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REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

Abstract

Through the first person narrator, who names himself the Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison sheds light on the plurality and heterogeneity of history, exposing mechanisms accompanying the creation of the official version and recovering multiple histories of African American individuals who are excluded from this official version. The official version of history records just moods, trends and patterns rather than individual stories, resembling a “song with turgid, inadequate words” (Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [1952] 1972: 335). Individual stories of minor actors of history, their words and deeds are unregistered by the pompous blare of trumpets, trombones and saxophones. The Invisible Man assumes the task of retrieving these suppressed voices.

Key words

Inside – outside; intersection of history and geography; the constructedness, plurality, selectivity and partiality of history

[W]e make a distinction between history writers and historians – history writers who simply record what the people in power dictate, and historians who write that which re-enforces our self-concept. (Maulana Karenga¹ cited in Flowers 1996: 47)

For history records the patterns of men's lives, they say:
Who slept with whom and with what results; who fought
and who won and who lived to lie about it afterwards.
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.

(Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [1952] 1972: 332)

They'd been there all along, but somehow I'd missed them. I'd missed them even when my work had been most successful. They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them. I looked into the design of their faces, hardly a one that was unlike someone I'd known down South. Forgotten names sang through my head like forgotten scenes in dreams. I moved through the crowd ... listening to the grinding roar of traffic, the growing sound of a record shop loudspeaker blaring a languid blues. I stopped. Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words.

(Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* [1952] 1972: 335)

The above-cited epigraphs illustrate the process of effacement from history. Through the first person narrator, who names himself the Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison sheds light on the plurality and heterogeneity of history, exposing mechanisms accompanying the creation of the official version and recovering multiple histories of African American individuals who are excluded from this official version. History, as delineated by Ellison, hinges on the individual and on the collective inextricably interwoven from the very beginning of the narrative. The collective branches out into the collective of the American state and the collective of the African American community, both of them in many ways separate in the 1930s and yet inseparably connected throughout American history.² For Ellison the individual and the collective are interlaced,³ but the official version of history depicted in the above-cited epigraphs prioritizes the collective, or rather a particular version of the collective over the individual. The official version of history records just moods, trends and patterns rather than individual stories, resembling a “song with turgid, inadequate words.” Individual stories of minor actors of history, their words and deeds are unregistered by the pompous blare of trumpets, trombones and saxophones. The Invisible Man assumes the task of retrieving these suppressed voices.

The Invisible Man's narrative presents two competing views on history. The first is promoted by the “keepers of history,” the constructors of the official version. In their view, history is made only by those who manage to claim the recognition of history writers, those who are the most visible and audible, while turning the wheels of power. This is also the view espoused by the immature Invisible Man. Even when he notices and embraces people who for others remain unseen and unheard, he still locates them outside history and outside the historical imaginary constructed by white Americans. Initially, the Invisible Man clings to the conviction that only by belonging to an organization like the Brotherhood, black people can define themselves and anchor themselves in history (*Invisible*

Man 331). Otherwise they “plunge” “outside history” (328–329). The opposition of the inside and the outside is one of the spatial metaphors employed in the narrative to visualize history as a vector of time and place. The immature Invisible Man believes that African Americans unaffiliated with the Brotherhood are “outside⁴ of historical time” (333), “outside the grooves of history” (335). He feels responsible for “getting them in” (335). At the beginning the Invisible Man does not understand that some of these people strategically choose to plunge outside history in order to “dodge [its] forces” “instead of making a dominating stand” (333). The dissenting voice within the Brotherhood, Tod Clifton, points out that “sometimes a man has to plunge outside history [...] plunge outside, turn his back [...] Otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts” (285). Plunging outside signifies in this case claiming individuality as well as the rejection of the pattern and discipline offered by the Brotherhood⁵, an illusory sense of purpose and vision. While initially the Invisible Man does not understand Clifton’s words or deeds, in the end he also chooses to opt out and descend underground, literally placing himself “off the map,” to use James Lee’s term (2002: 248).

