

Sounds of the Land of Promise:
Listening to Ralph Ellison's Metaphors of Memory in *Invisible Man*

by
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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

This project studies Ralph Ellison's incorporation of sonic memory, soundscapes (sonic environments), and music into his novel *Invisible Man* (1952). The central focus of this dissertation is the influence of the sonic on Ellison's work, beyond his interest in jazz. This project argues that Ellison's work incorporates his memories of sound and music as well as the sonic imagery and philosophies of the sonic he draws from his literary influences, namely T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. I approach *Invisible Man* as a semi-autobiographical text, which I argue transfigures Ellison's own sonic experiences into fiction. I draw on Ellison's essays, interviews, and letters, as well as the two major biographies on Ellison, Lawrence Jackson's *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (2002) and Arnold Rampersad's *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (2007), in order to contextualize the sonic elements and metaphors of memory that Ellison integrates into the soundscapes of *Invisible Man*.

This project argues that Ellison is an "earwitness" who draws on the sonic in his work in order to emphasize the significance of listening as well as draw attention to overlooked African-American soundscapes. Carolyn Birdsall elaborates on the term "earwitness" as follows: "In 1977, Raymond Murray Schafer defined the earwitness as an author who lived in the historical past, and who can be trusted 'when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known' (1994 [1977], p. 6). Schafer's understanding of the earwitness endorses the authority of literary texts for conveying an authentic experience of historical sounds" (169). Essentially, Ellison and his novel's narrator are concerned with both the intimacy of listening and the critical consideration of the psychological and personal impact of diverse and unique sound memories and soundscapes.

I employ a variety of approaches in my study of Ellison's use of the sonic in his work – including history, autobiography, analysis, and compositional method – in order to contextualize the nuances of sonic experience that inform Ellison's writing. I begin this project with a study of the historical context that informs Ellison's work, and then I gradually introduce analytical perspectives of the sonic as the dissertation progresses. I scaffold this project in this way in order to foreground the historical, contextual, and subjective uniqueness of listening before I apply scholarly approaches and analysis of the sonic to Ellison's work later in the dissertation. Chapters One and Two are history-based, as I provide historical context on Harlem's soundscapes and Ellison's education at the Tuskegee Institute. Chapters Three and Four are analytical approaches to Ellison's use of the sonic which build on the background information I provide in Chapters One and Two. Chapter Five blends sonic analysis, autobiographical and historical context, and compositional method in order to demonstrate the breadth of Ellison's nuanced integration of the sonic into his writing.

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Dedication

To Kimmy, I will never break your Pyrex.

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Introduction:

Between the Essence and the Descent

In a 1971 letter to boyhood friend Harold Calicutt, Ralph Ellison likens his recent visits to their native Oklahoma City to Rip Van Winkle waking from a sleep of twenty years to find his world transformed, strange, and new. Urban redevelopment of Oklahoma City in the 1960s and 1970s, which levelled and replaced 530 downtown buildings with modern architecture, made the city unrecognizable and alienating to Ellison (Lackmeyer). Ellison laments in his letter that the city of his youth began to “exist more in the memory than in the landscape” (686). Ellison contrasts his nostalgia for “the city [he] knew and loved [that had] disappeared” to the sound of an old phonograph record that has eroded and changed after decades of play. He reflects: “All the old grooves [of Oklahoma City] have been erased – not worn out like the grooves of a fine old recording that has been played until the tune is more in the memory than in the phonograph, but simply erased, torn down, uprooted and junked because some strangers who never knew the magic, the wonder and inspiration of living in those old dear grooves decided that they were no longer to exist” (686). Ellison here makes a clear distinction between memory and material continuity by associating the vivid but fleeting and unreliable nature of memory with the ephemeral and gradually abrading sound of a phonograph record¹. Ellison points to a disconnect between the endurance of memory and the

¹ Scholarship often refers to the sonic as “ephemeral” for a variety of reasons. For example, Debra Rae Cohen, Michael Coyle, and Jane Lewty, in *Broadcasting Modernism* (2009), characterize early radio broadcasts as “ephemeral” because, at the beginning of the twentieth century, live radio programs were not recorded. So, there is no way to reproduce or physically hear the early history of radio since there was no means or consideration for archiving radio broadcasts at the time: “Radio was, at the outset and by definition, an especially ephemeral medium, incapable of inscription. Little effort was made to preserve the content of broadcasts, even once the technology existed” (2). In Ellison’s case, the soundscapes of his youth only exist in his memory, and therefore cannot be entirely reproduced or described with complete accuracy, despite how vivid such sounds are to Ellison himself. In other words, Ellison can sketch the soundscape of his youth or

destruction of the past through the analogy of a phonograph's grooves wearing down. In other words, sound and sonic memory are, for Ellison, a means to evoke and speak about the past and personal experience in the absence of material continuity. In this letter – as he often does in his writing – Ellison examines the elusive mystery of memory through the lens of the sonic because sound, like memory, is, for Ellison, an impressionistic, deeply personal, and spiritual mode of perception and penetrating personal history.

This dissertation examines Ellison's incorporation of the soundscapes (sonic environments), sonic memory, and music of his life, as described in his essays, letters, interviews, lectures, and biographies into his fiction and his approach to writing in general. In more detail, this project views Ellison as an "earwitness" of unrecorded or personal sounds and music, and argues that he uses the sonic as an entry point to evaluate the emotional and psychological effect of segregation and racial uplift on African-American experience. Specifically, I contend that Ellison approaches African-American experience as an acoustic field of study, where he surveys the soundscapes of African-American education, work, housing, and recreation, in both his own life and the lives of other African-Americans, in order to engage with the cultural and critical dialogue about the discursively maligned authenticity and history of African-American subjectivity. As a point of reference on the term "earwitness," Carolyn Birdsall, in *Sound Souvenirs: Audio Technologies, Memory and Cultural Practices* (2009), elaborates as follows: "In 1977, Raymond Murray Schafer defined the earwitness as an author who lived in the historical past, and who can be trusted 'when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known' (1994 [1977], p. 6). Schafer's understanding of the earwitness endorses the authority of literary texts for

compare it to modern sounds, but the reader is still semiotically and representationally distanced from the sonic that resounds in Ellison's memory.

conveying an authentic experience of historical sounds” (169). Ellison’s approach to African-American experience as an acoustic field of study is grounded in both his sonic memory and his propensity to being an intellectual artist who promotes education among African-Americans for racial uplift². Ultimately, I contend that Ellison frames himself as an intellectual earwitness in his approach to writing because he is indebted to both learning about and disseminating the significance of sonic memory in the African-American experience. By extension, I maintain that Ellison draws on his own sonic past in order to sketch the sonically idiosyncratic but often unrecorded experiences of African-Americans as a whole, as soundscapes and sonic memory are, paradoxically but irrefutably, both authentic and unreliable “sound souvenirs” and “metaphors of memory,” where “the construction of sounds [that offer] traces of the past depends on external, physical objects” and hinge on “the role of sound within personal and social contexts of remembering” (Birdsall 169).

Although Ellison would only return to Oklahoma intermittently after leaving for the Tuskegee Institute in 1933 – and rarely during his formative years as a writer in the late 1930s and early 1940s – the haunting and romantic attachment he felt for his birthplace, defined by the death of his father Lewis during his boyhood, would shape his blues-tempered and quasi-

² Ellison’s career as a writer is significantly influenced by his experience at the Tuskegee Institute, where he would study music until he withdrew in 1936. Clashes with professors over his aptitude and the general purpose of his education led him to have a conflicted attitude towards the African-American education system, which he saw as a flawed, but ultimately necessary, institution since he considers knowledge to be the best means of gaining agency and approval among his peers, even if such knowledge was not always accessible to other African-Americans at the time. In a 1956 letter to Edna Slaughter, Ellison reflects on the education he received at Tuskegee, which, he states, consisted of “Tall tales, jokes, state history, personal confessions, and more than a few outright lies. But they were lies told because it was realized that in the strange, contradictory nature of experience lies sometimes got us closer, not to the facts, but to the truth. Maybe . . . I was receiving my real education and it’s a fact that I’ve done more with it than I’ve been able to do with all my years of music” (430). In reflecting on his time at Tuskegee, Ellison often seems torn on the direction of African-American education, but he still finds his difficult and frustrating time at the Institute essential for honing his critical thinking, expanding his knowledge of sound and music, and reflecting on his apprehension towards the nuanced sonic aspects of African-American subjectivity.

autobiographical approach to writing about sonic memory and environments: “the act of writing requires a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike” (56). While Ellison’s only completed novel *Invisible Man* (1952) is regularly considered to be a semi-autobiographical text, his novel largely revises and aestheticizes the personal experiences that informed its apparently autobiographical elements. While 1940s Black literature and music are often autobiographically charged to promote sentimentality with Black individual experience, Ellison encourages African-Americans to transform experience into intellectual art instead of merely making the communication of Black experience an end in itself³. For Ellison, lived experience and memory are, in his editor John F. Callahan’s words, “The territory he explores as an essayist,” and, I would argue, as a novelist as well, “[that] becomes a slowly settled, open country of the imagination through which he pursues the meaning and mystery, the promise and betrayals, and above all the complex past, present, and future possibilities of an American democracy” (*The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* xvii). This dissertation takes Callahan’s lead in tracing the representations of Ellison’s life and memory in his fiction by viewing them through the optic of earwitness experience, sonic analysis, and sonic contextualization in order to elaborate on the sonorously personal and artistic aspects of African-American experience in Ellison’s work.

Ultimately, this project considers Ellison to be an earwitness who integrates sonic memories, environments, and music into his work in order to emphasize the significance of unrecorded or overlooked African-American soundscapes. In a sense, Ellison’s approach to writing can be considered to be an earwitness approach since Ellison and his novel’s narrator

³ One of the first and most widely-cited examples of Ellison’s injunction to turn experience into intellectual art is his article “Richard Wright’s Blues,” a 1945 review of Richard Wright’s memoir *Black Boy* (1945).

are concerned with both the intimacy of listening and the critical consideration of the psychological and personal impact of diverse and unique sound memories and soundscapes, which can offer a sense of the “authentic experience of historical sounds” (Schafer qtd. in Birdsall 169)⁴. This being said, my characterization of Ellison as an earwitness is complicated by the fact that fiction writers are generally not documentarians who factually communicate authentic confessions of events witnessed, seen, or heard⁵. Ellison’s incorporation of his sonic past into his fiction is, of course, a fictionalized representation of lived experience. The character arc of Ellison’s narrator is informed by the specific events that the narrator witnesses and experiences: his narrator does not witness or document Ellison’s own experiences, obviously, as the narrator communicates his own impressions of sound, music, and noise in the universe of the novel, which are themselves sometimes inspired by moments in Ellison’s life. In Ellison’s fiction, he offers a glimpse of his own experiences as an earwitness by basing some of his narrator’s experiences with sound and noise on the soundscapes of his own life. In effect, Ellison emphasizes the inherent difficulty of relaying the nuances of sonic experience to another listener: in more detail, the act of describing the emotional impact of a specific sound or song to an audience will undoubtedly not communicate the personal beats and precise emotional tones of a listener’s exclusive

⁴ Scholarship refers to Ellison’s unnamed protagonist in different ways. I refer to him in this dissertation as simply the “the narrator” since he is narrating the story of his life from his underground cellar. Scholarship variously refers to the narrator as “the invisible man,” “invisible,” or “the protagonist.” I find it somewhat odd to refer to the narrator as “the invisible man” since the narrator’s worldview in his cellar is predicated on the realization that he is anonymous (even though Ellison himself refers to the narrator as both “the invisible man” and “the protagonist” in letters written following the publication of the novel). The narrator also refers to himself in the opening sentence of the novel as “an invisible man;” adding the article “the” seems to single him out and counter his anonymity.

⁵ As a point of reference, Birdsall’s work is historical and documentarian in scope, where she adopts an “oral history methodology in order to approach the interactions of auditory experience and memory in earwitness testimony. Unlike written forms of autobiographical narrative or interview transcriptions, the performative and interpersonal qualities of the interview highlight the vocal sounds and physical motions that emerge when individuals engage in remembering” (170-1).

experience with sound. Since Ellison's narrator is arguably a loose reflection of Ellison himself, the narrator's attention to the importance of the sonic gestures to Ellison's – or any listener's – inability to accurately communicate the significance of sound souvenirs and sonic metaphors of memory: “sound memories are not necessarily predicated on the exact reproduction of past sounds, nor does the earwitness account reveal ‘how it really was’ to the researcher” (Birdsall 179)⁶. In other words, the narrator's experiences with the sonic are purposefully imprecise reflections of Ellison's own earwitness experiences, which emphasizes the important and personal uniqueness of sonic memory as well as the difficulty of communicating such memories in a meaningful way. As an earwitness, Ellison also describes his attachment to the sonic in documentarian detail in his essays, interviews, and letters, which are themselves personal testimonies that provide critical context on his approach to crafting his narrator's own attention to sound.

F# A# ∞: An Overview of Scholarly Studies of the Sonic on Ellison's Work

My study of Ellison's earwitness approach focuses on his novel *Invisible Man* (1952).

Various episodes from Ellison's novel are widely discussed in scholarship, and others, less so.

Scholarship on *Invisible Man* regularly focuses on the noisy, musical, and dense prologue and epilogue of Ellison's novel. For example, the prologue and epilogue are studied extensively

⁶ In “Indivisible Man,” a quasi-play that Ellison wrote in collaboration with James Alan McPherson, where both Ellison and McPherson cast themselves as characters, Ellison and McPherson describe the character based on Ellison as follows: “Ellison is as practiced a listener as he is a speaker, and gives even the most naively put question thorough consideration before responding. He is a bit guarded at first, perhaps unwinding from a day at his desk, perhaps adjusting to the intellectual level of his guest” (365).

in almost every article included in the comprehensive collection *The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century* (2016)⁷. On another note, Houston Baker Jr.'s foundational text in African-American studies, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), thoroughly examines the narrator's interaction with a blues singer and sharecropper, Jim Trueblood, which is a topic that other scholars have built on since the publication of Baker Jr.'s text. Other episodes from Ellison's novel, such as the narrator's time at the noisy Liberty Paints factory and hospital, are not studied as often as the prologue and epilogue. In this project, I study an array of both popular and overlooked sonorous episodes from Ellison's novel in order to thoroughly sketch the narrator's education as an intellectual earwitness over the course of the novel.

The novel begins with a prologue, where Ellison's unnamed narrator describes living in the cellar of a building owned by Whites, somewhere on the edge of Harlem. From his "hole," as he refers to his underground dwelling, he recalls the last twenty years of his life and the events that led him to withdraw from aboveground society for almost two decades. In his cellar, he has come to the conclusion that he is an "invisible man" because the various White groups, publics, and communities he has become involved with over the past two decades do not see him as an individual: they only see his "surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations" (3). In the underground, the narrator has been thinking through how to compose his memoirs. He goes on to describe the events that led him to withdraw from society into the underground, and his reflection on his life's story forms the basis for the novel's plot. The novel ends with an epilogue that serves as an extension of the prologue,

⁷ I engage with Herman Beavers's contribution to the book, "The Noisy Lostness: Oppositionality and Acoustic Subjectivity in *Invisible Man*," in Chapters One and Four of this dissertation.

where the narrator decides that he must, at some point, emerge from the underground, though he does not indicate when he will do so.

From his cellar, the narrator recounts the events that led him to reside in the underground. As a young man, the narrator is given a scholarship to a Southern Black college – an institution partially modelled on Ellison’s time at Tuskegee – after making a speech to his town’s rich White elites. This speech primarily serves as entertainment for the White dignitaries, and is followed by a humiliating “battle royal” where he and other young Black men are forced into a boxing ring with each other. At the college, the narrator is tasked with chauffeuring Mr. Norton, a White college trustee, around the campus, which includes a detour through the grounds that currently house sharecroppers and formerly served as living quarters for slaves. The trip goes awry when Mr. Norton asks to stop at one of the cabins, where they meet Jim Trueblood, a blues singer and pariah, who addresses at length the gossip that surrounds his sexual assault of his daughter. After listening to Trueblood’s diatribe – or his “song,” as Baker Jr. describes the scene (187) – Mr. Norton becomes dehydrated, and is given liquor, as an ill-advised remedy, at the Golden Day. The narrator is subsequently blamed by Dr. Bledsoe, a college administrator, for mismanaging Mr. Norton’s tour of the college, and the narrator is expelled. Bledsoe gives the narrator seven sealed letters to deliver to college trustees in New York City which, the narrator thinks, will recommend that he be reenrolled at the college. However, when the narrator delivers the final letter, the son of the intended recipient, Mr. Emerson, discloses the contents of the letters to him, which, the narrator learns, recommend that he never be readmitted to the college. Mr. Emerson suggests that the narrator find a job at the Liberty Paints factory. On his first day of work at the factory, a boiler explodes at the narrator’s workstation, which leads him to be admitted to the factory

hospital where he is administered electroconvulsive therapy (ECT). Soon after, the narrator is recruited by the Brotherhood, a White, quasi-communist organization. The Brotherhood intends to make the narrator the nominal Black speech-maker for Central Harlem after the Brotherhood hears him making a protest speech outside a residence where an elderly Black couple is being evicted. During his time in the Brotherhood, which spans most of the second half of the novel, the narrator makes several spontaneous and moving speeches to Harlem residents. After making a speech about race, which the Brotherhood finds controversial, the narrator is reassigned to Downtown Manhattan. During this time, the narrator comes to question Brotherhood ideology when he witnesses the murder of fellow Brotherhood member Tod Clifton at the hands of a White policeman. The novel ends with the narrator getting drunk with Sybil, a woman who had attended one of his speeches. Later in the evening, a race riot begins in Harlem, which is partly inspired by Ellison's experience of witnessing the 1943 Harlem riot from his office at the *New York Post* (*The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison* 138). During the riot, the narrator witnesses several surreal scenes as he wanders through Harlem – such as Ras the Destroyer, a Black Nationalist leader, riding a horse dressed like an Abyssinian chieftain as well as a room full of hanging mannequins – before the narrator is chased into the sewers and Harlem's underground, where he falls asleep and envisions key authority figures from his life castrate him in a dream. Afterwards, the narrator comes across the cellar where he will continue to reside until the events of prologue, many years hence.

This project is primarily concerned with the quasi-autobiographical influence of the sonic on Ellison's work, and studies various episodes from *Invisible Man* that are both overtly and subtly concerned with the sonic. The academic conversation that surrounds Ellison's use of the sonic in his fiction usually draws on his interest in music and sound recording

technology, and such studies lean heavily on the musical proclivities and personal anecdotes Ellison presents in his essays. Much scholarly attention is given to Louis Armstrong's presence in *Invisible Man*, for example, since Armstrong is mentioned by name in the prologue and epilogue of Ellison's novel; Armstrong is likewise highlighted no less than twenty times in the 2003 volume of Ellison's collected essays and is often pointed to as one of Ellison's favourite artists⁸. It is commonplace to find a chapter, or at least a significant discussion, on Ellison's interest in jazz in an academic anthology on Ellison or in a critical study of the history and discourses of jazz. Scholars of sound and literature also regularly focus on Ellison's lifelong fascination with sound recording technology⁹. For instance, in "Lost in Music: Wild Notes and Organised Sound," Paul Gilroy outlines the parallels between Ellison's experiments with sound recording and the narrator of his novel's own experimentation with phonographic reverberation and sound in the prologue of *Invisible Man*, which other scholars have similarly discussed: "Ellison began to construct his own electronic amplifiers in 1949. His writing about HiFi, the introduction of long-playing records and his peerless studies of musicians all confirm his complex relationship with recorded sound. Ellison's nameless invisible man illuminates his underground refuge with expensive electric bulbs, but the source of his music is described as a 'radio phonograph'" (180). These popular academic topics survey Ellison's fiction through the autobiographical context of his essays in

⁸ Coy and perhaps incidental references to other musicians and tracks, such as the narrator of Ellison's novel referring to himself as "Jack the Bear," possibly a nod to the 1940 Duke Ellington track of the same name, are less often a subject of scholarly intrigue, even though Ellison holds Ellington in almost as high of a regard as Armstrong.

⁹ Ellison's captivation with technology in general is a popular academic topic on its own. While writing *Invisible Man* in the late 1940s, Ellison took up amateur photography as a hobby. Gordon Parks and Ellison's photographic work of Harlem is thoroughly documented in the 2016 scholarly omnibus *Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison in Harlem*, edited by Michael Raz-Russo, which also served as the basis for the 2017 Carnegie Museum of Art exhibition, "The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art."

order to provide analytical context for the artists and tracks that Ellison references and cherishes in his work.

Scholarship less frequently considers the impact of sonic memory, soundscapes, and the sonic elements of Ellison's literary influences on his work. A primary goal of this dissertation is to examine the nuanced quasi-autobiographical implementations of the sonic in Ellison's fiction, beyond his interest in jazz and audio recording technology, in order to concretely contextualize the sound souvenirs and metaphors of memory Ellison's approach incorporates into the soundscapes of *Invisible Man*. More specifically, while Ellison does deliberate on jazz at length in his essays, his essays also afford plenty of context and personal anecdotes on the various soundscapes of his life, as well as his reverence for the linguistic rhythm and musicality of T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Fyodor Dostoevsky, among others. For instance, Ellison often links the tragic themes of the blues to the musical language of literature, as he does in a 1957 letter to Albert Murray: "He [Stanley Hyman, both a friend and critic of Ellison] can't really see that Bessie Smith singing a good blues may deal with experience as profoundly as Eliot, with the eloquence of Eliotic poetry being expressed in her voice and phrasing" (491). By extension, this project relies heavily on not only Ellison's essays for sonic and autobiographical context, but also his letters, interviews, and lectures, as well as the two major biographies written on Ellison, Lawrence Jackson's *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (2002) and Arnold Rampersad's *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (2007). In my study of Ellison's quasi-autobiographical use of the sonic in his work, I draw on the examples of Ellison's sonic past that he outlines in his essays, as other scholars do similarly, but I also emphasize the importance of drawing content from his biographies, interviews, and letters. Scholarship on Ellison mostly leans on his essays for background information on his

life and approaches to writing, but his essays do not paint the complete picture of his interest in either the sonic, music, or his influences and background. Some sonic studies of Ellison incorporate content from his two major biographies, but not often. The only published volume of Ellison's interviews, *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, is rarely cited, despite being in print since 1995. A 1072-page volume of Ellison's selected letters was recently published in 2019, and has proved invaluable to this project's study of Ellison's background and influences, as his letters frequently and candidly expand on more difficult and ambiguous elements of Ellison's interest in the sonic and literary influences¹⁰. This dissertation leans on all of Ellison's nonfiction available in print in order to concretely contextualize and examine his earwitness approach and literary influences.

Since Ellison firmly and repeatedly reiterates his literary influences and their sonic importance throughout his essays, interviews, and letters, I contend that it is paramount that the researcher approaches the sonic elements of Ellison's work with as much sonic context as possible. My thinking follows Schafer's characterization of sonic history, contextualization, and literary analysis, as outlined in *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (1977): "While we may utilize the techniques of modern recording and analysis to study contemporary soundscapes, for the foundation of historical perspectives, we will have to turn to earwitness accounts from literature and mythology, as well as to anthropological and historical records" (8). When critically evaluating the emphasis and personal significance that an author places on soundscapes, sonic memory, and music in literature, I follow Schafer's and Birdsall's lead in prioritizing the earwitness's contextualization of the sonic. If one does not approach the sonic with thorough

¹⁰ Prior to the publication of this volume, most of these letters would only have been accessible if one were to visit Ellison's archive at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

contextualization, as Birdsall argues in *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933-1945* (2012), “Voices are no longer tied to their source, denying both the labour and identity of the uttering body. The sounds themselves are given an agency away from their source, which causes a loss of referents and meaning. With this loss of control over contextual meaning, Schafer implies that the sounds can no longer be properly experienced or understood” (22). In Ellison’s work, the source of his sonic influences can be vividly traced in his nonfiction and biographies, which give vital and expansive insight into his earwitness technique of deliberating on the sonic subjectivity of African-American experience.

Additionally, while the influence of jazz and the blues on Ellison’s work is covered extensively in scholarship, few studies examine other significant genres that shape his writer’s ear and the sonic references in his work, most notably classical, opera, and flamenco. If one plunges into the vast contents of Ellison’s record collection, it will be immediately apparent that the exclusion of these genres and others from the scholarly conversation on Ellison’s musical and sonic influence is not a minor oversight. Should a novice researcher of Ellison’s musical interests, informed by the scholarly discourse on Ellison’s predilection towards jazz, set out to listen to his entire collection of music, they might be initially perplexed by the diversity of genres in Ellison’s music library as well as the intricate dissimilarity of his musical influences. Well-known jazz artists such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, unsurprisingly, appear frequently in Ellison’s record collection. But it might be jarring to hear tracks by these two titans of jazz side-by-side with less renowned musicians such as Esteban de Sanlúcar or Amália Rodrigues, two flamenco artists Ellison admired¹¹. Ellison

¹¹ In attempting to better traverse the sea-change of Ellison’s rich and seemingly strange musical library, I spent several weeks adding almost every song or artist either mentioned in Ellison’s work or present in his record

also revered the music of Ludwig Van Beethoven and Richard Wagner, but there is notably less scholarship on Ellison's interest in classical and opera compared the many studies of jazz in Ellison's work. As another point of reference, Ellison's often discussed essay "Living with Music" describes living at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem – a small, thin-walled apartment where he composed most of *Invisible Man* – where he sometimes found himself unable to write because the insistent singing of his upstairs neighbour reverberated throughout his home¹². Ellison resorted to combat the "singer on [his] ceiling" by loudly playing a variety of music, which is not limited to jazz: "If, let us say, she [the upstairs singer] were singing 'Depuis le Jour' from *Louise*, I'd put on a tape of Bidu Sayão performing the same aria, and let the rafters ring. If it was some song by Mahler, I'd match her spitefully with Marian Anderson or Kathleen Ferrier; if she offended with something from Der Rosenkavalier, I'd attack her flank with Lotte Lehmann. If she brought me up from my desk with art songs by Ravel or Rachmaninoff, I'd defend myself with Maggie Teyte or Jennie Tourel" (234). Ultimately, the influence of the sonic on Ellison's work extends far beyond jazz and the musicians he specifically names in his fiction. I approach my topic with sonic context and history as my guiding methodology since I consider the sonic memories, environments, music, and sonorous literary texts important to Ellison in my evaluation of the significance of the sonic in his work. Context is key for examining the history, subjectivity, and production of sound since, to draw on Mark M. Smith's assessment of sound and sensory historiography, "sensory history . . . gestures to the ecumenical, considering not only the

collection to a Spotify playlist. Listening to the playlist in either alphabetical, chronological, or random order gives a profound impression that Ellison's musical influences stretch fathoms further than the prevalent scholarly discourse that hones in on just his jazz influences. The contents of this playlist are almost forty hours long.

¹² "Living with Music" was originally published in the December 1955 edition of *High Fidelity* magazine, and was later collected in *Shadow and Act* (1964).

history of a given sense but also its social and cultural construction and its role in texturing the past” (4). Essentially, this project is a contextual and historical approach that considers the sonic in Ellison’s work to be “a frame that surrounds the event and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation” (Goodwin and Duranti 8).

Running in the Night: How this Dissertation Engages with Ellison’s Earwitness

Approach

In this project, I argue that the soundscapes of Ellison’s fiction are based on his sonic past, in so far as he translates and transforms his sonic memory and impressions of sonic environments and literature into fiction. For instance, both Ellison and his narrator experiment with noisy sonic technologies, as Gilroy explores in his article, but Ellison’s bombastic use of audio amplifiers to combat the noise of his upstairs neighbour differs in intent from the narrator’s underground desire to play five phonographs simultaneously. Ellison strategically played loud music on an eccentric array of audio equipment at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue in order to not only drown out the singing of his upstairs neighbour, but, importantly, so that he could also write in a soundscape that employs a soundtrack with personal meaning. The narrator of Ellison’s novel, on the other hand, wishes to fill the underground of the novel’s prologue with the cacophonous noise of five phonographs playing simultaneously in order to reflect on the soundscapes, emotional music, and discordant sounds and events that have shaped his progress as an artist: “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” (7). While Ellison and his narrator both use the sonic in order to further their artistic ambitions, Ellison’s brash use of loud music at his 749 St. Nicholas Avenue apartment was an antagonistic and desperate reclamation of sonic space; as his essay on the experience, “Living with Music,” begins: “In those days it was either live with music or die with noise, and we chose rather desperately to live” (227). Ellison’s narrator also carves out a uniquely sonic space in his underground hole, but the narrator does so in order to specifically deliberate on the sound souvenirs and metaphors of memory that shape his identity.

In other words, the narrator is not aggressively reacting to immediately intrusive sounds, as Ellison does in his apartment: the narrator describes his hole as having an “acoustical deadness,” for example (8). The narrator philosophizes on the importance of the sonic to his artistic progress, agency, and past experiences in a comfortable sonic space of his own making – his gleeful ruminations on phonographs and stealing electricity demonstrate agency instead of desperation – while Ellison’s sonically combative approach to reclaiming sonic space at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue indicates that he requires a comfortable sonic environment to encourage artistic production¹³. Although Ellison does demonstrate sonic agency in his essay since he refuses to “die with noise” (227), and both Ellison and his narrator might be trusted “when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known” (Schafer qtd. in Birdsall 6), the narrator’s sonic underground allows him easier and

¹³ Rampersad also draws a comparison between the narrator’s underground and Ellison’s temporary residence in a separate basement unit of the same 749 St. Nicholas Avenue Tenement, where Ellison lived and wrote during the final stage of the novel’s composition: “On August 16th [1950] he [Ellison] rented a hot, cramped basement room (not unlike Invisible [the narrator]’s last known place of abode [his underground cellar]) from his landlord at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue and set to work [on completing his novel]. Four furious weeks later he was sure he was done” (254). This underground apartment would be solitary like the narrator’s cellar but it is unknown how much Ellison played music there. If he did, the volume of the music possibly wouldn’t be as overwhelming as when he was using music to spar with his upstairs neighbour. Perhaps the narrator’s sonic underground of the prologue borrows elements of sound and space from both of Ellison’s residences at 749. St. Nicholas Avenue.

“unmediated access to past sounds” and room to reflect and philosophize on sound souvenirs and metaphors of memory (Birdsall 12). I contend that the narrator, like Ellison, is an intellectual and artistic earwitness who uses the sonic as a guiding aesthetic. The narrator’s sonic underground can be read as a more ideal solitary space for philosophizing and reflecting on sonic experience, which borrows from, but does not replicate, Ellison’s own loud and sonorously personal experience at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue.

It is important to study Ellison as both an authorial earwitness and subjective sonic bystander since Ellison’s firsthand account of the sonic “testif[ies] to rich and complex historical soundscape[s]” as opposed to “an exact reproduction of sound memories” (Birdsall 170)¹⁴. Just as Ellison’s 749 St. Nicholas Avenue apartment probably informed the conception of the narrator’s sonic underground to some extent, the narrator’s and Ellison’s small, loud, and uniquely personal spaces should be importantly viewed as separate soundscapes, since Schafer’s concept of the soundscape, and, by extension, the notion of the earwitness itself, “was based on the premise that the sounds heard in a given place are as

¹⁴ This condensed citation comes from Birdsall’s comparison of Schafer and Elias Canetti’s differing conceptions of earwitnessing. The position I take on Ellison’s earwitness approach is informed by Schafer’s approach to the concept, where “Schafer’s earwitness can testify to rich and complex historical soundscape” (Birdsall 170). I argue that Ellison’s earwitness approach “endorses the authority of literary texts for conveying an authentic experience of historical sounds,” as Birdsall describes, since Ellison’s approach draws on both his own sonic experiences and sonic nuances in literature and music (169). Canetti’s conceptualization of the earwitness, on the other hand, “is capable of an exact reproduction of sound memories” (170). Ellison’s approach focusses more on a relatable representation of the sonic that is partially informed by, but importantly departs from, his own experience. The full passage of Birdsall’s comparison of Schafer and Canetti’s differing takes on the concept of earwitnessing reads as follows: “Raymond Murray Schafer defined the earwitness as an author who lived in the historical past, and who can be trusted ‘when writing about sounds directly experienced and intimately known’ (1994 [1977], p. 6). . . . Elias Canetti also conceived of earwitnessing as a key mode of experiencing and remembering. The earwitness, as Canetti rendered it in *Der Ohrenzeuge* (1974), has more confidence in sounds heard and spoken than in images or visibility. Canetti’s earwitness can be read as an exaggerated stereotype of a passive listener who ‘forgets nothing,’ sneaks around and stores information for the purpose of incriminating others. Both accounts present the image of an ideal earwitness. Schafer’s earwitness can testify to rich and complex historical soundscape, while Canetti’s earwitness is capable of an exact reproduction of sound memories. However, Schafer’s conception of earwitnessing in literary accounts sustains a fantasy of immediate access to the past sounds. Canetti’s ironic caricature, by contrast, mocks the notion that remembering allows unmediated access to the past” (170).

distinctive and as important as the things to be seen there” (Birdsall 12). Both the narrator’s phonograph and Ellison’s auditory war with his neighbour can be considered “technique[s] for self-definition” that are “contradictory, revisionary and above all spontaneous” in their varying and improvisational uses of the sonic, but these two instances should each be viewed in their own sonic contexts (Hanlon 87-88). Ellison’s fiction mythologizes and transfigures sonic experience into an artistic and symbolic representation of the sonic in order to importantly observe and study the uniqueness of individual African-American sonic experience. Ellison is a “sonic bystander” who studies and explores African-American soundscapes and sound memories; he grounds his craft in his experiences as both an authorial earwitness and a student of sonic analysis and music culture, as opposed to merely confessing his own personal sonic experiences into fiction.

One can thus think of Ellison’s earwitness approach as an authorial and psychological process of meaning-making and self-definition, where the traces of his sonic past inform the construction of unique but relatable fictional African-American soundscapes, characters, and narratives. Ellison himself describes his writing style as essentially sound-based: “My basic sense of artistic form is musical . . . As a boy . . . I listened constantly to music, trying to learn the processes of developing a theme . . . and working with techniques of musical continuity. . . . My instinctive approach to writing is through sound” (qtd. in Hersey 283). Ellison eventually elaborates on his approach to writing *Invisible Man* in the introduction of the thirtieth anniversary edition of the novel as being “in the manner of a jazz musician putting a musical theme through a wild star-burst of metamorphosis” (xxiii). I approach Ellison’s work by engaging with scholarship’s prioritization of sonic context and music history, semiotic interpretations of the sonic, the influence of Ellison’s autobiography on his

work, and his playful conversions of his sonic past into narrative form; I do so in order to parse the complicated discrepancies between Ellison the man, the writer, the musician, the listener, the reader, the intellectual, and the historian, as well as the sonic symbols and metaphors of memory Ellison imprints on the page. This project studies the intersection between sonic contextualization and Ellison's earwitness approach of extracting but obfuscating his sonic past specifically because his approach and the literary study of sonic representation both recognize the importance of personal meaning and context – autobiographical, historical, cultural, etc. – as well as the representational but meaningful semiotic gap between a contextual source and its literary representation. Ellison's earwitness approach, then, is intently concerned with incorporating his sonic influences and the sounds of his life into his fiction which, in a form of call-and-response with his younger self and his audience, aims to create an intellectualized and relatable sonic aesthetic of self-actualization.

In outlining my method, it is worth looking at T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (1925), which served as Ellison's inspiration for the title of his first collection of essays, *Shadow and Act* (1964), as the well as the titles of this dissertation's introduction and conclusion. The title of Ellison's *Shadow and Act* is borrowed from the fifth and final section of *The Hollow Men*, which reads as follows:

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire

And the spasm

Between the potency

And the existence

Between the essence

And the descent

Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom (ll. 72-91).

If one approaches Ellison's work without knowledge of Eliot's impact on Ellison's writing, the connection between Eliot's *The Hollow Men* and Ellison's work might seem dubious. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a sprawling novel that follows an unnamed African-American's "nightmare journey across the racial divide," as the back cover copy of the thirtieth anniversary edition of the novel describes the text, while Eliot's *The Hollow Men* is a complicated and esoteric reaction to the First World War, which, like Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is interpreted as "a work of sterility and desolation," as Everett A. Gillis describes the poem (464). While the subject and form of these two texts differ drastically, I contend that the traces of Eliot's thematic and stylistic influence on Ellison are evident in *The Hollow*

Men. The final stanza of the poem's repeated use of juxtaposition, as seen in the lines "Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow," gestures toward my apperception of the semiotic and representational disconnect between Ellison's autobiography and the textual representations of himself, where the quasi-autobiographical elements of Ellison we find in his fiction exist as a shadowed or obscured version of the real¹⁵. The quasi-autobiographical representations of Ellison we find in his work are both a projection and an obstruction of the autobiographical source, just as a point of light enjoins an object to cast a shadow which both gives the semblance and a distortion of its origin.

The Hollow Men importantly provides insight into Ellison's earwitness incorporation of the sonic into his work. Most of the poem that precedes the final stanza contemplates the meaning-making process of sound production, as the speaker relates in the first stanza: "Our dried voices, when / We whisper together / Are quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass." Adam J. Engel, in "Talking Heads: Bodiless Voices in *Heart of Darkness*, 'The Hollow Men,' and the First World War," writes of the sonic in Eliot's poem:

Eliot cloaks impotent, fractured symbols in complete patterns of sound to generate new meaning. This meaning may be located where the Shadow falls,

"Between the idea / And the reality / Between the motion / And the act" (5.72-

¹⁵ The line from Eliot's poem is probably a reference to the second act of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "Between the acting of a dreadful thing / And the first motion, all the interim is / Like a phantasma or a hideous dream" (II.I.66-68). This is important because *The Hollow Men* is often considered to be a difficult poem to analyze without knowledge of its context and background. I think that Ellison's *Invisible Man* should likewise be evaluated in the same light as Eliot's poem since Ellison's long novel likewise offers many difficult allusions and metaphors. The intricacy of Eliot's language, musicality, and intertextuality no doubt have a profound effect on Ellison, who states in a 1954 interview with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard: "In 1935 I discovered Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which moved and intrigued me but defied my powers of analysis – such as they were – and I wondered why I had never read anything of equal intensity and sensibility by an American Negro writer" (7).

5). The musicality capable of arising from a murmuring hollow man, an impotent fractured subject – resonant with extra-semantic meaning because, like a wind instrument, it is hollow – signifies the poet’s acceptance, prior to a recomposition, of this subject. (33)¹⁶

The important comparison we can draw between Engel’s reading of Eliot’s use of sound and Ellison’s approach lies in how both approaches value being an earwitness as well as a literary transcriber of new and relatable experiential meanings of the sonic, which are separate but similarly contextually specific modes of perceiving sound, music, and voice. I argue that it is crucial to evaluate Ellison’s earwitness approach from the point of view of an allegorical, symbolic, and literary reworking of the author-as-self into fiction, which produces a textual representation that individualizes the narrative and characters, in so far as it speaks to a collective but meaningful and representational experience of sound. As Brandon Labelle writes in “Auditory Relations,” “Sound is intrinsically and unignorably relational: it emanates, propagates, communicates, vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others; it binds and unhinges, harmonizes and traumatizes; it sends the body moving, the mind dreaming, the air oscillating. It seemingly eludes definition, while having profound effect” (468). Ultimately, while Ellison’s earwitness approach can be difficult to construe – Ellison himself, in one letter, indeed describes his authorial persona as a “professional liar” (Letter to Edna Slaughter, 11 Apr. 1956) – this dissertation argues that Ellison incorporates the sonic into his fiction by framing *Invisible Man* as a symbolic and intertextual reworking of

¹⁶ Engel elaborates on the significance of the sonic in Eliot’s poem further: “Such sound signals England’s ironic proximity to the Western Front. But more than proximity is evident here. [Paul] Fussell equates the ‘palpable’ with the ‘audible’; the army’s production of sound renders it real to the listener even in the absence of visible bodies. Though civilians in England had little access to images of combat, they were not insulated from sounds [heard from across the Channel]” (36). The emphasis that Engel places on the context, experience, and defamiliarization of the sonic in Eliot’s poem is also observable in Ellison’s fiction and nonfiction.

his sonic past and assumed earwitness authority in order to construct a fictional but meaningful expression of the existential silence of listening.

Running up that Hill: Dissertation Outline and Chapter Breakdown

This dissertation utilizes various approaches to examining Ellison's earwitness approach. I study my subject by drawing on a broad array of approaches – history, autobiography, analysis, compositional method, etc. – in order to fully contextualize the range of influences and nuanced circumstances that inform Ellison's writing. I scaffold this project in such a way that begins with a focus on historical context that gradually moves into analytical perspectives of the sonic. I do so in order to first emphasize the idiosyncratic impact of personal history and historical background on the composition of *Invisible Man* before applying scholarly approaches to the sonic to Ellison's quasi-autobiographical approach and personalized infusion of the sonic into his work. Each chapter thus builds on the approach of the chapter that precedes it. In other words, I begin this project with a thorough discussion of the history of Harlem soundscapes and then build on this historical foundation by gradually incorporating analytical readings of *Invisible Man* into my argument as the chapters of this project progress. The episodes of *Invisible Man* that I study in this dissertation are also sometimes overlooked in scholarship: while the prologue and epilogue of Ellison's novel are studied extensively in academia, episodes such as the narrator's time at the Liberty Paints factory and his evening with Sybil are less frequently discussed. Chapter One surveys the historical context of Harlem soundscapes that informs the background of prologue and epilogue of Ellison's novel.

Chapter Two is also history-based, but combines the historical and autobiographical context of Ellison's time at Tuskegee with an examination of Ellison's influences, namely T.S. Eliot and Louis Armstrong. Chapter Three has a more analytical focus than Chapters One and Two, and builds on the analytical readings that end Chapter Two by drawing more intently on various scholarly approaches of sonic experience. Chapter Four is, like Chapter Three, predominantly analytical, but I also combine scholarly approaches to the sonic with a consideration for Ellison's interest in sound recording technology. Chapter Five blends sonic analysis, autobiographical and historical context, and compositional method in order to examine the nuanced influence of Joyce on Ellison's earwitness approach.

I purposefully scaffold this dissertation with a methodological trajectory that begins with a history of Harlem soundscapes and Ellison's autobiography, before gradually incorporating analytical readings of *Invisible Man* as the dissertation progresses, in order to foreground the importance of the personal and historical context that informs Ellison's earwitness approach. The sound souvenirs that resound in one's personal memory are distinct from the sounds of the present, and are key to foregrounding the earwitness's contextual transcription of the many soundscapes and metaphors of memory that inform one's conception of sonic subjectivity: "while present-day recollections by earwitnesses might seem to call upon individual experiences, it is important to keep in mind that sounds – contrary to popular assumption – are not necessarily immediate and intimate" (Birdsall 174). In other words, I think that a purely analytical approach to studying the soundscapes of *Invisible Man* would not work without first demonstrating the historical and autobiographical context that informs an earwitness's unique perspective of listening and evoking the past through sound. The broad approaches I employ in each chapter of this dissertation also demonstrate the

difficulty in transcribing sonic experience into fiction. The earwitness will undoubtedly consider some sound memories and soundscapes important, and others, less so. It is therefore crucial to first delineate which historical soundscapes and personal sound souvenirs are important to Ellison in order to analyze the complexity of reflecting on and writing about listening.

Earwitnessing and sonic subjectivity are clearly important to Ellison, but his conception of listening and sonic subjectivity is nuanced and difficult to appraise, as demonstrated in the effort of navigating his nonfiction. In outlining his approach to structuring his 1964 volume of essays, *Shadow and Act*, Ellison states: “When the first of these essays was published I regarded myself—in my most secret heart at least—a musician” (“Introduction to *Shadow and Act*” 49). In speaking about Southwestern jazz musicians, Ellison also states: “They accepted themselves and the complexity of life as they knew it; they loved their art and through it they celebrated American experience definitively in sound” (51). Ellison’s sentiment in these two passages indicates that the sonic is a significant vehicle for critically appraising memory and personal experience, but in order to do so, it is crucial that historical context and autobiographical background be considered. For Ellison, the sonic is a means to both evoke the past in the absence of material continuity and an optic for evaluating the broader spectrum of personal experience. In this project, I examine the wider implications of the sonic on Ellison’s work since, I argue, Ellison considers earwitnessing to be a comprehensive and integral vehicle for intellectual development, as his earwitness approach closely considers the broader geography of one’s personal history, historical context, compositional method, and outside perspectives of one’s work and ideas.

Scholarship approaches Ellison's work from a variety of critical angles and schools of thought. When one surveys academic approaches to Ellison's essays and fiction, several key trends are apparent. In my own research, I found the most common scholarly avenues for evaluating Ellison's work include, but are not limited to: 1) the influence of jazz, blues, and African-American vernacular on his work; 2) the influence of modernism on Ellison's style; 3) the influence of African-American writers, literary tradition, and folklore on Ellison and Ellison's place in the African-American canon; 4) themes of invisibility and the underground in the prologue and epilogue of *Invisible Man*; 5) the influence of non-African-American writers on Ellison; 6) the autobiographical elements that Ellison incorporates into *Invisible Man* and his nonfiction; 7) Ellison's politics at the time of his writing *Invisible Man*; 8) Ellison's arduous and long-fraught process of trying to produce a second novel, which he never completed; 9) the historical and cultural context of Ellison's composition of *Invisible Man* in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s; and, of course, 10) the influence of the sonic on Ellison's work beyond jazz, blues, and African-American vernacular¹⁷. I outline these scholarly trends here before I breakdown the focus of each chapter in this dissertation since each chapter engages with one or more of these analytical foci. I keep these trends in mind when affirming my argument throughout this project in order to present a comprehensive study of how Ellison's earwitness approach intersects with the broader academic discussion of his work.

