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Heterophonic narrative as resistance: sound poetics in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

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Abstract

Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014) opens with a single imperative: "Listen." Criticism of the novel has reached for sonic metaphors—polyphony, cacophony, voice—without treating sound as an analytical category. Drawing on Schafer's soundscape theory, Attali's political economy of noise, and Brathwaite's concept of "nation language," while flagging the Eurocentric assumptions in Schafer and Attali, I propose the term "heterophonic narrative" to describe James's acoustic organization: more than seventy-five characters repeatedly vary a shared traumatic ground, a sonic relation that, Bakhtinian polyphony does not by itself fuly specify. The concept derives from Caribbean musical practice—kumina drumming, reggae riddim, call-and-response traditions—where the refusal to merge voices into harmonic unison carries political as well as formal force. The analysis proceeds through four stages: a ghost narrator's establishment of the novel's acoustic field; the Singer's (Bob Marley's) structurally designed silence as an absent keynote; the relation between heterophonic organization and Bakhtinian polyphony; and a three-level demonstration that heterophony functions as resistance—through tactical illegibility in code-switching at the micro level, through the refusal to domesticate violence into consumable narrative at the aesthetic-ethical limit, and through portable vocal retuning across what Stoever (2016) calls the "sonic color line" at the transnational macro level. Heterophony in this novel, I argue, does not merely describe a formal relationship among voices—it is itself a mode of resistance, operating through the acoustic properties of prose.

Keywords *A Brief History of Seven Killings* · Sound poetics · Heterophony · Noise politics · Caribbean literature · Postcolonial fiction

Winner of the 2015 Man Booker Prize and the first by a Jamaican author to claim it, Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014) reconstructs the attempted

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assassination of reggae superstar Bob Marley on December 3, 1976, channeling its narrative through more than seventy-five characters whose voices span three decades and two continents, from Kingston to New York City. Before any character speaks, the novel issues a single italicized command: "Listen." It is easy to pass over, but it matters: this is a novel built on sound.

Existing criticism has engaged the novel extensively, but the emphasis has fallen on what it says rather than how it sounds. Walonen (2018) reads violence as a force shaping the Jamaican diaspora; Harrison (2017, p. 92) argues that James's rejection of nationalism critiques global capital—thematically rich work that nonetheless privileges content over form. When formal analysis is attempted, it stops at metaphor: Miller (2014) invokes "the aesthetics of cacophony," and reviewers reach for sonic terms—polyphony, ventriloquism, voice—without interrogating what this auditory language actually does. The gap is sharpened by Cooper's (1993) foundational *Noises in the Blood*, which established that Jamaican popular culture's oral, musical, and linguistic expressions constitute "expressions of resistance to marginalization, racism, and sexism" (p. 2)—a framework that bears directly on James's acoustic strategies yet remains unapplied to this novel. Recent Caribbean scholarship has begun to address the broader deficit: Munro (2024) calls for a realignment of Caribbean studies that foregrounds sonic dimensions, Hamilton (2019) demonstrates how popular music shapes narrative form in contemporary Caribbean fiction, and Garland (2025) examines how *A Brief History of Seven Killings* functions as a kind of "digital playlist." Garland's focus, however, is intermedial—text and digital audio formats—which is different terrain from the acoustic poetics I pursue here. Sonic metaphors accumulate, but they remain metaphors, deployed impressionistically rather than as tools of formal analysis. Yet sound in this novel is structural, not atmospheric: the central figure, "the Singer" (Bob Marley), anchors the entire narrative yet never speaks as a first-person narrator; the dense Jamaican Creole makes rhythm and vocal texture inseparable from semantic meaning; and characters never stop commenting on how people talk—"chat bad," "talk proper," "speak good," "talk like a white man." These are not incidental features but the novel's organizing principles, and they demand analytical attention that existing criticism has not provided.

My argument is that *A Brief History of Seven Killings* constructs a coherent sound poetics, one that existing criticism—oriented toward the visual and the thematic—has rendered inaudible. Drawing on Schafer's (1994) soundscape theory, Attali's (1985) political economy of noise, and Brathwaite's (1984) concept of "nation language," while remaining alert to the Eurocentric assumptions embedded in Schafer and Attali, I propose the term "heterophonic narrative" to name the acoustic organization of James's multi-voiced structure, supplementing the language of polyphony by specifying how the novel's voices are sonically related.The concept draws on Caribbean musical practice, where simultaneous melodic variation is a living tradition rather than an archaic curiosity—and where the refusal to merge voices into harmonic unison carries political force. For heterophony is not only a formal principle; in the novel, it is a mode of resistance. Code-switching, cacophonous violence, and transnational vocal adaptation all extend the heterophonic logic from narrative structure into political action. As Snaith (2020, p. 1) has argued, "the tuning of the mind's ear is as important as the focusing of the mind's eye"; the literary-critical task, then, is to

develop analytical tools adequate to what the ear perceives. The analysis proceeds in four stages: I begin with the novel's auditory framework and the ghost narrator who establishes its acoustic field; move to the Singer's structurally designed silence, read through Schafer's and Attali's categories; clarify the relationship between heterophonic narrative and Bakhtinian polyphony; and finally trace heterophony's political dimension through code-switching, cacophonous violence, and transnational vocal adaptation.

