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'I listen to plenty': Digital Playlisting and Sonic Experience in Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

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Set in Kingston and New York over a 15-year period from 1976, Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014) dramatises the lives of people involved in the real-life attempted assassination of Bob Marley. The novel's most prominent critics emphasise its cinematic atmosphere, the polyphonic force of its many narrators' voices, and its distinctive use of music. However, the novel also explores how literary representations of historical sounds relate to the media technologies that became ubiquitous after the novel's action takes place. James's distinctive audiovisual sensitivity, I argue, is rooted in a formal orientation towards digital media. His novel itself behaves as a kind of playlist, subjecting both its characters and its readers to many different styles of audiovisuality, and switching between them at a high frequency. Thus, it acts as a textual demonstration of Jim Collins's argument that contemporary 'watching, reading, surfing, and listening are all subsumable to the pleasure of playlisting'. This term encapsulates both the specific action of creating or accessing a sequence of media products, and the general 'curatorial' process in which users of 'digital archives' like tablet computers or smartphones experience narrative 'worlds built out of our cultural obsessions'. By attending to how the novel approaches sound, we can see that *Brief History* acts as a container for audiovisual representations that embody different production values and aesthetic parameters. Therefore, it anticipates a literary culture that would become increasingly responsive to the sonic characteristics of digital technologies.

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Early critics of Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014) tend to summarise its sound-world in one of two ways: either they describe it as 'cacophonous' and emphasise its abundance of voices, songs, and gunshots, or they point out that some of its textual features and narrative preoccupations resemble some aspects of Jamaican musical practices like dancehall and dub.[1] Both of these interpretations are appropriate for a novel that gathers over a dozen narrators to describe the lives of some key figures involved in the real-life attempted assassination of Bob Marley in Kingston, while Jamaica contended with the violence fomented by western capitalism over a 15-year period from 1976. But in the decade since it won the 2015 Booker Prize, another aspect of this novel's distinctive approach to sonic experience has become more evident: its persistent and subtle attention to the relationship between written literature and mass-market digital communication technology. *Brief History* presents us with a historical drama of ironically epic length, in which there are many more than seven killings. While doing so, it also offers us many small but frequent glimpses of the relationships between literary representations of historical sounds and the media technologies that became ubiquitous after the novel's action takes place.

The following excerpt from a long exchange of dialogue, for example, is a significant point of inflexion in contemporary fictional explorations of sound in on-screen media. I shall explain the narrative context of this dialogue more fully below; the important aspect to attend to here is what happens with the audio. The first speaker is trying to hide from people chasing him. He breaks into the back yard of the second speaker, who threatens to shoot him if he does not leave:

– First. Is me come here first.
– No brethren me see you from last night. You not first or last.
– When you… you was in the second Datsun or first? Bam-Bam? So tired, so—

[CLICK]

– Hear that, pussyhole? You know click? You can tell difference between click and tick?
– Second Datsun or first? Me know you name? You is… You is…
– Like what you hear a second ago. Click or tick?
– Is not a second ago. Weeper? Tell Bam-Bam to stop chuck badness with me.
– Pussyhole, the click from a click ago. Me give you nothing to laugh 'bout?
– Me never hear no click […] (James 2014: 250).

[1] See, for example, Kei Miller's December 2014 review in the Guardian, Michiko Kakutani's September 2014 review in The New York Times, and Jason Frydman's 2019 article 'Death in the Arena: A Brief History of Dancehall, Time, and the Cold War' in *Small Axe*.

In this disorientating exchange, the single word '[CLICK]' is not spoken by a character or a narrator, but appears as if it were a closed caption—a textual rendering of a sound, as distinct from subtitles, which transcribe or translate speech. While the use of captions in print is not a new technique in itself, the way these characters dispute the click's audibility, and place different emphases upon its potential meaning, is a miniature example of the many ways in which James's text is animated by a wide range of audiovisual products and techniques. When the characters in this extract check whether the click can be heard, understood, and differentiated from other sounds, they perform an aural investigation for which the caption acts as a textual authority, rhetorically confirming the sound's occurrence and onomatopoetically conveying its tone. Their exchange therefore anticipates the literary and artistic engagements with the aesthetic potential of the closed caption in the decade following *Brief History*'s publication, such as the work of the artist Christine Sun Kim, and the poetry of Victoria Adukwei Bulley (in *Quiet*, published in 2022), and Raymond Antrobus (in *All the Names Given*, published in 2021). These works emerged during a decade when closed captions became a vastly more prevalent aspect of audiovisual media experience in general (of which more later). In this article, I argue that the use of closed captioning is just one of many ways in which *Brief History* gives multi-sensory sonic experience a crucial role in its investigation of how written fiction can develop formal affinities with audiovisual arts on digital devices. When we attend to the sonic experiences of *Brief History*'s characters, and notice how James dramatises their relationships with sound through rhetorical emphases and broader structural arrangements, we find that the novel anticipates a literary culture that would become increasingly responsive to the sonic characteristics of digital technologies.[2]