¹⁷ Another topic one could add to this list could be themes of gender and sexuality in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, though this topic is not commonly examined in scholarship. Gender and sexuality are arguably overlooked – and possibly more difficult to explore than other topics listed above – because the narrator of Ellison's novel seems relatively disinterested in his own gender and sexuality for most of the novel, in addition to there being a general lack of significant female characters in *Invisible Man*.

When I first set out to research Ellison's work, I was more likely to find scholarship on the first four trends listed above: the influence of jazz, vernacular, modernism, and other African-American writers on Ellison, as well as the study of the key theme of invisibility in *Invisible Man*. Ellison's modernist technique is regularly discussed in academia, as his work often employs musical symbolism and literary fragmentation. Lawrence Jackson states in *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* that the musicality of T.S. Eliot's language in his poems and prose was a guiding influence on Ellison since "The Symbolist code penetrated the depths of Ellison's artistic sensibility, fixing him permanently with the work of the era's high modernist authors" (154). It is likewise common to see criticism on the "jazz-like" elements of *Invisible Man*, due to the novel's seemingly syncopated style, which leads some scholars to classify *Invisible Man* as a "jazz-novel" or a "jazz-like" text that incorporates modernist techniques of fragmentation and pastiche in a musically chaotic or jazz-like manner. Scholarship also regularly highlights Ellison's use of African-American literary tropes and themes in his work. Foundational studies on the African-American canon, including Robert Stepto's *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979), Houston Baker Jr.'s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (1984), and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (1988) moved the scholarly discussion of African-American literature towards a more comprehensive examination of the African-American canon and how African-American authors reference and build off each other's work. These scholars, and the studies they influence, often highlight African-American and sonic tropes in Ellison's work, such as trickster figures and vernacular wordplay – usually referred to as "signifying," to cite Gates Jr.'s usage of the term – along with the apparent influence of other African-American writers

on Ellison, namely Richard Wright. Lastly, one of the oldest scholarly topics on *Invisible Man* is, not surprisingly, the narrator's racial and social invisibility, which, the narrator states, is "simply because people refuse to see" or perceive him in a critical human light (3).

Scholarly studies published on *Invisible Man* during the first few decades after the novel's publication usually stick to close readings of the symbolism of visibility and invisibility in the novel and/or thematically link Ellison's prologue and epilogue to Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1944). Recent thematic studies of *Invisible Man* expand on the visibility/invisibility symbolism in *Invisible Man* by linking invisibility to individual perception, enlightenment, and technologies of visual illumination such as photography, one of Ellison's hobbies.

I was initially less likely to come across studies on the final five trends listed above, aside from sonic studies of Ellison: the influence of non-African-American writers on Ellison, the autobiographical elements of *Invisible Man*, Ellison's politics, his attempts to write a second novel, and the historical context in which Ellison composed *Invisible Man*. While there are now numerous scholarly evaluations of the influence of non-African-American writers on Ellison, such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Kenneth Burke, and Mark Twain, such studies do not seem quite as common in relation to the seven decades worth of studies that examine Richard Wright's apparent influence on Ellison. When I initially set out to research Ellison, for example, I was led to believe that Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* provided the framework for Ellison's construction of the prologue and epilogue of *Invisible Man* since Baker Jr.'s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* and Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey*, two texts that were required reading for my doctoral comprehensive exam on American Literature, both suggest as much, even though

Ellison vehemently denies the comparison in interviews and letters, and I, now, find the comparison between Wright's and Ellison's texts unconvincing¹⁸. Moreover, while there has been an upsurge of studies on these five trends in the last couple of decades, the researcher will have to do a bit more digging in order to find a wider scholarly discussion that, say, compares Jackson or Rampersad's biographies to Ellison's work, or a comprehensive study that thoroughly examines the drafting and revision process of *Invisible Man*, Ellison's posthumously published short fiction, or Ellison's scrapped first novel *Slick*. As for the influence of the sonic on Ellison's work, scholarship, as noted earlier, usually focuses on the influence of jazz, blues, and vernacular on Ellison's writing. In general, scholarly studies do carefully observe the impact of the vernacular and sound recording technology on Ellison's characters and themes, but the sonic metaphors of memory, sonic environments, and sonorous literary influences that are referenced and alluded to in Ellison's nonfiction and biographies are covered less frequently. Studies that examine the apparent jazz-like style of *Invisible Man* also tend to regularly speak of jazz in a general or nebulous sense, as if all genres and eras of jazz, in its one-hundred-year history, are essentially the same. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is never described as a "swing-novel," for example – as opposed to a "jazz-novel" – even though "swing-novel" would be the more tangible term since it would reflect Ellison's most revered jazz era as well as a specific jazz era that roughly coincides with the early composition history of *Invisible Man* and Ellison's growth as a writer in the late 1930s and early 1940s¹⁹.

¹⁸ Baker Jr.'s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* and Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey* are perhaps the two most noteworthy studies that place Ellison firmly in an African-American tradition. Both texts also introduced me to Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, which was a somewhat obscure text in Wright's library until an expanded version of the novella was published in novel form in 2021.

¹⁹ The swing era roughly spans the mid- 1920s to 1940s, and reached the peak of its popularity between the mid- 1930s to 1940s. Ellison's first forays in writing during the late 1930s and his early writing on *Invisible Man*

Essentially, this dissertation engages with an array of scholarly interpretations of Ellison's work in order to appraise and converse with the broad field of Ellison studies as well as contribute crucial context informed by the study of the sonic. While the primary focus of the project concerns the impact of sonic memories and literary influences on Ellison's perception and authorial intent as an earwitness, I also explore aspects of Ellison's approach, influences, and writing that are peripherally related to the sonic in order to provide more context for my argument. For example, the exposition of some chapters in this project can go into significant detail about crucial background information on Ellison's influences and experiences that are not specifically sound-based. Moreover, I sometimes provide long footnotes on general background information on Ellison's life or influences in order to provide as much context as possible on the range of his influences and the complexity of his approach to writing. My broad discussions of Ellison's time at Tuskegee, his communications with other writers and literary critics, and this project's overview of historical events that do not directly involve the sonic are still vital for my study of how people, places, and events shape Ellison as an earwitness. As an example, Chapter Five of this project provides extensive information on the broader scope and intent of Joyce's writing, techniques, and literary experiments; I do so in order to concretely establish Joyce's impact on Ellison's approach, which is not limited to the sonic, though my broader examination of Joyce's various stylistic techniques is still imperative to examining Joyce's use of the sonic in order to thoroughly explain how Joyce's literary experiments with the sonic impact Ellison's writing. In other words, this chapter deliberates extensively on Joyce's general compositional

in the mid-1940s correspond with swing's peak popularity. Academic studies imperative to my research that consider the history of jazz, as well as Ellison's specific swing influences, include John Gennari's *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and its Critics* (2006), David Yaffe's *Fascination Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing* (2006), and Paul McCann's *Race, Music, and National Identity: Images of Jazz in American Fiction, 1920-1960* (2008).

process in order to parse the sonic elements of Joyce's work that appeal to Ellison, which is not an easy task to elucidate since a study of Joyce's work is complicated in its own right, and a comparison of Joyce to Ellison requires space to present links between Joyce and Ellison clearly and concisely.

Ultimately, this dissertation examines the significance of earwitnessing on Ellison's craft and the broader impact of the sonic on the many complex techniques and ideas Ellison incorporates into his work. This project's study of the influence of the sonic on Ellison's work also importantly gestures to broader discussions and interpretations of his work. I contend that Ellison, as an earwitness, is primarily concerned with communicating the nature of sonic subjectivity in his writing: his influences are so nuanced and broad that my examination of the significance of the sonic in his writing also gestures to other important critical evaluations of his work where the sonic sometimes plays a small but important part of his approach but is not itself the focus. Each chapter in this project differs in scope – for example, Chapters One and Two are history-based, Chapters Three and Four are analytical, and Chapter Five focuses intently on the influence of Joyce's sonic imagery and philosophies of sound – in order to demonstrate the range of critical approaches that arise from viewing Ellison's work through the lens of earwitnessing and the sonic. Each chapter in this dissertation approaches the sonic from different angles in order to demonstrate the narrator's complex development as an intellectual earwitness.

Chapter One, "Labyrinthine Acoustics: Underground Harlem Soundscapes and the Prologue of *Invisible Man*," examines the historical background of Ellison's composition of *Invisible Man*. Here, I sketch the historical soundscapes of Harlem and correlate them to the soundscapes of the prologue and epilogue of Ellison's novel. This chapter frontloads this

project with important historical context for the sonic environments and memory that shape the two widely-discussed short chapters that ground and bookend Ellison's novel. Chapter Two, "Isle Full of Noises: The Intertextual Dimension of Ellison's Earwitness Approach," expands on the literary inspirations for the sonic moments in Ellison's work. In this chapter, I study Ellison's education at Tuskegee as I elaborate on the influence of several authors he discovered or studied at the Institute, including James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Louis Armstrong, William Shakespeare, and others. Chapter Three, "Crack Under the Floor: Threshold Sound Signals and Surreal Sounds at the Southern College," elaborates on Schafer's criteria of the soundscape and sound studies in more detail, and applies them to the first college episode of *Invisible Man* (chapter 2 of *Invisible Man*). This chapter is primarily concerned with fleshing out Ellison's incorporation of sonic memories and environments into his work. This chapter also builds on Schafer's conception of the soundscape by introducing my own term for transformative and transitory liminal sonic moments, which I call the "threshold sound signal." Specifically, I look at surreal and liminal sounds at the college that prompt the narrator to think introspectively about his sonic experience and memory. Chapter Four, "Weltschmerz as Flamenco: Tracing the Development of the Narrator's Auditory Knowledge," discusses Ellison's investment in technologies of sonic transmission and production, namely radio and the phonograph. This chapter importantly contextualizes how Ellison applies his approach to tinkering with sonic technology to his literary experimentations with sonic representation. Chapter Five, "Groove of History: Joyce, Vico, and Ellison's Sonic Spiral and Boomerang of History," further expounds on the significance of Joyce's effect on Ellison's own visual-sonic imagery and his narrator's philosophies of the sonic. In this chapter, I specifically delineate Joyce's interweaving of sonic history, memory,

symbolism, and allegory in *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) in order to link the influence of Joyce's uses of the sonic to Ellison's earwitness approach. I compare the narrator's theory of a "groove of history" – which considers the trajectory of history to be circular like a phonographic groove – to Joyce's references to Giambattista Vico's cyclical theory of history in his later work.

Chapter One:

Labyrinthine Acoustics: Underground Harlem Soundscapes and the Prologue and Epilogue of *Invisible Man*

In Rudolph Fisher's 1925 story "The City of Refuge," King Solomon Gillis flees North Carolina for Harlem in fear that he will be lynched for shooting a White man. He naively assumes Harlem to be a city of refuge and a "land of plenty" for Blacks, where all Black residents have steady income and equal rights with Whites (4). Gillis, who originates from a comparatively quiet rural Southern landscape, is immediately struck by the loud and crowded urban concentration of New York City. Upon arriving in New York, Gillis describes his journey from Penn Station to Harlem as a disorienting whirlwind of sound and noise:

There had been strange and terrible sounds: "New York! Penn Terminal – all change!" "Pohter, hyer, pohter, suh?" Shuffle of a thousand soles, clatter of a thousand heels, innumerable echoes. Crack rifle shots – no, snapping turnstiles. "Put a nickel in!" "Harlem? Sure. This side – next train." Distant thunder, nearing. The screeching onslaught of the fiery hosts of hell, headlong, breathtaking. Car doors rattling, sliding, banging open. (3)

The chaotic city and subway noise Gillis encounters in his journey from Midtown Manhattan to Harlem's 135th Street station gives the impression that he is entering more of a heart of darkness than a city of refuge. Gillis is overly optimistic that escaping to Harlem will solve his problems, as he believes that all residents are protected under the law, while the neighbourhood "even got cullud policemen" (4). However, the hellish sounds of the train's "screeching onslaught" as it approaches the thunder of Harlem foreshadow the crime,

corruption, and difficult living experience Gillis will endure in Harlem. The “snapping turnstiles” Gillis initially mistakes for “crack rifle shots” also psychologically signify the gunfire and snapping dogs of the potential lynching he escaped in North Carolina. But Gillis remains overconfident that Harlem is a city of equality and refuge for Blacks up until he is eventually arrested in a loud, underground cabaret, by, ironically, one of the Black policemen he assumed earlier would protect him.

As in most of Fisher’s short stories of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Harlem is described as a claustrophobic and chaotic series of loud tenements, stores, airshafts, and underground spaces. Gillis’s noisy subway passage into Harlem serves as a dystopic warning that counters his utopic vision of Harlem, while Harlem’s noise seems to foretell the difficulty of living in the neighbourhood, an aspect that is not always apparent to outsiders. Early 20th century literature set in Harlem regularly notes the noise of the neighbourhood. Like Fisher’s story, for example, Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1925) begins with the protagonist, Jake, returning to Harlem after several years abroad; upon his arrival in Harlem, Jake immediately notes the sound of the neighbourhood: “Oh, to be in Harlem again after two years away. The deep-dyed color, the thickness, the closeness of it. The noises of Harlem. The sugared laughter. The honey-talk on its streets. And all night long, ragtime and ‘blues’ playing somewhere . . . singing somewhere, dancing somewhere!” (15). When it comes to sonic representation in Black literature of the 1920s to the late 1940s, roughly spanning the years between the Harlem Renaissance and the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, an overarching trope in literature and media accounts of Harlem is the sound of interior and underground spaces: the noisy train stations, cabarets, and disembodied singing of Fisher’s and McKay’s texts are sonic tropes that distinctively mark one’s entry into Harlem.

Invisible Man follows a similar course. When the unnamed narrator enters Harlem for the first time after leaving the Southern college, he, like Gillis and Jake, is baffled by the congested sonic disorder of the district (chapter 7 of *Invisible Man*):

I had never seen so many black people against a background of brick buildings, neon signs, plate glass and roaring traffic . . . So many, and moving along with so much tension and noise that I wasn't sure whether they were about to celebrate a holiday or join in a street fight. And now as I struggled through the lines of people a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds. I moved wide-eyed, trying to take the bombardment of impressions. (159)

While the narrator of *Invisible Man* is bewildered by New York City's dense and loud urban concentration, the sounds he experiences upon entering Harlem make him optimistic that he can find self-reliance and social stability in a community with other Blacks. While the narrator is, like Gillis, similarly seeking a kind of city of refuge in Harlem from his Southern upbringing, the sounds the narrator first hears in Harlem suggest the possibility of finding a voice rather than foreshadowing doom. Ellison is unique among Black authors of the early Civil Rights era, and in early 20th century Black literature in general, in that his narrator generally does not follow the trope of the "tragic Negro," which Richard Wright, for one, often incorporates into his work in order to create a sentimental attachment with the reader and establish the Black individual as an empathetic victim of racism and segregation²⁰.

²⁰ Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun* is another notable text that focuses on Black triumph instead of tragedy. However, the trope of the tragedy of Black life in Harlem is pervasive throughout early 20th century Black literature. Major texts of the period, including Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932), and James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1953), *Giovanni's Room* (1956), and *Another Country* (1962) all make the tragic death of a Black character a central focus of the text. Several stories in Richard Wright's 1938 collection *Uncle Tom's Children* –

Ellison, on the other hand, portrays the Black individual as capable of overcoming the crushing despair of racism and poverty; the narrator eventually yearns to develop a stronger voice and philosophical attention to earwitnessing out of his initial “small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds” through the creation of both tragic art and a personal philosophy of sonic experience.

In this chapter, I first look at the historical context that informs the prologue and epilogue of *Invisible Man*. I specifically examine the sounds of underground space in the prologue and epilogue as well as the discourse of sound that surrounds Harlem and Harlem literature from the 1920s to the late 1940s. Secondly, I focus on Ellison’s incorporation of his sonic literary influences into these two short chapters which begin and end his novel; I then discuss significant scholarly approaches to the sonic in these short but extensively discussed episodes of Ellison’s novel. I argue that the prologue and epilogue demonstrate Ellison’s philosophy that the Black individual should strive to be an artist and intellectual who integrates their sonic past into art and intellectual philosophy; I find that Ellison does so in order to humanize and contextualize the earwitness experience of both the Black individual and his novel’s narrator, as well as counter the stereotype of the “tragic Negro” and similar clichés in the culture and literature of the time. I also discuss scholarly and media accounts of the soundscapes of Manhattan, Harlem, and Ellison’s prologue and epilogue. I end this chapter by examining how Ellison incorporates his own sonic experience of living in Harlem as a struggling writer into his writing. Essentially, this chapter is frontloaded with crucial information on the historical context and scholarly assessments of Harlem soundscapes; I then

as well as *The Man Who Lived Underground* – end in nearly identical scenes involving the brutal murder of the Black protagonist.

evaluate the historical and earwitness significance of the prologue and epilogue's underground soundscape.

Terrible Canyons of Static: A History of New York City's Noise Abatement Programs, 1920-1945

New York City was often considered to be oppressively noisy throughout the beginning of the 20th Century. While city noise has always been an urban problem, Emily Thompson, in *The Soundscapes of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (2013), finds that cities at the beginning of the 20th century experienced an unprecedented degree of noise due to the new, modern sounds of elevated trains, automobile traffic, radios, and more concentrated urban centers. Thompson elaborates: “More troubling than the level of noise was its nature, as traditional auditory irritants were increasingly drowned out by the din of modern technology: the roar of elevated trains, the rumble of internal combustion engines, the crackle and hiss of radio transmissions. As the physical nature of noise changed, so, too, did attempts to eliminate it” (6). To control the noise of New York City, Midtown and Downtown buildings were fitted with new acoustic materials and technologies to absorb sound (6). Other efforts to control New York City's noise include the dismantling of the 6th Avenue elevated train in 1939 (Valk; La France 11); in 1941, a committee also argued that the 3rd Avenue elevated line should be closed or limited since “the din of the ‘El’ trains ‘constitutes a menace to health [sic], comfort and peaceable home life’” (*The New York Times*. 7 Dec. 1941).

The New York Times, which I cite often in this chapter, regularly ran stories on the burdensome and even criminal aspects of the city's noise, as if noise was not just a nuisance, it was destructive (Fig. 1). At times, the newspaper also exaggerates the relevance of noise to a given city issue by citing the impact of noise on a newsworthy event in the article headline when the article itself barely touches on the subject of noise (Fig. 2). Jennifer Lynn Stoever, in "'Just Be Quiet Pu-leeze: 'The *New York Amsterdam News* Fights the Postwar 'Campaign against Noise,'" finds that *The New York Times* asked citizens to limit noise in order to be more productive in the war effort during the 1940s (150)²¹. Stoever also states that the newspaper tended to associate race with noise in the 1940s, and that the newspaper assumed that most noise was the cause of Black sounds invading the presumed tranquility of White urban space (150). The newspaper cited police accounts of the apparent noise coming from the centralized residences and businesses north of 110th street in Harlem, while the congestion of the district in general seemed to lead to "extra noise" that was unique to Harlem (155). On the other hand, the Harlem-based *New York Amsterdam News*, Stoever finds, countered the racial discourse of noise by either not identifying the race of belligerent noisemakers or recounting how Black residents are personally affected by city noise (151). The *New York Amsterdam News* also found that police reports of the noise in Harlem did not recognize segregation as a contributing factor to the increased levels of sound in Harlem (155).

²¹ Stoever also elaborates on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" and the "veil" by characterizing the veil as an ideology that enables "visual processes through which black people are made simultaneously invisible and hypervisible by white supremacy's racial fantasies, but are never truly seen and known" (100). Stoever argues the veil is not merely an ideology of racial visibility, but also aural visibility. Stoever uses the term "the sonic color line" to illustrate how the voice and aural expression of Blacks is maligned and misinterpreted: "the veil invites . . . the emanation of sound from a source that is unseen and/or unknown (101). For Stoever, Du Bois links the aural to the veil in drawing on his 1940 text *Dusk of Dawn* with his allusion to the "wail," which Stoever argues "denaturalizes the senses in regards to the perception of race" (102).



Fig. 1. "Mother of 'Noisy' Children Freed." *The New York Times*. Feb 6, 1923. Web. 20 Jun 2017.

Later in the 1920s, New York City's department of health appointed the city's new Noise Abatement Commission to study the city's noise, and, in 1930, published a lengthy report on the origins of the city's noise and the negative health effects of modern urban din. The commission contends that New York City's noise problem grew out of control in the early 20th century due to the rapid and dense construction of Midtown and Downtown skyscrapers, as, the commission finds, street noise essentially tended to reverberate and echo off tall and densely planted high-rises. Before "the era of high buildings and imprisoned street noise," as the committee characterizes the early 1900s to the 1930s, traffic and

population noise could easily “escape into the air” since buildings were relatively low; for comparison, Midtown’s Trinity Church, standing 86 meters high, was the city’s tallest structure until 1890 (263; 267). Importantly, the report also continues to stress that the control of city noise is imperative to maintaining a productive workforce, as noise leads the city to be “deprived of a capacity for sustained work, clear thinking, and energetic actions, which is the mainstay of civilized life” (107). The committee also contends that the sleeplessness and exhaustion caused by city noise can cause neurasthenia and, they argue melodramatically, even insanity (293-4).

Despite New York City’s government, media, and citizens’ profound concern, and, at times, even obsession, with controlling noise, reports on Manhattan’s noise during the early 20th century generally focus on Midtown or Lower Manhattan, with less attention paid to Uptown and Central or East Harlem. The Noise Abatement Commission’s 301-page report of 1930, for one, does not mention Harlem once. Government and newspaper accounts of Manhattan’s noise from the 1920s to 1940s tend to assume that all of Manhattan Island is affected by the same high-rise, high-traffic noise. However, Harlem of the interwar period, except for Lenox Avenue, was largely devoid of traffic, as most residents did not have the income to own an automobile. 1930s photographs of the nightlife outside The Cotton Club and other Upper Lenox clubs usually show a roaring street packed with cabs and commuters from outside Harlem, but the comparatively narrower, more residential East-West numbered streets on the Harlem grid tended to have little or no traffic. These streets even commonly functioned as popular play areas for children due to the general emptiness of residential streets, in addition to the neighbourhood’s lack of playgrounds and parks, despite being

unusually filthy or filled with garbage (Fig. 3; Radovac 755)²². Thompson's *The Soundscapes of Modernity* also sometimes speaks of Manhattan in a general sense when exploring its soundscapes, and I think the focus of the text should be more clearly stated as Midtown and Downtown Manhattan's acoustic architectural innovations²³. Claire Corbould, in "Streets, Sounds and Identity in Interwar Harlem," likewise takes issue with Thompson's text because Thompson focuses on concert halls and the acoustic innovations in architecture of Midtown and Downtown, while 1920s and 30s Harlem had drastically different buildings and urban landscapes (861). Unlike the rest of Manhattan below 110th Street, Central Harlem is typified by unusually wide streets and enormous sidewalks. While real estate in Midtown and Lower Manhattan continued to be gentrified, restructured, and compressed throughout the late 19th Century and into the 20th, thoroughfares into Harlem were only beginning to be developed²⁴. The wide design of the tree-lined avenues that connected Lower Manhattan with the original Uptown cottages and mansion retreats of early 19th century Harlem would remain largely intact throughout the 20th century as the area urbanized (Gill 105).

²² The tallest building in Harlem until recently was the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Office Building; at 19 stories, its relatively meager height is shorter than Midtown's Flatiron Building, which, at 23 stories, was the world's tallest building when it was completed in 1902, at the beginning of the city's skyscraper boom (Heise 1).

²³ *The Soundscapes of Modernity* provided pivotal insight and historical background on Manhattan's soundscapes when I began researching this project, though its discussion of Harlem seems somewhat like an afterthought. The scope of Thompson's text left me wanting more since it is difficult to find studies of Harlem soundscapes as comprehensive as Thompson's text on New York City soundscapes elsewhere.

²⁴ For comparison, the Five Points slum, one of the most notorious slums of the 19th century world, and the focus of Jacob Riis's 1890 documentary text *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, is unrecognizable today. The Five Points, which is sometimes called America's first slum, has been completely transformed over 130 years, as streets have been rerouted and city blocks completely redesigned (*The New York Times*. 30 Sep. 2001). The Five Points now comprises parts of New York City's Chinatown and legislative buildings. Drawing on my own experience walking around Downtown New York City, I think tourists or travelling researchers looking for the Five Points' historical center might initially find it somewhat difficult to locate. The evolution of this urban soundscape and landscape underlines the importance of speaking of sonic environments, and urban environments in general, with specific attention to historical and sonic context.

WEST SIDE HIGHWAY PROJECT CRITICIZED

**Regional Plan Director Fears It
Would Add Ugliness Along
the Waterfront.**

ALSO FORESEES MORE NOISE

**Wants Harlem Valley Improved to
Provide for Growth in That
Direction.**

Fig. 2. "West Side Highway Project Criticized." *The New York Times*. Apr. 8, 1927. Web. 20 Jun 2017.

Between the two World Wars, the previously White-owned mansion estates and spacious tenements of Harlem would be partitioned into smaller apartments with thin, noisy, makeshift walls erected between dwellings in what used to be single apartments (Gill 117). Harlem's tenements stand low enough to not "imprison" noise, as the 1930 Noise Abatement Committee desires, and Harlem's spacious streets should, at first glance, allow noise to likewise "escape into the air." The sounds of private spaces in Harlem were unique to Manhattan since the noise of private residences also tended to be broadcast into the public sphere. Such sounds included the noise of overcrowded tenements, which could be easily heard through open windows, as tenement windows were regularly left open to vent the

musky air caused by the overcrowding common in partitioned Harlem tenements²⁵. Other crowded soundscapes unique to Harlem were often shaped by poverty: loud makeshift bars, referred to as “buffet flats,” popped up for short periods of time in private residences during prohibition, while “rent parties,” which donated door charges to a resident who could not meet that month’s rent, were typified by loud drinking and jazz performances (861). Importantly, early 20th century Harlem noise was usually attributed to Black culture – jazz, parades, street singers, choirs – or the noisy poverty of the carless streets where children played and families congregated. Corbould states that the street soundscapes of Harlem were a cultural experience exclusive to Harlem because the Black subject could not make noise in the streets of the Jim Crow South. In essence, the simple ability to be noisy in the streets of 1930s Harlem was an act of defiance and freedom that created a distinctly Black public space and soundscape; this community-oriented soundscape was specific to the latter stages of the Harlem Renaissance, which occurred between the Harlem riot of 1935 and the beginnings of the second mass migration of labourers to the city during the Second World War (862). New York City’s anti-noise campaigns also became less successful over the course of the Depression since widespread unemployment and poverty led individuals to seek labour anywhere they could.

²⁵ *The New York Post* reports in the 1935 article “Powell Says Rent Too High” that tenements often had one toilet for four apartments partitioned out of a single tenement, which housed upwards of twenty-five people; toilets were often old-fashioned or broken, and commonly emptied into the apartment below in summer and froze in winter (*The New York Post* qtd. in Schoener 138). *The New York Age* reports that Harlem apartments were so overcrowded and contained so few beds that it was common for two residents to sleep in the same bed at different times – should they have alternating day/night work shifts, for example – which was a practice known colloquially as “hot bedding” or “hot sheeting” (Gill 232). Claude McKay’s 1940 history of Harlem, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, also elaborates on the crowded living conditions of Harlem: “In the lowest bracket of wage earners, they were living in houses beyond their means. They were compelled to do considerable doubling up to pay that rent and otherwise exist. Two and three families rented an apartment together. And all families rented rooms. Every space was utilized – sometimes bathrooms were improvised as bedrooms – to meet the rent” (18).

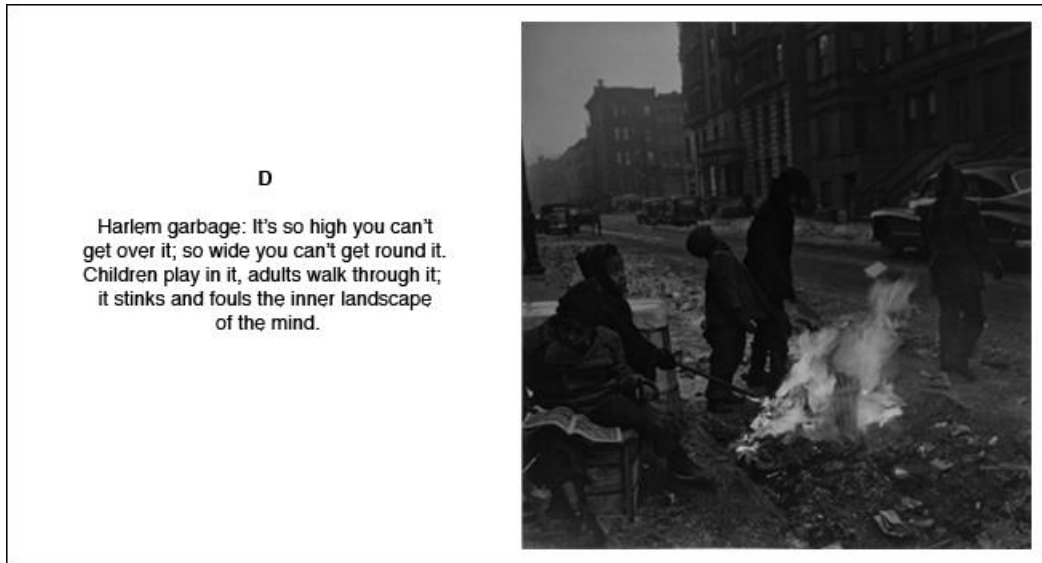


Fig. 3. “Plate D.” Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man: Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison in Harlem*, edited by Raz-Russo, Michael. 2016.

While New York City government and media considered noise abatement to be a primary means of improving individual welfare, the city’s noise abatement policies ultimately overlooked the urban and social contexts that lead to the production of excessive noise. Supposedly objectionable Harlem noise was the product, not the cause, of Black culture and the existential distress and ennui of impoverished Harlem residents. Importantly, the underground spaces of Harlem are neglected by the city’s noise abatement commissions and wars on noise; the cause and function of underground noise in Harlem would go unexamined in the media and government incentives. Lillian Radovac, in “The ‘War on Noise:’ Sound and Space in La Guardia’s New York,” states that Mayor Fiorello La Guardia’s anti-noise campaign of the Depression considered noise to be a debilitating cause of urban disorder (736)²⁶. La Guardia’s aim, Radovac argues, was to change how the subject of the city

²⁶ For reference, La Guardia was mayor of New York City from January 1st, 1934, to December 31st, 1945.

sounded but also how sound was experienced in urban space; in the context of the Depression, La Guardia's war on noise was an act that aimed to control the sound of labourers, industry, and leisure time, which, in theory, would stabilize the economic crisis of the Depression (Fig. 4; 736). La Guardia's war on noise of the mid- to late- 1930s was thus different from earlier campaigns, such as the Noise Abatement Commission from earlier in the decade, as earlier campaigns believed noise to be primarily the result of technology, industry, and "capital-intensive measures," which included architectural and industrial design (739). In La Guardia's New York, it was the noise of the street – in the public sphere – that was to be subdued, rather than the acoustical modification and sonic cleansing of private spaces which typified the city prior to the Depression. To put it another way, noise was no longer seen as something to be merely prevented: noise became a crime that could invoke punishment (739).

La Guardia's war on noise directly preceded the Harlem riot of 1935, a loud and chaotic event that reflected the frustration of segregated and impoverished residents of Harlem. As Radovac writes, in *The Muted City: New York, Noise Control and the Reconfiguration of Urban Space* (2014), Harlem residents were "disproportionately well represented in the number of summonses" for noise infractions in 1935 because of the noise of the riot as well as the assumed noise of the district in general (47-8). Radovac continues:

For La Guardia, who had been the Congressional Representative for East Harlem prior to its transformation, the neighborhood's aural culture was part of what made it strange to him, and therefore impossible to fully understand. By all accounts, he despised jazz, not only because it offended his aesthetic sensibilities, which had been shaped by years of classical music instruction,

but also because it seemed a gateway to the “dives,” “easy sex,” and “social problems” that he was determined to stamp out. Worse, he heard syncopation itself as a form of “improvised disorder,” which mirrored the chaos that threatened to erupt in the streets at a moment’s notice. (48)

La Guardia’s prerogative of containing and abating city noise is an ideology of behavioural control and regulation that seeks to maintain social order and labour production by limiting sonorous public expressions of either joy or despair. More than this, Harlem soundscapes were significantly affected by La Guardia’s policy of noise abatement and personal bias since the wide, open streets of Harlem led to an organic broadcasting of public sounds in the form of jazz performers jamming (either with amplifiers or without), street preachers shouting, children screaming, and echoing masses of residents walking and talking to either work, school, shops, or in the general search of employment or recreation.

The soundscape of Harlem was thus deemed to be a nexus of disorderly noise since La Guardia’s policy of strictly prohibiting street sounds affected everyday street and underground sonic life in Harlem. As *The New York Times* reports on La Guardia’s program, “Police Commissioner Valentine is keeping a rigid watch on all cabarets which have license to operate in residential zones. . . . Impromptu quartets on street corners and carousing groups in the early hours of the morning will find hostile audiences in patrolmen on beat. . . . The use of amplifiers for advertising purposes in stores will be permitted only at reasonable hours and in the event of a great popular event of a great emergency or an extremely popular public event” (Fig. 4; *The New York Times*. 1 Oct. 1935). For 1920s and 30s New York City politicians and the media that supported and disseminated the city’s noise abatement policies, Harlem soundscapes constituted a sonic aberration that fueled social disorder. In La

Guardia's effort to mute the soundscapes of Harlem he found strange and disorderly, his noise abatement program led to moral and racial ramifications for the sonorous experience of living in Harlem. Harlem sounds were a natural extension of geography, culture, and strife, but were policed and punished as the assumed cause of civil disorder.



CITY POSTER FOR THE CAMPAIGN ON NOISE.
Placard which the Mayor's committee has distributed throughout the city.

Fig. 4. "Quiet Please: Mayor LaGuardia's Noise Abatement Committee." *The New York Times*. Oct 1, 1935. Web. 1 Mar 2023.

Seasons in the Abyss: The Sonic Underground of the Prologue and Epilogue

The prologue and epilogue of *Invisible Man* take place in the narrator's present, where he deliberates on the events that led him to take up residence in a cellar for almost two decades. The narrator decides to continue to reside in this cellar after he is chased into the Harlem sewers during the Harlem riot that ends the novel because he has come to the conclusion that he is an "invisible man." The narrator withdraws from aboveground society because people do not see him as human being: they only see his "surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imaginations" (3). In his underground, the narrator reflects on the events that led him to withdraw from aboveground society. He also expresses his interest in listening to his phonograph, and aims to acquire five phonographs to play the same song on each machine in unison. Additionally, he rigs his cellar with exactly 1,369 lightbulbs in order to "feel [his] vital aliveness" because the idea of stealing electricity from the company Monopolated Light & Power and the building's White owners both brings him joy and spurs him to think philosophically and introspectively about his life and identity: "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" (7). Moreover, the prologue and epilogue of *Invisible Man* are noticeably more dense and harder to follow than other chapters in *Invisible Man*. In a 1954 interview with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard, Ellison describes the purpose of making the prologue and epilogue somewhat difficult to read as follows: "The Prologue was written afterwards, really—in terms of a shift in the hero's point of view. I wanted to throw the reader off balance—make him accept certain non-naturalistic effects. It was really a memoir written underground, and I wanted a

foreshadowing through which I hoped the reader would view the actions which took place in the main body of the book” (15). Since the prologue and epilogue were composed after Ellison completed a draft of the whole novel, the narrator of the prologue’s underground is noticeably more mature and intellectual than he is in the earlier chapters of the novel. The prologue and epilogue were originally intended to be one long prologue, which Ellison eventually revised considerably and separated into the two short chapters that bookend the novel²⁷. The prologue and epilogue are discussed in scholarship more than any other episode in *Invisible Man*. This is due, in part, because these two short chapters combine many significant aspects of Ellison’s influences, which include his interest in jazz and the sonic, his literary influences, and his adherence to modernist narrative techniques.

The motif of the underground found in Ellison’s prologue and epilogue is common in texts on Harlem from the Harlem Renaissance through the Great Depression and Second World War, and is rooted in the commonality of Harlem residents living in loud underground or congested spaces. The 1952 article “The Cellar Menace,” from The Citizens’ Housing and Planning Council, reports that 325 out of 840 Harlem buildings surveyed contained cellars that were illegally being used as makeshift apartments (3). Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton echo this point in *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (1998), and argue that White resistance to the expansion of Black ghettos resulted in new living spaces being created in Harlem from cellars, closets, and basements; in effect, Black living spaces were partitioned within slums, which increased the isolation of Black residents

²⁷ The draft of the prologue and epilogue were initially even more difficult. As Jackson writes, Ellison’s revisions and cuts to the prologue “made the narrator more of a literary character and less of a mouthpiece for philosophical discussions. For example, Ellison cut from the prologue a reversal of Kierkegaard’s book entitled *The Sickness Unto Death*. ‘All sickness is not unto death, neither is invisibility.’ Ellison wanted to make explicit his rejection of the notion (which was also rejected by Sartre and Camus) of despair as [a] steady detractor from a satisfying life” (430).

(43). Langston Hughes also illustrates these living conditions in his 1944 article “Down Under in Harlem”: “There are apartments with a dozen names over each bell. The house is full of roomers. Papa and mama sleep in the living room, the kids in the dining room, lodgers in every alcove and everything but the kitchen is rented out for sleeping. Cooking and meals are rotated in the kitchen” (*The New Republic*). In 1940s Harlem, then, the “deleterious effects” of oppression in Harlem were not always visible because the conditions of oppression in Harlem’s living spaces were buried in unseen niches under or within Harlem’s crowded infrastructure.

The “cellar menace” of the 1950s has its roots in the 1930s, where Blacks lived in cramped and overpriced cellars and basements along Lenox Avenue and Fifth Avenue from 135th Street to 138th Street. When Adam Clayton Powell Jr. toured Harlem in 1935, he characterized its poorest sections as a warren of sickness and decay where “the dwellers within these gates have evolved a new social scheme or rather a new social ‘odor’ that should smell pretty bad to the executives of the great estates that own the properties” (“Powell Says Rents Too High” 139). Thomas Heise, in *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (2010), also notes that the popular conception of the Black underworld changed as the Depression progressed; the idealized image of Harlem in 1920s American consciousness as a nightlife hotspot, with underground cabarets, speakeasies, and blues clubs, was being replaced by the harsher reality of basement apartments (128). While Harlem was never quite “a land of plenty,” as King Solomon Gillis mistakenly believes, Harlem in the 1940s was no longer imagined as a new city of opportunity and refuge, in either media or literature, but rather as a deteriorating neighbourhood in crisis. Ellison, in his essay “Harlem is Nowhere” (1948; 1964), describes

Harlem in the late 1940s as no longer a land of certain promises, but a “ruin” and a psychological torment to its residents; the passage that begins the 1964 *Harper’s* version of the essay reads: “To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city; it is to pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay” (53). Harlem in the cultural and social imagination of the 1930s and 1940s had become a locus of Black existential uncertainty; as Ellison iterates in “Harlem is Nowhere,” a common reply in Harlem to the greeting “How are you?” is “Oh, man, I’m *nowhere*” (emphasis in original), which signals that Harlemites had internalized poverty and segregation to the point where they gestured towards their illegibility through speech and sound (297).

In Harlem literature of the period, underground Harlem spaces are characteristically noisy, and Ellison’s prologue and epilogue are no exception. In Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* (1932), for comparison, the protagonist, Raymond, describes his eventual flight from the Niggerati Manor – a satire of Harlem Renaissance artistic retreats – as follows: “The rumble of the approaching train, the dimly lit subterranean interior, the clicking of the turnstiles and the bedlam of the crowd’s cross currents were too akin to that from which he had just fled. He wanted to be in the open, to be away from constricting walls, jabbering people, and ear deafening noises. But the street afforded a poor sanctuary” (206). But Ellison’s prologue and epilogue are unique in that the narrator’s cellar is both loud and sonically insulated from the outside world. His hole is loud within but neither produces sound properly nor adequately allows sound to escape, while the noise of the aboveground likewise does not intrude on the narrator’s personal sonic underground. The narrator describes the production of sound in his hole as follows:

Now I have one radio-phonograph; I plan to have five. 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. 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. Sometimes now I listen to Louis while I have my favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. I pour the red liquid over the white mound, watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound. 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. Once when I asked for a cigarette, some jokers gave me a reefer, which I lighted when I got home and sat listening to my phonograph. It was a strange evening. 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. That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music. (7-8)

The narrator describes his cellar as having an "acoustical deadness," which implies that the acoustics in his hole do not reverberate properly and are dampened and flat-sounding. Yet the narrator wants to amplify the poorly broadcast sounds of his phonograph by playing the same phonograph of Armstrong's track on five gramophones all at once. Herman Beavers has written on this episode at least twice: in "Documenting Turbulence: The Dialectics of Chaos

in *Invisible Man*,” he originally argued that five phonographs playing in unison would “mimic the effects of a chorus” but “because we are talking about machines that have the potential to malfunction, the slightest drop in speed on the turntable would [result in] a cacophony . . . it would become, in other words, white noise” (209). He later revises this point in “The Noisy Lostness: Oppositionality and Acoustic Subjectivity in *Invisible Man*” and contends that, while he was initially proud of his original argument, he “interpreted the narrator far too literally, while the other portion was that I had not considered the effect of playing the records on people living in the building’s inhabitants. Even if the record players are playing at different speeds, the effect, before the sound degrades into indecipherable noise, is that there would be an echo effect” (83). The act of playing five phonographs concurrently, in other words, seems to make the music unintelligible and pure noise.

In both of Beaver’s readings, he argues that playing five phonographs at once would create a cacophony. It should be noted, however, that the narrator states in the prologue that he only hypothetically plans to acquire additional phonographs, while, in the epilogue, he comes to the decision that he will eventually leave his cellar, perhaps without obtaining any additional phonographs at all. When, exactly, the narrator plans to exit his hole is unknown, but, regardless, his new direction in living accommodations should, at least, put his plans to acquire additional phonographs in flux; his need for additional record players also seems to be tied to his hole’s specific acoustic deadness. Regardless, Beavers is concerned that playing five records simultaneously would be a “proverbial thorn in the sides of the building’s inhabitants” (should the narrator actually acquire them). However, based on the narrator’s other actions in the prologue and epilogue, I doubt this would be a concern of the narrator. In the novel’s previous paragraph that anticipates the narrator’s rant on Louis Armstrong, sloe

gin, and his desire to purchase additional phonographs, the narrator proudly boasts that he is not only stealing electricity from Monopolated Light & Power and the building's White owners, he is also purposefully using older, more expensive bulbs as an act of rebellious "sabotage." For the narrator, loudly playing five phonographs at once would likely be an exciting sonic act of sabotage in itself.



Fig. 5. “After *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue.” Jeff Wall. *Museum of Modern Art*. 2000. Web. 25 Nov 2017.

Ellison’s choice to include an excessive number of lightbulbs was done purposefully to “produce a kinetic effect from the page of a book,” as he writes in a 1963 letter to Pierre Brodin (628). Ellison focuses on crafting a “kinetic” text in order to “reinforce the thematic content of the character’s situation and make it resonate with overtones of withdrawal,

alienation and that self-possession into which one comes when one has plunged into chaos and refused to be destroyed” (628)²⁸. Further, it is easy to think of five copies of the same record playing simultaneously to have a similar chaotic, alienating, and “kinetic” effect as the lightbulbs, even if the reader is not familiar with the nuances of phonograph technology, though Ellison himself surely would have been. Since the narrator plays his music loud enough to “feel its vibration, not only with [his] ear but with [his] whole body,” the act of playing one record in his cellar, let alone five at once, will surely cause the 1,369 hanging lightbulbs to shake violently and give the semblance of thousands of rattling echoes and variations on what would be, in isolation, a harmless sound. For comparison, Jeff Wall’s photograph, “After *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue,” elaborately stages the narrator’s cellar with a tight configuration of overhead lightbulbs; a quick count indicates there might be only slightly half of the intended 1,369 lightbulbs in Wall’s shot (Fig. 5). This means that the lightbulbs on the narrator’s ceiling in the actual text would need to be packed twice as tight, and would thus reverberate even more from phonographic resonance than the bulbs hanging in Wall’s photograph. Because of this, a phonograph played loud enough to make Armstrong’s song a full-body experience would create an overhead cacophony of ringing glass. Katherine Cora Harrison argues the narrator seeks a sense of “wholeness” in listening to the phonograph because it “provide[s] proof of [the narrator’s] corporeal existence” (31). In this sense, the narrator purposely figures himself as an earwitness of a unique underground soundscape, where the vibrating sounds of his cellar would be unlike any

²⁸ As discussed in the introduction to this project, this scene is reminiscent of a similar episode in Ellison’s essay “Living with Music,” where Ellison describes getting into a war of music and sound with his upstairs soprano neighbour at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue. If one were to read the prologue as an autobiographical reflection of Ellison’s sonic war with his upstairs neighbour, it would be difficult to see either Ellison or the narrator caring much about the narrator being a “proverbial thorn in the sides of the building’s inhabitants.”

other sonic space he has encountered in his life. It is worth comparing the narrator's earwitness philosophy to Anna Snaith's evaluation of Alain Corbin's analysis of the clamorous and echoing effect of 19th century church bells. In the introduction to *Sound and Literature* (2020), Saith writes: "[Corbin] tunes in to the keynote of a lost 'auditory landscape' that bears 'witness to a different relation to the world and to the sacred as well as to a different way of being inscribed in time and space, and of experiencing time and space'" (16-17). Snaith's assessment of Corbin's study is comparable to the narrator's earwitness philosophy since the narrator's chorus of vibrating lightbulbs, like the syncopated hourly ringing of church bells, creates a parodic but unique "lost auditory landscape" out of one of Harlem's many cellar dwellings, which most city residents would neither hear nor see.

