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Invisible Men and Women: A Critique of the Critiques of Particularity in African
American Literature

By

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Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University

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Ralph Ellison's ascension into the American literary canon is a product of the rise of formalist aesthetics during Cold War consensus. Ellison, once a young man committed to Marxist ideology and friends with the Communist Party USA, muted his political beliefs and began to espouse American exceptionalism during the height of the Cold War. I examine Ellison's revisions of *Invisible Man* that were designed to make him more artistically respected. I argue that Ellison's process of revision provides us with a striking account of American and African-American canon formation post-World War II that sought to define universality as that which transcended historical and political particularity. However, the only universal in literature is radical contingency based upon one's race, gender, and political and historical moment. In this thesis, I show that arguments for "transcendent universality" in American literature have wrongly positioned African Americans on the margin of the American literary canon.

Key words: Ellison, Cold War, universality

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my parents, Willie and Cynthia Brown, who always told me to know my history as a black person in America. I would also like to dedicate this to Dr. Horace Porter, who ignited a passion within me to study this history my parents have urged me to know.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) ends asking, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (Ellison 572). This rhetoric from the mind of the nameless narrator signals the possibility of an universal voice. Ralph Ellison is often praised for being one of the best writers at capturing the universal nature of African-American experience. He solves James Weldon Johnson's "problem of the divided audience," which argues that black writers cannot just appeal to a black audience when writing about black experience. Black artists also have to appeal to a white audience that has totally different expectations and ideas about blacks in America. Ellison's high-modernist representation of African-American life ostensibly bridges the gap and caters to formalist aesthetics lauded by New Critics–New York Intellectuals¹. Winning accolades such as the National Book Award, *Invisible Man* received inordinate praise from the dominant white literary establishment. Many black and communist critics, however, saw the novel as a betrayal. Re-examining the novelist's legacy, critics such as Barbara Foley and Richard Iton critique Ellison for isolating himself from exigent African-American political concerns. In contrast to providing a materialist analysis or forwarding community based politics, for these critics Ellison's protagonist represents the rugged and reflective individual who avoids status quo groupthink marking a

¹ This implied alliance is in many ways oversimplified. There are significant aesthetic differences between, and even within, these two groups. However, what is important here is how their ideological commonalities led to institutional pedagogical hegemony in the U.S. They both promote a conservative (neo)modernist aesthetic that mostly comprised a "stripped-down 'high' modernism that elided, evaded, or rejected mass culture and the more 'extreme' and politically radical strains of modernism, such as Dadaism, surrealism, German expressionism, and Russian futurism" (Smethurst, James. *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2005. 30-31).

commitment to American individualism—a commitment that buttresses Ellison’s ascension to fame and cements his place in the literary canon. The larger political forces of the Cold War and postwar liberalism that led to his ascension have not been fully explored and acknowledged.

Writers such as Lloyd Brown, who in *Iron City* (1951) offers a Marxist vision of racial and class unity, were rendered invisible at the same time as Ellison was made visible. Barbara Foley notes that Brown’s “novel about racist political and legal repression during the ‘mini-red Scare’ of 1939-1941, remained buried for years” (354), and it has still not received the attention it deserves. Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* (1953) tried “to work through the “communist-capitalist-existentialist morass,” (Jackson 385) but America was not ready for this nuance and ambition: it was Wright’s first to receive generally negative reviews in America. However Michal Fabre notes that, while this novel was ignored in America, the book was praised in France. *South Street* (1954) by William Gardner Smith, an expatriate living in France like Richard Wright, was a militant black protest novel in the social realist tradition. However, Jackson notes that though there was plenty of racist brutality in the U.S., “the public had officially wearied of realism that clunked along with a didactic message” (Jackson 401). The public, trained by the literary critics, wanted more of the high modernism of Ellison. However, positing Ellison’s depiction of black experience in America as “universal” belies the reality that many other black writers saw and portrayed Negro life differently. Moreover, the Cold War literary establishment obfuscates the fact that even Ellison wrestles with the particularity of black experience in his fiction and cultural criticism. This erasure of other black writers from the American canon and lack of nuance concerning Ellison’s literary

legacy is an institutional failure that reveals terms in which marginalized minorities become visible in America². With Ellison as my point of departure, I will broaden the conversation surrounding his legacy by emphasizing how his ascension to fame is a product of the rise of New Critics–New York Intellectuals, whose work parallels the emergence of Cold War politics that excluded, and still excludes many black writers from the literary canon due to misguided notions of universality³.

African American literary critic Ken Warren recently attempted to define what African American literature *was* in *What Was African American Literature?*, (2011) and his argument forces critics today to reconsider what separated it from American literature more generally. Warren argues that the difference is that African American writers had an explicit political goal of helping to end Jim Crow. After World War II, writers like Ralph

² This list of prominent black writers and thinkers whose fiction and nonfiction remains unexplored for the most part includes: Frank Marshall Davis, Oliver Harrington, John Oliver Killens, Paul Robeson, Lloyd Brown, and William Gardner Smith. These writers are dealt with in-depth in Lawrence Jackson's *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (2011), which critiques the commonly held notion that the period between the Harlem Renaissance and the BAM should be seen only in terms of a few select famous individual artists (e.g., Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and James Baldwin). He believes that these few select "black artists' startling aesthetic, institutional, and commercial success have overshadowed history's awareness of their 'positive action' or contribution to a group 'historical identity.' Individual writers did so well, especially between 1940 and 1953, that the idea of the artists operating as a cohort has been obscured" (3). Jackson reveals there were many more contemporary African Americans in the literary world that all knew each other due to their participation in Communist movements in Chicago and New York City, various reading and writing clubs, attendance as students and teachers at historically black colleges and universities, and so forth.

³ For more on the disillusionment of writers who started off as Communists in the 1930s and shifted to a more conservative political and literary aesthetic see Thomas Schaub's *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991) and Daniel Aaron's *Writers on the Left* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). For a personal account, see Alfred Kazin's *Starting Out in the Thirties* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). Gwendolyn Brooks' Pulitzer Prize (1950) *Annie Allen* (1949) and Ralph Ellison's 1953 National Book Award for *Invisible Man* (1952), were both firsts for African Americans. Both books tell the story of protagonist on a "Blakean journey from innocence to experience, from the myopia of the utopian to the twenty-twenty vision of the realist," (Schaub 5) in congruence with dominant white literary aesthetics. The National Book Award, instituted in 1950, has been criticized by Maxwell Geismar, who noted that "For the last twenty years of cold war culture, I consider [both the Pulitzer and the National Book Award] a fraud" (Trimmer, Joseph. *The National Book Awards for Fiction: An Index to the First Twenty-Five Years*. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978.).

Ellison, and the earlier works of James Baldwin, attempt to create a distinctly new black novel that erases the signature fiery political critique that had marked previous African American literature in order to enter the universal Western literary canon. The debate about what African American literature was, and if it still is, forces writers, readers, and critics alike to rethink what it means to write universal literature. Many double standards and dichotomies have formed over the history of American literary criticism that has led to the marginalization—and even absolute erasure—of black writers that have attempted to deal with the particularity of the African American experience. In the early twentieth century, emphasizing any racial difference carried with it negative parochial connotations that disqualified these writers from being considered true artists that could transcend their particular culture. After World War II, during the reign of postwar liberal literary criticism, there was a backlash against the politically charged leftist functional art derived from Communist-inspired movements of the 30s and 40s. Mainstream critics negatively criticized pro-Communist black literature in the paranoid era of McCarthyism. Ellison's many meticulous revisions to *Invisible Man* during the height of the Cold War show the ways in which acceptable black writers attempted erase the political mark of controversial Communist-inflected literature that might blemish their status as universal artists in order to be artistically acceptable to the literary establishment. Even in the 21st century of multiculturalism, literary incongruence still exists surround the politics of what constitute a universal and canonized novel. The controversy over Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* National Book Award in 2011, for example, due to her unapologetically explicit depiction of a poor black family in Mississippi that draws on an aesthetic that is very similar to the hip hop artists she as models, proves that literary debates about black

literature, and black literature itself, forces us to consider what constitutes universal literature and its relationship to the particulars of our lives. Is African American literature only universal when it imitates the white aesthetics in vogue, such as an apolitical and dehistoricized high modernism that was hegemonic—and still lingers—in the early postwar years? African American and postcolonial literary critics, as well Frankfurt School Marxists, such as Addison Gayle, Hannah Arendt, and Frantz Fanon, have all attempted to show that difference in genre, subject matter, and political and historical context should not doom a literature to canon marginalization and charges of artistic inferiority and immaturity. This thesis will argue that the very thing that makes literature makes universal is difference, and the ability of writers to make the reader understand the difference and relate to it.

Following the mindset of psychoanalyst Jacqueline Rose, I will argue that universals arise not from similarity, but from differences and particularity. By looking at debates about African American literature, and the literature itself, I will show that the only universality one finds in literature is radical contingency. However, due to postwar liberal ideology that catered to an American exceptionalism that still lingers in the literary world today, the formation of the American literary canon has attempted to erase and downplay its stains (e.g., white supremacy) to appear innocent. The attempt to ignore these stains in order to present an unblemished America has catered to a literary aesthetic that supposedly “transcends” politics, race, gender, and other particulars. However, the attempt to erase these stains of contingency also erases the universal because universality is contingent upon radical contingency. American literary critics have attempted to posit something called “art” or “literature” that is “universal,” yet this is a contradiction.

because it is not grounded in material reality, and the particulars of one's material reality are what make up any notion of universal. As Jacqueline Rose argues, it seems odd that "universality is also contingency," but one must realize that "perhaps the key thing to note is the way universality as a concept starts to break up under scrutiny." (412). In other words, radical contingency can never be relieved neatly into a universal statement about universals because such universality is empty. Rose continues by writing that "universality becomes something which can only be posited or spoken, not as universal, not as universal citizenship, but from its excluded underside" and thus "universality is always a historical, political, and nonsingular term. There can be no universal statements about universality, only historical" ones (418). Rodolph Gasché's "tain of the mirror" analogy exposes this contradiction in Derridean deconstructive terms, arguing that the attempt to erase the ways in which the material, historical, and political are intimately insinuated into any figure of the universal is, in fact, what constitutes the universal. Derrida's ability to reveal the "tain" in any functioning binary is particularly insightful to any discussion of African American literature; it helps to prove the contradictory injustice one finds in the exclusion of many black writers from the American literary canon.

The "tain in the mirror," as Rodolph Gasché put it, is the black lusterless tinfoil at the back of any mirror. Humans think they see the pure reflection of themselves when looking at a mirror, but they neglect to note the black tinfoil in the background, or the tain. Without that gritty background, "pure" reflection would not even be possible, thus proving that such purity (or "universality") is a philosophical and logical fantasy. Literary critics like Ralph Ellison and Lionel Trilling attempt to erase the tain and posit a seamless Cartesian whole self. In order to posit this universal whole self and create pure art, one

must get beyond the particularities of the world of objects (e.g., race, politics, material conditions, labor, and modes of production). These particulars are irrelevant to the larger point the author is trying to make of universality. All of these particularities must be used in a strategic way that transcends them. However, according to Derrida, in any assertion of such universality, one will also necessarily find particularity, and this phenomenon is what constitutes the universal tain. Black writers, and critics, who attempt to rid themselves of dichotomous thinking about “protest” and “art,” or “black characters” and “the universal human,” prove that the very desire to rid oneself of not only particularity, but that tain where it peaks through, is still operating as strongly as ever. Therefore, whether it is artists or critics who argue that African American literature is beyond particularity, the tain still proves that contingency cannot be erased. Ralph Ellison’s manuscripts mark this attempted erasure of the political and historical contingency of his moment, as well as do literary debates between Claude McKay and William Braithwaite, Addison Gayle and Herbert Hill, and Ralph Ellison and Irving Howe. Moreover, for Marxist critics, the very idea of universal literature that “transcends particularity” epitomizes ideology. In response, Marxist literature seeks to use protest literature to show the way in which ideology works. In other words, it seeks to show how race, gender, religion, politics, material conditions, labor, and modes of production are interconnected and play a role in one’s particular position in society. Marxists believe ideology obscures the connections between “art,” or “universality,” and the particulars, and thus effectively oppresses the have-nots of their society. These debates between Marxists, “universalists,” and deconstructionists are all played out in African American literature and literary debates (e.g., Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin’s early critique of Richard Wright’s

Bigger Thomas). I will argue that no universal conclusions can arise without radical contingency. Writing literature is not a purely objective, or universal, experience. Each writer brings his own subjective—historicized, racialized, gendered, politicized, time and place-bound—life with them as they write, and the subject and object both have a grip on each other. Who one is relates to how one sees the truth, and critics that posit a view of universal art that extinguishes subjectivity, or the radical contingency of human nature, are disingenuous because nothing exists independently of human experience.

Ralph Ellison's place in the African American literary canon, and the American literary canon more broadly, are extremely relevant to the question that Ken Warren has controversially recently posed in his latest book of criticism: what is African American literature today, or does it even exist at all? By honing in on the literary career of Ralph Ellison and putting it in relation to the rest 20th and 21st century African American literature, I will demonstrate the ways in which institutional literary debates—as much as the literature itself—frustrates the very concept of universality and any easy divide between the universal and particular. A lack of clarity of what constitutes representing universal experience continues to lead to the marginalization of many writers who are not answering to intellectual institutions of the West. By giving a more nuanced definition of “universality” in art, I hope to bring more lucidity to many of the problems black writers have had to unjustly overcome—or actively erase—in order to be placed in the heart of the American literary canon.

Chapter 2, Part 1

Playing Down Our Most Cherished Tradition: The Death of African American Literature

In Kenneth Warren's groundbreaking book of literary criticism, *What Was African American Literature?* (2012) argues that African American literature is dead. In order to understand this death-knell, one must first understand his definition of African American literature. Warren defines African American Literature as "postemancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow segregation" (1). African-American literature was a time-contingent genre forged by the social inequality of Jim Crow. All African American writers hoped that their literature would contribute to the demise of Jim Crow policies. Now that Jim Crow is over, so is African-American literature. What Ken Warren means is that "the relation of literary production to social inequality has changed, and it is that relation, or was that relation, and that relation only, that constituted African American literature" (*Harvard Review*). Literature written by African Americans is no longer burdened with the baggage of having to do political work. Moreover, what is more important, those who want to carry the baggage of politics will meet an unpleasantly surprising reception by the literary establishment. In the same interview Ken Warren warns aspiring American writers of African descent that there will be no more "Richard Wrights." Wright, of course, shocked the literary world with his harsh critique of the structural inequalities in America that dehumanized and criminalized blacks in his scathing protest novel, *Native Son*, in 1940. Warren argues that there is no environment that allows for black writers to speak with particularity on the black political condition

like Wright did back then. Warren says, “The difference is not so much what writers intend to do, but the social conditions that enable their work to have the broader effects they might like to have” (*Harvard Review*). Though the desire for particularity persists in some writers, what is missing is “the legal and political and social structures that give that particularity” any plausibility. Warren’s understanding of the relation of literary production to social inequality is an astute one, but he could be more nuanced about why this change in relations occurred. The end of Jim Crow, America’s disillusionment with Stalinism, Cold War Consensus, and the emergence of New Critics-New York Intellectual literary criticism are all important factors in African American writers experiencing a betrayal from the literary establishment that wanted universal art.

Lawrence Jackson explains this betrayal in *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*. By the 1950s, an optimistic and anticommunist liberal America, epitomized by the literary criticism found within Lionel Trilling’s *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), stood at odds with African American writers who “emphasized the crisis in resources and the cruelty of whites” (6). The African American literary tradition was functional. It was written to show the way black life in America was restricted by racial, economic, and social inequality. By the end of the 1940s, with the advent of Lionel Trilling and like-minded literary and cultural critics, American liberalism was redefined. Black writers were encouraged “to shift their focus to like ‘possibility’ or optimism in the American scene” (6). The new era of American revisionist postwar liberalism became conservatism, and this pessimistic defeatism dominated American art by the late 1940s. During this time period, a very selective apolitical, dehistoricized strain of high modernism reigned supreme, and it

vanquished the functional social realism of African Americans. Black literary critic Arthur P. Davis's 1956 comment on African American literature sums it up best: "I think we can safely say that the leaven of integration is very much at work. It has forced the Negro creative artist to play down his most cherished tradition" (qtd. in Jackson 7).

