

How Beale Street Talks and Whispers: The Political Soundscapes of James Baldwin's Novel

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Abstract

Through the critical application of Angela Leighton's recently published sonic framework *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (2018), this article shows how in his novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) James Baldwin uses sound to compose a socio-political soundscape of racist control and Black resistance. Contrary to what Leighton's suggestive side-lining of Black writing as mainly voice-based might suggest, Baldwin's work showcases how sound within Black writing

can break from homogenizing and restrictive narratives of Black identity construction, endorsed by quiet neglect and a hyperfocus on jazz and blues and spoken word as the main sonic vehicles of Black expression. Baldwin's text illustrates sound's vast and powerful discursive possibilities in depicting Black identity construction and in conveying the complexities of the Black community's marginalized condition in the United States of the 1970s.

Literary sound studies is an exciting upcoming field. For long, sonic analyses within the field of Black writing primarily focussed on the literary presence of Black music such as blues or jazz and vernacular speech.¹ Over the last decade, interventions examining sound through formal literary structures within both Black and non-Black writing increasingly emerged.² Angela Leighton’s explorative work *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (2018) exemplifies this growing interest in literary sound studies, offering a meditation on sound’s work in literature, yet excludes any substantial examination of Black writing. Her work draws the contours of a critical experimental framework that examines literary acoustics on both the level of form and of content. When describing the formal sonic properties of the printed page, Leighton introduces four categories: “the sounds of words [silently or out loud], the sounds signalled by words, the undercurrent murmur of intertextual allusions” (25) and, more implicitly, the ability of a text to “become a listening space itself” (47).

Her work continues as an exercise in hearing, grounding her arguments in the specificity of the texts under discussion including poetry, novels, letters, and philosophical writings written by Anglo-American, mainly white, authors. Leighton later states, however, that the sonic examples she uses “are just a little more consciously representative of patterns that are everywhere in literature,” yet she excludes works written by racial and ethnic minorities (41).³ This article, therefore, critically expands Leighton’s limited engagement with Black authors and applies the aforementioned categories as a methodological starting point to James Baldwin’s novel *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974).⁴ In doing so, it argues for the potential of these categories when applied to Baldwin’s work and illustrates how they enable new ways to engage with, and understand, the critical literary engagement of Black authors with their community’s marginalized condition in the United States in the 1970s.

¹ I capitalize Black to acknowledge its cultural constructedness as a racial category. For works on the literary presence of Black music see Baker, Floyd and Cantwell.

² See Mathes, Leighton and Snaith for examples.

³ The only exception is a slightly over three-page sonic meditation on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).

⁴ Hereafter referred to as *IBSCT*.

As such, this article presents a methodological intervention that is particularly valuable for Black sonic discourses as Black aurality in the US at large originated from an oppressed position due to slavery and its aftermath of institutionalized racism and segregation.

As a general starting point, Leighton's four categories offer a step-by-step approach that stimulates a bird's eye view to a text's sonic clues, thus moving away from a predictable focus on blues, jazz, and vernacular speech as the main sonic expressors of Black consciousness and the community's emancipatory endeavours. While this article acknowledges the importance of Black music for Black cultural expression and emancipation, also in *IBSCT*, this aspect is interpreted as a piece of the larger sonic literary puzzle. Considering Baldwin's recognition as a social critic and one of those "noisy" authors who "sound Black culture", his works are particularly inviting for investigations into the role of sounds and the lived Black experience (Mike Chasar 57). This analysis places *IBSCT* into the larger tradition of Black literary acoustic research building on Carter Mathes' book *Imagine the Sound: Experimental African American Literature After Civil Rights* (2015), specifically his chapter "The Radical Tonality of James Baldwin's Post-Civil Rights Blues". It is important to acknowledge my own politics of location here too.⁵ This article is written from a white, European perspective and thus offers a specific and partial view on this topic. Additionally, although implicit in my reading, due to limited space this article does not explicitly focus on the intersections of race, gender and other axes of difference present in this text. Such a focus could greatly enrich similar analyses in future research.