The Invisible Man imagines history and participation in history in terms of movement across vertical and horizontal lines. Before his illumination he fails to see that horizontal and vertical positions are culturally determined. From the white perspective, the American historical narrative unfolds to a greater extent along the horizontal lines leading West in the spirit of the Manifest Destiny. The African American historical narrative develops to a greater degree vertically, extending from the South to the North.⁶ African Americans headed North, first escaping slavery and later escaping pervasive racism of the South.⁷ Imbued with white indoctrination, the immature Invisible Man attaches unequivocally positive associations to the horizontal movement in a straight line, straight to the purpose. The already discussed plunge outside history, so maligned by the Invisible Man, also involves the vertical downward movement. What the Invisible Man does not take into account is the fact that some marginalized African American figures tactically transcend the horizontal vectors of history. Henry Louis Gates observes: “What did/do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated, as the enslaved cipher? Nothing on the *x* axis of white signification, and everything on the *y* axis of blackness” (1989: 47). On the horizontal axis of white signification blacks were reduced to submission and servitude. On the vertical axis they could successfully channel their invisibility.⁸ Black people could not succeed if they embraced the idea of success espoused by whites. African Americans’ road to success was different and the hallmarks of Afro-American success were different as well. Sometimes sheer survival was already a success. Having reached his racial self-consciousness, the Invisible Man reappraises the marginalized figures of African American history, acknowledging their strategic reinscription of the vectors of history:

And wasn’t that old slave a scientist [...] even when he stood with hat in hand, bowing and scraping in senile and obscene servility? My God what

possibilities existed! [...] And that lie that success was a rising *upward*. What a crummy lie they kept us dominated by. Not only could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downward as well; up *and* down, in retreat as well as in advance crabways and crossways and around in a circle. (385)

Eventually the Invisible Man also travels downward, descending underground and announcing his reemergence only in the final pages of the narrative.

The circular movement crabways and crossways is built into the very structure of the narrative, whose “end is in the beginning and lies far ahead” (5). The past and the present perpetually merge in the Invisible Man’s story and history. Hard as he tries to escape from the past, he is revisited by it, constantly meeting [his] old selves (385). The Invisible Man achieves a significantly higher degree of self-consciousness only after recognizing the importance of all life stages in the evolution of his consciousness. He starts to perceive himself as a “being who is growing and becoming” (Taylor 1996: 50). All his experiences define him, adding to his humanity and individuality:

all past humiliations became precious parts of my experience, and for the first time... I began to accept my past. Images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; They defined me. I was my experiences and they were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became... could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. (383)

The Invisible Man cannot blot out the past, because this would amount to negating part of his identity. And yet he has been trying to do it throughout the novel, denying himself the opportunity of full growth. The negation of any single life stage impedes the process of growing and becoming. Robert Butler argues that Ellison embraces Henri Bergson’s concept of time and self. Bergson’s self rests on the “consciousness able to experience the past, present and the future as an organic continuum” (Butler 1990: 261). In a similar vein, Marc Singer claims that Ellison has a palimpsestic conception of time. The palimpsest appears here as a “synchronous conflation or superimposition of multiple historical periods upon the present” (Singer 2003: 389), a “simultaneous copresence and conflation of multiple periods” (Singer 2003: 392). Only after the Invisible Man recognizes all facets of his experience, does he achieve a sense of coherence.

The palimpsestic concept of time links firmly to the Invisible Man’s unreserved commitment to diversity as a precondition of healthy human relations in the American democracy:

Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway? – diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you’ll have no tyrant states. Why,

if they follow this conformity business they'll end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white. Must I strive toward colorlessness? Think of what the world should lose if that should happen. [...] America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain [...] one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and blacks striving toward whiteness and becoming quite dull and gray. (435–436)

