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10
SOUNDING OUT RACIAL DIFFERENCE

Alex W. Corey

One afternoon in late 1930s New York City, Ralph Ellison stumbled into the kind of acoustic scene that perks up the ears of sound and race scholars. Ellison recounts that he was circulating a petition in the African American neighborhood of San Juan Hill when he strode down a dark basement hallway and heard "male Afro-American voices, raised in violent argument" behind a closed door (Ellison 1978: 45). The tenement building's physical form governed what Ellison could see and hear—the door a visual barrier occluding the speaking bodies from sight, the hallway an acoustic chamber resonating with the sound of disembodied voices. "Sounding out the lay of the land," Ellison approached the door and played the part of aural sleuth, noting that "the language was profane, the style of speech a southern idiomatic vernacular such as was spoken by formally uneducated Afro-American workingmen" (Ellison 1978: 45). Vocabulary and syntax were not all that conveyed a sense of who these men were; the sonic qualities of the voices—volume, cadence, timbre, and vocal pitch—conjured a precise image of the men in Ellison's mind, as did the location. Ellison paused to assess the situation while his ear gathered more information.

It was not the fact of the raised voices that gave him pause: as a self-proclaimed "slum dweller," he knew that "voices in slums are often raised in anger, but that the *rhetoric* of anger, being in itself cathartic, is not necessarily a prelude to violence" (Ellison 1978: 45). Rather, it was the topic of their argument that provoked further reflection, for these "foulmouthed black workingmen were locked in verbal combat over which of two celebrated Metropolitan Opera divas was the superior soprano" (Ellison 1978: 45). The vernacular culture of urban black workingmen, here, mingles with the lofty culture of opera, a world that prizes literacy not only in the Eurocentric operatic tradition but also in the polite rituals of spectatorship and concert listening. In this heated exchange, Ellison heard how music and sound could traverse boundaries that legal structures and cultural conventions sought to enforce, "for the angry voices behind the door were proclaiming an intimate familiarity with a subject of which, by all the logic of their linguistically projected social status, they should have been oblivious" (Ellison 1978: 45). Forced to reconsider his acceptance of a rigid divide between vernacular and canonical, between the spoken and the composed, Ellison decided to enter the room—to solve the acoustic mystery that had drawn him in.

The image of Ellison "sounding out the lay of the land" might well parallel the state of scholarship on sound and race today. Even as the scope and political thrust of contemporary

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scholarship often diverges from Ellison's dedication to American melting-pot ideals, Ellison's written reflection on his encounter gestures toward some of the key methods and concerns that scholars of race and sound have developed since the 1980s. Using his ear as a critical tool, Ellison situated himself in his immediate surroundings and reconfigured his understanding of the relationships among social class, race, geography, gender, and aesthetic taste. Furthermore, Ellison draws explicitly on his vernacular knowledge to challenge the scientific racism and institutionally reinforced presumptions of black people's pathological propensity for violence: his experiences as a black man in the rural South and the urban North had taught him that the sounds of anger did not necessarily imply a physical threat. And even if legal structures like Jim Crow sought to draw firm lines between black and white bodies, Ellison heard how sonic cultures could traverse the more permeable boundaries between the lofty aesthetics of Western opera and the vernacular cadence of black, urban speech.

This analogy between Ellison and contemporary scholars is admittedly heuristic, but it draws attention to two overlapping strains of thought that weave through the contemporary research on the intersections of sound, blackness, and racial difference. First, as Ellison did, current scholarship is refining our understanding of the extent to which historical modes of categorizing sound filter through, and indeed produce, conceptions of race. Racial difference is heard, sensed, and not only seen conceptions of racial difference generally draw on cultural assumptions that situate whiteness as a position of decorum and order whereas racialized others are unruly, noisy, and excessive and subject to excessive policing in all senses of the word (Smith 2001 and 2008; Wagner 2009). Musical culture plays an especially important role in studies about the way that sound polices racial boundaries. Some scholarship stresses the extent to which the commercial interests of the music industry drive the historical racialization of musical genres and performance styles (Radano 2003; Miller 2010; Kheshti 2015; Nunn 2015; Hamilton 2016). Other research prioritizes the extent to which music deemed "other" challenged the commercial structures by transforming sound into a resistant social force with an often liberatory potential (Jones/Baraka 1963; Baker 1984; Gilroy 1993; Davis 1998; Kun 2005; Monson 2007; Redmond 2013).