"Listen": auditory framework and the ghost's voice

The novel's first word stands outside the narrative. "Listen," in italics, alone on its line—not "Look," not "Imagine," not "Remember." James anchors his novel in the ear, not the eye. The word makes the reader a listener before any story begins. The first voice to answer this imperative belongs to Sir Arthur George Jennings, a murdered Jamaican politician who narrates as a ghost. His opening lines set the acoustic key for the entire novel:

> Dead people never stop talking. Maybe because death is not death at all, just a detention after school. You know where you're coming from and you're always returning from it. You know where you're going though you never seem to get there and you're just dead. Dead. (James, 2014, p. 1)

What strikes the ear first about Jennings is his register: educated, syntactically elaborate, marked by balanced clauses and philosophical abstraction— "Dead people never stop talking" is delivered not as exclamation but as quiet axiom, its rhythm unhurried. A few lines later, the formulation modulates: "the dead never stop talking and sometimes the living hear" (James, 2014, p. 1)—adding a listener, turning assertion into acoustic relation. The dead speak; the living may or may not hear. This is the voice of an educated elite comfortable with abstraction—his career ended by a fall, or a push, from a balcony. His polished sentences issue from radical powerlessness. The novel opens, then, with a voice whose authority is undermined by its source. How Jennings sounds and where he speaks from do not match—and this mismatch sets the pattern for much of what follows.

Jennings does more than narrate first; he establishes the acoustic field all the others will inhabit. His observation that "the dead never stop talking" describes the novel's own formal condition: voices here persist past their termination points, silenced speakers keep producing sound, and the line between audible and inaudible blurs. The ghost narrator literalizes what the novel's proliferating voices perform—more speech than any listener can absorb. What Jennings introduces is less a story than an acoustic problem: how do dozens of simultaneous voices, each claiming authority over the same events, relate to one another when no single perspective can organize them into coherence? The novel will spend seven hundred pages working through this question without resolving it.

This device has deep roots in Caribbean culture. James has noted that his ghosts are "closer to an African version of spirits than a Christian version" (Escoffery, 2014),

placing Jennings in the duppy tradition, where the dead keep talking through song, story, and ritual. But James complicates this resonance by making his ghost not an African ancestor but a compromised politician—a member of the very elite whose deafness to popular voices the novel will repeatedly indict. Jennings's authority is ironized from the start. The voice that frames the novel's auditory world belongs to a politician of questionable reliability—possibly murdered, certainly deaf to the sounds his class position screens out.

It is Jennings who first articulates the logic that will govern the novel's most significant silence. Reflecting on the Singer, he observes: "That's what happens when you personify hopes and dreams in one person. He becomes nothing more than a literary device" (James, 2014, p. 3). The moment is startlingly self-reflexive: a dead narrator—himself a kind of literary device—explaining why the most important figure in the novel will never speak. Jennings also establishes the novel's central acoustic motif—one that recurs across his sections—when he laments, "The living, they never listen" (James, 2014, p. 273). The refrain keeps returning, set against the opening "*Listen*" like a bitter answer: nobody in the novel actually listens. Politicians tune out the people they claim to represent; America, preoccupied with Cold War strategy, treats the Caribbean as background noise; and the novel's men, surrounded by female voices, consistently fail to hear them. Sound and failed listening pull against each other across the entire narrative, and the novel offers no resolution. Jennings's observation about the Singer points toward a conspicuous absence. A novel that channels so many narrators—each claiming their version of events—ought, by sheer accumulation, to have given voice to everyone who matters. It has not. The figure around whom the entire novel revolves, the one character whose voice should carry furthest, never speaks.

The singer's silence: soundscape structure and present absence

The Singer—James's designation for Bob Marley—appears by name or title 101 times across the novel's entire length, yet he never narrates. Characters talk about him, argue over him, occasionally address him directly, but his own perspective stays sealed. This is the novel's most consequential acoustic event: not a sound but a silence. It requires a vocabulary adequate to its structural weight. Schafer (1994), in *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, distinguishes between keynote sounds (the ambient acoustic background that conditions perception), sound signals (foreground events that seize attention), and soundmarks (sounds specific to a place and community). Schafer's framework has its biases: he idealizes pre-industrial "hi-fi" soundscapes and treats modern noise as degradation—a nostalgia that, applied carelessly, would reduce Kingston's ghetto soundscape to mere acoustic pollution. I use his categories here strictly as structural tools, shorn of their pastoral bias. What Schafer would call noise turns out to be the novel's most politically charged material.

