



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

[Review of: N.S. Eidsheim (2019) The Race of Sound : Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music]

Bosma, H.

DOI

[10.4000/transposition.7415](https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.7415)

Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Transposition: Musique et Sciences Sociales

License

CC BY-SA

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Bosma, H. (2022). [Review of: N.S. Eidsheim (2019) The Race of Sound : Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music]. *Transposition: Musique et Sciences Sociales*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.7415>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)



Transposition

Musique et Sciences Sociales

10 | 2022

Les flops en musique

Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*

Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2019, 268 p.

Hannah Bosma



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/transposition/7415>

DOI: 10.4000/transposition.7415

ISSN: 2110-6134

Publisher

CRAL - Centre de recherche sur les arts et le langage

Electronic reference

Hannah Bosma, "Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*", *Transposition* [Online], 10 | 2022, Online since 29 June 2022, connection on 02 July 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transposition/7415> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transposition.7415>

This text was automatically generated on 2 July 2022.



La revue *Transposition* est mise à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Partage dans les Mêmes Conditions 4.0 International.

Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*

Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2019, 268 p.

Hannah Bosma

REFERENCES

Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2019, 268 p.

- 1 The question of how to de-essentialize the concept of the voice may seem a theoretical exercise, but Nina Sun Eidsheim shows in her book *The Race of Sound* its important political stakes, offering both an analysis of racialized receptions of voices and a theory of voice and listening, with case studies coming from such wide-ranging fields as opera, jazz and voice synthesis software. The book starts with elaborate ontological, epistemological and methodological considerations – in line with the author’s concern that misconceptions about voice perpetuate racialized notions of voice. “[i]f we think about this problem simply through questions around race, and avoid examining basic understandings of voice, we will fail to get to the root of how categories, including race, are constructed through vocal timbre” (p. 40). Central in Eidsheim’s theoretical framework are “three correctives” and her notions of “listening to listening”, “figure of sound”, “the practice of the pause” and “critical performance practice”. The theoretical considerations and concepts exposed in the introduction come back throughout the book and acquire depth in the case studies.
- 2 Chapter 1 discusses how learning to use the voice is strongly related to listening practices. Based on sixteen years of experiences with classical singing education in Scandinavia and the USA and on thirteen interviews with voice teachers, Eidsheim shows that singing teachers often believe that they can hear racialized or ethnic

differences in voices and that they think it is best to respect and amplify in their teaching these supposed differences, thereby causing a feedback loop: “These beliefs lead mentors to encourage certain timbral features over others, which causes the re-enculturation of racialized vocal timbre” (p. 48). Eidsheim argues that feedback processes between listeners and vocalizers are not only present in formal music teaching, but also in the informal vocal learning practices in which humans are embedded their whole life: “daily formal and informal voice lessons plant an investment in race into both vocalizers’ bodies and listeners’ assessments” (p. 41), while “[e]very utterance, and every instance of listening to oneself and others, is a voice lesson” (p. 187).

- 3 Thus, listening practices influence both the interpretation of voices and the development of voices to a large extent. Eidsheim summarizes this in the “corrective” “voice’s source is not the singer; it is the listener” (p. 9-13, 65). Moreover, vocalizing is learned by listening to and vocalizing with others – a social practice. This is summarized with the corrective “voice is not singular; it is collective” (p. 9-11). Eidsheim argues that the possibilities of the human voice are infinite, and that particular vocal characteristics are the result of cultural influences, formal and informal vocal training, and choices of the vocalizer – “style and technique” (p. 10, 21, 30-37). Listening and vocal practices are cultural practices. This is in line with the corrective “voice is not innate; it is cultural” (p. 9). These three correctives may not cover all aspects of the voice, but are indeed “correctives”, meant to correct “broad misconceptions” about the voice (p. 9, 40). Eidsheim is “not insisting on a more perfect understanding of the voice”, but instead “aim[ing] to confront the continually developing understanding of meaning, the choices and power structures at its base” (p. 21). To do so, Eidsheim is “listening to listening”, focusing on listening practices, on the reception and interpretation of voices (p. 27-28, 57-58). I find this turn in line with the focus on listener-response in feminist musicology, discussed by Marcia Citron and Joke Dame and inspired by the reader-response criticism in literary studies of Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser, Jonathan Culler and others¹ (but Eidsheim does not refer to listener-response theory).
- 4 Eidsheim suggests that to deracialize vocal sound a listener must stop projecting labels on sound, “refuse to take any description of a voice for granted” and not “reduce the heterogeneity of a vocal moment, and the vocalizer’s style and technique, in one name” (p. 181-182). Eidsheim suggests that we could change our listening habits by “the practice of the pause” (p. 181-184, 197-200), by interrupting our automatic categorization and interpretation, “to move us from unexamined essentialization to a consideration of our participation in the process of reduction” (p. 182). This may function as an answer to Jennifer Stoeber’s remark that “[r]ecognizing and mobilizing one’s own agency to change how we listen is key to breaking down the sonic color line.”²
- 5 Eidsheim states that our listening is usually structured by “the acousmatic question”, or the “foundational” question “Who is this? Who is speaking?” when listening to a human voice (p. 1). The term “acousmatic” was introduced by Pierre Schaeffer in the 1950s. Schaeffer used it to designate the situation of hearing a sound without seeing its cause and related it to his ideal of “reduced listening”: listening to sound as sound, as *objet sonore*, independent of causes or meaning.³ However, Eidsheim’s “acousmatic question” refers to an opposite tendency: to the desire or supposed ability to recognize

