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WHICH WAY FOR THE NEGRO WRITER?:
RALPH ELLISON AND THE INVISIBLE BLACK LEFT

Abstract: The publication of *Invisible Man* by Random House in 1952 was a watershed moment in American literature. To this day, it is one of the most praised books in the country's history, and taught at high schools and universities across the United States – and the world. The classic novel is very often taught as the model African American literary text that found a way to creatively write about racial conflict to the general public without losing its high artistic quality. However, teaching the novel in this way reinforces damaging stereotypes about other African American novels published before it. When *Invisible Man* was published, mainstream literary publications, ironically enough, made invisible other black writers who had written other impressive works of fiction before Ellison. They made *Invisible Man* the exceptional good novel within the African American literary tradition. Some even separated it from the tradition because it seemed too exceptionally impressive, rather than placing it alongside a long history of works that came before it. In order to not reproduce these stereotypes, I offer innovative ways to present *Invisible Man*'s importance in the history of American and African American literature. First, I argue it should be placed in context with other works of fiction by African Americans that he was clearly influenced by, such as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson and “The Man Who Lived Underground” by Richard Wright. Secondly, I place Ellison's decision to change his plot in the late 1940s to create a staunchly anti-communist novel at the height of Cold War containment culture in context with other black writers who refused to make the same decision. I compare their careers and argue that *Invisible Man*'s success should not come at the expense of those that stood by other political convictions; rather, *Invisible Man* could be used as a jumping board to discuss all of these rich and complex topics that percolated in the 1950s among African American intellectuals.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Cold War, the black left, criticism, reception history, pedagogy

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ПУТИ НЕГРИТЯНСКОГО ПИСАТЕЛЯ:
РАЛЬФ ЭЛЛИСОН И «НЕВИДИМКИ»
АФРОАМЕРИКАНСКОГО ЛЕВОГО ДВИЖЕНИЯ

Аннотация: Публикация романа «Невидимка» издательством Random House в 1952 году стала вехой в истории американской литературы. Эта книга и сегодня считается одной из лучших в национальном литературном наследии, ее изучают в школах и университетах США – и всего мира. Этот классический роман часто называют образцовым для афроамериканской литературы текстом, автор которого нашел способ в художественной форме донести до широкой публики проблему межрасового конфликта, не поступаясь эстетическими достоинствами текста. Однако когда о романе рассказывают таким образом, укрепляются стереотипные представления об опубликованных до него других афроамериканских романах, которые умаляют их значимость. Когда вышел «Невидимка», другие чернокожие авторы, до Эллисона написавшие значительные произведения, по иронии судьбы превратились в невидимок литературного мейнстрима. «Невидимку» стали изображать как исключительный по своим качествам роман в русле афроамериканской литературной традиции. Иногда его даже отрывали от этой традиции, вместо того чтобы рассматривать в контексте более ранних произведений, написанных на протяжении длительного периода, – настолько исключительно ярким его считали. Чтобы не повторять этих стереотипов, я предлагаю новый подход к интерпретации значимого вклада романа «Невидимка» в историю американской и афроамериканской литературы. Во-первых, я полагаю, что его следует изучать на фоне других произведений афроамериканской литературы, оказавших на него очевидное влияние, таких, как «Автобиография бывшего цветного» Джеймса Уэлдона Джонсона и «Человек, который жил в под землей» Ричарда Райта. Во-вторых, я рассматриваю принятое Эллисоном в конце 1940-х годов решение взяться за новый сюжет, создав отчетливо антикоммунистический роман на пике культурной напряженности холодной войны, в контексте творчества других негритянских писателей, отвергших такое решение. Я сопоставляю их пути и пытаюсь показать, что высокая оценка «Невидимки» не должна стоять признания тем, кто придерживался иных политических убеждений; скорее этот роман может стать отправной точкой в разговоре об этих содержательных и сложных темах, интересовавших в 1950-е годы афроамериканских интеллектуалов.

