



## When Ralph Ellison Unmutes the Silences of History in *Invisible Man*



Ousseynou Sy <sup>a</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper deals with Ellison's ahistoriographic or counterhistory/ countermemory discourse that narrates the marginality of the African-American community. To craft his ahistoriographic discourse, Ellison uses sequels of the past, and tropes of carcerality and segregation to bring to the fore the process and politics of otherization that have set the African-American community away from linear time and progress. Ellison's counterhistory or countermemory discourse "revises received American history by inscribing the history of Blacks in America" (252), as Greene argues. Therefore, Ellison's ahistoriographic discourse is also a discourse of marginality that digs up the archives to rewrite the other side of suppressed and erased American history that America insulates itself within an amnesia that does not acknowledge that kind of history. As the narrator says, "only those events the recorder regards as important" (439) are archived. Ellison plays with history; he narrativizes the received American history (the official historiography), meaning that he assimilates it with mere lies or fiction. In so doing, he creates a historical narrative that calls against amnesia and the muting of injustices of the past. When we piece together all the slavery artifacts that permeate the text and contrast them with the ideology of "whitewash of the past" advocated by the college, we see that Ellison offers a complex perspective of American history. Ellison hints also at the ideology of "blackwash of the past" when he raises the issue of the African responsibility in the slave trade through the Tod Clifton's Sambo doll auction. Ellison thematizes all these silences of history through his palimpsestic historical narrative. He sets the college in an old plantation to make the silences of history visible, and to show how the archives are selective.

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### Corresponding author:

Ousseynou Sy,

Sahel University, Dakar, Senegal.

Email address: [ousseynou2002@gmail.com](mailto:ousseynou2002@gmail.com)

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<sup>a</sup> Sahel University, Dakar, Senegal

## Epigraphs

Wounded histories are written as literature, or fiction, and not as history, for only literature in our culture is allowed the narrative flexibility and the suspension of disbelief that are crucial to the telling of these histories.<sup>b</sup>

Minority histories have never come into full cultural consciousness, because mainstream American history is so relentlessly optimistic and teleological that it has become painfully difficult to articulate counterhistories that do not share these values, and because postmodern culture works against the sustained engagement with memory and commitment to complexity that is crucial for these histories.<sup>c</sup>

In *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Fredric Jameson questions the poststructuralist theory that defines history as a mere narrative that does not represent the exact events of the past. He rather offers a different perspective that at the same time views history as a narrative construction of the past (like the poststructuralists) and focuses on the trauma, wounds and stigmas of history that can always be registered. Jameson's definition of history as a narrative construction capable of registering the stigmas and effects of history aptly fits the historical fiction Ellison deals with. The Jamesonian tropes of history as wound and "what hurts" permeate Ellison's text, in particular in the slavery artifacts that surround the college, in Brother Tarp's limp (and leg chain) and Bledsoe's leg shackle and Grandfather's story.

*Invisible Man* is concerned about the wounds of history (slavery) and its sequels, and the question of who is naming or recording history. Ellison opens his narrative with the question of nation formation and the creation of identity. Right from the prologue which summarizes the content and anticipates the events to be narrated, the narrator complains about his marginality and subjectivity in these declarations:

I am an invisible man. No I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me (3).

The refusal of others to see invisible man shows that he is not just textually but also physically sentenced to a prison in his own country (I will pick up this trope of carcerality later). The refusal of the people to see invisible man results from the effects and stigmas of history that still act upon the present. The homodiegetic narrator lays then tracks, from his prologue, for a narrative that approaches history as wound and stigma. The palimpsest narrative that represents the college both as an "Eden" (because it favors the education of blacks and their social uplift) and its location in an old plantation offers an ironic and paradoxical lens through which we can read two layers of historical narrative that move poles asunder. As the narrator drives the wealthy white trustee of the college, Mr. Norton, around the campus, the reader is exposed to this superimposition or juxtaposition of historical narratives: the narrator contrasts the edenic description of the college opening chapter two with this passage that describes the other sides of the campus:

We were passing a collection of shacks and log cabins now, bleached white and warped by the weather. Sun-tortured shingles lay on the roofs like decks of water-soaked cards spread out to dry. The houses consisted of two squares rooms joined together by a common floor and roof with a porch in between.....  
It was an old cabin with its chinks filled with chalk-white clay, with bright new shingles patching its roofs (46).

