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# An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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*This article examines Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man *in light of recent thinking about Afrofuturism. As an international aesthetic movement concerned with the relations of science, technology, and race, Afrofuturism appropriates the narrative techniques of science fiction to put a black face on the future. In doing so, it combats those whitewashed visions of tomorrow generated by a global 'futures industry' that equates blackness with the failure of progress and technological catastrophe. Although Ellison claimed that his novel was not science fiction, I propose that he none-the-less deploys a range of science fictional tropes and references throughout his work in ways that profoundly anticipate later Afrofuturist thinking about the future of black history and culture. In the novel proper, Ellison uses these tropes and references to signify a number of dystopic futures where blackness is technologically managed. However, the opening and closing scenes of* Invisible Man *hold forth the possibility of a different relationship between technology, race, and art: by hiding out under New York City and stealing electricity to power his turntables, Ellison's protagonist creates a space outside linear time where he can begin to rewire the relations between past and present and art and technology. In doing so, he becomes, however tentatively, the figurehead for a hopeful new Afrofuture.*

*Keywords: Ralph Ellison;* Invisible Man*; Afrofuturism; History of the future; Futures industry; Science fiction*

Almost immediately upon the 1952 publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* literary critics hailed it as a shining example of the Great American Novel. Despite the fact that Ellison never published another novel, *Invisible Man* has remained central to the American imagination for well over half a century. In 1953 Ellison won the National Book Award for his work, and in

a 1965 *Book Week* poll 200 American critics and writers judged *Invisible Man* to be the best novel of the postwar era (Corry 1995, p. 98). And the accolades continue to accrue. As even the most casual perusal of the MLA bibliography reveals, scholars today continue to publish dozens of books and articles on Ellison's novel each year. Meanwhile, laypeople such as Christopher Schmitz of Amazon.com's Listmania regularly rank *Invisible Man* as one of the top twenty contenders for the best American novel of all times.

Ellison himself, however, treated his book in a far more ambivalent manner. In his acceptance speech for the National Book Award Ellison described *Invisible Man* as a 'not quite fully achieved attempt at a major novel' that, at best, replaced the 'narrow naturalism' of mainstream literature with an experimental prose style designed to 'challenge the apparent forms of reality itself' (Ellison [1953] 1994, pp. 102, 105–106). More specifically, Ellison tries to rethink reality—and to rethink the histories we tell ourselves to make sense of reality—by subjecting his unnamed protagonist (and, by extension, his readers) to a sometimes dizzying array of times, places, and events that do not necessarily unfold in a linear manner.

Of course, this is not to say that Ellison saw his novel as operating in an entirely speculative register. Indeed, as he notes somewhat testily in his introduction to the thirty-year anniversary edition of *Invisible Man*, 'a piece of science fiction is the last thing I expected to write' ([1982] 1989, p. xv). And indeed, if we follow Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as 'a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative alternative to the author's empirical experience,' *Invisible Man* is only at best a partially science fictional novel (Suvin 1979, pp. 7–8). Although we as readers may indeed identify with Ellison's protagonist and his increasing alienation from the world around him, that world itself remains painfully similar to our own. Ultimately, then, it seems that Ellison did not know how to categorize his own novel because he did not have a name for a literature predicated on both realist *and* speculative modes of fiction.

Recently, however, artists and scholars have indeed coined a name for this kind of storytelling: Afrofuturism. As Mark Dery argues, Afrofuturism is a process of 'signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically-enhanced future' to address the concerns that people of colour face in contemporary culture (Dery 1994, p. 136). First and foremost among these concerns is the representation of history. Whatever medium they work in, Afrofuturist artists are profoundly interested in identifying

those histories of the past, present, and yes, even the future that deny the black Atlantic experience. They are also profoundly interested in the power of the Afrofuturist artist to generate counter-histories that reweave connections between past, present, and future in a new practice of technoscientific storytelling.

