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The Blackness of Blackness . . . Reading the Typography of *Invisible Man*

Jennifer DeVere Brody

[Performance] is trying to find an equation
for time saved / saving time
but theatre / experience / performing /
being / living etc. is all about
spending time. No equation or . . . ?

—Suzan-Lori Parks¹

Redoubled blackness is determined in the encountering time of a caesura.

—Fred Moten²

Pick up any playscript and you are bound to engage with its typographical elements. The dialogue that composes and comprises the script calls upon us—critics, readers, actors, dramaturges, and directors—to interpret not only the words presented, but also the inevitably present blank spaces, parentheses, colons, fonts, typefaces, italics, ellipses, etc.³ Though an author may wish to guide us in our reading (as does Tony Kushner in the introduction to *Homebody/Kabul*, where he notes: “A sentence ending with a ‘. . .’ indicates that the speaker has trailed off . . . [and] A sentence ending with a ‘—’ indicates that the speaker is interrupted by someone or something”),⁴ in

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This essay is dedicated to the late Marvin Sims. I wish to thank Harry Elam and Michael Main, as well as E. Patrick Johnson, Alexander Weheliye, Kevin Bell, Jillana Enteen, John Keene, and other Northwestern colleagues for their comments on this essay. So, too, I am grateful to participants in the Black Performance Theory group and members of the Theatre Department at Brown University for their generous discussion of this work.

¹ Suzan-Lori Parks, “From Elements of Style,” in *The America Play And Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 13. Cited in Rebecca Schneider, “Driving the Lincoln ‘Cross History’: Viewing History, Almost, Not Quite,” in *Un/Sichtbarkeiten der Differenz: Beiträge zur Genderdebatte in de Künsten*, ed. Annette Jael Lehmann (Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 2001), 116.

² Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 71. Subsequent references are noted in the text.

³ See, for example, Anthony Hammond, “The Noisy Comma: Search for the Signal in Renaissance Dramatic Texts,” in *Crisis in Editing: Texts of the English Renaissance*, ed. Randall McCleod (New York: AMS Press, 1994), 203–49.

⁴ Tony Kushner, *Homebody/Kabul* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002), 5. Significantly, the *Homebody*’s monologue that takes place during act one is all about reading and speaking. Not only does the play open with this character reading from a guidebook; later she self-consciously proclaims: “I speak . . . I can’t help myself. Elliptically. Discursively. I’ve read too many books, and that’s not boasting, for I haven’t read *many* books, but I’ve read too many . . . So my diction, my syntax, well, it’s so irritating,

practice, we are free to imagine and even produce our own supplements to the printed matter in/of the text. What I wish to emphasize here is the ambivalence of such marks that are perpetually open to interpretation and improvisation. Exactly how long is a beat? How does one translate the pitch of bold typeface? How does one sense and interpret an italicized word? Can we think of such notations as notes—as both shorthand and music? How does typography cue us to action and vice versa? My questions are informed in part by the following quotation from Marshall McLuhan's controversial and typographically innovative production, *The Medium is the Massage*, which reads: "Reminders—(relics of the past)—in a world of the PRINTED word—efforts to introduce an AUDITORY dimension onto the visual organization of the PAGE: all effect information, RHYTHM, inflection, pauses. Until recent years, these EFFECTS were quite elaborate—they allowed for all sorts of CHANGES of type faces. The NEWSPAPER layout provides more variety for AUDITORY effects from typography than the ordinary book page does."⁵ Despite the dubious priority accorded types of print in this passage, it helps us to re-cognize the role typography plays in our perception of things and concepts. In highlighting typography, I want to remember that writing has been a tool of colonization and power.⁶

So, too, this inquiry is complicated by Ed Bullins's play, *The Theme is Blackness* (1967), which reads in its entirety:

- SPEAKER: The theme of our drama tonight will be Blackness. Within Blackness One may discover all the self-illuminating universes in creation. And now BLACKNESS—
(Lights go out for twenty minutes. Lights up.)
- SPEAKER: Will Blackness step out and take a curtain call?
- BLACKNESS⁷

Bullins's drama, appearing more than a decade after the 1952 publication of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, replays one of its retroactively produced antecedent themes (and here the term should be thought of in its most musical guise). In this drama, as in *Invisible Man*, there is an unnamed speaker, the concept-metaphor of blackness is played out against an idea of illumination, blackness is repeated with a difference, the action is circular, it appears between parentheses—bracketed as if in a black hole, the blackness of blackness is performed viscerally for an audience, and the blackness of blackness is "encountered in the time of a caesura," as Moten would say. As such, Bullins's play surprisingly shares much with Ellison's earlier text. This genealogy goes against a more popular version of literary history in which members of the 1960s Black Arts movement, such as Bullins, presented a radical break with the more assimilationist and conservative artists, including Ellison, who wrote during the 1940s and '50s. In my reading,

I apologize, I do, it's very hard, I know. To listen. I blame it on the books, how else to explain it?" (12). While the generically-named Homebody theorizes her idiosyncratic way of speaking as one that has been influenced by printed matter, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* has a different problem: he struggles to articulate in writing the influence of music and vernacular speech into a form. One final note: although Kushner lays out the rules for reading his text, he deviates from them immediately when the Homebody interrupts herself—which is rendered parenthetically with an ellipsis rather than a dash!

⁵ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, produced by Jerome Agel (New York: Ginko Press, 1967), 117.

⁶ See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), especially 16–29.

⁷ Ed Bullins, *The Theme is Blackness: The Corner and Other Plays* (New York: Morrow, 1973).

however, both texts are exemplars of experimental (black) performative conditions. In both Bullins's play and Ellison's novel, blackness is simultaneously visceral and elusive, enveloping and intangible, material and conceptual. Both texts let us see in the dark, hear in the silence, and feel in an empty arena the blackness of blackness. The embodied experience is played out against a series of always already inscribed notions of what blackness "is" and "ain't" and of our expectations of its overdetermined value. That blackness is invisible—is tied to the ocular—is the premise that Ellison's famous novel at once seeks to acknowledge and to undo through its complicated rendering of scenes that stage and restage formative moments of blackness in American culture.

In this essay, I think about the role typography plays in eliciting and soliciting (black) sensations and sensations of blackness—in moving us to respond to the calls (as in hailing) of black ink.⁸ More specifically, I offer a reading of a scene from Ralph Ellison's experimental novel, *Invisible Man*. By examining punctuation's (inter)actions as cultural performances, this essay and the larger project from which it is drawn argue that punctuation plays a key role in our quotidian movements and missteps, stopping, staying, and delaying the incessant flows of information—not to mention styling our movements. The essay aims to show how punctuation-typography simultaneously comprises, composes, compromises, and even choreographs the nuanced gestural performances of the blackness of blackness in Ellison's text. The larger goal of this endeavor is to press the issue of the link (or leak) between black ink and embodied forms of blackness—of being black and black being.⁹

The amount of published material on Ellison and jazz/blues is daunting to any scholar.¹⁰ Nevertheless, for all their detailed attention to the THEMATIC of jazz, many of

⁸ I take much of my understanding of typography from Johanna Drucker: "Typography renders apparent the relative, rather than the absolute, value of symbolic systems. No easy closure on signification is available in typographically experimental work . . . Material specificity enters into the final sum of semantic and symbolic value which collapses the planes of imago and logos in an uncomfortable and disturbing blend of presentational and referential modes which displace the fictive categories of presence and absence." Johanna Drucker, *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909–1923* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 245–46. See also Richard Bringham, *The Elements of Typographic Style* (Toronto: Hartley and Marks, 1992); and Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book 1480–1880: Print, Text, and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹ Indeed, a similar idea occurs in Miranda July's lovely film *Me, You and Everyone We Know* (2005). The "biracial" black brothers recognize themselves in the computer printout—black punctuation marks on a white page—and voice the title of the film.

