

“Black Is . . . Black Ain’t”: Ralph Ellison’s Meta-Black Aesthetic and the “End” of African American Literature

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Kenneth Warren notes the diverse ways that *Invisible Man* (1952) and its author have been interpreted from within and without the African American community, with Ellison being alternately characterized as race traitor, “race man,” and “transracial messiah.”¹ Warren reads *Invisible Man* as perhaps the quintessential example of a strain of African American literature seeking to assert black humanity to a segregated society in which that humanity was very materially in question. He finds the novel to be a powerful reminder of this humanity, but he wonders “how much longer . . . such reminders [will] be necessary.”² Recent high-profile instances of institutional and interpersonal racism, such as the deaths of Tanisha Anderson, Mike Brown, Jordan Davis, Samuel DuBose, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, and others, along with the recent shootings in Charleston, “stop-and-frisk” law enforcement offensives, and the prison-industrial complex, might make it easy to dismiss Warren’s question as overly optimistic at best. However, we need to take seriously his claim that perhaps Ellison’s novel in particular, and African American literature generally, do not quite matter in the same way they once did.

Warren’s provocatively titled *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), derived in large part from his 2007 W.E.B. Du Bois lecture at Harvard University and building upon the arguments he makes in *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (2003), has sparked a lively debate

that has extended from the world of academics (a forum in *PMLA* and a special issue of *African American Review* growing out of a Modern Language Association roundtable) to more mainstream forums (a symposium in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and a public online live chat between Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Warren sponsored by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*). Warren's fundamental claim in the book, that "African American literature was a postemancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation,"³ may seem primarily to be a question of genre and periodization. Certainly, some of the criticism of Warren's argument has been along these lines. Gene Andrew Jarrett, for example, has argued that "[s]uch a narrow periodization overstates the role that constitutional or juridical events have played in race relations, while restricting the political awareness and activities of African American writers to discourses of de jure segregation."⁴ Erica Edwards has additionally claimed that "[i]t was precisely with the post-Jim Crow creation of black literature classrooms, that African American writers and critics re-turned to and reinvented 'African American literature,' again and against history."⁵ These sorts of debates have always been a piece of academic discussions around canon formation and the definitions of national and ethnic literatures, of course, but the volume and the vehemence of the response to Warren's argument suggests that there is something more at stake than determining where Toni Morrison's novels should be stocked in the bookstore.

Warren himself freely admits that racism still exists and clarifies that while he does claim American society to be "post-Jim Crow," "as for postrace, I make no such claims."⁶ Regardless, it is easy to see how, when he describes Jim Crow-era African American literature as "prospective" and post-Jim Crow literature written by African Americans as largely "retrospective," many readers take it as a challenge to the idea that cultural and, by extension, political solidarity based on race remain practical bases for pursuing social justice in the contemporary moment.⁷ This is what inserts Warren, whether he would like it or not, into conversations around "post-blackness"⁸ and the utility of blackness as identity in the post-Civil Rights moment being carried on by pundits such as Touré, political theorists such as Tommie Shelby, so-called Afro-pessimist critics such as Saidiya Hartman, and those, like Fred Moten, who frame blackness in terms of performativity.⁹ At the heart of these conversations is a debate over the efficacy of a racially grounded solidarity as a basis for resistance to injustice. However he may try to confine himself to debates over the semantics of literary canon formation, Warren does dip his toes into these larger conversations when he writes, in response to those who privilege a pursuit of "racial democracy" over "social democracy," that "to believe that a politics centered on removing the barriers of discrimination that may still hinder the advancement of, say, blacks in Wall Street financial firms, is the same as a politics fundamentally interested in a more egalitarian redistribution of wealth is a mistake that at least some of us can no longer afford."¹⁰

The argument that class-based solidarity should be granted primacy over race-based solidarity is not a new one. However, as innumerable recent events centering around the interactions of African Americans and law enforcement and the #BlackLivesMatter social movement that has sprung up around these events make plain, to privilege class at the expense of race risks ignoring the material reality of embodied black experience in the United States. This experience, while it certainly intersects in important ways with class, carries its own weight, oftentimes the very weight of life and death.¹¹ As Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it in *Between the World and Me* (2015), addressing his teenaged son in an open-letter form very clearly influenced by that central figure of Jim Crow and post-Jim Crow African American literature, James Baldwin, “You have seen all the wonderful life up above the tree-line, yet you understand that there is no real difference between you and Trayvon Martin, and thus Trayvon Martin must terrify you in a way that he could never terrify me. You have seen so much more of all that is lost when they destroy your body.”¹² Coates’s focus on the sensate and psychological experience of blackness in America provides an important counterpoint to analyses like Warren’s that, as Hua Hsu aptly puts it in a review of *What Was African American Literature?*, “[underestimate] the broader, more nebulous blast radius of slavery—the effects that are not as legible or confirmed by statute, the ills that are perpetuated through ideology rather than code.”¹³ These effects are what Coates attempts to attune his son and his reader to when he writes that “[y]ou must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.”¹⁴ He goes on to instruct his son that “this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.”¹⁵ I argue that we can locate in Ellison’s novel the articulation of such a mode, which I will call “meta-black,” of living within the black body and within a country and world wherein sounds and images of the black body permeate the collective consciousness. It is here, in the elaboration of this meta-blackness, that Ellison’s *Invisible Man* takes on resonances that Warren’s positioning of the novel as a swan song for African American literature cannot account for.

While of course *Invisible Man* is in many respects very much a product of its time, and served at that time as a necessary reminder of black humanity, I argue that the novel additionally articulates a forward-looking model of black subjectivity in the face of mass-mediated subjection that has often been overlooked. This mode of selfhood becomes increasingly necessary in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and it profoundly influences the way that blackness as identity is treated in contemporary literature by authors such as Paul Beatty, Percival Everett, Danzy Senna, and ZZ Packer (to name a few) that some term “post-black.”¹⁶ I term Ellison’s version of black identity “meta-blackness” to account for his use of fragments of mass-mediated, popular-cultural iconography of blackness as the very material with which to build an eclectic subjectivity. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites contemporary usages

of the prefix “meta-” as being “[p]refixed to the name of a subject or discipline to denote another which deals with ulterior issues in the same field, or which raises questions about the nature of the original discipline and its methods, procedures, and assumptions.”¹⁷ This is what I will examine in my use of the term “meta-blackness”—the way that contemporary subjects raced as black make use of blackness as it is culturally circulated to raise questions about conceptions of blackness and the assumptions that underlie them.¹⁸ Ellison “samples” these popular-cultural specters of blackness to open up space for a black subjectivity that is neither “post-” black, nor tethered to prescriptive notions of authenticity. Today, these latter notions rightly face a great deal of skepticism; however, they continue to inform debates around African American subjectivity, and they are certainly among the forces that shape Ellison’s novel. Ellison’s choice of Louis Armstrong as a key figure in the development of his narrator’s subjectivity, and the narrator’s desire 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,” represent the novel’s quintessential iteration of this meta-blackness; thus, this essay pivots around an analysis of the implications of the ways in which technology and black music (and their intersections) are deployed in the novel, culminating in this technologically mediated invocation of Armstrong.¹⁹

Slipping into the Breaks: Ellison and the Stereophonic/Stereoscopic Self

Black music undoubtedly plays an important role in the novel and in Ellison’s oeuvre generally. While Ellison spent much of the rest of his life composing his follow-up to *Invisible Man*, he was throughout his career a prolific essayist, and music featured prominently in this writing. From reviews of music and texts on music, such as LeRoi Jones’s *Blues People*, to occasional pieces, such as his “Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday,” to the reflections on the larger societal resonances of music in his oft-cited “Living with Music,” black music was clearly a critical piece of what Ellison found to be exceptional about African American culture and identity, and about American culture and identity more generally. Ellison famously used his ideal conception of jazz music as a model of ideal democratic society, writing that “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 (like the successive canvasses of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition.”²⁰

Warren has observed a tendency among critics to assume “that music rather than literature has been the most politically powerful cultural force wielded by black Americans in the struggle against inequality.”²¹ Given this, and the centrality of black music to Ellison’s oeuvre, it is unsurprising that there has been a prominent strain of criticism that has, at its extreme, asserted that “[i]f

Invisible Man has been at all successful in helping to undermine the authority of white paternalism, it presumably has done so not by marshaling the stylistic resources of novelistic form but rather by appropriating the resources of black musical culture.²² Critics differ as to whether the novel is a “jazz text,”²³ a “literary extension of the blues,”²⁴ or some combination of the two.²⁵ Whatever their differences, these critics share a sense that what makes *Invisible Man* special as literature is the inspiration it draws from black vernacular musical culture. Walton Muyumba exemplifies this approach when he reads the novel as “literary improvisation,”²⁶ and Timothy Spaulding similarly argues that Ellison’s “protagonist achieves his sense of identity by improvising on elements of his past through key figures that represent both musical and cultural traditions within their narrative voices.”²⁷ In short, whether their focus is on the blues or jazz influences in Ellison’s novel, many of these critics seem to view Ellison’s achievement in the novel as a synthesis of the oral, improvisatory vernacular culture represented by the black musical aesthetic with the written, meticulously composed high modernism of the novelistic form.