Second, *phonography*, or the writing of sound from the printed page to phonographic disks, has become an increasingly crucial concept in studies of race and sound. Fred Moten's 2003 *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* and Alexander Weheliye's 2005 *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* have oriented this line of thought. Building on rich traditions of black feminist thought, African diasporan intellectual history, and continental philosophy, Weheliye and Moten develop theoretical foundations for studying the ways that racial discourse exists in the breaks and resonances between the sonic and the visual. Their research has strongly influenced recent scholarship that refuses to position hearing as modernity's second sense which simply reinforces senses of race based in the visual; instead, the sounding practices of black modern life enact forms of resistance that operate on the lower frequencies, just out of eyeshot (Stoever-Ackerman 2010; Stoever 2016; Stadler 2010a and 2010c; Crawley 2016). Throughout, contemporary research also calls attention to the illuminating power of social knowledge cultivated outside the walls of traditional educational institutions—in studies of Spanish-speaking and chican@ U.S radio (Casillas 2014; Sorensen 2016), Chicana and Cuban music (Vargas 2012; Vazquez 2013), African American music and culture (Monson 1996; Ramsey 2003; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz 2013), and a broader anthropology of sound (Samuels et al. 2010). The essay that follows traces these intellectual threads through field-defining texts and cutting-edge scholarship that promises to shape the field's ongoing development.

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Sound and the color line

Even though "modern discussions of 'race' and racial identity are hostage to the eye" (Smith 2008: 8), sound has long been a critical touchstone in studies of modern race relations. W. E. B. Du Bois, for instance, heard African American spirituals as claims to belonging within a nation that strove to exclude African Americans from the body politic [1903]. Du Bois writes:

> And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.
>
> *([Du Bois 1903] 2007: 168)*

Here, Du Bois employs a sonic logic to demonstrate the permeability of the color line, a dilemma that he elsewhere develops primarily through visual metaphors (see also Stoever 2016). African Americans occupy a double position for Du Bois, for they reside both inside and outside of the United States as a nation; and "it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (1903: 8). But if African Americans must cultivate a doubleness of vision that provides access to the nation's racial truths, America itself has a singular musical heritage that sounds forth when black voices rise up in song. J. Rosamond Johnson (1908) would go on to make a similar case, explaining "why they call American music ragtime," and his brother James Weldon Johnson's narrator in *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (2015) would repeat the claim that black music—ragtime, in particular—stood for America abroad. This music sounded doubly, as both a symbol of black racial solidarity and a token of racial difference, as symbol of U.S. national coherence and threat to U.S. regimes of white supremacy (Radano 2003: 278–286; Weheliye 2005: 73–105).

The relationship between sound and racial difference has remained a preoccupation for contemporary scholars, many of whom build on Du Bois's identification of a potent resistant force within the "soundscapes"—to borrow a term from R. Murray Schafer—of black and brown lives. Jennifer Lynn Stoever-Ackerman (2010; Stoever 2016), for instance, has coined the term "the sonic color line" to show how racialized soundscapes from the antebellum enslaver's plantation to New York's San Juan Hill in the 1950s made sound into a medium that both delineated racial boundaries and provided avenues for resisting white political dominance. Where Stoever traverses a variety of sonic genres in service of her argument and employs methodologies from literary close-reading to historical ethnography, Shana Redmond (2013) brings a musicological sensibility to her work on the consolidating force of music within black social movements. Bracketing the commercial interests of the music publishing industry and the recording industry, which were largely controlled by white executives, Redmond listens for the insurgent affirmation of blackness that pulses through songs from the Johnson Brothers' "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" to Nina Simone's iconic "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black." Redmond finds crucial continuities between sounds embedded in historical locales as distant as 1920s Harlem and 1970s–1980s South Africa. And Ashon Crawley's 2016 *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* draws out a theology of blackness that he calls "otherwise"—never quite new, but an already existing alternative—in collective breath, the breath of Eric Garner's digitally reproduced final words, "I can't breathe," the breath of the Hammond B-3 organ channeled through

a Leslie speaker's rotating components, the breath of black worship (2016). These scholars are especially indebted to earlier field-defining work that acknowledged the commercial pressures on black and brown musicians while emphasizing the power of music to express a liberatory potential that exceeded market strictures (Jones 1963; Baker 1984 and 1987; Gilroy 1993; Griffin 1995; Lipsitz 1997; Davis 1998; Kun 2005; and Brooks 2006).