Through this palimpsestic narrative, Ellison crafts a historical narrative that binds past and present into a revisionist fabric of history. He underscores the importance of the past throughout the text. Significantly enough, by setting the college in an old plantation, Ellison recovers the wounded history of his community that the college trustees try to wipe out through the ideology of whitewash. As the above quotation informs us there was "a collection of shacks and log cabins now, bleached white and warped by the weather" (46). This palimpsestic narration not only presents two conflicting superimposed versions of history, but also moves back and forth through time. This particular narration,

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<sup>b</sup> Nancy J. Peterson. *Against Amnesia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2001, p.7

<sup>c</sup> Nancy J. Peterson. *Against Amnesia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 2001, p.1

which can also be read as a *mise-en-abyme* narrative since it inscribes stories within stories, histories within histories, and unfolds the historical conditions that have rendered minority histories invisible from the mainstream American culture. Ellison presents a countermemory or counterhistory discourse that is against the erasure of the wounds of the past. The sequels of the past that Ellison brings to the fore in his narrative constitute a symbolic texture that is against the annihilation of the past. For example, through Brother Tarp's limp, Bledsoe's leg shackle, Ellison provides other textualized stigmas of his community's scarred history.

Through the stories of Brother Tarp and Bledsoe, Ellison shows how the effects of history can determine individual or even collective identity. Both Brother Tarp and Bledsoe are embodiments and living memories of their community's wounded history. They have indelible stigmas that record the unvoiced traumatic history of slavery. Brother Tarp, for example, narrates his enslaved life experience to invisible man. Indeed, the intention of Brother Tarp to delve into his painful past to excavate buried memories reveals that memory is the place, a sort of archive, where the eradication of history by official historiography or dominant national narrative is not possible. The flood of memories that runs into the mind of Brother Tarp with every turn, despite his efforts to block it out, shows the impossibility of forgetting about the past. Brother Tarp defines the past or history as a kind of "rememory" (to use Morrison's term) that should be passed on. Like a storyteller, Brother Tarp narrates his own story to invisible man in these terms:

You see, I was down there for a long time before I come up here, and when I did come up they were after me. What I mean is, I had to escape, I had to come a-running."  
"[.....] You noticed this limp I got?"  
Well, I wasn't always lame, and I'm not really now 'cause the doctors can't find anything wrong with this leg. They say it's sound as a piece of steel. What I mean is I got this limp from dragging a chain ... and after nineteen years I haven't been able to stop dragging my leg (387).

By narrating his story of limp, Brother Tarp constructs a powerful countermemory discourse capable of filling in the holes in the mainstream American history. Therefore, when Brother Tarp decides to give his leg chain to invisible man, he passes on to him his memory and history that should not fall into oblivion. As he tells invisible man when giving him his leg chain: "Funny thing to give somebody, but I think it's got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we're really fighting against. I don't think of it in terms of but two words, yes or no; but it signifies a heap more..."(388). This passage where Brother Tarp passes his leg chain to invisible man is significant, too, for it exemplifies the idea that some historical realities move beyond documentation. The problem of communicating such stories or histories is first addressed through invisible man's inability to seize the meaning and symbolism of that object. Is it just like a "watch" that a father passes on to his own son? Or more than that? In any case, there is an acknowledgement that a wounded and traumatic history causes for the victim an experience that lies beyond his narrative of communication. As Peterson argues: "some things are unspoken because reigning ideologies do not consider them worthy of notice. Other things are unspeakable because they are too traumatic to be remembered" (52). Because of this unspeakability of the wounds of the past, Ellison reduces them to relics which narrate their own stories.