There is evidence that Ellison saw his own role in a similarly synthetic light, and so my aim here is not to rebuke such approaches to analysis of his writing. In a well-known 1958 interview, for instance, Ellison says of his approach: “having inherited the language of Shakespeare and Melville, Mark Twain and Lincoln and no other, I try to do my part in keeping the American language alive and rich by using in my work the music and idiom of American Negro speech.”²⁸ However, to examine music in *Invisible Man* in a solely dialectical fashion, with the “authentic” folk on one pole and high modernist style on the other, is to ignore the ways that technology and the world of mass-mediated culture are incorporated into Ellison’s use of black music in his novel.

Critical analysis of the role of technology in *Invisible Man* remains relatively thin, though there are some notable exceptions. John S. Wright, for example, has observed that one of the key factors separating *Invisible Man* from other novels of its era is its “absorption with the immediate effects of the technological environment on the human imagination and spirit and on the blurring line between reality and illusion, the natural and the artificial.”²⁹ Johnnie Wilcox has also recently made the provocative claim that the novel “traces the narrator’s gradual transformation into a black cyborg as a result of his several exposures to electricity,” and finds electricity to provide a metaphor for the novel’s iteration of black identity, finding that in the world of the novel, “Blackness is neither performed nor embodied: it is transduced.”³⁰ Both of these arguments are compelling; however, neither delves extensively into the connections between music and technology in the novel. Given the fact that the phonographic listening experience plays such a significant role in shaping the narrator’s psychic world, I argue that the “stereo-” as metaphor might add some additional nuance to a consideration of Ellison’s novelistic version of black identity.³¹

In her study of the influence of African American music on pan-Africanist alliances, Tsitsi Jaji analyzes the etymology of “stereo-” as prefix, noting its

original root in the Greek word for “solid.” She observes that while, in its contemporary usage, the prefix “stereo-” has come to “[flag] fundamentally illusionary devices,” it is helpful to retain a consideration of the solidity implied by the term’s origins.³² Jaji writes that in looking for the connections between terms like “stereophonic, stereotypic, [and] stereoscopic . . . , stereo might be thought of as an effect, that which creates the impression of being surrounded by the contours of a voluminous, extensive three-dimensional body.”³³ It is easy to hear an echo of this notion of the stereo as solid when Ellison’s narrator declares, “I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen 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.”³⁴ And yet his subsequent lament that “[i]t is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass” expresses the simultaneous simulation that accompanies the stereo.³⁵

Stereo sound technology, which, in its most basic form relies on repetition with a slight difference (a temporal difference in the audio signals delivered to each ear) to achieve the illusion of three-dimensional performance, was pioneered throughout the 1920s and 1930s, emerging in commercial applications by the early 1950s. Stereophonic radio broadcasts appeared experimentally at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair and were made a “special feature of the 1952 Audio Fair” in New York City.³⁶ Ellison, of course, was no stranger to stereo technology. A self-professed “compulsive experimenter” with home audio equipment, Ellison wrote several essays during the 1950s geared toward audiophiles.³⁷ For instance, as stereophonic records for home phonographs began to make their first commercial appearance in 1958, Ellison wrote a technically nuanced account of the developments for *The Saturday Review* entitled “The Swing to Stereo.” In this article, Ellison enthusiastically proclaimed that the announcement of the practical development of stereo technology for home phonographs “had something of the effect attending the news that the U.S. was about to launch its first Earth satellite. The enthusiasm quite outweighed the difficulty.”³⁸

Given Ellison’s own knowledge of and enthusiasm for this technology, he was surely well aware of its developments in the years he spent composing *Invisible Man*, and thus we might read his “thinker-tinker”³⁹ narrator’s professed ideal listening situation as a sort of makeshift super-stereo system. And when we consider that stereophonic sound technology relies on virtually undetectable differences in the time that each audio signal reaches the ear, we may also hear new resonances in Ellison’s oft-quoted passage wherein he describes the way that “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.”⁴⁰ In some sense, Ellison here is exploiting the technol-

ogy of stereo sound as a metaphor for the unique mode of subjectivity that his narrator is in the process of discovering in his invisibility.

Just as stereophonic sound comprises multiple audio signals with minute temporal differences, so stereoscopic vision is composed of multiple visual scenes with slight differences in perspective. Similarly, stereotypes, in their original printing context, as Jaji points out, produce “a series of increasingly distorted copies of an original solid object.”⁴¹ It is from this meaning that our contemporary usage of the word “stereotype” derives, but despite the negative connotations the word has taken on in this contemporary context, Ellison locates a similar possibility of slipping into the breaks created by stereotypical notions of blackness and of using and ultimately subverting these stereotypes from this vantage point. Positioned in the middle of the twentieth century, Ellison’s narrator also offers insight into the way these stereotypes of blackness were increasingly mediated and multiplied via the circuits of audio/visual technologies. Perhaps no figure in the twentieth century more fully embodies the difficulties and possibilities of navigating this stereophonic, stereoscopic, stereotyped terrain of blackness than Louis Armstrong, and I argue that it is for this very reason that Ellison invokes him (in stereo) as a model for the meta-black mode of identity being discovered by his narrator.

“The Latest Style”: Louis Armstrong, Technology, and the Performance of Twentieth Century Blackness

Steven Tracy notes that Ellison originally intended Buddy Bolden to fill the role played in *Invisible Man* by Armstrong.⁴² While we can only speculate as to why Ellison changed his mind, it is notable that while Bolden was an innovator of early jazz music, no known recordings of his music exist. On the other hand, Armstrong, as musician, performer, and persona, achieved, by way of the emergent technologies of radio, home phonograph, and later, television, a truly international reach, becoming easily one of the (if not *the*) most popular and recognizable African American musical entertainers of the century.⁴³ In the years leading up to the publication of *Invisible Man*, Armstrong was achieving what biographer Terry Teachout terms a “renewal” of his career.⁴⁴ As the big band format that had dominated 1920s and 1930s jazz was declining in popularity and becoming less financially sustainable for artists, Armstrong began performing in 1947 with a leaner six-piece band called Louis Armstrong and His All Stars.⁴⁵ As bop became ascendant in the jazz world, Armstrong remained relevant by playing a brand of jazz that stayed true to traditional roots while putting an increased focus on himself as jazz singer and as individual, iconic performer.

Further, the revitalization of Armstrong’s career at this time owed a great deal to technologies such as the home phonograph, sound in films, and television.⁴⁶ Between 1930 and 1950, Armstrong appeared in fourteen films, usually playing himself or a fictionalized version of himself, and these roles became

increasingly prominent through the 1940s. Armstrong additionally eagerly embraced the opportunities presented by the medium of television. As Teachout observes, “Armstrong turned up at one time or another on virtually every variety show that aired on network TV in his lifetime, and it was these appearances that did more than anything else to establish him as an indelible presence in postwar American popular culture.”⁴⁷ The increased visibility of Armstrong in this era also did much to exaggerate his divisiveness as a public figure. As civil rights tensions escalated in the late 1940s and early 1950s, many were put off by Armstrong’s film and television persona, which was easy to read as “an all-grinning, all-mugging, ever-cheerful minstrel-like figure who with unabashed glee performs corny, knuckleheaded routines.”⁴⁸ In short, for many, the Armstrong who appeared on film and television was more a reminder of a shameful past than a beacon of a hopeful future.

