

Book Review

***The Race of Sound* by Nina Sun Eidsheim, Duke University Press, 2019**

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The Race of Sound gives an insight into topics related to African American music from the perspective of politicized listening, timbre and vocality. Everyone can sing a song and speak a language, but only talented singers and orators are exceptional to their audience. The singers' performances analyzed by the author of "The Race of Sound" come from the rich history of African American music. While Eidsheim tells the stories of both very and less famous singers, and focuses on the remarkable voices of Billie Holiday, Jimmy Scott and Marian Anderson, the book is not about their innate talent. It is about those vocal traits that are socially acquired either as part of a linguistic community or as part of culturally marked training techniques. Indeed, the author explains that when singers improvise, their performance appears spontaneous and natural, but it actually is the result of a lifetime enculturation process. Moreover, Eidsheim claims that, regrettably, vocal training is often influenced by pedagogical preconceptions based on political ideology.

The author relies on philosophical theories related to the human body to explain and illustrate the many ways politics and society, in general, shape misconceptions about identity. The practice of active listening produces meanings which never are neutral and therefore the act of listening becomes a political act. Listeners identify gender, race, vocal technique of singers based on series of assumptions about the nature of voice and expectations about the person to whom it belongs, and in the process they generate socially constructed labels such as the expressions 'in-tune', 'out-of-tune' and 'voice of a black man'. In every society most people think that the timbre of the human voice is a biological trait, but this book proves that the voice and its qualities are instead socially produced and the tone of the voice is linked to the cultural-historical formation of the politics of difference. The consequences of the history of discrimination and racism are then felt in the music business. Proof of that arises from the unfairness of professional critics towards African American singers. For example, the author reports and critically discusses racist descriptions, role restrictions, biased hiring processes that offend the modern sensibility in terms of lack of social equality, and poor attention to diversity and inclusion.

Eidsheim's exposure of discrimination and unfair evaluation of African American talented singers has the side effect of motivating the reader to listen to and appreciate all singers' performances of opera arias and famous covers of classical and jazz songs that are mentioned throughout the book. The author also takes into consideration the visual aspect of music: we discover that posters, pictures in magazines, album covers, and portrait photographs are highly stereotypical in the business of classical music, jazz, popular songs and gospels. Stereotypes and clichés are part of general marketing strategies, and they are typically used to sell, to attract attention, to target specific population segments, and music is not an exception. The part of the book related to gender discrimination is an invitation to listen and compare the wider range of talented male voices, and to learn about spectrum and timbre, which is, apparently, more significant than the pitch in our grasp of social, linguistic and gender identity of singers and speakers. In this way, readers are invited into a journey that is both historical and sociological, and in the process, they learn about music and language varieties and how a new perspective can open new ways of understanding the potentials of the human voice.

The social practice of listening creates meanings, and this book could be used as a guide to listening to music, and at the same time, to deconstruct common social assumptions about voice and physical identities. What we read about language and society calls for further investigating the element of timbre in language varieties from a sociolinguistic perspective. Language diversity is a significant topic for the science of linguistics. Linguists generally understand language varieties and variations in terms of lexicon and phonology, focusing the attention towards pitch and intonation as well as phonetic variations, among other aspects. This book adds a new insight that can be useful to geolinguistics, because it makes the case for timbre as an element that allows for distinctions associated to the various language communities.

Timbre is also the source of speakers' understanding of feelings and attitudes in conversational exchanges, and it goes beyond the semantic meaning of words. Linguistically timbre is a prevailing trait over lexical words whenever the listener hears a timbrally contradicted sentence such as "I'm okay". Timbre can also say something about the health and the inner state of an individual, and it is continuously assessed and acted upon. The author points out that the vocal timbre is also used as a diagnostic evaluation which allows for statements like "she is hysterical" or "she is lying".