¹⁰ A search of "Ellison and theatre" yields few results: instead, the voluminous (and often luminous) scholarship on Ellison's life and published works looks to related genres such as folklore, ritual, myth, history, and music—especially the blues and jazz. How, then, might one approach this conjunction? To begin, one can turn to the continually shifting biographical record: as a young man growing up in Oklahoma, Ellison knew Ida Clark, the personal assistant of the established theatrical grande dame, Emma Bunting. As was customary during the decades of Jim Crow segregation, traveling black workers roomed with black families. "During the late 1920's, the Ellisons were privileged to host an unusual houseguest. A black woman from England named Clark would come and stay at the Ellison household during the theater runs of Emma Bunting's company . . . As Bunting's personal maid, Miss Clark had access to the exciting world of professional theater . . . Clark introduced an unfamiliar accent and speech pattern into the house and delighted Ralph with her own rendition of high society theatrics . . . She showed him how black might fit into the world of Shakespeare and Big Ben, places that Ralph might have been inclined to imagine himself excluded from." (Lawrence Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* [New York: Wiley Press, 2002], 41.)

these critiques have downplayed the significance of Ellison's typographical composition—relegating it to a lower frequency whose relative invisibility seems not to speak at all. For all the reams of paper devoted to explicating Ellison's work in musical terms, little has been said about how the white background of the *mise-en-page* mediates and materially produces the blackandblue marks of invisible music. In musical notation, specific symbols such as rests, notes, and the like provide a blueprint for performance. Analogously (we still work with this technology even in this era of the digital), we might argue that other typographic devices (boldface, punctuation, italics, spacing, etc.) serve as the dramatic guidelines for the written word. There are multiple ways to construct a genealogy of such experimentation—but suffice it to write here that whatever their source, such typographic elements can be read as an important resource for reading *Invisible Man*. Virtually every page of *Invisible Man* can be read as a psychovisualauditory event. For example, chapter nine (the Peter Wheatstraw episode) employs the convention of *scriptio continua*, in which words were written without space. Arguing for the performative aspects of such alphabetic symbols, I follow the visual or spatial turn in cultural studies, whose concern is less with “logos” (the word) than with “logo” (the icon)—with aspects of “visual rather than textual rhetoric,” to paraphrase Anna Scott.

Even more specifically, however, I am interested in seeing how various marks on the stage of Ellison's page come to signify the “blackness of blackness” that “is . . . and ain't” sighted sound. With this last remark, I gesture toward the way in which characteristics of the ellipsis work as analogues of the character Invisible Man. Both characters are ambivalent, are singular yet multiple, heard but not seen, black but blank. Before offering an explication of these contentious points, I want to say something more about how we might temporarily join discussions that have previously occurred separately.

As Ellison famously wrote, “history is like a boomerang”: it is not teleological, but rather replayed through the return—an event that elapses time and space. This idea recalls Rebecca Schneider's reading of “the archive and the repertoire” (pace Diana Taylor) that argues that “theater does not disappear . . . but rather it reverberates, . . . it enters or begins again and again . . . via itself as repetition—like a copy or perhaps more like a ritual—as an echo in the ears of a confidence, an audience member, a witness.”¹¹ The fact that this description mixes sight and sound—includes the echo and the witness—suggests that sensory perception, like memory and history, is both multifaceted and entangled. In a brilliant reading of the “interwoven visual and aural contours” of four jazz poems, Meta Jones argues that “typographical techniques . . . [are not merely orthographic but also] prosodic.”¹² Some of the experimental typography that appears in the text of *Invisible Man* includes the following: the use of italics to mark some of the dream sequences and stress important words; the use of boldface and larger font to mark the various signs, slogans, and rising intonation; the lack of spacing and/or insertion of extra spaces. Although typographical experiments may be construed as part of a Western modernist tradition dating back at least to the novelist Laurence Sterne, Ellison's innovation was to put these black marks into the service of black subjectivity. Thus, in my reading, the blackness of blackness signifies a certain excess associated with black performance. In this I follow Marcellus Blount, who

¹¹ Schneider, “Driving,” 115.

¹² Meta Jones, “Jazz Prosodies: Orality and Textuality,” *Callaloo* 25.1 (2002): 77.

notes: "While the term performance can be applied variously to a range of cultural and literary phenomena, I use it to designate verbal performance viewed as a cultural event . . . the term vernacular is associated with the modern concept of folklore as an intricate interaction between performer and audience that relies on linguistic, paralinguistic, kinesic, and thoroughly contextual codes and conventions . . . In written texts that draw on the aesthetics of vernacular performance, the relations of orality and literacy are continuous."¹³

In her essay on Ellison and visual art, Elizabeth Yukins argues, "As an artist, [Ellison] had to transfigure his conceptions and his sense of rhythm and form into the specific and sometimes restrictive artistic medium of writing."¹⁴ While her analysis is confined to his posthumously published novel *Juneteenth*, one can see and hear elements of this technique in *Invisible Man* as well. I extend Yukins's insights about Ellison's use of cubist and collagist techniques by allowing us to see and hear how a graphic element figures in such renditions. Let us note here that Yukins argues for the role of the visual in Ellison's work, whereas other scholars seek to play up the role of music in the text, for example, "Ellison plays with language as he would a trumpet, taking lyrical flight in improvisational passages that stylistically emulate his artistic ancestor, 'Satchmo' Armstrong . . . *Invisible Man* is a musician's novel, a book meant to be heard as much as read."¹⁵

In a letter to his longtime correspondent, Albert Murray, documenting the completion of the "you-know-what" that was to become *Invisible Man*, Ellison wrote, "Is it a rock around my neck; a dream, a nasty compulsive dream which I no longer write but now am acting out (in an early section the guy is obsessed by gadgets and music, now I'm playing with cameras and have recently completed two high-fidelity amplifiers and installed a sound system for a friend); a ritual of regression which makes me dream of childhood every night (as a child I was a radio bug, you know, and take it from me after getting around with the camera bugs and the high-fi bugs and the model train bugs, you'll have no doubts as to the regressive nature of this gadget culture); or is it a kind of death a dying?"¹⁶ This rich quotation hints at a practice that Ellison would take up in composing his text. Although he began writing by hand, having his wife Fanny work as his typewriter, he typed as well as orally recorded his novels. Fanny remembers hearing him talking out loud to the characters in his work. She also claimed that when her husband "[couldn't] find the words at the typewriter, he [went] upstairs and play[ed] the trumpet."¹⁷

The relationship between Ellison's "bio" and his "graphy," like that between his fiction and his criticism, has been intertwined repeatedly. My contribution to this axiomatic way of entering Ellison scholarship is to read a scene in a PBS television

¹³ Marcellus Blount, "The Preacherly Text: African American Poetry and Vernacular Performance," in "Performance," ed. Kimberly Benston, special issue, *PMLA* 107 (1992): 582–93.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Yukins, "'An Artful Juxtaposition on the Page': Memory, Perception, and Cubist Technique in Ralph Ellison's *Juneteenth*," *PMLA* 119 (2004): 1248.