One can likewise see the narrator's use of vibrating lightbulbs as an earwitness "technique for self-definition," to draw on Christopher Hanlon, as well as a "contradictory [and] revisionary" reconfiguration of unseen sonic space (87-88). The sound of vibrating glass and phonographic resonance would be loud within the narrator's underground space but possibly unheard by outsiders and neighbours. In other words, the noise of the phonograph and vibrating bulbs would likely be considered a public nuisance if the sound was produced in a street-level tenement, but the underground production of these sounds is heard by the narrator alone, and, in effect, mocks New York City's noise abatement policies and racial regulations of the sonic. As the lived experience of Harlem cellar residents is largely not recorded in any substantial and humanizing way – the "cellar menace" of the 1930s was usually discussed in terms of abstract statistics, and there are very few photographs and firsthand accounts of the experience – the narrator's lost auditory landscape of echoing and vibrating lightbulbs authenticates and contextualizes his noisy but deeply personal sonic and

psychological experience. Thus, the vibrating effect of either one or five phonographs in this underground soundscape can be seen as another act of sabotage performed by the narrator; his underground identity as an earwitness is a sonic will-to-power that helps him work through various approaches to self-reliance and craft a sonic aesthetic during his underground “hibernation.”

Should the narrator play Armstrong’s track on five phonographs at once, the sound inside the narrator’s cellar would be harrowing. While I discuss the actual music and lyrics of the track in Chapter Two, along with the significance of Armstrong himself to Ellison, the act of playing five versions of the same song at once would, I think, indeed give the impression of a chorus, as Beavers initially argued, but it would be a chorus where the players are slightly out-of-sync with each other²⁹. The staggered and echoing effect of playing numerous phonographs at once might give the impression of a song skipping, but more exactly, would completely transform the song’s sonic meaning and the narrator’s hole into a surreal, nightmare-induced sonic space, which would also mirror the narrator’s chaotic and disjointed invisibility; as the narrator states: “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” (8). When the narrator first arrives in Harlem, “he struggled through the lines of people” and felt like a “small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds” (159).

²⁹ A similar effect can be easily achieved by playing Armstrong’s song on YouTube in five separate windows, which, when one goes to play the track in each window in sequence, each would be slightly out-of-sync. I don’t know if Beavers tried a similar experiment, but I found the results fascinating: for me, the layered combinations of the same track are still quite legible, rather than “indecipherable,” as Beavers claims. My experiment seems to create a tower of cascading sound, where the intended notes and emotions of the original track are still present and somewhat legible, while the individual versions of each track are also buried and defamiliarized under layers of their own replication. In other words, the listener has a brief window to contemplate the intended note before it is repeated, compounded, and made strange through an out-of-sync juxtaposition of itself, which, I think, would make the listener think and listen more closely to the impact and meaning of each bar, and would also encourage multiple listens of such a chorus or just the track on its own in order to parse the minutiae of the intended musical notes and sonic narrative.

The narrator's purposeful corruption of acoustic aesthetics and music in his cellar counters New York City's 1920s and 1930s attempts to aesthetically improve city architecture (which, of course, ignored Harlem buildings); his approach also undermines 1930s concerns about the perceived dangers and deintellectualizing effects of noise, which popular 1930s soprano Alma Gluck addressed as such: "The noise of New York City dulls the musical ears of our citizens thus permanently harming their ability to appreciate good music" (*New York Age*. 27 Feb. 1932). In his contempt for the "real" world outside, the narrator draws on the "sound and anguish" of the aboveground to create a seemingly strange but, for him, relatable sonic space comprised of socially defamiliarized but philosophically personal noise (*Invisible Man* 4).

The chthonic noise of the narrator's hole also mocks aboveground discourse of apparently "good" and "bad" sounds. In New York City of the 1920s and 1930s, Blacks were commonly thought to be inherently noisy. Corbould writes that the noise of Harlem particularly interested the White press because of its seemingly noisy racial nature, with one reporter noting that a 1927 march through Harlem gave the impression of the "jungle . . . creeping up among the skyscrapers" (859) (the narrator of *Invisible Man* likewise describes Harlem as a "jungle" in the prologue [5]). Corbould continues: "African-American vernacular culture led Blacks to define themselves as primarily aural beings instead of visual beings; the White upper class wanted to control sound through architectural innovation, and aligned noise with the apparently primitive Negro" (861). Moreover, according to Lisa Hollenbach, in "Sono-Montage: Langston Hughes and Tony Schwartz Listen to Postwar New York," the racial and economic geography of New York City in the 1940s was quickly changing, which caused a significant shift in the city's soundscape. Urban renewal projects, the migrations of Whites and Blacks in and out of the city, and technological innovations in

media and sound production, including magnetic tape, long playing (LP) records, and FM radio, created public concern over noise pollution, which implied, for some at the time, that the general public was beginning to lose “the capacity to listen” (276). Hollenbach uses the term “deferred listening” to characterize the act of remapping segregated space by focusing on critical listening of the soundscape, which the listener would be forced to do with the sound of the narrator’s rattling, vibrating cellar (277). The narrator is living in “a ‘hi-fi’ era where new technologies and aesthetics of recorded sound increasingly worked to isolate the individual listener,” while the narrator’s chthonic sonic approach “seek[s] new, creative forms through which to splice aural experience, [where] such approaches might likewise point to new perceptual strategies for remapping radical collectivity in the diverse and unequal, local and nonlocal, real and virtual neighborhoods” (296). The noise of the narrator’s cellar thus works to both sabotage White discourse of sound and mock the stereotype of a primitive and/or noisy African-American.

Returning to the cellar’s lightbulbs, Ellison chose the number of lights in the narrator’s hole to be exactly 1,369 because of their personal connection to symbolic imagery of the underground. Ellison recalls the superstitious use of this specific number in an underground gambling system from his youth in Oklahoma: “Players of the illegal lottery known as POLICY always played the numbers 3-6-9 after dreaming of fecal matter. . . . For my part, I suppose that the underground in which my imagination was operating in that section of the novel dredged up that bit of the sewer quite intentionally” (Letter to Theresa Ammirati, 23 Oct. 1963)³⁰. In another letter on the same topic decades later, Ellison

³⁰ I have come across a couple sources in my research that posit that Ellison uses the number “1,369” because it is military slang for “unlucky cocksucker” (where “13” refers to luck and “69” refers to fellatio) (Poyner). This idea, at first glance, might seem plausible since Ellison served in the merchant marine towards the end of the Second World War, while this hypothetical etymology of the term itself has a Joycean vulgarity I think Ellison

elaborates further: “I suppose that it was the sheer logic – or illogic – of symbolic thinking that led me to the strategy of having a narrator who was trying desperately to transform his nightmares into prose try to illustrate his efforts with 1369 lightbulbs” (Letter to F. Burgess, 28 Feb. 1983). Similarly, the narrator could potentially produce an illogical nightmare of sound by playing Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue” on five phonographs at once, which could also be seen as another attempt to transform the “sound and anguish” of his life into a personally meaningful and philosophical sonic style (*Invisible Man* 4). In terms of Ellison’s earwitness approach – where his textual representations of the sonic are a shadow and distortion of his actual experiences – the POLICY reference in *Invisible Man* implies that the narrator’s underground soundscape is a space where he works through the symbols and sounds of his experiences in order to craft a unique, deeply personal, and sonically subjective philosophy of intellectual and artistic self-reliance³¹. Both the noise and light produced in the narrator’s cellar are purposeful and chaotic reworkings of sensory stimuli that reflect the cloacal symbolism inherent in media and government descriptions of the cellar menace of 1930s and 1940s Harlem. Finally, the numbers 3-6-9 likewise “became a most convenient part of our vernacular speech,” Ellison states, and could be similarly used as a greeting or form of signifying. Ellison imagines a verbal exchange could happen as follows: ““Hey, watch it, Man! You’re about to step in that 3-6-9!’ Or, ‘Listen here, buddy,

would approve of. However, Ellison only associates 1,369 with the POLICY reference in his letters, and it is difficult to say when exactly the military slang term “1,369” was coined, so I am not convinced by Poyner’s suggestion.

³¹ The etymology of the term “POLICY” is not certain. LaShawn Harris, in “Playing the Numbers: Madame Stephanie St. Clair and African American Policy Culture in Harlem” defines the POLICY racket as follows: “The term ‘policy’ refers to number games in which numbers are used to select winners. The player picked a set of three-digit numbers between 000 and 999 and hoped their numbers matched the winning numbers. Winning numbers were randomly selected, sometimes by policy operators and sometimes from published numbers from the New York Stock Exchange or bank clearing totals (Light, 1977, 894)” (56). It has also been postulated that the term POLICY is related to the concept of insurance policies since the gambler is compensated for the loss of another gambler.

don't be trying to snow me with any of your old, cold 3-6-9!' Or, 'How'd you like to get the living 3-6-9 kicked out of you?'" (Letter to F. Burgess, 28 Feb. 1983). On the aural dimension of POLICY, one can also recall Ellison's anecdote from "Harlem is Nowhere," where he states that a common reply in Harlem to the greeting "How are you?" is "Oh, man, I'm *nowhere*" (297; emphasis in original)³². The sound and light of the narrator's cellar are both cloacal and sonic symbols, which the narrator employs to mock the presumed primitiveness of noise produced by the Harlem cellar menace.

Unfinished Sympathy: Applying Ellison's Approach to the Composition of *Invisible Man*

To end this chapter, I examine Ellison's sonic memories and environments that arguably influence his conception of the narrator's underground of sound. It could be argued that Ellison's inspiration for the narrator's underground is drawn from a combination of numerous elements in Ellison's early life. One point of reference is Lawrence Jackson's biography of Ellison; Jackson, in outlining the death of Ellison's father Lewis in 1916, seems to indicate important sonic memories that directly inform Ellison's composition of *Invisible Man* (19-21). Ellison, who, as a child, believed himself to be a "prince or heir to his father," heard but

³² Later in the novel, when the narrator first joins the Brotherhood, he pays rent dues to his landlord, Mary, with funds he earned working for the Brotherhood. He does not tell Mary of his new employer, however, which leads to her somewhat odd inference that he must have earned the money playing "the numbers" – a sly reference to Ellison's memory of POLICY – which is a concept that is not clearly explained in the novel. The narrator states: "Thus for one lone stretch of time I lived with the intensity displayed by those chronic numbers players who see clues to their fortune in the most minute and insignificant phenomena: in clouds, on passing trucks and subway cars, in dreams, comic strips, the shape of dog-luck fouled on the pavements" (380-381). If one is familiar with Ellison's letters, the "numbers" are a clear reference to POLICY; however, the reader will only glean the POLICY reference in Mary's conversation after stumbling upon Ellison's letters, which were published long after the novel's publication.

did not see his father slip and fall halfway down into a dirt cellar, where his father punctured his already ulcerated stomach (19-21). Following his father's death from experimental surgery soon after, Ellison began to be haunted by "visions" of his father on the operation table; being a child, Ellison thought these imaginations or dreams to be real, preternatural visions, and he subsequently became frustrated at the "limitations of his language" to describe these surreal visions to his mother (21). Jackson explains that, afterwards, Ellison's "sense of reality was subsequently shaken" but "this inadequacy of language fostered his creative imagination" (21). Years later, Ellison distracted himself from his mother's marriage to his new stepfather – whom he never connected with, and, even until adulthood, only ever addressed as "Sir" – with playing music and reveling in the noise of his Oklahoma City neighbourhood: "At least the chaos of sound drowned out the sounds of his mother's latest suitor" (74)³³. The neighbourhood noise of Ellison's youth in Oklahoma City also included the "roar" of combustion engines from the auto repair shop next door and the "already powerful noise" of the railroad switchyard three blocks away. Other sounds that "wafted through his house" included guitar players in nearby alleys, record stores, loud apartments, and Jimmy Rushing and the Blue Devils playing at Slaughter's Hall, four blocks away (21). While it might not have been his specific intent, Jackson's biography sketches Ellison's childhood with both comforting and perplexing personal events that are seemingly shaped by sound.

In this example, the connections between Ellison's sonic past and trauma to his conception of the narrator's sonic underground and existential ruminations on sonic space

³³ It is perhaps conceivable that Ellison shifted the primary focus of his perception and memorable meaning-making from visual imagery to earwitnessing during these childhood experiences since he might have begun to focus on the overpowering, but difficult to communicate, nature of traumatic experiences that were linked to the sonic.

might provide a fruitful starting point for examining Ellison's approach. Like Beavers's reassessment of his own interpretation of acousmatic space in Ellison's novel, I was originally proud of the connections I made between Ellison's sonic memory and his father's death when I first drafted this chapter. However, I think my original analysis is more complicated than I initially considered. Anna Snaith writes on the difficulty with unpacking the complicated connections one can draw between the earwitnessing nuances of autobiographical and representational soundscapes as follows:

The sonic disrupts the written precisely because it triggers and evokes a sense and medium other than the one used to experience it. But any sense experience, even visual, conjured in or by a novel or poem is at a remove from phenomena. The mind's ear tunes in just as the mind's eye assembles. Literary (or written) sound's potency can be gained from the fact that it foregrounds the gap between experience and representation. As Justin St. Clair puts it: "the relationship between literature and sound is fundamentally dislocatory: the 'there' of textuality is necessarily at a remove from whatever soundscape a specific passage records . . . Literature, in other words, is inherently acousmatic." As R. Murray Schafer notes: "*all visual projections of sounds are arbitrary and fictitious.*" The self-consciousness or amplification of the sonic dimensions of the literary medium, whether in alignment with or dissonance from the sounds a text gestures towards, might be considered an onomatopoeic mode that applies beyond a literal "figure of sound." The history of literary writing is also a history of the creative fuel derived from encounters between writing and sound. (3-4; emphasis in original)

Snaith's point explains that textual representations of the sonic offer the reader a sense of actual sound impressions the writer might have heard, but, obviously, the reader cannot hear these sounds themselves, though the reader should note that the sonic is important to both the writer and their characters. In other words, the reader gets a glimpse of the uniqueness of the writer's sonic experience, which is transmuted through textual representation, but since sonic experience is inherently subjective, the reader is prompted to acknowledge the significance of being unable to experience the incomparable sonic subjectivity of another listener. In effect, the disconnect between sonic representation and experience can prompt the reader to recognize that the textual representation of the sonic is existentially or thematically important and that each listening experience is valuable. This fact resounds in Ellison's approach because his work draws on his own autobiographical and earwitness experiences, but his narrator's earwitness experience is inherently different from Ellison's. The soundscapes of Ellison's youth that Jackson sketches in his biography provide important context for the significance Ellison places on sonic memory and the vivid associations he makes with sound and the formative moments of his youth. However, it would be another thing entirely to argue, for example, that young Ralph fixated so intently on hearing his father slip into the cellar that Ellison used the event specifically as inspiration for the narrator's sonic underground. As Snaith writes, "Literature is 'especially well suited for revealing sound's 'configured' quality', its 'imbrication in the non- or transacoustic', 'its relationships with other senses' and the 'qualitative dimension that means certain sounds are actually of interest to people'" (6). In looking at Ellison's sonic influences, it is important to consider how Ellison's fiction draws attention to the value of earwitnessing and the sonic uniqueness of individual soundscapes, which Ellison appreciates due to the importance he places on his own

sonic memory and earwitness mentality, but it is another thing entirely to assume that there are direct, uncomplicated autobiographical parallels between Ellison's life and his fiction.

When speaking of the influence of Ellison's sonic memory on the representation of the narrator's sonic underground, one can also make connections with the sonorousness of the apartment he lived in while writing much of *Invisible Man*, which I touched on earlier in this chapter and in the introduction to this project. In "Living with Music," Ellison describes his apartment at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem and its surrounding neighbourhood as a "labyrinth" of noise (5). The tenements on Ellison's block are narrow and densely packed; the courtyard behind his apartment is dark and enclosed on all sides by asymmetrical buildings. Ellison describes the noisy labyrinthine building design thus:

Our living room looked out across a small backyard to a rough stone wall to an apartment building which, towering above, caught every passing thoroughfare sound and rifled it straight down to me. . . . But the court behind the wall, which on the far side came knee-high to a short Iroquois, was a forum for various singing and/or preaching drunks who wandered back from the corner bar³⁴. . . . Which was disconcerting enough to all who heard . . . but such were the labyrinthine acoustics of courtyards and areaways that he [the drunk] seemed to direct his command at me. (227-228)

There are parallels between this apartment where Ellison composed *Invisible Man* and the narrator's cellar. While 749 St. Nicholas Avenue is not an underground space per se, it is, like the narrator's cellar, an enclosed, interior space with poor acoustics. According to Jackson, the Ellisons chose to live at the apartment on St. Nicholas Avenue because it

³⁴ An Iroquois is an enclosed building design.

“complemented Ellison’s vision of the black world; from his steps he could look down into the valley of Harlem and check the pulse of the black United States” (333). It should also be noted that the Ellisons, like the narrator of *Invisible Man*, lived not quite in Harlem but in a “border area” of the neighbourhood. The Ellison’s 749 St. Nicholas Avenue apartment lies between 148th and 149th streets in Uptown Manhattan; Central Harlem is usually considered to be drawn North-South between 110th street and 145th street, which means that the Ellison’s apartment would lie closer to Harlem’s wealthier Sugar Hill District or the Polo Grounds than the historic center of Black Harlem at 125th street and 7th Avenue (Fig. 6)³⁵.



Fig. 6. St. Nicholas Avenue looking south, 2018. Ellison’s 749 St. Nicholas Avenue apartment is in the foreground, on the right. Samuel Rowland. 16 Sept 2018.

³⁵ The Ellisons’ more famous residence at 730 Riverside Drive, where they lived from 1952 to 1994, is located a few blocks Northwest of their 749 St. Nicholas Avenue address. Their Riverside home is even farther away from Central Harlem than the apartment on St. Nicholas Avenue. Riverside Drive, as the name suggests, is a much more scenic area with a noticeably different atmosphere, look, and feel than Central Harlem.

While the narrator does not specify which border of Harlem he is referring to, it seems that Ellison drew on the sounds of Harlem he experienced personally at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue in his conceptualization of the narrator's sonic underground but, importantly, Ellison also combined them with the cloacal sonic labyrinth of 1940s Central Harlem, which he describes in an aforementioned quote from "Harlem is Nowhere": "To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city; it is to pass a labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay" (53). When one also considers the reference to the POLICY numbers in the prologue – another underground symbol for the unconscious and cloaca – one can deduce that the narrator's sonic underground is a symbolic, allegorical, and intertextual blending of several aspects of Ellison's sonic imagination. The sonic idiosyncrasy of the narrator's underground resonates in Jonathan Sterne's description of sonic space in *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012): "Sound does not exist in a vacuum; it implies space, as does hearing. 'Space,' John Mowitt once said, 'is the grain of sound'" (91). In effect, Ellison translates various urban and symbolic labyrinths of noise and decay into his conception of the narrator's underground.

While Ellison draws prominently on the labyrinthine sounds of Harlem in his work, his appreciation of the sounds of Harlem was mixed. Significant portions of *Invisible Man* were composed at the Ellisons' summer home in Vermont, for example, and other writing for the novel was done at a cottage in Quogue, Long Island; Ellison liked to escape Harlem for long periods of time because he found his Harlem apartment and its environs hot as well as "noisy, obnoxious, and barely tolerable in the summer, when virtually all windows remained open to catch any hint of breeze" (219). A 1965 interview with Richard Kostelanetz gives

some insight into why Ellison tolerated Harlem's noise. Kostelanetz asks why Ellison, unlike other prominent African-American writers, continued to live and write in Harlem (or, more accurately, in Uptown Manhattan, near Harlem). Unlike other notable Black authors who left Harlem in the 1940s, including Richard Wright and James Baldwin, Ellison would reside in Upper Manhattan most of his life. Ellison explains to Kostelanetz that his approach as a writer depends on hearing how other African-Americans speak and sound. Ellison elaborates: "My medium is language, and there is a Negro idiom . . . I have to hear that sounding in my ears, I have to. [In a] place like Harlem . . . the language is always feedback back to the past" (91-92). Clearly, Ellison's inspiration for the narrator's cellar and the labyrinths of Harlem is multifold, as he draws on the sounds of interior spaces, his own life, and the vernacular speech of Harlem residents he hears on the street. As an earwitness, Ellison conceptualizes his narrator's underground of sound by considering and listening to various African-American soundscapes in order to communicate a knowledgeable, personable, and authorial earwitness overview of the experience of living in the soundscapes of 1940s Harlem.

In the next chapter, I examine the intertextual aspect of Ellison's approach in more detail. I focus specifically on the influence of T.S. Eliot's visual-sonic imagery on Ellison's prose, which Ellison integrates into his work along with his own autobiographical elements. While Chapter One of this project examines the autobiographical and historical aspects of Harlem that influence Ellison's approach, the next chapter builds on my argument by looking at specific literary texts that shape Ellison's approach to sonic representation in his work, many of which he discovered or studied during his time at the Tuskegee Institute. As an intellectual earwitness, Ellison is concerned with creating art that deliberates on the significance of historical and personal soundscapes as well as purposefully integrating the

sonic elements of the literature that an artist has studied into their artistic representations of sound. In effect, Ellison's conception of the African-American intellectual earwitness considers that one should be cognizant of how their culture, history, and apperception of the sonic is informed by both personal experience and the texts that helped them hone their critical thinking skills.

Chapter Two:

Isle Full of Noises: The Intertextual Dimension of Ellison's Earwitness Approach

Ralph Ellison's 1950s correspondences with college friend and prominent essayist Albert Murray are usually composed in a punning, jazzy, and intertextual style that might be difficult for the casual reader to decipher. While Ellison's letters, interviews, and lectures regularly make quick references to his many influences, the structure of his letters to Murray can be difficult to decode. His letter to Murray from June 2nd, 1957 is a prime example. The letter begins cogently enough, with personal and uncomplicated ruminations on recent Duke Ellington and Count Basie records, Ellison's winning a bet on a 1956 Sugar Ray Robinson fight, and his recent weight loss and future travel plans. However, the content of the letter's final, long paragraph is so nuanced and, at times, intellectually byzantine that it is sometimes difficult to see Ellison's meaning, even if one catches some of the references he makes. It is worth citing a large passage of the letter's final paragraph to give an idea of the improvisational and intertextual style that one will commonly find when surveying Ellison's letters:

By the way, [Stanley] Hyman sent me a lecture he gave on Negro writing and the folk tradition, in which he writes about the blues, but it was a very disappointing piece. He's so busy looking for African myth in the U.S. that he can't see what's before his eyes, even when he points out that African and Greek myths finally merge in that similar figures appear in both. He sees what he terms the "darky entertainer" i.e. characters like Stepin Fetchit—intelligent men hiding behind the stereotype—as the archetypal figure to writing by

Negroes—including mine³⁶. This figure, who he also terms a “smart-man-playing-dumb,” he [Stanley] sees everywhere in Negro writing and I pointed out to him that wasn’t African, but American. That’s Hemingway when he pretends to be a sportsman, or only a sportsman; Faulkner when he pretends to be a farmer; Benjamin Franklin when pretended to be a “child of nature,” instead of the hipped operator that he was, even Lincoln when he pretended to be a simple country lawyer. (490)

After deliberating further on Hyman’s discussion of African-American folklore and tropes in his lecture, Ellison concludes:

Well, what bothers me about Stanley’s piece is that after all his work and insight it seems to reveal a basic failure to understand the nature of metaphor, thus he can’t really see that Bessie Smith singing a good blues may deal with experience as profoundly as Eliot, with the eloquence of Eliotic poetry being expressed in her voice and phrasing. Human anguish is human anguish, love love; the difference between Shakespeare and lesser artists is eloquence but when Beethoven writes it it’s still the anguish, only expressed in a different medium by an artist of comparable eloquence. Which reminds me that here, way late, I’ve discovered Louis singing Mack the Knife³⁷. Shakespeare invented Caliban, or changed himself into him—Who the hell dreamed up Louis? Some of the bop boys consider him Caliban but if he is he’s a mask for a lyric poet who is much greater than most now writing. That’s a mask for

³⁶ African-American vaudeville entertainer of the 1930s whose most famous on-stage persona embodied the stereotype of a “lazy and simple-minded Negro.”

³⁷ Armstrong’s version of the song “Mack the Knife,” originally composed for Bertolt Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera* (1928), was released the year before this letter was composed, in 1956.

Hyman to study, me too; only I know enough not to miss my train by messing around over looking over in Africa or even down in the West Indies. Hare and bear [are] the ticket; man and mask, sophistication and taste hiding behind clowning and crude manners—the American joke, man³⁸. (491-2)

To the common reader, and even the scholar, this is a lot of information to take in. Of course, the style and content of one's letters is usually directed to a specific audience of one – in this case, Albert Murray – and, if one were to load a letter with so many literary references, one might, I think, assume that the recipient would understand their nuances to some degree. But it is notable that Ellison also thought that his correspondences with Murray could be publishable – Ellison suggested the idea to Murray in a 1959 letter shortly before their correspondences ceased abruptly altogether (Callahan viii)³⁹ – which makes me wonder why the content of these letters to Murray isn't just a bit more accessible and less punning and somewhat self-indulgent. Ellison's 1957 letter to Murray shifts between ideas and contexts so jarringly that I think any reader, even Murray or experts on Ellison's work, would take pause when considering Ellison's meaning.

My aim in drawing attention to this long passage is to highlight two things about Ellison's earwitness approach. First, as previously mentioned, his work is consciously and continuously intertextual: his fiction and nonfiction incorporate myriad references to his influences. My second point, which is sometimes overlooked in scholarship, is that it can be tricky to gauge exactly how much of an influence an author, text, or sonic experience has on

³⁸ The insertion of the word "are" here comes from the collection's editor, John F. Callahan. I am not sure this insertion is entirely necessary since it detracts from the punning use of the word "bear," which seems to refer to both the animal and the verb (Ellison seems to be using "hare" here as a noun as well as a "verb" of his own invention too).

³⁹ Callahan would also publish Ellison and Murray's complete correspondences in the collection *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (2001).

Ellison, or even what Ellison means in a certain reference. Take, for example, this esoteric statement from Ellison's 1957 letter to Murray: "Shakespeare invented Caliban, or changed himself into him—Who the hell dreamed up Louis?" (491). My read on this passage is that Ellison likely put a fair amount of thought into composing this loaded analogy, given its punning nature, and did not write it off-the-cuff⁴⁰. I would think it odd if Ellison thought this analogy up on the spot since this short passage compounds a lot of pride and knowledge of the literature and music of his heart's neighbourhood⁴¹. However, this letter seems to be the only instance in any of his published work where Ellison discusses Caliban, and he never explains anywhere in print or interviews what he means by "Shakespeare changing himself into him [Caliban]." Significantly, in Murray's response to this letter, Murray ignores much of the long passage I cite at the beginning of this chapter; Murray's reply to Ellison mostly discusses his own travel plans and Duke Ellington, and Murray does so in a notably much

⁴⁰ The literary analogies in this letter are intricate and enigmatic to say the least. At the time of this letter's composition, Louis Armstrong was regarded among African-Americans audiences – and beboppers in particular – as an "Uncle Tom," who "sold out" his image and style in order to appeal to White audiences. Ellison vehemently defended Armstrong's music and image throughout his life since Ellison saw Armstrong's clowning, grinning persona as both a parody and a callback to African-American folklore: Ellison thought "Louis Armstrong was just as steeped in the tradition" of folklore as Ellison was, so Ellison "chose to stick with him as being more to [Ellison's] fictional purposes" (Letter to John Lucas. 29 Jul. 1969). Ellison's rhetorical statement, "Who the hell dreamed up Louis?" might refer to Prospero's famous speech from *The Tempest*: "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on" (IV.i.173-174). In his speech, Prospero reflects on his magic spell that imprisons the shipwrecked characters on his island in a kind of "dream-world;" Prospero is both joyful over the success of his plan and saddened that the spell cast over the ship's company is only an illusion. If we compare Prospero's speech to Ellison's thoughts on Armstrong's public image, it is possible that Ellison's analogy is pointing to a notable disconnect between the real Louis, the persona he invented for himself, and the image of Armstrong "dreamed up" in the cultural consciousness. If we follow Ellison's train of thought to its logical conclusion, it is possible that Ellison is also arguing that it is crucial to see the cultural image of Shakespeare as likewise different from the real person (just as Ellison persists that we should see Armstrong as a complex mixture of persona, person, myth, and discourse).

⁴¹ The structure of the statement itself also resembles how one would say it out loud: the dash indicates a pause that is typical of speech, as if Ellison is pausing and thinking. Given his revisionist nature, I think he probably included the dash on purpose, even though the sentence, as written, might give the impression that it was written impromptu.

more conversational and reader-friendly style than Ellison⁴². This begs several questions: why does Ellison mention Shakespeare at all? Can one, or should one, rely on this passage as evidence that Caliban and *The Tempest* are significant but downplayed influences on Ellison (when speaking of Ellison's views on Armstrong or Ellison's work in general), or are they impromptu or perhaps throwaway references⁴³? Should one even make the argument that Ellison is influenced by *The Tempest* – or any text or author he mentions, for that matter – even if the little information Ellison provides on a potential influence is convincing or fascinating in its premise? Or, what should we make of methodologically encumbered but enthralling intertextual and self-referential statements, such as Ellison's characterization of certain American symbols and cultural images: “That's Hemingway when he pretends to be a sportsman; . . . Faulkner when he pretends to be a farmer; Benjamin Franklin when he pretended to be a ‘child of nature’” (490). These are all examples of myriad rhetorical statements that Ellison, as far as I am aware, never explains or elaborates on significantly again.

⁴² Murray's response to Ellison's letter can be found in *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*.

⁴³ While the 2019 publication of Ellison's selected letters is invaluable to my research, and worth reading multiple times, the published volume of his selected letters leaves out innumerable correspondences. There are over sixty boxes of letters in Ellison's archives at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., many of which could provide valuable insight into various topics. For example, John F. Callahan, the collection's editor, only learned that Ellison had a “profound love” for Oklahoma that went beyond a general “fondness” for the territory as he sorted through which letters to include in the published collection (Bassett). Absent from Ellison's *Selected Letters* include several exchanges between Ellison and Ernest Hemingway's widow, Mary, following Hemingway's death. Ellison also corresponded several times with Henry Louis Gates Jr. while Gates Jr. was writing *The Signifying Monkey* in the 1980s, but only one letter from their communication is printed in Ellison's *Selected Letters*. It would be insightful to grasp the full extent of Ellison and Gates Jr.'s correspondence since Gates Jr. acknowledges Ellison as a guiding influence on his approach in the introduction to *The Signifying Monkey*. In the only letter to Gates Jr. available in Ellison's *Selected Letters*, Ellison seems to scold Gates Jr. for focusing too intently on the influence of African-American texts on his work when Gates Jr. analyzes the intertextual nuances of “signifying:” “I hope you'll find works to challenge your powers of analysis. And if none happen to be written by African-Americans—So what? You don't have to worry about that damn monkey because he has a thousand identities” (Letter to Henry Louis Gates. 2 Feb. 1984).

In this chapter, I trace the evolution of Ellison's earwitness approach by examining authors, musicians, and thinkers who shaped his literary style and penchant for foregrounding the sonic in his work. This chapter also outlines the importance of looking at Ellison's nonfiction for context on his authorial motivations, even if his nonfiction works are often difficult to penetrate. I begin by examining the intertextual, improvisational, and sometimes verbose style of Ellison's interviews and lectures in order to outline the complex but integral content of Ellison's nonfiction. I survey key figures who influence the intertextual dimension of Ellison's sonic approach – namely Joyce, Eliot, Dostoevsky, Twain, and Ellison's Tuskegee professor William Dawson – as well as look at Ellison's oratory style found in his lectures and interviews. More specifically, this chapter focuses intently on the influence of T.S. Eliot on Ellison's approach and how Ellison weaves autobiographical and intertextual references into his work. I argue that Ellison leans on Eliot in particular since Eliot's musical language significantly impacts Ellison's style⁴⁴. Moreover, I build on my examination of key early influences on Ellison by contextually linking their impact to Ellison's approach. I discuss the sonic memories and sonorous literary tropes that shape the sonic underground of Ellison's prologue and epilogue, as well as the possible sonic influence of *The Tempest* and other texts on Ellison's work. I focus on Ellison and his narrator's evolution as an orator, wordsmith, and philosopher of sonic memory and environments. I also work with the content and style of Ellison's 1957 letter to Murray in order to deliberate further on the inherent difficulty in identifying if or how Ellison is influenced by a specified text. My overview of Ellison's literary influences is a crucial entry point to examining his earwitness approach

⁴⁴ Joyce is another author who impacted Ellison's sonic style. But Joyce's influence on Ellison differs from Eliot's influence since Joyce impacts Ellison's philosophies of sound as well as his visual-sonic imagery. I study Joyce's influence on Ellison's approach in Chapter Five.

since it is arguable that Ellison demands his reader be a “super-reader” who is well-versed on his literary background and sonic past⁴⁵. Ellison’s nonfiction texts – which are variously perceptive, intricate, and perplexing – stress the importance of considering the context that informs a text’s composition and representations of the sonic. Context is key for meditating on Ellison’s sonic past, metaphors of memory, and sonic representations since his written, transcribed, and oral texts blend performance, memory, and representation with a complicated marriage of sonic and literary styles and tropes.

Antennas to Heaven: A Conspectus of Ellison’s Literary Influences

The 1957 letter to Murray is, admittedly, an extreme example of Ellison’s intellectualized, seemingly off-the-cuff style, but Ellison’s letters, interviews, and lectures often quickly shift between topics and thoughts, as each primary source features myriad puns and allusions to his influences⁴⁶. There are dozens of references, allusions, and influences that Ellison does return

⁴⁵ This demand might seem like a tall order for the reader, but, I think, it makes sense in the context of Ellison’s approach since he venerates the uplift and agency promised (but not guaranteed) by research, education, and intellectualism. The annoyance, frustration, and even mockery Ellison sometimes exhibits when responding to interview questions or critical readings of his work, or American literature in general, also suggests this interpretation. Moreover, the term “super-reader” is a term derived from a 2009 class from my undergraduate degree, led by Dr. Sara Humphreys, where Humphreys wondered if the author being studied expected his readers to be “super-readers” in order to glean the myriad and obscure literary and geographical references in the given text. The term stuck with me as I began researching Ellison’s complicated and referential style. I cite Humphreys here because I have not heard the term elsewhere.

⁴⁶ It is important to note that not all of Ellison’s letters are difficult to read and analyze: many are notably refined, clear, and personable. Ellison’s letters tend to be denser and more improvisational when he is writing to a friend (Albert Murray or Harold Calicutt, for example) or to an intellectual who has analyzed his work (Henry Louis Gates Jr., Stanley Hyman, Alan Nadel, etc.). But Ellison’s letters also feature several unambiguous, pleasant, and frank communications with curious writers and booksellers. A notable example is Ellison’s 1969 letter to Frances Steloff, the founder of Midtown Manhattan’s Gotham Book Mart, who wrote to Ellison in order to learn about which books influenced him in his youth. While Ellison’s letters to Murray and Steloff both concern literature, Ellison’s letter to Steloff is markedly more open, earnest, and clear in its content and tone: “It is difficult for me to decide which particular books influenced me most as a teenager, for I read haphazardly

to consistently in his work, which, if the reader is aware of them, would surely aid both the common reader and the scholar navigate his web of sonic, whimsical, personal, and literary references. Allusions to rabbit and bear trickster figures, for example – both of which appear twice in Ellison’s 1957 letter to Murray – noticeably reoccur throughout *Invisible Man* and his nonfiction⁴⁷. In editing Ellison’s *Selected Letters*, Callahan reflects that Ellison “put more than a few of his letters through multiple drafts and revisions, sometimes as many as four or five, each one mining extra nuance out of a sentence, an observation, an idea, or a memory” (14). Ultimately, the complexity of Ellison’s style can vary dramatically depending on the context of his writing. When asked a question in an interview, it is not uncommon to see Ellison move quickly onto another topic and only answer the original query in a roundabout way. Interviews with Ellison can also be difficult to research since interviewers do not always ask Ellison to elaborate on his meaning if his answer is indirect or obscure, which, I think, the interviewer can be forgiven for in the moment. Moreover, when Ellison was offered professorships in the 1960s and 70s, the reception of his classes was mixed due to his delivery being typically verbose. As Rampersad notes, some students enjoyed his courses, but his lectures could also be hard to follow. Ellison often read without a script or only vaguely from “mildewed notes,” as he did in the 1971 course he taught at New York University (NYU). Ellison’s 1976 NYU course left some students “befuddled” by the content of his lectures and his general remoteness (476; 514; 542). Ellison’s classes also did not allow for debate among students and pupils often found him unapproachable; when teaching

and voraciously anything and everything in print, including pulp magazines, boys adventure books, the family doctor book and an odd Bible in which the scriptures were conveyed in pictorial symbols” (651).

⁴⁷ At one point in *Invisible Man*, the narrator is stopped by an inquisitive, jive-talking man on the streets of New York City. The man startles and confuses the narrator with his offhand questions and statements (“Man, this Harlem ain’t nothing but a bear’s den”), which leads the narrator to think nervously to himself: “I tried to think of some saying about bears to reply, but remembered only Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear” (174).

at NYU in 1971, students and colleagues even began referring to him behind his back as “the invisible man” because of his odd style and aloof demeanor (476); Rampersad also states: “improvising in public lectures made him oracular—and, like any self-respecting oracle, in need of deciphering” (542). Ellison’s complex lecturing style is important to note since his meaning can be similarly difficult to glean in his essays and fiction. When employing his earwitness approach in his nonfiction, his expression of the sonic in the performative, spontaneous oral moment of the interview or lecture – and, to a similar extent, in the letter as well – is more introverted, self-referential, and sometimes less concerned with the experience of the listener or reader. It can thus be a daunting task trying to make sense of how various authors influenced Ellison when one consults his nonfiction.

In looking at how Ellison’s influences impact his writing and thinking on sound – or how his influences shape his style and approach in general – it is useful to briefly sketch the authors and texts that shape his craft. While Ellison’s prose and speech can be nuanced and complex, his influences generally remain constant throughout his life and work. Some major literary influences on Ellison’s work are easily identifiable because he either speaks of these authors often, has stated that their influence is paramount to his craft, or both. When speaking of verifiable and noticeable influences on Ellison, Fyodor Dostoevsky, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce are referenced often in his essays, letters, and interviews⁴⁸. The importance of these

⁴⁸ Ellison’s broad array of literary and stylistic influences primarily include the American Renaissance (1850s), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1840s-70s), British High Modernism (1910s-20s), the swing era of Jazz (1920s-30s), American Modernism (1930s-40s), and African-American folklore. Among American Renaissance writers, Ellison draws on Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, particularly in the areas of form and storytelling. Ellison also studies the wordplay and language of Mark Twain and Henry James. Dostoevsky’s philosophy-based narrative form also has a profound effect on Ellison, though Ellison was well-versed in Russian Literature in general: he was invited to teach a course on the Russian novel at New York City’s Bard College in 1960, for example (Rampersad 350). Ellison often cites André Malraux as an important influence on his writing and thought, though Malraux is one of the trickier influences on Ellison to evaluate. Scholarly comparisons of Malraux and Ellison are hard to come by, mostly because many of Malraux’s works are yet to be translated into English from the original French. Louis-Ferdinand Céline and

three authors to Ellison is alluded to in the reader's first paratextual entry point to his novel since the opening lines of *Invisible Man* and the often-discussed setting of the underground purposefully mirror Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864). In a 1985 letter to John F. Callahan, Ellison describes the opening lines of *Invisible Man* as a purposeful repurposing of the confessional style of Dostoevsky's narrator; the opening lines of *Notes* serve as the model for the oral style of Ellison's narrator since Ellison's narrator is a "talker[] who employ[s] irony" through sonic and syntactical juxtaposition (864). In a 1987 letter to Callahan, written shortly after Ellison had offered him the drafts of the opening lines of the prologue, Ellison eccentrically describes his daily routine as follows: "you'd find that I'm thronged with a whole insane system of disembodied voices, any one of whom would make ole Invisible [the narrator] sound taciturn" (870). Ellison's borrowing of Dostoevsky's language and cadence for the opening line of the prologue is not simply a reference to an important text that shapes his style: the opening of Dostoevsky's *Notes* informs the rhythm of the narrator's oral bravura. When speaking of the opening of the prologue in general, as Ellison does in his 1987 letter to Callahan, Ellison drifts into comparing his life to the narrator's by emphasizing the sonic significance of the everyday noise of Harlem life. The opening lines of the prologue thus references the sonorous language and the actual text of the opening lines of *Notes* in order to finesse the narrator's oratory style and the sonorousness of

Kenneth Burke are also variously counted as key influences in Ellison's nonfiction. This long list of authors I have provided here include the influences on Ellison I have come across the most in my research (in addition to Joyce, Eliot, Hemingway, and Faulkner, which I have noted previously). However, there are many other authors whom Ellison and his biographers only touch upon sporadically, and not in nearly enough detail to comment on at length. For example, in speaking on Ellison's essay "Richard Wright's Blues," Rampersad notes that Ellison's essay is somewhat "pretentious" since it crams in many sly but not entirely relevant references to "an array of literary luminaries, including Aeschylus, Dostoevsky, Joyce, George Moore, Hemingway, Yeats, Malraux, and William Empson" (188). On another note, one might arguably count Shirley Jackson and Stanley Hyman as significant but downplayed influences on Ellison since they provided significant feedback on the final drafts of *Invisible Man*.

the language of the prologue's opening. When reflecting on writing the opening passage of the prologue, Ellison immediately turns to comparing the significance of the sonic spaces of his life to the narrator's own sonorous spatial experience, though Ellison importantly implies that his life and the narrator's underground are unique soundscapes⁴⁹.

The often-studied opening lines of the prologue combine several references at once. The prologue begins: "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind" (3). Ellison likely had Dostoevsky's *Notes* in mind when finalizing this opening: "I am a sick man. . . I am a spiteful man. No, I am not a pleasant man at all. I believe there is something wrong with my liver" (Magarshack 95). The syntax and cadence of the two openings is similar: both passages begin with a simple, monosyllabic statement of identity, before shifting to a more complex and philosophical description of the body. On another note, Rampersad writes in his biography that Ellison also had Melville in mind when crafting the prologue's opening line: "If any one work inspired Ralph's decision in this respect it was probably

⁴⁹ As discussed in the introduction to this project, the title of Ellison's first collection of *Shadow and Act* is a reference to Eliot's *The Hollow Men*: "Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow" (ll. 76-76). Scholarship sometimes notes the impact of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* on Ellison, though not as often as Joyce, Dostoevsky, and Eliot. Ellison, like Hemingway, considers Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to be the "original national text" in American fiction (Jackson 370). Ellison first read the novel in his youth and fantasized about escaping the South, as Huck and Jim do. Ralph also refers to his younger brother Herbert as "Huck" in his letters (Rampersad 30; 542). On another note, Hemingway's tight, monosyllabic style was the "primary model" of Ellison's early forays into writing short stories in the late 1930s and early 40s (Rampersad 99). Ellison admired the apparent masculinity of Hemingway's language, and, at times, followed his precise, stripped-down approach to narration, where, Hemingway states, "prose is architecture, not interior decoration" (Jackson 147). Ellison was also struck by William Faulkner's autobiographical approach to writing, which Ellison fervently describes in a 1947 letter to his wife Fanny as follows: "notice too that he gets inside the character and sticks closely to his impression, to his, the character's, thoughts and emotions; and most of all notice the steady drone which is the rhythm of the story" (240). Ellison included both Twain and Faulkner's works on the syllabus of several of his courses; Ellison also affectionately refers to Faulkner as "Bill" in a 1953 letter to Murray where Ralph reflects on first meeting the author.

Moby-Dick. ‘I am an invisible man,’ the story begins, as ‘Call me Ishmael’ begins Melville’s novel” (197). David L. Carson asks Ellison, several decades before the publication of Rampersad’s biography, if Ellison’s prologue is comparable to *Moby-Dick*, to which Ellison responds: “Let me test something on you. [Reads from Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, Modern Library Series, the opening lines from Chapter I.] That ain’t Melville. [Chuckles.]” (202). The stylistic parallels between the openings of *Notes* and Ellison’s prologue seem to point to *Notes* as being the guiding literary framework of Ellison’s prologue, which Ellison seems to confirm in his response to Carson. On the other hand, while Rampersad and Carson’s analytical correlation of *Moby-Dick* to the prologue is, at first glance, interesting and, I think, worth exploring, Ellison’s chide rebuttal to Carson complicates this interpretation. Perhaps Carson was asking the wrong question, which is why he received a condescending response from Ellison. I wonder if Carson should have drawn a parallel between the opening lines of the prologue specifically and Melville’s “Call me Ishmael,” instead of linking *Moby-Dick* to the prologue in a general way. A thorough examination of the texts that shape Ellison’s fiction, nonfiction, and general style is a difficult task.

