

Foreword

Listening to the Sonic Life of Literature

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The clock strikes 4, *goo-ko*, as the animated creature wagging its feathery tail from side to side helps you to read the time. It is storming outside, but the candles warmly illuminate the bookstore cafe you just entered. The bird call briefly interrupts the familiar mélange of noise around you: the grinding of coffee beans, the indie tunes of a Spotify playlist, the low chatter rising from the table behind you, the high-pitched cling of a spoon stirring a drink. You enrich the mixture of sounds with the flutter of pages as you read your way through Ocean Vuong's new poetry collection. How different these sounds are from this morning when you were doing research in the university library, leafing through a battered copy of *The Affect Theory Reader*, attempting to focus on how the text is speaking to you rather than the soft shuffle of shoes, hushed conversations, fingers pressing passionately into keyboards. Later that night, in the comfort of your own home, you sigh contentedly when you finish the final poem in Vuong's collection, and *thump*, slam the book shut.

On the surface, literature appears to be a silent medium, printed letters seemingly static on a page. In practice, however, literature is

anything but silent. Literary history finds its origins in oral cultures around the world, as stories were composed and told again and again far before the invention of handwriting. Many of the world's oldest surviving texts, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, contain remnants of an oral culture. Mnemonic devices, such as the use of rhyme, ensured that bards and storytellers were able to tell their stories time and again, without needing to use written reminders. Literary scholars assume *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to have been composed within an oral tradition because of, for example, its additive and copious nature, indicating that the epic's original audience was not at liberty to revisit earlier parts of the story, as one might do by flipping back and forth through a book.

Naturally, the invention of handwriting majorly influenced the production and passing along of oral literatures and, between handwriting and later the printing press, literature increasingly became a silent medium. This cultural shift has been famously explored by Walter J. Ong in his work *Orality and Literacy*, in which he explores how the move away from orality to literacy has attributed to many crucial developments in philosophy, science, and literature over the centuries. Ong, having studied under media theorist Marshall McLuhan, writes that the development of electronic media has caused an "age of secondary orality" (133): an age relying on sound, but having been brought about by print culture. The effect this age of secondary orality had on literary production, but also on the contents of literary works, has been extensively discussed within modernist studies. Works by modernists like Virginia Woolf or James Joyce have been discussed widely in relation to the invention of technological apparatuses like the printing press or the radio.

Such inventions also brought in new sounds to associate with literature: the sound of printing, of typewriting, and later also of the voices used to remediate literary works as audio books. Now, as slam poetry and spoken word are becoming increasingly popular, these forms of literature reclaim some of literature's sonic history, relying upon the same rhythmical and rhetoric devices that have been used since the beginnings of human civilization. All this goes to say that literature is anything but a silent medium. It began in a spoken tradition, its sounds

became mechanical with the invention of the printing press, and as words began to speak in audiobooks, they became noisy in slam poetry. Literature has always been preoccupied with the portrayal of sound on the page: in its use of direct and indirect speech, alliterations and onomatopoeias (consider the cover for this issue of *FRAME*, as *thump* is the onomatopoeia for the sound of a book being slammed shut), its choice of words that conjure up actual sounds like ‘screamed’ or ‘laughed’ or ‘gasped’, as well as in its use of sound to describe a setting or a feeling. Consider, for example, the famous opening line to George Orwell’s *1984*: “It was a bright day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen” (3). The reader’s familiarity with hearing clocks announce the hour is juxtaposed with the impossibility of clocks striking thirteen, thus resulting in a powerful feeling of discomfort that is reliant upon the unfamiliar use of a familiar sound. Already in that first line, Orwell conjures a sense of uneasiness that will prove to be central to Big Brother’s society of control. Another striking employment of sound in a novel’s opening chapter can be found in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*, which invites readers “to develop and employ a more sensory-rich reading practice,” as Nicole Brittingham Furlonge describes (4). Considering that the first word reads, or put more accurately, speaks *Sth*, it seems almost inconceivable that readers would not attempt to say the word out loud. Clearly recognisable as a sound, *Sth* requires readers to approach Morrison’s text differently, to call upon multiple senses to make sense of the text. In other words, it “pauses them in their reading tracks” (Furlonge 4).