Like the relic of Brother Tarp, Ellison also presents Bledsoe's leg shackle. As a historical signifier, Bledsoe's leg shackle is obviously meant to disseminate a history that has gone unrecorded or forgotten. Bledsoe polishes his leg shackle and proudly displays it in his office. In so doing, he makes the absences or silences of history visible and palpable. Through the presentation of Brother Tarp and Bledsoe's relics, it becomes clear that Ellison's agenda is first to literalize these symbols of trauma by exporting them from the private realm into the public space and second to turn them into a literary device through a process of aestheticization. From the setting of the college in an old plantation down to the relics that the characters bear, Ellison reduces his narrative to a museum of historical relics. For example, both Brother Tarp and Bledsoe's relics at the same time concretize an act and retrieve a history. Indeed, behind each of these relics lies a personal story which is part of a grand narrative of trauma and violence. These relics function as an epitaph inscribed on a gravestone. In the case of epitaph, the name of the departed along with his or her date of birth and death attests to the existence of the deceased and at the same time immortalizes that life. Much the same is true with the body scarred characters of Ellison. These epitaph body-scarred characters provocatively break forth the limits of memory and representation. They make a claim to which we become answerable like Toni Morrison's eponymous character Beloved who, as the narrator puts it, « Although she has claim, she is not claimed. » (p. 322) By exposing these symbols of trauma, Ellison let these wounds and scars along with their relics speak for themselves and be heard in their own voice.

Since Bledsoe ironically calls his relic a “symbol of our progress” (141), he invites the reader to read between the lines. As the narrator, invisible man, contrasts Bledsoe and Brother Tarp’s relics, two versions of the same history are presented differently. Invisible man reads the two relics, or stories, in these terms: “It (Brother Tarp’s leg chain) was such a link as I had seen on Bledsoe’s desk, only while that one had been smooth, Tarp’s bore the marks of haste and violence, looking as though it had been attacked and conquered before it stubbornly yielded” (389). Through the difference between these two histories, Ellison highlights the subjectivity or fictionality of history. Bledsoe’s relic tells a story that undermines the trauma of the past and its effects. Bledsoe aestheticizes his trauma by polishing and exposing like an art object his leg shackle. This project of embellishment of trauma is Ellison’s own because he wants to gild the historical truth underlying his fiction. The truth in his fiction is so blunt, harsh, and unspeakable that it can only be told in a slant manner as Nancy Peterson’s opening epigraph suggests. Ellison, then, in order not to let vain the symbols of trauma like Brother Tarp’s limp and its relic, aestheticizes them. These relics and scarred bodies become a literary device through which the trauma of slavery is unveiled. There is then an aestheticization or embellishment of trauma. This aestheticization calls on the aesthetic acuity of the reader. Indeed, for Ellison the only trauma, scar, or relic that can be viewed as ugly or tragic is the one hidden or muted because these scars and wounds along with the reasons that have caused them are not fully exposed and analyzed, and therefore they are likely to repeat themselves. By bringing to the fore these symbols of trauma, Ellison makes a plea against amnesia. In this call against amnesia, every sign or symbol is turned into a loaded historical signifier and narratorial device. The symbols of trauma on the body parts of Bledsoe and Brother Tarp are for Ellison like the splitting of an atom in chemistry. Each entity has a great potential for productivity and destruction. But by turning these symbols of trauma and violence into a literary device, Ellison attempts to aestheticize them, and thereby nullify their destructive potential. By aestheticizing trauma, Ellison, like in the case of victims of collective calamity, displays the history of these scar-bearers in memorialization. He invites the reader to reflect upon the scars and relics of his characters like a visitor touring a museum of collective calamity reading and reflecting upon the names inscribed upon the gravestones. A relic or scar inflicted by violence or trauma is no need of explanation since the scar becomes a manifest identity like a name.

Brother Tarp’s relic is not only a marker of identity but also it stands for a historiographic document that wants to unveil the highest degree of truth about the past. Brother Tarp’s relic, which mentions the past in a perfunctory way, is then a narrative of “whiteness” like the one the college advocates.

