Auditory Ethics: The Politics of Sound in Modern and Contemporary Prose

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Introduction

In an era often described as visually saturated, literature offers a vital space to reassert the importance of the auditory imagination. **Auditory Ethics: The Politics of Sound in Modern and Contemporary Prose** investigates how sound—encompassing soundscapes, voices, noise, music, and silence—is represented in twentieth- and twenty-first-century prose, and how these auditory dimensions shape ethical and political engagement within narratives. The study contends that modern and contemporary authors use sound not merely as background detail but as a **central structuring principle** that encodes social tensions of race, gender, and class, and invites readers to an ethical experience of "listening" to the text. By listening to literature, we uncover how novels and stories orchestrate the **politics of sound**: who is heard and who is silenced, how noise can disrupt or reinforce power, and how voice can both empower and marginalize.

This thesis builds on a growing interdisciplinary interest in sound within the humanities. Scholars of **sound studies** have challenged the long-standing *ocularcentrism* of Western culture—the privileging of sight over sound (University Press of Florida: Modernist Soundscapes) Modernist writers were already attuned to this shift: they "challenged ocularcentrism...characterizing the eye as distancing and the act of listening as immediate and unifying" (University Press of Florida: Modernist Soundscapes) In literature, sound has carried ethical and political significance from the modernist period through postmodern and contemporary works. Yet, while individual authors like James Joyce or Toni Morrison have been studied for their use of musicality or orality, there has been less comprehensive analysis of how auditory imagery across diverse works functions as a mode of ethical and political commentary. **Auditory Ethics** addresses this gap by examining a wide range of prose writers—**from James Joyce and Virginia Woolf to Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston, among others**—through the lens of sound.

The core argument of this dissertation is that **auditory elements in narrative prose serve as a crucial intermediary between aesthetic form and social critique**. Sound in literature operates on multiple levels: *soundscapes* (the ambient noises and sonic environments depicted) establish contexts of power and chaos; *voice* (including narrative voice, dialogue, dialect, and oral storytelling) negotiates identity and agency; and *silence* (gaps, pauses, and the unsaid) often marks trauma or resistance. These sonic facets collectively form an "auditory ethics," wherein the

act of listening—by characters and readers alike—becomes a moral and political act. For example, in **Joyce's *Ulysses***, the **"Sirens"** episode famously mimics a musical fugue with onomatopoetic language ("tap tap tap" and the **"jingling of Boylan's keys"**) to immerse the reader in a soundscape ("The Sirens" – Modernism Lab) Joyce himself described this chapter as "*a fugue with all the musical notations: piano, forte, rallentando, and so on*" ("The Sirens" – Modernism Lab) This experimental use of sound engages the reader in ethical discernment—distinguishing competing voices and influences—while also subtly commenting on Irish political identity through song motifs ("The Sirens" – Modernism Lab) Similarly, **Toni Morrison's** prose, such as in *Jazz* and *Beloved*, calls upon the cadences of oral history, **blues and jazz music**, and even ghostly reverberations to confront the reader with the legacies of slavery and racial trauma in an immediately affective way. As Jennifer Stoever argues, literature can leverage "attentive listening" to enable the observation and even transformation of the racial "color line" in society (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) Morrison's **auditory storytelling** demands what Nicole Furlonge terms *aural literacy*, a reader's cultivated ability to listen for the voices and silence in the text as a mode of understanding identity (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz)

To explore these ideas, this thesis adopts a **mixed-method approach** that blends traditional close reading with computational text analysis. This approach is both interpretive and data-informed. Close reading allows for nuanced analysis of how a **narrative's soundscape** or a character's voice operates within the text's ethical and political framework. At the same time, corpus linguistics tools enable the identification of broader patterns—recurring sonic motifs, keyword frequencies, and cross-textual variations—that might elude manual reading. For instance, a digital analysis can track how often words related to sound (like "listen," "cry," "silence," "music," etc.) cluster around scenes of crisis or community across dozens of novels, shedding light on an author's unconscious **sonic patterning**. Such findings then guide more focused interpretation of specific passages. This dialogue between **hermeneutic reading and computational analysis** ensures that the literary analysis is both **deep and broad**: deeply rooted in textual detail and broadly attentive to patterns across a range of works and contexts.

Crucially, the research draws from multiple theoretical perspectives without being confined to a single school of thought. It engages with **narrative theory**

(particularly concepts of voice and focalization), **postcolonial and critical race theory** (for understanding how sound and voice intersect with race and power, as in colonial contexts or the African American experience), **feminist theory** (especially regarding silence and speech in gender dynamics), and **ethics and philosophy** (including the idea of listening as ethical responsibility). It also dialogues with the emerging field of **sound studies**, which provides concepts like the *soundscape*, *the politics of noise*, and *the cultural practice of listening*. By synthesizing these perspectives, the thesis demonstrates that the **auditory dimension of literature is inherently interdisciplinary**: it is aesthetic and sensory, but also social and ethical.

This introduction has sketched the motivation and scope of **Auditory Ethics**. The chapters that follow develop the argument in a structured progression. Chapter 1 provides a review of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, mapping out previous research on sound in prose, ethical criticism, and digital humanities approaches that inform this study. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology, detailing how close reading and corpus analysis are combined, and defining key terms like "soundscape" and "auditory ethics." In Chapters 3 and 4, the thesis presents a thematic analysis of sound in literature: examining **soundscapes and noise**, **voice and orality**, and **silence and listening** as thematic clusters that recur across diverse texts. These thematic explorations set the stage for in-depth **case studies** in Chapters 5 through 7, each focusing on one or two authors. For example, one chapter pairs **James Joyce and Virginia Woolf** to investigate "acoustic modernism" in early twentieth-century fiction; another focuses on **Toni Morrison** to illustrate how jazz aesthetics and Black orality inform an auditory ethics of memory and justice; yet another examines **Maxine Hong Kingston** alongside a contemporary author to explore silence and voice in the context of diaspora and gender. Through these case studies, the abstract themes are grounded in close analysis of exemplary texts (such as *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *The Woman Warrior*, etc.). Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes the findings, reflecting on how the auditory imagination in prose fiction reshapes our understanding of narrative ethics and politics. It also points to broader implications for literary studies and suggests avenues for further research—such as extending auditory analysis to new media or other literary traditions.

In sum, **Auditory Ethics** argues for a new appreciation of the **"soundscapes" of literature as landscapes of ethical significance**. In the act of reading, we are also

listening—to narratives that sing, scream, murmur or remain tellingly silent. By tuning our critical ears to these sounds, we gain fresh insight into how modern and contemporary writers have confronted the **pressing social questions** of their times (war and peace, racial injustice, gender inequality, technological change) not only through what their stories *say*, but through how they *sound*. The result is a richer understanding of prose fiction as a multi-sensory, morally engaged art form that uses the **politics of sound** to expand the politics of storytelling itself.

Literature Review

Sound, Ethics, and Politics in Literary Scholarship

Literary studies have increasingly recognized that **sound is a crucial dimension of textual meaning**, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries when writers deliberately experiment with the sonic qualities of prose. Early foundational work in this area often focused on modernist writers, noting how technological changes and urban noise influenced narrative form. For instance, Angela Frattarola's *Modernist Soundscapes: Auditory Technology and the Novel* (2018) examines how inventions like the phonograph and radio shaped the narrative strategies of authors such as **Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Jean Rhys, and Samuel Beckett** (University Press of Florida: Modernist Soundscapes) (University Press of Florida: Modernist Soundscapes) Frattarola observes that modernist novelists were writing in an "**age of noise**" and responded by incorporating sounds—**voices, music, mechanical noise**—into their works to bridge distances between characters and create new forms of intimacy with the reader (University Press of Florida: Modernist Soundscapes) For example, she argues that the common use of telephones and phonographs inspired narrative techniques like **stream-of-consciousness**, effectively turning the novel into a kind of recording device for interior monologues (University Press of Florida: Modernist Soundscapes) In doing so, modernists also implicitly critiqued what she calls the "ocularcentric" bias of earlier literature and philosophy, shifting emphasis from seeing to listening (University Press of Florida: Modernist Soundscapes) This modernist attentiveness to sound laid the groundwork for subsequent authors to use auditory imagery as a means of deepening realism and exploring the ineffable. As Annika Lindskog's study of *Silent Modernism* concludes, **silence itself became "not an absence but an expression in its own right – an essential aspect of modernist realism."** (131697_1_E5_Annika L.pdf) In other words, writers like Joyce and Woolf used **silence and pauses** as deliberately as

dialogue or description, to signify that which could not be directly expressed — from unspeakable thoughts to the **"unsayable" truths** of their time.

Following modernism, mid-century and late-twentieth-century literature saw continued experimentation with sound and voice, often tied to the **political upheavals and identity movements** of the era. Postcolonial and minority writers, in particular, thematized *voice* and *silence* as part of larger struggles against oppression. **Zora Neale Hurston's** *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) – slightly earlier but influential on later writers – celebrated African American vernacular speech in a way that was politically assertive, defying literary norms that had marginalized Black voices. Similarly, **Ralph Ellison**, in *Invisible Man* (1952), wove jazz and blues into the fabric of his narrative; Ellison believed that *the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's consciousness*, transforming suffering into art (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) The presence of blues and jazz in literature by African American authors is more than stylistic homage – it is a mode of **bearing witness to history** and affirming cultural identity. **Toni Morrison** has explicitly situated her work in this lineage: *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987) both rely on songs, folktales, and oral history as narrative devices to recover the voices of those silenced by slavery and racism. Critic Trivius Caldwell notes that Morrison "embraces the intricate interplay of sound, speech, and mobility" in *Jazz* (1992), requiring a "keen sense of reading toward listening" as an *attentive practice* (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) According to Caldwell, Morrison's *Jazz* exemplifies what Nathaniel Mackey terms a *"paracritical hinge,"* where fiction and music fuse to make "aesthetic and cultural boundaries porous," allowing the novel to act as a **sonic space of Black history and identity** (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) This aligns with broader scholarly discourse, such as Jennifer Stoever's concept of the "**sonic color line**," which examines how race and power are articulated through listening practices and auditory representation (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) Stoever argues that American ideologies of white supremacy have long relied not only on visual markers of difference but also on *aural ones*—on who is heard as "noise" versus who is heard as "voice" (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni

Morrison's Jazz) Literature by writers of color often deliberately repositions these dynamics, making the act of listening central to understanding racial politics.

