

Université de Montréal

Knowledge of Self: Identity Negotiation and Invisible Man

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Ce mémoire intitulé :  
Knowledge of Self: Identity Negotiation and Invisible Man

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*Résumé de synthèse*

Ce mémoire discute la manière dont l'œuvre de Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, a énoncé un nouveau discours sur l'identité et la diasporique noire de l'Amérique du Nord. Par évocation de l'histoire, la psychologie, la sociologie, la mythologie, le folklore et la dynamique de pouvoir, Ellison présente la complexité et la diversité actuelles parmi le peuple noir et simultanément déconstruit les notions mythiques et monogénéologiques de la 'race'. Ce mémoire suggère que le discours de Ellison est toujours pertinent et important dans les discussions contemporaines de la 'race', la culture, et l'identité.

Le sujet de l'identité individuelle et culturelle est toujours au cœur de plusieurs discussions politiques d'aujourd'hui. Jacques Derrida, Paul Gilroy, et Stuart Hall, théorise tous au sujet du dilemme de l'articulation d'une identité individuelle et culturelle dans la société moderne. Gilroy et Hall démontre la manière dont ce dilemme se complique davantage par les notions essentialistes et mythiques de la 'race'. Paul Gilroy suggère que la renonciation de la 'race' et le vocabulaire raciologique est la seule manière éthique d'adresser ce problème.

Par l'évocation des méthodologies tirées de plusieurs disciplines, l'histoire, la psychologie et la sociologie incluse, ce mémoire tient la position que la théorie de Gilroy est problématique, en questionnant la manière dont l'identité est construite et la façon dont le mythe de la 'race' s'implique dans cette construction.

En appuyant sur la théorie de l'essentialisme stratégique de Stuart Hall, ce mémoire tentera de questionner les manières dont la 'race' peut être manipulée d'une manière

stratégique pour articuler, surmonter et finalement se débarrasser déhumanisant, permettant plus de liberté pour la négociation de l'identité parmi la diaspora Africaine en Amérique du Nord.

### **Mots Clés**

Ralph Ellison

Invisible Man

L'essentialisme stratégique

Identité

Identité culturelle

Diaspora noire américaine

*Abstract*



This essay demonstrates the way in which Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* created a new discourse by which to articulate 'black' identity in North America. Through the careful recollection of history, psychology, sociology, mythology, and folkloric traditions, Ellison demonstrates the complexity within 'blackness', thus deconstructing mythic notions of a monogeneological, 'essential' racial identity. This thesis will suggest that the discourse created by Ellison is still relevant in today's discussions on race and identity.

The subject of individual and cultural identity is at the heart of many contemporary debates. Theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, all attempt to evoke and discuss the dilemma of the articulation of identity within modern day society. Gilroy and Hall demonstrate how this articulation is further complicated through the essentialist, mythic, and out-dated trope of race. Paul Gilroy suggests that the only ethical, effective way to transcend the boundaries of race (and to resume political life I have to mention something about the articulation of identity), is through a complete renunciation of the concept, more specifically through the rejection of all language that draws upon notions of race, language he refers to as raciology. By drawing on the disciplines of psychology, sociology, and history, this thesis will attempt to question Gilroy's theory, by asking how identities, both cultural and individual, are constructed, and how the myth of 'race' implicates in this construction.

Drawing on Hall's theory of strategic essentialism, this essay will attempt to question the way in which 'race' can be used strategically in order to articulate, transcend, and finally do away with the dehumanising concept, thus allowing for greater freedom in the negotiation of identity within the North American African diaspora.

## **Key Words**

Ralph Ellison

Invisible Man

Strategic essentialism

Identity

Cultural identity

African diaspora

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*Preface*

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery  
None but ourselves can free our minds  
Redemption Song  
Bob Marley

When I developed depressive tendencies at the age of 13, both my doctors and my parents were quite confused. At first, the psychiatric team looked to my parents - they certainly were neglecting me. After all, both my parents worked full time, which somehow, in the psychiatric world, translated to child neglect. Soon, however, they realised that this was not the case; although both my parents pursued careers, they were attentive and devoted to my sister and me. The following conclusion was that certainly I had a chemical imbalance; my depressed state of mind was clearly a question of science as opposed to familial environment. So at the age of 16, I found myself regularly taking anti-depressants. The only problem, however, was that the drugs were doing nothing to improve my behaviour. I still found myself in and out of hospitals, and if anything, the suicide attempts that brought me there were increasing in frequency as I grew older. Finally when I was 20 years old, not knowing what to do, medical doctors placed me on sedatives. No one could understand why I, Roxane Gunning, had developed depressive tendencies. In theory, there was no obvious reason for my condition. I was born into a middle class family, in a quiet suburb in Québec, Canada. My parents were within a certain economic bracket, met a certain marital status, and played an active role in the lives of their children. I did well in school and had no obvious problems with social interaction. I was the picture of an average Canadian girl.

