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Works Cited

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RALPH ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN: A CRITICAL REEVALUATION

You don't know this man he works in the dark.

INVISIBLE MAN

Almost four decades have passed since the publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in 1952. The novel, which won the National Book Award and has never been out of print, continues to gather prolific critical response as a fixture in American letters. This is as the Oklahoma-born author Ellison would have it: that *Invisible Man* in its very Americanness reveal "the human universals hidden within the plight of one . . . both black and American." Most critics have been generous in granting Ellison the universal citizenship for which he pleads in his novel, a citizenship that, like "the voice of invisibility," emerges "from deep within our complex American underground." [1] However, as W. Lawrence Hogue persuasively argues, there is a high price to be paid for those Afro-American writers praised "for not having written a 'Negro' novel and conforming to an established definition of the literary experience." [2] Double standards abound in literary production especially as pertains to African-American writing. To be acknowledged as acceptable may mean limiting meaningful engagement with other possible audiences. The price for having one's work "appropriated" by the dominant literary establishment, Hogue tells us, may engender "certain silences in critical discourse" (47).

Although the tremendous body of criticism on *Invisible Man* stands as a formidable tribute to the novelist and his novel, recent trends in criticism, especially by African-Americanist scholars but by no means limited to African-Americans, point to deafening silences and glaring omissions. That these silences largely lie outside the realm of assigned categories--categories previously unacceptable or unacknowledged by the dominant literary establishment--may account for lapses. [3] Incorporating dialogue with the silenced categories of (African) American literary history, (African) American women's studies, (African) American linguistics in reading any American text will indeed enrich our understanding of the present canon.

Nearly forty years' worth of American literary criticism has acknowledged Ellison's ties to Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Herman Melville, and William Faulkner, to name a few, yet that criticism has done little to account fully for what ties these authors to African-Americans, literarily and culturally. For example, at the level of narrative, how do Huck and Jim as a structural dyad contribute to Ellison's use of synchronicity as cultural critique? Alan Nadel in *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* begins to explore the importance of what black Americans have contributed by way of culture and history to authors in the existing canon. Concerning the construction of literary canons and hierarchies, Nadel sees *Invisible Man* as pointing toward

"some gap, some omission, some blindness in the way we read the past or wrote about it." [4] What *Invisible Man* does is force a literate audience to acknowledge that the touchstones of the American tradition signify each other and conversely the complexity of American culture.

Both Ellison and his critics have repeatedly documented the frontier and his Oklahoma boyhood as influential sources for his writings. The varied influences of Oklahoma City, with its jazz and blues musicians such as Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing, its solid middle class of black doctors, lawyers, teachers, and politicians, all helped shape Ellison's belief in possibilities within the grasp of the American--no matter what color. [5] Perhaps it was the inability of his one-time associate Richard Wright to affirm such possibilities that led Ellison to disavow him as a literary influence. Generally speaking, Afro-Americanists in the 1970s respected Ellison's recalcitrant stance toward being yoked with Wright but went on to dismiss the claim as spurious. Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon see *The Man Who Lived Underground* as "providing the *donnee* of *Invisible Man*." [6] What is interesting is that Ellison acknowledges the influences of Malraux, Henry James, Twain, Eliot, and Faulkner on his work, but he has not firmly aligned himself with a black literary tradition. Part of the problem here I have alluded to earlier: the past provided Ellison with no audience and with no forum for such. The present decade, though, finds a trajectory from which to launch its arguments on those subjects rarely written about when describing the Ellisonian esthetic. Recent literary criticism turns its attention to those subjects rarely talked about in Ellison's work: 1) the link to a literary tradition that is specifically African-American, 2) the use of mythical archetypes rooted in the colonial past as backdrop for unfolding and analyzing history, 3) the preoccupation of the American mind with violence and particularly war, and 4) a certain silence about women. I suggest that in subject number 4 we find parts of 1 through 3. Before turning to a more detailed analysis, let us look at specific inquiries.

The 1980s saw American literary critics turn to structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction as investigative modes of inquiry. We must note that if postmodern inquiry entered the American academy rather late, African-American studies has been even more reluctant to admit its viability. Despite the slow start, recent critical approaches permit African-Americanists to connect *Invisible Man* to a broader literary tradition. That literary tradition includes a past of intertextual connections rooted in the slave narrative. To this end Henry Louis Gates reads *Invisible Man* as a narrative of signifying tropes turning on "repetitive formal structures and their differences." [7] In light of this Gates sees Ellison as signifying "upon Wright by parodying Wright's literary structures" (245). We can take this to mean that signifying constitutes a metalanguage within the text whereby the violent codes of a racist society are mediated. The language of mediation with its signifying codes is inherent to the African-American tradition.