Hearts / Wires: Ellison’s Musical Education at Tuskegee

The musical and sonic elements of Ellison’s intellectualized aesthetic can be traced to his time attending Tuskegee, where he studied music and art from 1933 to 1936. Since a central aspect of Ellison’s approach is the incorporation of sound and music into his style, it follows

that he would draw on the musical and sonic elements of his literary icons. Pointedly, he first encountered many of the major figures in his literary pantheon – Dostoevsky, Eliot, Joyce, and Hemingway, as well as Sherwood Anderson, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein – at Tuskegee. As Jackson writes in his biography of Ellison, Ellison originally envisioned becoming a symphony composer; Ellison humbly did not believe he had the talent to be a professional musician and sought to write music instead. This self-awareness is perhaps due to his upbringing: as a young man, Ellison admired well-known Oklahoma City jazz musicians Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing; Christian, who was roughly Ellison’s age, was considered by Oklahoma City locals to be a guitar prodigy (75). Moreover, Ellison’s desire to become a composer is based on a desire to negotiate the cultural tensions between classical music and jazz. Jackson summarizes: “The intelligent appeal of the symphony could shape the tastes of the educated elite of both races” (75). Jackson then cites Ellison’s perspective on the matter from his essay “Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday”: “jazz possessed possibilities of a range of expressiveness to that of classical European music” (75-76). Ellison originally conceived of becoming a composer in high-school in the late 1920s, at a time when jazz was, according to Paul McCann, viewed as “primitive” and even “a threat to civilization” by White audiences (61). Jazz of the roaring twenties was thought to be low-art debauchery, with the speakeasies and jazz clubs of Harlem being associated with intoxication, recklessness, and sexual depravity; the roaring parties of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and other jazz-age stories presented jazz as glamorous but also noisy and meaningless chaos (58-61)⁵⁰. By the time Ellison began attending Tuskegee in the mid-

⁵⁰ The noise, jazz, and music of Gatsby’s 1920s Long Island parties reflect the excess, ennui, and struggle for meaning for White elites during Fitzgerald’s “Jazz Age.” McCann writes: “Fitzgerald portrays jazz in a manner that allows the music some cultural value and authority but remains sharply critical of the audience [Gatsby’s partygoers] whom Nick maintains his contempt” (63).

1930s, jazz began to be tolerated by mass audiences and critics, partly due to Harlem Renaissance literature's representation of jazz as a "folk tradition" (61). However, Jazz was still viewed as low culture throughout the Depression; McCann writes: "[Jazz] gained acceptance through its broad appeal but not respectability since it is not treated as classical music within the academic establishment" (61). Theodor Adorno's 1936 article "On Jazz" is a notable text from the period that misinterprets jazz as a noisy, formulaic, and useless commodity; for Adorno, Jazz is comprised of "the comical, the grotesque, and the anal" and represents "the amalgam of a destroyed subjectivity and of the social power which produces it, eliminates it, and objectifies it through this elimination" (67-68). Ellison's musical inspirations come from both classical music and African-American jazz, and he acknowledged the tensions in having dramatically different influences; the musical and sonically-conscious style he would adapt as a writer in the 1940s can be traced to his original aspiration to write and compose music.

Ellison's approach blends his literary influences, autobiography, and his musical education, but does so in a way that re-evaluates his past and the various ways he attempts to transfigure the sonic into intellectualism and art. According to Rampersad, when Ellison entered Tuskegee in 1933, he "most often . . . saw himself as a renowned black classical composer, writing symphonies based on the folk music of his people. Other blacks would revere him as a credit to the race. Whites would respect him as a Negro genius transcending the limitations of his culture and creating a universal art" (41). Ellison sought to study under William Dawson – one of the few prestigious Black composers at the time – who taught at Tuskegee; Dawson had received nationwide attention for promoting Black exceptionalism and aesthetic universalism (Jackson 122). While Ellison initially envied Dawson, Ellison

became disillusioned with Dawson's sternness and remoteness (Dawson had achieved musical acclaim by the age of twenty-three, which would be Ellison's age when he left Tuskegee in 1936). Dawson would also partially inspire the character of Dr. Bledsoe in *Invisible Man*, as both Dawson and Bledsoe, aside from being authoritative college educators, opted to play the part of a "stereotypical Negro," Ellison thought, who did not push back against White hegemony; "in some respects," Rampersad argues, "Dawson was a pure product of Tuskegee. Knowing the dangers that attended his rising fame, he was wary of crossing any of his superiors. He refused to bend the rules to help Ralph" (57; 228-229)⁵¹. In a 1952 letter to Murray, Ellison reflects on his study under Dawson: "I thank them although I don't forgive them and one of these days I intend to get a hold of that kind of false artist, false teacher, for which Dawson stands. Just thinking about it makes me mad all over again" (300)⁵². Both Rampersad and Jackson note that Ellison approached Dawson as a son to a father: Ellison sought to satisfy a "filial" need from Dawson, Rampersad states, as well as intellectual nurturing, in the void of his own father's death. When Ellison received neither, he began to even hate him (63); "Dawson stood as a near Oedipal father in Ellison's path, but

⁵¹ It is somewhat ironic that Ellison would adopt a similar detached demeanor himself as an educator thirty years later. I am not sure how much one should read into any superficial similarities between Ellison's and Dawson's teaching styles, however, or whether Ellison consciously or unconsciously inhabited a "father role" as an educator. The 1952 letter to Murray makes it clear that Ellison loathed Dawson's teaching style. Ellison and Dawson would eventually correspond and reconcile after the publication of *Invisible Man*. Ellison would later give Dawson some general praise in letters during the 1980s.

⁵² Ellison's wordage here is interesting. Although Ellison means to speak about Dawson specifically in this statement, he refers to the collegiate authority under which he studied at Tuskegee in the plural form ("them"). Ellison implies, possibly inadvertently, that he either encountered other authoritarian and unhelpful professors at the Institute, or else unconsciously recognizes Dawson to be the face of the entire faculty in his memory. I think the latter scenario is more likely, judging by Ellison's following statement: "one of these days I intend to get a hold of that kind of false artist, false teacher, for which Dawson stands" (300). Ellison also had a lifelong friendship with Hazel Harrison, another Tuskegee instructor, for example. The impact of Dawson's tutelage of Ellison, which Ralph saw as disagreeable, incomplete, and sometimes incompetent, arguably led Ellison to dissuade and interrogate what he considered pretentious or presumptuous interpretations of his work throughout his life.

perhaps a patrician too mighty to play on his familiar ground,” Jackson writes (122). In Dawson, Ellison saw an artist, but also a flawed intellectual, who “encouraged order, obeisance to decorum and, principally, unambiguous European music standards” over experimentation and creativity (114). The approach Ellison would craft as a writer would, on the contrary, encourages the Black individual to gain self-reliance and self-actualization through artistry and intellectualism grounded in a sonic and musical aesthetic, which Dawson dissuaded through his rigorously authoritarian pedagogy at Tuskegee.

Shadowplay: The Impact of *The Waste Land* on the Conception, Creation, and Emotion of Ellison’s Earwitness Approach

For Ellison, literature would become the center of the city where all roads meet, where he, as an author, could transfigure his formational texts into an earwitness style and voice of his own. In a 1952 letter, Ellison writes to Hazel Harrison, another former music teacher and confidant from Tuskegee, soon after the publication of *Invisible Man*. In this letter he addresses his artistic shift from composer to writer during the 1930s:

Well, so it was: the musician was stifled and the novelist was born. So I won’t complain. Indeed, I am thankful that even one’s negative experiences can not only be transcended, but if we keep trying, can be turned into an advantage—except, of course, I must confess, that I would have liked so much to have been a composer. So now I must make my music with words. But the important thing here is that you liked the book. (305)

In the late 1930s, Ellison's creative interests pivot from composing symphonies to studying and, eventually, writing literature, partly because of Dawson's stifling instruction, but also because of the "conscious education in literature" Ellison began concurrently with his music studies at Tuskegee (Ellison qtd. in Jackson 153). Ellison's foray into writing is importantly grounded in the sonic aspects of the literature he studied at Tuskegee.

When Ellison discovers T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* at Tuskegee in 1935, the poem transforms his approach to artistic creation and pushes him towards crafting and expressing a sonic and intertextual aesthetic through writing. For Ellison, *The Waste Land* embodies the dissonant sound and genre-bending structure he initially envisioned in his unrealized composition of a vernacular-inspired hybrid-classical symphony. Eliot's poem, for Ellison, combines the musical cadences of jazz and classical music with obscure references to literature, which appeals to Ellison because the poem seems to "play[] with schemes of condescension and superiority, hierarchy and order, only to dispose of them," Jackson writes (152). Since Ellison aspired to be a composer and a trumpeter, Ellison's view of Eliot's discordant sonic and structural style both perplexed and excited him because he could not "reduce [the form and style of Eliot's text] to a logical system" (152). Gemma Moss, in "Classical Music and Literature," describes the appeal of classical music to modernist writers, such as Ellison, as follows: "In literature, music often stands in for what cannot be put into words. While language creates meaning through differences, associations, and complex chains of signification, music also affects the body: it vibrates the organism, stimulating physical sensation and emotion. For many writers, classical music seemed to offer a different sort of communication: more direct than language, transmitting meanings directly to the listener, and transcending language by communicating through form" (92). Eliot's poem

resonates with Ellison's sonic approach since the poem incorporates techniques of symphony composition, modernist literature, and the musicality of language. Ellison found symphony composition and Dawson's musical education difficult because Ellison did not feel like he was provided the critical and academic tools necessary to communicate his musical vision into art⁵³. Ellison is instead attracted to *The Waste Land* because he believes the poem offers him a challenging but fair literary and musical education. The solitary dimension of reading, writing, and listening appeals more to Ellison's desire to be an intellectual earwitness because he seeks insight, uplift, and agency via the study of sound, music, and sonic literature that Dawson's rigidly hierarchal, orderly, and inadequate pedagogy could not instruct.

Moss points out that "music was integral" to Eliot, Joyce, and Pound, three significant authors Ellison encountered at Tuskegee who would shape his approach (92). It makes sense that Ellison would plunge into the musical complexity of their work at the same time he was struggling to express himself through musical composition. Moss's point on the bodily experience of classical music is also relevant to Ellison's thoughts on the sonic since Ellison often notes the distinct experience of listening to music as a group, a crowd, or on a dancefloor since music – swing, classical, and flamenco, in particular – can be an intimate, social, bodily, and hyper-sensorial experience. For example, in his 1954 essay "Flamenco," Ellison describes flamenco music as follows: "It can be just as noisy and sweaty and drunken as a Birmingham 'breakdown'; while one singer 'riffs' (improvises) or the dancers 'go to town' the others assist by clapping their hands in the intricate percussive manner called *palmada* and by stamping out the rhythms with their feet" (23).

⁵³ Although Ellison admired Dawson, Ellison could not deal with his harsh, unclear, and sometimes abusive teaching. Ellison relates in two letters from the 1980s, including one to Dawson himself, that Dawson threw a piece of chalk at Ellison's head when he responded to Dawson's lesson incorrectly (Letter William Dawson, 20 Sep. 1989).

Throughout his life, Ellison would interpret various lyrically suggestive texts as being “Eliotic,” “Eliotonian,” or otherwise reminiscent of Eliot’s work, though he does not always explain his meaning. Ellison evokes Eliot in his 1957 letter to Murray, for example, but his meaning isn’t entirely clear: Ellison describes Bessie Smith’s delivery as “singing a good blues [that] may deal with experience as profoundly as Eliot, with the eloquence of Eliotic poetry being expressed in her voice and phrasing. Human anguish is human anguish, love love” (491). Unpacking Ellison’s thoughts on Eliot is significantly aided by a consultation of Ellison’s nonfiction. In Ellison’s essay “On Bird, Bird-Watching and Jazz,” for instance, he describes jazz as essentially Eliotonian since jazz performance, like Eliot’s work, can be considered to be a sonic montage, inversion, and fragmentation of sometimes considerably different styles: “T. S. Eliot [created] a new aesthetic for poetry through the artful juxtapositioning of earlier styles, [while] Louis Armstrong, way down the river in New Orleans, was working out a similar technique for jazz,” Ellison writes (990). Ellison sees this apparently Eliotonian “juxtapositioning” of different jazz styles in Armstrong’s work. R.J. Owens’s description of Eliot’s approach can help explain the jazz-like montage and fragmentation that Ellison observes in Armstrong: “Eliot’s poem is concerned with his experience of a civilization which is confused and chaotic, but is also a means of ordering and harmonizing his experiences” (3). Ellison’s approach of blending various styles and sonic aesthetics also speaks to Birdsall’s thoughts on the difficulty of communicating the uniqueness of sonic events and memory, which Birdsall likens to an echo: “The echo allows for the alterations produced by its surroundings. . . . The echo also offers a useful metaphor for describing the re-soundings of the past in embodied practices of remembering. Sound memories are not necessarily predicated on the exact reproduction of past sounds, nor does

the earwitness account reveal ‘how it really was’ to the researcher” (179). Ellison takes Eliot’s lead by crafting a literary sonic montage that expresses the difficulty of relating and representing sonic experience instead of trying to accurately re-present autobiographical and authentic soundscapes in his writing.

The Waste Land is essential to Ellison’s approach since Eliot’s poem, for Ellison, blends dissimilar sonic, musical, and oratory styles: jazz, ragtime, classical, opera, poetry, onomatopoeia, sonic metaphors, etc. Rampersad describes Ellison’s interest in the poem as follows: “Outside of class [at Tuskegee], he read *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot’s book-length poem of 1922 that so radically exemplified the spirit and practice of artistic modernism with its myriad literary allusions, rhythms, and tones, its terse footnotes, its complex syntax, and its mysterious, montage-like structure. *The Waste Land* offered, as Eliot wanted it to offer, a severe intellectual and aesthetic challenge; the poem was not for lazy, conventional readers. Ralph accepted its challenge” (76). *The Waste Land* affords Ellison with one of his first entry points into syntactical sonic experimentation in literature, which he both appropriates and transforms for his own purposes. For example, Ellison compares *The Waste Land* to jazz in his 1969 lecture at West Point, “On Initiation Rites and Power”: “I didn’t know quite why it [*The Waste Land*] was working on me, but being close to the jazz experience—that is, the culture of jazz—I had a sense that some of the same sensibility was being expressed in poetry” (524). *The Waste Land* provides Ellison with a solid groundwork for crafting his approach since Eliot’s poem demands that the reader undertake heavy analytical and investigational work in order to come to a critical interpretation of text and context, both sonic and literary. Dawson’s authoritarian tutelage, on the other hand, dissuades the unique experiences of the student, subject, listener, and the unique contexts of acquiring knowledge

about music and the sonic; as Birdsall writes, “Listening provides a potential source for developing knowledge, concern about others, and for enabling observation and witnessing” (177). While Eliot did not necessarily compose *The Waste Land* with jazz in mind, Ellison projects his own understanding of jazz onto the cadence, rhythms, and tones of the poem since he could not find a more relatable and, for him, definitive example of jazz, earwitnessing, and musical knowledge elsewhere. Ellison’s approach implies that both Ellison and his reader should read and listen to a text closely and carefully since Ellison privileges education and knowledge as the primary means of racial and social uplift as well as intellectual agency.

As Ellison matures as a writer and reader, he begins to focus more and more on creating art that foregrounds a sonic and intellectual aesthetic. In other words, studying literature, for Ellison, should be demanding and instructive in order to press the reader to think of listening, reading, writing, and education as “equipment for living,” to draw on Kenneth Burke’s term⁵⁴. Rampersad outlines Ellison’s reverence for Eliot’s poem as follows:

Understanding this notoriously difficult poem was a task that possessed him, especially because he saw a link between it and his own life. “Somehow its rhythms were often closer to jazz than were those of the Negro poets, and even though I could not understand then, its range of allusion was as mixed and as varied as that of Louis Armstrong. Yet there were its discontinuities, its changes of pace and its hidden system of organization which escaped me.”

(76-77)

⁵⁴ This terminology is relevant to Ellison’s fidelity for the formative literature of his youth and early adulthood since he began reading Burke in the early 1940s. Ellison also notes Burke’s term “equipment for living” in his 1969 letter to Frances Steloff.

Ellison heartily studied the nuances and references of *The Waste Land* in order to incorporate Eliot's intellectualized sonic aesthetic into his own approach. Steve Pinkerton, in "Ralph Ellison's Righteous Riffs: Jazz, Democracy, and the Sacred," argues that Ellison's affinity for the apparent "jazz-like" aspects of Eliot's poem is not entirely incongruous: "With its captivating rhythms, its parodic irreverence, and its structuring principles of juxtaposition and allusion, *The Waste Land* indeed shares many affinities with Armstrong-style jazz" (189). Eliot's use of sonic juxtaposition is evident in Ellison's prologue, as when the narrator reflects on his experience with smoking marijuana: "And yet, it was a strangely satisfying experience for an invisible man to hear the silence of sound" (13). The narrator's seemingly incongruous linking of silence to sound gestures towards the narrator's own "hidden system of organization" when describing his philosophy of retreating into his sonic underground after the riot that ends the novel. The rhythm of the narrator's statement, along with its disparate sonic juxtaposition, mirrors and parodies the sonic imagery of *The Waste Land*, as both Eliot and Ellison's texts foreground the subjective experience of listening as well as the sonorously alliterative language of the text ("strangely satisfying;" "silence of sound")⁵⁵.

While Pinkerton's comparison of Eliot to Armstrong is valid, Pinkerton's discussion of Armstrong's "jazz style" is also a somewhat generalized assessment of jazz in Ellison's work. In other words, Pinkerton's description of Armstrong's style as "parodic" and "paradoxical" could, I think, be said about most jazz genres and artists. It seems that Pinkerton uses these terms as a shorthand to compare Armstrong to Eliot, since Eliot is not

⁵⁵ One could also compare the following lines from *The Waste Land* to Ellison's prologue: "I could not / Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither / Living nor dead, and I knew nothing, / Looking into the heart of light, the silence" (ll. 38-41). In the prologue, the narrator states: "I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation" (6). Soon after the narrator reflects: "And yet, it was a strangely satisfying experience for an invisible man to hear the silence of sound" (13).

the focus of his article. Ingrid Monson's article "Jazz Improvisation" helps elaborate on the nuances of Armstrong's swing style: "[Armstrong] provided the model for lengthier and more varied improvisation that went beyond ornamenting and paraphrasing a known melody by relying increasingly on the underlying harmony as the basis for improvisation. The distinctive off-beat phrasing of swung melody, which derives its push-and-pull effect from a weaving in and out of the rhythm section, had by this time become a distinctive element of the jazz sound" (115). The sonic and modernist aesthetic of *The Waste Land* parallels Monson's characterization of Armstrong's swing style since Eliot's poem is composed of lengthy and difficult sections that swing the reader in a "push-and-pull effect" between ambiguous allusions.

Wayfarer: Ellison's Auditory Imagination and the Influence of Eliot and Dante

At Tuskegee, Ellison begins to pivot his artistic focus from symphony composition to studying literary representations of the sonic. *The Waste Land* pushes Ellison towards a fundamental shift in artistic direction because Eliot's poem demands the reader intimately consider the sonorous language of the text. In his 1969 speech at West Point, Ellison reflects on the importance of *The Waste Land* to his early ventures into writing: "Fortunately Mr. Eliot appended to the original edition of *The Waste Land* a long body of footnotes, and I began to get the books out of the library and read them. That really was a beginning of my literary education, and actually it was the beginning of my transformation (or shall we say, metamorphosis) from a would-be composer into some sort of novelist" (525). It is useful to

compare the paratextual labyrinth and intellectual challenge of *The Waste Land* to Ellison's work by considering Eliot's term "auditory imagination," which Eliot defines as follows:

The "auditory imagination" is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. (Eliot qtd. in Halliday 46)

Sam Halliday, in "Hearing and the Senses," elaborates on Eliot's terminology thus:

By exercising this imagination, the poet [Eliot] performs a kind of time travel, passing beyond contemporary meanings in order to reach more ancient qualities contained by words. In this account, sound is what persists while other elements of language change: as such, it represents a portal through which the entire past of language itself becomes accessible. *Pace* [James Weldon] Johnson, sounds do not need to be added to words, orthographically, but acknowledged as immanent to words in their native state. This does not entail opposing sound to meaning but does insist that poets hear words as distinct from understanding them. (46)

With Eliot's influence, Ellison pivots from writing music to replicating the musical quality of language in a manner reminiscent of Eliot's intertextual, referential, and sonic montage. *The Waste Land* provided a young and artistically frustrated Ellison with a framework for communicating the experiential grammar of sonic experience into art.

As a point of reference, the following passage from the final act of *Invisible Man* can be evaluated using Eliot's concept of auditory imagination. Towards the end of the novel, the

narrator comes to question his role in the Brotherhood and its ideology after he witnesses the murder of fellow Brotherhood member Tod Clifton at the hands of a White policeman. The narrator first begins to think of himself as an “invisible man” shortly after Clifton’s murder. Soon after, he meets Sybil, a woman who presumably heard one of his speeches, and he invites her to his apartment; the riot in Harlem would begin later that evening. After the narrator and Sybil have had several drinks, he uses her lipstick to inscribe the following message on her stomach (chapter 24 of *Invisible Man*):

SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED

BY

SANTA CLAUS

SURPRISE (522)

On my first read of the novel years ago, this scene struck me as out of character for the narrator since he tends to be much more calculated and less crude in his speech and behaviour. But it is likely that the narrator’s lack of restraint is due to his contempt for Sybil’s adherence to Brotherhood ideology as well as the influence of alcohol⁵⁶. Perhaps this lipstick “lyric” is also intended to be a shocking play on Joycean vulgarity or a bizarre prelude

⁵⁶ The narrator doesn’t seem nearly as intoxicated as Sybil by the time he writes the lyric on her stomach. Sybil is slurring her speech by this point but the narrator seems relatively lucid throughout the chapter. The narrator is also relating this scene from the underground of the prologue, so his narration of this scene might be somewhat unreliable. In scrawling the lyric on Sybil’s stomach, the narrator seems to be sarcastically playing off the stereotype Sybil assumes him to be: “‘Don’t worry,’ I [the narrator] said. ‘I rapes real good when I’m drunk’” (521). Sybil sees him as the stereotype of a “primitive Negro,” calls him an “anonymous brute” (528), and begs him to “beat [her] daddy—you—you big black bruiser” (522). The mention of Santa Claus in this passage initially struck me as odd since Santa Clause is only mentioned this one time in the novel. Perhaps Ellison specifically chose to reference Santa Claus in this scene because Santa Claus is a lily-white symbol of religious celebration. In other words, Sybil expects to be “raped” by a “Black brute” – maybe this means have sex; maybe her inference is only bizarre, drunken, misguided flirting – after toasting and celebrating Brotherhood ideology, which leads the narrator to scrawl a lyrical image on her stomach that is racially antithetical to the stereotype she perceives the narrator to be: a White, joyful “Santa Claus.”

to the otherworldliness the narrator experiences in the riot episode that follows this scene⁵⁷. I also read this passage now as an Eliotian quasi-poem that is meant to be heard and not read, in addition to combining a bit of Joycean vulgarity and thematic foreshadowing. Ellison's use of language and symbols here seem somewhat out of place in relations to the narrator's vocabulary and the novel's themes ("Santa Claus;" "raped"). The heavy subject of rape, for example, is not discussed in any significant detail in the novel; the language of this lyric, then, seems to me to exemplify Eliot's technique of using discordant words that "pass[] beyond contemporary meanings" because they are unsettling in their juxtaposition and lack of context or exposition. Ellison's juxtaposition of sonorous symbols and unsettling inferences in the lyric – "Santa Claus," "raped," etc. – seem to be crafted more with a "feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling" (Eliot qtd. in Halliday 46). The alliteration of S-sounds are all examples of sibilance – hissing sounds – which is ironic because the character's name, Sybil, closely resembles the term "sibilance" phonetically. Should one perform a scansion of this lyric, the cadence of each syllable goes up and down in a sing-song manner, as if the inscription is meant to be read aloud. When pronouncing each of the S-sounds, the vowel that comes after each S-sound would follow a trajectory from the front of the mouth, to the middle, and then to the back, which makes the act of pronunciation itself more playful than other phonetic utterances⁵⁸. The pronunciation of this visual-sonic imagery also performatively and uncomfortably mocks the serious meaning of the lyric's reference to sexual assault. Furthermore, the first line of the lyric written on Sybil's body would also be somewhat unintelligible since it is very long, which

⁵⁷ The following vulgar couplet from the "Circe" episode of *Ulysses* comes to mind as the kind of Joycean lyric Ellison would enjoy: "Moses, Moses, king of the jews, / Wiped his arse in the *Daily News*" (435).

⁵⁸ My analysis of the lipstick inscription is derived from a discussion with my partner who provided the correct phonetic terminology.

likewise implies the narrator is more concerned with his perception of the sound of each syllable rather than the actual readability and content of the text⁵⁹. For both Eliot and Ellison, the typography and design of the words on the page are sometimes more important than the implied meaning of individual words since the visual-sonic impression of language is intended to echo the psychology of the speaker and the tone of the setting.

Consider the following passage from *The Waste Land* that ends the poem's first section, "The Burial of the Dead":

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.
Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,
To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours
With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine⁶⁰. (ll. 60-68)

Eliot's poem is saturated with references to other texts, which he explains in the poem's footnotes. For instance, "Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn" purposefully recalls Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857): "Unreal city, city full of dreams, /

⁵⁹ Writing "Sybil, you were / Raped by / Santa Claus / Surprise" would be more legible when inscribed on a human body. Since the narrator does not read the lyric aloud to Sybil, she would most likely read it for the first time when she wakes in the morning or observes it in the mirror (both events are not related in the novel). In either case, she would likely initially struggle to read and comprehend the lyric since it would be either upside down or backwards (due to Sybil either trying to read the lyric by looking down at her stomach or standing in front of a reflecting glass). Since Sybil is heavily intoxicated when the lipstick lyric is inscribed, on the following day, a hungover Sybil would probably struggle to both understand the meaning of the lyric or recall the events that led to its inscription in the first place.

⁶⁰ Saint Mary Woolnoth is an Anglican church in the City of London.

Where ghosts in broad daylight cling to passers-by” (Wasteland.Windingway.org)⁶¹. Ellison would most likely be aware of the this and many other literary references in *The Waste Land* since he meticulously studied Eliot’s poem and its explanatory footnotes, first at Tuskegee, and many times throughout his life.

The auditory similarities between Ellison’s work and this passage from Eliot’s poem are apparent. The “unreal dream city” of Eliot’s poem, an amalgam of Baudelaire’s dream city and the first circle of Dante’s *Inferno*, is reflected in Ellison’s description of Harlem in *Invisible Man*. Christopher Ricks, in “Eliot’s Auditory Imagination: A Rehearsal for Concrete Poetry,” writes that Eliot’s draft of this section of the poem originally looked very different: “The visual-sonic design of *The Waste Land* owes much to [Ezra] Pound’s revisions: an example is line 60, originally ‘Terrible city, I have sometimes seen and seen,’ which Pound crosses out; it is then replaced by the famously concise line ‘Unreal City’” (121-2). Eliot condenses the line considerably in order to present a visual-sonic image that is unsettling in both its conciseness and inconspicuousness. There is no longer a tangible description of the city (“Terrible city” would probably be the more emotional, percussive, and relatable image) or a speaker with a unique and idiosyncratic perspective to identify with (“I have sometimes seen and seen”). In *Invisible Man*, the narrator’s raucous entry into Harlem, discussed in more detail in Chapter One of this project, both references Eliot’s “unreal city” and employs Eliot’s concept of auditory imagination in its description of Harlem (chapter 7 of *Invisible Man*). The narrator describes first setting foot in Harlem thus: “for me, this was not a city of realities, but of dreams . . . and now as I struggled through the lines of people a new

⁶¹ It might also be viable to read Baudelaire’s poem as a parallel to the narrator’s confrontation with Mr. Norton in the epilogue of *Invisible Man*, where Baudelaire’s speaker confronts an old man who not only seems to be a “ghost in broad daylight” but also “whose aspect would have brought him showers of alms / If his eyes had not gleamed with so much wickedness.”

world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds. I moved wide-eyed, trying to take the bombardment of impressions” (159). In this instance, it might be more cogent for the narrator to state: “Trying to take *in* the bombardment of impressions.” But the passage, as written, calls attention to the narrator trying to handle the forced experience of the city’s sensations all at once, as if he is the unwilling or overwhelmed recipient of unfamiliar city noise. The sentence begins with alliteration (“trying to take”) and ends with polysyllabic juxtaposition (“the bombardment of impressions”). The syntactical construction of the passage gestures to Eliot’s concept of auditory imagination since the passage seems to be specifically crafted to melodically relay the uneasy sonic experience of entering a radically new soundscape; the sentence, as written, also presents a quasi-poetic visual-sonic image that reflects the narrator’s sonic bewilderment.

In “Harlem is Nowhere,” Ellison likewise describes Harlem as an overwhelming soundscape. While Ellison’s use of auditory imagination in his description of the narrator’s entry into Harlem is intended to highlight the narrator’s unease and naivety upon entering the district for the first time, the auditory imagination Ellison employs in his essay focuses instead on the voicelessness and overwhelming urban noise caused by the deleterious effects of segregation. Ellison’s essay states that the poverty of Central Harlem leaves residents living in a “labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously skyward with the spires and crosses of churches and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay” (321). Ellison recounts that living in the “ruin” of Harlem causes so much psychological torment on its residents that “the real and unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence” (320-321)⁶². Adam J. Engel’s evaluation of *The*

⁶² In “That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview,” Ellison also describes what he considers to be the lack of political effort on the part of Black leaders to help the Black poor as “a thick fog of unreality [that]

Hollow Men, in “Talking Heads: Bodiless Voices in *Heart of Darkness*, ‘The Hollow Men,’ and the First World War,” resonates in Ellison’s description of Harlem: “Eliot alters language by repurposing its postwar emptiness, using it to communicate experience through resonant sounds rather than referential words and thus restoring meaning to the voices of Conradian fragmented selves” (29)⁶³. Ellison’s cryptic but percussive description of “streets that explode monotonously skyward” gives the impression that tormenting but mundane city and pedestrian noise reverberates upwards and outwards throughout Harlem’s loud, wide, congested streets and uniform rows of brownstones. Ellison, like Engel’s assessment of Eliot, repurposes the emptiness of Harlem experience “through resonant sounds rather than referential words,” such as the implied noise of church bells and the “explosion” of urban din, in order to offer a glimpse into the psychology and unique earwitness experience of Harlem residents. Importantly, Ellison’s earwitness description of Harlem does not state in concrete terms what each Harlem earwitness hears, as each individual perception and cogitation of sound would be unique to the individual; instead, Ellison draws on Eliot’s auditory imagination to communicate abstruse but relatable shades of sonic experience and meaning.

In *The Waste Land*, it is significant that it is Virgil, Dante’s artistic as well as spiritual guide, who leads Dante downwards into Hell’s circles. This is notable since Eliot likewise serves as Ellison’s guide, and, by extension, his narrator’s guide, out of the South and towards honing an artistic approach grounded in a sonic aesthetic and sonic intellectualism. Eliot’s

separated the Negro group from its leaders,” which recalls Eliot’s “Unreal City, / Under the brown fog of a winter dawn” (77).

⁶³ Engel’s article thoroughly compares the musical language of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) to Eliot’s *The Hollow Men* (The epigraph of Eliot’s poem, “Mistah Kurtz-he dead / A penny for the Old Guy,” is a reference to *Heart of Darkness*). Engel explains his method in comparing Conrad to Eliot thus: “Conrad’s text reflects anxieties about language’s loss of meaning at the end of the nineteenth century, but he leaves this worry in a muddy pit and does not seek to resurrect hope. In *The Waste Land*, “The Hollow Men,” and *Four Quartets*, Eliot seeks to retrieve the lost human ability verbally to communicate experience even if he must transform language to do so” (29).

guidance of Ellison mirrors and inverts, in an Eliotian, swing-like juxtaposition, Virgil's guidance of Dante into the circles' depths. Ellison's narrator likewise descends into the abyss of the cellar of the prologue, and, importantly, gains critical knowledge and insight into his damnation there, as does Dante in his progress in following Virgil, his poet guide and literary inspiration, through the circles of Hell. The crowds of Eliot's unreal city move with "Sighs, short and infrequent," which is a reference to Canto IV of Dante's *Inferno*. Virgil leads Dante into the first circle of Hell, the "blind world" of limbo, where Dante observes lines of pagan crowds mired in psychological torment: "Here, as far as listening could tell, / The only lamentations were the sighs / That caused the everlasting air to tremble" (ll. 25-27)⁶⁴. As in Ellison's Harlem of "Harlem is Nowhere," Dante's first circle is composed of tormented people who are lined and confined in a labyrinth of unseen sounds and voices. In *Inferno*, Dante's voice is the only audible voice heard amidst the short sighs of the first circle. The ambiguous sighs of the damned give a sense of their suffering and corporeality, but the reader is only provided with a vague notion of the verbal expression of their suffering. In other words, sighs are heard, but repentances and experiences are not understood; the air "trembles" with the sounds of the damned, but voices of suffering do not "explode," as they do in Ellison's description of Harlem streets.

The ambiguous sighs of the damned in *Inferno* are comparable to the auditory imagination Ellison employs when describing the "small voice" of his narrator as he enters Harlem, which is both a noisy lostness and a "world of possibility." The narrator also

⁶⁴ *Inferno*, Canto III, lines 55-57: "And there, behind it, marched so long a file / Of people, I would never have believed / That death could have undone so many souls" (Wasteland.Windingway.org). My use of Dante's text acknowledges that the English translation will no doubt differ from the original Italian. But Dante's effect on Eliot, and, by extension, Ellison, is important to note because both Eliot and Ellison would have studied and been influenced by the English translations of Dante.

references the circles of Dante's Hell in describing the sonic experience of his underground hole. After unintentionally spending the evening intoxicated on marijuana, the narrator describes the new and distorted auditory reality of the drug:

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 piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. (9)

Here the narrator's cellar becomes a sonic underground of knowledge. While the unreal city of Eliot's Baudelaire-Dante montage is defined by lines of inaudible crowds suffering through "sighs, short and infrequent," the "melodic line[s]" of the narrator's cellar abyss are likewise "unheard" in aboveground discourse. The narrator's cellar is also artistically transformative in that it allows his voice to grow from the "small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds" into a careful and analytical underground temperance of "wait[ing] patiently for other voices to speak." It is also not insignificant that the end of Canto IV of *Inferno* reads: "Forth from the quiet to the air that trembles / And to a place I come where nothing shines" (ll. 51-52). If one can envision the aboveground unreality of Harlem as the circle of limbo, then it is fitting that the narrator's cellar is similarly located where no light is supposed to shine. Of course, the illumination of the narrator's hole stands in contrast with the darkened path between Dante's first and second circles. However, we can read this extreme differentiation between the darkness of the second circle and the narrator's 1,369 lightbulbs as another Eliotian and sonically juxtapositional inversion. The narrator's hole is not only

“full of light:” the sheer number of sonically vibrating bulbs serve to mock the racial damnation of his self-imposed abyss.

Arc Ascension: A Deliberation on the Import of Louis and Caliban in Ellison’s Letter to Albert Murray

I end this chapter by returning to the 1957 Murray letter that began this chapter. If the minutiae of Ellison’s nonfiction are so important to deciphering his influences and conception of sound, what should we make, if anything, of the curious passage “Shakespeare invented Caliban, or changed himself into him—Who the hell dreamed up Louis? Some of the bop boys consider him Caliban but if he is he’s a mask for a lyric poet who is much greater than most now writing” (491). I wonder if Ellison is, to draw on his own language, just “jiving” with the reader here. Perhaps Ellison envisions Shakespeare – who is probably considered to be an archetypal intellectual artist by Ellison’s peers and influences – becoming the sorcerer Prospero from *The Tempest*. In more detail, in Ellison’s letter, Armstrong arguably metamorphoses into Caliban in an essentially Eliotian montage of intellectual master and textual creation, which incorporates both Western and vernacular styles. What is evident, if Ellison is not significantly influenced by Shakespeare, is that Ellison does enjoy punning on Shakespeare. But it seems more likely that Ellison’s appreciation for Shakespeare comes from the references to Shakespeare found in Eliot and Joyce’s work, among others. For instance, in Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922), Stephen Daedalus finds his artistry and sense of intellectual importance on his knowledge of

Shakespeare. The cumbersome “Scylla and Charybdis” section of *Ulysses*, which the novice Joyce reader would likely find exhausting, is mostly comprised of Stephen’s seemingly endless references to Shakespeare’s work, which includes many references to *The Tempest*. The invaluable endnotes to the difficult intertextual whirlpool of “Scylla” found in the 2008 Oxford edition of *Ulysses* runs an incredible 37 pages, which is almost as long as “Scylla” itself. The Oxford edition of *Ulysses* would have surely engrossed Ellison had he lived to read it, based on Ellison’s affinity for the extensive footnotes Eliot provides in *The Waste Land*. I would argue that Ellison draws not on Shakespeare himself in his epistolary reference to *The Tempest*; more likely, Ellison derives his analogies of Shakespeare and Caliban from Eliot’s and Joyce’s reverence for Shakespeare. The reference to “Shakespeare becoming Caliban” in Ellison’s letter might only exist on a symbolistic, metareferential, punning, and playful level for Ellison; Ellison is, in other words, philosophizing “on the lower frequencies” in his letter merely for his and Murray’s enjoyment.

The comparison of Louis Armstrong to Caliban, however, is apt. At the time of the composition of *Invisible Man*, Armstrong was shunned by contemporary jazz artists, mostly by musicians from the bop genre, but also by Black audiences to a certain extent as well. While Armstrong was popular with White audiences for decades, he began to be largely seen by Black musicians of the day as an “Uncle Tom” who pandered to White audiences for money and fame. As Katherine Cora Harrison notes, Armstrong also seemed to have “exaggerated gestures” – his wide grinning and popping eyes, for example – which Armstrong’s contemporaries interpreted as minstrel stereotypes (219). Notably, Armstrong’s track “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue,” which the narrator discusses at length in the prologue, was originally written by Fats Waller. But Armstrong’s version of the song

partially rewrites the lyrics and tones down the theme of racial discrimination. Because of this, one might interpret Armstrong's cut of the song to be an effort to appeal to White audiences. But one can also compare the sonic otherness that surrounds Armstrong's image to the scene from *The Tempest* when Caliban soliloquizes on Stephano's reaffirmation of his servitude to Prospero:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
The clouds me thought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again. (III.ii.129-137).

For Harrison, the invisibility of Ellison's narrator is shaped by the "competing voices" of his cultural and rhetorical influences, namely the Brotherhood and Louis Armstrong (21).

Caliban is also torn between competing voices, though, unlike Ellison's narrator, Caliban's servitude is a noisy lostness of intellectual and symbolic misunderstanding as well as racialized shame. On the other hand, the narrator's underground, which is likewise a kind of "isle full of noises," is a transmogrified space of artistic formation and burgeoning cultural and discursive sonic understanding. Ellison's reference to Caliban in his letter to Murray is also an example of auditory imagination, which Ellison expresses in his epistle as a visual-sonic and intertextual buttressing of possibly untested sonic and literary theories. Since

Murray does not respond to Ellison's comments on Caliban in his epistolary response, it is possible that Ellison crafted the Armstrong-Caliban reference more as a clever visual-sonic image, which hinges on his adherence to a self-actualizing, universalizing insight of the sonic, rather than a serious discussion point for Murray to respond to.

Where Caliban ignores the noises of reason and psychologically seeps into the unreality of servitude in *The Tempest*, the narrator of *Invisible Man* seeks to emerge from the psychological underground of segregation and oppression with a sonic and intellectual awareness of the nuances of his subjectivity. While the beboppers of the late 1940s, Ellison argues, see Armstrong as a musical relic and an Uncle Tom, Ellison himself finds the comparison itself oppressive and unproductive. Ellison's use of Shakespeare in his compelling and nuanced letter to Murray is arguably an example of Ellison creating his own intellectual sonic montage, which is intended to fragment and disrupt the discursive meaning applied to Armstrong in the culture and popular music of the time. Tellingly, in another letter to Murray from 1953, Ellison reflects on the texts and lessons he was expected to learn at Tuskegee; Ellison refers to his educations as: "Waiting to see if I'd grown a tail or spoke Shakespearean jive out of my anus, or walked on my elbows" (331). In rejecting the influence of Tuskegee educators, namely William Dawson, Ellison draws on the significance of sound, voice, and African-American vernacular. Ellison here also channels Eliot (as well as the vulgarity of Joyce), whose *The Waste Land* itself contains the strikingly reminiscent and transformative line: "O O O O that Shakespeherian rag— / It's so elegant / So Intelligent" (ll. 128-130). In this line, Eliot is referring to Gene Buck and Herman Ruby's 1912 track "Shakespearean Rag" (North 85). But Eliot also transforms the wordage of the track for his own purposes, as Ellison does similarly in his repurposing of *The Tempest* in his letter to

Murray. Ultimately, Ellison's literary education of Eliot's sonic and intertextual style shapes his own earwitness, quasi-autobiographical, and sound-conscious approach, which is itself reflected in his narrator's purposefully vocal and auditory path to artistic self-actualization and philosophizing on sonic existentialism.

In the next chapter, I build on my discussion of Eliot's impact on Ellison's approach by exploring the philosophies of the sonic that Ellison's narrator develops over the course of *Invisible Man*. I focus on the narrator's time at the Southern college near the beginning of the novel (chapter 2 *Invisible Man*). I do so in order to examine the roots of the philosophy of the sonic he develops over the course of the novel. In the sonic underground of the prologue, the narrator describes his critical apperception of the significance of sonic experience, which has taken him almost two decades to hone and refine. In his cellar, the narrator deliberates on the existential and philosophical impact of sonic situations, which are built on personal perceptual acumens that have developed, changed, and matured over the course of the novel. His mature awareness of earwitnessing and individual sonic experience is rooted in his early experiences, at the college and in other episodes, where the narrator gleans that the sonic is important to him, but he does not yet have the words or insight to immediately critically appraise its import.

Chapter Three:

Crack Under the Floor: Threshold Sound Signals and Surreal Sounds at the Southern College

Ellison notes in his letters and interviews that the narrator's tone and narration become gradually more "surreal" over the course of *Invisible Man*. In a 1956 letter to Richard Brown, Ellison describes the stylistic evolution of his novel from beginning to end as follows: "The hero accepts society and his predicament seems 'right' but as he moves through his experiences they become progressively more, for the want of a better word, 'surrealistic.' Nothing is as it seems and in the fluidity of society strange juxtapositions lend a quality of nightmare" (Letter to Richard Brown. 16 Aug. 1956). In John O'Brien's preamble to his 1972 interview with Ellison, O'Brien relays a similar point: "Ellison molded a style which moves, as he has suggested elsewhere, from naturalism, to expressionism, to surrealism" (223)⁶⁵. Certain episodes of Ellison's novel are more "surreal" than others: in general, his novel becomes more surreal as the narrative progresses, which is important to note because his text likewise becomes noisier as the narrative advances. It seems that there is a correlation to be made between Ellison's description of the "nightmarish" and "surreal" scenes of the riot

⁶⁵ From a compositional point of view, Ellison seems to mature considerably as a writer over the course of writing *Invisible Man*. Ellison spent over a decade trying to produce a first novel, with *Invisible Man* itself being composed between 1945 and 1951. Ellison committed a lot of work in the late 1930s to composing an autobiographical novella, *Slick*, which he ultimately scrapped. Ellison continued to tinker with his style and the incorporation of his influences into his work as he matured as writer. His early writing in the late 1930s draws more on autobiography and realism, but his style becomes more complex into the mid-1940s as he begins to lean more into modernism and literary experimentation. As Rampersad writes, the intertextual and experimental tenor of the prologue and epilogue seems to speak to Ellison's confidence that he, in the stretch run of his novel's composition, is able to demonstrate an expertise in American literary styles, genres, and history: "For all its shaggy questioning, the epilogue seals the identity of Invisible Man [the novel's narrator] by at last grounding Ralph, after his years of dialectical wandering, in this noble lineage [of writers and writing]" (258).

chapters and the overwhelming noise of the riot itself, for example. As another point of reference, Ellison describes Wright's *Black Boy* as a lyrical memoir "filled with blues-tempered echoes" of the past, where lyrical descriptions of poverty are juxtaposed with memories of trauma: "Like a blues sung by such an artist as Bessie Smith, its [Wright's *Black Boy*] lyrical prose evokes the paradoxical, almost surreal image of a black boy singing lustily as he probes his own grievous wound" (130). The surreal moment, for Ellison, seems to be a lyrical description of an overwhelming, traumatic, or even "nightmarish" sonic situation that puts the reader off-balance. This being said, Ellison's exact definition of surrealism is somewhat unclear and requires some elaboration in order to parse his meaning⁶⁶.

