

Sound as Narrative: The Construction of Acoustic Intimacy in Sally Rooney's Conversations with Friends

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Abstract: This article examines the role of sound as a narrative mechanism in Sally Rooney's novel *Conversations with Friends*. Drawing on Michel Chion's concept of the "added value" of sound and R. Murray Schafer's soundscape theory, the study argues that the novel constructs what it terms "acoustic intimacy": a sonic regime in which sound operates not as atmospheric background but as an active participant in the construction of interpersonal relationships. The analysis focuses on three acoustic phenomena: the spoken-word performances through which the characters' voices encode their relationships, the strategic silences, technological, institutional, and interpersonal, that structure the novel's emotional life, and the interplay of music and ambient sound that shapes its emotional geography. A brief comparison with the 2022 BBC/Hulu television adaptation illustrates how the novel's understated soundscape is amplified and transformed through cinematic sound design. The article demonstrates that close attention to the auditory dimension of contemporary fiction reveals narrative structures and emotional dynamics that verbal analysis alone might not access.

1. Introduction

In the closing pages of Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017)^[1], the novel's tangled relationships are loosened by an accident of sound: Nick, meaning to phone his wife, dials Frances by mistake. When Nick tells Frances, "You know, I still have that impulse to be available to you," and Frances answers with a spoken invitation: "Come and get me, I said," the novel ends not with a kiss or an embrace, but with a voice: the sound of intimacy restored across a misdialled phone line, in an unbroken conversation that fills the book's final chapter. It exemplifies what this article calls "acoustic intimacy": the use of sound (and its absence) as a medium through which characters negotiate the boundaries of personal connection, vulnerability, and emotional disclosure.

The scholarly reception of Rooney's fiction has been remarkably thorough. Critics have examined the novel through Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, and digital-cultural frameworks, producing nuanced readings of its political, emotional, and technological dimensions. Orlaith Darling^[2] has situated Rooney's millennial protagonists within the depersonalizing conditions of late capitalism and internet-mediated intimacy, while Sam Waterman^[3] has traced the novel's distinctive intellectual register—its erotics of clever conversation—to the shifting class coordinates of contemporary Irish fiction. Yet one dimension has remained systematically underexplored: its

soundscape. The sounds that pervade the novel—the spoken-word performances, the silences, the music the characters play and withhold—have been treated as atmospheric decoration rather than as active narrative elements. Where criticism has engaged the novel’s silences at all, it has done so through the frameworks of trauma and neoliberal subjectivity rather than through sound studies^[4]. This article addresses that oversight by demonstrating that sound constitutes a distinct narrative mechanism in *Conversations with Friends*, one that operates alongside and in conjunction with the verbal and visual registers of the text.

The neglect of sound in Rooney scholarship is symptomatic of a broader tendency in literary criticism to privilege the visual and verbal over the auditory. As Jonathan Sterne^[5] has shown, Western thought has long organized the senses through what he calls the “audiovisual litany”: a set of habitual oppositions in which hearing is aligned with affect, subjectivity, and interiority, while vision is aligned with intellect, objectivity, and detachment. Sterne’s point is not simply that hearing has been devalued—the litany just as often idealizes hearing as a kind of pure interiority—but that the very habit of opposing the senses to one another has impoverished our understanding of both. Literary criticism has largely inherited this habit, treating sound as a peripheral element of narrative rather than a constitutive one. The emergence of sound studies as a distinct interdisciplinary field in the past two decades has begun to challenge this inheritance, but the application of sound-studies methodology to literary analysis remains relatively rare.

The theoretical framework of this article rests on two foundational concepts from sound studies. The first is Michel Chion’s notion of the “added value” of sound^[6]. In *Audio-Vision*, Chion defines added value as “the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this information or expression ‘naturally’ comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself.” Sound, in other words, does not merely accompany what is shown or told; it surreptitiously supplies meaning that the audience then credits to the scene itself. Applied to literary analysis, the concept suggests that the sounds described in a novel do not decorate the action but add a dimension of meaning that the verbal narrative alone cannot produce, and that this contribution is all the more powerful for going unnoticed. The second concept is R. Murray Schafer’s “soundscape”^[7]: the sonic environment understood as a field of study, the total acoustic field within which a narrative unfolds. Schafer’s concept allows us to analyze the novel’s sounds not as isolated phenomena but as elements of a structured acoustic environment.

