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Narration in *Jane Eyre*

Kevin Stevens

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“Eccentric Murmurs”: Noise, Voice, and Unreliable Narration in *Jane Eyre*

ABSTRACT: Responding to Ansgar F. Nünning’s oft-neglected call to locate the “clues” indicating unreliable narration, this essay offers a theory of what I call “narrative noise,” a sonic signal of unreliable narration (“Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration” 105). I propose that authors sometimes deploy noise to mark a narrative disturbance, a fracture in a narrator’s seemingly harmonious and coherent story, and I support this claim with a case study of *Jane Eyre*. I suggest that Bertha Mason’s repeated sound, what Jane calls Bertha’s “eccentric murmurs,” highlights not Bertha’s speechlessness (as critics have almost unanimously suggested) but Jane’s narrative distortions—her transformations of Bertha’s legible speech into noise (93). By attending to Bertha’s noise, I uncover the strategic narrative evasions and obfuscations that have helped Jane conceal Bertha’s voice, degrade her speech, and compromise her humanity. Yet I also show that this same noise retaliates against Jane, destabilizing her authorial identity as a writer of the “plain truth,” for Jane proves far more calculating than her humble self-proclamation suggests (93). Narrative noise thus enables Jane to debase Bertha and contain her voice, yet it also empowers Bertha, a character largely deprived of speech, to articulate a sonic counter-narrative to Jane’s. In sum, this essay highlights how noise can signal crucial fissures in an unreliable narrator’s story and more broadly exemplifies the profits of further merging sound studies with narratology.

KEYWORDS: *Jane Eyre*, *Bertha Mason*, *murmur*, *noise*, *sound*, *unreliable narration*

Kevin Stevens is completing his PhD in English at Fordham University. This article derives from a chapter of his dissertation, “Listening for Unreliable Narration: Narrative Noise in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel,” which also features chapters on Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* and Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl*. He can be reached at kstevens7@fordham.edu.

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“Too much noise”

A haunting noise introduces both Jane Eyre and her readers to *Jane Eyre*'s infamous villain, Bertha Mason. Emanating from the recesses of Thornfield Hall, Bertha's "clamorous peal" prompts Mrs. Fairfax to admonish Grace Poole for letting "[t]oo much noise" escape from Bertha's enclosure: "Remember directions!" Mrs. Fairfax demands (91). This terse directive indicates a concerted effort to stifle Bertha's noise—and in this endeavor Mrs. Fairfax is hardly alone. Indeed, this moment both foreshadows and emblemizes Jane's own narrative efforts to regulate and contain Bertha's subversive sounds. Like Rochester, our autobiographer Jane tries to suppress Bertha and craft a disingenuous narrative around her, yet Bertha's noises—her discordant, inarticulate, obtrusive, and often unsettling sounds—disrupt her foes' accounts, compromising their credibility. Mrs. Fairfax's concern that "too much noise" escapes thus gives voice to an anxiety pervading Jane's narrative: that Bertha's uncontained noise will undermine Jane's seemingly harmonious autobiography.

As many critics have shown, unreliable narrators work in different ways to suppress, censor, or disavow subversive elements of their narratives, yet I argue that such elements sometimes leave aural traces that haunt these works.¹ To listen to what I refer to as "narrative noise" is to uncover not only a narrator's discernible motives but also the capacity of noise to challenge that narrator's unreliable account. I will examine this dynamic in *Jane Eyre*, showing how noise can signal a narrative disturbance—the sound of a narrator's credibility rupturing.

In suggesting that narrative noise troubles a narrator's ostensibly reliable story, I join a half-century-long conversation about how to determine narrative unreliability, a conversation that has tended to divide critics into two camps: rhetorical and cognitive narratologists. Rhetorical narratologists posit that unreliability is a locatable textual feature, though they disagree about whether it arises from relations between narrators and their audiences or among authors, narrators, and audiences. Cognitive narratologists, on the other hand, primarily locate unreliability not in texts but in readers, whose particular traits (personalities, morals, knowledge, etc.) will profoundly shape their interpretation of a narrator. Aiming to synthesize these two approaches, Ansgar F. Nünning argues that any determination of unreliability must rely on "a broad range of definable signals" and not merely the "intuitive judgments" of a reader; readers may gauge a narrator's reliability by considering a variety of factors, he suggests, from textual data to their own dispositions and beliefs. Having laid this groundwork, Nünning calls for further inquiry: "what is needed is a more subtle and systematic account of the clues to unreliable narration" ("Reconceptualizing Unreliable Narration" 105).

This call for more work on the textual signals of unreliability first came almost two decades ago, yet subsequent attention to unreliable narration has largely gravitated towards efforts at taxonomization.² A recent anthology on unreliable narration, for instance, offers new definitions or re-conceptualizations of "over-reporting" and "over-regarding" as well as "incompetent," "insincere," "credible," "successful," and "dependable" narrations, yet it devotes only a few pages to an overview of the signals of unreliability.³ But only by first detecting textual clues of unreliability can we develop and apply this robust terminology and, significantly, better answer the question

at the crux of the debate between rhetorical and narratological approaches: precisely how can readers detect unreliable narration, if at all?⁴ Only once we have catalogued the clues that persistently accrue to moments of narrative unreliability can we proceed with more confidence that we are indeed locating unreliable narration and not merely projecting it onto a text.⁵

In what follows, I suggest that an unexplored way to discover such clues lies in narratology's developing aural turn, in which critics have sought to revise the field's ocularcentric, or visual-focused, lexicon.⁶ Melba Cuddy-Keane, in particular, has revisited some of narratology's ocularcentric concepts, such as "focalizer" and "focalization," to emphasize the process of listening: an "auscultatizer" listens, while "auscultation" describes the perception of an auditory environment. Though grounded in twentieth-century texts, Cuddy-Keane's interests in sound technologies and the history of auditory perception find parallels in the sound studies scholarship on the nineteenth century, from Jonathan Sterne's exploration of the development of sound technologies during the "Ensoniment" to John Picker's analysis of soundscapes in Victorian literature and culture.⁷ My study joins these efforts to foreground aurality, yet I direct this discussion toward new terrain: a relationship between noise and narrative unreliability.