Ellison and his biographers often point to the later episodes in his novel, along with the prologue and epilogue, as being the most surreal, strange, noisy, and "nightmarish" chapters in the novel. The surreal moments in Ellison's novel are usually described as sonic experiences since the narrator either calls attention to intrusive and unfamiliar sounds, expresses his thoughts in a more lyrical or musical manner, or integrates a lyrical, musical, or sonorous pun or reference into his narration. In more detail, a "surreal moment," for Ellison, seems to be a situation where a person or character becomes immediately cognizant of a juxtaposition or disconnect between how they view themselves and the identity formation that society expects of them. André Breton's *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (1924) offers one of the

⁶⁶ The narrator sometimes notes that his experiences are surreal, but does not exactly elaborate on his meaning. For example, after the narrator speaks to Mr. Emerson's son shortly after his arrival in New York City (chapter 9 of *Invisible Man*), Ellison describes the characters and events that led to the narrator's expulsion from the Southern college as follows: "Trueblood, Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe and the Golden Day swept around my mind in a mad surreal whirl" (136). Moreover, following Brotherhood member Tod Clifton's death, the narrator describes his subsequent disorientation and new disillusionment with Brotherhood ideology thus: "Now, moving through the crowds along 125th Street, I was painfully aware of other men dressed like the boys, and of girls in dark exotic-colored stockings, their costumes surreal variations of downtown styles" (443). Jackson notes that Ellison himself often describes his stylistic flourishes in abstract terms that can be difficult to unpack: "Terms like 'surreal,' 'extended metaphor,' and 'near allegory' were almost as challenging to the ordinary reader as his fiction, a fact for which he did not apologize" (371).

first definitions of surrealism: “Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (26). Ellison, like Breton, arguably sees the surreal as “psychic automatism,” which Breton expands on by drawing on Salvador Dalí’s definition of the term: “a spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based on the critical and systematic objectification of delirious associations and interpretations” (274)⁶⁷.

However, I think that Ellison’s conception of the surreal departs slightly from Breton’s view of the term since Breton argues that surreal experience is “dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.” Ellison’s conception of surrealism is perhaps more comparable to Jean Paul Sartre’s approach to the concept, which Michel Beaujour describes, in “Sartre and Surrealism,” as follows: “Sartre charges that the Surrealists, through their refusal of consciousness (on the pretext that this was a creation of the bourgeoisie), had undercut the basis of all action. Since they rejected subjectivity, they dialectically condemned themselves to reject any belief in an objective reality also” (86)⁶⁸. Ellison’s sense of the term “surrealism” implies that a character experiencing a surreal moment might have some control over their ability to reason and, in the

⁶⁷ Katherine Conley, in “Surrealism and Outsider Art: From the ‘Automatic Message’ to André Breton’s Collection” elaborates on Breton’s difficult definition of psychic automatism thus: “For automatism to be expressed, however, some degree of mediation must be involved, most often in the form of a body—which can be one’s own—suddenly speaking in an unfamiliar voice” (130). Such unconscious bodily movements of the surreal are apparent in Ellison’s essay “Harlem is Nowhere,” which describes the disorienting experience of living in Harlem poverty: “The most surreal fantasies are acted out upon the streets of Harlem; a man ducks in and out of traffic shouting and throwing imaginary grenades that actually exploded during World War I; a boy participates in the rape-robbery of his mother” (322).

⁶⁸ Ellison possibly doesn’t draw on Sartre’s conception of surrealism directly, but the comparison between Ellison and Sartre is still apt. Ellison notes in his letters that he was familiar with Sartre’s philosophy in the 1940s as he composed *Invisible Man*, though Ellison would not read Sartre’s novel *Nausea* (1938) and his other fiction until after *Invisible Man* was published (Letter to F. Burgess, 28 Feb. 1983).

surreal experience, might be prompted to reevaluate their identity, morals, or worldview because the real is intimately juxtaposed to intrusive memories and thoughts about their identity. The surreal in Ellison's writing is expressed through the juxtaposition of discordant narrative styles, sounds, images, or symbols; such symbolic and narrative juxtapositions spur a person or character, either consciously or unconsciously, to recall disjointed memories of sounds, places, people, and experiences that contrast their perception of themselves as an earwitness. Ellison's description of surreal moments often involves people and characters who either describe their present experience in a musical or lyrical way or unconsciously recall sound memories that speak to a discordance between their past and present sonic experiences.

As a point of reference, Ellison describes the narrator's surreal search for both an identity and objective worldview outside the Brotherhood as follows: "During his fall from grace in the Brotherhood, it [the narrative] becomes somewhat surrealistic" since the narrator's interior monologue begins to jump from one style to another in order to "try to express both his state of consciousness and the state of society" (Chester and Howard 16). The narrator describes one scene from the riot that coincides with his reassessment of his role in the Brotherhood as follows:

The rioting seemed in another world. For a moment I paused beneath a low, thickly leaved tree, looking down the well-kept doily-shadowed walks past the silent houses. It was as though the tenants had vanished, leaving the houses silent with all windows shaded, refugees from a rising flood. Then I heard the single footfalls coming doggedly toward me in the night, an eerie slapping sound followed by a precise and hallucinated cry—

“Time’s flying
Souls dying
The coming of the Lord
Draweth niiiigh!” (553-4)

This scene positions the narrator as an earwitness who is confused about his present circumstances, and, by extension, the identity formation that has led him to this point. Since the narrator has retreated to a quieter street currently unaffected by the riot, his opening statement here, “the rioting seemed in another world,” implies that he might still be able to hear the “loud, riotous air” of the violence a few blocks away (553). The narrator ultimately ceases to hide on this relatively quiet street when he hears “the single footfalls coming doggedly toward [him] in the night, an eerie slapping sound,” which is followed by the “hallucinated cry” of an anonymous rioter shouting a lyric.

In this scene, Ellison’s style shifts on an almost sentence-by-sentence basis: the passage begins with straightforward exposition, leads to sonic analogies and metaphors, and ends with a lyric. The description of the “single footfalls” of rioters is a paradoxical sonic image that focuses on the chaos of sounds heard instead of images seen. The narrator is then startled out of his philosophizing on “refugees from a rising flood” by “eerie slapping sound[s]” of anonymous, rushing rioters⁶⁹. In the surreal moments of Ellison’s novel, “Nothing is as it seems and in the fluidity of society strange juxtapositions lend a quality of nightmare” (Letter to Richard Brown, 16 Aug. 1956). The lyric itself, as printed on the page,

⁶⁹ The sonic image of “single footfalls” is paradoxical because “single footfall” or “several footfalls” would make more sense from a literal perspective. This paradoxical sonic image perhaps implies that the narrator is not sure how many footfalls he hears in the chaos of the moment. It is possible that the narrator hears either one rioter or several people running. Because the narrator cannot see the origin of the sound of footfalls, the sound of several rushing feet blends into an ambiguous sonic image of “eerie slapping sounds” that reflects the narrator’s inability to perceive the exact context of the sounds in a moment of panic.

also seems too precise to be either heard clearly or shouted cogently in the chaos of a riot, I think, which makes its usage disorienting because it calls into question what is real and what isn't. Since the narrator arguably does not hear the "cry" as precisely as he suggests – it is also described as "hallucinated," for example – the textual description of the lyric is possibly an *ad hoc* revision the narrator makes in the cellar of the prologue and epilogue, where he recounts his past and writes his memoirs. In other words, the lyric printed on the page is possibly not the exact sonic imprint the narrator actually heard in the moment, but is instead a partial reconstruction of a similar lyric from his memory. While much of the riot episode is loud and clamorous, this scene juxtaposes various perceptions of silence and sound – communicated through differing styles of interior monologue – in order to demonstrate the "surreal" experience of potentially being harmed by a mob of anonymous, strange faces on a street that would probably be familiar to the narrator during the day.

Importantly, Ellison's notion of surrealism integrates realism and pushes back on naturalism, a popular trend in 1940s Black literature. Naturalism, in more detail, concerns "the destructive forces of nature and industry that threatened Negroes migrating to the urban North" (Jackson 262). A naturalistic text is generally presented in a realistic style, as if the reader is intended to believe the events could actually occur; however, naturalism is distinct from realism since naturalism emphasizes a sentimental attachment to the protagonist, which usually arises with the death of the protagonist at the end of the text⁷⁰. With Black realism,

⁷⁰ For example, most of Richard Wright's work features somewhat "realistic" characters and settings. But his work is more naturalist than realist in scope since his texts almost always end with a death of the Black protagonist, which is meant to prompt the reader into feeling empathy for the life and meaning of the Black individual. Wright's 1938 short story "Down by the Riverside," for instance, focuses on a Black man, Mann, who struggles to save impoverished Black residents in a flood. In order to help as many residents as he can, Mann decides to steal a boat owned by a White man, Heartfield. Mann inadvertently kills Heartfield after the White man fires upon him during the theft of the boat. Mann is ultimately killed at the end of the story by soldiers brought to the scene to aid with the rescue effort. This story is considered naturalistic, or, more specifically, Black naturalist, because the text demonstrates "the destructive forces of nature and industry that

on the other hand, the narrative would make no obvious appeal to sentimentality: “The writer of realistic fiction, Ellison argued, had a sacred duty, such as that displayed by the heroic André Malraux, to detail emergent forms of liberating social consciousness” (Jackson 262). Ellison’s sense of surrealism integrates moments of realism – non-sentimental and realistic characters and settings – into situations where a character is so overwhelmed and traumatized that they are impelled to compare their current situation to the personal and historical trajectory that has led them to that point.

In this chapter, I study the first Southern college episode of *Invisible Man*, an episode that comes early in Ellison’s novel that also employs Ellison’s surrealist technique (chapter 2 of *Invisible Man*). The final chapters of *Invisible Man* that concern the riot in Harlem, along with the prologue and epilogue, are usually considered to be the most surreal, modernist, fragmentary, and symbolic sections of the novel, and are noticeably different in style and tone from the more naturalistic or realistic tenor of some of the novel’s earlier chapters. The naturalistic battle royal episode (chapter 1 of *Invisible Man*), for example, compels the reader to empathize with the narrator’s plight through various scenes where racial prejudice might seem immediately apparent or sometimes over-the-top. In other words, the battle royal is more naturalistic than realistic because the reader is compelled to empathize with the narrator’s experience of boxing other Blacks blindfolded, which is followed by a hyperbolic scene where the narrator collects money from an electrified floor. I argue that the first Southern college episode blends surrealism, realism, and naturalism in a disorientating

threatened Negroes migrating to the urban North” (Jackson 262). While Wright’s settings and characters are intended to have a degree of realism, the sentimentalized death of the protagonist at the end of the narrative – which, in several of Wright’s works, tends to be predictable or hyperbolic – is less realistic and more of a thematic necessity that directly and unsubtly expresses the inhumanity and unfairness of racism and segregation.

manner. This episode includes abrupt and discordant shifts in these styles, as well as varying sonic metaphors, which lead to sonic moments that prompt the narrator to reconsider his identity, purpose, and the impact of sonic memory on his worldview. While the earlier chapters of *Invisible Man* are generally naturalistic or realistic in scope, I contend that some earlier episodes in the novel also draw on a surrealist technique that blends different narrative styles into an existential monologue. Ellison uses surrealism sparsely but concisely in his depiction of sonic experience in this early episode and others in order to gradually develop the narrator's attentiveness towards sound, the importance of earwitnessing to his identity, and his own self-awareness, as well as establish the theme of surrealism that becomes more apparent later in the novel. While the novel's earlier chapters are much more naturalist or realistic in general, I argue that the early sections of Ellison's novel gradually integrate Ellison's sense of surrealism into the narrator's sonic experience in order to demonstrate his gradually evolving understanding of earwitnessing, his identity, and how society views him.

Beacon: Surreal Soundscapes in *Invisible Man*

The focus of this chapter is the narrator's perception of unfamiliar sounds in the first Southern college episode as surreal and disorienting (chapter 2 of *Invisible Man*). Any given episode in *Invisible Man* tends to be localized in one or more soundscapes that contain sounds, noises, music, and speech acts that are sonically and contextually exclusive to that episode's locations. When entering an acoustic environment for the first time, the narrator is sometimes affronted by defamiliarizing sounds. The sounds the narrator experiences when he enters a

new location can be considered “surreal” because the sounds of these new locations conflict with the comfort of his sonic memory. The seemingly strange sounds of a new soundscape mnemonically cue the narrator to experience a moment of introspection, where he compares the sounds heard in the moment to the sounds of his past. Like T.S. Eliot’s sonorous *The Waste Land*, the sounds the narrator encounters in new environments are presented in varying lyrical styles; the surreal sounds of new environments in Ellison’s novel can be compared to Arnold Rampersad’s assessment of *The Waste Land*, which argues that Eliot employs “myriad literary allusions, rhythms, and tones, . . . complex syntax, and . . . mysterious, montage-like structure” (65). In a surreal moment, the narrator of Ellison’s novel is prompted to reflect on the disconnect between past and present sounds, which leads him to re-evaluate how he perceives himself and the importance of his sonic memory in comparison to how others see him and the unique sonic experiences of others.

In speaking of how the soundscape of each episode in Ellison’s novel is unique, it is useful to discuss Schafer’s three core aspects of the soundscape: “keynote sounds,” “sound signals,” and “soundmarks.” Schafer’s three criteria of the soundscape are beneficial for examining the contextual, symbolic, and psychological nuances of the sounds of the many locations and episodes in Ellison’s novel. Schafer elaborates on his terminology as follows: keynote sounds are recognizable sounds regularly heard in a landscape’s geography – wind, birds, etc. – which “do not have to be listened to consciously; they are overheard but cannot be overlooked;” sound signals are “foreground sounds [that] are listened to consciously” and usually come in the form of acoustic warnings (bells, sirens, etc.); soundmark “refers to a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community. Once a soundmark has been identified, it deserves

to be protected, for soundmarks make the acoustic life of the community unique” (10)⁷¹. A key aspect of Schafer’s three criteria of the soundscape is that the definition of keynote sounds, sound signals, and soundmarks vary depending on the psychological context and cultural background of the listener⁷².

The soundscape the narrator describes at the beginning of the first Southern college episode can add clarity to Schafer’s terms. At the end of the battle royal episode, where the narrator is forced to fight other Blacks blindfolded, he is given a scholarship to a Southern college, which is partially modelled on Ellison’s time at Tuskegee. At the college, the narrator is eventually tasked with chauffeuring a trustee of the college, Mr. Norton. The narrator’s route leads to an excursion through the old slave quarters located on the campus, which leads Mr. Norton to demand that they stop at one of the cabins to speak to one of the sharecroppers, Jim Trueblood. Mr. Norton then becomes dehydrated and faint, and is ill-advisedly given liquor to aid his deteriorating vitality at a nearby bar, The Golden Day. The

⁷¹ Schafer also explains that a soundmark might not be immediately recognizable as important in the moment of listening but can still significantly shape the individual’s memory of a particular temporal and sonic landscape. Schafer offers a personal sonic memory as an example: “As the churn was pumped for half an hour or more, an almost imperceptible change in tone and texture occurred as the slopping cream gradually turned to butter. The hand-operated pump, also on the decline, now snaps into memory as a soundmark of my youth, though at the time I listened to it carelessly” (48).

⁷² Schafer offers the following example of a sound that can be perceived differently based on ones’ cultural background: “Noise by-laws are not created arbitrarily by individuals; they are argued into existence by societies. Hence they can be read to reveal different cultural attitudes toward sound phobias. For instance, along with articles dealing with well-known noise sources, the city of Genoa (Italy), in its *Regolamento di Polizia Comunale* [Municipal Police Regulations] (1969), identifies some unusual problems. Article 65 states that from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m., shutters must be opened and closed as quietly as possible. A keynote for the European, the shutter is a soundmark for the outsider” (197). Schafer also defines the church bell as a sound signal, but based on his description, it sounds like the church bell could also be considered a soundmark (though Schafer does not state this): “The most salient sound signal in the Christian community is the church bell. In a very real sense it defines the community, for the parish is an acoustic space, circumscribed by the range of the church bell” (53-54). It seems that Schafer’s terminology functions as a starting point for unpacking the varying degrees of psychological resonance that sounds have on a listener (keynotes and sound signals) as well as the symbolic importance that individuals and communities place on sounds (sound signals and soundmarks). However, the nuances of a given soundscape, as Schafer implies, can make his three criteria imprecise, or, perhaps intentionally, invite more thorough analysis of sounds that are privileged by some listeners and ignored by others, which also points to the malleable representational qualities of the sonic in general.

narrator is later blamed by Mr. Bledsoe, a college administrator, for this disastrous detour and expelled from the college. At the beginning of the first college episode, the narrator provides his initial impressions of his exploration of the college grounds – before he meets Mr. Norton and Jim Trueblood – which he describes as a disorienting, surreal, and liberating moment of agency that he had not previously experienced:

I've recalled it often, here in my hole: How the grass turned green in the springtime and how the mocking birds fluttered their tails and sang, how the moon shone down on the buildings, how the bell in the chapel tower rang out the precious short-lived hours; how the girls in bright summer dresses promenaded the grassy lawn. Many times, here at night, I've closed my eyes and walked along the forbidden road that winds past the girls' dormitories, past the hall with the clock in the tower, its windows warmly aglow, on down past the small white Home Economics practice cottage, whiter still in the moonlight, and on down the road with its sloping and turning, paralleling the Black powerhouse with its engines droning earth-shaking rhythms in the dark, its windows red from the glow of the furnace, on to where the road became a bridge over a dry riverbed, tangled with brush and clinging vines . . . I always come this far and open my eyes. . . . And then it is suddenly winter, with the moon high above and the chimes in the steeple ringing and a sonorous choir of trombones rendering a Christmas carol; and over all is a quietness and an ache as though all the world were loneliness. And I stand and listen beneath the high-hung moon, hearing "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," majestically mellow on four trombones, and then the organ. The sound floats over all, clear

like the night, liquid, serene, and lonely. . . . And sometimes I listen to hear if music reaches that far, but recall only the drunken laughter of sad, sad whores. . . . It's so long ago and far away that here in my invisibility I wonder if it happened at all. (34-36)

A key aspect of the narrator's reflection on the sound signals of the college is his framing of such sounds as surreal, dream-like, and otherworldly⁷³. The use of music and lyrical prose in this passage can be considered surreal because they, like blues and jazz, "combine to orchestrate the sometimes surreal nature of much of what makes up modern African-American urban consciousness" (Rampersad 197)⁷⁴. In speaking of the musical sound signals of the campus, the narrator recalls: "Oh, drum that marched us militarily at noon – what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream?" and "If real, why is it that I can recall in all that island of greenness no fountain but one that was broken, corroded and dry? . . . I'm convinced it was the product of a subtle magic, the alchemy of moonlight" (36-37). The narrator considers these sound signals "otherworldly" because he is less certain of their meaning in the moment, as he has only recently arrived in this unfamiliar soundscape. In the battle royal chapter that precedes the first college episode, for comparison, the narrator grasps for familiar sounds in order to steady himself when he is singled out to fight other

⁷³ We can glean several other instances of Schafer's criteria in this passage from Ellison's novel. The narrator perceives the singing of mocking birds as keynote sounds since he mostly focuses on describing the sounds of the campus's geography rather than his own emotional impressions. The sounding of the chapel bell and clock tower can be considered sound signals since the narrator points to the clock's acoustics several times in the chapter's opening passage and he consciously reflects on their effect on his psyche and daily routines as they "rang out the precious short-lived hours" (34). Other acoustics in the passage are mostly sound signals as well: the narrator consciously listens to the chimes of steeple and the Christmas choir and reflects on their sounds in an emotional manner.

⁷⁴ The full passage from Rampersad's biography reads as follows: "Jazz (and especially the bebop jazz that exploded in New York during the war) was inspirational because of its devious challenges to the conventions that had come to dominate popular music; blues also mattered in its equally determined refusal of an orderly separation of the comic and the tragic, laughter and tears. Both forms combine to orchestrate the sometimes surreal nature of much of what makes up modern African-American urban consciousness" (197).

Blacks in the boxing ring: “I strained to pick up the school superintendent’s voice, as though to squeeze some security out of that slightly more familiar sound” (21). The transition from the end of the battle royal episode to the beginning of the first college episode comes in the form of narrative fragmentation, as does the shift in narrator’s point of view from having “no insight into its meaning” to a nuanced attempt at unpacking the sounds and symbols of his initial arrival at the college. Additionally, the battle royal episode begins with the narrator recounting the events of the battle royal in more a linear, naturalistic, and unintrospective manner – “I spoke automatically and with such fervor that I did not realize that the men were still talking and laughing until my dry mouth, filling up with blood from the cut, almost strangled me” (30) – and ends with the narrator falling asleep and slipping into a reverie of chaotic and disconnected sonic dream imagery that forecasts the surreal, dreamlike monologue that begins the first college episode.

Like the scene where the narrator hides on a quiet street during the riot, the beginning of the first college episode moves from basic exposition, into a fantasy of sonic memory (“I always come this far and open my eyes”), and culminates with the sonic interruption of a song. The surreal nature of the college’s soundscape is evident in the juxtaposition of sound and quiet, as when the narrator follows his description of the “sonorous choir” of Christmas music by reflecting that the scene carries a “quietness and an ache as though all the world were loneliness.” The passage, overall, oscillates between various styles of exposition, beginning with realism, straightforward scene-setting, and ending with a lyrical fantasy of penetrating the meaning and memory of the soundscape. The surreal sounds of the scene lead the narrator to reconsider his identity, his sonic experiences up to this point, and the significance of sonic memory in general: “It’s so long ago and far away that here in my

invisibility I wonder if it happened at all.” The narrator’s sonic memory and impressions of music can be compared to Gemma Moss’s characterization of “musical meaning” in “Classical Music and Literature”: “Musical meaning is, then, constituted by memory and has a temporal aspect, reaching backwards into the past situations through and in which the meaning arose, and recreating those feelings in the present in a way that might anticipate the revival of the associated emotions or sensations in the future. Music is able to have these affective meanings because people make connections based on context and memory” (104). Since this scene occurs early in the narrator’s development as an intellectual earwitness, his introspection is less critical and sophisticated here and more reliant on emotional impressions of musical meaning. In other words, he vaguely identifies the emotional importance of keynote sounds, sound signals, and soundmarks, but cannot yet fully grasp their meaning as he probes their significance in his memory.

Beam: The Liminal Dimension of Threshold Sound Signals

Since surreal sounds in *Invisible Man* tend to denote the narrator’s passage from one location to another, these sounds infer a liminal passage from a more familiar soundscape to a new, unfamiliar, and intellectually-challenging sonic environment. The surreal and sonic moment of the narrator’s disorientating passage into a new soundscape can be referred to as a “threshold sound signal.” I introduce the term “threshold sound signal” to specifically describe any sound that indicates a liminal event, ritual, or existential transformation. A threshold sound signal denotes a sound or musical cue that seems out of place in the

soundscape because it will likely only be heard once, at the moment of transition from one sonic environment to another. The strange uniqueness of the threshold sound signal thereby prompts the subject to consider that they are passing between soundscapes; in one sense, a threshold sound signal is musical or sonic object that, in a similar sense that Ana María Ochoa Gauthier postulates, “is separated from its original context [and thus] enters a realm of symbolic interpretation that can be highly ambiguous” (399). Threshold sound signals are surreal and disorienting because they beg one to attempt to contextualize them due to their ambiguity; in considering the meanings of the threshold sound signal, one is also compelled to contrast the soundscapes they are passing between. The essentially liminal and surreal dimension of a threshold sound signal is integral to the narrator’s perception of the sonic and the importance he places on sonic memory because the ambiguity of threshold sound signals can lead to critical insight or a moment of clarity about one’s present identity and personal, educational trajectory as an earwitness. Since Ellison is foremost concerned with the African-American developing into an intellectual artist and earwitness, threshold sound signals are key moments that can lead one to think critically about themselves and their relation to discursive institutions, such as the African-American education system.

As a point of refence, I find that threshold sound signals are abundant in speculative, utopian, and dystopian texts, among other genres, as threshold sound signals indicate the protagonist’s passage from their own world to the world or utopia that serves as the text’s main setting. For example, films from speculative and psychological horror genres with rich sound production and soundtracks, such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *Midsommar* (2019), often mark the protagonist’s entry into a strange new world with a disorientating and unfamiliar threshold sound signal. In *The Matrix*, when the protagonist Neo is unplugged from a

simulation of what he thought was the real world, his passage from the simulation to the real is marked by the sound of his suffocated, digitalized, and depersonalized scream as the camera zooms down his throat. This sound is a threshold sound signal because it only exists in the process of unplugging but importantly epitomizes his rebirth in the real and recognizing the truth of reality. In *Midsommar*, American students enter a Swedish commune, which, unbeknownst to them, practices cultish death rituals based on seasonal change, by passing through an ornate wooden gateway in the shape of the sun whilst residents of the commune play an idyllic flute melody. Despite the typical softness of the instrument, the music overpowers the scene to ease the students' entry into an unfamiliar and potentially dangerous world. The overwhelming music of the flutes – paradoxically both soft and loud – almost becomes extra-diegetic, which implies that the characters will only hear this sound once in its comforting, lulling tenor, upon first entering the commune.

Approaching the surreal sounds of *Invisible Man* through the optic of liminality adds a psychoacoustic frame of reference to the surreal sound signals in the novel. This is a criterion that adds necessary nuance and context to the listener's approach to the novel's sound signals, which Schafer himself admits is somewhat lacking in his three broad criteria of the soundscape. Among the works of Ellison's contemporaries and influences, one can often observe a protagonist's passage from a familiar landscape to a more disorientating and dystopian world being marked by a liminal moment of overwhelming and strange threshold sound signals. As discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation, Rudolph Fisher's "The City of Refuge" begins with King Solomon Gillis's transit from Penn Station to Harlem, which is defined by "strange and terrible sounds" and "snapping turnstiles" that resemble rifle fire but also contrast the generally calmer soundscapes of the South (3). This threshold sound signal

is unique to Gillis's entry into Harlem because his association of the turnstiles with rifle fire only occurs in this scene. Gillis is overwhelmed by the "snapping" sound of turnstiles because he has not used or heard turnstiles before: he instinctively blends a present sound with a sonic memory in order to grasp its meaning in his incomplete understanding of the unfamiliar soundscape of Harlem. In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), a core influence on Ellison, Huck escapes his abusive father by faking his death in order to raft the Mississippi at his leisure; the next day, he is awoken by the sound of ferry-boat cannons firing into the river, with the intent of surfacing his presumed drowned corpse. Startled, Huck exclaims: "I thinks I hears a deep sound of 'boom!' away up the river;" this is a sonic event that signifies his symbolic rebirth outside of traditional Southern society (35). Finally, in his mentor Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the murder that Bigger commits – which comes to define the protagonist as a stereotype of an impulsive, brutal, and unintellectual African-American – transpires when Mrs. Dalton, the blind wife of Bigger's rich, White employer, almost catches Bigger carrying her intoxicated daughter Mary into her bedroom. Since Mrs. Dalton cannot see who is in the room, she merely assumes Mary has come home drunk. In an effort to conceal his presence in Mary's bedroom – a "crime" that might have led to his lynching even if there was no intended wrongdoing – Bigger accidentally and silently suffocates Mary so Mrs. Dalton cannot hear his sonic presence or any noises that might be considered suspicious. Mary's soft and startled cry of her suffocation is a sound that Bigger does not immediately recognize as an act of struggling for breath. Mary's cry is a threshold sound signal that Bigger only hears once in a unique and strange context, which ultimately changes the trajectory of his life. In each of these examples, the protagonist passes from one world to another – or, more specifically, from one distinct sonic worldview

informed by their location to another, entirely different soundscape and sonic perception – by passing through a threshold of sound that marks and defines their transfigured perception and being.

Threshold sound signals appear frequently throughout *Invisible Man*. Ellison's use of liminal and threshold sounds to signify the narrator's passage from a familiar location to a surreal and disorienting soundscape recalls his interest in mythology, symbolic ritual, and the influence of geography on one's psychology. Anthropologist Victor Turner's assessment of ritualized and symbolic liminal rites can provide insight into how Ellison configures threshold sound signals. According to Patrick Parrinder, Turner's work popularizes and builds on the work of Arnold Van Gennep, whose research on liminal rites of passage in French folklore, "divided such rites into three stages, the preliminal (rites of separation), liminal (rites of transition), and postliminal (rites of incorporation). Modern anthropology, under the influence of Victor Turner, has focused on the liminal rites and on the uncertainties of transition or in-betweenness, rather than on the ultimate goal of reincorporation into the social structure" (10). Parrinder continues:

First there is the protagonist's separation from the structures of his society, leading to isolation, fratricidal strife, or a denial of the claims of others. Secondly, the narrator must pass a forbidden boundary, a portal which marks the end of the old world and the beginning of the new. Thirdly, the liminal state of moving between worlds involves a timeless condition, or as Turner puts it a "moment in and out of time," or . . . a state to which the structural view of time is not applicable.' Fourthly, the moment of liminality is anthropomorphically transgressive: it is a 'time of marvels' in which

‘[m]asked figures, representing gods, ancestors, or chthonic powers may appear in grotesque, monstrous, or beautiful forms.’ Finally, [there is] an experience of death leading to rebirth in which the ‘biological order of birth and death is reversed’ (11)⁷⁵.

Parrinder’s assessment of Turner’s ideas are applicable to the narrator’s sonorous liminal experiences in *Invisible Man* in the first college episode. In the rest of this section, I outline how the threshold sound signals from the beginning of the first college episode align with Turner and Parrinder’s assessment of liminal rites of passage and the significance of sound as the defining aspect of the narrator’s liminal transition in this and other episodes in the novel. Several early scenes in the novel include liminal and surreal moments that demonstrate the narrator’s gradual development into an intellectual earwitness and artist. The narrator slowly learns to become keenly aware of the significance of earwitnessing and sonic memory, which he eventually incorporates into the memoirs he aims to write in the prologue’s underground of sound. Below, I provide a table that compares various liminal episodes of sonic unreality in *Invisible Man* where the narrator experiences a surreal transfiguration of sonic perception (Fig. 7). The idea for this table comes from Parrinder’s article, as he uses a similar table to compare various utopian texts that describe a protagonist’s liminal traversal between their own world and the strange, new land of the text’s utopia (Parrinder 11-12).

⁷⁵ Parrinder’s article on liminal rites in dystopian fiction is an eye-opening and concise study of liminality in utopian fiction which can be applied to a variety of genres, hence my discussion of liminal moments in both popular films and Ellison’s influences and contemporaries that began this chapter. I draw on Parrinder in this chapter since Parrinder’s piece is the inspiration for my analysis of Ellison’s treatment of sonic liminality. The dystopian quality of the Harlem riot from the final chapters of *Invisible Man* also demonstrates that Turner’s and Parrinder’s conceptualization of liminal transition is applicable in texts outside the utopian and science fiction (SF) genres.

	<i>Beginning of the first college episode (chapter 2)</i>	<i>Liberty Paints hospital episode (chapter 11)</i>	<i>Sybil episode (chapter 24)</i>	<i>Harlem riot episode (chapter 25)</i>
1. Separation from structures of society	The narrator awakes with “the old man’s laughter ringing in [his] ears” (<i>end of chapter 1</i>); the college chapel tower “rang out”	Noise and force of the factory boiler exploding; the narrator is admitted to the factory hospital (<i>end of chapter 10</i>)	The narrator meets Sybil in a bar, where voices sound like an “illusion creating a counter-illusion”	“Thunderous” sounds of the riot seem to cause “time to burst”
2. Forbidden boundary	Passing by the powerhouse with “earth shaking rhythms,” the hospital, and the insane asylum	Unseen noise of the hospital machinery; the narrator hallucinates “The Holy City” and Beethoven’s Fifth	A drunk and boisterous Sybil expects the narrator to sing and make noise like a “Black brute”	Voices rise as the narrator moves through the crowd of rioters
3. “Moment in and out of time”	“The spell breaks;” “it is suddenly winter;” “A Mighty Fortress is our God” is played on four trombones	Sounds, senses, and time become confused while the narrator is administered ECT	The narrator falls asleep drunk and awakens to the disorientating sound of bells	The narrator becomes dizzy; “the day sounds had lost their stable meaning”
4. Symbolic figures appear in a “time of marvels”	Morning bugle and military drum are heard; college benefactors whisper and make speeches	Acousmatic voices of doctors with “mouths working with soundless fury”	Sybil drunkenly slurs her speech in front of an ancient and “labyrinthine” building	Mannequins are seen hanging; the narrator hears “the cracking of bones”
5. Symbolic death and rebirth	Crickets chirp in the “wasteland” of the college; the narrator states: “they were all a part of that other life that’s dead”	The narrator leaves the hospital “vacuum-minded;” he is overwhelmed by traffic and subway noise	“Time runs fluid” as the narrator pictures himself drowned; the riot begins to roar in the distance	The narrator plunges into the underground; he is castrated in a dream

Fig. 7. Table of various episodes from *Invisible Man* that demonstrate threshold sound signals and significant liminal moments of passing from one soundscape to another.

At the beginning of first college episode, the narrator makes a point of noting that he is reflecting on the college from the prologue's underground with his more sonically- and self-aware perception, rather than attempting to narrate the scene from the point of view he had at the time when the scene initially unfolded. The narrator's reminiscence of threshold sound signals at the college can be considered an example of what Paul C. Jasen terms "myth-science." Jasen describes the term in his text on sonic liminality, *Low End Theory: Bass, Bodies and the Materiality of Sonic Experience* (2016), as follows: "Sonic fictions theorize becomings and conceptual affects; they attempt to find language for the mystifying feeling of affect's escape – the sense that one is caught up in more than meets the ear, and that reality doesn't quite add up" (15). Jasen borrows the term from jazz musician Sun Ra – a term Sun Ra popularized during his fusion period of the early 1970s – which Jasen defines as a means to "describe the myths and vernacular strategies that emerge around low-frequency sound's capacity to defamiliarize the world and inflect it differently" (14). Jasen's text focuses largely on low-frequency sounds that are too low to be heard, but his analytic framework applies to the experience of sonic bodies in general. The liminal aspect of the narrator's narration in the first college episode mirrors his own status as a liminal subject in the prologue's underground, which is itself a space "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial," as Victor Turner defines liminality in his text *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969) (93). Additionally, the narrator's final, somewhat abstract statement from the novel's epilogue, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581), also reinforces his underground status as a subject of sonic liminality in that low frequency sounds exist "just inside that liminal zone at the cusp of audition," as Jasen states (49).

It is applicable to recall one of the opening chapters of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864), which served as Ellison's primary model for writing the prologue and epilogue of *Invisible Man*. In the opening chapters of *Notes*, the protagonist states: "Of course I have myself made up all the things you say. That, too, is from underground. I have been for forty years listening to you through a crack under the floor. I have invented them myself, there was nothing else I could invent. It is no wonder that I have learned it by heart and it has taken a literary form..." (28)⁷⁶. Dostoevsky's protagonist lives in an underground cellar and listens to the society that excluded him through a "crack under the floor." The crack is a liminal space between the outside world and his underground cellar. Ellison's prologue and epilogue seem to riff on this scene by incorporating the underground liminality of Dostoevsky's protagonist into his novel. Dostoevsky's crack and the narrator's hole are both liminal spaces – instead of marginal, abject, etc. – since they are the sonic nexus of personal growth and transition from one world to another. But while the narrative that Dostoevsky's protagonist composes is more of a pessimistic rant that few would want to hear, Ellison casts his narrator as a liminal subject who listens, speaks, and analyzes the outside world that he chose to hibernate from by retelling his life's story on his own terms in his sonic underground, and perhaps without even caring if anyone is listening. So, in narrating the

⁷⁶ This passage comes from Constance Garnett's 1918 translation of *Notes*, which would have been the most widely available translation of Dostoevsky's text at the time that Ellison composed *Invisible Man*. Curiously, for a text that had such a profound effect on Ellison, the Garnett edition does not appear in Ellison's archive. The only translation of *Notes* included in Ellison's archive is David Magarshack's 1955 translation of *Notes*, (more specifically, *Notes* appears in Ellison's copy of The Modern Library's edition of *The Best Short Stories of Dostoevsky*). Since this collection of Dostoevsky's works was released after the 1952 publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison would not have been thinking of Magarshack's translation when writing the prologue and epilogue of his novel (though Ellison referred to this edition in later years when asked about Dostoevsky's influence on him). In any case, what follows is Magarschack's translation of the same passage quoted above, for comparison: "Now, of course, I've made up all this speech of yours myself. It, too, comes from the dark cellar. I've been listening to your words for forty years through a crack in the ceiling. I have invented them myself. It is the only thing I did invent. No wonder I got it pat and dressed up in a literary form" (128).

beginning of the college episode from the perspective of sonic liminality, the narrator's fragmented and surreal reminiscence of his initial sonic impressions of the college likewise foregrounds the threshold sound signals of the college that he, in hindsight, sees as perceptually transformative.

The narrator's initial separation from society comes in the form of surreal sonic confusion of waking "with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears" at the end of the battle royal episode (33). Reflecting on the existential unreality of the battle royal episode leads the narrator to begin his narration of the first college episode from a similar surreal and isolated point of view, in line with Turner's first criteria of liminal rites, but, again, from a sonic perspective that emphasizes the threshold sound signals of the college, including the chiming of the college chapel bell and clock tower. The "forbidden boundary" that Turner and Parrinder describes comes in the form of the "forbidden road that winds past the girls' dormitories, past the hall with the clock in the tower," as the narrator describes the college. The narrator's winding description of his dream-like journey "down the college road with its "sloping and turning" is comparable to the symbolic "portal which marks the end of the old world and the beginning of the new" that Turner and Parrinder describe. Importantly, the narrator focuses on the sounds of the "black powerhouse with its engines droning earth-shaking rhythms in the dark" at the end of his route, which recalls the droning, labyrinthine acoustics and phonograph of the prologue's underground. The forbidden boundary of the droning powerhouse also recalls scholarly assessments of the existential in-betweenness that comes from listening to underground vibrations, which Shelley Trower describes as "borderline infrasound" that is "defined through subjective perception, while infrasound helps illustrate the instability of its borders and the limits of human experience" (288). The narrator

concludes this initial section of the episode by stating “I always come this far and open my eyes. The spell breaks,” which implies that his sonorous and surreal impressions of the college exist more as a psychoacoustic imprint that combines the old world of his naïve, pre-college perceptions and the new world of his underground sonic impressions. This scene demonstrates that the disorienting and surreal sounds of the college are so unfamiliar that the narrator relies on various sonic memories from his life to fill in the sonic gaps in meaning of this particular memory of the college.

Furthermore, the narrator experiences a sonically definitive “liminal state of moving between worlds [which] involves a timeless condition” and a “moment in and out of time” (Parrinder 11) when he seems to briefly halt his reflection of the college and “opens his eyes,” only to continue his reminiscence in a semi-conscious manner. The narrator then observes: “And then it is suddenly winter, with the moon high above and the chimes in the steeple ringing and a sonorous choir of trombones rendering a Christmas carol; and over all is a quietness and an ache as though all the world were loneliness. And I stand and listen beneath the high-hung moon, hearing ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,’ majestically mellow on four trombones, and then the organ. The sound floats over all, clear like the night, liquid, serene, and lonely” (36). The narrator’s musing on the college jumps quickly between not only sounds, locations, and images but also jarringly forward in time as he ruminates on threshold sound signals that sometimes seem out of place. The threshold sound signals that appear at the beginning of the episode mostly signify the passage of time (the clock tower and chapel bell which “rang out the short lived hours”), while the sudden jump forward in time to the winter occurs when the narrator passes by the insane asylum, the hospital, and the droning powerhouse, and ends with the narrator hearing the hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God,”

played by four trombones. The narrator's description of the hymn as a Christmas carol and "liquid, serene, and lonely" seems a bit odd at first⁷⁷. The hymn is better known as a composition by Martin Luther which served as a Protestant battle hymn or a hymn of "protest against the revocation of [Protestant] liberties" (*A Dictionary of Hymnology* 323), and is generally played by a large choir and orchestra to denote many voices singing and protesting in unison. The narrator's characterization of the hymn as not only a Christmas song but a "lonely" melody suggests that the narrator is either confusing or combining the themes and melodies of the song with different impressions, experiences, and sounds of his past. While the hymn itself begins with trumpets and trombones when played with a full orchestra – though the hymn can be delivered with just a chorus alone with no instrumentation – the narrator's memory of the hymn being played by trombones alone as a "lonely" and "serene" Christmas song seem to be Ellison's attempt to deliberately transfigure the hymn's themes and music through odd but subtle juxtapositions. The description of the song is thus a disorienting marrying of literary, musical, and personal references that conveys an alienating sonic sense of time and place.

The beginning of the first college episode concludes with sonic events that follow Turner and Parrinder's final stages of liminal transition. Following Turner's criteria, an "anthropomorphically transgressive" moment comes when symbolic figures appear in a "time of marvels" in which such "[m]asked figures, representing gods, ancestors, or chthonic powers may appear in grotesque, monstrous, or beautiful forms." Such "marvels" come in

⁷⁷ The hymn is not exactly popular as a song for the holidays, and though I am sure it could be used as such, it is too upbeat to be considered serene. The song's description is thus another juxtaposition of sonic images and symbols. The most recent encyclopedia on hymns that predates Ellison's writing *Invisible Man* is John Julian's *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (1907), which does not list any of the many translations of "A Mighty Fortress is our God" as being used specifically for Christmas celebrations (323-325).

the form of the narrator first gazing at the statue of the founder – while he hears but does not see the “rustle of wings” of birds overhead about to defecate on the statue – as he notes the arrival of college benefactors who begin “conversing in whispers, speechmaking into the wide-open ears of our black and yellow faces.” The mix of surreal sonic impressions of the college that bracket the narrator’s description of the Founder’s statue – “Oh, quiet songs at dusk, . . . Oh, bugle that called in the morning” – and the arrival of the college benefactors are presented in a poetic manner, as if to juxtapose a romanticism for the Founder with a poetic parody of the sophisticated sounds that one might initially expect of college experience: “what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream?” This lyrical sentence can also be read rhythmically as a sequence of iambs, as if it were intended to be poetic verse: “Oh, long / green stretch / of cam / -pus, // Oh, qui / -et songs / at dusk, . . . // Oh, bug / -le that / called in / the morn / -ing.” The speech acts of the benefactors, which come as “whispers” and “speechmaking into the wide-open ears” of the students, can be considered “anthropomorphically transgressive” threshold sound signals. The image of the sanitized and soundless statue of the Founder is juxtaposed to the sounds of birds defecating on the statue and the benefactors – the heirs of the Founder – whispering and speechmaking. This last sequence also jumps forward in time, as the narrator notes that “the grass did grow and the green leaves appeared on the trees,” which juxtaposes authoritative sounds, images, and symbols with similar threshold sound signals with unstable meanings.

The narrator then endures “symbolically, an experience of death leading to rebirth in which the ‘biological order of birth and death is reversed.’” This final stage in the narrator’s sonically liminal passage occurs when the narrator begins the succeeding college episode by stating “They were all such a part of that other life that’s dead that I can’t remember them all.

(Time was as I was, but neither that time nor that ‘I’ are any more.)” (37), which signifies that, despite his rumination on the dream-like unreality of the episode, he is perceptually transfigured by the threshold sound signals of his impressions and the fragmented memories of his first experiences at the college. As the narrator concludes his reflection, he notes that the college seems to resemble a “wasteland” that is the “product of a subtle magic, the alchemy of moonlight” (37). The dominant sound the narrator recalls in this surreal wasteland is the chirping of crickets, which perhaps serve as a sonic parody of the American dream, which Ellison has noted elsewhere consists of “the simple living, the snow, the hamburgers and milk shakes, the country music and crickets and corn” (“Indivisible Man” 374)⁷⁸. Or, in typical Ellisonian fashion, Ellison could be riffing on the idiom “hearing crickets” when a bad joke is told, as the narrator often refers to his predicaments as the butt of an “absurd joke” (508). In this case, the joke is the surreal unreality the narrator experiences in viewing the soiled statue of the Founder juxtaposed to the hushed but interpellative “whispers and speeches” that the millionaire college benefactors make to the impressionable, lower-class students. Thus, this first college episode demonstrates that the narrator experiences or remembers sound – which he consciously considers pivotal to his perceptual development – as essentially liminal threshold sound signals.

In the next chapter, I build on my discussion of the narrator’s sonic existential experience by examining the Liberty Paints hospital episode of Ellison’s novel, which describes a different but related soundscape than the first college episode. These two

⁷⁸ The image of crickets also appears in *Invisible Man* when the narrator yells at his landlord, Mary, to “Act civilized!” when he becomes fixated on her coin bank that is modeled in the likeness of a minstrel figure. The narrator breaks the bank and notes “Then came a crash of sound and I felt the iron head crumble and fly apart in my hand. Coins flew over the room like crickets, ringing, rattling against the floor, rolling” (320). The sonic image of crickets is again used here to suggest the wealth and poverty attached to the ‘promise’ of American success.

episodes are related thematically and methodologically because the narrative trajectory from the first college episode to the Liberty Paints episode demonstrates the narrator's development as an intellectual earwitness who is continuously working through critical approaches to evaluating the significance of sonic and earwitness experience. I focus on the significance of strange and unsettling sounds – specifically “acousmatic sounds,” or sounds one can hear but cannot see the source of their resonance – which importantly shape the narrator's perception and intellectual development as an earwitness.