This quote pinpoints the tension that is at the heart of Kenneth Warren's argument in *What Was African American Literature?* Arthur P. Davis rightly understands that African American literature has accomplished the task that Warren claims it was always reaching toward, namely, integration (i.e., the end of Jim Crow). However, the victory came with a heavy price because it brought with it an unintended consequence. Black writers could no longer expect for people to read their vehement protest fiction. James Baldwin's 1949 essay, "Everybody's Protest Novel," exemplifies this shift in African American literature. His scathing critique of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, intentionally or unintentionally, supported the literary establishment that was uniformly proposing that black Americans could no longer directly express political bitterness over their situation in America in their literature and expect to be heard. The social realist days were over. White liberals, whether they be literary critics or publishers, "shaped and contained" black writers "circles of influence and prestige" in such rigid ways in the age postwar liberalism and anticommunism (13), and thus many black liberals became disillusioned, dissatisfied, and irrelevant by the end of the 1950s (13). Richard Wright moved to Paris in 1946 and died in 1960. Many other black writers, dissatisfied with literary establishment in America, followed in Wright's footsteps and moved to Paris. Gwendolyn Brooks and James Baldwin eventually resist the mainstream white literary establishment that made them famous, and many of their later works continue to be

overlooked.⁴ The leaven of integration, as Davis put it, has directly impacted what African American writers—and during what time periods of their career—are canonized. Currently, African American literature’s most cherished tradition of functional art that directly confronts the racial injustice of America is still marginalized as too particular, and thus not as good as “universal art.”

Kenneth Warren’s title *What Was African American Literature?* is an allusion to another book of literary criticism by Leslie Fielder entitled *What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society* (1982). In that book, Fielder “argues that literary criticism has unfortunately severed its ties to a broader reading public by committing itself to keeping alive those works it deemed to have aesthetic merit over those that enjoy popularity with a broader reading public” (*What Was* 64-65). Warren realizes that “institutional literary criticism has always stood in a problematic relationship to the works which it focuses and the public to which it interprets those works” (64). Critics choose certain books to canonize for a nation’s literature, and it assumed that these books reflect the people’s identity. However, “by advocating for the teaching of canonical literature, scholars tacitly acknowledge the marginality of this corpus to the reading habits of the general populace” (64). National literature thus turns out to be a myth because, though it claims to express

⁴ Lynn Orilla Scott’s book, *Witness to the Journey: James Baldwin's Later Fiction* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002) examines the ways in which scholars, critics, and the liberal political constituency—which had embraced him before—have often misrepresented and undervalued his later work. She seeks to correct the critical lapse in Baldwin studies. This phenomenon can be attributed to his seeming embrace of black power politics, among other things. Gwendolyn Brooks experienced similar problems when she became more involved with the Black Arts Movement. After the publication of *In the Mecca* (1968), Brooks left her longtime mainstream publisher, Harper & Row and began working with Broadside Press, a small Detroit-based black company in order to make a political statement about the limited black representation in the publishing world. Many of her subsequent books were neglected by mainstream reviewers and media. For more on this issue read James Sullivan’s “CRITICAL READINGS: Killing John Cabot And Publishing Black: Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Riot*.” (Critical Insights: Gwendolyn Brooks. 317-341. n.p.: Salem Press, 2010. *Literary Reference Center*.)

what a nation or a people already are, it is actually a literature that must be learned in order for the people to understand the themes and identity of their culture. This gap of contingency that arises in the formation of a national literature is exposed to macroscopic proportions when looks at African American literature. The canonization of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, in particular, for their works in the late 1940s and early 1950s that fit the mold of the postwar revisionist liberal literary criticism enabled a national literature to emerge by and about blacks in American that stood in contrast to the racial beliefs held by the majority of African Americans.

One important mid-twentieth century literary debate that directly relates to Baldwin and Ellison's emergence onto the literary scene transpired between Herbert Hill and Addison Gayle. Herbert Hill argues that Ellison and Baldwin reached a level of maturity that black literature of the past had not. The implication behind such an argument posits that black literature of old was parochially "committed the particularity of black experience" (*What Was* 69) Ellison and Baldwin, on the other hand, "while remaining faithful to the particular expression" of black behavior and life, would make also make sure to depict and define the lives of their African Americans "not by race but by broader swaths of human behavior and history" (69). Hill praises African American literature's shift into away from racial parochialism into modernity and states that a "profound disservice is done to the Negro writer, now and in the future, if any criteria are invoked except those of art and literature" (qtd. in *What Was* 73) in *Soon one Morning: New Writing by American Negroes, 1940-1962* (1963). The question still left unanswered, however, is what is "art and literature"? The very mention of the phrase posits a notion of universality that belies the reality of the tain in the mirror. Addison

Gayle comes back with a scathing response to Hill's new ideals for literary criticism of African American literature. Gayle feels that Hill has downplayed black literature of the past, deeming it dirty with the "grime of protest" (qtd. in 73). In his 1968 essay, "Perhaps Not So Soon One Morning," he sarcastically critiques his praise of writers like Ellison that supposedly "baptized" African American literature into "crystal clear waters of universality," ushering African American literature into the transcendent mainstream American literature that is not so much concerned with race, but only with man (qtd. in 73). Gayle exposes the erroneous nature of the dichotomy Hill has set up. One cannot separate a man from his race, and the act of producing literature is a subjective one. "Art and literature" do not have inherent ideals. Gayle astutely points out the way Hill has attempted to erase the tain of particularity, but that very tain is what makes the universal even possible. The only universal statement about universal "art and literature," is that there is no objective universal. Subjects produce art from their unique own place in the world, and attempting to baptize African American literature clean of its particular "grime of protest" in order to embrace high modernism, which was touted as universal art by the New Critics, proves that such stains (political protest, racial emphasis, etc) naturally exist. Gayle's critique of Hill shows that when a critic attempts to posit a notion of "pure universality," the tain in the mirror is in the background demonstrating that it is a myth. In fact, the very desire to for critics such as Herbert Hill to say that African American literature has moved beyond particularity, and not only that, but the desire to erase the tain where it peaks through, demonstrates that the binary is still operating as strongly as ever.

Gayle understands the implicit structural racism that is at work in the formation of

the American literary canon. Literature from each time period and culture comes with its own unique standards. It would be prejudiced and misguided to argue that one genre or period of literature does match up to the majority or value of another genre or period when their historical moments were seeking to accomplish totally different aims. Gayle makes this point when he says that “none has suggested that Harriet Beecher Stowe measures up to Marcel Proust or Henry James,” (qtd. in 75) but yet Stowe’s work is still praised. He goes on to say that no one judges a work like Sinclair’s *The Jungle* or Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* on aesthetic terms; rather, one views them sociologically, and thus Gayle concludes that “Negro writers have been excluded from contemporary American literature not because of artistic deficiencies but primarily because of race” (qtd. in 75). What Gayle, and other like-minded literary scholars attempted to do in the future is develop a narrative of black literature that protected it from the claims of immaturity. Gayle’s argument was not a new one. Claude McKay, who thought much like Gayle, had to defend his art against critics who claimed that he dealt with his subject matters (i.e., working-class blacks in Harlem) in a parochial manner that did not match up to the transcendent values of true art.

Chapter 2, Part 2

Harlem and Beyond: A Short History of 20th Century African American Literature

One of Claude McKay's critics was George Schuyler, and he "goes so far as to deny any difference or need for black writers to be consciously black" (Jemie 27). Therefore, Schuyler writes in "Negro Art Hokum" (1926) that it is "sheer nonsense to talk about 'racial differences' as between the American black man and the American white man" (qtd. in Dorsey 27). Schuyler believes that the "education and environment [have been] about the same for blacks and whites" (qtd. in Jemie 98). A Negro is "merely a lampblack Anglo-Saxon," or a white person in every way but skin color (qtd. in Jemie 98). Other black writers such as Countee Cullen and William Braithwaite seconded "Schuyler but with none of his vitriol" (Jemie 99). Of course, it is Cullen who "was notorious for repeated insistence that he saw himself and wished that others would see him as 'a poet, not a black poet'" (99)⁵. Moreover, Braithwaite tried to avoid racial themes, and in fact, though he was "an editor and critic with a national reputation," not many of "his readers were aware that he was black" (100). That is exactly the way he wanted it: for particularity to be erased. Braithwaite advised Claude McKay to follow in his footsteps, but McKay rejected his advice and argued instead that he felt more confident in his own way because "of all the poets I admire, major and minor, Byron,

⁵ Langston Hughes's famous essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926) is a response to Countee Cullen's desire to be seen as "poet, not a black poet." The statement implies that to be a black poet means one has not reached the maturity and universality of a "poet," which as Hughes notes, is just another way of saying one wants to be a white poet. Hughes hated the trend he saw in Negro writers "toward whiteness" (32). Instead of creating a particular literary aesthetic that was uniquely African American, there was a "desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (32). Hughes, by contrast, wrote poetry that displayed the beauty of "the low-down folks." Hughes argues for freedom of artistic expression, and for bold Negro writers who are not ashamed of their Negro heritage because he believed that it created poetry that was just as good as white poetry. Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, both major players in the Harlem Renaissance, thought very similarly and were good friends.

Shelley, Keats, Blake, Burns, Whitman, Heine, Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud and the rest—it seemed to me that when I read them—in their poetry I could feel their race, their class, their roots in the soil, growing into plants, spreading and forming the backgrounds against which they were silhouetted” (100). McKay—whose argument sounds very similar to the “contingency of universality” argument that Jacqueline Rose makes decades later—would thus do the same despite Braithwaite’s admonition to do otherwise. McKay understood, like Addison Gayle, that all poets are time-and-place bound. By contrast, the idea of achieving universality through one’s particular situation in the world has privileged white writers. All writing is time-and-place-bound, but all humans have certain things in common (e.g., “circumstances attending birth, growth, decline, and death, the emotions of joy and grief, love and hate, fear and guilt, anger and pain” [Jemie 115]). The ways in which literary critics have questioned the universality, transcendence, or aesthetic value in black fiction is an unfortunate legacy of white supremacy in America that has institutionally held black writers to a double standard that is neither realistic nor logical.

The McKay-Braithwaite debate illuminates the problematic way national literature is formulated, especially in relation to blacks in America because many black Americans could not relate to a Harlem Renaissance that posited blacks as the *same* as whites in culture, education, and environment as Schuyler, Braithwaite, and Cullen all argue to one degree or another. Blacks did see themselves as *equal* to whites, but not the *same*. Any formulation of an African American literary canon that made blacks look the same as whites would be a betrayal of blacks’ lived experience. This debate is

summarized by the famous quote Langston Hughes wrote in his autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), while reflecting on the Harlem Renaissance and its failure: “the ordinary Negroes hadn’t heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn’t raised their wages any” (228). What Hughes realized was that this group of privileged black writers that attempted to signal a shift into modernity did not speak for, or help, the plight of the majority of blacks. Most ordinary Negroes were disconnected from the literature produced about them. Other more recent critics have agreed with Hughes. For example, Brian Dorsey considers the Harlem Renaissance a failure because the idea of the New Negro was too much like the Talented Tenth, and thus failed to transform racial attitudes. He states that the “Talented Tenth Negroes were considered to be exceptions, the other ninety percent were just plain old niggers to most white people. The average citizen of either race had no interest in high culture and could not be influenced by these artists. Revolution has to come from the bottom up, not the other way around” (32). Nathan Huggins argued the same thing in *Harlem Renaissance* (1971) when he wrote that “The Harlem intellectuals had been anxious to make those class distinctions which would mark them as different from their black brothers further down” (306). They proclaimed “a new race consciousness,” while at the same time “wearing the clothes and using the manners of sophisticated whites;” therefore, they contradictorily earned “the epithet ‘dicty niggers’ from the very people they were supposed to be championing” (306). Once again, Jacqueline Rose’s argument rings true: universality does not arise from similarity, but from difference.

Huggins argues that one of the main problems with the Negro Renaissance was that it separated the “centrality of culture” from the “economic and social realities” of

their time (302). Moreover, it is hard to imagine the Negro Renaissance turning out other than it did because “white eminence had been overwhelming. A white commerce had determined what was to be considered success in business, industry, and art. A white establishment had really defined art and culture” (306). White norms and values were challenged, to an extent, in black literature of the Harlem Renaissance, but not enough because, as they challenged white norms, they still had to “return to the white judge to measure [their] achievement” (306)⁶. Huggins is not arguing for white hatred, but that “negroes had to see whites—without the awe of love or the awe of hate—and themselves truly, without myth or fantasy, in order that they could be themselves in life and in art” (307). The need for a sizable audience of whites and blacks that are interested in the African American experience is important: Huggins strongly believes that readers must be willing to learning the necessary details about a black artist in order for a successful renaissance to emerge. When Huggins wrote his book in 1971, he felt that blacks had an increasing numbers of whites who were willing to struggle to understand the black writer, and thus African American literature had improved. He writes that “black craftsmen have been freed from the weight of the didactic which had so crippled the art of the 1920s” (307). Richard Wright, and especially Ralph Ellison and LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka), were Huggins’ proof that a willing audience to come to black writers. He believes they write with a confidence that early black writers could not have because “a more sophisticated and cosmopolitan general readership” (239) existed for them than in

⁶ This is what makes black publishing companies so important. Black writers no longer have to “return to the white judge to measure [their] achievement.” However, as noted earlier, the career of Gwendolyn Brooks shows that when black writers move away from white publishers, their works are (for the most part) ignored.

the 1920s. Thus, black writers of the 1920s were severely hindered in their attempts to break free from white eminence.

In *Ethics of Swagger* (2013), Michael Hill argues that prizewinning novelists from 1977-1993 (i.e., David Bradley, Ernest Gaines, Charles Johnson, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, and John Edgar Wideman) should be considered a “cohort” that “helped secure African American literature’s place in the academy, and their prolific prize-winning accelerated the canonization (3). For Hill, they moved beyond even Ellison and Baraka because they freed themselves from arguments about literary insecurity and anxieties regarding Eurocentric literary ideas that those two had. They reached African American literary autonomy, Hill argues, but even as they supposedly do, many of the same tensions that characterized older African American literature still crop up. They steeped “themselves in aesthetics and themes from their own cultural archives,” or in other words, in particularity; by doing so, these “black novelists resolved the quandaries that had vexed post-World War II African American writing” (5). Hill calls this diverse cohort Black Archivists, and they all are unified by “their engagements with elemental aspects of twentieth century black life” that “stifle explanations that seek to read them exclusively through the ‘central norm’ of white literary aesthetics” (13)⁷. Their blending of aesthetics transformed the novel and fulfills what Huggins desired to see in black writers when he wrote *Harlem Renaissance* (1971): writers who had a healthy relationship with white literary aesthetics. They had neither an awe of love nor an awe of

⁷ This literary acceptance came in the wake of the critical shift in the literary establishment towards feminism, multiculturalism (e.g., Clifford Geertz), poststructuralism (Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault), and postcolonialism (e.g., Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), which presented many healthy critiques of New Criticism. The era of multiculturalism allows for critics to talk about what was once considered “racial parochialism” in a polite way, but the tensions still persist.

hate for them, but they were able to look at them from a healthy distance in their full humanity, and thus were able to write about their own people in their full humanity. They no longer had arguments and anxiety about the efficacy of using Eurocentric artistic models. The Black Archivists had moved beyond Amiri Baraka, who tried to create literature that aided in ‘the destruction of America’ as it was known (18), and past Ralph Ellison, who sought to “reduce the chaos of living to form” (18). Rather, they were content with an irreducibly, irreconcilably complex depiction of black life in America. They were not trying to prove or fight a particular political or ideological point. Their desire to “chronicle the signature themes that informed twentieth-century blackness—slavery, segregation, the Great Migration, and the urban blight—arose from a simple wish to see themselves and their people reflected in art” (171). Hill argues that their success proves that the literary establishment had begun to accept African American literature on their own terms by the end of 1970s. They insisted on writing with particularity, using their own “cultural archives,” and garnered great critical reception from the literary institution. However, not all is resolved, and critics’ ongoing debates on how to categorize black particularity—proven in recent and current debates over Ellison’s legacy or Jesmyn Ward’s National Book Award—demonstrate that critics are still grappling with the issue.

One overarching point that Hill makes about the Black Archivists is that they create art, that in Oscar Wilde’s words, “had no use.” Previous black writers wrote to achieve a particular end. Ellison used the Negro to reveal the complexity of the underground aspect of humans in American democracy. Baraka wrote pieces that would

incite his audience to change American social and racial inequality. To simplify, and possibly oversimplify, the Ellison-Baraka divide I will borrow from two phrases Huggins uses to explain the failure of the Harlem Renaissance. Huggins wrote that the “centrality of culture” was separated from “economic and social realities.” Ellison focused on the “centrality of culture” and Baraka focused on the “economic and social realities.” Hill argues that the Black Archivists do not focus on either one. There is no focus: they simply “chronicle the signature themes that informed twentieth-century blackness—slavery, segregation, the Great Migration, and the urban blight—” because they “wish to see themselves and their people reflected in art” (171). Culture, economic and social realities are all included in their reflection, but one particular *telos* cannot be attached to their literature. Blackness is no longer essentialized, and black writers are no longer burdened to represent the whole race—an impossible task for any writer who belongs to any group. Ellison shies away from even trying to pull off such a feat in his famous essay, “The World and the Jug” (1963): “I am, after all, only a minor member, not the whole damned tribe; in fact, most Negroes have never heard of me” (185).

