Intro

It's Beginning to Feel Like . . .

Prolegomena Beginnings and introductions are occasions for sonic events or apparitions—and song intros are no exception: the soft, mid-tempo, yet insistent drum-machine rumblings and water tap sounds of Mtume's "Juicy Fruit" that prolong the wait for the grand entrance of the bass, especially in the extended twelve-inch version; the lengthy cinematic string section of Phantom/Ghost's "Perfect Lovers (Unperfect Love Mix)"; the looped invocations of "love ya babe" in conjunction with the crisp, syncopated snare drums and sampled bird sounds that introduce Aaliyah's "One in a Million." I could continue this list indefinitely, but I trust that you get the picture, or the sound as it were, of the allurements that lurk in the crevices of sonic beginnings, those sonorous marks that launch new worlds, holding out pleasures to come while also tendering futurity as such in their grooves. My all-time favorite in this category is Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes' "Wake Up Everybody," which gently burrows into the tympanum with its harp swooshes, a tambourine, and two different piano motifs, to then guide us into the pièce de resistance: a very subtle bass solo that never reappears in the duration of this 7:33-minute masterpiece. These fifteen seconds invite repetition by virtue of denying the listener recurrence and as a result haunt and shadow the remainder of the track, compelling him/her to return the needle to the first grooves of the record, rewind the tape,

or push the back button on the CD/MP3 player. Because these sounds defy reiteration in the musical text, they compel the listener to actively intervene in its structure via the tools of technological re/production, which in turn calls attention to their singularity and the singularity of all sounds. These resonant instigations also amplify the integral enmeshment of sound and technology in the modern era, underscoring some of the ways sound technologies are a vital element of the musical text rather than supplementary to its unfolding.

If the coexistence of the "human" with various "technological" structures and processes presents one of the central challenges of the contemporary world, then Afro-diasporic subjects and cultures surely form a crucial part of this mix. But perhaps we should begin differently, since this statement already assumes too much, or too little, depending on your viewpoint. It presumes that the human and the technological represent separate, if not antagonistic stable entities, which at this point, and perhaps always already, seems untenable, to say the least, given that one is hardly conceivable without the other. Why then does black cultural production still function as a convenient outside to this interface that will not quite listen to the catachrestic nominalism "cyborg"? For all intents and purposes, it seems to be a resolutely stubborn child. Recent debates about the "digital divide," while surely drawing much needed attention to certain politicoeconomic inequities, cannot but reinforce the idea that Afro-diasporic populations are inherently Luddite and therefore situated outside the bounds of Western modernity. Samuel R. Delany, for instance, distinguishes "the white boxes of computer technology" and "the black boxes of modern street technology." The former, particularly in the form of the Internet and World Wide Web, are deemed central to the techno-vanguard of a continually progressing machine, while the latter—sound technologies for instance—are not regarded as technological at all.[1] Too often this bifurcation locates black cultural production beyond the pale of what counts as technological in contemporary critical discourse. Routinely, most academic considerations of technology, especially those found in studies of cyberculture (where the term "digital divide" was coined) remain deaf to the sonic topographies of popular music, which is not surprising, given the general hegemony of vision that permeates Western modernity. Yet popular music offers one of the most fertile grounds for the dissemination and enculturation of digi-

tal and analog technologies and has done so at least since the invention of the phonograph at the close of the nineteenth century. Pop music also represents the arena in which black subjects have culturally engaged with these technoinformational flows, so that any consideration of digital space might do well to include the sonic in order to comprehend different modalities of digitalness, but also to not endlessly circulate and therefore solidify the presumed "digital divide" with all its attendant baggage.[2]