¹⁵ Scott Irwin, "A Bugler of Words: Ellison's Musicality and the Jazz/Blues Tradition in *Invisible Man*," *Oakland Journal* (Winter 2004): 110.

¹⁶ Ellison to Albert Murray, 24 January 1950, quoted in *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*, ed. Albert Murray and John F. Callahan (New York: Vintage International, 2000), 8.

¹⁷ Robert G. O'Meally, *The Craft of Ralph Ellison* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 7.

documentary on his life and work, aired in 2002.¹⁸ Toward the end of the film (the first to dramatize scenes from his magnum opus *Invisible Man*—regrettably, the director chose to render the scenes in a hyperrealist style that flattens Ellison’s dramatic text), the audience sees the writer in his office, composing the beginning of his second novel, posthumously published as *Juneteenth*. The camera zooms in on a large tape recorder perched precariously on the edge of Ellison’s paper-cluttered desk. The clear plastic reels of the recorder spin black tape at high speed as the camera pans upward to reveal Ellison, microphone in hand, simultaneously reading typescript and speaking aloud. His voice becomes invisibly inscribed—in a medium shot we hear the voiceprint played back in reel/real time. Ellison smiles and laughs, nods his head acknowledging the “joy in repetition,” to quote the artist Prince. Such a scene reveals much more than the writer’s process or even the long-standing practice of writers presenting dramatic readings of their work (here I am thinking of those popularized by Dickens and other nineteenth-century professional writers): indeed, the entire sequence suggests, as Ellison himself wrote in a letter to his interlocutor, Albert Murray, that he often acted out his narratives. The film returns us to this scene, showing how Ellison has rewound the tape; during playback, his affect changes, as he shakes his head with satisfaction at the sound of his recorded, deferred, and differently technologized voice. In voicing his text, Ellison relies on the technology of the voice, as well as the recording machine. This kind of temporal disjunction appears again and again in Ellison’s novel. In other words, Ellison’s use of the recording device points out the simultaneity of what is too often taken to be a binary opposition between orality (spoken speech) and textuality (written word). In contrast, I want to think of orality and textuality as co-conspirators—simultaneous mechanical actors that maintain and produce movement.

In his introduction to the 1981 edition of *Invisible Man*, Ellison relates one of several different origin stories about how he came to write his novel. He remembers that:

Shortly before the spokesman for invisibility intruded, [he] had seen, in a nearby Vermont village, a poster announcing the performance of a “Tom Show,” that forgotten term for blackface minstrel versions of Mrs. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. [He] had thought such entertainment a thing of the past, but there, in a quiet Northern village, it was alive and kicking, with Eliza, frantically slipping and sliding on the ice, still trying—and that during World War II!—to escape the slaving hounds . . . [ellipsis in original].¹⁹

The passage records two annunciations: the intrusion of the voice of an invisible man and the advertisement of a blackface minstrel show. The theatrical underpinnings evident in these stereotypes of black performance retroactively provide a previously overlooked origin for the genesis of one of the twentieth century’s most celebrated American novels. Encountering these “strangers in the village” (pace James Baldwin) provides the writer Ellison with an opportunity to recognize the endurance of black popular forms in American culture. More specifically, Ellison’s vivid re-reading of the still active and kicking, still-running theatrical event from the nineteenth century serves, in its re-presentation, to keep the image in circulation. Far from having outlived its entertainment value, the “world’s greatest hit”²⁰—replete with its live translations from page to stage of the most prurient scenes of melodrama and

¹⁸ *American Masters Series: Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*, dir. Aaron Kirkland, PBS, 2002.

¹⁹ Ralph Ellison, “Introduction,” *Invisible Man* (1981; repr. New York: Vintage International, 1990), xvii–xix.

²⁰ Harry Birdoff, *The World’s Greatest Hit: Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (New York: Vanni Press, 1947).

violence—trades on and in a nostalgia for a past that, as its recurrence attests, has not passed. “Forgotten but not gone,” to use Joe Roach’s phrase, the Tom show is a (North) American staple.

The narrator of Ellison’s novel-to-be is characterized as an intruder as well as a “spokesman for invisibility.” He is a voice without a visage, although he has a vision and a story to tell. Ellison has seen “a poster announcing the performance of a ‘Tom Show,’ that forgotten term for blackface minstrel versions of Mrs. Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.” Although Ellison directs our attention to the ubiquitous black-and-white image of Eliza on the ice, such theatrical posters include writing—or, more specifically, typography. As noted earlier, numerous critics have commented upon and elegantly analyzed the jazz language of Ellison’s magnum opus, but few have seen the actual typeface and typography of the text as an element performing in the service of such jazz aesthetic politics. Borrowing Nathaniel Mackey’s rendition of Zora Neale Hurston’s formative work, we can see not only nouns singing and swinging in Ellison’s text but also punctuation marks and especially the poster as a peculiarly modern intertext for the novel itself.²¹ In short, I want to notice the notices that appear in the text as signposts and signals that provide viewers with opportunities to scrutinize sheets of sighted sound (and commodity culture)—those printed quotidian documents that help to compose the blackness of blackness in very graphic ways. If doubleness is constitutive of black performance, then we must learn to see the suprasegmentals and alphabetic symbols that appear throughout the text as complicated material in their own right/write. Where earlier modernists experimented with the form of the novel—adding and deleting punctuation for effect and affect—Ellison’s experiments also help to mediate and imprint call-and-response and other modes of black vernacular theory. Brent Edwards would see such excesses in the text as part of a larger implementation of what he terms “scat aesthetics.”²²

Ellison claimed that after typing the first sentence of the novel, “I am an invisible man,” he ripped the page from the typewriter and wanted to destroy the paper. He pondered the “origin” of such a sentence and then “the words began to sound with a familiar timbre of voice.” He recalls: “And suddenly, I could hear in my head a blackface comedian bragging on the stage of Harlem’s Apollo Theatre to the effect that each generation of his family was becoming so progressively black of complexion that no one, not even its own mother, had ever been able to see the two-year-old baby. The audience had roared with laughter and I recognized something of the same joking, in-group Negro American irony sounding from my rumped page.”²³ Such a phenotypical phenomenon can be seen in the black folk humor that produced the nickname “blue” for Negroes so dark-skinned they were blue-black. The blackface humor of the text is integral to explicating the blackness of blackness as an inescapable ethnic notion. In *Invisible Man*, theatrical posters, placards, and other printed signs appear to break up the otherwise uniform print.

²¹ Nathaniel Mackey, “Other: From Noun to Verb,” in *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 265–85.

²² Brent Hayes Edwards, “Louis Armstrong and the Syntax of Scat,” *Critical Inquiry* 28.3 (Spring 2002): 618–49. See also Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Afro-Sonic Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

²³ Robert O’Meally, ed. “Introduction,” in *New Essays On Invisible Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11.