the source, the vocalizer, his/her identity, emotional state, health, mood, etcetera: the belief “that if I listen carefully to a sound – in the absence of a visually presented or otherwise known source – I should be able to identify a source, and that any limitations are due to inexperience or ignorance” (p. 2). The following chapters show how this prevalence of the “acousmatic question” results in racialized listening practices.

- 6 Chapter 2 shows the influence of racialized listening on African American singers’ careers in opera, who are often stereotypically cast in roles of black or exotic characters (*Porgy and Bess*, *Otello*) or of “others” (outcasts, villains). Eidsheim wonders what could explain the identification of an opera singer as “black”, because opera is a standardized practice, notated on sheet music, with established, well defined and intensely trained aesthetic, technical and stylistic conventions – eliminating vocal style and pronunciation as possible markers of ethnicity; and opera is “a world of suspended disbelief”, where the visual appearance of the singer does not have to match with the character in terms of age or body size (p. 84-85). Moreover, she argues, the European operatic tradition is secondary to all American classical singers, so why single out African Americans? (p. 69) Given that pitches and durations are fixed in classical opera, the supposed “blackness” of these voices is projected by listeners onto singers’ timbre as a belief in an essential, innate “black voice”, Eidsheim argues. Additionally, a “phantom genealogy” of receptions, representations and practices of black singing – such as minstrel shows, spirituals, and segregated musical practices – and “unspoken beliefs about a uniform black culture” go with the stereotypical roles of black characters and the reception of black singers in terms of race instead of vocal style and technique (p. 87). Eidsheim focuses on the listener as the location to overcome this tendency, “to cure the pain of being reduced to the sum of a phantom genealogy constructed within a racist history”, by deconstructing listening (p. 89-90).
- 7 Chapter 3 extends the discussion to gender by focusing on Jimmy Scott (1925-2014), a male jazz singer with Kallmann syndrome, a hormonal condition that affected his voice due to a low level of testosterone. By comparing his vocals with those of other male vocalists, Eidsheim shows that the gender ambiguity that listeners hear in Scott’s singing is more related to timbre than to pitch. Vocalists like James Brown or Marvin Gaye sang even higher than Scott, but Scott, unlike the others, sang all pitches with the same voice type and didn’t sing the high notes in falsetto. Eidsheim argues that this contributed to the neglect Scott suffered during most of his career and to the projection of queerness onto his persona later on. Scott, however, reflected these projections back to the listener by stressing that he saw himself “as a normal guy”.⁴ Eidsheim argues that Scott was “performing disidentification” and that this may be understood as an “extraordinary pedagogical move”: “if we listen to our own listening to Scott, he offers us the opportunity to confront the *habitus* of that listening, that choir of voices to which we compare every new voice” (p. 111-112).
- 8 Chapter 4 discusses the reception and use of the singing software Vocaloid. Eidsheim shows that the listener-users of Vocaloid tend to connect a Vocaloid voice with a (real or imagined) human origin: with the voice provider (each Vocaloid voice has a library of pre-recorded voice sounds provided by an often anonymous professional vocalist) or with fan art depicting an imaginary vocalist. Such essentializing tendencies are prevalent in the reception and marketing practices around Vocaloid, Eidsheim shows. Highly interesting is the case of Lola and Leon, Vocaloid’s first artificial voices. These were not a success: marketed as artificial “soul singers”, the software users perceived

