

21. Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 21.
22. As the nineteenth century wore on, opera audiences got quieter and quieter, more and more in awe of German music. Enter the so-called *Bayreuth hush*, introduced by Wagner for *Parsifal*'s premiere at his music festival in 1882. Wagner soon became his own victim: when he shouted 'Bravo' at an aria two weeks later he was violently hissed.
23. Gitelman, *Always Already New*, p. 76. In *The Song of the Lark* Thea occasionally spends a poignant evening entertaining a friend with 'Flow Gently Sweet Afton' or Scottish folk songs. That seems related to Gitelman's observation that American 'Opera records' circa 1915 generally featured snippets of arias, or even 'popular songs . . . performed by musicians trained at a conservatory' (p. 76).
24. Gitelman, pp. 59, 80.
25. Cather, *Selected Letters*, p. 199. For further discussion, see Plotz, 'Cather's Remarkable Quotation Marks', p. 21.
26. Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, pp. 340–1.
27. Norris, *The Pit*, p. 22.
28. This is perhaps the one naturalist aspect to *The Song of the Lark* – the implication of even the higher realm of opera itself in a material universe of profit and loss – a point omitted in 'Full-Blooded Writing and Journalistic Fictions', Ahearn's astute article on the topic of Cather's naturalism in this novel.
29. Cather, p. 659.
30. Cather, *My Antonia*, pp. 865–6.
31. Cather, *The Professor's House*, p. 222.
32. Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, p. 703. The epilogue is heavily pruned in Cather's 1937 revision of the novel.
33. Cather, 'On *The Professor's House*', p. 31.
34. Cather, *World and the Parish*, vol. 2, p. 624.

## Chapter 8

Elliptical Sound: Audibility and the Space of Reading<sup>1</sup>

Julie Beth Napolin

' . . . . . ' the drummer sang softly.

Ernest Hemingway

## Sonifying narrative voice

I begin in a rented cabin room in Georgia in 1923. For a moment, I hang suspended, waiting for the arrival of the imputed final revelation of Jean Toomer's *Cane*. Its last vignette, 'Kabnis', begins as, 'An oil light on a chair . . . burns unsteadily. The cabin room is spaced fantastically about it. Whitewashed hearth and chimney, black with sooty saw-teeth.'<sup>2</sup> Something of the logic of the figure in relation to the surface of the skin brings both the literary world – as a space of appearance – and the body of its narrator and character into being. Light writes on the room, the condition of all vision. The walls of the room, as a surface of reflection, bear the very bodies whose skin has not yet been identified as the content of spatial form. Is it darkness that affords the body its blackness or blackness that affords the darkness its body? Facsimile and simile here share a most fundamental ground.

There is a hiatus in the phenomenal as the presence of substance. This room has been structured in advance by my determinate expectation, now haunted by the sense that a narrator has omitted or is withholding some 'object' from me: blackness in a work that, before this final vignette, had probed the vicissitudes of a black life of song on the cusp of disappearance in 1920s Georgia. The narrator finally sees a someone in the room: 'Brown eyes stare from a lemon face' (111).

The third-person narrator is not a someone I can claim to imagine or imagine that I hear. The narrative voice that reports the colour of Kabnis' face has been divested of subject position, one that might utter, '[I see that] Brown eyes stare from a lemon face.' The anonymous voice

of a narrator confers a face on Ralph Kabnis; that much is clear – there has been an elliptical appearance of a character's body. But behind that appearance, as it were (for it is without proper topography or location), there has been a disappearance of the narrator. There is an as-yet unnamed other within (or perhaps as) the room that occupies that site of a more primary ground: the blank space against which things may appear.

'Behind' narrative space and its figures is a motivating voice, irrecoverable, one that brings narrative into being. This force is not itself narrated. Samuel Beckett has dramatised the divine performative of literary appearance: 'A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.'<sup>3</sup> There has been a sleight of hand, one internal to the very structure of third-person address. Someone is narrated into existence. That someone doing the narrating evokes, brings into being, but is not itself called forth; it simply manifests.

The elliptical power of this room is testimony to the fact that we have yet to understand audibility and visibility in relation to the production of written narrative. Narrative discourse is, Gérard Genette insists, the only level 'directly available to textual analysis'.<sup>4</sup> To ask after the forces that determine that availability, but also reveal its availability as the realm of the apparent, is to exit the realm of narrative theory as it concerns itself with the realm of the signifier. And yet, as I will describe, pursuing that project to its own logical conclusion, particularly as it concerns a racial signifier of voice, opens up a series of questions regarding a level that does not, and cannot, come under the purview of narrative theory without at the same time becoming an acoustics, rather than, strictly speaking, a poetics or rhetoric.

A number of studies have described the politics of transcribing dialectic and vernacular voice in American modernism.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the phenomenological threshold between the sonic and the literary has yet to be elaborated, given the turn away from the linguistic and semiotic upon which sound studies is so often premised. My interest here is drawn to the ambiguous ground of narrative theory – narrative voice – and with it, the difficulty in retrieving its auditory threshold, a virtual or hypothetical hearing. Modernist literary production bore witness to new forms and spaces of interracial encounter, most palpable in the acoustical spaces in which voices, sounds and bodies touch. This encounter is not to be found solely within the diegetic space of the literary world. It is related to a hiatus in the no less material space of readerly consciousness. The space of reading presents an interracial encounter.