I was by birth a Canadian. It was true that my parents were immigrants; however this was not a strange phenomenon. Canada housed many immigrants; my childhood

friend's parents were immigrants as well. Both our parents had arrived in Canada in 1968, hers from Scotland, mine from Jamaica. My physical 'Jamaicanness', that is my brown skin and broad nose (although many Jamaicans have neither brown skin nor broad noses), was the only demarcation between my friend and me. This small detail was overlooked by my doctors and parents alike, and rightly so, for what could this slight physical distinction have to do with my depressive state? Perhaps, however, this physical distinction should have been considered when looking at the demographics of the suburban town in which I grew up. My family was one of three 'black' families in a town of some 25 000 inhabitants. How did a minority status in an isolated environment affect one's psychology? Another aspect professionals failed to take into consideration were all the messages that were being transmitted to me, through verbal and non-verbal communication. For example, in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade, a young boy in my class approached me and stated, 'You don't talk like a black person'. Oddly enough the same comment was made by several black girls when I was 16. I often asked myself during these years, if I were not a 'black' person, then what was I? In which manner did 'black' people speak? What did it mean to be 'black'? However, it was made clear to me by my peers, teachers, and the general community around me, that I was not quite Canadian either. Arriving at a CEGEP in Montréal, I was horrified when I was criticised for denying my 'roots', because I stayed close to my childhood friends. I, perhaps naively, wondered, how was I denying my 'roots' by associating with people with whom I grew up? What constituted roots if not one's personal experiences? What were my roots? These questions prompted me to make several trips to my 'homeland', Jamaica. Although there is no question of the

benefit of these trips, or of the pride I felt towards my Jamaican heritage, I soon came to realise the many ways in which I was not Jamaican.

Growing up I never thought of these comments as being about 'race'. The language of 'race' was never evoked in my household. My parents, of traditional middle class Jamaican upbringing, believed that in Canada personal merit, a good work ethic, and a positive attitude could release one from any form of discrimination, and that evoking the language of 'race' in the house would only be a hindrance. In addition to this, being the typical Canadian citizen, I did not think of 'race'. Canadians were not 'racist'; Canadians did not employ derogatory epithets. Canada did not have a history of institutionalised slavery, nor did we have an ugly past of systematic segregation and oppression. I believed the myth that 'race' was not part of the Canadian dialogue, nor something that tainted Canadian society. After all, Canada was one of the world's champions of human rights. Nevertheless, growing up in the suburbs, I was often, and am still, subjected to disturbing comments due to my physical appearance. During my childhood and adolescence, many things were assumed about my inner self or my identity, if you will, because of the way I looked outwardly. Depending on the observer, my skin is perceived to be dark, light, black, brown, and my hair is good, bad, kinky, curly, and sometimes, due to a blow drying technique, straight. I have grown accustomed to the questions, from people of all colours, as to the nature of my heritage. The simple answer that I am of Jamaican heritage rarely ever suffices because I am somehow not what people imagine a person of Jamaican heritage to look like.

My physical appearance, manner of speaking, and academic 'achievements' continue to be a subject of discussion. Despite my socio-economic background, and

general upbringing, I am still considered by many to be 'an exception', leaving me open to many impertinent comments concerning the 'black' community. However, what I have also realised is that I have to be careful what I say and how I say it, and to whom I say certain things, because although I am 'an exception', I am also perceived as an authority not only for Jamaicans, but for 'black' people in general.

For my entire life, my identity has been called into question, through inflections, tones, statements, contradictions and misconceptions, due not to my inner self, but rather to my outward appearance. When 'race' has not been explicitly evoked, it has often been clearly implied, in rather disturbing ways by both the 'black' and 'white' communities. In hindsight, it is clear that for half of my life I had been going through an identity 'crisis'. This 'crisis' concerning my identity was due in part to the way in which the myth of 'race' had insidiously worked its way into my psychology during the formative years of my life, shaping, or distorting rather, the way in which I perceived myself and the world around me. This, however, could never be articulated on my part because I did not have the language with which to articulate it. I could not speak of 'race' and therefore could not articulate the anger, frustration, and emotional pain I experienced growing up as a minority in Canada. As a result of this, I sank into a state of depression.



## ***Introduction***

“What did I do to be so black and blue?”

Louis Armstrong, *Black and Blue*

This quotation begins the story of Ralph Ellison’s masterpiece, Invisible Man, a novel which begins and ends in the Invisible Man’s underground hole. The allusion not only draws on the physical hole in which the narrator inhabits, but also to another hole: a metaphorical *cul-de-sac*, from which action is impossible and, as the narrator informs the reader in the prologue, hibernation in inaction is the only choice remaining for one in a situation such as his. Although the novel is far too dense to be reduced to one simple tenet, great emphasis is placed on the notion of identity. Throughout Invisible Man, the nameless protagonist vacillates amidst mythic identities -- identities created for him not only by the dominant hegemony but also by the subaltern collective to which he belongs. As a black man living in twentieth century America, he must understand his individuality as it has been pre-determined by societal myths and preconceptions concerning his race.

As demonstrated in the preface, in today’s world of immigration, globalization, historic revision, modern psychology, molecular biology, and mass communication, the notion of identity, be it cultural, ‘racial’, collective, or individual, is often called into question. How does the notion of ‘race’ complicate the negotiation of identity? Although the trope of ‘race’ has been disproved and de-constructed by molecular biology, the myth of ‘race’ still exists in modern society. Paul Gilroy, asks; “What does the long-lived trope ‘race’ mean in the age of molecular biology?” (48). To this it might be added, what does the trope ‘race’ mean in the age of modern psychology? How have cultural myths concerning ‘race’ affected, and continue to affect, modern notions of both collective and

individual identity? These questions are all evoked in Ellison's novel. The purpose of this thesis will be to demonstrate how Invisible Man created a new discourse for subsequent discussions of identity, and how this discourse is still poignant in today's debate on 'race', culture and identity. As Jonathan Arac, rightly contends:

“Ellison now, nearly a decade after his death and almost ninety years after his birth, is a figure of compelling actuality in American culture. [...] A strange functioning of the term *identity* arises as we reflect on *Invisible Man*, and this complication needs untangling for Ellison to be most useful in our times.” (198-204)

The purpose of this thesis will be to examine the issues of identity by contextualising the notion within the critical views presented by Jacques Derrida, Jonathan Arac, Paul Gilroy, Hortense Spillers, Cathy Caruth, Kai Erickson, Miriam Hirsh, and Stuart Hall. A reflection of Ellison's text will be evoked suggesting that Ellison set a new and vital discursive for the modern contemplation of identity.