The Black Archivists borrow from the best of both worlds: they do not “play down the tradition” of social realism because they draw from the cultural archives of African American history on their own terms. However, they also understand, like Ellison, that they are “not the whole damned tribe,” and do not feel the pressure to represent the whole race in their novel. They were able to write books that dealt with structures of racial inequality and political injustice honestly without making racial politics the point of the novel. They captured the individual humanity of their characters in all their complexity. This, of course, is what Ellison emphasized, and what many social

realists are criticized for not doing well enough. However, the Black Archivists do not shy away from a full honest historical and political context that steeped in struggle, which is what social realists are known for overemphasizing to a fault in the world of fiction. An example of the way in which the Black Archivists overcame the Eurocentric anxiety that caused some to hate Eurocentric models of art (e.g., Amiri Baraka), and some to feel the need to embrace it so much that they denied the validity of their own heritage (e.g., Ralph Ellison) is look at the contrast between Ralph Ellison and John Wideman's relationship to the high modernists. Ralph Ellison, speaking on why he uses Negro folklore in his fiction, writes, "I use folklore in my work not because I am Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance" (Ellison 111–12). In an interview that dealt with the same issue, John Edgar Wideman confessed:

"I think I had my priorities a little bit mixed up. I felt that I had to prove something about black speech for instance, and about black culture, and that they needed to be imbedded within the *larger literary frame*. In other words, a quote from T. S. Eliot would authenticate a quote from my grandmother. Or the quote from my grandmother wasn't enough, I had to have a Joycean allusion to buttress it" (qtd. in Hill 3, italics added).

Wideman first thought he had to justify his writing by tying it into to the *larger literary frame*, which is another way of saying that he did not feel that his work in African American literature could stand on its own apart from a white American or Eurocentric model to support it. In Huggins' opinion, this *larger literary frame* is what caused so many black writers during the Harlem Renaissance to not succeed: "white eminence had

been overwhelming. A white commerce had determined what was to be considered success in business, industry, and art. A white establishment had really defined art and culture” (Huggins 306). In the process of black Americans creating African American literature that challenged white norms and values, they still had to “return to the white judge to measure his achievement” (306). Ellison’s artistry suffers from this need to deprecate his literary heritage and tradition in order to be accepted by the literary establishment, but Wideman emerged at a historical moment when he could deal with black particularity more honestly and still enjoy a large reading audience.

Ellison and James Baldwin emerged onto the literary scene during a time when white eminence still loomed large, and they were heavily involved in debates about Eurocentric models of art. Baldwin’s favorite writer was Henry James⁸, and Ellison inordinately praised the high modernists (e.g., Joyce, Eliot, and Pound). They signal a shift in African American literature from the “parochial” social realism of black struggle into the “universal” high modernism beloved by the New Critics. They have a general disdain for political, economic, and sociological ideology in their literature. Therefore, they both critiqued Richard Wright’s *Native Son* for suffering under the pressures of being a Negro writer burdened to prove an ideological point. Elizabeth Hardwick describes this problem in her review of Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945) in *Partisan Review*. She says Wright suffers from the “tragic dilemma” of being a Negro writer, and therefore every word he writes has importance beyond its literary effect. With each word,

⁸ For more on James Baldwin’s admiration of Henry James, see Horace Porter’s *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.) In particular, Chapter 5 deals with this relationship: “‘Out of Disorder, the Order Which is Art.’ James Baldwin and the ‘Mighty’ Henry James.”

he is also speaking for the black millions and the hostile whites who cannot be treated as adults. Hardwick thinks it basically impossible for a Negro to function as an individual artist in the same way as a white artist. She describes Richard Wright as performing a “double duty as a creative artist and spokesmen for America’s twelve million Negroes” (407). Wright, as good of a writer as he is, still suffers from this double duty he takes on. Hardwick argues that his creation of *Bigger Thomas* is full of legendary rigor, but it falls short because Wright begins to hear black and white American voices as he attempted to complete the novel, and he thus degenerated from an artist into an impassioned pamphleteer “who forced himself to deny gifts in order to meet the demands of the most uncomprehending. His novellas, also, are reduced by the injection of the final Forward, March! theme” (407). She considers his work a victim of “official, unimaginative, Communist Party politics,” (407) which led to America distrusting the Negro.

Hardwick sees in *Black Boy* a sign that he truly believes in literature, though it too has faults. What Hardwick’s review shows is that “literature” is a loaded word that, during postwar neoliberal revisionist history, was defined very narrowly. Allegorizing, moralizing, and politicizing was somehow connected to, as Hardwick deemed it, “official, unimaginative, Communist Party politic,” (407) and thus was not good universal literature. However, in the very formation of such a definition of literature, the particularity of that historical moment functions as the tain in the mirror that creates the binary in the first place. Ellison and Baldwin attempted to erase the under-side of that binary, (e.g., Communist Party, and political protest more generally) in order to be considered among the greats in the American literary canon. Therefore, they separated themselves from the black protest literature that had come before them. For example, in

“Sermons and Blues,” (1959) James Baldwin reviews *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* for the *New York Times*. He begins by saying, “Every time I read Langston Hughes I am amazed all over again by his genuine gifts—and depressed that he has done so little with them” (Baldwin 614). He ends by explaining how Hughes squandered his gifts: “Hughes is an American Negro poet and has no choice but to be acutely aware of it. He is not the first American Negro to find the war between his social and artistic responsibilities all but irreconcilable” (615). Ellison criticized most black fiction before him for similar reasons, and thus chooses to praise white American and European writers over black literature. In “The World and Jug,” (1963) Ellison praises white high modernism over the Harlem Renaissance. He argues for literary critics to see that he, though black, has chosen to be a part of their (i.e., white modernist) literary lineage. They are, as he put it, his “literary ancestors,” (e.g., Twain, James, Eliot, Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dostoevsky, and Faulkner) and he would rather be associated with them than with his “literary relatives,” (e.g., Harlem Renaissance writers) that he has been forced into comparison with because of his race. Furthermore, in “The Art of Fiction,” an interview he did with *The Paris Review*, Ellison describes the experience he had when he first read *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot: it “moved and intrigued me but defied my powers of analysis—such as they were—and I wondered why I had never read anything of equal intensity and sensibility by an American Negro writer” (211). Like Baldwin, he would conclude that it was because American Negro writers could not reconcile their social and artistic responsibilities. Ellison and early Baldwin sought to change that by casting off their social responsibility; implicitly, in the process, they separate art from politics, placing art above politics in their binary. However, in positing

this “pure” definition of universal art, the stain of politics is always lurking underneath the surface and proving that, as Jacqueline Rose writes, any pure definition of “universality as a concept starts to break up under scrutiny” (412). Ken Warren argues that Ellison and Baldwin’s literature and criticism helped to change the black writer’s relation to social critique because he says no book can deal with the particularity of black political condition in the way Richard Wright did in 1940 with the publication of *Native Son*. However, in the era of a New Jim Crow and Dog-Whistle Politics⁹, as Michele Alexander and Ian-Haney-Lopez have deemed it, there may very well be a need for it. In order to understand black writers’ relationship to politics, I will now explore Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin’s glaringly problematic ascendancy to literary stardom. By putting their ascendancy in the context of Cold War cultural history and post-World War II racial politics, I hope to shed more light on the controversial ways art and politics clash when dealing with African American literary criticism.

⁹ *Dog Whistle Politics: How Coded Racial Appeals Have Reinvented Racism and Wrecked the Middle Class* by Ian Haney-Lopez (Oxford University Press, 2013) and *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012) prove very convincingly that we do not live in a post-racial era. In fact, they show the ways in which racism is just as strong today as it was during the time when Richard Wright wrote *Native Son* (1940). The Jim Crow era as we knew it may be over, but it more subtle ways (e.g., from Jim Crow to prison industrial complex based on racist drug laws, or from George Wallace’s “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, and segregation forever” speech in 1963 to “states’ rights” and “tax cuts” political platforms in the present that are used to justify racist ends), racism still very much controls the laws and politics of our time.

Chapter 3

Post-World War II Racial Politics: Universality and its Counterpoints

The hegemonic racial beliefs held by postwar intellectuals wrongly defined “universal art” as that which downplayed racial difference. Richard King, author of *Race, Culture and the Intellectuals, 1940-1970* (2004), points out that this universalist vision believed that all “racial (and cultural) differences would fade in light of the assumption that all races enjoyed equal capabilities and aspirations” (3), which is similar to the beliefs of George Schuyler, William Braithwaite, and Countee Cullen of the Harlem Renaissance. It is this expectation that gave rise to the fame of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, who wanted their talent as a writer, not their skin color and politics, to be stressed when talking about their art. Though there are reasons for this groupthink to become the dominant viewpoint in America, it is easy to retrospectively see this postwar universalism was hypocritically ingenuous. In the 1960s, critics from various schools of thought began to challenge this naive understanding of universalism. From postcolonialists to Frankfurt School Marxists, intellectuals started to see that “the most resolute universalist vision needed grounding in specific political and legal institutions and cultural values” (8). Black intellectuals such as Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire, and German Jewish refugees such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Hannah Arendt realized that “particularist identities needed to be protected by an actual political order” (9). The work of these writers—in particular, the literary fiction, drama, and nonfiction of writers such as Aimé Césaire and other radical black writers of the Black Arts Movement—did not garner as much visibility as Ellison’s and Baldwin’s literature given the prominence of the New Critics. Furthermore, Ellison’s “wrestling

with the left,” as Barbara Foley calls it, is more nuanced than she gives him credit for in *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (2010). Foley argues that he cut all ties with radical leftist beliefs in order to have a successful literary career; in the process of wrestling down his former leftist beliefs, Ellison created a less humane novel due to his political and artistic shift. While all of this is true, his “wrestling” was also unfortunately co-opted by U.S.’s reactionary New Right. And though Ellison’s literary aesthetic fits in with the New Critics–New York Intellectuals’, his focus on racial equality is obscured by the literary criticism produced about his work during this time period.

The emergence of Ralph Ellison along with James Baldwin onto the literary scene signaled a new type of African-American literature that sought to separate itself from the literary naturalism and social realism of previous black writers such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright¹⁰. Stacy Morgan writes that socially realist African American literature used art as a political platform. They placed a “heightened emphasis on the role of the creative artist as an agent of democratic consciousness raising and social change”(1). These writers did not believe that art functioned strictly as a political weapon, but they did all “have a profound faith in the capacity of *cultural* work to

¹⁰ The most visible black writer of the Harlem Renaissance (1919-1934) is Langston Hughes. The most black visible literary writer of the Indignant Generation (1934-1960), as Lawrence Jackson has titled them, is Richard Wright. Both broadly fit within the literary genre of social realism. In essays such as “To Negro Writers” (1935) and “Negro Writers and the War,” (1942) Hughes argues that he wants Negro writers to expose the social inequalities that existed in Jim Crow America, and display how African Americans were connected to the global struggle for freedom. Wright’s Marxist and black nationalist essay “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) calls for Negro writers to take advantage of “their unique minority position” to reflect the consciousness of Negro workers who, “propelled by the harsh conditions of their lives,” believe in “economic and political action” (98). With *Native Son* (1940), Wright reached the apex of social realism with his protagonist Bigger Thomas, a Marxist representation of an “indignant consciousness” to be held up to condemn white America for what it had created due to racial inequality (Jackson 3).

leverage transformations in the social and political sphere on behalf of America's poor and working classes" (2). Inspired by Roosevelt's New Deal programs and the politics of the U.S. Communist Party, African-American social realists' believed their cultural work was "an instrument of social criticism, a means of instilling race pride, and an agent of interracial working-class coalition building" (2). After the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, American literary aesthetics shifted, and this particularly impacted African-American literature. The U.S. made a point to eradicate radical Popular Front aesthetics in response to its disillusionment with Stalinism. This shift did not bode well for writers who came from a traditional Marxist perspective that believed socially responsible proletariat literature could speak to the particular conflicts of the historical moment. That literary aesthetic was usurped by New Critics--New York Intellectuals' new vision for art. Their revisionist liberalism forwarded a selective neo-modernist, apolitical, ahistorical formalism that emphasized the limits of innately corrupt humans' control over progress. Politically progressive intellectuals were characterized as dangerously romantic, optimistic, utopian and proto-fascist. American revisionist postwar liberalism became conservatism, and this pessimistic defeatism dominated American art during the 1940s and 1950s. In order to be a visible African American writer, African American writers adapted to the conservative, African-American exceptionalist, modernist aesthetic that was embraced by white American awarding bodies, such as Gwendolyn Brooks' *Annie Allen* (1950) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) during McCarthyism. In 1950, Hughes noted that "the Negro writer has to work especially hard to avoid the appearance of propaganda" (309). Hughes, who had ties with the Communist party, learned this lesson the hard way from an U.S. marshal who subpoenaed him to

appear before Senator McCarthy to explain and account for his radical past (Rampersad 17). He successfully renounced his radical writings and escaped the serious charges brought upon him, but not all African American intellectuals were as fortunate as he¹¹. Richard Wright, in fear of what would happen to him for his communist leanings, left Cold War America for Paris in 1947 where he continued to write and speak out against global racial inequality. The persecution of many black intellectuals in the Cold War Era and Wright's departure from America led to the demise of social realism in America. Ellison, Brooks, and Baldwin, in their attempt to avoid the appearance of forwarding "propaganda,"—in other words, to erase the stain of particularity—use their literary aesthetics to argue for African American exceptionalism in the age of postwar liberalism.

Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, more so than Gwendolyn Brooks, emerged as the two visible black literary intellectuals in the Cold War Era. *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society*¹² (1950) by New York Intellectual Lionel Trilling set

¹¹ For example, Paul Robeson's career spiraled downward because of his communist beliefs. The U.S. government cancelled his passport, among many other things. Similarly, Ferdinand Smith helped found and lead one of the strongest unions in the United States, the National Maritime Union. He was also a devoted leader of the U.S. Communist Party and an important spokesman for the international labor movements of the 1930s and 1940s. He was deported from the United States in 1952. See Gerald Horne's *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica*. New York: New York University Press, 2005. Finally, W.E.B. Du Bois was forced to leave the NAACP, the very organization he helped found, due to his communist leanings.

¹² The importance of *The Liberal Imagination* can not be underestimated. It sold nearly 200,000 copies, and as Louis Menand notes, "changed the role of literature in American life" (Menand vii). In "Reality in America," Trilling writes a scolding review of Theodore Dreiser's left-wing naturalistic "reality in America." He wants to replace his hard, impenetrable material reality with a metaphysical one that transcends physical limitations. He thus says: "no doubt Dreiser was an organic artist in the sense that he wrote what he knew and what he was, but so, I suppose, is every artist; the question for criticism comes down to what he knew and what he was.... the question for criticism is how he transcended the imposed limitations of his time and class" (17). In "The Princess Casamassima," Trilling praises Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) for its ability to get at deep truths of "reality" (a metaphysical reality, to be sure) by representing actuality through the primitive story of legend and folklore, a stark contrast to Dreiser. The central dispute of the novel is between art and moral action. This novel is often read as Henry James's statement implying that "the man of art may be close to the secret center of things when the man of action is quite apart from it" (80). These two essays ("Reality in America" [part I: originally published in

the new standards for literature in postwar America, and there are many similarities between Ralph Ellison, early James Baldwin, and the New Critics—New York Intellectuals. Baldwin and Ellison’s accommodation of the dominant white literary aesthetic directly resulted in their visibility. *The Liberal Imagination*, a collection of essays published from 1940-1949, varies in subject matter, but are formally unified by an interest in liberalism and its relation to literature (Menand xv). Its main purpose was to warn people “against the dogmatism and philistinism of the fellow-traveling mentality” (viii). Menand explains that “in Trilling’s view, the assumption all liberals share, whether they are Soviet apologists, Hayekian free marketers, or subscribers to the *Partisan Review*,” is that people are perfectible” (ix). They believe that if the right system or educational curriculum is put in place, then it will do away injustice. However, Trilling thinks this is a naïve belief because literature’s precise subject matter has always been such injustice, and it thus proves that evil is embedded in human nature, and one should not think that it will be so easy to do away with. Trilling feels it is his mission to protect the literary canon because “not every work of literature conduces to an awareness of the kind of complication that Trilling wants liberalism to confront, of course” (xv-x) highlighted by the differences between Theodore Dreiser and Henry James. Trilling embraced Henry James primarily because of his apolitical and modernist aesthetic. Trilling broke ties with the Popular Front like most, and “did so by embracing modernist art and literature” (x). This political gesture argued not only that “modernist art and literature could be appreciated regardless of one’s politics,” but moreover that modernism

Partisan Review, Jan.-Feb., 1940; part II: originally published in *The Nation*, April 20, 1946] and “The Princess Casamassima” [originally published as an introductory essay to the 1948 Macmillan edition of the novel]) show Trilling’s contrasting literary models of Theodore Dreiser and Henry James.

was, in fact, “consistent with political progressivism” (xi). He sought to protect liberalism from “weak or wrong expressions of itself” (xvii) that tended to oversimplify itself the complexity and difficulty of political change in America.

