

'To Hear the Silence of Sound': Making Sense of Listening in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

By Nicole Brittingham Furlonge

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Abstract

In this essay, I examine the ways in which Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* enacts listening as a corporeally distributed process, one that is not isolated in the ear, but is instead dispersed throughout the body. This essay also engages the ways in which Ellison reflects on the impact of sound technology on constructions of race. While the novel dramatizes invisibility as its key metaphor for racial dislocation, *Invisible Man* amplifies listening as a fully embodied experience, one that allows the Invisible Man space in which to reconstitute his being. For instance, about his underground home in Harlem, Invisible Man says, "There is a certain acoustical deadness in my hole, and when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body" (*IM* 8). He owns one phonograph on which he plays Louis Armstrong's "(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?," but he longs to own five phonographs so that he can envelope himself with the song's sound. Invisible Man longs for Armstrong's music to touch him, for audition that is felt as well as heard. In this sonic feeling, Invisible Man finds a space in which to potentially sense a newly materialized racial identity.

What did they think of us transitory ones? Ones such as I had been before I found Brotherhood—birds of passage too obscure for learned classification, too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound; of natures too ambiguous for the most ambiguous words, and too distant from the centers of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents? We who write no novels, histories or other books. What about us, I thought.

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

At this moment of unprecedented danger and unprecedented opportunity, virtuosity entails listening as well as speaking. It requires patient explorations into spaces and silences as much as it demands bold and forthright articulation of ideas and interests. Most important, it calls for an understanding of how people make meaning for themselves.

- George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*

Listening is needed today in order to admit the excluded, the looked past, to allow the 'out of place' a sense of belonging.

- Les Back, *The Art Of Listening*¹

Introduction

Race sounds differently than it looks. While critics have illuminated extensively the dislocating and often problematic relationship between the visual and constructions of race,² sonic iterations of race has provided artists and critics alike alternative spaces for sounding black cultural identity. The contemporary critical and artistic attention to sound – whether one's spoken or sung voice, talking book or singing drum, the blues, trains, or hambones – has served as a central metaphoric and epistemic site of the black cultural subject.³ But, how does one listen to these sounds? How does one listen to and for sonic constructions of racial subjectivity? And what are the implications for a racialized listening? In this essay, I advocate for a critical practice of listening that allows for consideration of sonic reception and for listening as a fully embodied process, one that is not isolated in the ear, but is instead perceived, dispersed, and experienced throughout the body. How one listens can intimately structure experiences of 'race' and the construction of racialized subjects.

A rich cultural site for engaging these sonic questions is Ralph Ellison's first novel, *Invisible Man*. Published in 1952 to great critical acclaim, *Invisible Man* was touted as an immediate literary classic that at once transcends racial issues in the United States *and* places racial issues at the center of the nation's story. Compelling in its representation of the psychological and cultural effects of segregation in the United States, the novel chronicles the Invisible Man from his life as a young boy and then a college student in Jim Crow South, to his migration North to Harlem. His development in Harlem occurs through a series of encounters: chance meetings with World War I black veterans, work in northern factories, involvement with a left-wing political group called the Brotherhood, and various cultural encounters with musical and vernacular forms. The novel is framed in a Prologue and Epilogue by Invisible Man's hibernation beneath the streets of Harlem, where he accepts and embraces his invisibility even while trying to reclaim his self, lost through that imposed invisibility.