Given this interest in alternate history, it is perhaps not surprising that the authors who have been most closely associated with literary Afrofuturism have been fabulists such as Ishmael Reed and Amiri Baraka and science fiction authors such as Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler.[1] In this article I propose that we think about Ralph Ellison as a kind of early or proto-Afrofuturist as well.[2] After briefly reviewing the Afrofuturist tendencies in Ellison's critical writing I turn to a more extensive consideration of *Invisible Man* itself. As with his critical writing Ellison's fiction powerfully anticipates the tenets of contemporary Afrofuturism, demonstrating a very real need for black Americans—and indeed all Americans—to resist the whitewashed social, political, and economic futures that many of our leaders and other, more hidden persuaders promise us. However, Ellison ultimately leaves it to the next generation of artists to imagine what alternative futures might replace them. In this sense his novel is not an Afrofuturist one per se. Rather, it is a literary clarion call for an Afrofuturist imaginary that was just barely thinkable at the time of *Invisible Man*'s publication.

To understand how Ellison's novel fits into the history of Afrofuturism we must first consider the political and aesthetic mission of Afrofuturism as a whole movement. In its broadest dimensions Afrofuturism is an extension of the historical recovery projects that black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over two hundred years. According to Toni Morrison, these projects demonstrate how the conditions of homelessness and alienation experienced by African slaves and their descendants anticipate what philosophers such as Nietzsche claimed were the founding conditions of modernity (Gilroy 1993, p. 178). Thus historical, literary, and other aesthetic representations of Afrodiasporic history insist on both the authenticity of the black subject's experience in Western history and authenticity of this experience as a literal embodiment of the dislocation felt by many modern peoples.

As a popular aesthetic movement centred on seemingly fantastic tropes such as 'the encounter with the alien other' and 'travel through time and space,' Afrofuturism holds the potential to bring the Afrodiasporic experience to life in new ways. As Alondra Nelson puts it, the science fictional elements of Afrofuturism provide both 'apt metaphors for black life and history' and inspiration for 'technical and creative innovations' of

artists working in a variety of traditional and new media (http://www.afrofuturism.net/text/about.html). Furthermore, by harnessing one of the signature languages of modernity—the language of science fiction—Afrofuturist artists automatically create new audiences for their stories: those primarily young, white, Western and middle-class men who comprise the majority of science fiction fans and who may never otherwise learn much about the history of their country save what they haphazardly pick up in the high school classroom.

Although there have been relatively few book-length studies of Afrofuturism to date, scholars generally agree that the movement began in the late 1950s with jazz musicians such as Sun Ra and Lee 'Scratch' Perry who presented themselves as alien visitors from other worlds.[3] In the 1960s, Black Arts Movement authors including Ishmael Reed and Amiri Baraka also began telling stories about fantastic black people who travelled freely through time and space. By blending science fictional motifs with more conventional modes of black cultural expression these artists insisted on the right of Afrodiasporic subjects to fully participate in the dawning space age. After all, their stories suggested, if black men and women could imagine themselves travelling to other worlds and other times, what right did anyone have to prevent them from staking their claims on the future since it was actually unfolding in the present?

With the advent of global communication and information technologies in the 1970s and 1980s, Afrofuturist artists broadened the scope of their attention to encompass both outer space and cyberspace. For example, techno DJs such as Spooky That Subliminal Kid and Derek May, visual artists such as Carrie Weems and Fatimah Tuggar, and speculative writers including Nalo Hopkinson and Minister Faust all explore the de- and reconstruction of Afrodiasporic subjectivity in digital culture. Taken together, these artists demonstrate both the pervasiveness of Afrofuturism throughout contemporary culture and the diverse ways that this aesthetic practice has evolved in tandem with new sciences and technologies themselves.

As its name implies, Afrofuturism is not just about reclaiming the history of the past, but about reclaiming the history of the future as well. Kodwo Eshun argues that our most culturally pervasive visions of tomorrow are generated by a 'futures industry' that weaves together technoscientific findings, mass media storytelling practices, and economic prediction to make sense of its own movements. More often than not, the futures industry conflates blackness with catastrophe. For example, Eshun notes that 'African social reality is overdetermined by intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical

reports on AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts, all of which predict decades of immiserization' (Eshun 2003, pp. 291–292). As such, Africa becomes a site of absolute dystopia, an imaginary futurological space where the persistence of black identity signifies a disastrous failure in the ongoing progress of global capital as a whole.

