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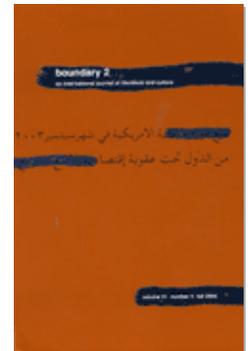
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## "I Am I Be": The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity

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## “I Am I Be”: The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity

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*Alexander G. Weheliye*

We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone.

—Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

And let us not insist upon the optic metaphor which opens up every theoretical view under the sun.

—Jacques Derrida, *White Mythology*

Sounds go through the muscles  
these abstract wordless movements  
they start off cells that haven't been touched before  
. . . waking up slowly.

—Björk Gudmundsdóttir, “Headphones,” from *Post*

This essay forms part of a book-length manuscript in progress entitled *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-modernity*. Earlier versions were presented in the context of “Ralph Ellison: The Next Fifty Years,” a *boundary 2* conference at the University of Pittsburgh, and the Fellows’ Workshop of the Alice Berline Kaplan Center for the Humanities at Northwestern University. I extend gratitude to Kevin Bell, Jennifer DeVere Brody, Jillana Enteen, Ronald Judy, and Michael Hanchard for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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Surely “the subject” represents one of the more embattled concepts in the recent history of the Anglo-American humanities; structuralist and poststructuralist discourses were almost singularly concerned with dissolving and/or resituating the self-same subject (in some cases putting it under erasure) as it appeared in Western thinking, idealist philosophy in particular. The main thrust of these debates troubled the coherence and unmediated presence of this subject, seeking to displace the subject as the uncontested center in a variety of thought systems, with varying structures (linguistic, anthropological, political, psychic, economic, and so forth), or, in the post-structuralist case, rendered visible the fissures, traces, and ruptures contained within and undermining these very structures that enabled the subject’s intelligibility, and, therefore, constrained its ability to appear as the center from which all movements flow. If the advent of structuralism and its ensuing postformations provide one of the crucial reformulations of the humanities project since the 1960s, then the coming to the fore of “minority discourses” stands as the other major shift in this context. Although some scholars, for example, Hortense J. Spillers and Sylvia Wynter, have thought these two developments together fruitfully, usually they are perceived as mutually exclusive, at least contradictory. In most instances, however—and this bears stressing—the two processes are not thought related at all.<sup>1</sup> One version of this argument discerns the irony in the dissolution, and perhaps even abandonment, of the subject as a category of critical thinking, just as “minority” subjects are being recognized as subjects within academic discourse; in fact, the uttering of minority and subject in the same breath seems counterintuitive, if not paradoxical.<sup>2</sup> While this essay surely does not seek to undermine this particular claim here, or reinstate an earlier and more innocent version of the subject, I would like to take the occasion to think about the subject from the perspective of the “minoritarian” with this particular critique in mind. In that vein, I refer to “black studies” as opposed to

1. Any debate about the recent history of the U.S. academic humanities might benefit from consulting Hortense Spillers’s magisterial “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Post-date,” *boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (1994): 65–116. For Sylvia Wynter’s arguments, see “Columbus, the Ocean Blue, and Fables That Stir the Mind: To Reinvent the Study of Letters,” in *Poetics of the Americas: Race, Founding, and Textuality*, ed. Bianard Cowan and Jefferson Humphries (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 141–202; and “On Disenchanted Discourse: ‘Minority’ Literary Criticism and Beyond,” in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 432–69.

2. See Barbara Christian, “The Race for Theory,” in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, 37–49.

more specified forms of Afro-diasporic thought to keep concerns of institutionality in mind, since neither of these forces can be disarticulated from the other. Furthermore, while I focus primarily on black studies for the purposes of this argument, many of these points pertain to other forms of racialized minority discourse in the U.S. academy as well. These reflections will be preceded by a discussion of how sound recording and reproduction figure in twentieth-century black culture, followed by an analysis of the prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, in which I examine the way he imagines a subject of "sonic Afro-modernity." Ellison constructs a model of subjectivity in relation to sound technologies, which bears witness to specificities of black life while also gesturing toward a more general condition of Western modernity. I use the playful yet germane phrase "I am I be" as a shorthand that garners its argumentative and evocative force via juxtaposition and facilitates both the magnification of the putative gulf that divides "subjectivity" and "identity" within current academic discursive formations as well as their suggested compatibility within the context of my own argument.<sup>3</sup> In other words, by linking "I be" as a linguistic instantiation of Afro-diasporic particularity (identity) and the normative declaration "I am" (subjectivity) without the interruption of punctuation worries the manner in which these two modalities are routinely construed as mutual exclusives rather than as coeval.

