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

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Gaines ends with an Epilogue on Rachel Dolezal, “The Last Soul Sister.” Even if readers remember when Dolezal came on the scene because of the unavoidable news coverage, they are sure to learn more from Gaines’s careful research. Gaines demonstrates that like her forerunners in this genealogy of racial impersonation, Dolezal is a “failed white ally, using overdetermined black experiences to overshadow structural inequality” (169). But what Gaines takes from Dolezal’s insistence upon clinging to blackness—even in the face of Black women’s articulations of how her doing so is damaging—is a reminder of how Black people value blackness, even as they understand race to be a construction. Gaines insists, “Blackness, even in its vulnerability, pain, and suffering, is an identity worth performing and pursuing” (171).

For all the pitfalls Gaines traces, she maintains: “We must continue to crave an epistemology of empathy” that improves upon those currently in play by equipping ourselves “to turn empathy into systemic and necessary change” (171). By tracing precisely how decades of racial impersonation have failed, *Black for a Day* challenges readers to think harder about what empathy really looks like and should achieve. If one simply considers gender (cis and trans), sexuality, and mental and physical ability, it becomes clear that achieving empathy is a challenge worth issuing and accepting.

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**Nina Sun Eidsheim. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Durham: Duke UP, 2018. 288 pp. \$25.95.**

**Reviewed by Brittney L. Proctor, University of California, Irvine**

**T**he recent aesthetic turn in research on Black music has proffered new ways of theorizing sound *and* its source. Nina Sun Eidsheim’s *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* turns to vocality to articulate the fault lines between Black sound and Black vocalizers.

*The Race of Sound* unfurls the ways voice and the aesthetics of voice are socially produced. In illuminating the ways listeners quantify race via sound and produce racial subjectivities via vocal timbre (meaning the color or tone of a voice; everything about the sound of voice, with the exception of pitch and duration), she disavows the idea that voice and vocal performance are natural phenomena. She also turns to performance and the cultural-historical formation of the timbral politics of difference to disentangle the relationship between race, gender, vocal technique, and timbre. For Eidsheim, comprehending voice remains central to understanding human experience. As such, she is interested in dispelling the assumed relationship between vocal timbre and vocalization (25).

The work builds upon Eidsheim’s *Sensing Sound: Singing and Listening as Vibrational Practice* (Duke UP, 2015), which theorizes sound as “materially contingent.” In *Sensing Sound*, Eidsheim argues that the naturalization of the way we measure sound, and the sonic parameters therein, shapes how we listen to voice and experience vocal performance//listening to voice. In this way, *Sensing Sound* and *The Race of Sound* are “companion volumes” that both address the contingency of sound (5). Where *The Race of Sound* differs is that it proffers a lesson in *listening* to voice.

In a quest to know more about the “thick vocal event” (as theorized in *Sensing Sound*) and, in particular, vocal timbre, Eidsheim poses that the acousmatic question “*Who Is This?*” offers insight into the instability of voice. Three postulates emerge from the acousmatic question and are taken up in the chapters of the book:

- 1) Voice is not singular; it is collective
- 2) Voice is not innate; it is cultural
- 3) Voice's source is not the singer; it is the listener

Inverting the “acousmatic question” (the listener’s question of the vocalizer), Eidsheim advocates for a form of listening that would allow us to *listen* to vocalizers in a self-reflexive, denaturalized way. What she terms a “listening-to-listening framework” forces listeners to ask, “*Who am I, who hears this,*” calling listeners to be mindful about the ways their subjectivity shapes the practice of listening (22, 24). *The Race of Sound* aims to show how we can better understand voice by analyzing how we *listen* to voice. A few impediments to this aim include the “deeply engrained” idea that voice is natural and essential, the inability to ruminate on the ways voice is structured through listening, and the two distinct “camps” of voice scholarship: “the measurable” and “the symbolic” (14).

The measurable camp of voice scholarship treats voice as a material, unambiguous phenomenon. Voice scholarship that presumes voice is symbolic assumes voice can produce meaning at the level of the symbolic, divorced from the material conditions of voice. Accordingly, voice studies struggles with cross-pollinating these two camps. Eidsheim uses the methodology of *critical performance practice* to upend the roadblock of treating voice as either measurable or symbolic, revealing the codependent relationship between the two.