Jennings's observation—that personifying collective hope in one figure reduces that figure to "nothing more than a literary device"—has already named the logic at work: once a person becomes the vessel for collective desire, his particular voice

vanishes into symbol. The Singer's silence is designed into the novel's architecture. But why silence rather than, say, an unreliable or fragmentary first-person account? The answer lies in what the Singer's music was doing before the shooting—and what its interruption released.

Attali's (1985) noise theory sheds further light on this designed absence, though his framework, too, carries Eurocentric assumptions. His four-stage narrative of music (sacrificing, representing, repeating, composing) sits uneasily with Caribbean sonic experience, where African-derived musical practices have never followed neat developmental schemas. Yet his core insight holds: music is political technology, channeling noise into harmonic order to shore up social order. Music, in Attali's analysis, is "a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community" (Attali, 1985, p. 6). The Singer planned to hold the "Smile Jamaica" peace concert on December 5, 1976, attempting to use music to reconcile political conflict between the People's National Party and the Jamaica Labour Party. He was trying to funnel political cacophony into reggae's ordered rhythm.

On December 3, 1976, the shooting shattered this effort. Violence overflowed the channels of music. What the gunmen did literalized Attali's account of repressed noise returning: "Listening to music is listening to all noise, realizing that its appropriation and control is a reflection of power, that it is essentially political" (Attali, 1985, p. 6). When the Singer's body absorbs bullets, his harmonizing function ruptures. Silence replaces song, and the noise his music had channeled floods the narrative space. The novel's narrators—gang leaders, drug dealers, assassins, prostitutes, journalists, CIA agents—represent the social forces that the Singer's music had, however briefly, held in provisional equilibrium. Some were genuinely moved by his art; others merely exploited his cultural authority; but all were positioned, willingly or not, within the acoustic field his music organized. The shooting disperses that field, and every voice in the novel carries some portion of the dissonance his music had tried, and failed, to contain.

The Singer is the novel's keynote sound—but it is an absent keynote, a silence that shapes everything around it. As Schafer (1994, p. 9) explains, a keynote is the "anchor or fundamental tone" of a composition; "although the material may modulate around it, often obscuring its importance, it is in reference to this point that everything else takes on its special meaning." Keynote sounds need not be consciously heard to shape perception. The Singer never speaks, yet he is the reference point for every other voice. Papa-Lo protects him, Josey Wales betrays him, Nina loves him from afar, the CIA exploits him. Every voice in the novel orbits a singer who makes no sound.

Gunfire is the novel's sound signal. The December 3, 1976 shooting scene is repeatedly presented through multiple narrators' perspectives, each rendering the acoustic event differently. One character hears "fifty-six bullets"; another recalls "a burned cockroach" and a "scream stops right at the gate of his teeth" (James, 2014, pp. 2, 3). In Schafer's (1994, p. 10) terms, these are "sound signals": foreground sounds that seize attention and mark turning points. Heard from so many angles, the shooting surrounds the reader like stereo sound.

And the soundmark? Jamaican Creole itself. James renders Creole in phonetic English— "that deh pussy for Jesus now," "bombocloth," "batty boy" —enabling

non-Jamaican readers to "hear" its rhythms even as they struggle with comprehension. The strategy recalls Brathwaite's (1984, p. 17) concept of "nation language": "The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word…When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning." James fights to keep Creole's sound alive on the page—audible to global readers, still unmistakably Jamaican.

The novel is thus organized around an absent center: the Singer's silence generates the acoustic field, gunfire punctuates it, Creole gives it its local coloring. The novel's multiple voices remain, at this level of description, an undifferentiated mass of noise. Yet something other than noise is at work here—the novel shapes and patterns its voices with care. How do these voices relate to one another, and what distinguishes their simultaneous sounding from the polyphony critics have casually attributed to the novel?

Polyphony and heterophony: dialogic autonomy and acoustic variation

The preceding analysis mapped the novel's acoustic architecture—an absent keynote, gunfire as signal, Creole as soundmark. But Schafer's categories describe the components of a soundscape, not the relationships among the voices that inhabit it. The answer critics have reached for is Bakhtin's (1984) concept of "polyphony": "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (p. 6), a narrative structure in which multiple independent worldviews interact without being subordinated to authorial monologue. James's novel certainly presents multiple voices—James's novel certainly presents multiple voices, and Bakhtin's concept remains useful for describing their dialogic plurality. Yet polyphony does not by itself specify the acoustic relations among those voices. An exchange between gang members and a CIA agent helps clarify the distinctio:

> Weeper telling the white man that Papa-Lo get soft but the white man don't understand much of what Weeper saying. He just nod and laugh and say I gotcha! then look at Josey Wales to repeat everything slower but he still laugh too loud at what wasn't no joke. This make Josey Wales' face even more cross because everybody know that he proud that he can speak good. The white man say we're fighting for freedom from totalitarianism, terrorism and tyranny, but nobody know what he mean. (James, 2014, p. 73)

What collides in this passage is not dialogue but incompatible sonic modes. Weeper's thick Creole ("Papa-Lo get soft"), which the white man cannot parse; Josey Wales's code-switched speech, priding himself on being able to "speak good" (note the Creole grammar retained even in his aspiration toward standard English); and the CIA agent's ideological abstractions ("totalitarianism, terrorism and tyranny" —an alliterative trio whose rhetorical polish produces no actual communication). The white man "laugh too loud at what wasn't no joke"—wrong volume, wrong reaction, total

acoustic incomprehension. His alliterative slogan echoes emptily against the novel's soundscape: technically audible, semantically null.