### **Sonic Afro-modernity**

The invention of technological sound recording in the form of the phonograph at the end of the nineteenth century offered the ability to split sounds from the sources that produced them, thus generating a "post-technological" orality and musicality in twentieth-century black culture. Since the space and time of audition were separated from the contexts of reception, orality and musicality were no longer reliant on the immediate presence of human subjects. Two results of this development, the technological recording and mass distribution of music, are often construed as lacking the authenticity and immediacy of live performances and/or as the wholesale appropriation of musical cultures by various capitalist formations in current critical discourses. Although these interpretations surely possess some form of value, they tend to neglect the possibilities occasioned by this audiovisual disjuncture for black cultural production, or any form of cultural production for that matter. The complex interfacing of mod-

3. De La Soul, "I Am I Be," *Buhloone Mind State* (New York: Tommy Boy Records, 1993).

ern black culture and sound technologies grants the venue for imagining and producing a variety of cultural practices, constituting a domain I call sonic Afro-modernity. While the literature on black musics comprises an expansive archive, encompassing numerous disciplinary approaches and spanning various historical periods, work that considers the technological mediation of these sounds occurs less frequently. However, if we are to analyze a sounding black modernity, we should strive to understand how technologies have affected the production, consumption, and dissemination of black popular music, and vice versa, an endeavor that is even more pertinent today due to the increasing globality of black musical practices. In other words, we need to probe the conditions for the possibility of “modern black sounds”; what makes these perceptible in the modern era are sonic technologies.

Not too long ago, both Paul Gilroy and Houston Baker attempted in their work to account for the crucial place of sound within modern black culture. Like many other critics, however, they largely glossed over the technological aspects (which are never simply reducible to technology) of black popular music.<sup>4</sup> Carefully assessing the effects of the recording, reproduction, and international distribution of black popular music, Gilroy and Baker stopped short of reflecting on these factors as such. Nonetheless, they were right to think together black popular music and modernity, since black musical practices are routinely described as pristine and untouched forms of “vernacular” expression. Any consideration of black music might do well to surmise the ramifications of this particular culture qua information imbrication without succumbing to the pitfalls of technological determinism or celebrating the vernacular authenticity of black popular music.

When phonographs began to augment and replace live performances and/or musical scores at the end of the nineteenth century, they created a glaring rupture between sound and vision. Both performer and score clearly provided some discernible human origin for sounds, where the phonograph gave the listener only “a voice without a face,” to use David Laing’s phrase.<sup>5</sup> Now this newly invented technological apparatus stood as the main visual counterpoint to the sounds emanating from its horn, ostensibly reproducing sonic data without the intervention of human subjects.

4. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), especially chaps. 1 and 3; Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

5. David Laing, “A Voice without a Face: Popular Music and the Phonograph in the 1890’s,” *Popular Music* 10, no. 1 (1991): 1–9.

Even the telephone, although similarly disrupting the spatial configuration of linguistic communication, offered a clearly palpable human source for its sounds at the other end of the line. As a direct reaction to this gash between sound and visual source, a profusion of cultural maneuvers has sought to yoke the two back together; the iconography of record covers and music videos are some obvious examples. Before these developments, however, records were produced without much graphic and/or visual accompaniment. In this particular framework, written notation suggested the most “natural” material grounding of the “ephemerality” of music, since this particular way of writing sound represented the phonograph’s immediate historical precedent in the West. The phonograph suggested a machinic materiality, one that acutely destabilized any notion of an “absolute music” and called attention to other forms of aural embodiment, whether a concert stage, a musical score, or a human body. It is precisely this conflict between the phonograph’s material and ephemeral dimensions, as well as the machine’s worrying of the immediate connection between sound and writing, that makes it such a crucial site for the articulation of black cultural practices in the twentieth century.

Because the technology of the phonograph seemingly heightened the nonrepresentational, disembodied, ephemeral qualities of music, almost from its very inception various discourses—more specifically those revolving around questions of copyright—attempted to capture fleeting sounds in writing, extending the linkage between writing and sound already embedded in the very designation *phonograph*. Several critics concerned with the wider social and epistemological implications of the technology of the phonograph have stressed the way in which it refigured the connection between sound and writing.<sup>6</sup> In a discussion about musical copyright and the Copyright Act of 1909, the first to include recorded music, Lisa Gitelman holds that the central debate concerned the split between sound and vision, especially writing, in the technology of the phonograph.<sup>7</sup> Since musical copyright law was hitherto based on sheet music, in order for recorded music to function as intellectual property, composers had to prove that the phonograph “read” their music in the same or a similar way as consumers who played the music from printed scores. The dispute over the Copyright Act revolved

6. See Thomas Y. Levin, “For the Record: Adorno on Music in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” *October* 55 (1990): 38, 40–41; Theodor W. Adorno, “The Form of the Phonograph Record,” trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 55 (1990): 60.

7. Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 97–147.

around whether recordings based on copyrighted sheet music merely represented the use of the score or a particular performance of a composition as opposed to an altogether different material manifestation of music. In these debates, the sounds contained on phonograph records were fixable as objects only under the purview of copyright law if they were proven to be the mechanical equivalent of written notation and/or alphabetic script. Record companies, in particular, argued that phonograph records did not represent written embodiments of the composer's score, since they were not legible to humans, in order to claim all the profits from record sales. Conversely, composers and publishers, defending their own economic interests, attempted to establish that recordings could, indeed, be read by the phonograph. This new technology also magnified the embodiment of music per se, because it queried the naturalization of musical notation as the most faithful record of sonic information. Since the phonograph possessed the ability to make sounds audible, even though these noises could hardly be heard as mimetic due to technological limitations in this particular situation, marks on a page now seemed glaringly mute in comparison.

Surely, the conjoining of writing and sound has particular ramifications for black cultural production given the importance of orality as the major mode of cultural transmission in this temporal setting. Because alphabetic script was such an embattled terrain for black subjects in nineteenth-century America, the phonograph did not cause as many anxieties in black cultural discourses, and thus musical notation and writing were not necessarily apprehended as the most "natural" way of recording music. Much has been written about the fraught status of writing in Afro-diasporic configurations, particularly in regard to nineteenth-century African American literary history, but rather than redacting these arguments here, suffice it to say that black subjects did not have the same access to alphabetic script as white subjects and therefore were also barred, both discursively and materially, by a variety of repressive, and at times violent, mechanisms, from writing's attendant qualities of reason, disembodiment, and full humanity. This is not to argue that orality and music were the only channels for black culture in this period, but that the relationship between sound and writing imploded by the discourses around the phonograph in mainstream American culture carried different cadences in relation to black culture. Thus, we need to account for how orality and music, the two main techniques of cultural communication in African America, were transformed by the technology of the phonograph. In what sense does the decoupling of sound and source shift the central place of orality and music in the production, transmission, and reception of black culture? How do these modes of cultural transfer change at the end

of the nineteenth century through the incorporation of orality and music into written texts and the technological recording of sound and speech?

In the literary domain, writers such as Pauline Hopkins, W. E. B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Toni Morrison, to name only a few, have “sounded” modern African American culture, utilizing aspects from the varied histories of black music in their writings. In addition, black literature has also produced a multitude of “speakerly texts” by stressing the oral performative dimensions of written language.<sup>8</sup> Understood as sound recordings, then, these texts suggest a different way of merging the *phono* and *graph* than the technology of the phonograph, underscoring how sound and writing meet and inform each other in the written annals of twentieth-century African American literature. Subsequently, black performers, not always under the most advantageous economic and political circumstances, have been leading actors in the national and international dissemination and immense prominence of U.S. popular music. Examples are too numerous to list here, but the obvious point remains that modern black cultural production is intimately tied to sound as it is embodied by a variety of technologies, such as literary texts, films, records, tapes, and CDs. Not only did these technologies modify the ways in which cultural artifacts were produced, but, and perhaps more importantly, by virtue of radically altering how music was consumed, they enabled new modalities of existence for black subjects within and against Western modernity: sonic Afro-modernity. Given the brief gloss on sonic Afro-modernity, how might we ascertain its subject? Can it even suggest a subject given the nominal prefix *Afro*?

Contemporary critical idioms often take the linguistic sphere as their axiomatic horizon when theorizing the subject. Judith Butler, for instance, offers one of the more succinct recitals of this trend: “The subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility.”<sup>9</sup> For my purposes, the sonic in its nonlinguistic musical form provides one of the best examples of what Edouard Glissant has called “opacity.” By opacity, he means that “which is not obscure, though it is possible to be so and accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”<sup>10</sup> Rather than apprehending

8. See Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), xxv–xxvi and passim.

9. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 11.

10. Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 191.

opacity in terms of deficiency or lack, Glissant accentuates how “opacity . . . is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity.”<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the sonic is an instance of opacity because it fails to cast either intelligibility or transparency in the role of its logos, which enables us to, paraphrasing the prologue from *Invisible Man*, “listen around corners.”<sup>12</sup> Focusing on the sonic does not intimate privileging another mode of discursivity as the preferred figure for the articulation of subjectivity over the linguistic. Instead, it opens up possibilities for thinking, hearing, seeing, apprehending the subject in a number of different arenas that do not insist on monocausality. Still, we should not hastily rush to the sonic as a preconscious, open, fragmented, and fluid sphere that sounds in strict opposition to the visual and/or language, because music does not rely on meaning making in the same way as language.<sup>13</sup> Put crassly, humans do not use music as their main mode of communication—it calls attention to its texture and confluence rather than striving for intelligibility, networking it squarely within the charged currents of opacity. I hope it is sufficiently clear that I am in no way suggesting an uncomplicated contrast between language and the sonic; rather, I am simply highlighting their different properties. Locating the subject in the sonic grants a quite different notion of this concept—which does not mean that the subject as a linguistic category is rendered null and void; it just relocates it to a new analytic neighborhood without losing its ties to old friends—one that does not posit meaning and/or intelligibility as its teleological end point but enables “[o]pacities [to] coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.”<sup>14</sup> By concentrating on texture and not meaning, as effervescent as it may be, “thinking sonically” adduces a mode of divining the world that sounds

11. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

12. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 13: “[T]o see around corners is enough (that is not that unusual when you are invisible). But to hear around them is too much; it inhibits action.” While hearing around corners might mitigate activity, certainly it does not prohibit critical thinking. Subsequent quotations from this work are cited parenthetically as *IM*.

13. See the arguments on behalf of the fluidity of the sonic in Steven Connor, “The Modern Auditory I,” in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 203–23. For a psychoanalytic version of this argument, which interprets all listening practices as harking back to a presymbolic oceanic mirror stage, see David Schwarz, *Listening Subjects: Music, Psychoanalysis, Culture* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997).

14. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

its multitude of opacities without drowning their singularities in the noise of transparency.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the subject that emerges from Ellison's ruminations on the intersectionality of sound and technology remains a contingent opacity that never quite achieves any determinate form of intelligibility.

### Listening around Corners

Ralph Ellison's poetics, situated at the interstices of music and technology, bridge the putative divide between black cultural production and modern informational technologies, probing the textural and overdetermined interdependence rather than their opposing "natures." In *Invisible Man*, his essays (particularly "Living with Music"), and in numerous interviews, he has consistently turned to questions of sound recording and reproduction.<sup>16</sup> At several key points in "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview," Ellison mentions his early enthusiasm for building radios. When asked by his interviewer, Richard J. Stern, how he managed to encounter the world beyond the black community, Ellison responds, "Ironically, I would have to start with some of the features of American life which it has become quite fashionable to criticize in a most unthinking way—the mass media. Like so many kids of the twenties, I played around with radio—building crystal sets and circuits consisting of a few tubes, which I found published in radio magazines."<sup>17</sup> As opposed to proving that "[w]ithin the safety of one's own home, and out of public view, one's masculinity could be tested and reaffirmed," Ellison describes the sociality building radios granted him, utilizing his radio hobby not to cut himself off from the world around him but to connect to communities and discourses beyond immediate physical reach, redacting on a biographical scale the possibilities occasioned by sound technologies in general.<sup>18</sup> In this way, he not only insists on the sociality of sonic technologies but also bears witness to the plethora of ways in which

15. Glissant's differentiation between *nature* and *texture* will have to be complicated in an expanded version of the current argument. Although this distinction is crucial, it should occasion only a first step in the exhuming of "nature" within "texture," and vice versa.

16. Ralph Ellison, "Living with Music," in *Shadow and Act* (1955; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1995), 187–89.

17. Ralph Ellison, "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview," in *Shadow and Act*, 4. Ellison also evokes his radio hobby when pontificating on the role of music in his life, linking both his status as a musician and radio hobbyist with his proclivity for creating things.

18. Kier Keightley, "'Turn It Down!' She Shrieked: Gender, Domestic Space, and High Fidelity, 1948–59," *Popular Music* 15, no. 2 (1996): 160.

they structure modern life worlds, heaving black life out of a mythic, Luddite, unusable past and into the center of Western modernity. Sadly, critics have paid scant attention to Ellison's engagement with sonic technologies, zeroing in only on his thoughts about jazz and the blues rather than the interplay of content *and* transmission so crucial to the Ellison oeuvre. We might even say, *pace* Walter Benjamin, that Ellison locates the aura not in the original musical utterance but in the mode of mechanical reproduction itself, which makes him one of the foremost theorists of sonic Afro-modernity.