The first chapter will contextualise current debates on 'race', culture and identity through a detailed exploration of Jacques Derrida's recent work on cultural identity, L'Autre Cap. The general discussion put forth by Derrida will then be situated within the context of modern political debates concerning 'race', through the presentation of recent scholarly works by Jonathan Arac, Paul Gilroy and Hortense Spillers. An emphasis will be placed on how each theorist attempts to understand the complex relationship between history, psychology, sociology, and the politics of race and identity.

The above-mentioned theorists will then be re-evaluated, in the second chapter, through the psychoanalytical theories of Cathy Caruth, Kai Erickson, and Miriam Hirsh, in order to gain a better understanding of how historical events continue to affect the psychology of certain social groups. The various psychological and identity theories will

then be contextualised within the history of slavery and of the institutionalised practice of segregation in the United States. This last step will be taken in order to evaluate the proposed theories, while considering Derrida's recent contribution to the thesis of identity politics.

The third chapter will review Stuart Hall's recent contributions to the contemporary issue of black identity, mainly with regard to his theory of strategic essentialism. This theory will then be demonstrated by exploring the ways in which Richard Wright's novel, Native Son, significantly contributed to modern articulations of 'race', culture, and identity.

The fourth chapter will present Ralph Ellison's novel, Invisible Man, more specifically the ways in which the novel sets forth a new discourse in black American literature by articulating the complex relationship between, history, myth, psychology, power, and 'race' and their effect on both cultural and individual identity.

***Chapter 1***

In order to situate the current discussion on 'black' identity in North America, it is imperative to look at the modern discourse of cultural and individual identity in general. In his essay L'autre cap, French theorist, Jacques Derrida, raises interesting and poignant questions concerning national, collective and individual identity. Derrida begins by stating:

Quelque chose d'unique est en cours en Europe, dans ce qui s'appelle encore l'Europe même si on ne sait plus très bien *ce qui* s'appelle ainsi. A quel concept, en effet, à quel individu réel, à quelle entité singulière assigner ce nom aujourd'hui? Qui en dessinera les frontières?...Expérience angoissée de l'imminence, traversée de deux certitudes contradictoires : le très vieux sujet de l'identité culturelle en général (avant la guerre on aurait peut-être parlé de l'identité « spirituelle »), le très vieux sujet de l'identité européenne a certes l'antiquité vénérable d'un thème épuisé. Mais ce « sujet » garde peut-être encore un corps vierge. Son nom masquerait-il pas quelque chose qui n'a pas encore de visage? Nous nous demandons dans l'espoir, la crainte et le tremblement à quoi va ressembler ce visage. Ressemblera-t-il encore? Et à celui de quelque *persona* que nous croyons connaître, Europe? Et si la non-ressemblance avait les traits de l'avenir, échappera-t-elle à la monstruosité? (12)

Derrida's interrogations surrounding contemporary European identity is an excellent place to begin the current discussion. Derrida's first question asks, to which concept, to which authentic individual, to which singular entity, do we assign the name 'European' today? Who will draw the boundaries of Europeanness? Although addressing European cultural identity, these two questions can be also applied to the notion of 'blackness' in North America. What does it mean to be 'black'? As noted earlier, in this age of immigration and globalization, there is significant cultural, economic, and ethnic difference within North American 'blackness'. The only unifying element is the outdated trope of 'race'. How does the trope of 'race' affect the self and general perception of the 'black' North American subject? More importantly, how does this perception affect one's

identity? Finally, who will draw the boundaries? In other words, who will articulate, enunciate and define modern 'blackness'?

However, what follows is Derrida's most interesting point concerning this discussion. Although the subject is ancient, 'European' identity remains faceless, undefined; so, how will this new identity take shape? Does the very idea of an unveiling of this new and previously undefined face create a mood of fear, hope and general anxiety? Similarly, what does modern 'blackness' look like? If there is difference within 'blackness', what happens to old, consoling notions of a monolithic 'race' based on deterministic notions of a fictional binary?

As Derrida states, the subject of cultural identity is old and exhausted. The very title evokes anxiety and fear, because it recalls memories of the worst acts of violence and hatred the world has seen to date, memories such as xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, religious and nationalist fanaticism, all of which end up mixing and borrowing one from the other. It appears that, concerning 'cultural identity', both Europeans and North Americans have experienced all its liberating as well as binding elements.

« L'espoir, la crainte, et le tremblement sont à la mesure des signes qui nous arrivent de partout en Europe où, justement au titre de l'identité culturelle ou non, les pire violences, celles que nous reconnaissons trop sans les avoir encore pensées, les crimes de la xénophobie, du racisme, de l'antisémitisme, du fanatisme religieux ou nationaliste, désormais, se déchaînent, se mêlent, se mêlent entre eux, mais se mêlent aussi, il n'y a rien de fortuit à cela, aux souffles, à la respiration, à l' « esprit » même de la promesse. (13)

Derrida states that essential, monogeneological theories of collective and cultural identities have always been and will always be historical mythology. Cultural identity is something that is constantly changing and evolving. According to Derrida, Europeans, and here, I might add black North Americans, are younger than ever, because we are at

the dawn of new era, where the old ideologies that founded Europe or the Americas no longer exist. However, Europeans and black North Americans are a young people who wake up to this dawning, old and exhausted precisely because of the impossible *devoir*, or duty, with which our past has left us. It would seem that the discourses and counter-discourses concerning identity which have preceded us have all evoked culturally centric ideologies (Derrida 32). It is Derrida's notion of cultural *devoir* that is the most pertinent to our debate. If we have a 'devoir' to avoid old discourses on culture, which are always to some degree 'central' or 'centric', how are we to articulate anything about our culture, and as Derrida concludes, our identity? Culture and identity are, for Derrida, inextricably linked. Derrida believes that this cultural 'devoir' places one in a state of inertia, or what he refers to as a 'double bind', because the 'devoir' requires one to act simultaneously on contradicting issues.

