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1982), 52–57). As Kirk claims, the notion of opposite is better understood as opposite *things* and also not as absolutely but relatively opposed (Kirk, *The Cosmic Fragments*, 74, 112).
49. Graham, "Heraclitus," 12.
50. Wiggins proposes a pre-logical reading: "Heraclitus did not have the logical equipment to distinguish opposition from contradiction (say), or identity from exact similarity. But so far from concluding from this that he must then have been tempted to confuse them, I have drawn the conclusion that, not having the equipment to distinguish them, he did not have the logical equipment to confuse them either" Wiggins, "Heraclitus' Conceptions of Flux, 27). Cf. also Graham, "Heraclitus: Flux, Order, and Knowledge," 181–82, to see the extreme views on Heraclitus's epistemology and logic.
51. Edward Hussey, "Epistemology and Meaning in Heraclitus," in *Language and Logos: Studies in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, eds. M. Schofield and M. Nussbaum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 40.
52. Sam Belinfante, "Listening," in *The Listening Reader*, ed. Sam Belinfante (London: Cours de Poétique, 2016), 13.
53. Martin Iddon, "Inside Fama's House: Listening, Intimacy and the Noises of the Body," in *The Listening Reader*, ed. Sam Belinfante (London: Cours de Poétique, 2016), 55–72.
54. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 4.
55. Holger Schulze, *Sonic Fiction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 146.
56. Brandon LaBelle, "Lecture on Shared Space," in *The Listening Reader*, ed. Sam Belinfante (London: Cours de Poétique, 2016), 76–77.
57. Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 3.
58. Considering Heraclitus was critical of poets as authorities. Cf. DK B 104; DK A23; D 40, D 57, D106, D42; D56.
59. Cf. Richard Martin, "The Seven Sages as Performers of Wisdom," in *Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece: Cult, Performance, Politics*, eds. C. Dougherty and L. Kurke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 108–28.
60. Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 4.
61. Khan, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 7.
62. Khan, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 7.
63. James Warren, *Presocratics* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 58.
64. Graham, "Heraclitus," 5.
65. Cf. Eric Havelock, "The Alphabetic Mind: A Gift of Greece to the Modern World," *Oral Tradition* 1, no. 1 (January 1986): 134, 150.
66. Warren, *Presocratics*, 59–60.s