Noise, of course, has no single narrative purpose or effect (authors' motives for including it vary widely), yet we can identify at least two reasons authors tend to turn to noise to signal a narrative disturbance.⁸ First, noise almost inevitably suggests disruption. In his synthesis of various definitions of noise, Greg Hainge concludes that "[i]t is undoubtedly not insignificant that noise is imbued with a particular propensity for transgressing and destabilizing fixed boundaries" (11). With a focus on the political resonances of noise, Jacques Attali draws parallels between music (which maintains harmony only by marginalizing dissonant and destabilizing noise) and society (which maintains order by suppressing subversion) (29). When noise emerges from its social margins, Attali adds, it introduces chaos to a ruling order—or disturbs a social harmony. Defining the term more broadly, Peter Bailey classifies noise as "sounds that register variously as excessive, incoherent, confused, inarticulate, or degenerate" and notes its "potential for disturbance and disorder" (195, 199). Unintelligible, unwanted: noise is "sound out of place" (195). Whether "out of place" or consigned to social or musical margins, noise seems to loom as a threatening, forceful disturbance, at once signifying sonic and social dissonance. And in literary narratives, noise can emerge to disrupt a narrator's account and call attention to the subversive elements s/he attempts to conceal.

Second, beyond its general power to disrupt, noise is especially useful for communicating the non-verbal expressions of oppressed characters, whose voices are often marginalized by controlling and manipulative narrators. While presenting these characters as limited in their discourse, authors allow them to exploit the subversive power of noise to interrupt and challenge a narrator. Narrative noise thus articulates complex power dynamics between narrators and noise-makers: it marks a narrator's attempts to dominate and nearly silence his/her foe but, in doing so, carries the response of the oppressed, an aural retaliation that unsettles a narrator's seemingly coherent account.

The sounds of the “madwoman”

It is no surprise that a Victorian novel that traffics in gothic tropes should present readers with noises of various kinds. In the soundscape of *Jane Eyre*, the most conspicuous noise is Bertha Mason’s haunting laugh, which Jane defines first as “mirthless,” “tragic,” and “preternatural” and then as “demoniac” and “goblin-laughter”: an “unnatural sound” that “gurgled and moaned” (91, 126). In portraying this sound, Jane provides a detailed, even disorienting, list of adjectives, yet her emphasis on laughter drowns out Bertha’s other utterance: a briefly mentioned “odd murmur” (91). These “eccentric murmurs; stranger than her laugh” and “vague murmur, peculiar and lugubrious” emerge in every instance of Bertha’s laughter, reverberating a markedly strange noise—even “stranger,” Jane admits, than Bertha’s infamous cackle (93, 126). Jane’s particular choice of “murmur” is striking, for, as several critics have shown, this word often harbors racist connotations. Writing on the use of “murmur” in Joseph Conrad’s work, Michael North argues that the term appears when an imperial agent wishes to reduce non-European languages to babble and “deny that a foreign language is a language at all” (42). Similarly, no language appears signaled by Bertha’s murmurs, as Jane ties these “eccentric” and “lugubrious” sounds to the woman’s “preternatural” and markedly non-linguistic laughter (93, 126, 91)—all descriptions that recall the many qualities Peter Bailey attributes to noise: “incoherent, confused, inarticulate or degenerate” (195). But what do these strange murmurs actually sound like? Does Bertha really utter inarticulate noise, or does Jane, like Conrad’s compromised narrators, reduce the Creole woman’s language to murmurs? Can the “madwoman” speak?

Critics have tended to answer the latter question with an unequivocal “no.” Nina Baym, for instance, condemns Brontë for utterly silencing Bertha’s voice, a silencing that has led post-colonial critics to identify Bertha as Gayatri Spivak’s voiceless subaltern.⁹ Others, like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have read Bertha’s “murmurs” as metaphors for Jane’s imagination.¹⁰ Even D. Christopher Gabbard’s sympathetic reading of Bertha stops short of attributing speech to her murmurs: her nonverbal sounds constitute “extralinguistic discourse” that force Jane to confront not speech but “the limits of language” (103). Across this range of critical engagement exists a basic agreement: Bertha cannot truly speak but can only embody something communicable. She exists to perform a “function” in the novel, a symbolic status in conspicuous contrast to the more fully realized (and humanized) English characters in Jane’s narrative.¹¹ To say this another way, whatever Bertha’s murmurs signify, it is not language.

Yet by interpreting Bertha’s “murmurs” as non-linguistic utterances and associating her “eccentric” status (her distance from the “center” of Jane’s narrative) with Spivak’s silent subaltern, critics actually underscore what I claim is Jane’s power to obfuscate Bertha’s voice—to transform Bertha’s legible discourse into inarticulate noise. In what follows, I propose that Bertha does not just attempt but actually succeeds in speaking and that our enduring impression of her speechlessness has been carefully scripted by the cagey autobiographer of *Jane Eyre*. In making this claim, I both join and redirect the recent efforts of two critics, Nicole Plyler Fisk and Thorell Porter Tsomondo, in revising a critical conversation that has long disregarded or denied Bertha’s language, though I argue that the presence of Bertha’s speech is not merely an

overlooked or misunderstood element, but is integrally tied to Brontë's larger portrait of the politics of voice that contour Jane's fashioning of her life story.¹² Jane has led many critics to overlook—and recreate—her suppression and distortion of Bertha's language, but this essay uncovers Jane's deliberate narrative acts and reclassifies Bertha's noisy murmurs as speech.¹³

Underscoring the power of narrative noise, Bertha's murmurs weaken Jane's credibility by amplifying the contradictions in Jane's autobiography and the artful framing that distorts and obscures Bertha's voice.¹⁴ In the soundscape of *Jane Eyre*, Bertha's noises thus not only mark discordant sound but also register *narrative* discord—an antagonistic relationship between a noise-listener and noisemaker, each of whom effectively uses sound to condemn her foe. Narrative noise proves to wield a destabilizing power, as Jane shifts from the self-described victim of oppressive institutional force to a disingenuous aggressor. We understand, then, why Jane stifles Bertha's speech: echoing throughout Thornfield, these "eccentric murmurs" threaten to rewrite Jane's own autobiography.

"Conversational murmur[s]" set against a "foul vocabulary"

What do "murmurs" sound like in *Jane Eyre*? An overview of the word's appearances shows that it ranges from describing fully intelligible speech to non-linguistic sounds. When portraying intelligible speech, Jane repeatedly associates murmuring with either a lowness in sound ("I will indeed send her to school soon," murmured Mrs. Reed, *sotto voce*"; "My things were indeed in shameful disorder," murmured Helen to me, in a low voice") (31, 62) or a complaint ("But he was already in the passage, putting on his cloak; and without one objection, one murmur, he departed"; "I never dared complain, because I saw that to murmur would be to vex him") (336, 338). And when describing distinctly non-linguistic murmurs, Jane remarks of their inanimate source: murmurs occur from the billowing smoke from chimneys or from the "waft of wind roaming fitful among the trees round Thornfield" (99).