This analysis of *Brief History*'s sound enriches our understanding of contemporary literary styles. One defining aspect of contemporary writing and art is what Anna Kornbluh (2023) calls a style of 'immediacy' in the era of 'too late capitalism'. Literary texts that exhibit immediacy 'aim [...] less at the representation of characters, settings, and events than presencing charisma or voice, especially the sensibility of the single consciousness in moment-to-moment sensation' (Kornbluh 2023: 109). The 'immediacy' mode de-privileges plot and action in favour of this 'presencing', emerging through genres like auto-fiction, auto-theory, memoir, and the personal essay. Kornbluh (2023) cites *Brief History* alongside *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel as one of several historical novels that exhibit immediacy through their reliance upon first-person, present-tense voice, which 'compresses event and narration into one temporal

[2] I use the term 'sonic experience' to encompass both hearing and listening through multiple senses, including sight and touch as well as by ear, amongst individuals whose aural capacities and socially conditioned attitudes to sound may vary widely.

register, an immediate here-now' (108). But I would argue that *Brief History*'s reliance upon present tense voice is more than a simple vehicle for the 'presencing' effect, not least because the novel uses *many* first-person voices to explore a social collectivity destabilised by capitalist pressures. As Rhone Fraser (2017) puts it, *Brief History* presents an 'exposure and critique of a chain of command—with the CIA at its top and teenage gang leaders at its bottom—that ultimately critiques neocolonialism' (68). Lucy Evans (2020) argues that *Brief History* 'resituates the [gangster] genre' by engaging with 'the specifics of the gangster figure in the context of mid- to late-twentieth-century Jamaica and its diaspora' (53). Bearing both arguments in mind, I explore how *Brief History*'s 'exposure and critique' of power structures and its engagement with the 'specifics' of the gangster genre exhibit many textual gestures towards habits of audiovisual media consumption on digital devices. These gestures are most evident in the way its narrators exhibit clear differences in their relationships with sound, just as they differ in their relationships to The Singer—the book's name for the Bob Marley character, whose voice we only encounter indirectly. Their narration overall tends to present sonic experience as a multi-sensorial and highly mediated process—in other words, like an audiovisual phenomenon, suited to the period of 'too late capitalism' characterised by an abundance of individually owned devices through which people access art, entertainment, and information.

The novel's anticipation of this world becomes apparent when we note how much it resembles a playlist on a digital device that gathers songs, texts, photos, and video clips within the same frame. Thus, *Brief History*'s narrative unfolds within two temporal registers, as the character Artie Jennings indicates on the novel's first page: 'even as I talk now I can hear how I sounded then' (James 2014: 1). As we read, we feel the text dwelling both in the 'immediate here-now' of the narrators' present tenses, supported by their first-person voices, and in our own differently-mediated present time, supported by a constant stream of audiovisual references. The absence of significant engagement with other characteristic features of the digital world, such as apps, social media platforms, and memes, further helps to bring into focus this novelistic concern for Twenty-First-Century audiovisuality.

Playlisting

As Jim Collins (2013) argues, contemporary 'watching, reading, surfing, and listening are all subsumable to the pleasure of playlisting' (652). The term requires some clarification. As a noun, 'playlist' can refer to a sequence of videos or songs or other media, on any kind of device or product. Collins's specific use of 'playlisting' refers to a 'curatorial' *practice*, through which users of 'digital archives' like computers or

smartphones experience narrative 'worlds built out of our cultural obsessions' (652). This world-building capability is what characterises the contemporary playlist that emerged once digital media were on their way to becoming ubiquitous.[3] What makes the 'digital' experience distinct from analog media like VHS, vinyl, audio tape and 16mm film is the way we can now access a huge variety of media products within a single device, all of which are available to us because they have been 'digitised'—that is, mediated by being converted into data that we access by streaming or downloading. As long as we have sufficient bandwidth, we can access a large number of such products in a rapid sequence. My argument that digital playlisting is an organising principle of *Brief History* is rooted in the way digital experience involves huge data capacity and rapid movement between products and sources.

Some potential for confusion emerges when we notice that the open-ended activity of playlisting can (but does not have to) include the accessing and creation of discrete playlists. The novel *The Taiga Syndrome* (2018) by Cristina Rivera Garza ends by presenting a discrete playlist, but the book does not engage in playlisting because it does not explore the narrative world of an existing cultural phenomenon. The novels *This is Memorial Device* (2017) by David Keenan and *Liveforever* (1977) by Andrés Caicedo are like *Brief History*: they contain playlists *and* engage in playlisting by exploring the worlds of post-punk and salsa, respectively. As Wolfgang Streeck (2018) puts it, we now live in a world in which consumers of media products use digital devices to 'pick what they expect to like' (241), and the activity of playlisting belongs to this world. It happens over an extended period during which a person may use a device to explore the world of, for example, Jane Austen, through its many manifestations in different media on the same screen: an e-book, a TV adaptation, a few pieces of fan fiction, a virtual museum, a film of the same novel as the TV adaptation, a soundtrack to that film, and so on. Users 'curate' the playlist when they pick some aspects of Austen's narrative world they expect to like, and use their device to move between them.

