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"Black is . . an' black ain't": A Reading of Identity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Abstract

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) explores the theme of alienation in interesting ways - an alienation marked by the colour of the protagonist's skin, but one which cannot be resolved by the different social grids of identification available to him. This article examines the protagonist's attempts to fashion an identity that can offer him a sense of agency, in a way that both preserves and values his racial identity, and at the same time, an identity that will allow him a freedom to find himself and not be confined solely to his racial identity. The novel seeks to forge new ways of thinking about the subjectivity of persons who are burdened by their collective history of slavery, and explores the need to find ways of moving forward beyond rigid racial identities that do not disavow their past and present racial oppression.

Keywords: *Invisible Man*, Racial identities, African American writing, Ralph Ellison, visibility

Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man* published in 1952, is a groundbreaking American novel by an African American author that went beyond a focus on issues of race, inequity, and the legacies of slavery. Ellison (1913-1994) was also the first black author to win the U.S. National Book Award in 1953 for this novel, and it continues to generate critical discussion in academic circles and to enjoy a popular readership. A section of the novel was originally published in a magazine named *Horizon* in 1947, and after the novel's roaring success, it has found a place in the American canon.

The novel's title, without an article 'the' or 'an', remains a subject of debate. Invisibility in the novel as this article demonstrates, is not necessarily a symbol of the suppression or erasure of black identities as has often been stated. In fact, the narrator-protagonist in *Invisible Man* embraces the power of being invisible at the end of the novel. Shelly Jarenski observes that Ellison in fact "advocates invisibility as a powerful cultural space, a space from which the interrelated matrices of dominance and, in fact, the concept of the body are deconstructed" (85).

Ralph Ellison described his novel *Invisible Man* as an experimental piece and he stated in an interview with Richard Kostelanetz for the BBC in 1965, that looking at his novel as solely depicting the negative experiences of a 'Negro' in America was an "incorrect and sentimental interpretation," mainly by "white readers" (8). Ellison notes that his aim in writing novels was not to depict the typical lives of all black people, but was to delineate symbolic actions of

characters, and to enable the reader to see "universal patterns of human existence" (10). Going beyond the legacy of black writers like Richard Wright who influenced him, Ellison acknowledged the influences of Hemingway, Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, and Dostoevsky, among others, on his writing. Ellison was conscious of the interconnectedness of different cultural traditions, and he noted, for example in the BBC interview, that the "rhetoric of a Negro sermon" can be traced to Shakespeare and Donne (5), and that the English spoken by American Southerners was partially learned from 'Negroes'. It is thus not easy to place Ellison in a tradition of African-American literature or even American literature, and this novel makes explicit the problems of seeking discrete identities, especially with regard to race in early 20th-century America. Without denying the centrality of race to American life, Ellison suggested in an interview to The New York Times in 1952 that race was not just a sociological phenomenon for him: "The Negro experience… becomes important to the novelist because it is in this problem, as Faulkner makes us aware, that the American human conflict is at its most intense and dramatic".

In *Invisible Man*, the first-person narrator and protagonist, who remains unnamed in the novel, explores a series of identities to try and achieve a sense of self and agency, and not become a mere puppet in the hands of institutions and ideologies. This unnamed narrator, who is depicted as a young black man in the novel, seeks an identity that can accommodate his racial history, and yet release him from an identity that is solely based on being an African American. This article looks at the pioneering questions that Ellison raised about race and identity, in search of a healthy psychic space for members of oppressed groups like women and people of colour by which they could achieve a sense of agency. The novel's complex relationship to gender, especially the erasure of black women, has already been explored by scholars like Michele Wallace, Claudia Tate and Shelly Jarenski. Critics like Casey Hayman use the term 'meta-black' to describe a new mode of black subjectivity and argues that "we can locate in Ellison's novel the articulation of such a mode, I call "meta-black," of living within the black body and within a country and world wherein sounds and images of the black body permeate the collective consciousness" (129). Hayman argues that this would be a way of speaking about a black subjectivity that is "neither 'post-black', nor tethered to prescriptive notions of authenticity" (130).