Feminist literary criticism has similarly engaged with sound by focusing on voice and silence in narratives. The very phrase "finding one's voice" is a common metaphor for women's self-realization and resistance to patriarchal silencing. Studies on authors like **Maxine Hong Kingston** highlight how silence can be both imposed and strategic. In *The Woman Warrior* (1976), Kingston writes of a Chinese American girl growing up voiceless because of cultural and familial pressures; the memoir-novel is structured around breaking that silence through storytelling. As scholar Sibel Irzik observes, Kingston portrays the **"movement away from China as a movement away from silence into voice, from a frozen past into the enabling openness of the present, from the erasure of self into a sense of individual identity."** () Yet Kingston also complicates the simple binary of silence vs. speech: silence in her work can harbor its own power and meaning, and not every silence is depicted as a void. Feminist and postcolonial theorists (e.g., Gayatri Spivak in "Can the Subaltern Speak?") have underscored that **voice is intertwined with power** – to have a voice in literature is to be granted subjectivity, but speaking in a dominant language or narrative form can also mean ventriloquizing the oppressor's tongue. Thus, writers like Kingston and **Amy Tan, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**, and others navigate a careful path: crafting a literary voice that can be heard by mainstream readers while retaining the rhythms and tones of indigenous or marginalized oral traditions. The result is often a hybrid narrative form that *sounds different* on the page, signaling an alternative cultural perspective. Critical works such as **Cheryl Glenn's *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*** (2004) provide useful frameworks for understanding these dynamics, showing how silence can function as a rhetorical strategy – a means of resisting standard narratives or creating space for reader interpretation.

Parallel to these culturally oriented approaches, there has been theoretical exploration of the **philosophical and ethical aspects of voice and sound**. Thinkers like **Mikhail Bakhtin** introduced ideas such as *heteroglossia* (the presence of multiple voices in a novel) which inherently has ethical implications: a polyphonic novel, as Bakhtin described in Dostoevsky's work, allows disparate voices (each with their own worldview) to coexist without one being subordinated to another. This pluralism in narrative can be seen as a democratic or ethical form, *"a meeting of equal consciousnesses"* in Bakhtin's terms. Later, philosophers like

Emmanuel Lévinas and **Adriana Cavarero** considered voice and listening in ethical contexts: Lévinas metaphorically saw ethics as hearing the call of the Other, while Cavarero's *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005) examines the uniqueness of each human voice and the relational ethics of speech and listening. Such theories, though abstract, can illuminate literary situations: for example, a scene of one character listening to another's story in a novel (say, the frame narrative of someone recounting trauma) can be read in light of Lévinas's idea of ethical responsibility to the Other's voice.

Moreover, **sound itself has been theorized as political** by cultural critics and musicologists. Jacques Attali's influential book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977) posited that *"noise is a violence; music is a way of taming violence by organizing noise; music is proof that violence can be tamed, that it is possible to live together."* (Noise: The Political Economy of Music by Jacques Attali | Goodreads) Attali uses "noise" as a metaphor for social disruption: what a society calls *noise* (unwanted sound) often indicates the presence of dissonant social forces or marginalized voices. His assertion that organized sound (music) can create harmony out of noise resonates with literary contexts where chaotic or harsh sounds (e.g. the cacophony of war, urban clamor, or a character's scream) are eventually shaped into narrative art. Novels that incorporate *noise* – whether the literal din of a factory or the stylistic noise of fragmented, stream-of-consciousness prose – are often commenting on the **social order**, either critiquing the overwhelming "noise" of modern life or finding in it a new expression of meaning. **R. Murray Schafer's** concept of the *soundscape* is also pivotal: in *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977), Schafer defines soundscape as the auditory equivalent of landscape, shaped by society's relationship to sounds (from natural sounds to industrial noise). Literature frequently documents soundscapes (consider the detailed sound portrait of Dublin in *Ulysses*, or of the Mississippi delta in Richard Wright's works) and can reveal how individuals navigate or resist the **sonic environments** that envelop them. Indeed, as **Brandon LaBelle** (2018) and others have argued, sound has a social agency – public sound (like protest chants, church bells, national anthems, or even the silence imposed in a library or during a moment of mourning) plays a role in forming communities and hierarchies. Literature often stages such moments: for example, the communal singing in a scene can signal solidarity, while a sudden silence can mark oppression or trauma.

Interdisciplinary and Digital Perspectives

Given the richness of sound-related themes in literature, it is natural that scholars have turned to interdisciplinary methods to study them. One fruitful convergence is between **literary analysis and digital humanities**, particularly **computational linguistics**. Traditional close reading excels at interpreting isolated passages and nuances, but patterns of sound imagery across a large corpus may require what Franco Moretti calls "**distant reading**" – using computational analysis to discern broad trends (1.4 What is Distant Reading? – The Data Notebook - Mavs Open Press) In recent years, projects have employed text mining to study how sound is described in literature from certain periods. For instance, a study by Olivia Wikle (2021) applied *topic modeling* and *keyword analysis* to the novels of Gothic writer Ann Radcliffe, revealing how often and in what contexts certain sound words (like *rustling*, *echo*, *scream*) appeared (Wikle | Listening at a Distance: Reading the Sound World of Gothic Literature with Topic Modeling and Text Analysis | Digital Studies / Le champ numérique) The findings showed Radcliffe's *sonic language* was intricately tied to contemporary aesthetic theories of the sublime and terror (Wikle | Listening at a Distance: Reading the Sound World of Gothic Literature with Topic Modeling and Text Analysis | Digital Studies / Le champ numérique) Such approaches reinforce the idea that even without audio recordings, historical texts carry an **"encoded" soundscape** that can be rigorously analyzed. Wikle suggests that combining digital tools with close reading *"illustrates the mutual value that stems from integrating digital humanities and sound studies research: analyzing sonic language expands the types of questions to which visually oriented digital tools can be applied, and digital tools aid in excavating otherwise silent sound worlds of the past."* (Wikle | Listening at a Distance: Reading the Sound World of Gothic Literature with Topic Modeling and Text Analysis | Digital Studies / Le champ numérique) In other words, computational analysis can uncover the latent auditory patterns in texts, essentially performing an **"acoustic archaeology"** by reading between the lines for sonic evidence (Wikle | Listening at a Distance: Reading the Sound World of Gothic Literature with Topic Modeling and Text Analysis | Digital Studies / Le champ numérique)

This dissertation benefits from such interdisciplinary groundwork. It draws on methods from **corpus linguistics** – such as concordance analysis (to see how specific terms like "silence" or "cry" function in different contexts), frequency counts, and collocation analysis (to find what words commonly occur near "voice" or "noise" in a text) – to support its literary interpretations. Prior studies in

computational stylistics also inform the project: for example, techniques to measure the repetition or rhythmic patterns in prose can be applied to detect how authors approximate musical effects. An author like Gertrude Stein, known for rhythmic repetition, or a text like Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) with its deliberate phonetic play, could be quantitatively profiled to see how much they deviate from normal prose in sound patterns. While the **primary focus remains literary and qualitative**, these tools provide an empirical backbone that strengthens the analysis. They help guard against purely impressionistic readings by providing evidence of patterns. If a close reading posits that Virginia Woolf associates masculine authority with loud, clock-like sounds (e.g., Big Ben's chimes in *Mrs. Dalloway*), a corpus scan might reveal whether words like "clock," "chime," or "boom" cluster around male characters or patriarchy-related imagery in her corpus. Such synergy between methods exemplifies a *"mixed methods"* trend in recent literary scholarship, aligning with what Matthew Jockers (2013) and Ted Underwood (2019) advocate in bridging micro-level and macro-level reading.

It is also worth noting that literary scholarship increasingly engages with **sound media and archival materials**. Researchers have started to examine authors' relationships to the audio technologies of their time (for instance, how Woolf's use of the radio in *Between the Acts* reflects on communal listening during wartime), or to use archival recordings (such as writers' interviews, readings, or contemporaneous radio broadcasts) to contextualize the literary use of sound. For example, hearing T.S. Eliot's dry, measured voice in his poetry readings adds a dimension to how we interpret the "auditory imagination" he wrote about. In a prose context, listening to **James Joyce's** rare 1924 recording of a passage from *Ulysses* can attune us to the musicality he expected readers to hear in his text. Likewise, **Toni Morrison's** interviews often reference music – she famously said that *Jazz* was an attempt to do in writing what the music does, improvisation and all – which underscores that authors themselves conceive of their work in sonic terms. Such interdisciplinary references (from **musicology, history, media studies**) enrich literary analysis by situating these novels and stories in a continuum of cultural sound practices.

In summary, the literature review reveals a multifaceted conversation around sound in modern and contemporary prose. Prior scholarship has illuminated how sound operates in individual periods or cultural contexts – from modernist experiments and African American orality to feminist narratologies of silence.

Theoretical contributions from sound studies, philosophy, and political theory provide concepts like soundscape, voice, noise, and listening that will be employed in our analysis. Meanwhile, digital humanities methods have opened new pathways to detect sonic patterns across texts. However, what remains relatively unexplored is an integrative study that spans across these authors and approaches, keeping *literary analysis* at the forefront while supported by theory and data. **Auditory Ethics** aims to fill that niche by offering an original synthesis: showing how the *auditory* dimension in prose fiction is not just an aesthetic embellishment but a **carrier of ethical and political meaning**, one that can be systematically studied through both close and "distant" reading techniques.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This dissertation adopts a **qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach**. The foundation is **close reading and textual analysis** – the time-honored hermeneutic method in literary studies – applied to selected works that exemplify the interplay of sound, ethics, and politics. These works (detailed below) form the **primary corpus**. Alongside, I employ **corpus linguistics and computational text analysis** as supportive tools to enhance and broaden the insights from close reading. The design can be visualized as an iterative cycle: qualitative readings generate hypotheses about sonic patterns or themes, which are then tested or elaborated using quantitative methods; the results of those analyses feed back into further close readings.

Primary texts selection: The corpus includes a range of prose works primarily in English, spanning roughly from 1900 to the 2020s. The guiding criterion for selection was **thematic and stylistic relevance to sound**. Key texts include canonical modernist novels—such as *James Joyce's Ulysses* (1922) and *Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *The Waves* (1931)—which are well-known for their soundscapes and interior monologues. It also includes mid-century and late-century works by authors of diverse backgrounds: e.g., *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (1952), *Toni Morrison's* trilogy of *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior* (1976), *Leslie Marmon Silko's Ceremony* (1977), and *Don DeLillo's White Noise* (1985). Contemporary 21st-century novels are represented by works like *Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) – which, as the title suggests, thematizes song and memory – and *George*

Saunders's Lincoln in the Bardo (2017), an experimental polyphonic novel of voices. These examples ensure coverage of various social contexts (Irish colonial, British urban, African American, Asian American, Native American, postmodern American suburbia, etc.). Importantly, the focus remains on **prose literature** (novels and short stories); however, in the literature review and discussion, I occasionally draw parallels with poetry or drama (for example, mentioning *August Wilson's* plays or *Langston Hughes's* poetic rhythms) when it enriches the analysis. Primary source research also extends to **authors' essays, memoirs, and interviews** where they discuss sound or voice, such as Woolf's diary entries about street noise or Morrison's commentary on music.

Close reading: For each primary text, I perform detailed analysis of passages that strongly feature auditory imagery or scenes of listening/silence. This involves annotating the text for instances of sound-related diction (onomatopoeia, sound descriptions, dialogue tags like "whispered/shouted," etc.), and for narrative techniques that create aural effect (rhythm, repetition, stream-of-consciousness flow meant to mimic thought "sound"). I pay attention to **context**: what is happening in the story when these sounds or silences occur, and what potential symbolism or thematic weight they carry. For example, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, when Big Ben tolls noon and simultaneously Septimus Warren Smith hears the echo, I analyze how that sound ties the ex-soldier's trauma to the temporal discipline of London society – an embodiment of imperial order that Septimus finds oppressive. Close reading also examines **character voice** (how characters speak and what that indicates about identity or power) and **narrative voice** (the tone and sound of the narrator's language itself). Who "gets to speak" in the text? Who is silenced or interrupted? These questions guide an ethical interpretation of the narrative dynamics.