Given these insights into Ellison's practices, we should not be surprised by the fact that the printed *Invisible Man* begins with two epigraphs that record dialogue, the first from a scene in Melville's novella "Benito Cereno" (1856) and the latter from T. S. Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* (1939). There are also moments in *Invisible Man* in which Ellison employs different forms of typographical excess to overscore, underscore, and represent important shifts in the narrative: for example, the use of italics in the dream sequences, parenthetical asides, lack of spacing, capitalization, and line breaks. Indeed, retrospectively, the book reads as if it were a Beat poem. For all of Amiri Baraka and other black nationalist poets' denouncing of Ellison as an Uncle Tom and apolitical writer, they nevertheless seem indebted to his formal experimentation with the *mise-en-page*. Even the very use of the term "blackness" as a signifier for the new movement might be indebted to its appearance in the novel, which deployed the term in contradistinction to Ellison's contemporaneous citation of the term "Negro." The first edition begins with an "I" that is printed in font so bold it has no seraph. The first fragmented sentence in bold reads I AM AN invisible man. The use of capitalization makes a fragment that is reminiscent of Ellison's stutter, with its near-rhyme between AM and AN (missing in a near-rhyme making a Man). Could we hear Ellison, with the stutter he famously tried to stop, recording "I am Man—(sotto voce) invisible Man."

Although in classical rhetoric the ellipsis has been understood as a scheme rather than as a trope, more current scholarship, according to the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, notes that classical rhetoric increasingly is read in figurative terms.²⁴ I argue that the proleptic, proliferating, and perforating figure of the ellipsis performs in Ellison's text (as it does here) as a point of contention. More importantly, however, this essay is interested in explicating a key moment in *Invisible Man* that dramatizes typography as a form of experimental (and perhaps even experiential) blackness, foregrounding the unusual use of typography as a means of expressing the blackness of blackness. This is a playful, if deadly serious, endeavor that seeks to understand such a tautological phrase as inscribing blackness as a nonessential character. I ask you to look askance at the ellipsis and to listen to them/it—as if in an hallucination. Now we occupy an imaginative place of ludic play where lucidity loses its appeal. Like Ellison's fictional character, we enter a layered cave in an impossible time-space continuum—the passage is by turns violent and pleasurable. Significantly, however, it calls upon us as readers to witness the existential angst of the character. In analyzing the fragmentation of accounts of those survivors of state terror (such as the Holocaust and the disappeared in Argentina), Anne Cubilié suggests, "The complexity of issues raised by this dialogic and temporal confusion . . . the narrative collage style in which the book is written works against strong reader identification with a single authorial voice...[instead] the text works to create an engaged and critical reader . . . While one can read the book as a distanced spectator, eliding the gaps and reading only the basic narrative structure, the form of the text encourages a performative, engaged, witnessing relationship with the reader."²⁵

²⁴ David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 70.

²⁵ Anne Cubilié, *Women Witnessing Terror: Testimony and the Cultural Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 172.

Invisible Man can also be read as a kind of “poetry/play”—a term Deborah Richards uses to describe a genre akin to “a closet drama—a play to be read aloud rather than performed”—that also helps to suture the sound/image binary. Remember, Ellison read the entire text out loud even as the priority of speaking/writing/reading remains undecidable. The point here/hear is to recognize the simultaneity and untranslatability of this ritual practice and to re-member the “interanimation of vision and sound” (Moten 71) recorded through recoding in Ellison’s work. Then, it is up to the audience (in multiple senses of the term) to “. . . fall for your affectation or flail you for requesting their attention.”²⁶ We can imagine Ellison, like so many other writers, as one whose “work is a collaboration of voices [in which one] takes the role of director, producer, and editor.”²⁷ I mention Richards in the context of this reading of Ellison because she conceives of her work as “a collection of episodes . . . [She] discovered that Japanese *sumi* brush painting is purposely left incomplete. The viewer has to become an active participant . . . [The] reader reads the gaps as well as the content of the poem.”²⁸ Not only is this an excellent summary of the larger narrative of invisible man, it also makes a case for the active role of the witness/participant that accords with Ellison’s well-documented ideas about call-and-response and the potential of art to transform action. Richards’s work is a palimpsest on which the evidence of what has happened before is apparent. She describes her style as being “like watching a play from the wings. If I continue the analogy, I would say that with my work you get a closer look at the strings holding the puppet up. Perhaps you even see the puppeteer working the limbs” [one can think of the scene in *Invisible Man* with the minstrel doll].²⁹ Such techniques are at play in Ellison’s text—especially in the figure of the ellipsis, which appears throughout.

The ellipsis appears to de-compose the page and speech: as such, it labors to contradictory ends. It marks a strategic deletion that produces not only deleterious effects (lack); but also, and simultaneously, affective desire (excess). Like the strategy of silence that many employed as a form of power and which has been examined by black feminist critics such as Darlene Clark Hine, the ellipsis can be read as “saying something obliquely”—or, as Linda Brent says, “telling it slant.” In speech, the ellipsis runs rampant. It is an everyday occurrence. Here I am concurring with Fred Moten’s idea that there is an “intense relationship between experimentalism and the everyday (which includes but is not reducible to what people call the vernacular) that animates radical artistic practice in the 2nd half of the 20th century.”³⁰ Ellison, as a scholar of vernacular culture, a musician, and an interpreter of black forms, employs the ellipsis as both a mark and a strategy in *Invisible Man*. At times in Ellison’s text, the ellipsis can be read as a site that invites improvisation: one might even say that the ellipsis as a present figure of absence is paradoxically more meaning-full, rather than meaning-less.³¹ By this I mean to point out that rather than seeing the ellipses as empty—not

²⁶ Deborah Richards interview with Charles Rowell, “The Halle Berry One Two,” in *Callaloo* 27 (2004): 1013.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1006.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1004.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Fred Moten interview with Charles Rowell, *Callaloo* 27 (2004): 957.

³¹ Avital Ronell, in *The Telephone Book*, suggests that “punctuation hails our sonic gaze”—a phrase that perfectly captures Ellison’s problematic as theorized in *Invisible Man*. See *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (1989; repr. 1991, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 117.

doing or acting on the page—they could be rethought as active agents that suture the call-and-response of Ellison's dialogue and, in other spaces, as the marks that hail the reader as a participant, inviting the audience into imaginative engagement with the text. The mandate to "keep this nigger boy running" can be read typographically in the repetition (always with difference) of the ellipsis throughout the entire novel.

The ongoing black blues tradition of the changing same has been documented and replayed by many who subscribe to the aesthetic and theoretical idea that it is "in the break" that the music and movement of invisibility and improvisation take place.³² This notion of the break or change is constitutive of a modern black tradition reaching back, if you will, to an (African) past that can only ever be reconstructed by remembering the radical break—known euphemistically as the Middle Passage—in the transition. In the following reading, the ellipsis is read as revealing, evoking, and performing as Ellison's effective/affective strategy of racialized performance.

Let us think about *Invisible Man* in terms of the elisions and embodied excesses performed in a pinpointed part of its prologue which itself is performed explicitly for an audience/viewer, as signaled by its use of first-person direct address. Here we witness the warped texture or the weave of space, time, temperament, and tempo of the text. The situation in the text is a reefer-induced hallucination in which Invisible Man "slips into a break" that is like a spatiotemporal warp . . . like the "beam of lyrical sound ben[t] by Louis [Armstrong's] military instrument."³³

He seems to be caught in limbo between time spent/spending time, past-passed and present.

. . . beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it [cave or tempo or both?] and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slave owners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout:

"Brothers

And sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'"

And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother,

Most Black . . ."

"In the beginning . . ."

"At the very start," they cried.

". . . there was blackness . . ."

"Preach it . . ."

". . . and the sun . . ."

"The sun, Lawd . . ."

