

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

Eidsheim, Nina Sun. 2019. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. 288 pp.

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Nina Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music* is indispensable reading for scholars in any discipline engaging issues of voice, timbre, race, or identity. This beautifully written book offers a truly important argument: it is listeners, not singers, who create voice, itself a dynamic social construction, which does not reflect some stable or fixed essence of a vocalizer. The author opens with a premise she calls "the acousmatic question" — the question of "who is this?" that we ask when we hear someone vocalize. Eidsheim argues that the question of who is singing cannot be answered because the answer points back to us, the listening agent. In other words, Eidsheim redirects the scholarly conversation from identifying voices as signifiers of race and other identities to attending to how listeners racialize voices they hear, an act she situates in a history of racist practices in which listeners attribute aspects of timbre (in addition to other physical and behavioural attributes) as essential characteristics of someone's race, gender, or identity. As in her previous work, Eidsheim not only maintains race as a cultural construction, but also presents evidence showing that voice, too, is socially constructed.

Organized in six efficient chapters, Eidsheim outlines the book's central ten-

ets: Chapter 1 argues against essentializing vocal timbre, especially as it relates to vocal pedagogy; Chapter 2 explores the concept of phantom genealogy through a history of the reception of African-American classical singers in the past two centuries; Chapter 3 examines vocal markers of Blackness and masculinity in a case study of Jimmy Scott; Chapter 4 critiques essentialized marketing practices and the reception of racialized vocal fonts in Vocaloid software; Chapter 5 argues for an acknowledgment of vocal craft in performances by iconic Black singers, such as Billie Holiday, whose voice has wrongly been reduced to an essentialized result of her biography and presumed ancestry; and Chapter 6 offers several strategies and a new model of listening stances that can help listeners deconstruct their own problematic listening practices.

Several central concepts govern the monograph. First, the author introduces voice as a "thick event," stressing the multi-dimensional complexity of the "vocal moment" and implying that its reduction to the concept of sound alone denies its richness of quality and its formation by cultural and social forces (5). Second, Eidsheim offers three concepts meant to correct commonly held fallacies about voice: that voice is cultural, not innate; that it is collective, not unique; and that the listener, not the singer, is the source of voice (9). Third, the author observes that due to the "micropolitics" of listening and timbre, the act of listening is never neutral (24). This final observation fuels Eidsheim's larger argument that critics should shift their attention from singers and vocal sound to listeners and how we listen to sound.

Finally, Eidsheim introduces the concept of the “figure of sound (FoS),” which she defines as “a constellation of beliefs in a stable, knowable sound” (50), only to offer a corrective understanding: that sound is neither fixed nor knowable, as listeners ascribe various values to the sounds they hear, shaped by ever-changing cultural and social contexts.

In the second chapter, Eidsheim adds to “FoS” the concept of “phantom genealogy,” which she defines as “the collective conception that voices and difference are essential, stable, and knowable” (90). In detailed historical accounts of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (c.1820-1876) and Matilda Sissieretta Jones (1869-1933), two early African-American classical singers who faced racist treatment from critics and concertgoers alike, the author documents the shift from white abolitionist listeners thinking of Black slave singing as noise to hearing their human emotional expression, a transformation Jon Cruz calls “ethnosympathy” (1999). Eidsheim traces a phantom genealogy in patterns of historical reception, developing belief systems, and racist practices like typecasting set in motion by critics of Greenfield and Jones through the difficulties faced by 20th- and 21st-century African-American classical singers such as Marian Anderson (1897-1993). Though style is a learned phenomenon, Eidsheim shows that listeners still explain the style of African-American classical singers as timbrally Black. Eidsheim offers a remedy to perpetuating problematic phantom genealogies by calling for listeners to consciously deconstruct practices that continually reinscribe notions that timbre and race are essential aspects of one’s being.

