



Sound Studies

An Interdisciplinary Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfso20>

The sonic episteme: acoustic resonance, neoliberalism, and biopolitics

by Robin James. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2019, 245 pages, \$26.95(PB), 978-1-4780-0664-0

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To cite this article: Madeleine Collier (2020): The sonic episteme: acoustic resonance, neoliberalism, and biopolitics, Sound Studies, DOI: [10.1080/20551940.2020.1755925](https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2020.1755925)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2020.1755925>



Published online: 07 Jun 2020.



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BOOK REVIEW

The sonic episteme: acoustic resonance, neoliberalism, and biopolitics, by Robin James. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2019, 245 pages. \$26.95 (PB), 978-1-4780-0664-0

In his account of key representational ruptures across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, German media theorist Friedrich Kittler noted the transition from Old European music's notation system of Pythagorean intervals to the frequency transcription enabled by early recording technologies. As a consequence, he would claim, mathematical-physical notation came to displace Old European alphabetism, and "The real [took] the place of the symbolic" (1999, 24-25). This is precisely the development which Robin James engages in *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance, Neoliberalism, and Biopolitics*. A wide-ranging and highly ambitious treatise on the relationship between the formal attributes of acoustic resonance and the strategies of neoliberal enclosure, *The Sonic Episteme* investigates the consequences of the frequentative and vibrational metaphors deployed across contemporary social theory.

Expanding on the project she began in *Resilience and Melancholy* (2015), James draws from a Foucauldian notion of biopolitics to establish that the probabilistic statistics of the bell curve are integral to both free market logic and contemporary acoustic modeling. As the Real has increasingly become rendered in frequency ratios, she contends, social theorists of diverse backgrounds have begun to rely on the language of music and acoustic resonance to translate these technical, mathematical ideals into layman's terms. Accordingly, James proffers the concept of the *sonic episteme*—a qualitative counterpart of Foucault's quantitative *neoliberal episteme*—to describe how neoliberal relations of domination and subordination are represented in sound and resonance. Performing a methodological pivot akin to Jonathan Sterne's move from Enlightenment to *Ensoniment* values (2003), James proffers the *sonic episteme* as an implement to reach past well-worn descriptive tropes of systemic disenfranchisement under the neoliberal state.

Over five chapters, James engages with a broad swathe of contemporary philosophers, sound theorists, and political economists to demonstrate how acoustic resonance and neoliberalism co-articulate across musical texts and social events. In the first chapter, "Neoliberal Noise and the Biopolitics of (Un)cool: Acoustic Resonance as Political Economy," James establishes her interest in exploring how neoliberalism recuperates and recycles social "noise" into profitable figures. Situating her present inquiry as an extension and complication of Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), James identifies a certain set of statistical, mathematical relations which she argues are the basis of both acoustic resonance and Hayekian, neoliberal financialisation. While both these broader phenomena are typically modeled with the same frequency-based representational figures, James argues that theorists like Attali who describe the "quantitative" relations of neoliberalism with the "qualitative" vocabulary of music theory uncritically double-down on the systemic domination of neoliberal enclosure (27). This premise begs two questions which hang over the text as a whole: First, in which contexts specifically are we to consider neoliberal relations solely "quantitative" and musical relations solely "qualitative"? Second, as James does not historicise the conception and application of frequency-based modeling systems, to what extent can we safely or

productively claim this idealised distribution, first and foremost, for acoustic resonance rather than population studies or the physical sciences?

Continuing her investigation of systems which facilitate the enclosure of noise into intelligible/profitable sonic figures, James raises the Ancient Greek ideal of the *sophrosyne* (frequently translated as moderation or self-mastery), noting Plato's use of harmonic ratios to describe the ideal comportment of various members of society. For James, these musical-mathematical relationships have long been more than purely figurative or rhetorical tools; they are intrinsic to the social relations of subordination, hierarchy, and regulation. Where (as Kittler also noted) Plato relied heavily on Euclidean geometric relations to render these ideals, today, biopolitical extraction has elevated probabilistic statistics above all other metrics of rationalization or representation. James turns to Rancière's work on post-democratic regimes to describe how these normative distributions "code out" the marginal tail populations which impede the messaging of the hegemonic state. The transition from the proportional, hierarchical, and static models of modernity to the dynamic models of the twenty-first century which manage risk, James claims, has enabled the *sophrosyne* to adapt to more aggressively- and globally-implemented techniques of normalization.