Trilling critiques literary critic V.L. Parrington for praising writers affiliated with left wing movements, such as Theodore Dreiser. He admonishes Parrington’s praise of Dreiser because he thinks he wrongly bases that praise on how realistically he depicts gritty urban life and the hard moral choices one has to make within it, not on how one can transcend that gritty urban life. Dreiser, who is America’s principle naturalist writer, uses his characters to show that the way society is structured unjustly determines the fate of marginalized and non-privileged individuals. In other words, it is a Marxist critique of capitalist society that alienates people from their very selves. Richard Wright comes from a similar tradition. Parrington likes Dreiser’s works because he feels his gritty and heavy literature mirrors the heavy and gritty struggle of marginalized peoples in the real world at the moment. Trilling dismisses Parrington’s argument because he wants literature to transcend the particular moment and reach an universal ideal. He wants an optimistic depiction of American life that did not focus on economic and environment rigidity, and thus he equates good universal art with that which transcends the particular and historical moment. This argument, of course, is self-contradictory because the tain of particularity and radical contingency of each person’s experience is what enables universality to emerge. Nonetheless, in contrast to Dreiser, Trilling uses Henry James stands as a good model of a writer that gets at deep truths of a metaphysical reality—not material reality—by using folklore and legend in works likes *The Princess Casamassima*. By choosing a very exclusive modernist canon for very specific ends, Trilling dismisses

Parrington's literary criticism and ushers in a new era of postwar liberal American literature that debunked not only V.L. Parrington and Theodore Dreiser, but Irving Howe and Richard Wright. Michael Nowlin writes that, "Dreiser and James: the bloody road where literature and politics meet" is directly connected to the African-American literary debate between Irving Howe and Ralph Ellison in 1963.

Irving Howe's "Black Boys and Native Sons" (1963) responds to the brand of liberalism that resulted from conservative critics like Lionel Trilling's coup d'état of literary establishment that was once ruled by fellow travelers of the Communist Party USA. Howe critiques the weak state of popular American liberalism that is epitomized in the praise of Ellison and Baldwin. Before going into Howe's critique of Ellison and Baldwin, it is first important to note what these two writers have in common. They both had harsh critiques of Communism. Baldwin never had any serious affiliations with Communism, and Ellison disowned his radical past quickly and absolutely. Moreover, Michael Nowlin argues that Baldwin and Ellison both a similar literary aesthetic that worked hard "to find virtue in African American cultural and aesthetic expressive forms" that they could harness into a "liberal defence of high modernist avant-gardism" that would enter them into a "narrow canon of classic American literature exclusive of a naturalist tradition of literary protest" (120). Baldwin and Ellison made sure to position themselves to emerge as acceptable black thinkers in a very suspicious era in American literature. They took fellow-traveling Langston Hughes's advice to heart, who said that Negro writers had to make sure to stay "away from the appearance of propaganda" (Hughes 309). In the process of doing so, Michael Nowlin argues that Baldwin and Wright are "highly self-conscious" in their "efforts to write a more distinguished African

American novel than had ever been written before” (124). To borrow from Ellison’s neologism, their novels and literary criticism had to be distinct from their “literary relatives,” many of whom were accused of propaganda. By contrast, Ellison and Baldwin aligned themselves with a safe group of “literary ancestors,” such as Henry James, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway. This also explains Baldwin’s harsh critique of Richard Wright in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” (1949) and Ellison’s downplaying of Wright’s mentorship during his earlier years of writing. Looking back on their decisions now, it makes one consider if their decision to make sure to stay away from the appearance of propaganda was worth the price of the ticket.

Lastly, early Baldwin and Ellison both posited an African-American exceptionalism that aligned itself with the optimism and possibility of postwar liberal America that seemed to inevitable arise after the move away from Communist internationalism and radical socialism. They both published essays in white academic elite magazines such as *Partisan Review*, *Dissent*, and *The Nation*. Hughes, Robeson, Wright and others before them positioned the Negro in a global struggle for freedom, whereas Ellison and Baldwin separated the Negro from all other Africans in the African diaspora, and suggested that they were superior in their literary criticism. The following quote by James Baldwin from “Stranger in the Village” (1953) is worth quoting at length:

The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for

any American alive. One of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no other people has ever been so deeply involved in the lives of black men, and vice versa. This fact faced, with all its implications, it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, *it is also something of an achievement*. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met. It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again. (emphasis added)

(175)

Here, one sees that Baldwin does not stress the perpetual struggle of Africans in America in relation to the struggle of all Africans who are victims of slavery and colonization in the Western world. He is not urging all blacks to unite to fight against the powers that be, but rather, he is celebrating the unique set of relations that has formed in America, and calling it an achievement despite the amount of injustice that still persisted when he published that piece in October 1953 in *Harper's Magazine*. Ellison's literary criticism, which can be found in his two collections of essays (*Shadow and Act* [1964] and *Going to the Territory* [1986]) bolsters a similar African American exceptionalism.

Ellison and Baldwin were not the first, or even the last, black writers to do this. Michael Nowlin rightly notes that he and Baldwin are "picking up an argument that goes back at least to W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson and anticipates Toni Morrison recent theoretical musings," namely, that he "made not the absence of a

traditional class structure but the African American presence the cornerstone of American exceptionalism” (122). As the Civil Rights Movement picked up steam, Ellison and Baldwin go in opposite directions in their depiction of America, and in particular, race relations. I will coin two terms that summarize the goal of black writers during the 1960s and 1970s: to emphasize “political rigidity” or “cultural fluidity.” Writers of the Black Arts Movements—following in the path of Richard Wright and many before them—sought to expose the political rigidity of America, and thus help change laws and free black America. A passage from *Black Boy* (1945) by Richard Wright summarizes their mindset. This excerpt describes Wright’s reaction to reading H.L. Mencken:

I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American... What was this? I stood up, trying to realize what reality lay behind the meaning of words ... Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon?

(248)

This is the model of black writers had in mind who wished expose the “political rigidity” of America. They use their words as weapons to denounce racism, class inequality, and so forth. However, Ellison’s mindset is the exact opposite.

Ellison thinks the goal of literature is to “transcend” any political battle and speak to “humanity” on a “universal” literature. His interview with *The Paris Review* in 1955

summarizes his stance. Ellison essentially separates “art” from “protest” in his response to the question, “Were you affected by the social realism of the period?” (211). He says that he “didn’t think too much of the so-called proletarian fiction even when I was most impressed by Marxism” (211). Ellison goes on to praise Malraux because – though he was claimed by Marxists, he was never really a Marxist in his opinion – his books “live on “not because of a political positions embraced at the time, but because of its larger concern with the tragic struggle of humanity” (211). It is this “universal tragedy” that Ellison is concerned with and thus he was not impressed with the trends of social realism during the height of the Communist Party USA: “most of the social realists of the period were concerned less with tragedy than with injustice. I wasn’t and am not, primarily concerned with *injustice*, but with *art*” (211, italics added). The interviewer then lays out the dichotomy Ellison made in question form: “Then you consider your novel a purely literary work as opposed to one in the tradition of social protest?” (211). Ellison then backtracks: “Now mind! I recognize no dichotomy between art and protest,” but Ellison is clearly walking on thin ice because he is striving for the “universal in the novel,” – which is what he says everybody is “clamoring for these days” (212) – and thus feels the need to eschew using words as a weapon to fight injustice. This very “clamoring of universality” is what Wright is precisely trying to write against. In response, his Marxist-inflected literature seeks to use protest literature to combat the ideology of “universal literature.” He wanted to use words to show how race and politics, among other particulars, are interconnected and play a role in the oppression of blacks in America. He does not care about being universal, but about condemning America and forcing it to confront its racism. Marxists believe that the very talk of “universality” is

what obscures the connections of the particulars, and thus effectively oppresses the have-nots of their society. Nonetheless, Ellison uses words to reveal the “universal” experience of the Negro, and to show that it is an integral part of American history. This is precisely what Nowlin meant by saying that Ellison “made not the absence of a traditional class structure but the African American presence the cornerstone of American exceptionalism” (122). Ellison depicts this in his response to a question about the importance of Negro folklore to American more generally:

The history of the American Negro is a most intimate part of American history. Through the very process of slavery came the building of the United States. Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior, was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro’s willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him. His experience is that of America and the West, and is as rich a body of experience as one would find anywhere. We can view it narrowly as something exotic, folksy, or “low-down,” or we may identify ourselves with it and recognize it as an important segment of the larger American experience—not lying at the bottom of it, but intertwined, diffused in its very texture. I can’t take this lightly or be impressed by those who cannot see its importance; it is important to me. One ironic witness to the beauty and the universality of this art is the fact that the descendants of the very men who enslaved us can now sing the spirituals and find in the singing an exaltation of their own humanity. Just

take a look at some of the slave songs, blues, folk ballads; their possibilities for the writer are infinitely suggestive. Some of them have named human situations so well that a whole corps of writers could not exhaust their universality (214).

Like Baldwin, Ellison is praising the achievement of Negro culture—not the tragedy and ongoing discrimination of white supremacy. Ellison is not focusing on the residual impact this enslavement still has on American political and racial issues of his time because that would not be “universal.” One can clearly see that Ellison is coming from a totally different viewpoint from Wright and Black Arts Movement writers who used “words as weapons;” Black Arts Movement writers felt that Ellison’s literary aesthetic played right into the hands of those in power.

Ellison’s sole novel and subsequent essays seek to praise the “cultural fluidity” of America and emphasize the “universal” nature of Negro experience whereas James Baldwin goes in the exact opposite direction. However, it is important to note that Ellison did not start his literary career as an American exceptionalist. In fact, he started his literary career the same way Baldwin finished his. Before his disavowal of the Communist Party USA and Marxist ideology more generally, Ellison wrote for Marxist magazines such as *New Masses*. In 1942, Ellison wrote “The Way It Is” for *New Masses*, and it tells the story of Mrs. Jackson and her son, Wilbur, who was sent to Fort Bragg, and then told that he must fight in World War II. Mrs. Jackson tells Ellison that she does not like the situation:

I tells you I’m even afraid to open Wilbur’s letters, some of the things he tells is so awful. I’m even afraid to open letters that the government sends

sometimes about his insurance or something like that 'cause I'm afraid it might be a message that Wilbur's been beaten up or killed by some of those white folks down there. Then I gets so mad I don't know what to do. I use to pray, but praying don't do no good. And too, like the union folks was telling us when we was so broken up about William, we got to fight the big Hitler over yonder even with all the Hitlers over here. I wish they'd hurry up and send Wilbur on out of the country 'cause then maybe my mind would know some ease, Lord!' (316)

Mrs. Jackson then says that Harlem is "like that old song that says: *It's so high you can't get over it / So low, you can't get under it, / And so wide, you can't get around it . . .*

That's the way it really is" (318). Ellison does not give any simple solutions to these problems, and he does not resort to a praise of American culture. In fact, he sympathizes with her plight by ending with a plea for political change in America that will make American democracy a reality for people like Mrs. Jackson:

So there you have Mrs. Jackson. And that's the way "it really is" for her and many like her who are searching for that gate of freedom. In the very texture of their lives there is confusion, war-made confusion, and the problem is to get around, over, under and through this confusion. They do not ask for a lighter share of necessary war sacrifices than other Americans to bear. But they do ask for equal reasons to believe that their sacrifices are worthwhile, and they do want to be rid of the heavy resentment and bitterness which has been their long before the war. Forced in normal times to live at standards much lower than those the war

has brought to the United States generally, they find it emotionally difficult to give their attention to the war. The struggle for existence constitutes a war in itself. The Mrs. Jacksons of Harlem offer one of the best arguments for the stabilization of prices and the freezing of rents. Twenty-five percent of those still on relief come from our five percent of New York's population. Mrs. Jackson finds it increasingly difficult to feed her children. She must pay six cents more on the dollar for food than do the mothers of similar-income sections elsewhere in the city. With the prospect of a heatless winter, Harlem, with its poor housing and high tuberculosis death rate, will know an increase of hardship.

It is an old story. Touch any phase of urban living in our democracy, and its worst aspects are to be found in Harlem. Our housing is the poorest, and our rents the highest. Our people are the sickest, and Harlem Hospital the most overcrowded and understaffed. Our unemployment is the greatest, and our cost of food the most exorbitant. Our crime the most understandable and easily corrected, but the policeman sent among us the most brutal. Our desire to rid the world of fascism the most burning, and the obstacles placed in our way the most frustrating. Our need to see the war as a struggle between democracy and fascism the most intense, and our temptation to interpret it as a 'color' war the most compelling. Our need to believe in the age of the 'common man' the most hope-inspiring, and our reasons to doubt that it will include us the most disheartening. (This is no Whitmanesque catalogue of democratic exultations, while more than

anything else we wish that it could be.) And that's the way it is.

Many of Mrs. Jackson's neighbors are joining in the fight to freeze rents and for the broadening of the F.E.C.P. for Negroes and all other Americans. Their very lives demand that they back the President's stabilization program. That they must be victorious is one of the necessities upon which our democratic freedom rests. The Mrs. Jacksons cannot make the sacrifices necessary to participate in a total war if the conditions under which they live, the very ground on which they must fight, continues its offensive against them. Nor is this something to be solved by propaganda. Morale grows out of realities, lest irritation and confusion turn into exasperation, and exasperation change to disgust and finally into anti-war sentiment (and there is such a danger). Mrs. Jackson's reality must be democratized so that she may clarify her thinking and her emotions. And that's the way it is (318-319).

Here one can see Ellison using words as weapons to historicize the political moment in order to critique the structurally racist inequalities that are so clearly evident in Harlem (e.g., overpriced rent and food, understaffed hospitals, police brutality, disproportionate amount of unemployed). He clearly writes to arouse a need for change in American democracy, and it is representative of the "early Ellison" who wrote to expose and change the "political rigidity" of America. It stands in stark contrast to the optimistic and patriotic ending of *Invisible Man*, as well as his later essays.

By the time he had published *Invisible Man*, Ellison critiqued writers who were too narrowly focused on injustice, such as in his 1953 National Book Award Acceptance

speech (he critiques writers of “narrow naturalism” and “unrelieved despair”[153]) or in 1955 *The Paris Review* interview, (he boasts that he “wasn’t and [is] not, primarily concerned with injustice, but with art”[211]), or in his scathing critique of Amiri Baraka’s book *Blues People* in 1963 for *The New York Review*. In this review, Ellison says Baraka’s scholarly interests were too often distracted by his black militancy: “Its introductory mood of scholarly analysis, and one gets the impression that while Jones wants to perform a crucial task which he feels someone should take on—as indeed someone should—he is frustrated by the restraint demanded of the critical pen and would like to pick up a club” (279). Because of this militancy, Ellison believes Baraka ignores “the aesthetic nature of the blues in order to make his ideological point, for he might have come much closer had he considered the blues not as politics but as art” (287). Here again, Ellison draws that dichotomy, and he repeats it in the next paragraph of the review: “For the blues are not primarily concerned with civil rights or obvious political protest; they are an art form and thus a transcendence of those conditions created within the Negro community by the denial of social injustice” (287). Ellison concludes by disabusing his audience of the notion that, because Baraka is one of the first blacks to write about the blues, it is automatically a worthwhile read. In the same year, he also critiques Richard Wright’s literary works on the same ground in “The World and the Jug.” Ellison went from critiquing the “political rigidity” of America in his early days to praising its “cultural fluidity” as he got older

This cultural fluidity can be seen in later essays such as “What Would America Be Like Without Blacks” (1970) and “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” (1977/1978). Instead of focusing on the problems that come with blacks being politically segregated,

overlooked, and discriminated against in ghettos as he did in “The Way It Is,” he shifts his focus to the ways in which the Negro has always been at the center of American culture. Ken Warren describes his new project of “cultural fluidity” as such:

His point was that despite the best efforts of segregationists, the goods of the world’s culture had been available to the Negro and had played a role in shaping his tastes and sensibilities. Likewise, and equally important, the Negro, despite his segregation, had been a powerful force in creating American culture as well as the culture of the modern world. The study of the Negro, then, could not be carried out in isolation from the broader currents of American life” (*So Black and Blue* 94-95).