Ellison places equal emphasis on the interrelatedness of African American and white American history in his essays dedicated to various aspects of American life: race, culture and literature. In his 1970 'What America Would Be Like Without Blacks' he consistently demotes the myth of the separation of cultures, dispelling the illusions of people who would like to see white Americans as disconnected from African Americans: "most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it" ([1970] 1999: 163). In particular Ellison underscores the impact of African American culture on the language and literature of canonical American authors such as Twain, Faulkner, Crane, not only on their aesthetics but also on central themes of their works: "For not only is the black man a co-creator of the language that Mark Twain raised to the level of literary eloquence, but Jim's condition as American and Huck's commitment to freedom are at the moral center of the novel. In other words, had there been no blacks, certain creative tensions arising from the cross-purposes of whites and blacks would also not have existed" ([1970] 1999: 163). In this reading African American history and the history of interracial strife is a source of inspiration both for African Americans and white Americans.

The *Invisible Man's* vision of history contrasts movement with immobility. While some African Americans "travel up and down, in retreat as well as in advance," others seem to be completely stuck, immobilized and silenced by the forces of history. That is the impression formulated by the *Invisible Man* when he watches black passengers in the metro station. They stand out in their stillness and silence. Their immobility is so profound as to invite oxymoronic associations in the *Invisible Man's* mind. They are "so still and silent that they clash with the crowd in their very immobility; standing noisy in their very silence, harsh as a cry of terror in their quietness" (332).⁹ On the one hand, the *Invisible Man* emphasizes the black passengers' immobility (in particular the immobility of the three youths). On the other hand, he calls them "birds of passage" (332), "men of transition whose faces were immobile" (333). The word "transition" finds several interpretations. On the most literal level, it denotes the passage from the South to the North, since most of the black passengers in the metro station are immigrants from the South, "shoot[ing] up from the South into the busy city like wild jacks-in-the-box broken loose from air springs" (332). On a more existential level, transition signifies transitoriness, passing without being noticed.¹⁰ It is quite ironic that the same people should be referred to as "men out of time" (333). If they do not belong to the time scale, they also should be immutable to the passage of time. Yet they are not.

The Invisible Man's reflections on African Americans' very special relation to time prompts him to amend his views on African Americans' agency and their place in history.¹¹ Does agency belong to its most visible actors or to those who apparently reside "outside history" and therefore may as well be "the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it" (333).¹² The Invisible Man begins to wonder whether history was not a "gambler," "instead of a force in a laboratory experiment," "not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these [invisible] boys his agents, his big surprise" (333). Virtually all powerful people whom he encounters and especially the Brotherhood leaders believe that they can control history and reality. They do not realize that they are mere pawns on the chessboard of history, playing a role in a show directed by forces outside their control: "they're running too, running all over themselves" (434), refusing to "recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity" (422). They profess a linear vision of history and reality, clinging to the belief that life moves in a straight line. Similarly, the Invisible Man initially believes that he can walk straight towards his goal, disregarding all obstacles on the way. The Brotherhood dupes him into thinking that reality can be reduced to a pattern. Having been "boomeranged" from his original plans and expectations, he addresses a clear warning to his readers: "that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the *spiral* of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.)" (5, brackets in *Invisible Man*).

Although the Invisible Man first of all tells his own story, he also proclaims himself a spokesman for people who are unseen and unheard. He declares: "on the lower frequencies, I speak for you" (439). His "you" encompasses all those who are "too obscure for learned classification, too silent for the most sensitive recorders of sound ... and too distant from the centers of historical decision to sign or even to applaud the signers of historical documents" (332). At this point of narration the Invisible Man levels himself with people "who write no novels, histories or other books" (332). A moment later he does notice the disparity between himself and black people who are even more invisible than himself. Openly reflecting on his relation to them, he compares himself to Frederick Douglass (334).¹³ Stephen Butterfield notes that a personal success in American society usually meant an increasing alienation from the masses of black people (1974: 94). The Invisible Man's predecessors were to a varying degree aware of the dilemma. At various stages of his life the Invisible Man himself is confronted with a similar predicament, although he is not always conscious of it either. By disassociating himself from the Brotherhood he manages to avoid Booker T. Washington's success. Having gone through the ordeal of all his experiences, ranging from a sharecropper childhood and physical abuse suffered in the South to shockwave treatment in the lobotomy machine and near-execution by hanging

during the Harlem riots, the Invisible Man has every right to say “on the lower frequencies, I speak for you” (439).