Cette responsabilité, ce devoir capital, comment l'assumer? Comment répondre? Et surtout comment assumer ici une responsabilité qui s'annonce comme contradictoire puisqu'elle nous inscrit d'entrée de jeu dans une sorte d'obligation nécessairement double, de *double bind*? L'injonction nous divise en effet, elle nous met toujours en faute ou en défaut car elle dédouble le *il faut*: il faut se faire les gardiens d'une idée de l'Europe, d'une différence de l'Europe *mais* d'une Europe qui consiste précisément à ne pas se fermer sur sa propre identité et à s'avancer exemplairement vers ce qui n'est pas elle vers l'autre cap ou le cap de l'autre, voire, et c'est peut-être tout autre chose, l'autre *du* cap qui serait l'au-delà de cette tradition moderne, une autre structure de bord, un autre rivage.  
(Derrida 32-33)

How is 'blackness' in North America to be represented if we are to, at the same time, uncover, remember, preserve and re-create, the history of Colonialism and slavery, understand the differences within 'blackness', without trapping ourselves in the language of 'race' and the discourse of essentialism, and all the while moving forward in an exemplary manner towards a new discursive concerning identity? Do we repeat, break with, or continue to oppose, the ways in which we have previously addressed 'race' and



culture? In modern contemplations of black North American culture and identity, we are trapped in this double-bind of duty. Similar to Invisible Man, our history has left us in a hole, in a state of hibernation. However, as Invisible Man concludes, he must act; this is another aspect of the impossible *devoir*. One must act, because action is the duty of a responsible individual. As Derrida concludes, modern self-affirmation on a 'national' level, continues to be a *philosophème* (45). A new discursive should be attempted in order to move forward. The idea of moving forward, for Derrida, is a key to our current *philosophème*;

S'avancer, certes, c'est se présenter, s'introduire, se montrer, donc s'identifier et se nommer. (Derrida 48-50)

To move forward or advance, one must present, introduce and reveal oneself. In other words, one must identify, and most importantly, name oneself. The face must be defined; one must create one's visibility.

The main premise for Derrida's work is that, in order to create a new discursive in modern discussion on cultural identities, one must look to *l'autre cap* or another, different, however not opposite, capital. Let us now review the current debates concerning modern black North American culture and identity.

I begin by asking the question; how can identity be defined? Is one's identity something that is congenitally unique or is identity a montage of past and present social experiences? Theorist Jonathan Arac provides a stimulating historical account of identity by recalling earlier theories on identity, presented by Kenneth Burke, Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, to name a few. An excellent place to begin is with Arac's contemporary understanding of the term *identity*:

[...] it may be helpful to reflect on some of these fault lines in the meaning and

usage of the term *identity*. In our current usage, the term seems wholly ambivalent along the axis of necessity and freedom: The term is used to name both what you can't help being and also what you choose to become. No doubt this saturation of the spectrum is one cause for the term's appeal. Its fundamental sense is *sameness*, but it is nowadays understood within a discourse of difference. (204)

The very term *identity* is itself paradoxical, recalling the double-bind evoked earlier by Derrida. Arac begins his unravelling of *identity* by providing a historical account of the term. Arac acknowledges the previous usage of the term in other languages, and also in disciplines other than sociology and literature. However, he places great emphasis on the role played by Burke's interpretation. Arac cites Burke as being the first English language critic to discuss the term identity.

I do not think it is widely registered in our contemporary critical awareness that Burke was, to the best of my knowledge, the first English-language critic to make extended, crucial use of the term *identity* and *identification*. He understood these terms as being drawn from the repertory of psychoanalysis, and he used them both for matters of textual rhetorical analysis and for thinking larger social questions [...] (203)

Arac also briefly makes reference to the term as used by Laplanche, Pontalis and David Potter, but places greater emphasis on the inter-disciplinary use of the term presented by scholar; Erick Erickson.

Erickson...mobilized the term *identity* to bring together culture and personality in his founding interdisciplinary zone known as psycho-history...Erickson placed his project in relation to three levels: the body, the self, and society, and therefore in relation to 'three different scientific disciplines – biology, psychology and the social sciences.[...] For Erickson claimed that 'psychological identity develops out of a gradual integration of all identifications'...[H]ere, if anywhere, the whole has a different character from the sum of its parts. And for those parts, in a way wholly familiar in our discourse but the OED suggests, quite new at the time, Erickson used all of the following adjectives to modify *identity*: cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, sexual, tribal – but also emerging. (Arac 208-209)

This last application of the term to interdisciplinary fields is crucial to our present debate. In order to provide the most holistic understanding of the complexity of identity, scholars from many different fields will be used in this essay. The term is not only invoked in literary criticism, such as the one viewed previously, but it is also widely applied in the new interdisciplinary field of Cultural Studies, which can be summarised as the comparative study of fields such as psychology, sociology, history, fine arts, and literature. This new discipline has been the most recent scholarly attempt to understand contemporary social issues. The interdisciplinary nature of the new field is quite pertinent to our debate. How are all of these fields interrelated? More importantly, how does this interrelation affect discussions on identity? How does history affect individual identity? While asking these questions, one must also consider the effect of collective and intergenerational trauma. This is an explicit interaction between history and psychology. How does the historical trauma experienced by an oppressed social group affect the understanding of individual “selfness”? How have society and psychology been shaped by history? By asking these questions we must also consider the field of sociology. One of today’s most interesting contributions to the contemporary debate of black identity is sociologist Paul Gilroy’s most recent work, Against Race: Imagining a Political Future Beyond the Colour Line.