Therefore, in “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” Ellison tells the story of two black men arguing about something outside of a tenement in San Juan Hill while he was working for the Federal Writers’ Project during the Great Depression. When he discovers what they are arguing about, he is utterly surprised because “impossible as it seemed, these foul-mouthed black workingmen were locked in verbal combat over which of two celebrated Metropolitan Opera divas was the superior soprano!” (520). Ellison tells stories, and writes essays, like these in essays in the 1960s and 1970s to prove an overlooked point during black militancy, namely, that it is impossible to place an individual within a single tradition. Ellison thus praises the democratic culture of America and eschews sociology because he thinks “it would always prove to be misleading because of the unpredictability of individual experiences and tastes. Someone would always turn out to be something other than what he or she was expected to be” (*So Black and Blue*, 96). This is why Ellison dislikes black militants who attempted to

separate black culture from the wider western World in order to fight for political self-determination. Ellison thought the black militant's project was misguided because they had forgotten the "pluralistic wholeness" of "American democracy" that is "not only a political collectivity of individuals, but culturally a collectivity of styles, tastes and traditions" (504) – which included a mixture of black and white culture. Ellison thus tells the story of America's history as one of cultural fluidity:

The Pilgrims began by appropriating the agricultural, military, and meteorological lore of the Indians, including much of their terminology. The Africans, thrown together from numerous ravaged tribes, took up the English language and the biblical legends of the ancient Hebrews and were "Americanizing" themselves long before the American Revolution Everyone played the appropriation game. The whites took over any elements of Afro-American culture that seemed useful: the imagery of folklore, ways of speaking, endurance of what appeared to be hopeless hardship, and singing and dancing—including the combination of Afro-American art forms that produced the first musical theater of national appeal: the minstrel show (515).

Interestingly enough, Ellison does not mention how politically rigid and racist the minstrel show was, nor does he deal with the "political rigidity" of Native American life in America after European settlers.

Ellison's "cultural fluidity" is also exemplified in "What Would America Be Like Without Blacks." In that essay, he praises the melting pot America has become and urges his readers to resist "for a moment the temptation to view everything having to do with

Negro Americans in terms of their racially imposed status” and explore with him the “fact that for all the harsh reality of the social and economic injustices visited upon them, these injustices have failed to keep Negroes clear of the cultural mainstream; Negro Americans are, in fact, one of its major tributaries” (584). He dislikes segregating black and white culture, and argues that sports, music, media (e.g., television and radio), literature, and more are all a mixture of black and white culture. Ellison’s emphasis on “cultural fluidity” also gives one critical insight to the meaning behind the title of “The World and the Jug.” Ellison is critiquing Irving Howe for seeing the black world as a segregated one akin to “an opaque steel jug with the Negroes inside waiting for some black messiah to come along and blow the cork” (163). Ellison however, disagrees, because “if we are in a jug it is transparent, not opaque, and one is allowed not only to see outside but to read what is going on out there, and to make identifications as to values and human quality” (164). And vice versa, white Americans, and the Western world more broadly, can see in the black jug; moreover, it has been transformed by it. This, in Baldwin’s terms, this is America’s cultural achievement. Black is no longer black, and white is no longer white. Now, due to America’s racial layout, the two are inevitably and irrevocably intertwined.

“Black Boys and Native Sons,” is Howe’s response to early Baldwin and Ellison’s emphasis on America’s cultural fluidity in African American literature, and the lack of uproar around it considering the political rigidity of the nation. In Ellison’s response to Howe, he critiques him for praising Richard Wright, and reproaching himself and Baldwin, on the basis of their political stance. Ellison argues, “I can only ask that my fiction be judged as art; if it fails, it fails aesthetically, not because I did or did not fight

some ideological battle (182). Ellison goes on to write “protest is not the source of the inadequacy characteristic of most novels by Negroes, but the simple failure of craft, bad writing” (182). Ellison’s novel was intentionally apolitical and void of the “emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country” because his purpose was “to transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape or hold back, but to work through; to *transcend*, as the blues *transcend* the painful conditions with which they deal” (183, italics added). Like Trilling, Ellison equates universal literature with that which transcends the political and historical moment. This is Irving Howe’s problem, in Ellison’s opinion: he wrongly bases his view of *Invisible Man* on whether or not he accurately depicts the efficacy of the Communist Party USA and the state of race relations in America, but Ellison brushes these issues aside. He wants to focus on the craft *alone*. Irving Howe, however, raises great points that Ellison never fully addresses, namely, the way in which one’s own particular experience impacts one’s depiction of reality. Howe critiques Ellison for attempting to separate sociology from literature, and he thus writes: “Literature and sociology are not one and the same, but it is equally true that such statements hardly begin to cope with the problem of how a writer’s own experience affects his desire to represent human affairs in a work of fiction” (120). In other words, Ellison and Baldwin attempt to force black writers to depict a universal, or objective, homogenous reality, but there is not one. This is the Derridean paradox: subjects and objects are not totally separate: each subject brings his or her own particular viewpoint to any object, and this paradox is precisely what is universal. Irving Howe was one of the few prominent critics of his time to mark the stain of particularity in an age that attempted to erase it. He proves this when he writes that “James Baldwin’s early

essays are superbly eloquent, displaying virtually in full the gifts that would enable him to become one of the great American rhetoricians. But these essays, like some of the later ones, are marred by *riffts of logic so little noticed* when one gets swept away by the brilliance of the language that *it takes a special effort to attend their argument,*” (121, italics added). It takes special effort to trace the way in which critics, especially dealing with African American literature, attempt to erase the stain of particularity. Howe compares Wright’s *Native Son* to Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) in that they both are naturalistic novels “of exposure and accumulation, charting the waste of the undersides of the American city” (123). Wright “wished to pummel his readers into awareness; like Dreiser, to overpower them with the sense of society as an enclosing force,” (123) and in the process of doing so, Howe understands that when dealing “with the most degraded and inarticulate sector of the Negro world,” the false dichotomy between the object (universal) and subject (particular) becomes very clear. He writes that “the distinction between objective rendering and subjective immersion becomes still more difficult, perhaps even impossible. For a novelist who has lived through the searing experiences that Wright has there cannot be so much possibility of approaching his subject with the ‘mature’ poise recommended by high-minded critics” (125). What these “high-minded critics” wanted was a homogeneous objective universal aesthetic, but that it is impossible to produce.

Ellison and Baldwin’s lack of protest fit right in with the postwar revisionist liberal defense of high modernism, and Howe critiques how “so many American intellectuals . . . during the years of postwar liberalism” embraced a liberalism “not very different from conservatism” (127). He points out where this conservatism crops up in

Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel": "Our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult—that is, accept it" (qtd. in Howe 127). One of Ellison's most obvious instances of conservatism can be found in his 1953 National Book Award acceptance speech in which he pleads for more American writers to see the nation's "rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom" (Ellison 153). Like Baldwin, he does not focus on the structural injustice that still needs to be overcome in 1953 Jim Crow America¹³. They focus on blacks accepting their plight and looking at the "diversity" and "freedom" of America, which was not a reality for most blacks in America in that time, or any time. Ellison goes on to say that he dislikes writers that are burdened by "narrow naturalism" and "unrelieved despair" (153). Though he does not name "literary relatives" Richard Wright, Lloyd Brown, or William Gardner Smith, he is most definitely critiquing these writers. Ellison stressed that Negro art had to transcend its time. Good writers take their experience (race, gender, class) and transform it into "art," and "true art" was "art for its own sake"—not art that was contingent upon driving in a particular political message that would not apply to the people reading the book 100 years later. However, Ellison wrongly equates *transcendence* with *erasure* of particularity, and this mis-equation can be found in Lionel Trilling, early James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison's literary criticism.

One of the "The World and Jug's" most frequently cited passages is the quote about the difference between Bigger Thomas and Richard Wright: "Wright could imagine

¹³ This is not to say that Baldwin and Ellison did not think change needed to occur. Obviously, their writings are critiques of racial relations in America, and it would be utterly absurd to think that they were content with black life in America. However, they are very careful in how they position themselves and their politics in their criticism and literature. It is a very carefully crafted conservative critique in comparison with Hughes, Wright, Robeson, Du Bois, and others, and it was malleable enough for the New Right to use for its own ends as well.

Bigger, but Bigger could not possibly imagine Richard Wright. Wright saw to that” (162). In other words, Bigger Thomas does not transcend his time period in the same way that Richard Wright does in life¹⁴. Ellison thinks Wright “was himself a better argument for my approach that Bigger was for his” (162) Ellison laments that Wright, who was “so wonderful an example of human possibility,” could not “for ideological reasons depict a Negro as intelligent, as creative, or as dedicated as himself” (167). Richard King castigates Ellison for his misunderstanding of *Native Son*’s purpose. Ellison argues for a fullness and richness of life in Mississippi despite the brutal nature of Jim Crow, and he thinks Wright’s creation of Bigger Thomas shows that Wright doubts the humanity of Negroes. However, according to King, Ellison is not doing “justice to Wright’s intensely felt account of the black experience. By insisting that all literary representations should be normative projections of human possibility, they came close to denying Wright the freedom to experiment, to ‘improvise,’ as it were, to represent other ways that African Americans had dealt with their condition” (301). In other words, like Howe argued, King critiques Ellison for not sharply separating objectivity, or universality, with subjectivity, or particularity, and expecting a self-contradictory universal homogenous objective literature to arise from all African Americans. Ellison held “the definition of the human condition is at stake at any piece of fiction. Under such philosophical weight, any fictional project would run the risk of collapsing,” (301) but that is typical Cold War literary criticism and politics. In Ellison and Trilling’s attempt to protect the “universal” literary canon from the particular “the grime of protest,” as Addison Gayle put it, they

¹⁴ For example on how the New Right could use their conservative critique of race relations for their own ends, one only need to look at this quote, which could easily be used to say that all Bigger Thomases could become Richard Wrights if they worked hard enough and behaved like upstanding citizens.

exclude literature that might even hint at a determinism that is reminiscent of totalitarian corruption.

Postwar liberal institutions returned the favor to Ellison and early Baldwin by solidifying them a place in the American literary canon. However, this did not secure a place for Baldwin's later works and other writers in the Black Arts Movement [BAM]. Ellison and early Baldwin's representation of African Americans as a symbol for the "playfully ironic liberal imagination attuned to tragedy and skeptical of 'History' conceived along scientific-materialist, naively progressivist, eschatological lines" (Nowlin129) fits right within New Critics–New York Intellectuals' formalism exemplified by Trilling. Baldwin changes with the times and becomes a controversial spokesman during the Civil Rights Movement, and it costs him his literary career¹⁵. This is a price Irving Howe knew he would unfortunately have to pay. The postwar conservative bias in the formation of the American literary canon silences writers such as Baldwin (after he becomes a spokesperson for the Civil Rights), and others more radical than he in the BAM become eclipsed altogether. Baldwin continued to write prolifically and enjoyed great general readership, but his later work is seen as unimportant in the academic world. Ellison, by contrast, kept his postwar revisionist liberalist aesthetics despite strong opposition from the BAM, and continues to generate a seemingly infinite

¹⁵ Horace Porter explores Baldwin's shift from "cultural fluidity" to "political rigidity" in *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989.) He divides his career into two phases, "up to *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and after" (11). He says that all the writings after *The Fire Next Time* are all "consciously political" (12). In particular, his chapter " 'This Web of Lust and Fury': Harriet Beecher's Stowe, James Baldwin's Nineteenth Century White Mother" proves that Baldwin eventually follows in the footsteps of the protest tradition of his mother Stowe, and his father, Richard Wright, despite his harsh critique of them in his early years (e.g., "Everybody's Protest Novel" [1949]).

amount of literary criticism¹⁶. His connection with postwar universities via numerous teaching jobs ensured his canonicity because postwar universities are still enticed by literary criticism on high modernism.

Writers like the Martinician Frantz Fanon functions as a particularist counterpoint to the “universality” of the high modernists: “Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all corners of the globe” (qtd. in King 311). Aimé Césaire, similarly, argued against the idea that Martinicians were simply “Frenchmen with black skin” (qtd. in King 14-15). Césaire’s together with Léopold Senghor’s formulation of Negritude resisted a politics of assimilation that said minorities desired a homogenous and universal culture (King 1). Richard King points out that these group of writers showed that rather than attempting to ignore racial and cultural differences in order to focus on what all humans have in common, racial and cultural differences should be nurtured and coupled with political self-determination. True universality, which is radical contingency, only arises then. King writes that from the “Third World and black American perspective, the universalist vision seemed like another example of white Western hypocrisy” used to “bolster the idea of West’s cultural superiority, yet was never taken seriously enough to protect its internal minorities or its colonial subjects” (11). This is true when one considers the exclusion of politically radical minorities that desired, and still desire, to speak with racial and political particularity in their art. Though the civil rights movement made progress to protect the legal rights of blacks, cultural criticism on

¹⁶ For example, see: Tracy, Steven C. *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. Print. In particular, see the last chapter, “Bibliographical Essay” by Robert J. Butler, and read the “Selected Bibliography that follows it.

art did not allow for an atmosphere that sustained a robust literary aesthetic that keeps the social inequalities of minorities at the forefront of everyday American society. As writers like Gwendolyn Brooks and James Baldwin began to associate with the Black Arts Movement in order to use their art to deal more directly with the Civil Rights Movement, the mainstream media and literary academic institution were able to dismissed their work as too particular.

In *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960* (2011), Lawrence Jackson makes the point that a whole generation of writers has been dismissed by the literary academic institution. He argues that black writers during this time period should be seen as a cohort bound by their affiliation with communism that encouraged them to use their art to highlight the particular identity of the underclass in their literature, to show how traditional capitalism was not competent in fixing social inequality, and to foster a strong sense of self-consciousness in the masses. However, most literary critics view the period between the Harlem Renaissance and the BAM as one that should be seen only in terms of a few select famous individual artists (e.g., Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and James Baldwin). He believes that these few select “black artists’ startling aesthetic, institutional, and commercial success have overshadowed history’s awareness of their ‘positive action’ or contribution to a group ‘historical identity.’ Individual writers did so well, especially between 1940 and 1953, that the idea of the artists operating as a cohort has been obscured” (3). Jackson reveals there were many more contemporary African Americans in the literary world that all knew each other due to their participation in Communist movements in Chicago and New York City, formation of various reading

and writing clubs, and attendance as students and teachers at historically black colleges and universities, and so forth. In fact, many of them wrote germane novels and sparked relevant literary debates that, as again Barbara Foley argues, remain invisible and neglected due to the popularity and significance of Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the American and African American literary canon.

More specifically, Foley argues that the way *Invisible Man* is taught in classrooms, and the way Ellison told the story of how *Invisible Man* was written—from a New Critical theoretical lens—has negatively impacted African American and American literature. To borrow from Foley's phrase, if Ellison "wrestled with the left," (and eventually stopped fighting the good fight) contemporary African American literary critics wrestle with Ellison's legacy in the twenty-first century. Is he a strategic dialectician who shrewdly and soberly navigated the hectic racial currents of his time, or did he compromise his moral principles and do a disservice to his race by changing the core of his novel to make it compatible to Cold War consensus? This ongoing either-or debate shows the way Ellison's struggle is the same as critics: should we situate his work as that of a strategic universal dialectician or a traitor to particular black political interests? Like the marks of his revisions, this illustrates the stain of contingency that blemishes all human beings bound to time, place, and history. Foley writes that in the process of changing the book from pro-Communist to anti-Communist, he sacrificed a "range of characters, central and marginal, black and white, who embody the personality for a multiracial proletarian solidarity and interpersonal love in the struggle to bring a 'better world' into being" (22) that was greatly needed at that time. While other more radical blacks such as Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois faced severe punishment from

the American government, Ellison was the “black literary darling.” In Foley’s opinion, Ellison’s “wrestling with the left” may have very well been a personal victory, but for the greater black community and America in general, it was a devastating loss. Ellison’s making of *Invisible Man* is therefore directly responsible for the “many radical black writers who to this day remain scapegoats of cold war rites of consensus” (23). Amiri Baraka, leading member of the Black Arts Movement, seconds Foley’s arguments and goes so far as to say that though Ellison may not have been “a conscious agent of anti-black forces,” he still held to a “political line [that] serves the people who oppress us” (*Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*) when one looks at it objectively.