Ellison himself tends to discount Gates's earlier claim that *Invisible Man* "embodies and transcends almost two centuries of repeated black narrative strategies," but in the same way that Barksdale and Kinnamon comment upon the Wright issue, anyone who has read *Invisible Man* finds that, whether intentional or not, the "slave narrative" as strategy is in place as "prologue" to *Invisible Man*. To subject and text, the slave narrative is essential to our understanding of how the protagonist re-creates himself. [8]

Barbara Christian sees this re-creation of the self in metaphorical and metonymic terms: "Ellison had devised a plan for a book which would incorporate the myth and literature of the Western World into the experience of the American black man." [9] Hortense Spillers finds this mythical retelling possible with *Invisible Man* as "confessor" on "a historical line that reaches back through the generations and extends forward into the frontiers of the future." [10] I take this further to suggest that the "historical line" is encoded with archetypal figures which bear witness to the narrator's tale. The women who bear witness to the "beingness" of the *Invisible Man* work as metaphors of cultural consciousness. They sustain him during his dizzy spells at various times in the street and during all the dream excursions that explain the mystery of surviving being-black-in-the-world. The archetype and the disembodied voice taken together are the figurative conscience of America. As such, they are both a mediating force and a signifying trope parodying the American Dream.

As the historical line moves from the colony to postindustrial urban America, the "Woman Question" is never explored or addressed in a viable manner. Women come and go in *Invisible*

Man without ever expressing their inner struggles. The only female character who can name the source of her (indirect) violation--"I done warn you Jim" (61)--is Kate, though she is the most atypical of all the women in the novel. The dialectics of engagement are different too. Kate is the Southern agrarian wife who maintains some of the traditional shared power in community. As Trueblood tells Norton, "You got to born down here to stand this kind of heat" (68). In other words, this Southern agrarian couple point to another kind of type existing on the historical line. The Invisible Man repeatedly has visions of himself as a would-be Trueblood, or at least part Trueblood, whereas Kate recalls for him childhood memories of his mother hanging the wash.

In reevaluating Ellison criticism we find that these categories of women are silenced. There is certain silence about the colonial auction block and women who could be black or white pleading for freedom; certain silence about the violence of politicians, preachers, doctors, lawyers, Klansmen toward white women. Moreover, there is an inability to see black women who step outside their role as victim and become active agents in negotiating their freedom. Part of what accounts for the silences is the history of letters. Most Ellisonian critics are, or have been, male; but gender does not norm criticism. Critics have come to the Ellison text with a map construed out of Eurocentrism and North Americanness, almost to the exclusion of the black side of either continent. For example, the 1980s saw fewer than a dozen black female critics enter the Ellison debate. Perhaps we are ready to turn from the silence to the text, where women, if not heard, are felt.

In the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Invisible Man* Ellison tells the reader that the text "erupted out of what had been conceived as a war novel," and so it is, if not about a military war, then in DuBoisian terms "warring ideals." Central to the concept of "warring ideals" is the Ellisonian notion of woman's occupying the site from which the wars of humanity and inhumanity are launched. If we look at the physical dimensions of the novel proper, we find the masculine voice "buried alive," mocking and threatening those who hold a monopoly on light and power while clustered amid the black jewels of the earth. I mean this in both senses that the sentence may be read. The voice is pregnant with possibilities for coming out as the word made flesh. The voice, separated from the symbolic mother Mary, has intimated that he will make the journey back not as "Sambo"--the inanimate device of technocracy and corrupted idealism but as body joined to voice, alive, awake, and struggling up from blackness (IM, 558).

Claudia Tate, addressing the treatment of women in Ellison's novel, sees the one-dimensional figures as "assist[ing] the Invisible Man along his course to freedom." According to Tate, these "teachers" "force him to recognize their common plight." [11] If Tate is right and these women-teachers-conductresses usher the Invisible Man to freedom in the literal sense of the word, what are we to make of the narrator's literal representation of himself in the beginning and in the end as man-in-the-hole? Man-in-the-hole is still dependent upon white light and power to sustain him as he lives in "the border area" (5). Though the practical joker may chuckle over who has the monopoly, whites remain in control of the central switch. This gives every indication that reciprocal violence, deceit, and mean-spiritedness will be tied to any freedom the emerging protagonist might find.

