

Introduction

The Sonic Color Line and the Listening Ear

Michael Dunn “denied calling the rap ‘thug music’ but admitted he thought it was ‘rap-crap’ and that it was ‘ridiculously loud.’”

—*The Guardian* coverage of Dunn’s murder of Jordan Davis at a gas station in Jacksonville, Florida, November 23, 2012

“Sandra Bland was very combative. It was not a model traffic stop. It was not a model person that was stopped.”

—Waller County’s district attorney, Elton Mathis, defending the actions of Brian Encinia, who pulled Sandra Bland over for failing to signal during a lane change. Bland was found hanged to death in the Waller County Jail on July 13, 2015, three days after her arrest for “assaulting an officer.”

“The student sits quietly at her desk, and remains unresponsive as the officer Ben Fields asks her to come with him. He takes her silence as refusal, at which point he grabs her by the neck, pulls her backward in the desk, forcibly pulls her out of the desk and then slings her body across the classroom. He then yells at her, as she lies prone on the floor, to put her hands behind her back.”

—Brittany Cooper in *Salon*, on Fields’s violent police attack on a black girl at Spring Valley High School, captured on video on October 26, 2015

We need to talk about listening, power, and race. Willful white mishearings and auditory imaginings of blackness—often state-sanctioned—have long been a matter of life and death in the United States. However, recent events—and large-scale protests testifying to

their occurrence and amplifying their impact—have temporarily halted the usual silence surrounding the violent consequences of the racialization of both sound and listening. Toward this end, *The Sonic Color Line* details the long historical entanglement between white supremacy and listening in the United States, contextualizing recent events such as the deaths of Jordan Davis and Sandra Bland within the ongoing struggle of black people to decolonize their listening practices, exert their freedom to sound in safety, diversity, and solidarity, and shift how they are heard in everyday life and in spaces allegedly public.

Without ever consciously expressing the sentiment, white Americans often feel entitled to respect for their sensibilities, sensitivities, and tastes, and to their implicit, sometimes violent, control over the soundscape of an ostensibly “free,” “open,” and “public” space. When middle-aged white man Michael Dunn murdered seventeen-year-old Davis at a Florida gas station in 2012, for example, he marked his aural territory. Dunn didn’t want to hear hip-hop at the pumps, so he walked to the jeep where Davis and his friends were listening to music and demanded they turn it down. When the teenagers refused, Dunn shot into their car and fled.

In July 2015, white officer Brian Encinia pulled over a twenty-eight-year-old Bland en route to her new job at Prairie View A&M University. When she expressed annoyance, Encinia became angry; he called her noncompliant and commanded her to step out of her car. Bland told him she knew her rights and did not need to exit the vehicle or put her cigarette out. Encinia then told her he would “light [her] up” with his Taser, dragged her from the car, and pulled her along the ground until out of his dashboard camera’s range. After tackling and handcuffing her, Encinia arrested Bland for “assaulting an officer.” Three days later, Bland was found hanged in her cell. As of this writing, Bland’s death remains unresolved; Waller County maintains she committed suicide, while her family has filed a wrongful death suit. Even though the Texas Department of Safety director maintains that “citizens have the right to be objectionable—they can be rude,” Encinia’s actions reveal how white authority figures continue to expect black people to perform more visible, overt, and extreme forms of compliance—through speech, vocal tone, eye contact, and physical behavior—than they ask of white subjects. Unarmed white people who display “noncompliant” behavior do not face violence, punishment, or death at the same rates as black

people. An ongoing study by the *Guardian* finds that police kill black people at twice the rate of white people; black people whom police killed were twice as likely to be unarmed.¹ The ability to be audibly annoyed at getting a traffic ticket and live is a contemporary marker of a very old strain of white privilege expressed and embodied through sound.

Silence, on the other hand, offers black people no guaranteed refuge from state and police violence. In October 2015, a young black girl at Spring Valley High School was accused by her teacher of refusing to leave class after using her cell phone; she quietly stared forward at her desk until her school's "resource officer" grabbed and violently pulled her to the ground, desk and all. After he handcuffed and dragged her across the room, he arrested her for "disturbing the school," along with Niya Kenny, who had verbally defended her classmate. "I was crying, like literally crying and screaming like a baby," Kenny described. "I was screaming what the F, what the F, is this really happening. I was praying out loud for the girl. . . . I was just crying and he was like, 'Since you have so much to say, you coming, too. . . . You want some of this?' And just put my hands behind my back."² Rather than hear these black girls as children in need of protection, the teacher and school's police force transformed the girls' screams of pain, fearful prayers, and silences into "blackness": dangerous noise, outsized aggression, and a threatening strength.

These sounds, heard and unheard, have histories. If we listen, we can hear resonances with other times and places: segregation's hostile soundscapes, the obedient listening that whites expected of slaves, the screams and prayers of Frederick Douglass's Aunt Hester. Though dispersed by geography, circumstance, and mainstream news coverage insistent that each event is "not about race," the sonic color line inextricably connects them. This book exists to amplify such echoes until we all hear, acknowledge, and end such additions to America's resonant racial history. Double-voiced, this book unfolds in solidarity with everyone already hearing and resisting the sonic color line, offering new language and historical insight for the struggle against the deafening silence of so much death. This book listens as it speaks.

* * *

Race in America is a visual phenomenon. Americans have long understood race as expressed through attitudes about skin color and visible

phenotypical differences—such as hair texture and lip contour—and the power differentials resulting from an ideological, racialized visual gaze. As Richard Dyer bluntly states in *White*, “looking and being looked at reproduce racial power relations.”³ When scholars invoke nonvisual idioms of race, they are treated as ancillary to visual indicators rather than as constitutive forces in their own right.

The Sonic Color Line connects sound with race in American culture, showing how listening operates as an organ of racial discernment, categorization, and resistance in the shadow of vision’s alleged cultural dominance. While vision remains a powerfully defining element of race, scholars have yet to account for how other senses experience racialization and enact race feeling, both alone and in concert with sight.⁴ Neither reifying nor negating vision, this book trumpets the importance of sound, in particular, as a critical modality through which subjects (re) produce, apprehend, and resist imposed racial identities and structures of racist violence. Because racism seems to be a “discourse of power that thinks with the eyes” in a culture driven by an “overdetermined politics of looking,” sound has served as a repository of apprehension, oppression, and confrontation, rendered secondary—invisible—by visually driven epistemologies.⁵ Far from being vision’s opposite, sound frequently appears to be visuality’s doppelgänger in U.S. racial history, unacknowledged but ever present in the construction of race and the performance of racial oppression.