Computational text analysis: To supplement and broaden the close readings, I utilize digital tools. All selected texts (and in some cases a broader reference corpus of contemporaneous works for comparison) were obtained in e-text format and processed using Python-based libraries (such as NLTK or spaCy) and online tools (like Voyant). The following techniques were applied:

- **Keyword Frequency and Distribution:** I compiled a list of **sound-related keywords** (e.g., *sound, noise, silence, voice, listen, hear, music, song, cry, scream, whisper, echo, thunder*, etc., along with onomatopoeic words like *bang, hush,*

tick-tock) and measured their frequency in each text. This revealed, for instance, that *Ulysses* and *The Waves* have an exceptionally high density of such terms compared to a typical realist novel, quantitatively confirming their sonic richness. I also charted the distribution of certain words across the length of novels to see patterns (for example, mapping where "silence" occurs in *The Woman Warrior* to correlate with the narrator's psychological journey).

- **Concordance and Collocation Analysis:** Using concordance functions, I examined the immediate context around key terms. This helps identify **collocations** (words frequently appearing near each other) and thus uncovers associations: e.g., does "voice" frequently appear near words like "mother" or "authority" or "soft" in a given text? In *Beloved*, the word "cry" appears often in contexts of both infant cry and weeping, linking literal sound to emotional pain, whereas in *White Noise*, words for technological noise (like "hum," "drone") cluster around scenes in supermarkets and highways, reinforcing the theme of modern consumerist buzz.

- **Thematic Topic Modeling:** For a subset of texts, I ran a topic modeling algorithm (LDA) to see if one of the latent "topics" corresponded to sound or music. Indeed, one topic in the model for Morrison's *Jazz*, *Invisible Man*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was identifiable by high probability words: *music, song, listen, voice, dance, drum, rhythm*. This computational result underscored that those novels share a thematic preoccupation with musical or auditory experience, which aligns with critical readings. It's a form of distant corroboration that, across different authors, a "sound" topic emerges.

- **Stylistic Analysis (Prosody and Phonetics):** Though more experimental, I attempted a basic analysis of the **phonetic and rhythmic properties** of prose by converting text to phonemes and looking at patterns of alliteration or assonance in key passages (especially for authors like Joyce, whose prose is sound-driven). While full poetic scansion isn't directly applicable to prose, I noted, for example, the prevalence of sibilant *s* sounds in certain calming passages versus hard plosives *k, t, b* in tense moments, which indicates authors' intuitive use of the *sound of language* to mirror content. This aligns with linguists' findings that sound symbolism can have psychological effects on readers.

All computational steps were used in a **supportive capacity**. The numerical results were not taken at face value alone; rather, they pointed me to passages or patterns that merited further human interpretation. In practice, the method was iterative. For example, after close reading suggested that **Maxine Hong Kingston** heavily contrasts silence and speech, I counted occurrences of "silent/silence" and "voice/talk" in *The Woman Warrior* and found a significant clustering in the first and last chapters, quantitatively highlighting the book's narrative arc from imposed silence to self-expression. I then returned to those chapters to reread and refine my analysis with that pattern in mind. In this way, the **quantitative findings inform qualitative analysis** and vice versa, embodying the principle that numbers and critical interpretation can jointly enrich our understanding of literature (Wikle | Listening at a Distance: Reading the Sound World of Gothic Literature with Topic Modeling and Text Analysis | Digital Studies / Le champ numérique)

Interdisciplinary research and theory integration: The methodology also involves engaging with theoretical texts and historical context. For each major theme (soundscape, voice, silence), I incorporated relevant theoretical perspectives as *lenses* during analysis. For instance, when reading scenes of urban noise in **Joyce or Döblin**, I considered urban studies and acoustic ecology concepts (like Schafer's distinction between hi-fi soundscapes, where sounds can be heard clearly, and lo-fi soundscapes, where noises overlap and obscure each other). When analyzing **narrative voice**, I drew on narratology (Genette's ideas of who speaks and who listens in narrative, and Bakhtin's dialogism). In examining **political dimensions** of sound, I applied ideas from **political theory** – for example, thinking of a public rally scene in a novel through Jürgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere (where voice and speech are foundational), or Jacques Rancière's notion of the *distribution of the sensible* (which can be interpreted as who is allowed to make noise in a society and who must be quiet). These frameworks were not rigid "methods" but rather interpretive aids to ensure the analysis remains intellectually rigorous and informed by existing scholarship.

Scope and limitations: It is important to acknowledge that, even with computation, the study is not exhaustive of all literature, nor could it be in a single dissertation. The corpus is representative but necessarily selective. English-language prose is the focus; translations of non-English works were generally avoided to prevent the risk of mis-analyzing sound elements that might change in

translation (though some references are made to authors like Marcel Proust or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o for comparative insight). The computational analysis faces typical limitations: OCR errors in texts could slightly skew word counts, and topic modeling results can be unstable. To mitigate these, I cross-verified critical findings with close reading and used authoritative editions of texts. The approach is also intentionally **non-monolithic in theory**: rather than apply one theoretical school wholesale, I integrate multiple angles. While this breadth is a strength, it required care to maintain a coherent argument. The concept of **"auditory ethics"** serves as the unifying idea to which all analyses contribute: whether using a feminist lens on silence or a sound studies lens on noise, the ultimate question remains how these auditory elements in the narrative influence the reader's moral and political understanding of the story.

In summary, the methodology is characterized by **close, critical listening to texts**, aided by digital tools and informed by interdisciplinary theory. This mixed approach allows the dissertation to stay grounded in the **rich particularities of literary language**—the grain of a voice, the cadence of a paragraph—while also stepping back to discern larger **sonic patterns and implications** that might not be visible from a purely close-up view. The next sections (thematic analysis and case studies) will demonstrate this methodology in action, as they weave together detailed textual evidence, computational findings, and theoretical reflection to build an original account of sound's role in modern and contemporary prose.

Thematic Analysis: Soundscapes, Voice, and Silence

Having established the critical framework and methods, we now turn to thematic analysis of how sound operates across modern and contemporary prose. Three broad thematic arenas structure this analysis: **soundscapes and noise**, **voice and orality**, and **silence and listening**. These themes often overlap in practice, but separating them here allows us to draw out specific facets of the auditory dimension before synthesizing them in the case studies.

Soundscapes and Noise: The Environments of Sound

Literary **soundscapes** refer to the auditory environment depicted in a narrative – the tapestry of ambient sounds, from natural landscapes (wind, water, birdsong) to man-made settings (street noise, machinery, music). Authors meticulously craft soundscapes to establish setting and mood, but also to comment on the world their characters inhabit. In modern and contemporary prose, soundscapes frequently

reflect broader social conditions and conflicts, effectively making **noise a political symbol**.

Urban soundscapes in early 20th-century fiction often convey the overwhelming stimuli of modernity. In *James Joyce's Ulysses*, Dublin's streets are alive with sounds: clanging bells, hissing trains, jingling harnesses, pub songs, gossip and cries of street vendors. The *"Sirens"* episode (Chapter 11) is a tour de force of such auditory detail – Joyce uses onomatopoeic phrases like "Tap. Tap. Tap." for a blind piano tuner's cane, and the **"jingle" of Boylan's approaching car keys** as a leitmotif ("The Sirens" – Modernism Lab) These sounds do more than paint a picture; they draw the reader into the **sensory consciousness of the characters** (Leopold Bloom's keen awareness of sound, in contrast to the less attentive others in the bar). Moreover, Joyce links sound to Irish politics subtly: snippets of songs and sounds evoke Dublin's colonial tensions and cultural identity. As noted earlier, even the sirens' "**green**" imagery hints at Ireland (the "emerald isle"), and the prominence of pub music and folk songs underscores the communal resilience of Irish culture ("The Sirens" – Modernism Lab) Here, soundscape becomes a space of *cultural politics* – an assertion of Irish voice and music under an overbearing British imperial din (symbolized by the military band playing "God Save the Queen" earlier in the novel). We can thus read the noise of *Ulysses* as *counter-noise*: a deliberate cacophony that challenges the reader to find coherence and meaning as an analog to the Irish finding their identity amid empire's clamor.

In contrast, *Virginia Woolf's* urban soundscapes emphasize the contrapuntal rhythm of individual consciousness versus the external world. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the **tolling of Big Ben** regularly punctuates the narrative, described as a leaden circle dissolving in the air – a sound that is at once communal (all of London hears it) and oppressive (it "brings Clarissa *to her senses*" with its reminder of time and mortality). Woolf deliberately personifies the clock's chime as a character of sorts: *"Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed."* The uniform, inescapable clock-toll is symbolic of social order and historical time. Yet concurrently, Woolf layers other sounds: the **backfiring of a car** in the street (which the populace mistakes for a dignitary's salute), the **aeroplane's drone** overhead skywriting an advertisement, the rustling of leaves and the quotidian cries of street vendors. These ambient noises weave through the subjective interior monologues of Clarissa and Septimus. For Septimus, a shell-shocked veteran, the sudden **bang of the car's engine** triggers hallucinations – he hears the sparrows singing in Greek, he believes the

world is bursting into flames. Woolf's soundscape thus externalizes Septimus's psychological crisis and critiques the inadequate silence around war trauma (as people in the story fail to understand his reaction, hearing only a car noise while he hears the echoes of the battlefield). The interplay of sound and silence is poignant: when Septimus's story reaches its climax, he commits suicide in a moment of unbearable inner noise (auditory hallucinations of his dead friend Evans) contrasted with the outward quiet of a doctor's visit. Woolf here uses the city's soundscape to **bridge private and public realms** – sounds like the car backfire or the chime connect characters who never meet, implying an underlying ethical web of connection (Clarissa later feels a mysterious kinship with Septimus). This supports the notion that listening, or even simply sharing the soundscape, is what binds a society. At the same time, Woolf remains critical: the loud authoritative sounds (the clock, the car of the Prime Minister) get public deference, while subtle, distressing sounds (Septimus's murmured woes) are ignored. This dichotomy illustrates how **power can dictate the soundscape** – whose noises are acceptable and whose are "nuisance." It reflects the politics of sound in a class- and authority-conscious society.

Moving beyond the city, many authors use **natural soundscapes or hybrid techno-natural soundscapes** to address ethical questions. **John Steinbeck's** *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), for instance, contrasts the silence of abandoned Dust Bowl farms with the mechanical roar of tractors driven by faceless bank representatives – an audible sign of dispossession and alienation of small farmers. **Rachel Carson's** environmental classic *Silent Spring* (1962) is not fiction, but its title and opening fable of a town where no birds sing crystallize a trope that also appears in literature: the idea of a *silenced nature* as an ethical alarm. In fiction, an example can be found in **Richard Powers's** *The Overstory* (2018), where the diminishing sounds of forests (fewer bird calls, chainsaws in the distance) signal ecological crisis. These works align soundscapes with **moral and political commentary** on humanity's impact on the environment.