Gilroy agrees with Derrida and Arac that the very term “identity” is a slippery and complex notion (106). Gilroy’s post-race stance is contingent on the notion of identity, and the detailed re-exploration of identity is particularly advantageous in his argument.

The political language of identity levels out distinctions between chosen connections and given particularities: between the person you choose to be and

the thing that determines your individuality by being thrust upon you. [...] the term “identity has become a significant element in contemporary debates over cultural, ethnic, religious, “racial”, and national differences. [...] At the same time individual identity, the counterpart to the collective, is constantly negotiated, cultivated and protected as a source of pleasure, power and wealth, and potential danger.(Gilroy 106)

Gilroy suggests the term identity must first be “unpacked” in order to fully grasp his post racial stance.

The first of these is the understanding of identity as subjectivity. Religious and spiritual obligations around the selfhood were gradually assimilated into the secular, modern goal of an ordered self operating in an orderly polity. This historic combination was supplemented by the idea that the stability and coherence of the self was a precondition for authoritative and reliable truth-seeking activity. [...] uncertain, outward movement, from the anxious body-bound self towards the world, leads us to a second set of difficulties in the field of identity. This is the problem of sameness understood here as intersubjectivity.[...] *The theme of identification and the consequent relationship between sociology, psychology, and even psychoanalysis enter here and add layers of complexity to deliberations about how selves – and their identities -- are formed through relationships of exteriority, conflict and exclusion.* [...] (my emphasis) Building on this insight...: How does the concept of identity provide a means to speak about social and political solidarity? How is the term ‘identity’ invoked in the summoning and binding of individual agents into groups that become social actors? For these purposes, considering identity requires a confrontation with the specific ideas of ethnic, racialized, and national identity and their civic counterparts. [...] The alternative argument set out below asks you to consider the socioecological dynamics of identity formation. (Gilroy 107-109)

In this last quotation, Gilroy raises an important point by questioning the way in which identity can be manipulated for political ends. Gilroy’s main point of contention with this is how the term can be misused and fall prey to the politics of essentialism. However, in order to fully understand the stance taken by Gilroy, it is first necessary to define a few key terms. Essentialism, as defined by Diana Fuss is:

[...] most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity.[...] Importantly, essentialism is typically defined in opposition to difference. [...] The opposition is a helpful one in that it reminds us that a complex system of cultural, social, psychical, and historical differences, and not a set of pre-existent

human essences, position and constitute the subject. However, the binary articulation of essentialism and difference can also be restrictive, even obfuscating, in that it allows us to ignore or deny the differences within essentialism. (xi - xii)

This definition provides the framework necessary to comprehend the crux of the anti-essentialist debate, and Gilroy's post-race stance. The main problem often stressed in debates around essentialism is that it is often groups who have been marginalised who are relegated to the realm of having an "essential" identity. For example, there is a certain notion of a "true" black person, or a "real" native person, limiting possible identities, and as Gilroy concludes, infringing on the humanity of persons belonging to a marginalised group. Gilroy importantly notes:

[...] the post racial stance I have been trying to develop does not admit the integrity of any avowedly natural perceptual schemes. It does not concede the possibility that "race" could have been seen spontaneously, unmediated by technical and social processes. There will be individual variation, but that is not "race". The human sensorium has had to be educated to the appreciation of racial differences.[...]The history of racism is a narrative in which the congruency of micro- and macrocosm has been disrupted at the point of their analogical intersections: the human body. The order of affective differentiation that gets called "race" may be modernity's most pernicious signature. It articulates reason and unreason. It knits together science and superstition. Its specious ontologies are anything but spontaneous and natural. They should be awarded no immunity from prosecution amid the reveries of reflexivity and comfortable form of inertia induced by capitulation to the lazy essentialism that postmodern sages inform us we cannot escape.  
(52-53)

Gilroy raises an important point when he states that the trope 'race' "articulates reason and unreason. It knits together science and superstition. Its specious ontologies are anything but spontaneous and natural."(Gilroy 52). Historically, the concept was created in order to practically identify the labouring class from the dominant class. However, the trope 'race' took on its modern meaning when, in order to justify the subjugation and

annihilation of millions of people, the dominant hegemony created a racial hierarchy and ideologies of inferiority between the races. Scholar and critic, Hortense Spillers, calls on the notion of mythology as an example of how notions of 'race' gained ground in the United States.

Myth, then, is a form of selective discourse since its life and death are governed by human history: 'Ancient, or not, mythology can only have an historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things' (Barthes 110). Not confined to oral speech, myth can be constituted of other modes of signification, including written discourse, photography, cinema, reporting, sports, shows, publicity. Myth as a form does not only denote the sacred object or event, but may also be viewed as the wider application of a certain linguistic status to a hierarchy of motives and meditations. [...] It is a mode of shorthand in that the mythical signifier conceals as much as it reveals.

(Spillers 67-68)

'Race' was a 'selective discourse' founded in the history of colonisation and slavery.

For Gilroy, this is precisely the manner in which mythic and essentialist notions of race become problematic. The myth of an essentialist aspect of 'race' conceals the specific historical discourse of colonisation and slavery. Even when the mythic identity is adopted by the marginalised group in question, it will continue to 'conceal as much as it reveals.'

What may seem at first to be a positive movement affirming the identity of a subjugated group, could soon trap members of this group in distorted identities that deny humanity to individuals within this group.