Of course, these predictions are not limited to the continent of Africa. Rather, they implicitly and explicitly structure dominant perceptions of blackness in Atlantic nations as well. Nelson notes that over the past decade Western discourse has become increasingly dominated by the rhetoric of 'the digital divide,' an expression that serves primarily as 'a code phrase for the tech[nical] inequities that exist between blacks and whites' (Nelson 2002, p. 1). According to Nelson, the rhetoric of the digital divide does more than assume that, in the best of all worlds, technology can and should eliminate racial distinctions. It also assumes that 'race is a liability in the twenty-first century' and that blackness is 'always oppositional to technologically-driven chronicles of progress' (p. 1). Whether proponents of this concept attribute the digital divide to material, economic, or cultural differences, the end result is the same: even in the seemingly most advanced nations black subjects cannot hope to participate fully in the world of tomorrow.

Afrofuturist artists fight these dystopic futures in two related ways. First, they use the vocabulary of science fiction to reconfigure the relations of race, science and technology. Noting that 'science fiction has long treated [alien] people who might or might not exist,' author Octavia Butler argues that the genre provides an ideal language for artists interested in the seemingly fantastic possibility that there might be Afrodiasporic subject relations that exist outside those most commonly described by the discourses of the futures industry (quoted in Crossley 1988, p. xvi). Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere, Afrofuturist artists like Butler herself appropriate deracinated images of robots and cyborgs to specifically politicized ends, as tropes through which to explore the appropriation of black labour in the name of national or global progress and to celebrate black mastery over communication and information technologies.[4] As such, these tropes become powerful tools for demonstrating the Afrodiasporic subject's cognitive dissent—or what W.E.B. Du Bois called 'double consciousness'—from those visions of tomorrow that are generated by the futures industry.

Second, Afrofuturist artists disrupt, challenge and otherwise transform those futures with fantastic stories that, as Ruth Mayer puts it, 'move seamlessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographic time zones' and thus between blackness as a

dystopic relic of the past and as a harbinger of a new and more promising alien future (Mayer 2000, pp. 556–566). For example, the Detroit electronic duo Drexciya present themselves in the liner notes to their albums as sea creatures evolved from the premature babies born by African women who were raped and thrown overboard in the course of the Middle Passage. After years of building dazzling submarine civilizations, the Drexciyans now stand poised to head for the stars. By retelling the story of the Middle Passage as the disturbing but ultimately triumphant tale of strangers in a strange land, Drexciya 'produce self-destroying narratives, fictions that strain against the conventional pull of identification and closure' (Mayer 2000, p. 563). These acts of 'chronopolitical intervention,' as Eshun calls them, double, triple, and even quadruple readers' consciousness about what it might mean to live in a world made by people of colour—in other words, to live in a black future (Eshun 2003, p. 298). Thus Afrofuturist artists like Drexciya encourage disalienation from the world of tomorrow by insisting on a multiplicity of black futures that are distinctly alien to those whitewashed ones featured regularly in Hollywood films, Sci-Fi Channel television programming, and glossy computer magazines.

Although Ralph Ellison described himself as a specifically American author rather than an exclusively Afrodiasporic one, much of his own thinking about history, identity and artistry anticipates that of later Afrofuturist artists and scholars. For instance, in 'Change the joke and slip the yoke' he proposes that 'the white American has charged the Negro American with being without a past or tradition (something that strikes the white man with a nameless horror), just as he himself has been so charged by European and American critics with a nostalgia for the stability once typical of European cultures. [But] the Negro knows that both were ''mammy-made'' right here at home' (Ellison [1958a] 1994, p. 54). Much like Toni Morrison, then, Ellison sees the Afrodiasporic experience of homelessness and alienation as encapsulating the more general condition of all Americans as quintessentially modern people.

