

Narrative, Power Politics, and the Emergence of the Black Mass Sphere in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947) is the story of an anonymous, young Black protagonist's geographical and psychological journey to fulfill a desire to become a Black leader and his ultimate failure to do so. Because of his oratory talent, the protagonist gains the opportunity to become a Black leader; in the end, however, he discovers his own invisibility in American society. Secluding himself in the underground, the protagonist narrates how he became aware of his "invisibility." In his introduction to the 1981 edition, Ellison described the protagonist as a "blues-toned laughter-at-wounds who included himself in his indictment of the human condition" (xviii).

The protagonist is placed in a conflicting zone between the spheres of Black leadership and the Black masses. In *Invisible Man*, Black leadership connotes two aspects: politics and ideologies. The politics of Black leadership is encapsulated in the character of Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the fictitious Black college. Since Reconstruction, the training of Black elites had been "based on the model of privileged, White educational institutions" (James, 16), which denied the world of the Black masses. Southern racial politics in Black higher education takes the form of Dr. Bledsoe's unconditional compliance with White influential figures, which leads to his merciless expulsion of the protagonist because he "ruins" the racial image by showing the White director, Mr. Norton, the world of uneducated local Blacks. Like its politics, the ideologies of Black leadership are incompatible with the interests of the Black masses.

As a writer, Ellison refused to write propaganda since he was convinced that no specific ideology could "explore the full range of American Negro humanity" and "affirm those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous condition of servitude" (*Shadow and Act*, 17). In *Invisible Man*, the Brotherhood measures Blacks' lives with its specific social science, which coincides with Marxism and denies the diversity of Black lives. Also, the other ideology, Ras's Black nationalism, idealizes Africa as African Americans' spiritual root and, therefore, ignores the long history they have experienced in America. Throughout the novel, the protagonist travels between these two irreconcilable spheres, and in the end he chooses to shut himself away, an underground dweller.

In this article, I explore Ellison's representation of these two Black spheres and argue how they affect the protagonist's identity politics, leading him to become aware of his own "invisibility."

Ellison's Representation of Black Leadership

In *Invisible Man*, the ideology espoused by discourses on Black leadership shape the protagonist's identity. Going through the physical and psychological journey to become a Black leader, the protagonist reaches the conclusion that he is an "invisible man" because the

discourses of Black leadership “force [their] picture of reality upon [him] and neither [give] a hot in hell for how things looked to [him]” (508).

The ambitious, young Black protagonist’s journey begins with a painful acknowledgement of African Americans’ position in American society. At the beginning of the novel, he is given a “passport” to become a Black leader, prompted by his high school graduation speech, which overlaps Booker T. Washington’s compromise speech in Atlanta. When the protagonist speaks of “social equality,” instead of “social responsibility” (31), before the local southern figures of influence, the tension suddenly heightens. Subsequently, however, he is coerced to admit his “mistake,” a foreshadowing of the difficulties he will face as he strives to assume the mantle of a Black leader. Washington’s thoughts on African Americans’ racial uplift was a well-accepted concept of Black leadership in post-Reconstruction America because it supported a system that never surpassed White supremacy. By admitting the “mistake” of having claimed racial equality, the protagonist wins a scholarship to study at a southern Black college, a sphere that fosters future Black leaders.

Ellison’s experience at Tuskegee is reflected in his representation of the college. In 1933, Ellison entered Tuskegee Institute, founded by Washington, to study classical music, although he was equally skilled as a jazz trumpeter (Sundquist, 7). Lawrence Jackson refers to Robert Russa Moton, president of the college while Ellison was in attendance, as “a monument to the strategies of gradualism and accommodation” (Jackson, 101). Jackson, with his “unswerving faith in the path laid down by the Founder” (Jackson, 101), is representative of the Black college executives’ blind loyalty to the Founder in *Invisible Man*. The music and literary education Ellison received in the early 1930s at Tuskegee prompted his assimilation into a White-centered American elitism that inevitably led to the denial of his Black cultural heritage (Jackson, 100-110). Tuskegee Institute was initially founded as a vocational training institution for African Americans, and Washington insisted that his educational purpose was “to teach [African Americans] respect for labor; to replace stupid drudgery with skilled hands” (Jackson, 34), which supported a White-centered American democracy and its industrialism, implying two contradictory systems: (1) the institution of slavery and racial segregation in the postbellum South and (2) the ideal of Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence,” which loudly proclaimed all humans equal.