Heterophony, I argue, specifies an aspect of the novel's multi-voiced form that the generic label of polyphony leaves underdescribed. The distinction is worth pressing. In musicology, heterophony means simultaneous variation of a single melody—multiple performers elaborating on a shared melodic line, producing variations that diverge and reconverge in ways that resist Western notation (see "Heterophony," 2001). Ethnomusicologists caution against treating heterophony as mere ornamentation; in traditions such as Javanese gamelan, West African drumming, and Caribbean kumina, it constitutes a fundamentally different conception of musical collectivity, one rooted in oral practice rather than compositional design. In classical musicial polyphony, simultaneous melodic lines retain a relative degree of independence, whereas heterophony organizes difference through variations on a shared melodic ground. Bakhtin's literary use of polyphony, however, should not be reduced to this musicological distinction. In his reading of Dostoevsky, what matters is the dialogic status of voices: characters speak as unmerged and unfinalized consciousnesses whose discourse is not subordinated to a single authorial truth. Dostoevsky's characters can therefore converge on the same events without ceasing to be polyphonic. My claim about James operates at a different analytical level. His narrators likewise inhabit distinct ideological positions; the novel does not flatten ideological difference. Yet their voices are also acoustically patterned as recurrent variations on shared traumatic material—above all the Singer's shooting and its cascading consequences—through differences of rhythm, syntax, Creole, register, and timbre. Heterophony thus does not replace Bakhtinian polyphony; rather, it specifies the sonic organization that polyphony leaves underdescribed. If polyphony names the dialogic autonomy and unfinalizability of voices, heterophony names their patterned divergence from and return to a common acoustic ground. The two concepts are therefore not mutually exclusive but analytically distinct descriptions of multivoicedness.

The distinction is genealogical as well as taxonomic. Heterophonic texture has deep roots in Caribbean musical practice. In Jamaican kumina drumming, multiple drummers simultaneously elaborate a shared rhythmic pattern, producing variations that diverge from and return to the core rhythm in ways that are structurally heterophonic. Mento music's call-and-response patterns, reggae's characteristic layering of riddim and toasting, and dancehall's practice of multiple DJs "riding" the same instrumental track all exhibit heterophonic logic: multiple voices working with and against a common musical ground. The concept, in other words, comes from the same musical world that saturates James's novel, and heterophonic narrative names his way of turning that acoustic inheritance into novelistic form.

Individual narrators' acoustic signatures bring the concept into focus. *A Brief History of Seven Killings*'s main melody is the Singer's shooting; the narrators' voices are variations around this theme. The shooting is the shared melodic ground—the reference pattern that heterophonic performers simultaneously elaborate—and every voice inflects it differently. Jennings's narration is meditative and syntactically elaborate—the measured, syntactically complex voice already heard in his opening monologue. By contrast, gang member Bam-Bam's narration is fragmented, rough, full of short declarative sentences and present-tense immediacy: "My mother run back

in and start to laugh and kick my father and Funnyboy go up to her and shoot her in the face. She fall right on top of me" (James, 2014, p. 13). The syntax itself-minimal punctuation, paratactic structure, absence of subordination—registers trauma's impact on language, violence stripping speech to its acoustic essentials.

Reporter Alex Pierce occupies a different vocal mode entirely: analytical, observational, marked by the outsider's qualifying phrases ("I think," "it seems," "perhaps"). His sentences reach toward explanation while acknowledging their own inadequacy: "I can't figure out if I just got a sudden case of the chickenshits or if I am slowly realizing that even though the Singer is the center of the story, it really isn't his story" (James, 2014, p. 221). Pierce is trying to understand what he cannot, and his grammar shows it—hedging that marks the gap between American journalism and Caribbean reality.

In the novel's final section, "Sound Boy Killing," James stops identifying narrators, because readers can now recognize each character solely by voice. By now the heterophonic structure has trained the reader's ear—each voice is recognizable by timbre, rhythm, register. The novel teaches us to hear difference, pushing back against global media's flattening of Caribbean voices. By removing the names, James forces the reader to do what heterophonic listening demands: attend to timbre and inflection rather than labels. The technique is not merely modernist defamiliarization; it is specifically heterophonic in its logic, because it requires the reader to identify each voice by its distinctive variation on the shared melodic material—by how each narrator inflects the common trauma—rather than by an external tag that would sort voices into separate, independent tracks. The reader, in short, must listen the way a kumina drummer listens: for variation within a shared pattern, not for independent melodies. What remains to be shown is that this formal structure carries political force—that heterophony in this novel is not only an acoustic architecture but a mode of resistance.