Chapter 3 traces the history of singer Jimmy Scott (1925-2014), whose high

voice complicated people’s responses to his Black heterosexual masculinity. Eidsheim shows how Scott faced challenges through his career because of the perceived mismatch between his voice and identity: he was first presented as a novelty act, then as an unnamed, uncredited, and/or miscredited artist, and later as otherworldly, non-human, a person whose voice signified death and otherness. In collaboration, Eidsheim and Jody Kreiman determined that though Scott’s mean fundamental frequency is lower than that of his contemporaries Marvin Gaye, Smokey Robinson, and Frankie Valli, to whom listeners have generally ascribed masculine traits despite their higher fundamental frequencies, listeners have not considered Scott masculine. Clearly pitch alone does not determine listeners’ perceptions of masculinity or femininity. Eidsheim hypothesizes instead that the difference between Scott and his contemporaries is his non-falsetto delivery and “timbral evenness” (110). Although Eidsheim rightly argues that we must look beyond pitch alone to understand vocal markers, it isn’t until later in the chapter that she considers other aspects, such as prosody and inflection, as well as a host of extra-musical performative markers, which I would argue are just as central (if not more so) as pitch and timbre in contributing to listeners’ ascription of gender, masculinity, and femininity to vocal delivery.

Building off the author’s earlier research, Chapter 4 is a fascinating examination of Vocaloid software, which takes thousands of recorded vocal samples and allows users to input lyrics, notes, and rhythms, resulting in a “synthesized” voice (which isn’t exactly synthesized, since the software relies on sampling to produce a computer-generated voice). Eidsheim

considers Vocaloid software that claims to portray two “soul” singers — one gendered female (Lola) and the other male (Leon). Marketed as backing vocalists, packaging and other marketing tools present these voices as Black. Reception from users, however, shows these software packages weren’t successful stylistically, thus revealing the fallacy and social construction of conflating skin colour and genre, as developers used Black singers to record the vocal samples used in the Vocaloid software. Eidsheim shows evidence of fan art and cosplay that racially transform the images and representation of Leon and Lola, and other vocal fonts. She further examines how essentialized notions of voice fuel the controversies that ensued after the release of the software.

Chapter 5 considers impersonations of Billie Holiday’s supposedly inimitable voice and examines how listeners and critics have “naturalized” Holiday’s voice. The author argues against these practices, showing how people equate Holiday’s biography with the quality of her voice without recognizing the singer’s practiced artistry. Eidsheim further argues for acknowledging singers’ craft, technique, and style rather than reducing their vocality to an essential trait linked to biography and personal suffering. In my view, in much popular music discourse, critics often assume that emotive aspects of vocal delivery somehow derive from an artist’s biography, particularly when the artist has had a troubled life. Matthew LeMay makes a similar argument about music criticism regarding Elliott Smith; like Eidsheim, LeMay argues that Smith’s artistry and dedication to his craft, not his struggles with drug addiction and history of abuse, enabled the emotive impact of his music (2009).

The final chapter synthesizes earlier arguments and, in line with the book’s central tenets, presents strategies for overcoming our problematic listening practices. First, Eidsheim offers “the pause” as a strategy that recognizes vocal technique and style, and moves away from unexamined essentialism (182). Second, Eidsheim argues that timbre itself possesses no inherent meaning, but rather that listeners ascribe meaning to it. Finally, the author presents a model of three listening stances, each of which gets further away from essentializing practices.

Notwithstanding the occasional double negative, which obfuscates meaning, the book is stylistically engaging and accessible. Beyond style, its arguments are central to anyone engaging issues related to voice, race, or sound across a variety of humanistic, social scientific, and interdisciplinary fields. Like Eidsheim’s earlier work, *The Race of Sound* presents meticulously researched, compelling, and detailed accounts of reception, race, and voice throughout the careers of important historical figures. The author provides ample evidence to support her groundbreaking arguments that will give readers a new understanding of how we construct voice, race, and identity every time we engage in the act of listening. 🍀

REFERENCES

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