The concept of “acoustic intimacy” developed in this article represents an attempt to synthesize these theoretical resources into a framework capable of capturing the specific role of sound in Rooney’s fiction. Acoustic intimacy refers to the use of sound as a medium for the construction and negotiation of interpersonal closeness. It encompasses both the presence of sound (vocal performance, music, ambient noise) and its absence (silence), treating both as significant narrative acts. The concept draws on what Veit Erlmann^[8] has called “hearing cultures”—the culturally and historically specific ways in which individuals attend to and make meaning from sound—and on Emily Thompson’s^[9] account of the “culture of listening,” while also attending to the formal properties of literary sound description.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. The first three examine the novel’s literary soundscape: spoken-word performance as vocal narrative, silence as acoustic event, and the interplay of music and ambient sound. The fourth stage turns briefly to the 2022 BBC/Hulu television adaptation^[10], using it not as a co-equal object of analysis but as a point of comparison that illuminates the specificity of the novel’s acoustic strategies. Throughout, the article’s focus remains on sound as narrative: how sound tells the story that words alone cannot tell.

2. The Voice as Narrative: Spoken-Word Performance

The opening sentence of *Conversations with Friends*^[1] announces the centrality of sound to the novel's narrative method: "Bobbi and I first met Melissa at a poetry night in town, where we were performing together." Frances and Bobbi are spoken-word poets—"Bobbi and I often performed at spoken word events and open mic nights that summer"—and the novel's initiating encounter, Melissa's approach to the pair after their set, begins as an act of listening before it becomes anything else. The performance itself is barely transcribed; what the narration preserves instead is its acoustic and social texture: the fact of two voices working together in front of a room. From its first page, the novel is attentive not merely to what its characters say but to how they sound.

The article argues that these spoken-word performances function as sonic events in their own right—auditory phenomena that carry narrative weight independent of their semantic content. When Frances and Bobbi perform, what matters is not only what they say but how they sound together. Frances's own assessment of the act is telling: "Sometimes I was good, sometimes I was just okay. But Bobbi was exact." Their voices create an acoustic texture: two distinct instruments, one precise and one effortful, bound into a single performance. This texture encodes their relationship more directly than any verbal description could. The performance is a sonic enactment of intimacy: two voices intertwined in time, producing a sound that neither could produce alone.

The significance of the opening performance extends beyond its immediate narrative function. It establishes what the article terms an "acoustic contract" between the novel and its reader: the implicit agreement that sound will be treated not as background but as foreground, not as decoration but as meaning. This contract governs the reader's engagement with the novel's soundscape, directing attention to acoustic details that might otherwise be overlooked. When Frances recalls that "onstage, Bobbi was always precise," and that "that night she made everyone laugh and got a lot of applause," the reader is invited to attend not merely to the report but to the acoustic reality it evokes—to imagine the exactness of Bobbi's delivery, and Frances's quieter labor beside it.

The contrast between the characters' acoustic signatures is established through performance and report rather than direct vocal description. Bobbi's sound is wit and precision; Frances positions herself as the uneven half of the act, adequate only when carried by her partner. Offstage, Frances curates what she calls her persona of "the smiling girl"—an affective surface whose very smoothness signals the labor of suppression beneath it. This produces what may be called an "acoustic gap" between what Frances says and what she feels, between her semantic content and her affective tone, and it is in this gap that much of the novel's emotional drama unfolds.

Nick, by contrast, is characterized acoustically by indirection. In the famous-names game at the French holiday house, Bobbi, who has slipped Frances's name into the bowl, elaborates Nick's one-word clue "rational" into the verdict "unemotional ... emotionally unintelligent," words spoken into the room as if they were Nick's own and immediately disowned by him: "What? No. That's not what I said." A personality is assigned aloud, attributed to a voice that never spoke it; and the spoken elaboration, not the spoken denial, is what lingers in the room. The article proposes that these descriptions function as a form of "acoustic characterization"—a method of establishing character through how people sound, and how others hear them, rather than through appearance or action. Each character's acoustic signature is not merely a physical attribute but a psychological one: a trace of their interior life in sound.