Given the considerable difference between Brother Tarp’s and Bledsoe’s stories, we can see that the text reduces any historical narrative to a question of representation. Therefore, history is not an objective and unbiased discourse, but a narrative constructed for personal and ideological interests. Our motivation then compels us to give credence to one particular version over another. By juxtaposing Brother Tarp’s version of tragic history with the perfunctory one of Bledsoe, Ellison calls into question the conflation between history (as it really happened) and history as discourse (the possibility to alternate versions of history). But though Greene, like many critics, analyzes the two versions of these stories in terms of “accurate truth” and “artifactual text” (253), I think that Ellison’s intention goes beyond the tension between history and “lie”. The point is that whether the story renders a historical version that minimizes the wrong of the past (like Bledsoe’s) or not, meaning it favors a truthful historical narrative; the fact of telling it is the prime concern of Ellison. Ellison shows that the only history that can be seen as tragic or irrecoverable is the one that is muted, not told, not passed on to the future generation. This idea of passing on historical narrative is emphasized right from the outset of the novel when Grandfather on his deathbed narrates through his personal story, the history of his people to invisible man’s father.

Besides the narratorial symbols of Bledsoe and Brother Tarp, Ellison presents other troublesome traces of historical memory. If objects are images that can affect memory and in turn produce a textualized history, story has the same attribute. On his deathbed, Grandfather narrates his story of oppression and his defeatist attitude or “betrayal” in his people’s struggle for freedom and visibility. The sense of guilt that permeates Grandfather’s story shows that history, as Glissant argues, can be either “an expression or a lived experienced ... capable of quarrying deep within us, as a consciousness or emergence of a consciousness, a neurosis (symptom of loss) and a contraction of the self” (70). Grandfather’s story is then meant to create the consciousness of his oppressed community. As he says: “I never told you, but our life is war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion’s mouth” (16). Grandfather’s story, which the narrator, invisible man, looks upon as a “curse” (16), portrays “the past as a burden and a stepping stone to the future” (30) as O’Meally asserts in *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*. His story is rather a warning about the boomerang aspect of history than a simple historical narrative. In other words, a reading of Grandfather’s story suggests that his people’s identity is inextricably linked with their history. Therefore, if they ignore their past, they

will suffer from the same injustices of the past. Contrary, then, to invisible man who reads Grandfather's story as a victimist narrative or a "curse," I read it as an invitation to be conscious of the cycles of history. By cycles of history, I mean any social injustice that sanctions or perpetuates violence towards invisible man's community. In this respect, Clifton's episode is quite illustrative. The incident of Clifton, which I read as a historical regression, presents history as madness.

In chapter 20, Tod Clifton, one of the members of the Brotherhood, is shot dead by the policeman for selling sambo dolls in the streets. Chapter 20 is central in the novel since Ellison deals implicitly, on the one hand, with the taboo subject of the African responsibility in the slave trade, and, on the other hand, with the complex black and white relationship.