The chapter dedicated to the various versions of the software suite Vocaloid, that allow users to access a database of synthesized voices and characters, also discusses the misuse of timbre and the failure to recreate authentic human vocal diversity by means of software-based manipulation. Another important issue that the author discusses is the use of voice-based assessments regarding race in profiling alleged criminals in court cases—for example the epigraph from the famous court case *California versus Simpson*. The author also reports that in the USA potential renters are often turned down on the phone when they sound nonwhite or non-American. Social and racialized expectations are also common regarding musical genre, vocal ability and vocal sound; therefore, the author claims that acquiring awareness about timbral discrimination could be compared to exposing discrimination based on skin color or hair texture.

The following comment is restricted to the aspects of each chapter related to the interface between linguistics, timbre and social context. The introduction of the book explains that when tape recording and telephone were invented the link between the source of the voice and the voice itself became technologically separated and it is now a common habit to try and recognize who calls you on the phone, as well as the identity of singers or speakers heard from a CD, MP3 file, from the radio or even the television—when we are not watching but we can still hear it. This happens because we are interested in the causes and the source behind the sound that we hear. Listening practices and self-monitoring of voice are conditions of participation in a culture in general but also the source of broad misconceptions. The author, at first, plays with the idea that misconceptions can be corrected through awareness of scientific truths about the voice; but then she points out that deconstruction works better than any corrective strategy in arguing against distorted social assumptions. To pursue this purpose, the author makes some interesting references, the first of which is *The Speech Chain: The Physics and Biology of Spoken Language* where Peter B. Denes and Elliot N. Pinson describe speaking as a practice where speaker and listener are both part of the communicative process. Another fascinating reference is *Blues legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* where Angela Davis compares Billie Holiday's challenge of the boundaries between white popular songs and African American cultural tradition to the historical appropriation of the English Language by African Americans, as well as their appropriation of the 19th century romantic novel. Another reference on the issue of racialized voices is Jacques Derrida who claimed that the research for meaning consists of a series of deferrals. The listener is the originator of meaning and on this basis the author's aim is to confront the developing understanding of meaning, the choices and power structures at its base, and the selective choices the listener must carry out in order to make sense of a voice.

The first chapter opens with a strong argument against linguistic profiling and cultural beliefs about the connection between voice and biological categories such as gender and race. In this chapter we also learn that audiovisual markers of race are highly subjective, that lexical choices and pronunciation are tied to speech communities and therefore are not biological traits. The study of music proves that vocal styles originate in a speech community and they extend beyond it.

The innovative perspective of the book is the exposure of the lack of scientific investigations and efforts in explaining the process of racialized listening practices even though it is well known that voice is a culturally mediated essence. The author points out that the history of African American vocal performance and the study of the rich African American music culture has not yet clarified that the vocal timbre has nothing to do with race. She then states that this is the result of the legacy of the nineteenth century racism which preserves contemporary misconceptions, for example, the presupposition that a specific timbre is unquestionably African American. According to Eidsheim we can stop the persistence of preconceptions about African American timbre only by engaging in a careful examination of the basic understandings of voice. Eidsheim proceeds in deconstructing the aspect of timbre by identifying the process around the areas of enunciation, articulation, and intonation. These areas are linked to specific choices that create a pattern of vocalization. Timbre is a choice that speakers make, exactly as they choose words, pronunciation, enunciation and intonation, and that is why vocalizers may choose to adopt or discontinue timbral patterns.

The research on the vocal timbre is contextualized as part of the study of body technologies. The author mentions Marcell Mauss, who, in *Sociology and Psychology*, coined the term "body technologies" to refer to the education of the vision and the walking. Another important reference is Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past*, which discusses the education and shaping of audition. Eidsheim also makes direct reference to Foucault who, in *Discipline and Punish*, determined that the body is object and target of power. Body technologies shape actions to affirm social structures of recognition such as strides that are evaluated as 'masculine', or enunciation which is labeled as 'upper class'.