Black figures hovering on the lower frequencies recur throughout the Invisible Man's autobiography, even though not all of them are immediately visible to the Invisible Man. These are:

- sharecroppers whom the immature Invisible Man shuns, believing that they bring shame on all black people
- the vets in the Golden Day
- the poor evicted couple, whose history is told by the objects scattered on the sidewalk¹⁴
- Brother Tarp¹⁵
- Tod Clifton
- black people of Harlem.

All of them have their personal histories of oppression and of their service to the country but these histories are blotted out in the broader historical narrative.¹⁶

Marginality and half-fulfilled potential are the most conspicuous in the figure of Tod Clifton, whose story would have gone unregistered if the Invisible Man had not happened to be on the scene when Clifton was gunned down by a white policeman. It is after witnessing the untimely death of Tod Clifton that the Invisible Man formulates most of his theories of history. He concludes that the “cop would be Clifton's historian, his judge, his witness and his executioner” (332). Calling himself the “only witness for the defense” (332), the Invisible Man ponders over the constructedness, selectivity and partiality of history. Historians play an active role in the process of empowerment and disempowerment. According to the Invisible Man, the construction of history always involves the selection and omission of particular facts. What is included and excluded depends on the judgement of a particular historian, on what he sees and hears or rather what he is willing to see and hear: “only those events that the recorder regards as important [...] are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by” (332). The historian is necessarily implicated in a larger power structure, being locked in a relation of mutual dependence with people whose power he helps to perpetuate.

In the aftermath of Clifton's death, the Invisible Man also mulls over the question of authorship in history. He concludes that only survivors gain the privilege of being historians. Survivors are those “who lived to lie about it afterwards” (332). For the Invisible Man the process of recording history necessarily involves a certain distortion and slanting. This slanting is highly visible in Tod Clifton's case. *The Daily News* account of Clifton's death contradicts what the Invisible Man saw: “I was there to see him fall. So I know it as I know it” (344). The Invisible Man's eulogy and African American newspapers correct *The Daily News*' slant on the facts.

Clifton's story reaffirms history as a vector of time and place. The Invisible Man contends: “If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you

are” (436). At the moment preceding his death Clifton loses a sense of time and place: “He thought he was a man when he was only Tod Clifton. [...] He thought he was a man and that men were not meant to be pushed around. But it was hot downtown and he forgot his history, he forgot the time and the place. He lost his hold on reality” (345). Clifton forgot the place of African Americans in the United States of the 1930s. He forgot how a black man was supposed to behave when confronted by the police. He forgot although he had to handle the police on numerous occasions before. He forgot or he became tired of being pushed around. Powerless as Clifton seems at the moment of his death, he still unleashes through his one man protest the power dormant in black people: “Look at what he made, look inside you and feel his awful power” (345).¹⁷ Like the invisible men from the metro station, Clifton is on the one hand a prisoner of time, while on the other he is thoroughly outside the narrow frames of time. His death signifies “the end in the beginning” without an “encore” (343), but his twenty one years of life cannot be shattered by twenty seconds of his dying. Nor can they be compressed into the Invisible Man’s twenty minute eulogy (343).¹⁸

Basic facts about Tod Clifton barely exhaust his life’s history. His location is hardly mappable: “His Race: colored! Religion: unknown, probably born Baptist. Place of birth: U.S. Some southern town. Next of kin: unknown. Address: unknown. Occupation: unemployed” (345). If we look at Tod Clifton through the prism of Adrienne Rich’s statement: “a place on the map is also a place in history,” then Tod Clifton is again outside history, because he is outside the map (Rich 1986: 212). Yet being outside the map, he defies the state apparatus, which usually uses the address to pin down a particular individual (Kirby 1993: 183). Clifton does not allow the state to define him, just as he does not allow the Brotherhood to manipulate his image. That is why he quits the organization. Rather than be a marionette in the hands of the Brotherhood, he prefers to pull the strings himself and manipulate his image to his own advantage.