My argument, however, is that for Ellison, who was busy composing his novel as Armstrong grew increasingly popular and divisive during this period, the musician (specifically, his recorded effigy, duplicated five times over) represented the ideal symbolic beacon of both the hope and challenges of this future, as well as a representative example of a viable strategy for articulating black subjectivity in a mass-mediated world. With this view of Armstrong in mind, I argue that by including Armstrong in the novel in his technologically mediated form (in the protagonist’s ideal listening situation, a hypermediated form), Ellison suggests that Armstrong’s audience never gets access to the “real” Louis Armstrong.⁴⁹ But Ellison also proposes, in the development of his narrator’s self-creation throughout the novel, that there is potential agency in these mediated simulacra of subjectivity. This possibility for Armstrong rests in the way he manipulates stereotypical iconographies of blackness to engage with an audience and perhaps, at least in the case of listeners like Ellison’s invisible man, subvert these stereotypes. While it is certainly possible to overstate the resistance or subversiveness represented by Armstrong, it does seem that he consciously worked to create the sort of engaged audience represented by Ellison’s narrator. Daniel Stein, for example, locates in Armstrong’s aesthetic “an interactive ethos to expressive media in which audiences were not directly present: sound recording, on which he frequently addressed his listeners directly as ladies and gentlemen . . . , and autobiographical narratives, which are filled with rhetorical questions, apostrophes to the reader, and deictic comments.”⁵⁰

We see this “interactive ethos” in one of Armstrong’s first filmic appearances, a 1932 short called *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*. While Armstrong does not play the song “(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue” in the film, it is relevant to Ellison’s use of Armstrong in the novel not only because of the resonance of the title, but also because it displays Armstrong’s early consciousness of the possibilities that his music, in its phonographic and filmic forms, offered for an engagement with listeners/viewers.⁵¹ The film opens with the credits displayed on a spinning record and then cuts to a shot of a phonograph playing an Armstrong record. The music emanating from the phonograph, how-

ever, is drowned out by the sound of someone banging and scat-singing along to the record. The shot pans out and we see a black male listener enthusiastically banging drumsticks on a chair, a washtub, and other nearby items. The man's wife interrupts, telling him to "take your ear from out that jazz box, and jazz this mop around this floor." We can already see the film's reliance on familiar stereotypes of the black woman as a nagging, "Mammy" figure and the shiftless, lazy black male.⁵²

The man's wife leaves, and after she catches him again listening to the phonograph, she hits him over the head with a mop. He sinks into a dream state, sitting on a throne as the "King of Jazzmania" and being treated to surrealistic performances by Armstrong, draped in leopard skin and surrounded by soap bubbles. As he awakens to find his wife standing behind him and the phonograph needle skipping on the label, he declares with a grin, "I'll be glad when I'm dead, you rascal you," and smashes a vase over his head in an attempt to return to Jazzmania. His wife replies, "I'll be more gladder," and as she hits him with a frying pan, the film ends. Understandably, contemporary critics and audiences are made more than a little uncomfortable by the film's racial and sexual caricatures, and thus even when seeking something redeeming in Armstrong's performance, critics tend to twist themselves into rhetorical knots. Donald Bogle, for example, feels compelled to separate Armstrong's singing and clowning from his trumpet playing, finding that "[w]hen he puts the lyrics aside to take up his trumpet, he is transformed right before our eyes."⁵³ Bogle goes on to state that "[i]n these moments, there is something so real, so pure, so sublime that he takes us with him as he transcends the sequence, the very nature and concept of the film itself, and makes us forget the hackneyed setting."⁵⁴ It is not to knock Armstrong's performance to suggest that Bogle's account of the music verges into the territory of overstatement.⁵⁵

Bogle claims that for white film audiences, Armstrong "represented an ever-enthusiastic, nonthreatening, friendly figure who did not challenge their assumptions on race or racial superiority—except when he played his instrument."⁵⁶ However, to separate his playing and visual performance in this way misses the fact that, for Armstrong (and all black performers trying to make a living in a racist society), this ambivalent relationship to racial caricatures could not be avoided, and it cannot be separated from any part of the music. For example, a closer look at the surreal landscape of Jazzmania casts a different light on Armstrong's performance in the film. While Armstrong's leopard-print clothing evokes stereotypical images of the premodern African, he also wears a V-shaped glittering neckpiece. This detail seems to evoke early imaginings of space travelers, such as Buck Rogers, who was often depicted wearing similar neckpieces in his earliest comic strip appearances in the late 1920s and early 1930s. This hint of futurism, along with the glittering pillars and rays of light emanating from the film's backdrop, modify simple readings of Armstrong's role in the film. Further, in his performance of "Shine," Armstrong takes the opportunity presented by the line "I likes to dress up in the latest style" to point to

his outfit, offering a knowing grin to acknowledge the absurdity of the costume and perhaps even point out his consciousness of the fact that, even in spite of how far African Americans have come, racial stereotypes still very much represent the “latest style.”

I argue that it is this ambivalence surrounding the Armstrong persona, and this willingness to play within and against a regime of mass-mediated stereotypes of blackness, that leads Ellison to implicate Armstrong as he does in the novel. And by doing so, Ellison makes plain the fact that for black American subjects in the mid-twentieth century generally—as American racist ideologies began to be increasingly duplicated and transmitted via the circuits of mass-mediated communication—navigating and attempting to subvert this stereotypical iconography from within and adopting a meta- approach to blackness became a necessity of material existence. This meta-identity becomes necessary as the hypervisibility of blackness, which Nicole Fleetwood has defined as a “term to describe processes that produce the overrepresentation of certain images of blacks and the visual currency of these images in public culture”⁵⁷ enters an era of Baudrillardian “hyperreality,” wherein “[e]verywhere socialization is measured by the exposure to media messages.”⁵⁸ In this context, black subjects seeking to, as Coates puts it, “find some way to live within the all”⁵⁹ of the world and their own raced bodies, must simultaneously engage with and work against the simulacra of blackness permeating the cultural imaginary (and its very real institutions and ideologies). This meta-blackness offers, I argue, critical insights into how engagements with and deployments of blackness as it circulates in American culture might provide a key to the basis for the sort of communal solidarity that contemporary scholars find so elusive but that seems so crucial to contemporary social movements for racial justice as they are conducted in both the material and virtual worlds.

Take, for example, recent examples springing out of the #BlackLivesMatter movement: the wearing of hoodies in protest of the killing of Trayvon Martin, as well as the use of the “I Can’t Breathe” and “Hands up, don’t shoot” phrases and gestures (and Twitter hashtags) in the wake of Eric Garner and Michael Brown’s deaths at the hands of police officers. In all of these cases, protestors (from activists to politicians, professional athletes, and celebrities) invoke sounds and images of the black male as criminal and of the black male in the literal crosshairs and grasp of police violence, and take them beyond their contexts in the realms of reality and stereotype. These protestors are able to cleverly reframe these tragic, stultifying depictions of black masculinity in what I would claim is a meta-fashion, elevating them to the level of the iconic. As these meta-black symbolic gestures permeate the popular imaginary through the internet, mass media, and of course, protests carried out on the ground around the world, they have been mobilized as platforms to forge solidarity in material and virtual contexts around issues of racial justice. Ellison, of course, was not especially radical politically, but I argue that we can read his sense of the growing necessity and potential usefulness of this meta-black mode of self-

hood in the pages of *Invisible Man*. This sort of reading of the novel is crucial because it allows us to complement Warren’s retrospective take on the novel as a plea for the recognition of black humanity under Jim Crow with a prospective reading that acknowledges the novel’s insights into how blackness as identity is lived in the contemporary moment and how a meta-black approach to racial solidarity remains relevant post-Jim Crow.

**“Somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility”:
Meta-Black Identity in *Invisible Man***

Ellison’s prologue to *Invisible Man* contains a somewhat darker parallel to the plot of *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*. As the narrator “discover[s] a new analytical way of listening” to Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue” “under the spell of . . . reefer,” he, like the man in the film, “enter[s] the music.”⁶⁰ Instead of entering the fantasy world of Jazzmania, the narrator descends through layers of racial history, finding first an old woman singing a spiritual, then “a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother’s as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body,” and finally, a preacher giving a seemingly contradictory sermon on “the ‘Blackness of Blackness,’” summed up by the declaration “black is . . . an’ black ain’t.”⁶¹ While the scene is obviously surreal, it contains some profound summations of the form of black identity articulated by Ellison throughout the novel. As the narrator speaks to the singer about her simultaneous love and hate for her slave master, who was also the father of her children, he responds, “I too have become acquainted with ambivalence. . . . That’s why I’m here.”⁶² Ellison traces this ambivalence of black identity throughout the novel, and it is through Armstrong’s recorded performance that the invisible man is able to explore this ambivalence, just as he is able to get closer to the definition of freedom, which, the singer speculates, “ain’t nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head.”⁶³ But just as the man in *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue* is returned to consciousness by an upbeat trumpet solo, which ends with Armstrong playing the same note repeatedly, Ellison’s narrator is returned to the real world by a “blaring” trumpet and “hectic” rhythm.⁶⁴ As he awakens to hear Armstrong asking “What did I do/To be so black/And blue?,” he realizes that “this familiar music had demanded action,”⁶⁵ and he embarks, like the iconic Armstrong who inspires him, on his task of making music out of invisibility.