Invisible Man is significant to this discussion because, even as Ellison's seminal novel highlights invisibility as a key metaphor for racial dislocation, it amplifies listening as a productive mode of racial, cultural, and social engagement. It is a text that catalogs various black cultural expressive forms while simultaneously dramatizing how sensory engagement participates in constructing and perceiving racial difference. As Kimberly Benston asserts, *Invisible Man* 'in its persistent and ambivalent return to such performative modes as blues, jazz, and sermons for models of self-narration, participates in what has become the most consistent imprint of this modern African-American cultural blueprint: its aspiration to construct a powerful cultural voice that receives its authority from creative imitation of vernacular exemplars' (Benston 2000: 249). Benston also notes Ellison's concern with "the relationship of human senses to the perception of racial difference" (Benston 2000: 391). The listening that *Invisible Man* learns to do throughout the novel is compelling in the context of this discussion because it allows for an exploration into the possibility of listening as a process of reforming the lost, invisible racial self.⁴ While invisibility in Ellison's text can be mistaken solely as a universal construct of a lost modern self, Fred Moten contends convincingly that "The mark of invisibility is a visible racial mark," and in his attempts to shift the power of the visual to the sonic, Ellison "bring[s] the noise to in/visibility," thereby attempting to reconstitute race through the sonic (Moten: 2003: 68). Like Moten, I read invisibility in Ellison's novel as a symbol of racial disfranchisement, and therefore, I contend that attempts in the novel to listen for a new self are imbricated in efforts to reconstitute a racial self. *Invisible Man* is, in large part, about studying listening, about the aural curiosity necessary to move with and through audio-cognitive dissonance towards potentially new understandings of listening as a dynamic, ever-shifting, and challenging process.⁵ Such attention to listening would better enable us to hear new understandings of embodied racial identities.

I. 'Between Hi-Fi and the Ear': Listening for Cultural Fidelity

When Ralph Ellison writes about his experience writing *Invisible Man*, he admits that he was a poor listener.⁶ In his now-seminal essay, 'Living with Music,' Ellison describes himself as constantly under the attack of noise; the towering apartment building wall next to his building caught "every passing thoroughfare sound" and "rifled it straight down" to him (O'Meally 2002: 4).⁷ Although Ellison finds himself undoubtedly wanting more than anything to control his environment, to render it conducive to developing a writing practice, he is positioned within a scene of "labyrinthine acoustics" that resists sonic stability. He recounts his battles with cacophonous sounds rifling through his Harlem basement apartment: juke box music, howling cats, Basie's blaring brasses, barking dogs and preaching drunks. In such a constantly shifting, noisy, and sonically boundless environment, it is difficult for Ellison to develop a *sound* writing practice, that is, "sound" as stable and healthy *and* as the audible source of his inspiration to write.⁸ The task of penning a first book while living within such "chaos of sound" was daunting for the emerging writer, though ironically, Ellison's reflections on a moment that created so complete a writer's block as to render the condition itself indescribable resulted in an eloquent rendering of his Harlem neighborhood.

Yet in this chaotic soundscape, the sounds that most trouble him are those of a persistently practicing vocalist. For Ellison, no other sources of noise in the neighborhood troubled him as viscerally and

intimately as his upstairs neighbor's singing. A budding vocalist, this black woman was, Ellison recalls, "intensely devoted to her art" and often hindered Ellison's own development as a writer. He writes:

From morning to night she vocalized, regardless of the condition of her voice, the weather or my screaming nerves. There were times when her notes, sifting through her floor and my ceiling, bouncing down the walls and ricocheting off the building in the rear, whistled like tenpenny nails, buzzed like a saw, wheezed like the asthma of a Hercules, [and] trumpeted like an enraged African elephant (O'Meally 2002: 6).

The neighbor's notes are anthropomorphic, taking on an acoustic life energy of their own as they "sift," "bounce," "ricochet," "whistle," "buzz," "wheeze," and "trumpet" around and through Ellison's apartment. The singer's vocal vibrations are described here as tactile: they touch Ellison's physical and psychological being. Ellison decides to contribute to the noise around him and turns on his radio to hear Kathleen Ferrier's operatic voice singing the aria from Handel's *Rodelinda*: "Art thou troubled? Music will calm thee" (O'Meally 2002: 10). Ellison decides to go out and purchase Ferrier's records, and while shopping, realizes that, 'Between the hi-fi and the ear, I learned, there was a new electronic world' (O'Meally 2002: 10). Ellison's shopping spree for this newly discovered stereo equipment reveals his deep interest in what was, at the time, a listening culture emerging in the late 1940s and 1950s: High Fidelity.

Connected to High Fidelity, or Full Frequency Range Recordings as they were called in Britain, was the idea of faithfulness to the original, live performance through developing equipment that would record *and* reproduce sound with little distortion. (Morton 2000: 38). Achieving this would allow the recording to resemble the original performed sound as closely as possible. This growing global sound recording market featured the development and mass marketing of high fidelity recording and listening equipment in American homes.⁹ Ellison develops such an intense interest in this new sound technology that he attends the 1949 Audio Fair in New York and, after building several systems on his own, eventually purchases a whole sound system (Morton 2000: 11).¹⁰ Overwhelmed by the sound of his neighbor's voice, Ellison decides to create an 'audio booby trap,' amplifying music loud enough to shut out his neighbor's singing from his apartment and to signal to this woman her own artistic shortcomings. In response, his neighbor sings more loudly and blares recorded music as well, and a sonic battle ensues.

