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Back to index

"An urge to make music of invisibility": Ralph Ellison's fiction

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Music is a discernible presence in Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, from the jazz inspired prose style to the protagonist's rapidly changing and discordant experiences; the influence of music is strong. Ellison's incorporation of musical impulses form an interplay between ideas of performance, creativity and the visibility and movement of the body that recur in a number of his texts.

Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man* explores the moments in which the visible does not cohere. These 'breaks' within the visible signify a moment of opportunity, when the African-American protagonists can articulate their own identity, by evading the arbitrary classifications of race imposed by the visible. This process resonates with the improvisational processes of jazz composition. Individual musicians locate their break within the group melody and take that moment to improvise their solo narrative within it. The relationship between music and invisibility in Ellison's texts is far more complex than this central reference might suggest. However, it does provide a useful starting point from which to explore the dynamic between music and identity.

The experience of invisibility not only provides a critique that locates the breaks in the visible, but also creates the potential for entering into those moments to extemporize a response. This is exemplified in an episode from the prologue to Invisible Man:

> Once I saw a prize-fighter boxing a yokel. The fighter was swift and amazingly scientific. His body was one violent flow of rapid rhythmic action. He hit the yokel a hundred times while the yokel held up his arms in stunned surprise. But suddenly the yokel ... struck one blow .... The smart money hit the canvas. The long shot got the nod. The yokel had simply stepped inside of the opponent's sense of time.'

This insight into an alternative sense of timing provides a strategy for the outsider to subvert the odds and overpower the violent flow of the scientific. Just as being under the spell of reefer leads the narrator to the discovery of a new analytical way of listening to music, creative adventuring within the invisible poetry of Louis Armstrong allows him to discover new ways to respond to restriction. However, music and invisibility are not offered simply as alternative models for defining identity. They are used to destabilise the arbitrary racial classifications of the visible and prompt new configurations of identity, inclusive of the body but not defined by it. As Robyn Wiegman has shown, the function of the visible is to fix the body as the locus of being and, therefore, racial identity has been bound to the visible body. Subsequently, the process of becoming invisible described in these texts does not mean that the body must be unseen in any ocular sense but that strategies must be found to disrupt the process of the visible whereby the subject becomes fixed within a 'racial chain of being'.

The concept of visibility pervades many narratives of African-American identity, yet it remains an ambiguous concept. Visibility has often served as a motif for participation or presence in the national schema, whilst invisibility has been used to denote exclusion. The enfranchised national citizen may see their own local body reflected and visibly represented in political, economic and social structures of power. In contrast, the non-white citizen has historically been denied access to adequate political representation or agency in their representation in the mainstream media. As a consequence of this, invisibility has often been instilled with a negative connotation, a kind of shorthand for the denial of identity.

Ellison's invisible man, perhaps the most famous literary exponent of this concept, unequivocally states the terms of his invisibility: 'I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.' The fictional narrator of Ellison's text attributes his condition to an imposition effected by others and foregrounds the process of disavowal that creates it: 'When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed everything and anything except me.'

The opposition between visibility and invisibility and their associated meanings has been challenged by new theoretical approaches to identity in the work of critics such as Lauren Berlant and Robyn Wiegman. This work provides a valuable re-conceptualisation of invisibility and its relationship to the privileges and restrictions of the national citizen. Literary narratives such as Ellison's *Invisible Man* also provide new contexts in which to re-examine the fluctuations in visibility. As a result the traditional associations of visibility as presence or belonging and invisibility as exclusion can be contested. In particular, invisibility has opened up as a site of potentiality, able to more adequately transmit the experience of changing identity forms and becoming synonymous with indeterminacy and mutability. These new contexts undermine the impulse to view identity as a fixed, stable and rooted concept.