Phonographies hopes to circumvent and reroute this path by examining the numerous links and relays between twentieth-century black cultural production and sound technologies such as the phonograph and Walkman. Recognition of these connections will in turn lead us away from the assumption that black cultures are somehow pre- or antitechnological. That is not to suggest, however, that this project reduces black cultural production to an "objective" technological sphere; it is neither a strict history of black people's involvement in the processes of sound recording and reproduction nor a comprehensive survey of representations of sound recording and reproduction in black culture.[3] Rather, I assess specific instances in the technological and social histories of sound recording and reproduction as they cut across twentieth-century black cultural production in order to suggest that the interface of these two discourses provides a singular mode of (black) modernity.[4] *Phonographies* imagines not a strict historicist account of the interface between sound technologies and black culture but instead a conceptual intervention into the fields of African American studies, musical histories of the twentieth century, and cultural studies. Black culture's reciprocal engagement with sound technologies amplifies this formation's indicativeness of and centrality to modernity rather than affirming its status as a minor modernity or countermodernity.[5] That said, this modernity appears not as an overparticularized and identitarian minority configuration as much as modernity per se, which, although marked by certain particularisms (as all cultural formations are), cannot and should not be wholly contained by them. What is generally at stake are the fates of black sounds in the age of mechanical, electrical, and digital reproduction. And, while the appearance of the phonograph suggests the most obvious point of entry into "sonic Afro-modernity," given the clearly technological dimensions of this summit so central to twentieth-century global culture, we will have to cast a wider and differently tuned historical net that considers the vexed place of writing—both in a limited and general sense—and orality

vis-à-vis New World slavery, in order to come to grips with the singularity of black sounds as they ricochet between "humans" and modern informational technologies. The phonograph and other sound technologies in its wake offer prime loci from which to consider the ineluctable imbrication of black cultural formations with technology and Western modernity.

Although there exist many theories of modernity, three moments are commonly taken to be the grounds upon which this *longue durée* is erected: first, the beginnings of secularization in the Renaissance; second, the Enlightenment, as well as the rise of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century; and third, the proliferation of information technologies such as the phonograph, telegraph, telephone, and cinematograph at the end of the nineteenth century. All these prostheses of modern origins emphasize the ascent and proliferation of reason, secularization, progress, humanism, individualism, rationalization, industrialization, and so on.[6] Yet—as writers such as Walter Benjamin, Aimé Césaire, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Sylvia Wynter, to name but a few, have argued—slavery, colonialism, scientific racism, and the Holocaust are not, as has often been assumed, aberrations from the "higher" ideals of the modern but lie at its molten nucleus. In fact, these supposed archaisms provide the props, both conceptually and sociohistorically, upon which the hubristic edifices of unmitigated reason and progress rest, if uneasily so. Modern discourses and institutions have found it necessary to produce and project their own outsides in various guises—the contemporaneousness and codependency of industrialization and anthropology is a prima facie case in point—the primitive or insane serving as some obvious candidates.[7] Afro-diasporic subjects and blackness in general have had to bear the burden of being cast in the role of the other to Western modernity in numerous ways, heightening the bitter irony that marks the fractured dialectic of Enlightenment, since spatial proximity had to be compensated by a temporal displacement that deems blackness beyond the epistemological and ontological reach of the West even while this category is a fabrication of its discourses, practices, and institutions.[8] *Phonographies* surveys some of the mechanics by which (technosonic) blackness came to be fashioned as antithetical to modern structures, asking why it seemed, and in some ways still does seem, imperative to stress ad nauseam these anti- and/or premodern facets of black cultural production if, indeed, these

were thought to reside beside reason, progress, and rationality. Phrased differently, how does blackness operate paradoxically as both central to and outside of Western modernity? The node of black cultural practices and sound technologies acts as one of the chief areas for examining this conundrum in the twentieth century.

The sonic remains an important zone from and through which to theorize the fundamentality of Afro-diasporic formations to the currents of Western modernity, since this field remains, to put it bluntly, the principal modality in which Afro-diasporic cultures have been articulated—though clearly it has not been the only one. Consequently, it seems only fitting that I center my analysis on the cultural, political, economic, and epistemological complexities that ensue from the new-fangled technologization of black sounds beginning at the end of the nineteenth century. Even though my argument will most clearly be situated in the last of the three models for the origins of modernity (see the beginning of the preceding paragraph), I do not want to construct a decisive rift, choosing instead to trace the rhizomatic reverberations of sonic Afro-modernity through a variety of historicocultural patterns. For instance, the volatile liaison between racial formation and vision would not appear quite comprehensible without nods to the structuration of the scopic as the disembodied sense of reason par excellence since the Renaissance. Similarly, my discussion of race, writing, and difference draws on debates about the status of black subjects as (non)human in the Enlightenment and after.

