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# “That Men Might Listen Earnestly to It”: Hearing Blackness

Kristin Moriah

**L**ISTENING TO BLACK CULTURE and Black music is so ubiquitous that the act of listening to Blackness can seem facile and its nuances can go unnoticed. But listening to Blackness entails forms of critical apprehension that carry different valences across different frequencies. “Listen” can be a command, an invocation, or a plea. In progressive political discourses about anti-racism and anti-Blackness, we are asked to listen for sounds that go unnoticed by others; to listen for dissonance; to listen to music; to listen to protest; to listen for signs of life. And yet, there is still so much to be said about Black sonic phenomena, like the way “I Can’t Breathe,” Eric Garner’s last words, are now the title of an R&B song *and* a protest chant. Thus, the complex and shifting meaning of Black sounds and occasions to listen to Black culture pose significant critical challenges. At the same time, the misapprehension of Black sounds and sonic forms carries profound consequences and can contribute to enduring forms of subjection. Here, I am thinking of the way Matthew Morrison uses the term “Blacksound” to refer to “the legacies, sounds, and movements of African American bodies—both real and imagined—on which blackface performance and popular entertainment was based” (18) and finds copious examples of Blacksound in the present. Or the way Jennifer Stoeber argues that beginning in the nineteenth century, racist listening practices offered

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"white elites a new method of grounding racial abjection in the body while cultivating white listening practices as critical, discerning, delicate and, above all, as the standard of citizenship and personhood (5). Following Kevin Quashie, given that being "heard" can also be fraught with danger, and that certain aspects of Black vernacular culture flourish outside of the range of dominant culture, I am struck by the way inaudibility, or sonic inscrutability, emerges as a significant aspect of Black sounding worlds and Black literature, where listening is often related to the struggle to sound or to be heard correctly, even while retaining autonomy and privacy. I note that the struggle to sound publicly, and to be perceived accurately, forms the bedrock of Black literature in North America and creates a bridge to literature across the Black diaspora.

It might feel like a digression, but I hope that an anecdote about the insistence upon the importance of being heard taken from Black print culture will ground my argument and smooth the way here. As Sylvia Wynter says, "we are a storytelling species" (McKittrick 9). And you are, by extension, my listeners. In spring 1848 the *Frederick Douglass' Paper* entered a literary fray and marshalled the power of listening to argue for the cultural relevance of anti-slavery lyrics and verse. In an unsigned editorial, preeminent American literary critic Rufus W. Griswold was excoriated for not including abolitionist poetry in *The Poets and Poetry of America* (1842), an anthology of American poetry that was one of the earliest and most important of its kind. Griswold's nationalist literary project would help to define American literature and culture for years to come. According to Albert D. Pionke, "as a nation, Griswold's United States accrued intellectual status by virtue of counting among its citizens ... a diversely talented ensemble of critics, publishers, and writers" (320). Frederick Douglass's interlocutors were well aware of the importance of Griswold's anthology and of the implications of their exclusion. But perhaps even more fascinating than their conviction that abolitionist verses were foundational to American national literary projects was the recourse to sound in their very appeal to Griswold and his like. The editorial provides us with an opportunity to consider the politics of listening and hearing and how they have been marshalled by Black writers in North America.

And so, the *Frederick Douglass' Paper* writers bemoan the notable absence of even one "line of good anti-slavery song; for be it known to the lovers of good songs, that some of the best ever sung, are those to be heard in the happy homes of abolitionists, and our great anti-slavery gatherings." The editorial board continues to extoll the virtue of abolitionist poetics and song in their complaint, proclaiming that:

some of the best, the most touching, earnest, strong yet beautiful poems in this land, are those written by men and women, who love to use their high poetic gift to wake the nation's heart to *the wail* of the slave [...] But to the call, "come and join the abolitionists," would it could *ring* through all the land, reaching up the beautiful valley of the Genesee, down along the winding Mohawk, the broad Hudson, *mingling* with the sound of every *brawling* brook, the low *murmur* of every sweetly *flowing* streamlet, that it might be *heard* amid the forests, through the sequestered vales, in the hamlet homes, the busy town, the fields, the work-shops. That men might *listen earnestly* to it, that women might everywhere *lend a pitying ear*, that children might pause amid the glad free sport of infancy, *to hear a voice* that tells of childhood sold on the auction block; *of merry laughs* and happy sports thrown into market and this turned to despair and sorrow, come before their time to cloud life's early day with darkened shadows.

The editorial itself is not a timeless verse. The editors' complaint with Griswold is easily forgotten. But I am charmed by the unapologetic floweriness of this abolitionist polemic. It strikes the right note. In pitch, it reaches the fervour one would expect to find in an anthology of national literature. It displays a deep reverence for America and its people while anticipating what will come next. The "brawling brook" contrasts with the "low murmur" of the "sweetly flowing streamlet" in a way that foreshadows Walt Whitman's reverential take on the cacophony of American life. And yet, the writers' complaint here is practical, too. We are meant to apprehend, to feel, and to do. We are asked, to listen earnestly, lend a pitying ear, and hear a voice of merry laughs, despair, and sorrow. We are asked to listen for the human. Wailing, ringing, mingling, murmuring, the voice of freedom travels across the land by means at once surreptitious and serendipitous. The editors are firm in their conviction that inclusion in *The Poets and Poetry of America* offers an important opportunity for the circulation of abolitionist song and verse. Reading the editorial today reminds us that critiques of the exclusion of Black voices from elite cultural spaces are not merely a thing of the present—they have deep historic and political roots. Furthermore, sounding remains a critical means of defining Black space while seeking entry into public discourse. And, conscious listeners have a responsibility to act in righteous ways.

In *A Voice from the South*, Anna Julia Cooper says of a certain kind of naturalist American writer, that "all who care to, may listen while they

make the woods resound with their glad sweet carolling; and the listeners may draw their own conclusions as to the meaning of the cadences of this minor strain, or that hushed and almost awful note of rage or despair.” Here, Cooper also appeals to sound in her attempt to write Blackness into the cannon. In doing so, she also illustrates the tension that exists between the desire to be “heard” in public discourse and the existence of Black sonic phenomena that are audial in nature but which go unheard, or are incomprehensible to those unwilling to sit with Black culture, to draw connections between Black literature and the here and now. One may or may not care to listen. But thinking about Black literature and sound in this way helps me to decipher rhetorical and figurative moves in Black literature and culture across regions and time periods. It lets me rebel a bit against the notion of literature as a rigid discipline. It reaffirms the way Black Sound Studies can disrupt colonial ways of reading and organizing knowledge. I have trained as a literary scholar in Canada and the United States. And yet, I resist disciplinarity or, to be more precise, the task of defending English Literary Studies as discipline, because my most meaningful scholarly training was with Black intellectuals whose work was deeply interdisciplinary and who have very publicly cast a skeptical ear toward calls for inclusion and canonization. I have the privilege, now, of being a university professor. As a teacher and organizer, I have tried to cultivate spaces where aporia is restorative and where we attend to things like Glissant’s calls for opacity. Care and attentiveness, then, are key to the kinds of listening I seek to practice and inculcate, that we might listen earnestly.

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