Bobbi Connolly represents a third vocal type. Her sound is precision and command: onstage she is "exact," the half of the act that lands every line, wins the laughter and the applause. Against Frances's self-effacing unevenness, Bobbi's voice asserts itself without effort. The interplay between the two produces what the article terms "vocal counterpoint": a sonic relationship in which two distinct voices maintain their individuality while creating a collective sound. The counterpoint

between Frances and Bobbi is not merely aesthetic but narrative: it enacts a form of collaborative intimacy that resists the individualistic logic of conventional first-person narration.

The acoustic triangle formed by Frances, Nick, and Bobbi creates a complex sonic texture in which each character's signature contributes to the novel's exploration of intimacy and distance. Frances's performed smoothness, Nick's hesitancy, and Bobbi's precision form what may be called a "vocal chord," a combination of distinct acoustic qualities that together produce the novel's characteristic emotional tone. This chord is not static but dynamic, shifting in response to the characters' changing relationships. When Frances and Nick draw closer, the distance between her guarded evenness and his hesitant candor narrows; when Frances and Bobbi fall out, the counterpoint between their voices falls silent—the act stops performing. The novel's emotional narrative is thus also an acoustic narrative, told through the shifting relations among its characters' sounds.

3. Silence as Sound: The Acoustics of Absence

If the spoken-word performances represent the active, sound-producing dimension of the novel's acoustic intimacy, silence constitutes its negative pole. Rooney does not treat silence as the mere absence of sound but as a significant narrative event—a communicative act that carries meaning in its own right. The silences that punctuate the novel's dialogues are charged intervals in which emotions accumulate, relationships shift, and meanings are transformed.

The novel's most sustained meditation on silence attaches not to a face-to-face scene but to a screen. After watching Nick perform in his play, Frances composes an email to him and then waits. His reply arrives only the following afternoon; in the interval before she can bring herself to send the email, Frances fills the silence with music: "I put *Astral Weeks* on the stereo"—Van Morrison's recorded voice filling the room where the screen had held her eye: "I sat staring at my laptop screen until it went black."

The concept of technological silence extends beyond Frances's wait for a single reply. Throughout the novel, digital communication—instant messages, emails, social media—produces a distinctive acoustic experience characterized by the absence of immediate vocal response. When characters communicate through screens, they are deprived of the acoustic cues—tone, timbre, rhythm—that normally accompany speech. This acoustic deprivation creates what the article terms "sonic distance": a form of communicative gap that is both technological and emotional. The novel's preoccupation with technological silence reflects a broader cultural anxiety about the acoustic consequences of digital mediation—an anxiety that the 2022 adaptation, as Section 5 will show, translates into its own visual register.

Other significant silences follow a structural pattern. In the hospital, where Frances undergoes an ultrasound in the course of her endometriosis diagnosis, she reads to pass the time while her body becomes an object of institutional listening—probed, scanned, and spoken about in the clinic's professional register. A different withheld response follows the most candid message Frances sends in the novel: her long email of apology to Bobbi, which ends "I love you and I always have. ... I love you. Frances." Bobbi never answers in writing; she answers by appearing in person—"That was a weird email ... But I love you too." And at the novel's ambiguous conclusion, the pattern of acoustic absence is broken altogether: Nick's misdialled call becomes the book's longest sustained exchange, closing on Frances's spoken "Come and get me." Each of these instances represents a distinct type of silence or its resolution: the silence of institutional listening, the silence answered by presence rather than words, the silence finally displaced by voice. Together, they constitute what may be called a "grammar of silence"—a systematic pattern of acoustic absence that operates as a parallel narrative system alongside the novel's verbal content.

The grammar of silence in *Conversations with Friends* can be analyzed in terms of three distinct modes. The first is “tensive silence”: silence that accumulates emotional weight as it persists. Frances’s waits for Nick’s replies exemplify this mode: the unanswered message expands to fill her attention until the screen itself seems to watch her back. The second is “institutional silence”: silence imposed by an acoustic regime in which the individual is listened to rather than heard. The hospital scenes exemplify this mode: Frances’s body is read by machines and reported on by professionals, while her own voice is reduced to answers. The third is “broken silence”: the moment at which accumulated absence tips over into voice. Bobbi answering Frances’s email not in writing but at her door, and Frances closing the novel with “Come and get me,” exemplify this mode: the resolution the novel offers is never silent but acoustic, a sound that finally answers the silence.