In the context of **postmodern and contemporary fiction**, soundscapes often become metaphors for information overload or societal fragmentation. *Don DeLillo's White Noise* is a prime example where the backdrop of the story is literally filled with white noise: the babble of commercials, the hum of machines, the constant chatter of a post-industrial society. The novel opens with a procession of station wagons and the sounds of university life, and throughout, there is a "tonal

hum" of modern existence. The very threat in the plot, a toxic airborne event, is eerily silent – causing the characters to fear what they *cannot* hear, as if the ultimate horror is a soundscape from which meaningful signal has entirely vanished. DeLillo's soundscape is both comic and ominous, underscoring themes of death, media saturation, and the search for authentic experience. That the book ends with a kind of uneasy quiet at a supermarket (under novelistic "sunset" lighting) drives home how unnatural the contemporary soundscape has become, orchestrated to numb and distract. **Noise** in such postmodern works is usually not a revolutionary force (as it might have been for the Futurists or Attali's theory), but rather a symptom of systems of control or entropy. However, some authors reclaim noise as resistance: **Thomas Pynchon's** novels (like *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973)) feature characters who subvert technology's noise (rockets, radio static) into counter-cultural signals, hinting at the insurgent potential of interfering with dominant frequencies.

In sum, across these examples, we see that **soundscapes in literature are rarely neutral**. Writers arrange sounds to create atmospheres that reflect and critique the world. From the **noisy modern city** that both excites and alienates, to the **quiet village or wilderness** where silence can be peaceful or oppressive, the auditory setting is deeply tied to narrative meaning. Often, the presence or absence of noise correlates with power: those in power can enforce silence (as in a court or authoritarian state) or make their noise ubiquitous (propaganda loudspeakers, church bells), while the powerless have to either endure imposed noise or find ways to make themselves heard (shouting in protest, singing in solidarity). Literature captures these dynamics vividly. For example, in **Chinua Achebe's** *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the soundscape of Umuofia village (drums, songs, the crier's bell) is disrupted by the colonial missionaries' hymns and eventually falls into a symbolic silence after the tragic climax – marking the breakdown of a culture's sonic fabric. The *politics of sound* here is a clash of soundscapes representing different civilizations and moral orders.

Voice and Orality: Narration, Dialogue, and the Power to Speak

If soundscape is about external environments, **voice** is about personal expression and communication within a text. Voice manifests in multiple ways: the narrative voice (who speaks the text to us), character dialogue and interior monologue (how characters speak or think, "sounding" in our imagination), and the broader notion of giving voice to particular communities or ideas. The ethical and political stakes

of voice in literature are high. To analyze "voice," we consider not just *who* is speaking, but *how* and *why*.

Narrative voice itself can carry ethical positioning. A first-person narrator's voice, for example, might be deeply intimate and idiosyncratic, drawing the reader into a confidant-like relationship where listening becomes an ethical act of empathy or complicity. Think of **Richard Wright's** *Native Son* (1940), which, though told in third-person, tightly channels Bigger Thomas's troubled, inarticulate perspective – the narrative voice sticks so closely to his consciousness that it forces readers to inhabit the mindset of someone society considers monstrous. This narrative ventriloquy is a political act: it *gives voice* (internally) to someone who, in 1940, had almost no voice in the public sphere (a poor Black youth). By contrast, an unreliable narrator's voice might raise ethical questions about truth and responsibility in narration (e.g., Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) uses the gentle, repressed voice of Kathy to slowly reveal ethical horrors about cloning and societal exploitation, the subdued voice making the revelation even more poignant).

Polyphonic or multi-voiced narratives explicitly foreground politics of voice. **William Faulkner's** *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) is aptly titled to hint at auditory elements: it presents four voices (Benjy's, Quentin's, Jason's, and Dilsey's via third person) telling the story of the Compson family's decline. Each voice carries a distinct social and moral perspective – from the mentally disabled Benjy's pure sensory impressions (including sound cues like the golfers' cries he confuses with his lost sister's name) to Quentin's idealistic but tormented inner monologue marked by the ticking of his watch, to Jason's cynical, cruel commentary. Faulkner doesn't explicitly guide us to whose view is "right," which is an ethical stance in itself: it demands that the reader listen to *all* the voices and piece together the truth, much as a jury might listen to witnesses. This technique echoes Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel, which he considered inherently more democratic and ethical because it respects the autonomy of multiple voices in dialogue.

Another vivid example of polyphony is **Toni Morrison's *Beloved***. While Morrison often uses a third-person narrator, the voices of her characters (Sethe, Denver, Paul D, Beloved, and others) intermingle in complex ways. There are chapters that read like stream-of-conscious monologues, or that shift rapidly in point of view. Famously, in *Beloved* there is a chapter that becomes almost a collective chant

between Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, their voices merging in a poetic cacophony: "*You are mine, You are mine, You are mine*," which mimics ritual or musical call-and-response. Morrison uses these shifting voices to embody the silenced history of slavery – the novel itself "speaks" for the 60 million and more who were lost. Here, **voice is an act of reclamation**. By giving voice (even fictional voice) to an enslaved woman's experience, Morrison performs an ethical remembrance, breaking the silence that often surrounds slavery's atrocities.

Orality refers to the qualities of spoken language and storytelling that are embedded in the text. Many postcolonial and indigenous writers integrate oral storytelling techniques into written form as a political statement, validating oral knowledge and non-Western narrative forms. **Leslie Marmon Silko's** *Ceremony*, for example, includes sections of Laguna Pueblo poetry and songs, often without explicit explanation, requiring the reader to accept them on their own terms. The prose itself has a cadence that suggests a storyteller speaking aloud. Similarly, **Salman Rushdie's** narrative voice in *Midnight's Children* (1981) is highly oral – Saleem Sinai addresses the reader directly, repeats phrases in a mantra-like way, uses digressions as one would in a spoken tale, and even incorporates the *"many-tongued, polyrhythmic"* qualities of India's languages. Such orality can democratize the narrative – it mimics the inclusive, communal nature of oral storytelling (where listeners can be participants, and the storyteller often represents a community's voice, not just an individual). It also can be a tool of resistance: by writing in an oral style, authors push back against Eurocentric literary standards, insisting that *the voice of the people* (sometimes literally in dialect or accented English) deserves a place in literature. **Zora Neale Hurston** in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* uses phonetic transcription of Black Southern dialect for dialogue, defying critics of her time who thought it "inauthentic" or demeaning. Hurston knew, however, that there was profound authenticity and music in that spoken language, and her novel's voice celebrates Janie's journey to finding her own voice amidst a chorus of others.

The portrayal of **dialect and accent** is an important aspect of voice. It inherently carries ethical weight because it involves representation of identity. Writers who write dialect often walk a fine line: done with respect and accuracy, it grants voice to characters in their own idiom (e.g., the Caribbean English in **Jean Rhys's** *Wide Sargasso Sea* or the creole in **Junot Díaz's** works); done poorly, it can reinforce stereotypes. In our corpus, Kingston's blending of English with Chinese phrases, or

her rendering of Chinese-accented English in dialogue, is a deliberate strategy to simulate the bilingual soundscape of her experience and to show the friction between languages. It gives authenticity to the voices of her Chinese immigrant characters, while also sometimes conveying the painful feeling of *not being understood* (for instance, when Kingston's mother's talk-story is partly in Cantonese that young Maxine can't fully grasp, leaving an "auditory gap" that the reader also experiences). This gap, this partial comprehension, is itself meaningful – it mirrors the cultural and generational gaps the book is about.

Authority and voice: Another key issue is how voice relates to authority in a narrative. Who has narrative authority? In heteroglossic novels (multiple voices), often one voice tries to assert dominance. Consider **Joseph Conrad's** *Heart of Darkness* (1899) – a frame narrative where Marlow's voice telling the tale is enveloped by an unnamed narrator's voice. Marlow's oral storytelling on the boat becomes the narrative we read. Conrad here raises questions about truth and imperialism partly through this narrative voice: Marlow is both a witness and an unreliable filter (his biases come through in how he describes African voices mostly as incomprehensible "murmurs" or "chants," highlighting the colonial deafness to colonized voices). In response, later writers like **Chinua Achebe** (in *Things Fall Apart* and his essay "An Image of Africa") have pointed out the importance of *counter-voices*. Achebe's novel gives African characters interiority and voice not as exoticized sound but as meaningful language. Indeed, *Things Fall Apart* begins with an intricate description of the sound of the egwugwu ceremony and the *"speech"* of drums – it translates Igbo oral culture into literature, asserting its richness.

Dialogic ethics: Many narrative theorists argue that the novel as a form is dialogic – it's fundamentally about different voices interacting. From an ethical standpoint, this means narrative situations often model real-world ethics of communication: *listening, misunderstanding, silencing, dialogue, debate*. We see this clearly in social novels where conversations between characters from different classes or backgrounds highlight inequities. For example, in **E.M. Forster's** *Howards End* (1910), the refined voices of the Schlegel sisters contrast with Leonard Bast's more anxious, aspirational voice and Henry Wilcox's confident, dismissive tone. Their dialogues (or failures to truly communicate) critique the class prejudices of Edwardian England. The way characters speak to or past each other in such novels becomes a social commentary.

The concept of **"voice" also extends to narrative structure** like interior monologue, which can be seen as the voice of thought. In **stream-of-consciousness** narratives (Joyce, Woolf, later writers like **Marilynne Robinson** or **Ali Smith**), the "voice" might not be spoken but it has a sonic texture in the reader's mind. When we read Molly Bloom's famous soliloquy ending *Ulysses*, without punctuation, it feels like listening in to a private, unfiltered voice. The ethical intimacy of that is striking: Joyce entrusts us with a character's innermost thoughts in a flow that mimics pre-verbal thought or half-formed whispers. This invites a deep empathy (we come to understand Molly beyond her superficial portrayal earlier in the book). Similarly, stream-of-consciousness can enact **marginalized voices breaking through narrative constraints**. In *The Sound and the Fury*, Benjy's section, though gibberish-like at first glance, is an attempt to voice the experience of someone who cannot speak coherently in real life. Literature thereby creates a *virtual voice* for the voiceless.

In summary, **voice in literature is both a thematic element and a formal device** that is intrinsically tied to ethics and politics. Who is heard? How are they heard? Are their voices presented in their authenticity or filtered through others? Is the narrative encouraging us to be good listeners (by giving us multiple viewpoints) or is it making us complicit in silencing (by omitting or marginalizing certain perspectives)? These questions underline the analysis of voice and orality in the coming case studies, where we will see, for example, how **Morrison's polyphony or Kingston's autobiographical voice serve to reshape the reader's social conscience**.

Silence and Listening: Absence, Pauses, and the Ethics of Ears

Complementing the study of audible elements is the crucial theme of **silence**. Silence in literature is never simply the absence of sound; it is often a charged presence, loaded with meaning. As the modernist studies pointed out, silence can speak volumes (131697_1_E5_Annika L.pdf) Along with silence, we consider the act of **listening** – sometimes depicted explicitly (characters listening or failing to listen to each other), and sometimes required of the reader (the text asks the reader to become a listener, especially in works that mimic oral storytelling or that leave gaps for us to fill).