At the same time Ellison—again like later Afrofuturist critics—insists that black experiences of the New World are more than just traumatic ones. Moreover, he explicitly links such thinking about modern blackness to the discursive practices of the futures industry as it expressed itself in his own day. As Ellison argued in a 1967 interview with *Harper's Magazine*:

> if a Negro writer is going to listen to sociologists…he is in trouble because he will have abandoned his task before he begins. If he accepts the cliché to the effect that the Negro family is usually a broken

family…if he believes that Negro males are having all these alleged troubles with their sexuality, or that Harlem is a 'negro ghetto'…well, he'll never see the people of whom he wishes to write.... [The problem is that] our lives, since slavery, have been described mainly in terms of our political, economic, and social conditions as measured by outside norms, seldom in terms of our own sense of life or our own sense of values gained from our own unique experience. (Ellison [1967] 1995, p 113)

Here, Ellison suggests that sociological and other semi-scientific analyses of Afrodiasporic past and present are always already conditioned by certain ideological assumptions about the necessary opposition of blackness to progress. In doing so, these analyses obscure the positive and fulfilling aspects of African American subject relations as they are actually experienced by those who live them.

For Ellison, it is the goal of the black writer—and all black people—to reorder narrative accounts of the past and present so that audiences may remember them differently without being too tightly bound to them. On the one hand, Ellison celebrates a 'Negro American consciousness that is not a product…of a will to historical forgetfulness, [but] a product of our memory, sustained and constantly reinforced by events' (Ellison [1963/1964] 1994, p. 124). On the other hand, he is an equally enthusiastic proponent of the notion that 'the United States is an international country and its conscious character [combined with the lack of a long history] makes it possible for us to abandon the mistakes of the past' without dwelling on them for too long (Ellison [1958b] 1994, p. 231). It is not only that African Americans inherently possess an awareness of historical and material conditions that enable them to think about the past and present outside official representations of their own history. It is that in doing so as subjects of modernity they can begin to move towards new futures as well.

Of course Ellison, like other Afrofuturists, is specifically concerned with the possibility of making space for Afrodiasporic subjects in the technology-intensive future that seemed immanent after the Second World War. As he notes in 'Some questions and some answers,' science and technology have long been brought to bear on labouring black bodies for the profit of others. 'But now,' Ellison claims,

it is precisely technology which promises [us] release from the brutalizing effects of over three hundred years of racism and European domination. Men cannot unmake history, thus it is not a question of reincarnating those cultural traditions which were destroyed, but a matter of using industrialization, modern medicine, modern science generally to work in the interest of these peoples rather than against

them. Nor is the disruption of the past a totally negative phenomenon; sometimes it makes possible a modulation in a people's way of life that allows for a more creative use of its energies.

([1958b] 1994, pp. 264–65)

Thus Ellison advocates what we might call a kind of technoscientific humanism, one that is not so much rooted in nostalgic myths of an idyllic, organic past as it is in the recognition of how technological change in the present may well pave the way for new and more egalitarian futures.

Not surprisingly, Ellison's sense of a uniquely modern American sociopolitical identity is closely related to his belief in a uniquely modern American aesthetic practice. As a participant in a 1955 debate over 'What's wrong with the american novel?' Ellison dumbfounded his fellow panelists by proposing that the real problem with the contemporary American novel was not that it failed to make everyday experience fresh for readers (as the white authors unanimously concluded), but that it failed to adequately capture what is truly new about the modern experience—rapid social and industrial change. As he explained, 'in the early days when the novel came into being...society had begun to shift, and the novel was about these new things which were happening so fast that men needed to get an idea of what was simply temporary and what was abiding.... Reality changes fast, and if you don't keep up with it, you are apt to fall into writing the same book or the book that is expected of you' (Ellison [1955] 1995, pp. 27, 49). For Ellison, the goal of the contemporary writer is to induce 'a sense of wonder' both at the multiplicity of American realities and the speed with which they evolve into new futures (p. 25). As such, Ellison advocates the kind of 'chronopolitical intervention' into dominant historical and aesthetic representational practices championed by Afrofuturists such as Kodwo Eshun nearly four decades later.

Ellison performs just this kind of chronopolitical intervention in *Invisible Man* by inviting readers to critically assess the rhetoric of the mid-century futures industry as it served to define appropriate modes of American—and specifically African American—subjectivity. Ellison's novel follows the adventures of an unnamed protagonist who tries to become a national leader by allying himself with various institutions: the historic black college he attends as a young man in the south, the paint factory he works for when he first moves north, and then finally the leftist political group known as the Brotherhood. As I read this text in the history of Afrofuturism, what Ellison's protagonist is looking for is the possibility of a black future that, in the 1930s of the novel, he cannot find. In each case his dreams of self-realization are thwarted because he is treated as little more than a blank

slate upon which institutional authority projects its own vision of the future. The most explicit acknowledgement of this comes from Mr. Norton, the rich white college trustee who tells Ellison's protagonist: 'You are my fate, young man. Only you can tell me what it really is. . .. Through you. . .I can observe in terms of living personalities to what extent my money, my time and my hopes have been fruitfully invested' (pp. 42, 45). Here then the black subject is figured as a kind of venture capital, a natural resource available to white investors speculating in the stock market of tomorrow.