Chapter Four:

Weltschmerz as Flamenco: Tracing the Development of the Narrator's Auditory

Knowledge

Ralph Ellison had a lifelong fascination with technologies of modernity, including building his own audio equipment in his youth, taking up amateur photography during the composition of *Invisible Man*, and, in 1982, being one of the first people to purchase a personal computer (Letter to Ron Burke, 10 Dec. 1982). Ellison's interest in sound technology can be traced to collecting, assembling, and experimenting with radio equipment in his youth with a neighbourhood friend, whom he called "Hoolie." In a 1985 letter to Hoolie, Ellison elaborates on the significance of bonding over experimenting with sound technology⁷⁹:

Always a music lover, I had become interested in high fidelity, and upon coming across an article on the Williamson amplifier in *Audio* magazine, I studied the circuit and decided that I remembered enough from the old days to build it – which I did. . . . What is interesting about all this is that I made . . . contact . . . [with David Sarser], a violinist in the N.B.C. Symphony, the famous orchestra which he joined after studying at Julliard, and it was through him that I soon found myself not only wiring room amplifiers and assisting in the installation of hi-fi sound systems, but having the delightful experience of

⁷⁹ Despite not reconnecting until the 1980s, Ellison held his friendship with Hoolie – whose name he would later learn was Herman Bowman Otto Davis – in high regard throughout his life, as he explains in the 1961 interview "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview": "Like so many kids of the twenties, I played around with radio . . . and it was while searching the trash for cylindrical ice-cream cartons which were used by amateurs for winding turning coils that I met a white boy who was looking for the same thing. I gave him some of those I'd found and we became friends. . . . Knowing him led me to expect much more of myself and of the world" (63-64).

accompanying him to the home of Arturo Toscanini to assist (in a very minor role I assure you) in the transference of many of the Maestro's early recordings to tape.

Although Ellison had not communicated with Hoolie for decades, Ellison's early friendship and later correspondence with him are notable because they highlight core sonic aspects and influences on his writing, namely the impact of sound recording, community building through sonic technology, and a modernist integration of the sonic into his writing.

Building, using, and listening to sonic technology significantly influenced Ellison's conception of sonic perception, as is evident in tracing his personal experience with sound technology through his interactions with Hoolie. It is useful to think of Ellison, like his narrator in *Invisible Man*, as a "thinker-tinker," whom the narrator philosophizes as being "in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin" (7). In a 1983 letter to John F. Callahan, Ellison elaborates on his philosophy of tinkering by drawing on one of his core influences, William Faulkner: "Perhaps, to paraphrase Faulkner, when a tinker goes to work knowing knows before theory formulates. . . . I guess tinkers make their scores by monkeying around with theory as it finds concrete existence in machines" (797)⁸⁰. The narrator of the prologue is more of a critical, creative, and self-actualizing "thinker-tinker" who investigates and innovates sonic technology and space for his own means. However, in the novel's earlier chapters – such as the battle royal episode, his experiences at the Southern college, and his brief tenure at the Liberty Paints factory shortly after arriving in Harlem – he is more a subject interpellated by sonic and technological

⁸⁰ This philosophy of tinkering is also reflected in Ellison's letter to Hoolie: "But how ironic that technological advances have curtailed your own knowledgeable tinkering even as it has brought an end to mine. Never long on theory, I was simply busy writing and teaching to make the abrupt transition from vacuum tube to transistor" (845)

discourse who does not yet have the critical tools to adequately appraise the soundscapes of his artistic progress.

In *Invisible Man*, sonic machines and technologies, along with the noisy machines of modernity, take many forms, including microphones, boilers, cars, subways, stereos, phonographs, radios, telephones. The prominence and purpose of specific sonic machines in Ellison's novel depend on the scenario and sonic context. In the earlier chapters of *Invisible Man*, the noise of machines takes the form of technologies of capitalist mass production: cars, subways, factories, etc. The key sonic technologies in the later Brotherhood chapters are the telephone and the microphone, which are used to transmit sound but do not retain sonic memory. As the narrator's sonic ethos develops throughout the novel, "from purpose, through passion, to perception" to draw on Kenneth Burke's outline of narrative structure – a significant influence on Ellison's framing of his novel (Letter to Bettye Thomas, 4 Dec. 1986) – the noise of modern machines moves from machines of mass production to more personalized sonic technologies that do not merely make noise but reproduce and retain sound. Ellison's adherence to putting the sounds of his period of writing into context also document unrecorded histories of sound, which is crucial because, as Anna Snaith writes, "the historic dominance of vision has not only minimized the critical energy devoted to histories and cultures of sound and hearing but has also shaped the understanding of sites of modernity, such as the city, which has revolved around spectacle and the gaze" (8). Understanding the context behind technological sound production is important to historicizing how sounds are produced and shaped by the specific mechanics and technology of their era.

Ellison's lifelong fascination and experimentation with radio and sound equipment shaped his modernist incorporation of sound and sound technology into his writing. While

Ellison often riffs on several schools of writing, including naturalism, realism, and surrealism, his overall approach to writing and sonic experimentation is generally regarded as modernist in scholarship since “he not only combined modernist techniques with a defiantly Negro perspective, but he pursued his artistic projects with an analysis emphasizing both the life of the mind and the influence of environment upon the human personality” (Jackson 179). Importantly, modernism and modernity are different but subtly related concepts, and Ellison is interested in both. According to Kavita S. Jerath, modernity can be defined as the “social, political and economic conditions and experiences that result from modernization and capitalism” (32). Modernism, on the other hand, is a term that developed “in reference to all the artistic and cultural movements that arose primarily in response to wide scale changes in the society on account of industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (34). Modernism is a philosophy and aesthetic that was conceived as a reaction to traditional techniques of writing, painting, and thinking. Modernism also pushes back against some aspects of modernity, such as mass consumption and capitalism, but it can embrace other elements of modernity, which include the emphasis on self-consciousness and self-reliance. Ellison’s sense of modernism is drawn from Eliot, Joyce, and Faulkner, among others. His novel’s emphasis on subjective experience and nontraditional methods of storytelling – the important uniqueness of sonic experience, his novel’s references to jazz, his blending of narrative styles and techniques, and his novel’s many long, dense interior monologues – are examples of a modernist approach. Ellison’s incorporation of sound into his work can also be considered broadly modernist in scope because he makes sound the forefront of his narrator’s ethos and narrative style. Ellison both embraces elements of modernity, such as the gramophone, camera, and personal computer, and rejects others, like the dehumanizing

effects of industry labour, which is a topic that will be discussed at length in this chapter. In more detail, Ellison's earwitness approach can be considered modernist since he emphasizes the importance of individual sonic perception, and he also draws on a variety of literary styles, such as naturalism, realism, and surrealism. Ellison is enthralled with technologies of modernity, and how the individual can develop as an intellectual earwitness by engaging with and philosophizing on technologies of modernity, such as the gramophone, but he is also concerned that dehumanizing aspects of modernity's manufacturing industries limit the subject's growth as an intellectual earwitness.

In *The Senses of Modernism* (2002), Sara Danius states that sensory perception gained a new aesthetic importance with the rise of modernism, and argues: "in the modernist period, the human sensorium came to be invoked as a touchstone for aesthetic gratification and experiential authenticity" (1). Danius elaborates: "The emergence of modernist aesthetics signifies the increasing internalization of technological matrices of perception. For to chart how the question of perception, notably sight and hearing, is configured in the modernist period is to witness the ever-closer relationship between the sensuous and technological" (2). Additionally, it is useful to view Ellison and his narrator's use of sonic technologies as "acousmatic" because Ellison and his narrator are interested in how unseen sounds inform their perception of the soundscape, the authorities and subjects of sonic and cultural discourse, and their identities as intellectual, artistic earwitnesses. Brian Kane writes, in *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (2014), that composer Pierre Schaffer initially defined acousmatic sound as "sound that one hears without seeing what causes it" (3). In Kane's study of the essentially acousmatic nature of modern technology and architecture, he elaborates that acousmatic sound is "an audible trace of a source that is

invisible to the listener” (3). Sam Halliday also argues that sounds and sound technologies of modernity are definitively “acousmatic” in nature. In outlining the acousmatic dimension of modern sound and sound technology, Halliday elaborates: “Though historically aspecific (insofar as anyone in any period may, say, speak from behind a curtain) the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a pronounced rise and ‘normalisation’ of acousmatic listening, principally through the diffusion of technologies such as the telephone, gramophone and radio, whose ‘bracketing’ of sounds from visible sources is more or less intrinsic to their use” (14). The transformative potential of acousmatic sound-reproducing technologies allows the narrator to focus on sonic context and think critically about the epistemologies of various soundscapes.

In this chapter, I examine how Ellison envisions sound and sonic technology as crucial perceptual approaches to artistic production, self-actualization, and earwitness perception where “auditory modernity can lead us to altered concepts of the self” (Snaith 8). The narrator’s artistic and self-actualizing progress over the course of Ellison’s novel is also complicated by the dissonance and acousmatic noise of modernity. The narrator’s process of becoming an earwitness thinker-tinker is stymied by industrial soundscapes of racial power and control, such as the Southern college, the Liberty Paints hospital, and the Brotherhood, all of which produce discordant and psychologically disorderly noise which the narrator often hears but cannot see. This chapter studies the Liberty Paints episode in particular (chapter 10 of *Invisible Man*): I look at examples in this episode – and in Ellison’s novel more generally – of industrial 20th century machines that produce noise, but are not primarily classifiable as “sonic technologies,” such as factory machinery, and how such machines mediate and reinforce racial hierarchies in Ellison’s novel by sonically dominating environments and

soundscapes of labour. While radio and the gramophone serve as productive, community-building technologies of artistic- and self-improvement for the narrator later in the novel, the sounds produced by the machines of factories, hospitals, the city, and other institutions of capitalist White hegemony prove to be oppressive and faceless mechanisms of racial discourse that impede or disrupt the narrator's perceptual refinement and sonic consciousness.

To end this chapter, I build on my discussion of acousmatic sound by demonstrating how some acousmatic sounds can also be threshold sound signals, which is the concept I introduced in Chapter Three of this dissertation. In the last section of this chapter, I examine the chapter in Ellison's novel that follows the Liberty Paints factory episode, where the narrator is admitted to the factory hospital (chapter 11 of *Invisible Man*). I argue that the acousmatic sounds of the hospital chapter are also threshold sound signals. The narrator's experience at the factory hospital is significant because the narrator's perception is significantly altered under the effect of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT): for the narrator, the effects of ECT lead to a sonorous liminal moment where he becomes suddenly critically aware of the significance of acousmatic sound and soundscapes in general⁸¹. His critical aptitude towards the subjective significance of the sonic is spurred by being forced into a transitional moment where unseen sounds become strange and new. The defamiliarizing newness of sound signals at the Liberty Paints hospital differs from the threshold sound

⁸¹ For reference, this is how I characterize the threshold sound signal in Chapter Three of this project: "The strange uniqueness of the threshold sound signal thereby prompts the subject to consider that they are passing between soundscapes; in one sense, a threshold sound signal is musical or sonic object that, in a similar sense that Ana María Ochoa Gauthier postulates, 'is separated from its original context [and thus] enters a realm of symbolic interpretation that can be highly ambiguous' (399). Threshold sound signals are surreal and disorienting because they beg one to attempt to contextualize them due to their ambiguity; in considering the meanings of the threshold sound signal, one is compelled to compare the soundscapes they are passing between. The essentially liminal and surreal dimension of a threshold sound signal is integral to the narrator's perception of the sonic and the importance he places on sonic memory because the ambiguity of threshold sound signals can lead to critical insight or a moment of clarity about one's present identity and personal, educational trajectory as an earwitness."

signals of the first college episode because the effects of ECT forcibly alter the narrator's sonic perception, which radically alters his outlook of the sonic in the moment.

Zero Point Non-Response: The Narrator's Apperception of Acousmatic Sound and Voice at Liberty Paints

Much academic attention is dedicated to the narrator's repurposing of the "acoustical deadness" of the prologue's underground into a countercultural sonic array of excessive sound, noise, and light. However, for much of Ellison's novel, the narrator has limited critical tools for evaluating sonic discourses and ideologies when he is either confronted with the sounds of machines and technology or when evaluating speech acts in the sonic publics he navigates. For Herman Beavers, whom I engage with in the first chapter of this dissertation, the narrator's sonic underground "represents a space in which, like Trueblood[']s scene], he [the narrator] can listen to Armstrong's gravelly vocal and conclude that he is nobody but himself" (81)⁸². In speaking of the narrator's sonically motivated perceptual refinement in the prologue's underground, Beavers draws on Brandon LaBelle's term "auditory knowledge" to describe the narrator's sonic epistemology of the underground. Beavers states:

⁸² Beavers concludes that the narrator's sonic perception in the underground is significantly shaped by the censorship of Black voices and sounds the narrator experiences in the soundscapes and sonic publics he crosses. Beavers argues: "the hero [of *Invisible Man*] discovers that black public utterance is heavily policed, a circumstance reflected across a range of public speech acts in the novel" (82). Because the narrator's voice and identity are continuously mediated and censored by discourses of sound and race throughout the novel, Beavers argues that the narrator's sonic underground represents a sonically informed philosophical pivot, where "it could be said that the hero moves from a sensibility that emphasizes strategic thinking to one that values tactical thinking" (91). However, it is imperative to consider that the narrator only begins to purposefully channel his sonic perception into a phenomenology of being on his own terms in the underground of the novel's prologue and epilogue.

The hero's 'hibernation,' then, is not only a writerly enterprise, but an auditory one, in which he seeks to understand how to create a feedback loop between the ear and the (writerly) voice. The hero's 'compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white,' his 'urge to make music of invisibility' (*Invisible Man* 14), constitutes what artist Brandon LaBelle terms auditory knowledge."⁸³

(80)

LaBelle defines his term "auditory knowledge" in *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (2010), which Beavers also cites, as follows: "auditory knowledge is a radical epistemological thrust that unfolds as a spatio-temporal event: sound opens up a field of interaction, to become a channel, a fluid, a flux of voice and urgency, of play and drama, of mutuality and sharing, to ultimately carve out a micro-geography of the moment, while always already disappearing, as a distributive and sensitive propagation" (xvii). In discussing the narrator's "auditory knowledge," Beavers focusses on how the narrator develops an identity grounded in the metaphysics of speech, voice, and music. But Beavers also overlooks the psychological and social influence of the novel's soundscapes of the city, industry, and technology⁸³. I take Beavers's lead by drawing on LaBelle's term "auditory knowledge," and apply LaBelle's term to the soundscape of the Liberty Paints episode (chapter 10 of *Invisible Man*) in order to flesh out the narrator's developing earwitness perception and attention to sonic epistemology.

⁸³ While Beavers does not specifically draw on one speech act theorist in particular, John B. Thompson's introduction to *Pierre Bourdieu's Language and Symbolic Power* offers a feasible interpretation of Jürgen Habermas's approach to speech acts that is applicable to both mine and Beavers's reading of the narrator's identity-forming negotiation of speech situations. Thompson summarizes Habermas's approach to speech act theory as follows: "In exchanging speech acts, individuals are implicitly raising certain 'validity claims,' such as truth and correctness; and that some of these validity claims can only be redeemed or made good in an 'ideal speech situation,' that is, a communicative situation in which participants are motivated to accept or reject a problematic claim on the basis of reasons or grounds alone" (10).

The Liberty Paints episode occurs near the middle of Ellison's novel. At the end of the Southern college episodes, the narrator is expelled from the college. Despite this, he is given several sealed letters to deliver to trustees of the college in New York City so that he may be readmitted. The narrator does not initially know that each of the letters recommend that he be barred from re-enrolling at the college altogether. When the narrator delivers the final letter, the son of the intended recipient, Mr. Emerson, reads him the contents of the letter, which recommends to each recipient that he should never return to the college. Mr. Emerson's son then suggests that the narrator seek work at the Liberty Paints factory. At the factory, the foreman, Lucius Brockway, becomes distrustful of the narrator after the narrator attends a union meeting. Later, a malfunction occurs in the factory boilers while the narrator is working with Brockway; the boilers explode, either from Brockway's negligence or his desire to terminate the narrator's presence at the factory. Brockway escapes, but the narrator is caught in the blast. The narrator is then admitted to the factory hospital where he is administered ECT. The narrator leaves the hospital with his perception radically altered from the effects of ECT, and he is recruited by the Brotherhood soon after.

The soundscape of the Liberty Paints episode is comprised of sonic machines and technologies, which provides the narrator with a radically different auditory knowledge than his experimentations with sonic technology in the prologue. *Invisible Man* is rife with confusing and violent noises of modern machines that serve as barriers to critical thinking and a well-informed auditory knowledge. The narrator describes the paint machines at Liberty Paints as emitting "scream[s] like a circular saw" when the machines are activated; they also come to life with "an angry hum, followed by a slight explosion" (214). When the Liberty Paints boilers malfunction, the narrator is unable to follow Brockway's instructions for safely

recalibrating the boiler valves since the narrator cannot comprehend Brockway's directions over the tremendous factory noise. The resulting explosion that injures the narrator is experienced as a disorienting "fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension," which, in his temporary dislocation from reality, is perceived primarily through the sonic: "somewhere an engine ground in furious futility, grating loudly until a pain shot around the curve of my head and bounced me off into blackness for a distance" (230). In these instances, the disordered and overwhelming noise of modern machines – often used in racial institutions of power – invoke in the narrator a chaotic or ambiguous sensory reality. In "Listening to Machines: Industry Noise, Hearing Loss and the Cultural Meaning of Sound," Karin Bijsterveld writes that the chaotic noise of factory machinery is psychologically disruptive because factories are typified by many overpowering machines that produce arrhythmical and overwhelming noise: "Although work had once been rhythmical, the introduction of modern machines had brusquely unbalanced the sound of the shop-floor. The beat of the machine was more rapid and fixed than human rhythms. Even worse, a standard workshop had not one, but a multitude of machines, with varying rhythms that, taken together, produced sonic chaos" (154). When considering Bijsterveld's point, it is noteworthy that Brockway also states "we [are] the machines inside the machine" when initially training the narrator on how to operate the valves, a point that the narrator neither acknowledges nor evaluates (217)⁸⁴. Brockway's command implies that he adheres to a Taylorist work ethic, perhaps without even knowing it,

⁸⁴ Frequently in *Invisible Man*, the narrator is interpellated as being a mechanical and anonymous apparatus in a larger social "machine," which is probably meant to recall the theme of his invisibility. When chauffeuring Mr. Norton, Mr. Norton philosophizes on his assumed racial responsibility to give African-Americans uplift as follows: "You are important because if you fail I have failed by one individual, one defective cog; it didn't matter so much before, but now I'm growing old and it has become very important..." (45). Much later, once the narrator has become firmly entrenched in the Brotherhood's ideology, the narrator dismisses a request for an interview by affirming: "I'm no hero and I'm far from the top; I'm a cog in a machine. We here in the Brotherhood work as a unit" (396). The trope of the narrator being a 'cog in the machine of modernity' is noteworthy because, in each instance, he is unable or unwilling to critically evaluate the metaphor.

where the efficiency of factory labour is intended to be maximized by working in-sync with factory machinery, so much so that the worker might be thought of as an extension of the machine⁸⁵.

As a brief aside, the police gunfire that erupts during the eviction scene also occurs as an unseen “single explosion” that “sounded above like a bursting bag” that knocks the narrator to the ground “backward into a whirl of milling legs” (280). The gunshots that kill Brotherhood member Tod Clifton later in the novel are similarly described as unobserved “rapid explosions” that sound “somewhere between the dull roar of traffic and the subway vibrating underground” (436). The chaos that ensues from the loud, unseen gunshots causes the narrator to focus instead on other sounds of unknown origin and a tumult of images, namely “the swift interval of [pigeons] circling, very abruptly and in the noise of traffic – yet seeming to unfold in my mind like a slow-motion movie run off with the sound track dead” (436). Arguably, the narrator also perceives police weaponry to be disorienting sonic machines of control as their sounds are perceived as unseen explosions, which is comparable to the disorienting noise of factory machinery.

When considering Bijsterveld’s point about the psychological turmoil of factory noise, it is arguable that the Liberty Paints worker is intended to work rhythmically and efficiently like the machines they operate even though factory noise unavoidably causes existential and sensorial dislocation. The Taylorist discourse of syncing machine and human rhythms for increased production is an ideal that cannot be realistically attained in the modern factory because “The beat of the machine was more rapid and fixed than human rhythms,” as

⁸⁵ A definition of Taylorism from McGill University’s website reads as follows: “By reducing workers to the status of machines, these principles ultimately impaired the profitability of the enterprise itself. With the depression of the 1930s, social protest movements also emerged to which employers were forced to respond.” Notably, since Brockway is anti-union, he would be against such social protest.

Bijsterveld notes, but also because the noise of modern machines is detrimental to both labour and mental acuity. In drawing on Karl Bücher, Bijsterveld elaborates: “The fast movements of modern machines, so Bücher asserted, produced a ‘confusing, deafening noise’ in which one could ‘hear’ but not ‘experience’ rhythm, thus evoking ‘merely a sense of frustration’” (155). The discourse of labour at Liberty Paints demands that labourers work in rhythm with the machines of production even though factory noise is psychologically and existentially detrimental to such production. The narrator’s auditory knowledge at the factory is limited because he is not only confused about the meaning and direction of his labour, he is unable to adequately question or evaluate how to rhythmically sync with the machines that require his labour over the dehumanizing “screams” of the factory machines.

Importantly, machine noise at Liberty Paints is arguably frustrating and difficult for the narrator to evaluate and interrogate because he cannot immediately locate the overwhelming sounds he hears. While the narrator’s auditory knowledge in the prologue is grounded in investigating and experimenting with sonic technologies, namely the gramophone, the narrator begins to first develop an awareness and understanding of acousmatic sound at Liberty Paints. Brockway’s unseen commands to the narrator can be described as an “acousmatic voice,” which Kane defines as follows: “The acousmatic voice directs the listener toward the absent presence or present absence of the source, without ever allowing the completion of that passage” (195). The unseen nature of Brockway’s voice gives his commands a sonic authority because the narrator cannot locate the subject of their utterance, which makes the speaking subject powerful as an ambiguous and absolute producer of sound. Brockway’s power over the narrator is defined by the acousmatic nature of his commands since Brockway is framed as the authoritative subject of speech whom the narrator

must respond to because the narrator cannot comprehend the source of Brockway's commands: "This is the moment when the phenomenological voice is shaken by an insistent question from the acousmatic voice: 'Who speaks?'" (Kane 195). In contrast, Beavers frames the narrator as an "acousmatic subject" who seems to be at all times a receiver and producer of acousmatic sound: "What I am finally proposing is that *Invisible Man* is a novel that argues for the acousmatic subject, the product of a moment when we cannot visually account for a sound's point of origin, an instance in which the narrator's 'disembodied' voice, having been loosed from a cultural politics that places value on messages sent from a visually verifiable source, achieved the credibility to speak for us" (95). However, the narrator does not often possess an authoritative acousmatic voice during the novel, especially in the novel's earlier chapters, including the Liberty Paints episode. The narrator is often the subject of acousmatic voices until the end of his tenure in the Brotherhood, which directly precedes his residence in the underground of the prologue and epilogue⁸⁶. Beaver's sweeping claim about Ellison's novel "argu[ing] for the acousmatic subject" does not fully elaborate on the contextual and sonic nuances of the various acousmatic situations the narrator encounters throughout the novel where he is often commanded by unseen voices; early in the novel, the narrator is not yet the matured intellectual, artistic, earwitness, and philosophizing authority of sound and voice he becomes in his sonic underground⁸⁷. I agree that the narrator's auditory knowledge

⁸⁶ For example, the blindfolded narrator is directed by White elites in the battle royal episode. Mr. Norton also gives the narrator directions and shaky moral guidance from the backseat of the car the narrator chauffeurs. The narrator hears but cannot see the doctors studying him at the Liberty Paints hospital, and so on.

⁸⁷ Beavers draws on Ross Chambers's definition of oppositionality in his analysis, which Beavers cites as follows: "[Oppositional behaviour] consists of individual or group survival tactics that do not challenge the power in place, but make use of circumstance set up by that power for purposes that power may ignore or deny" (Chambers qtd. in Beavers 78). It seems that Beavers's analysis is more concerned with situations of oppositionality in distinctly sonic spaces, namely discursively mediated speech situations, as opposed to a comprehensively contextual approach to the varying situations of sonic authority, power, and subjectivity in Ellison's novel.

at various points in the novel is arguably influenced by acousmatic sound, as Beavers argues, since unseen sounds invite inquiry and consideration due to their ambiguous sources.

However, I am concerned that such sounds should be interpreted contextually as uniquely sonic moments which consider who is speaking with acousmatic authority in specific sonic contexts, in addition to the narrator's intellectual and social situation at the time of listening in the various unique soundscapes he encounters.

Rip & Tear: Acousmatic Perspective by Incongruity and Underlexicalization at Liberty Paints

The narrator's auditory knowledge of acousmatic sound at Liberty Paints is limited by his inability to locate, analyze, and assign meaning to the acousmatic sounds of the factory boilers and machines, along with his lack of meaningful and knowledgeable engagement with the sounds of factory machinery. Before taking up refuge in the underground as a sonic "thinker-tinker," the narrator arguably does not possess a developed "perspective by incongruity" in the novel's earlier chapters, especially when the narrator interacts with the soundscapes and sonic technologies and machines at Liberty Paints, the factory hospital, and other pre-prologue episodes. Burke defines the term "perspective by incongruity" somewhat esoterically, as a linguistic and symbolic defamiliarization or subjective "logonomical purgatory" that involves a subject's perspective "shattering or fragmentation, analogous to the stage of 'rending and tearing'" (69). Elizabeth B. Gorman elaborates that Burke's term can be defined more clearly as a shift in one's perception due to "oddly juxtaposed symbols [that]

influence audiences to have new perspectives by challenging their habits of thinking” (4). In “Toward a Theory of Rhetoric: Ralph Ellison, Kenneth Burke, and the Problem of Modernism,” Robert Genter argues: “Ellison appropriated one of the central tenets of modernism—that language is not a transparent medium of expression but a charged way of ordering the field of objects—and invested himself in the language and psychology of his readers. Whereas modernism was concerned with developing its own linguistic system to provide a unity of immediate experience amidst, as T. S. Eliot claimed, ‘A heap of broken images’ (53), Ellison was preoccupied with entering a particular community of discourse, a ‘cultural heritage,’ and examining its implications and contradictions” (200). Perspective by incongruity, then, is a critical means of evaluating one’s identity in the moment in relation to how signs, symbols, and sounds of discourse inform that identity position and how the subject thinks, acts, and reacts to the environment and positions of power.

The narrator’s sonic perspective by incongruity is evident in the prologue when he ruminates on the “strangely satisfying experience . . . [of] hear[ing] the silence of sound” when smoking marijuana. The narrator’s theft of electricity from Monopolated Light & Power leads to his epiphany that he can control and distort sound and light in order to symbolically “illuminate the blackness of [his] invisibility” and inviolably play the “invisible music of [his] isolation” (13). In these statements, the narrator expresses a grounded, or at least an epistemologically consistent and confident, auditory and linguistic knowledge of sonic and linguistic signification. In the underground, the narrator tinkers with the meaning of sounds and acoustic signs by employing “oddly juxtaposed symbols” when he parses the discursive logic of the sonic and visual sign systems of the aboveground, which he does in order to demonstrate how the signifying meaning of the novel’s master symbols of sound and

light have the capacity to “rend and tear” and not absolutely define his identity. The narrator’s auditory knowledge in the underground is expressed in his desire to tinker with the “acoustic deadness” of his underground space. The narrator of the prologue wishes to juxtapose the sonic dampness of his hole with the harrowing and mechanically unstable echoing of multiple phonographs, which would contest the “‘bracketing’ of sounds from visible sources [that] is more or less intrinsic to their use,” as Halliday describes such sonic technologies. The narrator also wants to communicate the “invisible music of [his] isolation” in his sonic underground with a weaving and defamiliarizing style that emphasizes the rending and tearing of meaning and purpose of sound technology, sonic symbolism in language, and acoustic space (14).

At Liberty Paints, the narrator’s auditory knowledge and communication with Brockway is predominantly disrupted by Brockway’s acousmatic voice and the unseen noise of modern machines. After the narrator is given poor instructions on how to mix paint in his first job at the factory, he is relocated to the factory basement to assist Brockway; the narrator describes entering the factory basement as “descend[ing] into a noisy, dimly lit room,” where he hears “a high-pitched Negro voice [that] rang out above the machine sounds” but initially “strain[s] to locate the voice” because he cannot detect Brockway’s presence over the noise of the machines. When Brockway instructs the narrator on how to operate the boiler valves, the noise of the boilers inconsistently rises and falls. The irregularity of noise in the factory basement makes Brockway’s instructions difficult to assess since the factory’s noise both complicates the narrator’s ability to grasp how sounds operate in this strange and new soundscape and limits his will to advance his auditory knowledge of the basement’s sonic environment. When learning how to operate the machines, the narrator first describes

Brockway's voice "cutting sharply through the roar of the furnaces" and then, once the noise of the furnaces fluctuates, the narrator states: "I heard the noise rise to a higher, almost hysterical pitch, somehow making it possible to hear without yelling, our voices moving blurrily underneath" (208). The psychological strain of operating in a soundscape that is both overpowering and erratic would surely be a "splinter in [the] ear," as James Mansell describes noise in the opening to his article "Noise" (154). This psychological and acousmatic strain is also evident in the "blurring" of voices in this underground space of the factory, which in their melding sounds do not offer the same "rending and tearing" of meaning necessary to provoke a perspective by incongruity. Mansell also surmises that forming a cohesive analytical framework for evaluating noise can be difficult since noise is "'stubbornly resistant to theorization' because definitions of what it is vary so widely, even, and perhaps especially, in colloquial use" (154).

Since the narrator is a novice intellectual in these early chapters, it would be difficult for him to evaluate the discursive implications of being forced to work in such an oppressively noisy environment. As it turns out, the noise of the factory underground leads to a significant miscommunication between Brockway and the narrator; their miscommunication leads to the basement's boilers exploding and the narrator being admitted to the factory hospital to be administered ECT. The chaotic and nuanced noise of the factory's basement would not easily allow the subject to develop an auditory knowledge of its soundscape, much less give the narrator the confidence to approach the factory's basement with a confidence and theoretical grammar informed by a perspective by incongruity. Compare the disordered noise of the factory basement and the younger narrator's lack of conversational agency to the older narrator's sonic experiments in the prologue's underground and his tinkering with speech and

sonic metaphors. While the factory and the prologue and epilogue both feature basements with malleable and irregular acousmatic sounds, the underground of the prologue and epilogue is a space of creative reflection where the narrator can control sound on his own terms. Unlike the soundscape of the factory basement, the narrator's underground of the prologue is more of a "magic circle," to draw on Johan H. Huizinga's term for a deeply personal space of play (10-11). In more detail, the narrator's underground is a magic circle where he can apply various critical tools of sound and perception to orally relate his narrative without the dialogically limiting feedback he encounters with Norton, at Liberty Paints, in the Brotherhood, etc.⁸⁸. The older narrator of the prologue incorporates the acousmatic sounds of his underground, as well as the vacillating signification of Louis Armstrong's musical style and image, into an epistemological thinker-tinker framework or "equipment for living," to again draw on Burke's term, in order to recreate the sounds, music, and noise that inform and impose on his identity into an artistic voice of sonic creation⁸⁹.

In the prologue's underground, the narrator's auditory knowledge is grounded in a sonic approach of perspective by incongruity which he has developed over the course of decades of trial-and-error interactions with various acousmatic soundscapes. In the factory basement, the younger, sonically inexperienced narrator does not yet possess a nuanced understanding of sounds and signs necessary for navigating the factory basement's chaos of acousmatic noise and sonic discord. While the narrator notes the difficulty in evaluating and

⁸⁸ Huizinga characterizes the magic circle and other spaces of play in *Homo Ludens* (1950) as follows: "The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (10).

⁸⁹ Ellison notes both of Burke's terms, "perspective by incongruity" and "equipment for living" in his nonfiction. The former appears towards the end of his essay "An Extravagance of Laughter" and the latter, as mentioned in Chapter Two of this dissertation, appears in his 1969 letter to Frances Steloff.

understanding Brockway's acousmatic commands, along with the acousmatic sounds of danger from the machines, the narrator neither questions Brockway's commands nor asks for clarification. For example, one might expect one to at least reply to Brockway simply with a "What?" or "Why?" or "How?" – or, to draw on Kane, even "the insistent question from the acousmatic voice: 'Who speaks?'" (195) – which the narrator never does, and nor does he ask Brockway to give basic instructions on the factory machines in a less noisy space adjacent to where they are to work.

This episode of the novel ends with the factory boilers exploding in a scene dominated by unseen sound and noise. The final passage of this chapter is notable because the explosion itself is not described directly, but is instead implied circuitously through descriptions of disorientating noise and the narrator's dislocated perception. Based on the narrator's eagerness to describe sharp, loud noises throughout *Invisible Man* as "explosions," including machine noise, gunfire, and his own emotional "explosions" of internal voiceless agony, it is significant that the boiler's blast is described in lengthy detail without ever using the word "explosion" or concisely alluding to the event as such. The blast occurs after Brockway and the narrator have been arguing over the narrator's unintentional attendance at a factory union meeting, an act that Brockway is firmly against, which leads the two men to not properly monitor the factory's machinery until it is too late.

With the narrator stating that he "had lost irrevocably an important victory," the chapter ends and the next begins with the narrator feeling dislocated in a surreal space: "I was sitting in a cold, white rigid chair and a man was looking at me out of a bright third eye that glowed from the center of his forehead" (231). The narrator's perception of the explosion scene can be characterized with Roger Fowler's term "underlexicalization," which he defines

in *Linguistic Criticism* (1986) as follows: “underlexicalization is a lack of a term or a set of terms. The psycho-linguistic theory of vocabulary that we have been assuming would suggest that such gaps, in an individual’s lexical repertoire, mean that the individual does not have access to the concepts concerned, or has difficulty of access” (152)⁹⁰. Moreover, Elena Semino elaborates on Fowler’s term in “Mind Style 25 Years On” hence: “If an individual appears to lack lexical items that are normally shared amongst speakers of a particular language, he or she exhibits what Fowler calls ‘underlexicalization,’ and readers will have to infer some explanation as to why that individual’s repertoire of lexical items and associated concepts is more limited than what they regard to be the ‘norm’” (5). In other words, the narrator does not have the vocabulary to adequately assess the explosion as it happens, and in this moment of perceptual dislocation from the shock of the event, he instead focuses on the unseen and overwhelming noise of the blast as he “fall[s] into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension” (230). The narrator notes that his attempts to shut down the boilers only “increased the noise” of the machines and, once they explode, he lyrically and affectively perceives a “wet blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness” enveloping him instead of expressing conscious alarm for the unfolding events (230). The devastating acousmatic noise of the Liberty Paints basement leads to a critical moment of misunderstanding of sonic meaning and an inability to navigate the “micro-geography of the

⁹⁰ Fowler’s definition of underlexicalization in *Linguistic Criticism* continues as such: “In deliberately formed ‘literary’ texts . . . underlexicalization is marked by two alternative linguistic devices: either the noticeable suppression of a term, or the substitution of a noticeably complex expression for what in other registers would be a simple term. The former procedure, suppression, is the basis of Swift’s shocking presentation of the Yahoos as animals rather than humans [in *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726)]. The latter, substitution of a complex expression, is a standard device for the evocation of naïve consciousness, as we have seen . . . in [William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929),] Benjy’s ‘curling flower spaces’ and ‘flower tree’ [which probably refers to the blossoming pear trees that regularly feature in the novel] (Note that lexical suppression is also at work in the opening of *The Sound and the Fury*: the game of golf which Benjy is watching is never named.)” (152-153).

moment,” to recall Beaver’s usage of LaBelle’s term “auditory knowledge” (xvii). Here, the narrator is the misinformed object of Brockway’s acousmatic voice and an unskilled interpreter of acousmatic signs.

Furthermore, acousmatic noise in the factory explosion scene, both from the machines and Brockway, amplifies the narrator’s temporal dislocation and skewed perception. LaBelle writes in his original version of “Acoustic Spatiality” for *Književnost i Kultura* that “sound is always already a trace of location,” which he revises in the *Infrasonica* version of his piece to read: “sound and listening can be captured as providing a platform for understanding place and emplacement as processes.” LaBelle’s revision here is notable because he reassigns what seems to be one of his central tenets of an epistemology of listening from ‘listening offers knowledge of where you are’ to ‘sound can lead you to knowledge of where you are if you are able to study the information carefully’ (in both versions of his article the statement anchors the end of the opening paragraph). When I initially drafted my discussion of acousmatic sound in this chapter, I consulted the following passage from *Infrasonica* when sketching my argument: “Such a material force characteristic of sound suggests a deeply affective, locational knowledge path – that is, sound affords unique ways of exchanging, of being situated, and from which we often extend ourselves.” LaBelle’s piece for *Infrasonica* is a significant revision of the same article he submitted to *Književnost i Kultura*. In the *Književnost i Kultura* piece, he originally argued: “The physicality characteristic of sound suggests a deeply impressionistic, locational ‘knowledge structure’—that is, the ways in which listening affords processes of exchange, of being in the world, and from which we extend ourselves.” LaBelle’s original formulation of sound in *Književnost i Kultura* seems to imply that sound is an accessible but complex medium of meaning – an impressionistic

“knowledge structure” – while his *Infrasonica* revision alters his statement subtly, but, I would say, significantly, to instead imply that listening does not absolutely allow access to a structural foundation of meaning; rather, LaBelle’s revised statement offers the mere possibility of navigating a “knowledge path” that does not necessarily guarantee meaning or sonically-informed spatial identification. Interestingly, the Heideggerian wordage “being in the world” is also removed in the revision, which again implies a de-emphasis of the subject’s control over or accessibility to the nuances of a spatially-particular sound-knowledge. LaBelle’s relocation of sound-knowledge from impressionism to affect also implies an emotional – and perhaps emotionally misinformed or overestimated – reaction to a distinctly subjective and personal acquirement of an idea or concept. I draw on the significant revisions of LaBelle’s piece to highlight two different but related perspectives on sound that arguably mirror the narrator’s evolving sonic ethos in *Invisible Man*. The younger narrator’s perception of acousmatic sound at Liberty Paints is closer to LaBelle’s original thoughts on spatial sound: the acousmatic noise of Taylorist factory labour and the narrator’s identification with such noisy mechanical labour at the factory is a discursive sonic knowledge structure, which, on the surface, promises agency and accessibility, but guarantees neither. As the narrator will learn throughout the novel, however, a thorough understanding of auditory knowledge is closer to LaBelle’s revised formulation of spatially-sonic knowledge from his *Infrasonica* article: auditory knowledge of acousmatic sound, which is precisely spatial in nature, prerequires a revised and well-developed ethos of the signs and meaning of the contextually specific nuances of the sonic in order to evaluate the sonic elements that influence one’s identity.

Finally, as a self-proclaimed thinker-tinker in the prologue, the narrator of the underground expresses his philosophical stance as an “orator, a rabble rouser” (14) as a kind of semiotician in sonic “logonomical purgatory,” to again gesture to Burke, which is a philosophy that is absent from the younger narrator’s perspective during the Liberty Paints episode. The acousmatic machinery at Liberty Paints proves to be a significant barrier to the narrator’s auditory knowledge, which differs from his experimental control over sound in the prologue’s underground. While the narrator experiences the Liberty Paints factory blast event as a “fall into space that seemed not a fall but a suspension,” which he describes in a underlexicalized manner, the narrator’s ethos of sound at Liberty Paints differs from the prologue in that his auditory knowledge in the seemingly sonic purgatory of the prologue’s underground is refined by a sonic perspective by incongruity. When speaking on the discursive function of machinery in *Invisible Man*, Jennifer L. Lieberman notes that noisy machines in the novel prove to be difficult for aiding the narrator to formulate an ethos of either sound or uplift:

Repeatedly, the author hints that access to modern technologies cannot solve social problems. For example, when *Invisible Man* [the narrator] recollects his college days, he can still hear “the black powerhouse with its engines droning earth-shaking rhythms in the dark” (*Invisible Man* 34). . . . Ellison amplified this theme by reimagining the powerhouse—as an invisible, sonic force that affects no perceptible change. . . . Although the novel’s prologue coded such images of sound and darkness as powerful and subversive, the placement of this scene alongside the Trueblood episode challenges an entirely affirmative reading. (11)

While Beavers argues that *Invisible Man* represents the narrator as an “acousmatic subject,” the contextual nuances of the narrator’s acousmatic experiences should consider that he is often not a subject of acousmatic voice, but rather the object of acousmatic vocal authority. The Liberty Paints episode concludes with the narrator sensing that Brockway was escaping the blast: “I could hear the sound of someone wading, sloshing, nearby, and an old man’s garrulous voice saying, ‘I tole ’em these here young Nineteen-Hundred boys ain’t no good for the job. They ain’t got the nerves. Naw, sir, they just ain’t got the nerves’” (230). The narrator is unable to call out to Brockway, however, as he is “transfixed and numb with the sense that [he] had lost irrevocably an important victory” (230). The narrator is carefully attentive to the acousmatic sounds of Brockway escaping the explosion, as he hears him “wading” and “sloshing” off into the distance, which implies that Brockway, like the narrator, is mired and entwined in the noise and chaos of the blast. But as the narrator finds himself unable to speak as Brockway flees, the chapter ends with the narrator focusing instead on Brockway’s “garrulous” voice, which counterpoises the narrator’s lack of vocal agency with Brockway’s indistinct, far-off, but authoritative blathering. The narrator’s auditory knowledge in this episode is incomplete even though he seems attentive to the power of acousmatic sound. Arguably, the Liberty Paints factory episode serves as a teachable moment for the narrator’s education towards refining his earwitness perception, as his auditory knowledge of sounds and their meaning are underdeveloped when compared to the more intellectually-rounded thinker-tinker semiotician of sound he comes to be in the prologue’s underground.

Analog Nights: Acousmatic Sound in the Prologue's Underground

In this section, I focus specifically on the narrator's utilization of acousmatic sound in the prologue and how his sonic ethos of the underground is distinctly developed from the Liberty Paints episode and other early chapters in the novel. In the prologue, the narrator proudly exercises his auditory knowledge through his experimentation with phonographic and spatial sound, as well as his drive to orally relate the narrative of his artistic progression, which he does, ironically, in a cellar defined by its "acoustical deadness," where sounds are muted and distorted by the rattling lightbulbs and spatial configurations of the underground (7)⁹¹. The narrator's auditory knowledge in the prologue's underground is driven by an intellectualization of sonic technology and sonic space, which sees its parallel in Ellison's 1985 letter to Hoolie, where he praises Hoolie's knowledge of the "intricacies of electronics with such daring and whose mind was intellectually aggressive" (64). The narrator's auditory knowledge in the prologue also differs significantly from his attempts – or his failed or misinformed efforts – at gaining auditory knowledge during the Liberty Paints episode since the prologue is communicated, according to Ellison, in a blues manner. Ellison's definition of the blues "allows a maximum of individual expression" that "mocks the despair stated explicitly in the lyric, and it expresses the great human joke directed against the universe" ("Flamenco" 24-25). The blues aesthetic Ellison employs in the prologue is distinctively

⁹¹ In a 1956 letter to Richard Brown, Ellison elaborates on the unique psychological perception of the narrator as an underground, invisible philosopher. This letter reinforces how the narrator's perspective, and, by extension, his auditory knowledge, should be viewed as an evolving metaphysics, as opposed to a singular auditory *weltschmerz*: "As for the Riot section, if you go back to the beginning of the book you will notice, after the Prologue, that the action starts on a fairly naturalistic level. The hero accepts society and his predicament seems 'right' but as he moves through his experiences they become progressively more, for the want of a better word, 'surrealistic.' Nothing is as it seems and in the fluidity of society strange juxtapositions lend a quality of nightmare" (450).

modernist in scope because he and his narrator tinker with sonic meaning and signs, which is not only a “violation of the word” and linguistic signification – to recall Ellison’s usage of “tinkering” with sound and language, which he draws from Faulkner – but also a modernist and Burkian symbolic process of fragmentation and juxtaposition vis-à-vis perspective by incongruity. Robert Genter elaborates on the Burkian lens of modernist fragmentation as follows: “An acknowledged relationship between two objects in a social field is not a reflection of reality but an interpretation of reality, a social and linguistic construct inherited from a community of discourse. Such orientations not only provide an ontology of the social but also a motivation for action, a set of norms, values, and judgments that establish the framework for individual and group activity” (196).

Moreover, the narrator’s modernist technique of fragmentation and juxtaposition is amplified through his ability to operate and experiment with the phonograph, which he can do on his own terms in the magic circle of the underground in order to learn, replay, and apply the sounds of his experiences to his telling of the story of his life. The narrator’s adaptation of the sounds of the phonograph into oral and written accounts of his sonic experiences can be surmised in the following passage from Julie Beth Napolin’s article “Unrecordable Sound”:

“After the invention of the phonograph, it becomes possible to hypothesize in literature what we might call heteraudiophony, it being undecidable whether some diegetic sounds are naturally vibrating or technologically reproduced” (194-195). In other words, the narrator considers the phonograph to be a sonic vehicle that reproduces, transfigures, and distinguishes a sonic moment as “heteraudiophonous” or sonically unique. The narrator’s underground understanding of acousmatic sound, which often comes in the form of philosophizing on the phonograph, allows for experimentation with sound and the establishment of a sonically-

personalized autobiographical record that reflects his auditory expertise (and with five phonographs, the potential to think about sound reproduction in other abstract, intellectualized ways).

The narrator's transmutation of sound and sonic space in the prologue also differs from the Liberty Paints episode because the narrator's sonic epistemology in the prologue's underground is more consciously modernist in scope. Ellison's prologue can be seen to employ a modernist technique, where there is a "Modernist contest between mass culture and authentic experience [which can include] African American idiom and folk tradition" (Willihnganz 128). For instance, the narrator's excessive deployment of 1,369 overhead lightbulbs in the prologue and his desire to acquire many more phonographs than are required for simple musical enjoyment serve to mock the mass culture discourse of modernity because he plunges into odd and idiosyncratic forms of consumerism in order to deliberate on the nature of authentic sonic experience and African-American philosophies of the sonic. In the prologue, the narrator plans to acquire five phonographs to play at once in his cellar because, he philosophically and directly states: "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" (8). Shelly Trower, in "Vibrations," describes the vibration of sound technology as an "infrasensory" experience that is essentially modernist because it exists "on the edge of hearing," while, more generally, "sound is a category of vibration defined through subjective perception, while infrasound helps illustrate the instability of its borders and the limits of human experience" (288). While many parts of *Invisible Man* are written in a distinctly modernist or fragmentary style – the riot episode, the factory hospital episode, etc. – the prologue's modernist use of language reflects the narrator's conscious rending and tearing of

sound and signs as opposed to unconsciously or indirectly expressing his perception in a fragmentary modernist point-of-view.