The six chapters of the book address a different facet related to the naturalization of voice. Chapter one, “Formal and Informal Pedagogies: Believing in Race, Teaching Race, Hearing Race,” uses data from sixteen years’ worth of participant observation in classical vocal training to consider how performance and pedagogy in this setting is rooted in the racialization and gendering of vocal timbre. Voice pedagogy and instructors presume voice can be quantified and “known” (49). Thus, both formal and informal voice lessons become the terrain for making racial and gendered meaning through voice. Turning from these logics, the chapter argues that voice/vocal performance is rooted in enculturation (the acquisition of vocal style and technique from culture and society). Eidsheim argues that we can address the “politics of listening” by disavowing presumptions about voice “at the outset of listening, and through attending to the process within which listening takes place—through listening to how we listen” (58).

“Phantom Genealogy: Sonic Blackness and the American Operatic Timbre” explores how vocal timbre is understood and informed by both singer and voice as well as by genre, repertoire, and race. The chapter uses the example of Black American opera singer Marian Anderson and the characterization of her vocal timbre as “black” (62). Eidsheim traces how the vocal timbre of Anderson was assessed through Anderson’s January 1955 debut at the Metropolitan Opera and by Rosa Parks’s December arrest in the same year for her staged bus sit-in. Using anti-Black tropes expressing stereotypical Black vocal essence (*e.g.*, minstrel shows), she accounts for the ways listeners’ responses to the acousmatic question reside in race *and* gender oppression.

“Familiarity as Strangeness: Jimmy Scott and the Question of Black Timbral Masculinity” studies the work of Jimmy Scott, who had Kallmann syndrome, a condition that affects hormonal levels of humans assigned male at birth, preventing the onset of puberty. The condition is imagined to signify “gender ambiguity” via vocal range. Eidsheim demonstrates that although Scott’s contemporaries shared the same vocal range as Scott, and Scott himself identified as a cisgender, heterosexual man, he was marketed “neither as masculine (whether as a masculine female or a masculine male) nor as a man” (102). Insofar as gender can be “cued,” it is done so by way of vocal pitch ranges and vocal timbre. Although vocal entrainment frequently occurs, analyses of a vocalizer’s style and technique should be the basis for the analysis.

“Race as Zeros and Ones: Vocaloid Refused, Reimagined, and Repurposed” builds upon previous discussions about vocal entrainment. The chapter revolves around Eidsheim’s analysis of Vocaloid software and the way listeners produce singers through what she terms “digital entrainment—the fashioning of sound and image using digital tools” (36). Music producers and online communities, which overlap with Anime communities, refused the racialized voices the software offered (e.g., Vocaloid’s representation of “LOLA and LEON”) often opting to use their own characters’ voices over those produced by the software. The same communities also insisted upon a Latina representation for its “Ruby” voice bank (voiced by a Latina woman). Marking the tension between these two reactions, Eidsheim ends the chapter poignantly: “is there any space for or way to play with agency, on behalf of both singer and listener?” (150).

“Bifurcated Listening: The Inimitable, Imitated Billie Holiday” ruminates on the question of agency posed at the end of chapter four, illustrating audiences’ vacillation between using analyses of style and technique to remark on vocal performance and reducing a singer’s voice to “essence.” Turning to Billie Holiday’s vocal performance and its frequent imitation, Eidsheim argues that we must move away from understanding voice as essence even in its imitations, and deeply engage Holiday’s artistry by way of style and technique. Doing so will allow listeners “to denaturalize voice as essence” (155).

Framing “the listener is an active agent” in “Widening Rings of Being: The Singer as Stylist and Technician,” Eidsheim introduces “the pause” as a method in critical performance practice. She calls upon listeners to avoid falling prey to the cult of fidelity or solely relying on vocal entrainment to name voice, but to “pause” and listen to the “many competing answers—a multitude of possible namings” that vocal performance provides (183). Turning from the timbral politics of voice that produces whiteness and blackness via listening, she reasserts that the acousmatic question alone is not sufficient for the study or naming of voice.

While *The Race of Sound* offers indispensable ways for inverting the acousmatic question and denaturalizing voice (i.e., “listening-to-listening” critical practice methodology), the work may leave readers with a series of questions. For example, what constitutes “African American music” in *The Race of Sound*? Can voice only be theorized, described, and analyzed via style and technique? How is Eidsheim accounting for the inextricable link between Black subjection and Black (vocal) performance?

