

## MEDIA REVIEW

*The Sonic Gaze: Jazz, Whiteness, and Racialized Listening.* By T. Storm Heter. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022. 193pp. \$34.00

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*The Sonic Gaze: Jazz, Whiteness, and Racialized Listening* by T. Storm Heter is a valuable addition to contemporary humanities scholarship that destabilizes fixed identity categories and considers how whiteness is shaped by shifting relationships to self and power. Resonating with Dylan Robinson's indigenizing understanding of settler listening as a kind of consumption that seeks self-affirmation, as well as the work of Nina Sun Eidsheim and Jennifer Lynn Stoeber on race and aurality, this text extends similar concerns by examining attitudes and responses toward the genre of jazz throughout the twentieth century. Fundamentally, Heter argues that twentieth-century jazz and its surrounding discourses demonstrate that race is constructed in part with the ears, and that one way in which people become white is through their listening practices.

Heter understands white listening as a technology of colonization in which white people control listening spaces and the distinctions between music and noise, listening from a position of power while understanding that position as neutral. Drawing upon sonic and print culture throughout the twentieth century, Heter's main intervention presents a phenomenological analysis of what it has meant to listen whitely to jazz over time, followed by the proposal of an alternative listening practice, which he calls "creolized listening," that involves attending to difference, positionality, and hybridity rather than searching for cultural authenticity and rigid musical boundaries.

After laying out his frameworks and major arguments in the first chapter, Heter proceeds to investigate the characteristics of white listening. From sound recordings, periodicals, and scholarship, he creates a taxonomy of six phases of white jazz listening which arose over the course of the twentieth century. Although listeners' behavior differs in each phase of white listening, they all involve rigid understandings of authenticity through which listeners are trained to investigate and problematize non-white musicians and their musical styles. The six phases of white listening which Heter coins are as follows: white minstrel listening, white savior listening, white hipster listening, white revivalist listening, white colorblind listening, and white ecstatic listening. This

periodization, which Heter synthesizes from discussions of jazz listening contributed by non-white thinkers and theorists throughout the twentieth century, acts as a useful tool for tracing the development of racialized listening practices.

According to Heter, the first form of white listening is minstrel listening. This form of listening began in the late nineteenth century, when white audiences understood the caricatures and performances they witnessed in minstrel shows as authentic representations of Black life, creating a monolithic understanding of Blackness. Heter draws out the relationship between early jazz performances and blackface minstrelsy, arguing that listeners' earliest approaches to jazz contained many of the same traits and conflated performances with a representation of authentic Blackness. The second phase, white savior listening, began in the late 1920s as white bandleaders began to appropriate jazz, characterizing their work as an elevation of primitive Black music into a sophisticated and artistically valuable art form while retaining a sense of exotic thrill for their audiences. White hipster listening, the third phase, reacted to these earlier phases. Viewing minstrel and savior listening as embarrassing and inappropriate, white hipster listeners were aware of their whiteness and they sought to immerse themselves in Black culture to escape it. In the fourth phase, revivalist listening, Black music was understood as a folk object that could act as an antidote to the cultural ills of modern urban life, and published collections of Black musical traditions as cultural artifacts became popular among white listeners. Under colorblind listening, the fifth phase, jazz was embraced by the white establishment as long as it conformed to white expectations. Finally, white ecstatic listening emerged as the cornerstone of the post-1950s perception of jazz as art music. In this type of listening, audience members seek to experience jazz in a disembodied and intellectual framework, separating themselves from Black-coded noise and embodiment. While he describes these phases as occurring chronologically, Heter also argues that they are reinscribed and re-expressed across time, and aspects of each phase of white listening can be found in contemporary listening practices.

Heter's descriptions of white listening are oriented toward the behaviors and practices of white people, and he writes that the text is largely directed toward contemporary white listeners in order to help them more critically approach their own listening habits. He acknowledges that white listening is an orientation that has dominated listening in the United States, one which people of all races are influenced by and engage in. However, in his efforts to define the practices and characteristics of white listening, Heter mostly focuses on the habits of listeners who are white. His analyses of non-white approaches to listening, which constitute his last two chapters, are confined to those forms of listening that

resist, challenge, and subvert white listening. At just under two hundred pages, *The Sonic Gaze* does not attempt to fully define the nuance and complexity that characterizes the relationship between non-white people and the dominant white listening practices that shape American culture. While underdeveloped in the text, this relationship is a crucial facet of the concepts Heter considers, a ripe area for future research and exploration which readers should bear in mind as they navigate the text.

Out of four total chapters, the final two describe resistance and alternatives to white listening from non-white jazz musicians and writers. In Chapter Three, Heter explores the recordings and writings of several Creole jazz musicians, including Sidney Bechet and Edward “Kid” Ory, understanding them as intellectuals and phenomenologists in their own right. He argues that Bechet’s autobiography includes a creolizing phenomenology, which explores hybridity in the wake of colonialism and chattel slavery. Based on his analysis of this work, Heter advocates for his audience, which he largely assumes to be white, to adopt what he calls “creolized listening habits” as a means to combat white supremacy and racism. This includes acknowledging and attending to positionality and taking an imaginative or improvisatory orientation to whiteness in their listening.

Heter concludes the text with an analysis of Africana critiques of white listening based in Black existentialism, Harlem Renaissance thought, and Black journalism. The fundamental critique he draws out from these writers, including W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson, is that white people consume and discuss sounds and images of Blackness at will while ignoring critiques of this behavior from Black people. Black theorists have responded to this selective appropriation of Blackness in a variety of ways, ranging from efforts to make Black music palatable in the concert hall to total disengagement that sees discourse with white audiences as a hopeless endeavor. Heter argues that as white people become increasingly aware of whiteness in contemporary discourses, they often ignore the already-existing analysis of these practices from these Black theorists. He concludes the text with a call for his white readers to engage in better listening practices from an embodied community perspective, using the work of these non-white thinkers and scholars to inform their listening and self-analysis.

Heter intends for *The Sonic Gaze* to function as a pedagogical tool as well as a scholarly monograph, and following each chapter, he includes ear training exercises for educators to employ in the classroom. These exercises ask students to develop their technical skills in recognizing pitch, rhythm, and form, as well as to critically consider the ways in which they may be listening whitely in their musical lives and how they might begin to take the more creolized approach

Heter advocates. For example, following the second chapter, Heter's exercises include teaching students the three-against-two clave polyrhythm and later listening to a 1920s performance by Paul Whiteman's orchestra, noting the ways in which this version "tames" and simplifies polyrhythms. This type of material requires students to engage in a musical practice, recognize aural patterns, and think critically about the social meanings of music in history. These exercises are an effective addition to the text, adding practical strategies with the potential to reshape listening practices and aid in the creation of an anti-racist music pedagogy.

In general, Heter's concept of white listening can be expanded to think more widely about oppressive listening structures based on other identities, such as considering the ways in which the male gaze, which has been widely theorized in media and film studies, might be applied to sonic media. An intersectional sonic gaze that follows Heter's strategy of taking seriously the phenomenology of listening from various perspectives and confronts dominant understandings by embracing and learning from lenses employed by oppressed communities, often outside of academic discourse, is fertile ground for further study.

In *The Sonic Gaze*, Heter offers a framework that encourages intention, care, and attention to position in our listening, scholarship, and teaching. The forms of white listening he enumerates are particularly useful, and the text's instructions for listeners makes it a constructive tool for white readers interested in anti-racist research and pedagogy. All in all, this is a worthy contribution to scholarly literature in jazz studies and beyond, a must-read for anyone interested in cultural constructions of race and hybridity, musical or otherwise.