The novel evokes a struggle on the narrator's part to move between an identity where he is valued in the eyes of others, and one through which he can transcend history and the gaze of the other. Ellison's novel recognises that one's identity is bound with the other, and he uses this image as a metaphor to question the oppositionality that racist ideologies depend on. Though the narrator in becoming an Invisible Man at the end of the novel, breaks out of labels and expectations that tether him and his identity by finally going underground and becoming 'invisible', he understands that he must find a way of being visible again, a visibility that is not the projection of others but a recognition from the other of the interrelatedness of each other. In the novel's Prologue, the narrator dreams of the call and response between a preacher and his congregation which is presented as a confused exchange:

"I said black is . . ."

"Preach it, brother . . ."

". . . an' black ain't . . " (8)

The novel goes on to play with the complex meaning of blackness that the narrator must explore before he can end his hibernation at the end of the novel and re-frame his invisibility.

This article explores the narrator's search for agency in the novel as he moves from being what he terms early on in the novel as "pre-invisible", to invisible at the end. The novel represents his struggle to break out of a structure of identity which keeps him in a trap of binary oppositions -- of either becoming entrenched in an identity bound by history or transcending history completely. The narrator steers between the options of erasing one's sense of racial identity or embracing it; the first option is in diminishing the reality of race relations by subsuming it under class identity or erasing all social markers, and the second option would straitjacket him into an identity which denies him escape from being completely engulphed into his race and its history.

One way of reading the problem of racial identity in the novel has been done through the prism of Julia Kristeva's ideas of trauma and representation. Kelly Oliver frames the novel within Kristeva's notion of the imaginary father or loving third that helps create a positive identity. For Kristeva, the result of social exclusion, which African-Americans face in the novel, is trauma, the unspeakable: "Lack of social support leads to feelings of exclusion and alienation caused by the inability to find the social space or language with which to express one's own body and meaning. Only if connected to words and representation can trauma become experience proper. When traumas are not represented, they are repeated" (Oliver, 57). "Revolt is the assimilation of social authority" through the representation of one's meaning to others. However, one can also see that Ellison's novel explores subjectivity beyond Oliver's goal of achieving a positive identity for oppressed groups like African Americans.

The end of the novel offers no closure to the complex questions of race and identity but instead, the act of writing the novel itself functions as the narrator's commitment to search for an identity that is not one which will be moulded by others, in order to question existent structures of identity, to 'plunge outside history', in the phrase of the character Tod Clifton (292), which the narrator does not finally endorse. The narrator chooses an alternative space of invisibility which is not easily definable. Invisibility gives him an alternative identity, and is not necessarily a negative thing. Shelly Jarenski reads the narrator's invisibility as "a personification of what Judith Butler, building on Julia Kristeva, calls the "abject": the realm of bodies that remain unproduced by discourse in order to provide an outside against which dominant bodies (bodies that are male, straight, and white) can be defined" (86). Jarenski says we can reconsider *Invisible Man* as the narrative of one man's process of embracing that abject alternative. The narrator reclaims invisibility as a site of freedom and power.

The first part of the novel tracks the attempts of the narrator-protagonist to initially conform to a pre-fabricated identity that is manipulated by various individuals like the characters of Bledsoe and Norton, and their institutions. The period of the narrator's illness and treatment in the factory clinic suggests a kind of death or retreat from his old self, as if he were returned to the womb and is cleansed of his former identity. He emerges from the clinic determined to manufacture a new self and to give up the illusory dreams he had of becoming an important leader like Booker T. Washington. He wishes to find a new psychic space in which his subjectivity is free from meanings thrust on him by various sections of society.

The novel maps his attempts to recreate himself by associating with or considering organisations that claim to secure freedom for people, organisations like the Brotherhood and the black nationalist group of Ras. The narrator's gaining of membership in the Brotherhood is his attempt to seek dignity and erase all negative meanings associated with his black racial identity. But in the Brotherhood, he is expected to play a prescribed role, with a discipline that demands complete submission based on the core organisational elite's judgement of transforming society, even if it means exploiting the anger of the Harlem community for their ends. On the other side of his choices, and opposed to the Brotherhood, is the figure of Ras the Exhorter and his black nationalist group, caught in the zeal of a separatist identity, opposed to integration, and inhabiting a belief in African essentialism. The novel traces his gradual disillusionment with both these organisations.

