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UWS 55A – Racial Difference and the Senses

12 October 2021

A Blind Spot in the Listening Ear

There's more to listening than sound. In the introduction to her book *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Jennifer Lynn Stoever develops a language for understanding listening as an involved, racialized process. To explain this process, Stoever coins the term "the listening ear," which identifies how sonic information is filtered through aural stereotypes to naturalize artificial categories of racial difference (15). Particularly in the case of Blackness, the listening ear establishes racialized descriptors that mark "noisy," "loud," or "improper" sounds as deviant (14). It's from this starting point that Boots Riley's recent film *Sorry to Bother You* follows the story of Cassius Green, a Black man in a modern capitalist society who uses his "white voice" to find financial success at a telemarketing company. Through their respective mediums, Stoever's essay and Riley's film provide unambiguous criticism of the listening ear. However, they are less decisive about the more complicated project of resisting the racialization of sound. This essay develops an understanding of the modes of resistance in *Sorry to Bother You*, examining matches and mismatches with Stoever's theoretical work to assess their efficacies. While *Sorry to Bother You* illustrates Stoever's criticism of the listening ear, it also posits subversive strategies that extend Stoever's claims towards methods of resistance. However, the film displays the provisional nature of these forms of resistance, highlighting the ways they might sustain hierarchies of aural and visual racial difference in the long run.

Before moving to an examination of the film's proposed methods of subverting the listening ear, it's useful to establish the relationship between the film's depiction of sonic race

and Stoever's criticism of the listening ear. The primary convergence between the two sources is the film's central plot device: the white voice. The audience is introduced to the concept early in the movie during a scene at Cassius's new place of work, the telemarketing company. Cassius is advised to use his white voice on calls by an older colleague, Langston, who describes the white voice as not just "proper" or "nasal," but rather "sounding like you don't have a care" and "what they think they're supposed to sound like." Langston's understanding of the white voice can be explained as a manifestation of Stoever's listening ear. It exemplifies how imagined stereotypes of what race sounds like are imposed on practices of listening by customers and sound production by callers. As Stoever argues, the way we listen is "embodied," constructed from our "experiences, historical context, and physicality" (15). In parallel with Stoever, what's striking about Langston's definition of the white voice is its refrain from using direct aural descriptors, instead offering descriptors of the speaker. Langston's diction illustrates Stoever's core thesis that listening is not the passive observation of sonic phenomena. Instead, it's a personally involved imaginative process that uses preconceptions to generate non-sonic information like identity. This initial scene serves to signal the film's broader intent to identify and perform aural racial stereotypes as a mode of inquiry into the listening ear.

Sorry to Bother You also includes performances of one of Stoever's most concrete examples of the listening ear in action. In her essay, Stoever writes about "coffee shop minstrel" shows, "*really* white moments" where white individuals, usually men, would approach her as she wrote her book in coffee shops and impersonate a "Black voice" after hearing the topic of her writing (8). Similar minstrel performances make frequent appearances during the film. In one instance, when Cassius is promoted to be a "Power Caller," Diana DeBauchery, his manager, addresses him using her "Black voice." She touches his clothes, nervously raises her eyebrows,

and says “Let’s do this, mu-tha-fuck-ah,” followed by a giggle and “I’ve always wanted to say that.” In the same way that Stoever describes the coffee shop minstrels as thinking their performance is “funny and weird and sexual” (8), Diana takes great pleasure in impersonating a vocal stereotype of Black impropriety via slang, profanity, and particular pronunciations. Stoever describes these minstrel shows as affirming whiteness because they serve to identify and catalogue aural stereotypes, a process which codes racial difference into practices of listening (8). Once racial differences have been codified, *Sorry to Bother You* suggests that minstrel shows are a display of asymmetric power relationships where whiteness gets to occupy a position of deviance for fun. Thus, Diana enjoys momentarily imitating her conception of Black speech precisely because it’s a momentary act. In contrast, the capacity to slip in and out of racial difference for personal gratification is not afforded to non-white, particularly Black, individuals. While white people can live their lives with an “invisible” race, populations that have been othered by mechanisms like the listening ear must live the effects of codified racial difference every day (Stoever 12).