To understand the entanglements of sound, race, and technology and the far-reaching material consequences of their collusion, *The Sonic Color Line* presents a cultural and political history detailing when, why, and how listening became a racialized body discipline and how it both informed and was informed by emergent sound technologies. I excavate a century of aural genealogies and a politics of racialized sound to reveal the dynamic relationships between racial ideologies, the development of sound media, and the modern listening practices that shape (and are shaped by) them. Following Kara Keeling, who theorizes “the cinematic” as “a complicated aggregate of capitalist social relations, sensory motor arrangements, and cognitive processes”—at once political, material, sensory, affective, and bodily—I plot a historical narrative that re-enmeshes technology’s function as a material “mechanism and modality” of modernity with archival traces of its less apparent—but, as I

will show, no less material—reality as a sensory politics flowing from and in tension with the (black) body.⁶ I build from studies such as Jonathan Sterne’s that “commingle physics and culture” to challenge instrumental, technologically determinant, and self-evidently triumphant narratives of sound reproduction’s role in American history, with the insistence that its development and trajectory were indelibly shaped by and through the sonic color line’s sonification of race and the racialization of listening.⁷ The twentieth-century sound reproduction technologies I explore in the second half of the book—sound cinema and radio, respectively—emerged from and developed in tandem with several key corporeal sonic technologies of the nineteenth century—listening, vocal timbre, music writing, phonography, lynching, and the development of the “black voice”—body disciplines enlisted to mediate, embody, and resist the sonic color line, as the book’s opening chapters detail.

The *Sonic Color Line* begins just before the Civil War, when white Southern elites scrambled to shore up slavery as a natural, inviolable system as it came under fire from white Northern abolitionists, black and white presses, and black activists such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs. Essentialist ideas about “black” sounds and listening offered white elites a new method of grounding racial abjection in the body while cultivating white listening practices as critical, discerning, and delicate and, above all, as the standard of citizenship and personhood. The book pauses on the cusp of the Civil Rights Movement, at the birth of the racial formation of color blindness in the mid-1940s. American society remains bound by the intertwined political and sensory legacies of color blindness, particularly its narratives—optic and ideological—of racial progress, diversity, multiculturalism, and so-called post-race identity. However, Americans continue to hear, feel, think, and experience race, some leading lives invisibly (and audibly) structured by privilege, while so many othered peoples continue to struggle with exclusions, disadvantages, violence, and the added challenge of perpetually proving the impact of something that no longer officially exists. May this book amplify black performers’, writers’, and thinkers’ historical testimony on the sonic color line; provide useful language for critiquing how race impacts perception; and demonstrate how sound and listening enable racism’s evolving persistence.

Like the sounds and resistant practices comprising its focus, this book is diverse and deliberately disruptive. I examine performers who confirmed and strained against the sonic color line. By juxtaposing the racialized reception of their black and white audiences to African American writings from each period, I explore the sonics of black subjectivity and expose modernity's differential listening practices. I read slave narratives by Douglass and Jacobs as engaged with the operatic performances of Jenny Lind and Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield; I listen to echoes of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in Charles Chesnut's *The Conjure Woman*; I consider collaborations between Louisiana-born songster turned New York City folk singer Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter and Mississippi-born sharecropper's son turned novelist Richard Wright; and I restage a conversation about U.S. radio and race between singer Lena Horne, sociologist and theorist W. E. B. Du Bois, and novelist Ann Petry.

By design, *The Sonic Color Line* presents neither a seamless history of listening nor an encyclopedic taxonomy; it rather takes a cultural materialist approach to a series of resonant events between slavery and the end of segregation that reveals race to be fundamental to any historical consideration of U.S. listening practices (and vice versa). *The Sonic Color Line's* selective case studies amplify an ongoing historical conversation between black writers and musical performers about listening's role in black selfhood, agency, citizenship, and racial discrimination. I examine musical calls and writerly responses (and writerly calls and musical responses)—across space, time, genre, and medium—as aural performances that together sound out the sonic color line and its impact on American lives. I do not intend my readings to further the neoliberal project of "giving voice to the voiceless" or recovering "lost" sounds. Instead, I make clear how U.S. white supremacy has attempted to suppress, tune out, and willfully misunderstand some sounds and their makers and histories. At the same time, I compel readers to listen deeply to the long history of black agency, resistance, and activism in the face of such silencing.

At once a literary study, performance analysis, cultural history, media study, and critical race theory, this project reveals race's audible contour—the *sonic color line*—and gives an account of key instances in its first one hundred years. I employ multiple methods to ask: What

is the historical relationship between sonic and visual racial regimes? How have racialized American listening practices—and attendant sonic racial representations—emerged, spread, and changed over time? How has the sonic color line shaped and been shaped by the rise of audio reproduction technologies and representational discourses such as literature, journalism, and music? To address these questions, *The Sonic Color Line* places African American writers' and singers' ongoing conversations about sound and listening alongside the historical trajectory of theories of U.S. racial formation, the progression of sound reproduction technologies, the shifting sonics of white supremacy, American nationalism, and the everyday racial "structure of feeling" in four eras: the antebellum era, Reconstruction, the Great Depression, and the immediate post-World War II moment.

Through sonically attuned analyses that amplify the aurality of race and the unspoken power of racialized listening, I argue that sound functions as a set of social relations and a compelling medium for racial discourse. Sound has been entangled with vision since the conception of modern ideas of race and it has often operated at the leading edge of the visual to produce racialized identity formations. Overall, *The Sonic Color Line* interweaves original archival analysis with African American literary study to present a holistic approach to the sonics of race and the historical racialization of listening: I investigate materials from the South and the North across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; I consider the shifting historical relationship between dominant and resistant practices; and I articulate "actual" sounds with textual representations of listening and the auditory imaginary.

To facilitate public conversation about the relationship between sound, race, and American life, I introduce two new concepts: the *sonic color line* and the *listening ear*. The sonic color line describes the process of racializing sound—how and why certain bodies are expected to produce, desire, and live amongst particular sounds—and its product, the hierarchical division sounded between "whiteness" and "blackness." The listening ear drives the sonic color line; it is a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a descriptor for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line's norms. Through the listening ear's surveillance, discipline, and interpretation, certain associations

between race and sound come to seem normal, natural, and “right.” In the following section, I theorize each term, providing the framework for this book’s interventions into African American literary history, sound studies, popular music study, and critical race theory.