Tuskegee’s purpose lay in producing Black laborers who would contribute to American industrial society, not in the reform of existing racial inequality. In *Invisible Man*, the bronze statue of the college’s founder and a kneeling slave represent Washington’s statue at Tuskegee. The protagonist’s suspicion about the college’s founder is revealed by his ambiguous interpretation of this statue: he is “unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether [he is] witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding” (36). The metaphor of the veil represents African Americans’ psychological confinement to Anglo-Americans’ fantasy of “Blackness.” Ellison related that White Americans’ “fascination of Blackness” veiled “the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign” (*Shadow and Act*, 49), which inevitably led to their dehumanization.

Dr. Bledsoe, the Black president of the college, embodies the racial politics in Black higher education. He behaves like a humble servant before White influential figures. He implicitly represents Washington, who expanded the Tuskegee network in both the academic and political fields and mercilessly expelled African-American intellectuals who opposed his policies (Harlan, 3-5). Dr. Bledsoe, who rose in the world with a subordinate attitude that never threatened the existing racial power politics, says to the protagonist, “You’re Black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?” (139). John F. Callahan writes that the protagonist learns that the secret to success as a Black leader is dependent upon shuttering “the gates of self—for both speaker and audience—against terrors of the unexpected, the tabooed” (Callahan, 116). Dr. Bledsoe never reveals his true intention. His interest lies in his success in a world that fundamentally denies his race, which results in a distorted racial self-loathing. He expels the protagonist from the college as “punishment” for exposing the White philanthropist, Mr. Norton, to the world of the neighboring Blacks, which he rejects.

Ellison depicts Mr. Norton as the typical model of White hypocrisy. He indulges himself in a fantasy of omnipotence in which he can control the destinies of Blacks. By recommending that the protagonist read Ralph W. Emerson’s works, Mr. Norton believes that Western Enlightenment releases African Americans from their “ignorant” state. Here, the irony is not lost. Despite his egalitarianism, which was influential to the abolitionist movement, Emerson believed that each race “grew as its genius determines, some to triumph and some to annihilation and all other races were temporary beings destined to serve the Saxon” (Lee, 333). Moreover, Robin D. G. Kelley comments that “modern racism is one of the ‘gifts’ of the Enlightenment” and that “the expansion of slavery and genocidal wars against non-European peoples” occurred with “bourgeois democratic revolutions that gave birth to the concept that liberty and freedom are inalienable rights” (Kelley, 107).

The racial politics surrounding the Black higher education system emerge in Reverend Homer Barbee’s sermon. Barbee’s sermon about the Founder’s legendary life creates the sphere within which the college’s core principle is revived. In his sermon, Barbee follows Black English oral tradition, combining the rhetoric of Call/Response and Witness/Testify, which are “cultural ritual[s] that [promote] solidarity and cohesion, creating a living archive of African American culture” (Atkinson, 23). The Call/Response structure enables preachers to give their audience a space for “a communal voice,” which creates “the possibility of self-definition through community articulation” (Rice, 17). However, Barbee’s heroic story of the Founder functions as propaganda that encourages the students to pledge their loyalty to Black elitism, not to the Black masses. In his sermon, the Founder’s diligent and self-reliant personality is extremely idealized and his death is deified, which correlates with Christ’s death and revival:

[The Blacks] felt the dark night of slavery settling once more upon them. They smelted that old obscene stink of darkness, that old slavery smell, worse than the rank halitosis of hoary death. . . . But think of [the Founder’s death] not as a death, but as a birth. A great seed had been planted. A seed which has continued to put forth its fruit in its season as

surely as if the great creator had been resurrected. For in a sense he was, if not in the flesh, in the spirit. And in a sense in the flesh too. For has not your present leader become his living agent, his physical presence (131-132)?

The deified image of the Founder can be defined as what Houston A. Baker, Jr., calls “nostalgia.” As Baker says, “[Black] modernity is figured in the textual and textual interweaving of nostalgia and critical memory” (Baker, 8). He writes that “only a beautiful reasonableness of future expectations can nostalgically write the past” (Baker, 8) and that this optimism leads to “the primary scene of Black conservative modernity” without “the noise or even a fleeting memory of the Black masses” (Baker, 8), which “critical memory” presents.