Ellison proposes an engaged mode of listening when he describes his desire not merely to listen passively to Armstrong’s music, but to “*feel* its vibration, not only with my ear but with my whole body.”⁶⁶ This urge to listen to Armstrong with his entire body indicates the possibility the narrator finds in using Armstrong to construct his own subjectivity, a possibility that is powerfully expressed in the last line of the prologue, when, sampling the recorded Armstrong, the narrator directly addresses his audience, posing the question, “But what did I do to be so blue? Bear with me.”⁶⁷ Ellison then proceeds to tell of his

narrator's various encounters with forms of black identity that, in their links to both black folk culture and negative stereotypes representing a painful history, initially repulse him. However, I argue that these same forms of blackness also progressively lead him to a performative, meta-black conception of identity, of which I argue the recorded Armstrong represents the apotheosis.

Following the narrator's encounter with the primitivist stereotype represented by Jim Trueblood, the first model of a performative meta-blackness that the narrator encounters in the novel comes in the form of the eccentric Peter Wheatstraw, a black man walking through the city singing the blues with a pushcart filled with blueprints. Wheatstraw is immediately presented as a figure connecting the narrator to a history that, at this point in the novel, he would rather ignore. As the narrator listens to his singing, "some memories slipped around my life at the campus and went far back to things I had long ago shut out of my mind."⁶⁸ Where Trueblood (from his name to his cabin "built during slavery times" to his shocking story of incest) represents an exaggerated stereotype of black pathology, Wheatstraw's version of black identity is forged not from some elusive "true" self but rather from a blues-influenced sampling of black folk and popular culture.⁶⁹ In identifying himself, Wheatstraw invokes a rapid-fire sequence of markers of African American folk culture: "I'm-seventh-son-of-a-seventh-son-bawn-with-a-caul-over-bo-both-eyes-raised-on-black-cat-bone-shigh-john-the-conqueror-and-greasy-greens."⁷⁰ A. Yemisi Jimoh convincingly reads Wheatstraw as a "Blues philosopher,"⁷¹ citing the way that the character's "status as the seventh son of a seventh son, his special qualities as someone born with a caul, or his birth sac, intact, and his connection to aspects of conjure such as black cat bones and high John the conqueror root give him four connections to knowledge that goes beyond the simple appearance of things."⁷² Robert O'Meally similarly reads Wheatstraw's blues as imparting to Ellison's narrator the lesson that "southern black folk experience must not be discarded in the North."⁷³ I agree that Wheatstraw functions in the novel to impart the wisdom of a blues philosophy to the invisible man and that this philosophy is tied to the African American folk tradition, but I would add that it is important to acknowledge that the reference to Wheatstraw and his folk wisdom blends the spiritual and the secular. That is, Wheatstraw's philosophy may have as much to do with the "greasy greens" that end his declaration as with the preceding references to folk religious beliefs.

Beyond being a food traditionally associated with southern African American cooking, "Greasy Greens" is also the title of a traditional blues song. The song is cited in Howard W. Odum's 1911 collection of traditional African American folk songs, "Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes,"⁷⁴ and first appears in recorded form in a 1950 performance (commercially released in 1961) by Pink Anderson, who spent the early part of the twentieth century as a blues singer and traveling guitarist with touring medicine shows.⁷⁵ Many versions of the song, like many traditional African American blues songs, contain sexual double entendres (for example,

from the Anderson version: “That meat you use must be fat / Cook them greens so greasy like that / You don’t use nothin’ but natural lean / You can’t cook no good greasy greens”).⁷⁶ This reference in the novel, then, and its paratactic juxtaposition with elements of folk religion, reveals Ellison’s willingness to playfully sample from all aspects of African American tradition, from the “shit” and “grit” as well as the “mother-wit,”⁷⁷ as part of his blues-influenced meta-black identity.

Further insight into the ambiguous, playfully referential nature of the mode of identity elaborated by Ellison can be gained by unpacking the dual nature of the reference inherent in Wheatstraw’s name. Wheatstraw seems to be a reference to both the real-life blues singer Peetie Wheatstraw (whose real name was William Bunch), as well as Peter Wheatstraw, a character drawn from African American folklore, whom Ellison recalled as part of a “frontier brag” that he and his childhood friends would use while playing pool.⁷⁸ Ellison’s intentions in using the name in his novel are debatable. According to blues historian Paul Garon in his book-length study of Wheatstraw’s life and legacy, the blues guitarist and researcher Leroy Pierson interviewed Ellison and “found that the author had not only known Peetie but also played trumpet with him occasionally in the bars of St. Louis. According to Ellison, the character in the novel was inspired by Peetie’s general personality and patterns of speech.”⁷⁹ And one aspect of Wheatstraw’s patterns of speech in his music was the kind of doubly resonant riffing on sexuality that the “Greasy Greens” reference evokes. W.T. Lhamon notes that the “actual Wheatstraw was considerably racier” than Ellison’s version and cites some of his lyrics to argue that Ellison intentionally makes use of Wheatstraw’s “ambiguous connection to taboo” in order to make a reference that is “as scrubbed or as suggestive as the audience might make it.”⁸⁰

On the record, Ellison was ambiguous as to whether he intended the Wheatstraw character in the novel to refer to Wheatstraw the musician or Wheatstraw the folk legend. In a 1988 interview with Robert O’Meally (published as a piece of O’Meally’s review of *Juneteenth* in 1999), Ellison was quoted as saying, “As far as I know ‘Peter Wheatstraw’ was not, and is not, a living individual, but a character born of Afro-American mythology.”⁸¹ Regardless, I would argue that in the context of Ellison’s vision of meta-black identity, the very elusiveness and duality of the Wheatstraw reference may be the point. Garon points out that while details of Wheatstraw’s life are sketchy at best, and only one known photograph of him exists, Wheatstraw was “one of the more prolifically recorded blues artists.”⁸² He was also an emblematic figure of the larger-than-life bluesman persona, billing himself, in spectacular turns of self-fashioning that today’s hip-hop artists would surely envy, as “the devil’s son-in-law” and the “high sheriff from hell.”⁸³ Here again, then, we have Ellison sampling both from African American folklore and also the iconic, technologically reproduced, and sexually suggestive figure of Wheatstraw the musician as a representative of bold, iconic self-creation working within and against “bad man” and hypersexualized stereotypes of black masculinity. The dual nod with the Wheatstraw

character to a usable, communal past and the performative possibilities of a mediated present and future mark a key touchpoint in Ellison's narrator's journey toward a meta-black identity.

The novelistic Wheatstraw's version of blues music also speaks to this mode of self-creation and again forms a stark contrast with the version of the blues modeled by Trueblood. Trueblood's version of blues music presents Ellison with an opportunity to parody stereotypical notions of black musicality as inborn and as passive lament in the face of suffering. After his incestuous encounter with his daughter has been discovered, Trueblood recalls, to the narrator and Mr. Norton's fascination and horror, "I *ends up* singin' the blues . . . and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen happen."⁸⁴ Wheatstraw's version of a blues identity offers more agency and more performative possibilities. He sings, "She's got feet like a monkey / Legs like a frog" and "I loves my baabay . . . / better than I do myself," and as he walks away, the narrator thinks about the song: "What does it mean, I thought. I'd heard it all my life but suddenly the strangeness of it came through to me. Was it about a woman or about some strange sphinxlike animal? Certainly his woman, no woman, fitted that description. And why describe anyone in such contradictory words?"⁸⁵ Jimoh has argued that "Ellison uses Wheatstraw to prepare Invisible Man for the possibilities of change and the necessity for variety."⁸⁶ Tracy similarly sums up the effect of Wheatstraw's contradictory words, writing that "Ellison's Wheatstraw is a character in possession of but not enslaved to the blueprints (read: blues identity) he carts around—that is, he understands that the plans can be changed."⁸⁷ These are both apt analyses, but I would add that a substantive piece of the changes that Ellison's narrator and African Americans in the mid-twentieth century were being forced to grapple with were those wrought by an increase in technological mediation. These changes in the way that subjects raced as black in America had to grapple with blackness as it circulates in the culture at large are what necessitates a meta-black mode of identity, and the beginning of Ellison's narrator's consciousness of the possibilities and pitfalls of this performative identity truly begin with his climactic encounter with the "spiritual technologist,"⁸⁸ Rinehart.