At its broadest, *Phonographies* hopes to establish the centrality of both sonic blackness—here characterized as an unwieldy compound comprising all the discourses (black and nonblack) that imagine and circumscribe racial formation within Western modernity—and black culture (the totality of cultural marks produced by those who have been labeled and/or define themselves as black) to Western modernity. The very category "black" is an invention of Western modernity, which does not mean that it can be reduced to a mere colonialist imposition on empirically verifiable black beings that preexist this classification, but that this arrangement defies any sort of quasi comprehensibility, if it does so at all, outside the modern West. In this regard, Ronald Judy, in *(Dis)forming the American Canon*, makes an important intervention in the debates concerning the function of writing in the New World slave narrative.[9] Hitherto, critics have assumed that because of the interfacing and/or equating of writing with reason the slave narrative facilitated black

peoples' ingress to the domain of the human, since their ability to master alphabetic script proved their humanity. Judy, however, maintains that "the humanization in writing achieved in the slave narrative required the conversion of the incomprehensible African into the comprehensible Negro" (92). This subtle and supple syncopation of emphasis is vital because it does not suppose *the Negro* and *the African* to be fungible, even if they occupy the same continuum, while also making possible the conjecture that Afro-diasporic cultural formations are not intrinsically beside Western modernity. Instead, the argument magnifies the ways in which blackness becomes (il)legible from within this assemblage; paradoxically, this decipherability rests on the supposed externality of black culture to Western modernity, amplifying the manifold ways in which the inside always already discharges the outside and vice versa. Or, in Ralph Ellison's phrasing, "Black is . . . an' black ain't."[10] And while Judy is chiefly concerned with the figuration of "the Negro as a trope, indeed as a misapplied metaphor" (94) in the realm of the writing, my endeavor lies in scrutinizing the in/audibility of blackness in this field, which designates how blackness is sounded and heard by a whole range of cultural, philosophical, political, social, and economic discourses. What strikes the auditory apparatus via this line of inquiry is not so much a monolith of negritude as a series of compounded materiodiscursive echoes in and around black sounds in the West, what Edouard Glissant would call an opacity. In this way, the dub version or remix of blackness precedes and envelops both temporally and conceptually any putative original over the last hundred years or so; this is what I term "sonic Afro-modernity," no more, no less.

Prior to the twentieth century, orality and music served as the main modes of dissemination for New World black cultural productions. In the twentieth century, we see the indexing of music and orality in the aesthetic productions of major black authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, James Weldon Johnson, Paule Marshall, and Toni Morrison. In addition, black music from ragtime to hip-hop has enjoyed massive success on a global scale over the last century. The engagements with sound technologies are both an extension of and a divergence from these pre-twentieth-century musical and oral *technes*. While many studies of black culture and literature discuss the two concepts, these works frequently posit music and orality as static constants, mapping one particular form of music, such as the blues, onto all of black culture, or locating a pre-technological orality in black cultural history. As a result, these theo-

ries do not fully account for the overdetermined contingency of orality or particular genres of black music, and, most important, they seldom address their technicities. We find these complexities both in the continuities between nineteenth- and twentieth-century formations and in the ruptures created by modern sound technologies. The advent of technological sound recording embodied in the phonograph made it possible to split sounds from the sources that (re)produced them, creating differently pitched technological oralities and musicalities in twentieth-century black culture. In other words, oralities and musicalities were no longer tied to the immediate presence of human subjects, a situation that occasions not so much a complete disappearance of the human as much as a resounding through new styles of technological folding.