Barbee’s nostalgic sermon promotes what Baker calls “exclusively middle class beautification of history” (Baker, 8). Barbee sows Black conservative propaganda in the students’ minds and requires them to emulate Dr. Bledsoe’s conformity, saying, “[Dr. Bledsoe] is a form of greatness worthy of your imitation. I say to you, pattern yourselves upon him” (133). Barbee implants what Angela Davis calls “Booker T. Washington syndrome” (Davis, 92) in the students. Reminiscing on her childhood education in the early 1950s South, Davis writes that this “syndrome” requires excessive effort and sacrifice on the part of African Americans to attain middle-class status, which makes social obstacles gnawing at Black lives invisible as “part of the natural order of things, rather than the product of a system of racism” (Davis, 92). This results in verifying White prejudice against African-American “laziness” and producing a racial self-loathing in Blacks due to their oppressed conditions.

However, by exposing Barbee’s blindness, Ellison reveals the trick in Barbee’s sermon, which relies on what he “witnessed.” As Washington committed himself to Black elites and took a dim view of working-class leaders (Harlan, 10), Barbee’s nostalgic past delegates the poor Black neighbors to the invisible sphere. Ellison points to the episode in which the college attempts to remove the local peasant’s, Trueblood’s, household lest the man’s incest be exposed to the White philanthropists. In *Invisible Man*, the Black college creates a politics of Black leadership that is completely separate from the interests of the Black masses.

Baker’s concept of nostalgia leads to discourse on Ras’s Black nationalism and ideology. With his oratory, Ras emerges as the protagonist’s rival, who becomes the representative of the Brotherhood, a racially integrated, secret political society. Ras’s character overlaps that of Marcus Garvey, a charismatic, Jamaican-born political leader who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), an organization that launched the “return to Africa” movement in the 1920s. Garvey saw African Americans’ cultural identity essentially as African and advocated the Black separatist philosophy of “Africa for the Africans.” Like Garvey, Ras romanticizes Africa as African Americans’ root, saying, “Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these White men brother? . . . We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You Black, BLACK! . . . You African. AFRICAN” (370-371)! As he claims his “Africaness” in “the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain” (556), Ras upholds Africa as the utopia that unites all Blacks. However, his “nostalgic” view of Africa denies the harsh history of Blacks in America,

and, in this point, Ras's ideology correlates to the politics of Black elitism. The difference is that Ras sees the possibility of Black leadership in the return to Africa, while the Black elites pursue their success in a White-centered America.

The Brotherhood's dogmatic belief in the "scientific" approach to human history and society also indicates what Baker calls "nostalgia." Eric J. Sundquist comments that the Brotherhood's "scientific" view derives from Marxist theories that explain social/cultural relations strictly in terms of the world's economic structure (Sundquist, 194). The protagonist's involvement in the Brotherhood reflects Black political leaders' involvement in the Communist Party in the 1930s and 1940s, placing their faith in "the only predominantly White organization willing to fight for racial equality" (Sundquist, 193). In fact, Ellison was sympathetic to the goal of the Communist Party at the beginning. However, he never became an official member, and by the early 1940s, he marked "his intellectual distance from those thinkers and writers who, in his view, sacrificed creativity to narrow ideology" (Sundquist, 8). Like the Black college's elitism and Ras's Afrocentrism, the Brotherhood's "science" as an ideology causes the rupture between the protagonist and the Black masses in Harlem because it ignores the elements that shape their daily lives and interests. The Brotherhood's nostalgia for Marx's "scientific" ideology marginalizes the lives of the Black masses that do not fit in its "science" and justifies the victimization of individuals for the organization's aims. As Brother Jack says to the protagonist, "We are forced to think of the organization at the expense of our personal feelings. The Brotherhood is bigger than all of us" (405).

Ellison's Representation of the Black Mass Sphere

Although the text of *Invisible Man* is haunted by the exclusive nostalgia of Black elitism, Ellison reiteratively interpolates the Black folks' sphere as its counterpart. Voices of nameless Blacks reveal what James A. Snead calls "cut," a rupture in the linear smoothness of discourses on Black leadership.

A culture based on the idea of the "cut" will always suffer in a society whose dominant idea is material progress—but "cuts" possess their charm! . . . European culture does not allow "a succession of accidents and surprises" but instead maintains the illusions of progression and control at all costs. Black culture, in the "cut," builds "accidents" into its coverage, almost as if to control their unpredictability. Itself a kind of cultural coverage, this magic of the "cut" attempts to confront accident and rupture not by covering them over but by making room for them inside the system itself (Snead, 69-70).