We can return for a moment to Kabnis' room. Its *fiat lux* is not without a certain surplus sound. The wind whispers through the cabin's

horizontal cracks that bring shards of darkness (dark writing). Afforded the space is not only a looker, but a listener:

Night winds in Georgia are vagrant poets, whispering. The warm whiteness of his bed, the lamp-light, do not protect him from the weird chill of their song:

White-man's land.  
Niggers, sing.  
Burn, bear black children  
Till poor rivers bring  
Rest, and sweet glory  
In Camp Ground.<sup>6</sup>

The wind's message is encrypted in sound, just above the threshold of audition. But before chilling the body, it is wrapped once more in a second, graphic layer of poesies. It is as if the wind sings. Its chill stands in relation to the surface of the body, but also in circular relation to figuration. The song refers back to itself, commanding song and singing of song. It is what Jean-Luc Nancy might call (after Schelling and Coleridge) 'tautegorical', for 'it says nothing other than itself'.<sup>7</sup> Something of (fac-simile) in relation to an imputed racial substance is being performed. This performance, we will find, exposes the highly mediated quality of narrative space. Visually, the page suggests the citation of an unnamed singer or group of singers, but also figures a burrowing inward, as if the narrator overhears an interior auditory space. Kabnis might be remembering a song while he lies awake, but whose voice(s) he remembers is perhaps even less articulated or more diffuse than the anonymous narrating voice that communicates the scene of haunting recitation.

While a reader arrives at an interior more historical, further away in time from the moment of audition, the historical content is itself encrypted. The transmissive force that has brought the song here – historicity as such – is lost to representation. The song acts as an elliptical and difficult to interpret preface to the story of the lynching of Mary Turner, referred to in 'Kabnis' as Mame Lamkins. Her story is carried, but also omitted or waylaid, by the sound of the wind. Mary Turner, lynched while eight months pregnant in Georgia in 1918, was nearly expunged from public record to be remembered principally by the unofficial histories of modernism.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the story, Toomer's mode of presentation – a half-presentation – absorbs into itself public memory's mode of silencing.<sup>9</sup> The sound of wind is disarticulated in relation to content. It remains unclear who is hearing it as song or if this song has ever been sung outside of its citation by narrative, one that will refrain throughout the story and never through an attributed singer. It is not even clear that Kabnis hears it as such. It has been internalised as an

interpellative voice of social memory. The song is an imaginary auditory object, yet voices something of the reality of racial consciousness. There is very little of this sound that 'is' available to audile presentation.

The threshold of audibility is not simply a matter of loudness, nor is it one of pronunciation or timbre. There are sounds that do not become more or less audible through volume. We cannot make reference to audibility solely in its brute materiality. Sound is, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests, 'that which is and may be heard'.<sup>10</sup> We should hear a curious tautology, an is that is. I cite this definition as one that opens the recent volume, *Keywords in Sound* (2015), but also because of its passive grammar that masks the subject position and with it, audibility as it is always-already in relation to a listening subject. There is always a spatial configuration of audibility, or a distribution of sounds and points of their reflection in relation to an imputed listening subject. But the space of configuration is precisely that, a figuring of relations between subjects.

I suggest we reopen for inquiry a simple question that Barthes once asked of a sentence from Balzac in 'The Death of the Author': 'who speaks thus?' Barthes begins his famous essay by forcefully resolving this question in tautology:

As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself . . . the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.<sup>11</sup>

Barthes continues: 'No one, no "person," says it: its source, its voice, is not the true place of writing, which is reading' (147). But what is reading?<sup>12</sup> As if in answer to this also quite simple question, Barthes concludes his essay by invoking a scene of listening. He recalls the ambiguity of Greek tragic utterance, or words woven with 'double meanings' and misunderstandings that lend drama its tragic dimension: 'there is, however, someone who understands each word in its duplicity and who, in addition, hears the very deafness of the characters speaking in front of him – this someone being precisely the reader (or here, the listener)' (148).

Barthes moves from drama to the novel, from listening to dramatic speech to 'listening' to sentences on a page. His parenthetical remark leaves open this gap or transference that is metaphor. Listening appears to be an attribute of reading while also its figure. Perhaps this attribute of reading is necessarily incomplete, requiring a figure to make itself known in its effects. Further, it remains difficult to establish if, in this account, one would merely be listening to oneself. We will have occasion to return to these questions in the case of Ralph Ellison.

The reader-voice is perhaps only a terminological convenience, one that borrows from the long tradition of inner speech. 'I'm aware of it *sounding* in a very thin version of my own tone of voice. I can hear myself in its silent sound, a paradox audible only to me.'<sup>13</sup> It is the immediacy of this experience that Jacques Derrida named auto-affection or 'hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak'.<sup>14</sup> If a reader-voice carries, transmits and transports the words into consciousness, then what is the nature or structure of the 'invisible distance' it traverses?<sup>15</sup> Sound, in this space, is pushed through into an alternate dimension. When I read, there is nothing that, properly speaking, separates written voices from one another: no surface of another body emerges by which to posit their limit. The space of reading is a singular, absolute space.

'There' the threshold of audibility concerns the very 'voice' that might be recognised as the immediate, internal voice of reading. One readily speaks of seeing narrative, or of reading as an ideational space in which characters, settings and scenes appear in acts of what phenomenologist Wolfgang Iser has called 'image-building', a phrase that promises the substantiality of architecture.<sup>16</sup> There are various forms of support for this space that are non-ideational because they produce no images. Reader-response theory and phenomenology of reading are deeply eidetic, unable to ask after the very force of voicing that is the traversal of an invisible distance. There is a rhetorical sliding between listening as metaphor and listening as act, a sliding that must be designated the threshold of audibility. The history of philosophy would indicate that such a threshold is impossible in the case in visibility, so coequal are the image and the idea.

Even Barthes must retain an ideal space (metaphorised as listening) where all levels of articulation are simultaneous and coterminous.<sup>17</sup> There is merely a transfer of power from the voice (of the writer) to the ear (of a reader). But this ear, I will argue, is not without its own stratification, particularly in these scenarios, so difficult to recuperate and narrate. There is an ellipsis, a dot-dot-dot in our own ability to think through reading in relation to listening and its subject.