Indeed, the issue of the African responsibility in transatlantic slavery is often muted. However being both against the ideology of "whitewash" and "blackwash" -- meaning the Europeans, Americans, and Africans' refusal not to restore the historical truth--, Ellison can't prevent himself from lifting a veil on this African taboo. In Chapter 20, Tod Clifton is depicted selling Sambo dolls. A Sambo doll, as explained in the author's note, dates back to the days of slavery and it designates a docile and faithful slave. Consequently, the selling of Sambo dolls by Tod Clifton alludes implicitly to the thorny issue of the African responsibility in slavery. Even the name Sambo is significant enough to allow such an interpretation. By just turning the letter O into A, we get Samba, a name the African resonance of which is indisputable. The reader is appalled by the act of Tod Clifton. This allusion is made more explicit when the narrator comments that "there's no license for little sambo" (433). That is to say that you do not need permission to sell a Sambo. Selling a Sambo does not require any legal document. However open to interpretation this issue may be, there are textual elements that illustrate that Ellison fictionalizes this historical taboo. A deconstructive reading allows us to see how the passage of Tod Clifton looks like a real scene of auction. Indeed, in the scene of Tod Clifton, the latter sings a jingle while making the Sambo dolls dance, and the public is watching and haggling. Invisible Man, the narrator, is appalled by the act of Tod Clifton and called him a traitor. Towards the end of the chapter when the narrator meditates on the act of Tod Clifton, he asks why Tod Clifton has chosen to "fall outside of history" (434). Through his act, Tod Clifton has unmade history. There are in the Clifton scene textual elements that seemingly incriminate the Africans in the transatlantic slave trade. But right after his act, Clifton is murdered by a white policeman for selling sambo dolls as if to efface his crime. This technique of effacement implies that there are many innuendoes and censored arguments buried in the text. The narrative structure stands between two complementary poles of censorship and self-censorship, which mirrors perfectly the problematic of history writing. History writing is always a matter of conflicting evidence, and thereby next to the truth there is always some retention of information, fabulation, alteration, and falsehood. And any of these inaccurate and incomplete accounts of history is possible without some censorship or self-censorship from either the historians or witnesses. To capture this reality, Ellison deploys a narrative structure that censors itself, saying least than it knows as if it does not want to be answerable or liable to blame. This technique of censorship is even extended to the characters. Invisible Man as one of the witnesses of Clifton's act tries his most to erase the scene out of his mind. Even the policeman who murders Clifton disappeared in the text, he is no longer mentioned. In other words, Clifton and his act are not claimed like Morrison's *Beloved*. Speaking about *Beloved*, Morrison writes: "Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. (323) Morrison poses here the question of answerability regarding slavery. *Beloved* is not claimed because no one wants to take up that responsibility. Answerability entails always guilt. A guilt that the bystanders, victims, and perpetrators try to silence that is why the narrative structure has tactfully let the murder of Clifton give so much sound and fury that the narration shifts radically its focus onto the black and white difficult cohabitation.

Through Tod Clifton's murder, Ellison reveals how, like a heritage, the implications of the past still determine the relationship between the black and white communities. In other words, history can create an atmosphere of incomprehension and hostility if people can't transcend the racial divisions and aporia resulting from the discords and injustices of the past. As the narrator says after the incident of Clifton: "What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile..." (441). Through this passage, we can see that since history may be madness and an instrument of division, it should be reoriented and "rationalized". The prime concern of the Brotherhood is to "rationalize" it through the creation of a black community conscious of its past, and at the same time embracing other communities. The Brotherhood is a movement of oneness and national unity that negates the separateness of races or the hegemony of a race. The narrator defines the Brotherhood in these terms: "And 'a white man's world' was just what the Brotherhood was against. We were dedicated to building a world of Brotherhood"

(391). The Brotherhood is then a celebrant of ecumenical understanding, national unity and universal love. It transcends race differences as the symbolic picture in the wall of invisible man's office reveals:

It was a symbolic poster of a group of heroic figures: An American Indian couple, representing the dispossessed past; a blond brother (in overalls) and a leading Irish sister, representing the dispossessed present; and brother Tod Clifton and a young white couple (it had been felt unwise simply to show Clifton and the girl) surrounded by a group of children of mixed races, representing the future, a color photograph of bright skin texture and smooth contrast (385).

This poster confesses the "dispossessions" of the past, the wounds of history, and proposes a bright perspective for the future that can be achieved only by rejecting the social markers of otherization, in particular race and color. Through the "children of mixed races", the picture enables race fluidity, which means that race is a social construct. Ellison presents race as a social construct in many passages. The narrator recalls his English professor, Woodridge, lecturing about the construction of race and culture. Woodridge's narrative is rendered in this passage:

Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscious of his race, but creating the *uncreated features of his face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscious of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record... We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture. Why waste time creating a conscience for something that doesn't exist? For, you see, blood and skin do not think! (354).

Ellison debunks the myth of race and at the same time he questions what constitutes whiteness and blackness. For example, the "optic white" paints, the purest white, the government uses to "Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints" (196) is made brighter through the addition of drops of black pigment. And this white paint can also efface blackness as Kimbro explains: "We make the best white paint in the world, I don't give a damn what nobody says. Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through" (217). Through this blend and formulation of colors, Ellison reinforces the discourse of Woodridge about the construction of race. But Ellison's act of enforcing racelessness or presenting race as a social construct is itself a racial act, since he rejects one of the structuring tropes of Americanness: race.