Further, the narrator's perceptual experience of phonographic vibration is also a multisensory experience, in line with modernism's emphasis on artistically penetrating subjective and idiosyncratic sensory perception, but with the emphasis on sound as his creative and hermeneutic *modus operandi*. The narrator's listening experience of his single radio-phonograph is characterized as follows: "I pour the red liquid [sloe gin] over the white mound [of ice cream], watching it glisten and the vapor rising as Louis bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound" (8). The narrator's sonic epistemology here is essentially a multi-sensory experience that makes sound the primary mode of perception, with the other senses being secondary (vision and taste). This perspective follows Halliday's conception of the sonic in modernism: "Sound in modernism, in whatever art form, is irreducible to sound alone. Sound, instead, is best conceived as a configuration, with 'real' sound at its center, to be sure, but other sense phenomena, such as touch and vision, rarely at more than one or two removes on its periphery" (2). Moreover, the narrator's perception here reflects Trower's analysis of the subjective aesthetics of vibration, where "Vibrations may be felt-heard while they also exist beyond the senses altogether: threshold experiences of infrasound can present us with an ontological materiality beyond human perception" (297). The narrator's emphasis on philosophically using and engrossing himself in sonic art and technology also echoes Danus's claim that modernist explorations of modern technology "project themselves as literary equivalents of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as synaesthetic works of art seeking to transcend genre" (3). Both Ellison and his narrator of the prologue adopt a modernist hermeneutic approach to sensory perception and exploration that prioritizes

an understanding of sound technology and how such technologies mediate perception through sonic experience and aesthetics.

Ellison's correspondence with Hoolie demonstrates that engaging with or listening to sonic technology with others can serve as a community-forming approach to sonic and artistic creation and knowledge, which one might read similar to Ellison's interpretation of the Spanish folk music Flamenco, which Ellison believes "allows a maximum of individual expression, and a democratic rivalry such as is typical of a jam session; for, like the blues and jazz, it is an art of improvisation, and like them it can be quite graphic (24). However, as much as Ellison often envisions listening and engaging with sonic technology as a democratic practice – or as an "imagined community" of listeners united by a common soundscape, as some sound scholars note – Lieberman argues that "such episodes underscore how people in power use new inventions to bolster racial hierarchies" (10)⁹². Arguably, Ellison envisages sonic technology to be a democratic apparatus when he or the narrator uses sonic technology for their own means, but perceptions and applications of sonic technology and noisy machines in his work can also function as both discursive tools and criticisms of racial hierarchies. The key difference between the community-forming promise of sound recording technology and the communal experience of psychologically detrimental noise of modern machinery is the

⁹² For example, multiple articles included in *The Sound Studies Reader*, edited by Jonathan Sterne, draw on Benedict Anderson's concept of the "imagined community" in describing various examples of shared listening. In Michelle Himes's contribution to the collection, "Radio and the Imagined Community," Himes argues that "At the very least, listeners' tuning in by the tens of thousands to one specific program airing at a specific time created that shared simultaneity of experience crucial to Benedict Anderson's concept of the modern 'imagined community' of nationhood" (351). Himes draws on Anderson's characterization of the imagined community of newspaper readers in outlining how radio listeners form a similar imagined sonic community of listeners: "[The newspaper reader] is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?" (Anderson qt. in Himes 351)

ability to hone an auditory knowledge and pedagogy of sound from the ability to play, replay, parse, and reflect on recorded sound, or, to “slip into the breaks and look around” (9), as the narrator states in the prologue. As Halliday notes on the significant ability of sonic technologies to record and retain sound, “The rise of acousmatic sound technology is also, in large part, responsible for the historic breakthrough represented by sound’s capture and retention – though the latter is also linked to scientific developments, occurring as early as the first years of the nineteenth century” (14). In drawing on James Lastra, Halliday goes on to state that the acousmatic nature of modern sonic technologies “suggested that not only that sound might be ‘stored’ for future reference, but also that if the resultant record could somehow be *re-sounded*, the resultant sound would reproduce the original as it had ‘really’ been, without a listener’s interpretation” (14; emphasis in original).

Ellison characterizes his sonic experimentation with Hoolie as a democratic relationship as follows: “For although ours was all too brief a relationship there was nevertheless a bit of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn about it that I’ve treasured. So the fact that I remembered you only as ‘Hoolie’ helped to preserve the precious democracy of boyhood and undercut the formalities that society imposes later to divide us as adults” (843). Ellison’s characterization of Huck and Tom’s relationship in *Huckleberry Finn* is more nostalgic than critical. As mentioned previously in this dissertation, Ellison read Twain’s text at an early age, and continued to see himself or his environment in the novel (as he did when he would refer to his brother Herbert as “Huck”). As with Ellison’s appreciation of Hemingway, whose prose Ellison admired but whose problematic racial representations he consciously overlooked, Ellison seems to cherry-pick elements from Twain’s novel that he finds most artistically useful and personal. I think it is a stretch to say that Huck and Tom’s relationship

is exactly democratic – Tom, after all, takes over direction of Huck’s plan to free Jim by turning their endeavor into a fantastical game (asking Jim to grow a flower with his tears, etc.). Tom’s redirection of Huck’s endeavor to help Jim escape also essentially re-casts Jim as a prop in Tom’s scheme, while Huck has no real sway in the matter.

The sonic technologies of both the narrator’s prologue underground and Ellison’s adolescence, which Ellison incorporates in various ways in his fiction, letters, and essays through a modernist technique, produced contextually specific sounds distinctive of that era’s social, cultural, and racial response to the advancement in sound technology. The narrator of the prologue reflects on the identity-forming and discursive possibility of sound with a blues-like auditory knowledge informed by a Burkian sonic perspective by incongruity. The narrator refers to this sonic perception as a “Weltschmerz as flamenco” in the prologue, which he sees as “a new analytical way of listening to music [where] the unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest” (8-9). On the other hand, the “unbalanced . . . sound of the shop-floor,” to borrow Bijsterveld’s phrasing – with its “multitude of machines, with varying rhythms that, taken together, produced sonic chaos” that the narrator experiences earlier in his life at the Liberty Paints factory (154) – is less psychologically conducive to sonic perspective by incongruity in the “micro-geography of the moment,” to again recall Labelle’s terminology. But such an experience can still significantly influence the subject’s sonic ethos once they acquire the adequate acoustic critical tools and sonic landscape necessary to hone and tinker with a grounded auditory knowledge.

Zohar: Acousmatic Threshold Sound Signals at the Liberty Paints Hospital

In the Liberty Paints hospital episode (chapter 11 in *Invisible Man*), the narrator is admitted to the factory hospital following the boiler explosion at the Liberty Paints factory. This is a significant episode that is defined by acousmatic threshold sound signals and surreal moments of discordant sounds which transform the narrator's perception of the sonic due to the effects of ECT. In this episode of the novel, the narrator awakens, he eventually learns, in the Liberty Paints factory hospital, where he is secured to a bed in order to be administered ECT. The hospital episode is, like the previous episode, dominated by acousmatic sound, though the unseen sounds of the hospital have a radically different effect on the narrator's perception than the factory episode and the prologue and epilogue because such unseen sounds are liminal in nature. As the narrator lays strapped to the hospital bed awaiting ECT, he describes his helplessness as an acousmatic experience:

Somewhere a machine began to hum and I distrusted the man and woman above me. They were holding me firm and it was fiery and above it all I kept hearing the opening motif of Beethoven's Fifth – three short and one long buzz, repeated again and again in varying volume, and I was struggling and breaking through, rising up, to find myself lying on my back with two pink-faced men laughing down. . . . Now a man sitting with his back to me, manipulating dials on a panel. I wanted to call him, but the Fifth Symphony rhythm racked me, and he seemed too serene and too far away. Bright metal bars were between us and when I strained my neck around I discovered that I

was not lying on an operating table but in a kind of glass and nickel box, the lid of which was propped open. Why was I here? (233)

The narrator's liminal transition in this episode begins at the end of the previous episode in the novel (chapter 10 of *Invisible Man*), when the boilers of the Liberty Paints factory basement explode with furious and chaotic noise. The disorientating factory noise that leads to the boilers exploding and the narrator's resulting unconsciousness aligns with Turner and Parrinder's first stage of liminal transition, a "separation from the structures of society" (Parrinder 11). In the passage above, the narrator experiences a sonorous liminal stage, where he crosses "a forbidden boundary, a portal which marks the end of the old world and the beginning of the new" (Parrinder 11). This boundary between two distinct soundscapes comes in the form of the acousmatic noise of hospital machinery – we are possibly hearing the sounds of the ECT machines being prepared for use – as well as the narrator's linking the rhythm of the machine noises to the tempo of Beethoven's Fifth symphony.

The sequence of Beethoven's symphony in question refers to the famous four-note motif that begins the piece ("three short and one long buzz, repeated again and again in varying volume," the narrator states [232]) (Fig. 8). In his essay "Living with Music," Ellison also compares Beethoven's motif to the overwhelming neighbourhood noise he endured at his apartment at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue, where he would struggle to write most of *Invisible Man*. Ellison's comparison of Beethoven's motif to the overwhelming and bewildering noise of his loud neighbours can shed light on his usage of the motif in the Liberty Paints hospital episode: "These more involved feelings" of intrusive, overwhelming, acousmatic noise, Ellison states, "were aroused by a more intimate source of noise, one that got beneath the skin and worked in the very structure of one's consciousness – like the 'fate' motif in Beethoven's

Fifth or the knocking-at-the-gates scene in *Macbeth*” (228). Ellison identifies the unseen, invasive, and disorientating noise of his neighbours as a burden on his concentration and composition because such noise is both all-consuming and psychologically transformative and exhausting. Ellison himself endured significant unproductive periods where he could not write, create, or think because neighbourhood noise was an intimate and obfuscating presence that limited his intellectual agency. Brandon LaBelle would call this unwanted presence of noise an “organic sheath to the flow of experience” because such outside noise clouds the soundscape and disrupts the listener’s ability to focus (“Acoustic Spatiality,” *Književnost i Kultura*). The notion that the opening of the Beethoven’s fate motif signifies a looming dread or fate is also regularly reflected in scholarship on Beethoven, as Anton Felix Schindler writes in *Beethoven as I Knew Him: A Biography* (1966):

What a marvellous union of pathos, majesty, mystery, and grandeur is contained in those four movements! What a life of poetry this work unfolds before our senses, allowing us to see into its depths! The composer himself provided the key to those depths when one day, in this author’s presence, he pointed to the beginning of the first movement and expressed in these words the fundamental idea of his work: “Thus Fate knocks at the door!” (147)

Ellison’s description of the opening motif of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony as a “fate” motif, as Beethoven scholars likewise assert, suggests that Ellison associates the motif with creative pressure, psychological torment, and intellectual telos, just as Ellison would eventually spar with his noisy neighbour by “[fighting] noise with noise” in order to regain sonic and creative agency in his personal space⁹³. The narrator’s perception of the “knocking-at-the gates” sonic

⁹³ The episode where Jack and other Brotherhood members confront the narrator about his handling of Tod Clifton’s eulogy (chapter 22 of *Invisible Man*) also include some surreal moments, such as Jack’s glass eye falling

personal sonic meaning, which, in the moment of ECT, comes in the form of his association of the noises of the factory hospital machinery with Beethoven's fate motif. In "Living with Music," Ellison also associates the fate motif with the knocking-at-the-gates scene in *Macbeth*, which suggests that Ellison considers Beethoven's fate motif to represent a liminal passage or door between two sonic worlds, perceptions, or subject positions. Ellison might also have Thomas De Quincey's lauded 1823 essay on the knocking-at-the-gates scene in mind when he wrote "Living with Music." De Quincey's essay can provide clarity to the notion that the knocking-at-the-gates scene indicates a liminal passage between two soundscapes:

Hence it is, that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.⁹⁴

Furthermore, it is useful to consider Richard Wagner's thoughts on Beethoven's fate motif, as Wagner was likewise a core musical influence on Ellison. In *Sonic Modernity*, Sam Halliday writes: "In his essay 'Beethoven' (1870), Wagner claims the existence of a 'sound-world

⁹⁴ The knocking-at-the-gates scene appears at the beginning of Act II, scene III, of *Macbeth*, where one of Macbeth's porters delivers a long, paranoid soliloquy about the identity of unknown visitors to the castle – these visitors turn out to be Macduff and Lenox – who come knocking at the castle soon after Macbeth murders and usurps the king, Duncan. The Porter's opening lines read as follows: "Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key. [Knocking.] Knock, knock, knock. Who's there, i' th' name of Belzebub? . . . Never at quiet! What are you? – But this place is too cold for hell" (II.iii.1-16).

beside the light-world,' parallel to that of vision and bearing 'the same relation to the visible world as dreaming to waking'" (5). The narrator's sonic disorientation prior to being administered ECT is comparable to both De Quincey and Wagner's analysis of the knocking-at-the-gates scene. The narrator, in his confused, hospitalized state, focuses on the fate motif of Beethoven's Fifth as a symbol for an uncertain boundary between his current, naïve, and optimistic state and an unknown, future perception, where he will ultimately be more intimately attuned to sonic acumen and more aware of threats to his identity and agency.

The scene continues with the narrator experiencing sensory and sonic disorientation, which constitutes a "moment in and out of time," according to Turner and Parrinder's criteria, where the threshold sound signals of the hospital lead the narrator to experience feelings of timelessness and defamiliarization with his own body and identity. The narrator recalls:

"Doctor! Doctor!" I called.

No answer. Perhaps he hadn't heard, I thought, calling again and feeling the stabbing pulses of the machine again and feeling myself going under and fighting against it and coming up to hear voices carrying on a conversation behind my head. The static sounds became a quiet drone. Strains of music, a Sunday air, drifted from a distance. With closed eyes, barely breathing I warded off the pain. The voices droned harmoniously. Was it a radio I heard—a phonograph? The *vox humana* of a hidden organ? If so, what organ and where? I felt warm. Green hedges, dazzling with red wild roses appeared behind my eyes, stretching with a gentle curving to an infinity empty of objects, a limpid blue space. Scenes of a shaded lawn in summer drifted past; I saw a uniformed military band arrayed decorously in concert, each musician

with well-oiled hair, heard a sweet-voiced trumpet rendering “The Holy City” as from an echoing distance, buoyed by a choir of muted horns; and above, the mocking obbligato of a mocking bird. I felt giddy. The air seemed to grow thick with fine white gnats, filling my eyes, boiling so thickly that the dark trumpeter breathed them in and expelled them through the bell of his golden horn, a live white cloud mixing with the tones upon the torpid air. (233-234; emphasis in original)

The temporal and sonic displacement the narrator experiences in this section of the episode is exemplified by this experience of confusing human sounds with musical machines, as he states: “The voices droned harmoniously. Was it a radio I heard—a phonograph? The *vox humana* of a hidden organ? If so, what organ and where?” It is significant to note that the narrator associates the threshold sound signals of the ECT machines with the religious ballad “The Holy City,” which the narrator claims he hears “from an echoing distance, buoyed by a choir of muted horns.” The lyrics of the “The Holy City” begin with the lines “Last night I lay asleeping / There came a dream so fair” (Weatherly 2), which gives the effect of sonic dislocation and reflects the narrator’s out-of-place experience of ECT. More than this, the narrator experiences an intense and “intimate source of noise, one that got beneath the skin and worked in the very structure of one’s consciousness” akin to the disorientation and psychoacoustic effect of the neighbourhood noise Ellison experienced in his small, loud apartment at 749 St. Nicholas Avenue (228).

It is also notable that the “The Holy City” plays on a gramophone in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, during the long, surreal, absinthe-fueled quasi-play episode “Circe” that dominates the middle section of Joyce’s novel. The gramophone – which, like other mundane objects in the

hallucinatory “Circe” episode, seems to “speak” like a character – cries “Open your gates and sing” as “a rocket rushes up to the sky and bursts . . . along an infinite invisible tightrope taut from zenith to nadir the End of the World” (477). Since Joyce is a core influence on Ellison, and the song is not mentioned elsewhere in Ellison’s nonfiction, it is plausible that Ellison drew the reference to “The Holy City” from *Ulysses*. Joyce’s use of the “The Holy City” also demonstrates a liminal and hallucinatory “moment in and out of time,” a transformative threshold of sound and light (“a rocket rushes up to the sky and bursts”), and a sonic gateway between soundscapes (“Open your gates and sing”). Each of these aspects are comparable to the narrator’s experience of the “dazzling light” and threshold sound signals forced upon him by the effects of ECT.

Furthermore, when the narrator is administered ECT, he endures a sonic experience that consumes his body. He recalls:

I heard them move away; a chair scraped. The machine droned, and I knew definitely that they were discussing me and steeled myself for the shocks, but was blasted nevertheless. The pulse came swift and staccato, increasing gradually until I fairly danced between the nodes. My teeth chattered. I closed my eyes and bit my lips to smother my screams. Warm blood filled my mouth. Between my lids I saw a circle of hands and faces, dazzling with light. Some were scribbling upon charts.

“Look, he’s dancing,” someone called.

“No, really?”

An oily face looked in. “They really do have rhythm, don’t they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!” it said with a laugh. (237)

The experience of ECT is here defined by threshold sound signals that signify a liminal transition that consumes the narrator spiritually and corporeally. “The pulse came swift and staccato, increasing gradually until I fairly danced between the nodes,” the narrator states, as the hospital attendants mock him: “They really do have rhythm, don’t they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!” The “staccato” pulse of the ECT shocks indicate that the ECT equipment produces noise and electricity in a sharp, intense, and focused manner, in which the narrator cannot always discern a unique musical beat to cling to for meaning⁹⁵. Referring to the source of the voice as “it” – instead of “they,” “she,” or “he” – also emphasizes the narrator’s acousmatic liminal disorientation.

The sonically and temporally transitory “dazzling light” of the narrator’s ECT experience also recalls the middle sequence of “The Holy City,” which reads:

And once again the scene was chang’d

New earth there seem’d to be

I saw the Holy City

Beside the tideless sea

The light of God was on its streets

The gates were open wide

And all who would might enter

And no one was denied

⁹⁵ Since the narrator associates the pulses of ECT with Beethoven’s fate motif, the pulse of the ECT shocks would be in 2/4 time. 1/4 and 2/4 time is the common meter for a military march, which the narrator also refers to in the first Southern college episode. Marches are commonly used in ceremonies, which are relevant to this passage since the narrator is experiencing a sonic ritual of liminal transition. For reference, Johnny Cash’s song “Ring of Fire” (1963) is a good example of a 2/4 pop song, as the song is dominated by a fast, tense, stomping beat, which is probably done to reflect the tension of literally or metaphorically jumping through a ring on fire. More recent popular songs such as “Hey Ya!” by Outkast (2003) and “I Will Wait” by Mumford and Sons (2012) are also written in 2/4 time, and have similar tense and/or celebratory themes as “Ring of Fire.”

In the above passages, the narrator experiences a sonic “moment in and out of time,” in the sense that he associates the experience with sonic texts that he intrinsically perceives to possess profound personal, sonic, and teleological meaning. Although the narrator is indeed forced to listen to the sound signals of the hospital while being administered ECT, he is likewise drawn to psychoacoustic motifs and songs that are both important to his past and the intellectual development of his sonic, subjective, and creative perception; or to recall the end of “Living with Music,” “music with not only calm, it will ennoble thee” (236).

The ECT procedure concludes with the narrator confused but partially aware of the voices of the doctors “dron[ing] above him” (234) while “other faces came up, their mouths working with soundless fury. But we are all human, I thought, wondering what I meant” (239). The sonic, sensory, and temporal dislocation the narrator experiences under the effects of ECT lead to sound and language becoming difficult to comprehend. The fragmentary and unlocatable sound signals and images of the doctors working around the narrator suggests the “time of marvels” stage of the narrator’s perceptual liminal transition. The constant “droning” and hushed sounds of hospital voices and machines can also be compared to Paul C. Jasen’s assessment of infrasound (low-frequency sound): “Instead of a lower ‘limit’ of audition, we are presented with a liminal region across which perceptual faculties break down and recombine while synaesthetic uncertainties flood in” (47). Finally, the final stage of liminality occurs when the narrator is released from the hospital. He experiences a “symbolic rebirth” when he becomes fully aware that ECT has altered his sonic perception once he leaves the surreal world of the hospital, which he describes as feeling “vacuum-minded” (250). Upon leaving the hospital, the narrator experiences a moment of existential uncertainty and states: “I had the feeling I had been talking beyond myself, had used words and expressed

attitudes not my own, that I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me” (249). The narrator then describes the city streets with a radically new and disorientating sonic acuity:

Things whirled too fast around me. My mind went alternately bright and blank in slow rolling waves. We, he, him – my mind and I – were no longer getting around in the same circles. Nor my body either. Across the aisle a young platinum blonde nibbled at a red Delicious apple as station lights rippled past behind her. The train plunged. I dropped through the roar, giddy and vacuum-minded, sucked under and out into late afternoon Harlem. (250)

The narrator’s attention to acousmatic threshold sound signals upon leaving the hospital is drastically different from how he perceived sound when he originally arrived at the Liberty Paints factory (beginning of chapter 10 of *Invisible Man*), as, in that episode, the narrator focuses instead on the intense silence of the building’s environs (or, perhaps, he did not even notice any sound at all at the time because he could have experienced such sounds as keynote sounds instead of sound signals): “Flags were fluttering in the breeze from each of a maze of buildings below the sign, and for a moment it was like watching some vast patriotic ceremony from a distance. But no shots were fired and no bugles sounded. I hurried ahead with the others through the fog” (196). The chapter that follows the Liberty Paints hospital episode also suggests the narrator experiences a symbolic rebirth as he leaves the hospital, as he states at the beginning of chapter 12: “I focused on the teetering scene with wild, infant’s eyes” (251). Thus, the Liberty Paints hospital episode serves as a surreal and radically transformative sonic liminal ritual for the narrator – or a “ceremony,” as the narrator notes at the beginning of the episode – that transfigures the narrator’s sonic acumen and spurs him to

more intimately consider the unique, personal, and sometimes transformative significance of the sonic.

In the next chapter, I examine the impact of James Joyce's literary experiments with the sonic on Ellison's earwitness approach. Like Eliot, Joyce's auditory imagination, visual-sonic imagery, and musical language influence Ellison as an earwitness. Joyce's influence on Ellison's approach is unique, however, because Joyce also philosophizes on the existential significance of the sonic in his work. Because of this, the next chapter argues that the narrator crafts a sonic philosophy of history towards the end of the novel that is informed by Joyce and Joyce's influences, namely Giambattista Vico. This dissertation's final chapter demonstrates the culmination of the narrator's development as an intellectual earwitness: the narrator of the novel's prologue and epilogue has matured into an intellectual artistic earwitness and thinker-tinker of sonic experience who is critically committed to evaluating cultural and historical discourses of the sonic. The narrator's experiences in the battle royal, Southern college, Liberty Paints factory, and Brotherhood episodes lead him to significantly mature as an intellectual earwitness. In effect, the narrator of the prologue confidentially philosophizes on the important uniqueness of sonic subjectivity and uplift provided by the artistic expression of his sonic past. The narrator's philosophical and artistic sonic ethos in the prologue's underground is expressed through his description of his conception of a philosophy of sonic history and self-reliance.

Chapter Five:

Groove of History: Joyce, Vico, and Ellison's Sonic Spiral and Boomerang of History

The musical prose, sonic metaphors, and songs in James Joyce's work significantly impact Ellison's use of the sonic in his work. Ellison states in a 1974 interview with John Hersey: "Joyce and Eliot . . . made me aware of the playful possibilities of language. You look at a page of *Finnegans Wake* and see references to all sorts of American popular music, yet the context gives it an extension from the popular back to the classical and beyond" (286). While scholarship sometimes notes a connection between the musicality of Joyce's prose and Ellison's use of the sonic, scholarly comparisons of Joyce and Ellison tend to focus more on the modernist elements of Ellison's work that Ellison derives from Joyce and Eliot, such as narrative fragmentation and an emphasis on subjective experience. Ellison, like Joyce, employs modernist techniques that include varied experimentations with language and narrative form, a clear intent to create an innovative work that is distinct in their literary field, and critique, satirize, or philosophize on discourses of modernity. Broad comparisons between Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Invisible Man* are not uncommon since both texts use modernist techniques to describe the various challenges and experiences in a young man's intellectual and philosophical development. More often, scholarship and reviews of *Invisible Man* tend to note Joyce's influence on Ellison in a passive manner that sometimes glosses over the nuances of Joyce's effect on Ellison⁹⁶. For

⁹⁶ It is common to find scholarship that links Joyce to Ellison in a list of several authors that impacted Ellison, instead of a thorough comparison of Joyce to Ellison. For example, in *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates Jr. makes several variations of the following statement: "Literary echoes, or pastiche, as found in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, of signal tropes found in Emerson, Eliot, Joyce, Crane, or Melville (among others) constitute one mode of Signifyin(g)" (28).

instance, John Corry, in the preamble to his 1966 interview with Ellison, briefly describes Ellison's prologue as "Joycean," but Corry does not elaborate on his meaning (99)⁹⁷. But the impact of Joyce's work on Ellison's approach stretches beyond a general emulation of Joyce's modernist techniques. Ellison often notes the specifically sonic and musical elements of Joyce's prose as guiding influences on his work, as he does in his interview with Hersey. The musical language of Joyce's work shapes the modernist, fragmentary, and dense sections of *Invisible Man* in the sense that the more modernist or "Joycean" sections of Ellison's novel present sonic philosophies or experiences in a lyrically experimental manner.

Scholarship does not often survey the influence of Joyce's two most difficult novels, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, on *Invisible Man*. Despite the supreme difficulty of Joyce's later work, it is worth examining the impact of Joyce's musical language and sonic imagery in *Ulysses* and the *Wake* on Ellison's earwitness approach since Joyce's experiments with the sonic in *Ulysses* and the *Wake* shape Ellison's attention to crafting sonic imagery and philosophizing on the existential significance of listening⁹⁸. For example, Ellison refers to his signed copy of Joyce's *Anna Livia Plurabelle* (*ALP*) as one of the few "precious" things he owns, but his reverence for *ALP* goes beyond merely owning a rare literary item (Letter to John Roche, 6 Nov. 1984)⁹⁹. There seems to be something to make of the fact that Ellison

⁹⁷ I wonder if Corry is drawing a comparison between the interior monologue of the prologue and the stream-of-consciousness techniques Joyce uses in various episodes of *Ulysses*. However, Ellison, in the introduction to the thirtieth anniversary edition of the novel, characterizes the narrator's monologue as an example of psychological introspection, akin to Henry James's proto-modernism, which blends psychological self-examination with elements of realism: "James had taught us much with his hyperconscious, 'Super subtle fry,' characters who embodied in their own cultured, upper-class way the American virtues of conscience and consciousness" (xix).

⁹⁸ The *Wake* is so complex that scholars, over eighty years after the publication of the novel, are still not entirely sure about many of the nuances of the novel's plot. Scholars such as Joseph Campbell and Kimberley J. Devlin have written academic guides on *The Wake* that focus entirely on how to merely navigate Joyce's labyrinthine text in order to glimpse his meaning and the novel's basic structure, symbols, and narrative.

⁹⁹ *ALP* is the eighth chapter of *The Wake*, and was published as a standalone piece in 1928. Only 800 first edition copies were printed, and each one was signed by Joyce. Ellison, to his delight, came across and

sometimes interprets the sonic language and imagery of an unrelated text by comparing the text to the musical language of *ALP* or Joyce's other work (Fig. 9). For instance, in the 1980s, Hugh Kenner created algorithmically generated "pseudo-poems" with the computer program *Travesty*; in 1985, Kenner sent Ellison a *Travesty* based on the works of Henry James, to which Ellison emphatically responds:

It is most intriguing, and with all the "plashing" and "stream(ing)" around I'm reminded of lil ole Anna, down whose soft cheek a pearly tear did flow—Anna Livia, the plurabella:

"But she were stream..."

"She stream (?)"

"She certainly."

Then what happen, man?

"She certainly and then stood up and lost her lap!"

Joyce would have loved that! (839)¹⁰⁰

Ellison interprets this Jamesian pseudo-poem through the lens of the musical language of *ALP* and does not mention James at all. The repetition of S-sounds that form visual-sonic images of water strikes Ellison as specifically Joycean. Specifically, the character Anna Livia Plurabelle is often associated with water in the *Wake*: "Livia" is a pun on the river Liffey that

purchased the 347th signed copy in a Harlem bookstore in 1940 for only \$1.25, which would be about \$35 Canadian in 2023. The asking price today for a signed copy from the original signed set of 800 ranges from \$5,000 to \$10,000 Canadian. Both Rampersad and Jackson note the reverence Ellison had for his signed copy of *ALP* in their biographies.

¹⁰⁰ *Travesty* takes random snippets from select works of a given author – a line, part of a sentence, etc. – and rearranges them into a new "pseudo-poem." Kenner published an overview of his experiment, "A *Travesty* Generator for Micros," co-authored with Joseph O'Rourke, in the November, 1984 issue of *Byte* magazine. The article features the following *Travesty* pseudo-poem that uses Eliot's *The Hollow Men* as its source text: "This is / the world ends / There, the stuffed meaning places / Are quiet and more silent souls, but on a bang / but a whimper. / Let me also wear / Prickly pear: [sic]" (133). A reader who is generally familiar with Eliot's poem is sure to note familiar lines such as "the world ends," "but a whimper," and "Prickly pear," among others.

runs through Dublin. For Ellison, the fragmented lines outputted by Travesty seem to create visual-sonic images that are supposed to be heard instead of understood as a coherent narrative. The string of monosyllabic words that dominate the final line, “She certainly and then stood up and lost her lap!,” is also somewhat reminiscent of the final line of the *Wake*, which uses alliteration to create a visual-sonic image of the passage of time: “A way a lone a last a loved a long the” (628).

Ellison’s reading of Kenner’s Jamesian Travesty also includes his own Joycean pun: Ellison refers to Anna as the “plurabella,” a word that does not appear in the *Wake*. Ellison’s use of “plurabella” can be interpreted as a “klang” word of Ellison’s own invention. Scholarship on the *Wake* uses the term “klang” to indicate words or “associations in the *Wake* [that] frequently generate[] a line of ‘double talk,’ in which the line of discourse in the *Wake* recalls an association, [and] a silent second line of discourse in the reader’s mind (José Lanteris 212). Ellison’s interpretation of Kenner’s Jamesian Travesty draws on Joyce’s technique of transforming and distorting words into nonnarrative, emotional sonic-images¹⁰¹. The term “klang” is itself a klang word since it is a pun that has several implied meanings. First, “klang” is the German word for sound. Second, the word “klang” includes the letters “l-a-n-g,” which gestures to the word “language.” Third, adding the letter “k” to “l-a-n-g” makes the term percussive, which draws attention to the sonic nature of Joyce’s multi-layered puns and associations. In order to navigate the narrative and themes of the *Wake*, the reader should pay attention to the repetition of phonetically similar klang words and visual-sonic

¹⁰¹ When Kimberley J. Devlin teaches sections of the *Wake*, she asks students to slowly read the text out loud (160). Doing so, I think, allows the reader to focus on the sounds of the text’s language. Joyce’s language might look like nonsense to the first-time reader; but reading the text out loud will draw attention to phonetic similarities of various puns and klang associations, which will help the reader navigate the difficult narrative and basic themes of the *Wake*.

images in the text. Some words in the *Wake* might be vaguely familiar in their spelling, but are more recognizably similar in their phonetic construction and general sound. For instance, Anna Livia Plurabelle is, at one point in the *Wake*, referred to as “Quanty purty bellas, here, Madama Lifay” (224). The use of the word “Lifay” should be enough to indicate to the reader that this sentence refers to Anna since the word “Lifay” phonetically resembles “Liffey.” Joyce might also be playing with the complex and inconsistent rules for pronouncing English vowels: for example, the words “pray” and “prey” are pronounced the same in English, but “kay” and “key” are not. “Purty” is probably a quasi-homonym of “pretty,” and is possibly also an ironic and percussive inversion of the more aesthetic word “Plura.” The use of “purty” here gives an idea of how Anna is perceived in this passage: she is seen as “purty” (pretty) but possibly also unapproachable (since “purty” is a less aesthetically pleasing word than “plura”). Moreover, scholars generally agree that the name “Plurabelle” indicates that Anna is both melancholic (“pleur” is the French word for both rain and weeping) and a stereotype or archetype of an attractive “everywoman” (“plural” + “belle”). Alternative spellings of Anna’s name in the text – like all characters in the *Wake* – demonstrate subtly shifting perceptions of the character. Anna is also referred to as “Pia de Purebelle,” for example (“the most pious of pure women”).

The focus of this chapter is the influence of Joyce’s sonic literary experiments on *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s use of visual-sonic imagery, poetic language, auditory imagination, and philosophies of listening are influenced by Joyce as much as Eliot. While the language of *Invisible Man* isn’t nearly as complex as the *Wake*, obviously, the visual-sonic imagery and philosophies of sound in *Invisible Man* are arguably influenced by Joyce’s literary experiments with language and the sonic. In more detail, I examine how Ellison’s narrator

initially develops a philosophy of history that considers history to be cyclical like a phonograph record: “They [Harlem residents] were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them” (443). The narrator initially conceives of the idea of a “groove of history” after witnessing the murder of fellow Brotherhood member Tod Clifton (chapter 20 of *Invisible Man*). As I examine in this chapter, the narrator later refines this concept in the underground of the prologue and epilogue.

O
tell me all about
Anna Livia! I want to hear all
about Anna Livia. Well, you know Anna Livia? Yes, of course,
we all know Anna Livia. Tell me all. Tell me now. You'll die
when you hear. Well, you know, when the old cheb went futt
and did what you know. Yes, I know, go on. Wash quit and
don't be dabbling. Tuck up your sleeves and loosen your talk-
tapes. And don't butt me — hike! — when you bend. Or what-
ever it was they threed, to make out he thried to two in the
Fiendish park. He's an awful old reppe. Look at the shirt of him!
Look at the dirt of it! He has all my water black on me. And it
steeping and stuping since this time last wik. How many goes
is it I wonder I washed it? I know by heart the places he likes to
saale, duddurty devil! Scorching my hand and starving my fa-
mine to make his private linen public. Wallop it well with your
battel and clean it. My wrists are wrusty rubbing the mouldaw
stains. And the dneepers of wet and the gangres of sin in it! What
was it he did a tail at all on Animal Sendai? And how long was
he under loch and neagh? It was put in the newses what he did,
nicies and priers, the King fierceas Humphrey, with illysus dis-
tilling, exploits and all. But toms will till. I know he well. Temp
untamed will hist for no man. As you spring so shall you neap.
O, the roughy old rappe! Minxing marrage and making loof.

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Fig. 9. The first page of *ALP*. James Joyce. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.463592/page/n199/mode/2up?view=theater> [public domain]. 1939 (2015). Web. 30 May 2023.

The narrator's cyclical view of history might remind the reader of the cliché, "history repeats itself." However, I argue that the narrator's philosophy of a cyclical "groove" of history is drawn from Joyce's sonic presentation of historical cycles in the *Wake*¹⁰². Joseph Campbell, in *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (1944), describes the *Wake* as "a mighty allegory of the fall and resurrection of mankind. It is a strange book, a compound of fable, symphony, and nightmare . . . Its mechanics resemble those of a dream . . . [that] compress[es] all periods of history, all phases of individual and racial development, into a circular design, of which every part is beginning, middle, and end" (3). The use of cycles in Joyce's novel is apparent in the opening line of the text, which begins in the middle of the same sentence that ends the novel: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs" (3)¹⁰³. Joyce's use of cycles is drawn from the philosopher Giambattista Vico, who argues that historical periods go through a cycle of four ages: "theocratic, aristocratic, democratic, and chaotic" (Campbell 5)¹⁰⁴. Vico, in *The First New Science* (1725), uses the

¹⁰² Ellison also uses the "groove" metaphor to describe the history of Oklahoma in his letter to Harold Calicutt, which I discuss in the introduction of this dissertation: "All the old grooves [of Oklahoma City] have been erased – not worn out like the grooves of a fine old recording that has been played until the tune is more in the memory than in the phonograph, but simply erased, torn down, uprooted and junked because some strangers who never knew the magic, the wonder and inspiration of living in those old dear grooves decided that they were no longer to exist" (686).

¹⁰³ Campbell states: "the last word flow into the first, Omega merges into Alpha, and the rosary of history begins all over again" (23). The "river" of words that begins the novel are also intentionally musical and aesthetic in their appearance on the page.

¹⁰⁴ Vico and his cyclical theory of history is alluded to in the opening line of the *Wake*: "vicus of recirculation." "Vicinus" is a klang word that refers to Vico and possibly also the landscape ("vicus" is Latin for village); "recirculation" refers to both the flow of the river Liffey and the Vichian cycle of history beginning anew. The *Wake* is divided into four parts, with each part representing one of Vico's ages. Northrop Frye elaborates on Vico's cyclical view of history as follows: "Vico thinks of history as the repetition of a cycle that passes through four main phases: a mythical or poetic period, an age of the gods; then an aristocratic period dominated by heroes and heraldic crests; then a demotic period; and, finally, a ricorso, or return to chaos, followed by the beginning of another cycle. Vico traces these four periods through the Classical age to the fall of the Roman Empire, and speaks of a new cycle beginning in the medieval period" (4). As an aside, it is possible that the narrative trajectory of *Invisible Man* loosely follows Vico's four ages as well: the narrator lives in fear of authority during the battle royal and the Southern college episodes (age of gods); the narrator later confronts

terms “corso” and “ricorso” to signify the course and repetition of history. Vico elaborates on these terms as follows:

A ricorso does not, like the recurrence of a cosmic cycle, merely repeat the corso. It is ahistorical, not a purely natural, process, and it has the legal sense of a retrial or appeal. Since the historical Corso has not received justice, it must, as it were, appeal to higher court for a rehearing of its case. The highest court of justice, however, is providential history as a whole; and it requires an age of disintegration and oversophistication, of “the barbarism of reflection,” in order to return to the creative barbarism of sense and thus begin anew. (xliii)

Importantly, Naomi S. Baron and Nikhil Bhattacharya argue that Vico’s cyclical theory of history observes how the myths, oral histories, and literature of each age uses various forms of symbolic or “poetic language” to understand and interpret the world (182)¹⁰⁵. The *Wake* – sometimes referred to as Joyce’s “Viconian dream-book” – likewise uses symbolic and poetic language to describe the cycles of history; but the text also purposefully distorts language through klang associations and dense, punning visual-sonic imagery in order to mirror how images, settings, or characters in a dream can take on new but related forms. Baron and Bhattacharya elaborate: “In *Finnegans Wake*, the ambiguous resonances of the sounds of words and their patterns take on a pivotal role. Joyce knew enough of psychoanalysis to know that the unconscious mind works with homonymy and homophony to create dream

discursive authority in New York, including meeting with Mr. Emerson’s son and making a speech when he witnesses the eviction of a Black family (age of heroes); the narrator then joins the Brotherhood and becomes an orator (demotic age; age of men); the narrator retreats into the underground during the Harlem riot, and the novel ends with the epilogue – a continuation of the prologue – where he decides that he will eventually return to the aboveground (ricorso).

¹⁰⁵ For example, the theocratic age uses “hieroglyphic or sacred language;” the demotic age uses “the epistolary or vulgar language of men employing signs for communicating the common needs of their life;” and so on (Vico qtd. in Baron and Bhattacharya 182).

sequences. . . . [Joyce's characters] too could switch from one [character's identity] to another, based on similarities of sound and meaning. It was in this way that Joyce hoped to construct a unified world from across the Vichian stages of history, that would finally disclose transhistorical experience" (194). The *Wake* thus incorporates Vico's cyclical theory of history into its dream-like narrative by using sonic puns and subtly changing visual-sonic imagery; in effect, Joyce's "Viconian dream-book" demonstrates that interpretations of language and history are constantly in flux.

I argue that Ellison's narrator develops his own philosophy of history that recalls the sonorous Vichian cycles of the *Wake*. The narrator's commitment to Brotherhood ideology is shaken when he witnesses a White police officer murder fellow Brotherhood member Tod Clifton. This traumatic event is dominated by threshold sound signals: "the grinding roar of traffic, the growing sound of a record shop loudspeaker blaring a languid blues," which leads the narrator to conclude that the lives of ordinary Harlem residents – like Tod Clifton – will go unobserved by historians: "They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them" (443)¹⁰⁶. The narrator here envisions history as a phonograph record: in a basic sense, history goes through cycles and repeats itself, just as a phonograph record spins until it is eventually flipped over or replayed. However, there is a key difference between the narrator's groove of history and Joyce's appropriation of Vichian cycles.

¹⁰⁶ For reference, the full passage reads as follows: "Now, moving through the crowds along 125th Street, I was painfully aware of other men dressed like the boys, and of girls in dark exotic-colored stockings, their costumes surreal variations of downtown styles. They'd been there all along, but somehow I'd missed them. I'd missed them even when my work had been most successful. They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them. I looked into the design of their faces, hardly a one that was unlike someone I'd known down South. Forgotten names sang through my head like forgotten scenes in dreams. I moved with the crowd, the sweat pouring off me, listening to the grinding roar of traffic, the growing sound of a record shop loudspeaker blaring a languid blues. I stopped. Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words? My mind flowed. It was as though in this short block I was forced to walk past everyone I'd ever known and no one would smile or call my name. No one fixed me in his eyes." (443).

Clifton's death makes the narrator "painfully aware" that the lives of most Harlem residents will either not be recorded in any substantial detail or be forgotten entirely: "it was my job to get them in, all of them¹⁰⁷." Characters in the *Wake*, in contrast, transform into different entities without warning since Joyce's characters are intended to be symbols or archetypes of several historical or mythical figures instead of individuals¹⁰⁸. In other words, Ellison's narrator views Harlem residents as individual, unique, and marginalized listeners and producers of sound whose sonic experiences are not thoroughly historicized, if at all. Characters in the *Wake*, on the other hand, represent a variety of sonic experiences and mythologized or "dreamlike" soundscapes of historical cycles instead of the sonic experiences of individual agents. Ultimately, the main element of the Vichian cycles of history that Ellison draws from Joyce's use of Vico is Joyce's emphasis on using sonic imagery and metaphors to describe the cycles of history. Ellison takes Joyce's lead in emphasizing the significance of soundscapes in contextualizing historical cycles and periods. The narrator's groove of history builds on Joyce's sonic experiments with Vichian cycles in the sense that the narrator both prioritizes the individual's experience and context of listening and critiques the historical discourse that omits the apparently noisier or seemingly less aesthetic sonic experiences of marginalized listeners.

¹⁰⁷ For example, in Chapter One of this dissertation, I note that the "cellar menace" of 1930s Harlem was usually reported using statistics instead of first-hand experiences. In other words, we do not know much about the individuals who lived in Harlem's cramped cellar dwellings: we mostly have statistics.

¹⁰⁸ Campbell describes Anna and her husband Earwicker as follows: "Just as Earwicker is metamorphosed into Adam, Noah, Lord Nelson, [a] mountain, or a tree, so ALP becomes by subtle transposition, Eve, Isis, Iseult, a passing cloud, a flowing stream. She is the eternally fructivous and love-bearing principle in the world—a little crone who goes about gathering fragments into a basket; Isis picking up the dismembered body of her brother-husband, Osiris" (8). As another point of reference, Earwicker and Anna's two sons, Shem and Shaun, abruptly become Jerry and Kevin, then Glugg and Chuff, and so on.

Fab Tool: An Overview of Listening, Invisibility, and Sonic Intellectualism in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Invisible Man*

The influence of Joyce's use of sonic imagery and music on Ellison's writing is apparent in the title of *Invisible Man* and the novel's main theme of invisibility. While writing in the barn of his Vermont summer home in August 1945, Ellison sketched what would become the novel's opening line: "I am an Invisible Man" (3). Ellison had spent weeks preparing to give a lecture on *Ulysses* for Stanley Hyman's class at Bennington College, and had become enthralled with the theme of invisibility that is expressed lyrically in the novel's opening episode, "Telemachus": "She [Stephen Dedalus's mother] heard old Royce sing in the pantomime of Turko the Terrible and laughed with others when he sang: 'I am the boy / That can enjoy / Invisibility'" (Jackson 320-1)¹⁰⁹. In this passage, Stephen is remembering the death of his mother, who, in Stephen's memory, is herself emotionally reacting to Royce's song of invisibility. Stephen identifies with the song because it encapsulates his grief for his mother's recent passing and the insecurity he feels over his current level of knowledge as a burgeoning artist¹¹⁰. Stephen's understanding of the lyric is filtered through his own impression of his mother's connection to the song. He is both disconnected from the sound of

¹⁰⁹ Like Ellison's narrator in the prologue of *Invisible Man*, the many literary references Stephen makes in "Telemachus" reflects the knowledge he gained in his progress as an artist throughout *Portrait*. According to the notes to the 2008 Oxford edition of *Ulysses*, the character Royce refers to Edward William Royce, a comic actor that Stephen imagines could have performed in William Brough's pantomime play "Turko the Terrible" (1876) (771).