The narratological category of voice remains instructive, for properly speaking, it is without body and a face. It is merely what Genette calls 'the narrating instance'.<sup>18</sup> Genette describes at length the structure that distinguishes the narrator, the one who reports the scene, from a focaliser, the agent who 'sees and selects' the particularities of world to be given over to representation. We must suspend for a moment the provocative point that Genette makes no distinction in focalising between *seeing* and *hearing*, that is, between an object that has been selected for a character or narrator's audition and an object that has been selected

for a character or narrator's vision. Genette's use of 'voice' is not, Stephen Ross summarises in his own monumental study of speech and writing, 'a medium of utterance, but rather a set of relationships among time of narration, implied or actual narrators, and diegetic levels of the fiction's discourse'.<sup>19</sup> Ross continues: 'From this fundamental relationship Genette can derive subtle and elaborate configurations of narrative without pretending to solve the mystery of an author's (or implied author's) assumed presence behind voice and absence from discourse' (7–8).

In this structure, the distinction between first- and third-person is ontologically abridged. I suggest that what matters most in narrative discourse is focalisation, a selection of sensory data. That selection at times coincides with the person narrating and at times does not. Genette, for example, typologised focalisers that are 'internal' and 'external' to the diegesis, but also made an allowance for 'zero focalization' in the case of classical narrative or epic.<sup>20</sup> In any event, what matters – and I say it with all the weight of trying to open for inquiry the focaliser's material reality – is that selecting goes on ontologically and temporally prior to narrating. In among the most enigmatic contributions to narrative theory, Maurice Blanchot writes 'the speech of narrative always *lets us feel* that what is being recounted is not being recounted by anyone: it speaks in the neutral'.<sup>21</sup> Blanchot does not address the question of where it would speak. I suggest that even in this floating, yet purposive dimension of voice, in the zero, there is a focaliser, a focaliser of what Blanchot names 'the neutral space of narrative' (384). The focaliser is an anonymous accompaniment to any literary voicing, available to narrative, though not fully retrievable by it as its condition. Even the most neutral of spaces, that lets me feel as though 'it speaks', is a selected space.

The sensible is never simply or immediately such but rather regulated, censored or organised by laws that are perhaps not fully discoverable as laws for there is no place outside of representation from which to see them. Visibility is the perceptual condition of the object as it might present itself to vision.<sup>22</sup> As we move from the visual to the acoustical register, there is also a passage between them: audibility itself is an audiovisual form. And yet, the moment we concern ourselves with audibility, we are no longer concerned simply with the material life of the object, but also with its subjective and somatic possibilities for recognition. Audibility is not a purely material category that can be pluralised and distributed in a series as would a series of things: it is the ontological force by which consciousness can experience itself as such. Audibility is the supportive, yet occluded, function of the subject as the verb's mode of action.

The focaliser sees but does not 'say'. My concern here is not only the issue of confounding hearing and seeing, but also the distribution of the sensible by which politics determines aesthetics, or the threshold of an object's perceptibility.<sup>23</sup> Modernist scholar Melba Cuddy-Keane has also asked after the limits of focalisation in the account of sound, focusing in particular on what she calls a 'the new aurality' of technological modernity:

Besides the problem of mediating sound through a visually oriented discourse, there is the fundamental problem of mediating sound through language at all – the inevitable translation of sound into a conceptual category that takes place in the process of verbalization.<sup>24</sup>

But is that not a problem with any sensation or perception? The literary can only become the site in which to recuperate such an object if it is to be understood as a purely representational space. Cuddy-Keane argues that rather than focalisation, terms such as 'diffusion and auscultation may thus help us both to focus on the presentation of sound in itself' (71).<sup>25</sup>

The gains of such a shift in focus to 'sound in itself' remain unclear, or rather, politically neutral. This neutrality defines the limits and scope of narrative theory in relation to audibility. Race, taken to be a purely visual phenomenon, has been largely absent from discussions of the sound object. Yet, race is not a content, a content that can be added and then removed through reduced listening. My insistence is on the 'audible', which is not prior to an act of reading. These questions become more vexed in moments of half-presentation and in the sound object that is its narrative 'voice', the very intersection of the linguistic, imagistic, psychic and sonorous. Judith Butler writes of a 'racially saturated field of visibility'.<sup>26</sup> We might say in turn: race determines in advance the field of audibility.

Narrative voice is no voice at all or lacks sonorous substance. As a grammatical category, it is *desonified*. Someone is speaking (in the case of the first person) or reporting speech (in the case of the third person). This 'voice' bears no relation to timbre, which immediately gives rise to the question of a point of audition, a someone who is listening. Narrative voice also bears no relation to phenomenological voice as the animating intention of *logos*. Again, it is merely the 'narrating instance', that blank neutrality of the space of narrative. How are we to anatomise a series of auditory thresholds that determines narrativity? I take narrativity here to be not only the presumed narratability of an object that makes it available to focalisation, but also the supposed neutrality of narrative voice as grammatical agency: voice as it brings into existence, as it

signifies, but is not itself retrievable. Narrative voice is a figural voice that displaces, but cannot fully overcome, its acoustical associations.

### Who hears?

In relation to this difficult-to-narrate region of audibility the prologue to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947) stands as a primal scene. The title of the novel would indicate a problem with vision alone. The novel's narrator describes himself only as 'invisible', or 'the product of a "refusal" on the part of others to see him'.<sup>27</sup> Because he is invisible, light, he tells us, 'confirms my reality, gives birth to my form'.<sup>28</sup> Light is that which gives birth to form, form here taken to be the outline of the body, the very shape of what would otherwise be a 'formless mass' (7). But his form reflexively indicates a structuring omission in the ontology of form as such, its manner of appearing as if from nothing. While the emergence of any literary world posits a ground against which figure appears, here ground persists as that against which a body resists manifestation, even against so many lights. As in Kabnis' room, ground is figured. 'There is a certain acoustical deadness to my hole', he explains – there is a resistance, then, even to echo of the voice as auditory reflection of the self (8). There is a fundamental gesture of disappearance in the will to escape, to re-determine determination.