On the one hand, this (dis)juncture between sound and source rendered sound more ephemeral, since it failed to provide the listener with a "human" visual point of reference. On the other hand, sound gained its materiality in the technological apparatuses and the practices surrounding these devices and in the process rematerialized the human source. We should understand this disturbance of the alleged unity between sound and source not as an originary rupture but as a radical reformulation of their already vexed codependency, which retroactively calls attention to the ways in which any sound re/production is technological, whether it emanates from the horn of a phonograph, a musical score, or a human body. The singularity of the technological instantiation, however, does not remain the same. This interplay between the ephemerality of music (and/or the apparatus) and the materiality of the audio technologies/practices (and/or music) provides the central, nonsublatable tension at the core of sonic Afro-modernity.[11] The novel cleft between sound and source initiated by the technology of the phonograph in twentieth-century black culture supplies the grooves of sonic Afro-modernity. By drastically re/constructing the flow between sounds and an identifiable human source, the technology of the phonograph worried the complex intersection of orality, music, and writing. This joint proves particularly pertinent to black culture since music and orality carried a different weight in nineteenth-century African American culture. Because alphabetic script did not represent the primary mode of cultural transmission, the phonograph did not cause the same sorts of anxieties about the legibility of music as it did in mainstream American culture. Instead, black cultural producers and consumers productively engaged

the split between sound and source in order to create a variety of musics, literary texts, and films. The nexus of black culture and sonic technologies tenders notions of temporality, spatiality, and community unlike those that insist on linearity, progress, and the like, but without renouncing these *tout court*, thus enabling black subjects to structure and sound their positionalities within and against Western modernity. The chapters that follow isolate some major currents within sonic Afro-modernity that boost the ephemoromateriality of sound transmitted through technology and reveal how black cultural producers have created a plethora of practices and objets d'art that (re)mix the divide between the ephemerality and materiality of technologized sound in the twentieth century.

Surveying literary texts, films, and sound media that highlight the recording and reproduction of sonic material provides the occasion to explore the ways in which black culture has utilized and created the technological innovations that now characterize sound technologies' central features. I draw on these cultural representations, because sonic technologies and their attendant listening practices have received scant attention in analyses of black music or, until recently, of music in general. While some studies have begun to address the new technological developments and their cultural ramifications, few works thoroughly probe the explicit connection between black culture and developments in sound recording and reproduction.[12] My method, although situated within (black) cultural studies, is not beholden to one particular school of thought. As an alternative, I establish a dialogue between literary texts and current popular culture to conjecture how sonic technologies and black cultural production have fruitfully contaminated each other, analyzing specific musical practices and their technological (un)folding. *Phonographies* practices what I dub—with all its resonances of echo, delay, and Afro-diasporic studio tricknology—"thinking sound/sound thinking." This approach eschews a strict opposition between popular culture and canonical forms of cultural expression, without erasing their differing institutional articulations; it involves using the insights of each field to critically reconfigure the other. Like the practices of disc jockeys, it juxtaposes historically and formally (supposedly) disparate artifacts and methodological approaches to yield new meanings, intensities, and textures in the field of sonic Afro-modernity. This style of inquiry not only offers different modalities for probing the crosscurrents and dis-

continuities of twentieth-century black cultures as they intersect with the histories of sound technologies, but also, and perhaps more significantly, transacts different registers for apprehending modern cultural formations in the Western world (readers interested in a more elaborate discussion of these methodological questions might want to jump ahead to the outro).[13] Framed by this intro and the outro, the core of the book takes up specific concerns central to Western modernity (subjectivity, temporality, spatiality, and community) from the conceptual purview of sonic Afro-modernity, adding new interpretive layers to the initial argument instead of "applying" the theoretical insights developed at the onset. In short, this book elaborates both the black cultural specificities and general modern Western provenances of these patterns and asks whether the distinctions between the two are as steadfast as we would like or assume them to be.

Phonographies also contains substantial (re)readings of African American canonical texts by W. E. B. Du Bois and Ralph Ellison from a techno-auditory standpoint. Ellison has emerged as a central figure in the process of writing, since he, more than any other writer, engages the poetics of sonic Afro-modernity by returning time and again to questions of sound, technology, and (black) culture. My engagements with Ellison and Du Bois provide occasions from and through which to think and hear both lyrically and critically the three fields that form this book's core: sound, technology, and black culture. Just as important are the popular works of art and practices, which, on their own and in their interfacing with Ellison's and Du Bois's texts, form the other archive of this book. And while I am aware of the differential positions occupied by the bibliotheques and discotheques "out there," in here they meld into a splintered totality that cannot be encapsulated by either field separately. What is more, my analysis takes the purportedly ephemeral cases as seriously as those already enshrined in consecrated timelessness, insisting, as I mentioned above, on their singularity. Discussing popular culture only qua popular culture commonly leaves unsullied the orders of discourse that relegate noncanonical formations to the dustbin of "history" until they are excavated as important texts in the future at the same time as neglecting pop culture's constitutive conceptualness. In other words, *Phonographies* does not celebrate popular cultural resistance; nor does it scrutinize its ideological containment or hegemonic rearticulation. More exactly, I ask

what new modes of thinking, being, listening, and becoming, what Amiri Baraka terms "the flow of *is*," are set in motion by all the cultural idioms included here.[14] The answer: sonic Afro-modernity.

