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Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity by Alexander G. Weheliye (Duke UP, 2005)

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1985) marked a critical turning point in the study of African American literature by offering a “theory of interpretation arrived at from within the black cultural matrix” (258). Gates delineated a black literary tradition that developed parallel to the so-called Western canon; his project remains crucial to any understanding of the ways that, for instance, European aesthetics and philosophy are bound up with the African American literary tradition. If Gates’s work broke new ground in the study of African American literature, then Paul Gilroy’s work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) extended that intervention by reconstructing the history of modernity “from the slaves’ points of view” (55). Gilroy’s transatlantic turn offered an account of modernity that ran counter to essentialist ones that restricted black cultural and literary production to stable, nation-centered sites. Neither of these projects, however, fully accounted for the sound dimensions—“the sonic”—in the black transnation. By turning fully to the place of sound in Western modernity, and its subsequent relationship to black cultural production and technology, Alexander G. Weheliye’s *Phonographies* thus offers a necessary contribution to the study of black cultural and literary production.

In a broad sense, *Phonographies* is useful to a range of current concerns in cultural, literary, and performance studies. By seeking to (re)read Western theory through constructions of blackness in cultural production and sound, it joins the ranks of projects such as Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003). Like Moten, Weheliye is interested in the relationship between the collective and the individual, the performer and the audience, the subject and the object. Unlike Moten, however, Weheliye examines how these

relationships are mediated by the (re)production of sonic blackness. *Phonographies* is concerned with “the conditions for the im/possibility of black modern sounds” as those conditions are enacted by the interdependency of sonic technologies and black music (19–20). This project considers the intrinsic role of sound recording technologies in black cultural production and their subsequent effects on and for Afro-diasporic subjectivity.

Weheliye’s examples are numerous. For instance, he rereads Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) through Louis Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Be so) Black and Blue.” He looks at how sound “augment[s] an inferior black subjectivity” and points to the way that “a (black) subject inhabits a spatiotemporal terrain between sonic modernity and visual modernity: the crossroads of subjection and subjectivation” (50). In another chapter, he “hears” W. E. B. Dubois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) alongside the more contemporary practices of disc jockeying, positing both as “two central forms in sonic Afro-modernity” (73). Generally speaking, the first four chapters of *Phonographies* remain within the mix of black American literary and cultural production, but in the fifth chapter, “Sounding Diasporic Citizenship,” Weheliye reconfigures his analysis to think about “the fragmented and at times contentious communities enabled by the global circulation of African American popular music” (145). This final chapter resignifies aspects of Gilroy’s work in important ways, as will be discussed below.

Through historical analysis of sound technologies, Weheliye examines the politics of the concept of authenticity, specifically the relationship between authenticity and Enlightenment signifying structures. He investigates the interdependency of voice and writing in sound technologies. The visual, the *graph*, was (and persists as) the dominant cultural technology in the West. This preference for the graphic had “volatile consequences for the Afro-diasporic cultural constellation” since “sound necessitates transposition into writing to even register as technology” (24–25). Sound technologies, Weheliye argues, “split sounds from the sources that (re)produced them” and “created a glaring rupture

between sound and vision” (19, 29). This rupture produced anxieties about the power of the disembodied human voice. Weheliye turns to the early work of Jacques Derrida as a way to think through the power of the human voice. By modifying Derrida’s notion of the trace, of writing-as-absence, *Phonographies* clearly establishes how sound technologies created an anxiety about “speech as absence,” an anxiety that Weheliye links to perceptions and constructions of blackness that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. *Phonographies* thus argues that “the sounds of the phonograph had to necessarily be yoked to writing, otherwise the materiality and ‘iterability’ of the [black] voice would become all too audible” (30–31). This critical insight into the construction of blackness alongside emerging—and now established—sound technologies is one way that Weheliye extends the analysis of literary, cultural, and race studies.