Nathaniel Mackey provides a valuable contribution to these debates. Citing the work of Victor Zuckerkandl he offers music as a mediator between visibility and invisibility. He argues that '... because music exists the tangible and visible can not be the whole of the given world. The intangible and invisible is itself a part of the world, something which we encounter, something to which we respond.' The idea that music can articulate or represent what has been termed the invisible or the intangible is a prominent feature in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Ellison employs the central metaphor of the 'invisible man' as a means to communicate the fluidity of his African-American protagonist's experience and how this translates into perceptions of identity.

Nathaniel Mackey describes *Invisible Man* as a 'meditation on the two way cut of invisibility. On the other side of invisibility as exclusion, social death, we find it as revenge, millenarian reversal.' It is precisely the ambiguity of 'the two way cut' or reversal of terms that enhances the potential of invisibility. The invisible subject is obscured from the racialising gaze but rather than precipitating a passive condition it provides a space from which to actively resist and interrogate the very definitions which the gaze seeks to fix. The narrator's descent into the basement of the New York tenement is portrayed as a period of hibernation, his exile as regenerative, thus indicating his future emergence. Thus the experience of invisibility is integral to the narrative, yet it also operates as another temporary identity, one that informs but does not define his existence. Although he introduces his metaphysical condition as an imposition affected by others who will not acknowledge him, the negative connotation is redefined by the protagonist's creative play upon his invisibility. The disavowal inherent in society's refusal to see him reveals their attitude to him. It is appropriated by the narrator as an insight into the 'opponent's sense of time.' This strategic re-positioning is apparent in the most decisive interpretation of invisibility offered by Ellison's narrator:

> Invisibility ... 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.

For Ellison invisibility defies the regularity of beat and linearity and creates spaces or breaks that the invisible subject can slip into and look around. The allusions to jazz and particularly improvisation become explicit in the narrator's description of listening to Louis Armstrong. The breaks (characteristic of the different sense of time invisibility provides) are also a staple feature of improvisational compositions in jazz. Albert Murray describes the importance of the break and illustrates how it functions as a 'disruption of the normal cadence of a piece of music.'. The narrator, who has previously been defined in terms of symbolic profiles of race and class, discovers in the experience of invisibility an opportunity to extemporise his own identity. Albert Murray outlines a similar decisive moment, on the break, which arises for the musician within the improvised composition:

> The break is an extremely important device both from the structural point of view and from its implications. It is precisely this disjuncture which is the moment of truth. It is on the break that you 'do your thing'. The moment of greatest jeopardy is your moment of greatest opportunity. This is the heroic moment ... It is when you establish your identity; ... That is how you come to terms with the void.

Ellison perpetuates the intimacy between music and the expression of African-American experience throughout the dream-like narrative sequence. Ellison presents a vivid illustration of the protagonist's invisibility as history, vernacular, music, and religious speech conflate in a free form, polyphonic structure of sound:

> The unheard sounds come 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 ... I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended ... into its depths.

Emerging from the seemingly chaotic disorder of the individual but synchronous sounds, comes a democratic coherence, once more demonstrating the conjunction of music and collective spatial experience. This description alludes to the subtle organisation of jazz musicians and the turn taking which allows soloists to contribute to a group composition. Ellison's perception of jazz is characteristic of what Eric Lott describes as, '...the democratic ethos of jazz ... in which soloists assume a momentary universality in a highly mutual context.'

This image of the collective group also foregrounds the communal and antiphonal traditions of black music. The interaction between performers and their audience is also emphasised by the narrator's complete immersion in the music. Hearing in time and space alludes to the intimate relationship between musician and listener. In classical music tradition, attention has been focused on the strict adherence to the original artistic vision of the composer, in what is considered its authentic form. As Joachim Berendt writes, 'the improvisatory force and (the) freedom of ... baroque and prebaroque soloistically conceived music has been lost to the ideal of authenticity.'. He proceeds to argue that in contrast to this the 'technique of ornamentation the embellishment of melody ... survives in jazz.' The authentic rendering of the original version or composition in classical music relies heavily upon its conception by the original composer. The artistic vision of the originator of the piece becomes enshrined in the process of performance;

musicians must reproduce the original text in order to ensure its authenticity. In contrast to this view, Ellison assigns a radically different fate to the innovators of jazz:

> Some of the most brilliant jazzmen made no records; their names appeared in print only in announcements of some local dance ... Being devoted to an art which traditionally thrives on improvisation, these unrecorded artists very often have their most original ideas enter the public domain almost as rapidly as they are conceived to be quickly absorbed into the thought and techniques of their fellows. Thus the riffs which swung the dancers and the band ... which inspired others ... became all too swiftly part of the general style, leaving the originators ... anonymous.