Not only does the narrator eventually see the limitations of both groups, but indeed comes to see the constructed nature of race, which is given meaning both within a political and social context. The most intellectual insight for the narrator as to how he is invisible because he is not really seen for who he is, is through the absent figure of Rinehart. Rinehart's image in Harlem, where the narrator is sometimes mistaken for him, reveals a startling fact -- the exchangeability and invisibility of one's identity as well as a manipulation of one's image. Rinehart symbolises the manufactured nature of identity, which can be manipulated because people wish to see you according to a pattern in their heads.

The lack of agency and freedom for the narrator experienced even in political groups which seek justice for black people comes from a disillusionment with heroic or mentor figures. This can be seen in his movement between 'father' figures and their initial support and then betrayal in helping achieve a sense of self and agency. The narrator encounters a series of people from whom he seeks answers to his questions of freedom and identity. Some of these function as father figures, or role models he wishes to emulate, but who control him by invisible strings until he recognises this and breaks free. Supercargo, the old veteran, recognises the same problem and advises him thus: "[B]e your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it" - and urges the casting off of a mould which does not allow movement.

The novel demonstrates how notions of freedom and progress may have invisible strings. Norton's view of the progress of African Americans as the white man's burden offers a brief insight into the control such men wield over the institutions for the progress of African American students. This is symbolised in the novel at the scene, where standing before the statue of the college Founder holding the veil of a kneeling slave, the narrator 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" (28). At the same time, the narrator can see that the white college trustee Mr. Norton's identification at some subconscious level with the scandalous black character of Trueblood signifies the breakdown of a racial divide in a disturbing way, a perverse mix of racism and desire.

The figure of Bledsoe and his relationship to the powerful white trustees illustrates how Bledsoe uses the white man's desire for a particular image of the other for his own power. His perpetuation of racism by conforming to the image white liberal leaders expect, marks the first disillusionment for the narrator with the meaning of progress and success. Bledsoe's success is

made by playing into the hands of powerful white men, a two-way game in which he gives them what they wish to see. As he tells the horrified young boy, "the white folk tell everybody what to think except men like me. I tell them; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about" (110). Yet Bledsoe admits that he is not happy in this game, and it is apparent in the novel that both sides seem to be manipulating the other. This rivalrous and aggressive symbiosis is present in many others too, but in an unconscious way.

The narrator's period in the factory clinic completes his disillusionment with the idea of trying to go back to college and follow a conventional path to material success. The clinic's abuse of his mind and body symbolises complete control over him, in which he is rendered helpless and incommunicable. He loses his identity for a while and when he recovers, it is as though he emerges from the womb and he determines to seek a new mode of identity: "I conceived there was one constant flaw - myself.... I could no more escape than I could think of my identity... When I discover who I am, I'll be free" (185). The novel explores the static and illusory nature of seeking recognition through the other. An instance of this is when the narrator imagines that he carries letters of reference to important people who recommend him. He wants to show them "to someone who could give me a proper reflection of my importance" (28). But he ends up smiling at himself admiringly in the mirror. The protagonist becomes invisible initially in a negative way because he comes to realise that he is unseen to others except in the ways they wish to see him.

Blackness itself has complex meanings in the novel. In the Liberty Paints factory, the narrator learns the inextricable link between black and white; the whitest paint is produced only if drops of a black dope are added. But he also realises that the supposedly obvious colour of white that seems to be strikingly distinguishable, fails the eyes of Kimbro, the Liberty Paints supervisor. The constructed nature of vision and thereby of colour on which race is based stands exposed. The narrator fails in his task of producing the whitest paint, but when it is inspected, Kimbro fails to note it. "But I had a feeling that something had gone wrong, something far more important than the paint; that either I had played a trick on Kimbro or he, like the trustees and Bledsoe, was playing one on me..." (156). It seems as though those who are powerful deploy and manipulate colour/race for their own advantages.

The novel explodes the dual nature of black and white identities. These identities have rendered people invisible, as well as the ideologies that keep this binary opposition in place. He recognises that clinging to the tag of victimhood can also become a form of adhering to binary oppositions of black and white, good and evil: "Even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all" (12).

