Abstract

This paper focuses on Invisible Man (1952) by Ralph Ellison in order to analyse voice, voicelessness and silence as structuring components in the formation of subjectivity. The essay argues that the incongruity between voice and gaze shapes how an individual subject formulates, fantasizes, and interacts with other subjects as well as with culturally framed ideologies. I propose that the constantly shifting fissure between voice and gaze both contributes to the formation of subaltern otherness and serves as a source of subversive individual/communitarian agency. Building on Slavoj Žižek’s and Mladen Dolar’s Lacanian approaches to objects of desire and fantasizing, I analyse the role of the voice in the construction of cultural otherness and agency, and identify the voice as inherently connected to the ways subjects distinguish between the real and the phantasmatic. Drawing on both Mary Louise Pratt’s formulation of “contact zones” and Sara Ahmed’s theory of affect to supplement my analysis of how the moments of fissure between voice and gaze highlight complex issues of generational and racial disruption that inform the process of cultural interaction.

Introduction

Psychoanalytic criticism has frequently placed the focus on the function of voice and gaze as partial objects in literary texts. Critical study of the relationships between partial objects and narratives reflects the potential inherent in the examination of the role of voice and gaze in subject formation. This article focuses on the interactions of narrative elements
and psychological mechanisms within the literary medium. The notion of voice – as an elusive and paradoxical point of convergence between the physical body and the linguistic structure – is one such interaction and a recurrent motif in American literature. If one were in need of another canonical example in which the object voice acts as an ambiguous locus of subjectivity in the American narrative tradition, Herman Melville’s Bartleby’s iconic utterance of passive resistance would come to mind as a pivotal point in the literary representation of vocal agency.

This paper turns to a foundational novel by the African American writer Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952), to examine voice, voicelessness and silence as active structuring components in the formation of subjectivity. To identify the role of the voice in the construction of cultural otherness and agency, I want to engage with Ellison’s work by looking at specific moments of storytelling, public speaking, and internal monologue. These, I shall be arguing, allow for an analysis of the voice as inherently connected to the ways subjects distinguish between the real and the phantasmatic. The novel sets up the fissured relationship between the gaze and the voice in order to trace the formation and preservation of cultural and sociopolitical difference and otherness. I argue that this incongruous relationship shapes the formation of culturally-conscious subjectivity and agency in *Invisible Man*. Through the lens of Slavoj Žižek’s and Dolar’s Lacanian formulation of fantasizing and objects of desire, this paper appraises the dynamics and articulates the potential sources of individual agency in Ellison’s renderings of the voice.

**African-American subjectivity in the 1940s and 50s**

The construction of a strong, regenerative and unique voice for the African-American subject in *Invisible Man* is intrinsically linked to the novel’s capacity to convey the changing relationship between individual and social agency which shapes the African-American experience of the 1940s and 50s. In his 1981 “Introduction” Ellison noted that, as an imaginative manipulation of the possibilities to be found in “Afro-American personality and in the restricted structure of American society”,

**Invisible Man**