Ellison's interest in and discussion of high fidelity is not inconsequential. While the high fidelity culture was intricately connected with high cultural forms of music like classical, operatic, and orchestral music, Ellison's use of this equipment expands this relationship between "high culture" and "high recording" to include jazz, blues, gospel and Latin music. As he fights a "war of decibels" with his singing neighbor, he selects music by musicians representing a plethora of musical traditions: Bidu Sayão, Marian Anderson, Kathleen Ferrier, Lotte Lehmann, Maggie Teyte, Jennie Tourel, Bessie Smith, Strauss, Bartok, Duke Ellington, and Louis Armstrong (O'Meally 2002: 12).

Although Ellison initially frames these moments as a sonic war of sorts, he eventually grows remorseful for 'complain[ing] against the hard work and devotion to craft of another aspiring artist,' and admits 'that [he] could not have withstood a similar comparison with literary artists of like caliber' (O'Meally

2002: 12). Despite this sonic warring, Ellison comes to identify with the singer's voice so deeply that it affects his view of himself as a writer: 'If she sang badly I'd hear my own futility in the windy sound; if well, I'd stare at my typewriter and despair that I would ever make my prose so sing' (O'Meally 2002:9, 10). Over time, the singer 'improve[s] her style [and], [b]etter still...vocalize[s] more softly' and Ellison 'use[s] music less and less as a weapon and more for its magic and memory' (O'Meally 2002: 12, 13). What Ellison realizes through these exchanges is that open sonic engagement is important to his writing. The sonic experiences he chronicles here teach him the importance of developing a listening – rather than merely a broadcasting – self. Productivity as a writer depends heavily on a sonic self who openly and actively negotiates the aural atmosphere around him.¹¹

In his study of sound and Afro-modernity, Alexander Weheliye hears Ellison's attempts at *phonographing*, or literally, writing sound, in *Invisible Man* as resulting in the expression of a modern African American subject (Weheliye 2005: 46-56).¹² According to Weheliye, sound is significant in Ellison's novel specifically and in black cultural production generally for its ability to 'augment an inferior black subjectivity – a subjectivity created by racist ideologies and practices in the field of vision – establishing venues for the constitution of new modes of existence' (Weheliye 2005: 50). At stake in the literary sonic fidelity Ellison aims for, then, is a recovery of a dislocated and denied racial self.

While I agree with Weheliye's astute examination of sonic Afro-Modernity in Ellison's novel, I am also drawn to the ways in which these sonic moments dramatize sensation of and in sound. Ellison amplifies blues, jazz, vernacular, and other instances of sonic cultural production in ways that provide his protagonist and his reader with opportunities to listen. His attentiveness to sound technology in *Invisible Man* and in 'Living with Music' suggests more than this technology's contribution to increased musical pleasure. More importantly, sound technology for Ellison provides opportunities for a listener to learn to listen differently, more acutely, and more intentionally to the sounds that, in this case, the phonograph emits. Yet this recording technology, without the full-bodied engagement of an attentive listener, *Invisible Man* suggests, amplifies a limited fidelity. In other words, Ellison's work suggests a modern listening enhanced through the intentional play between the ear, the body, and technology. These opportunities call not merely for notation of sounds, but also for sound thinking, or thinking through listening. For Ellison, it is listening that enables – sometimes wholeheartedly and sometimes ambivalently – the reconstitution of a fractured racial self.

II. 'I want to *feel* its vibration': *Invisible Man*'s Listening Body

Given Ellison's struggles to control and then engage the acoustics of his basement apartment in Harlem, it is perhaps no wonder that the resulting novel, *Invisible Man*, features a protagonist who grapples with controlling the light, sound, and feel of his hibernating hole beneath the streets of Harlem. Following his descent into hibernation, *Invisible Man* paradoxically begins to use his invisibility to become a better listener. While he explains that he is 'invisible...simply because people refuse to see [him]' (Ellison 1952: 3), his invisibility does not hamper his ability to perceive sound. On the contrary, he can still sense, thereby confirming that he has a form and substance – that he has not lost his self despite others' dismissal of that very self.

