

President Obama: All Over But the Shouting?

Jennifer Stoever 

Blog post published December 21, 2010 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/zfset-4z709>

Abstract

Ishmael Reed's 12/12/2010 op-ed for the New York Times, "What Progressives Don't Understand About Obama," certainly struck a nerve amongst the Left. In the piece, Reed calls out far-Lefters for their misplaced—and dangerous—desire for President Obama to essentially “bust a can of whup ass” out on the Republicans over the tax cut debacle.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Authenticities, Black Studies, Listening

Recommended citation

Stoever, J. (2010, December 21). President Obama: All Over But the Shouting?. *Sounding Out!*.

<https://doi.org/10.59350/zfset-4z709>

Copyright

Copyright © Jennifer Stoever 2010. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



Ishmael Reed's 12/12/2010 op-ed for the *New York Times*, "[What Progressives Don't Understand About Obama](#)," certainly struck a nerve amongst the Left. In the piece, Reed calls out far-Lefters for their misplaced—and dangerous—desire for President Obama to essentially “bust a can of whup ass” out on the Republicans over the tax cut debacle. Citing a lifetime of being labeled rhetorically “rowdy” by white teachers and peers, Reed calls attention to a deeply embedded and racialized double standard for the public expression of anger in the United States. Beyond turning a deaf ear to their own pleas for a “sane” national debate back in October—see [Mark Brantner's Sounding Out!](#) analysis of the rhetorical logic of John Stewart's Rally to Restore Sanity [here](#)—Reed argues that white liberals are also disregarding the racialized difference between white perceptions of their own anger (represented as righteous and authoritative) and their characterizations of black anger (as a loud, dangerous “whup ass”—or as Reed phrases it “paranoid,” “bitter,” “rowdy,” “angry,” [and] “bull[ying]”). In other words, behind the cries in Reed's comments for Obama to regain his “drama and passion” and to “stand up and tell these idiots to stuff it” lies a flirtation with and fear of “black anger,” which has a long history in the United States. As Reed mentions, black intellectuals have “been accused of tirades and diatribes for more than 100 years.”



As someone who researches the racialization of sound and listening, I have been tracking Obama's struggle with sonic stereotypes for quite some time now, and I think it is important to

connect Reed's recent thoughts with the utterance of another man named Reid almost a year ago. Woven into comments supposedly intended as praise of President Obama's political prowess, Former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nevada) told two political journalists that he had known Obama would be elected president in 2008 because he was "light skinned" and had ["no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one."](#) In this brief sound bite, the other Reid acknowledged the increased role that vocal grain and diction would play in a "post-racial" or "colorblind" world, linking the racialization of skin pigmentation with its less acknowledged yet perhaps more insidious counterpart, the racialization of sounds, voices and speech. Unfortunately, incendiary media coverage focused bluntly on Reid's alleged racism for using the antiquated term "Negro" rather than sparking a more nuanced conversation about the role that race plays in perception and the multifaceted ways in which this racialized perception affects American politics and culture, down to the very level of the senses.

What was most disturbing about Reid's comments (and the least talked about) was how they showed aural markers of race aligning with—and even superseding—visual codes of race, exposing the seeming comfort Americans have developed with this ["sonic color-line,"](#) as I have termed it. Inspired by and indebted to [W. E. B. Du Bois's](#) concept of the visual color-line in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and his later reimagining of that color-line as a suffocating plate-glass enclosure in *Dusk of Dawn* (1940), my notion of the sonic color-line posits listening as an interpretive site where racial difference is coded, produced, and policed. In short, we hear race in addition to (and sometimes even before) seeing it. As I have argued [elsewhere](#), the socially constructed division between "sound/noise" marks one border of the sonic color-line; the hierarchies pointed out by Reed (quiet/loud) and exacerbated by Reid (proper/improper) mark still others. The sonic markers of whiteness ("sound"/"quiet"/"proper") are culturally associated with both intellect and full citizenship privileges; the sonic markers representing blackness ("noise"/"loud"/"improper") are repeatedly trotted out as signs of deviance, danger, and deserved abjection.

Though I very rarely find myself agreeing with Conservative linguist John McWhorter, I couldn't help concede to the sentiment expressed in his January 9, 2010, blog for the *The New Republic*, ["Reid's Three Little Words; The Log in Our Own Eye"](#): "And who among us—including black people—thinks someone with what I call a 'black-cent' who occasionally popped up with double negatives and things like *aks* could be elected President, whether it's fair or not?" Both Reid's statement and McWhorter's embellishment imply an unspoken sonic color-line, a racial "common sense" that African Americans are not only identifiable by a particular type of sound—the so-called "Negro dialect" or "black-cent" and its attendant loudness—but are aberrant and unelectable because of it, a sonic standard that does not appear to apply to white people. After all, the preceding two white presidents were known for their distinctive dialects and the ways in which they used them to mobilize their respective electorates; Bill Clinton's soft-spoken Southern drawl was often read as smooth, intimate, and reassuring during the 1990s and George Bush's folksy Texas-by-way-of-Andover twang attempted to sonically bridge the gaping class divides in the Republican coalition. But even before the recent debates that have pitted Obama's "coolness"—itself a racialized [jazz form of "quiet revolution" a la Miles Davis](#)—against the imagined explosive heat of his anger, contemporary pundits heard the sound of Obama's crisp, cosmopolitan voice with anxious and divisive ears, leading some to question his "blackness" and his political commitment to black

people (*Salon*, “[Colorblind](#),” 1.22.07) while still others called his baritone “magic” and immediately connected its resonant qualities with Martin Luther King Jr.’s, despite clear differences of tone, cadence, and regional inflection (*Salon*, “[Does Obama’s Baritone Give Him an Edge?](#)” 2.28.2008).



Senator Harry Reid (D-Nevada) Listens to Obama Speak

In other words, Americans continue to hear Obama’s voice through the historical filter of “loudness” and the so-called “Negro dialect” whether or not Obama wants them to and whether or not he “wanted to have one.” While Reid’s prompt and profuse apologies to Obama may have pulled the story from the news cycle—the President called the remarks “unfortunate”—the phenomenon Reid’s clumsy words exposed remains an invisible yet palpable cultural force in the U.S., one whose longer historical genealogy has yet to be reckoned with. Sure to be labeled “rowdy” for beginning to do so, Reid’s recent commentary suggests that Obama’s social and historical knowledge has led him to an astute awareness of “when not to shout” that white Liberals need to recognize. I offer a perhaps less consoling conclusion, that we need to concentrate less on the sound of Obama’s voice and more on the racialized listening practices that can radically distort public discourse in this country. Unless we understand (and eventually dismantle) the relationship between the dominant American “[listening ear](#)” and the sonic color-line that shapes it for many (white) liberals and conservatives alike, we will continue to shout into the wind.