The distinctions between these different aspects are more mutable now than they have ever been. TV programmes are repackaged in bite-size chunks on YouTube. Audiobooks are available on the music-streaming service Spotify, where you can hear adverts for a paint called Dulux Heritage that encourages you to 'let the feelings of your favourite books become the colours of your favourite rooms' (Spotify 2024).[4] Digital playlisting differs from, for example, the playlists that a radio station uses to

[3] We could date the origin of the playlist to at least as far back as the 1860s, when people could choose to bind together small collections of sheet music songs between gilt-edged boards.

[4] It's not clear to me whether everyone could hear this advert or if it was targeted at me because I listen to book-related podcasts.

ensure certain songs receive a minimum number of weekly and daily plays, because the digital playlist is heavily individualised and subject to the user's immediate emotional response—if they're not in the mood to hear the current track, they can skip to the next one. Because media platforms keep a record of users' skips and other navigational behaviour, songwriters and producers have started to shift choruses further forward in their songs, in an effort to retain listener attention, prevent skipping, and thus potentially receive more revenue from the host platform.[5] The digital playlist is therefore geared towards capturing attention in a way that pre-digital playlists were not. Thus playlisting is a specifically contemporary way to experience the coherence of a narrative world across various media platforms and venues.

We should note that Marlon James himself would reject the term 'curatorial' as a description of what he does in writing—in a recent interview he took pains to distinguish curation from creation, while acknowledging it as a skill (Ondaatje 2024). However, Collins's argument that playlisting activities have a curatorial basis illuminates what James has produced because it attunes us to the way his novel is oriented towards contemporary audiovisual cultures, and how it engages sonic experience to register the formal convergences that have developed between the reading and writing of books and the consumption of media on digital devices.

There is already a long tradition of novelistic engagements with media consumption. Critic Silvio Torres-Saillant (2007) argues that the novels *Tres tristes tigres* (1967) by Guillermo Carbrera Infante, *La guaracha del macho Camacho* (1976) by Luis Rafael Sanchez, and *Solo cenzias ballarás* (1980) by Pedro Verges are 'three of the central novels in the literary histories of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic' (34). These novels, whose publication dates span three decades, all share a particular formal quality: they are 'steeped in the evocation of each society's habits of musical consumption and popular speaking patterns' (34). *Brief History* extends and updates this tradition, offering a variety of popular speaking patterns that respond to their historical audiovisual cultures through the filter of our contemporary digital media.

Another key part of *Brief History*'s relationship with contemporary media is the fact that the activity of reading increasingly takes place on the same digital devices that enable the activity of playlisting. Naomi S. Baron (2015) analyses surveys of reading habits in America, and argues that

[5] See Cohen (2023) for example: 'In 2010, less than 20 per cent of number one songs in the US had choruses that started within the first fifteen seconds; by 2018, almost 40 per cent did.' We should note that Spotify's payment model is grossly unfair to smaller artists, and a clear demonstration that they do not care about music as much as increasing profits for the biggest selling acts. For more on this, see the work of the philosopher Robin James.

> the data suggest that people who read on digital devices tend to do more reading overall than those only reading print [...]. [And] the number of people owning and using mobile reading devices continues to grow [...]. By early 2014, more than 40 percent of Americans owned a tablet, while one third owned an eReader. (208)

These statistics establish the point that *Brief History* emerged at a time when the activity called 'reading' increasingly referred to one of several different media experiences accessed through the same device. Baron identifies those other experiences as 'email, news, games, and social networking sites' (10), and this situation has only become more prevalent in the last decade. The act of reading text that belongs to a novel frequently occurs as one small part of a broader range of reading, watching, listening, and so on, within the same device.

Brief History presents itself as a playlisting exploration of Bob Marley's narrative world by saturating its text with references to music, films, TV shows, and rhetorical devices that mimic technologised experiences. Its primary novelistic innovation is its attention to *differences in sonic characteristics* throughout the whole narrative. All of the characters encounter radio, television, film, and recorded sound, and the narrative of one character, Tristan Phillips, acts as a recording itself because Tristan speaks his story into the tape recorder of another character, the journalist Alex Pierce (James 2014: 451). The majority of narrators in *Brief History* also explicitly relates their experience of certain events to experiences of media, such as scenes they remember from particular films and TV shows. For example, the gangster Papa-Lo describes an unusually quiet part of the city as 'like them town in Clint Eastwood movie' (217). The same character notes how all the white men he meets insists they don't work for the CIA: 'but that sorta lie seem like them have no mental skill to think up something like that. Is like when a little boy open him mouth but what flow out sound like TV' (344). Another gangster, Josey Wales, describes how Kingston's airport in the early morning seems quiet, 'like the first reel of a cowboy movie' (402). Josey also emphasises, in a significant passage near the start of the novel, the breadth and depth of his listening habits:

> I listen to plenty. I listen to the TV, to Bill Mason and *I Dream of Jeannie*, and the radio serial on RJR at ten every morning, even though that was woman business. And I listen to the politicians, not when they're talking to me and pretending like I'm some backward ghetto naigger, but when they talk to each other, or to the white man from America. (41)

Josey engages in playlisting here by assembling, within his own attention and memory, a variety of media that enable him to develop the discernment necessary to prosper

amongst the cultural forces of his own narrative world. As well as being one of the novel's most violent characters, he is its most attentive and considerate listener.