Weheliye defines *Phonographies* in contradistinction to Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*. He asserts that Gilroy “glosses over the techne-logical aspects” of the sonic and does not fully assess the historical ramifications of the recording, reproducing, and distributing of black popular music. Weheliye focuses on the fact that Gilroy only examines the lyrics (the “graphical” aspect) and live performances of black popular music, never accounting for sound recording and reproduction. Highlighting Gilroy’s brief examination of the ways that sound technologies reorient notions of the local, Weheliye insists that “rather than erasing the local altogether” they changed how black popular music was consumed in specific geographic sites (21). But Gilroy’s notion that “black music cannot be reduced to a fixed dialogue between a thinking racial self and a stable racial community” is quite close to Weheliye’s notion of “splitting” and “interfacing” (110). Gilroy asserts that, “calls and response [i.e., live performances] no longer converge in the tidy patterns of secret, ethnically encoded dialogue” (110). Here Weheliye agrees with Gilroy, noting that: “sound technologies assured that local calls and responses would differ according to spatio-temporal coordinates” (21).

For Gilroy, music reorders Hegel to “express a direct image of the slaves’ will” by refusing the “categories on which the relative evaluation” of expressive cultural forms is based (74). Working out from the final chapter of Dubois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, “Sorrow Songs,” Gilroy argues that music archives and expresses the “topos of unsayability produced from the slaves’ experiences” (90). Gilroy’s concern here is that, despite the fact that the “calls” of the music have changed, the “structure of racial feeling” is retained and communicated. As Weheliye notes, music is of primary interest to Gilroy for “its ability to convey the horrors of slavery via its primarily nonrepresentational attributes” (20). For Gilroy, the “unsayable” is *only* the fact of the immediacy of performance. This is where *Phonographies*, by focusing on the technological (re)production of sound, breaks from *The Black Atlantic*. Weheliye argues that the immediacy of performance was replaced with an “audiovisual disjuncture” that engendered a “complex interfacing” of black music and sonic technologies. Weheliye sees this interface as *the* “venue for imagining and producing a variety of cultural practices” that constituted “sonic Afro-modernity” (19). He argues that the “splitting” and subsequent “interfacing” ushered in by sound technologies like the phonograph did not dematerialize but “rematerialize the sonic source” (20). Although the phonograph “rendered sound more ephemeral,” it also “afforded black cultural producers and consumers different means of staging time, space, and community” (20). Weheliye thus concludes that this split—this “radical reconstruction”—“created fresh cultural spheres” for black cultural production (20). He thus extends Gilroy’s discourse-defining argument by offering a necessary break from it. Gilroy’s sense of authenticity emerges from the notion that modern black popular music’s “source” will persist, but its reception—if not its meaning—might be lost; Weheliye, by focusing on technology, revises Gilroy’s concerns to suggest that what is not heard in Western, Enlightenment-signifying practices is both heard and produced in Afro-diasporic modernity.

The most important contribution of *Phonographies*, then, may be its attempt to establish sound as an alternative to linguistic-

and visual-based signifying systems through an examination of the place and function of (re)producible sound in black cultural production. As Weheliye notes, very much in the vein of Gates and Gilroy, “no Western modernity [exists] without (sonic) blackness” (20). Through theoretical exploration of writing’s function as the preeminent “recording technology” of the West, this project therefore assesses the ways that the sonic both exceeds and intersects with the graphic. Gilroy has examined music in relation to modernity, reception, and cultural production, arguing that “music can be used to challenge the privileged conceptions of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness” (74). Homi Bhabha has theorized the *graph*, noting how the space between the Saussurian signifier/signified “develops a *graphical historical* and cultural specificity in the *splitting* of the subject in its historical place of utterance” (66–67). Bhabha discusses this dynamic, this fact of modernity, as “time-lag,” a lag that, for Weheliye, marks the “node where the *phono* [the sonic] meets the *graph*” (23). This node is also the crossroads of subjectivity mentioned above in reference to Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and it is the place where Weheliye firmly locates his argument for resituating the sonic alongside the graphic in the study of Afro-diasporic cultural production.

Works Cited

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