Yet "murmurs" often fall between these two extremes to indicate barely audible or intelligible speech. Occupying a vague space between language and non-language, these sounds require an act of not only auscultation but also interpretation—a translation of slightly audible speech into comprehensible language. These murmurs give insight into the narrative's politics of auscultation, as Jane decides whose sounds merit translation and exploration and whose she may ignore or, as I suggest, distort. Indeed, when encountering such vague sounds, Jane often alternates between an amplification of the murmurs she wants to translate and a distortion—a transformation of language into noise—of those she does not.

To observe Jane fluctuating on the linguistic status of murmurs, witness the way she employs the same word to contrast rational, if impaired, speakers with the noisy madwoman, Bertha. When Bertha's "vague murmur" awakens Jane, the smell of smoke leads Jane to Rochester's room, where she finds him engulfed by smoke: "Wake! wake! I cried—I shook him, but he only murmured and turned: the smoke had stupefied him" (126, 127). Delirious and barely conscious, Rochester can only

communicate through a murmur, which Jane suggests here is “stupefied” babble. The proximate “murmur”—Bertha’s “vague murmur” that leads Jane to a murmuring Rochester—connects this “stupefied” gibberish with Bertha’s seemingly mad, incomprehensible noises, only Rochester’s madness, our narrator assures us, is temporarily induced by the smoke Bertha has created (127). Similarly, after Bertha’s second strike against her brother, Jane twice describes Richard Mason murmuring during his brief dialogue: “‘Is there immediate danger?’ murmured Mr. Mason” and “‘She bit me,’ he murmured” (178, 181). Richard Mason’s “murmur” suggests the fatigued words of an injured man; having just been bitten, he can only offer a “faint reply” to Rochester (181). Yet these murmurs also juxtapose the sounds of the Mason siblings, distinguishing Richard’s rational and timid language from Bertha’s supposedly “eccentric” and hostile noise. Before the reader is aware of Bertha’s existence (at this point we, with Jane, mistake her for Grace Poole), her murmurs already register her violent madness: nonsensical yet sinister, these sounds cast doubt over her ability to communicate.

In fact, Bertha’s murmurs mark the only instances in the novel when Jane does not associate a character’s murmurs with language. When Jane hears other murmurs—even those from a distance that renders the sounds unintelligible—she still insists that she perceives words. While eavesdropping on Rochester’s party, for example, Jane notes that “a joyous conversational murmur filled up the intervals. I listened long: suddenly I discovered that my ear was wholly intent on analyzing the mingled sounds, and trying to discriminate amidst the confusion of accents those of Mr. Rochester; and when it caught them, which it soon did, it found a further task in framing the tones, rendered by distance inarticulate, into words” (143). And again, Jane writes shortly afterwards that “they spoke in so low a key that nothing of their conversation could be distinguished beyond a soothing murmur” (145). In both instances, Jane explicitly links “conversation” to the murmurs she hears: it is the excess of speech that turns these words into a steady murmur. By contrast, when Bertha issues her “murmurs,” Jane offers no indications that Bertha tries to speak; instead, Jane briefly remarks of a “hushed” or bizarre “sound,” descriptors that lack any linguistic connotations (126, 93). Jane also seems uninterested in interpreting Bertha’s distant-yet-fascinating sounds, whereas at the Thornfield party she works hard to isolate Rochester’s voice from the “joyous conversational murmur”: Jane’s ear, we are told, is “wholly intent on analyzing the mingled sounds” (143). Although the words prove difficult to hear, muddled by both “accents” and her distance, Jane remains determined to uncover Rochester’s concealed language. But Bertha’s mysterious sounds remain unexamined, even though, as we know, her voice can be understood even from “two rooms off” (262).

Murmurs, then, are associated with all social strata, but only Bertha’s “eccentric” ones do not occasion language. Indeed, Jane explains why others murmur—Rochester because of the “stupefying” smoke, Richard Mason because of his injury, and the partygoers because of Jane’s distance from their layered conversations—yet she neither explores the source of Bertha’s sounds nor clarifies why they are “eccentric.” That Bertha’s murmurs carry this qualifier seems no accident: the *Oxford English Dictionary* de-

finer “eccentric” as “regulated by no central control of actions, movements, and things in general: irregular, anomalous, proceeding by no known method, capricious.” Jane appears to imply that Bertha’s murmurs, too, are unregulated by a codified language; Bertha produces incoherent noise, which our narrator cannot translate into coherent English. Moreover, eccentric’s other meaning—“[r]emote from the centre”—captures Bertha’s peripheral origins, her strange sounds seeming to travel from somewhere beyond the imperial “center” (“eccentric, n.”).

Yet while Bertha’s noises—her ostensibly non-linguistic murmurs and laughter—comprise most of her utterances, her speech does appear twice through the reported dialogue of Rochester and Richard Mason. In the first instance, Rochester cryptically recalls how Bertha once dared him to enjoy Thornfield, and in the second, Mason reports, in the novel’s narrative present, that Bertha threatened to “drain my heart” (181). And after Bertha’s identity is revealed, Rochester even tells Jane of “the curses the maniac still shrieked out” when she was brought to Thornfield, “wherein she momentarily mingled my name with such a tone of demon-hate, with such language!—no professed harlot ever had a fouler vocabulary than she: though two rooms off, I heard every word” (262). Such instances of Bertha’s spoken words challenge the implication that Bertha’s murmurs must be non-linguistic noise. How, then, do we reconcile this contradiction in the narrative? If Jane acknowledges in her narrative that Bertha can, and does, speak, why does she seem to suggest her inability to communicate?

One straightforward explanation for Bertha’s unexplored language is that Jane simply cannot recognize whatever language Bertha speaks. If Jane does not understand Bertha’s words, then she may misinterpret them as noisy babble. But as the daughter of a wealthy merchant from Jamaica, Bertha would likely speak French (and possibly English), perhaps inflected with an accent or an influence of Creolized French or English.¹⁵ Considering that Jane’s purpose in Thornfield is to teach English to the French-speaking Adele, and given that Jane is fascinated by, and adept at learning, foreign languages like French, German, and Hindostanee, her inability to translate or even acknowledge Bertha’s language becomes even more conspicuous. The narrative foregrounds Jane’s fluency in the two languages Bertha would presumably know, and since Jane explains that for seven years she had “learnt a portion of French by heart daily,” it seems unlikely that Bertha’s speech, however inflected, could have signified only “eccentric murmurs” (86, 93). We know that Bertha speaks a language that Rochester comprehends, and because Adele is impressed that her governess can “speak my language as well as Mr. Rochester does,” we may presume that Rochester’s abilities to understand Bertha may be comparable to Jane’s (86). Further, Rochester’s recollection of Bertha’s “demon-hate, [spoken] with such language!” and “foul vocabulary” complicate Jane’s accounts of the woman’s illegibility. Rochester describes Bertha’s language as clear and comprehensible and actually stresses its forceful articulateness: even amidst her ostensible madness, Bertha can still harness what Rochester names a “foul vocabulary” (262). Why, then, do Bertha’s words escape Jane?