Brief History's abundance of references to film and TV also come in the form of visual gags, such as when the young gunman Weeper complains, during a murder, that Josey Wales has spilled blood on his Starsky and Hutch t-shirt (109). As the novel unfolds, the characters filter their local sociopolitical situations and specific dramatic moments through their experiences of analogue audiovisual media, while James organises his text according to the playlisting capacities of digital devices.

This mode of organisation is one of *Brief History*'s most obvious but least-discussed formal aspects. The book is divided into five sections, each of which takes its title from an album or a song that relates to the events of that section. The full list of these sections is given on a single page near the start, and their appearance here resembles a short musical playlist. Each section also has a subtitle that gives the date on which the events within it take place. Some of these dates precede by several years the albums or songs for which the sections are named. The first section, 'Original Rockers', set on December 2nd, 1976, is named for an Augustus Pablo album released in 1979. The final section, 'Sound Boy Killing', set on March 22nd, 1991, is named for a Mega Banton track released in 1993. The character Bam-Bam, who dies in 1976, is named for a song by Sister Nancy released in 1980. These chronological discrepancies matter because they reinforce the curatorial principle behind the formal organisation of the novel. The songs and albums are suitable choices not for their adherence to real-life historical chronology, but because they feel appropriate to the action. As Liz Pelly (2017) argues, playlists on the streaming service Spotify 'have spawned a new type of music listener, one who thinks less about the artist or album they are seeking out, and instead connects with emotions, moods and activities'. The songs and albums of these section titles give the events a musical context that suits the activity of exploring Bob Marley's narrative world.

Another formal feature that signals a concern with playlisting is the cast list. This sequence of names precedes the contents page, and the many characters named for musical and fictional figures are a textual version of what Collins (2013) would call 'cultural obsessions' within the 'digital archive' (652). Many novels use cast lists, but the one in *Brief History* functions like a screen of search results that indexes a contemporary version of the audiovisual and literary cultures in which Bob Marley circulates. The character Funnyboy references the Lee 'Scratch' Perry song 'People Funny Boy'. Demus references the Jamaican singer Chaka Demus. Tony Pavarotti references the opera singer Luciano Pavarotti. Renton is the name of a historic slave owner, as well as a character

from Irvine Welsh's novel and Danny Boyle's film adaptation *Trainspotting*—a story that is a tonal precursor to *Brief History* in its blend of dialect-heavy voices narrating a drug-addled drama.

Because each of these characters has their name at the top of the pages that contain their narration, they function in the reader's imagination in a similar way to music on a film's soundtrack. Michel Chion (1994) describes this effect as 'unification', whereby music 'can cast the images into a homogenizing bath or current' (47). This is only one of the ways in which James produces textual analogues of musical practices, but because several critics have already explored the novel's engagement with musical cultures in great detail, I will maintain a focus on audiovisual encounters. As Kodwo Eshun (1998) reminds us, Lee 'Scratch' Perry—one of the pioneers of dub—would infuse his music with 'smashing glass, squawling babies, trickling water [...] a horse and a 70s TV sitcom on backing vocals' (65). Perry's studio walls featured film posters and contemporary paintings, and the window between his mixing desk and the room in which he recorded his musicians was almost entirely covered with photographs (Burnett 2009). Likewise, James's novel never loses track of the visual dimensions of sonic experience, and emphasises that these visual dimensions often originate in the cultural products of the American empire (such as Weeper's Starsky and Hutch merchandise, noted above).

Beyond these first pages, the sequencing of cultural obsessions in *Brief History* extends through the text of the narrative itself by the use of contextualising quotations and gags. Papa-Lo, for example, quotes three lines verbatim from Eric Clapton's infamous racist tirade, onstage at a gig in 1976—'this is England. This is a white country' (James 2014: 27). Two characters' dialogue mimics a famous verbal exchange in Isaac Hayes' theme from the film *Shaft* (Parkers 1971)—'you's a bad motherf- / —shut yo' mouth' (James 2014: 116). And an explanation of Marley's song 'Buffalo Soldiers' is distinctly similar to the explanation given in Timothy White's biography of Marley, *Catch a Fire* (James 2014: 600).[6]

The sequencing of the book's sections is also suggestive. The first four sections switch between narrators in a more or less random order, as they might appear in a digital playlist set to randomise upcoming tunes; and the name of the current narrator appears at the top of every other page. But the final section is divided into twelve parts, the number of each part appears in the place usually reserved for the narrators' names, and they are given in an ascending sequence. We might say that the first four sections

[6] The similarity between the accounts of 'Buffalo Soldiers' lies in the fact that both of them, after explaining the song, immediately mention that Marley's image appeared on Jamaican postage stamps after his death.

are ‘on shuffle’ while the final one appears in a specific, intended order. Thus, there is a formal dialogue between two of the curatorial principles available on digital devices—one randomised and the other directed. What Torres-Saillant calls ‘habits of musical consumption’ appear here as habits of audiovisual curation. The formal apparatus of page headings, section titles, cast lists, and so on, offer a textual analogue of curatorial digital media practices, by which James’s historical fiction foregrounds its textual contemporaneity.