By putting on sunglasses and a hat and moving through Harlem, the narrator begins to be mistaken for a man named Rinehart, but he soon realizes that this Rinehart has many different manifestations. He finally stumbles into a church where he is mistaken for a preacher named Rinehart. The narrator wonders to himself:

[C]ould he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was

true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. . . . The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home.⁸⁹

Critical readings of what exactly Ellison aimed to express through the character of Rinehart are numerous and varied. By and large, however, these readings tend to tie Rinehart to the jazz aesthetic of improvisation and also to belie an anxiety, on the part of the critics and also perhaps on the part of Ellison himself, over what becomes of communal notions of blackness when this improvisation of selfhood is taken to Rinehartian extremes. For instance, Walton Muyumba seems to support the interpretation of Rinehart as a near-ideal model of selfhood in *Invisible Man* insofar as he represents a jazz aesthetic when he reads Rinehart as “an improvisation, an experiment, an expression of possibilities outside of essentialism.”⁹⁰ Jimoh reads Rinehart as “Ellison’s Jazz character,” in contrast to the narrator as “Blues character.”⁹¹

Andrew Radford similarly connects Rinehart to jazz improvisation, but is skeptical regarding Ellison’s endorsement of Rinehartism as a model of self-creation. He writes that Rinehart “provides an essential commentary on Ellison’s faith in improvisation,” but ultimately finds that, for Rinehart, “improvisation becomes overwhelming perplexity” and results in the “ultimate diffusion and loss of self.”⁹² This gets at a central question of the novel: Ellison clearly believes that there are lessons to be learned from Rinehart’s improvisatory self-creation, but how can Rinehart’s freedom be achieved without this loss of self, and without a loss of community? This question remains elusive for critics, as it does in the novel for Ellison and his narrator, who declares, “I felt that somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility there were great possibilities.”⁹³ I argue that a meta-black conception of identity, specifically as it is elaborated in the figure of Louis Armstrong in the novel, can offer us some insight into Ellison’s attempt to find this space between Rinehart and invisibility, to determine the “next phase” beyond Rinehartism.⁹⁴

Given Ellison’s description of Rinehart as a man whose “world was possibility and he knew it,”⁹⁵ he might seem, on the surface, to represent a prototype of meta-black identity as I have outlined it. After all, Rinehart “the rounder” creates a home for himself in the world by moving in and out of various identities, many of them associated with negative stereotypes of black masculinity (the black man as street hustler, gambler, and as hypersexualized lover and perhaps even pimp). Jimoh perceptively observes this meta-nature of Rinehart’s character when she describes him as “a principle of chaotic life, which is mastered through shifting—and often exploitative images.”⁹⁶ And indeed, the narrator does learn important lessons from this aspect of Rinehart, perhaps most succinctly expressed in his revelation that “You could actually make yourself anew. The notion was frightening, for now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it

was the recognition of possibility.⁹⁷ However, I would argue that Rinehart is all image, whereas the meta-blackness that the narrator is moving toward balances an engagement with this image-based, hypervisible blackness as it circulates in the popular imaginary (both positively and negatively), with a “recognition of necessity,” the necessity of living in the material world within the raced black body.

The persona of Rinehart is entirely hypervisible, and thus it is no wonder that the invisible man is initially excited that, in donning Rinehart’s glasses and hat, he is finally “recognized” by the people around him, even if it is a false recognition. However, he becomes discouraged when he is not able to manipulate the hypervisible aspects of blackness that he inhabits, and they instead begin to manipulate him. For example, when he approaches his friend Brother Maceo in the Jolly Dollar bar dressed as Rinehart, a misunderstanding leads the two men to the verge of violence, and the narrator laments, “Here I’d set out to test a disguise on a friend and now I was ready to beat him to his knees—not because I wanted to but because of place and circumstance.”⁹⁸ And even when he adopts an ostensibly more positive manifestation of Rinehart, the religious leader Reverend B.P. Rinehart, the narrator feels a “nameless despair” upon interacting with two women who attend his church, and he wants to “tell them that Rinehart was a fraud.”⁹⁹ Ellison describes these two women as “motherly old women of the southern type,” and thus they seem to represent a connection to black history and community, a connection Rinehart clearly lacks.

Ellison’s narrator may not consciously understand that it is this lack of a connection to the material history and embodied experience of blackness that he finds disturbing about Rinehart, but Ellison implies as much when he writes “beneath it all something about Rinehart bothered me, darted just beneath the surface of my mind; something that had to do with me intimately.”¹⁰⁰ This is the ultimate paradox of the philosophy of Rinehartism: it represents individual freedom, but it is a freedom that comes at the expense of communal identification. This paradox has also informed critical assessments of the novel, with John S. Wright echoing this anxiety around the issue of communal black identity when he writes that “Unlike Rinehart, . . . whose own ingenuity knows no moral boundaries and no human loyalties, Jack-the-Bear commits himself to community.”¹⁰¹ Steve Pinkerton speaks to a similar concern for community when he writes that “Rinehart is no role model; he is merely an embodiment of the extreme *possibilities* of African American (non)identity, minus that commitment to the collective which for Ellison is the responsibility of all democratic subjects, especially of the artist.”¹⁰²

Given this general agreement on the part of critics that the pure improvisation of self as represented by Rinehart must be tempered with some sense of form or engagement with the material realities of black existence, and given Ellison’s return to Armstrong’s aesthetic in the epilogue, it seems surprising how few critical analyses of Ellison’s mode of self-creation turn to Armstrong as Ellison’s representation of this space “between” Rinehart and improvisation.¹⁰³

And even in analysis that pays attention to Armstrong as model for Ellisonian black identity, relatively little heed is paid to the fact of the technologically mediated and duplicated nature of Armstrong’s bookending of the novel. I argue that it is specifically in Ellison’s invocation of Armstrong as audiovisual icon, an Armstrong presented *in stereo*, that we may find Ellison’s provisional resolution of this dichotomy between pure improvisation and communal identification. Whether or not Ellison himself would have been receptive to such a characterization, I find that the novel elaborates a meta-black mode of identity.¹⁰⁴ An Ellisonian meta-blackness engages with and ultimately exceeds blackness as it circulates in the popular imaginary, sampling mediated simulacra of blackness as the basis for the sort of forward-looking communal identity that scholars like Warren argue loses relevance shortly after the publication of *Invisible Man*.

Conclusion

At the time that Ellison was composing *Invisible Man*, interpretations of Armstrong and his career often tended to fall on one side or the other of the binary of minstrel and revolutionary, a tendency that Ellison lamented.¹⁰⁵ In a 1959 essay, Ellison finds fault with bop artists’ resentment toward Armstrong, “whom (confusing the spirit of his music with his clowning) they considered an Uncle Tom.”¹⁰⁶ Ellison then lists what he sees as some of these young artists’ “myths and misconceptions” to which Armstrong might have offered a substantial corrective.¹⁰⁷ In Ellison’s view, these artists believed that “to be truly free they must act exactly the opposite of what white people might believe, rightly or wrongly, a Negro to be” and that “the performing artist can be completely and absolutely free of the obligations of the entertainer.”¹⁰⁸ Armstrong stood at a particularly precarious position in relation to this artist-entertainer binary in the years leading up to the publication of *Invisible Man*, as he emerged as a film and television star.¹⁰⁹ The complexity of Armstrong’s legacy, and particularly the multiple potential readings of the import of this specific mid-twentieth-century moment in his career, must inevitably find its way into any assessments of Armstrong’s role in the novel, forcing readers to ask, with Tracy, “who was Armstrong: the revolutionary jazz performer or the smiling image before the mainstream American public?”¹¹⁰

Tracy’s answer to this quandary is “both, the trickster using a mask to make his forays across social and musical boundaries without exposing himself to too much danger in the process.”¹¹¹ I concur, but I would add that we must acknowledge that for both Armstrong and Ellison’s narrator, these forays across boundaries are made in large part via the circuits of mass-mediated communications and that the goal of these forays is not merely to avoid danger, but also to articulate a subjectivity and to *communicate* across these social and musical boundaries. After all, Ellison’s protagonist has effectively avoided the societal dangers that impose themselves upon him throughout the novel by holing up underground, but having “whipped it all except the mind,” he concludes, “I

must come out, I must emerge.”¹¹² Describing himself as “a disembodied voice,” he feels it to be his responsibility to “try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through,” closing with the now-famous rhetorical question, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”¹¹³

In emerging from his hole, in speaking on these lower frequencies, Ellison’s narrator speaks to the necessity for black subjects, in spite of living in a world where others tend to “see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me,” to live in the world and to articulate and communicate subjectivities in this world.¹¹⁴ Here again, the role of Armstrong in the narrative comes into focus. As Ellison’s narrator realizes while listening to Armstrong’s music in the prologue, “this familiar music had demanded action,” and he goes on to define his hibernation as “a covert preparation for a more overt action.”¹¹⁵ He hints that this action may be “to make music of invisibility,” an echo of the moment earlier in the prologue when he describes Louis Armstrong as having “made poetry out of being invisible.”¹¹⁶ This subtle rewording is significant: the written document that is the novel represents the narrator’s attempt to make music out of invisibility, and Armstrong’s music represents his attempt to make poetry (a form relying, unlike music, primarily on words) out of the condition of invisibility. This transmedial¹¹⁷ approach to identity—the idea of Ellison’s novel as music, of Armstrong’s music as poetry, this play in the interstitial space between the audible and (simultaneously in- and hyper-) visible self—is key to Ellison’s version of a meta-black identity.