As these examples have made clear, matters of noise, sound, voice and silence are inextricably linked to literature, in a wide array of shapes and forms. After all, as Nathaniel Mackey argues, “the page and the ear coexist. Not only do they coexist, they can contribute to one another” (313). For that reason, this new issue of *FRAME* focuses precisely on the synthesis of literature and sound, and thus moves away from “the so-called hegemony of the visual and the privileging of the eye” (Sterne 7), a hegemony that can be traced in contemporary society in the Global North in general and literary studies specifically. As Jacques Attali poignantly writes, for a long time “Western knowledge

[...] has failed to understand that the world is not for beholding. It is for hearing [...] we must learn to judge a society more by its sounds” (3).

Moving away from a primary engagement with seeing, *FRAME*'s new issue largely falls in line with debates in the discipline of sound studies, which can be defined as “an interdisciplinary field of inquiry and practice concerned with how humans attribute significance to sound in various forms” (Furlonge 8). By considering the implications of the ear rather than the eye, sound scholars challenge the hegemonic role of the visual in academic thought and instead call for “a democracy of the senses” (Berendt 32). Importantly, the ear is not approached through a visualist frame of reference but through its own auditory and sonic complexities. In doing so, sound scholars participate in the important task of “broadening the senses of sense” (Bull and Back 2).

Zooming in on the field of literary studies, where questions of sound and silence have increasingly been voiced and listened to, scholars explore “literature’s overlooked aurality” (Furlonge 9). Engaging with nonhuman or multispecies soundscapes, decolonial practices of writing about sound and silence, audiobooks, deafness, and musical lyrics, among many other sites of inquiry, these scholars delve into the sonic capacities within text. Ultimately, they set out ‘to think with their ears’, to borrow this provocative phrase from Furlonge, and “unmut[e] the potential of [...] listening in print” (4). Such an approach to text allows for previously unheard stories to be listened to and alternative stories to be told. In this issue, *FRAME* has brought together five of these acoustemological approaches, in which ‘acoustics’ are combined with ‘epistemology’ to consider sound and, in our case, specifically literary sound as a form of knowledge production (see Feld).

Our opening article by Ben De Bruyn diverges from our focus on sounds made by humans and human production to the presentation of non-human sounds in literature, honing in on Laura Jean McKay’s novel *The Animals in that Country*. The novel imagines a pandemic of ‘zooflu’, a virus causing those affected to gain the ability to communicate with animals. In its use of different animal tongues, McKay relies on typography to illustrate the differences in communication, even when man and animal can now understand one another. In this article, De Bruyn

first explores how McKay's novel should be understood within the context of fables, where 'the speaking animal motif' is common, and how the fable holds up in the Anthropocene. He invokes the concept of the Phonocene to draw attention to the colonial and ecocritical dimensions of our era, by placing back focus on the voice. From here, De Bruyn moves to explore McKay's portrayal of animal tongues, illustrating how their linguistic and typographic character complicates the boundaries between human and animal. His close reading of the animal tongues is combined with a reading of the tone of the novel, illustrating how its sonic character is more complex than a mere portrayal of nonhuman voices. Ultimately, De Bruyn argues that the novel calls for more attentive listening practices, and that even if smooth communication between species is not entirely possible, we should learn to listen closely to the world around us.

Rather than examining non-human sounds, our second article is concerned with silence. While silence is generally understood to be a passive and powerless phenomenon, a result of being silenced, Gerlov van Engelenhoven employs the work of Dutch East Indies writer Maria Dermoût to argue that silence can in fact be a powerful, disruptive tool. Through a close reading of Dermoût's short story *De juwelen haarkam*, Van Engelenhoven analyses how Dermoût uses silence as a decolonizing writing strategy. Constructing a twofold picture of silence—on the one hand as the unreliable narrator's refusal to speak and on the other hand as this narrator's inability to speak—Dermoût represents the Moluccan revolt of the early nineteenth century rather differently from most other accounts, which Van Engelenhoven interprets as an intervention in the collective memory of this crucial moment in the Dutch colonial past. As a result, Dermoût opens up new potentialities of engaging with the Dutch colonial past broadly and the Moluccan revolt specifically, in which silence emerges as an alternative, even empowering, mode of articulation. Therefore, Dermoût's short story *De juwelen haarkam* not only offers the potential to imagine the Moluccan revolt differently but also to challenge the logocentric notion that regards voice as powerful and silence as powerless. As Van Engelenhoven puts forward, reading between

the lines while searching for silence can be a refreshing and comforting alternative to the academic and activist inclination towards voice.