**“Framing the tones”:
Jane’s selective heteroglossia and story of “interest”**

That most of Bertha’s language is indecipherable appears less an effect of any narrative ignorance and more a signal of Jane’s conscious effort to conceal the voice of Rochester’s first wife. Jane repeatedly disguises Bertha and her language, persuading readers to perceive Bertha solely as subhuman—a Gothic monster unworthy of sympathy. Even as we ultimately recognize that Bertha’s husband commits infidelity by wooing Jane, Jane’s narrative makes it difficult to sympathize with Rochester’s antagonistic wife (in fact, Bertha’s malice seems calibrated to increase our sympathy for Rochester, whom Bertha ostensibly drives to vice). Similarly, Jane’s decision to return to a presumably still-married Rochester seems less objectionable when Bertha appears nothing but a malevolent monster. If Bertha could speak, however, her characterization would almost certainly change; she would seem more human—and maybe worthier of readers’ attention. The legible voice, perhaps even narrative, of the first Mrs. Rochester might even redirect readerly sympathies from Jane to the entrapped “madwoman” and force Jane to confront her own transgressions.¹⁶ Rather than acknowledging this potentially subversive voice, Jane, it appears, actively structures her narrative to conceal it.

To transform her antagonist’s voice into noise, Jane invokes several key strategies: an illusion of heteroglossia and a carefully crafted narrative frame that disguises Bertha’s identity for most of Jane’s *Thornfield* account. Even though the novel’s murmurs often signify distressed speech—and even though Bertha’s articulate language is twice reported in the novel—these narrative strategies have quietly but profoundly shaped the critical perception of Bertha as a speechless noisemaker.

Jane’s autobiography appears a model of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, the “diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (1192). Bakhtin describes some of the novel’s many “social dialects” as “professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, [and] languages that serve the specific socio-political purposes of the day,” and indeed, from the various characters we encounter in the narrative—Mrs. Reed, Bessie, Brocklehurst, St. John Rivers, Mr. Lloyd, Blanche Ingram, and even Jane herself—we receive a broad range of dialects (1192).¹⁷ Furthermore, Jane’s inclusion of five national languages in her narration (English, French, German, Hindostanee, and Latin) highlights the novel’s heteroglot account. Suggesting that Bertha’s “murmurs” simply cannot be translated into language, that they are “eccentric” even in her polyglot community, Jane blames Bertha for the absence of her own voice: it is the madwoman’s deficiencies, not our narrator’s.

Jane further implies this deficiency by including and retroactively translating some of the languages that she could not understand in the present moment. For instance, when Jane first enters St. John’s house, she hears Diana Rivers reading a German book, which Jane records and translates, despite not knowing the language at the time: “And in a low voice she read something, of which not one word was intelligible to me; for it was in an unknown tongue—neither French nor Latin. Whether it were Greek or German I could not tell. . . . At a later day, I knew the language and the

book; therefore I will here quote the line: though when I first heard it it was only like a stroke on sounding brass to me—conveying no meaning:—“Da trat hervor Einer, anzusehen wie die Sternen Nacht” (283).¹⁸ Even though these words, like the incoherent murmurs from Rochester’s party, fail to convey “meaning,” Jane understands that a language orders the sounds, and she retrospectively includes the German words for her readers (283). In doing so, Jane creates the appearance that she acknowledges all languages, thereby positioning herself as a linguistic authority who will decipher for her readers the words that she once registered as noise (“it was only like a stroke on sounding brass to me”).

Yet this polyglot world is both disarming and illusory, for Jane also excludes key translations in an attempt to limit her autobiography’s heteroglossia. She in fact emphasizes her monologic power while she listens to the “conversational murmur” at Thornfield. By telling us that her ear first had to distinguish Rochester’s voice before “it found a further task in framing the tones, rendered by distance inarticulate, into words,” Jane signals how she “frame[s]” the voices in her narrative: she will both include and exclude (she aims to distinguish Rochester’s words and block out or silence those of her rival, Blanche), changing some of the inarticulate murmurs into sounds while leaving other “accents” unexplored (143). Jane’s exclusion of the words of her rival, Blanche, helps to illuminate Jane’s effort not just to exclude but also to disembody the speech of her other rival, Bertha. Without calling attention to her own manipulation, Jane contains Bertha’s voice.

In addition to creating what we might call a selective heteroglossia, Jane also frames her narrative around an act of ignorance: while composing her autobiography, she would have understood in retrospect that Bertha spoke through her “murmurs,” yet she structures her autobiography so that the reader, like the younger Jane, cannot yet associate these murmurs with Bertha. Jane defends this technique by announcing the first of her two principles of storytelling: “I am only bound to invoke memory where I know her responses will possess some degree of interest” (70). Immediately alerting the reader to Bertha’s presence would apparently attenuate the drama of Jane’s autobiography; Jane reasons that her reader must share the experience of the narrated “I,” enduring the same shock and outrage at the existence of the concealed madwoman as Jane had. Yet with this decision, Jane crucially privileges aesthetics over ethics: withholding Bertha’s existence also withholds her very humanity, as she is instead alive in the narrative only through noises—demonic laughter and seemingly non-linguistic murmurs. Indeed, Bertha is not embodied until Jane’s final moments at Thornfield, and our brief encounter with her apparently grotesque figure would seem to foreclose any sense of her linguistic potential.¹⁹ Thus, by structuring her story with “interest” in mind, Jane artfully avoids “framing the tones” of Bertha’s speech and can instead “frame”—or create the illusion of—Bertha’s noisy speechlessness (143).