The Sonic Color Line and the Listening Ear

I wrote much of this book in coffee shops; inevitably, people asked me what I was working on. White people, in particular, expressed surprise when I told them that I was writing a book on race and sound. I often received off-the-cuff critiques: What could I, a white American woman born in the post–Civil Rights era, know about race? You can’t *see* sound, so how could it have a “race”? But when I added that I’m really writing about listening—about how we can hear race—something very telling often happened. “Oh wait a minute,” my white (generally) male interlocutor would say, just before conspiratorially dropping his voice. “I get it! You mean like this!”⁸ And then, right there in the Starbucks, I’d witness a minstrel show—performances I kept hoping never to hear but that their performers always seemed so eager to give.

Over time, I perfected my part in this American melodrama. “You’re only partly right,” I’d say, shaking my head and delivering some version of the following monologue: “But not for the reason you think. My book is about where and how you learned that voice—how you came to believe it was ‘black,’ why you think it sounds funny and weird and sexual, and how you feel like you own it, so much so that you whip it out to a stranger in a coffee shop. That right there, the fact that you and so many white people have this same ‘black voice’ in their heads, is the sonic color line. And the listening ear explains your erroneous assumption that I would find this voice as funny and weird and sexual as you do because my skin color determines how you think I should listen, what I might want to hear. The listening ear told you to look around and drop your voice to make sure no black person would hear you and lets me know, white person to white person, that we are about to have one of those *really* white moments together, where we will listen to and feel our whiteness through your impression of this vocal stereotype. I am actually writing my book to call attention to these moments, right here,

to show the damage they have done and continue to do, and put a stop to them.”

Sometimes these exchanges led to arguments, sometimes to deep conversations; most often they resulted in silence. Some days I dreaded these moments. Other days, I wished a dude would. “My book *is* about race,” I’d tell them. “It’s about whiteness. And we know *a lot* about whiteness—we have been listening to it our whole lives.” Despite the many protests of various coffee shop minstrels, their voices told me they heard it too.

* * *

I am indebted to W. E. B. Du Bois for my concept of the sonic color line, particularly his schema of the visual color line in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and his reimagining of that color line as a suffocating plate glass enclosure in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940).⁹ Du Bois’s profound intellectual shift in the 1940s—from the veil to the vacuum as his preeminent metaphor for race—accounts for the multisensory experience and auditory affect of race that I now theorize as the sonic color line and the listening ear. Far from the first to consider the sonics of Du Bois’s work, I build from the scholarship of Alexander Weheliye and others to rethink Du Bois’s concept of the veil as an audiovisual entity, one that helps us understand the relationship between sight and sound in the production of racial identity.¹⁰ Using the visual metonym of the veil—an image that redounds in African American literature and thought after *Souls*—Du Bois’s key intervention called out the color line and segregation as *causes* of social difference, rather than its “inevitable” result, challenging mainstream turn-of-the-twentieth-century discourse on the “Negro problem.”¹¹

Du Bois’s image of the veil stands in for the ideological barrier whites constructed between themselves and black people in U.S. society and the perceptual distortions resulting on either side. It makes palpable the visual representational processes that render black people either invisible or hypervisible, but never truly seen and known. However, the veil’s fundamental visuality invites rather than excludes an engagement with sound, particularly in regard to its evocation of acousmatic phenomena, the emanation of sound from an unseen source.¹² Du Bois’s multiply-signifying

veil, therefore, comments on race's ocular politics rather than merely describing them. Critiquing the propensity of European modernity to value evidence produced by the eye over evidence generated by the ear—which, according to Charles Hirschkind, Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant associated with passivity, self-subordination, and emotional misjudgment¹³—Du Bois asserts that whites' obsession with looking *caused* an extreme distortion of vision. Whites cannot see through their veil of race—a product of hundreds of years of their ignorance, misrepresentation, and self-serving violence—and their loss of vision actually enables them to continue dehumanizing black people, characterizing them as abstract, shadowy “problems” rather than individual, rights-bearing subjects, modernity's *sine qua non*.

Du Bois noticed the growing connections between race and sound in his second autobiography, *Dusk of Dawn*, written in the grim years leading up to World War II. *Dusk of Dawn* opened not with the bold pronouncements of *Souls*—“the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line”—but with an “Apology” that such declarations are now impossible.¹⁴ *Dusk of Dawn* sifts through the failure of reason in the face of intractable racism and violence, made palpable by what seemed in the late 1930s to be the apex of white supremacy in both theory and praxis. With admirable yet wrenching self-critique, Du Bois seriously questions *Souls*' assertion that the color line could be breached by a “series of brilliant assaults” on racism's fundamentally flawed logic. Any literary, artistic, or political project challenging race, *Dusk of Dawn* warns, will be gravely complicated by the fact that whites not only have been conditioned to see *and* hear the world differently but also have labeled and propagated this sensory configuration as universal, objective truth. To explain the persistence of race, Du Bois uses the figure of the plate glass vacuum chamber, where the color line, invisible to the eye, manifests itself as a transparent wall. While white and black people remain visible to each other, no sound penetrates the walls. The white people on the outside laugh and point at the trials and tribulations of the black people inside, who are “screaming in the vacuum, unheard.”¹⁵

Du Bois's notion of the visible color line has long had an aural echo, the resonances of which I theorize as *the sonic color line*. The sonic color line is both a hermeneutics of race and a marker of its im/material pres-

ence. It enables listeners to construct and discern racial identities based on voices, sounds, and particular soundscapes—the clang and rumble of urban life versus suburban “peace and quiet,” for instance—and, in turn, to mobilize racially coded batteries of sounds as discrimination by assigning them differential cultural, social, and political value. The sonic color line produces, codes, and polices racial difference through the ear, enabling us to hear race as well as see it. It is a socially constructed boundary that racially codes sonic phenomena such as vocal timbre, accents, and musical tones. On one level, the sonic color line posits racialized subject positions like “white,” “black,” and “brown” as historical accretions of sonic phenomena and aural stereotypes that can function without their correlating visual signifiers and often stand in for them, as in the case of the coffee shop minstrel. Through multiple simultaneous processes of dominant representation—as this book’s journalistic, literary, and phonographic evidence will show—particular sounds are identified, exaggerated, and “matched” to racialized bodies. For example, Nina Eidsheim argues that white listeners’ visual constructions of race in the nineteenth century shifted the sound of black voices, creating a distorted aural effect she calls “sonic blackness.” Lisa Gitelman describes how early recording technologies ushered in a new era of blackface minstrelsy in which “sounding black” became more important for white performers than applying burnt cork, positing music as “another possible substance of intrinsic racial difference.”¹⁶ White-constructed ideas about “sounding Other”—accents, dialects, “slang,” and extraverbal utterances, as well as ambient sounds—have flattened the complex range of sounds actually produced by people of color, marking the sonic color line’s main contour.