Heterophony as resistance: code-switching, cacophony, and transnational noise

Heterophonic narrative, as it is previously argued, describes the formal relationship among the novel's voices—simultaneous variations on a shared traumatic melody. But heterophony in Caribbean musical practice has never been merely formal. In kumina and reggae, the refusal to merge individual voices into harmonic unison is itself a mode of resistance to standardization—an insistence that difference persist within collectivity. James's novel inherits this political dimension. By "resistance" I mean not only explicit political opposition, but a broader acoustic refusal of imposed legibility and assimilation—a refusal to sound in the way dominant listeners, institutions, or markets demand. What the novel resists, at every scale, is the compression of Caribbean sound into a single, transparent, manageable object. Its heterophonic voices do not merely vary a theme; they wield sound as a weapon against that compression. The three sections that follow trace this refusal as it operates across three levels that form a progression rather than a parallel series. Code-switching stages resistance as tactical illegibility at the micro level of interpersonal exchange, where layered

vocal registers produce a heterophony that colonial listeners cannot parse. Violence, rendered as cacophony, tests resistance at the aesthetic-ethical limit of heterophonic form—the threshold where traumatic overload defeats any harmonizing impulse and Caribbean suffering refuses assimilation into consumable narrative. Transnational vocal adaptation extends resistance to the macro level of systemic encounter, where the same heterophonic logic must retune itself to survive within a different regime of listening. What unifies these sections is not simply that each involves conflict, but that each stages a refusal of acoustic assimilation: first as tactical illegibility in interpersonal exchange, then as resistance to the aesthetic domestication of pain, and finally as mobile re-voicing within transnational regimes of listening.

Code-switching: "play fool fi ketch wise"

At the micro level of interpersonal exchange, the novel's heterophonic resistance takes the form of code-switching—the conscious shifting between languages and registers to manipulate power relations. The object of resistance here is the colonial listener's demand for acoustic transparency: the expectation that the colonized subject speak in a single, legible register that confirms the listener's interpretive authority. The mechanism is the simultaneous layering of incompatible linguistic codes within a single voice, producing a vocal heterophony that colonial ears cannot parse. And the consequence is a reversal of the power relation that listening ordinarily enforces: the surveilling ear, confident in its capacity to decode, is fed a performance that confirms its stereotypes while concealing the speaker's actual competence, knowledge, and intent. Where heterophony in kumina drumming layers simultaneous rhythmic variations, code-switching overlays simultaneous linguistic codes, and colonial listeners hear only the outermost layer. Josey Wales's conversation with a CIA agent is a case in point:

> I don't tell him that yo tengo suficiente español para conocer que eres la más gran broma en Sudamérica [I know enough Spanish to know you're the biggest joke in South America]. I chat to him bad like some bush naigger and ask dumb question like, So everybody in America have gun? What kinda bullet American fire? Why you don't transfer Dirty Harry to the Jamaica branch? Hee hee hee. (James, 2014, p. 44)

What runs simultaneously here is a layered sonic deception: inner monologue in Spanish—linguistic competence the CIA man cannot begin to imagine; exaggerated Creole put on for his benefit ("bush naigger," "dumb question"); and a cultural jab disguised as naivety ("Dirty Harry"). The Spanish positions Josey within hemispheric networks that exceed the US-Jamaica binary the CIA agent assumes, suggesting knowledge of Latin American politics and CIA operations that the American cannot suspect. But this Spanish exists only in Josey's interior speech, inaudible to the CIA agent; the novel opens a gap between what the colonizer hears and what fills the colonized subject's mind.

The performance operates down to individual words. Josey performs a specific stereotype (the rural, unsophisticated Black subject) that white imperial agents expect and find comfortable. Note the spelling: "naigger" with an "a" rather than the standard American slur registers the word's passage through Jamaican phonology, an appropriation that strips the slur of its American charge. The "Dirty Harry" reference reveals Josey's cultural literacy—Josey knows American cinema well enough to grasp its vigilante mythology and turn it into irony. The "Hee hee hee" that follows (sycophantic laughter, performed to excess) completes the act. Readers hear the artifice; the CIA agent does not.