Context trumps volume

It is worth dwelling again on this single moment in a very long novel because it shows how *Brief History*’s awareness of closed captioning extends beyond the appearance of the ‘[CLICK]’, and alerts us to the depth and subtlety of the novel’s concern with digital mediation. There are several moments in the narrative when James uses closed captioning principles as both points of dramatic inflection and formal gestures towards contemporary media experience.

The ‘[CLICK]’ arrives at a frantic moment, as the character Demus narrates his own situation to himself, in a delirious mental state, in the aftermath of his participation in a group effort to kill The Singer. After the assassination attempt fails, the group of would-be killers scatter themselves across Kingston while they are hunted by members of rival gangs. Demus runs along some train tracks and breaks into the yard of a house, where he lies down and replays fragments of the attempted assassination in his mind, while a man in the yard threatens him with a gun and tells him ‘you can’t stay here’ (James 2014: 250). Since Demus does not respond in a way that acknowledges the man’s injunction, the man releases the safety catch on the gun, making the click sound, and tells Demus that the sound that comes after the click is ‘the fucking bang. Want to bet say you hear that?’ (250). With this question, the text acknowledges a fundamental principle of caption-writing. As Sean Zdenek (2015) argues, captions ‘don’t describe sounds so much as convey the purpose and meaning of sounds in specific contexts’ (8). In films and TV shows, captions are generally produced for sounds that are crucial for the plot, while incidental or atmospheric sounds are not automatically included: just because it is audible does not mean it will be captioned. The man in the yard conveys the purpose and meaning of the sound to Demus by reminding him that the click is what you hear just before you are shot.[7] Demus’s claim to not have heard the threatening click emphasises his dissociated state. He wants to believe that he might not be shot,

[7] Not having time for scientific pedantry, the man doesn’t add that, because a discharged bullet travels at a faster speed than its acoustic wave, Demus would not hear the bang if he were shot in the head.

but by page 250, readers are familiar with the lethal dynamics between, and mental strains upon, the characters in the novel—we know there is not any doubt that he is really in danger. Thus, the click has to be present on the page as it would have to be present in a captioned film or TV show.[8] Since the characters explicitly refer to it, the caption-writer would be obliged to include it.

However, the click's appearance in the text is somewhat anachronistic. The experience of captions is far more common in 2025 than it was in the 1976 timeframe of this episode, when captions for films and TV shows were costly to produce and rarely encountered outside of Deaf venues. By contrast, Hannah J Davies (2019) argues that captions have become 'an inescapable part of visual media'. Closed captions are now a defining aspect of digital experience: a 2021 survey found that people aged 18–25 are four times more likely than older people to use on-screen text when viewing online media, even though such people are far less likely to be living with the forms of aural diversity from which the need for such texts first emerged (Youngs 2021). Thus, users are highly likely to encounter closed captions while playlisting, in particular, as well as during online navigation in general (via TikTok's auto-generated captions, for example). For more and more people in 2025, captions are a normal part of daily—digital—experience, unlike in the 1970s, when most people would encounter them only rarely. Moreover, for James as a writer, the inclusion of the '[CLICK]' at this moment in the story also solves a technical problem. He has to include the sound while also maintaining the idea that the narrator might not have heard it, so it cannot be explicitly acknowledged by Demus, nor can the scene lose tension by switching to a different narrator. So the text briefly *enables* captions, here an omniscient point of 'listening' (instead of point of view), as if pressing an on-screen button that was not available to 1970s viewers. It is the sole instance of narration—if we can call it that—from outside of a narrator's mind, unattributable to any named entity. Readers can then be sure the click 'really' happened, its 'purpose and meaning' fully conveyed even if it did not reach the addled awareness of the narrator.

Elsewhere, the novel attends to another principle of caption production: 'context trumps volume level' (Zdenek 2015: 3). In other words, the loudest sound is not always the most important. Thus, characters in *Brief History* are sometimes surprised or troubled by what, to them, is a strange ability to hear certain sounds, but to us is

[8] Of course, on a screen, the caption is part of a simultaneous audiovisual blend that includes images and sound. In a printed book, there is only a linear text on the page, but we can still experience simultaneity when reading. In the analogy I'm suggesting here, the reader 'views' the caption on the page simultaneously with the scene's images and sounds in their imagination. By distinguishing itself with capital letters and square brackets, the click reminds us that the text has not disappeared.

a normal aspect of film or TV sound design. For example, the character Kim Clarke complains that she lives in a house 'right by the sea that's roaring all the time' and with birds 'cawing outside' the window and 'yet traffic sounds still find a way to get down here' (James 2014: 282). She doesn't know that the dramatic purpose of the traffic sound is to reinforce the presence of the city in her thoughts, and thus motivate her to escape the feeling of being trapped that her life in Kingston induces. The gangster Josey Wales, in a room above a nightclub, hears the Boney M song 'Ma Baker' playing 'even over the crowd yelling and joking and cussing and screaming' (406). The song makes him laugh, and he doesn't say why, but it is obvious that the story in the song's lyrics reflects something of his own life back to him, much like any well-chosen song in a film soundtrack says something about the on-screen events, and establishes 'unification' (Chion 1994) for the flow of on-screen images. Josey Wales inspires much fear in the characters, especially Dorcas Palmer—a fact that becomes increasingly important throughout the narrative. In all of these examples, context trumps volume level, characters briefly ponder the sonic aspects of the situations in which they find themselves, and closed captioning principles are briefly 'enabled' within the narrative flow. Thus, James's formal engagements with captioning apply a contemporary digital filter to his historical fiction.