Indeed the message the discourse of Woodridge conveys as well as that of the poster contradict the disaffected veterans' conviction that racial differences cannot be transcended, and that history is always chaos since like a "roulette wheel" (81) it circles back without any possibility for man to alter its course. Whether history is always synonymous with madness or a demon that can be exorcised and "rationalized," Ellison leaves unsolved the tension between these two sides of history that run throughout the text. Even within the Brotherhood all the members don't have the same conception of history. Brother Tarp and Ras, for instance, refute the Brotherhood's concept of history. A concept of history they regard as too idealized. Therefore like the narratorial symbols of Brother Tarp and Bledsoe, the representation of history as a "madman full of paranoid guile" or a "reasonable citizen" raises more questions than it provides answers. But the race riot after the death of Clifton leads us to question the Brotherhood's concept of history. Instead of being just a movement of liberation and national unity, the Brotherhood is torn apart by internal divisions and the refusal of the rest of the nation to recognize it. As the narrator says: "outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn't see us" (499). This dilemma the black community find themselves in shows that they are sentenced to prison. Their fight for a world of brotherhood is but an effort to break free from a carceral life.

Grandfather's assumption that his community should learn to live with their "heads in the lion's mouth", along with invisible man's claim that society refuses to see him, set the framework of imprisonment imagery. These metaphors of carcerality reveal that Ellison crafts his countermemory discourse with topos of fear and dependence that further deny freedom and power to invisible man's community, and reduce them to invisibility. Before demonstrating how the tropes of carcerality function in the text, let's reflect on some definitions of the term prison and its lexicon (imprisonment, carcerality).

In her essay, "The Metaphorics and Metonymics of Carcerality," Monika Fludernik defines how prison imagery operates in literary texts in these terms:

Prison metaphors, on the other hand, traditionally revolve around characterization of prison as hell, as live burial, as death, and more recently as anonymity, stupid routine, uniformity, and most topically, warehousing. These metaphors all emphasize the underlying container image of imprisonment (being shut up) rather than restriction

of movement which is more prominent in the metaphors of imprisonment; the latter also emphasize the experiential quality of imprisonment (the feelings of despair, suffering, humiliation) (231).

Alongside the metaphors of imprisonment Fludernik provides in her definition, Foucault's reflections on carcerality allow us to think of imprisonment as a social machine, a theatre of roles, in which some people are victims and other perpetrators. In his representation, the perpetrators stand for a rationalized institution and the "prisoners" a group of insane individuals. All these tropes of carcerality function in Ellison's text as markers of otherization that set apart the black community and hem in their lives.

First Ellison presents imprisonment as psychic fear not just in Grandfather's story but also in Mary Rambo's. Though physically independent, Mary Rambo is not liberated from the myths and psychic shackles of the past. When invisible man gives her the hundred dollar bill, she refuses to take it not because she is not short of money, but because, as the marginalized other, the restraints of society suggest that she does not possess that amount of money as she says:

But that's a hundred-dollar bill. I take that an' try to change it and the white folks'll want to know my whole life's story." She snorted. They want to know where I was born, where I work, and where I been for the last six months, and when I tell 'em they still gonna think I stole it. Ain't you got nothing smaller? (325).

Mary Rambo's reaction shows that society keeps her, like a prisoner, under restrictions that are not imposed upon others, which leads us to question her agency and rights as an American citizen. The freedom and pursuit of happiness that her citizenship warranties are not respected. Her psychic fear exemplifies the assumption Ellison makes in his introduction that "democratic ideals and military valor alike were rendered absurd by the prevailing mystique of race and color (XIII)." The Mary Rambo scene reveals that Ellison links the tropes of carcerality with the politics and process of perpetual otherization that keeps the blacks in an "outsider within" position. That is to say the presence of blacks is politically important in order to represent America as a "melting pot," as a space which defines "Americanness" in terms of race inclusion. The narrator, for instance, reminds the reader that "America is woven of many strands" (577) and that he is part and parcel of it.