As Snead argues, the "cut" in Black culture reveals the bounds of linear progression, which Reverend Barbee's sermon, Ras's agitation, and the Brotherhood's ideology represent. For example, the blackguard bar, the Golden Day, emerges as the "cut" in the discourse on Black leadership. There, an insane alumnus, a former doctor, criticizes the college's hypocrisy and

confesses that his education did not give him dignity as a human being (93). The voices of the Golden Day function as an admonition to the protagonist, revealing the “cut” of Black leadership’s progressive ideology. During his journey to New York following his expulsion from the college, the protagonist is advised by a former soldier who frequents the bar to see the world with his own eyes, not with the eyes of others: “Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you’ll discover it” (156).

In addition to the voices from the Golden Day, Ellison uses music as “the cut,” which reveals African-American wisdom in surviving hardships. In *Living with Music*, Ellison defines blues music as follows:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness [emphasis added], to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically (103).

Ellison says that the blues functions as a tool for transcending hardships by accepting them as they are. Trueblood’s narrative conspicuously indicates his interpretation of blues:

I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singin’. I don’t mean to. I didn’t think ‘bout it, just start singin’. I don’t know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I ends up singin’ the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain’t never been sang before, and while I’m singin’ them blues I makes up my mind that I ain’t nobody but myself and ain’t nothin’ I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen [emphasis added]. I made up my mind that I was goin’ back home and face Kate; yeah, and face Matty Lou too (66).

The blues leads to Trueblood’s decision to live with the sin of his incest. Ellison dares to abandon his omnipotent narrative and allows a minor character like Trueblood to narrate his life story. In this scene, Ellison creates a space for the nameless Black masses that Trueblood embodies, revealing the “cut” as a rupture of the lineally progressive ideology of Black leadership. Trueblood’s blues overlaps Ellison’s view of blues as a symbol of African-American survival: blues “at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self” (*Shadow and Act*, 94). Trueblood’s narrative shows the protagonist Black folks’ historical survival against a binary standard of value between good and evil, which he later acquires at the end of the novel.

In the prologue, Ellison uses blues as an entrance into African Americans’ collective memory. In the underground, the protagonist listens to Louis Armstrong’s jazz piece “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue,” which is one of the first overt instances of racial protest in

American popular music (Razaf, 115). Armstrong's lyrics describe African Americans' agony of being judged by skin color: "All my life through, I've been so Black and blue... My only sin is in my skin." Armstrong's performance leads the protagonist to what Snead calls "cut," as he traces back to slavery in his imagination. Indeed, the protagonist's personal story reflects the collective experience of his race in White America. In the "cut," as Armstrong's music begins, the protagonist hears an old former slave woman singing a spiritual and sees the image of a naked, ebony-colored girl on whom others are bidding. Then he hears the sermon of "Blackness of Blackness" (9), which takes the form of Call/Response. The multiple Black voices shout in enthusiasm:

"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 darkness..."
 "Black will make you..."
 "Black..."
 "...or Black will un-make you."
 "Ain't it the truth, Lawd?" (10)

In the sermon, Blackness is defined as both presence and absence. Blackness can efface African-American existence with its "most Blackness," and at the same time it makes them conspicuous with its extreme Blackness, just like the protagonist's black skin in the extreme light around the walls of the underground. The inscrutableness and confusion of the sermon itself conjure the old former slave woman's "voice of trombone timbre" (10). She confesses conflicted emotions to her master, who raped her, about bearing his children: "and because I loved my sons I learned to love their father though I hated him too" (10). The voices from the "cut" represent the historical ambiguity that has haunted African-American identity politics. Amiri Baraka states that "foreignness of African culture" (Baraka, 7) in antebellum America brought about serious self-alienation to American-born Blacks and adds, "The only way of life these children knew was the accursed thing they had been born into" (Baraka, 13). This condition allows their voices to emerge, and the narrative ambiguity that results mixes with the protagonist's acknowledgement of his own "invisibility": "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3).

Transition of the Protagonist's Narrative

Throughout the novel, the protagonist is suspended in a dilemma between the sphere of Black leadership and that of the Black masses. Until being expelled from the college, the

protagonist's narrative reflects typical Black elitism. He believes in the idea of African Americans' linear progression based on assimilation into White society, and he has little sympathy for the poor neighboring Blacks. In the opening of the novel, he is embarrassed by "the earthy harmonies" (47) of the local peasants' spiritual, which reminds him of his family in the South. His psychology is racially uprooted, thus pushing him into a state of self-alienation.