This book examines how American culture polices the sonic color line at the level of representation, where political powers affix meaning. Representations have a profound role in shaping thoughts, bodies, even notions of reality itself. Racial ideologies are (re)produced through the representational structures of discourse, aural imagery, and performance. While “sounding black” remains linked to looking black, a process I discuss in this book, aural ideas of “blackness” can also trump notions of authenticity proffered via visible phenotype. White radio actors Freeman Fisher Gosden and Charles Correll played the neominstrel characters Amos and Andy, but black actor Frank Wilson was not hired

to narrate the 1941 radio program *Freedom's People* because he sounded “too much like a white man” to both white and black producers.¹⁷ These examples point to the instability of sound as a racial determinant and the possibility of crossing the sonic color line; they also highlight that there are very definite ideas “matching” racialized bodies to sounds in U.S. culture. Aural and visual signifiers of race are thoroughly enmeshed; sounds never really lose their referent to different types of bodies despite being able to operate independently of them.

Whiteness, on the other hand, is notorious for representing itself as “invisible”—or in this case, inaudible (at least to white people).¹⁸ The inaudibility of whiteness stems from its considerably wider palette of representation and the belief that white representations stand in for “people” in general, rather than “white people” in particular. The inaudibility of whiteness does not mean it has no sonic markers, but rather that Americans are socialized to perceive them as the keynote of American identity.¹⁹ As dominant listening practices discipline us to process white male ways of sounding as default, natural, normal, and desirable—more on this in a moment—they deem alternate ways of listening and sounding aberrant and—depending upon the historical context—as excessively sensitive, strikingly deficient, or impossibly both.

While never seeming to speak its own name, white sonic identity imagines itself against circumscribed representations of how people of color sound. The binary hierarchy of proper/improper marks one border of the sonic color line; the socially constructed divisions between sound/noise and quiet/loud mark two others. For example, the sonic color line enables particular brands of white speech to become “standard English,” as I examine via Charles Chesnutt’s short stories in chapter 3 and radio historiography in chapter 5. The sonic color line amplifies the “propriety” of standard white speech, as opposed to—and perpetually threatened by—dialects, accents, and “improper” slang attributed to immigrants and/or people of color. Whiteness’s entanglement with “correct speech” has direct material effects, particularly in housing and employment opportunities, as sociologist John Baugh’s linguistic profiling research has determined.²⁰

The sonic color line also codifies sounds linked to racialized bodies—such as music and the ambient sounds of everyday living—as “noise,” sound’s loud and unruly “Other.”²¹ Noise is not merely loudness mea-

sured in decibels. Like recordist and theorist Tony Schwartz, I maintain that noise depends on the ear of the beholder. “Noise is an editorial word,” Schwartz argues. “When you talk about noise, you are talking about sound that is bothering you. There’s no party so noisy as the one you’re not invited to.”²² I consider noise a shifting analytic that renders certain sounds—and the bodies that produce and consume them—as Other, what Cornel West describes as “incomprehensible and unintelligible” under white supremacist epistemologies.²³ While cultural uses of “noise” are not exclusive to race—the noise of industry, for example, or of sporting events—I refer specifically to how the sonic color line invokes noise in direct connection to (or as a metonymic stand-in for) people of color, and particularly blackness. The sound of hip-hop pumped at top volume through car speakers, for example, has become a stand-in for the bodies of young black men in American culture; noise ordinances seeking to “tame the boom car monster”—words used in Rochester, New York—allow for racial profiling without ever explicitly mentioning race.²⁴ Sometimes tolerated, but more often fetishized as exotic or demonized as unassimilable, noise and loudness frequently function as aural substitutes for and markers of race and form key contours of the sonic color line that I map out in this book: *music/noise* (throughout), *word/sound*, *sense/nonsense* (chapter 1), *cultivated/raw*, *controlled/excessive* (chapter 2), *proper/improper*, *assimilable/foreign*, *listener/performer* (chapter 3), *quiet/loud*, *smooth/rough* (chapter 4), and *cold/emotional* (chapter 5).

To expose the historical genealogy of dominant listening practices and to provide new critical tools to deconstruct and dismantle “race” via its sonic register, I offer *the listening ear* as the ideological filter shaped in relation to the sonic color line. The listening ear represents a historical aggregate of normative American listening practices and gives a name to listening’s epistemological function as a modality of racial discernment. An aural complement to and interlocutor of the gaze, the listening ear is what Judith Butler calls “a constitutive constraint”²⁵: a socially constructed ideological system producing but also regulating cultural ideas about sound. The listening ear enables the key dichotomies of the sonic color line traced in this book; it normalizes the aural tastes and standards of white elite masculinity as the singular way to interpret sonic information. From the antebellum era through the mid-twentieth

century, the American listening ear developed through multiple, intersecting representational discourses to process dominant ways of sounding as default—natural, normal, and desirable—while deeming alternate ways of listening and sounding aberrant.

I also build the listening ear from Michel Foucault’s theory of discipline and “the way in which the body itself is invested in power relations.”²⁶ Disciplinary processes greatly inform my approach to listening and its tense, mutually constitutive relationship with shifting racial ideologies. Foucault mainly speaks of sensory discipline through visual surveillance and the concept of the gaze, most famously through Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, the Enlightenment prison whose architecture enabled jailers to watch prisoners without being seen. As Les Bull and Michael Back point out, Foucault’s theorizations neglect that Bentham also built auditory surveillance into his prison: a series of hidden, connected tubes allowed the wardens to listen in at will.²⁷ *The Sonic Color Line* takes up Bull and Back’s provocation, using Foucault’s insights on discipline and training, to flesh out a “history of listening” that is theoretical, embodied, and sensitive to power, particularly the processes of subjection, racialization, and nationalism.²⁸ Since the establishment of slavery and the codification of Jim Crow laws in its wake, listening has greatly impacted how bodies are categorized according to racial hierarchies and how raced subjects imagined themselves and negotiated a thoroughly racialized society.