While invisibility is viewed as the master trope of racial dislocation in the novel, moments of audibility and inaudibility run throughout Ellison's novel, often intertwined with invisibility. *Invisible Man* needs a form, a body, a confirmed being to be able to listen; likewise, he needs to listen in order to reform his racial self, dislocated through the visual. What is at stake for *Invisible Man* in listening, then, is his very self.¹³ As Brandon LaBelle suggests, 'sound reroutes the making of identity by creating a greater and more suggestive weave between self and surrounding' (LaBelle 2010: xxi). More immediately, the attentiveness Ellison's novel pays to listening resonates with Don Ihde's notion that '[a]n inquiry into the auditory is also an inquiry into the invisible. Listening makes the invisible *present*' (Ihde 1976: xxi). Thus, *Invisible Man*'s new awareness of his invisibility helps him listen more complexly:

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. 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 (Ellison 1952: 8).

Though *Invisible Man* insists that he now hears 'vaguely' this 'different sense of time' as he listens to music, what he is experiencing here specifically is sonic time. If we consider Julian Henriques' explanation of sonic time as 'not travelled in straight lines. It's too heterogeneous for that' (Henriques 2003: 459), then we come to hear *Invisible Man*'s hibernating plunges into sound precisely as a deep, complex listening to and within sound.

What is at utmost stake in *Invisible Man*'s ability to practice a full-bodied listening, though, is this narrator's need to find a way to reconstitute further his form and substance, the existence of his very self. He begins this pursuit of form by wiring the ceiling and illuminating his home with 1,369 lightbulbs; he plans to wire the walls and floor later. He takes on all this electrical work, he says, because, 'Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form.... Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well' (Ellison 1952: 6, 7). Electrifying his hole also allows him to play his phonograph and delve into sound in ways that allow him to remain aware of his invisibility as he simultaneously resounds his invisible body as a 'sonic body,' one that is touched by, perceives, and produces sound. While others refuse to see *Invisible Man*, he can assert himself as an audible presence.¹⁴ Thus, listening provides *Invisible Man* form along with the ability to sense and enables the entire body's sensory capabilities to hear.

One well-known and often discussed instance of sonic experience in *Invisible Man* is the protagonist's aural plunge into Louis Armstrong's '(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue?'¹⁵ The *Invisible Man*'s home underneath and on the edge of Harlem suffers from 'a certain acoustical deadness.' This 'deadness' makes *Invisible Man* long to own five stereos so that he can fill his home with Armstrong's music and 'feel its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body' (Ellison 1952: 8). By displacing acoustical deadness with Armstrong's music in surround sound, *Invisible Man* plans to accentuate the 'slightly different sense of time' that he hears in Armstrong's song (Ellison 1952: 8). Such a listening experience, he believes, would enliven his entire body and create in his abode acoustical liveliness, or what Julian Henriques terms 'sonic dominance.' In his discussion of the physical characteristics of the sound system used in Jamaican dancehall culture, Henriques explains sonic dominance as 'hard, extreme and excessive. At the same time the sound is also soft and embracing and

it makes for an enveloping, immersive and intense experience. The sound pervades, or even invades the body.... Its not just heard in the ears, but felt over the entire surface of the skin' (Henriques 2003: 451, 452). Invisible Man yearns for a listening experience that is *tactile*. If he is able to establish sonic dominance in the space from which he embraces his invisibility, an invisibility that stems largely from other's view of his racial identity, Invisible Man will carry out his hibernation while learning how to listen differently – and for difference.

