

Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and The Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 331 pp.

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In *The Sonic Color Line*, Jennifer Lynn Stoever sets out to construct a history of the sound of race in the US. For the author, what this means is not a continuous linear narrative of the multitudinous examples of black sound-making but rather a concise critical interrogation of the ways in which listening embeds and embodies a culture of racialized hierarchy. Stoever reads the literary and historical record for the rhetorical acts of differentiation and identification that show where ideology meets perception. The “listening ear” is the central figure of the text. It is Stoever’s term for how “one’s ideas about race shape what and how one hears and vice versa” (14). In each of the book’s five chapters—which range from Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs’s autobiographical narratives to the World War II-era radio performances of the singer Lena Horne—Stoever uncovers the power and limits of the white “listening ear.” While this figured and figuring listening transforms in different literary, musical, and media contexts, the book emphasizes the agency of black writers, performers, and sound theorists to reconfigure listening in responsive and resistant ways.

Stoever is the editor of the blog *Sounding Out*, one of the most important new venues for the academic study of sound, and *The Sonic Color Line* is an exemplary application of this interdisciplinary methodology. Most of its historical evidence comes from written records rather than sound recordings, but this is an advantage because the book is less concerned with close listenings of performed sounds than in describing how different auditors—black, white, slave, free, performer, commentator—heard “blackness.” By taking up various responses to the performances by Jenny Lind, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, Lead Belly, Lena Horne, and others, Stoever simultaneously delineates the structural contours of the sonic color line and provides a narrative of its transformations over time. Figures of black resistance and white power fight over the meaning of sounds produced by and in relation to enslaved, formerly enslaved, violated, and disenfranchised bodies.

The Sonic Color Line’s major critical intervention is to attend to the sonic dimension of racialization, which is most often considered in terms of its visual marking. Following from the work of Fred Moten, Alex Weheliye, Eric Lott, Saidiya Hartman, and other critical race theorists attuned to sound, Stoever’s study convincingly argues that white power manifested and disciplined blackness through a politics and practice of listening as well as seeing. For the white listening ear, the sounds of black performers and writers act as either sites of unseemly noise or peaceful subjection. Defining noise and enforcing

silence become strategies, then, for controlling and redefining the black body, its comportment, and its movements.

In order to construct her argument, Stoever draws on a rich array of archival materials and literary texts. Each chapter has a similar structure: Stoever traces and contextualizes the sounds of black performers through white performance reviews and other writings; then, she reflects on the ways black listeners and authors resist and reappropriate the listening ear. By thinking through the rhetorical “trope of the listener” in many different performances and texts, Stoever invites her readers to hear black texts anew. That is, we attune our ears neither to the reproduced noise of otherness nor the reaffirming silence of domination but rather to an affirmative signifying agency. Despite the ubiquity of the listening ear, black listeners had power over how, when, where, and why their bodies, voices, and ears represented sound.

This text’s emphasis upon the manifold acts by which black writers and performers trope on listening and define themselves through sound is a powerful corrective to scholarship and popular music criticism that often hears black music only as determined by white domination, or as an “authentic” expression of pain. Stoever highlights the manifold rhetorical strategies by which whites rendered black sound-making as noisy, premodern, weird, visceral, uncultivated, impure, improper, and alien. Yet through new readings of key texts in the African American literary tradition, including *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), *The Conjure Woman* (1899), *Native Son* (1940), and *The Street* (1946), she also argues that black listeners conserved a listening practice outside of mere domination and negation. Just as Jacobs, trapped in hiding for years in a small upstairs garret, transforms the environmental sounds she hears into copresence, emotional sustenance, and imaginary participation, the black performers and writers Stoever discusses all use “aural literacy and auditory imagination” to cultivate sophisticated listening practices against the grain of white domination (53).

The description and archival retrieval of this complex interweaving of reading and listening, performing and responding, music-making and writing, makes for a project that goes beyond a simple “symptomatic” or “negative” criticism of the sort now targeted by the “critique of critique.” That is to say, Stoever analyzes the processes of selection, appreciation, and understanding that mark listening as an ideological and racialized practice in US cultural history, but she also emphasizes the many positive, emergent forms of sonic life that black sound-writers compose in counterpoint to the listening ear’s dehumanizing force.

In this way, the book is unabashedly and usefully presentist. Its striking opening sentence—“We need to talk about listening, power, and race.”—sums up both its content and motive while also expressing an urgency lacking in much cultural and historical scholarship. Many works in sound studies—like Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past*, Richard Cullen Rath’s *How Early America Sounded*, and Mark Smith’s *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*—use wide-ranging archives to investigate the history of listening through rhetorical figuration, technological change, ideological exchange, and cultural practice. Sound is never a “natural” or “pure” sense, sign, or object. *The Sonic Color Line* builds upon this work but with a cutting insistence: the domination, inequality, and violence that undergirds the listening ear remains deeply embedded within contemporary culture. And the lives of Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and the many other victims of racist violence in the US hang in the balance.

That the critical intertexts for this book are not only scholarly works but also the Black Lives Matter movement and the many other political movements dedicated to racial justice is a key element in its timeliness and appeal. Engaged scholarship dedicated to an ethics of equality, community, and demystification is a powerful necessity in these times of increasing uncertainty about what “America” is and how it came to be. What is frightening about Stoever’s analysis, however, is that the story of the listening ear is ultimately one of constant slippage, of conscious and unconscious strategies for enforcing new limits and preserving the sonic color line. Even now, political actors are mobilizing ideological and racist forces through rhetorical diversion, sonic surveillance, media manipulation, and immoral desensitization. Even now, these forces bind black, immigrant, female, queer, trans- and all other bodies marked by their difference from an imaginary “white” America. We are in the midst of a new iteration of the listening ear.

So I applaud *The Sonic Color Line* for arming scholars and other readers with a new way of understanding the history of racist violence in the US and its continued effects on our senses and sensibilities. But it also left me wanting more contemporary readings. Who, now, is rethinking and remaking the listening ear? Who are the writers, poets, performers who are following up this still-living tradition of resistance and reaffirmation? And how are they doing it? *The Sonic Color Line* argues that ideological veiling is immanent in every US sonic encounter, but so are the possibilities of resistance and, even, fleeting utopia. Those potentialities exist both inside and outside the literary world as we know it: in poetry, fiction, song as well as scholarship, in protest. The senses remain contested sites for remaking the individual and collective body politic, and contemporary writers and artists—through their engagement with the history that Stoever tells—remain at the cutting edge of the sonic color line.