Although white members of the Brotherhood explicitly oppose themselves to capitalists like Norton, they, too, treat black men as natural resources rather than as human beings. This attitude is clearly encapsulated in a Brotherhood poster entitled 'After the Struggle: The Rainbow of America's Future.' The poster depicts 'a group of heroic figures. An American Indian couple, representing the dispossessed past; a blond brother (in overalls) and a leading Irish sister, representing the dispossessed present; and [black] Brother Tod Clifton and a young white couple (it had been felt unwise simply to show Clifton and the girl) surrounded by a group of children of mixed races, representing the future' (Ellison [1952] 1989, p. 385). Much like Norton, then, the Brotherhood equates blackness with futurity, but only insofar as the black subject conforms to a predictable and carefully controlled vision of the future of which he is not totally a part.

Like later Afrofuturists, Ellison strategically deploys the language of science fiction to emphasize the alienation of black subjects from these kinds of whitewashed futures. The invisible man describes his fellow college students as 'robots' with 'laced up' minds (p. 36); later, a disillusioned black vet dismisses the invisible man himself as 'a walking personification of the Negative. . .. [a] mechanical man' (p. 94). Elsewhere in *Invisible Man* a black factory worker notes that 'we the machines inside the machine' (p. 217), and the Brotherhood leaders themselves treat black men as scientific prototypes, 'one step in the experiment' of making society new (p. 350). Furthermore, both during the battle royale and his stay at the paint factory hospital, Ellison's protagonist—much like Frankenstein's monster—finds himself subject to manipulation by white culture through literal applications of electricity. At the end of the battle royale the invisible man scrambles for coins tossed on to an electrified rug by an amused group of white townsmen; meanwhile, at the paint factory hospital white doctors carefully administer a kind of electrical lobotomy to Ellison's protagonist to ensure his future docility. Taken together, these science fictional references allow Ellison to suggest that American institutions do more than simply conspire to 'Keep This Nigger-Boy Running' (p. 33). They conspire to keep him running right into the future as well.

Ellison also insists that, as the alien others of America, black subjects are defined by complex historic and material relations that cannot be streamlined to fit institutional visions of tomorrow. For example, the invisible man shatters Norton's dreams of a docile black future when he allows the trustee to meet Jim Trueblood, a black sharecropper who accidentally impregnates his own daughter, and then after that the mad black veterans who haunt the local tavern. In the north Ellison's protagonist more consciously challenges the Brotherhood's blandly multicultural vision of futurity when he refuses to subordinate the needs of the African American community to the cause of international class struggle. Not surprisingly, in both cases reprisal is swift and absolute. Confronted with the chaos of a rural black world which refuses to respond to benevolent white paternalism, Norton suffers a nervous breakdown and the invisible man is banished from school. Similarly, when Brotherhood leaders are confronted with what they perceive to be the chaos of the invisible man's adherence to the backward past of racial community they immediately relieve him of his position as the head of the Brotherhood's Harlem chapter. In essence, then, the invisible man loses his status as a symbol of futurity precisely because he cannot—or will not—reinforce those official future histories that relegate all kinds of disruptive black behaviour to the safety of a sealed-off past.