Whereas Stoever, Redmond, and Crawley amplify a collective resistance within black and brown sonic cultures that market interests cannot circumscribe, other scholars prioritize the extent to which music as a commodity has shaped our understandings of racial difference in the first place. Within the music industry and the broader popular imagination, divisions between white and black music were largely products of record companies and sheet music publishers driving a wedge between genres rather than empirical differences in the music's sound. Miller (2010), for instance, argues that early twentieth-century distinctions between race records and hillbilly music inaugurated an increasingly stark division between music associated with whiteness and music associated with blackness. Hamilton (2016) traces how the distorted sound of a Stratocaster guitar could so convincingly conjure an image of whiteness by the end of the 1960s, when this style of playing emerged through the playing of black guitarists from Chuck Berry to Jimi Hendrix. Nunn (2015) examines what it means for music and text to be *Sounding the Color Line*—that is, both reflecting socially significant racial distinctions and permeating the boundaries between racial categories—while constructing sonic visions of the U.S. South. This work is especially indebted, both explicitly or implicitly, to earlier research that explores how the sounds that circulate within musical culture mediate understandings of racial difference and cultural exchange (Lott 1993; Radano and Bohlman 2000; Meintjes 2003; Radano 2003).

Phonography and racialized modernity

Blackness in body and in sound has long been commodified in the United States, and the scholarship of Stoever, Crawley, and Redmond, among many others, extends Fred Moten's (2003) provocative claim that "the history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist." Moten's groundbreaking *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* reconfigures the received split between speech and writing, between sounding presence and visual silence, as he gathers photography, staged and ephemeral performance, print culture, and sound recording together as disparate but conjoined forms of *phonography*. Sound and sight interanimate each other, producing not an accumulation of the senses but a kind of aesthetic and political urgency that only happens where they intersect. His reading of the famous photograph of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till's broken body, who was lynched by white men 1955 for purportedly whistling at a white woman, is especially incisive for its access to the sonic qualities of such a seemingly silent object:

> You lean into it but you can't; the aesthetic and philosophical arrangements of the photograph—some organizations of and for light—anticipate a looking that cannot be sustained as unalloyed looking but must be accompanied by listening and this, even though what is listened to—echo of a whistle or a phrase, moaning, mourning, desperate testimony and flight—is also unbearable. These are the complex musics of the photograph. This is the sound before the photograph:
>
> Scream inside and out, out from outside, of the image. Bye, baby. Whistling. Lord, take my soul. Redoubled and reanimating, the passion of a seeing that is involuntary and uncontrollable, a seeing that redoubles itself as sound, a passion that is the

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redoubling of Emmett Till's passion, of whatever passion would redeem, crucifixion, lynching, middle passion, passage.

(Moten 2003: 200–201)

Here, Moten performs a kind of sonic archaeology of the visual, demonstrating how hearing and seeing bleed into each other but never collapse into identical sensory formations. The photograph's palpable silence provokes the sensory reception of its overwhelming loudness. Blackness—both as a philosophical concept and a racial category—is loud but invisible, spectacular yet silent.

No clear account of sound as a racializing phenomenon can exist without accounting, as well, for listening as a racialized act. Focusing on acts of forced listening, for instance, can call attention to the ways that sound can become a tool for political suppression that falls along racial and ethnic lines (Cheng 2016; Goodman 2009). Gustavus Stadler (2015) reminds us of racialized, everyday acts of listening in his sweeping critique of the broader field of sound studies. There is no such thing as the "sound itself" of a police siren divorced from its social context, Stadler argues, and whether a bystander hears it as a promise of help or a threat to safety depends on histories of generations of racial and gendered discrimination in policing as well as personal experience with the police. His point is especially poignant given the ongoing crisis—which is sadly nothing new—of police brutality and the escalation of deadly force against black and brown people. Stadler, addressing the recent publication of a number of reference texts such as *Keywords in Sound*, *The Sound Studies Reader*, and the *Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, finds more of a "liberal politics of representation or 'inclusion'" than a sustained engagement with questions of social difference (Stadler 2015). He points readers in the direction of volumes such as Josh Kun and Kara Keeling's edited special issue of *American Quarterly* from 2011 ("Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies," now a book) and his own 2010 edited special issue *Social Text* (*The Politics of Recorded Sound*), both of which are strongly recommended reading for scholars orienting themselves in the field. Like *Sounding Out!*, an American Studies sound studies blog edited by Jennifer Stoever and Dolores Inés Casillas that publishes research addressing issues of sound and social difference, these special journal issues model a range of methodologies for engaging sound and race in intersectional relation to other forms of social difference such as gender, sexuality, disability, class, and nationality.

Stadler's critique contributes to a broader genealogy of thought arguing that blackness and racial difference are constitutive of, rather than ancillary to, modernity. We have known at least since Paul Gilroy's 1993 *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* that modernity itself is a racialized concept, that black music and sonic practices have played an integral role in the development of modernity because black people have been central players on a global scale. The pulsing rhythms and dense textures of black music from the spirituals to the blues, from Jamaican sound system culture to New York City's 1980s hip hop scene, tell a story about modernity that centers on, rather than relegates to the margins, the routes, and roots of a transatlantic black culture. On the whole, *The Black Atlantic* constructs an alternative to what David Michael Levin (1993: 101) diagnoses as "the hegemony of vision" within modernity at the same time that it dismantles one of the tacit assumptions of most prior theories of modernity, which Levin's edited collection reproduced—that white, Eurocentric experience is the primary site for discussing modernity's twin ideals of rationality and the liberal subject. For Gilroy, the "counterculture of modernity" emerges because black people live "both inside and outside modernity," and the music of the African diaspora sounds a "cultural sense of the inability of mere words to convey certain truths."