these voices as inadequate for this genre, because they heard a strange pronunciation. Eidsheim analyses that this was caused by the essentialist notion of the voice that the software producers adhered to. The voice providers for Lola and Leon were two black soul singers, Jamaican and British, working in the UK. These voice providers were asked to record lists of syllables for the Vocaloid library. It turned out that while they were not singing soul music, their voices did not have a “soul” sound, but instead their primary Jamaican or British accent; whereas when singing soul music, they would do so with American English pronunciation, by their professional knowledge of this musical genre. Eidsheim argues that this shows that there is no essential black soul voice and that the soul music character of a voice is produced by the style and technique of soul singing and by its musical context, not by a supposedly plain, natural, essential, black voice. The failure of the Vocaloid voices Lola and Leon was due to “an erroneous conflation of professional knowledge about a musical genre with the assumption that blackness infuses the voice throughout all vocal circumstances” (p. 126).

- 9 Style and technique are central in Eidsheim’s discussion of the vocal performances of jazz singer Billie Holiday (1915-1959) and her imitators in Chapter 5. Eidsheim discusses how Holiday’s vocal performances are often interpreted as autobiographical, mirroring her life experiences as well as the collective experience of black women, with a “common explanatory thread [...] that the artist’s skill is reduced to an expression of biographical circumstances” (p. 156). However, intriguingly close imitations of Holiday’s singing by vocalists with very different backgrounds and bodies, such as 65-year-old male drag artist Joey Arias and 7-year-old girl Angelina Jordan, show that Holiday’s singing was not determined by her supposedly natural, biological, racial or biographical essence, but by her artistic choices, style and technique, Eidsheim argues. I would be interested in a more detailed discussion of the musical and vocal style and technique of Billie Holiday, therefore I am happy to read that Eidsheim is working with Eliza Jane Schneider on a forthcoming technical analysis of Holiday’s voice (p. 237 n. 49). Schneider is a voice artist who travelled the world to collect recordings of English dialects and analysed voices “as a technical puzzle waiting to be solved” to prepare for her voice roles in the animation series *South Park* (p. 168). She is therefore herself an example of the approach Eidsheim promotes: to consider voice as style and technique. The artistic agency that Eidsheim rightly assigns to Billie Holiday and other vocalists⁵ seems to contrast with her corrective that “voice’s source is not the singer; it is the listener”. But for singers, listening is crucial in learning and developing their style and technique, Eidsheim argues. Moreover, Eidsheim’s choice to focus on style and technique is indeed a choice for a specific listening strategy. Eidsheim proposes to base this listening strategy on embodied knowledge of vocal style and technique that can be acquired by experimenting with voice production, and introduces the term “critical performance practice” (p. 17): “Building self-knowledge and educating others about vocal style and technique offers a path to denaturalizing voice” (p. 169).

- 10 For Eidsheim, de-essentializing listening is necessary to stop racializing vocal sound:

[N]ot only is the timbral identification of race not a direct result of racist views, but, if we work under such an assumption, we will ultimately fail to address and deconstruct racialized vocal timbre. The perpetuation of racialized timbre goes much deeper and is based on fundamental beliefs about sound. [...] I posit that the practice of essentializing vocal timbre is the unexamined foundation upon which racialized vocal timbre is maintained. [...] If the myth of essential vocal timbre is debunked, voices become immune to racialization. (p. 154)