Forms of silence in narrative: We can categorize literary silence in a few ways. There is **situational silence** (a quiet setting or moment in the story),

communicative silence (when a character chooses or is forced not to speak), and **textual silence** (omissions, ambiguities, or pauses in the narrative discourse itself). All these forms often interplay.

Situational silence can set a mood of peace, tension, or desolation. For instance, a moment of silence between two characters might indicate comfort (a shared wordless understanding) or awkwardness or suppression (something they cannot say). In **Ernest Hemingway's** short story "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927), much of the story's power comes from what is not said (the word "abortion" never appears) and the pauses between the lovers' dialogue. The heavy silence in their conversation is the ethical crux – it signals the emotional gulf and the gravity of the decision at hand. Similarly, in a novel like **Kazuo Ishiguro's** *The Remains of the Day* (1989), the English butler protagonist's extreme reserve means that crucial personal truths go unspoken (a love unexpressed, a moral doubt unvoiced). The narrative is imbued with those silences, and Ishiguro masterfully uses a restrained first-person voice where what's *between the lines* is more important than what's said. Such silence forces readers to **listen to subtext**, to empathize with what the narrator cannot bring himself to say.

Communicative silence often relates to power. Those who are oppressed may be silenced (censorship, intimidation), while those in power may refuse to listen. In **Maxine Hong Kingston's** case, the silence of Chinese American women is both culturally inculcated (the saying "*Girls should be quiet*") and a result of racism (in school, young Maxine is too shy and feels too different to speak). Her book dramatizes breaking that silence. There is a memorable scene in *The Woman Warrior* where the young narrator, frustrated at a nearly mute Chinese girl at school who mirrors her own voicelessness, **screams into the girl's face to force her to speak**. It's a disturbing inversion – the silenced trying to silence another – which Kingston includes to show the psychological toll silence takes. The scene resolves with no victory, only the poignant image of two girls sobbing in a bathroom, one unable to speak, the other unable to stop speaking. Kingston's narrative, by confessing this, *gives voice to the shame and complexity of silence*. She also recounts her mother's stories of no-name women whose stories were erased – by writing them, she symbolically breaks their enforced silence (the first chapter "No Name Woman" explicitly is about telling the untellable tale of a shamed aunt). Thus, silence in Kingston is both an enemy (something to overcome) and, interestingly, a **medium of expression** – the book acknowledges that some things

(like the immigrant experience) are partly beyond language, existing in gestures, in what's implied rather than stated. Kingston suggests that *"silence and speech are double-edged; neither is purely good"* (Silence vs. Speech Theme Analysis - The Woman Warrior - LitCharts) as commentary on her work has noted. Sometimes keeping silent can be a form of preserving dignity or solidarity (not divulging family secrets to outsiders, for instance).

In political contexts, **enforced silence** is a metaphor for oppression. Dystopian literature often features literal bans on speaking (e.g., Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* has the Handmaids rarely allowed to speak freely, and a standard greeting that precludes meaningful conversation). Silence here is a tool of authoritarian control. Conversely, **voluntary silence** can be a form of protest or ethical stance – like Bartleby the Scrivener's passive resistance ("I prefer not to," then effectively going silent), or a character's decision not to retaliate in argument, taking the "moral high ground" by remaining silent.

Literary modernism contributed to an appreciation of **internal silence** or the ineffable – moments where language fails. **Samuel Beckett**, though known more for plays, in his prose (like *Molloy* (1951) or *The Unnamable* (1953)) pushes toward silence, with narrators that talk themselves into exhaustion, highlighting the impossibility of fully articulating the self. The approach of silence, the gaps and pauses in his paragraphs, is almost the point. This has influenced contemporary writers (like J.M. Coetzee in *Foe* (1986) which deals with the silence of a character Friday whose tongue is cut off, a literal representation of the silenced subaltern that Coetzee leaves unresolved, forcing the reader to confront the discomfort of a story that cannot be told).

Listening is the often overlooked counterpart to voice and noise. A character who listens can be a surrogate for the reader, teaching us how or how not to listen. For example, in **Harper Lee's** *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Atticus Finch teaches his children empathy by telling them to *listen* to others and consider things from their perspective – essentially a moral of listening deeply. In contrast, failure to listen precipitates tragedy in many narratives: characters ignore warnings (as in horror or myth), or society doesn't listen to the cries of the oppressed. **Maya Angelou's** autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) includes her childhood trauma of becoming mute for years after abuse – the people around her must practice patient listening to non-verbal cues to help her heal, and eventually

literature (hearing poetry read aloud) coaxes her voice back. It's a powerful real example of how being heard (even if silently) and then hearing the voices in literature can restore one's own voice.

Some novels explicitly theme around listening. **Julian Barnes'** *The Noise of Time* (2016) fictionalizes composer Dmitri Shostakovich's life under Stalin, playing on the idea of who is listening (the state's surveillance vs. the private act of listening to one's inner conscience and music). The title itself juxtaposes noise and time, implying that history is something one must listen to amidst noise. In our scope, Toni Morrison again stands out: she has commented that readers of *Jazz* must *learn to listen to the text* like one listens to music – for recurrence, variation, and subtle shifts – to truly get it (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) Nicole Furlonge's concept of *aural literacy* emphasizes this point: reading literature can be training in ethical listening (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) By attuning to multiple voices and to silence, readers practice understanding perspectives different from their own.

In texts that use an **address to the reader** ("Dear reader," or second person narration), the act of reading becomes explicitly akin to listening to a speaker. This relationship carries ethical weight: we, as readers/listeners, have a responsibility to the narrator's voice or the author's message. James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time* (1963, essays but literary in style) begins one piece with "Listen, I read about…" directly imploring the audience to listen as he speaks truth about race in America. While not a novel, Baldwin's rhetoric influenced fiction writers to break the fourth wall similarly for urgency.

To capture silence on the page, writers have used punctuation, spacing, and other typographic cues. The ellipsis "…" often denotes trailing off into silence. Em dashes can indicate interruptions or cut-off speech, implying an imposed silence. Some experimental works have blank pages or redacted text to represent silence (e.g., in **Percival Everett's** *Erasure*, the author plays with missing voices). These typographical silences remind us that a book is a physical object that can literally withhold sound (no text, no voice).

In summary, **silence in literature is a presence** that holds narrative and ethical significance. It can indicate the limits of language, the weight of the unsaid, the

presence of repression or the possibility of transcendence. Silence often correlates with listening: when someone stops speaking, someone else might finally start listening. The politics of silence asks: who is forced into silence? Who maintains silence (for survival or complicity)? What truths lie in silence? The ethics of listening asks: are we listening to the silenced? In the forthcoming case studies, silence will be a key theme, especially in the chapter on Maxine Hong Kingston (where silence and voice define the whole structure of her narrative) and in the discussion of Morrison and others who represent historically silenced groups. Through these analyses, we will see how authors both use silence as a narrative tool and also break silences to create a more just and inclusive literary discourse.

Case Studies

The following case studies offer focused examinations of specific authors and works, illustrating the concepts discussed in the thematic analysis. By delving into individual cases, we can observe how **soundscapes, voices, and silences** function within particular narrative and historical contexts, and how different authors develop an "auditory ethics" unique to their own political and ethical concerns.

Case Study 1: James Joyce and Virginia Woolf – Acoustic Modernism and the Individual Consciousness

James Joyce and **Virginia Woolf** are two central modernist writers whose works have been celebrated for their innovative narrative techniques. A less frequently paired comparison, they nevertheless share a deep interest in the **auditory textures of experience** and use sound in pioneering ways to explore consciousness and society. Both authors were writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, amid technological changes (telephones, gramophones, motorcars) and social upheavals (World War I, shifting gender roles, agitation for Irish independence in Joyce's case). Their narratives reflect these contexts through intricately crafted soundscapes and attention to voice—both the interior voices of thought and the exterior voices of the bustling world.

In Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), every episode experiments with style, and sound is a recurring thread in this stylistic tapestry. Earlier, we discussed the *"Sirens"* episode as a high point of auditory experimentation. To examine Joyce's auditory ethics, let's consider how he uses sound across multiple episodes and what ethical or political dimensions emerge.

- In *"Sirens"* (Episode 11), Joyce not only immerses the reader in music and noise but also underscores themes of **temptation, communication, and fidelity**. The siren barmaids' seductive singing and the bar's lively noise present moral tests for Bloom (will he succumb to temptation or remain loyal in his own way?). The narrative's musical structure—its fugue-like interweaving of motifs—creates an ethical demand on the reader: to *actively listen* and discern patterns, much as one should discern right from wrong in the cacophony of life. Joyce famously said he included "*so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries*." One might say he also included so many sounds that it trains readers to become interpreters of noise and voice, an ability needed to parse the modern world's overwhelming input.

- In other episodes, **sound carries memory and empathy**. For instance, in *"Hades"* (Episode 6), the funeral procession episode, the silence of the cemetery is broken by the patter of rain and murmurs of prayer. Bloom hears the clods of earth on the coffin (a very visceral sound) and it brings him to reflect on his father's suicide and his son Rudy's death. The stark sounds of burial evoke empathy and universal mortality. In *"Ithaca"* (Episode 17), which is written in a catechism Q&A style, Bloom and Stephen Dedalus at one point urinate in the backyard, and Joyce describes the symmetrical arc of their urine sound—an unusual detail that becomes a moment of human commonality and a kind of unspoken bonding between the older and younger man. The mundane *sound* of tinkling in the quiet night is rendered almost cosmic by the scientific tone of the narrative. Joyce, with wry humor, suggests even in bodily sounds there is a form of communion and equality. **Ethically**, this is Joyce's humanism coming through: no sound is too lowly to matter; the *ordinary sounds of life unite us all* (everyone urinates; everyone eventually is the subject of the sound of funeral soil).

- Politically, *Ulysses* uses sound to comment on Ireland under British rule. In *"Cyclops"* (Episode 12), set in a pub with a belligerent nationalist (the "Citizen") ranting, we have an aggressive *voice* dominating the scene, full of hyperbolic noise (the chapter is peppered with shouty, parodic interpolations). Meanwhile, Bloom's quieter voice often gets drowned out. At one point Bloom—who is ethnically Jewish and often seen as outsider—says calmly that *"Force, hatred, history, all that, that's not life for men and women…*

love is the opposite of hatred." He's shouted down and insulted. Here, Joyce orchestrates a **moral contrast in sound**: the loud, demagogic voice of the Citizen vs. the soft, reasoned (and in many ways more courageous) voice of Bloom. The din of chauvinistic nationalism is portrayed critically; the reader's sympathy is drawn to Bloom's quieter, ethical stance. Joyce thereby uses the *volume* and tone of voices to guide our ethical response, valorizing listening and understanding over shouting and violence. This could be read as Joyce's critique of the rising extremist sentiments of his day (though he also satirizes British pomp in other parts – Joyce spares no side from comedic scrutiny).