Of course it is not enough for Ellison's protagonist to simply witness what he calls 'the boomerang of history.' Eventually he must learn to take control of history and deny those whitewashed histories of the future predicated on the erasure of black subjectivity. He learns this lesson from Brother Tarp, an unassuming old man who becomes a kind of spokesperson for Afrofuturity. As a young man in the south, Tarp refuses to give up his possessions to a white man; later, he refuses to accept the sentence of life imprisonment he receives for doing so, and, after nineteen years of patient waiting, he finds his opportunity and escapes to the north. As he tells the invisible man: 'I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me; that's what it cost me for saying no and even now the debt ain't fully paid and will *never* be paid in their terms.... I said no...I said *hell* no! And I kept saying no until I broke the chain and left' (p. 387). Significantly, this passage does more than demonstrate one man's refusal to play the role that has been socially scripted for him. It shows how, in refusing this role, one man can change the future: Tarp's 'debt'—such as it is—will never be paid because he refuses to become the subservient black man he is supposed to be. Instead, he removes himself from the future that has been imposed on him and allies himself with the Brotherhood in the hope of a better tomorrow.

But if Ellison's protagonist says no to all those whitewashed futures that deny the complexity of his history and identity—including, eventually, those offered by the Brotherhood—what is left to him? Towards the end of the novel he encounters two possible black futures, but neither seem particularly satisfactory. Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer dreams of a Black Nationalist future in Africa, but his is a dream of tomorrow that has been pieced together from nothing more than an artificial past. Ras rides to battle during the Harlem riots in his 'foreign costume,' hefting a spear like 'the kind you see them African guys carrying in the moving pictures' and riding his horse 'like Heigho, the goddam Silver' (pp. 563 – 564). This leads the invisible man to conclude that the separatist is 'funny and dangerous and sad' (p. 564): dangerous because he dares to dream of preserving an authentic black identity through rebellion and revolution, but funny and sad because these same dreams are always already mediated by the narratives of white culture through which he speaks them.

The other black future is embodied by Rinehart, a man who rules the Harlem underworld by shifting into whatever role is appropriate to the moment: lover or fighter, preacher or pimp, gangster or police informant. Rinehart 'opens up a new section of reality' for Ellison's protagonist precisely because, like Tarp, he says no to any one predetermined future. As the invisible man himself puts it: 'his world was possibility and he knew it' (pp. 499, 498). But possibility alone is not enough to ensure a viable black future—indeed, it turns out to do quite the opposite. Taking his cue from Rinehart, the invisible man decides to become all things to all people, cheerfully assuring the Brotherhood that he has Harlem well under control while solemnly assuring the people of Harlem that they have every right to be angry at the way they have been treated by white politicians—including, implicitly, the Brotherhood itself. Unfortunately, the invisible man's plan backfires and, rather than coming to a collective awareness that it must find its own destiny, Harlem explodes in a night of apocalyptic rioting that tears the community apart and leaves the invisible man trapped in the sewers beneath New York City.

Stunned by the disastrous chain of events he has triggered, Ellison's protagonist decides to refuse history—including the history of the future—altogether. After a feverish dream in which the invisible man finally recognizes that until now he has been nothing more than a sacrifice to the 'iron man' of industrial futurity, he concludes, 'I couldn't return to Mary's, or to any part of my old life. … No, I couldn't return to Mary's, or to the campus, or to the Brotherhood, or home. I could only move ahead or stay here, underground. So I would stay here until I was chased out' (p. 571). Here, then, Ellison's protagonist goes beyond Tarp and all the other black

subjects who have said no to the historical trajectories predetermined for them by institutional authorities. Rather than running either backward into a sentimentalized yesterday or forward into a whitewashed tomorrow, he instead opts out of linear time altogether.

Although the invisible man's decision to stay underground marks the end of Ellison's novel proper, it is not the end of his protagonist's story. Ellison's portrait of the artist as a young man is framed by a prologue and epilogue that reveal what happens to the invisible man as he moves into middle age during his long stay underground.[5] In short, he finally learns who he is—and who he may someday be—as both a black man and an American:

> Like almost everyone else in this country I started out with my share of optimism. I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after being first 'for' society and then 'against' it, I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. . . .. Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway?—diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you'll have no tyrant states. . . .. America is woven of many strands, I would recognize them and let it remain so. . . .. This is not prophecy, but description.
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> (pp. 576–577)

In essence, then, the invisible man's basement home becomes a kind of time- and spaceship that carries him outside of the known world, providing him with a new perspective from which he can see both the multiple aspects of the Afrodiasporic experience and its complex relations to the 'many strands' of American reality. Much like Kodwo Eshun's ideal Afrofuturist subject, then, Ellison's protagonist begins to experience the kind of multiple consciousness that is itself the first step towards the creation of a new and more egalitarian multiracial futurity.