“Merely telling the truth”: Jane’s narrative obfuscations

While Jane may conceal, ignore, or misconstrue Bertha’s speech to create an “interesting” story, she is less able to evade reports of Bertha’s speech. If, as Lisa Sternlieb

suggests, Jane habitually lies throughout the novel, we might suspect that Jane would expurgate this dangerous dialogue from her narrative; instead, however, I suggest that Jane is bound by another guiding principle for her storytelling: telling a truthful narrative. Just after introducing Bertha's first laugh and murmur, Jane explains that she is "not writing to . . . echo cant, or prop up humbug; I am merely telling the truth" (92). This emphasis on truthfulness appears just as Bertha enters the narrative, during which Jane becomes unusually insistent on her own honesty (itself a signal, as Ansgar Nünning points out, that readers may wish to query reliability).²⁰ Indeed, one page after insisting upon her delivery of "the truth," and just moments after first describing Bertha's "eccentric murmurs," Jane again pleads, "oh, romantic reader, forgive me for telling the plain truth" (93). If Jane indeed lies here and elsewhere in the novel, it is nearly impossible to distinguish between her truth and fiction—an issue Sternlieb herself points to in her interpretation of the novel.²¹ However, if Jane abides by her averred principles of honesty, we can consider how she avoids directly confronting the many complex "truth[s]" of her life. Rather than outright lying, Jane selects which truths to tell and when to tell them, using the self-declared need to create an "interesting" story to justify the re-framing, abbreviating, and distorting of Bertha's speech.²²

To report Bertha's speech truthfully while also deemphasizing her words, Jane profoundly obscures the instances of Bertha's speech. In disguising these moments, Jane simultaneously implies the "madwoman's" speechlessness (Bertha, it seems, has no story to tell, nor a means to tell it) as well as silently presents her own narration as the "plain truth." This final strategy, narrative obfuscation surrounding Bertha's speech, further buries Bertha's linguistic potential, reinforcing the illusion that, even in her closest encounters with Bertha, Jane only hears inarticulate, incoherent noise.

The first instance of Bertha's disguised speech occurs in chapter 15, which Jane presents as the story of Rochester and Celine. She opens the chapter by referencing Rochester's relationship with his "French floweret," Adele, writing, "Mr. Rochester did, on a future occasion, explain it" (119). Although Jane structures the chapter around Rochester's past with Celine and Adele, Rochester's own story is marked by a significant digression, as he vacillates between describing Celine's hotel in Paris and his own home in England. When Rochester pauses his autobiographical account, Jane notes:

We were ascending the avenue when he thus paused; the hall was before us. Lifting his eye to its battlements, he cast over them a glare such as I never saw before or since. Pain, shame, ire—impatience, disgust, detestation—seemed momentarily to hold a quivering conflict in the large pupil dilating under his ebon eyebrow. . . . [H]e went on:—"During the moment I was silent, Miss Eyre, I was arranging a point with my destiny. She stood there, by that beech-trunk—a hag like one of those who appeared to 'Macbeth' on the heath of Forres. "You like Thornfield?" she said, lifting her finger; and then she wrote in the air a memento, which ran in lurid hieroglyphics all along the house-front, between the upper and lower row of windows, "Like it if you can!" "Like it if you dare!" (121–22)

In this strange detour from Rochester's initial story, the "hag" to which Rochester refers seems to be his personified "destiny," an apparition that suddenly materializes during his walk with Jane. What challenges this straightforward reading, however, is that Jane reports Rochester standing silently, even though he describes responding to the hag's challenge: "I will like it," said I. "I dare like it" (122). The cryptic account of Rochester's speech and silence complicate the temporality of this episode: is Rochester reporting something that has just occurred in his mind, or is he recalling a different moment of his life? Jane, however, shows no interest in pursuing this inquiry; exemplifying what James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin term "underreporting," our narrator swiftly returns the conversation to Celine ("I ventured to recall him to the point whence he had abruptly diverged"), leaving the identity of this mysterious "hag" and the meaning of her challenge uncertain (122).

But there are several indications that Bertha previously uttered this challenge. First, the "hag" epithet fits with Rochester's other derogatory descriptions of Bertha; once Bertha's identity has been unveiled, he himself calls her this term: "*my wife*, as you term that fearful hag" (256). Second, Jane's eventual account of the "savage" and otherworldly Bertha echoes Banquo's appraisal of *Macbeth's* witches: "What are these / So wither'd and so wild in their attire / That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth" (Brontë 242, Shakespeare 1.iii.40–42). Third, chapter 15 juxtaposes two prophecies: just before the hag declares Rochester's "destiny," Rochester forewarns Jane's eventual despair, stating, "I tell you—and you may mark my words—you will come some day to a craggy pass of the channel, where the whole of life's stream will be broken up into whirl and tumult, foam and noise" (121). Although her name is absent from this passage, Bertha is at the center of both prophecies: once revealed as Rochester's wife, Bertha will disrupt Jane's "life's stream," just as she will prevent Rochester from liking the incinerated Thornfield. Bertha appears at once concealed from and central to the chapter; indeed, although ostensibly about Celine and Adele, the chapter climaxes with Bertha's nearly fatal arson.

In retrospect, Jane would almost certainly recognize that Rochester vaguely alluded to Bertha (no other character mentioned in Thornfield, or even *Jane Eyre*, fits Rochester's description), but Jane's focalization on her experiencing-self allows her both to withhold any retrospective realization and to misattribute this rare instance of Bertha's legible speech. Shortly thereafter, Jane's narrative withholding and misattributions recur: just as Jane knowingly misattributes the speaker of Rochester's "destiny," so too does she misidentify the culprit of the fire that ends the chapter. Our autobiographer, Jane Rochester, persuades readers to think that the speaker is an apparition or that the arsonist is Grace Poole because, at that moment, *Jane Eyre* seemed to have believed so, too. Yet while we have, with hindsight, recognized Bertha's arson, we have been less aware of Bertha's speech: Jane's silent editorial hand has so obscured Bertha's language that only faint clues mark its appearances.

In narrating around her knowledge, or employing what Helen H. Davis calls "circumnarration," Jane resembles another of Brontë's guarded heroines: *Villette's* Lucy Snowe, a character who uses "substituted narratives, metalepses, [and] misdirections" as well as oblique or indirect references to avoid discussing her "non-normative behaviors or outcomes," such as her ambition and independence (199). Like Lucy, who

“may feel the need for secrecy and deception because she is retrospectively writing a narrative that will end outside of the bounds of the marriage plot,” Jane is invested with retrospective knowledge that profoundly shapes her storytelling (202). Jane’s persistent obfuscation of Bertha’s presence and speech appears no accident or coincidence, but part of a larger pattern of retrospective and opportunistically evasive narrations in Brontë’s novels.²³

In exploiting such vague and indirect language, Jane proves particularly adept: it is likely because of her difficult, layered narrative framing that few critics have observed the first instance of Bertha’s speech.²⁴ Yet despite Jane’s efforts, Bertha’s “lurid hieroglyphics” impel readers to acknowledge a language (however indecipherable it may be in Jane’s narrative) underlying her reported murmurs (122). That Bertha writes into the “air” is fitting, for critics must attend to the unwritten components of Jane’s narrative—deliberate gaps, silences, and untranslated speech—to expose what it insistently conceals.