The brief enabling of closed captions is just one of the ways in which the novel introduces aspects of digital audiovisual cultures into its imagined history, and invites us to consider how habits of playlisting affect the status of sound in contemporary narratives. These aspects always serve a dramatic purpose and demonstrate that the sonic character of the narrative—the way its 'soundtrack' is filtered, and thus the way it distributes meaning—is always in flux. In other words, the novel does not simply switch from song to song and sound to sound. Its audio *parameters* also change, rapidly, in a way that is much more akin to the digital world than the analogue. In quick succession, *Brief History* 'sounds like' a film, then 'sounds like' real life, then 'sounds like' a TV show, 'sounds like' a song, and so on. These shifting parameters modulate the characters' sonic experiences: sometimes they are surprised by the differences between the sound of cinematic and real-life events; at other times, they hear real-life events according to the sonic priorities of television; at still other times, we find them simultaneously listening, viewing, and reading. We can gain some understanding of these changing parameters by considering some key features of cinematic sound design.

'Me hear horse hoof again': metaphoric sound and silence

Multi-layered film and musical references are a major component of the curation by which *Brief History* establishes a sense of audiovisual saturation. For example, Evans

(2020) identifies the character Josey Wales as the exemplification of the 'cross-fertilization of cultural influences' (56). Josey 'is affiliated, through his name, with both a Jamaican dancehall deejay posing as a shotta and a fictional American outlaw' (Evans 2020: 56). To be specific: there is a film starring Clint Eastwood called The Outlaw Josey Wales, from which the real-life musician Josey Wales took his name, who pretends to be a 'shotta'—a particular type of gangster—as part of his performance persona. The fictional character Josey Wales in *Brief History* is thus an entity who 'blurs the boundary between fact and fiction' by referring to many different people, both real and imagined, scattered across various points along an audiovisual continuum (56). Hence, it is appropriate that he 'listens to plenty', as he informs us near the novel's beginning. Meanwhile, referring to particular films and cinematic characters, *Brief History* also features sound that is experienced *as if* the action of the novel takes place within a film. We could say James's novel is intensely cinematic, but that would be to limit the scope of its concern for mediation. Cinematic sound design comes and goes throughout the text, as it does for users of digital devices when they navigate between films, songs, articles, TV shows, and podcasts. This on-again off-again shifting of sonic parameters is one of the central operations through which the text explores a specifically digital mode of sonic experience. To demonstrate the extent of this exploration, it is necessary to establish how the novel incorporates some basic techniques of cinematic sound.

James has described Francis Ford Coppola's 1974 film *The Godfather II* as 'the biggest influence' on *Brief History* (Evans 2020: 50). This influence is evident in the way James employs a technique that the sound designer for the first two *The Godfather* films, Walter Murch (2007), calls 'metaphoric sound' (100). When the protagonist of *The Godfather* (1972), Michael Corleone, is about to murder someone for the first time, he is in the bathroom of a restaurant while the sound of an inner-city train, which is not shown on screen, emits a kind of 'metallic scream' (100) as it turns a corner. Murch explains the metaphoric function of this sound: 'the metallic scream works as a clue to the state of Michael's mind at the [...] critical moment before he commits his first murder and his life turns an irrevocable corner' (100). The key feature of 'metaphoric' sound in its specifically Murchian sense is that it offers the state of mind of a character as an 'explanation' for the presence of the sound, while the event that produces the sound remains off-screen. Viewers would not necessarily know that the sound they hear comes from a train turning a corner, but the sound seems sufficiently appropriate to the events on the screen, in which a character makes a distressing choice amidst social forces he cannot control.

In *Brief History*, there are several instances in which unusual or incongruous sounds stand metaphorically for the characters' states of mind. For example, during a brief respite as he attempts to outrun the men who want to kill him in revenge for his part in

the failed attempt to kill The Singer, Demus falls asleep in a gully. He dreams of being on a bus, with an unidentified schoolboy sat behind him. After turning to look at this boy, he says, 'I turn my back again and I hear horsefoot. I hear horsefoot getting louder and louder and I know it's the ratatat of this old bus engine but I hear horses coming' (James 2014: 262). The sound of the horses is an audible metaphor for the distress he feels because he knows he is being hunted. When he exits the bus in the dream and wakes up in the gully, he knows he is still not safe, and decides to run towards the sea: 'me hear horse hoof again. Me heart start to beat fast, boom boom boom with the horse foot clap clap clap and me hand and foot feel cold and getting colder' (263). The hoof sound here intensifies, and synchronises with Demus' heartbeat as his fear increases. The embodied intensity produces a historical resonance: 'I must be mad too hearing horse hoof like me is some runaway slave [...] maybe I should run to the maroons' (264). Like viral soundbites on TikTok or Instagram which are experienced repetitively by different users the metaphorical sound becomes a historical aperture: he hears what 'maroons'—people who successfully escaped slavery—must have heard in reality, while they outran the people who kept them enslaved. This incident of metaphoric sound functions as a literal 'brief history' before Demus is himself hunted down and killed.