Yet, if nation as a democratic institution and a social-political category is defined to be homogenous, and that homogeneity is constructed in terms of the whiteness of Euro-Americans, then being a black, or even a native American, implies a difference of status, a difference which the official ideologies of the American nation-state need to negotiate with. The metaphors of carcerality that Ellison uses to show the otherization of blacks can be read as a failure of the American nation-state to negotiate this difference. Perhaps this situation is too complex for the nation-state to solve, and therefore it adopts a mechanism of invisibility that helps to structure a white American self. This binary opposition between the privileged and governing self and the incarcerated other recalls the clash that Foucault describes in *Madness and Civilization* between the mad and the "institution of reason" (government):

Incessantly cast in the role of unknown visitor, and challenged in everything that can be known about him, drawn to the surface of himself by a social personality imposed by observation, by form and mask, the madman is obliged to objectify himself in the eyes of reason as the perfect stranger, that is, as the man whose strangeness does not reveal itself. The city of reason welcomes him only with this qualification and at the price of his surrender to anonymity (249-250).

Through the lens of Foucault's quotation, we can read Mary Rambo's decision not to take the money as an attempt to "objectify herself in the eyes of reason" and to remain anonymous. As the incarcerated other (like invisible man), Mary Rambo should be deprived of any social privileges that confer on her a legal status of citizenship. The money becomes then a simultaneous act of discovery and inclusion that would break the process of segregation and imprisonment that keeps Mary as an "outsider within."

If anonymity is a metaphor of carcerality as both Fludernik and Foucault's quotations suggest, then Ellison has textually sentenced invisible man to a constant situation of invisibility, exploitation and frustration. Invisible man remains anonymous throughout the narrative, not once is his name mentioned. Even his Brotherhood name is kept secret to the reader. Only his inner frustration and status as a victim are narrated to the reader. Through this narrative structure, Ellison provides structuring images that emphasize the victimization and imprisonment of invisible man, but also repeat that same imprisonment. In so doing, invisible man's struggle for visibility in a social power structure that hems in his life or confines it to a secondary citizen status is, by extension, his community's aspiration to more

freedom. In other words, invisible man is an epitome of the black community; his personal story is a means of counteracting communal self-hatred, stigmas and stereotypes. For example, he utters all the criticism about nationhood and citizenship. In one of his monologues in which he ponders over the paradoxes and contradictions on which the nation is built, he says that “the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine” (559) to contrast the democratic citizenship that other people enjoy with his carceral life. As John Callahan says, invisible man’s claim that there is a dividing line between his status and that of others, and that there are contradictions within the nation’s principles, turns his phrase or lament “the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine” into a summary of the novel, it could stand for the “novel’s epigraph” (84).

Moreover, invisible man’s laments denote a lack of social space and agency. He is denied the ability and intellectual comprehension to act back, and thus he becomes a subject, a prisoner, who is only supposed to be acted upon. The premise of invisibility upon which the narrative is based strengthens this idea of being a passive subject. His interaction with Mr. Norton ironically reveals his powerlessness and lack of social space. Mr. Norton, whose name symbolically represents an institution or a canonized structure, is one of the benefactors who determine the social space of blacks. For example, though he exhorts invisible man to read Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”, he creates through his patronage a condition of dependence that turns his college into one of the carceral institutions that Foucault describes. He argues that a prison is an “institution of reason” that imposes the “invisibility of unreason” achieved by putting together a particular group of individuals into an institutionalized place. In this respect, the punishment inflicted on invisible man resulting from the incident when he is driving Mr. Norton around campus, is a trope that can be read through Foucault’s analysis that:

Everything was organized so that the madman would recognize himself in a world of judgment that enveloped him on all sides; he must know that he is judged, watched, condemned; from transgression to punishment, the transgression must be evident as a guilt recognized by all (267).