*Invisible Man* is framed by the protagonist's consumption of and engagement with Louis Armstrong's recording of the Andy Razaf and Fats Waller tune "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue." Armstrong recorded several versions of this piece after he encountered it as part of the stage musical *Hot Chocolates* in 1929, where it was performed by a very light-skinned chanteuse, and legend has it that the song was composed because the financier of the show, Mafioso Dutch Schulz, demanded a humorous musical rendering of the black experience. While Ellison's protagonist draws on "Black and Blue" as "one of the first instances of racial protest in American popular music," he emphasizes the quality of Armstrong's voice embodied in the particular performance rendered on record and not primarily the signification of the song's lyrics.<sup>19</sup> The prologue establishes the protagonist's social invisibility, the major theme of the novel, by depicting his hibernation in a hole, the basement of a "whites only" building, and describing his condition in the following fashion: "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (*IM*, 3). By way of explicating how he is refused representation in the field of vision, the protagonist also insists on the intersubjective workings of his invisibility rather than construing it as an ontological absolute. This is crucial since, according to Sylvia Wynter, the prologue as a whole performs "the possibility of their/our recognition of this imposed 'invisibility,' which leads to a new demand for another concept of freedom, another possibility of a livable being that culminates in [the protagonist's] recognition of his alterity."<sup>20</sup> Wynter's invocation of the protagonist's "alterity" appears at

19. Eric Sundquist, ed., *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man": A Bedford Documentary Companion* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1995), 115.

20. Wynter, "On Disenchanting Discourse," 452.

the interstice of self and other, which is to say that the protagonist remains “foreign” to himself as much as he does to others, although evidently not in the same way.

While the racial metaphors of this predicament—white subjects’ inability and/or outright refusal to recognize black people’s subjectivity—appear abundantly clear, the question of visibility merits more than a brief glance here, since Ellison explicitly situates the protagonist’s “non-subjectivity” in the ocular domain.<sup>21</sup> Recently, the hegemony of vision in Western modernity, what Martin Jay has referred to as its ocularcentric discourse, has been scrutinized for a variety of reasons.<sup>22</sup> Afro-diasporic thinkers, in particular, have stressed the centrality of the ocular in Western constructions of race and racism, wherein the look of white subjects deduces supposed inferior racial characteristics from the surface of black subjects’ skin—what Frantz Fanon terms “the racial epidermal schema.” Fanon shows the slippage from racial identity, as it is grafted on and therefore legible from the epidermis, to assumed inferiority as synonymous in the scopic regime of racialization.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, W. E. B. Du Bois explicitly implicates ocular mechanisms and ideologies in the workings of “double-consciousness,” as in the following famous passage from *The Souls of Black Folk*: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always *looking* at one’s self through the *eyes* of others, of measuring one’s *soul* by the tape of the world that *looks on* in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>24</sup> If looking at oneself through the eyes of others squarely locates the subject of double-consciousness in the visual field, then for Du Bois the sonic, linked throughout *Souls* to the Sorrow Songs, and at times taking on the form of

21. Perhaps the protagonist’s invisibility can be described, in Hortense Spillers’s formulation, as both “a signifying property *plus* [and *minus*].” Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65.

22. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). See also David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For a discussion of visual modernity that takes in questions of race, consult Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 21–42.

23. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markman (1952; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112.

24. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1989), 5; my emphasis. For a more detailed consideration of Du Bois’s ruminations on racialization as it cuts across vision and sound, see Alexander Weheliye, “In the Mix: Hearing the Souls of Black Folks,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 45, no. 4 (fall 2000): 535–54.

Wagner's *Lohengrin*, provides an altogether different realm for the articulation of black subjectivity. Surely, Ellison's utilization of invisibility takes into account the vexed vicissitudes of race and visibility in Western modernity as well, while also insisting on a sonic-cum-technological formulation of the black subject.