Moving from our main to our masterclass section, in her article “How Beale Street Talks and Whispers: The Political Soundscapes of James Baldwin’s Novel,” Florian Kijlstra explores the literary world of sound in James Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*. In this article, Kijlstra engages with Angela Leighton’s *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature*, in which Leighton offers a methodological approach to sound’s work in literature. Besides attempting to rectify the absence of works written by Black authors in Leighton’s analyses, Kijlstra uses Leighton’s concepts of ‘voice’ and ‘voicing’ and her four proposed categories for ‘the formal sonic properties of the printed page’ to study the importance of sound in Baldwin’s novel as well as to show how studying sound within Black writing can break from the homogenizing and restrictive narratives of Black identity construction, that are endorsed by quiet neglect and a hyperfocus on jazz, blues and spoken word as the main sonic vehicles of Black expression in both academia and popular culture. As such, Kijlstra argues that Baldwin uses sound to offer insights into the experiences of its Black characters and construct a complex audible picture of Black identity within the US culture of the 1970s.

In the article “Persephone Screams, and We Listen: An Analysis of Sound in the Hymn to Demeter,” Judith Hendriksma puts the Greek oral tradition into conversation with contemporary ideas on sound and performance. Turning to the mythological figure of Persephone, as recounted in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Hendriksma presents a comprehensive analysis of how the hymn’s narrator employs sound and silence as affective narrative vehicles to sustain immersive reader responses to the hymn across millennia. The story of Persephone’s abduction to the Underworld, as Hendriksma demonstrates in this article, informs a stylistic progression from nonverbal sound to narrative silence and, ultimately, to actual speech. It is the interplay between these different narrative modes of silence and sound that comes to re-think longstanding dichotomies between textuality and orality and ancient and modern readership. As such, Hendriksma’s article bears witness to how behind the textual translations of this Greek hymn lurks

a performative oral tradition, one that continues to shape affective reading engagements with the sufferings of Persephone and her mourning mother Demeter. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, Hendriksma argues, thus ultimately reminds us of the power of narrative silence and sound in the translation of ancient stories into modern reading experiences, where the narratological affect of Persephone's scream never fades away over the course of literary history.

In our next article, "For the People Hear Us Singing 'Bread and Roses': The Myth of a Poem Turned Labor Song," Marit van de Warenburg expands on the origin, orchestration and lyrical contents of the poem "Bread and Roses" (1912) by James Oppenheim, which turned into an influential protest song over time. Working from a cultural memory studies perspective, the article discusses the factors that may have influenced the protest song's 'stickiness', while also elaborating on the meaningful symbioses between text and sound. The article starts with a genealogy of "Bread and Roses," which clarifies the myriad ways in which the poem remediated in society—as poem, as slogan and as song—and addresses how its narrative is the result of an invented story. Then, while connecting the song to labour- and women activism, the article powerfully sketches the lyrical contents with the embodied experience of protesting, therewith synthesising the memory-activism nexus with musicological and literary scholarship. In doing so, Van de Warenburg shows how the poem's lines themselves invite musicking processes that move beyond mere singing and listening, while addressing the integration of memories of the past with actions in the present, therewith proving to evolve into a mobilising force.

Lastly, in our miscellaneous section, Yuqi Khoo offers an alternative approach to understanding theory. Rather than engaging with the theoretical concept of sound through the conventions of an academic paper, Khoo explores sound through creative writing. Imagining a conversation between the American cultural theorist Fred Moten and the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer poured over steaming cups of coffee, Khoo employs creative writing as a productive tool to understand dense sound theories differently. Functioning as a site of discovery, the creative writing approach allows Khoo to connect two

thinkers whose theoretical ideas might not seem related at first glance. By reworking direct quotations from the two scholars into an imagined conversation, however, Khoo demonstrates that Moten and Gadamer's respective conceptualizations of sound work rather well together and produce a striking connection between Blackness and performance, both visual and sonic. This imaginary conversation is deepened through the figure of an extrinsic third party (assuming the form of a barista extraordinaire) who ties the theoretical conceptualizations together, pondering over their implications. Engaging with academic thought through creative means, Khoo's article ultimately engages with the ongoing project of decolonizing academic practice, in which alternative forms of knowledge production (such as creative writing) challenge the hegemonic conventions of the academy.

Now that we have delineated *FRAME*'s current issue full of sounds and silences, we hope you tune in and become, what Robert Stepto has so strikingly coined, a "storylistener" (151).

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