In the other instance of Bertha’s speech, the bitten Mr. Mason reports his sister’s words: “She sucked the blood: she said she’d drain my heart,” to which Rochester retorts: “Come, be silent, Richard, and never mind her gibberish: don’t repeat it” (181). Here Bertha appears to speak in the present moment, and Jane can only disavow this language by recording and gently affirming Rochester’s disparagement of Bertha’s “gibberish,” a word that revises Mason’s report of Bertha’s clear language to “unintelligible speech belonging to no known language” (“gibberish, n.”). To support Rochester’s assessment, Jane does not present Bertha’s speech as direct discourse (“she said she’d drain my heart,” not “she said she’d ‘drain’ my ‘heart’”), a subtle point of punctuation that deemphasizes the words attributed to Bertha (or, at this point in the novel, misattributed to Grace Poole). In this attempt to cast doubt over Bertha’s words, Jane evinces far more subtlety than Rochester, who sloppily and unconvincingly attempts to conceal Bertha’s presence and downplay Mason’s injury. Yet neither Jane’s nor Rochester’s effort is convincing; this scene most clearly demonstrates Bertha’s capacity for speech and calls into question Jane’s presentation of all Bertha’s other sonic moments.

Once we identify Bertha’s voice in these moments of occluded and misattributed speech, we return to her enigmatic murmurs, sounds that now seem—like the “murmurs” spoken by all other characters in the novel—to connote language. If these sounds do signify attempted speech, Bertha’s words are irretrievable, expurgated from Jane’s autobiography. However, her speech-as-noise nevertheless highlights Jane’s narrative manipulation—her efforts to deny and obscure Bertha’s speech—and further challenges Jane’s self-proclaimed role as a writer of the “plain truth.” In so doing, Bertha’s murmurs exemplify the power dynamics of narrative noise: on the one hand, Bertha’s noise underlines Jane’s power to censor her adversary’s language and convincingly disguise Bertha’s linguistic capabilities. Noise, in other words, has helped further demonize Bertha, seemingly confirming her madness and warranting her marginalization in both the recesses of *Thornfield* and the pages of Jane’s narrative. On the other hand, these strange “murmurs” amplify Jane’s quiet attempts to transform Bertha’s discourse into noise. Just as Rochester contains Bertha behind doubly locked doors, so too Jane locks Bertha’s story away in a carefully crafted narrative. Yet

Bertha escapes through Rochester's locked doors, and her voice, too, at times emerges from Jane's seemingly "locked" narrative to resonate with subversive power.

Author-Narrator-Audience Relations in *Jane Eyre*

Because Jane articulates and then exploits her guiding narrative principles, and because Jane, like Brontë's Lucy Snowe, writes retrospectively (well aware of Bertha's identity), I have suggested that Brontë invites readers to consider Jane's autobiographical text as comprised of Jane's deliberate narrative decisions. However, there are also occasions when Jane's authorial filter recedes and Brontë goes, to borrow from Wayne Booth's description of unreliable narration, "behind [Jane's] back" to plant additional clues that contest Jane's characterizations of Bertha's noise (159). Such moments further highlight Brontë's efforts to alert readers to her novel's noise, while also revealing a dynamic I have yet to mention: how an author can use moments of *reliable* narration to communicate to her audience more than a narrator recognizes.

To trouble Jane's depiction of Bertha's inarticulate and mad sounds, Brontë stages similar moments of "acousmatic" noise (or noise whose source is not visible or clear). These scenes collectively imply that Jane and Bertha might each experience unfair confinement and express justifiably indignant sounds. First, in the Red Room scene, an entrapped and frightened Jane unleashes a terrifying scream, a noise so horrifying that it leads Miss Abbot to rush into the locked room: "What a dreadful noise! it went quite through me!" she exclaims (14). Unsympathetic to Jane's emotional turmoil, Miss Abbot quickly departs with Mrs. Reed and Bessie, "lock[ing] me (Jane) in, without farther parley" (14). Here Brontë indicates that something deeply distressing provokes Jane's scream and that unfeeling authorities keep a suffering Jane confined in her room. Of the latter, readers likely echo the assessment of Jane's "Reason," personified just moments ago: Jane's treatment is, indeed, "Unjust!—unjust!" (12). The scene's focalization nearly ensures this affective response: we should recognize Jane's punishment as excessive and her resulting feelings—"I was oppressed, suffocated"—as reasonable. Further, when Miss Abbot wrongly infers that Jane screams "to bring us all here: I know her naughty tricks," we might share Jane's outrage, recognizing that Abbot's prejudices lead her to misread, willfully or not, the impetus to Jane's noise. What's more, we might pity that Jane cannot defend herself against this accusation or excessive punishment, her lack of voice emphasized when her pleas for mercy ("I cannot endure it—let me be punished some other way! I shall be killed if—") are interrupted by a demand for "Silence!" (14).

Not too long after, Brontë composes similar scenes with a different focalization and set of characters. Like Jane in the Red Room, Bertha Mason is confined in the third story of Thornfield, where she too reverberates many "dreadful noise[s]" that frighten its inhabitants: her uncanny sounds, as we have seen, lead Jane to attribute to them an array of adjectives (14). The key distinction between these similar moments of acousmatic sound is the focalization: whereas we observe our narrator and the conditions that provoke her "dreadful noise" (Miss Abbot, Bessie, and Mrs. Reed hear but do not see the source of the scream), we lie outside Bertha's enclosure and

experience her screams acoustically. The parallels leave us to wonder if Bertha's harrowing noise might be as justifiably indignant as Jane's; indeed, after years of confinement, Bertha completes the self-destruction Jane had threatened as the inevitable outcome of continual solitary confinement ("I shall be killed if—"). Yet while Jane has her noise produce readerly sympathy and indignation, she frames Bertha's sounds to evoke horror and disgust. Brontë's paralleled scenes remind us that, by accepting Jane's characterization, we may be reacting just as unfairly as Miss Abbot, effectively silencing Bertha without considering her voice. Moreover, we might recall Miss Abbot's prejudices and wonder if Jane, too, has a similar motive: keeping the door that contains her adversary definitively shut.

