

**THE SONIC COLOR LINE**  
RACE AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF LISTENING

Jennifer Lynn Stoeber

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. The Word, the Sound, and the Listening Ear: Listening to the Sonic Color Line in Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative and Harriet Jacobs's 1861 Incidents 29
  2. Performing the Sonic Color Line in the Antebellum North: The Swedish Nightingale and the Black Swan 78
  3. Preserving "Quare Sounds," Conserving the "Dark Past": The Jubilee Singers and Charles Chesnutt Reconstruct the Sonic Color Line 132
  4. "A Voice to Match All That": Lead Belly, Richard Wright, and Lynching's Soundtrack 180
  5. Broadcasting Race: Lena Horne, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Ann Petry 229
- Afterword 277
- Notes 281
- Index 323
- About the Author 331

## PREMISE

**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

**A U D I B L E .**



+ USA = Racialized Hearing and Listnin'



## The Antebellum Racial Setting – Slave Owners and Enforcers Defined the Sonic Color Line

- EXTENDED Race and Racism into the auditory UNSEEN
- Use of ACOUSTIC DISCIPLINING for coercive psychological disciplining
- Revolt against sonic-line colonialism:
  - “Overcome ‘em with YES’es;
  - Undermine ‘em with grins;
  - Agree ‘em to death and destruction;
  - Let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or burst wide open.”
- White supremacists REQUIRED a sonic barrier to impede any “erotic” sway of slave voice

The sonic color line affectively delineated the “BLACK” and “WHITE” borders of cross-racial conversation

# FREDERICK DOUGLAS 1845 & HARRIET JACOBS 1861

- Ethnosympathy: at Frederick Douglas' beckon, by the end of the Civil War voices and melodies once considered noise (i.e. the woes of slaves captured in songs of pain, suffering, and perseverance) were heard as song and were used by abolitionists as symbolic weapons against slavery.
- By recognizing black cultural authenticity, society accepted that slaves were not only capable of worship but also of cultural exchange, proof that they possessed agency and emotion.
- Jacobs described the path to decolonization of racialized listening practices:
  - “If you want to be fully convinced of the abominations of slavery, go on a Southern Plantation and call yourself a Negro Trader. Then there will be no concealment, and you will see and hear things that to you will seem impossible among human beings with immortal souls.”
  - “Northern prejudice oppresses the spirits and energies of black people—just like slavery oppresses their bodies.”

# ANTEBELLUM NORTH: SWEDISH NIGHTINGALE & BLACK SWAN

- <http://www.youtubeinmp3.me/download.php?q=dRcH3TJvIPk> - idealized “Swedish Nightingale “- Lenny Lindt recreated by Loren Allred (The Greatest Showman) / emblematic of racial purity, in support of new theories crafted by racial scientists.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JihudsPjAfw> - at 0:32” idealized “Black Swan” – Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield by (*unidentified, from “Portraits – a retrospective of Black Opera Divas*)
- Visual blackness was projected onto timbre, resulting in the perception of sonic blackness.
- For many black antebellum music critics, hearing the voice of the Black Swan was a decolonizing listening experience , an alternate to conforming with “the Listening Ear (i.e. white dominance and the minimization of Black lyrical talent).
- In this era before sound recording media, print served to codify the sound of race and its intersection with gender, class, sexuality, and citizenship.
- Aural conformity to “the Listening Ear” could inflict great damage upon black subjects, giving rise to Black Sonic Resistance.

Jennifer Stoeber notes, because critical race studies focus on the visual realm, they risk overlooking the potential for racism in other sensory realms.

# “DARK PAST”: THE JUBILEE SINGERS AND CHARLES CHESNUTT

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUvBGZnL9rE>

Presented TWO separable voices:

- the Sonics of White Supremacy
- a “charming’ blackness still circumscribed by white desire and temporality

A TIGHTROPE FOR BLACK PERFORMERS

STRUGGLE AGAINST WHITE DEMAND FOR REPETITION AND “PRESERVATION” OF THE  
SONIC COLOR LINE / THE LISTENING EAR

# LEAD BELLY, RICHARD WRIGHT, AND LYNCHING'S SOUNDTRACK

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cu7gafphe9M>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A\\_C3rg4v9jw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_C3rg4v9jw)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Web007rzSOI>



# LENA HORNE, W. E. B. DU BOIS, AND ANN PETRY

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.