The problematic of visibility is picked up again later in the prologue, when the protagonist reflects on his desire for brightness: "My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, *full* of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine. . . . Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light" (*IM*, 6). However, the desire for light seems noteworthy only in a world where social visibility is a given. As an a priori, social visibility already functions as light, legislating the boundary between the visible and invisible, and therefore does not necessitate any further illumination. The text proceeds: "But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. . . . Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (*IM*, 6–7). This contradictory insight underscores the protagonist's urgency to comprehend his invisibility while simultaneously reformulating this very predicament by consuming light, since he needs to "look at himself through the eyes of others" in order to not disappear from his own line of sight. Illuminated by the 1,369 lightbulbs covering the ceiling of his hibernating hole, the protagonist pilfers the electricity from the Monopolated Light & Power, which ensures, both literally and metaphorically, that his illumination cannot be disentangled from his invisibility. In this scene, Monopolated Light & Power, as the modernized and electrified capitalist reformulation of Western-style heliocentrism, causally encodes the structures at the root of the protagonist's invisibility. The electricity rechanneled from the company is turned against itself, because instead of presenting his visual nonpresence as an ontological and political *fait accompli*, it allows him to illuminate, and thus verify, the fact of his invisibility, which disenchants the truth-value of light as such. In other words, if the protagonist's invisibility can be set alight, then maybe seeing the light does not always already imply luminosity as self-evidence, or, in Ellison's formulation, "Truth is the light and light is the truth" (*IM*, 7). Hence, the ideological and material currents of subordination electrically cross the protagonist's inscription as lack in the field of vision, in the meantime giving birth to his sonic interpellation, a movement further evident in his identification

with Thomas Edison, the “father” of both the lightbulb and the phonograph (*IM*, 7).

The electricity the protagonist reroutes from the large company also powers his radio-phonograph, assuring that the aural component of the protagonist’s subjectivity and his scopic invisibility are fully interfaced. A single radio-phonograph, however, does not do the job; the protagonist yearns for five machines: “I’d like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing ‘(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue’—all at the same time.” The reason, he claims, stems from the sonic characteristics of the basement: “There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to feel its vibration with my whole body” (*IM*, 8). If the multiplicity of lights reflects the protagonist’s craving to understand his social invisibility, then the corporeal viscerality of the protagonist’s ideal listening scenario manifests an intense longing to experience his body in sound in ways that he cannot do visually. Wanting to embody and be embodied by sound, the protagonist imagines his flesh as an eardrum, transforming his corporeal schema into a channel for his sonic subjectivity, which, in turn, emerges only in relation to his scopic interpellation. Thus, the sonic and the scopic, far from being diametrically opposed, provide occasion for one another; visual subjection begets sonic subjectivation.

In this way, formlessness elides the protagonist only insofar as the music sounds his invisibility, particularly Armstrong’s voice: “Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he’s unaware that he *is* invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music” (*IM*, 8). On the surface, the protagonist detects similar qualities of invisibility in Armstrong’s recorded voice, so that it presumably serves as an aural mirror of his own predicament. Yet, despite this strong identification, there exists a crucial difference between them: Armstrong has no conception of his invisibility, at least in the eyes and ears of the protagonist, which powers the poetic motor of his music. In the earlier, visually mediated passages, the protagonist’s condition was predicated on others’ negation of his optic presence; in this case, however, he can embody his own invisibility via the sounds of another invisible subject. Consequently, sound, particularly recorded and mechanically reproduced sound, grants the protagonist access to his invisibility in a different fashion than the not-so-soft glow afforded by the 1,369 lightbulbs. Even though this aspect of the protagonist’s being is staged intersubjectively—his invisibility is amplified by the effect of Armstrong’s voice on the phonograph—it dif-

fers quite significantly from the visual one because it relies not on negation and abjection but on recognition, or rather on the protagonist's recognition of Armstrong's supposed misrecognition. More than a simple identification, the protagonist recasts Armstrong as his former self, the self not able to ascertain its own invisibility.

Apart from filling the dead air in the basement with music, the phonograph stages Armstrong's nonpresence just as much as it allows the protagonist to reside within the contours of his invisibility. Armstrong's invisibility manifests itself in several ways: the manner in which his racial identity figures in the musical text, both in terms of lyrical content and vocal delivery, in addition to Armstrong's literal invisibility to the protagonist, since he cannot see Armstrong but only hears the specific way in which the phonograph represents his voice. The protagonist's emphasis shifts from the visual to the aural because being unable to visually face Armstrong makes him more susceptible to the quality of invisibility transacted by Armstrong's voice. As a result, this visual lack becomes even more indicative of the social invisibility faced by black subjects due to its phonographic transmission. Since there are no visual cues—only Armstrong's phantomlike voice accompanied by instrumentation on the recording—the protagonist projects his own invisibility onto Armstrong's vocal apparatus. Recently, Lindon Barrett has argued that the black voice functions as a figure of value within African American culture, particularly as it is contrasted with the lack of value ascribed to blackness in American mainstream culture. He distinguishes *the singing voice* from the *signing voice* of Euramerican alphabetical literacy. He contends that “the African American singing voice emphasizes—rather than merely glances at—the spatial, material, dative, or enunciative action of voice. Singing voices undo voice as speech per se.”<sup>25</sup> Barrett offers a model that reformulates the writing-as-freedom problematic in black literary studies by allotting the voice a central role in the shaping of black subjectivity, even if at times it risks ontologizing the corporeal provenances of the black voice by not stressing enough questions of skill and technique, especially those of the black female voices so central to his argument. Focusing on how the black voice is worked on like an instrument refashions the voice as a cultural technology with specific meanings in black cultural contexts rather than as a side effect of epidermal melanation. Moreover, the characteristics Barrett ascribes to the black voice are magnified in the phonographic listening sce-

25. Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 84.

nario, when the singer's embodiment rests chiefly in his or her voice. When the visual bolsters disappear, the ghostlike ruminations of the voice stand as the last and only vestiges of the corporeal, sonically folding the body into the voice, and vice versa. In the process of this folding, the ear is directed toward the sound process itself—the ways in which the black voice performs and constructs its corporeality.

The phonograph's ability to disconnect the singing voice from its face further heightens its materiality, which impels the protagonist to imbue Armstrong's voice with a surplus of signification; in order to achieve this feat, however, light cannot function as the sole source of illumination: "It was a strangely satisfying experience for an invisible man to hear the silence of sound. . . . I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility—and vice versa. And so I play the invisible music of my isolation. The last statement doesn't seem just right, does it?" (*IM*, 13). Taken literally, the statement does seem just right though, for the phonograph represents, if anything, invisible music, since it denies the listener visual access to the performer. What initially seems oxymoronic actually provides the most succinct description of the protagonist's invisibility in relation to Armstrong's voice flowing from the phonograph's speaker. The protagonist and Armstrong are joined not only by their social invisibility as black subjects but also by their reliance on sound to transmit their invisibility—Armstrong, by singing his invisibility; and the protagonist, by listening to Armstrong. What is called for is an ear that recognizes the value of the African American singing voice. The protagonist has just such an ear, or, in the extreme, is the ear that sonically "illuminates the blackness of [his] invisibility—and *vice versa*" (*IM*, 13). As a consequence, the value of Armstrong's voice lies in his skill at sonically representing his invisibility. Nevertheless, in a moment of disavowal, the protagonist casts Armstrong in the role of the naïf, rather than skilled performer, in order to better understand the parameters of his own invisibility. For the protagonist hears not an eternal spring of blackness welling from Armstrong's throat but the deftness and grace with which Armstrong manipulates his voice in relation to the sonic apparatus.

Still, Armstrong's voice should not be understood as the only form of embodiment in this scene. At the most basic level, the sonic apparatus itself provides a material grounding for the ephemeral "voice without a face" inasmuch as it replaces Armstrong's appearance as the visual counterpoint to his voice, substituting a machinic for a human presence and inducing the protagonist's urge to hear and feel Armstrong's voice more ardently in an effort to counterbalance the paucity of visual stimuli. Because Armstrong

remains invisible to the protagonist, he imagines being both assailed and enveloped by the sound of Armstrong's voice from five directions. The protagonist realizes that there is no chance for visual accompaniment to the sonic in his situation, so his desire is displaced onto the apparatus itself. Yet the machine, even if multiplied by five, supplies principally aural information, which explains why his fantasy involves hearing Armstrong's voice further amplified and not looking at five phonographs. Hearing Armstrong intonate from so many different machines at once, even if only in the realm of the phantasmatic, produces an aural materiality. As opposed to grounding sound in writing, the protagonist acutely positions the palpable dimensions of sound within the phonographic voice. Accordingly, he does not suggest hearing five different singers, or even five different Armstrong recordings, but the same five Armstrong recordings simultaneously. Possibly, more than Armstrong's voice itself, it is the "voice without a face"—the voice of the phonograph—that grounds and transacts both Armstrong's and the protagonist's invisibility. Rather than dissipating into thin air, as early discourse on the phonograph suggested, the disembodied voice is precisely what frames the social invisibility of the black subject in this scene. As a consequence, the phonograph does not so much occasion a faceless voice as it transforms the voice into a face. In this particular instance, the phonograph reconfigures the protagonist's invisibility via sonic envisage; denied representation in the field of vision, Armstrong's phonographic voice facilitates the protagonist in recognizing the mechanics of his invisibility—his aural face, as it were. Overall, light projects the silhouette of his invisibility, where Armstrong's voice fills the visual contours with sound, or to put it crudely, where light confirms invisibility as fact—choosing either *I am* or *I be*—the phonographic voice sonically reticulates invisibility as process, enabling a two-way sonic flow between *I am I be*; taken together they provide the contingency for the subject of sonic Afro-modernity.