The strategy recalls a Jamaican proverb: "play fool fi ketch wise"—playing dumb to gain advantage. Josey's code-switching enacts this proverb, using sonic performance to reverse power relations while appearing to confirm them. The tactic has deep roots in what Cooper (1993, p. 2) identifies in *Noises in the Blood* as Jamaican popular culture's tradition of resistance through "noise"—folklore, idioms, music, profanity—all dismissed as vulgar by colonial and elite ears, all functioning as "expressions of resistance to marginalization, racism, and sexism." Colonizers long treated Creole as rough speech; "patois" itself derives from French for vulgar language. *A Brief History of Seven Killings* inherits and extends this tradition, transforming Creole "noise" into literary power while dramatizing how that noise functions strategically in contexts of asymmetrical power. What matters, however, is not code-switching alone, but the coexistence of discrepant sonic registers that cannot be reduced to a single communicative intention. Josey's interior Spanish, his performed Creole, and his ironic cultural references do not alternate sequentially; they layer simultaneously in the reader's ear, producing a vocal texture that is heterophonic rather than merely bilingual, and resistant rather than merely adaptive. It is precisely this irreducible multiplicity—the refusal to collapse into one legible voice—that constitutes tactical illegibility. Yet heterophonic resistance in the novel is not exhausted by strategic cunning. James also writes scenes in which sonic variation ceases to be a controllable tactic and becomes the form through which trauma exceeds representation. If code-switching shows heterophony as tactical control, the novel's violence scenes show what happens when heterophonic variation is driven to the threshold of collapse: not harmony, but a refusal of aesthetic repair.

Cacophonous aesthetics: violence, pain, and the ethics of listening

A terminological distinction is necessary before proceeding. Heterophony, as I have used the term, denotes a structural logic: the relational organization of simultaneous variation around a shared melodic ground. Cacophony, by contrast, names a phenomenological horizon—the perceptual and affective condition that arises when dissonant saturation overwhelms the listener's capacity to resolve sonic input into pattern. The two are not synonymous, but neither are they unrelated. What the novel's violence scenes stage is not a separate example of heterophonic resistance parallel to code-switching, but heterophony's limit-case: the threshold at which variation under traumatic pressure intensifies to the point where the structural logic of heterophony produces cacophony as its phenomenological effect. If code-switching demonstrated

heterophony as tactical control, these scenes test what happens when that control fractures—when the formal principle persists but its output can no longer be aesthetically domesticated.

A Brief History of Seven Killings is renowned for its unflinching violence, but critical discussions have mostly treated its violence as content, not form—what happens, not how it sounds. Attend to how James writes violence, and a different pattern emerges: he refuses to make suffering consumable. Teen gang member Bam-Bam's witnessing of his parents' murder is among the novel's most visceral passages:

> My mother run back in and start to laugh and kick my father and Funnyboy go up to her and shoot her in the face. She fall right on top of me… me in a cage looking through her fingers and I don't cry… (James, 2014, p. 13).

This passage's impact is inseparable from its sonic texture. The mother's "laugh" forms a jarring contrast with the subsequent gunshot—laughter cut short by gunfire. Placing "laugh" and "shoot" in the same clause forces acoustically incompatible events into syntactic proximity—a dissonant chord in prose. And the paratactic rush ("run back in and start to laugh and kick") is breathless, mimicking trauma's speed. All those "and"s refuse subordination—no causal hierarchy, no narrative sense-making. What disturbs most is the flat statement "I not crying." Crying would be the expected response. Its absence is more disturbing than any wailing. A point of method: the construction "I not crying" is standard Jamaican Creole syntax, which does not require the copula "am." James does not invent a "broken" voice to signal trauma. He picks a narrator whose natural idiom (Creole's directness, its refusal to qualify and subordinate the way standard English does) turns out to be the perfect vehicle for traumatic speech. The absence of the auxiliary is Creole grammar; the devastating effect is James's art of matching voice to content.

James has articulated his approach to representing violence by distinguishing between spectacular violence and embodied pain. In an interview with Hazlitt, he observed that action films routinely depict heroes "killing anywhere between 48 and 70 people," yet if even one of those deaths were rendered with attention to suffering— "a shot to the stomach…that's very painful and very slow" —the film would become unbearable (Lim, 2019). Here is the core of James's sound poetics: pain over spectacle, an insistence that suffering not be domesticated. Where music can be channeled into order, pain resists assimilation. In Attali's (1985) terms, it stays noise—raw, resistant to the harmonizing impulse that Attali places at the heart of musical culture. The resistance here operates through a specific readerly mechanism. Paratactic syntax and acoustic collision do not merely make the prose difficult; they block the cognitive pathway by which readers ordinarily convert fictional violence into narrative pleasure—the pathway of causal subordination, emotional resolution, and aesthetic closure. By refusing subordinate clauses, James refuses the grammar of sense-making that would allow the reader to metabolize Bam-Bam's trauma into a consumed and completed experience. The discomfort is not incidental; it is the point at which form performs its ethical work. What is resisted, then, is not a political antagonist but a reading practice: the habit of aesthetic domestication that renders Caribbean suffering legible, digestible, and ultimately forgettable. Cacophony, at this

level, is not noise for its own sake but the acoustic signature of a refusal to let pain become story in the conventional sense.