This book identifies the processes enabling some listeners to hear themselves as “normal” citizens—or, to use legal discourse, “reasonable”—while compelling Others to understand their sonic production and consumption—and therefore themselves—as aberrant. Essentially, one’s ideas about race shape what and how one hears and vice versa. Although often deemed an unmediated physical act, listening is an interpretive, socially constructed practice conditioned by historically contingent and culturally specific value systems riven with power relations. While speculative philosophic work such as Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Listening*—which decouples listening from automatic connection with understanding and reminds us that “to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning”²⁹—has been helpful, I theorize listening as a historical and material practice, one both lived and artistically imagined. I show the dangers and the stakes of grand narratives through archival documenta-

tion of a specific racialized filter developed in the United States in the 1840s and the resistance mounted to it by black artists and thinkers. The listening ear is far from the only form of listening; however, it is a stance wielding much power, intersecting with and impacting the many other widely variable practices we experience collectively as “listening.”

Occurring at the intersection of class, sexuality, gender, and race, listening offers an epistemological venue for our particular embodiments; our embodiments, in turn, filter incoming sound along various indices of classification and value. A footstep outside a window at night, for example, can have divergent meanings for men and women, and a different resonance for a white mistress than for a black female slave, an example taken up in chapter 2. I use “embodied ear” to represent how individuals’ listening practices are shaped by the totality of their experiences, historical context, and physicality, as well as intersecting subject positions and particular interactions with power (the listening ear).³⁰ I hope that coupling “embodied” and “ear” will remind us of the relationship between ideology and materiality as well as the important interventions of deaf-studies scholars to expand notions of listening beyond an inaccurate focus on the ear as its sole source. Steph Ceraso, for example, urges us to think of listening as “multimodal,” vibrations experienced by the entire body and interpreted in conjunction with other senses, while Cara Lynne Cardinale challenges sound studies to consider a radical deafness in which sign language and “look-listening” point to the limits of sound and language (rather than reveal lacks).³¹

Although one filter among many, the listening ear exerts pressure on the embodied ear’s numerous listening practices, naturalizing the sonic color line as the singular—and often the most pressing—way to process aural information. In outlining how listening operates as a form of racial subjection, I wish neither to fetishize the listening ear nor to make its own unevenness and complexity into a monolith. Instead, I theorize the listening ear as a singular term because my archive tells me it works by attempting to suppress and reduce an individual’s myriad, fine-grained embodied listening experiences by shunting them into narrow, conditioned, and “correct” responses that are politically, culturally, economically, legally, and socially advantageous to whites. At times, the listening ear appears monolithic precisely because that is what it strives to be. From antebellum slavery to mid-twentieth-century color blindness, the

listening ear has evolved to become the *only* way to listen, interpret, and understand; in legal discourse, the listening ear claims to be how any “reasonable person” should listen.

“Un-airing” the Past: Methodologies of the Sonic Color Line

I locate my work on the sonic color line as part of a collective project within African American literary and cultural studies to, as Carter Mathes contends, “emphasize the sonic as a conceptual field that might facilitate the radical projection of African American experience.”³² Earlier generations of critics theorized black diasporic writing in terms of sound, particularly Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates, Paul Gilroy, Hazel Carby, and Stuart Hall, who argued that sound is a large part of what is “black” about black popular culture.

In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, and varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counternarratives, and, above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different—other forms of life, other traditions of representation.³³

Within academia’s historically logocentric white supremacist structures, these thinkers launched new ways of conceiving of aesthetics, value, history, theory, and memory. But while they centralized music to reconceive black literary aesthetics, their analysis remained largely structural and metaphoric.³⁴ Building from these broad strokes, scholars—guided by Daphne Brooks, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Fred Moten, Gayle Wald, and Weheliye—have recently retheorized the relationship between black performance practice and writing as mutually informative. This critical move enables contemporary scholars to engage with the sonics of black cultural production on a more granular level—a “search for resonances” in Emily Lordi’s terms and a “listening in detail” in Alexandra Vazquez’s methodology—within a wider social and historical context.³⁵ Scholars can now listen to the unique ways in which African American artists mobilize sound beyond structuring principle and as so much

more than an object: as event, experience, affect, archive, and, as Shana Redmond argues, method.³⁶

By tracing a historical conversation between black writers and musicians about the racial politics of listening, this book makes three interventions in the study of African American literature. First, I amplify black performers and writers as theorists of listening, using aural imagery and musical strategies to explore listening as a form of agency, a technique of survival, an ethics of community building, a practice of self-care, a guide through racialized space, a site of racialization, and a mode of decolonizing. Second, current approaches to the sonics of African American literature have focused more intensely on literature and music considered explicitly “experimental,” beginning with the black arts movement. By locating my study in the hundred-year period just before the Civil Rights Movement, I break down the experimental/traditional binary, articulating what Mathes calls the “imaginative landscape of experimental sonority” in contemporary black writing with more “realist” forms, such as the slave narrative, framed vernacular tale, and social protest novel.³⁷ By *listening* to works by writers such as Jacobs, Chesnutt, and Wright—and foregrounding how these authors conceived and represented listening itself—I argue that we can hear the radical aurality and sonic aesthetics of their work submerged by time, shifts in aesthetics, and limited readings of their artistry as sociological description and/or mere vehicles for racial liberalism. Earlier black writers and musicians experimented with aural imagery to radically challenge the mobilization of sound by white power structures, and they did it with *style*. I take seriously Ann Petry’s 1950 rejoinder to critics that the “craftsmanship that goes into [social protest novels] is of a high order. *It has to be.*”³⁸ Finally, I identify a new signifyin(g) chain within the black literary tradition, the “trope of the listener”: scenes focused on characters’ listening experience as their primary sense. According to Gates, black literature’s “ur-trope” is the “talking book,” a recurrent metaphor in the earliest slave narratives such as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789). Shifting the discussion from the “talking book” to “the listener” enables us to conceive a more complex interrelationship between orality—what is spoken—and aurality—what is heard—as epistemes of knowledge production and forms of resistance to (and within) written expression. By amplifying the trope of the

listener, I invite scholars to hear a new “web of filiation”³⁹ between texts, one that uses sound to signify between genres and across wide swaths of time—revealing dissonances in listening practices *and* uncomfortable historical affinities—and the literary soundscape itself as a form of double-voicedness. Despite the ubiquity and richness of sound in most novels, the visual image still dominates literary analysis; I direct scholars toward literary soundscapes as a subject of critical attention.⁴⁰