In this way recognition is the result of encultured knowledge and therefore timbral markers that suggest a correlation with gender, race, and age have power and meaning only in the cultural context within which they are defined. The vocal timbre is then part of the encultured performance of a singer which in turn depends on the 'body politic'. The question that the author names 'the acousmatic question', is socially acquired and it is about the association between the tone of the voice and the identity of the speaker or singer. In this process performance practices that create timbres are linked to assumptions regarding difference, as if they were not the product of such practices but as if they were natural predisposition or innate traits. It is known that artists learn by listening to other artists' performances through the critical filter provided by their instructors. However, Eidsheim points out that the general attitudes around sound create the core of the feedback given by instructors about the vocal usage of a singer, and it is the instructor's feedback which slowly creates the core of the vocalist choices and habituation. A related concept is identified as "ethnic vocal timbre" which, according to the author, vocal pedagogists enhance by correcting and advising students. The author uncovers the faults of this vocal pedagogy in claiming that classical voice teachers pair timbre profiles with identity.

The second chapter is dedicated to opera singers and the discrimination that they had to put up with for a long time. Magazine's critics and the casting process, both played a part in creating or maintaining discrimination concerning African American opera singers. Marian Anderson is the most important figure, but others African American opera singers are mentioned, and their performances are described and their stories of professional discrimination are revealed. This chapter is so detailed in reporting biased assessment of performances that cannot but make the reader want to listen to the voices of African American opera singers with clear mind and open heart.

The third chapter is dedicated to Scott's story who suffered discrimination in a musical-cultural context where blackness was a powerful symbol of masculinity. Scott is presented as the challenger of the constructed identity of black heterosexual masculinity stereotypes. The story of Scott is the story of discrimination against a voice that was perceived of as androgynous and for that reason caused so much hate against him and discomfort in giving him credit on the part of the jazz industry. This unjust, unfair, hateful reaction lasted for many years until the release of the album *All the Way* in 1992, which earned him a Grammy nomination. After that success Scott maintained an international profile, re-released old albums, recorded new works, and earned many prestigious awards until his death in 2014. The album *The Source* is an example of stereotypical album covers because it portrays the face of a beautiful, young, black woman instead of the portrait of the male artist.

The fourth chapter is about Vocaloid and its various releases. The author describes in detail the story of the success and failures of Vocaloid characters and its voices databases in English, Spanish, and Japanese and Hatsune Miku's songs as a breakout success with otaku culture. The fifth chapter is about the stereotypical images of Billie Holiday whose borderline life was portrayed in her songs and in iconic photographs. In this chapter the author discusses the role of collective identity mentioning autobiographies as sources of artistic expressions, and reporting that the association between age-related markers and singers has baffled entire audiences when imitators of iconic voices had a totally different appearance than that of the original singer.

The last chapter assesses the new way we should listen to singers and reminds us that old prejudices may appear when we hear someone speaking. Stereotypes about the physical aspect of a person resurface today whenever the verbal language of a speaker does not match the expected race or ethnicity that is culturally associated to it. Obama is an example that Eidsheim discusses because his voice has been labelled as too white or not black enough. Here again it is the timbre and not only the pitch that the audience is perceiving of as non-correspondent to the racialized voice. The conclusion is that both artists and skilled orators should be able to choose their style and technical growth in less prejudice-based pedagogy.

All in all, the book is engaging, and provides an incredible amount of facts that can inform the reader about the latest research about musicology and the political, socio-cultural and linguistic impact of timbre. The book can also be read as a guide to listen to music and singers that made the history of African American music, and an invitation to pay attention to the element of timbre in both talented and common speakers of all ages, social communities, and of those whose voice is not clearly associated to a specific gender. Finally, the book is not completely exhaustive about the deconstruction of social identities. Some of Eidsheim's claims may appear controversial, and sometimes her language comes across as highly technical when discussing music and not technical enough when discussing linguistic issues, but she certainly makes the point about timbre as a non-innate trait that has a role in scientific research about the human voice potentials and about human languages and their social context.