". . . was bloody red . . ."

"Red . . ."

³² See for example, Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones, *Blues People*; Robert Ferris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*; Houston H. Baker, Jr., *Blues Ideology and African American Culture*; John Callahan, *In the African American Grain: Call and Response in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988); Aldon Nielson, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). For a reading of queerness in Ellison's text see Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations of Blackness* (University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

³³ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 8. Except as noted, all material cited is from this edition and will hereafter be cited in the text.

"Now black is . . ." the preacher shouted.
 "Preach it, brother . . ."
 ". . . an' black ain't . . ."
 "Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"

[8–9]

The ellipses here signify an hallucinatory sequence whose spatiotemporality is "preposterous"—like a boomerang, its "end is in the beginning and lies far ahead."³⁴ Thinking elliptically (with the ellipsis) helps us to understand Ellison's ethical call-and-response. Ellison's text notes, with and through the ellipsis, a suspended space and space of suspense where "the unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed in itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night [he continues], I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well" (8). We witness the performative labor the ellipsis does in this famous passage of Ellison's text. It is noteworthy that the passage rendered in italics repeats the word "tempo" three times in its opening paragraph. The swift hot tempo gives way to slower tempo and ultimately to a more rapid tempo. Each shift in tempo takes the narrator to another level, signaling the impossibility of separating time from space—a concept-metaphor substantiated by the ellipses in the passage—back, which is to say, below . . . a passage that "is and ain't." The tempo never stops: rather, like the ellipsis, it is figured relationally—as "more or less" (t)here. It is in this section of the text that a dialogue ensues between the old woman and the invisible man about the terms love, hate, and ambivalence—the latter glossed as "a word that doesn't explain it."

As we have begun to map out, the ellipsis is ambivalent, enigmatic, paradoxical—the presence of absence [or vice versa] that like the blackness of blackness "is and ain't." Isaac Julien praises the passage for having the preacher show that "blackness is an open-ended identity."³⁵ The ellipsis self-referentially points to a variable deictic space in which "the entanglement of subject and object . . . embraces the reader within the narrative as a variable 'you' who is fully dependent on, and constitutive of its corollary, the 'I.'"³⁶

The blackness of blackness is both textual and performative—figured as, in, and by the ellipsis. Even the previous paragraph illuminates or serves to illustrate and narrate the ellipsis. For when the dream, which is recorded in italic type, enters into the depths (remember, we read the book layer by layer—creating the illusion of entering its depths—and it has a prologue and an epilogue that take place in the same space), the narrator continues: "beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before a group of slave owners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo . . ." (9). The page that forms and frames the ellipses (framed again by quotations) is ivory-colored, like the (not)black slave mother, who, it bears repeating, is the condition of possibility for the birth of (the) blackness of the sun/son. Law-d (think logos) over by an overlord in the form of the white master's bidding on her body, it is she who carries the trace of blackness that gives birth to the trauma

³⁴ Mieke Bal, *Quoting Carravaggio* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 195.

³⁵ Isaac Julien, quoted in Gina Dent, ed., *Black Popular Culture* (New York: Dia Press, 1992), 255.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

experienced and expressed in *Invisible Man*.³⁷ This is in fact one of the harbingers of the strategy of racial performance that is performed in the novel's engagement with both the "speakerly and preacherly text."³⁸

The miscegenative mixture is the trope that animates the text. The spiritual aspects of the text are less metaphysical than temporal and cultural (in the sense of tied to tempo—to the here-and-now as opposed to some conception of a transcendental eternal space above the line). Kim Benston explains, "Ellison ironically displaces 'white mythology's' fable of the origin with a story of the beginning-as-blackness. At that beginning, the passage suggests, we find enacted a series of complex differences and dislocation, first imagined as descending through cultural realms . . . [then] plunging toward a site where language, in the crucible of national and family romance, has both the impulse and the power to declare its own absence."³⁹ I would argue, however, that the ellipsis presented in the second epigraph and throughout the prologue in fact marks the "beginning of blackness" that performs such a vital element and idea. For, if we read the typography of *Invisible Man*, the ellipsis appears as the first (in)co-hear-ent mark in the text—an initializing site/cite of trouble that recurs in the text's opening stages. The ellipses are at once distant and near, transparent and opaque. Their beat . . . nicks the page—confounding and connecting senses and sensations simultaneously while gathering into its orbit a host of other binary oppositions so as to move beyond them. When Ellison's text records and repeats the word "red" as in the color of the bloody sun, I see and hear the term, literally, "read." The history, his story and ours, is bloody, red, black and ivory—but also read, and heard, in black and white.⁴⁰ The speech act mixes the sacred and the secular, recording, reverentially, a profound profanity. Ellison also asks: "Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?" (13–14). In terms of my desire to read punctuation-typography's aspirations problematically and materially, I think that this is an important question for which ellipses may provide a partial, imprinted answer. Before I elaborate on this elaborate point (and these elaborate points . . .), let me complete my reading of the paragraph. "But I am an orator, a rabble rouser—Am? I was, and perhaps shall be again. Who knows? All sickness is not unto death, neither is invisibility" (14; original italics). The phrasing here signals the open end of *Invisible Man*'s sentence of blackness that concludes with the repetition of the epistemological query, "Who knows?" As the text asks later: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (568). Again, the ellipses open the spatial/temporal gap, mark the break, are represented in, and in fact are the break between these determined, determining questions. Thus, the ellipsis at once "is and ain't."

The ellipsis in Ellison's text may be read as a means of understanding black performance, or, more pointedly, the performance of the blackness of blackness. In such settings (pun intended), these graphic alphabetic symbols function as shadow

³⁷ One thinks of Hortense Spillers' "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" here as well. See Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

³⁸ Blount, "Preacherly Text," 582–93.

³⁹ Kimberly W. Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 9.

⁴⁰ There is a joke that transforms the yoke of racist humor. The not/joke is a retort and goes as follows: "What is black and white and red and floating down the river? A white man telling nigger jokes."

figures that both compose and haunt writing's sound and substance. We remember that Ellison, with his stutter, vocalized every page of *Invisible Man*—recording and recoding his language in a process that he called acting, but which required the use of machinery to capture the sound. There is no priority here in the circulation of the text. Hearing the unheard music of *Invisible Man* requires us to respond with ear, eye, and mind. Indeed, those moments in the text in which words break apart, dialect becomes dialogue, spaces appear and disappear, where punctuation proliferates, perforating the page and our passive silent reading—those are the interactive moments of Ellison's work that turn us into audiences—things seen as written and written as seen. Ellison played out his work vocally in the rhythm of a jazz musician. Although he left his musical training behind, Ellison was still a composer of sound and visual rhythm. On the matter of literary value and literacy, I follow those who advocate for an expanded view of writing: one that cannot demarcate the ends of speech and the beginning of writing and where it is impossible to have a "text" without a "con" or writing without a concept of embodiment—however spectral and tenuous.