As this unnamed narrator addresses us, some reality of voice, one not without its own skin, remains. David Copenhafer writes of Ellison's prologue:

Insofar as the narrator is able to speak, to write, to *figure* his condition, his invisibility would appear not to be absolute . . . A mouth, a face, may tend to stubbornly persist. Beyond this particular figure, however, the simple fact of narrative voice, what we might call an irreducible acoustic remainder in the text, tends to bring the blackness of the narrator into visibility. Someone is speaking. And it is difficult not to confer a 'raced' body to a voice despite the massive epistemological uncertainties of such a conferral. Oddly, voice translates a measure of vision.<sup>29</sup>

The 'measure of vision' in which the black body of the narrator appears is perhaps only a measure because it cannot be sustained, that is, made properly substantive. It disappears as quickly as it appears. A measure of vision of course has musical and rhythmic implications – a sequence, a series of beats, a unit of protraction in time. If *legein*, the Greek root of *logos*, means speaking, gathering, binding, joining, but also 'to count' and 'to recount', *logos* also requires 'a sequence, or chain that is developed temporally'.<sup>30</sup> This chain is between single words, a chain that

gives them meaning. As I will return to, this sequence would seem to forbid anything like an ellipsis, for each dot is a unit of the same. If there is always a space between words that holds together their meaningful sequence, the ellipsis is a pure holding together, a pulse.

In the translation of voice into a measure of vision, it is as if audibility, visibility and legibility coincide along a certain threshold. I cannot claim to 'see' the body of narrator, just as I cannot claim to hear his voice. I can only claim to do so to the extent that a written figure might facsimile something other than what it is.

In an invisible man's room,<sup>31</sup> it is difficult to know if voice only translates a measure of vision because someone – who wishes to be anonymous – is speaking in the first person. Decades of post-structural narrative theory, from Barthes to Genette and Gates, would encourage us not to seek out anyone speaking behind the first-person voice. 'Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative [*le noir-et-blanc*] where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing'.<sup>32</sup> If in Kabnis' room, there are two entities (one a disembodied narrator, the other the body it narrates into existence), in an invisible man's room there is one entity. An 'I' addresses, seemingly directly, a 'you' who cannot possibly respond.

But Ellison's unnamed narrator draws the conditioning disappearance of the third-person voice into his own being, wishing to overcome its intractable determination. He cannot perfectly imitate its force, displaced as it is onto a series of prosthetics under his tight supervision. He lives in a dark hole artificially illuminated by 1,369 pilfered lights. Ellison borrows the structuring omission of the third-person to lend it architectural and technological proportions; in that gesture its sly force becomes figured as his room (invisible, at least to us). Yet, who could forget that his narrator sits not only amongst the artificial lights, but also with the disembodied voice of another? The singing voice of Louis Armstrong, who 'made poetry out of being invisible', floats from out of a radio-phonograph.<sup>33</sup> In the phonographic voice, there is a doubling of the imaginary body of the narrator, but also of the very force of narrative.

At the end of this essay, we will have occasion to return this scene that has borne so much critical repetition – making what follows something of an ellipsis itself – but suffice it to say that the title of the song Armstrong sings dramatises the difficult to retrieve bracketing of the agential force of third-person narrative voice: '(What did I Do to Become So) Black and Blue'. I say 'bracketing' of the third-person because though the first part of the title avows an 'I', it is an 'I' that poses a difficult-to-answer question. The parenthesis acknowledges that the agency lies with someone else who is not there or, what's more, fundamentally unavailable.<sup>34</sup>

We should leave for a moment the song as described by the narrator to consider the song as sung by Armstrong. Reading Ellison invites moving between these two regions. After a protracted instrumental introduction, Armstrong finally sings. Ellison does not transcribe the lyrics of the song. While we must go outside of the novel, as listeners, Armstrong again forces us to become readers, reading and listening being enjoined in his voicing of the problem of legibility. At the bridge, that part of any song that is cast between its beginning and return, Armstrong sings:

I'm white inside but that don't help my case  
'Cause I can't hide what is in my fa...<sup>35</sup>

I borrow this transcription from Copenhafer's 'Invisible Music (Ellison)', a title whose own punctuation dramatises a missing voice (illegible and inaudible). The standard transcription of the song provides the full word 'face', but that belies Armstrong's performative omission. For, just then, Copenhafer notes, Armstrong begins to scat, transcribed here as an ellipsis. Ellison, Copenhafer convincingly argues, could only have been referring to a 1929 recording, in which Armstrong replaces the original lyric, 'on my face' with 'in my face' (177). The grammar of that substitution claims to convert the surface of the skin, as if form to an imputed content. Such a claim is simultaneously undone by its own articulation in (or as) Armstrong's voice. He refuses to articulate the phoneme and digs up sounds secreted within or rejected by the word as it has shaped itself. Again, content stands in disarticulated and transmuted relation to form. 'In fact', Copenhafer writes, 'he never completes the world, never completes the rhyme with "case" that might bring some kind of closure to the bridge' (177). Ellison's unnamed narrator concludes the novel with an elementary blues lyric, one that completes the very phonetic structure of rhyming that, Copenhafer suggests, had been occluded in the revelatory moment of Armstrong's performance (185).<sup>36</sup> The narrator intones: 'Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through?'<sup>37</sup> The narrator then culminates with a single, dangling line: 'Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?' (581). He suggests, then, something of his inaudibility.