Sounds of Words

In what our "ear" perceives as "sounds of words" when silently reading a text, the first of Leighton's four categories, different interpretations are in constant tension with each other. To better understand this process from a sonic perspective, Leighton makes a distinction between "voice" and "voicing". This distinction is based on concepts proposed by Eric Griffiths and Jonathan Culler. Griffiths differentiates between "hints

⁵ See Rich for her coinage of the phrase "a politics of location" (11).

at voicing, whose centre in utterance lies outside of itself [the page]” as opposed to “an achieved pattern on the page” (qtd. in Leighton 7). The “hints at voicing” may have no visible sign within the text but are contextually demarcated, whereas the achieved pattern, or “voice”, exists on the page. Leighton names these two concepts “voicing” and “voice” and aligns these with Culler’s separation of “voicing” and “voice”. Culler states that “[r]ather than imagine that lyrics embody voices, we do better to say that they create effects of voicing, of aural-ity” (qtd. in Leighton 7). Culler considers “voice” as the “echoing of rhyme, assonance, or alliteration, and rhythmic patterning”, echoing Griffiths’ achieved pattern on the page (Leighton 7). Leighton blends these analogous concepts into the singular “voicing” to create a general vantagepoint throughout her meditation, later also referring to “voicing” more generally as the text’s “imaginable audibility”, constituting the mental process of distinguishing among different possible sonic interpretations offered by the “silent” roar on the page (25).

Despite Leighton’s intention of using “voicing” as a general vantagepoint, she seems to later use it as a justification for her failure to substantially include Black writing:

Inevitably, a great deal of literature is left out of this selection of texts from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. Not only drama and performance poetry, but also much of the heritage of [B]lack writing, from Langston Hughes to Patience Agbabi—writing which calls on the voice rather than on what Griffiths’ and Culler call “voicing”, and whose logical end is the live audience rather than the solitary reader—do not feature in this book (18).

Her demarcation is problematic and prescriptive—not in the least as certainly not all texts by Hughes and Agbabi are solely read out loud. Considering Leighton’s previous elaboration on “voice” and “voicing”, this reference to voice, here interpreted as the human ability to speak words out loud, appears abrupt and oversimplified. Additionally, Leighton seems to imply that texts such as drama, performance poetry,

and Black writing lack a sense of “voicing”, despite her loose definition of these terms. The lack of variety within her case studies is furthermore surprising considering her repeated emphasis on the common occurrence of these patterns within all literary texts (41).

In this analysis, I interpret Leighton’s use of “voice” as the authorial presence within the text that is constructed through rhyme, rhythm, tone, stress, assonance, and alliteration, and “voicing” as the “imaginable audibility of the text” constituting the different possible sonic interpretations offered by the “silent” noises, or roars, on the internally voiced page (25). Following this interpretation, “voice” is arguably easier to recognize and more fixed, as opposed to “voicing”. The author’s literary “voice” is comparable with what John F. Fleischauer calls “the author’s pattern of expression” (141). Extending this metaphor, “voice” can be considered the dots the author draws on the page. The act of “voicing”, then, is fulfilled by the reader who carefully connects these dots, creating meaning. We are presented with a certain pattern, however, the outcome of the drawing is not fixed. The text continues to offer the reader endless drawing possibilities which the reader can make sense of in different ways with each read. Much like optical illusion patterns that cause a momentary lapse in the process of meaning making within the viewer, an interruption in the interplay between “voice” and “voicing” can potentially expose the very process of listening to the text. Thus, it breaks with the routine moments of making sense, or as Leighton writes, creates “a space in which to pay attention to our own attention, to reflect on reflection, like putting an ear to a shell – or to a cupped hand” (27). This frequently occurs in *IBSCT* as will be illustrated later.

“Voice” and “Voicing” in *IBSCT*

When examining its re-occurring syntactic and stylistic traits, *IBSCT* exposes a rich ground for sonic interpretation, or “voicings”. According to Fleischauer, “the kind of verbs a writer uses often influence the effect of his prose on the reader” (142). In *IBSCT*, Baldwin uses more active verb forms than their passive counterparts. This aspect of

stylistic “voice” enables a more dynamic read and narrative flow as active verbs function as movers of action and result in shorter sentences. Consequently, this stylistic trait has a direct influence on the perceived rhythm of the text. Furthermore, the active voice unconsciously emphasizes the active character of the story and its characters while hinting at the reader to take on an active reading/listening position. In addition, the novel’s use of the form *is* combines this active tense with the construction of identity. The opening section of the novel introduces the main characters narrated through Tish in an act of self-reflection:

I look at myself in the mirror. I know that I was christened Clementine, and so it would make sense if people called me Clem, or, even, come to think of it, Clementine, since that’s my name; but they don’t. People call me Tish. I guess that makes sense, too [...] I’m beginning to think that maybe everything that happens makes sense. Like, if it didn’t make sense, how could it happen? But that’s really a terrible thought. It can only come out of trouble—trouble that doesn’t make sense. Today, I went to see Fonny. That’s not *his* name, either, he was christened Alonzo: and it might make sense if people called him Lonnie. But no, we’ve always called him Fonny. (3, original emphasis)

This passage describes the disorientating effect of the protagonist’s search for her personal identity and the identity others ascribe to her through the act of nicknaming, while trying to make sense of the disorienting aftermath of Fonny’s rape accusation and subsequent incarceration—which is something the reader will not yet know at this point. On the level of “voice”, the italicization of *his* emphasizes the position of the female-speaker, highlighting the role of differentiation in the construction of Tish’ identity, a process that has been paramount for Black people due to the violent binary system of racist and sexist oppression and segregation. Instances of interpunction, such as the use of parenthetical sentences, can cause a suspension within the narrative flow. The use of the dash in “[i]t can only come out of trouble—trouble

that doesn't make sense" offers a suspension in the follow-up of the first "trouble", which is then repeated with an emphasizing echo. Simultaneously, the dash literally represents a textual silence, a moment of quietness in the character's narration, and an abrupt openness in "voicing" as it offers the blank ambiguity that enables the reader to momentarily lapse and wonder what will follow or what this trouble is.

When turning again to the "voice" in this passage, through repetition and parallel structuring, like the resonance of "come to think of it" and "beginning to think that" and the positioning of the word "trouble", Baldwin creates a mental echo that resonates a diary-like notation of the circular loop of thoughts experienced by a troubled mind. While writing, Baldwin never wrote with a specific reader in mind:

When you're writing, you're trying to find out something which you don't know. The whole language of writing for me is finding out what you don't want to know, what you don't want to find out. But something forces you anyway. (Jordan Elgrably n.p.)

Similarly, the reader is slowly discovering what it is you do not want to find out. Each echo becomes a premonition of what might await the characters in the future. Additionally, through the re-occurring mental echo of the aspect of "sense" and "making sense", Tish is not only trying to figure out the logic behind her own name but also the supposed logic of violent past events. As such, Baldwin introduces Fonny and Tish as a couple and places Tish in a one-sided critical mental dialogue with the white supremacist logic and anti-Black violence of 1970s America. The occurrence of these echoes is combined with a seemingly improvisational sentence structure. Short and long sentences alternate with no visible pattern. Combined with the echoes of specific words and the rhyme present in the final two sentences, Baldwin creates a recognizable, yet unique prosaic musicality open to improvisations in the ears of the reader. Baldwin quite literally places the beauty of his text in the ear of the beholder. What has become clear in this section is that the categories of "voice" and "voicing" function by no means in isolation

and do not exclude a more ideological or political reading. “Voice” and “voicing” are fundamental parts of each other and enable one another in their function, highlighting the improbability of differentiating between texts based on these categories as Leighton does.

Sounds Signalled by Words

According to Leighton, sounds signalled by words—sounds the narrator or character seems to hear—unconsciously set up “listening expectations in the reader” (25). These sounds also take place within the narrative world of *IBSCT* and create a fictional auditory landscape, offering insight into the experiences of its Black characters and constructing a complex audible picture of Black identity within 1970s US culture. Firstly, Baldwin uses diverging verbs such as “screaming, crying, tearing, rumbling” with “whistling, sighing, murmuring, giggling, whispering and breathing,” to describe the characters’ bodily acoustics. Many of these words signify a sense of either complete quietness, heavily subdued volume or extreme loudness. This wide range in evocative volumes heightens the reader’s aural awareness.

Referring to the senses, these words conjure a synesthetic alertness that subtly steers the readers to lend an ear to the story’s audible world. This sensory awareness occurs in numerous moments and with different intensities. In a moment of high poetic sensorial awareness Tish constructs a sense of historical and social self, through which Baldwin depicts an image of Black consciousness. Tish, the main narrator, is sitting in the living room on her father’s knee while her mother is cooking diner in the kitchen. They are about to announce her pregnancy:

It was seven o’clock and the streets were full of noises [...]
I listened to the music and the sounds from the streets [...]
And everything seems connected – the street sounds, and
Ray’s voice and his piano and my Daddy’s hair and my sister’s silhouette and the sounds and the lights coming from the kitchen. It was as though we were a picture, trapped in time [...] And it was as though, out of these elements, this

patience, my Daddy's touch, the sounds of my mother in the kitchen [...] the way the music continued beneath everything [...] the blurred human voices rising from the street, out of this rage and steady, somehow triumphant sorrow, my baby was slowly being formed. (36-37)

Employing Murray Schafer's "three-stage plan" (157) to interpret the several sonic levels present in this passage, this scene can be divided into three main parts: the "immediate", "the support" and the "background" (157). The immediate effect is to be listened to while the support and the background are merely heard. Tish experiences a moment of ultimate sensory awareness where the support and background are merged into a sensory fusion of being, particularly, of being Black. She experiences everything simultaneously: "from the kitchen" slowly forming into more a detailed experience of "the sounds of her mother in the kitchen" slowly descending into a deeper revelation. The streets of the Black neighbourhood are held to a distance, yet the noises of human life, of Black life, their "rage" and "triumphant sorrow", shape new life itself. Within this "trapped" sensorial picture, support and background sounds are taken into the intimate experience of the "immediate", and distant sounds are transported into the personal space of the living room, merging distant public sounds with the deeply personal. As Tish makes sense of her own being and that of her unborn child, Baldwin creates a (sonic) picture of a Black consciousness that is both internal and external, resilient and vulnerable, universal and deeply unique.

The presence of all-encompassing sounds is juxtaposed by moments of silence. Regarding silence, Schafer writes:

Man likes to make sounds to remind himself that he is not alone. From this point of view, total silence is the rejection of human personality. Man fears the absence of sound as he fears the absence of life. [...] In western society, silence is a negative, a vacuum. (256)

In *IBSCT*, silence holds a dehumanizing and dangerous quality, brought to the fore in passages where Black characters are directly confronted with or suffering from acts of institutionalized racism. Silence is consistently described with a sense of intrusion and discomfort: “a stinging silence” (66); “dreadful quietness” (121); “terrifying quietness” (122). The negative connotation of silence as a vacuum is exemplified in the description of Fonny’s state in prison: “Everything is still and silent. [...] His mind is as empty as a shell, rings, like a shell, with a meaningless sound, no questions, no answers nothing” (156-57). The “meaningless sound”, echoing the description of white noise, refers to the vacuum that is forming in his mind because of his incarceration, the epitome of anti-Black political policy.

Additionally, the scene in which officer Bell, a white officer on duty in Fonny and Tish’ neighbourhood, attempts to provoke Fonny into his arrest is accompanied with a quietness as “no one said a word”, including Black onlookers and officer Bell himself (119). As Jacques Attali commented: “the appropriation and control [of noise] is a reflection of power [...] it is essentially political [...] in noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men” (6). Silence too is a marker of these hierarchal relations. From this perspective, the white officer, representing the US’ legal institutions, silently executes his power over Fonny and Tish, who represent the Black community. Sound and silence are thus fundamental in Baldwin’s depiction of Black identity and Black struggle. Additionally, this section shows how depictions of sounds and silences are subtle yet powerful tools to convey Black experiences within an oppressive system, tools that in a more traditional sonic reading run the risk of being overlooked.

The Undercurrent Murmur of Other Texts at Work

In his work, Baldwin incorporates gospels and well-known Black and white musicians such as Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Bony M, Marvin Gaye, BB King and Barbra Streisand. Seeing his incorporation of many Black artists, Baldwin seems to use music to claim a Black

popular culture and community. Although this might be the case, it seems likely that Baldwin simultaneously reflects on Black music's position within popular culture at large, as he also includes songs from films such as Streisand's "Funny Girl". The novel questions music's potential as a vehicle of intercommunal bonding and possible emancipation. As such, music is depicted as both a transcultural and trans-communal bonding mechanism as well as a compulsory means of expression.

Within popular culture, music tends to circulate. Baldwin occasionally places Black music in "mixed" public spaces such as Bleeker Street: "the streets were very crowded now, with youngsters [B]lack and white, and cops [...] a jukebox was playing Aretha's *That's Life*. It was strange" (48). Yet, Tish experiences this seemingly melting-pot-esque scene with suspicion. This suspicion is echoed in a statement by Baldwin himself. In *Notes of a Native Son* in the passage "Many Thousands Gone", Baldwin notes: "As is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence; and the story is told, compulsively, in symbols and signs, in hieroglyphics" (24). This awful reverberating silence is accompanied by the dominant narratives conveyed through "hieroglyphics" of popular music, film, and fashion that trap the Black community into a homogeneous cultural straitjacket without room for human dialogue, nuance, and genuine understanding. Considering this quote, Bleeker street—the centre of the music scene, American Bohemia, and progressive and anti-establishment movements—becomes a site of both emancipatory potential and hollow political symbolism, something which is evoked in Tish' apprehensive reading of the scene.