We remember, as alluded to in the opening of this essay, that the script in theatre as well as in our daily repertoire is that which allows us to repeat our lines. Typography and punctuation perform as do mouth movements, facial contortions, and other somatic gestures. Such ". . . excess *outlines* other possibilities not taken, not voiced. There is no transcendence here; all elements (at the very least), all these implications coexist in the performance . . ." (italics added).⁴¹ Indeed, such gestures both frame and exceed the "lines" all subjects are given to perform. As such, the ellipsis can be read as signifyin(g), ". . . as expressive potentiality, articulating a syntax where, in Billie Holiday's phrase, the meaning used to change. Scat works 'the accompaniments of the utterance' in a given medium: in song, the vocal play that liquefies words; in performance, the excessive, oblique physicality, of mugging; *in writing, the overgrowth of punctuation*, self-interruptions, asides, that exceed the purposes of emphasis, intonation, citation. Inarticulacy is telling because the proliferation of index points at—structurally suggests—an expressive syntax that is unavailable but inferred through its accompaniments'" (italics added).⁴² The ellipses, as I am reading them here, form a corollary between the different and yet analogically related experiences of silence and invisibility. They supplement experience and call attention to the scripted-ness and excess ascribed to black performance. Others have called such "notes" grace notes, or perhaps we might even think of them as akin to theatrical stage business. I read punctuation marks as figures of speech that cannot resolve the tension between aural/oral and visual and other "tangled skeins," to re-cite and resituate Linda Brent/Harriet Jacobs's euphemism for slavery's material as well as miscegenated practices,⁴³ or what Alexander Weheliye calls "the surplus gift inherent to Afro-diasporic double consciousness . . . [whose] excess comes in the form of a phonography that rebuffs any separation of the two forces in this compound [speech/writing] whether it rolls up in the sphere of literature or music."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Edwards, "Syntax," 645.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 648–49.

⁴³ Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. 1865; repr., *Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1987).

⁴⁴ Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic-Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 36.

The ellipsis marks both presence and absence. On the page, it is a visible element that signals missing information, and it does so in the English language through the repetition of a dot such that it becomes a series.⁴⁵ In short, the ellipsis, in its singularity, is not a “single” mark; but rather a triple “one” or a “complete multiple.”⁴⁶ Ellison himself spoke of the significance of “our unity-in-diversity, our oneness-in-manyness.”⁴⁷ Here, one can extrapolate and read the ellipsis as a figure that is at once singular and collective, denoted by a series of dots (a run of ellipses) whose connotations are a con akin to “unspeakable things unspoken,” to borrow Toni Morrison’s suggestive phrase, or perhaps, to revise her words, unbreakable things unbroken.⁴⁸ This (im)possible construction lays and delays the groundwork of sentencings, leaves a final resolution open to questioning: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” asks Invisible Man at the conclusion (not end) of his text. The ellipsis tarries with negative space and suggests the not (t)here. Ellipses (un)cover (un)familiar ghosts. These *blank black bullets* bore into our psyches, asking us as we read them to project and imagine what might be . . . behind, beyond, and within them. Like empty signifiers, they mark a desire whose meaning can never be fulfilled but must always be filled. Such comments concur with the tenets of close reading, in which each mark on the page matters—is the matter of/with writing. Such countersyntactic cues provide clues to the importance of improvisation in Ellison’s sermonic section of text. Typography becomes song in its excessive expression.

The ellipsis in particular defies the supposed value of punctuation for prescriptivist punctuationists who subscribe to the view that punctuation can harness speech and/as writing in an enlightened drive for clarity and rationality. What I want to underscore here is the way in which Ellison’s gestural use of typography seeks to liberate such markers from their conformist strictures. They are, in fact, part and parcel of the novel’s improvisational impulse—we might even say that they provide the page with a pulsing visual rhythm. The very word “point” itself is elliptical for “full (or perfect) point; full (or complete) pause; full stop.”⁴⁹ This last point relates to my earlier discussion of ellipses as delaying sentencings. We are made aware of that which either goes unsaid, exceeds saying, or cannot be said. The ellipsis can stand for what need not be said, for what may be redundant to say, as well as for what cannot be said, for that which exceeds locution and is therefore impossible.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Here one may think of Peter Stallybrass’s work on Renaissance conceptualizations of the term “individual,” which Raymond Williams explains once was synonymous with “indivisible.” See Peter Stallybrass, *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 594.

⁴⁶ The term “complete multiple” is the title of a catalogue of Richard Artschwager’s work published in New York by Brook Alexander Editions, 1991.

⁴⁷ Ralph Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 503.

⁴⁸ Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (Fall 1989): 1–34.

⁴⁹ Eric Partridge, *You Have a Point There: A Guide to Punctuation and Its Allies* (London: Routledge, 1953), 8. Subsequent references to this work are noted in the text.

⁵⁰ See Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas*, trans. Greg Rabassa (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90–91. The author was a typesetter, self-taught man of letters, and translator; his prescient nineteenth-century novel provides examples of two different types of elliptical performance.

The ellipses mark the space of difference—where the practically nothing but (im)practically something will be (not) said and (not) written—or, “said in silence.” Jason Merchant, in *The Syntax of Silence* (2001), claims that the primary goal of the discipline of theoretical linguistics “is to develop a theory of the correspondence between sound (or gesture) and meaning. Nowhere does this sound-meaning correspondence break down more spectacularly than in the case of ellipsis. And yet various forms of ellipsis are pervasive in natural language—words and phrases that by rights should be in the linguistic signal go missing . . . [This] is possible because ellipsis is parasitic on redundancy . . .”⁵¹ Here, Merchant explicates three key ideas associated with the definition and work of ellipses: redundancy, silence, and omission—which are also figures of blackface performance.⁵²

Re-reading *Invisible Man*, I was struck by the following line: “The end is in the beginning and lies far ahead” (6). I render this phrase as Ellison’s eloquent elaboration of the ellipsis, given that the end and beginning of the ellipsis is recorded in a horizontal train distinguished only by the space in-between, which is another black (w)hole. Entering such open-endedness confounds our orientation . . . we are disoriented yet present. The use of ellipses by Ellison and other artists punches a hole (Moten would say it cuts “in the break”) in the illusion of perception, adding dimension by disrupting the seemingly seamless relentlessness of the line—of linearity, whether horizontal or vertical—that directs writing. Ellipses function as points of disorientation and perhaps democracy. Like a palindrome and a palimpsest (or perhaps even the book itself), ellipses may be read backwards or forwards and in terms of surface and depth. Their multifaceted structure of many-in-one that forms a complex, yet unified, web may be read as supporting Ellison’s radical democratic content. Ellison’s use of ellipses helps us to rethink the line according to artist Paul Klee, who conceived of it as “dots going out for a walk.”⁵³ As Ellison’s unnamed narrator tells us, “The point now is that I found a home—or a hole in the ground” (6). I tend to read this line literarily rather than literally, which is to say that I interpret Ellison’s point to be that this home is a “hole in the ground(ing)” of being—if not a becoming that moves even in its apparent stability. The distinction between being and becoming here suggests the home/hole is also a drop in the bucket of opaque

⁵¹ Jason Merchant, *The Syntax of Silence: Sluicing, Islands, and the Theory of Ellipses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 94.

⁵² Eric Partridge’s parsing of the term is a means of opening up what will be my more detailed discussion of Ellison. Partridge defines “dots” (to use his British locution for ellipsis) in a tellingly entitled essay, “‘Twopence Coloured’: Compound Points or Multiple Punctuation; Plurality of Dots.” The twopence coloured refers to hand-colored prints sold from the Punch and Judy theatres, connecting the term not only to commodity culture, but also more significantly to the co-terminus nineteenth-century practice of blackface minstrelsy, which is the quintessential form that figures the mimicked relation of performing blackness. The archive of work on minstrelsy includes Robert Toll, *Blacking Up* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and James Hatch, Brooks McNamara, and Annemarie Bean, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask* (Middletown: University of New England Press, 1997).