Thereupon, the lot of invisible man is similar to that of the madman Foucault describes as the marginalized other who is deprived of agency. Like the Foucauldian madman, invisible man, erased like a shadow, is a subject to be acted upon. He utters his plight in these terms: “well, I was and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet I was unseen” (507). Because of the extreme ambiguity of his existence and the indifference of the world he lives in, invisible man makes the “underground” his home in the prologue, which reinforces his incarceration. But by going underground, inspired by the music of Louis Armstrong, invisible man discovers his humanity and writes his existential drama to subvert social reality. As a “walled in” narrator, writing becomes a liberating act for him as thinking was an act of freedom for Frederick Douglass: “But thinking was all I could do like a fish in a net.”

To pick up Fludernik’s tropes of carcerality, invisible man is sentenced not just to anonymity and invisibility, but also to “stupid routine and uniformity.” Through his search for a job, the reader is exposed to the societal stereotypes and uniformity that hem in his life. His interview with Mr. Emerson’s son and secretary is a discourse that shows his exclusion, and at the same time reveals the unconscious legitimization of a certain normative code or uniformity to view him as well as the function he should exercise in society. Here is part of the conversation that emphasizes the institutionalization of uniformity in order to maintain a certain social status quo or hierarchy:

“Tell me, what is it that you’re trying to accomplish?” he said.  
“I want a job, sir, so that I can earn money to return to college in the fall.”  
“To your old school?”  
“Yes, sir.”  
“I see.” For a moment he studied me silently. “When do you expect to graduate?”  
“Next year, sir. I’ve completed my junior classes...”  
“Oh, you have? That’s very good. And how old are you?”  
“Almost twenty, sir?”  
“A junior at nineteen? You *are* a good student.”  
“Thank you, sir,” I said, beginning to enjoy the interview.  
“Were you an athlete?” he asked.  
“No, sir...”  
“You have the build,” he said, looking me up and down.  
“You’d probably make an excellent runner, a sprinter” (182-183).



Through this passage, Ellison narrates the absurdity of social classifications based on uniformity. He deconstructs how an entire social order keeps invisible man from fully making use of his intellectual potential. Such politics of otherization keeps him in a perpetual position of a governed subject. But, paradoxically, invisible man is not conscious of his imprisonment. As Mr. Norton's son tells invisible man, he is blinded by his ambition and that to help invisible man Mr. Norton's son must "disillusion" him (187). The question we may then ask is why Ellison keeps invisible man blind to the social realities (a question we'll pick up later).

An analysis of invisible man's plight through Foucault's definition of imprisonment emphasizes his invisibility and otherness. Monika Fludernik's tropes of carcerality similarly bring to the fore the arcanum into which he is trapped. By narrativizing history through his countermemory discourse and metaphors of imprisonment, Ellison shows that as a deliberate presentation of a particular reality, literature can provide a place for new ways of imagining oneself and counteracting internalized self-hatred and stigma. At the same time, Ellison teaches that literature can be a good substitute for a history book, and it can function as a survival mechanism for marginalized communities and cultures.

#### *Conflict of interest statement*

The author declared that he has no competing interests.

#### *Statement of authorship*

The author has a responsibility for the conception and design of the study. The author has approved the final article.

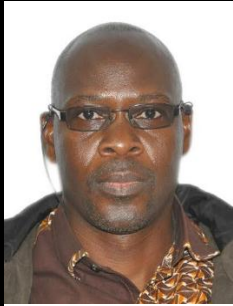
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### Biography of Author

	<p>Ousseynou Sy earned a Master in English at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) in 2007 and another Master in Public Affairs at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at UT Austin. He also worked for five years as a Teaching Assistant in the English Department at UT Austin teaching American and World literature. Prior to that he attended Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar Senegal where he earned in 2004 a Post-master degree (a.k.a Diplome d'Etude Approfondie) in British literature. He is a Ph.D in American literature from Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis in Senegal. His research interests are African American literature and Post-colonial African literature, and international development and relations. He teaches English and Public Policy in Sahel University Dakar. His publications appeared in Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory, the Ethnic Third World Journal (E3W Review of Books) and in the following newspapers: Le Soleil, Le Quotidien, and Senego.com. <i>Email: <a href="mailto:ousseynousy2002@yahoo.fr">ousseynousy2002@yahoo.fr</a> / <a href="mailto:ousseynou2002@gmail.com">ousseynou2002@gmail.com</a></i></p>
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