In the novel's Prologue, Armstrong's 'Black and Blue' fills Invisible Man's underground home, sonically enveloping him within Armstrong's music and literalizing Ellison's notion of living with music.¹⁶ In a marijuana-induced state, one that creates a sonic experience unlike any he has encountered before, Invisible Man enters and descends Dante-like into the depths of the amplified music, level by level, listening to sound at previously unperceived lower frequencies all while learning how to listen anew: 'I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its peace, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak' (Ellison 1952: 8, 9). This listening pulls Invisible Man's attention to the 'unheard,' seemingly silent, parts of the music as well as to the distinct melodic parts. The music is figured in spatial terms, and listening as descending into sound is associated with an attempt to locate meaning, or sense, in the absence of certainty. This plunge into Armstrong's music allows Invisible Man to listen deeply and, in his account, to use his awareness and acceptance of his invisibility to help him better understand 'Black and Blue.' The manner in which Invisible Man listens in this moment recalls Ihde's assertion, 'Listening makes the invisible *present*' (Ihde 1976: xxi). Invisible Man restores himself as he listens from within sound – and as we listen to him from his hibernating space.

To signal Invisible Man's descent into an 'underworld of sound,' the typography of the text slips into italics. Invisible Man describes entering a space of sound. He first hears an old woman singing a spiritual, a pleading voice of a woman who is being bid on at slave auction, the haunting sounds of slavery, and then the sermon 'Blackness of Blackness,' a revised allusion to Herman Melville's 'Whiteness of Whiteness' in *Moby Dick*. While Invisible Man's descent might be mistaken for a plunging into ultimate and essential sounds of blackness, the sermon Invisible Man hears as he plunges specifically contains, as Benston demonstrates, complex differences and tensions that ultimately suggest blackness as 'not [as] a node of absolute essence but, rather, the (re)discovery of the subversive ambiguity of any expressive act' (Benston 2000: 10).¹⁷ In this moment, Ellison's protagonist demonstrates listening as intentional, fluid engagement and practice of sonic perception in service of developing sonic understanding.

Disrupting the sermon, a disembodied 'voice of trombone timbre' screams and tells the Invisible Man to leave. Invisible Man then continues his travels below, listening more deeply into a return to the old slave woman, and he asks her, 'Why do you moan?' (Ellison 1952: 10). The question, one that keys in on her moan, a sound whose vibrations are felt within a body and heard beyond it, begins a dialogue between Invisible Man and the once-enslaved woman about freedom and ambivalence. She shares that she loved her master because he was the father of her sons, but she hated him, too, for refusing their freedom. She poisoned her master, and in response produces an ambivalent moan mixed with happiness, sadness and resistance. The woman's wordless moan signals her struggle to exercise her freedom, to speak eloquently, a struggle that speaks in many ways to the immense difficulty involved

in listening. For, in order to translate her inner thoughts to spoken language – to 'remember how to say...' – the slave woman must open a frequency that will allow her to access what she needs psychically to articulate. *Invisible Man*'s encounter with the depths of music, and particularly his conversation with the slave woman, leads him to consider how, even as an invisible man, what he listens to and how he listens poses a challenge to act. His dialogue with the slave woman pushes him to another place to consider social – and sonic – responsibility.

Following his immersion in this 'underworld of sound,' *Invisible Man* reflects on his listening: 'At first I was afraid; this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act. Nevertheless, I know now that few really listen to this music' (Ellison 1952: 12). He is so enveloped in sound that he is able to experience the satisfaction of accessing even silent sound, a kind of sound that in the previous 'acoustical deadness' of his home did not resonate: '[I]t was a strangely satisfying experience for an invisible man to hear the silence of sound' (Ellison 1952: 6). Accessing silence provides *Invisible Man* additional satisfaction; though negated by the eye, he, in turn, senses in this sonic moment that which is usually rendered silent.

Yet this moment of depth of perception does not suggest listening as an unproblematic practice. On the contrary, *Invisible Man* offers moments of keen awareness and acceptance of sound and meaning while also cautioning against a complacent listening that could be born from technologically enhanced or other kinds of listening.¹⁸ The importance of a full-bodied listener for Ellison is even more audible in moments when his protagonist sounds critical of the capacity of human and technological listeners to record racial identity and racial experience fully. Following the death of his Brotherhood colleague, Tod Clifton, and prior to his hibernation, *Invisible Man* wanders down Harlem's 125th Street, listening to sounds blasting mainly from storefront speakers. When he reaches the train station, he stands on the platform, watching the 'transitory ones' who, like him, are waiting for the next train. In this moment of waiting, as the first epigraph to this essay records, *Invisible Man* questions the ability of those traditionally in charge of writing history and novels to hear, listen to, and record those 'too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound' (Ellison 1952: 439). Struck by their 'noisy silence' in the midst of blaring city sounds, *Invisible Man* wonders why even he did not hear them before, why, despite his job in the Brotherhood to do otherwise, he had left these people stuck, unrecorded 'outside the groove of history' (Ellison 1952: 443). For Ellison and his protagonist, there is much at stake in this listening. Here, listening is an ethical practice, one whose purpose largely is to hear and record those who are inaudible and, therefore, ignored. In light of this sonic exclusion, *Invisible Man*'s ability to access 'the silence of sound' becomes even more significant and offers enhanced possibilities for the recording of those left in realms beyond the traditionally heard.