He ends with a rhetorical question, figuring a direct address and with it, the reader's conjectural hearing. I agree that the rhyme is fundamental to blues musicality and that his particular rhyme is one that ironises his racialised condition. Yet, the narrator's address figures its somatic and acoustical collaboration with the timbre of reading. Does not the reader begin to transmit rhythm to his word, translating word into song? These

frequencies and rhythms suggest something of the material process of traversing an invisible distance between text and consciousness. It is a paradoxical site – paradoxical, because nowhere locatable – for word to become rhythmicised as song. Simultaneously, or at least structurally inseparably, these lower frequencies function on the baritone register of a male voice, a timbre that is often racially stereotyped and therefore functions in advance of his individual speech. The narrator tells us that his invisibility is 'a matter of the construction of [people's] *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality' (3). Yet, at issue in the space of narrative is the threshold of audibility, or what I have called the stratification of the ear: the inner ears with which we hear through physical ears. A white woman at one point says to the narrator that his voice has 'primitive' associations: 'no one has told you, Brother, that at times you have tom-toms beating in your voice?' (413). It is a timbre that he himself does or cannot hear: the narrator ironises something of the act of reading, for even in his reduced space of disembodiment, he is given black skin within the ear of a (white?) reader. There is, then, a kind of fulfilment of voice by a reader who might provide both the sensuous, yet structural archive of timbre, the reader perhaps recalling a series of phantasmatic voices to suture to this narrating instance.

The lower frequencies are lower still, beneath even that threshold that gives the lowest range of human audition, and yet more intimately travelling: his voice might in fact line and people the inner speech of reading. The threshold of audibility concerns the very voice that might be recognised as the immediate, internal voice of reading, a voice presumed to be racially neutral. It is as if the narrator asks, if this space is so fungible that you can continue to attribute to me a race, then how do you know that you are where and who you are when you hear yourself?

Not all voices of reading translate a measure of vision. Some readerly voices occlude, vex, or hyper-accentuate that translation and in different somatic sites of animation. There is a voice that a reader might lend to writing, a voice that might efface, misappropriate and misconstrue. The voice without a mouth is not without reference to a situation. Rather, it is with an elided or half-presented situation. Richard Dyer writes, 'white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular ... [moreover] when whiteness qua whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial'.<sup>38</sup> Consciousness itself – the very 'site' of the word's animation and shelter – is a racial formation. The act of reading, in traversing an invisible distance, traverses not an emptiness of immediacy, but a virtual and yet no less material and racialised space.

The challenging issue of focalisation or selection in the space of reading remains to be considered within this nexus.

### The deselected object

Language knows a 'subject', not a person, and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together' . . .

Roland Barthes<sup>39</sup>

I have been suggesting that the category of narrative voice is structured by auditory elision. I have also considered the possibility of a mode of omission that is vexed in its play of appearance and disappearance in part because a series of graphic omissions are made to stand in for auditory thresholds, both physical and what Frantz Fanon might call 'historico-racial'.<sup>40</sup> I turn now to an acoustical narrative space whose structure of selection will strike us as the kind inverted by Ellison.

Near the conclusion of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Lady Brett Ashley and her former love Jake sit at a café table with a young bullfighter, Pedro Romero, in Spain. Chapter 26 abruptly comes to end when Jake leaves the table for a moment, only to return and find that Brett and Romero are gone. 'The coffee-glasses and our three empty cognac-glasses were on the table. A waiter came with a cloth and picked up the glasses and mopped off the table.'<sup>41</sup> We have only metonyms, the empty table and glasses, to depict, vividly by way of narrative omission, that Brett and Romero have gone off together for the night. Fantasy must intervene where description will not. We come to know that something has happened, not because it is presented but by way of remainders, an affective halo around the scene of action that points towards it. Narrative that 'shows' by omitting, what Hemingway called 'the principle of the iceberg', here can be defined in rather visible terms.<sup>42</sup>

But consider another passing moment in *The Sun Also Rises* when Jake meets Brett in a jazz club in Spain. The moment is itself a passageway – a sonorous corridor – for larger themes of the novel concerning omission, but also reticence and repression:

The music hit you as you went in. Brett and I danced. It was so crowded we could barely move. The nigger drummer waved at Brett. We were caught in the jam, dancing in one place in front of him.  
'Hahre you?'  
'Great.'  
'Thaats good.'

He was all teeth and lips  
'He's a friend of mine,' Brett said. 'Damn good drummer.'  
. . . .  
'Oh darling,' Brett said. 'I'm so miserable.'  
I had the feeling of going through something that has all happened before.  
'You were happy a minute ago.'  
The drummer shouted: 'You can't two time –'  
'It's all gone'  
'What's the matter?'  
'I don't know. I just feel terribly.'  
' . . . . ' the drummer chanted. Then turned to his sticks.  
'Want to go?'  
I had the feeling as in a nightmare of it all being something repeated,  
something I had been through and that now I must through again.'  
' . . . . ' the drummer sang softly.  
'Let's go,' said Brett. 'You don't mind.'  
' . . . . ' the drummer shouted and grinned at Brett. (69–70)

A selected sound object is 'audible' to the focaliser; a selected visual object is 'visible'. This scene forces us to ask, what is a *deselected* object? Are its axes purely silence and invisibility, or rather a more fraught sensory and political territory delimiting speech from noise, image from its occlusion, a location in which seeing and hearing are co-produced in the somatic act of reading?

Brett knows one of the musicians and while she does not say more, in a novel that is fundamentally about words withheld or omitted, they perhaps know one another from America. We know from other moments in the text that Brett has left a long line of lovers, the implication here being that Brett and the unnamed drummer have been sexually involved. The racial epithet serves the psychic function of neutralising Jake's anxiety in this interracial space. Already displaced away from the American scene, the presence of jazz speaks to an America abroad in suspension. But the scene, as presented by Jake, is notably disfiguring. The body of the drummer, in a measure of vision, is corporealised by the epithet as a black body. But that body is immediately reduced, disappearing behind two remaining figures (teeth and mouth) that hang suspended. A floating mouth absorbs and stands in place of the rest of the body. Jake's mode of narrative is not only reductive, but also aggressive, disfiguring the drummer's face.