Ключевые слова: Ральф Эллисон, «Невидимка», холодная война, афроамериканское левое движение, критика, рецепция, педагогика

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“Not Ultimately a Negro Novel: ”*Invisible Man*’s Unprecedented Praise

The publication of *Invisible Man* (1952) ushered in a new era of African American literature. Soon after it was released, critics began to argue that no novel by a Negro had ever been published like it. Orville Prescott of *The New York Times* argued that “*Invisible Man* is the most impressive work of fiction by an American Negro which I have ever read.”¹ The novel, according to Prescott, was distinct from other Negro writers because Ellison was “a finished novelist” who used “words with great skill and who writes with poetic intensity and immense narrative.”² Saul Bellow seconded the sentiment, stating that Ellison’s novel was an “exceedingly rare” mature modern novel distinct from other Negro novelists who all “go at their problems” in a particularly narrow way.³ Ellison, by contrast, found a “significant kind of independence in the writing,” because he has “not adopted a minority tone” and was thus able to “establish a true middle-of-consciousness for everyone.”⁴ R.W.B. Lewis went the furthest of all, perhaps, in his claim. He wrote that *Invisible Man* was “the most impressive work of fiction in a number of years,” and praised it for, among many things, not being “ultimately a ‘Negro novel.’”⁵ William Barrett went just as far in *American Mercury*: The publication of *Invisible Man* was “the first considerable step forward in Negro literature.”⁶

The reception history of *Invisible Man* has had, debatably, more impact on the history of post-World War II African American literature than any other book in American history. By close reading the reviews cited above, one notices quickly what assumptions the literary mainstream had about Negro literature pre-Ellison. For one, they were not “finished,” or polished, like Ellison. Secondly, they had no “poetic intensity,” and could not tell a good story like Ellison (no “immense narrative” skills).

¹ Prescott, Orville. “A Review of *Invisible Man*.” In *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*, ed. by Robert Butler. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000: 19.

² Ibid.

³ Bellow, Saul. “Man Underground.” In *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*: 28.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lewis, R.W.B. “Eccentric Pilgrimage.” In *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*: 39.

⁶ Barrett, William. “Black and Blue: A Negro Celine.” In *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*: 23.

Also, all Negro writers wrote in the same way and could not relate their life experiences to other ethnicities.⁷ Due to all these rarities, Ellison's *Invisible Man* was not "ultimately a Negro novel." It was too good to be a "Negro novel" to the literary mainstream. Or, if it was a "Negro novel," it was something all together different: "the first considerable step forward in Negro literature." All following Negro writers who wanted to reach the same heights as Ellison would have to learn from him if they were to get to respect from the literary establishment. Such criticism is obviously rife with major deleterious assumptions. What is one to make of James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Richard Wright, to name a few? To view African American literature that teleologically is ripe with flaws, yet those initial reviews still have enormous influence on how *Invisible Man*, within the African American and American literary canon, is taught and discussed today.⁸ To ask a question implicitly raised by R.W.B. Lewis, what is a Negro novel, and what makes a Negro novel inherently, it seems, worse than what Ellison produced in some critics' minds?⁹ In order to untangle

⁷ Saul Bellow continued in *Commentary* that Ellison found a language that spoke for everyone, not just minority American Negroes. *Invisible Man* is not a "Harlem matter; it is *the matter*, German, French, Russian, American, universal, a matter very little understood". He later writes, "Most Americans thus are Invisible" [Bellow, Saul. "Man Underground": 28, 29].

⁸ The group of renowned scholars who published *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2004) — the most important singular text on the history of African American literature — paints a similarly limiting picture of pre-Ellison African American literature. It does so by pitting Richard Wright's against Ralph Ellison's, portraying it as inferior. Though the anthology acknowledges Wright's fusion of "the aesthetics of naturalism with the reportorial practices of journalism and urban sociology to create Bigger Thomas," they quickly recant on the praise by concluding that the work of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* "further liberated" African American literature from the "limited and aesthetically confining ... straitjacket of naturalism and the protest narrative" that Wright produced." This teleological view of African American literature is very faulty, and erases the complexity of the many writers that came before *Invisible Man*. See: "Realism, Naturalism, Modernism, 1940–1960." In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2004: 1358–1360.

⁹ It is very problematic to call *Invisible Man* "not a Negro novel" because the novel is written by a Negro, about a Negro protagonist, and race is central to the conflict of the plot at every twist and turn. Furthermore, the novel is so obviously indebted to fiction written by Negroes that came before, the three most obvious being James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927), Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942). We also know that Ellison was friends with Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and many others. As Lawrence Jackson writes in his biography of Ralph Ellison, he was actively involved in "the socialist Left of the 1930s and 1940s, the black radical rights movement of the same period," and

these questions and reframe the history of African American literature in a more fluid and fair manner, I will “re-historicize” *Invisible Man* and offer a new pedagogical framing for teaching the classic text.