¹¹⁰ Stephen's grief for his recently deceased mother has a parallel with Ellison's lifelong grieving over the death of his father and the impedious, pounding ideas that resounded in trying to trace his memory. Both Stephen and Ellison associate the passing of a parent with a homeland they seldom, if ever, returned to. For Stephen and Joyce, the mother figure is linked to Ireland, and for Ellison, his parents might represent Oklahoma. Ellison possibly also identified with the passing of Stephen's mother when his own mother passed away in 1937 (her fatal illness, like his father Lewis's, was similarly misdiagnosed). As with the death of Stephen's mother, Ida Ellison died unexpectedly at the beginning of Ellison's artistic and intellectual awakening, shortly after he left Tuskegee for Harlem.

the lyric as Royce sings it and his mother's own subjective experience of hearing it. Ellison appropriates Joyce's theme of invisibility to demonstrate, in part, that an intellectual earwitness acknowledges both the subjective nature of sonic experience and the inherent difficulty in communicating memories and histories of sound.

Stephen develops the metaphor of invisibility as an aesthetic of artistic creation towards the end of *Portrait*. According to Richard Ellmann, the aesthetic of invisibility that Stephen develops in *Ulysses* emphasizes the sonorous solitude of thinking and learning about sonic and subjective experience: "Joyce believed . . . that the artist should take into the center of his intense life the life that surrounds it; he could then fling it abroad again 'amid planetary music'" (338)¹¹¹. Stephen's aesthetic considers artistic creation to be a quasi-autobiographical approach, as does Ellison; more than this, the artist's development into an intellectual is a deeply personal and solitary experience which, for both Stephen and Ellison's narrator, is often difficult to describe to others in an emotionally meaningful way ("life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination")¹¹². In the same passage where Stephen ruminates over the lyric "I am the boy / That can enjoy / Invisibility," he also recalls the song "Who Goes with Fergus" from W.B. Yeats's play *The Countess Cathleen* (1892). In recalling the song from Yeats's play, Stephen says he "sang it alone in the house, holding down the long dark chords," which emphasizes the solitary experience of listening, learning, and suffering. In other words, Stephen's solitary development of a philosophy of experience

¹¹¹ Stephen's theory that the artist is "like the God of the creation" who remains "within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails," is perhaps a reflection of Joyce as a young artist himself. During Joyce's early career, he described himself as "James Overman," a reference to the Nietzschean concept of the Overman (Übermensch). Joyce's reference to the Nietzschean Overman would no doubt be recognizable to Ellison, though I am not sure how influential Nietzsche's philosophy is on Ellison in general.

¹¹² The notes to the 2008 Oxford edition of *Ulysses* state that the song in the play is "sung to comfort Cathleen who has sold her soul to buy food for her people" (771).

and memory is likened to an act of “singing” to no one but oneself. Stephen feels that the artist might feel compelled to create a personal soundscape in a solitary space of hard-fraught intellectual development: for Stephen, such a space is essentially sonic in nature, and is based on the rhythm and cadences of his voice as well as the lyrically aesthetic vocalization of the ideas he has proudly learned and honed. Stephen’s act of “singing about his suffering to himself” resonates in Ellison’s description of his narrator’s artistic development in his sonic underground, which Ellison describes, in a 1958 letter to Albert Murray, as follows: “He [the narrator] writes a memoir, he orates, rants and sings for over five hundred pages” (520). Although Stephen considers artistic production to be powerful – “like the God of creation” – his authorial voice and life’s work is not guaranteed to be taken seriously by his peers, and could be lost “amid planetary music” (67)¹¹³. Stephen, like Ellison’s narrator, is concerned that individual voices and sonic experiences have no guarantee of being recorded or remembered in historical studies. Both Stephen and Ellison’s narrator consider the soundscapes of solitary intellectual development to be ephemeral and indistinct spaces as well as significant modes of intellectual perception; in other words, Stephen and Ellison’s narrator are apprehensive towards being considered historically insignificant in relation to the noisy, “planetary music” of the myriad voices of contemporary culture and historical masses.

A central aspect of Stephen’s metaphor of intellectual invisibility is the influence of one’s cultural-historical background on their artistic method. In *Portrait*, Stephen states: “I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (121). As Lawrence Jackson writes, Ellison likewise attempts to “creat[e] the ‘uncreated conscience’ of his race” by applying Stephen’s

¹¹³ This phrase comes from *Stephen Hero*, the long first draft of *Portrait*, which was published posthumously as a standalone text in 1944.

views on artistry and nationalism to African-American themes in *Invisible Man* (320). Jackson continues: “Ellison chose to explore the contradiction of black identity, the idea of a competing and opposite reality that is submerged but rides alongside of popularly recognized poses of existence” (321). Ellison adopts Joyce’s maxim into his own philosophy of intellectual development, but reinterprets the racial terminology to be applicable to African-Americans. The narrator’s groove of history invokes Stephen’s attempt to create “the uncreated conscience of his race” by emphasizing the subjectivity and ephemerality of sonic experiences that are neglected by historical discourse. Ellison is himself concerned with the unrecorded aspects of African-American experience; in “Going to the Territory,” Ellison writes: “our unwritten history looms as [the] obscure alter ego [of recorded history], and although repressed from our general knowledge of ourselves, it is always active in the shaping of events” (598)¹¹⁴. In envisioning history as a phonographic groove, the narrator draws attention to what Emily Thompson refers to as the “mysteries of the acoustic,” or elements of subjective sonic experience that are neglected by historical discourse. Thompson elaborates: “historians of soundscapes are similarly challenged by sound’s mysterious ability to melt into air, its tendency—even in a postphonographic age—to efface itself from the historical record. But if most sounds of the past are gone for good, they have nonetheless left behind a rich record of their existence in the artifacts, the people, and the cultures that once brought them forth” (125). The narrator’s philosophy of a groove of history considers that many

¹¹⁴ In a 1945 letter to Richard Wright, Ellison writes: “I see it this way: they [American politicians] have no conscience, being Americans, and the only force capable of awakening a conscience within them, and the only force politically capable of keeping them in line until that happens, are the Negroes. It is our job as Joyce put it, ‘to create the uncreated conscience’ of the Negroes” (194). This letter to Dick is telling because it was written during the compositional and philosophical genesis of *Invisible Man* in Ellison’s Vermont barn, which indicates that Ellison firmly had Joyce (and a few other authors, such as Eliot and Dostoevsky) in mind when he first formulated the scope and themes of his novel.

individuals are neglected by historians; to paraphrase Howard Zinn, historical discourse of Ellison's time focused on "important" men and events, and sought to "teach nothing but facts, facts, facts" (684). There would have been few, if any, historical texts that objectively and thoroughly examined the importance of the sonic in African-American experience during the compositional period of *Invisible Man*. Historical texts and media accounts of jazz and the blues of the time tended to gloss over the nuances of these genres and often considered African-American sound to be essentially noisy and valueless, which ignores how "the blues, however pathetic, concealed anger; and the jazz, however joyful, portended rebellion" (443-4). The narrator's groove of history thus draws attention to the unrecorded consciousness of African-American soundscapes. The narrator's philosophy of history also incorporates his own earwitness and artistic experiences, as his philosophy of a groove of history gestures to his own interest in sound, music, and technologies of sound production. Historical accounts of sonic and lived experience become important to the narrator during his time in the Brotherhood, which, importantly, is when he first begins to think of himself as an "invisible man" who, like Stephen, is unsure if his more refined intellectual voice will be either heard or lost amid the planetary music of historical discourse.

Horus Djet Serekh: The Narrator's Intellectual Refinement of the Groove of History into a Sonic Boomerang

The narrator's conception of history as a phonographic groove suggests that the narrator notices a disconnect between which sounds and voices are recorded and which are not. Every

historical period has a distinct soundscape, but most historical soundscapes predate sound recording technology; additionally, older phonographic recordings of voices, music, and soundscapes are grainy and somewhat imprecise reproductions of the sonic. Friedrich Kittler writes: “It is characteristic of so-called Man and his consciousness to hear himself speak and see himself write, [but] media dissolve[s] such feedback loops. . . . The phonograph does not hear as do ears that have been trained immediately to filter voices, words, and sounds out of noise; it registers acoustic events as such” (“Gramophone” 235). The narrator echoes Kittler’s concern when he initially conceives of history as a cyclical phonographic groove:

Forgotten names sang through my head like forgotten scenes in dreams. I moved with the crowd, the sweat pouring off me, listening to the grinding roar of traffic, the growing sound of a record shop loudspeaker blaring a languid blues. I stopped. Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words? (443)

The narrator suggests that a phonograph record is incapable of precisely recording the lived nuances of sonic experience. While any given sound recording can be an emotional, personal, and spiritual experience for the listener, regardless of the recording quality of the track, the narrator is foremost concerned that Harlem’s soundscape is too loud, idiosyncratic, and varied to be recorded in a humanizing way. Ultimately, the narrator’s philosophy of a groove of history considers that recorded cycles of history overlook a labyrinth of unrecorded personal experiences of sound, music, and noise. The grooves of a phonograph record themselves resemble a labyrinth of mysterious sonic phonographic trenches. In other words, the listener might be both perplexed and fascinated at how, exactly, the enigmatic, crooked, and circular

trajectory of a phonographic record's labyrinthine grooves are actually capable of producing sound (Fig. 10). The philosophy of history the narrator develops reflects his development as an intellectual and an earwitness since, for the narrator, marginalized and unheard voices of Harlem residents – like the myriad alternate takes of a song that are necessary for finally producing the album-version of the track – are just as important to understanding the context, production, and experience of sonic moments and histories.

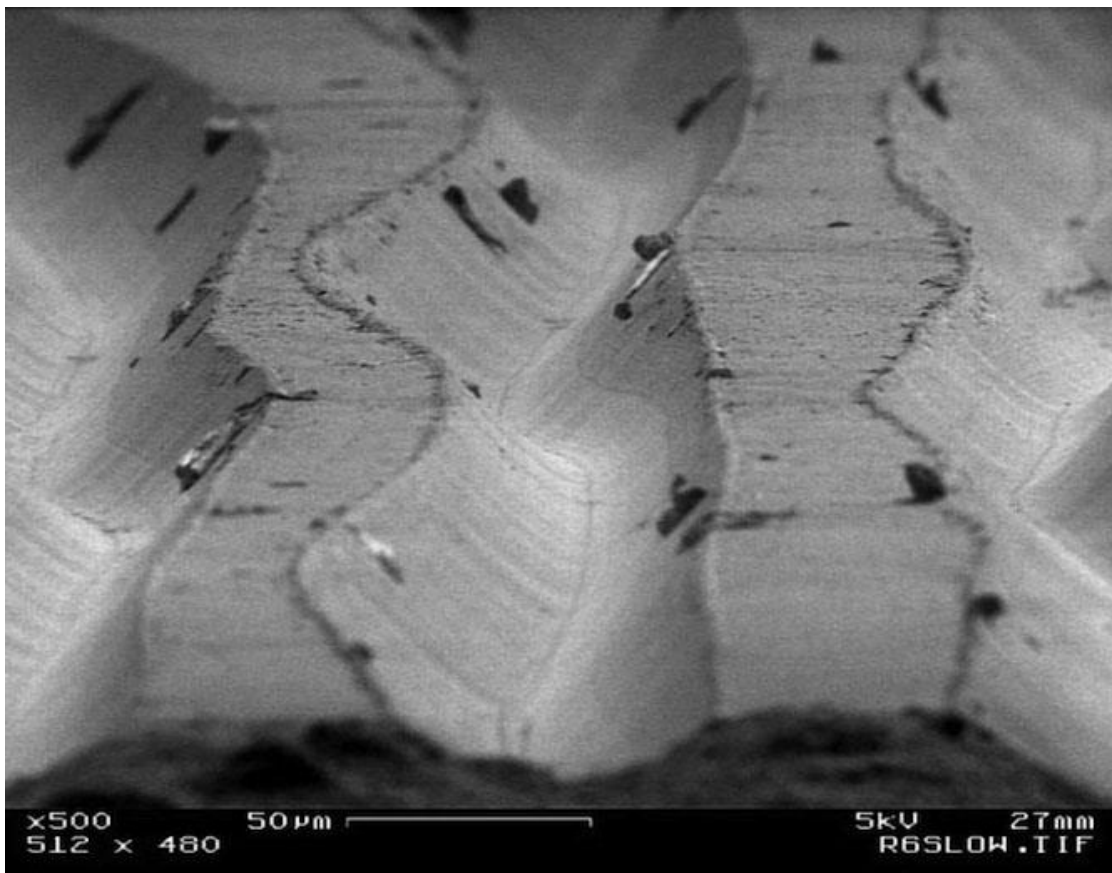


Fig. 10. “A Stunning (and Scary?) Close-up of Vinyl Record Grooves.” Amar Ediriwira. *Pressing Plant*. 2014. Web. 7 Jul 2023. <https://thevinylfactory.com/news/incredible-photos-of-record-grooves-under-an-electron-microscope/> .

In other words, when a musician records a song, the recording will inevitably sound different from the song they hear themselves play in the moment of recording. As a point of reference, until the 1970s, a band would usually record a track with all bandmembers playing at the same time, as if they were performing live as a unit. This method differs significantly from modern studio practices, where each bandmember tends to record their parts independently: in my own experience, usually the rhythm guitar and drums are recorded first, and then the lead guitarist, bassist, and vocalist record their parts afterwards while listening to the recorded parts of the rhythm section. On the other hand, music recorded during the compositional period of *Invisible Man* – from musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, and Charlie Parker – would usually require the performers to play and record an entire song in one sitting. This means that it could take multiple long takes to record a track, and each alternate take could differ significantly from the take that is ultimately included on the record. Ultimately, there are many versions of a single song, but it is often the recorded version of the cut that becomes the most recognizable or “authoritative” version in the cultural consciousness¹¹⁵. Because of this, the narrator’s groove of history arguably considers recorded history to be flawed because historical discourse does not accurately reflect the nuances of sonic experience, sonic production, and moments of listening. In other words, the recorded version of a song will usually become the most recognizable or arbitrarily “pure” version of the song that all other versions of the song might be measured against; however, the album-version of a given track is both one of many possible iterations of the song and the result of many takes and trial-and-error performances. Some examples include: the 1997

¹¹⁵ This is certainly not always the case, and there are some notable exceptions. A recent example is the 2021 track “Meet Me at Our Spot” by The Anxiety, which only became popular after the arguably more fluid and emotionally resonant live version was released after the studio single.

reissue of Miles Davis's 1959 record *Kind of Blue* includes an alternate take of "Flamenco Sketches," which features notably less pronounced trumpet accents and sax work from John Coltrane than the album version of the track, which, I think, makes the song's mood less varied. Similarly, The Band's alternative take of "Tears of Rage" from the 2000 reissue of *Music from Big Pink* (1968) features somewhat odd drum fills and beat progression that makes the track not as immersive as the subtle, tension-filled final cut which would come to lead off the album. Lastly, Paul McCartney experimented widely with his vocal delivery for "Hey Jude" during the 1968 EMI sessions for the Beatles's *The White Album*; alternate takes of the track are strikingly different from the album version since McCartney's improvised whoops and hollers alter the chorus and the general tone of the song considerably.

The *Wake* demands the reader read Joyce's text over and over, in endless cycles, in order to glimpse its layers of meaning. Joyce arguably made his novel supremely difficult in order to ensure that his text would be studied for many years after his death. Because of the text's difficulty, scholarship sometimes argues that Joyce considers history to be a "spiral" instead of a cycle. Lorraine Weir argues: "The Vichian spiral provides us with a way of dealing with the fact of the postlapsarian inscription of anamnesis and aboulia the Wakean cycle of mnemonic repetition[,] for if memory cycles constantly toward a moment of redemption from time, it also encounters the fact of its own momentary amputation in the very succession of loci required in the composition of a memory theatre or *speculum* such as the Joyce system is" (245; emphasis in original). Further, William York Tindall's *A Reader's Guide to Finnegans Wake* (1996) argues that the *Wake*, in a typically Joycean manner, seems to hint at the cyclical or "spiraling" themes in the text since Joyce's "Viconian dream-book," at one point, seems to metafictionally refer to itself as a "dreamskhwindel," which, Tindall

argues, is a pun that resembles the wordage “dream-spiral” in Danish (225). Importantly, the notion that Viconian history repeats in a “spiral,” rather than a “cycle,” seems to come from Robert Flint’s 1884 work, *Vico*. In H.S. Harris’s analysis of Joyce’s use of Vico, Harris argues: “Flint takes Vico far too theologically. In his reading, the theory of history turns into an endless spiral. Vico’s view, on the other hand, is that the comprehension of *corso* and *ricorso* together makes science possible; and further, that although once the *ricorso* is reached human affairs may sway uneasily between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy for an indefinite period (and no equilibrium can ever be permanent), still the pendulum must have as its point of balance ‘the eternal royal law’” (68-69). Harris suggests that the “spiral” interpretation of Vico’s cyclical theory of history took hold in academia because, until the end of the 19th century, Vico’s work remained obscure and untranslated in a “dark and difficult Italian” (68-69). Flint’s text on Vico would have been one of the only interpretations of Vico available in English in the early 20th century. Benedetto Croce’s 1911 text, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (translated into English in 1913), would have been the only other major work on Vico available during the composition of *Invisible Man*. Croce’s text speaks of Vico’s theory of history as a cycle instead of spiral, though scholarship seems to turn to Flint’s text more than Croce’s.

The narrator’s conception of a groove of history during his time in the Brotherhood implies that history is both cyclical and a spiral. In other words, a phonographic groove begins at the outer edge of the record, and spirals inward towards the record’s center. It is important to note that the narrator conceives his philosophy of a groove of history in a moment of trauma and panic, shortly after witnessing the murder of Clifton. Arguably, the narrator’s concept of a groove of history is an ambitious theory but requires some refinement.

In more detail, a cycle better expresses the endlessness of the Vichian historical *corso* and *ricorso* than a spiral since a cycle continues ad infinitum, but a spiral will surely end at some point since a spiral is essentially linear. Vico's philosophical framework of the cycle of history – where historical ethics and epochs grow and decay and then repeat, as a “*corsi e ricorsi*” – is sometimes interpreted as a “spiral” instead of a “cycle” because Vico's philosophy seems to imply that the historical cycle of growth, decay, and rebirth is endless but still linear¹¹⁶. The narrator's theory of a groove of history seems incomplete during his time in the Brotherhood because he develops the theory spontaneously amid a flurry of Downtown noise, mayhem, and trauma, and, in the chaos of the moment, he might not know exactly how to translate his perception into a cohesive theory of history. But the narrator's conception of a groove of history does coincide with his intellectual awakening as an agent and earwitness, as the murder of Tod Clifton leads the narrator to first question Brotherhood ideology, even though, at this point, the narrator's theory of history still requires some revision and intellectual growth in order to become a fully-formed idea. In more detail, since the narrator is still a member of the Brotherhood at the time of Clifton's death, his philosophy is still clouded by Brotherhood ideology¹¹⁷. In *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-*

¹¹⁶ The interpretation that Vico intended the term “spiral,” instead of “cycle,” to represent his theory of history is difficult to research on its own. While the term “cycle of history” is often attributed to Vico, the phrasing “spiral of history” seems to be just one interpretation of Vico's “cycle of history” philosophy that grew into its own motif in academic circles. In researching Vico's “spiral of history,” I did not come across any sources that concretely elaborate on how or why exactly Vico himself thought his cyclical philosophy of history should be thought of as spiral. Any mention of a “spiral of history” is usually passed off as matter-of-fact shorthand for Vico's philosophy of the repetition of history. For example, *The German Conception of History* (1968) by Georg G. Iggers reads: “Every historical epoch has its place in the recurrent cycles (*corso* and *ricorso*) which make up the upward spiral of history” (30; emphasis in original). Joseph Campbell's *A Skeleton's Key to Finnegans Wake*, an imperative guide for any reader attempting to navigate the *Wake*, also uses the term “spiral” when discussing Vichian cycles, but Campbell does not elaborate on his usage of the term.

¹¹⁷ Brotherhood ideology dictates that the concepts of class, race, and history are absolutist discursive narratives, where social contexts and subjective experiences are mostly irrelevant. In more detail, during his time in the Brotherhood, the narrator draws a distinction between “culture” and “civilization,” which is based on the Brotherhood doctrine of speaking in absolutes. The terms “civilization” and “civilized” are ideological

Modernity (2005), Alexander G. Weheliye writes on the narrator's groove of history as follows: "Unable to relinquish the dominant model of history propagated by the Brotherhood, which can only conceive of these men as embodying cpt ('colored people's time'), the protagonist imagines history as a single groove from which the zoot suiters are barred even while they opt for remaining beyond its borders, thus suggesting a syncopated equilibrium between determining structure and human agency" (77). Weheliye continues: "The 'groove of history' allows for both the materiality and intersubjectivity of history, and if black history is, indeed, contained on, or at least summoned by phonograph records, it is only because the discs and their attendant discourses and practices harbor all these vital forces. Ellison's protagonist comes upon this recognition in an instance of peril, which promotes his recognition of temporality as series of monadic cross-currents and discontinuities, as opposed to a single and totalizing genus of history" (82). In one sense, the narrator's conception of history as a phonographic groove considers the listener to be an agent in history who has some play in the recording of historical cycles, which makes sense considering that the narrator is becoming slowly aware of his own intellectual agency. The narrator's groove of history also considers that there are significant histories that go unrecorded. But the narrator's groove interpretation of history is still linked to a discursively linear model of history informed by Brotherhood ideology, where cycles spiral towards a predicable center, and then repeat with only marginal change.

tenets the Brotherhood equates with reason, truth, and scientific absolutism. The narrator's civilization/culture dichotomy is drawn from the Brotherhood's propaganda since the narrator does not use the words "civilized" or "civilization" until he joins the group. The narrator seems to be attracted to the Brotherhood's ideology in general because the group offers him a chance to pursue a degree of intellectual refinement, which he was denied at the Southern college that expelled him. But the Brotherhood's ideology also limits the narrator's intellectual education, as he is instructed by the group to think and speak in line with the Brotherhood's so-called "scientific" discourse.

When speaking on the symbolism of the narrator's underground, Ellison suggests that light and in/visibility in the novel symbolize the narrator's new self-awareness and artistic earwitness enlightenment. In a 1957 letter to Stanley Hyman, Ellison states: "The final act of the book is not that of concealment in darkness but that of a voice issuing its little wisdom out of darkness as a result of a transformation through which the former rabble rouser becomes the author of a memoir. Confession, not concealment, is the mode. . . . So that all the while he is engaged in moving vertically downward (not into a sewer, by the way, but into a coal cellar, a source of heat, light, power and perception), he is in the process of rising vertically to a perception of his human condition" (488). Because of this, it is significant that the narrator revises his original theory of a groove of history into a sonic boomerang in the sonic underground of the prologue, many years after leaving the Brotherhood. In John O'Brien's 1972 interview with Ellison, O'Brien asks Ellison about his conception of history in the prologue: "The image of history that you use in the novel is that of a boomerang. How does this differ from other geometric figures that are used to explain the shape of history?" Ellison responds:

Vico, whom Joyce used in his great novels, described history as circling. I described it as a boomerang because a boomerang moves in a parabola. It goes and it comes. It is never the same thing. There is implicit in the image the old idea that those who do not learn from history are bound to repeat its mistakes. History comes back and hits you. But you really cannot break down a symbol rationally. It allows you to say things that cannot really be said." (231)

Formative scholarship on African-American literature from Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Houston Baker Jr. argues that Ellison's work is heavily indebted to an African-American

vernacular style of writing. Gates Jr.'s seminal academic text *The Signifying Monkey* makes the argument that Ellison "signifies" on Richard Wright's work by significantly drawing on, re-incorporating, and transmuting Wright's novella *The Man Who Lived Underground* into his own novel of the underground. Gates Jr.'s theory is based almost exclusively in the African-American literary tradition, with the intention of demonstrating how the basis and influence of African-American literary texts are indebted to preceding works of African-American authors and artists who employ similar vernacular styles. While I take some issue with the exact texts and authors that Gates Jr. finds that Ellison signifies on, I agree with the significance of Gates Jr.'s guiding framework that "Ralph Ellison's example of a thoroughly integrated critical discourse, [is] informed by the Black vernacular tradition and Western criticism" (10) as well as the basic theory of signifying itself, which Gates outlines as a theory that "arises from . . . moments of self-reflexiveness" (22) and is defined through creative acts of "repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference" (25). Gates Jr.'s approach is applicable here in respect to the nature of Ellison's signifying on Joyce, which Ellison does in reformulating Joyce's Vichian approach to history with his own self-reflective revisions. The narrator warns the reader to "beware" of the spiral of history in the prologue's underground, which is either Ellison's interpretation of Vico or his critique of Joyce and/or Joyce scholarship's approach to Vico. Ellison reformulates Joyce's Vichian cycle or spiral into his own historical approach of a boomerang, which, unlike Joyce and Vico's cycle, does not renew itself, but rather violently revises itself in unpredictable cycles.

The narrator's boomerang of history is essentially sonic in nature. In the prologue, the narrator warns the reader against the "spiral of history," it seems, because of the lack of consequences to cyclical history inherent in a historical spiral. With a boomerang of history,

“the extremes of tyranny and anarchy for an indefinite period” and the possibility that “no equilibrium can ever be permanent” are made more obvious since, for Ellison, “history comes back and hits you” (Harris 69). The narrator’s conception of a groove of history has the philosophical seeds of the prologue’s more mature sonic boomerang theory, which is apparent because the narrator’s initial conception of a groove of history coincides with his burgeoning distrust of Brotherhood ideology. After Clifton’s death, the narrator describes various Harlem passersby as “forgotten names” that “sang through [his] head like forgotten scenes in dreams” (443). As the narrator moves through Harlem’s crowded streets, he is overcome by the sound of the “grinding roar of traffic” and the street loudspeakers “blaring a languid blues” (443). After Clifton’s murder, the narrator seems overwhelmed by an oversaturation of sound on the streets of Harlem. Arguably, the mood of the scene is not entirely tangible due to the volume of conflicting sounds and images, which is punctuated by the narrator’s lament that the narrative of the scene seems to only reflect “a song with turgid, inadequate words.” The flow of events in the scene itself is presented in such a soporifically sonorous manner that elementary Joycean descriptive portmanteaus such as “sightseeing” and “soundhearing” would not feel completely out of place here, which are terms that Joyce himself employs at the beginning of Book III of the *Wake* to demonstrate his characters’ “dream vision of the future” (Campbell 21). Envisioning history as a sonic boomerang emphasizes that history is not entirely linear since historical cycles will vary, just like a boomerang’s inconsistent trajectory.

The narrator’s intellectual and ideological break from the Brotherhood comes when he begins to reconsider the trajectory of history to be akin to the groove of a phonograph record. But his more mature perception as an intellectual earwitness and agent comes later in the

solitude of his sonic underground where he revises his theory of history by likening the cycles of history to a sonic boomerang. While Vico's philosophy sees history move in a cycle, where historical epochs begin, end, and renew, it is not altogether clear in the narrator's initial conception of a "groove of history" whether each epoch builds on the previous cycle. Flint argues that Vico's cycle is an "ascending spiral movement" with differentiating cycles that "still less . . . impl[ies] that any cycle was perfectly like another, and that history merely repeated itself" (228). The narrator's sonic boomerang theory deliberately reconfigures the notion of a spiral of history – which he sees in the Brotherhood's discourse of linear history – into a parabola. The narrator does so in order to emphasize the contextual cause and effect of events. The narrator seems to find that cycles do not happen in a vacuum, but rather, that historical cause and effect is imperative to consider when thinking about historical discourse. In reflecting on Clifton's death and observing the surreally dressed Harlem zoot suiters, the narrator states: "Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words?" (443). In imagining history as a phonograph record with a recordable but malleable "groove of history," the narrator initially gets the impression that the discourse of recorded history is a discourse *sui generis* that gestures to unrecorded histories and peoples that shape the discourse of record. But the narrator's mature theory of a sonic boomerang of history builds on and circumvents the concept of a spiral of history by recognizing that moments, experiences, and cycles of history are contextually specific but also constantly in flux. For instance, music plays from a phonograph record when the needle moves in the record's uneven groove in a spiral motion from the outside of the record inwards. The playing record produces several layers of sound: from the song itself, obviously, but also the

static of the needle moving along its groove, in addition to the unamplified recording that emanates from the groove itself. If the stereo sound is off but the needle is still touching the record, the unamplified music on the record can still be faintly heard if the listener leans in closely to the machine. This faint sound produced by the actual record can also be dimly heard if the stereo is on, alongside the intended, amplified version. Further, when a record is played over and over, the sound of the recording will no doubt wear and change with time, which destabilizes the intended meaning or presumably authentic version of the track. Different stereo equipment and spatial dimensions of the environment where the phonograph is housed and played will also alter the sound and the immediate experience of listening.

Mikopashpe: Exergue on the Influences of Ellison’s Sonic Grooves and Spirals of History

Why does the narrator tell the reader to beware of the “spiral” of history (6)? The nature and nuances of the Brotherhood’s “science” and adherence to “civilized” discourse are never exactly explained in *Invisible Man*. From a compositional standpoint, the narrator’s suspicion, or even dismissal, of the hierarchical value the Brotherhood places on “civilization” is probably drawn from a variety of sources. Scholarship regularly considers that the Brotherhood is based on the Communist Party (CP), which Ellison was briefly affiliated with during his apprenticeship under Richard Wright during the early 1940s. However, Ellison always rebukes the assertion that the Brotherhood is explicitly based on the CP in interviews, as he does when he responds to any reading of *Invisible Man* that is rigidly

allegorical; for example, Ellison calls the CP analogy a “misreading” in a 1954 interview with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard (16). The ideas put forth in Robert E. Park’s foundational but condescending and problematic textbook *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1919), which was used in classrooms into the 1940s, seems to be one inspiration for the Brotherhood’s ideological approach to the concept of civilization¹¹⁸. Ellison studied Park’s textbook at Tuskegee, and as Lawrence Jackson writes, Ellison was offended that Park describes Blacks as the “lady among the races” (142)¹¹⁹. Shortly before the narrator witnesses Clifton’s murder, he is reassigned to Downtown Manhattan because the Brotherhood begins to see his speeches as controversial and too dependent on subjects of race. While downtown, the narrator believes, at one point, that he is being followed by a Brotherhood agent, whom he cannot see; the narrator believes he is being tailed by a Brotherhood agent because the figure he senses behind him seems to have a “sophisticated” scientific approach and possesses an “over-civiliz[ed]” silence and careful consideration of sound (419). Moreover, it is significant that the narrator’s reassignment from Harlem is predicated on a speech he gave on African-American dispossession and self-reliance, which the Brotherhood deems to be “unscientific” and a threat to their “scientific tranquility” (351). Park’s textbook likewise bases its sociological methodology on “scientific history” that considers historical discourse to be only a partial representation of historical actors: “Not everything that happened, to be sure, is

¹¹⁸ Another possible inspiration for the Brotherhood’s discourse is Clive Bell’s *Civilization* (1928), which Ellison owned. Bell’s text argues in favour of a “natural” distinction between “civilized” and “savage” peoples.

¹¹⁹ From Park’s textbook: “The Negro is, by natural disposition, neither an intellectual nor an idealist, like the Jew; nor a brooding introspective, like the East Indian; nor a pioneer and frontiersman, like the Anglo-Saxon. He is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His metier is expression rather than action. He is, so to speak, the lady among the races” (139). According to Jackson: “Park accepted the historical thesis of the civilization that offered the African cultivation. [According to Park,] Blacks had endured bondage with only minor rebellions because of the docile, carefree racial constitution” (143). It is not difficult to see the naturally reactionary and signifying action Ellison takes against this section of Park’s textbook by casting his protagonist with many of the traits Park lists as being arbitrarily “not natural” to African-Americans.

history, but every event that ever was or ever will be significant is history. . . . As soon as historians seek to take events out of their historical setting, that is to say, out of their time-and-space relations, in order to compare them and classify them; as soon as historians begin to emphasize the typical and representative rather than the unique character of events, history ceases to be history and becomes sociology” (8). It seems that the narrator associates the term “civilization” with the Brotherhood’s so-called “science,” which implies the Brotherhood relies on absolute or verifiable records of events in order to rigidly control the narrative of their ideological formations of identity.

In a 1945 letter to Kenneth Burke, written nine years after leaving Tuskegee, Ellison writes dismissively of Park’s “scientific” approach to sociology¹²⁰. Ellison would likely take issue with Park’s linear description of history and his focus on presumably important events, which Park describes as follows:

Every historical fact, it is pointed out, is concerned with a unique event.

History never repeats itself. If nothing else, the mere circumstance that every event has a date and location would give historical facts an individuality that facts of the abstract sciences do not possess. Because historical facts always are located and dated, and cannot therefore be repeated, they are not subject to experiment and verification. On the other hand, a fact not subject to verification is not a fact for natural science. History, as distinguished from

¹²⁰ In his letter to Burke, Ellison elaborates: “Carver, the myth, was a creation of Robert E. Park, the father of American sociology, who was adviser to Booker T. Washington and publicity director for that institutional creation of the compromise between northern capital and southern ruling class, Tuskegee Institute. Carver was inflated into the symbol of the achievement possible for Negroes who stayed in their place, bowed to the white folks, prayed to God and left politics alone. During my three years at Tuskegee I was unable to discover anything definite about the value of Carver’s work and the younger men in science dismissed him as a glorified medicine man, more concerned with scientific investigation” (206).

natural history, deals with individuals, i.e., individual events, persons, institutions. Natural science is concerned, not with individuals, but with classes, types, species. (6)

The narrator's conception of a groove of history re-evaluates Park's claim that "Every historical fact, it is pointed out, is concerned with a unique event. History never repeats itself." The wavering and transmutable sound of a phonograph record can also not be easily categorized as the "authentic" cut of a musical project. Not to mention, the narrator's sonic underground of light and sound is heavily indebted to unverifiable sonic experimentation. The narrator's underground experimentation with light and sound is also Joycean in nature, where the narrator's excessive and cacophonous project of collecting many light bulbs and multiple phonographs resembles Ellman's description of Joyce's exhaustive approach to making the prose of the *Wake* resonate sonically on the page through klang associations and visual-sonic imagery: "like Shem in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce 'wrote over every square inch of the only foolscap available, his own body, till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integument slowly unfolded all ... history (thereby, he said, reflecting from his own individual person life unlivable, ... common to all flesh, human only, mortal).' Instead of being creation's God, the artist is its quid, his work a secretion" (339)¹²¹. It also worth noting that the exact time period of *Invisible Man* is reasonably vague. The riot that ends *Invisible Man* – partially based on the 1943 Harlem riot, which Ellison witnessed from his office at the *New York Post* – seems to be more of a surreal, dreamlike inference and recreation of several Harlem riots. Major events in the United States, such as the two World Wars and prominent historical figures from the time period, are rarely mentioned in the novel.

¹²¹ Or as Harris puns in the title of his study, "What is Mr. Ear-Vico Supposed to be 'Earing?'"

It is perhaps implied that the eviction the narrator witnesses is directly caused by the Great Depression, but the novel does not exactly indicate this. It seems as if Ellison purposefully omits “historical facts” from his novel, and instead incorporates lesser-known or altogether unrecorded events, in order to circumvent Park’s strictly categorical and verifiable historical philosophy. The narrator’s battle with Monopolated Light & Power is one example of Ellison drawing on unrecorded Harlem history, which Jackson details as follows: “Harlem had solved the problem of satisfying the expensive rates of Consolidated Edison by routinely short-circuiting their electric meters. Light to brighten meager apartments and power to operate radios and phonographs were the invaluable antidotes to what Ellison thought of as America’s daily psychological violence against black people” (267). Trying to research the precise historical events that influenced the Monopolated Light & Power scene is difficult, and, in trying to locate a source that points to Ellison’s inspiration for the scene, the most relevant and insightful record seems to be Ellison’s own personal account, which Lawrence draws from an unpublished letter in Ellison’s archive.

Ultimately, for Ellison, intellectual earwitness writing is a “feel of the past” that helps the artist unpack the “knowledge of” their sonic experiences and personal context in history rather than a historian’s academic “knowledge about” a written or discursive past (“The Uses of History in Fiction,” 144-5). Ellison’s approach counters Park’s discursive historical slant since Park, like the Brotherhood, is indebted to a discursive, linear vision of history and an absolutist process of “scientific verification” that rejects subjective experience. Park writes: “This is a typical statement of a fact of natural history. It is not, however, the rather vague generality of the statement that makes it scientific. It is its representative character, the character which makes it possible of verification by further observation which makes it a

scientific fact” (7). Significantly, Ellison seems to combine his distrust for Park’s scientific history with Vico’s philosophy of the historical cycle, which Vico importantly finds makes “science” possible and leads to a “civil theology reasoned from divine providence” (this is one reason why Harris finds that Flint reads Vico too “theologically”) (4). Ellison transmutes Park’s “scientific” approach to history by reconceptualizing history first as a phonographic groove and later as a sonic boomerang; both ideas gesture to the sonic ephemerality of unrecorded peoples and happenings, with the latter idea being the narrator’s more mature and nuanced critique of historical discourse.

To end this chapter, it is worth looking at how the narrator phrases Clifton’s “plunge” outside of the groove of history. The narrator states: “Why should a man deliberately plunge outside of history and peddle an obscenity, my mind went on abstractedly. Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to ‘define’ himself?” (438). The narrator continues:

Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history? I tried to step away and look at it from a distance of words read in books, half-remembered. For history records the patterns of men’s lives, they say: Who slept with whom and with what results; who fought and who won and who lived to lie about it afterwards. All things, it is said, are duly recorded—all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by. But the cop would be Clifton’s historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the

watching crowd. And I, the only witness for the defense, knew neither the extent of his guilt nor the nature of his crime. Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down? (449).

The word “plunge” is used repeatedly during the narrator’s rumination on Clifton’s death, and is a word that Ellison himself seems particularly fond of using in his essays and letters. A telling instance occurs in a 1953 Letter to Albert Murray, where Ellison encloses a poem he wrote about his recent return to Oklahoma, titled “Deep Second,” which reads:

Tossed into a corner of the newer city
There was only this to do; accept
Accept the smack, smack! of Time upon my flanks and plunge me boldly
Into that inner past to fit
The puzzle of now and then together
The girl and woman, man and boy (335)

This poem resonates with the narrator’s observation that “Clifton had chosen to plunge out of history and, except for the picture it made in my mind’s eye, only the plunge was recorded, and that was the only important thing” (447). The description of the “smack, smack!” of time is also a sudden, percussive moment – and a threshold sound signal as well – that is comparable to the abrupt gunshots that kill Clifton. Additionally, the seemingly ordinary but precisely worded phrases “There was only this to do” and “The girl and woman, man and boy” appear frequently throughout Ellison’s letters, which demonstrate that the language and themes of this poem are deeply personal to him and worth repeating. “Smack, smack” and, a variation, “the smacking whirr,” are phrases that appear in Ellison’s other letters as well. Interestingly, there is a very similar phrasing of the “plunge” metaphor in *Ulysses*, when

Stephen philosophizes on the ephemerality of time: “Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past” (177). Fittingly, Stephen states this in the “Scylla and Charybdis” section of *Ulysses*, where he outlines his artistic aesthetic approach to interpreting Shakespeare’s plays autobiographically, which is a topic I also discuss in Chapter Two of this dissertation. In Ellison’s appropriation of Joyce’s use of Vichian philosophy, he reconfigures the scientific discourse of history, first as a phonographic groove and later as a sonic boomerang, full of sound and fury, that gestures to the unrecorded sound and noise of personal experience and marginalized individual histories of listening: “Accept the smack, smack! of Time upon my flanks and plunge me boldly.”

Conclusion:

Between the Idea and the Reality

This dissertation argues that Ellison is an intellectual earwitness who draws on his sonic memories, revered music artists, and sonorous literary influences in order to create a representation of the uniqueness of sonic subjectivity in his novel *Invisible Man*. This project examines Ellison's incorporation of the soundscapes of his life, as he describes them in his essays, letters, and interviews, into his fiction and his approach to writing in general. I draw predominantly on Ellison's nonfiction in outlining my argument in order to stress the personal and complex import of earwitnessing. Evaluating the sonic importance of the quasi-autobiographical elements of Ellison's work can be tricky because, in his typically enigmatic and byzantine manner, Ellison tends to link the sonic to the important beats of his life in indirect, complicated, or abstract ways. As such, this dissertation draws on a variety of approaches, including history, analytical readings, and compositional method, in order to contextually assess the nuances of his earwitness approach to his textual representations of the sonic. Ellison's narrator gradually forms an earwitness philosophy of meaningful listening and a personal connection to the sonic over the course of *Invisible Man*, which culminates in his empathic conception of a mature philosophy of intellectual earwitnessing – his theory of a “sonic boomerang of history” – in the prologue and epilogue's underground of sound. As such, my various approaches to studying *Invisible Man* gesture to the diverse metaphors of memory that inform Ellison's engagement with subjective sonic experience as well as elaborate on the subjective intricacies of the narrator's development as an earwitness and intellectual, which, in Kenneth Burke's sense, moves “from purpose, through passion, to

perception” (Letter to Bettye Thomas, 4 Dec. 1986). Ellison’s novel thus prompts the reader to recognize that a listener’s experience is important to honing one’s critical approaches to considering the intimate uniqueness of the sonic since the narrator, in the prologue’s underground, comes to the conclusion that his sonic experiences are an essentially intellectual and subjective vehicle for pondering the endlessness of planetary music.

This project is concerned with the quasi-autobiographical impact of Ellison’s sonic experience on his work. I consult his essays, interviews, letters, and biographies in order to provide as much context as possible on his earwitness approach. I do so because I consider the contextual experience of the earwitness to be of utmost importance when gauging the nuances of sonic subjectivity and textual representations of the sonic. As such, this dissertation engages with a variety of approaches to analyzing Ellison’s approach, which range from historical background and context (Chapters One and Two of this dissertation), literary analysis (Chapters Three and Four), and a blending of analytical approaches that combines analysis, history, and compositional method (Chapter Five). I scaffold this project in such a way in order to demonstrate the broad impact of the sonic on Ellison’s approach as well as explore the complicated minutiae of Ellison’s influences and writing process. This project is frontloaded with historical and background context in order to foreground the contextual significance of listening; I then gradually incorporate analytical approaches to the sonic in Ellison’s novel as the dissertation progresses. I also scaffold this dissertation in this way in order to examine a variety of episodes from Ellison’s novel – some of which, like the prologue and epilogue, are widely discussed in scholarship, while others, such as the Liberty Paints episode, less so – in order to trace the development of the narrator’s growth as an earwitness, intellectual, and artist over the course of the novel. Moreover, I examine an array

of artists whose sonic experiments significantly influence Ellison in various ways: T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Fyodor Dostoevsky, William Faulkner, Mark Twain, Kenneth Burke, Louis Armstrong, Ludwig Van Beethoven, Richard Wagner, and others, since each artist contributes unique tools to Ellison and his narrator's philosophies and approaches to the sonic.

Ultimately, I consider sonic, historical, cultural, and autobiographical context to be crucial for evaluating both the subjectivity of sonic experience and the textual representations of sound in Ellison's or any author's work.

The final line of *Invisible Man* is "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581). This phrase is popularly pointed to in scholarship as an example of improvisatory or syncopated language, but I think there is a bit more to say about it. Ellison possibly borrows the phrase from the book of Esther in the Bible: "For if you remain silent at this time . . . your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4.14). Eliot's *The Waste Land* also includes Biblical and intertextual phrases, which could be another reason why Ellison frames the novel's final line as he does. Moreover, the narrator's adoption of this quasi-ecclesiastical anchor points to the culmination of his linguistic and sonic progress as an intertextually-minded artist: in a sense, he refuses to "remain silent" in the underground by relating the story of his life, which he does in order to solidify his position as an intellectual earwitness and matured philosopher of the sonic. The novel's final line is generally taken to imply the narrator's – or even Ellison's – final achievement as an orator, artist, and intellectual. The narrator declares that he "speak[s] for you," which seems to signify his authoritative mastery of unheard sounds "on the lower frequencies" (581). John F. Callahan ends his introduction to Ellison's *Selected Letters* by himself channeling the line: "If we listen carefully, we may

hear Ellison answer, ‘Who knows? I know.’ And we’ll sense that he’s speaking to us” (14). The line appears to fittingly culminate both the novel and the narrator’s novel-length education of the sonic. The phrasing “Who knows but that” is slightly formal – and might perhaps seem a bit odd to a first-time reader – but the phrasing also recalls the narrator’s maxim of invisibility: “Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat” (8). The quasi-autobiographical element of the phrasing is apparent in Ellison’s pride in the line’s wording; for example, he ends his 1952 letter to Hazel Harrison with a strikingly similar wording: “Please give my regards to those who started those days [at Tuskegee] with me. Who knows but that before too long I shall visit Washington and we’ll relive the rest of that time together” (305). Ultimately, the phrase signifies that the narrator of the prologue’s underground, as a matured intellectual earwitness, is acutely aware of the personal and intellectual significance of sound, voice, and music, as he presents the final line of his underground memoir in a slightly unusual but not altogether unfamiliar sonic-image that reflects his intellectually refined propensity for playing with sound, language, and the musical cadence of communicating the shadow of sonic subjectivity. Between the idea and the reality of the artistic production of *Invisible Man* falls the shadow of the intrinsic subjectivity of earwitness experience.

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