Farah Griffin sees it differently than Foley. Griffin notes that Ellison had two seemingly contradictory interests in mind when he wrote: “Number one, he loves black people. Number two, he loves the United States of America, and that seems like a contradiction at times.” Nonetheless, black people are American and “they have a national identity, but they have an identity with a nation that has acted despicably towards them” (*Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*). Kenneth Warren argues that Ellison sought “a dynamic, even dialectical, account of the Negro that would acknowledge the history of racial oppression but not characterize black people as merely prisoners of a repressive environment. The challenge he faced was making his account truly dialectical” (63). His emphasis on the cultural creativity, freedom, and agency (“cultural fluidity”) that Negroes had in the South despite the brutal nature of slavery and Jim Crow (“political rigidity”) attempted to show the humanity of Negroes. During a time in which most intellectuals—white or black—were depicting Negroes as inferior human beings that had not yet reached the standards of white culture (epitomized in Wright’s

depiction of Bigger Thomas), Ellison wrote to prove them wrong. He wrote to show that they were, in fact, more than ready to be integrated into American democracy and benefit from the same privileges as whites. However, Ellison's purpose is undermined by American politics, the Cold War literary establishment, and the greater American public. His continual emphasis on the *cultural* agency of Negroes during slavery and Jim Crow played right into the hands of southerners who resisted giving blacks *political* agency. In their eyes, blacks seemed to be doing fine as they were. Ellison's glorification of black culture was co-opted to prove that.

Barbara Foley almost titled her book *Wrestling with Prometheus* to "suggest the titanic dimension of his grappling with the political and historical forces that shaped both his environment and his own sense of what it means to be a human being" (18). Prometheus was Ellison's favorite mythological figure during his Marxist days, but he eventually wrestled him down and found a new favorite mythological figure, Proteus. This shape-shifter symbolized, for Ellison, both the magical fluidity and freedom of America, and "the inheritance of illusion through which all men must fight to achieve reality" (154). The illusion everyone was still reeling from at the time of his speech is, of course, Stalinism. He and the New Critics–New York Intellectuals were fighting, or "wrestling" to achieve reality in light of their fallout with a romanticized view of the left. Two magazines that allowed for this "wrestling" are the *Partisan Review* and *Dissent*¹⁷.

¹⁷ *Partisan Review* and *Dissent* are two influential literary journals during the Cold War that show how formerly Communist-minded writers were redefining the role of literature. In fact, the history of *Partisan Review* mirrors the history of Ralph Ellison's shift in literary aesthetics. This literary magazine begins as one dedicated to the defense of the Soviet Union and revolutionary Communist Party politics in 1934. However, they changed their views two years later, and took their magazine in a very different direction that stressed disdain for any type of organized political expression. Of course, the one political expression they had in mind is Communism.

Partisan Review, the most popular Cold War literary magazine in American history, held to the “conviction that literature in our period should be free of all factional dependence,” or free of all particularity, because they see “a tendency in America for the more conscious social writers to identify themselves with a single organization, the Communist Party; with the result that they grow automatic in their political responses but increasingly less responsible in the artistic sense” (3). Again, the sharp divide between universality (art) and particularity (politics) crops up once again, and it wrongly defines universality as “free of contingency,” which is the only thing that is universal.

In the first issue of *Dissent*, 1954, M. Rubel published “The Use of the Word ‘Socialism,’” in which he argues that, due to the Russian revolution, he runs the risk of being misunderstood when he uses the word “socialism.” Should one still use it anyway, ignoring the Russo-Asiatic co-opting of the word for their misconstrued purposes? Rubel notes the word has no unanimous definition. On the other hand, Rubel realizes socialism and “Stalinism” have become synonymous. He goes on to point out that there are various types of Socialists (non-Marxist socialisms, Marxist socialisms, and anti-Marxist socialisms) who all claim the same intellectual patrimony. When one simply compares the “conceptual content of the word ‘socialism,’ as it was formed in a number of Western minds more than a century ago, with the significance that this term has taken on throughout the whole world beginning with the First World War,” (11) one will see that socialism is a good word attached to a good concept that needs to be saved from the Russians’ usurpation of it for oppressive ends. Other essays in Volume 1 of *Dissent* deal with the same issue surrounding the importance of the redemption of the word “socialism” (e.g., Irving Howe’s “Images of Socialism” and Norman Thomas’s response

to Rubel, also entitled, “The Use of the Word Socialism”). Ellison and the rest in the New York Intellectual circle were all “wrestling with the left.” In other words, they were trying to remain radical in a conformist socialist society that they think is no longer radical, yet their revisionist liberalism becomes pessimistic defeatism and conservatism at times.

Ellison, in particular, is trying to deal with the African American experience, and argues for Negroes to not so quickly be swept away with the political bedlam of the time. He negotiates his love of America and blacks while also dialectically accounting for blacks’ cultural and creative agency in the midst of the need for more political agency. To those who are generous to Ellison’s dilemma, they argue that his dialectical account was misunderstood by black radicals who wanted more political protest and white conservatives who only wanted to stress the universal nature of art. Richard Iton, along with Foley, is not so generous to his plight. Iton believes that, because of Ellison’s disjunction between the political and cultural realms, “the argument Ellison and his intellectual progeny raise is so unconvincing: the obvious influence of African Americans on mainstream American culture (i.e., the blues and jazz) and the possibility that all Americans are cultural mulattoes do not translate into acceptance of blacks in the formal political structures of the (white) republic” (12). Being accepted culturally does not equate to being accepted politically, and this is exactly what the Negritude writers understood as problematic and disingenuous about post World War II notions of universalism. A political order must be put in place to protect marginalized and mistreated groups of people, just as the Frankfurt School Marxists and postcolonial critics argued. Until a new political order took place, writing about the centrality of that group’s

culture—in Ellison’s case, African Americans to American culture—seemed evasive to the real issue at hand: injustice. and The problem with the “Ellisonian paradigm, especially in its later iterations” is that it is “energized by an urge to curtail the political, to push it out of the frame of the artistic and the creative, a move that itself necessitates a restriction of the imaginative and a denial of the full range of the possible, intentional, and significant” (Iton 13)¹⁸. Though there is much truth in Iton’s critique, Iton only reads Ellison as he was received during Cold War suspicion. Ellison does not equate cultural acceptance equates with political acceptance; rather, he is using their cultural acceptance to prove they should be accepted politically. This subtle nuance and labor within the Cold War literary establishment is often overlooked; it is more accurate to state that his conservative, but still sincere and viably effective, fight for racial equality was overlooked and co-opted during the height of the Cold War.

Similarly to Ellison, James Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” (*Partisan Review*, 1949) highlights the shift in literary criticism from naturalism and social realism to high modernism, and could easily be co-opted for the wrong end. He lambastes the protest novel, starting with a discussion concerning *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. He also connects Richard Wright with Stowe, calling him her descendant because he also writes sentimental protest novels. Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) condemns

¹⁸ I thank Iton for causing me to go back and re-read Ellison’s *Collected Essays* in order (starting with his earliest essays (“The Way It Is” [1942]), all the way to his last published works). “The Way It Is” was his last piece to appear in a radical leftist journal (e.g., *New Masses*). Arnold Rampersad writes in his biography of Ellison that, “he vanished mysteriously, in some respects, as he had first appeared among the radicals in 1937. Later, he would never be frank in public about his former links to the Communists. Perhaps only once, in a private letter, did he ever acknowledge that early in the 1940s he had drastically altered his way of thinking about art and politics” (157). This, of course, is what makes Foley’s book so important. It explores his “earlier self” and writings (e.g., excised portions of *Invisible Man* and earlier published and unpublished essays written when he affiliated with the radical left).

and frightens the racist with theological terror, but Baldwin does not think it displays real artistic nuance. It aims to bring more freedom to the oppressed, but it undermines its purpose. Baldwin thinks that protest novels are not really novels at all; they are just moral pamphlets or impassioned sermons. Baldwin critiques how Wright made Bigger's life a connection of determined causes, and thus does not reflect the complexity of Negro humanity. He argues the theology that Wright preaches ultimately denies Bigger life because it portrays him as sub-human; it presents Negroes as trapped in their burdens and plights, implying they cannot transcend their struggles. Baldwin's critique of Wright is very similar to Ellison's, and Baldwin was one of the few black critics to praise *Invisible Man*. In "Autobiographical Notes," (1952), Baldwin laments over the lack of a Jamesian literary aesthetic, especially in Negro art. However, Baldwin sees hope "in the advent of Ralph Ellison"(8). In him are "the beginnings—at least—of a more genuinely penetrating search. Mr. Ellison, by the way, is the first Negro novelist I have read to utilize in language, and brilliantly, some of the ambiguity and irony of Negro life (8). In "The Discovery of what It Means to Be an American," (1959) Baldwin writes that he hopes to "prevent myself from becoming *merely* a Negro; or, even, merely a Negro writer. I wanted to find out in the way the *specialness* of my experience could be made to connect me with other people instead of dividing me from them" (137). Ellison and (early) Baldwin—like Jean Toomer, William Stanley Braithwaite, George Schuyler before them—attempt to either erase, or "transcend," particularity and become universal, but they wrongly understand the relation between the two. Their fiction and nonfiction strives to reveal "the complexities of Negro humanity." However, their lack of emphasis on the political complexity of inequality hindering black Americans from taking part in the

American Dream fits right in with politicians and thinkers who did not think it important to give blacks' political agency. These two writers visibility exposes a failure in the American literary canon due to a misunderstanding of universality. It is assumed that writers have freedom of expression, but until we realize the dramatic institutional forces and pressures placed on writers that alter their particular experience and the way we read that experience, we will not recognize the institutional failure to include a more diverse array of literary aesthetics in the American and African American literary canon, especially during the Cold War era—past or present.

Chapter 4

Trying to Erase the Tain: The Universal Implications of Ellison's Cold War Revisions

Ralph Ellison's privileged position in the American literary canon, and his controversial ascension to literary fame is a product of the rise of New Criticism, New York Intellectuals, Cold War consensus, and the new liberal left's cultural criticism¹⁹. Other black novelists with more politically radical ideas have been erased from the American canon in the era when a very selective, apoliticized, and dehistoricized high modernism was sought after. Barbara's Foley proves what Ralph Ellison effectively kept secret during his life time by looking at his earlier neglected writings, namely, that he was once a young man committed to Marxist ideology and friends with the Communist Party USA —like most other black novelists during his time—yet he totally changed his view of America during the height of the Cold War era. Ellison is famous for his downplaying of involvement with leftist politics in the 30s and 40s, but Foley shows with enormous amounts of evidence that he actually did have deep ties with the Communist Party USA. He intentionally changed and muted his earlier political ideas by effectively burying his early Marxist journalism and literary criticism and excising early Marxist-friendly drafts of *Invisible Man* in order to become visible and artistically respected. Those who did not were erased from the canon, and this problem should be

¹⁹ To explore the relationship between New Criticism and the politics of McCarthyism and the Cold War, please read (Walhout, Mark. "The New Criticism and the Crisis of American Liberalism: The Poetics of the Cold War." *College English* 8 (1987): 861-871. *JSTOR Arts & Sciences III*. Print.). Also, a scathing critique of creative writing workshops' totalitarian literary aesthetic, was recently published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by Eric Bennett (Bennett, Eric. "How Iowa Flattened Literature." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 60.22 [2014]: B6. *MasterFILE Premier*.), and it argues that the CIA funded money to bring writers from all over the world to the University of Iowa to write anticommunist literature. His book, *Workshops of Empire: Creative Writing and the Cold War* will come out soon from the University of Iowa Press.

redressed.

In Arnold Rampersad's words, Foley's book "fills perhaps the biggest gap in our critical and biographical understanding of Ralph Ellison" (Ramsey 3) by showing that Ellison was, for quite some time, completely committed to a Marxist ideology and was thus writing *Invisible Man* as a pro-Communist book. However, as the Cold War heightened, he wrestled down his political beliefs to give us what we have in the 1952 Random House publication. She makes the point that, contrary to popular belief, his leftist politics were not what hindered his use of symbolism and surrealism, but it actually made it better. His radical politics did not contradict his experimental form, but it bolstered it, and brought out the best of black culture. In his earlier writings, Foley notes how Ellison looked to William Sheldon's *Psychology and the Promethean Will* (1936), which argues that the Promethean will contains "the forward straining of a better world ... When dominant, [it] gives rise to radical idealism" (qtd. in Foley 87). Richard Wright, in fact, recommended Ellison to read Sheldon, and one can see Sheldon's influence in both of their literature: "Bigger Thomas was evidently in Wright's eyes a misguided Promethean rebel; Ellison would draw upon Sheldon in his portraits of more disciplined Negro radicals," (87) but as Foley shows in her book, his more disciplined Negro radicals were erased from the published edition of *Invisible Man*. The Negro radicals that do appear in *Invisible Man* look quite idiotic and self-destructive, such as Ras the Destroyer, but earlier in Ellison's literary career he looked to Andre Malraux for guidance on how "novels could convey forms of Promethean heroism in the historical present"²⁰. In fact,

²⁰ Interestingly enough, in Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* literary criticism, Ellison highlights the "non-Communist features of Malraux's protagonists and the largely depoliticized aesthetic theory set forth

Ellison even interviewed Malraux in 1934 for *International Literature*, which was the “journal of Comintern-sponsored International Union of Revolutionary Writers” (88) and Malraux told Ellison he was “absorbed by the new, forthcoming personality” embodied in “the Communist man, the man of the classless society” (88). Malraux was trying to find the right form to represent this “emergent social reality” and “inner world of naked feelings” with a psychological literature (88). As Ellison took notes on Malraux’s words, Foley notes that Ellison underlined “Malraux’s statements about psychology” and “jotted his own name in the margin” (88). It is clear that Ellison had intentions in writing in the same tradition, and did for quite some time into the early drafts of *Invisible Man*.

Ellison’s depiction of how Invisible was introduced to the Brotherhood changed from earlier drafts in which the white members of the Brotherhood are not originally introduced as “aliens mysteriously popping up at Harlem evictions, but as activists at ease marching down Lenox Avenue alongside their black comrades” (249). They knew the blacks in Harlem and their culture and sought to assimilate into it – not the other way around. In the original text, Invisible Man was attracted to the Brotherhood because of the reputation it had with the people, not because he needed money. Furthermore, the Brotherhood is originally a very humble group of people, and this stands in contrast to the famous passage in *Invisible Man* in which he reaches an epiphany and realizes that the Brotherhood never had his real interest in mind. Interestingly enough, before these earlier drafts were even known about, Irving Howe realized this problem, as well as many other

in *The Psychology of Art* (1949),” which was “published several years after Malraux had abandoned his leftist sympathies’ (88). However, the story is more complex than Ellison would like it to be: he was first attracted to Malraux because of his “fervent embrace in the 1930s of Soviet aesthetic theory” (88).

black critics. He writes:

If *Native Son* is marred by the ideological delusions of the thirties, *Invisible Man* is marred, less grossly, by those of the fifties. The middle section of Ellison's novel, dealing with the Harlem Communists, does not ring quite true, in the way a good portion of the writings on this theme during the postwar years does not ring quite true. Ellison makes his Stalinist figures so vicious and stupid that one cannot understand how they could have ever attracted him or any other Negro. That the party leadership manipulated members with deliberate cynicism is beyond doubt, but this cynicism was surely more complex and guarded than Ellison shows it to be. No party leader would ever tell prominent Negro Communist, as one of them does in *Invisible Man*: 'You were not hired [as a functionary] to think'—even if that were what he felt. Such passages were almost as damaging as the propagandists outbursts in *Native Son* (131).

Here is a scene from the published 1952 version—the point at which the narrator realizes that the Brotherhood is a domineering entity that does not allow him to think for himself. The Invisible Man and the Brotherhood come into conflict after the death and protest of Tod Clifton. The Brotherhood does not like the eulogy he gave at the funeral and officially regards Clifton as a traitor to their ideals, but the Invisible Man sees it differently. Moreover, he lets them know that the black community sees it differently also, but Jack tells him that the Brotherhood tells him and the black community what to think. Here is a 1952 Random House published portion of the dialogue between Brother

Jack and the Invisible Man:

Brother Jack rubbed his eye. "Do you know that you have become quite a theoretician?" he said. "You astound me."

"I doubt that, Brother, but there's nothing like isolating a man to make him think," I said.

"Yes, that's true; some of our best ideas have been thought in prison.