It was not only mainstream white literary critics who sought to separate *Invisible Man* from Negro literature produced before it. Esteemed African American literary critics, such as James Baldwin and Alaine Locke told the same story. In *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), James Baldwin writes that “Mr. Ellison, by the way, is the first Negro novelist I have ever read to utilize in language, and brilliantly, some of the ambiguity and irony of Negro life.”¹⁰ Locke, a few years earlier, in a review of all Negro literature produced in 1952, wrote that, “both in style and conception,” Ellison reached “a new height of literary achievement.”¹¹ Locke goes on to praise the book for being aesthetically integrated with the best of “European realism in that it is so three-dimensional.”¹² However, a few black literary critics, as well as other leftists, were quite critical of the book. To be more specific, they were

laments that “little has been done with the important friendships he shared with Richard Wright and Langston Hughes, or in fact, with the existence of an entire fraternal cadre of important black leftist writers and critics who lived in or frequented New York” that Ellison knew [See: Jackson, Lawrence. *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*. New York: Wiley, 2002: x]. To say that *Invisible Man* is not ultimately a “Negro novel” seems to just be saying that, in Lewis’s opinion, the book is a worthwhile read for all people whereas other books by Negroes have not been. Numerous scholars have hinted at this conclusion: Jacqueline Covo’s *The Blinking Eye: Ralph Waldo Ellison and His American, French, German, and Italian Critics, 1952–1971* (1974) argues that reviews of *Invisible Man* had (and still have) a tendency to praise the aesthetics of the novel, while failing to engage with the seriousness and immensity of the racial conflict wrapped up within the aesthetics [See: Covo, Jacqueline. *The Blinking Eye: Ralph Ellison and His American, French, German, and Italian Critics, 1952–1971*. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1974]. They only praise the novel for its distinction of being more sophisticated, and being more aesthetically integrated with global classics than other Negro literature before it [Hill, Michael D.; Hill, Lena. M. *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Reference Guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008: 137–138]. This observation by Covo still applies in the 21st century, where the novel is still discussed, taught, and even praised without talking about race. In the documentary, *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey* (2002) both R.W.B. Lewis and Shelby Steele give their summaries of the book in a de-racialized manner, which confirms why Houston Baker called *Invisible Man* a “colorblind, literarily-allusive prison house of language” [See: Hill, Michael D.; Hill, Lena. M. *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man*: 136].

¹⁰ Baldwin, James A. “Autobiographical Notes.” In Baldwin, James A. *Collected Essays*. New York: Library of America, 1998: 9.

¹¹ Locke, Alaine. “From *Native Son* to *Invisible Man*: A Review of the Literature of the Negro for 1952.” In *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*: 41.

¹² Ibid.: 42.

implicitly critical of the unprecedented success the book garnered. Behind their criticism is a deeper question of the terms a Negro novelist must agree to in order to win the National Book Award and accrue such literary capital in the mainstream? And what does that say about the overall freedom of Negroes in America? In a June 1952 review in *Masses and Mainstream*, Lloyd Brown writes that Ellison's message of anti-Communism "conforms exactly to the formula for literary success in today's market."¹³ He continues, scathingly, arguing that Ellison is bitterly alienated from "the Negro people," and has a "hatred and contempt of the Negro working masses." The review ends by calling Ellison a traitor to the race.¹⁴ In the same month, John Oliver Killens wrote similarly in *Freedom*, calling the book "a vicious distortion of Negro life."¹⁵ He accuses Ellison, like Brown did, of "following a publisher's dream recipe of sex, violence, sadism, red-baiting, Uncle Toms, Negro perverts, and African American traitors, concluding that the novel was a 'modernized "surrealist" anti-Negro stereotype."¹⁶ To prove his point even further, Killens wrote: "the Negro people need Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* like we need a hole in the head or a stab in the back."¹⁷

Despite such pushback from black leftists and nationalists, *Invisible Man* was and is unambiguously one of the most critically acclaimed novels in American literary history. In a 1965 *New York Herald Tribune's* "Book Week Poll," voted upon by a "poll of prominent authors, critics, and editors," *Invisible Man* was judged the "'most distinguished single work' published after 1945."¹⁸ Seven years later Penn State professors John K. Crane and Daniel Walden conducted a similar survey, and "the nation's leading critics still place[d] *Invisible Man* at the head of the list of two dozen American novels (1945–1972) 'most likely to endure.'"¹⁹ Michael Hill and Lena Hill rightly argue that Ellison's own collection of essays set the template for further study on the novel, and "no fewer than four essay collections" on *Invisible Man* were produced by scholars "within a scant three-year span"²⁰

¹³ Brown, Lloyd. "The Deep Pit." In *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*: 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*: 32-33.