His narrator learns to approach identity “through division. . . . I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love.”¹¹⁸ And in his fearless sampling from iconic and stereotypical images and sounds of blackness, Ellison articulates a meta-black identity, a blackness that, evoking the various meanings of the “stereo-,” is simultaneously solid and simulated. *Invisible Man*, then, does not reside wholly in the Jim Crow past, signifying the “end” of African American literature and identity and serving as an outmoded and ossified “reminder” of black humanity. Nor does it present a Rinehartian future of “infinite possibilities” as a *fait accompli*, making a post-black declaration of absolute individual freedom.¹¹⁹ Ellison instead situates his version of black identity pragmatically in the present, a present where identity can indeed be performed and creatively built, but where the sounds, images, and ideas of blackness as it circulates in the popular imaginary is a substantial piece of the material with which to build it and where the circuits of mass-mediated technology are largely the medium through which it is performed. In short, black identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century present remains fraught with material (sometimes dire) consequences, even as it is invested with imaginative (often emancipatory) possibility. Recognizing this ambivalent duality, Ellison takes blackness “meta-,” elaborating a blackness that samples stereotype to subvert it, that hi-jacks reproductive technology to draw into question the very existence of an original, “authentic” copy—a blackness that simultaneously “is” and “ain’t.”

Notes

1. Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 16.
2. Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 107.
3. *Ibid.*, 1.
4. Gene Andrew Jarrett, “What Is Jim Crow?,” *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 388-90.
5. Erica Edwards, “What Was African American Literature? A Symposium by Erica Edwards & Walter Benn Michaels,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, June 13, 2011., <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/what-was-african-american-literature-a-symposium>.
6. Kenneth W. Warren and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Live Chat: The End of African American Literature?,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 24, 2011.) <http://chronicle.com/article/Live-Chat-The-End-of/126492/>.
7. As Walter Benn Michaels, a prominent supporter of Warren’s argument, describes these differences in Warren’s book, “The writing of the Jim Crow period itself was . . . ‘prospective’—oriented toward the goal of a future in which Jim Crow would be overcome. African American writing now is ‘retrospective’—occasionally nostalgic for the racial solidarity achieved during (actually enforced by) segregation itself, and usually committed to remembering the abuses of the past as the key to understanding and overcoming those of the present.” See Erica Edwards, “*What Was African American Literature?*,” <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/what-was-african-american-literature-a-symposium>
8. While the term “post-black” has become commonplace in the wake of Touré’s *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Black Now* (New York: Free Press, 2011), we should not overlook its antecedents in Trey Ellis’s “The New Black Aesthetic,” *Callaloo*, no. 38 (1989): 233-243xx and Nelson George’s term “Post-Soul,” coined in *Buppies, B-boys, Baps, and Bohos: Notes On Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).
9. Moten views blackness as essentially performative, arguing that “[t]he cultural and political discourse on black pathology has been so pervasive that it could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of blacks, blackness, or (the color) black take place” and emphasizes the possibilities for resistance in performances of contemporary black identity against this background. In contrast, the so-called Afro-pessimists, following in large part from Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), argue for the persistence of a social death forged in slavery and, finding that modernity itself is premised in fundamental ways upon the denial of black humanity, argue against black communal identity as a basis for resistance. Shelby seeks a middle ground of sorts, arguing against black cultural autonomy, but aiming to identify an “oppression-centered conception of black solidarity” in the realm of politics. See Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no. 2 (2008): 177; and Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4.
10. Kenneth W. Warren, “Response,” *African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): 590.
11. It also importantly risks ignoring the ways that criminal justice is unevenly enforced (to say the least) along racial lines in the United States. Many of the most forceful critiques of Warren’s argument cite Michelle Alexander’s notion of the “New Jim Crow” maintained by the criminal justice system, and her argument that we have in effect created a “new racial caste system” in which “[w]hat has changed since the collapse of the Jim Crow system has less to do with the basic structure of our society than with the language we use to justify it.” See Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 2-3.
12. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 24-25.
13. Hua Hsu, “Capital Rules Everything Around Me,” review of *The Anthology of Rap* edited by Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois; Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 107; and Mark Chiang Author, “*The Cultural Capital of Asian American Studies: Autonomy and Representation in the Academy*,” *American Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2013): 135.
14. Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 10.
15. *Ibid.*, 11-12.
16. While I don’t have the space here to fully explore contemporary manifestations of this meta-black aesthetic, I would argue that we could trace an Ellisonian influence through paradigmatic examples such as Percival Everett’s meta-black bildungsroman *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2009), in which a critical piece of the protagonist’s (named Not Sidney Poitier) coming of age consists of accepting that “you’re Not Sidney Poitier and also not Sidney Poitier, but in a strange way you are Sidney Poitier as much as you’re anyone,” and Paul Beatty’s *Slumberland* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), in which the narrator, listening to Rahaan Roland Kirk on a jukebox, achieves the key realization that it is “Perfectly fine to once in a while play with your food, your blackness, and your craft.” See Everett, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, 102; and Beatty, *Slumberland*, 216.
17. *OED Online*, s.v. “meta- prefix,” Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com.silk.library.umass.edu/view/Entry/117150?rkey=ncgvt9&result=4&isAdvanced=false>.

18. Additionally, I find that replacing the “post-” in “post-blackness” with “meta-” might help in some sense to address the common criticism that post-blackness describes a primarily middle-class phenomenon. Meta-blackness focuses on the agency inherent in black subjects’ negotiations with mass-mediated representations of Blackness, signifying on these representations to articulate a nuanced, eclectic subjectivity that exceeds these representations. Rather than moving “beyond” blackness from a place of relative economic privilege, meta-black subjects engage with popular notions of blackness to forge their own versions of black identity.

19. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2nd Vintage International ed. (1952; New York: Vintage, 1995), 8.

20. Ralph Ellison, “The Charlie Christian Story,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 267.

21. Warren, *So Black and Blue*, 25.

22. *Ibid.*, 26.

23. Horace Porter, *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America* (Des Moines, IA: niversityUniversity of Iowa Press, 2001), 74.

24. Albert Murray, *Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (Cambridge: Da Capo, 1970), 167.

25. A. Yemisi Jimoh traces the influences of music in the text beyond the blues-jazz dichotomy, observing how Ellison “inculcates his novel with both Spiritual-Gospel and Blues philosophy,” and also “employs Jazz philosophy,” though she argues that Ellison is ultimately unable to fully embrace the “fragmented” nature of Jazz philosophy. See Jimoh, *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction: Living in Paradox* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2005).

26. Walton M. Muyumba, *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 58.

27. Timothy Spaulding, “Embracing Chaos in Narrative Form: the Bebop Aesthetic in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *Callaloo* 27, no. 2 (2004): 482.

28. Ralph Ellison, “Some Questions and Some Answers,” *Shadow and Act*, 1st Vintage International ed. (1964; New York: Vintage, 1995), 266.

29. John S. Wright, “‘Jack-the-Bear’ Dreaming: Ellison’s Spiritual Technologies,” *boundary* 2 30, no. 2 (2003): 185.

30. Johnnie Wilcox, “Black Power: Minstrelsy and Electricity in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *Callaloo* 30, no. 4 (2007): 987, 1003.