Marilyn Waniek reminds us that in the black literary tradition and in *Invisible Man* there is a lack of any "lasting sexual relationship between the Black protagonist and a woman." [12] Waniek recalls James Baldwin in analyzing the "scarcity of fulfilling heterosexual relationships in novels by Black authors" (7), quoting Baldwin as follows: "In most of the novels written by Negroes until today . . . there is a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence." [13] Baldwin goes on to say that "the root of the violence is never examined" (151). Waniek argues that "the root of the violence" is best understood through the DuBoisian theory of "double consciousness." DuBois's theory on the "twoness" of the black American is viewed by Waniek as an explanation for the racial violence between the black self and the white self. Taking Waniek's argument from Baldwin a step further, we can say that in the space Baldwin a step further, we can say that in the space where sex ought to be lies sexual violence. We can trace this sexual violence along a historical line of warring ideals. These "warring ideals," which include racial conflict, see woman as cultural icon, part of the failed ideology of Western civilization. Each trope of violence is prefigured by sexual violence that signifies and recalls another. Borrowing from Spillers's argument of the Invisible Man's reaching back and forth on a historical line, we can see

woman as icon and artifact, a traveling metaphor uncovering and naming the root of violence. The repeated tropes of the narrative of invisibility find woman as subtext moving with the circle enconched in the circular boomerang pattern.

The circle as rhetorical and metaphorical emblem is associated with the mother, regression, and recreation of the self. The violent process by which the re-creation of self takes place occurs in what Robert O'Meally calls an "absurdly disjointed space." [14] The Invisible Man, a scapegoat of violence moving in this absurdly disjointed space, is hurtled into a "gaping breach" (15), where he confronts "our whole culture" as a series of hoaxes and contradictions (IM, 6). The Invisible Man occupies the gaping breach not as a sexualized being but as a eunuch. (IM, 557). His figurative castration frees him from sexual conflict and permits his regression to his furthestmost past, where his presence/blackness is refigured in historical terms. He understands what it means to be a "true blood," who sees the movement of the world as it is, "not like an arrow, but a boomerang" (6).

The prologue foregrounds the battleground of "warring ideals in the middle section of the novel." It establishes the protagonist African-American as the descendant of slavery and heir to its fragmenting, depersonalizing, repressive nuances, thereby uncovering the utterly sadistic nature of neocolonial violence. The colonial past against the background of a "military" trumpet is paired with the mother's voice, which is traced to a quadroon on the auction block. The mother's voice is upstaged by the voice of a savvy, manipulative, signifying preacher. The black preacher as an interpreter of blackness signifies upon the "myriad subtleties" of what "black is" and what "black ain't." H. Beecher Hicks Jr. surmises that "the slave system partially undermined the effectiveness of the slave preacher and thus brought his image and his purpose into historical question." [15] In reality as in fiction, the voice of the black preacher as leader, advocate, and interpreter of experience mediates the pain and sorrow of the auction block. This is the black preacher at his best. At his worst, a compromised victim of the dehumanizing and debilitating influence of slavery, he is "Rinehart the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rine the Reverend" (IM, 487). Such a depiction calls forth another type known in black culture, "the Jack." The "Jack-leg" preacher, like all the other "Jacks" in Invisible Man, does not have a spiritual leg to stand on. He is the signified in the signifying ritual of black theological iconography. When the preacher abandons his position as leader and interpreter--an exalted position--and begins to use the traditional ritual of call-and-response to invoke carnality, his voice is interrupted by the voice of the black mother in Reconstruction. As female preacher she reverses the trope and tries to impart understanding to the seeking protagonist.

The black mother in Reconstruction has survived the gaze of the auction block, the sexual desire of the slave master and his empty promises of freedom. She sits in oppressive silence contemplating the psychic burden of her violent past. She recalls poisoning her master/lover to keep their sons from castrating him, from tearing "him to pieces with their homemade knives" (11). Whereas the questing protagonist's desire is couched in knowing himself and his others, the concubine/slave's desire is couched in desire for freedom.

That freedom from slavery is inextricably bound to sexual freedom, and freedom from sexual violence is the text of the Invisible Man's sermonizing as he tenderly asks the reader to "bear witness" with him at the end of the prologue. His voice takes over the voice of the concubine, who preaches by testifying. The concubine/slave sits on the traditional "moaner's bench," reserved for the "mothers of the church." [16] She has earned the right to preach by testifying. Jarena Lee (1783-?) helps us understand the role of testifying as it pertains to the black female preacher in slavery and freedom. In her testimonial on the right of woman to preach Reverend Lee points out that "it may be that the term preach in . . . primitive times, did not mean exactly what it is now made to mean; perhaps it was a great deal more simple then, than it is now." [17] The female preacher steps in at the moment that the male preacher begins to exhort decadence. She testifies that "freedom" lies in "loving." She fulfills the traditional role of the black preacher as interpreter of experience and culture, creatively using the doctrine of Christian love to justify murdering the master and saving her children.