The theoretical significance of this grammar becomes apparent when we consider Chion’s observation that silence in film—and, by extension, in narrative—is never “a neutral emptiness” but a produced effect, something that “can only be produced as a result of context and preparation”^[6]. In *Conversations with Friends*, silence does not merely punctuate the verbal narrative; it redirects it. When words fail, as they repeatedly do in this novel, silence takes over as the primary medium of emotional communication. The characters’ inability to articulate their feelings in language is compensated by their capacity to communicate through acoustic absence, until absence itself becomes unbearable and tips into voice. Silence is the sound of what cannot yet be said.

The article draws here on the phenomenology of listening developed by Jean-Luc Nancy in his essay “Listening”^[11]. Nancy distinguishes between hearing (*entendre*), which understands, and listening (*écouter*), which strains toward a meaning not immediately accessible; listening, in his account, opens the subject both inwardly and outwardly at once and involves the whole body rather than the ears alone. Applied to the novel, this framework suggests that the characters’ experience of silence is not a mere absence of auditory input but a mode of bodily attunement to the acoustic environment. When Frances lies for her ultrasound and imagines how, in some other version of her life, the scan might be displaying a heartbeat, she is not experiencing silence but a heightened form of listening—a listening that turns inward, toward the sounds and possibilities of her own body.

The relationship between silence and intimacy in the novel is thus more complex than a simple opposition between sound and absence. Silence is not the opposite of acoustic intimacy but one of its modes—perhaps its most profound mode. The characters’ most intimate moments are often their most silent: the pause before a confession, the gap after a revelation, the stillness of shared solitude. These silences create what the article calls “acoustic space”: a sonic environment in which the absence of sound opens a field of possibility for emotional connection. In this sense, silence is not the absence of acoustic intimacy but its most concentrated form.

4. Music, Ambience, and the Emotional Geography of Sound

Beyond voice and silence, the novel constructs its acoustic intimacy through a third dimension: the interplay of music and ambient sound. Rooney pays careful attention to the sonic environments in which her scenes take place, creating what Schafer^[7] would recognize as a highly structured soundscape in which every acoustic element contributes to the narrative’s emotional geography.

Musical references in the novel are sparse but strategically placed. When music appears, it functions not as background atmosphere but as an emotional marker. Driving through France, Frances plays a Joni Mitchell album on the car stereo; alone after waiting in vain for Nick’s reply, she puts on Van Morrison’s *Astral Weeks*; Melissa and Nick’s married ease is archived in an old Facebook video of the pair singing “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.” Consider the song Nick sends Frances: the novel names the artist, a link to a Joanna Newsom song, but withholds the title, leaving the track’s precise emotional color to the reader’s inner ear. The adaptation closes only that final

degree of indeterminacy, selecting Newsom's "Peach, Plum, Pear"^[12], a choice faithful to the novel's specification, fixing in the viewer's ear what the novel leaves resonating in the reader's imagination. More pervasive than specific musical references is the novel's attention to ambient sound: the acoustic texture of open mic nights, of parties at Melissa and Nick's house, of the clinic, of a car crossing France.

The concept of ambience requires careful theoretical elaboration. Following the work of Brandon LaBelle^[13], the article treats ambience as productive rather than passive: ambient sound actively shapes the environments it inhabits, creating what LaBelle calls "acoustic territories": spaces defined and contested through their sonic characteristics. (The article's further distinction between "background sound," sound that is merely present, and "ambient sound," sound that actively organizes an environment, is offered as the article's own analytic shorthand, extending LaBelle's account of acoustic territoriality rather than reporting it.) In *Conversations with Friends*, the ambient sounds of parties, cafés, clinics, and cars do not merely provide realistic detail but actively construct the novel's emotional and social world.

The contrast between different acoustic environments is particularly significant. The novel moves between the quiet domestic spaces of Melissa and Nick's home, the bustling public spaces of Dublin's literary scene, and the clinical acoustic environments of hospitals. Each environment carries distinct acoustic associations: domestic spaces suggest intimacy and confinement, public spaces suggest performance and exposure, medical spaces suggest vulnerability and isolation. The transitions between these acoustic environments often mark significant narrative turning points. When Frances moves from the warm acoustics of Nick's living room to the cold silence of a hospital corridor, the shift in soundscape mirrors a corresponding shift in her emotional state.