Since the Enlightenment, the sonic, especially in the form of music, has led a strange existence in the annals of Western thought, functioning concurrently as the most abjected and most exalted of the arts. Beginning with Plato, music was thought to have no significance without the accompaniment of words. Since sound by itself could only generate affect and not linguistic meaning, Plato and many after him feared the abandon and sensory pleasure derived from pure sonorousness.[15] During the "Ensoniment," however, music came to be heard as the most rarefied of the arts, but only insofar as it interfaced with the mathematicism of certain types of classical music that eschewed sensory pleasure and the body in favor of the "higher" regions of the mind; thus the idea of "absolute music" was born.[16] Yet, as many recent writers have pointed out, "absolute music" remains an impossibility due to the necessary material manifestation of any sound whether in human bodies, written scores, on phonograph records, compact discs, or MP3 files. But the phantoms of these post-Enlightenment discourses concerning music's asocial purity still indefatigably haunt both popular media and academic arguments.[17] What remains to be interrogated is the embodiment of sonic matter in a variety of forms without resorting to any a priori suppositions of the figuration these materialities will assume, if they do so at all. Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* remains an important text about the place of the sonic in Western culture(s) since the Middle Ages, even while it succumbs at points to an unnecessary economic functionalism. The gauntlet Attali has thrown before traditional musicology has found its most attentive listeners among academic and journalistic popular music critics, who have taken seriously the sociality of the auditory. For Attali, *pace* conventional musicology, the main factor in establishing an ontological rift between noise and music is culture, or rather the totality of a given sociohistorical formation. According to his argument, "we must learn to judge a society by its sounds, by its art, and by its festivals, [rather] than by its statistics," that is, by instigating a style of cultural analysis that carefully and boisterously lends its ear to the sounds produced within a sociohistorical context as well as their mutual enmeshment.[18] Attali tends to emphasize the primacy of the political and economic, especially in its determination of the aural; a shortcoming, to be

sure, but not so grave as to render his arguments useless. This obsession with the socioeconomic is most clearly articulated in the principal narrative of *Noise*, which begins with the sonic at the center of social life in the Middle Ages (here music serves as ritual sacrifice), moving to its abstraction from the quotidian and reification in scores and concert halls (Attali terms this the epoch of representation), followed by music's utter and devastating commodification at the hands of the recording industry (the age of repetition), culminating, finally, in an era of composition made possible by new sound technologies.

To any reader of Marxist theory this story of an Edenic and precapitalist world where the people fall from grace as they are colonized by capital and then only after a while reclaim their place in an utopian future hardly contains any surprises; we might even say that it is as comforting as a fairy tale. In each of these stages recounted by Attali—in a rather circular and perhaps even tautological fashion—the sonic simply mirrors/redacts the social contexts from which it initially welled up. To Attali's credit, he actually takes a slightly different stance, rendering music as prophetic of social formations rather than representing them a posteriori. This is a welcome change, even if it just reverses the order of things by positing the aural to herald future social and political constellations: "Music is prophecy. . . . [I]t makes audible the new world that will gradually become visible" (11).[19] At the very least, this puts a heavy burden on music while also making it a cog in a quasirepresentational apparatus. Perhaps we should tune Attali's interpretive framework to another pitch or dub his steady Marxist beat a bit by not reading the prophetic vicissitudes too literally, but keeping in play the imbrication of the social and the sonorous—what distinguishes noise from music in the first place. Put differently, maybe the sonic does not harbor so much a sheer image—its figuration as sound qua sound would in many ways preempt this pictorializing gesture—of what is to come as much as it renders futurity audible in its circumvention of strictly mimetic technes. In sonic Afro-modernity, sound, for a variety of social, ontological, historical, and aesthetic reasons (as a general rule, the *why* is never quite as important as the *how* here), holds out more flexible and future-directed provenances of black subjects' relation to and participation in the creation of Western modernity. I am by no means, at least not by any necessary ones, propagating a sonic idealism or hierarchy of the senses with their attendant structuration in the West since the Enlightenment, but instead welcome