In another episode, the metaphoric sounds of human voices accompany a burning house. The character Kim Clarke, previously known as Nina Burgess and later to be known as Dorcas Palmer, has locked herself in the bedroom. The house belongs to her boyfriend, Chuck, an American man who works for a bauxite extraction company in Jamaica. Like Demus, Kim hears Murchian metaphorical sound as she reflects on the idea of escape and the action of running, but instead of escaping a person who wants to kill her, she wants to escape Jamaica itself, having described the two years that followed the attempted assassination of The Singer, at which she was present, as 'two years of running in a straight line that turns into a circle' (312). Just after she hears Chuck return home, she sets fire to a sheet of newspaper and throws it onto the bed. Chuck, locked out of the room, says 'what the hell is going on?' to which she responds, in her internal monologue:

> Burn a way through the white man's knocking and shouting and screaming and rapping and ramming down the door that won't budge, and the cackling pillows and the hissing silk sheets and the laughing polyester curtains, watch the flame shoot up like under a skirt and expose the screaming window (313).

The sounds of Chuck 'knocking and shouting' while he tries to break through the locked door give way to vocal sounds that stand metaphorically for the sounds of

burning. These sounds of fire do include a realistic 'hissing', but this is surrounded by 'cackling' and 'laughing' attributed to the burning pillows and curtains. These vocal events reflect the contempt Kim feels for the capitalist economic dynamics that make it so hard for her to escape Kingston. Her highly audible act of revenge is her version of what Rhone Fraser (2017) calls the 'critique [of] neocolonialism' in *Brief History* (68). Chuck himself obviously stands for 'the white man' who extracts profit from Jamaica's land and people while ensuring the country will not develop sufficient political agency to use the value of its labour and resources to benefit its population and thus threaten capitalist interests. When Kim exits through the 'screaming window', she physically moves through the sonic metaphor of human anguish into the next chapter of her life, in which she lives in America under another assumed name, and thus becomes a small-scale personification of the multi-narrator book itself. We should also note that 'window' in a digital context can refer to the rectangle that appears on screen when we load an internet browser, and thus a 'screaming window' is what we'd be viewing if we watched this scene on a laptop. This idea will become relevant later when we consider the final scene in the novel.

Another technique of cinematic sound design that James employs in *Brief History* is the dramatic placement of unexpected silence. As Murch (2007) explains, this kind of silence is

> the ultimate metaphoric sound [...]. If you can get the film to a place with no sound where there should be sound, the audience will crowd that silence with sounds and feelings of their own making, and they will, individually, answer the question of, "Why is it quiet?". (100)

In other words, the unexpected occurrence of silence provides a space in the audiovisual narrative that increases dramatic intensity by forcing the viewer to interpret a sensory anomaly. The silence demands attention. Such silences 'will get the audience to a strange and wonderful place where the film becomes their own creation in a way that is deeper than any other' (100). Murch offers the example of a scene from *Apocalypse Now* (1979), in which US Army helicopters set off to attack a Vietnamese village. Shots of the helicopters have the soundtrack of Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries', but shots of the villages appear with a 'locational silence' (95). As Murch explains, 'this sudden silence [...] helps you share the point of view of the Vietnamese, who are shortly going to be overwhelmed with the noise and violence coming at them' (95). The sudden silence in the film communicates to the viewer the vulnerability of people who are about to be killed by the globally dominant military force.

James employs precisely this technique of 'locational silence' just before one of the most violent episodes in *Brief History*. In New York, Josey Wales is about to massacre the residents of a crack house. Another gangster, Weeper, describes what he sees as he watches Josey: 'two guns, one in each hand like an outlaw for real. No voice, no sound, no nothing but the stepping. Josey Wales stomp slow into the dark to the crack house' (James 2014: 577). The 'locational silence' here begins with the words 'no voice, no sound'. After these words, Weeper describes the sights and smells inside the house, but does not reference the sounds that would be made as he and Josey move through 'plenty beer can on the floor'. He also notices an audiovisual contrast: 'candles making slow light, not like Josey moving fast' (577). Thus, the subdued lighting, like the silence, seems at odds with Josey's rapid and violent movements. The first time he shoots, Josey's gun makes only 'a sudden flash of fire' (577). The silence ends when Josey shoots for a second time, hitting a man who Weeper sees and hears 'crash on the floor' (577). From this moment on, Weeper describes sound in detail:

> gunshot never sound like a pow in the movie, always a papapapap. Still Josey moving and the house don't wake up yet, each step a crunch through beer can and Coke can and pizza box and Chinese takeout and forty-ounce bottle and dry shit. (577)