Ellison’s vision of history links closely to geography, location, the textualization of space and the movement across this space. Ellison redefines the notions of being outside and inside. While being outside entails marginalization and a sense of disempowerment, it also opens a world of possibilities, especially for constructive criticism of dominant discourses, including the discourse of history. Having become disenchanted with the role of a marginalized insider, the Invisible Man concludes that he “could approach it only from the outside” (431). Being outside gives him a measure of distance necessary to “think things out in peace” (431). Yet even when hibernating underground, he can never place himself thoroughly outside because “there is always the mind” (433). The mind transports him back to his grandfather’s words: “Agree them to death and destruction” (434). After all his mind-searching, the Invisible Man wonders: “Weren’t we *part of them* as well as apart from them?” (434). “Us” and “them” merge and diverge throughout American history. The Invisible Man’s final conclusion is that death awaits both whites and African Americans if they do not affirm the principle of diversity upon which the

country was built and if they try to escape their mutual fate to “become one, and yet many” (435).¹⁹

Notes

¹ Maulana Karenga (b. 1941) is one of the chief black cultural nationalists and educators on the West Coast of the United States. In 1965 Karenga founded the “back to black” organization Us. The movement adopted Kawaida as its ideology, promoting cultural and social change. Seven key values which governed the lives of Us followers were compressed in Nguzo Saba. Karenga found white Christmas too materialistic; therefore, he replaced it with Kwanzaa connected to harvest festivals of Africans. He also championed Swahili as a language of self-definition that rises above tribal divisions. His name in Swahili means the “keeper of tradition” (Van Deburg 1997: 275). Karenga is a faculty professor at the Department of Africana Studies, California State University, Long Beach.

² The events of *Invisible Man* unfold in the 1930s, at the time of the Great Depression. Ellison began to write the novel in 1945 and published it in 1952. Ellison’s skepticism mixed with optimism derives from the mood prevailing among African Americans following the completion of World War II. On the one hand, the participation of African Americans in the war increased their hopes for enfranchisement. On the other hand, those hopes were quickly dashed by the post World War II reality of aggravated segregation. Still, the publication of *Invisible Man* (1952) precedes by two years the ruling of the Supreme Court in the case of Brown vs. the Board of Education (1954). Only one year later, in 1955, the Montgomery bus boycott broke out. No wonder that, very much in tune with the spirit of the day, Ellison has the Invisible Man declare: “my world has become one of infinite possibilities. What a phrase – still it’s a good phrase and a good view of life, and a man shouldn’t accept any other; that much I’ve learned underground. Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility” (435).

Originally, Ellison planned a novel reaching beyond the borders of the United States and unfolding during World War II, not the 1930s (Ellison’s Introduction 1972: ix). Ellison himself spent World War II in the United States marine merchant service. He intended to place his protagonist – a black soldier – in the German camp for prisoners of war. At stake then, according to Ellison, would be the relation of his black protagonist to white fellow-prisoners of war and German captors, also white. He would be confronted with “native and foreign racisms” (Introduction 1972: ix).

³ Reflecting on the link between individual and collective histories, Ralph Ellison observes: “We tell ourselves our individual stories so as to become aware of *general* story” (Ishmael Reed’s Interview with Ellison 1977: 155).

⁴ According to Ralph Ellison, white Americans placed African Americans outside because they chose oppositional definitions of identities, defining themselves in terms of who they were not rather than who they were: “Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the “outsider.” Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was not American” (Ellison, “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks” [1970] 1999: 165–166).