Attali's challenge, albeit without resorting to the functionalism that intermittently mars *Noise*. What I take from Attali are the jerky perimeters of the noise/music bifurcation within modernity and black cultures' fundamental part in its fluctuation; as Attali himself observes, the global dominance of the recording industry was made possible by "the colonization of black music by the American industrial apparatus" (103). My argument versions Attali's work by hearing the flux of the world in the traffic between music and a variety of social formations, minus any representational or idealist guarantees, choosing instead to dwell on the singularity framed by their close encounters (of the third kind).

Chapter 1 of this book, "Hearing Sonic Afro-Modernity," commences with a discussion of recent theories of "minor" modernities as they interface with sonic technologies and follows with a short history of the phonograph. Then the argument turns to the thorny intersection of speech and writing—as framed by debates in African American literary studies and poststructuralist theory—to analyze how this bifurcation is both compounded and reframed by the technology of the phonograph. Relating these debates to a number of contemporary writings on race, modernity, and sound situates my concept of "sonic Afro-modernity" within a broad theoretical field. These thoughts are followed by a discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness as put forth in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). I scrutinize the role of vision and sound in the construction of modern black subjectivity, amplifying both the materiality of the visual by way of racial formation and suggesting different ways of combining the phono and the optic. Overall, I take the phonographic technologization of black music and speech not as an instance of "inauthenticity" but as a condition of (im)possibility for modern (black) cultural production.

"I Am I Be" (chapter 2) draws on the prologue of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) to query the vexed intersections of sound, technology, and black subjectivity in the twentieth century. I investigate how Ellison's nameless protagonist's subjectivity is framed by his engagement with Louis Armstrong's recording of "(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue." Ellison's insistence on sound and technology as forceful modalities in the construction of black selfhood suggests a path that circumvents, or at least refigures, the identity/subjectivity split by refusing to pit one against the other. Armstrong's voice on a phonograph provides an acoustic mirror for the protagonist's social invisibility and serves as

the structuring metaphor for the protagonist's subjectivity. The resulting increased technological audibility provides the necessary backdrop for the social invisibility of black subjects. The chapter then considers more generally how *identity*, as a particular, local, and minoritized category, is often construed against the *subject*, as its universal and disembodied other within academic discourse. Thus, the "sounds of blackness" articulated through constantly shifting sonic technologies represent a crucial signifying locus for the formation of (black) subjectivities throughout the twentieth century and help recalibrate the identity-subject gulf by calling attention to their mutual interreliance.

"In the Mix" (chapter 3) links the formal structure of W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* to the contemporary mixing practices of DJs. First, the argument returns to Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where he imagines history in the form of a groove inscribed on the surface of a phonograph record, offering a model of temporal change that "spins around" a linear and progressive version of history. Ellison's description of the "groove of history," I argue, locates black culture in the technologized sounds of the phonograph. Du Bois's text suggests a continuous mix of different genres and media (sociology, history, narrative fiction, poetry, and music). Moreover, the musical bars at the beginning of each chapter of *Souls*, quotations from the vast archive of spirituals, appear in the text not as accurate mimetic representations but as distorted, layered, lingering traces that disrupt the flow of words. "In the Mix" then surveys the history and mechanics of disc jockeying as an art form in contemporary (black) musical culture in order to conjecture how this practice is echoed in Du Bois's textual strategies and vice versa. My analysis shows that one of the major currents of sonic Afro-modernity is "the mix" as it appears in *Souls* and DJing, for it offers an aesthetic that realigns the temporalities (grooves) of Western modernity in its insistence on rupture and repetition. If, in Ellison, history appears in the form of a groove, then the mixing tactics of Du Bois and DJs provide ways to noisily bring together competing and complementary beats without sublating their tensions.