Although the narrator feels a bodily connection to people of his own kind, he cannot persist in what he feels amounts to an essentialist identity. He submits to eating yams on the road, giving up a ‘sophisticated image’, to eat what floods him with a sense of home. But when he goes back for a second yam and bites into it, it is bitter with frostbite. It seems that the identification with home and race can only be a part of him. He enters the Brotherhood as an escape from an essentialist black identity that keeps people like him 'running': "Here was a way that didn't lead through the back door, a way not limited by black and white…For the first time... I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race" (268).

From Clifton's idea, he ponders on the lesson of the need "to plunge outside history" (285) but does not eventually reconcile fully to it. Clifton's sudden turnaround from brother to peddler of 'Sambo' puppets, forces him to question why Clifton would leave an organisation which allowed them not to be puppets - "Why should a man deliberately plunge outside of history and peddle an obscenity..."(331). The narrator begins to mistrust the manipulability of science and history - "What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment... What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile...?"(333). The Brotherhood's refusal to honour Clifton after his death brings home their inability to accept contradictions. Jack's refusal to render dignity to a former member is a manifestation of the blindness of discipline, symbolised by his blind eye -- "Outside the brotherhood we were outside history, but inside of it they didn't see us" (377). The narrator sees the cynical use of African Americans, including himself and Clifton, in the name of the greater good -- "Everywhere I've turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good - only they were the ones who benefited. And now we start on the old sacrificial merry-go-round. At what point do we stop? ... is Brotherhood a matter of sacrificing the weak?" (382). When riots break out in Harlem and he witnesses arson by men to their own uninhabitable homes, he realises that the people could organise action on their own. He also recognises that the committee has planned this race riot, and with his unwitting complicity, allows the people to be killed. Ras, too, is unknowingly following the pattern set by the Brotherhood.

The novel comes to redefine visibility and its absence. The chance resemblance the narrator bears when he wears dark glasses and a hat, to the unknown and mysterious figure of Rinehart, drives home to him the truth that we are all invisible, made visible only in the other's desire to see us in their way. Rinehart as an absent character, sums up the contradictions of human identity. Rinehart's girlfriends and his men all mistake the narrator for him. But at one point, when the cops make a similar mistake, several people assert that the narrator in no way resembles Rinehart - "Them paddies must be going stone blind. Anybody can see you ain't Rinehart" (372), confusing the idea of what we see. But it isn't just physical appearances that are deceptive and two-sided. Rinehart's personality to some as a gambler and to others as a pious preacher opens up the fixity of identity: "All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility... I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities..." (377).

The ending of the novel finds the narrator underground, perhaps representing a brief foray into his unconscious. He has been unable to trace an identity that is not imbued with the self-interest of others, that demeans him to an object without value. Freud, in his piece on narcissism, observes that "instinctual impulses undergo the vicissitude of pathogenic repression if they come into conflict with the subject's cultural and ethical ideas" (Freud, 93). It is perhaps these impulses that pour out of the narrator when he is making public speeches, and which make him feel that the words emerge from within him. Progressively through the novel, we see that each speech becomes more personal and less prepared -- from the first one at the Battle Royal before the white men, to the last public speech of the narrator at Clifton's funeral. Those moments, when he addresses his own people and senses their response to his words without seeing them, are the only moments when he can connect to others:" 'What is it, son, what do you feel?' a shrill voice asked...'I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human' " (261).

But these are transitory moments, and the narrator is confronted with a lack of self at the end of the novel. He has learnt that in order to find a positive reflection of himself, "in order to justify them, I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself" (432). While underground, he is aware that the world moves "not like an arrow, but a boomerang" (5), and he has to return. He has written himself down in this narrative, and he finds that he cannot stop loving because he understands that "men are different and that all life is divided...diversity is the word" (435). He has given up trying to fix the mind into any fixed pattern because the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals (438). The narrator decides to come up from the underground but remains invisible.

The search for an identity, which Ellison regarded as *the* American theme, is in this novel an attempt to depict the conflicts that black Americans faced, and align them with the universal aspects of all human struggles to be free. It would do the novel justice in reading it with all its nuances and questions, and to be what Ellison states is the best reader -- “one who has the imagination, regardless of what color he is” (Ellison interview, 8).

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