And yet, not only is seeing the drummer not at issue, but also hearing him. An essential violence is happening at the level of reported speech. The drummer's speech is rendered in vernacular, which is perhaps how Jake hears it, that is, through racist filters. But this violence is happening in the apparatus of reporting itself. For, while the scene is focalised through Jake, he is also one of the scene's objects. The apparatus must

overhear the characters as well as the music and drum-taps. There is some shift in attention: the narrative registers these sounds, but it increasingly attempts to banish the language of the drummer to non-narrative. Rhythm is the impetus for an elision in the ellipsis, which then comes to stand in for a voice. It is worth noting that another character in the scene is referred to simply as 'the count'. What begins as stenography of the drum-taps becomes overfull with displacement (by what force or from what point of audition, it is unclear). It is no longer sufficient to isolate the racist structures of representation within Jake. The well-worn literary question 'Who is speaking?' is perhaps best rendered here as 'Who is selecting?'

Perspective, narratologist Mieke Bal maintains, 'covers both the physical and psychological points of perception', but it has come traditionally to mean both the narrator and the 'vision'.<sup>43</sup> The term focaliser, meant to cover the act of vision alone, is drawn from the language of film and photography, preferred by Bal over something like 'perspectiviser' for being both subject-oriented while also technical. The examples that tether and elaborate Bal's theory of the focaliser are drawn from spectatorship for reasons that remain instructive in the case of the racial signifier: the focalised objects (another character, a landscape, a thing, or a voice or sound event) are fundamentally specular.

As Jake moves through the music of the jazz club, we are, despite an elision, in the realm of something that gains its narrative status from being seen: a body under the erasure of racist disfigurement, rendered and reduced graphically to a series of dots. But it also gains its status from being heard. Selection still remains in this instance an operative act. While a subject – who has been reduced to a (sound) object – is being heard, it is selected and unselected at the same time. That is not to claim that the drummer 'is not being heard', for the very structure of audibility here underscores that objects (who are also subjects) are not simply available to hearing. We are in the realm of *deselection* as the speech of the drummer moves further and further away from representation, being first a dialect rendering of a racialised timbre. It is perhaps even a Southern timbre, but it is made to take on black proportions: the matter of his voice is left unnarrated, calling upon the reader's inner sense of sound and that reader's archive of racial associations of voice. It is then a singing, a chanting, until finally it is an ellipsis, a spacing out within written discourse itself.

But while it is out of the ordinary for a drummer to sing, the ellipses stand in for a problem of description, as if the sound qualities of the drummer's singing cannot be graphically represented.<sup>44</sup> The very notion of timbre is premised upon a descriptive desire in relation to sound.

In one of few reflections on the incredibly difficult to define notion of timbre, Emily Dolan writes, 'to talk about timbre is to value sound as sound and not as a sonic manifestation of abstract principles'.<sup>45</sup> Timbre indicates an attention to what Dolan calls the 'eachness' of sounds (88). But how is eachness, or particularity, to be resolved with an attention to the *structural* levels that support the racialisation of timbre – the claim to reduce and therefore (mis)recognise a black voice or sound, in reading and in listening?

Certainly, the elision indicates a problem of acoustics, as Jake might not hear what the drummer sings (though the drummer's skin has silenced him in advance of speech and music). Perhaps Jake turns his ear elsewhere physically. The gap in both narrative and the grapheme might also be a kind of background noise, as if his emotional attention is drawn elsewhere in ways that he cannot quite articulate. If we return to Barthes's formulation of tragic listening, double meanings lend the scene its dramatic proportions: this scene unfolds principally as a failure of dialogue. Both Brett and Jake circle around some void in feeling they cannot say clearly or directly. But it is the body of the drummer that indicates something of that circle. He was there, in the scene, for a moment, just before marking its borders of inclusion. The novel has rich technical resources internal to itself for omission. What work is he – as a spectral, elliptical frame of dialogue – doing for narrative?

The acoustical pulses around narrative, just as the music pulses around dialogue: the music is represented *so as* to be marginalised. Yet, that narrative and textual labour is, nonetheless, unfulfilled. While the racialised sound object has been marginalised, it remains 'in' the narrative in elided and distorted (but also compressed) form. The racialised drummer is 'there', at the audiovisual margins of narratability: the ellipsis is a visualised fracture in articulation.

The two-time is in the text. It is the only thing that the drummer says: he is elided as a double elision, two-timed out of the narrative. It is possible that Hemingway here meant to say 'double time', a double time solo being the lingua franca of jazz of this moment, a remark about how early jazz was played. Perhaps the drummer is cautioning the player not to double the rhythm. The phrase 'two time' then takes on an ironic proportion as overheard by Jake who is, in a sense, asking Brett to two-time with him (she is engaged to Mike, a name with an easily substitutable phoneme). In Jake's impotence, an injury from the war, he could never fulfil that two time, where the drummer it seems, already has, making Jake painfully, or doubly secondary.

The elliptical sound, or the half-presentation of the music, indicates not only what the characters cannot hear, but also what narrative



discourse itself cannot hear if it is to maintain its semiotic hold upon the affective limitations of its characters. The emptiness of the ellipses, or rather an emptying out of music by narrative and the grapheme, figures the characters' own sense of emptiness. But that emptiness is symptomatic of an absence already within and as whiteness, preserving its dominance. Jake cannot admit the drummer into his society if he is to preserve it; he can dance along to the music, but no more. But this emptiness is doubly empty, two-timing. The ellipsis is then over-full to double fully the convention of three dots. Jake and Brett are miserable, to be sure. But the narrative discourse borrows the authenticity of their emptiness from the erased music to communicate its own lack. The melancholy of the characters is borrowed, omitted music being its prosthetic.