Although characterized as interdisciplinary, the work reads more like a work of analytical musicology. For example, much of *The Race of Sound* is preoccupied with creating a musicological method for listening to voice/discussing vocal timbre. The work could have benefited from more trenchant engagements with transgender studies, Black studies, and (Black) feminist theory, especially as it sought to map the entanglements between biological essentialism and race, gender, and vocal timbre. Lastly, Eidsheim’s remarks on Angela Davis’s and Farah Jasmine Griffin’s works on Billie Holiday as voice scholarship vested in the cult of fidelity seems misplaced. Both authors make clear the impossibility of fidelity when writing about Billie Holiday and her vocal performance. For example, in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (1998), Davis writes, “The connection I attempt to make between blues legacies and black feminism is not without its contradictions and discontinuities” (xi). Davis is also mindful of the limits of her own attempts to revise both histories of blues traditions and Black feminist historiographies, writing, “I have chosen to work with firsthand transcriptions, which no doubt contain their own inaccuracies and for which I take full responsibility” (xvi). Similarly, in *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (2002), Griffin notes, “I am willing to admit that I do not escape positing my own version of Lady Day. Nor do I want to escape doing so. Mine is not the first, nor will it be the last” (6). Invested in recuperative Black feminist sound studies scholarship, both Davis and

Griffin are reflexive about the impossibility of collapsing Black women's orature into definitive meaning.

Nevertheless, *The Race of Sound* encourages listeners to think critically about the act of listening and the racial politics of vocal timbre. Musicologists, voice studies scholars, or scholars interested in analyzing voice in Black music will find Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound* immensely helpful. Quite masterfully, the work provides new insights into the naturalization of listening and makes way for research interested in disentangling the relationship between race and voice.

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**Candice M. Jenkins. *Black Bourgeois: Class & Sex in the Flesh*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2019. 280 pp. \$108.00 cloth/\$27.00 paper.**

**Reviewed by Roberta Wolfson, Stanford University**

On June 14, 2005, Oprah Winfrey was denied entry into the Hermès boutique in Paris during closing time. On July 16, 2009, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was arrested for allegedly breaking and entering into what turned out to be his own home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. On April 12, 2018, two Black real estate agents waiting in a Philadelphia Starbucks for a business meeting with a white associate were arrested after the store manager demanded they leave because they had not made a purchase before requesting to use the restroom. In none of these incidents were the material wealth, professional status, and social capital enjoyed by these Black individuals sufficient to protect them from being racially profiled, snubbed, or criminalized. Each of these situations is discussed in Candice M. Jenkins's insightful and readable book *Black Bourgeois: Class & Sex in the Flesh* as critical examples of how the Black body continues to be viewed in the contemporary period as inherently out of place in middle-class spaces that are racially marked as white.

These examples reflect the existential paradox of the Black bourgeois subject, who is privileged by class but rendered vulnerable by race, a paradox that forms the central focus of *Black Bourgeois*. Jenkins calls this phenomenon "the black and bourgeois dilemma" (6), a conundrum that defines the lived experiences of the middle-class Black subject who enjoys the protection of material wealth while simultaneously enduring the precarity of blackness. At the heart of Jenkins's book lies a central question: "Does material privilege offer any *real* protection from the operation of black vulnerability?" (7). The answer, as Jenkins demonstrates, is complex: On the one hand, class privilege has been historically associated with whiteness but on the other hand, material wealth confers undeniable protections for Black people. In exploring the dimensions of this conundrum, *Black Bourgeois* offers a timely contribution to our understanding of how race, class, and gender intersect in the contemporary era and how these categories are complexly performed and complicated by the Black (materially privileged) body.

Jenkins grounds her analysis of the Black and bourgeois dilemma within theoretical frameworks from cultural studies, sociology, and Black studies. Drawing upon the work of cultural theorists Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, Jenkins takes as a basic premise the claim that class is lived through race, that class is always and already racialized. This claim, coupled with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* (the idea that we are taught how to perform our membership in a social category), forms the foundation of Jenkins's assessment of why the Black body does not seem to appropriately "perform"