⁵³ Paul Klee, redacted in Peggy Phelan, “Warhol: Performances of Death in America,” in *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, ed. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (New York: Routledge, 1999), 225.

whiteness, destined to disappear in America's will toward whiteness, an idea Joe Roach suggests when he names miscegenation, "as . . . an opportunistic tactic of whiteness."⁵⁴ *Invisible Man* seeks to re-member the blackness of whiteness that the term "American" would seek to erase.

Another formative meditation on race and American culture is W. E. B. Du Bois's endlessly repeated pronouncement: "The Problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the colorline."⁵⁵ In *After Whiteness: Unmaking an American Majority*, Mike Hill justifies employing, or rather deploying, only an elliptical version of Du Bois's over-cited axiom. He justifies his strategic citation of the line, which he never presents in full but only in its cut version, explaining:

The epigraph above from Du Bois, which I leave deliberately incomplete, is perhaps one of the most oft repeated aphorisms ever cited in contemporary scholarship on race. In that sense, to those familiar with such work, the phrase may sound a little worn. But then again, how else to begin to think about color and categorization, which of course includes thinking about whiteness, than through the extraordinary figure of Du Bois? Even in the simple reluctance to repeat his celebrated phrase yet once more.⁵⁶

The epigraph evokes a problem about citation (and re-citation) that is at the heart of theatrical practice and performance—its twice-restored behavior—and therefore gets one thinking from the get-go about repetition and time. This ongoing racial drama was played out similarly in Ellison's ellipses—a sentence he did not want to finish, as he remembered standing before the poster for the Tom show, about to embark on the composition of *Invisible Man*.

Hill returns to the phrase later in his text, when he repeats his reasoning about why Du Bois' line in (t)his historical moment must be elided, emended, elliptical: "Part One of this book began with a certain reluctance to repeat Du Bois's famous maxim that 'the problem of the twentieth century is . . . ' *et cetera*. By way of introduction, my intention in leaving out the key term 'colorline' was to signal my sense of the overuse of this phrase. There has been no more repeated *line* in race scholarship over the last twenty years than that one, I remarked. The idea of not repeating it again, or in *almost* not repeating it, was not just an academic language game. I wanted to signal a more substantive political problem having to do with subjective citationality at the beginning of the twenty-first century."⁵⁷ Such ideas fit as well with Ellison's interest in warping history—of not succumbing to an idea of history as a linear, progressive timeline. To my mind, this is an elaboration of the problematic involved in the performance of "colored contradictions"—to recite the title of a collection of African American plays—especially in Ellison's work.⁵⁸ It may be no coincidence that E. Patrick Johnson elaborates on this concept in an eloquent redaction of Marlon Riggs's

⁵⁴ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 6.

⁵⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Quoted in Mike Hill, *After Whiteness: Unmaking an American Majority* (New York: NYU Press, 2004), 21.

⁵⁶ Hill, *After Whiteness*, 67–68.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁸ Harry J. Elam and Robert Alexander, ed., *Colored Contradictions: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Plays* (New York: Plume Books Penguin Press, 1996). The title comes from the last line of George C. Wolfe's play, *The Colored Museum*.

film, *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*. For the title, like Riggs's naked black body in the film, recites and resituates, signifies on, Ellison's ellipsis and black performance more generally. I concur with Johnson's argument for the simultaneity of being and becoming that "refus[es] to privilege identity as solely performance or solely performative and by demonstrating the dialogic/dialectic relationship of these two tropes housed in and by the body."⁵⁹

As mentioned earlier, a quotation from T. S. Eliot's play, *The Family Reunion*, provides a beginning or entry (as well as an ending) to *Invisible Man*. It reads:

. . . I tell you, it is not me you are looking at,
Not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks
Incriminate, but that other person, if person,
You thought I was: let your necrophily
Feed upon that carcase. . . .

The four dots that provide the open ending of the quotation offer our first encounter with such marks in the text. Eliot's ellipsis here graphically illustrates and performs the repetition of the "not me" that is a central thematic of Ellison's novel. The epigraph points the way towards the profusion of ellipses that appears in the oft-quoted text on the "Blackness of Blackness" in *Invisible Man* (9). Despite the numerous commentaries on this passage of (the) text, none, to my knowledge, has thought about how the ellipses signify and are signifying there. Do the dots function punctuationally—marking mere pauses in dialogue? Are they meant to mimic spoken language in an impossible transcription of aurality/orality? Or rather, is the work of the ellipsis more ludic than lucid? I suspect that the ellipses (t)here signify the tempo figured in and by "the Blackness of Blackness." In my reading, ellipses serve as a kind of instantiation of the complex and dynamic (racial) subject that arguably is the main point (pun intended) of the dialogue. They regulate the timing of the call-and-response, signal a shift in tempo, invite the reader to enter the dialogue and more.

In his introduction to the 1981 edition of *Invisible Man*, Ellison explains that "writing about invisibility had rendered [him] either transparent or opaque."⁶⁰ So, too, in the same essay, he speaks of Invisible Man as "a 'character' . . . in the dual meaning of the term."⁶¹ These statements both allude to the ellipsis: a figure or character, like the performing stereotype, that is neither transparent nor opaque but somehow both simultaneously. Moreover, in his disquisition on democratic fictions, Ellison employs the ellipsis in a key paragraph that reads: ". . . it now appeared that the voice of invisibility issued from deep within our complex American underground. So how crazy-logical that I should finally locate its owner living—and oh, so garrulously—in an abandoned cellar. Of course, the process was far more disjointed than I make it sound, but such was the inner-outer, subjective-objective process of the developing fiction, its pied rind and surreal heart . . ."⁶² Ellison suggests that invisibility, erasure, and fluidity—all things figured (out) by the ellipsis—are major themes of the novel as

⁵⁹ E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 42.

⁶⁰ Ellison, "Introduction," xvii–xix.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, xviii.

well as its central philosophical concepts—which, I contend, are performed in a formal sense by the ellipses. Ellison claimed that the visual arts and early studies of perception influenced his thinking about identity—a fact that allows us to think of the text as a negotiation of the aural/oral matrix.

Perhaps, then, we can imagine the ellipsis set out like bait waiting to be swallowed, leading us literally down into the narrator's den as well as into the depths of the text . . . Recall the first printed ellipses that appear in the epigraph of the text, itself an elliptical redaction of Eliot's text as a (w)hole. Ellipsis is an imaginary figurative and figured space in the analogy between figure and ground that is now punctured and un-done with punctuation. We may read ellipses as figures of history as well as hysteria and haunting—as *Invisible Man's* quintessential (re)marks. Moreover, to repeat this particular point, the ellipses are contra-dictory figures that are (t)here to mark the (k)not-(t)here of and in the text. Ellipses, we might say, stand (in and for) the music of invisibility, or perhaps more precisely, music's invisible tempo—seen only by the musicians. Here, Ellison riffs on the "music of invisibility," especially when he signifies upon Louis Armstrong's song, "What did I do to be so black and blue?" The lyrics appear set off from the rest of the text. The perceived opacity of the ellipsis is revealing and has been rendered as the "blankness visible" that is so important to Ellison's experiment with new modes of (black) performance.⁶³

Like Ellison, punctuationist Eric Partridge begins to elaborate on the ellipsis' capacity to mark temporality. Partridge claims that the ellipsis can be used to highlight a "hiatus in the thinking, a pause in the action, or a hesitation in the dialogue" (84). This statement is reminiscent of the musical interlude in the blues—that productive gap that is filled in by the audience's expectation, or more precisely, its meditation on what has passed and what is to come. Such remarks become a recurrent trope in Ellison's figuration of invisibility, as the following quotation exemplifies: "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" (8; emphasis added . . . by my use of italics). This quotation understands and theorizes time as ellipsis and vice versa. It is this passage in particular that inspires Fred Moten to ask: "How to activate the noise's transcendence of the ocular frame?" The ellipses appear to answer Moten's astute and searching query, for they "put another metaphysics forward" (68). We return, then, to the productive performative simultaneity of the aural/oral/visual performance of the ellipsis.