Here, the *sonic parameters* change while the visual aspects remain the same. After the obviously cinematic locational silence, Weeper suddenly insists that 'gunshot never sound like a pow in the movie', suggesting that what follows the gunshot is also not supposed to sound cinematic. We have suddenly transitioned from an unrealistic total silence that was explicable as an audiovisual metaphoric device, into a highly realistic sequence of gunshots and the various crunches made by discarded packaging.[9] We might have expected the sounds that followed the silence to seem louder by contrast, but their quietness intensifies the violence by forcing us into a kind of close listening, Moreover, this switch between two different sonic modes is emblematic of *Brief History*'s overall digital strategy. The defining sonic feature of playlisting is that users switch between different audio parameters within a single digital device. So when this narrative moment crosses an abrupt sonic threshold, from the cinematic to the realistic, it gestures towards the broader context of the novel's thoroughly mediatised sonic multiplicity, as does Josey Wales when he says 'I listen to plenty'.

[9] Although we could still describe these unobtrusively realistic sounds as 'foley'—a key aspect of cinematic sound. But Weeper hears them differently.

Credits where they're due

After Dorcas learns of Josey Wales' death, she returns in shock to her apartment and watches the TV 'for two hours' without knowing what she is watching (James 2014: 686). Her sister, who still lives in Kingston and to whom she has not spoken since her move to New York, phones her to discuss the news. The book ends just after they have established that the correct number has been dialled, but before their conversation properly begins. As if to cap its events with a final nod to the relationship between audiovisuality and lists, this phone-call occurs 'just as the credits start to roll' (686) on the unnamed TV show. Therefore, the final scene is one in which two sisters reestablish contact through sound, while one of them watches a block of moving text at the end of a narrative. Dorcas simultaneously views, listens, and reads—the three primary modes whose entanglement is uniquely afforded by our everyday use of digital devices.

To encounter this scene in 2025 is to glimpse a now-rare situation: the credits Dorcas views are not squashed into the corner of the screen by adverts for other programmes, and not automatically skipped by the conventions of the platform on which the programme is being streamed. While Dorcas views in 1991, the book is published in 2014, just before streaming platforms invested heavily in the algorithms that aim to feed us what they think we like, based on the extraction of our behavioural data. In such conditions, the convention of the automatically skipped credit sequence took hold. Therefore, James ends his novel as films and TV shows *used to* end, by offering us an image of someone experiencing an aspect of audiovisual media to which fewer and fewer people now attend.

After nearly 700 pages of playlist-esque transitions between different sonic parameters, *Brief History* leaves us with a scene in which a name-changing woman who has escaped through a 'screaming window' to arrive where she sits, in the aftermath of the death of her primary threat, while receiving a phone call from an estranged sibling, and viewing an audiovisual form that is on its way to obsolescence, but that also acts as one of the gags with which the book is peppered. Earlier, James enabled captions to solve a technical problem about sound. Here, he literally rolls the credits—a specific genre of writing that registers collective labour and affirms the social basis of audiovisual production, echoing a similar fictional list at the start of the book that demonstrated its own fictionally collective mode. As Chion (1994) argues, however, end credits not only present us with relevant names but also 'reaffirm' the frame of the screen 'as a preexisting container, which was there before the images came on and which can remain after the images disappear' (67). In *Brief History*'s final scene, Dorcas is watching a television screen in 1991, while the reader in 2025 could be encountering the text through a printed book, a phone, a computer, an e-reader, a tablet, or an

audiobook. The devices that comprise those digital 'containers' are products of the same neo-colonial strategies of mineral extraction and labour exploitation that caused Dorcas to 'escape the screaming window' by following the trajectory of bauxite: out of Jamaica and into the imperial core. The frames and containers have changed between 1991 and 2025, but the profit motive and the exploitation have not. What is being 'presenced', then, in this image of a thoroughly mediatised multi-sensory experience, is not a single charismatic voice that aims for immediacy, or a textual imitation of a musical practice. It is a microcosm of *Brief History* as a whole: a scene of multi-layered audiovisual density that demonstrates the capacity of literature to crystallise glimpses of people at the threshold of personal and social transformation. The novel raises the status of these glimpses through its playlisting structure, which simulates a wi-fi enabled device, receiving streams of data while crossing thresholds between sonic parameters, and showing us people who acknowledge those parameters in an environment saturated with audiovisual references. It attunes us to the plentiful forms of audiovisual mediation under capitalism. Therefore, it diverges from the kind of contemporary literature that Kornbluh (2013) argues 'repudiates representation itself, dismantling narration, character [and] plot [...] in favor of simply manifesting viscerally affecting stuff' (7). Instead, *Brief History* manifests a kind of digitised navigation, a restless leaping between audiovisual modes within a single narrative world, whose components are eclectic but artistically coherent. This principle invites us to think of literature as a mediated interrelation between sound and text—an interrelation that is rapidly developing in our cultural moment, with its proliferation of playlists, closed captions, audiobooks, podcasts, and targeted adverts aimed at fans of Jane Austen. Through its anachronistic formal engagements with contemporary habits of artistic consumption, *Brief History* affirms the potential of sonic experience to enhance the possibilities of political narrative.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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