In New York, the protagonist first encounters Ras cursing Whites on the street. "I was puzzled, both by the effect of his voice upon me and by the obvious anger of the crowd. I had never seen so many Black men angry in public before" (160). When the protagonist begins to understand that Blacks are allowed to express themselves in public, the protagonist indulges himself in the fantasy of becoming an orator. "I imagined myself making a speech and caught in striking poses by flashing cameras, snapped at the end of some period of dazzling eloquence" (164). His migration to New York enables him to consider this possibility, and his desire stems from anger over Dr. Bledsoe's betrayal:

One moment I believed, I was dedicated, willing to lie on the blazing coals, do anything to attain a position on the campus—then snap! It was done with, finished, through. Now there was only the problem of forgetting it. If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison, whatever it was I wouldn't care as long as they sang without dissonance; yes, and avoided the uncertain extremes of the scale. But there was no relief. I was wild with resentment but too much under "self-control," that frozen virtue, that freezing vice. *And the more resentful I became, the more my old urge to make speeches returned* [emphasis added] (259).

The protagonist's desire to become an orator initially points to a wish to seek revenge against the hypocritical Black elitism that Dr. Bledsoe's merciless treatment embodies. Despite his social success as president of a Black college, Dr. Bledsoe follows the unfulfilled hopes inherent in Whites' historical betrayal against Blacks. However, even with his vehement fury against Dr. Bledsoe's insidious betrayal, the protagonist is haunted by "the contradictory voices" that echo the ambiguous Black narratives in the prologue. In the pre-Civil Rights Era, African Americans' upward mobility was attained at the expense of their racial self-denial and subsequent self-alienation. Facing Dr. Bledsoe's betrayal, which victimized individuals for the benefit of an organization that controls White supremacy politics, the protagonist's naïve faith in Black leadership crumbles. His drive for speech initially stems from anger that he cannot control his own life, which inevitably results in his sympathy for oppressed Blacks. As he perceives the link between his fury and his desire to proclaim himself in public, he encounters an old Black couple who were heartlessly evicted from their apartment. Feeling sympathy for them, the protagonist impulsively begins to speak on the street, claiming that the old couple's tragedy is a prime example of African Americans, victimization, citing himself as another example.

Look at them, they look like my mama and my papa and my grandma and grandpa, and I look like you and you look like me. . . What's happened to them? They're our people, your people and mine, your parents and mine. What's happened to 'em (278)?

This speech serves as a turning point in the story, and the protagonist is recruited as a member of the Brotherhood and given the opportunity to become a Black spokesman. While the protagonist fulfills his duty to promote the Brotherhood's propaganda, he is awakened to his new identity as a representative of the Black masses and impulsively confesses his personal pleasure:

My voice fell to a husky whisper, "I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human. Do you understand? More human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human. . . No, wait, let me confess...I feel the urge to affirm my feelings... I feel that here, after a long and desperate and uncommonly blind journey, I have come home... Home! With your eyes upon me I feel that I've found my true family! My true people! My true country! I am a new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land (346).

Applause from the audience gives him the space to claim his humanity. Then the protagonist makes the firm decision to succeed as a Black leader. "I saw no limits, [the Brotherhood] was the only organization in the whole country in which I could reach the very top and I meant to get there" (380).

However, the Brotherhood does not offer the protagonist the opportunity to become intimate with the Black masses. His narrative is now controlled by the organization's "scientific" ideology, with which he is totally unfamiliar. Moreover, his comrade, Tod Clifton, confesses his desire to fall outside of the Brotherhood's "history" (434). Soon after leaving the Brotherhood, Clifton emerges as a vendor selling paper Sambo dolls, which are the ultimate manifestation of Black stereotypes. The grinning, dancing doll without strings ominously symbolizes the protagonist's position within the politics of Black leadership (*i.e.*, the Black college and the Brotherhood). Although he struggles to attain his status as a Black leader, his will as an individual has been exploited by the politics of both organizations. When he believes that the Brotherhood is the only place that Blacks "could . . . make [themselves] known, could . . . avoid being empty Sambo dolls" (434), the protagonist fails to see that Black leadership is under White control. Dr. Bledsoe's absence of expression corresponds to Sambo's "mask-like face" (431), which tacitly follows the dehumanizing norm that defines Blackness as blankness. Clifton's mimicry of Black leadership results in his death by police's brutality. Witnessing Clifton's death, the protagonist first reconsiders the reliability of the Brotherhood's "history," in which he has believed blindly:

All things, it is said, are duly recorded—all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and *only those events that the*

recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by [emphasis added]. But the cop would be Clifton's historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the watching crowd. And I, the only witness for the defense, knew neither the extent of his guilt nor the nature of his crime. Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down (439)?