¹⁵ Cited in Bell, Bernard W. *The Contemporary African American Novel: Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches*. Amherst, MA, 2004: 142.

¹⁶ Cited in Gilyard, Keith. *John Oliver Killens: A Life of Black Literary Activism*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2010: 104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Carson, David. "Ralph Ellison: Twenty Years After." *Studies in American Fiction* I: 1 (Spring 1939): 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Hill, Michael D.; Hill, Lena M. *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*: 143.

after the publication of *Shadow and Act*. All of this resulted in “the firm canonization of *Invisible Man*.”²¹

Nonetheless, future African American writers looked elsewhere for models of black writers. In the 1960s the Black Arts Movement argued, in the words of Larry Neal, they were “radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community.”²² Neal and others urged black artists to “define the world in their own terms,” and re-evaluate “western aesthetics, the traditional role of the writer, and the social function of art.”²³ Contrary to Ellison’s literary politics, which consistently placed Negro history as an integral part of Western modernity, praised Euro-American writers that came before him, and downplayed the social function of art, the Black Arts Movement found it “impossible to construct anything meaningful within” the “decaying structure”²⁴ of Western literary standards. It is no coincidence then, in the January 1968 issue of *Negro Digest* issue entitled “A Survey: Black Writers Speak out On Literary Lions and Values,” that Richard Wright was voted, by far, their most important black writer. Langston Hughes came in second, and the more conservative Ellison came in at a distant third. On the cover of that January 1968 issue is a big picture of Richard Wright, subtitled, “Richard Wright: ‘The Leading Lion.’” The literary mainstream may have worshipped Ellison, but young black writers were looking elsewhere for inspiration.²⁵

²¹ Ibid.

²² Cited in “The Black Arts Movement.” In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*: 2039.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Along with Larry Neal, Amiri Baraka has an interesting take on why Richard Wright meant so much to African American writers in the late 1960s, and why Ralph Ellison rubbed so many African American writers the wrong way. Baraka says of Wright: “It was Wright who was one of the people who made me conscious of the need to struggle, you understand what I mean? Even though later, I come up and say, ‘I don’t agree with that. I don’t agree with that.’ Still, in the sense of him describing and analyzing the whole existence of black people as an oppressed nation. That’s priceless” [See: *Richard Wright: Black Boy*, dir. Madison Davis Lacy et al. [Film] California Newsreel, 1995]. Baraka says of Ellison: “Ellison was a very skillful craftsman. Now, don’t let anybody tell you I thought he was a sloppy writer or he was like unskilled, but the most dangerous thing in the world is a very skilled artist with very backward ideas” [See: *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*, dir. Elsie Robertson and Avon Kirkland. [Film], 2002).

There is also the famous story, of course, of Ralph Ellison’s time at Grinnell College in October of 1967. He, alongside many other cultural icons, such as Willie Morris and Martin Luther King, Jr. were award honorary degrees. Ellison took part in a panel while there, entitled “Urban Culture for the Negro.” Willie Morris recalls how “hard [the

I. Ellison's Postwar Conservative Makeover

Ralph Ellison's ascended into the upper echelon of American literary prestige by an exceptional amount of talent, but also – and more importantly – a strategic conservative makeover in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As Arnold Rampersad writes in his biography of Ellison:

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.²⁶

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, Ellison was a fellow traveler actively involved in black leftist politics, publishing in journals like *New Masses*. However, in latter half of the 1940s, he became staunchly anti-communist in the 1940s. Barbara Foley's book *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (2010) exposes this reality more than any other scholar up to date. She looks deeply into the numerous drafts of *Invisible Man*, highlighting the drastic changes from the novel's early, more radical 1945 draft to its final publication in 1952. Her close readings of the changes in plot, style, technique and political message enable future scholars to realize just how much Ellison was once immersed in that Black Left that he later downplayed and criticized so harshly upon and after *Invisible Man's* publication. In Arnold Rampersad's words, Foley's book "fills perhaps the biggest gap in our critical and biographical understanding of Ralph Ellison"²⁷

students] were on Ellison." The day after the panel, at a party, a "young black man in his mid-twenties in a black leather jacket and a black beret" busted into the party. This young man, along with another black youngster, got into an intense argument with Ellison and the "black jacketed man" told Ralph: "You're an Uncle Tom, man. You're a sell-out. You're a disgrace to your race." Ellison, after trying to compose himself, eventually "broke down in tears," responding: "I'm not a Tom, I'm not a Tom" [See: Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007: 439]. This story is symbolic of how many blacks, or any one rooted in radical leftist tradition, have viewed *Invisible Man* and the legacy of Ralph Ellison.

²⁶ Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*: 157.

²⁷ Ramsey, Joseph C. "Invisible Tragedies, Invisible Possibilities: Or, Re-Reading What's Left of a Great American (Anticommunist) Novel on Barbara Foley's *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*." *Works & Days* XXX: 1/2 (2012): 3.

by showing that Ellison was, for quite some time, committed to a Marxist ideology and writing *Invisible Man* as a pro-Communist book. However, as the Cold War heightened²⁸, he wrestled down his political beliefs to give us what we have in the 1952 Random House publication.

Though Ellison's acceptance by the literary mainstream was surely out of his control, he did everything he could to secure his position atop the American literary canon, even if it meant separating himself from other African American writers who mentored him earlier in his career. The publication of *Shadow and Act* (1964), Ellison's collection of essays — ostensibly a hodgepodge of autobiography and cultural and literary commentary housed within in his integrationist approach to how to view Negro culture in general—also served a second purpose: how to read *Invisible Man*. In “The World and the Jug,” he separates himself from Hughes, Wright, and other “Negro relatives,” and directs readers to his ancestral lineage of “Eliot, Pound, Gertrude Stein and Hemingway.”²⁹ In “The Art of Fiction,” he separates himself from naturalist writers who “stick to case histories and sociology.”³⁰ Ellison, on the other hand, was more concerned “with ritual understructure.”³¹ Therefore, earlier in the interview, he praises Picasso, calling him “the greatest wrestler with forms and techniques.”³² Just like in “The World and the Jug,” he reminds his audience just how much he studied “Joyce, Dostoevsky, Stein, and Hemingway.”³³ He does not once mention the obvious explicit impact the black literary circle in Harlem that he was

²⁸ Emory Professor Mary Dudziak has studied the ways in which the Cold War impacted the politics of the Civil Rights movement. Her book, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, argued that because any news of American racism “brought to the surface international anxiety” about the United States ability to be “the leader of free world,” Cold War containment culture overtook all American political discourse as it sought to create an optimistic image of an anti-communist democratic state that, through slow and peaceful progress, was ridding itself of the Negro problem. The U.S. adopted this specific narrative in order to improve its foreign relations with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, yet this greatly limited the range of acceptable civic protest. [Dudziak, Mary. *Cold War Civil Rights*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000: 3, 13]. Many African American writers, as I will note later, stood outside of that range and unjustly suffered for it. Ralph Ellison, on the other hand, fell right within it.

²⁹ Ellison, Ralph. “The World and the Jug.” In *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan. New York: Random House, 2003: 184.

³⁰ Ellison, Ralph. “The Art of Fiction.” In *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*: 222.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.: 213.

³³ Ibid.: 211.

intimately involved with had on him as an aspiring writer in the 1930s and early 1940s, but he is able to recall how much of an impact the forms of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Gogol's *The Overcoat*, French literature as a whole (Andre Malraux in particular [i.e., *Man's Fate*]), *Don Quixote*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, Francisco Goya, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, Thomas Mann, and *The Confidence Man* by Herman Melville had on him.³⁴

As Michael Nowlin has argued, Ellison, along with James Baldwin, self-consciously separated themselves from African American writers who had come before them in a strategic move to the align with Cold War containment culture:

Ellison and Baldwin revealed their affiliation with the new liberalism of the early Cold War era in their highly self-conscious efforts to write a more distinguished African American novel than had ever been written before. This entailed not merely disparaging previous efforts of this kind, as in their differently toned critiques of *Native Son*. They wrote, despite their early friendships with Langston Hughes (and Ellison's marriage to Fanny McConnell, a former secretary to James Weldon Johnson), as though earlier African American literature was largely forgettable. Forgettable precisely because it was not informed by the same high artistic purpose as that select twentieth-century literature being dignified and canonized in the 1940s and 1950s, largely inside but also outside the academy, under the rubric "modernism."³⁵

The mission for current scholars, then, is to not reproduce the same narrative that Ellison and numerous others critics have told about the history of African American literature concerning "ancestors" and "relatives."

³⁴ This is very reminiscent of Ellison's point about "ancestors," which he argues you can choose, versus "relatives," which he argues you cannot choose. Ellison prefers his ancestors, Euro-American modernist writers, over his relatives, which are other black writers of his generation like Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. This analogy is made in "The World and the Jug."

³⁵ Nowlin, Michael. "Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and the Liberal Imagination." *Arizona Quarterly* LX:2 (Summer 2004): 123.

II. New Pedagogical Methods: Ellison's "Relatives," and Reviving the Invisible Black Left

In order to properly contextualize *Invisible Man*, it must be taught alongside the works by other Negroes it is clearly indebted to, despite the fact that Ellison attempted to distance himself from those novelists. Two works that it must be placed alongside, among others, is James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground." Ellison's debts to Johnson are clear. Both narrators are reflective anonymous black men, and they both frame their stories the same way: as meticulously curated, highly symbolic vignettes. Their adventures and travels take on a picaresque form, and both attempt to write under the influence of blues-jazz musical traditions. Ellison's debt to "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1942) is even more evident. The protagonist, Fred Daniels, is in trouble with the law — wrongly accused of murdering a white woman — and running from the police. In order to escape their grasp, he sneaks his way into the underground sewers, just like the narrator in *Invisible Man*. While underground, he makes a home in the underground cave. He uses invisibility to his advantage and breaks laws and watches others get punished for it. The invisible man, of course, has a similar story: he is able to steal electricity from an all-white building and secretly make his home in their basement.³⁶ Though Ellison clearly did try to separate himself from other African American writers before him, as Michael Nowlin rightly argues in his scholarship, it must also be noted just how much he was influenced by African American writers who came before him as well in order to correct exaggerated assertions of its anomalous standing with African American literary history.

On the other hand, it is also important to highlight just how different Ellison's political line of thought was to many other Negro novelists of his time. The easiest way to contextualize this would be to read Lloyd Brown two-part piece in *Masses and Mainstream* in 1951.³⁷ Brown is the same writer

³⁶ There are other points worth mentioning also, such as the church scene. In "The Man Who Lived Underground," Fred Daniels visits a church and witnesses part of an esoteric sermon, and Ellison uses the exact same plot point in the "Prologue" in *Invisible Man*.

³⁷ See: Brown, Lloyd. "Which Way for the Negro Writer?" *Masses and Mainstream* IV: 3 (March 1, 1951): 53-63; Idem. "Which Way for the Negro Writer? II" *Masses and Mainstream* IV: 4 (April 1, 1951): 50-60.

who wrote the contemptuous review of *Invisible Man* just a year later, arguing that Ellison betrayed his race for literary success by writing a novel that would appeal to a more conservative, anticommunist, and white American literary market. As Brown wrote this piece in 1951, though Ellison is not mentioned, he is surely looming large in the back of his mind. In this essay, he sets up a scenario in which Negro writers can take two roads. Some have decided to *turn away* from a literature of protest and a love for black people, and *turned towards* Eurocentric notions of universalism that does not allow for black writers to unapologetically write about the Negro experience in America. Brown encourages writers to “resist conservative attempts to mainstream black writing and eliminate racial protest” after World War II.³⁸ After reading this two-part essay, one could then read his review of *Invisible Man*, or John Oliver Killens’s, and understand where such vitriol came from, and decide how much — if any, or if all of it — was justified. This would expand student’s imagination as they read the text and not merely reproduce the same praise for *Invisible Man* without having to think through alternative — and often marginalized — views on the classic novel.