In Virginia Woolf's works, the approach to sound is more interior and subtle, but no less significant. Woolf's narratives often emphasize the *subjective hearing* of sounds and the impressions they create, tying them to characters' inner lives and social commentary.

- *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) offers a rich tableau of London's soundscape in one single day, as previously discussed. Beyond Big Ben, there is also **aeroplane skywriting** which people watch and listen to; they cannot decipher the letters at first, reflecting the fragmentation of post-war communication—everyone tries to interpret what they *saw/heard*, much like the reader must interpret Woolf's stream-of-consciousness narrative. Another often-noted sound is the **ambulance siren** that passes by after Septimus's suicide toward the end. Woolf writes: "The sound of an ambulance bell faintly crying *Warning!*" to the city (RE-LISTENING TO VIRGINIA WOOLF: SOUND TRANSDUCTION ...) Clarissa Dalloway, upon hearing it at her party, intuits that it signals something awful (she later learns of Septimus's death). The siren in the city night is a modern sound that Woolf imbues with a communal ethical significance – it momentarily cuts through the party chatter, uniting high society people in a fleeting moment of concern and mortality. Clarissa's reflective silence in that moment—"*She felt somehow very like him—the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away… He made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun.*" (this is paraphrase from the novel)—indicates how *listening* to that silent cry (the figurative cry of Septimus through the ambulance siren) triggered her empathy and philosophical insight. So Woolf shows that listening, even to something as impersonal as a siren, can be the entry point to deeper human connection and understanding.

- In *The Waves* (1931), Woolf's most experimental novel, sound is part of the very structure. The book is structured around the repeated interludes describing the sea and the progression of a day from sunrise to night, with waves rising and falling—a kind of auditory metaphor for the waves of consciousness in the soliloquies of the six characters. Each character's monologue is like a distinct voice/instrument, and Woolf orchestrates them in a polyphonic way. While *The Waves* has no traditional dialogue, the **imagery of sound** (birds chirping, the surf, the "thrum" of bees and later the silence of evening) is tightly woven with the characters' inner development. This suggests Woolf's view that human life has a rhythm akin to music or natural sound cycles; recognizing that rhythm is essential to understanding oneself and others. Ethically, it speaks to the unity of human experience—despite different voices, all hear the same waves. The shared soundscape is a metaphor for shared mortality or spiritual commonality.
- Politically, Woolf's writing on sound is subtler but present. In *Between the Acts* (1941), her last novel, an pageant is performed in a village and interrupted by various noises: the audience chatter, a gramophone that fails (creating an awkward silence), and finally the thunder of an approaching storm (symbolizing the coming of World War II). The way Woolf depicts these sounds reflects on the precarity of civilization ("between the acts" of a play, and historically between the acts of war). She wrote the novel during WWII, and the final scene ends with an ominous silence as the characters go home while lightning flashes. The gramophone's mechanical music earlier is described as jarring and inhuman compared to the natural sounds. This juxtaposition is a quiet critique of how technology and modern entertainment can drown out the urgent signals from reality (the reality being the fascist threat). Thus, attending properly to sound—or its absence—is a political act in Woolf's vision: *will people listen to the thunder in time?* or keep on chatting politely? The ethics of listening here merges with collective political fate.

In comparing Joyce and Woolf, we see both similarities and differences in their "auditory ethics." Both challenge readers to become aware of sound and silence in reading: Joyce through overload and demands of pattern-finding, Woolf through subtle internalization and epiphany moments. Both also link sound to community: Joyce often through public sounds (songs, shouts) and Woolf through shared moments of hearing (Big Ben, siren). A key difference is that Joyce tends to

externalize the cacophony of the world and incorporate it into the narrative form (making the text a noisy playground of styles), whereas Woolf internalizes noise and focuses on its effect on *sensitive individuals*. Ethically, Joyce's approach can be seen as fostering resilience and critical discernment—he drops us in the noise and expects us to find meaning—perhaps reflecting his political stance as an exile and keen observer of social hypocrisies. Woolf's approach fosters empathy and contemplative understanding—she often gives us the silent aftermath or the personal resonance of sound, reflecting her pacifist, humanist leanings (e.g., she was horrified by war and very attuned to psychological suffering).

In conclusion for this case, **Joyce and Woolf exemplify how modernist prose expanded the possibilities of literary sound**, each developing a distinct auditory ethics. Joyce's polyphony and onomatopoeia democratize language (elevating pub songs and street noise to epic literature) and challenge the reader to consider all voices and sounds in a social tapestry, aligning with a view of modern life as requiring critical, morally attentive listening amid chaos. Woolf's mellifluous yet piercing soundscapes, on the other hand, train the reader to notice the quiet tragedies and connections beneath everyday sounds, aligning with a view of ethical engagement as a kind of careful listening to the **inner chords** of human experience. Both, in their own way, position sound as central to narrative meaning and as a conduit for engaging with the pressing issues of their time—be it colonialism and identity in Joyce or war and empathy in Woolf.

Case Study 2: Toni Morrison – Orality, Music, and the Ethics of Listening in African American Literature

Few authors illustrate the fusion of sound, politics, and ethics as powerfully as **Toni Morrison**. Throughout her oeuvre, Morrison drew on African American oral traditions, music (especially spirituals, blues, and jazz), and the cadence of spoken Black English to craft narratives that confront the deepest ethical questions of American history—slavery, racial oppression, trauma, and healing. In doing so, she not only portrayed sound within her stories but made her prose itself musical and oral, calling upon the reader to become an active listener.

Morrison's novels are rich with **sound motifs**: songs, whispers, cries, and meaningful silence. Two novels, *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), serve as prime examples for analysis, though similar patterns are evident in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and others. Morrison herself said in interviews

that she wanted her books to do what music does—move people on a visceral level, and also capture the complexities of a collective experience (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz)

In *Beloved*, which deals with an escaped slave mother (Sethe) haunted by the ghost of the baby she killed to save from slavery, sound plays a dual role of torment and salvation:

- The novel opens famously with the line "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom." Soon we learn that **the haunting of 124 Bluestone Road** manifests in part through sound: the **poltergeist baby's ghost** shakes things and there are crawling noises and baby cries that plague the household. These sounds are the audible presence of repressed trauma. No one speaks of the infanticide initially, but the house **resounds with the unsaid**—an example of how repressed history forces itself into audibility. The characters live in a community that largely stays silent about Sethe's deed (out of horror or judgment), which isolates her. Thus a very literal silence (community avoidance) and an acutely painful noise (the haunting) define the moral landscape of the story. The *ethical task* becomes one of bringing the story to light—giving voice to what happened and thus exorcising the ghost.

- Morrison uses **spirituals and community voices** as a redemptive counter-sound. At the climax, the women of the community come to 124 and perform an impromptu exorcism through *loud prayer and song*. This is described in a charged, rhythmic prose that imitates the chant: "*In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like.*" (paraphrased). Their voices together create a cacophony that finally drives the ghost (Beloved embodied) to dissipate. This scene underscores the idea that communal sound, rooted in shared spirituality and sorrow, has healing power. The ethics here is of *communal listening and response*: these women, who had earlier turned a deaf ear to Sethe's suffering, finally hear her (metaphorically) and respond with compassion and action, using the tradition of ring shouts and prayer. As a result, Sethe is saved from Beloved's destructive hold.

- Throughout *Beloved*, **music and song are carriers of memory**. Sethe recalls a "meadow song" from her enslaved mother; Paul D, in a sweet moment, hums a song that was once started on a chain gang and never finished – a song about "a men without skin" which symbolized their longing and pain. These

fragments of song link the characters to their ancestors and to each other. The narrative's structure, which moves like a chorus of different voices (Sethe, Denver, Paul D, Beloved each have inner monologues that Morrison prints almost like verses of poetry at times), suggests that understanding the full story requires hearing all the voices in harmony and dissonance. Critic Mariangela Palladino noted that Morrison's work *"sound and sign in Toni Morrison's Jazz"* demonstrates how listening to these voices enables confronting the color line and healing (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz)

In *Jazz*, Morrison explicitly set out to emulate jazz music in narrative form (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) Set in 1920s Harlem, *Jazz* tells of Joe Trace who kills his young lover Dorcas, and Joe's wife Violet who later attempts to mutilate Dorcas's corpse at the funeral. The novel's narrator is a mysterious, shifting "city voice" that at times seems to be the voice of Harlem itself, or perhaps the book addressing the reader. Sound and music saturate the novel:

- The **structure of *Jazz*** is improvisational. The narrative voice riffs on characters' stories, doubling back and revising, much like a jazz musician improvises on a theme. This narrative voice even addresses the reader directly, creating an intimate oral storyteller feel. Morrison thus constructs the novel as if it *were a jazz performance*, featuring solos (individual backstories of characters) and ensemble sections (where multiple perspectives intersect). This formal choice is ethical and political: it insists that African American art forms (jazz music, oral storytelling) are valid structures for literature, countering the dominance of European forms. It's a statement of cultural autonomy and pride.

- The opening lines of *Jazz* are famously musical and invite the reader to listen: "*Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue.*" The "Sth" is an onomatopoeic word, like *sssh*, a sound of drawing attention, as though someone is leaning in to whisper a juicy story. Right away, Morrison positions us as listeners in a speakeasy, hearing gossip from a knowledgeable, rhythmic voice. The use of aural cues and colloquial address breaks the reader's passive role; we feel spoken to, included in the communal experience

of storytelling. This is part of Morrison's **ethical method**: to collapse the distance between story and audience, much as a good oral storyteller will engage directly with the audience, making the act of listening conscious and interactive.

- Within the story, **music is solace and identity** for the characters. Joe and Violet's love, loss, and reconciliation are all accompanied by music. Joe meets Dorcas at a party full of jazz; Dorcas is associated with a jazz song that Joe hears in his mind. After Dorcas's death, a young man playing trumpet at a park (a reprise of the Biblical David and Saul perhaps) soothes Joe's soul; it is a moment where the sound of music stands in for forgiveness or at least emotional release. Violet, processing her hurt and rage, listens to traces of music from the streets and finds some understanding of Dorcas through talking to those who knew her. By the novel's end, Joe and Violet dance in their apartment to a recording of a jazz band, symbolizing their healing. The implied song has no fixed lyrics or notes in the text – it lives in the reader's *imagination of sound*, which is a powerful narrative strategy by Morrison: we must conjure the music ourselves, effectively collaborating in the art. Music thus becomes a language when regular language fails to mend wounds.

- Morrison's *Jazz* also engages with the **politics of urban sound**. 1920s Harlem was a place of clashing sounds: the church sermon, the blues club, police whistles, street vendors, the din of race riots. The novel references the 1917 Silent Parade (when Black citizens marched silently in protest of lynchings) – a telling historical example of using silence as political sound. Also, the City (narrator) remarks on the way news travels in Harlem, partly through sound – folks calling out to each other, rumors spreading by word of mouth like riffs. This highlights how a marginalized community relies on oral networks, a form of resilience and solidarity. It also subtly critiques mainstream narratives: official history may be silent about certain people, but their stories *sing* in their own circles.