Only you haven't been in prison, Brother, and you were not hired to think.

Had you forgotten that? If so, listen to me: You were not hired to think."

He

was speaking very deliberately and I thought, So . . . So here it is, naked and old and rotten. So now it's out in the open . . .

"So now I know where I am," I said, "and with whom —"

"Don't twist my meaning. For all of us, the committee does the thinking. For all of us. And you were hired to talk."

"That's right, I was hired. Things have been so brotherly I had forgotten my place. But what if I wish to express an idea?"

"We furnish all ideas. We have some acute ones. Ideas are part of our apparatus. Only the correct ideas for the correct occasion."

"And suppose you misjudge the occasion?"

"Should that ever happen, you keep quiet."

"Even though I am correct?"

"You say nothing unless it is passed by the committee. Otherwise I suggest you keep saying the last thing you were told."

“And when my people demand that I speak?”

“The committee will have an answer!”

I looked at him. The room was hot, quiet, smoky. The others looked at me strangely. I heard the nervous sound of someone mashing out a cigarette in a glass ashtray. I pushed back my chair, breathing deeply, controlled. I was on a dangerous road and I thought of Clifton and tried to get off of it. I said nothing.

Suddenly Jack smiled and slipped back into his fatherly role.

“Let us handle the theory and the business of strategy,” he said. “We are experienced. We're graduates and while you are a smart beginner you skipped several grades. But they were important grades, especially for gaining

strategical knowledge. For such it is necessary to see the overall picture.

More

is involved than meets the eye. With the long view and the short view and the overall view mastered, perhaps you won't slander the political consciousness of the people of Harlem.”

Can't he see I'm trying to tell them what's real, I thought. Does my membership stop me from feeling Harlem? (461-462)

Ralph Ellison effectively shifts the blame of racism in America to the Communist Party USA. He creates a straw man in the Brotherhood and makes it seem as if they are slandering the political consciousness of Harlem. Instead of critiquing America's structure founded on white supremacy since inception with the Founding Fathers, and

instead of critiquing an American capitalist society that continually excluded blacks from its system, Communism is depicted as the major problem hindering America from including all of its members in full participation in American democracy. Earlier drafts give a much different account of the Brotherhood. Brother Stein, a character in the earlier drafts, stands in stark contrast to characters like Brother Jack and Brother Hambro. Here is a quote from Brother Stein:

We don't know too much about your people. We thought we did but we don't, even though some of us still think we do. What we have is a theory. It's a good theory, but it's up to you to put into action. So instead of trying to tell you how or what to do I'll tell you to work it out your own way. Only don't say that I told you, because some of our brothers wouldn't understand... And one final thing, Brother: don't tell us what we want to hear, tell us what we need to know" (qtd. in Foley 260)

Foley notes that "Ellison's decision to exclude this conversation from the 1952 text substantially alters the invisible man's introduction to the left" (260). People like Brother Jack and Brother Hambro seem to know it all and only want the Invisible Man to be their mouthpiece. However, Brother Stein wants the narrator to not just use his voice, but his brain and ears also in order to unite with the people of Harlem. Foley notes that Brother Stein is also "most likely Jewish, as his name suggests, and he bears on his hand what appears to be a concentration camp tattoo as well as evidence of torture" (260). It is clear to see that Ellison's original depiction of the Brotherhood included a character that

“suggests his continuity with such positively rendered left-wing Boris Max²¹ in *Native Son* and Himes’s Abe Rosenberg in *Lonely Crusade*” (260)—two writers who eventually moved to France when they felt there was no audience for their type of literature in America. This shift from characters like Brother Stein into ones like Brother Hambro has major implications, especially when taken in light of other exclusions from the novel. Ellison originally had “references to Spain and Munich” (260) also. All of these changes combined “removes *Invisible man* from the international context of fascism and war” and “the ‘supreme world crisis’ to which Brother Jack referred,” (260) and instead posits African American exceptionalism.

Another interesting change from earlier drafts in *Invisible Man* is the change in the function of Mary Rambo’s house in *Invisible Man*. Mary is a nice and motherly woman who let the Invisible Man stay for free at her place after his rough stint at Liberty Paints. Her black Southern hospitality is very comforting for him as he still is trying to adjust to life in the North. She cooks for him, helps him recover physically from his injury at Liberty Paints, supports his black identity, and sees potential in him to be a future black leader of racial uplift. Nonetheless, the invisible man eventually connects with the Brotherhood and begins to look down on her and feel ashamed at that part of his heritage. He leaves her house without saying goodbye, noting that she talks too much. He

²¹ Boris Max is the lawyer who defends Bigger at his trial. He is a member of the Labor Defenders, a legal organization that has ties with the Communist Party. Max seems to be the only white character in the novel who is able to see and understand Bigger as a human being – not as *only* as a black man or *only* as a murderer. He enables Bigger to tell his own story for the first time in his life. Max’s ability to connect with Bigger as a human shows Bigger that a caring and supportive relationship between a white man and a black man is, in fact, conceivable. With this relationship, Wright offers, as Ellison put it, an image “of black and white fraternity” that American literature had so badly lack Mark Twain’s time (Foley 22). With Ellison’s exclusion of people like Boris Max (e.g., Brother Stein), he does not give us any of those much-needed images that he claimed to long for.

is confident that she will be fine because he knows that other black men must have left her just like himself. However, this false dichotomy between Mary Rambo and the Brotherhood did not exist in earlier drafts in *Invisible Man*. Foley writes that “rather than a womb-like space exempt from Harlem’s class struggles, Mary’s rooming house is the site where the invisible man is readied for his initiation into leftist politics” (220). In the 1952 version of the novel, Mary’s character is rather static, and her roommates never appear in the text (Ellison only mentions there being some), but in earlier drafts, Mary is much more fully rounded out, and her roommates are “given names, faces, and voices” (218). The most important erased character from the vigorous debates about politics, the Brotherhood, and societal ills is LeRoy, a black member of the National Maritime Union who was murdered by racists while out at sea. While at Mary’s house, the Invisible Man lives in his former room, and he even wears LeRoy’s clothes. Treadwell, a white Southerner who was LeRoy’s closest shipboard friend, tells Invisible Man and other Harlemites that he changed his life. Ellison’s sketch of him depicts the type of nuance that does not attempt to erase the stain of particularity that he eventually erases from the text:

[He] is distinctly different from those who like him were born in South. He has learned to read, and has linked up his humanity with that of Humanity generally. He is interested in problems of leadership. He is Leader, psychologically, who has seen the dichotomy of his position as consisting of a need to act on folk level, or of building up organization whereby he can cooperate on more sophisticated urban level. In folk he can see only limited possibilities, which are nevertheless vital. On the

other hand he feels need to possess the meaning of the entire American culture, if not emotionally, intellectually – *although he does not believe that such a division is necessary* (220, italics added)

LeRoy's journal has radical and even Communist musings on history and the fight for equal rights in America and the world. The Invisible Man reads these journal entries with great interest, and it is obvious that Ellison planned for LeRoy to be his double. Barbara Foley also makes the argument that LeRoy is supposed to cause the audience to think of Ferdinand Smith, who was "declared an immigrant troublemaker," and "deported in 1949" (228). Foley continues by saying that "Ellison was fully cognizant of NMU's left-wing association: he had secured his position on the *Sun Yat-Sen* through the agency of the Communist organizer Add Bates and had begun *Invisible Man* while staying on the farm owned by Bates's fellow-traveling brother and sister-in law" (228). In the final draft, Ellison erases his praise for the equal rights work that the National Maritime Union so diligently fought for.

One of the more interesting findings Foley finds in Ellison's drafts is the journal entries by LeRoy in which he addresses "the politics of revolt and revolution, past and present" (230). These entries deal with controversial figure such as Karl Marx, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown. To set up the context, I would like to first quote from another erased portion of *Invisible Man* that deals compares Frederick Douglass to Karl Marx:

Douglass was of the same type as Marx. He liked to fight, he was quick tempered and he had a great mind. And just like Marx he was for the oppressed, not just the black but the white as well; and not only in the United States but all over the world. He just didn't have the education that

Marx had and being black kept him from getting the people around him like Marx....

They looked very much alike. They both looked lions ... [with] big heads, thick manes of hair, with large beards and bushy eyebrows. And in the pictures I've seen of Marx he was almost as dark as a Negro, not that I'm trying to make him one, though I wish he had been, but it's the truth. Both of them had fierce eyes and both looked like they would fight a circle saw (qtd. in Foley 129).

In response to this depiction, LeRoy concludes that Douglass was a "typical 19th century idealist" who "made [the] mistake of throwing his best energies into speeches. Had he spent his time in organizing revolt he would have been a far more important man today; he would have fathered a tradition of militant action around which men could rally today" (qtd. in Foley 230). In Ellison's personal journal, he wrote something similar about Frederick Douglass: "[He] made the mistake of trying to work inside when outside was where he belonged," (qtd. in Foley 131) LeRoy contrasts Douglass with John Brown, who he considers "'more reasonable in his so-called madness' because he advocated 'guerilla warfare.... No matter if a million had died, but died with guns in their hands, a tradition of responsible civic action would have been established that would have become a living force in our national life'" (230). He concludes that journal entry by saying that he would not recommend "quoting Thoreau, or Ghandi [sic], for though their words be weapons, in some instances bullets are the only effective words" (qtd. in Foley 230). This wrestling with theory and practice, and with the African-American abolitionist movement and Marxism, is all regrettably excised and oversimplified in the final text, and Foley

rightly concludes that it makes it a less humane and less accurate depiction of black life in Harlem in America in the 1930s. Joseph G. Ramsey summarizes the ways in which Ellison's revisions to *Invisible Man* not only mischaracterized the Communist Party, but the humanity of working-class blacks:

As Foley aptly points out, this simplification not only creates a straw man of the Communist Party (one that lines up again and again with stock Cold War stereotypes) but, in some ways even more troublingly, it casts the people of Harlem themselves (or even black people more generally) as epistemologically or even ontologically uninterested or incapable of concerted political or historical (rational?) thinking. The flip side of Ellison's caricaturing of the Left (and perhaps the corollary of anticommunism more generally), Foley demonstrates, is a delimiting and even demeaning de-politicization of working and oppressed people themselves. *Wrestling with the Left* surveys the history of black radical organizing in Harlem from the 1930s to the 50s, reminding us again of how far Ellison's depiction leaps from the actuality of this moment (8).

One of the most important things that Ellison erases from LeRoy's journal is his wrestling with the particularity and universality of black life in America. LeRoy writes in his journal: "[It is] part of the character imposed upon us as a people to be a 'race'—that vague term without cultural or geographical boundaries . . . [But] it is my nature, my internal compulsion, to be a man, a member of culture, a civilization, a citizen of the world" (qtd. In Foley 230). LeRoy goes on to wonder if Negroes "are the true inheritors of the West, the rightful heirs of the humanist tradition," (qtd. In Foley 230) and here is

why he says so:

[The West] has flourished through our own dehumanization, debasement, through our being ruled out of bounds; since we have been brutalized and forced to live inhuman lives so that they could become what they consider 'more human.' . . . Not because we are humble shall we inherit [the] earth but because we are kept, forced into a position in which we are uncorrupted, forced outside, alienated from outlook, policy, etc., forced into an identity of experience with [the] whole non-European world . . . Isn't the whole pattern of our history away from authoritarianism either of the left or right? . . . Doesn't the pattern of our experience insist that we seek a way of life more universal, more human and more free than any to be found in the world today? If only it were conceivable that in order to achieve the consciousness of the West one must also absorb its corruption! . . . [The paradox of being a Negro stems from] the constant remembrance that even the best that the Western World has fashioned – art, science, and culture – even religion – has been attained through our degradation[.] There is black blood alike in bullion cubes and in bullion gold, and in the bulls of popes and bulletins of state, and the loftiest arguments by the loftiest minds (qtd. in Foley 230-231)

LeRoy thus seeks “a change in the rules by which men live. For now for me to be more human is to be less like those who degrade me I wish to be, in my thinking, neither black nor white, and in my acting, neither exploited nor exploiter” (231). LeRoy, like Marx, hopes for a classless society, and Foley concludes that the voice of Leroy “figures

crucially as a barometer of Ellison's politics as he drafted *Invisible Man*" (232). LeRoy's words, values, and aspirations "are largely congruent with those expressed in Ellison's *Negro Quarterly* writings of 1942-1943. LeRoy's presence in the drafts of *Invisible Man* reveals the extent to which Ellison continued to embrace a Marxist paradigm well in to the late 1940s and could not readily banish it from the novel's ethical frame" (233). LeRoy, the radical internationalist who questions what a democracy is and what its boundaries are, gives us a picture of what Ellison was like when he was first inspired to write the novel. However, Harry Ford of Knopf, urged Ellison to cut out LeRoy from the text.

All we have left in the 1952 text of Mary Rambo and her house is a complaint that she talks too much. She seems out of place because "her talk about leadership is not borne out by any dramatized evidence" (226). The original dramatic evidence that was eventually eliminated from the final text helps to explain the Invisible Man's uneasiness: he felt a "pressure not just to lead, but to lead as LeRoy has done," and Foley argues that this pressure was very intense (226). In the earlier drafts, Treadwell says that LeRoy had the "stamp of destiny," and was thus "dedicated and set aside" (222). He follows that by saying, "LeRoy goes, you come. I got an idea, like I say, that you something special too," and he then half-jokingly says tells the Invisible Man, "You can't avoid it ... for now you are the dedicated and set aside ... his life is not his own He arouses expectations of those who can find in him no external reason for their great expectations" (222). With the erasure of LeRoy, and the other working class Harlemites that live with Mary Rambo, the dramatic decision to leave her house is lessened, and the African Americans that live there are stripped of their political energy and humanity. Ellison intentionally erased

LeRoy from his own novel, and due to the popularity of his novel (and the way it was touted as a model for future black writers), he implicitly erased many black novelists from the Western literary canon who thought like LeRoy.

Reconsidering her title, one can see the various meanings that emerge from it. In one sense, “wrestling with the left” means that Ellison was in opposition to it, and eventually wrestled it down to be accepted by the literary establishment. However, another way of looking at the title is to show that—in the process of writing *Invisible Man*—one can find traces of him “wrestling with the left” in a honest and searching way. That is to say, he wrestled with the left while he was at the same a part of that left. Ellison originally hoped the novel would tell “the story of a man of good will who attempts to function idealistically in a political organization which cannot afford the luxury of idealism” (qtd. in Foley 155). With this understanding in mind, Foley does not depict Ellison as some pure and undefiled Communist who was set in his beliefs in his early years, but it was the wrestling with these ideas that made Ellison just like many of his contemporaries, such as Lenin and Badiou who “worked to theorize the relationship between revolutionary, community consciousness (on the one hand) and the particularity and immediacy of group demands (on the other)” (Ramsey 11). Here is a draft from an earlier draft in which Ellison contemplates the paradoxical development of revolutionary leadership:

A leader while leading the ruled is still controlled by the laws which rule the group. A revolutionary transcends both the group and the laws. He is under the spell of another picture of reality. He breaks the laws and the status quo emotionally and intellectually under the influence of his will to

create the new” (27).

These type of complex musings that do not create either-or binaries are stark contrasts with the way in which he eventually resorted to neat and rigid binaries between subjectivity and objectivity, theory and practice, and politics and culture. What was once a novel about the “internal contradiction” between the individual and society in America is “reconfigured as liberal pluralism” that blends together perfectly (Foley 341). The American dilemma, as Gunnar Myrdal put it, namely the fact that America could espouse such lofty liberal ideals while *at the same time* treat African Americans so inhumanely, is not the central focus of Ellison and (early) Baldwin. The dilemma is reconfigured to be America’s achievement²², namely, that black and white are culturally intertwined²³. A novel that began in its early drafts with a Communist scapegoat in the text, LeRoy, is eventually published with the Communist party as the scapegoat of the text—not racism and/or capitalism. Ellison not only portrays working-class African Americans as subjects who are not capable of “radical political consciousness and collective agency,” (Ramsey 18) which is a tragedy in itself, but he does one worse: he elides the very problem limiting these working class blacks. The quick turn to American exceptionalism that occurs at the novel’s ending is the source of this elision, and it immediately received much criticism from many black and Marxist literary reviewers. For example, in the

²² Remember this Baldwin quote: “One of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no other people has ever been so deeply involved in the lives of black men, and vice versa. This fact faced, with all its implications, it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, *it is also something of an achievement*. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met. It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again” (175, italics added).

²³ Think back to my earlier close readings of “What Would America Be Like Without Blacks,” (1970) “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” (1977/1978) and my reference to Ellison’s meaning behind his essay title, “The World and the Jug” (1963).