In *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator thinks that "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (13). Such statements are also part of the narrative's construction of suspense that perhaps not coincidentally are made with suspension points (the British term for the ellipsis). "Multiple dots are equally suitable—many would say unsuitable—for the expression, or at least the intimation, either of suspense, when they are called Points of Suspense, or of reverie" (Partridge

⁶³ See Charles Mills's discussion in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Other essays appear in the special summer 2003 issue of *boundary 2*, "Ralph Ellison: The Next Fifty Years," edited by Ronald A. Judy, in which excellent essays by Kevin Bell and Alexander Weheliye, among others, appear.

85). The opacity of the ellipsis is the “blackness visible” that is such an important part of Ellison’s experimental performance of blackness. In other words, the ellipsis carries a “negative capability” that can interrupt the flow of time: it can temporarily shift the direction, change speed and tempo. We can think of punctuation as theatrical marks that choreograph thought. Such syncopated out of sync sinking sensations are suggested and sustained by the ellipsis in the text. The dots are the nodes, the literal points, where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. The ellipsis provides us a point of view from which, and with which, to enter the theatricalized space of time. Indeed, Ellison’s wrenching rendering of the wench in the cave exemplifies such a defiant gesture—allowing us to enter into the paced space of time. The tempting tempo of the ellipsis leads us into a *contretemps* . . .

The ellipsis in *Invisible Man* performs the “figure of a figure,” “the blackness of blackness,” the “rind and the heart” (21)—not so much an external mark of internal desire, but rather a neither/nor figure whose meaning-content is (re)inscribed, and sounded invisibly, with each review—and therefore is open perpetually to possibility. The form and figure of freedom, rendered with restraint (remember the ellipses is both contracted and expansive), the ellipsis is the black (w—does this w stand for whiteness, for writing, the West—all three and more?) hole of our mutually constituted racialized culture. Anne Cheng argues astutely that some of the characters in *Invisible Man* seem “more stylized than racialized. More to the point, [they] expose the idea that racialization is always a matter of style rather than essence—a performance of type that can be either self-stereotyping or self-identifying.”⁶⁴

In this essay, I have been thinking about the performance of typography as playing a role in such productions. Where Cheng perhaps means this abstractly, we might supplement her musing with a concretization of her words, or as Johnson would say, a fleshing out and materialization. The ellipsis seems more stylized than racialized—as a performance of (material) type, although its blackness cannot be elided.⁶⁵ I suggest that the ellipsis functions as yet another figuration and materialization for understanding and underscoring Ellison’s synaesthetic mix. *Invisible Man* drifts off and thinks: “If, I thought, one could slow down his heartbeats and memory to the tempo of the black drops falling so slowly into the bucket yet reacting so swiftly, it would seem like a sequence in feverish dream . . . I was so deep in reverie that I failed to hear Kimbro approach” (197).

He recalls the earlier scene of hallucination, where he finds the founding ancestor—the foremother who comes afterwards in the narrative of the text. He tries to temper his temper—to change the tempo . . . but “the rhythm was too hectic. A tom-tom beating like heart-thuds began drowning out the trumpet, filling my ears” (12).⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 132.

⁶⁵ See Jeffrey Masten, Nancy Vickers and Peter Stallybrass, *Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁶⁶ Tempo was also a kind of coin currency in nineteenth-century Japan. In the *OED* the term tempo resides among related terms such as temper, tempera, temperamental, temperature, temperance, tempest, and temple. All seem to have a role to play in Ellison’s elucidation of the blackness of blackness. The main root, however, is attributed to a Latin source, “tempus,” meaning time. The first definition listed is “The timing of an attack in fencing so that one’s opponent is within reach.” Second,

This passage from Ellison's text contrasts with another from the same era that comes from Strunk and White's famous stylebook, *The Elements of Style*. In the latter, suggestion #21, "Prefer the standard to the offbeat," cautions against the peril of using "the crossbred language of mutilation."⁶⁷ Such temptations are carried by sound and rhythm, something emphasized by the use of onomatopoeia: a trope that stresses the commensurability of sound and word. So, too, we might think here of how jazz performs and reforms the standard—or, as James Snead would say, how repetition is a figure of black culture that heralds the cut in contradistinction to the cover up.⁶⁸ Indeed, the excessive use of breaks and interruptions that mimic emergent patterns of speech and silence might be traced to an African-derived beginning in the letters of Ignatius Sancho, an eighteenth-century black British composer, grocer, and correspondent of Lawrence Sterne. Sancho was wonderfully innovative in his use of punctuation, as his epistles—which are chock-full of dashes, exclamation points, and the ellipses—attest.⁶⁹ The performance of the ellipsis in Ellison's text helps us to understand, if not apprehend, the performativity of the blackness of blackness—that is and ain't—not only on the stage of the page, but also in the performance of everyday life.

tempo is a musical term signifying "Relative speed or rate of movement; pace, time; the speed at which music for a dance is or should be played." Thus, I think it is felicitous (pace Austin) that Ellison's preface to the preaching mentions "flamenco." Finally, tempo can refer to "the rate of motion or activity (of someone or something)." The temporal, unlike the sacred, is secular time. Temporal: "Belonging or relating to a particular time or period; of passing interest, ephemeral." Metaphysically speaking, what is temporary, "occurring or existing in time, not from eternity."

⁶⁷ William Strunk and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (1959; rept. New York: McMillan Press, 1979), 80.

⁶⁸ James Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Min-ha, and Cornel West (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 213–30.

⁶⁹ It should come as no surprise, then, that Strunk and White's prescriptive pamphlet, *The Elements of Style*, written in the same era as *Invisible Man*, deems subcultural style (pace Dick Hebdidge) dangerous, primitive, native, and, by extension, "black." They write:

The young writer will be drawn at every turn toward eccentricities in language. He will hear the beat of new vocabularies, the exciting rhythms of special segments of his society, each speaking a language of its own. All of us come under the spell of these unsettling drums; the problem for the beginner is to listen to them, learn the words, feel the vibrations, and not be carried away. Youth invariably speaks to youth in a tongue of his own devising: *he renovates the language with a wild vigor, as he would a basement apartment* [emphasis added]. By the time this paragraph sees print, *uptight, ripoff, rap, dude, vibes, copout, and funky* will be the words of yesteryear . . . more appropriate to conversation than composition.

[81–82]

Importantly, Ellison's entire opus belies the impossibility of this prediction. Moreover, Strunk and White unwittingly prove Ellison's understanding of the profound influences of blackness on American race relations. It is precisely the blackness in whiteness that composes American culture.