James's refusal to aestheticize violence has deep Caribbean cultural roots. Brathwaite (1984, p. 15) invoked Caliban's line from *The Tempest*: "Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises." For Brathwaite, these "noises" metaphorize Caribbean nation language—jarring to colonizers' ears but for Caribbean people their own voice. James inherits and radicalizes this tradition; his Jamaican ghetto soundscape (gunshots, profanity, drug-dealing code, victims' wails) amounts to a cacophonous aesthetic that assaults the reader's sensibilities while insisting that this noise deserves hearing. To summarize the resistance at work in this section: the object is the global literary market's appetite for consumable suffering—what might be called trauma as commodity; the mechanism is the sonic and syntactic overload that defeats narrative domestication; and the political consequence is an insistence that Caribbean pain retain its full abrasive weight rather than being smoothed into pathos for external consumption.

Yet this cacophonous aesthetic also raises ethical questions about listening, particularly along gendered lines. James has observed in interview: "I think that's what Toni Morrison and Alice Walker understand, the secret language of women. That it's not a secret at all; men just don't know how to listen" (James, 2009). Secrecy, reframed: what appears hidden is actually spoken. The problem is not silence but deafness. Nina Burgess—one of the few sustained female voices in a male-dominated text—dramatizes this acoustic exclusion. Nina's vocal texture is distinctive: introspective, self-questioning, marked by conditional and subjunctive moods ("If I was," "I would have") that contrast sharply with the declarative certainty of male gang narrators. Her hesitations come from knowing how precarious female self-assertion is in this soundscape. When she reflects on the Singer, her language turns lyrical in ways no male narrator's does—and the surrounding cacophony of male violence threatens to drown it out. The point extends beyond gender: Caribbean noise, in this novel, is not marginal or inaudible but actively unheard—tuned out by listeners whose acoustic frameworks cannot accommodate its frequencies. If these scenes mark the ethical limit of heterophonic form under traumatic pressure, the novel's New York chapters test its geographic portability: can the same resistant acoustic logic survive after relocation into a different regime of listening?

Transnational noise: from Kingston to New York

The preceding sections traced heterophonic resistance at the scale of individual encounter and at the aesthetic-ethical limit of formal endurance. This final section moves to a different register: the systemic. The question is no longer whether a single speaker can deploy heterophony as tactic, nor whether heterophonic form can withstand traumatic overload, but whether heterophonic resistance remains operative when the entire acoustic environment changes—when Caribbean voices must sound within a regime of listening governed by different codes of legibility, different institutions of surveillance, and different economies of attention. Sound in *A Brief History of Seven Killings* does not stay in Jamaica. The novel's fourth section shifts to 1980s New York, following the Jamaican drug syndicate "Shower Posse" into

America. With this geographic shift, heterophonic variation acquires a transnational dimension: the same Caribbean voices, elaborating the same traumatic melody, now sound against an American acoustic backdrop—and the resistance strategies developed in Kingston must retune to survive. What distinguishes this section from the code-switching analysis above is scale: Tristan Phillips's performances in the Bronx may resemble Josey Wales's in Kingston, but the structural conditions have changed. The dominant acoustic order is no longer a local colonial apparatus but the diffuse listening regime of American immigration enforcement, racial profiling, and consumer capitalism. Resistance at this level is not individual cunning but portable non-assimilation—a systemic refusal to be absorbed into the acoustic norms of the host environment.

This new listening regime can be understood through what Stoever (2016) calls the "sonic color line": the auditory dimension of racial classification, in which listeners assign racial identity on the basis of how a speaker sounds and then hear selectively according to those assignments. In 1980s New York, Jamaican immigrants encounter a sonic color line that does not map neatly onto the one they navigated in Kingston. American racial listening sorts voices into a Black-white binary that has no place for the class-inflected, linguistically stratified hierarchies of the Caribbean. Creole, which in Jamaica signifies class position and cultural allegiance with considerable nuance, is heard in New York simply as "foreign Black"—flattened into a single category that strips away the internal differentiations the voice actually carries. It is against this flattening that the novel's transnational heterophony operates.

When Jamaican gang members relocate to New York, the novel tracks the acoustic negotiations this displacement demands. Tristan Phillips, a Jamaican drug runner operating in the Bronx, deliberately performs the immigrant stereotype—talking as though he has just stepped off the boat, deploying a thick accent that signals harmless incompetence to white Americans. This is "play fool fi ketch wise" on American soil, but the tactic has been structurally retuned. In Kingston, Josey's performance deceived a single interlocutor—a CIA agent whose listening was shaped by Cold War intelligence frameworks. In the Bronx, Tristan's performance must deceive an entire environment: police officers who profile by accent, landlords who screen by speech, and rival drug networks that assess threat by vocal register. The unit of deception has shifted from the interpersonal to the institutional. What makes Tristan's strategy heterophonic rather than merely imitative is that, as with Josey, the performed voice coexists with other registers that remain inaudible to the surveilling ear. Among fellow Jamaicans, Tristan's full vocal range returns—the code-switching is not between two fixed positions but among a continuously modulated array of variations, each calibrated to the ears present in the room. The heterophonic principle holds: multiple vocal lines elaborate a shared ground simultaneously, and no single line represents the "real" voice.