While the first three chapters dwell in the dominion of the primarily conceptual (and in some ways literary), the final two chapters draw on a more clearly discernable cultural studies approach, in part because the works discussed therein are not as well known as those central to the earlier arguments, so contextualization seems more paramount here. Nevertheless, I want to caution against the easy opposition of the "theo-

retical" and "cultural" that so often occurs in contemporary debates; rather, my approach queries the foundations upon which these distinctions are routinely administered. In other words, in the recent history of the Anglo-American humanities, "theory" and "cultural studies" designate not only two supposedly dissimilar ways of analyzing cultural objects and subjects but also two points in a fairly traditional narrative of supersession, where the more "empirical," "historical," "ethnographic," and so on discourse pays for the "sins" of its "abstract," "lofty," and "elitist" father (maternity—and this will come as no great surprise—remains absent in this context: papa's baby, mama's maybe). Now—according to this account—we are dealing with real people instead of intangible subjects, with politics and history (always functioning as the ultimate guarantors for the real) and not textuality or philosophy, or so we tell ourselves time and again. This story, taken at face value, frequently serves as a safeguard against various criticisms from outside the academy in the wake of the theoretical turn and the culture wars. It also makes "us" feel important, since we are now actually helping "the people" and not just onanistically relishing abstract otherworldly thought. But I have little tolerance for this line of thinking, given that it preempts inventive and idiosyncratic ideas and smuggles in an unarticulated positivism that calcifies how things are instead of imagining how they could be. Conversely, my patience is equally lacking (maybe my problem is that I just don't have enough patience) for the calls for a return to the heady days of "pure theory." *Phonographies* is very much a product of and in dialogue with both of these forces, and, while the chapter structure of this book might indicate a schizophrenic dualism, all the arguments reflect an engagement with a theoretically inflected (black) cultural studies, just differently so. In the end, I hope that readers will discern the cultural dimensions of the first three units and the theoretical spirits of the final chapters, as well as their complementary intersections.[20]

Chapter 4, "Consuming Sonic Technologies," considers Ralph Ellison's essay "Living with Music" (1955) and Darnell Martin's film *I Like It Like That* (1994). These texts exemplify how recorded music and its technological embodiment construct public and private spaces. Ellison's essay meticulously describes his living quarters in terms of the music that emanates from the apartments around him and the manner in which he uses recorded music (phonograph records on his sound system) to distinguish his space from that of his neighbors. Similarly, Lisette, the protagonist of

Martin's film, uses sonic technologies (boom box, radio, and Walkman) to create a space that simultaneously differentiates her from and links her to her family and neighbors. As these texts progress, both characters redefine themselves vis-à-vis their spatial and social surroundings through sound technologies. Where Ellison fetishizes the stereo equipment itself, Lisette deploys audio technologies to access sound and establish a zone of privacy. Still, both instances underscore the integrality of sound technologies in making and recasting modern urban geographies, while also highlighting how these spatialities are inflected by the history of technologies and gendered access to these apparatuses.

The final chapter represents an aberration of an aberration; fittingly it is also the longest of the five. Not only does "Sounding Diasporic Citizenship" focus narrowly on contemporary popular music in a cultural studies fashion; it also includes little deliberation on sonic technologies per se. What this chapter does in fact is zero in on the culturo-political practices initiated by sonic technologies. So, while its analysis of three contemporary Afro-diasporic musical acts—the Haitian and African American rap group the Fugees, the Afro- and Italian-German rap collective Advanced Chemistry, and the black British artist Tricky and his partner, Martina—does not concern itself with the specific machinations of recording and reproducing sonorous material, the very existence of these artists would not have been possible without the technological shifts discussed in the preceding chapters. I begin with a deliberation of current discussions of diaspora and citizenship, coming to the conclusion that both figurations are too narrow to contain the complexities of Afro-diasporic subjectivities. These forms of belonging also belie any easy invocations of hybridity as a cultural and political free-for-all, given that they direct attention to the difficult political, cultural, and affective labor involved in maintaining multifarious forms of association. Music as it is transmitted through different sound technologies provides alternative spaces for the articulation of "diasporic citizenship" and offers avenues for present-day black musical artists to envision and sound their multiple sites of political and cultural membership. The diasporic citizenships of these musical acts imagine black political and cultural subjectivities that encompass local/global and national/transnational affiliations through sonic technologies.