Ellison attributes this anonymity to the creative adventuring and competition of jazz, which did not allow the dominance of individual figures and faithful rendering of original performances. Even the burgeoning recording industry could not produce a definitive account of jazz performance. It was selective in its promotion of artists, and recordings only captured one interpretation of a musical venture as opposed to the definitive composition. Jazz effaces its own authoritative texts by engaging in a constant process of reinterpretation. Thomas J. Hennessey illustrates these points in his discussion of the impact of the phonograph. In his study *From Jazz to Swing* he writes; 'Many important artists and styles were not often recorded ... Moreover recordings which freeze the improviser at one moment in time may give a distorted view of actual nightly performances.'

Thus Ellison's view of the anonymity of the unrecorded heroes of jazz appears symptomatic of its artistic practices. The nature of improvisation meant the creative process was open to constant reinterpretation and appropriation. For Ellison jazz was elusive and moments of musical identity were fleeting, this view is expressed in his essay 'The Charlie Christian Story'*:*

> There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment ... springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight or improvisation, represents ... a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.

This view echoes Albert Murray's description of the break in improvisation, which is simultaneously the moment of 'greatest jeopardy' and 'opportunity'. Ellison elaborates upon the nature of this jeopardy, suggesting that any moment of identity that is gained must then be relinquished. Identity may be momentarily experienced in its pursuit yet it cannot be consolidated in any fixed way. Paul Gilroy attests to the importance of understanding these moments for the contribution they make and identifies the 'need to make sense of musical performances in which identity is fleetingly experienced in the most intensive ways and … socially reproduced.'

As the narrator of *Invisible Man* discovers identities can be lost, remade or transformed. Ellison chooses to reveal the continuous change and instability of identity, subsequently making a definitive rendition of it a redundant concept. The narrator's ethereal descent into the music in the prologue of the text establishes many of the elements of jazz, which Ellison then translates into his narrative of identity and invisibility. The diversity of experience music can articulate also becomes apparent in this episode; '... beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a

slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco.' Ellison's vision of music is multi layered and acknowledges its ability to evoke seemingly contradictory impulses, the sorrowful and the spirited, the melancholy and the animated. The blues tradition embodies this combination, articulating lyrical world weariness whilst simultaneously providing the audience with the rhythms to move.

Ellison's depiction of music and its capacity to transmit identity forms is congruent with Paul Gilroy's perception of music in the black Atlantic world and its significance in studying the formation of black identities:

> Examining the place of music in the black Atlantic world means surveying the self understanding articulated by the musicians who made it, the symbolic use to which their music is put by other black artists and writers and the social relations which have produced and reproduced the unique expressive culture in which music comprises a central and even foundational element.

The self-understanding that Gilroy alludes to is present in Ellison's conjunction of jazz performance with invisibility, engaging with the fluidity of experience and the complexity of identity. Music as a central element in transmitting and forming black Atlantic identity operates as a foundation for expressive culture and can be utilised by artists like Ellison to convey heterogeneity and diversity. Invisibility, and its expression through music, becomes a sign for the indeterminacy and complexity of experience.