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

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YodXpCij6ZE>

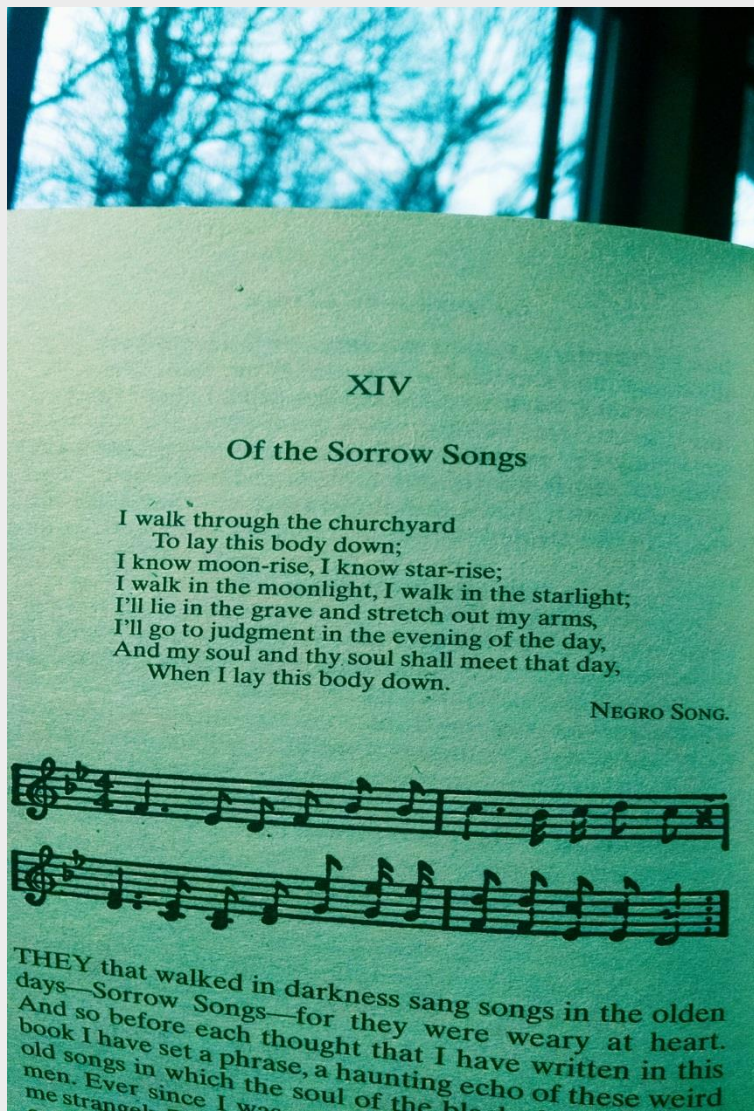
Mendi Obadike discovers that sound may summon the presence of blackness even without the attendance of black bodies—a phenomenon that she terms “acousmatic blackness.”

# W.E.B. DU BOIS' PLATE-GLASS CHAMBER

Du Bois's figuration of the color-line as a plate-glass vacuum enclosure re-theorizes the workings of race in the 1940s, using aural imagery to represent the contours of its pervasive, persistent, and palpable (in)visibility



# W.E.B. DU BOIS THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLKS



Published in 1903. Grapples with the existential burden of being black and being American.

Describes consequences of the American political color line, as captured in a wealth of *SORROW SONGS*.

“Like all primitive folk, the slave stood near to Nature’s heart... “ from the ploughman, the song:

Dere’s no rain to wet you,  
Dere’s no sun to burn you,  
Oh, push along believer,  
I want to go home.

***“Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth...”***

# CONCLUSION

American ideologies of white supremacy are just as dependent on what we hear

“The Listening Ear” = racialized listening practices

Black thinkers conceived their own cultural politics of listening: Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (Black Swan), W.E.B. Du Bois, Lena Horne among others as agents and theorists of sound.

The difficult work of decolonizing listening and dismantling race’s sonic architecture will take much time

To paraphrase Ice Cube: “We must check ourselves before we wreck ourselves.”

We must be “witnesses and participants” to overcome racialized listening:

**Listen out TO, and FOR one another.**