Invisible Man's musings also remind us that listening is not utopic, or in Josh Kun's term, audiotopic.¹⁹ Although offered in Ellison's novel largely as a liberating and restorative racial and cultural practice, *Invisible Man* reminds us that listening can still be imbricated in the racial subjection usually ascribed to visual treatments of race. In this moment, I hear Ellison through his contemplative protagonist questioning the human ear, new technologies of sound recording, and writers like himself and their limited ability to record those who reside in more silent spaces of sound.

III. 'Few really read this novel': A Call for Sonic Literacy

Giving audience to Ellison's novel tunes our attention to *Invisible Man*'s challenging query from underground: '*Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?*' (Ellison 1952: 581). This question, the concluding line of the novel, explicitly calls attention to the necessary function of this book's readers to act as a listening audience. But how are the lower frequencies significant in this audio relationship between reader and text? First, *Invisible Man*'s focus specifically on the lower frequencies brings to mind R. Murray Schafer's connection between touch and hearing. Asserting touch as the most personal sense, Schafer explains: "Hearing and touch meet where the lower frequencies of audible sound pass over to tactile vibrations (at about 20 hertz). Hearing is a way of touching at a distance and...is fused with sociability whenever people gather together to hear something special" (qtd. in McCartney 179). *Invisible Man*'s reading audience is activated here as a listening community – one that gives audience, gives a listen – drawn together by the social and communal possibilities of listening.²⁰ Ideally, the listener intentionally becomes the ear of a society, insuring that we record more than merely 'a song with turgid, inadequate words' (Ellison 1952: 443).

Second, Ellison's novel and its last line in particular attune us to the importance of listening as an act of sonic literacy. As Michelle Comstock and Mary Hocks have explained, while sonic literacy is 'the ability to identify, define, situate, construct, manipulate, and communicate our personal and cultural soundscapes,' listening is the sensory process through which we develop sonic literacy:

Listening is an art, a conscious process of observing and defining sound. And like the art of writing, it is affected by one's place in and knowledge of a particular sonic environment as much as one's previous experiences with sonic forms. Recognizing both resonances and dissonances as cultural and individual are key to what we consider critical sonic literacy.²¹

Ellison concludes his novel by asserting the sonic aspects of his written text and the need for his readers to listen. Fred Moten also acknowledges *Invisible Man*'s call for 'a new analytical way of listening and reading,' one that is necessary given that, for Moten, this is a novel that cannot be read. Moten writes, 'Few really read this novel. This is alarming even though you can't really read this novel' (Moten: 2003: 67). Like Moten, I am interested in the 'ensemble of senses' from which listening emerges and in listening's capacity to disrupt the traditional separation between acts of reading (highly visual and focused on the eye) and reception of orality (highly audible and focused on the ear).²² Texts such as *Invisible Man* are progressively modern in the sense that they challenge their readers to engage writing as fully sensing audiences. His protagonist's query opens a channel for readers to listen *and* channels our practice of literacy as one that involves a training of the ear as well as the eye – and the rest of our sensing selves.

This discussion of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* sounds the capabilities and possible limitations of listening as a cultural and social practice. Opening channels between the sonically rich fields of African American literary and cultural studies and Sound Studies allows us to listen for new frequencies on

which to understand race. The listening body, in other words, enacts a body of cultural work whose broadcasting potentially amplifies new understandings of race and culture.