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Alexander Weheliye (2005: 4) revises Gilroy's foundational claims for blackness in modernity by situating black "technosonic" cultures, especially those that use reproduction technology like the phonograph, printed writing, and visual media squarely within modernity at the same time that these cultures are relegated to a location outside of modernity. Weheliye suggests that the racist presumptions of black people as "primitive"—historical attempts to exclude black people from modern subjectivity—willfully ignore the extent to which black people have adopted fundamentally modern technologies such as the music video, the feature film, the phonograph, the cassette tape, and Western musical notation and adapted them to suit their own expressive purposes. Refusing to reproduce a version of white-centric modernity, Weheliye argues that black sonic practices from drumming and dialect-writing to the mix tape and beyond are not a "counterculture of modernity" responding to a dominant modernity, as Gilroy would have it; rather, they are enactments of a modernity of their own—perhaps what Crawley might call an "otherwise" modernity, one that flourishes in its own right and answers to no white person. There is a structural antagonism between blackness as it circulates in phonographic forms and modernity's inadequate eye, which always privileges whiteness and light and always shields itself from the blackness it opposes. The sounds of blackness make modernity look as it does and, at the same time, these sounds undo modernity's ability to look.

At stake is the dismantling of a binary division between writing and speech, between sounding presence and written silence, that has structured the study of modern cultures writ large. Weheliye is one of many scholars whose work reconsiders the decades-old distinction between oral and literate cultures, which tended to break along social lines—oral/aural culture tended to associate most directly with minoritized ethnic and socioeconomic groups, whereas the literate represented civilization, the high culture of Europe, the sophistication of whiteness. In the 1980s, scholars of African American culture began a systematic revision to the hard distinction between oral culture and literary production, as scholars showed how African American literature and culture consistently infused the literary with the oral, bringing embodied voice to bear on the printed word as a visual artifact (Baker 1984 and 1987; Gates 1988; Jones 1991; Griffin 1995). This scholarship provides a compelling account of the way that African American cultural production has consistently challenged the hierarchy of literacies within modernity. However, not everyone accepts the divide between literate and oral cultures at face value. Richard Cullen Rath (2003), for instance, addresses the conditions of possibility for such a mode of categorizing culture; Rath challenges what he calls the "literacy hypothesis," or the presumption that oral cultures are pre-modern states of nature that progress to visual-based, literate modernity. Rath writes:

> This literacy hypothesis hinges on the assumption of an older, ear-based way of life. Without that, there is no shift in perception, and without that, no literate/oral divide. Yet orality is not established empirically in these theories; it is established by inference. It is what literacy is not, and serves as a foil. The evidence for the transformation of ear-based oral culture to visual print culture is thus circular. Orality is itself the product of literate minds. So-called oral cultures would have no need for the term.
>
> *(Rath 2003: 3)*

I take Rath's point to be this: dividing modern cultures schematically along oral/literate lines flattens distinctions between so-called oral cultures and, furthermore, threatens to reinforce the literate/oral hierarchy that anthropologists and historians often seek to dismantle. Rath's intervention seems to land most forcefully within disciplines that prize empiricism and accept the literate/oral divide as fundamental to modernity. After all, anthropologists, ethnographers, and African Americanists have long known that as Rath (2003: 174) stated "Native American and

African American soundways were much more complex than a simple attribution of 'orality' would allow" (Levine 1977; Feld 1982; Basso 1985; Jones 1999; Harris-Lacewell 2004; Levin 2006; Fulton 2006).

But the force of Rath's provocative question remains: what would modernity sound like, and what would racial difference entail, if we were to imagine a fundamentally different cultural schema than the age-old distinction between the primitive ear and the modern eye, with the entrenched racial connotations embedded in that sensory split? To address the interpenetrations between sound and racial discourse is not simply an attempt to strap a discrete, racialized aural appendage onto an already stable formation of ocularcentric (white) modernity. After all, sound does not simply filter through the ear, adding a single dimension to our understandings of race or modernity. Rather, as Nina Sun Eidsheim (2015) argues, sound is a multisensory phenomenon, a "vibrational practice" that physically affects us and literally moves our flesh toward the incorporation of different modes of knowing ourselves and others. Perhaps it is this potential for transformation, for knowing modernity anew and otherwise, that the study of sound and race promises.

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