Significantly, the invisible man's ability to multiply his consciousness directly correlates with his increasing mastery over new technologies. As Alexander G. Weheliye notes in his discussion of sonic Afromodernity, the 'hegemony of vision'' and visual technologies is a distinctly raced one in which the privileged 'look of white subjects deduces supposed inferior racial characteristics from the surface of the black subject's skin' (2003, p. 107). By way of contrast, sonic technologies that enable the recording and mass distribution of sound both transform and extend what Weheliye identifies as 'the two main techniques of cultural communication in African America': orality and music (ibid., p. 102). These technologies are useful for both musicians and other artists who incorporate sonic elements into their work because they 'open up possibilities for thinking, hearing, seeing, and

apprehending the subject in a number of different arenas that do not insist on monocausality' (ibid.). In many respects, 'the sonic' functions like 'the science fictional' in Afrodiasporic art: both provide alternate means by which to rethink history and subjectivity outside of dominant visual and discursive structures.

This is certainly true of Ellison's novel. Throughout the main story Ellison links his protagonist's most rote or robotic behaviour to the tyranny of mainstream visual technologies. For instance, when the invisible man first moves to New York City he spends much of his time mentally (and physically) refashioning himself to conform to Hollywood visions of American success: 'I imagined myself making a speech and caught in striking poses by flashing cameras, snapped at the end of some period of dazzling eloquence…. I would hardly ever speak above a whisper and I would always be—yes, there was no other word, I would be *charming*. Like Ronald Coleman' (p. 164). Later when the invisible man learns to just say no to mass-produced reality be begins to recognize its insidious influence on other black subjects as well. Indeed, he ultimately rejects Ras' dream of a natural African subjectivity precisely because he comes to recognize it as simply one more pastiche of old movie imagery. Much like the young invisible man, then, Ras turns out to be not so much a producer of new ideas about what it might mean to be the black subject of futurity as a mindless consumer of secondhand ideas and imagery.

But when the invisible man finally retreats to his subterranean chamber, he transforms from robotic consumer to proto-hacker who diverts power from that bastion of white theatrical culture—Broadway—to fuel his own sonic technologies. In contrast to the films and magazines that falsely assured the invisible man social recognition if he simply looked the part, the invisible man's turntable, stacked with Louis Armstrong records, speaks directly to his newfound understanding of black invisibility: '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. That's what you hear vaguely in [blues and jazz] music' (p. 8). Little wonder, then, that Ellison's protagonist dreams of wiring not just two or three but four more turntables to his original one. After all, if one Armstrong recording fosters the invisible man's sense of double consciousness, then five played at once may well catapult him into a truly expansive and multifaceted Afrofuturist subjectivity.[6]

And indeed, during his time underground, Ellison's protagonist does become a proto-Afrofuturist author. Inspired by his newfound ability to

'see around corners,' the invisible man begins rethinking the relations of his past and present and mapping the networks of power that would propel him into various futures not of his own making. In essence, then, the story that emerges from this new kind of contemplative activity—the story of *Invisible Man*—exemplifies Afrofuturist narrative practice as Ruth Mayer describes it, moving 'seamlessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographic time zones' (Mayer 2000, pp. 556–566). Thus the invisible man's subterranean spaceship, propelled by sonic technologies, carries Ellison's protagonist towards a new identity, a new aesthetic practice, and perhaps, finally, to a truly new future.

But the invisible man never actually gets to that future. In the final pages of the novel Ellison's protagonist claims that 'in spite of myself I've learned some things. . . .. A decision has been made. I'm shaking off the old skin. . .. I'm coming out, no less invisible. . .but coming out nonetheless' (pp. 579, 581). However, he still does not seem to know what he must do if he does return to the world: 'it escapes me. What do I really want, I've asked myself. Certainly not the freedom of a Rinehart or the power of [the Brotherhood], nor simply the freedom not to run. No, but the next step I [can't] make, so I've remained in the hole' (p. 574). As such, the invisible man remains perpetually on the edge of revelation and the edge of action, aware that he holds within him the possibility of a new future, but one that is not yet quite ready to unfold.