As far as black political cultures are concerned, the period after emancipation, essentialist approaches to building solidarity and synchronized communal mobilization have often relied upon the effects of racial hierarchy to supply the binding agent that could in turn precipitate national consciousness. Routine experiences of oppression, repression, and abuse -- however widespread -- could not be transferred into the political arena from which blacks were barred. Instead they became the basis for dissident cultures and an alternative public world. Togetherness produced under these conditions was inherently unreliable. Its instability added to the attractiveness of the authoritarian solutions that offered shortcuts to solidarity, especially where everyday consciousness fell short of the

models of nationhood that had been borrowed wholesale from the Europe-centered history of the dominant group. Where the political chemistry of nation, race, and culture came together to produce these alarming results, the rebirth of fascist thinking and reappearance of stern, uniformed, political movements was not far away[...] (Gilroy 38-39)

Many examples can be found to demonstrate this type of phenomenon within the black American community, such as Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement of the early twentieth century, or the Black Panther movement of the nineteen sixties and seventies. The obvious problem with these movements is that they simultaneously create new and propagate old myths, borrowing 'wholesale' from the racist ideologies that originally brought the community to subjugation. As Gilroy points out, such thinking is problematic because it mirrors other essentialist movements of white supremacy and fascism. Black Nationalism ironically becomes much like Nazism or White Supremacy.

Gilroy believes that this type of trap is inevitable as long as arguments presented by any so-called antiracist movements rely on the language of raciology.

It will be more fruitful in future to trace the history of racial metaphysics – or rather of a metaphysical raciology -- as an underlying precondition for various variations of determinism: biological, nationalistic, cultural, and now genomic. [...] (Gilroy 52-53)

"Indeed, the political and cultural changes I have described as part of the crisis of "race" have carried into the core of contemporary concerns the same anxieties about the basis on which race exists. I am suggesting that the only appropriate response to this uncertainty is to demand liberation not from white supremacy alone, however urgently that is required, but from all racializing and raciological thought, from racialized seeing, racialized thinking, and racialized thinking about thinking. There is one other overriding issue associated with these utopian aspirations. However reluctant we may feel to take the step of renouncing "race" as part of an attempt to bring political culture back to life, this course must be considered because it seems to represent the only *ethical* response to the conspicuous wrongs that raciology continues to solicit and sanction.[...] The deliberate wholesale renunciation of "race" proposed here even views the appearance of an alternative metaphysical humanism premised on face-to-face relations between different actors – beings of equal worth – as preferable to the problems of inhumanity that raciology creates. (Gilroy 40-41)

According to Gilroy, no position in the “racial hierarchy” is immune to the trappings of raciology because ‘race’ thinking from any group, even so called “antiracist” groups, does not permit one to think in terms of humanity. Gilroy poses the important question: what of human identity? (98) This question lies at the heart of the anti-essentialist stance. Essentialist notions do not allow for the humanity of the individual, because the concept too easily sacrifices individual identity by holding it in opposition to a fixed concept of collective identity. If one accepts the doctrines of essentialism and raciology, it follows that there is no room for independent identity negotiation, based on the life experiences of an individual.

This is, however, where the debate against essentialism becomes more complex. What entities comprise personal experience? Is the individual not affected psychologically by a collective history? How do historical experiences shape individual identity within a given social group? More importantly, how do the experiences of previous generations in one’s lineage influence the development of identity? The next chapter will examine the psychoanalytical theories of post-memory, intergenerational and collective trauma.



## ***Chapter 2***

“The wounds of slaves in cotton fields that never heal  
What’s the deal?”  
*Thieves in the Night*  
*Black Star*

In his article “Notes on Trauma and Community”, Kai Erikson provides an excellent description of individual trauma, when he states:

Trauma has the quality of converting that one sharp stab of which I spoke a moment ago into an enduring state of mind. A chronicler of passing events may report that the episode itself lasted no more than an instant – a gunshot, say – but the traumatized mind holds on to that moment, preventing it from slipping back into its proper chronological place in the past, and relives it over and over again in the compulsive musings of the day and the seething dreams of night. The moment becomes a season, the event becomes a condition. (183)

For a greater understanding of the relationship between history, psychology and trauma, it is important to first look at Cathy Caruth’s definition of trauma and post-traumatic-stress-disorder, more commonly known as PTSD.

In her work Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History, Caruth provides the following definition of trauma:

In its later usage, particularly in medical and psychiatric literature, [...] the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. [...] In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena. (11)

PTSD, was first noticed in the behavioural patterns of veterans who had returned from World War I and II as well as the Vietnam war. Although for many years the condition was widely recognised but officially ignored in the psychiatric field, in the nineteen eighties scholars took a new interest in the condition previously known as shell

shock, and the psychological disorder was acknowledged (Caruth 3). PTSD is characterised by the involuntary re-living of, or delayed response to, an overwhelming event or sequence of events, on the part of a victim. This re-living of the event is usually in the form of a returning dream, or nightmare on the part of the victim (Caruth 4). In the introduction to Trauma and Experience: Explorations in Memory, Caruth defines PTSD as follows:

[M]odern analysts [...] have remarked on the surprising *literality* and nonsymbolic nature of traumatic dreams and flashbacks, which resist cure to the extent that they remain, precisely literal. It is this literality and insistent return which thus constitutes trauma and points towards its enigmatic core: the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even seeing, an overwhelming occurrence that then remains, in its insistent return, absolutely *true* to the event. It is indeed this truth of traumatic experience that forms the center of its pathology or symptoms; it is not a pathology, that is, of falsehood or displacement of meaning, but of history itself. If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess. (5)

In his article, “Notes on Trauma and Community”, Kai Erikson, extends Caruth’s general definition of trauma, and more specifically PTSD, by applying them not only to the individual, but to the realm of the community as well. Trauma, Erikson postulates, can manifest itself in many different forms, not only in dreams as stated above, but also in behavioural tendencies. Restlessness, anxiety, rage, depression and isolation can all be understood as classic symptoms of trauma, as well as the “continuous reliving of some wounding experience in daydreams and nightmares, flashbacks and hallucinations, and in a compulsive seeking out of similar circumstances.” (Erickson 184). Erickson argues that “Our memory repeats to us what we haven’t yet come to terms with, what still haunts

us.”(Erikson 184). It is also argued in this article that the traumatic quotient is not simply *in* the event that occurred but rather the reaction to an event. Erikson defines trauma as “resulting from a *constellation of life experiences* as well as from a discreet happening, from a *persisting condition* as well as from an acute event.” (185).