As a whole, my project examines particular instances in black culture that would have not been possible without sound recording and repro-

duction and their entanglement with the world at large. Yet, rather than merely seeing them as instances of commodification, I have chosen to focus on the conditions of im/possibility these technologies represent for twentieth-century black culture. The bulk of *Phonographies* builds its argumentative intensity by way of examples rather than by attempting any sort of comprehensive overview that assumes to uncritically represent the encased totality of a field already preestablished in "the real world." I cling to the importance of the example, since, as Giorgio Agamben explains, it enhances the singularity of the cases in question: "Neither particular nor universal, the example is a singular object that presents itself as such, that shows its singularity."[21] Insisting on singularity, and not, say, particularity and/or universality with reference to black cultural architectonics offers different styles for thinking this field, modes of inquiry that do not cast black culture as belated or dislocated from some general sphere of Western modernity. In general, my "method" is best described by what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari term *ritournelle*, a rhythmic pattern in a field of chaos, or rather the autopoetic vacillation of the universe. Translated as "the refrain," the ritournelle is for Deleuze and Guattari a "prism, a crystal of space-time. It acts upon that which surrounds it, sound or light, extracting from it various vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or transformations. The refrain also has a catalytic function."[22] The refrain is decisive for the phono-graphic unfolding and folding of this book, because it allows for theorizations from and with the sonic, while also underscoring the singularity of the subjects and objects under scrutiny.

Focusing on the conditions of im/possibility that these technologies engender for twentieth-century black culture and how black cultural sensibilities have shaped the history of sonic technologies accents the complicated rapport among sound, writing, orality, and technology in the twentieth century. Instead of emphasizing either the technological or the cultural, the grooves of sonic Afro-modernity integrate both. *Phonographies* acknowledges the technological mediation of black popular music in the twentieth century but does not relegate these practices to the apparatus itself, at least not any notion thereof in which technology's materiality remains anterior to or outside of the machinations of (black) culture. The grooves of sonic Afro-modernity can be found in the spaces and times between technological change and a variety of cultural practices, and the interplay between the hard- and software poignantly en-

codes the competing notions of subjectivity, temporality, spatiality, and community without dissolving them.

Post Script Let us return for a moment to the planet of popular music, if you will permit me to indulge in a further instance of "high-fidelity-ism" before we begin "properly."[23] One of my favorite songs over the last year has been a recording by British R&B girl-group Mis-Teeq. The refrain of this song repeats the phrase "It's beginning to feel like."[24] Of course, what it is beginning to feel like is *love*, the central topos of R&B and perhaps all popular music. Yet, when the lead singer utters the L-word the background harmonies contrapuntally interrupt and/or augment the central voice with the following lines: "Like the sun on my skin on a hot summer's day / Like a song in my head that won't go away / Like a smile on my face coz you make me happy / Ohhh." Here, *love* is indefinitely postponed both sonically and linguistically, lingering in the quagmire of simile and creating aural ellipses by making language stutter (as Nathaniel Mackey and Gilles Deleuze remind us).[25] This musical example, along with the ones invoked earlier, provide fragile complexities from which academic discourses can learn a thing or three, even though there does not seem to be a need to treat academic language and pop culture all that differently. While I surely cannot claim creating something as majestic as Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff's work with Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes on "Wake Up Everybody," or Mis-Teeq's rigorous vocal acrobatics, I take these sonoric flickers as inspirations, since they make perceptible singulars that only signify in their "poetics of relation" to other sounds and matters.[26] A literary approximation of these instances appears in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "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" (9). These lines from Ellison appear, disappear, and rematerialize throughout *Phonographies* as epigraphs, mantras, choruses, or refrains, to heighten the texturality and intensity of my contentions (and to remind myself of the pleasures, responsibilities, and dangers attached to this gliding), honing in on singular temporospatial nodes found in the tumultuous relationship between black cultural production and sound technologies in the streams of the twentieth century, an intimate affair, to be sure, one marked by both soft screams and loud whispers.