“Epilogue,” once the Invisible Man is back underground musing on his past experiences, he reflects on his grandfather’s enigmatic words (“Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open” [15-16]). He comes to the conclusion that he meant to say “yes” to the great principles this country was built on and “no” to the hypocritical practice of the Founding Fathers. He writes:

He *must* have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not on the men who did the violence. Did he mean say ‘yes’ because he knew that the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name?... Or did he mean that we had to take responsibility for all of it, because we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs? Not for the power or for vindication, but because we, with the given circumstance of our origin, could only thus find transcendence (564-565).

Here, the Invisible Man puts the burden on himself as a black man to transcend while working within a society built with inherent contradictions within it that limits himself. However, he is content with that plight. He even goes so far as to say that he, “like almost everyone in our country, I started out with my share of optimism. I believed in hard work and progress and action, but now, after first being ‘for’ society and then ‘against’ it,” he comes to realize that his “world has become one of infinite possibilities,” and “that much I’ve learned underground” (567). Nowhere to be found are the musings from earlier drafts that suggest that it might be more efficient to work outside the system because the system is

inherently broken and needs to undergo a revolution (e.g., LeRoy's journaling about contrasts of John Brown and Frederick Douglass, and the similarities between Frederick Douglass and Karl Marx). Rather, he praises the diversity of America: "America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain" (568). *Let it so remain*, and *my world has become one of infinite impossibilities*, as if Jim Crow did not even exist when this text was published. Many Marxist and black critics gave the book negative reviews due to this lavish American exceptionalism. One of these critics was, of course, Irving Howe, who writes that the "the sudden, unprepared, and implausible assertion of the unconditioned freedom with which the novel ends" is proof of "Ellison's dependence on the postwar zeitgeist"(131). More specifically, he says that "the hero's discovery that 'my world has become one of infinite impossibilities'" is simply not a reality for many blacks in America because "the unfortunate fact remains that to define one's individuality is to stumble upon social barriers which stand in the way, all too much in the way, of 'infinite possibilities.'" (131). One can fight for freedom, but "it cannot always be willed or asserted into existence. And it seems hardly an accident that even as Ellison's hero asserts the 'infinite possibilities' he makes no attempt to specify them.'" (132)

Foley makes much of this lack of specificity in her critique of Ellison as well. In particular, one of her major problems with *Invisible Man* is the way in which it dehistoricizes the shortcomings of the Brotherhood, or the Communist Party. Foley hopes to show that their demise was not necessary, natural, or inevitable. The end was not in the beginning, as Ellison writes in the penultimate chapter of the novel, and as Ellison would continue to purport as his post-National Book Award self. Thus the real tragedy of *Invisible Man* is that it does not tell the true story of the demise of the Left, and that it has

triumphed other novels and histories that actually tried to. Rather, Ellison absurdly makes a caricature of real people honestly fighting for a better world. She hopes to redress this wrong by historicizing the prior achievements and shortcomings of that prior leftist American movement in order to provide insight to current and future leftist movements. As I mentioned earlier, in this new Jim Crow era of dog-whistle politics, there is definitely a need for much structural change. Foley argues that Ellison's dehistoricization is a necessary tool in his anticommunist rhetoric:

Ellison's decision to excise all reference to the Second World War enabled him to avoid confronting the crisis about the meaning of democracy that the antifascist war posed to large number of African Americans. The omission also made it possible to evade the complicated matrix of local, national, and international considerations that had challenged the political judgment of a wide range of actions and organizations (not just Moscow-affiliated Communists) during the war (319).

If Ellison would have explained the political reasoning behind the Brotherhood's quick shift in focus, it would not seem as if Brother Jack was simply a blind, irredeemable, and poisonous leftist leader caught in an inevitably ruined system. Therefore, instead of automatically reverting to American patriotism, one can actually think of how to create a more fair society with revolutionary politics.

Implicitly, Foley is seeking to change one's definition and approaches to teaching literature. By looking at the ruins of the "high modernist 'well-wrought urn,'" (Ramsey 26), Foley shows the messiness involved in creating a work of art, which is something

Ellison, as well as other high modernists, attempted to hide²⁴. She reveals the tain of particularity that he, as well as many other writers and critics, have tried to hide. Thus Ramsey argues that Foley “*expands and deepens* literature into the realm of ‘non-literature’” by revealing the grime of history and politics onto the literary text (26). However, Foley is not creating anything new, but just offering a new approach that exposes and decodes “the ways that history and politics *were and are always there* in the literary work itself. It was just that certain all-too-*simple* forms of reading have tended to obscure them from view” (26). Foley thus forces one to reconsider what “literature” means, and how that impacts how one teaches it. Instead of seeing novels as completed works of genius, one could view them as “the remains – even the ruins – of complex and contradictory political and historical *processes*” that always eventually elude the novelist (26)²⁵. Joseph Ramsey, arguing from a similar standpoint as Foley, raises important questions related to literary pedagogical practices: “Who says that what matters most about a literary text is its ‘finished’ state upon emerging on the bookstore shelf? What (or whose) interests and values are served by such a notion? What would it mean instead to put a writer’s *process of engagement* (with history, with politics) at the center of how we

²⁴ *The Work of Revision* (2013) by Hannah Sullivan argues that redrafting is a fairly new 20th century modernist phenomenon. By exploring the works of writers such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, and others, she shows how with the advent of the typewriter, writers were able to take revisions to another level of self-scrutinizing obsessive multi-drafting. In direct contrast with Romantics who believed that writing should be organic and free, these modernists laboriously crafted their works for their particular purpose. She argues that they may, in fact, have sometimes gone too far. Ralph Ellison, of course, worked to fight against his race and be placed in the same twentieth-century modernist tradition, and had similar revisionist techniques. What would it mean to expose this while teaching their works?

²⁵ For more on the way in which literary studies is trying to redefine itself and deepen itself by including what has been traditionally categorized as “non-literature,” see the 1128-page anthology, *A New Literary History of America*, edited by Marcus, Greil and Werner Sollors. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009. Print.)

teach literature?” (26) This is precisely why Foley asks her readers to reconsider the implications of teaching *Invisible Man* as a modernist well-wrought urn. Thus Foley writes:

To interpret the novel’s patterning on its own terms, and not to query what is being equated with what and why, is to reproduce uncritically the ideological premises under girding that patterning. An awareness that the symbolistic roundedness of Ellison’s novel is the formal correlative of a politics of guilt by association makes it far more difficult simply to teach *Invisible Man* as a novel. It is a necessary to confront the embeddedness of the political in the aesthetic (22).

Foley thus works to show the ideology working within literary studies, and hopes to deconstruct misguided notions of the “universality of art and literature,” and the way in which it has served privileged groups who happen to be on the right side of false dichotomies. She demonstrates the ability to, like Irving Howe, take “special effort . . . [and] attend to their argument” found within an Ellisonian essay or novel and find the “rifts of logic so little noticed when one gets swept away by the brilliance of the language” (121). I argue that the tain that always peaks through any aesthetic ideology—even when critics and novelists, as they have done in African American literary debates, have tried to erase it.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Eating More Spinach: Jesmyn Ward and the Future of Black Literature

In January 1990, Irving Howe reflected on his debate with Ralph Ellison, and he writes that “while the relationship between blacks and whites, though considerably changed in some respects improved since 1963, continues to be difficult. The problems raised in both ‘Black Boys and Native Sons’ and Ellison’s attack upon it remain” (138). He concedes that he was wrong on one point, namely, that he underestimated the ability of African Americans to “create a vital culture apart from social protest,” (138) but he still thinks that his “original stress upon the inescapability of protest as a literary theme, both enabling and disabling black writers, is valid: it has been borne out by the writings of many younger black novelists” (138-139). Irving Howe is correct, and John Edgar Wideman’s early career conflict attests to the struggle black writers have to deal with their particulars and still be considered as universal writers: does an allusion to T.S. Eliot hold the same literary value as to one’s colored grandmother, or to Andre 3000 of the rap group, OutKast? Even more recently, in 2011, when Jesmyn Ward won the National Book Award for *Salvage the Bones* (2011), her epigraph to the famous Southern rap duo, OutKast, and depiction of characters like them—poor blacks living the South (i.e., Mississippi)—caused an uproar in the literary world. Her novel chronicles the life of a poor black family in Mississippi before, during and after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Jesmyn Ward, and almost everyone else, was surprised when she won the prestigious national award. In an interview with CNN, Ward said she was “totally surprised. I was shocked. I had prepared an acceptance speech, just in case, but I did not think that was going to happen at all” (Lavandera). The main reason she was so surprised

is because, as the interviewer noted, one could not “find any reviews of your book in major newspapers across the country or much talk about your book before it was nominated for a National Book Award” (Lavandera). Previously ignored by a wider public, she hit upon a major problem that still very much impacts American literary culture and criticism. Some stories—for example, those based around poor blacks from Mississippi—are not as easily seen as “universal” by the literary establishment:²⁶

I think part of the reason was because I’m writing about poor black people from the South. I think people make certain assumptions about what they’re interested in reading or what others would be interested in reading, and when they think of poor black people in the South, they don’t think people are interested in reading about those people. So I did think that it was just being lost in the sea of books (qtd. in Lavandera).

She thinks stories about families like hers—poor black families from Mississippi—deserve to be told because “they are universal stories. In the end, it’s about us as human beings trying to survive and make the best of what we have right here, right now” (Lavandera). However, not everyone sees it that way, and that is why her award was such a surprise.

In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Ward directly addresses the problematic black writers are still read, and the ways in which she tried to combat that in her novel. She makes sure to align the main character in her novel, Esch, within an universal framework by comparing her to the Greek figure of Medea:

²⁶ Martha Southgate, another great African American female novelist, wrote a very honest article in the *New York Times* about this problem. See: Southgate, Martha. “Writers Like Me.” *New York Times* 1 July 2007. Web. 28 March 2014.

It infuriates me that the work of white American writers can be universal and lay claim to classic texts, while black and female authors are ghetto-ized as “other.” I wanted to align Esch with that classic text, with the universal figure of Medea, the antihero, to claim that tradition as part of my Western literary heritage. The stories I write are particular to my community and my people, which means the details are particular to our circumstances, but the larger story of the survivor, the savage, is essentially a universal, human one (Ward 265).

To be a black woman writing a novel which focuses on the life of a black teenage girl is to be “ghetto-ized as ‘other.’” Even though she wins the National Book Award, she has to work painstakingly hard in her explanation of her book to make sure her audience sees the universality of her work, which is radical contingency (“the larger story of the survivor, the savage”). It proves the ways in which blacks are still relegated to the particular, and thus not as easily placed within the American literary canon.

Ward was not the only person surprised that her novel won the National Book Award. In fact, many critics were upset at the whole list of finalists. In Ron Charles’ *Washington Post* Book Review of *Salvage the Bones*, he apologetically confesses that he was one of those writers who was “grumbling about the obscurity of some of the authors (Andrew Krivak?), even some of the publishers (Lookout Books?).” Victor LaValle, one of the National Book Award judges, said that he and the other judges “ignored popular novels in hopes of making the public ‘eat their spinach.’” (Charles). Moreover, these books “worked some special kind of magic on us. In the end, what’s any good reader really hoping for? That spark. That spell” (Charles). After reading the book, Charles said

that he was happy to “eat my words. And my spinach” as he went on to praise the book in his review. However, one must consider what type of praise he and La Valle are giving Ward’s book when they compare it to spinach. It reproduces the same literary debates of old: it works special magic on its readers (universality), but one also has to take the spinach (particularity). He makes it seem as if the two are separate from each other, but the two are embedded in each other in their very formation. It is a side comment, but it is an important one. Her particular community, poor blacks in Mississippi, is a portion of the population that has been ignored nationally—even during the enormous amount of press that Hurricane Katrina attracted. New Orleans, due to its wealth and privileged citizens, got plenty of media attention, but many towns in Mississippi—who were actually damaged just as bad if not worse—got hardly any national attention. Ward wrote her novel to redress that wrong, and Charles’s comment prove the way in which “the spinach” of society, or the tain of the particular, even when it is recognized, is, as Ward put it, “ghetto-ized as ‘other.’” Charles wrote that review before the National Book Award winner was announced. Even though he loved the book, he did not think it would win: “Tea Obrecht’s ‘The Tiger’s Wife’ is an odds-on favorite for the National Book Award, partly because it’s the only well-known novel among the finalists, but ‘Salvage the Bones’ has the aura of a classic about it.” His review of the novel shows the politics that surround National Book Awards, and it is very similar to Leslie Fielder’s critique of national literature in his work, *What Was Literature?: Class Culture and Mass Society* (1982). If LaValle and the other judges did not make a conscious point to force the reading public to “eat their spinach,” not many people would have read Ward’s book. The

broader reading public would have overlooked a great book written by a black writer that deals with particularity on the black political condition, which has happened so often due to American literary canon formation history. Moreover, even as Victor la Valle and the other judges award Ward's novel with the National Book Award, he still puts her novel in a problematic position as he compares it to "eating one's spinach." He makes it seem as if it is a duty as an American to read her book and take in the undesirable social realism and black particularity; following the logic conclusion, Ward seems to have garnered the award, not by its own merit or literary quality (or universality), but because of its political message. The same contradictory relationship between universality and particularity is reproduced even in 2011.

Ward counters the false dichotomy in the many interviews she has done since winning the National Book Award. She argues that writing with particularity on the black political condition, in fact, speaks to the universal tragic condition of all humans. In an interview with Anna Bressanin of BBC News, she argues that America is not yet post-racial. She hopes that her book will help improve race relations, and says that her novel can be used as a litmus test: "If one day, ... they're able to pick up my work and read it and see ... the characters in my books as human beings and feel for them, then I think that that is a political act." Furthermore, in an interview with *Paris Review*, she responds to the question, "Do you think of your writing as political?" very honestly:

After I finished my first draft of *Salvage the Bones*, I felt that I wasn't political enough. I had to be more honest about the realities of the community I was writing about. After my brother died in the fall of 2000, four young black men from my community died in the next four

years—from suicide, drug overdose, murder, and auto accidents. My family and I survived Hurricane Katrina in 2005; we left my grandmother’s flooding house, were refused shelter by a white family, and took refuge in trucks in an open field during a Category Five hurricane. I saw an entire town demolished, people fighting over water, breaking open caskets searching for something that could help them survive. I realized that if I was going to assume the responsibility of writing about my home, *I needed narrative ruthlessness*. I couldn’t dull the edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us (Ward 266, italics added).

Hopefully, in the future, judges will get to a point in which they do not compare Ward’s novel to “spinach,” but an “entrée” that marks the grime of the universal in and of itself. Ward does not attempt to erase the particularity of her characters (“I couldn’t dull the edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us.”). Rather, she understands that radical contingency is the only mark of the universal: the larger story of the survivor, the savage in all their contingency (“I needed narrative ruthlessness”), and she stays faithful to it. Jesmyn Ward was only the second black writer since the 1977-1993 Black Archivists generation to win a major literary prize. The other was Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* (2004), which won a National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2004 and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2005.

Ward’s victory is proof of the arguments made by Michael Hill in *The Ethics of Swagger* and prophesied by Nathan Huggins in *Harlem Renaissance*, but it is a partial

victory. Her work was, after all, still compared to spinach. Due to the progress made, Ward is able to start her novel with an epigraph by OutKast, a Southern rap group. She expects her audience to accept it as good art judged on its own terms. In her interview with *Paris Review*, she writes, “Hip-hop, which is my generation’s blues, is important to the characters that I write about. They use hip-hop to understand the world through language” (Ward 263). African American literature now has a secure place in the academy. This is evinced by the Hutchins Center for African & African American Research at Harvard University, which even includes the Hiphop Archive & Research Institute²⁷. The appreciation and study of African American literature has come a long way, but, as Jesmyn Ward noted, there is still a long way to go.

²⁷ The Hiphop Archive and Research Institute at Harvard University proves the acceptance of African American art and letters. In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2004) Leonard Deutsch tells of his experience at Kent State University in 1970. He recalled “the harsh resistance that greeted his request to write a Ph.D. dissertation on Ralph Ellison” (xliii). In fact, “when his prospectus was approved, a member of his thesis committee—a well-known Melville Scholar—resigned in protest,” (xliii) concluding that Ellison was “not of the stature being studied for a Ph.D. in English. Other stories of white professors and predominantly white institutions of higher education discouraging scholarly interests and careers in African American literature abound in contemporary academic folklore” (xliii). To now have rappers such as Nas and 9th Wonder as fellows at arguably the most prestigious university in the world shows the acceptance and authority African American literature now has.

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