To extend this hypothesis, Erikson presents to the reader the concept of trauma as a social condition, and clearly denotes the distinction between the traumatized individual and the traumatized community.

Sometimes the tissue of a community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of the mind and body [...] even when that does not happen, traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos – a group culture, almost -- that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up. Trauma, that is, has a social dimension. (185)

To that end, Erikson makes the following distinction between collective and individual Trauma, using as an example the Buffalo Creek catastrophe<sup>1</sup>:

By *individual trauma* I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defences so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively ....[The] Buffalo Creek survivors experienced precisely that. They suffered deep shock as a result of their exposure to death and devastation, and, as so often happens in catastrophes of this magnitude, they withdrew into themselves, feeling numbed, afraid, vulnerable, and very alone.

By *collective trauma*, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality. The collective trauma works its way slowly and even insidiously into the awareness of those who suffer from it, so it does not have the quality of suddenness normally associated with “trauma”. But it is a form of shock all the same, a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared. (187)

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<sup>1</sup> On February 26<sup>th</sup>, 1972, Buffalo Creek, a small mining town in West Virginia was flooded when a nearby dam collapsed following a period of heavy rains. 118 of the town’s inhabitants were killed and another 4000 left homeless.

In the last sentence of his definition of collective trauma, Erikson insinuates that the community is in fact an important aspect of the individual self. How does such a statement further complicate the anti-essentialist debate? This notion of collective trauma, as defined by Erikson, is further complicated by Miriam Hirsh's concept of postmemory. Hirsh's definition of postmemory is defined as follows:

The term "postmemory" is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary, or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness. Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection and creation – often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible. That is not, of course, to say that the survivor memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly – chronologically – connected to the past.  
(Hirsh 9)

It would now appear that trauma is not limited to the process of individual identification, but also extends to the community as well. In addition to this, trauma not only affects one generation but may in fact be transmitted through generations, thus affecting future communities as well as present ones. How is all of this to be understood in terms of the black diaspora? What happens to the future generations of a community that has suffered, "a blow to the basic tissues of social life" which, in turn, has impaired "the prevailing sense of community"? How is trauma repeated throughout generations? If traumatised individuals carry "an impossible history within them", and become "themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth 5), this reminds us of Spiller's notion of 'historical burden'; what happens to the children of the survivors who have not been able to entirely possess their own history? Do the descendants not also carry a greater feat, an "impossible history" within them? Are not the same rules also applicable to the societal tissue that has received the same blow?

According to Erikson, when a given community has been affected, one can speak of the “damaged” social organism much in the same respect as one would speak of a damaged body (188). Erickson explains that communal trauma can also help to build singularity among its members: “[...] trauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common language and background can.”(186) One of the explanations provided is that disasters, or traumas, often:

[...]force open whatever fault lines once ran silently through the structure of the larger community, dividing it into divisive fragments. [...] The fault lines usually open to divide the people affected by the event from the people spared, exactly the opposite of what happens in a ‘city of comrades’. Those not touched try to distance themselves from those touched, almost as if they are escaping something spoiled, something contaminated, something polluted. (Erikson 189)

It follows how such exclusion may lead to communal bonding, as Erikson states, “estrangement becomes the basis for communality[...]persons without homes or citizenship or any other niche in the larger order of things were invited to gather in a quarter set aside for the disenfranchised, a ghetto for the unattached.”(186).

Could it then be added here that the condition is not simply a psychological condition, but has now become a historical and sociological one? The event is not limited to a specific moment in history, but its ramifications continue to affect the future generations of a traumatized collective. Trauma has now become a history.

In Unclaimed Experience, Caruth asks, “What does it mean, precisely, for history to be the history of a trauma?”(18). The response provided for this profound question is as follows:

For history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that history can be grasped in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence.

(Caruth18)

Much like the manner in which a traumatised individual may not realise the trauma at the exact moment it occurs, but only later realises they have been traumatised through the reoccurrence of nightmares and other phenomenon, a historical event is often not fully understood as it occurs, but rather only in hindsight, not only in the “very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (18), as Caruth states, but also in the repercussions observed after the event. Much like the traumatised individual, trauma can be gauged in a community by the effect produced by an event.

In order to fully grasp the theories developed by Arac, Gilroy and Spillers, the psychological theories of Caruth, Erikson and Hirsh, must now be applied to the historical event of slavery. How has the trauma endured by the enslaved peoples of Africa continued to affect black American communities and individuals? Is this trauma limited specifically to the black American community, or can it also be understood in varying degrees with regard to the African Diaspora? How does this notion of collective trauma affect the anti-essentialist debate? Finally, how can the obvious obstacle of an identity grounded in trauma be overcome? A detailed review of slavery and segregation in the United States will attempt to shed light on the above mentioned questions.