Brontë leaves other clues, too, that direct readers towards suspicious readings of Jane's narration and even call attention to *Jane Eyre* as metanarrative—a narrative about strategic narration. For instance, shortly before Jane and her readers reach Thornfield and hear Bertha, Brontë details Jane's discovery of effective storytelling techniques: "mindful of Helen's warnings against the indulgence of resentment, I infused into the narrative far less of gall and wormwood than ordinary. Thus restrained and simplified, it *sounded more credible*: I felt as I went on that Miss Temple fully believed me" (60, my emphasis). Here Brontë seems to bypass Jane to alert us—Jane's new interlocutors, her famous "Reader[s]"—of our narrator's supreme narrative skill, which, as a retrospective tale, is exploited by the narrating-Jane throughout the novel. Jane proves particularly effective in crafting a seemingly "credible" narrative about Bertha—yet Brontë also shows that Jane's abilities have their limitations. Indeed, in this narrative about narration, Brontë announces the power of noise to disrupt Jane's seemingly coherent account and destabilize her narratorial authority.

Written in the *Eyre*: Listening for narrative noise

As Deanna K. Kreisel points out, Bertha resides on the "third story" in Thornfield, a space, Kreisel argues, that the novel associates with "the site of narrative, indeed of narratability" (105). We now recognize how Brontë imbues this association with irony, since Jane denies Bertha, the crucial inhabitant of the "third story," with the means to tell her story. Furthermore, this association with Bertha and narratability accentuates Jane's use of—indeed, reliance on—her narrative power in suppressing Bertha's voice and own narrative. Yet by offering glimpses of Bertha's language, Brontë suggests that the narrative in the "third story" of Thornfield is essential to but expurgated from the "third story" of *Jane Eyre's* five-part geographical schema (Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Marsh End, Ferndean). Nevertheless, listening closely to Bertha uncovers the voice Jane distorts but cannot ultimately conceal—a story suppressed from Jane's account, but one that, through noise, can still call attention to the narrative forces that stifle it.

Jane ends her autobiography in Ferndean, where she and Rochester reunite after Bertha perishes in the Thornfield fire. Although Rochester earlier describes Ferndean's "damp walls" as potentially hazardous, his later description of his home stresses a different feature: its quietness. "Ferndean is buried, as you see, in a heavy wood, where

sound falls dull, and dies unreverberating,” Rochester informs Jane (381). With the death of Bertha, noise ceases in *Jane Eyre*; sequestered in the woods, Jane and Rochester no longer have to endure Bertha’s subversive sounds. Yet Jane remains haunted by Bertha’s powerful noises, which resonate throughout the autobiography. In fact, when Bertha scribbled her “lurid hieroglyphics” in the “air,” she phonetically linked her curse to Jane “Eyre” (122). Bertha’s presence is indelibly inscribed onto Jane and her eponymous autobiography: her noises undermine the author’s monologic control and threaten to tear down, like the walls of the burning Thornfield, the architecture of Jane’s narrative.

This essay has sought to merge further narratology and sound studies by studying noise to better understand and identify unreliable narrators and their misleading accounts. This currently unexplored connection between noise and unreliable narration actually has a historical basis, for the emergence of unreliable narration in so many works of British and American literature coincides with a striking rise in noise, and volume more generally, in the rapidly industrializing Britain and America. For example, Ansgar F. Nünning locates “one of the earliest instances in British fiction of a full-fledged unreliable narrator” at the beginning of the nineteenth century with Maria Edgeworth’s 1800 *Castle Rackrent*, while John Picker and Jonathan Sterne explain that nineteenth-century Britain and America not only experienced increasingly pervasive noise—as the boisterous sounds from both the Industrial Revolution and rising urbanization heightened each nation’s volume—but also evinced a marked fascination with acoustics and aurality. From Picker, we know that nineteenth-century authors, in particular, wrote extensively about, and were often disrupted by, noise; however, we do not yet know the extent to which they used such sounds for narratological purposes.²⁵ This essay begins to fill this critical gap, proposing a narratology of noise that uncovers disturbances in narrative authority.

This essay also lays the groundwork for future observations of sonic disruptions in narratives. As I have shown, noise leads us to re-examine a text, its narrators, and its narrative structure by questioning the actual sound of the noise as well as the status of the noisemaker(s) and his/her/their relationship to the narrator. My case study reveals the benefits of pursuing these inquiries, for noise has amplified previously understudied elements of *Jane Eyre*, bringing attention to Bertha’s moments of resistance and narrative disruption that are articulated not (or not only) by spoken discourse but by more subtle, non-linguistic sounds. While such approaches to noise in *Jane Eyre* and elsewhere had or have yet to be written, perhaps highlighting a legacy of ocularcentric criticism, this essay seeks to galvanize interest in narratives’ most jarring sounds.

Endnotes

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1. Unreliable narration need not always be deliberate: narrators may unwittingly censor or suppress elements from their narratives. See James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin for an overview of six types of unreliable narration.

2. Nünning initially delivered this call for further inquiry in 1997. See “Signals,” 102.
3. *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness* (2015) exemplifies this taxonomic impulse. To James Phelan and Mary Patricia Martin’s own classification of unreliable narrations, Bo Pettersson adds two other terms: “over-reporting” and “over-regarding” (114). Similarly, Uri Margolin proposes categorizing narrators as “credible,” “successful,” and “dependable,” while Vera Nünning offers new terms to evaluate a speaker’s “trustworthiness”: “reliability,” “sincerity,” and “competence.” For a discussion of the signals of unreliable narration, see Vera Nünning’s “Reconceptualising,” 94–98.
4. Emphasizing this primary need to identify “signals” of unreliability, Vera Nünning writes, “Only after detecting signals which show that the story told by the narrator does not correspond to the facts in the fictional world and/or that his norms and values are questionable are readers in a position to ask for possible reasons for these discrepancies; only then can they decide whether the narrator is (un)reliable, (in)sincere, and/or (in)competent” (“Reconceptualising” 94).
5. In outlining a “systematic account of clues to unreliable narration,” Ansgar Nünning organizes and builds on the signals proposed by Susan Lanser, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, J. De Reuck, José Antonio Alvarez Amorós, Renate Hof, and Kathleen Wall. Nünning includes textual signals (a narrator’s inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies), contextual clues (a discrepancy between the world the narrator describes and the reader’s understanding of that world), paratextual clues (an editor’s voice, a foreword, epigraph, etc. that challenges the narrator’s account), and extratextual clues (“the norms, cultural models, and conceptual frameworks that readers bring to the text”) (“Signals of Unreliable Narration” 95–100).
6. For a brief discussion of the ocularcentric legacy in narratology, see Sheila Honess, 84–85.
7. Sterne suggests that new ways of listening to and thinking about sound precipitated innovative listening technologies like the stethoscope and telephone. Meanwhile, with a focus on literary texts, Picker’s *Victorian Soundscapes* contextualizes representations of sound technologies (like the stethoscope in Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*) and of loud sounds produced by industrialization (like the chugging of the railroad in Dickens’s *Dombey and Sons*).
8. See Meir Sternberg’s “Proteus Principle,” which states that “in different contexts . . . the same form may fulfill different functions *and* different forms the same function” (148).
9. Baym writes that “[a]mong Charlotte Brontë’s outrages on her madwoman is the denial of the ability to speak; Bertha will never get to tell her own story” (48). This reading of Brontë’s novel informs Rama Kundu’s contrast of the speechless, subaltern Bertha of *Jane Eyre* with the Bertha of Rhys’s revisionist *Wide Sargasso Sea*, who speaks directly, without mediators (72).
10. With a Kristevian turn to non-linguistic semiotics, Valeria Beattie contends that Bertha’s voice resists a “phenotext” that “obeys the rules of communication and presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee” (Kristeva qtd. in Beattie 499); instead, Bertha’s voice expresses “the re-emergence of repressed feminine rebellion, thereby ‘evading the censorship of realism’” (499). Sally Shuttleworth similarly turns to Kristeva, writing that Bertha’s “voice is not that of the semiotic (as defined by Kristeva), the upswell of madness outside the dominant patriarchal sphere of the symbolic” (164).
11. Critical references to Bertha’s “function” tend to reduce the character into a symbol or plot device: “the figure of Bertha functions to call attention to the tenuous, fragile foundations of Jane’s imperialist claims to self-dominion” (Shuttleworth 164); “Bertha has functioned as Jane’s dark double throughout the governess’s stay at Thornfield” (Gilbert and Gubar 360); “Bertha’s function in *Jane Eyre* is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal” (Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts,” 249); and “it is Bertha’s function (although she cannot be present in the church) to scupper the premature wedding attempted by Jane and Mr. Rochester” (Emslie 61).
12. Fisk explains that Jane “does not even attempt to decode” Bertha’s muffled language or symbolic warnings (burning Rochester’s bed, tearing Jane’s wedding veil), misrecognizing the Creole