The article proposes that these acoustic environments function as what may be called "sonic stages"—settings that do not merely contain the action but actively shape it. Each sonic stage has its own acoustic rules, its own repertoire of acceptable sounds, its own politics of listening. The open mic night has its own acoustic conventions: the expectation of performative vocality, the rhythm of performance and applause, the specific acoustic dynamics of the microphone-mediated voice. The domestic living room has different conventions: the softness of intimate conversation, the absence of public performance, the privileging of proximity over projection. The hospital has yet different conventions: the dominance of mechanical sound, the suppression of emotional vocalization, the acoustic regime of institutional care. The characters' movements between these sonic stages trace not only their physical journeys but their emotional and social trajectories.

The concept of "emotional geography," borrowed from cultural geography, provides a useful framework for understanding these acoustic transitions. Just as physical spaces carry emotional associations, so too do acoustic spaces. The novel's soundscape constitutes an emotional map: different acoustic environments correspond to different emotional territories, and the characters' movements through this acoustic landscape trace the contours of their interpersonal relationships. The soundscape of *Conversations with Friends* is thus not merely a setting but a narrative device, a sonic structure that organizes the novel's emotional content.

The acoustic dimension of place in the novel also carries political implications. The different sonic environments correspond to different social locations: the public performance space of the open mic night (available, democratic, but also exposed), the private domestic space of Nick and Melissa's home (comfortable, intimate, but also exclusive), the institutional space of the hospital (professional, caring, but also alienating). The characters' access to these acoustic environments is structured by their social positions—their class, their age, their cultural capital. Frances's movement through the novel's soundscape is thus also a movement through the social hierarchy, an acoustic journey that maps the contours of contemporary Irish class relations.

The article concludes this section by considering the relationship between the novel's

soundscape and its broader aesthetic project. Rooney's fiction is often characterized as "minimalist" or "restrained," and this characterization applies as much to her soundscape as to her prose style. The novel's acoustic world is understated, sparse, precise—a soundscape of absence as much as presence. This acoustic minimalism is not a failure of descriptive imagination but a deliberate aesthetic choice. By restricting the range and volume of her soundscape, Rooney directs the reader's attention to the subtle acoustic phenomena that might otherwise be drowned out: the silence between words, the texture of a voice, the ambient hum of a room. The restraint of the novel's soundscape is the condition of its acoustic intimacy.

5. Beyond the Page: The Television Adaptation's Soundscape

The 2022 BBC/Hulu television adaptation^[10] provides a useful point of comparison for understanding the specificity of the novel's acoustic strategies. Where the novel constructs its soundscape through literary description—words that evoke sounds—the adaptation constructs its soundscape through direct acoustic means: musical score, diegetic sound, ambient noise, and vocal performance. This transmedia transformation reveals not merely a change of medium but a reconfiguration of the narrative's acoustic politics.

The most immediately striking difference is the presence of a curated musical soundtrack in the television series, set against Stephen Rennicks's understated original score. The adaptation features artists such as Phoebe Bridgers—who wrote "Sidelines" expressly for the series, having been a reader of the novel—alongside Mitski ("First Love/Late Spring") and James Blake ("Atmosphere"): indie musicians whose hushed vocals and melancholic textures create a sonic atmosphere of emotional vulnerability. Where the novel uses prose to convey Frances's interiority, the adaptation uses music to achieve a similar effect through different means. The soundtrack functions as a form of "sonic interiority," providing the audience with direct access to the characters' emotional states without the mediating filter of first-person narration. A particularly instructive case is the song Nick sends Frances: the novel withholds its title, leaving the sound to the reader's imagination, while the adaptation must commit to one—and commits to Joanna Newsom's "Peach, Plum, Pear." The choice realizes, and in realizing narrows, the acoustic openness of the prose.