The slave's narrative, as Gates suggests, is the "trope of tropes" (236). In it are all the other tropes of sexual violence. Of particular interest here is the trope of castration. Just as the master's

sons are willing to murder and castrate their father, so too are they willing to beat and figuratively castrate the Invisible Man when he asks too many questions about freedom. They are the sons of the Old South and gatekeepers of repression. Their mother, a slave/ concubine, implies that freedom is knowing how to say what "I got up in my head" (11). This scene reveals that the son's understanding of the world and the questions it asks are inseparable from the pain of the mother. By banishing the questions and any outside Other, they silence and repress the mother. They try to speak for the mother but can only do so through violent confrontation.

Ellison himself talks about castration and the myth of the black woman as castrator. Rather than castrators, he sees black women as "circumcisers" (5). Kate symbolically circumcises Trueblood when she fells him with an ax. Reproaching him for committing incest, she scolds: "You ain't no man. No man'd do what you did" (66). Although it has been several months since Kate has axed Trueblood, gnats swarm at the "raw and moist scar" (50). Trueblood's wound is a reminder to him that, as a sexual being, man has a moral responsibility to exercise self-control. He acquires a "circumcised," controlled voice, which gives his rehearsed rendering of the incest tale its depth and artistry. Ellison uses Mary Rambo as a "circumciser" in helping the Invisible Man ask the right questions of himself.

When the Invisible Man realizes that he is part of Mary's oppression as a devalued woman, he leaves her home to go and work for the Brotherhood. Mary has become for him the stereotypical strong black woman who fulfills her assigned role of making something out of nothing, supporting an out-of-work man. His conscience simply will not allow him to contribute to her oppression and invisibility. Moral conscience tells him that "money could never repay her generosity" (308). Experience tells him that he may fail her as a "race leader." The least he can do is try to articulate her grievance (289) by acting like a man instead of like a child (290). Acting like a man meant leaving Mary for the Brotherhood. Mary is crucial to the protagonist's understanding that he is engaged in an ideological war between "us" and "them." Unfortunately, he has failed to see this in either the "Battle Royal" or the "Trueblood" episode.

Mary as culmination of the women in the prologue augurs the minor figures of black womanhood that the Invisible Man meets as he travels through the streets of Harlem. She is the echo of the West Indian woman who announces, "Black men, I'm proud of you! . . . Proud!" (275). She is reminiscent of the level-headed women "'bout bent bowlegged trying to make it home" (527) with provisions for their families after the final riot scene. These women move in contrast to the men who are busy looting whiskey and work clothes. Such scenes affirm the Invisible Man's daydream vision of Mary as "a force, a stable familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face" (252). It is these women silently struggling against poverty and dispossession that prompt the Invisible Man to see them "far beyond their intrinsic value as objects" (267). He has missed other opportunities to see the black women's true identity as hidden "behind a veil" of ideology (267).

One must be careful to acknowledge that the Invisible Man has been formally and culturally indoctrinated to have ambivalent feelings about women. Before he is permitted to give his graduation speech at a town "smoker," he is forced to watch a nude blond dance. The men who attend the smoker express their ambivalence as well. They see it as their job to "bring up the little shiners" (18). By this they mean initiate the black boys. The boys are threatened if they look and threatened if they don't. The white men turn their desire into sexual violence, tossing the nude woman "as college boys are tossed at a hazing" (20). They then blindfold the black boys, beat them, and subject them to electric shock. This conflict reveals more than racial strife; it specifically ties racial conflict to sexual violence. Ellison agrees with David Carson that the "Battle Royal" episode is not only a "failed initiation rite" but also a "castration rite." [18]

Throughout the novel the Invisible Man is forced into castrating relationships with white women. Emma expects him to dance (307); the nameless seducer sees him as "primitive," with "tom-toms beating" in his "voice" (403); and Sybil wants him to be her "big black bruiser" and rapist (511). In one way or another these women, as pawns of Western ideology, are foils to the black women, who relate to the protagonist in nonsexual terms. Even the prostitutes at the Golden Day ignore the Invisible Man as a potential customer. Agonizing over the sexual roles he is expected to play, he queries, "Why do they [white males] have to mix their women into everything?" (408). He

realizes that "between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they placed a woman: socially, politically, economically" (408). The prediction of the mad veteran on the train comes true; the only "freedom" he has known has been "symbolic" (151). Time after time he finds that the most easily accessible symbol of "freedom" is "woman" (151). Although woman discloses the trace, revealing the source of illusions and violence, as a construction of ideology she too is an illusion.