However, as *Sorry to Bother You* suggests, there might be circumstances in which the roles of the minstrel show can be reversed to benefit those oppressed by the listening ear. The film explores subversive strategies of resistance in two main ways. The primary instance is Cassius’s use of the white voice to advance his career. After receiving advice from Langston, Cassius finds a large vein of success, making an endless stream of sales. Prior to his aural adjustment, he was treated with scorn by white customers, one of whom tells him, “Sorry, we don’t have any money,” associating his Black voice with poverty. When Cassius codeswitches to his white voice, his customers laugh with him over the line, clearly enjoying the voice and excited by it. Eventually, he receives a large promotion, allowing him to pay off his uncle’s rent

and improve his living conditions. While his identity remains Black, he's taken advantage of subconscious expectations and imaginations of what it sounds like to be white to advance his financial position. This kind of subversive act feels like a response to the racial violence of Stoever's coffee shop minstrels: it is not just another instance of a white minstrel performance but a negative image, in which racial roles are flipped.

When sound emanates from an unseen source, it's racialized in a way that might not be in accordance with visual signifiers (Stoever 9). Stoever argues that "Whites cannot see through their veil of race" (10), creating metaphorically acousmatic conditions that facilitate the introduction of sonic racial signifiers. *Sorry to Bother You* pushes beyond Stoever's metaphor to literally acousmatic conditions, suggesting that in the right physical circumstances aural racial signifiers can be manipulated. Each time Cassius calls a customer, he and his desk are transported into the customer's house. In these scenes, Cassius is treated as white by the customers, putting them at so much ease he even borrows a joint from one. At the same time, Cassius's virtual transport to the customers' homes creates a surreal, almost magical realist scene: Cassius's eyebrows raise to indicate he perceives the transport, but his reaction is muted; he simply sticks to the script. The audience and Cassius observe white customers, who are only able to perceive him through his voice, be literally incapable of seeing him. These moments extend Stoever's identification of the intense ocular-centrism of race to find a blind spot created by the listening ear that might allow Black folks to use aural tools like the white voice without explicitly assimilating. By codeswitching, Cassius can turn the listening ear against broader structures of racial difference, momentarily tricking them. In this sense, acousmatic conditions create opportunities for the listening ear to be subverted.

The second method of subversion in *Sorry to Bother You* is not a plot element; it manifests in the form and intent of the film itself. The directors of the movie are experimenting with their own kind of response to the listening ear and aural minstrel shows, but they don't try to flip the roles of the minstrel show as Cassius does in telemarketing. Instead, the movie is a parody of minstrel shows, a comedy making fun of the absurdity of aural stereotypes. Each scene containing the white voice is over the top, an exaggeration of characteristics of the stereotypically white voice, making these scenes simultaneously comedic and unsettling. For example, when Cassius first tries his voice out in the bar with his friends, the music takes on an eerie tone, the camera panning to his friends' disturbed faces. Cassius's speech is excessively proper, overpronounced, and animated. In this way, the film forces white audiences to hear the white voice, an experience that may be uncomfortable. As Stoeber writes, the whiteness represents itself as invisible and inaudible, the background against which deviance is heard (12). *Sorry to Bother You* responds to this perspective by pushing back against whiteness's invisibility through the medium of film, intending to force viewers to hear whiteness for at least the duration of the movie through unsettling caricatures of the white voice.