Invisible Man presents Ellison's most explicit meditation on invisibility and its relationship to music. However, these themes have a discernible presence within Ellison's short stories and many of the texts featured in the collection *Flying Home and Other Stories* ruminate upon ideas of movement and journeys

Houston Baker explores the figure of the railroad in blues culture in his text *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* (1984). Baker's imaginative interpretation of the railroad draws both upon its presence in the musical imagination and lyrical content of the blues and also what it came to signify:

> Afro-Americans - at the bottom even of the vernacular ladder in America - responded to the railroad as a 'meaningful symbol offering both economic progress and the possibility of aesthetic expression.' This possibility came from the locomotive's drive and thrust, its promise of unrestrained mobility and unlimited freedom.

William Barlow affirms this idea, identifying the influence of the railroad on the musician Henry Thomas' 'Travelling Blues': 'The cadences of the song depict the restless lifestyle of the vagabonds who rode the rails and their boundless enthusiasm for the mobility it gave them.' The celebration of newly discovered mobility expressed through music provides a strong counter-response to the containment of slavery and the coerced migration and forced journeys associated with it. The rail journey in blues culture hosts a number of complex signifiers of experience, thus making it a rich, artistic source. Baker illustrates the elements of the blues form that make it a creative and allusive framework in which to ruminate upon issues of identity:

> … the blues song erupts, creating a veritable playful festival of meaning. Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offers a phylogenetic recapitulation - a non linear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation of species experience. What emerges is not a

> filled subject but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole.

These blues-inspired ideas are constantly at play in Ellison's short story, *I Did Not Learn Their Names,* narrated by an unnamed protagonist, hoboing on the freight trains in the 1930's. The transience of the hoboing protagonists in the story not only represents the liberty of movement synonymous with this classic blues figure but also the locating of freedom within the economic restrictions of travel. When the narrator reveals his destination as Alabama, a fellow traveller expresses surprise at his presence on a train travelling north. This moment of geographical confusion is extremely significant as it reveals the purpose of the narrator's journey is not simply to reach Alabama but also to experience the freedom of travel on route. The description of his journey integrates the perpetual motion of the train with the activity and movement of the landscape it passes through:

The composition of his improvised journey is constructed through the mapping of place names, such as California, Denver, Oklahoma and Kansas City, thus providing the structure and reflecting the scope of his travel. The evocative visual images provide the embellishment, functioning as the melody of the piece. As the blues artist incorporates the sounds, rhythms and images of the railroad into their music, Ellison's narrator includes visual motifs of the landscape into his representation of the journey. However, whilst the boxcar is lauded as the vehicle for the narrator's autonomous journey, it remains a space governed by racial anxieties. This is exemplified in the scene in which the narrator awakens to find himself in the boxcar with a white couple:

> I stretched and started outside … I was sorry that I hadn't wakened in time to save them embarrassment. In the dark, I was like all the rest who were on the freight and it didn't make a difference. Now it did. (91)

The freedom that is synonymous with the boxcar is challenged in this moment by the racial visibility of the narrator under the gaze of the white passengers. However, as the scene progresses, it is clear that the anxiety he feels emanates from the constraints this visibility places on his own behaviour; 'I was nasty sometimes, because to be decent was to appear afraid and aware of a "place"'. (92) The narrator's journey is constructed around continuous motion; the restless journeying he pursues is antithetical to the fixity of place. In this textual moment the idea of journeying and geographical place intersects with the restriction of 'place' in a racial hierarchy. The narrator avoids being fixed in either definition. However, the friendly exchange that is shared between the narrator and the couple undermines these fears.

Ellison uses the lessons of journeying as a counterpoint to the rigidity of education. Whilst riding the rails with his white buddy, Morrie, the narrator has 'learned not to attack those who are not personally aggressive towards him and who only expressed passively what they had been taught.' (91-92) Though the narrator's ultimate destination is his musical education in Alabama, the lessons he learns en route convey Ellison's blues-inspired view of the railroad as a signifier of individual freedom; 'I had learned that on the road you really had no place; you were all the same though some of them did not understand that.' (93) Baker identifies this sentiment with the 'blues singer's signatory coda', which he argues is 'always, *atopic*, placeless: "If anybody ask you who sang this song/ Tell 'em X done been here and gone"'. The desire to be both anonymous and placeless is a concern of Ellison's unnamed narrator, expressed through his need to avoid the fixity of identity and location. Baker elaborates further upon the figure of the blues singer: 'The "signature" is a space already "X" (ed), a trace of the already "gone" … ' Music, as Gilroy identifies, displays a capacity for identity to be fleetingly experienced, often in a mutual context, with the listener/audience in collaboration. However, the blues singer vacates the space