Throughout his work, Ellison listens carefully not only to the complexities and subtleties of black musical expression but also, and this distinguishes him from other writers, to the intricate manner in which these sounds are intertwined with informational technologies in the modern era. This sensibility enables Ellison to suggest a grammar for thinking, if not hearing, the subject of sonic Afro-modernity located in that explosive audiovisual disjuncture engendered by the phonograph. This subject appears at the spatiotemporal crossroads, where the performer's ghostly sounds merge with the ear of the listener on those lower frequencies, which resituate, reframe, and resound the black subject's visual invisibility, producing a flash

point of subjectivity gleaned in and through sound. In the force field of sonic Afro-modernity, sound technologies, as opposed to being exclusively determined or determining, form a relay point in the orbit between the apparatus and a plethora of cultural, economic, and political discourses. Insisting on the central place of technology in this formation goes a long way toward conjecturing how musical production and structures of listening have shifted over the course of the last century. At the very least, this might move us away from the zero-sum game of authenticity versus commodification, which will surely entail letting out some of the old Bad Air without losing all of its funk. At most, we could fire up the old phonograph and open our ears to those instances in which, according to Ellison, “instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around” (*IM*, 8).

Emmanuel Levinas describes and links these nodal moments to the general provenances of the sonic as follows:

In sound, and in the consciousness termed hearing, there is in fact a break with the self-complete world of vision. . . . In its entirety, sound is a ringing, clanging scandal. Whereas, in vision, form is wedded to content in such a way as to appease it, in sound the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its content. A real rent is produced, through which the world that is *here* prolongs a dimension that cannot be converted into vision.<sup>26</sup>

Levinas underscores one of the reasons sound retains such a crucial place within black cultural formations: openness, particularly when contrasted to the way vision has been codified in Western modernity. Over the course of the twentieth century, this openness has been boosted by sound technologies such as the phonograph, which, by disturbing any seemingly pre-determined symbiosis between the aural and the visual, have allowed for a multiplication of practices and contexts for both the production and reception of black musical cultures. Rather than suggest that this dimension (subjectivity) can be converted into or represented in sound, I would like to retain its “scandalous” qualities, since the sonic realm grants aural “opacities” qua subjectivity: pathways to moments of subjectivity set off against subjectivity *per se*; a sonic subjectivity that does not lose sight of the black subject’s

26. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Transcendence of Words,” in *The Emmanuel Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (London: Blackwell, 1989), 147.

visual interpellation but noisily “rings” and “clangs” beyond, above, below, and beside the optic nonetheless.

This modality of subjectivity might explain the immense global popularity—without inescapably succumbing to the tenacious lure of the empirical—of black popular music over the course of the last century. In other words, rather than exclusively presenting a racially particular identity, black music, in the form of the varying technological structures of sonic Afro-modernity, advances and constructs a subject, at once more and less than its attendant minor identity without which it cannot be thought or perceived. Just as this subject occupies the nether regions between the sonic and the scopic, it correspondingly dislodges the subject/identity bifurcation running amok in current debates within the Anglo-American humanities by refusing to separate *I am I be*, while filling the space and time between these phrases with sonic technicity. The interface of black music and sound technologies yields a rich, varied, and complex field, which amplifies the opacities included therein; as in the words of Levinas, “Form can no longer contain its content,” converging the textures of the technosonic weave rather than the nature of its components (Glissant). Even if this constellation could just as easily walk the dark corners of the earth in the cloak of identity, there is a climacteric methodological and theoretical point to be made about wielding the category of the subject from the standpoint of black studies in order to dispel “the pervasive operative presumption that general theory or conceptual reflection is formulated elsewhere than in African Diasporic (American) Studies, and that it is only applied here,” since this frees black life from the conceptual chains of radical particularity and embarks on a global journey to ascertain how black cultural practices do not merely mimic or recast those of Western modernity “proper” but are constitutive of this modernity *sui generis*.<sup>27</sup> This will not entail abandoning the particularities of black life in favor of a color-blind, can’t-we-all-just-get-along critical theory and practice as much as reconstructing black life and Western modernity in their mobile relationality, so as not to construe them as mutually exclusive, or even all that different. More succinctly: *I be* (sojourning—both leisurely and contentiously—in the spaces and times between) *I am*.

27. Nahum Dimitri Chandler, “Originary Displacement,” *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (fall 2000): 250.