At the beginning of this article I proposed that *Invisible Man* is most accurately thought of as an antecedent to, rather than as a full-blown example of, Afrofuturist literature. On the one hand, Ellison's novel performs an important act of chronopolitical intervention into conventional thinking about the future. On the other hand, it does not offer readers any alternative futures—black, white, or any other colour. Thus its place in the canon of Afrofuturism as a call for precisely this kind of future-historical art. As an author who saw his own fiction as an updated variant on that of the nineteenth-century realist authors who preceded him, Ellison primarily looked backwards to rewrite the past and present. But he did so in a way that powerfully previews how the next generation of Afrodiasporic artists could—and would—write about the history of the future as well.

## Notes

[1] For discussions of Afrofuturist elements in Ishmael Reed's fiction, see Alondra Nelson's introduction to the *Social Text* special issue on Afrofuturism (2002) and Roxanne Harde's ' "We will make our own Future Text": allegory, iconoclasm, and reverence in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*' (2003). For a similar discussion of

Amiri Baraka, see Paul Youngquist's 'The space machine: Baraka and science fiction.' For explorations of Afrofuturism in science fiction, see Mark Dery's 'Black to the future: interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose' (1993); Gregory Rutledge's 'Black futurist fiction and fantasy: The racial establishment' (2001) and 'Science fiction and the black power/arts movement: The transpositional cosmogony of Samuel R. Delany Jr.' (2002); and Marilyn Mehaffy and AnaLouise Keating's '"Radio Imagination": Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment' (2001). Reed, Baraka, Delany and Butler are also featured prominently on Alonda Nelson and Paul D. Miller's Afrofuturism website.

[2] Afrofuturist scholars including Alondra Nelson, Mark Dery and Sheree R. Thomas all acknowledge Ellison's place in early Afrofuturist history. To date, however, I have found only one other sustained exploration of this subject: Alexander G. Weheliye's '"I am I be": the subject of Sonic Afro-modernity' (2003).

[3] At the time of writing there is only one book-length critical study, three literary anthologies and one website devoted to Afrofuturism. For further reading on this subject, see, respectively, Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fictions* (1999); Sheree R. Thomas' *Dark Matters: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), and *Dark Matters: Reading the Bones* (2004); Nalo Hopkinson's *Whispers From the Cotton Tree: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* (2000); and Alondra Nelson's *Afrofuturism.net* (2000).

[4] For further discussion of black technosubjects in science fiction, see Lisa Yaszek, *The Self Wired: Technology and Subjectivity in Contemporary Narrative* (2002). See also Jeboon Ye's 'The representation of inappropriate/d others: the epistemology of Donna Haraway's cyborg feminism and Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series' (2004), and Rebecca Holden's 'The high costs of cyborg survival: Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy' (1998). For a related discussion of Afrodiasporic engagements with (and appropriations of) cybernetic sciences and technologies, see Ron Eglash's 'African influences in cybernetics' (1995). For in-depth exploration of black technosubjects in the popular music industry, see Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fictions* (1999).

[5] The invisible man's underground sojourn is indeed a long one. According to Patrick W. Shaw, the chronology of the novel indicates that he stays in his basement from 1931–1948, or *seventeen years* (1990, p. 119).

[6] Indeed, Afrofuturist scholars including Kodwo Eshun and Alexander G. Weheliye regularly cite this passage from Ellison in their assessments of sonic Afrofuturism. As Weheliye notes, there has been a great deal of critical discussion regarding Ellison's use of jazz and the blues in his novel, but until the advent of Afrofuturist scholarship most of this discussion glossed over the technological aspects of black popular music. As such, they miss a key element of Ellison's thinking about technologically mediated subjectivity (Weheliye 2003, p. 100). For further discussion of sonic Afrofuturism as it pertains to Ellison see Eshun's 'Further considerations on Afrofuturism' (2003) and Weheliye's '"I am I be": the subject of sonic Afro-modernity' (2003). For two recent but more conventional treatments of music in Ellison, A. see Timothy Spaulding's 'Embracing chaos in narrative form: the bebop aesthetic in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*' (2004), and Wilfred Raussert's 'Jazz, time, and narrativity' (2000).

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