Ralph Ellison (and James Baldwin) were not the only African American writer producing scintillating work in the 1950s. As of now, they seem to be the main two who are recognized by academy who are recognized by the academy as producing work worthy of study during that time. This reality is mainly due to political, not artistic, reasons. To be more specific, what political line a novel followed seemed to be a primary — if not *the primary* — reason an African American novelist received literary praise. In order to undo this reality, *Invisible Man* should be placed alongside many other lesser known writers to paint a fuller picture of the milieu that produced Ellison, the same milieu he eventually distanced himself from. Recent scholarship by Lawrence Jackson and Mary Helen Washington has made incredible strides to revive this milieu and acknowledge their accomplishments. In Jackson’s 2002 biography of Ellison, he argues that Ellison became the “appropriate symbol for the intellectual promise of liberal democracy and peacetime American freedom,”³⁹ yet at that same time, black critics with more radical ideas questioned the terms black writers had to work within to be accepted. Many of those writers, such as John Oliver Killens and Lloyd Brown, who have yet to receive substantial amount of academic consideration, were a

³⁸ Washington, Mary. *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014: 35.

³⁹ Jackson, Lawrence. *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*: vii.

part of what Jackson calls “Ellison’s active involvement in the socialist Left of the 1930s and 1940s, the black radical movement of the same period.”⁴⁰ In Lawrence Jackson’s next book, *The Indignant Generation*, he explores those involvements, and concludes that the “anguished artistic and political choices facing African American writers who embraced artistic naturalism in the 1930s,” found themselves dissatisfied with post World War II liberalism and had “even fewer places to go by the end of the 1950s.”⁴¹ Mary Helen Washington, furthering this scholarship, breaks down how the decisions they made cost them in the 1950s. Her book, *The African American and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (2014) is a groundbreaking work that resuscitates the careers of forgotten writers who urged other Negro writers to “resist conservative attempts to mainstream black writing and eliminate racial protest” after World War II.⁴² The five artists she focuses on are writers Lloyd Brown, Frank London Brown, Alice Childress, Gwendolyn Brooks, and visual artist Charles White. There are many others she could have chosen that still deserve to be written on and revived, such as William Gardner Smith and John Oliver Killens, to name two. Due to the work of Jackson, Washington, and others, the groundwork has been laid to build upon.

Invisible Man became and still is a standard of African American literature. It was a watershed moment in American literary history, and caused many to rethink just how rich black life could be portrayed on paper. As Clyde Taylor, Emeritus African American film professor at NYU, commented in a documentary on Ellison regarding his experience reading *Invisible Man* for the first time:

I had not believed that black fiction could be so wonderful... I had not thought the raw material existed in black life that could make literature this great, and that it could provide for black literature to reach that height,

⁴⁰ Ibid.: XV.

Black leftists Lloyd Brown and John Oliver Killens, for example, wrote scathing reviews in which they accused Ellison of hating and bitterly alienating himself from “the Negro people.” Brown accused him of traitorously conforming to “the formula for literary success in today’s market” [Brown, L. “The Deep Pit: Review of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison.” *Masses and Mainstream* (June 1952)], Killens felt that it created “a vicious distortion of Negro life” [Killens, O. “*Invisible Man*.” *Freedom* (7 June 1952)].

⁴¹ Ibid.: 13.

⁴² Lloyd Brown argues for this in “Which Way for the Negro Writer?” [*Masses and Mainstream* (March 1951)], qtd. in Washington, Mary. *The Other Blacklist...: 35*.

and he showed us that you can do with black life what Homer did with Greek life, what Joyce did with Irish life.⁴³

Taylor's experience is shared by many. For that reason, *Invisible Man* clearly deserves the praise it has accrued over the years. However, Taylor's experience is not shared by all, and to ignore that is to misrepresent — and completely dismiss — other African Americans who wrote before and during Ellison's time. Yes, the book is “wonderful” because it tells the frames African American life in the same way Homer and Joyce do for their cultures. The deeper question to ask, however, is can books still be “wonderful” if they do not seek to frame stories in the same way as Homer and Joyce? That is the question that Lloyd Brown asks in the 1950s in *Masses and Mainstream*, and the same question Larry Neal asks in the “The Black Arts Movement.” It is the same question current scholars should be asking as they read *Invisible Man* today in order to not reproduce the same faulty literary assumptions and blind spots as before.

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⁴³ See: *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*.

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