Turning to blues and jazz, vernacular Black communities attained a music that had "wide appeal because it expressed a toughness of spirit and resilience, a willingness to transcend difficulties which was strikingly familiar to those whites who remembered their own history" (James Alan McPherson qtd. in Baker Jr. 11). By 1920, American financiers noticed they could commercially exploit its wide appeal (Baker 12).⁶ Immediately, the suffering of the Black community was appropriated

⁶ For an elaborate study on the role of blues in the construction of the Black vernacular imagination, see Mosher and Baker.

and financially exploited by the dominant group. Yet, within literature, blues and jazz are extensively used as an empowering, emotional, and social literary motif; one that Baldwin is known to incorporate in his works too.⁷ In *IBSCT*, he comments on the double-edged nature of this motif, for example in the passage where Tish's mother visits Puerto Rico:

There must be two thousand transistor radios playing all around them, and all of them are playing B.B. King. Actually, Sharon cannot tell what the radios are playing, but she recognises the beat; it has never sounded louder, more insistent, more plaintive. It has never sounded so determined and dangerous [...] The beat of the music rises higher, becoming almost unbearable, beginning to sound inside Sharon's head, and causing her to feel that her mind is about to crack. (146)

The echoing, lamenting, dangerous sound of the blues—and with it the cultural narrative of Black suffering—is manifesting inside Sharon's mind. Not directly construed as either positive or negative, Baldwin describes the music as penetrative and ever present, a feature also highlighted by the small remark later in the novel: “even the juke-box is silent” (190). This strongly echoes Baldwin's previous statement on the dominance of popular culture. By incorporating Black music as a transcommunal medium on the one hand and as a dominant presence on the other, Baldwin questions Black music's role as a motor for emancipatory potential and vehicle of authentic cultural expression. Ironically, academia has analyzed this emancipatory potential extensively, often interpreting jazz and blues as empowering, socio-political literary motifs. Poignantly, this generates a similarly restrictive silence within academia as jazz and blues are often considered the main vehicles of Black sonic expression within literature. Ultimately, such analyses reinstate similarly restrictive literary sonic narratives through which the Black community is expected to acoustically express itself. Thus, it is vital to stay attuned to other sonic clues present withing Black writing

⁷ See Cantwell and Mathes for analyses of this motif in Baldwin's work.

and to consider jazz and blues as a piece of a larger sonic puzzle, something Leighton's framework encourages us to do.

Conclusion

Re-iterating Baldwin's lucid statement "as is the inevitable result of things unsaid, we find ourselves until today oppressed with a dangerous and reverberating silence", Leighton's side-lining of Black writing reduces Black literature to a realm of silent neglect (24). By applying Leighton's categories to *IBSCT*, this analysis attempts to break this silence, showing that the undefinable, abstract nature of sound provides a powerful vehicle through which Black writing can depict and problematize the construction of Black identity within a society dominated by anti-Black control. Ultimately, Baldwin employs sound to compose a socio-political soundscape of Black oppression and resistance, and offers a text that listens to itself, a reflection on our reflection, like putting an ear to a shell, while questioning the very forces that shaped it so and washed it up on the shore.

It is vital to ignite a shift in perception regarding Black literary acoustics to overcome the marginalization of Black culture caused by quiet neglect, sonic over-simplification and musical tunnel vision fed by mainstream popular culture and endorsed within the academic field. As such, Leighton's concepts offer a methodological starting point for literary sonic analyses that aim to break with purely ideological or thematic approaches. However, it is also important to consider the limitations of the knowledge tradition this analysis builds on. In a much-needed attempt to decentralize the Eurocentrism implicit in this literary sound study—and in the methods used in literary sound studies overall—future research could examine this methodological framework from a decolonial perspective using Jennifer Lynn Stoeber's "the sonic colour line", Marie Thompson's "white aurality", and Julie B. Napolin's examination of the racial politics of sound technologies.

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Biography

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