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In *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature*, Angela Leighton meditates upon the auditory imagination of a selection of literary works from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The focus of the book is “on the sound that, in a sense, stays silent on the page while shaping the labor of the ear through which it might, nevertheless, be heard” (18). As the knotty syntax of this sentence suggests, the movement between eye and ear, text and its haunting sonic double, involves a labor—the shaping of an “ear” that might hear a sound imagined in and through the visual mark. Leighton attends to the ways in which poets, novelists, and critics produce such hearing. Through an interlinked set of virtuosic close readings that move from Tennyson’s poetic “hum” to the intricate repetitions of Australian poet Les Murray, Leighton listens for the listening written within literary text.

That is, she reads for how poets display and transform their own listening (and ours) by writing the memory of sound through poetic form. These listening-readings uncover the “strange resurrections” (116) of the sounds of other literary figures and texts (for example, the echoes of Tennyson’s rhythms and assonances in the work of Christina Rossetti and Virginia Woolf). They also suggest the enigmatic haunting of literary texts by nonliterary sounds and rhythms (for example, the sound of horses’ hooves as mediated by metrical form in the poetry of Yeats). *Hearing Things*, then, studies “the story of debt, echo, and allusion” as a “story of hums and murmurs, however distracting, captivating or even laughable” that give “literary language its rich backdrop of noises from the past” (95).

In consequence, the tone of this study is undeniably elegiac. Each chapter begins with the writer situating herself in space and time. We follow her to the seaside or to her study. We listen to traffic or to a conversation with a philosopher. We witness her memories of a walk to Lindisfarne with another (who is made present through the collective pronoun “we”). In other words, each chapter begins by highlighting the reader’s strange distance from and intimacy with the writer. These little expositions simultaneously remove and invite readers into the scene of writing. We are there and not there. This oscillation of presence and absence—between a recorded past and the projection of our readerly selves into the text’s voice—is, needless to say, not a new discovery in literary criticism. However, it works for Leighton by setting up the threshold state in which her sonic ghost-hunting may occur. We enter texts by association, by wandering but traceable means. In this way, *Hearing Things* demonstrates how “words carry their underground connectives, their humming undersongs and understories” with and against narrative sequence and
explicable meaning (154). Through the imaginative threshold of copresence, Leighton seeks out the “ghostly purposes of literary language itself” (157).

I call this emphasis upon ghostliness—on echo and allusion primarily—elegiac because it foregrounds the loss and reconstitution of sound as work within and through poetic texts. Leighton’s readings of Walter de la Mare—who is given little attention these days—particularly emphasize this sense of a ghostly, subterranean murmur that works at the meeting point between conscious construction and unconscious accident. This sense of the haunting powers of sound gives a powerful affective charge to this work in sound.

But it also somewhat limits the possibilities of Leighton’s intervention. For what emerges from these readings for echoes, sound similarities, and allusions is the beautiful particularity of certain texts as against the generalized outcome of their media format: a collection of visible marks that produce conditions for the possibility of voicing. Leighton shapes an abstract condition for all literary sounding from her selective readings. This method of lyric reading (to use Virginia Jackson’s term) wanders and wonders, but it depends upon a fixed method: as readers “seehear” (in Joyce’s phrase), they must be “all eyes and ears at once, seeing words on the page but also hearing what they sound like, and making sense of the sound” (21). The work of sound within the medium of print—the work of sounding out a text—is a labor of attention, recognition, recall, and interpretation. A guide like Leighton helps readers to attune their own ears to those of writers like Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Frost, and Alice Oswald, all of whom insist upon the hold of sound within and through poetry.

Such attunements and attentions are conditioned by a selection of texts that emphasize, then, the craft of silent reading. Leighton chooses to emphasize this readerly form in the face of the impossibility of comprehensiveness, but it still must be said that the work of sound in literature cannot be simply a question of resonances within the mostly formal, lineated, page-bound poetry (and some works of fiction) from the last 200 years in English. Comprehensiveness is impossible, but the range of possible interventions here could certainly be expanded. To exclude performances and audio recordings is to limit the forms of mediation and communication that literature’s auditory imagination might transform. Critics can use similar processes of echolocation and of listening to listening in order to read sounds reproduced on stage or by audio technologies. As work by critics like Yopie Prins (in historical prosody) and Charles Bernstein (in experimental poetry) make clear, the difference between the mediations of phonographic technology and the mediation of printed text is a difference of degree, not kind. Attending to literary work through these media forms shows how literature—as sound-writing—may invest any medium with a kind of sonic excess that produces what Leighton calls “intransitive sufficiency” (271).
In *Hearing Things*, this term ultimately defines the work sound does in literature (as opposed to the work readers must do to hear sound in texts). Intransitivity suggests not the recording and communication of knowledge but rather the presentation of a “continuous act of discovery” (272) in the charming repetitions-with-a-difference of poetic sound. This is not work with a definable content or end. Sound becomes both a means and a mode for such productive ongoingness. Leighton figures sound as “a moving target, invisible in itself, caught in transit, its origins partly deduced or guessed from its effects” (22), and so it parallels the process of “knowing” presented by poetry. Sound offers a way into a kind of disinterested beauty that emerges from literature’s playful challenges to “the ear’s own variable thresholds of attention” (21).

This story of intransitive knowing, however, is limited—once again—by the scope of the project. For to exclude Black writers like Langston Hughes or Patience Agbabi on the basis that their work “calls on voice” rather than the work of “voicing” is to misread their work and to close off other forms of auditory imagination and knowing available to the work of sound in literature (18). For it is certainly not the case that we read Hughes or Gwendolyn Brooks—much less Kamau Brathwaite, Cecil Taylor, or Harryette Mullen—only in relation to the expression of a fixed object, a single voice or identity. Rather, work like theirs manifests an always-emerging multiplicity of voices and voicings made present in the variable and varied materiality of sound. The beauty—and terror—in the work of these poets is deeply connected to an “intransitive ongoingness” in sound but that intransitivity is tied to historical dispossession and the continual movement within what Fred Moten in *In the Break* calls a “freedom drive.”

In the end, these questions of scope must transition into questions of framing, for what if we reversed the terms of the title to ask: What is the work of literature in sound? Rather than accepting a particular “nature” of sound (as fleeting, unfixed, ineffable) that produces literature in its image, how could we hear literary work as conditioning how we listen? *Hearing Things* does show us a way here, with many instances of the effect of literary ears in organizing attention, scanning other texts, repeating and reframing the previously heard into new “listenings.” But as the work of sound studies scholars like Jonathan Sterne and Mara Mills makes clear, sound is not one thing for all people in all places. Literature’s—in particular poetry’s—language as sound and sound as language can ask its readers to attend to the echoing soundscape of literature and to the unheard on the other side of sound’s sense.

While Leighton shows us how all poetic sound presents uncanny pathways through listening, an emphasis upon the reconstitution of sound as memory closes off the ways in which another literary tradition (an “other” tradition in poetry, from William Carlos
Williams to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha) might speculatively denaturalize and distort “our” speech and “our” listening. What new labor in hearing and knowing might emerge not through acts of resurrection and consolation but through mishearing or even silence? Sound, through such work, might be heard not as a call to being but as a call to be differently.