Footnotes

1. Ellison (1952: 439); Lipsitz (1994: 3); Back (2007: 22). [↩]
2. For instance, as Lindon Barrett asserts in *Blackness and Value*, "It is the skin colors, the textures of hair, the shapes of skulls and noses, the placement of cheekbones, the thicknesses of lips, the contours of the buttocks that visibly define those in the African diaspora [sic]. Diasporic populations find themselves in circumstances in which the sense-making capacity of vision, the significance of vision, is monopolized from a hostile perspective" (1999: 318). [↩]
3. See, for example, Benston (2003), Baker (1984), and Gates (1988). [↩]
4. Don Ihde also explains that, for him, listening is 'a deliberate decentering of a dominant tradition' that 'symbolizes a hope to find...a different understanding of experience, one which has its roots in a phenomenology of auditory experience.' Ihde (1976: 15). [↩]
5. Major studies in Learning Theory argue convincingly that cognitive dissonance is necessary for learning to occur. For a discussion of the central role cognitive dissonance plays in learning, see National Research Council (2000). [↩]
6. Ellison (2002). [↩]
7. Ellison's essay, 'Living with Music,' was first published in *High Fidelity Magazine*. *High Fidelity*, published beginning in 1958, was a magazine geared toward recorded music lovers, and its articles influenced consumer taste in music and musical equipment. It is not surprising, then, that Ellison makes a point of mentioning in his essay the type of radio he owned (a Philco) and other equipment. Not only was he knowledgeable, but he was also writing for an audience that wanted to know what equipment to purchase. He was affecting not only the singing taste of the neighbor he discusses in his essay, but also the buying tastes of his readers. [↩]
8. Elsewhere, Ellison explains that his 'instinctive approach to writing is through sound' thereby enacting a 'planned dislocation of the senses,' or what he also calls 'the condition of fiction' (qtd. O'Meally 2002: ix). [↩]
9. The early 1950s saw a surge in sales of phonograph and high fidelity equipment, particularly in urban markets like New York City (Morton 2000: 39). For a history of the development of High Fidelity, see Morton. [↩]
10. Ellison's stereo set-up included a speaker system, an AM-FM tuner, a transcription turntable and a speaker cabinet, all of high quality. He later added a preamplifier and record compensator, arm, magnetic cartridge and a tape recorder. Ellison was quite pleased that he was able to purchase a tape recorder. Critics of sound recording equipment at the time, according to Morton, 'saw the tape recorder as the more advanced, and hence more desirable, technology' over the alternative – the wire recorder (2000: 134). [↩]
11. I borrow the term 'sonic self' from Brandon LaBelle for whom the sonic self is 'a special figure embedded within a sphere of cultural and social habits.' See LaBelle (2010: xxv). [↩]
12. Throughout his essays, Ellison reflects on his negotiations between sound and writing. See, for instance, 'The Golden Age, Time Past,' in O'Meally (2002: 60). [↩]

13. Part of what animates this construction of invisibility is swing. When Ellison talks about being ahead or behind time, he is referring largely to the workings of swing music. See O'Meally (2002). [↵]
14. As Henriques asserts, 'We can listen to the sonic body' (Henriques 2003: 472). [↵]
15. Listen to Armstrong here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHLT12cMCQk> [↵]
16. See O'Meally; Eric Sundquist also discusses the history of this song (1995: 115, 116). [↵]
17. See a full analysis of the sermon in Benston (2000: 7-10). [↵]
18. As Moten asserts, 'Invisible Man represents the dialectic of improvement...but it also offers a quite devastating critique of that progression' (Moten 2003: 71). [↵]
19. Kun (2005). [↵]
20. Rayner (1993). [↵]
21. Available from http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/comstock_hocks/technologicalliteracy.htm [Accessed April 18, 2011]. [↵]
22. For an exception to this focus on reading as solely ocular, see Philip Schweighauser (2006). [↵]

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Author Bio

Nicole Brittingham Furlonge is a teacher and writer who received her PhD in English from the University of Pennsylvania in 2006. She has taught at several private schools, including Holderness School, St. Andrew's School, and Lawrenceville School. She has also lectured at the University of Pennsylvania. Her essay on *Invisible Man* in this issue of *Interference* is part of a larger project that examines the ways in which sensory engagement -- particularly listening -- participates in constructing and perceiving racial and ethnic difference.