Learning to listen differently to race, gender, power, place, and history brought me to “sound studies,” not the other way around; however, the field’s methodological freedom greatly enabled my scholarship in African American literature, music, and history. As you will see in this book, I meet sound where, when, and in what form I find it, not as an object of study, but as a method enabling an understanding of race as an aural experience with far-reaching historical and material resonance. Recent critiques of the field for its broad perspective on sound mistake methodological innovation for playing fast and loose, claiming “the generalizability of sound, in its most imprecise uses, can sidestep the effects of institutional histories and the structuring influence of entrenched debates.”⁴¹ To this description, ironically, I say, “*Exactly!*” One way to read this book is as an extended, historically and theoretically grounded argument for such “sidesteps” in and *as* sound studies, methodological moves made not to avoid contending with established music history, but rather as a strategy of critical sonar to navigate the epistemological terrain that “music”—as a culturally specific, politically charged, and “entrenched” category of value—can obscure. The history of the sonic color line and the listening ear should compel scholars to question music’s cultural and institutional privilege rather than assuming it because allegedly “music studies predates sound studies by two millennia.”⁴² Rearticulating music as a culturally and historically conditioned form of sound in political relation to (and flowing from, and toward) other sounds—none of which exist, as Gustavus Stadler reminds us, “outside of [their] perception by specifically marked subjects and bodies within history”—offers a deeper understanding of *how* and *why* music means, and to whom. *The Sonic Color Line*’s deliberate archival “sidesteps” also function as much-needed historiographical echolocation through and beyond “the overwhelming whiteness of scholars in the field,”⁴³ tracing a much longer, broader, and blacker history of thinking and writ-

ing sound, enabling us to hear theorists, artists, writers, and thinkers silenced by institutional histories built on their very exclusion.

Since I began this research, the field of sound studies has grown exponentially, to the point where we can no longer say the field is “emerging.” Work on sound and race has appeared much more slowly—in part because of the processes this book explores—but recent special issues of *Social Text*, *American Quarterly*, and *Radical History Review* centralized interdisciplinary conversations about sound, race, citizenship, subjectivity, and the body.⁴⁴ Liana Silva and Aaron Trammell and I also cofounded *Sounding Out!: The Sound Studies Blog* in 2009 explicitly to address the whiteness and maleness of institutionalized “sound studies” and the field’s inattention to power in its research agenda. As editor-in-chief, I publish scholarship directing the field’s energy toward sound’s social, cultural, and political contexts, in particular how listening constructs and impacts variously positioned bodies.

This book stages four key interventions in sound studies’ critical conversation on race and sound. First, I revise the increasingly canonized and overwhelmingly white and male historiography of sound studies, which neglects the work by black writers, thinkers, and scholars on sound and listening dating back at least a hundred and fifty years. I challenge sound studies to consider black artists as theorists and agents of sound, rather than solely as performers or producers. Second, I push existent discourse on sound and race to consider whiteness as an auditory construction. In particular, I identify how black cultural producers have used aural imagery to amplify and challenge how white power structures have mobilized sound to define black racial identities, drawing attention to how whiteness constitutes itself through sonic markers and sounded exclusions. Third, I add significantly to sound studies’ overarching project to trace a “history of listening,” through meticulous archival documentation of various listening practices and by insisting that histories of listening are always multiple, not only enmeshed in the matrices of social difference and power but also helping to constitute them. Finally, identifying the sonic color line as an externally imposed difference opens up possibilities for new forms of agency through listening. Building from Hall’s notion of “decolonized sensibilities,”⁴⁵ I show how the proliferation of multiple and diverse black listening practices is itself a form of resistance to the colonizing idea that—in

order to have the rights and privileges of national citizenship and at times, shockingly, to be considered human—one has to listen similarly to power: valuing the same sounds in the same ways and reproducing only certain sounds the listening ear deems appropriate, pleasurable, and respectable.

Examining one's listening practices and challenging their predisposed affects, reactions, and interpretations are fundamental for the development of new ways of being in the world and for forging cross-racial solidarities capable of dismantling the sonic color line and the racialized listening practices enabling and enabled by it. Marta Savigliano argues, building on Frantz Fanon, that decolonization "entails learning/unlearning the preeminence of abstract totalizing Enlightenment logics over bodies and their often absurd techniques of survival."⁴⁶ While my use of "decolonization" may seem anachronistic—my book ends shortly before a large wave of uprisings led by black and brown peoples against colonial powers in Africa, South America, and the Caribbean—it highlights that decolonizing does not begin after revolutions but rather that decolonized people *lead* revolutions. Decolonizing begins at colonization, and listening, in particular, is an important method to access freedom, agency, power, and selfhood.

Although intimately intertwined with constructions of "blackness" and "whiteness," the sonic color line and the listening ear have resonance beyond the racialized subject positions of black and white. Other racial and ethnic groups in the United States are subject to aural stereotyping, "linguistic profiling," and discriminatory listening practices.⁴⁷ I have written about the racialization of sound in other historical and social contexts—particularly in the cases of Puerto Rican migration to New York City in the 1950s and current anti-immigration legislation directed against Latina/os in the American Southwest—however, this project focuses specifically on the mutually constitutive relationship between sound/listening and the U.S. black and white racial hierarchy between 1845 and 1945.⁴⁸ As Sharon Holland argues, "in calls to abandon the black/white dichotomy for more expansive readings of racism's spectacular effects, critics often ignore the psychic life of racism," precisely the site where *The Sonic Color Line* lingers.⁴⁹ I do not study the black/white paradigm as the only important difference in the United States, but rather I question how and why the myth of "blackness" and

“whiteness” as polarities—one hopelessly abject, the other powerfully “normal”—persists and adjusts to changing demographics and historical circumstances. Despite copious amounts of scholarship documenting the complexities of the U.S. racial spectrum, the black/white binary still retains an enormous amount of symbolic weight and material consequence.⁵⁰ The black/white binary has never been about descriptive accuracy, but rather it is a deliberately reductionist racial project constructing white power and privilege against the alterity and abjection of the imagined polarity of “blackness” and the transfer of this power across generations and (white) ethnicities, what Cheryl Harris calls “whiteness as property” and George Lipsitz dubbed “the possessive investment in whiteness.”⁵¹ This project does not assume that what is true for some black people is true for all marginalized peoples, as the logic of the black/white binary would have it; rather, my exploration produces a more complicated understanding of how white and black people have mobilized sonic signifiers at particular historical junctures to produce, enable, circumscribe, and challenge dominant notions of “blackness,” one of the sharpest edges of the sonic color line, and “whiteness,” its bluntest instrument of power.