woman's sisterly affections and "[d]isqualifying" Bertha as a companion (228, 227). Similarly, Tsomondo finds an obliviousness in Jane's narrative, one that precludes any "moment of reflection—sympathetic or condemnatory—to the madwoman's groans" (82). Vera Nünning's typology of unreliable narrators helps differentiate these critics' readings from my own, as she distinguishes devious narrators from ignorant or "incompetent" ones ("Conceptualising" 11).

13. Sandra Gilbert's description of Bertha's language as "gibbering," for instance, shades very closely to Rochester's own dismissals: "never mind her gibberish" (Gilbert 361, Brontë 181).
14. Bertha's noises in the novel are representative of what Julie Napolin has termed the "acoustics of marginality."
15. See Dagmar Deuber's "The Background and Context of English in Jamaica and Trinidad."
16. Instead, Jane participates in the demonization of Bertha to such a degree that, as Patrick Brantlinger has argued, "Both she (Jane) and the reader feel relieved when Bertha immolates herself" (109).
17. On the novel's "heteroglot formation," see Julia Sun-Joo Lee, 30.
18. Richard J. Dunn translates this phrase as "Then there stepped forth one, in appearance like the starry sky" (Brontë 284). On Brontë's own translation work, see Lesa Scholl.
19. Tsomondo points out that Jane emphasizes Rochester's depiction of Bertha, which "prepares his prospective audience as well as Jane's reader to see a figure cast in culturally alienating mold: 'a mysterious lunatic' rumored to be a 'bastard half-sister,' a 'cast-off' mistress'; a madwoman descended from 'idiots,' 'maniacs' and 'a drunkard'; a creature of foreign extraction—a 'creole'—; a 'something [not] at least human'" (82–83).
20. See Nünning's "Reconceptualizing," 95–96.
21. Sternlieb writes that, paradoxically, "in order to argue that Jane is lying to us we must accept much of what she tells us as the truth" (457).
22. Shuttleworth notes that Jane has proven adept at concealing information about herself, revealing "a history of secrecy and concealment" from her time at Gateshead (157).
23. Brontë's letters show that she herself occasionally resembles one of her unreliable narrators, for she never discloses her authorship to perhaps her closest friend and correspondent, Ellen Nussey. When necessary, Brontë even outright lies to Nussey about her publications: "All I can say to you about a certain matter is this: the report . . . must have had its origin in some absurd misunderstanding. I have given no one a right either to affirm, or hint, in the most distant manner, that I am 'publishing'—(humbly!) Whoever has said it—if any one has, which I doubt—is no friend of mine. Though twenty books were ascribed to me, I should own none" (*Letters* 104–5). Recalling Jane's outrage when accused of dishonesty at Gateshead, Brontë indignantly continues: "If then any . . . should presume to bore you on the subject,—to ask you what 'novel' Miss Brontë has been 'publishing,'—you can just say . . . that you are authorized by Miss Brontë to say, that she repels and disowns every accusation of the kind" (*Letters* 105). The irony of Brontë's dishonesty is that, as Janet Gezari notes, her letters to Ellen reveal "a particular woman who prized honesty and openness above all else" (xxviii).
24. Sternlieb, for instance, asserts that "[i]n the only words [Bertha] is reported to speak, she swears that, through sucking Mason's blood, she will 'drain [his] heart'" (470). Even Deanna K. Kreisel's close-reading of *Jane Eyre*, which overturns the "puzzlingly entrenched reading mistake" that mislocates Bertha in Thornfield's attic and not its "third story," misses the moments of Bertha's speech, calling Bertha a character "with very little plot time and literally without a word" (103, 113). Shuttleworth, however, does acknowledge Bertha's challenge to Rochester in this scene, drawing on Victorian rhetoric of insanity to claim first that "concealment and deception were the very attributes that the insane were assumed to lack" and second that "Bertha's insanity is in fact

visible proof of her inability to mask her feelings or actions. . . . [W]e are presented with the 'lurid hieroglyphics' of a sexuality too evidently displayed" (165).

25. Many Victorian middle-class writers denounced London's itinerant street musicians for polluting England's soundscape, from public streets to private homes, with unpleasant noise. Charles Dickens, for instance, wrote the introduction to Michael Thomas Bass's 120-page condemnation of public noise, *Street Music in the Metropolis* (1864), in which he insisted on noise legislation. This missive was co-signed by, as Picker notes in "The Soundproof Study: Victorian Professionals, Work Space, and Urban Noise," "a roster of the Victorian cultural elite: Alfred Tennyson, John Everett Millais, Francis Grant, Forster, Leech, William Holman Hunt, Wilkie Collins, Frith, Richard Doyle, Carlyle, Alfred Wigan, Thomas Faed, E. M. Barry, Thomas Woolner, and so on" (440).

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