The protagonist notices that the Brotherhood's "science" fails to grasp that the entire world and existing history are nothing but documents written for the benefit of those with power. "What did [historians] ever think of us transitory ones? One such as I had been before I found Brotherhood" (439). Clifton's senseless death emerges as the "cut" of the linear progression of the Brotherhood's "history." Then, from the "cut," the protagonist first recognizes the existence of the nameless Black masses. "I looked into the design of their faces, hardly a one that was unlike someone I'd known down South" (443). "A languish blues" (443) being played on the street represents their lives deleted from the politics of Black leadership, and the protagonist wonders if people outside the "history" can be "the saviors, the true leaders, and bearers of something precious" (441). The "languish blues" as the voice of the Black community culminates in a nameless old man's spiritual at Clifton's funeral. His song explores the Black masses' humanity, which was fostered during their long history in America.

It was as though the song had been there all the time and he knew it and aroused it; and I knew that I had known it too and had failed to release it out of a vague, nameless shame or fear. But he had known and aroused it. . . I looked at the coffin and the marchers, listening to them, and yet realizing that I was listening within myself, and for a second I heard the shattering stroke of my heart. . . They had touched upon something deeper than protest, or religion; though now images of all the church meetings of my life welled up within me with much suppressed and forgotten anger. . . It was not the words, for they were all the same old slave-borne words; it was as though he'd changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sounded above, now deepened by that something for which the theory of Brotherhood had given me no name (453).

The old man's spiritual reveals what Ellison calls "Negro American consciousness" (*Shadow and Act*, 124). Like Trueblood's blues, the spiritual accepts the conditions of African Americans' lives beyond their "tragic" socio-scientific interpretations. The old man's voice emerges deep from within a collective racial memory, and his timbre adds new meaning to the familiar words of the song. His improvisation ritually provides space for Clifton's death in a comprehensive racial memory missing from the "history." The old man's timbre de-authorizes logo-centricity, which diminishes multi-layered Black voices in such a limited ideology, such as the Brotherhood's "science." The spiritual leads the protagonist to find the voice to narrate Clifton's life and death. His funeral speech relies on what Baker defines as "critical memory,"

which “illustrate[s] the community-interested politics of Black publicity” (Baker, 8). The protagonist reiterates how Clifton’s life should be recorded in “history” to reveal his “invisibility” in White America:

Very well, so I’ll tell you. His name was Clifton and he was young and he was a leader and when he fell there was a hole in the heel of his sock and when he stretched forward he seemed not as tall as when he stood. So he died; and we who loved him are gathered here to mourn him. It’s as simple as that and as short as that. His name was Clifton and he was Black and they shot him. Isn’t that enough to tell? Isn’t it all you need to know? Isn’t that enough to appease your thirst for drama and send you home to sleep it off? Go take a drink and forget it. Or read it in the *Daily News*. His name was Clifton and they shot him, and I was there to see him fall. So I know it as I know it (456).

By refusing to romanticize Clifton’s death, the protagonist’s speech makes a striking contrast to Barbee’s “nostalgia” of the Founder’s linear progression as a Black leader. He simply discloses the way Blacks as a racial group have been recorded in the “official” history by repeating a monolithic depiction of Clifton’s death.

Against the Western model of linear progression, the protagonist’s funeral speech takes the form of what Snead calls the repetitive view of history in Black culture. Snead writes, “Black culture highlights the observance of such repetition, often in homage to an original generative instance or act” (Snead, 68). He explains the repetition in Black cultural performances:

Repetition in Black culture finds its most characteristic shape in performance: rhythm in music, dance and language. . . Repetitive words and rhythms have long been recognized as a focal constituent of African music and its American descendants—slave-songs, blues, spirituals and jazz. . . The fact that repetition in some sense is the principle of organization shows the desire to rely upon “the thing that is there to pick up.” Progress in the sense of “avoidance of repetition” would at once sabotage such an effort. Without an organizing principle of repetition, true improvisation would be impossible, since an improviser relies upon the ongoing recurrence of the beat (Snead, 70).