However, these modes of resistance provide provisional benefits at high long-term costs. As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly obvious that using the white voice was not nearly as subversive as it initially seemed. As Cassius ranks up in his job, he is invited to a party at Steve Lift's mansion, a billionaire who developed a business model resembling slavery. The scene begins with Cassius's boss from the telemarketing company guiding him to meet Lift. Cassius extends a hand to shake with Lift, bowing and telling him in his white voice that it's a pleasure to meet him, "an honor even, sir." Lift looks uncertain and doesn't respond until Cassius's boss says in a tone like an owner introducing someone to their pet, "It's okay he's

friendly. He's friendly." The scene reframes the use of the white voice as futile and degrading. Unlike over the phone, the white voice does not have the same deceptive, pacifying effect. Predictably, in the absence of acousmatic conditions, trying to trick the listening ear has little to no effect. This makes sense, given Stoever's characterization of the veil of racism as an audiovisual phenomenon that *evokes* acousmatic phenomena (9). In most situations, the veil is not entirely acousmatic, so codeswitching fails to entirely "trick" the listening ear. Thus, the subversive strategy of codeswitching is shown to have a major limitation.

As the party scene continues, more complications in the strategy of subversion arise. As Cassius approaches the main room, Lift regales a crowd of white partygoers with the story of brutally using an assault rifle to kill the rhino whose shredded head is mounted above the fireplace. Cassius is invited into the room by Lift and he sits on the floor, surrounded by a semi-circle of partygoers. The partygoers are primarily either standing or sitting on furniture, creating a height differential, which allows the audience to feel the asymmetric power relationship. To follow it up, Lift asks if Cassius can "bust a rap," insists that Cassius can rap despite Cassius's protests, then chants "Rap! Rap! Rap!" In this line, Lift uses his impression of "the Black voice," putting on his own minstrel show as he simultaneously projects the stereotype of violent behavior onto Cassius. Lift's question is almost rhetorical, with his tone implying he expects an affirmative response, emblematic of the assumed truth of deeply internalized stereotypes. The camera positions Cassius on the floor beneath the rhino, forcing the audience to consider the parallels between the rhino and Cassius's experiences.

These details point towards the conclusion that the film's strategies of subversion do not subvert racial hierarchies. While it might be leveraged for short term personal gain, using a white voice does not prevent Cassius from being abused for his Blackness. In the setting of the party,

his white voice reaffirms the white audience's power over him. To be provisionally included in their circle, he must assimilate to the listening ear and attempt to disavow his own identity. That he must try to assimilate indicates he will never be genuinely included or genuinely subvert the racial hierarchies that ultimately animate the listening ear. Using the white voice doesn't subvert; it invests in structures of racial difference because it's an instance of Blackness being forced to disavow itself to survive in a white world. In the end, Cassius is taken as a trophy to perform his Blackness for entertainment, just as the rhino is hung on the wall as a show of mastery. It's a similar story for the form of the film itself. While parody might train viewers to hear whiteness, this act of hearing race is still investing in the notion that aural racial stereotypes are a legitimate way to discern identity. For each the film's attempts to subvert the minstrel show—negative image and parody—the show's audience is still white; both methods are still performances of racial difference for whiteness. In the end, any form of a minstrel show is still a minstrel show.

As *Sorry to Bother You* and Stoeber agree, the listening ear generates and codifies racial differences based on aural stereotypes. The differential values associated with descriptors of aural phenomena generate internalized hierarchies of value that change the way we listen. This produces a complex issue with no simple solution. One strategy of resistance posited by *Sorry to Bother You* is codeswitching in acousmatic settings, which may produce provisional benefits by using the listening ear to temporarily access the social benefits of being perceived as white. The film itself is also a response to the listening ear, intended to force viewers to hear whiteness, an experience the listening ear typically works to prevent. However, it becomes clear that both strategies are transient solutions at best. Both operate within the framework of the listening ear, never moving beyond the base assumption that race can be and ought to be differentiated by sound. Through the lens of Stoeber, *Sorry to Bother You* ought to be taken as a lesson about the

difficulty of separating ourselves from dominant rubrics of perceiving and interpreting the world.

While the short-term relief provided by survival strategies that operate within these rubrics should not be discounted, to truly resist structures of domination we need to orient ourselves towards more radical methods that offer alternative ways of listening and being.

Works Cited

Riley, Boots. *Sorry to Bother You*. Annapurna Distribution, 2018.

Stoever, Jennifer Lynn. "Introduction: The Sonic Color Line and the Listening Ear." *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, NYUP, 2016, 7-16.