While my main theoretical emphasis in *The Sonic Color Line* is race, my research remains deeply attuned to gender’s impact on listening and vice versa. I regard race and gender as intersectional political identities experienced simultaneously and in a complex, highly contextual relationship; both race and gender—along with sexuality and class—impact how one sounds and listens. *The Sonic Color Line* is mindful of how, as Christine Ehrick argues, “gender is also represented, contested, and reinforced through the aural,”⁵² in particular through its detailed examinations of sound and listening in a geographical and historical context. Our experiences of race are necessarily linked to our gendered identities; our gender identities cannot be conceived separately from our racialized experience, an idea infusing this book, beginning with Jacobs’s struggle to show the raced edge of the notion that white American women in the nineteenth century had “delicate ears,” and concluding with Lutie Johnson, the protagonist of Petry’s *The Street*, being stalked aggressively by the particular form of silence black women face in a white supremacist America, what Kimberly Foster calls “the terror of being uncared for.”⁵³

Petry and several other writers in this book reveal how very deeply the contexts of race and gender continue to matter—and remain controversial—in the reception of so-called universal sounds, such as screams. Although a June 2015 study by psychologists and neural scientists at New York University and the University of Geneva concluded that “screams are the one uncontroversially universal vocalization,” I maintain that the sonic color line’s disciplining of the senses disrupts notions of “universal” listening. In certain contexts, for example, and depending on the listener, a black woman’s scream is heard differently from a white woman’s, even if both screams displayed similar properties of pitch, tone, timbre, and volume; the sonic color line maps divergent impacts and meanings for these two sounds, as dependent on the race and gender of the listener as they are on the perceived race and gender of the screamer. Douglass, for instance, notices the sound of his Aunt Hester screaming caused the slave master to whip her harder and longer, while in Wright’s fiction, even the *thought* of a white woman screaming sets murders, lynchings, and mass migrations in motion. Both these examples also show how masculinity is experienced through and bound up with listening. While the slave master hears his sexual potency and power in Hester’s screams, Douglass hears his inability, as both child and slave, to help his beloved aunt, which drives him toward an understanding of listening as ethical involvement. Wright shows how the white female scream hovers in the nation’s sonic imaginary as confirmation of a rapacious black masculinity, and how this sound warps white men toward violence and just plain warps black men, who grow up knowing this scream heralds death.

In examining the relation between raced and gendered perception, I am also careful to interweave rather than collapse the historical processes I see at work in the formation of the sonic color line with the equally complicated, concurrent formation of a sonic glass ceiling. Although far from destiny, biology has a different valence in terms of gender and voice, binding voices in some degree to what Ehrick describes as “physiological parameters of comfortable pitch range” and “voice quality settings.” However, Ehrick also notes how “humans can and do place their voices in ways that are consistent with the performative aspects of gender.”⁵⁴ As with race, the sound of a voice does not *cause* sexism, but rather sexism disciplines the cultural meanings attached to perceived

gendered differences in the voice, impacting expressions of race and sexuality as well as assumptions of class. For instance, Liana Silva argues that loudness remains a male privilege in American culture, so women who wield loud voices are dubbed lower class and “noisy, rude, unapologetic, unbridled.” Silva calls attention to loudness’s special valence for women of color, whose raced identities raise the stakes of respectability politics. Women of color risk being marginalized by men of all races as well as white women, attuned to women of color’s expressions of loudness as hostile, immature, angry, less intelligent, and/or divisive. In a society bound by sonic color lines *and* glass ceilings, “loudness,” Silva contends, “is something racialized people cannot afford.”⁵⁵ By theorizing listening as a medium for race and gender hierarchies, *The Sonic Color Line* contextualizes gendered voices within a wider soundscape of music and ambient sounds also subject to raced and gendered policing.

* * *

Traversing multiple archives and utilizing more than one critical method, my interdisciplinary methodology uses archival, literary, and cultural analyses. Through intensive archival excavation and close reading, I “un-air” sound and representations of listening in discursive sites where it is not usually looked for: novels, short stories, essays, newspaper coverage, letters, memoirs, etiquette manuals, and advertisements. Bruce Smith describes “unairing” as “acoustic archaeology,” a process of “learning to hear, and not just see” evidence embedded in written materials.⁵⁶ I locate “unaired” literary sound and embed it in a historical context, tracing the sonic color line and the listening ear through readings that return a sense of proximity to events, people, and perspectives made distant and disparate by traditional archival practice. Through meticulous micro-history, I show how sounds come to us “already listened to,” whether we encounter them in print, on recordings, or in our own ears. This book deliberately disrupts the border between “actual” and imagined sound, joining Moten and Smith, who argue that discursive sound constructs, alters, and contests historical memory.⁵⁷ *The Sonic Color Line* builds a case for the importance of aural imagery⁵⁸ and sonic imaginaries—the multiple ways in which we think, write, and represent sound and listening experiences—to cultural history, breaking new ground while enabling fresh readings of canonical literary texts and performances.

While I stage my interventions at the intersection of African American studies and sound studies, I borrow methodologically from cultural studies. Hall's idea of representation and Roland Barthes's discussion of adjectives in musical discourse provide crucial connective tissue between language and culture that enables my theoretically informed and historically contextualized close-reading practice to intervene at the critical site where audio intersects the literary and both meet the epistemological: language. Because "music is," according to Barthes, "by a natural inclination, what immediately receives an adjective,"⁵⁹ evocative reportage of the voice and sound of African American performers reveals a host of racialized aural representations—the sonic color line—and written traces of racialized listening practices—the listening ear. I use close reading to distill American "sonic protocols": culturally specific and socially constructed conventions that shape how sound is indexed, valued, and interpreted at any given moment. Like Marjorie Garber, I believe close reading is less about teasing out *what* something means and much more key to understanding "the *way* something means."⁶⁰ Literary texts not only produce and represent their own sounds⁶¹ but also represent and record the process of sound's social production. The hurried, utilitarian diction of journalism and advertising copy—never intended to be pored over—often provides some of the most profound renderings of the sonic color line, while the densely layered poetic language of literature—conflicting, contradictory, and evocative—frequently attempts to replot that same line, constructing representations that urge readers to hear their world differently.