In the third chapter, "Vibration and Diffraction: Acoustic Resonance as Materialist Ontology," James extends the provocative claim that when new materialist theorists substitute vibratory ontologies for text- and ocular-centric models of the Real, they, like Attali, unwittingly reinforce frequency-based strategies of neoliberal enclosure. Specifically, James surveys the work of Elizabeth Grosz, Karen Barad, and Jane Bennett, contending that their frequent reliance on acoustic and vibrational metaphors build upon a fundamentally probabilistic ontology of the Real, founded on mathematical abstraction (89). Furthermore, she critiques the relatively flat ontologies of new materialism as models which, in eschewing hierarchy, ultimately lend a dynamic flexibility to "Philosophy's choreography of enclosure" (124). Where James critiques Barad's quantum physics-based model of diffraction on the grounds that it draws from the same probabilistic mathematical principles used in statistical normalization, she neglects to parse the precise situation of auditory resonance as a constituent of both physical relations and statistical distributions. As Jonathan Sterne reminds us, "Sound is a very particular perception of vibrations... As part of a larger physical phenomenon of vibration, sound is a product of the human senses and not a thing in the world apart from humans" (2003, 12). By collapsing any nuance between the cooperative processes and communicative assemblages which engender the phenomenon of "sound" and physical modeling as a whole, James forecloses any investigation into the specific implications of relational, vibratory ontologies for sound studies. Furthermore, while I would contend that new materialism is vulnerable to critique on several fronts, I find it difficult to accept James's wholesale dismissal of the field (and its Deleuzian project of transversal coming-into-being) as "enclosure" based primarily on these theorists' emphasis on transduction, flexibility, and relatively flat hierarchies. However, new materialist theorists would benefit by responding to James challenge; a rigorous, historicised account of frequency's role in vibrational ontologies would help to resolve the ideological basis of these representational models.

As an alternative to the sonic episteme, James works through questions of political resonance and vibratory ontology aided by the scholarship of black social theorists, including Alexander Weheliye, Katherine McKittrick, Christina Sharpe, and Devonya Harris. Harnessing the current resurgence of interest in the politics of compression, James argues compellingly for

a renewed consideration of perceptual coding, oriented around the range which Tricia Rose calls “in the red” frequencies. These frequencies, alongside other sonic gestures which could be considered “coded-out happenings,” are defined by their ability to pivot away from the hegemonic registers of intelligibility and profitability; they operate “outside the spectrum of frequencies that accurately reproduce and transmit white aesthetic values” (7). Building on Alexander Weheliye’s *phonographic* framework (2005), James culls a diverse selection of black sonic and audiovisual techniques (hip-hop’s *lean* aesthetics, the antiphonal isolation of Beyoncé’s “Hold Up”, the inverted pornotroping of Rihanna’s “Bitch Better Have My Money” music video) to illustrate various strategies which subvert the sonic episteme’s domestication of noise. Feminist media scholars such as Jenny Sundén (2015) and Legacy Russell (2013) have recently turned their attention to a minor language of the glitch posited against high-fidelity reproductions of gender; James is similarly invested in the potential of harsh noise, grain, skips, and distortion to unveil and obliquely critique otherwise transparent infrastructures. However, James expands her investigation beyond the moment of technological reproduction, demonstrating how production values, lyrical themes, and audiovisual aesthetics can likewise apply pressure to the internal coherence of biopolitical systems of extraction.

The Sonic Episteme grounds its argument in a vast and crisscrossing archive. James brings diverse theories of (bio)political economy, critical race theory, and new materialism to bear on a similarly crowded field of primary source texts: features of digital audio processing tools, popular music video aesthetics, the politics of “hit parades,” lyrical themes, and the rhythm of breathing patterns, to name a few. As a result of the perpetually shifting foundations of her investigation, it becomes increasingly difficult to trace the throughlines of her central argument as the book progresses; however, this extensive assemblage of source texts generates unexpected and often striking conclusions. Most valuably, James organises crucial texts at the intersection of sound studies and critical race studies, proffering their diverse methodologies as alternatives to the techniques of post-democratic perceptual coding. For those interested in the consequences of frequency modeling and the broader project of approaching philosophy through sound, *The Sonic Episteme* presents a bold—if sometimes cumbersome—foray into the rich territory of neoliberal sonic representation.

Notes on contributor

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2020.1755925>