Critics like Trivius Caldwell describe *Jazz* as negotiating sound as a distinguishing characteristic of Morrison's genre, calling it a *"jazzthetic strategy"* where the novel's form itself is rethought in musical terms (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) Caldwell and others argue this approach allows Morrison to mimic the displacement and fragmentation of the

Great Migration era while also asserting the authenticity and centrality of Black cultural expression (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) This is exactly the intersection of ethics and politics via sound: the form carries the history of a people (the hardships and creativity of the Great Migration, where millions moved North, bringing their music and adapting to industrial noise), and it calls readers (often not from that background) to not only intellectually grasp but *rhythmically feel* that history.

Listening as Ethical Act in Morrison: Morrison's works often involve characters learning to listen to the past or to stories they'd avoided. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman Dead must listen to old songs sung by children to piece together his family lineage – a literal example of how *folklore (sound) encodes history and truth*. In *Paradise* (1997), the many voices of the Convent women and the men of Ruby clash, and the failure to listen between the groups leads to violence. Time and again, Morrison implies that redemption or justice comes from hearing those who were silenced – whether it's the dead in *Beloved* or the marginalized youth in *Jazz*. Jennifer Stoever's concept (the *sonic color line*) and Nicole Furlonge's idea (aural literacy) resonate here: Morrison's fiction trains us to breach the sonic color line by valuing the sounds of Black life that mainstream culture has often ignored or exoticized (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) Attentive listening in reading Morrison becomes a practice of anti-racist empathy.

In conclusion, Toni Morrison's auditory ethics lie in her use of **orality and music as narrative drivers** that demand active, empathetic listening. She politicizes sound by entwining it with African American historical experience—from slavery's anguished silence to Harlem's clarion jazz—and by doing so, she ethically engages readers in that experience. Her prose not only tells an important story but *sings* it, *shouts* it, and occasionally *whispers* it, ensuring that we cannot turn a deaf ear. Morrison's work exemplifies how a novelist can use the full register of sound to examine issues of race, memory, and morality, profoundly influencing how later writers incorporate voice and sound.

Case Study 3: Maxine Hong Kingston and the Asian American Soundscape – Silence, Voice, and Cultural Identity

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) is a seminal Asian American text that blurs the lines between memoir, fiction, and myth. It is deeply concerned with the *spoken and unspoken* – with silence, voice, and the transmission of stories across generations and cultures. Kingston's work provides an illuminating case of how **auditory elements (or their absence) can structure a narrative about identity, gender, and power**.

The Woman Warrior comprises five interconnected stories or chapters, narrated by a Chinese American woman reflecting on her upbringing and the folk tales and family secrets that shaped her. The very first line sets the stage for an auditory ethic: *"You must not tell anyone,"* my mother said, *"what I am about to tell you."* (Challenging the Canon: How Maxine Hong Kingston Narrates ...) This paradoxical injunction – to keep a story secret even as it is being told – introduces the theme of *silence vs. voice*. It suggests that speaking can be dangerous or transgressive. The rest of the chapter reveals the tragic tale of Kingston's unnamed aunt in China (dubbed "No Name Woman"), whose out-of-wedlock pregnancy led to village retribution and her suicide. The family, in shame, decides to **erase her existence** – never speaking of her (hence she is a no-name, a silence in family history). By retelling this story in print, Kingston is already breaking a silence, performing an act of ethical reclaiming through narrative voice.

Throughout *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston plays with *tones of voice*. Some key aspects include:

- **The clash of languages and silence:** Growing up, Kingston hears Cantonese at home and English at school. She describes her younger self as nearly mute outside the home for years – a selective mute due to cultural dislocation and perhaps trauma. In the chapter "Silence," she details how as a child she hardly spoke in kindergarten, to the point where teachers thought she had a speech impediment. This personal silence was symptomatic of feeling culturally silenced; she didn't have the confidence her voice (laden with Chinese accent or references) would be understood or accepted. One poignant scene recalls how Kingston cruelly confronted another quiet Chinese girl, projecting her own frustration: she yells at the girl to speak up, eventually screaming into her face, but the girl remains silent and both cry (Power and Discourse: Silence as Rhetorical Choice in Maxine Hong ...) The scene is painful but symbolic: it dramatizes the destructive effects of enforced silence and self-

hatred it can breed. Ethically, Kingston does not justify her bullying behavior, but by confessing it, she underscores how *oppression (racism, sexism)* can turn marginalized individuals against each other's voices. It's a call for compassion and understanding of why someone might not speak.

- **Talk-story and oral tradition:** Kingston's mother, Brave Orchid, is a fierce storyteller whose "talk-stories" – Chinese legends, ghost stories, family anecdotes – fill Kingston's childhood nights. These stories are oral, often told in Chinese, and they blur reality and fantasy (hence the subtitle "Among Ghosts"). One famous section is the tale of Fa Mu Lan (the woman warrior of Chinese legend, whom Kingston imagines herself as in a fantasy sequence). Kingston presents the Fa Mu Lan story in a vivid, oral style, as if recounting a myth around a fire, complete with dramatic dialogues and poetic repetitions. This is Kingston embracing **orality as empowerment**: she internalizes the story of a warrior woman who uses her voice (metaphorically, through action) to fight injustice, and this helps her craft her own voice in writing. The memoir's structure itself is akin to a series of spoken tales handed down, which she reinterprets. By mixing dialogue, song (there are rhymes and chants in the Fa Mu Lan section), and first-person assertion, Kingston is ensuring the *cadence of spoken word* is in the text. She is effectively saying that *the Chinese American female experience cannot be fully expressed in standard written English alone*; it needs these oral, bilingual infusions.

- **Sound of names and words:** Names hold power in Kingston's narrative. There's a silence around certain names (like her aunt's true name, or calling someone a "ghost"). At one point, she enumerates all the Chinese insults or expectations thrown at girls: *"husband-less, child-less, formless, and so on,"* which in Chinese culture were admonishments to girls to behave. She hears these as a barrage of negative sound that she has to overcome. Conversely, learning to say *"I"* – to assert a first-person identity in either language – becomes a turning point. In a climactic moment, Kingston finally bursts out at her parents in anger, pouring forth all the grievances she had suppressed. This cathartic monologue is paradoxically an ugly, heartbreaking scene (she accuses them of favoring boys, of trapping her in silence) but also a necessary shattering of her quietude. The act of speaking, even if it causes temporary hurt, is portrayed as necessary for growth. The silence was more harmful in the long run.

- **Auditory imagery of ghosts:** The concept of "ghosts" in Kingston's book often refers to white Americans and strange foreign ideas from the perspective of her immigrant family (they call Americans "ghosts" – e.g., a supermarket is run by "ghosts"). This language indicates how *English and American sounds were alien and frightening* to them, like the wail of a ghost might be. For Kingston, bridging that auditory gap – making the ghosts understandable and having her own voice heard by the ghosts – is part of assimilating and claiming space in America. By the end of the book, in the chapter "Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," Kingston merges Chinese legend (the story of Ts'ai Yen, a poet who was captured by barbarians) with her own perspective. Ts'ai Yen in the legend **sings a song that transcends cultural barriers** – though she's Chinese among nomads, her song, about longing, is understood by them; when she returns to China, she brings back a new music to her people. Kingston parallels this with her writing: *The Woman Warrior* is her song bridging China and America, women and men, silence and voice. The final line of the book is about Ts'ai Yen's song: *"It translated well."* This emphasizes that sound (music, voice) can translate feelings and truths across divides that prose sometimes cannot. It's an optimistic ending: the idea that her own voice, forged from silence and multicultural influences, will "translate" her experience to readers of any background.

Gender and voice are tightly interwoven in Kingston's narrative. The oppression of women in traditional Chinese society often took the form of silencing – e.g., Kingston recounts how girls in her village might have their feet bound (so they step silently) or be discouraged from too much speech or laughter. She describes an aunt who cut her frenum (the web under the tongue) of Kingston as a baby so she *wouldn't be tongue-tied* and could speak well – a haunting literal intervention to ensure a voice, hinting at generational desperation for women to be able to speak out. And yet, ironically, so many silencing messages persisted. The memoir wrestles with this contradiction: Chinese culture gave her heroic woman warrior myths (voices of strength) and also proverbs demanding female silence. Kingston's solution is to create a **hybrid voice**: English text suffused with Chinese oral aesthetics, a woman's voice that wields the power of both Western literary training and Eastern storytelling lore.

Politically, *The Woman Warrior* was groundbreaking in giving Asian American women a voice in literature. It confronted the **"model minority" stereotype**,

which often expects Asian Americans to be quiet, compliant, and invisible, by presenting a narrator who is introspective about how she learned to speak up. Kingston's auditory ethic is to champion storytelling (speaking out) as a means of personal and communal liberation. The book influenced many later writers to explore bilingual play, code-switching in dialogue, and open up about the harm of silence in immigrant communities (e.g., Amy Tan's novels also often involve secrets and silence, and the struggle to articulate generational conflicts).

In summary, Maxine Hong Kingston's case underscores how **silence and voice carry cultural and ethical weight**. Her narrative techniques—integrating oral tales, capturing the psychological experience of muteness, and ultimately breaking the silence with a patchwork of song and story—demonstrate literature's capacity to encode and challenge social norms. The *politics of sound* in her work is evident in the contrast between the clamor of old world expectations and the quietness of a Chinese American girl in American society; her *auditory ethics* emerges as she finds a voice that can encompass both, thereby asserting her identity. Kingston teaches that to heal the rift in oneself (and by extension in one's community), one must sometimes defy the command "Don't tell" and instead, tell loudly and lyrically, until the silence is filled with understanding.

Case Study 4: Other Contemporary Perspectives – Echoes in 21st Century Prose

While the previous case studies have focused on specific major authors, it is worth briefly considering how the politics of sound continue to evolve in very recent literature. The 21st century has brought new contexts—digital media, globalized culture, and ongoing social justice movements—that influence how writers deploy sound in prose. We see authors building on the legacy of Joyce, Woolf, Morrison, Kingston, and others, sometimes in novel ways.

One notable trend is the exploration of **technologically mediated sound** and its effects on human relationships. **Jennifer Egan's** *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) includes a chapter written as a PowerPoint presentation by a character, in which pauses in a song (the famous "Pause" chapter) become a metaphor for emotional communication. Here the absence of sound (rests in music) is thematically tied to the difficulty characters have in connecting—a modern take on how silence speaks. Egan's work also touches on the digitization of music, and implicitly, how the shift from analog to digital changes our soundscapes (e.g., the difference between a live

concert and a tape). The novel suggests that even in an age of hyperconnection, people yearn for authentic moments of listening and silence.

Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011) follows a Nigerian American man walking in New York; Cole's narrative often notes the sounds of the city—snatches of many languages, street musicians, echoes in the museum—underscoring the polyphonic nature of urban life and the protagonist's status as a sensitive listener. Cole's meditative style shows the narrator morally grappling with what he hears (for example, he is disturbed by a distant scream no one else reacts to, raising questions about urban insularity). This reflects a contemporary cosmopolitan ethics: in a global city of millions, what responsibility does one have to the voices of strangers?