The presence of a curated soundtrack also introduces what the article calls "sonic branding"—the use of music to position the series within a specific cultural and commercial niche. The selection of indie artists such as Phoebe Bridgers and Mitski is not merely an aesthetic choice but a marketing strategy, designed to appeal to a demographic that values emotional authenticity, artistic credibility, and cultural sophistication. The soundtrack thus functions as a form of what Sarah Thornton calls "subcultural capital"^[14]—cultural knowledge that confers social distinction. The series' acoustic identity is inseparable from its commercial identity; the soundscape of prestige television is always also a commercial soundscape.

The adaptation's most significant acoustic contribution is its strategic use of silence. When Frances and Nick kiss for the first time, the soundtrack drops away almost entirely: the moment is, as one account describes it, "completely quiet save for the intense sound of their lips smacking," with "no music to swell in the background" (Wang)^[12]. Music supervisor Juliet Martin described a deliberate policy of restraint around the series' biggest moments, avoiding prominent needle drops whose lyrics might pull viewers out of the scene^[12]. This technique creates what may be called "acoustic exposure": a sonic environment in which the absence of dramatic underscoring forces the viewer into a more direct, less mediated relationship with the on-screen action. The adaptation thus inherits the novel's preoccupation with silence while transforming it through the specific affordances of cinematic sound.

These comparisons illuminate what is distinctive about the novel's acoustic strategies. The novel

cannot provide actual sound; it can only describe it. This limitation becomes a narrative strength. Because the reader must imagine the sounds the novel evokes, the acoustic experience of reading is inherently participatory: the reader constructs the soundscape in collaboration with the text. The adaptation, by providing actual sound, relieves the reader of this imaginative labor. The result is a more explicit but less collaborative acoustic experience. The novel's acoustic intimacy is achieved through the reader's active participation in the construction of its soundscape; the adaptation's acoustic intimacy is received rather than produced.

The article concludes this section by reflecting on the broader implications of transmedia sound for the study of literary adaptation. The transformation of *Conversations with Friends* from page to screen involves not merely a change of medium but a fundamental reconfiguration of the narrative's acoustic economy. The novel's participatory soundscape, constructed through the reader's imaginative labor, is replaced by the adaptation's presentational soundscape, which delivers acoustic experience ready-made. This shift reflects broader trends in contemporary media consumption, where the act of listening is increasingly passive and the soundscape increasingly curated. The novel's acoustic intimacy, rooted in the reader's active engagement, represents a form of sonic experience that may be increasingly rare in an era of algorithmic recommendation and streaming convenience.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that sound constitutes a distinct narrative mechanism in Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*. Through the concept of acoustic intimacy, the study has demonstrated that the novel's soundscape (encompassing spoken-word performance, strategic silence, and ambient acoustic description) operates as an active participant in the construction of interpersonal relationships. The analysis has revealed that close attention to the auditory dimension of the novel exposes narrative structures and emotional dynamics that verbal analysis alone cannot access.

The brief comparison with the television adaptation suggests that the novel's acoustic strategies are specific to the literary medium. The adaptation's soundtrack, however sophisticated, operates through different mechanisms: it provides rather than evokes, exposes rather than invites. The novel's acoustic intimacy is unique to the reading experience, a form of sonic imagination that requires the reader's active participation. This is not to claim that the novel is superior to the adaptation but to identify what is irreducibly literary about its soundscape: the fact that it exists only in the space between the text and the reader's imagination.

The article concludes by suggesting directions for future research. The concept of acoustic intimacy, as developed here, may prove productive for analyzing other works of contemporary fiction in which sound plays a significant narrative role. Authors such as Rachel Cusk^[15], who share Rooney's interest in the precise articulation of emotional experience, may similarly construct soundscapes that reward close acoustic analysis. More broadly, the article suggests that literary sound studies has much to contribute to our understanding of how contemporary fiction constructs its emotional worlds, not through words alone, but through the complex interplay of sound and silence that constitutes the auditory dimension of narrative.

In an era increasingly dominated by visual and digital media, the persistence of sound as a narrative force in literary fiction testifies to the enduring power of the auditory imagination. Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* reminds us that reading is not merely a visual act but an acoustic one, that the silent page contains a world of sound waiting to be heard. The task of literary sound studies is to develop the critical vocabulary and methodological tools necessary to attend to this acoustic dimension, to listen carefully to what literature has to say about how we hear and are heard.

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