⁵ Ostensibly, the Brotherhood welcomes everyone irrespective of their skin colour. In the eyes of the organization all human beings are equal. However, under the veneer of lofty goals there is nothing but yearning for power. Giving black Americans a false sense of action and belonging, top brothers use blacks as a political instrument:

I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men. For all they were concerned, we were so many names scribbled on fake ballots, to be used at their convenience and when not needed to be filed away. (384)

Brotherhood leaders are not interested in black people as individuals. Minor brothers do not represent any value. What counts is the number of votes and marchers they can provide. The Invisible Man compares brothers to the great white father. Like some slaveholders, they propagate the myth of paternalism, perceiving themselves as guardians of ignorant black masses, whom they need to guide and protect. Whenever African Americans become too vociferous in their demands, they do their best to silence them. Anyone who refuses to toe the party line is eliminated. When demonstrations reach a crescendo, inching towards accomplishing something, white leaders immediately bring them to a halt. Brothers concentrate on the virtual non-issue of black Sambo dolls, but are not concerned by the problem of police brutality.

⁶ In Ishmael Reed's Interview with Ralph Ellison, Ellison claims that "the movement from the South to the North became a basic pattern for [his] novel" (1977: 156).

⁷ In the above cited Interview Ellison also notes: "Historically, we were trying to escape from slavery in a scene consisting of geographical space. First, to the North and then to the West, going to the Nation (meaning the Indian Nation and later the Oklahoma Territory), just as Huckleberry Finn decided to do, and as Bessie Smith states in one of her blues. Of course, some of us escaped South and joined the Seminoles and fought with them against the United States. Geography forms the scene in which we and our forefathers acted and continue to act out the drama of Afro-American freedom" (Ishmael Reed's Interview with Ellison 1977: 155). Ellison's statement is a specific rendition of Foucault's statement: "A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers" (Foucault 1980: 149).

⁸ Gates makes the statement in the context of his discussion of African American signifying – the complex strategy of survival in a hostile environment. Being confronted with a more powerful opponent, African Americans resorted to unconventional tactics like wit, deceit, masking. Gates traces the origins of Afro-American tricksterism to the mythologies of Yoruba cultures. The chief trickster was called Esu. African American tradition replaced Esu with the Signifying Monkey (Gates 1989: xxi). The relationship between whites and the black trickster parallels that between the Lion and the Signifying Monkey. The Lion, although more powerful, is outsmarted by the Monkey, because he cannot decipher the Monkey's figurative language. He reads it literally, not figuratively. African tricksterism was transplanted onto American soil, finding its way into Afro-American oral tradition and into everyday life of African Americans. The Signifying Monkey is one of many African American tricksters. Brer Fox, Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear, Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear are others, to name just a few. Joel Chandler Harris wrote down trickster tales in his collection *Uncle Remus Stories* (1881). Charles Waldell Chesnutt, the author of the *Conjure Woman* collection (1899), expanded the narrative plot of trickster tales and introduced human characters instead of animals.

⁹ The immobility of the black passengers stands in stark contrast to the mobility inscribed in the American dream, to which they aspire but from which they are barred.

¹⁰ It is significant that the scene unfolds in the metro station, the place where people usually pass each other, taking only cursory interest in other passengers. This sense of passing, of insignificance, the lack of recognition is magnified in the case of black people. Watching the black passengers, the Invisible Man remembers his teacher's statement: "You're like one of these African sculptures, distorted in the interest of a design" (333). The Invisible Man is wondering to what and whose design they belong (333). Sculpture also entails the juxtaposition of immobility and the frozen, arrested movement.

¹¹ As some of the New Historicist critics like for example Louis A. Montrose point out, all human beings are agents within history although their "possibilities and patterns for action are always socially and historically situated" (1989: 21). Aware of the limitations

constraining African Americans' possibilities for action in the 1930s, the Invisible Man still chooses to define himself through possibility: "I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. But my world has become one of infinite possibilities (435).

¹² In another passage the Invisible Man speaks of a yokel who knocked out a prizefighter because he "stepped inside" his "sense of time" (7).

¹³ The comparison to Douglass drew criticism from Robert Stepto, who rebukes the Invisible Man for his presumptuousness and naivety, pointing also to Ellison's irony leveled at his protagonist (1991: 184–186).