Snead explains that repetition is the indispensable element of Black cultural performance, and improvisation relies heavily on it. At Clifton’s funeral, the protagonist abandons the discourses of linear progression that prompt a specific ideology. In his “repetitive” speech, he relies on “the things that is there to pick up” (Snead, 70), which lead to the race’s collective memory about which the old man sings. His “anti-nostalgic” narrative on Clifton exposes African Americans’ historical invisibility to the public eye. The protagonist refers to a play on words, “Nigger/Trigger,” to explain Clifton’s meaningless death and leads his audience to realize that the racist word “Nigger” could possibly cause the death of Blacks when combined with the Whites’ nonsensical joke. The protagonist’s unsentimental narrative reflects a desperate attempt

to create a space in which to place Clifton as the “cut” of the “official” history. He yells to the audience, “Tod Clifton’s one with the ages. But what’s that to do with you in this heat under this veiled sun? Now he’s part of history, and he has received his true freedom” (458).

Disclosure of Clifton’s invisibility results in a widespread racial riot in Harlem, denoting the Black masses’ act of inscribing his death into their history as well as rebellion against their invisibility in White-centered America. In the turmoil of the riot, the protagonist falls into a manhole, which physically symbolizes his stepping outside the “history.” In the underground, he burns all the documents he has always carried as the given identifications of his life. When the protagonist falls into the manhole—the “cut” from human society and his complete seclusion as a result—he first finds the voice to claim himself an “*Invisible Man*.”

Conclusion

The protagonist’s underground life presents the “cut” of existing “history” as he loses sense of linear time. From outside of human society, the protagonist thinks, “all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd” (579). He “experiments” on his new self in an exchange with Mr. Norton. At the subway station, he imagines a scenario in which he usurps their former relationship by giving Mr. Norton directions to the Golden Day bar. “Take any train; they all go to the Golden D” (578). The Golden Day is the chaotic sphere that no specific politics or ideology can reach, as Mr. Norton’s fainting symbolizes. When he says to Mr. Norton, “I’m your destiny. I made you” (578), the protagonist discovers the sphere in which he realizes his own worldview. In this sphere, he embodies the Black masses deleted by “history”; therefore, as an “*Invisible Man*,” he can move about the world without any restriction, like a trickster. In his 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ellison says he created the protagonist as an individual with “a capacity for conscious self-assertion as basic to his blundering quest for freedom” (xxi).

On the other hand, life in the underground alienates the protagonist from the Black masses as well as from the sphere of Black leadership. The protagonist’s “invisibility” puts him in what Michael G. Cooke calls “solitude,” the condition in which he “discovers himself without any sustaining connections” (Cooke, 38). In an interview, Ellison stated that Black leaders in the 1940s generally “represented White philanthropy, White politicians, business interests” (*Shadow and Act*, 18). Analyzing the rupture between Black leaders and the Black masses, Ellison mentioned that “the predicament of Negroes in the United States rendered these leaders automatically impotent, until they recognized their true source of power—which lies as Martin Luther King perceived, in the Negro’s ability to suffer even death for the attainment of our beliefs” (*Shadow and Act*, 19). Although his self-identification as an “*Invisible Man*” owes much to the Black masses, the protagonist fails in attaining intimacy with them because of his lack of recognition of what Ellison calls Blacks’ “true source of power.” Cooke states that the protagonist “has no choice, being uncertain of the reader’s position” because of his solitude (Cooke, 107). He has to speak (write) to the general public, whose reactions are out of his control, and face the threat of his voice being silenced, resulting from a lack of “appropriate”

listeners. Thus, despite his fluency in the narrative of the past and the present, the protagonist can have no firm belief in the future, unlike the numerous civil rights activists to follow.

However, the ending of *Invisible Man* is not pessimistic. Although he indicts the injustice of White America, making him “invisible,” the protagonist embraces the principle that America has instilled in him. “Sometimes I feel the need to reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unloved in it, for all of it is part of me” (579). The protagonist’s words—“when it was the good music that came from the bell of old Bad Air’s horn that counted” (581)—specifically reflect Ellison’s firm self-declaration as a Black writer as well as an American writer. For good or ill, Ellison accepted the elements that have formed African Americans, and, in this novel, he visualizes their “invisibility,” which is unmistakably part of a multi-layered American experience.

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