Elision, all that dictates how the raced body is to be both seen and heard in advance of seeing and hearing, is an audiovisual form. Such labour cannot in itself be narrated, but supports narration. We can see, then, that this scene posits something of the exact inverse of Ellison's chamber, which borrows structural elision to displace it onto electric lights and the phonographic voice. What Hemingway elides, Ellison refigures.

The drummer indicates a rhythm, 'two timing', that is at the limit of narrative temporality and serial presentation. The narrative space is pulled in two directions – a syncopated rhythm stands as the limit of the linguistic representation of layered acoustical space. If narrative turns fully towards the drummer, it will negate the spoken scene, falling into the music that will become its primary object. Narrative is in the midst of a struggle to the death. In that moment, 'background noise' ceases to be an appropriate designation, for the written finds its limit in its capacity to represent these simultaneous sounds. The narrative struggles to represent what is underneath the spoken as its support. But, at the level of inscription, this support (of music) can only be *just alongside* dialogue, visibly surrounding direct discourse. This proximity signals an acute danger: for what if narrative discourse were to turn its attention to this music?

As Hemingway's project of narrative omission reaches a certain limit, we might hazard that *The Sun Also Rises* would have to become *Invisible Man*, the two novels together being what Barthes had called 'the negative [*le noir-et-blanc*] where all identity is lost'.<sup>46</sup> I want, then, to conclude with a coda, a return to the prologue to *Invisible Man*. As the narrator listens,

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.<sup>47</sup>

He hears several layers of discourse beneath the lyrics, the voices of a congregation and then finally, of the ancestors. He begins to hear a more 'rapid tempo', perhaps as a compound rhythm. The ellipses are (in the) original, indicating a sound space in text, but also the logic of tautology as it eclipses genesis:

'Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'  
And a congregation of voices answered: 'That blackness is most black, brother, most black ...'  
'In the beginning ...'  
'At the very start', they cried.  
'... there was blackness ...'  
'Preach it ...' (9)

In the beginning ... there was blackness. How blackness came to be lies in the ellipsis, that invisible distance between matter and form. Here, a sonorous and non-verbal relation is performed. The ellipses are not a pause, but indicate the acoustics of their imaginary space, its resonance where the voice of one is ending and the voices of the others begin. The ellipsis, as antiphony, is a place of calling back. It is where the other lives, in resonance. The ellipsis is the only way, graphically, to indicate something of that interface between voice and space as a site of animation and circumscription.

But this relation, though difficult to narrate in its genesis, is not essential. Alexander Weheliye has persuaded us to hear the narrator's room as a fundamentally technological space, connecting its parameters to the trajectory of Afro-Futurism.<sup>48</sup> In that spirit, we should remember that the narrator tells us that he plans one day to have five radio-phonographs playing simultaneously. Such a device has a dual function; it both repeats and transmits. The narrator leaves unsaid how they, in his extreme solitude, could possibly be made to play the same record synchronously. Used as a radio, each device could tune in simultaneously to the broadcast, multiplying the same. Five records playing simultaneously would pose a different condition of listening: they would fall out of phase, echoing each other in odd and not fully determined intervals. The distinction between transmission (playing sound from afar) and reproduction (generating sound from within) is along the axis not of form or even 'format', but content.<sup>49</sup> Out of phase, the envelopes of words – their consonants and sibilance – would become prolonged ... as a *whispering through its cracks* (we should hear, once again, the figural winds that give shape to Kabnis). The phase relations would

return the words of the song into the sound of sibilance. In 1947, there were not yet stereophonics, but Ellison's narrator, a 'thinker-tinker', imagines dividing the unitary mono-sound not into two but *five* (7).<sup>50</sup> He is already beyond the fundamental units of dialectics, one and two, being amidst the many. For Plato, the number that gives reality to all things, because it gives dimension, is four. Perhaps, then, we are in an ultra-dialectical space, as it pushes out from the given.<sup>51</sup> The disarticulation of the phrase relations is not immediately immanent to the space as negativity: the phrase relations do not neutralise, but multiply and expand.

The room, he tells us, is anechoic. It is through the technological addition of surround sound, phasing so many simultaneous recordings, that echo would be simulated rather than given in advance as a property of space. The work removes echo only to give it back as a facsimile, phase relations being the future of modernist music. It is a form of sound that had not yet been played, not yet heard, and perhaps, not even imagined.

#### Notes

1. Portions of this essay were presented the 'Techniques of the Listener' symposium at Yale University (2016) and the American Comparative Literature Association Convention panel, 'Sites of Sound' (2014). I wish to thank those auditors, Paul Nadal, Todd Barnes and the editors of this volume for their comments.
2. Toomer, *Cane*, p. 111.
3. Beckett, 'Company', p. 3.
4. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 27.
5. See, for example, North, *The Dialectic of Modernism*.
6. Toomer, p. 111.
7. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 49. My aim here is to show how modernist voicing exposes tautologies within the very logic of racialised production.
8. I cannot address in the scope of this present essay the central importance of Mary Turner as an unfathomable presence in 'Kabnis'. Also see Julie Buckner Armstrong's *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching*. Confronting the social memory of Mary Turner, the prose of 'Kabnis' can appear to be what Armstrong calls 'an incomprehensible mess' (7).
9. See Henry Louis Gates Jr's monumental rethinking of narrative theory, *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates notes 'the privileged oral voice [of *Cane*] ... and its poignant silences', describing at length a set of African American rhetorical strategies that both conceal and reveal (192). These strategies retain in their play a 'primarily antiphonal function' of a black oral tradition (192).
10. Cited in Novak and Sakakeeny, *Keywords in Sound*, p. 1. The editors begin, 'sound is vibration that is perceived and becomes known through its materiality' (1). This definition functions via a similar tautology.

11. Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, p. 142.
12. As Garrett Stewart asks, in one of few reflections on the question of sonorousness in the event of reading, 'Where do we read?' Such a question, he suggests, immediately leads us to the 'reading body' as the 'somatic locus of soundless reception'. Stewart, *Reading Voices*, p. 1.
13. Riley, 'The Voice Without A Mouth', p. 58. In a recent discussion at the Whitney Humanities Centre meeting, 'Techniques of the Listener' (April 2016), Mara Mills noted that in nineteenth-century discussions of hearing and disability, it was thought that the deaf could not be taught to read silently, being without speech and therefore, without inner speech. So entrenched is the notion that written word must be silently articulated in mind.
14. Derrida elaborates this phrase across numerous works and evokes the double sense of the French verb *écouter*, both 'to hear' and 'to understand'. '[To speak] produces a signifier which seems not to fall into the world, outside the ideality of the signified, but to remain there sheltered – even in the moment that it attains the audiophonic system of the other – within the pure interiority of auto-affection. It does not fall into the exteriority of space, into what one calls the world, which is nothing but the outside of speech.' Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 166.
15. I borrow this phrase from Derrida's critique of Husserl in *Speech and Phenomena*. Derrida writes of 'the invisible distance held out between the two acts' of phenomenological reduction and between the transcendental and the world that requires it to appear (11–13).
16. 'The process of image-building begins ... with the schemata of the text, which are aspects of a totality that the reader himself must assemble; in assembling it, he will occupy the position set out for him, and so create a sequence of images that eventually results in his constituting the meaning of the text.' Iser, *The Act of Reading*, p. 141.
17. In part, this space owes to Barthes's investments in certain models of psychoanalytic listening. See, for example, 'Listening' in *The Responsibility of Forms*, pp. 245–60.
18. Genette, p. 214.
19. Ross, *Fiction's Inexhaustible Voice*, pp. 7–8.
20. Genette, pp. 189–94.
21. Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, p. 384. While Blanchot does not discuss focalisation per se, his parallel theory of narrative voice adopts 'il', often translated as 'he', but also indicative of a neuter 'it'.
22. I am grateful to the work of Pooja Rangan who recommends, in this vein, a related passage from Gilles Deleuze when he writes of 'visibilities'. These 'are not to be confused with elements that are visible or more generally perceptible, such as qualities, things, objects, compounds of objects. ... Visibilities are not forms of objects, nor even forms that would show up under the light, but rather forms of luminosity which are created by the light itself and allow a thing or object to exist only as a flash, sparkle or shimmer'. Deleuze, *Foucault*, p. 45; Rangan, *Immediations*.
23. Jacques Rancière writes in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 'the system of a priori forms determines what presents itself to sense experience. [Aesthetics] is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech

- and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience' (13).
24. Cuddy-Keane, 'Virginia Woolf, Sound Technologies, and the New Aurality', p. 70.
  25. Also see John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*. Picker discusses the Romantic and Victorian literary imagination in terms of auscultation, a technique whose history has since been richly explored by Jonathan Sterne in *The Audible Past*.
  26. Butler, 'Endangered/Endangering', p. 17. In this seminal essay, Butler writes of the video of Rodney King being brutally beaten, as it was nonetheless marshalled as visual evidence of King being a threat. 'The visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful' (19). Butler does not isolate the 'seen' as being prior to reading (17).
  27. Copenhafer, 'Invisible Man (Ellison)', p. 172.
  28. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 6.
  29. Copenhafer, p. 172.
  30. Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, p. 43.
  31. I use this rather awkward formation because the narrator says, 'I am an invisible man.' It would be misleading to substitute a definite article for what is persistently indefinite.
  32. Barthes, 'Death of The Author', p. 142. It is a bit odd to translate the phrase 'le noir-et-blanc' as 'negative', though it is true that the contrast bears within itself a dialectical, and thus negating, relation. Barthes's original sense might have been the blank (white) page, which then bears black ink. But given that black-and-white is stated as if in union, it is difficult not to hear a prelude to Barthes's future thinking on photography. At the same time, given Barthes's silence on Algeria, it is also quite difficult not to hear an occluded racial other. This play is of course testimony to his central thesis.
  33. Ellison, p. 8.
  34. Also see Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, in which Weheliye argues for the paramount importance of the subject position in Ellison's discourse. Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* and *The Psychic Life of Power* are also foundational meditations on what in subject-formation cannot be narrated and is only figured.
  35. Quoted in Copenhafer, p. 173.
  36. Throughout his essay, Copenhafer shows how the narrator's language resists or forecloses rhyming more generally, making this final moment of rhyme all the more powerful.
  37. Ellison, p. 581.
  38. Cited in Jackson, 'White Noises', p. 51.
  39. 'Death of the Author', p. 145.
  40. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 111.
  41. Hemingway, *Sun Also Rises*, p. 191.
  42. Hemingway, 'The Art of Fiction No. 21'. In the interview with George Plimpton, Hemingway states that only something that a writer knows can be omitted; anything else is a 'hole'.
  43. Bal, *Narratology* (2009), p. 146.

44. For a related reading, see Benson, 'Gatsby's Tattoo', which argues for 'jazz under erasure' in *The Great Gatsby* (747). Benson compellingly highlights a moment of racialised foot tapping within the broader context of anthropology and ethnography.
45. Dolan, *Orchestral Revolution*, pp. 87–8.
46. Barthes, 'Death of the Author', p. 142.
47. Ellison, pp. 8–9.
48. See Weheliye.
49. For a discussion of the notion of format in relation to form and content, see Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format*.
50. So too does Toomer in 'Kabnis': 'Way off down the street four figures sway beneath iron awnings which form a sort of corridor that imperfectly echoes and jumbles what they say. A fifth form joins them' (143).
51. The novel begins with the end or the closest point of the present. I have tried to show how, in the musicality of the last line of the novel and its mode of address, the narrator and reader hear in ways not yet possible at the beginning of the book. He (and we) finally 'hears' his own self-alienation. This is the elliptical shape of Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, one articulation of the modern predicament.