¹⁴ Among the objects belonging to the evicted couple named Provo there are liberation papers dating back to 1859, Abraham Lincoln's tintype, an Ethiopian flag, a newspaper portrait of Marcus Garvey. All of the objects testify to Provo's attachment to the African American tradition and the ideals of the American Republic (205). They also represent odd fragments of African American history. Rummaging through Provo's snow-sprinkled possessions, the Invisible Man uncovers the layers of African American history, arriving at the most arduous period last. The slavery past, whose brand the immature Invisible Man assiduously represses, reaches him through liberation papers of Primus Provo: "Be it known to all men that my negro, Primus Provo, has been freed by me this sixth day of August, 1859. Signed: John Samuels. Macon ..." (206). Upon reading the words, the Invisible Man is left with trembling hands and rasping breath "as if [he] had run a long distance or come upon a coiled snake in a busy street" (206). Quickly replacing the papers in a drawer, he seems to initially think that he can again blot out the memory as easily as he has just blotted out "the single drop of melted snow which glistened on the yellow page" (206). He tells himself: "*It has been longer than that, further removed in time [...]* and yet I knew that it hadn't been" (206, original italics). Try as he might to banish the memory of slavery, he knows that it is barely possible with all the remnants of slavery and the slave past visiting African Americans in their present. The memory of slavery transports him inward, into his mind and through his mind to the South, to the stories heard from his relatives.

¹⁵ Unlike the Invisible Man's Grandfather, Brother Tarp says "no" and is punished for it. He says no consistently until he breaks the chain and runs away to freedom. Thomas Vogler calls Tarp the Invisible Man's spiritual father and brother (1974: 146). While the Invisible Man understands the need to say "yes" to the principle of reconciliation (Ellison, *Invisible Man* [1952] 1972: 433), he is also fed up with nodding assent, with saying "yes" against the nay saying of his stomach (433).

¹⁶ Ralph Ellison presents a gendered representation of history. It is his story, not her story. Women play a marginal role in the novel. Even if they are significant figures, they do not feature prominently and their perspective is not fully displayed. The most significant African American women crossing the Invisible Man's path are the black slave woman in his Prologue dream and Mary Rambo. The slave-woman tells the Invisible Man: "Freedom is nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head. But it's a hard job" (9). The Invisible Man acts on this statement while constructing his narrative. The control over his text gives the Invisible Man full self-control, releasing him from the manipulations of others. The other significant African American woman in the narrative, Mary Rambo, is a paragon of strength, resistance and perseverance. She also gains the semblance of the ministering angel who takes the Invisible Man under her wings when the racist forces of New York overwhelm him. It is quite significant that the task/honor of retrieving Clifton's body from the morgue falls to the committee of three elderly women (339). Black women are portrayed as originators of African American life, its nurturers, caretakers and ultimate claimers. African American life originates in black women and it returns to them. Not all African American women are granted the voice in the narrative. Trueblood's daughter never tells her own story. White women are also treated instrumentally by the Invisible Man, who intends to use them as a means of extracting information from top Brotherhood leaders. He shows profound disenchantment when Brotherhood leaders sideline him and assign him the investigation of the "woman

question.” It is shortly after his “investigation” that he strikes upon the idea of using women to his advantage. For a thorough discussion of the portrayal of female characters in *Invisible Man* see Claudia Tate’s “Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” and Carolyn Sylvander’s “Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Female Stereotypes.”

- ¹⁷ The Invisible Man is emphatic about the disparity of African Americans’ and white people’s power: “We [African Americans] had only our minds and bodies, as against the other side’s vast power” (338).
- ¹⁸ Delivering his eulogy for Tod Clifton, the Invisible Man reflects on the impossibility of the task: “Can I say in twenty minutes what was building twenty one years and ended in twenty seconds?” (343)
- ¹⁹ The Invisible Man observes: “one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and blacks striving toward whiteness and becoming quite dull and gray” (436).

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