31. While there has been relatively little critical engagement with the intersections of music and technology in *Invisible Man*, notable and recent exceptions include the work of Alexander Weheliye and Mark Goble. Weheliye terms Ellison one of the principal theorists of what he calls “Afro-sonic modernity,” in which the aural, and the technologically reproduced aural in particular, holds great possibility in articulating black subjectivity in the face of the subjection to be found in the realm of the visual. Weheliye’s reading of the prologue to *Invisible Man* is deftly handled and compelling; however, I would argue that he somewhat too easily separates the visual and the sonic, figuring the aural as a realm of potential liberation and the scopic as one of stultifying subjection. I would claim, instead, that it is precisely the difficulty to be found in maintaining fixed boundaries between the sonic and the scopic from the mid-twentieth century on that led Ellison to choose Armstrong, emerging at this time as a profoundly (and divisively) audiovisual cultural icon, to play such a prominent role in his narrator’s dawning self-consciousness. Goble’s discussion of Ellison’s interest in sound technology is also very interesting, as he points out the “double logic” in what he terms Ellison’s “aesthetic of ‘fidelity’ that assumes a prior, absent scene of sound that only technology, by way of the most ornate circuits of mediation, can reproduce.” I find Goble’s analysis illuminating, and it leads me to explore the extent to which it is the very act of slipping into the breaks between fidelity and mediation, authenticity and simulation that comprises Ellison’s groundbreaking take on contemporary black identity. See Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Afro-Sonic Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 106; and Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 162.

32. Tsitsi Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 12.

33. *Ibid.*, 11.

34. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

35. *Ibid.*, 3.

36. Henry B. Comstock, “Radio Adds Third Dimension,” *Popular Science* (January 1953), 106.

37. Ralph Ellison, “Living With Music,” *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 234.

38. Ralph Ellison, “The Swing to Stereo,” *The Saturday Review* (April 26, 1958), 39.

39. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 7.

40. *Ibid.*, 8.

41. Jaji, *Africa in Stereo*, 12.

42. Steven C. Tracy, "A Delicate Ear, a Retentive Memory, and the Power to Weld the Fragments," in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Steven C. Tracy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 89.

43. Armstrong also had, like Ellison, a strong personal interest in technology. Krin Gabbard notes that Armstrong was "fascinated with gadgets all his life. . . . Whenever a technological device came on the market, Armstrong was among the first to purchase it." In particular, Gabbard notes Armstrong's interest in record players (which he always brought on tour), typewriters (he was a prolific letter writer), and tape recorders (he recorded himself playing but also hours of conversation and monologues). See Gabbard, *Hotter Than That: The Trumpet, Jazz, and American Culture* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), 96.

44. Terry Teachout, *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 267.

45. Armstrong's transformation into iconic bandleader, singer, and entertainer began with his recordings as leader of Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five and Hot Seven in the mid-1920s. However, as Teachout observes, "The original Hot Five performed together in public only once," and the 1947 Town Hall performance in New York City that led Armstrong and manager Joe Glaser to formally create the All Stars was "the first time since 1926 that [Armstrong] had appeared in public as the leader of a small group of his own." See Teachout, *Pops*, 98, 262.

46. It is important to note the role that Armstrong's performances in the black stage revue *Hot Chocolates*, starting at Connie's Inn in Harlem and later moving to Broadway, played in his emergence as a mainstream pop entertainer, which thus facilitated his entry into the world of film and television. Teachout notes that while "*Hot Chocolates* [did not make] him a superstar, . . . it did give him a toehold in the white world, and it also gave him a pop song ['Ain't Misbehavin'] that was the perfect vehicle for his ebullient singing and playing." The song "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue" was also composed by Andy Razaf and Fats Waller for *Hot Chocolates*. Originally conceived as a "dark-skinned lady's lament about losing in the game of love to lighter rivals," Armstrong altered the lyrics of the song in his recorded version, refiguring it as "what has long been regarded as a 'protest song.'" This provides yet another example of Armstrong's working from within the realm of popular entertainment and stereotype to express political commentaries and adds another layer of resonance to Ellison's meta- invocation of this Armstrong record in his novel. See Teachout, *Pops*, 140, and Dan Morganstern, "Louis Armstrong and the Development and Diffusion of Jazz," in *Louis Armstrong: A Cultural Legacy*, ed. Marc H. Miller (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 111.

47. Teachout, *Pops*, 283.

48. Donald Bogle, "Louis Armstrong: The Films," in *Louis Armstrong: A Cultural Legacy*, ed. Marc H. Miller (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 148. This discomfort with the filmic Armstrong persists in the critical literature. As Gabbard points out, "Especially today when jazz canonizers have defined Armstrong as a revolutionary artist, his films are probably ignored to sidestep troubling questions about stage mannerisms that are invisible on the fetishized recordings." See Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 205.

49. In light of the televisual turn occurring in Armstrong's career (and American society at large) at this time, the famous passage in which Ellison's narrator declares that "[i]t is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass" may resonate in ways that have not yet been critically considered. It is interesting to consider, for example, whether this "distorting glass" may have been Ellison's intentional evocation of a television screen. See Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 3.

50. Daniel Stein, *Music is My Life: Louis Armstrong, Autobiography, and American Jazz* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 106.

51. It is also relevant to this discussion in that there has been a good deal of critical conversation around the film, and so it is an instructive example in pointing up critics' discomfort with the minstrel undertones of Armstrong's emergence into the filmic sphere.

52. In his analysis of the film, Donald Bogle finds that "The sequence conforms to the traditional stereotypes of African-Americans in films: the hardworking, long-suffering, crankily domineering black woman in conflict with her triffin', good-for-nothing, lazy man." Bogle links the similarity of *A Rhapsody in Black and Blue*'s depiction of this male-female dynamic to the similarly stereotypical roles played by Hattie McDaniel and Stepin Fetchit in the 1934 film *Judge Priest*, as well as McDaniel's and Paul Robeson's roles in *Show Boat* (1936). See Bogle, "Louis Armstrong: The Films," in *Louis Armstrong: A Cultural Legacy*, ed. Marc H. Miller (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 154.

53. Bogle, "Louis Armstrong: The Films," 157.

54. *Ibid.*, 157.

55. Stein also notes this tendency on the part of critics to "[argue] about this film that Armstrong transcends the minstrel primitivism through his charismatic singing, artistic trumpeting, and the virility of the performance." However, Stein himself ultimately claims that it is "more plausible . . . to argue that audiences were again confronted with productive ambiguities, with a performance that allowed (and still allows!) Armstrong's more enthusiastic admirers to focus on its transcendent

aspects while it enabled others to indulge in its minstrel echoes.” See Stein, *Music Is My Life*, 217-218.

56. Bogle, “Louis Armstrong: The Films,” 159.

57. Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 16.

58. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 80.

59. Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 12.

60. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 8, 9.

61. *Ibid.*, 9.

62. *Ibid.*, 10.

63. *Ibid.*, 11.

64. *Ibid.*, 12.

65. *Ibid.*, 12.

66. *Ibid.*, 8.

67. *Ibid.*, 14.

68. *Ibid.*, 173

69. *Ibid.*, 47.

70. *Ibid.*, 176.

71. Jimoh, *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People*, 143.

72. *Ibid.*, 144.

73. Robert G. O’Meally, *The Craft of Ralph Ellison* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 88.

74. See Odum, “Folk-Song and Folk-Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 24, no. 94 (1911): 365.

75. Anderson’s version of the song was recorded by white folk singer and folklorist Paul Clayton, a major figure in the folk music revival of the 1950s and 60s.

76. Pink Anderson, “Greasy Greens,” *Reverend Gary Davis and Pink Anderson: American Street Songs*, Riverside Records 12-611, 1961.

77. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 176.

78. Robert G. O’Meally, “How Can the Light Deny the Dark,” *Atlantic Monthly* 244, no. 1 (July 1999), <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jul/9907ellison.htm>.

79. Paul Garon, *The Devil’s Son-In-Law: The Story of Peetie Wheatstraw and His Songs* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing, 2003), 71-72.

80. W.T. Lhamon, *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 59.

81. O’Meally, “How Can the Light Deny the Dark,” <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99jul/9907ellison.htm>.

82. Garon, *The Devil’s Son-In-Law*, 24.

83. A. Yemisi Jimoh also points out the influence that Wheatstraw’s iconic “alliance-with-the-devil attitude” has on subsequent blues musicians such as Robert Johnson, as well as the long history this sort of association with the devil has in African American folklore. See Jimoh, *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People*, 231 n. 15.

84. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 66.

85. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 173, 177. O’Meally has noted that the lyrics Wheatstraw sings in the novel are drawn from Count Basie and Jimmy Rushing’s “Boogie Woogie Blues.” See O’Meally, *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*, 87.