Ali Smith, a Scottish author, in novels like *How to be both* (2014) and *Autumn* (2016), plays with voice and perspective in a postmodern way. In *Autumn*, set around the time of the Brexit referendum, she includes the murmurs of media and political rhetoric as part of the atmosphere, but counterpoints them with the quiet, intimate conversations of the main characters (a young woman and her centenarian friend). The contrast between the noise of political discourse and the human voice of personal storytelling becomes an implicit critique of how impersonal and loud political culture had become. Smith suggests that to retain our humanity, we need to tune out the relentless media static at times and listen to individual stories.

Science fiction and speculative fiction have also tackled sound politics interestingly. **Margaret Atwood's** *Oryx and Crake* (2003) imagines a post-apocalyptic world where few humans remain; the protagonist Snowman often recalls the cacophony of advertisements and pop songs from the pre-collapse society as a symbol of its hubris, while he now lives in near silence except for genetically spliced animal calls. The book, and its sequels, highlight an ethical inversion: the silence of a ruined world is the result of humans not having listened to warnings amidst all the noise of consumerism. Conversely, **N.K. Jemisin's** *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017) (although fantasy, with magic tied to the earth's vibrations) uses the metaphor of *"listening"* to the earth to literally quell or incite earthquakes—listening is power. Those who can do it (an oppressed caste called orogenes) are both feared and needed. The narrative's use of sonic imagery

(vibrations, hums, the absence of sound before catastrophe) adds a visceral layer to its political allegory on how societies treat the different.

Finally, the rise of **audiobooks and podcasts** as popular narrative forms has started influencing how authors write prose, knowing that many will *hear* their books read aloud. This has led some writers to adopt more oral storytelling techniques or rhythmic prose that carries well when spoken. One could argue that contemporary prose is becoming more consciously auditory in style due to this shift in consumption. The boundary between oral and written storytelling is blurring again, much as it was in ancient times. This could be seen as a democratizing effect of technology, aligning with what Walter Ong described as the secondary orality of the electronic age.

What remains consistent is that authors use sound to engage with the pressing issues of their contexts. Whether it's the fragmentation of modern identity, the clash of cultures, or the din of digital information, the **politics of sound** remains a fruitful avenue for literature to comment on and influence our ethical perceptions. As we've seen, sound in literature can encode protest, preserve memory, challenge readers, and shape emotional responses in ways that visual description or abstract narration might not. The 21st-century authors continue to expand this repertoire: incorporating e-mails, texts, and the internet's *visual noise* ironically often by referencing their sound or silence (for example, the "ping" of an iPhone message or the eerie quiet of a disconnected life).

In summing up the case studies, we observe a rich tapestry: **modernists** mapping inner and outer soundscapes; **postcolonial and minority writers** reclaiming voice and infusing oral traditions; **late 20th-century writers** like Morrison orchestrating textual jazz and blues; and **contemporary writers** grappling with new sonic environments and media. Each contributes to our central thesis: that the auditory dimension of prose fiction is a powerful vehicle for ethical and political engagement. Through detailed exploration of these cases, we see in practice how authors make *sound* shape *meaning*—how the *ear* becomes as important as the *eye* in reading literature, and how paying attention to this can unveil layers of significance particularly related to social values, power structures, and human connection.

Conclusion

This dissertation has traveled through a century of prose to listen to what literature is saying beneath and between its lines. By focusing on **soundscapes, voices, and silences**, we have uncovered an "auditory ethics" at work in modern and contemporary fiction — a set of strategies by which authors use sound to engage readers morally and politically. From the cacophonous streets of Joyce's Dublin to the haunted whispers in Morrison's 124 Bluestone Road; from the interior monologues resonating with Big Ben's chime in Woolf's London to the clash of talk-stories and quiet in Kingston's California Chinatown, we have seen that **sound is not ornamental in these narratives, but foundational**. It shapes form and content, and through them, influences how stories reflect and affect human values.

Several key insights emerge from this study:

- **Soundscapes as Social Critique:** Authors frequently use descriptions of ambient sound to mirror social conditions and power dynamics. Noises and silences in setting are rarely neutral background; they encode judgments about modernity, urbanization, colonialism, or environmental change. For example, the dissonant *"age of noise"* in modernist works (University Press of Florida: Modernist Soundscapes) signaled both the excitement and alienation of early 20th-century life, prompting writers to find new narrative forms. In postcolonial contexts, the suppression of indigenous soundscapes (like banned drums or silenced languages) became a metaphor for oppression, while the revival or representation of those sounds in literature acted as an assertion of identity. Our analysis showed that reading for soundscapes can reveal an author's stance on issues like industrialization (DeLillo's *White Noise* critique of consumer culture), war (the omnipresent World War I gunfire echoes in Hemingway and Woolf), or community (the vibrant, if tense, chorus of voices in Hurston's Eatonville).
- **Voice and Polyphony as Ethics of Representation:** The study reaffirmed Bakhtin's notion that the novel is inherently polyphonic and that this polyphony has ethical implications. When a novel allows multiple voices to speak (especially voices from marginalized groups, dialects, or conflicting viewpoints), it models a form of coexistence and dialogue. We saw how Morrison and Kingston consciously diversify the voices in their texts to include the once-excluded, thereby performing an ethical act of restitution.

Even in third-person narratives, techniques like free indirect discourse or stream of consciousness give readers access to a chorus of internal voices, fostering empathy across differences. The attention to *how characters speak*—their idioms, rhythms, first languages—underscores literature's role in humanizing those often caricatured or silenced in society. To read these voices well, readers must become good listeners, attuned to context and tone, which is an ethical practice parallel to real-world cross-cultural listening.

- **Silence as Potent Expression:** Far from being mere absence, silence emerged as one of the most meaningful "sounds" in our analysis. Authors use silence to signal trauma, oppression, or contemplative reflection. The choice to fall silent or to break a silence is often a pivotal ethical moment for characters (e.g., Sethe finally sharing her past in *Beloved*, or Kingston deciding to write what was forbidden to speak). On a structural level, narrative gaps and ambiguities force readers to reckon with uncertainty and the limits of knowledge, mirroring moral complexities where clear answers are elusive. The thesis highlighted how silence can both harm (enforced silence as violence) and heal (ritual silences in mourning or introspection). Recognizing the dual nature of silence leads to a nuanced understanding of literary communication: sometimes what is *not said* cries out the loudest, and writers rely on readers to supply the sound of silence with their empathetic imagination.

- **Interdisciplinary Dialogue Enhances Literary Analysis:** By drawing on sound studies, linguistics, and theory, this dissertation demonstrated that a multidisciplinary approach can enrich our interpretation of literature. Concepts like **the sonic color line** (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) **acoustic ecology**, or **aural literacy** (Jazzthetic Technique: Oralizing Fiction and Jazz Strategies in Toni Morrison's Jazz) provided language to discuss what novelists intuitively accomplish. Additionally, computational tools, while not overshadowing the literary analysis, offered supporting evidence and uncovered patterns (for instance, confirming Joyce's heavy use of musical terms, or Morrison's repetition of certain auditory words). This blend of close and distant reading validated the mixed-method approach: quantitative analysis underscored qualitative insights, fulfilling Moretti's vision that new methods can open up "many different sorts of literary inquiry" (Textual Analysis - A Companion to Digital Humanities) The success of this approach suggests that future

research could further harness digital humanities to study, say, the evolution of sound imagery over time or across genres, or to map networks of influence among authors in terms of auditory style.

- **Original Contribution – Auditory Ethics Framework:** The central contribution of this thesis is proposing **"auditory ethics"** as a framework for literary analysis. This framework posits that how literature sounds to us (in our mind's ear, or actual ear if read aloud) profoundly shapes its ethical impact. It pushes beyond the visual/textual bias to claim that there is a *moral acoustics* in narrative: pitch, volume, harmony, dissonance, and rhythm in writing all play a part in how a story persuades or moves us. For example, cacophonous, abrupt prose might instill discomfort or urgency appropriate to a theme of chaos or injustice, whereas a gentle, lullaby-like narration might engender trust or highlight innocence. Recognizing these effects can deepen our appreciation of authorial craft and intent. The **politics of sound**, in this view, isn't just about depicting political situations, but about engaging readers as citizens of the narrative through the act of listening. When a novel demands attentive listening, it might cultivate the kind of empathy and critical awareness that translates beyond the page to real-world ethical listening.

In demonstrating these points, the thesis remains mindful not to claim that sound is the *only* key to these works' meanings. Rather, it argues that **sound is an under-appreciated, yet essential, dimension** that works in concert with imagery, plot, and character to shape a narrative's overall effect. By tuning into this dimension, we often find a text's *subterranean connections*: between a story's form and society's forum, between an author's technique and a cultural context, between reader and writer in the act of communication.

The implications of this research are manifold. For literary scholarship, it encourages further studies into the sensory aspects of texts—hearing, but also perhaps touch and smell (an emerging field of sensory literary studies). For sound studies, it provides case examples of how soundscapes and listening practices are portrayed in art, enriching the understanding of historical auditory cultures. For ethics and political theory, it offers a reminder that narratives shape moral imagination not just through *what* they say, but *how* they say it; the form can be as ethically significant as the content.

There are also pedagogical implications: teaching literature through reading aloud or using audio recordings might unlock interpretations that silent reading could miss, especially for works like those of Morrison or Joyce where voice and rhythm are so integral. Similarly, creative writers might take inspiration from this study to consciously craft the sonic qualities of their prose to enhance thematic depth.

Of course, this work has limitations that point toward future research. The focus was on prose fiction in English; there remain vast territories unexplored here – for instance, the soundscapes of Latin American magical realism, or the narrative voices of Middle-Eastern diasporic fiction, or East Asian modernist literature's engagement with sound. Each of these could yield fascinating comparative insights (e.g., how do conceptions of silence differ in Japanese literature influenced by Zen, versus Western literature?). Additionally, as audio technologies progress, future narratives might incorporate sound in new ways (consider how a multi-modal digital novel might use actual audio snippets). The boundary of what constitutes "literature" could expand, and our analytic tools will need to adapt accordingly.

In closing, **Auditory Ethics: The Politics of Sound in Modern and Contemporary Prose** has shown that listening to literature can transform our understanding of it. By hearing its voices—those on the page and those left echoing off it—we attune ourselves to the ethical resonances intended by writers and sometimes even those they unintendedly include, shaped by their milieu. In a world that often overwhelms us with noise or, conversely, threatens with enforced silences, learning to listen in this nuanced way is a skill of great value. Literature, this thesis suggests, is a training ground for that skill. Authors invite us into a contract of listening; when we accept, we might find that the stories we read not only reflect the politics of their times but also have something to teach about *our* time—about how to remain human in the din, how to discern the truth amidst competing voices, and how to ensure no vital voice is lost to silence.

The final note is itself a call, or perhaps an invitation: *to continue this conversation*. As readers and scholars, may we keep our ears open for the next tone, the next melody or murmur that literature offers. There is always more to hear, and thus more to understand. After all, as one character poignantly realizes in Ali Smith's novel: *"Always, there'll be more story. That's what story is."* And as long as stories continue, so will their sounds—carrying the ethics and politics of human experience in every reverberation.

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