Nina Burgess's trajectory from Kingston to New York offers a contrasting but complementary demonstration. Where Tristan retunes tactically within criminal networks, Nina's vocal transformation is existential. In Jamaica, her voice carries the hesitant, self-questioning quality noted earlier—the voice of someone who has not yet decided who she is. In New York, where she reinvents herself as "Millicent," her voice hardens, grows more guarded—exile forcing a recalibration of pitch, volume,

and self-disclosure in every encounter. This is not assimilation; Nina does not begin to "sound American." Rather, she develops a new variation—a diasporic register that carries traces of the Jamaican voice within a protective shell adapted to American ears. The old heterophonic variation persists beneath the new one, audible to readers who have been trained by the novel's earlier sections to listen for layered vocal registers. Nina's retuning differs from Tristan's in that it is not a conscious strategy of deception but a survival adaptation—the voice reshaping itself under pressure from a new acoustic environment without losing its Caribbean ground tone. Together, Tristan and Nina demonstrate that transnational heterophonic resistance is not a single tactic but a spectrum: from deliberate performance to involuntary adaptation, the Caribbean voice in diaspora refuses absorption into the host nation's monophonic categories.

Creole itself undergoes transformation in these American acoustic environments. Among Jamaicans, full Creole returns; with Americans, it is modulated or strategically exaggerated—a process that might be termed diasporic heterophony: the same melody, sounding in multiple variations as speakers adapt to different ears. Caribbean noise circulates through global capitalism's channels: reggae music born in Kingston's studios travels worldwide, and Jamaican drug networks follow similar routes. Harrison (2017) has shown how the novel's rejection of nationalism exposes the material circuits—drugs, music, migration—through which Caribbean and American economies are entangled. The novel's transnational soundscape confirms that heterophonic resistance is never just local—Caribbean voices carry their variations across borders, diverging from and returning to a shared melody of dispossession that global capitalism's acoustic field cannot fully absorb. At this macro level, then, the object of resistance is the American racial-capitalist listening regime—Stoever's sonic color line—that would fix Caribbean voices into consumable immigrant identities: the harmless exotic, the dangerous alien, the assimilated success story. The mechanism is retuning: the portable recalibration of heterophonic variation, whether deliberate (Tristan) or adaptive (Nina), to exploit the gaps and expectations of each new acoustic environment. And the consequence is that Caribbean sound persists as irreducibly plural rather than being absorbed into the host nation's monophonic categories of racial and cultural classification.

Conclusion: the capacity for listening

At the novel's end, Nina—now in New York, now calling herself Millicent—learns that Josey Wales has burned to death in prison. The phone rings; she hesitates to answer but finally picks up the receiver. After dozens of narrators and three decades, the question of listening remains open. Jennings opens the novel by asserting that "Dead people never stop talking," yet laments that "the living, they never listen." Between these two statements lies the novel's central problem—a world overflowing with sound in which almost no one manages to listen.

The deeper point of this analysis is that heterophony in this novel is itself a mode of resistance, and the preceding sections have traced a single principle—the refusal of acoustic assimilation—as it operates across three escalating scales. At the micro level, Josey Wales's layered code-switching demonstrated resistance as tactical illegi-

bility, where discrepant sonic registers coexist without collapsing into a single legible voice. At the aesthetic-ethical limit, the novel's violence scenes showed heterophony under traumatic pressure reaching the threshold of cacophony—not a failure of form but a refusal to domesticate Caribbean suffering into consumable narrative. At the macro level, the transnational chapters confirmed that heterophonic resistance is portable: the same acoustic logic retunes itself to a new regime of listening without being absorbed by it. These are not three parallel illustrations but a progressive demonstration that the refusal to merge into harmonic consensus operates from the individual utterance through the ethics of representation to the global circulation of Caribbean sound. James's sound poetics does not merely represent Caribbean resistance—it is Caribbean resistance, operating through the acoustic properties of prose.

The analysis has its tensions—Schafer and Attali come from Euro-American traditions whose assumptions I have flagged throughout, and the novel's female narrators beyond Nina Burgess deserve fuller treatment. Nor does heterophonic form automatically produce resistance; its political efficacy depends on the regimes of listening within which it sounds, and in a reception context that fetishizes Caribbean "authenticity" or markets linguistic difference as exotic flavor, the same formal strategies could be co-opted rather than oppositional. The claim is that James's novel constructs conditions under which heterophony becomes resistant, not that it is resistant by nature. These limitations suggest directions rather than dead ends: it would be worth testing heterophonic narrative on other Caribbean multi-voiced novels—Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*, James's own *Moon Witch*, *Spider King*—to see whether heterophonic resistance names something broader in Caribbean literary aesthetics. "Listen," the novel's first word, extends past its fictional world as a demand on criticism itself. Heterophonic narrative is one such response—provisional, no doubt, but tuned to a an accoustic relation that polyphony by itself leaves underdescribed.

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