86. Jimoh, *Spiritual, Jazz, and Blues People*, 143.

87. Tracy, “A Delicate Ear, a Retentive Memory, and the Power to Weld the Fragments,” 107.

88. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 495.

89. *Ibid.*, 498.

90. MUYUMBA, *The Shadow and the Act*, 73.

91. Jimoh, *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People*, 148.

92. Andrew Radford, “The Invisible Music of Ralph Ellison,” *Raritan* 23, no. 1 (2003): 59, 61.

93. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 510.

94. *Ibid.*, 576.

95. *Ibid.*, 498.

96. Jimoh, *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People*, 150.

97. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 499.

98. *Ibid.*, 489.

99. *Ibid.*, 497.

100. *Ibid.*, 501.

101. John S. Wright, *Shadowing Ralph Ellison* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 2006): 158.

102. Steve Pinkerton, “Ralph Ellison’s Righteous Riffs: Jazz, Democracy, and the Sacred,” *African American Review* 44, nos. 1 & 2 (2011): 198-199.

103. Andrew Radford represents one exception to this, reading Armstrong, with his “musical credo [that] posits a buoyant expectation of dialogue, keen anticipation of movement and openness to myriad influence” as a potential solution to the problem posed by Rinehart. See Radford, “Ralph Ellison and Improvised History,” *The Midwest Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2011): 129.

104. Indeed, the case has been persuasively made that a significant piece of Ellison’s intention in writing *Invisible Man* was to elaborate an American, rather than an exclusively African American, identity. Albert Murray famously writes that the novel is “a prototypical story about being not only a twentieth century American but also a twentieth century man, the Negro’s obvious predicament symbolizing everybody’s essential predicament.” I would argue however that the two things, expressing an American and African American identity (and further, a more general human identity), need not be mutually exclusive. In addition to speaking to the American and human condition, Ellison is fundamentally concerned with communicating a distinctly African American condition, the experience of living as a black person in America. I argue that he is also concerned with elaborating, for his black audience, pragmatic strategies for navigating life in America and in a world that devalues and distorts blackness, and that this is what my notion of meta-blackness may be useful in illuminating. See Murray, *The Omni-Americans*, 167.

105. Thankfully, contemporary scholarship on Armstrong tends to be more nuanced. However, we can still hear echoes of this sort of Manichean take on Armstrong’s career in relatively recent academic writing. For instance, Donald Bogle finds that, Armstrong’s “film work distorted his accomplishments and his place in cultural history.” In a recent study of music’s role in defining American national identity, Charles Hiroshi Garrett finds Armstrong to have been a representative figure of the first African American Great Migration of the 1920s, “whose recordings gave voice to the experiences, hopes, and strivings of a marginalized community,” but Garrett argues that later in Armstrong’s career, he lost his connection with an authentic African American experience: “By continuing to revisit nostalgic themes about the old South and failing to speak directly to the contemporary black experience, Armstrong eventually lost his symbolic position as a beacon of modern progress.” See Bogle, “Louis Armstrong: The Films,” 148, and Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music and the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 83, 116.

106. Ralph Ellison “The Golden Age, Time Past,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 247.

107. *Ibid.*, 247-48.

108. *Ibid.*, 248.

109. Daniel Stein provides further evidence for the divisiveness of Armstrong as public figure around the time that *Invisible Man* was published, pointing out that for many, Armstrong’s appearance in the 1949 Mardi Gras parade as King of the Zulus (in blackface makeup and a grass skirt), along with his appearance on the cover of *Time* magazine that same year, stand as “fault lines separating the musician’s culturally and politically relevant phase from a kind of post-Edenic, fallen state in which he pandered shamelessly to the minstrel mode, grinning on television and playing the Sambo for his white mainstream audience.” See Stein, *Music Is My Life*, 255.

110. Tracy, “A Delicate Ear, a Retentive Memory, and the Power to Weld the Fragments,” 99.

111. *Ibid.*, 99.

112. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 580, 581.

113. *Ibid.*, 581.

114. *Ibid.*, 3.

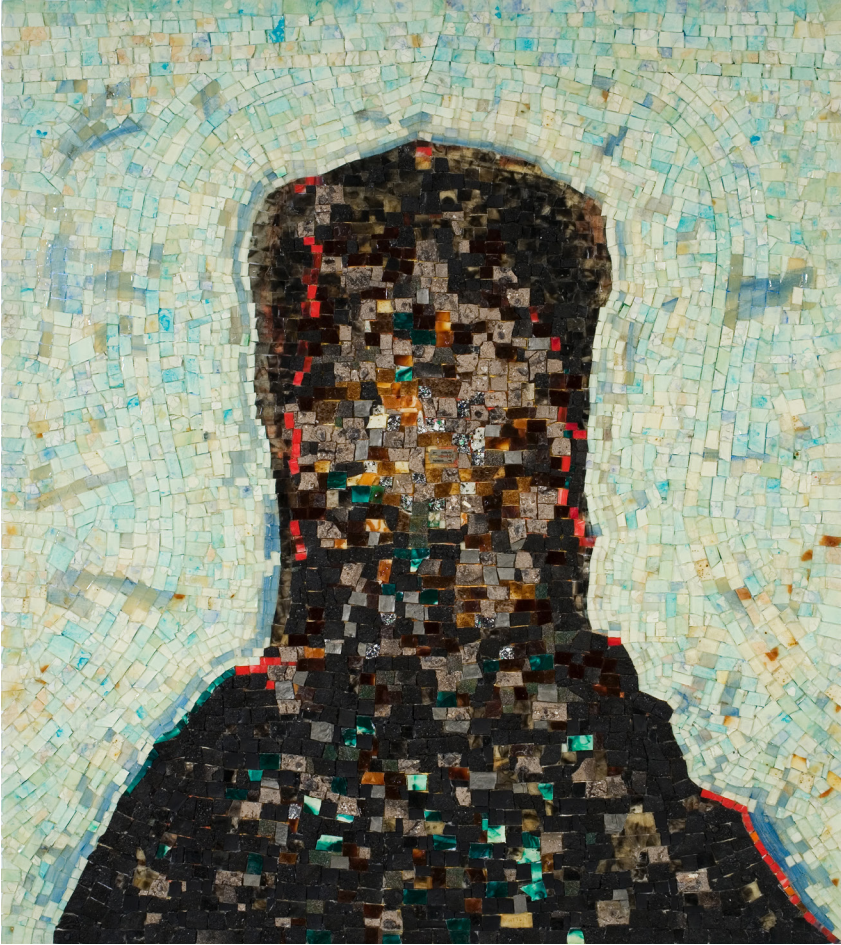
115. *Ibid.*, 12, 13.

116. *Ibid.*, 14, 8.

117. I borrow the term “transmedial” from Stein’s study of what he calls the autobiographical narratives put forth by Armstrong across aural, visual, and written media. Describing what he terms Armstrong’s “transmedial impulse, Stein writes that Armstrong is “communicating similar ideas and sentiments in and through different media. He performs his life story in every medium at his disposal.” I argue that it is exactly this transmedial approach to self-creation that leads Ellison to invoke a technologically mediated and duplicated Armstrong in his novel. See Stein, *Music is My Life*, 23.

118. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 580.

119. *Ibid.*, 576. Interestingly, Touré uses Rinehart’s language when he declares that “[w]e are in a post-Black era where the number of ways of being Black is infinite.” Like Ellison, Touré also takes up technological metaphors in making his case for a new mode of black identity. The apotheosis of his case for post-blackness may come when he declares that it is “as if we’re computers that have been working with personas powered by an operating system called Blackness 9.0 that has amazing creativity but still has some limits on what you can do. Then post-Blackness comes along, offering a revolutionary OS called Person 10.0, which allows you to customize everything, even the operating system itself.” However, pushing this metaphor just a bit further, I would argue that Ellison would note the impossibility of a conversion from “Blackness” to “Person,” given the way that blackness and representations of blackness are fundamentally embedded in the “code” that underlies our society and ourselves. See Touré, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 20, 55.



Jack Whitten, *Black Monolith II (for Ralph Ellison)* (1994). Brooklyn Museum, William K. Jacobs, Jr. Fund, 2014.65 © 2015 Jack Whitten / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Jordan Casteel, *Cornelius* (2014). From the series "Visible Man." Sargent's Daughters, NY, NY. Used by permission.



Elizabeth Catlett, *Invisible Man: A Memorial to Ralph Ellison* (2003). Riverside Park, Collection of NYC Parks & Recreation. Used by permission.