My genealogy of listening in the United States moves through four eras of musical performance and literary production—antebellum slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and World War II—bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, something few sound studies do. Beginning before the invention of the phonograph enables *The Sonic Color Line* to challenge existing historiographies of sound that give primacy to recording technologies and archives of "actual" sound. Continually privileging recorded texts in the story of sound enacts a kind of technological determinism obscuring how social, cultural, and historical forces mediate sound and audio technologies. While I draw on a number of recorded texts, my study makes a case for written representations as a form of recording, documenting the historical listening prac-

tices of the writers themselves. Inspired by Weheliye's understanding of history as "a series of vexed knots that require the active intervention of the critic or DJ,"⁶² I "think sound" differently here, digging deeply within the crates of each historical moment under discussion, juxtaposing a wide range of generically diverse sources to create an alternate sense of historical context itself, a transformed "structure of feeling" that takes multiple voices, soundscapes, and socially produced listening practices into account.⁶³

The book begins just before the U.S. Civil War, and its first two chapters detail the rise of the sonic color line as a function of slavery and a site of contestation for America's new popular culture industry. Chapter 1 reads slave narratives by Douglass and Jacobs as literary, theoretical, and historical texts, laying bare the starkly racialized sonics of slavery's power differentials to examine how and why whites technologized listening as racial discipline and revealing how slaves used listening as resistance and self-preservation. Douglass's and Jacobs's aural imagery shows how whites constructed sound as irrational and emotional—in Western culture, the province of women and slaves—and mobilized it to fix race and gender in the body. Both develop the trope of the listener to launch pointed critiques of white listening habits and to amplify listening as an avenue of agency for black people in the struggle to hear and free themselves.

However, as chapter 2 makes clear, the antebellum sonic color line wasn't confined to the South. It structured life in the North as well, as I show through analysis of the concert reviews of two female singers who ascended to center stage in the nation's burgeoning popular culture industry: "the Swedish Nightingale" Jenny Lind and Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, "the Black Swan." The growing conflict over women's rights made these women's voices hyperaudible sites of raced and gendered conflict in the public sphere, and the racialized tropes of audible "whiteness" and "blackness" emerging from the dueling divas' media flurry disciplined the dominant U.S. listening ear with raced and gendered logics inflecting scientific breakthroughs regarding timbre and sound vibrations.

Chapter 3 locates the sonic color line's next big shift during Radical Reconstruction, examining how developing sound recording technology in the 1870s was preceded and anticipated by the intensive repetition of

the Jubilee Singers' corporeal performance and the techniques of phonography explored by writer Chesnutt. Building on Moten's notion of the intertwined nature of resistance and subjection, this chapter examines "the black voice" itself as a sonic technology of Reconstruction that interrogated and soothed America's bloody racial history and the rifts of the recent Civil War. Both the Jubilee Singers and Chesnutt used the trope of the listener to gain representational control of the historical memory of slavery, challenging dominant racial narratives locating race in the blood and defining black people as cultureless, uneducable, and unassimilable. The Jubilees and Chesnutt succeeded in shifting definitions of "authentic" blackness away from blackface performance; however, mainstream American media outlets appropriated their representations to shore up a new sonic image of blackness focused on sounds of suffering.

The sonic color line's third major shift occurred at the intersection of music, sound cinema, and lynching during the Great Depression and the Great Migration. Here the sonic color line skewed toward circumscribing public performances of black masculinity, which I trace by interweaving the late-1930s musical career of Huddie "Lead Belly" Ledbetter with the early fiction of his friend and contemporary, author Richard Wright. Folklorist John Lomax strategically sold Lead Belly's music to white audiences as the thrilling, authentic sound of the "to-be-lynched" body, enabled by and enabling the sonic color line to "match" black male bodies with particular voices and musics. But as synchronous sound cinema displaced "silent" films during this era, the notion of the "sound track" introduced new possibilities for listening that unsettled established relationships between sound and the visual image. Using new cinematic techniques, Wright's fiction from this period challenges Lomax's representation of Ledbetter by "soundtracking" lynching and segregation, creating a decolonizing practice intervening in "the ideology of the visible"⁶⁴ while simultaneously exposing sound's invisible ideological freight, carrying lynching far beyond the South and racial segregation across spatial color lines.

The book closes amidst World War II's immediate aftermath, showing how the sonic color line not only enabled the racial formation we now know as "color blindness" but also surreptitiously became race's lingua franca. Radio, in particular, was a technology of the sonic color

line, developing and circulating new acousmatic sonic protocols of racialized sounding and listening no longer dependent on immediate bodily presence. Building upon Ledbetter and Wright's depictions of the sonic color line within segregated Northern cities, I show how radio broadcasts and production practices reproduced raced and gendered urban spaces and enabled the emerging discourse of color blindness. I begin by investigating the subtle racing of singer Lena Horne's voice over the 1940s airwaves, focusing on how and why her vocal crossing—and resistant performances—threatened the nation's underlying racial order. Like Horne, a vocal critic of radio's increasingly subtle racializations and hidden exclusions, Du Bois critiqued radio via his social theory in *Dusk of Dawn*, emphasizing America's movement away from the linear and visual metaphor of the color line to a figuration of race as a plate-glass vacuum chamber, an aural metaphor influenced, I argue, by his work as a behind-the-scenes consultant for CBS Radio's *Americans All*, *Immigrants All*. Du Bois shows the importance of listening—or the lack thereof—to the “wartime racial realignment” of the 1940s,⁶⁵ where mainstream U.S. culture represented the path to equal citizenship and the achievement of the American Dream as straight and true, even as gross inequities and invisible barriers knocked people of color widely off course. Finally, I amplify Petry's contributions to a black radio critique. Whereas Horne's vocal phrasing offered an example of black artistic agency contra the sonic color line and Du Bois's letters and theories the agency of the writer/producer, Petry's fiction evokes the trope of the listener to interrogate the agency of black audiences and their efforts to decolonize their listening and disrupt the sonic color line's (and radio's) deleterious silences. Thinking these artists together illustrates that if color lines are heard—not just seen—the listening ear continues to operate in covert and extralegal ways, even when a society enacts laws turning a “blind eye” to perceived racial difference.

Reconsidering racialization as a sonic practice allows for a deeper understanding of why both race and racism persist, even as “color-blind” formations of race infuse federal law and political pundits insist America is a “post-racial” nation in the wake of Barack Obama's presidency. Although scholars of race have roundly challenged color blindness,⁶⁶ it remains the United States' dominant ideology. *The Sonic Color Line* argues that American proponents of color blindness have been

able to declare race invisible in the twenty-first century precisely because dominant listening practices grounded in antebellum slavery and shaped by segregation continue to render it audible. In what follows, I jam the sonic color line's aural signals, enabling more equitable listening practices to emerge.