- 11 This may raise questions that are not addressed. Would a non-essentialist, constructionist conception of the voice, considering voices as formed through informal vocal learning practices in ethnic or social groups, preclude the problems of racial profiling? Are there other ways of considering and evaluating “difference”?⁶ Here I miss dialogue with other studies and positions in the wider debates on identity, difference and essentialism in relation to race and gender.
- 12 Throughout the book Eidsheim stresses that the racialization of vocal timbre is caused by the idea of sound as a stable, knowable entity, and by the habit of categorizing sound:
- Thus, while not comparable in effect or ramification, listening assessments ranging from mood, gender, age, health, authenticity, class, ethnicity, and racial tone arise from a general framework that involves the possibility of quantifying and knowing sound. All of these assessments are enabled by the naturalization of sound as a specific knowable entity (e.g., A-sharp) and as a more ambiguous knowable entity (e.g., as authentic or truthful). (p. 49)
- For example, “black voice” is an observation born from an encultured notion of sound that expects fidelity to a referent and listens for difference. (p. 51)
- 13 Eidsheim uses the term “Figure of Sound” (“FoS”) to refer to the reduction of sound by categorization, naming and labelling, and to the assumption that sound is a fixed object, a stable, knowable sound (p. 50-52). This stance against “knowing” and categorizing sound may seem problematic in itself, but its function is to counter-balance and open up essentialist conceptions of voice. Additionally, Eidsheim provides a richer and more nuanced account with room for a dynamic conception of knowledge: the meaning, naming and interpretation of voice sounds and timbre are not immanent to these sounds but bound up with conventions of communities, and the names and descriptions of sound refer both back to the listener-interpreter and further to other meanings – “it is not possible to know voice, vocal identity, and meaning as such; we can know them only in their multidimensional, always unfolding processes and practices, indeed in their multiplicities” (p. 3). In the last chapter, Eidsheim argues that interpreting and naming sound does not have to lead to assigning fixed, essentialized meanings, but could be part of an infinite chain of interpretations, of non-totalizing meanings and knowledge about the voice. It is this process that transpires in the intriguing case studies and that may be continued by the reader.

NOTES

1. CITRON Marcia J., *Gender and the Musical Canon*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993; DAME Joke, *Het zingend lichaam: Betekenissen van de stem in westerse vocale muziek*, Kampen, Kok Agora, 1994.
2. MURPHY Maria, “Interview Series: Jennifer Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*”, IASPMUS December 1, 2017, <https://iaspm-us.net/interview-series-the-sonic-color-line/>,

accessed 14 December 2020. See also STOEVER Jennifer, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, New York, NYU Press, 2016.

3. CHION Michel, *Guide des objets sonores : Pierre Schaeffer et la recherche musicale*, Paris, Ina-GRM/Buchet-Chastel, 1983, p. 18-20.

SCHAEFFER Pierre, *Traité des objets musicaux*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1966, p. 92-94.

SCHAEFFER Pierre, *Traktaat van de muzikale objecten: een interdisciplinair onderzoek*. Introduction, selection and translation by Konrad BOEHMER, Ubbergen, Tandem Felix, 2006 [1966], p. 55-56.

4. Scott quoted by Eidsheim, p. 112, from Ritz David, *Faith in Time: The Life of Jimmy Scott*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002, p. 70.

5. For my discussion of vocal creativity and agency, closely related to what Eidsheim names “style and technique”, and my critique on Cavarero’s neglect of this, see BOSMA Hannah, “*Thema (Omaggio a Joyce): A listening experience as homage to Cathy Berberian*”, KARANTONIS Pamela, Anne SIVUOJA, Francesca PLACANICA and Pieter VERSTRAETE (eds), *Cathy Berberian: Pioneer of Contemporary Vocality*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, p. 97-117.

6. For example, the linguist John Baugh distinguishes negative, discriminatory and positive, preferential linguistic profiling of African American Vernacular English and other dialects. BAUGH John, “Linguistic Profiling”, in MAKONI Sinfree et al. (eds), *Black Linguistics: Language, Society, and Politics in Africa and the Americas*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 167-180. Although Eidsheim mentions strategic essentialism, she does not elaborate on the possibility of various situated essentialisms. For a deconstructive discussion of the dichotomy of essentialism versus constructivism, see FUSS Diana, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*, New York, Routledge, 1989. Fuss writes about “essentialisms” and claims that constructionism “operates as a more sophisticated form of essentialism” (p. xii).

AUTHORS

HANNAH BOSMA

Hannah Bosma is an interdisciplinary musicologist specialized in voice, gender, electroacoustic music and preservation. Currently she works at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) for her postdoc research project “Preservation as performance: Liveness, loss and viability in electroacoustic music” (2019-2023) and is project leader of the research project “From archive to network: Syrian music in the Jaap Kunst audio collection and beyond” (2021-2023), both funded by the Dutch national organization for scientific research NWO. She lectured on archiving art and gender, voice and music technology at the UvA, Kunstuniversität Graz and other academic institutes, organized the conference *The Art of Voice Synthesis* (UvA 2016), and worked for music and arts organizations. Her publications include “Unsettling performances, soundwalks and loudspeakers: Gender in electroacoustic music and other sounding arts”, in M. Cobussen,

V. Meelberg, and B. Truax (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Sounding Art* (2017) and her doctoral dissertation *The Electronic Cry: Voice, gender and electroacoustic music* (UvA 2013).