that they have created, precipitating a similar condition to Ellison's jazz man, 'who must lose his identity even as he finds it'.

Whilst the music-inspired breaks and changes in Ellison's work can be viewed as a site of potential creative response to oppressive conditions, it is vital that they are not perceived simply as natural or universal. Ellison's musical responses represent one possible mode of thought in a complex and multifarious repertoire of resistance. However, the narratives of visibility and containment he includes offer a valuable critique of the oppressive conditions that prompt such strategies of resistance. As improvisation requires an awareness of musical structure, extemporising a response to restriction demands an understanding of its oppressive strategies. This concept finds potent expression in the symbolic motif of the railroad, which represents routes of movement but only within a certain network of tracks. This recurring image in Ellison's short stories resounds with the subjects of invisibility and music, articulating his desire to express both restriction and resistance within his African American protagonist's experiences.

Endnotes

i. The break in a musical context refers to a short solo or instrumental passage, which disrupts the 'normal cadence of a piece of music', Murray, 'Improvisation and the Creative Process' in O'Meally, Robert G (ed), *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) p.113.

ii. Ellison, Ralph, *Invisible Man,* (Great Britain: Penguin, 1965) p.11.

iii. See Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*,(Durham, London:Duke University Press, 1995) for a discussion of the links between race and science.

iv. Wiegman, Robyn, *American Anatomies:* p. 21.

v. Ellison, Ralph, *Invisible Man*, p.7.

vi. Ibid, p.7.

vii. See also Richard Dyer, *White* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997).

viii. Victor Zuckerkandl cited in Nathaniel Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement, Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p.233.

ix. Ibid, p.245.

x. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p.11.

xi. Ibid, p.11.

xii. Murray, 'Improvisation and the Creative Process' in O'Meally (ed), *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture,* p.111.

xiii. Ibid, p.112.

xiv. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 11.

xv. Eric Lott, 'Double V, Double-Time: Bebop's Politics of Style' in Krin Gabbard (ed), *Jazz Among The Discourses* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1995) p.249

xvi. Joachim Berendt, *The Jazz Book, From Ragtime to Fusion and Beyond* (Brooklyn New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1992) p.153.

xvii. Ibid, p.153.

xviii. Ellison, Ralph, *Shadow and Act*, (Canada, New York: Vintage, 1972) p.234.

xix. Ibid, p.42.

xx. Ellison, 'The Charlie Christian Story' in *Shadow and Act*, p.234.

xxi. Murray, 'Improvisation and the Creative Process' in O'Meally (ed), *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture,* p.112.

xxii. Gilroy,Paul, *The Black Atlantic*, (USA:Harvard University Press, 1993) p.78.

xxiii. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, pp.74-75.

xxiv. Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 1998).

xxv. Houston A. Baker, Jnr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1984) p.11.

xxvi. William Barlow, *Looking Up at Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989) p.64.

xxvii. Baker Jnr, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, p.5.

xxviii. Ellison, *I Did Not Learn Their Names* in *Flying Home and Other Stories*. The story was also not published in Ellison's lifetime but was posthumously published by Random House in the USA in 1996. Although an exact date of writing is unknown John F. Callahan notes in his introduction that the original manuscript is marked with the address where Ellison was resident in 1940. All quotations are from the Penguin edition, Great Britain 1998. All further references will be incorporated in the text.

xxix. Baker Jnr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature,* p.5.

xxx. Ibid*,* p.5.

xxxi. Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p.234.