The slave's narrative and the grandfather's testimonial offer the Invisible Man all the information he needs to get through the "conflict" between the ideological and the biological, duty and desire" (406). In not-so-veiled language the grandfather explains the contrapuntal problem of being a nonviolent man in a world of "war" (16). When the grandfather tells his son to say "yes," he means to say "yes" to life (406). Before saying "yes," however, the protagonist has to follow the advice of the mother: "Go curse your God, boy, and die" (11). The woman, echoing the advice of Job's wife, does not mean that she wants the boy to curse the biblical God. The term here is merely symbolic. She means the same thing the vet means in explaining "They." She wants the boy to curse "the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances--the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more" (152). After cursing these false gods, the protagonist can die to the illusions they have paraded in front of him.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): RALPH ELLISON

1. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York, Vintage, 1972, p. xviii. All quotations and references are from the thirtieth-anniversary edition. Where needed for clarity, the abbreviation IM is used in parenthetical page references.
2. W. Lawrence Hogue, *Discourse and the Other*, Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1988, p. 45.
3. The deliberate omission of Africanicity in American studies in every way points back to the 1954 desegregation decision (*Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*). This decision, two years after *Invisible Man's* publication, was to abolish previous concepts of a "separate but equal" education for black Americans. That black studies in the American university is now only twenty years old accounts for another problem with lagging criticism.
4. Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon*, . . .
5. For a detailed account of Ellison's perspective on the American Dream and the richness of frontier culture, I suggest his two collections of critical essays *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986).
6. Richard K. Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon, in *Black Writers of America*, New York, Macmillan, 1972, p. 684. Barksdale and Kinnamon's introduction to Ellison (683--87) cites the early fiction and essays as undeniable "evidence" of the Wright connection. Their introduction provides an excellent concise bibliography of early Ellison writing.
7. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the Racial Self*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987. Gates suggests that "signifying is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony . . . and also hyperbole and litotes and metalepsis."
8. For a clear discussion of Ellison's response to Steve Cannon on the issue of the slave narrative, see the introduction to *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds., New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. xvii, xxi. For another perspective on Ellison's ties to any African-American literary tradition, see Charles Nichols, "The Slave Narrators and the Picaresque Mode: Archetypes for Modern Black Personae," in *The Slave's Narrative*, pp. 283-98.
9. Barbara Christian, "Ralph Ellison: A Critical Study," in *Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in the Creative Arts*, Addison Gayle, ed., New York, Weybright & Talley, p. 357.
10. Hortense Spillers, "Ellison's 'Usable Past': Toward a Theory of Myth," in *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, Kimberly W. Benston, ed., Washington, D.C., Howard University Press, 1987, p. 147.
11. Claudia Tate, "Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," in *Speaking for You*, p. 164.
12. Marilyn Nelson Waniek, "The Space Where Sex Should Be: Toward a Definition of the Black American Literary Tradition," *Black Studies in Literature*, 6:3 (Fall 1985), pp. 7-13.

13. James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, New York, Dial, 1963, p. 188.
14. Robert O'Meally, *New Essays on Invisible Man*, New York, Cambridge University Press, p. 15.
15. H. Beecher Hicks Jr., *Images of the Black Preacher: The Man Nobody Knows*, Valley Forge, Pa., Judson, 1981, p. 18.
16. The expression "Mother[s] of the Church" is not to be taken literally. In black theological iconography the "Mother" refers to a particular office corresponding to that of a male elder or trustee. She occupies a space higher than that of a deacon or deaconess. In church she sits on the moaners' bench, usually clothed in white to suggest both her purity and her wisdom. She is allowed to take part in the preparation and blessing of the sacraments. Although this woman may or may not be married or have children of her own, she is a mentor and advocate for all, including the pastor.
17. Jarena Lee, "My Call to Preach the Gospel," in *Afro-American Women Writers, 1746-1933*, Ann Allen Shockley, ed., New York, New American Library, 1989, p. 45.
18. Ralph Ellison, interview with David L. Carson, "Ralph Ellison: Twenty Years After," *Studies in American Fiction*, 1:1 (Spring 1973), pp. 1-23.

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