In his work on slavery, Generations of Captivity: A History of Africa-American Slaves, Ira Berlin traces the history of slavery from its beginnings in the late sixteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century. Beginning with what he refers to as the *Charter Generation* and ending with *Generations of Freedom*, Berlin describes the evolution of slavery and its impact on each new generation. The technique used by Berlin is quite effective in untangling the confusing history of slavery in a systematic manner. For this

reason, the same technique will be used for this portion of the essay. How was the trauma of slavery different for each new generation of Africans and black Americans held in captivity? What were some “memories” that were passed down through the different generations? How did each generation re-negotiate its identity and relationship with the institution of slavery? These questions will be addressed in the following section.

The first generation of slavery documented in Generations of Captivity, is referred to by Berlin as the *Charter Generation or Tangosmao*. The *Charter Generation* can be loosely defined as the first generation of offspring, emerging from transcontinental meeting between Africans and Europeans. The slaves from the *Charter Generation* were the first mixed “race” children of European voyagers, sailors, clergymen and merchants, and people inhabiting the western coast of the African continent. The children of mixed parent ancestry, the *Tangosmaos*, were often identified by the physical characteristics of their light brown skin, and linguistic plurality, most commonly Portuguese and a West-African dialect. An intercultural pidgin arose from this linguistic plurality that permitted the *Charter Generation* to communicate with many different nations. Having insider knowledge of both European and African language, culture and sometimes geography, the children of the *Charter Generation* developed the reputation in both the African and European continents, as astucious intercultural traders. Thus cultural plurality was often quite beneficial for the *Charter Generation*. Although never fully accepted in either of their cultures, the *Charter Generation* were nevertheless able to negotiate a comfortable position between European and African identity (Berlin 26). However, due to this cultural plurality, the *Tangosmaos* at times, found themselves in precarious situations. The ‘between’ position, at times greatly valued among both Africans and Europeans, could



also subject the *Charter Generation* to serious discrimination. Their “bi-racial” heritage sometimes left *Tangosmaos* vulnerable to practices of ostracization, scapegoating or worse - exile into slavery. The latter and most serious was unfortunately the fate of many. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries common destinations for African slaves were the Americas and West-Indian colonies. Slaves were often shipped from Africa to the American continent, or sugar plantations in the West-Indies. It was not uncommon to find *Tangosmaos* among the African slaves who were brought over by the trade as the primary source of free labour. On the islands such as Saint Domingue, Jamaica and the Barbados, as well as the colonies of the Americas, members of the *Charter Generation* once again negotiated their position due to their “bi-racial” heritage. Equipped with the knowledge of a European language and a European religion, the *Tangosmaos*, were often times able to challenge their oppressors by professing Christianity and gaining access to the written law. These tools, combined with knowledge of trade, resulted in a modest amount of prosperity, placing the *Tangosmaos* in a position from which to negotiate their freedom. However, the rise in the Trans-Atlantic trade and the increase in mass production of cash crops such as sugar, indigo and rice, demanded a large influx of African Slaves and the *Charter Generation* soon became “extinct”, giving way to the next generation, the *Plantation Generation* (Berlin 49).

The growing demand for slave labour soon depleted the original sources on the West African coast and the West Indies, and traders were forced to go to the interior of the African continent for slaves to fill the labour demand. Unlike *Tangosmaos* who came before them, the Africans who now made up the majority of the labour force did not have access to European language or religion; therefore they could not challenge their European

masters. The *Plantation Generation* were virtually powerless in subverting their masters' efforts to enslave and subjugate them. It was during this time that the nature of American colonies shifted from societies with slaves to slave societies. Berlin makes the following distinction between the two:

What distinguished societies with slaves was the fact that slaves were marginal to the central productive process. In societies with slaves, slavery was just one form of labor among many. Slave owners treated their slaves with extreme callousness and cruelty at times, because this was the way they treated all subordinates, be they indentured servants, debtors, prisoners of war; no one presumed the master slave relationship to be exemplary.

In slave societies, by contrast, slavery stood at the center of economic production, and the master slave relationship provided a model for all social relations: husband and wife, parent and child, employer and employee. [...] Whereas in societies with slaves, slaveholders were just one portion of a propertied elite, in slave societies they were the ruling class. In slave societies, nearly everyone – free and slave – aspired to enter the slaveholding class, and upon occasion some former slaves rose into the slaveholders' ranks. Their acceptance was grudging, as they carried the stigma of bondage in their lineage and, in the case of American slavery, color in their skin. But the right to enter the slaveholding class was rarely denied, because slaveownership was open to all irrespective of family, nationality, color, or ancestry.  
(Berlin 9)

Drawing on this last point made by Berlin, on the question of skin colour, it should be noted here that it was during the *Plantation generation* that the conflation between race and class occurred. With the large influx of African slaves, as well as the transition from societies with slaves to slave societies, the colour line in America began to emerge. With the emergence of a plantation economy, "race" took on a new meaning. The majority of the labour force were, in fact, African or of African descent, and thus of a darker skin tone than the white planter class. This obvious difference in pigmentation was an easy

demarcation between the upper and lower echelons of society. In addition to this, in order to justify Europeans' right to subjugate, degrade and hold in bondage the non-European "races" of the world, theories of a racial hierarchy were created. The basic premise of the hierarchy stated that the other races were degenerate forms of the superior Caucasian race. Recalling Spillers' notion of myth, it was during this historical moment that many myths about "race" emerged. These myths often attributed negative 'innate' characteristics to non-European peoples. By creating a physical demarcation to distinguish class status, "race" served as a means by which to organise society. It was also during this period that systematic forms of degradation began to take place. Some of the common practices were re-naming the slaves with comic or ironic names and the removal of surnames. The removal of surnames was especially poignant because it also removed any right to or knowledge of prior lineage, thus stripping newly arrived Africans of any knowledge of their ancestry, culture and traditions. Other laws were set in place to prevent Africans from speaking in their native tongue or practising religions other than Christianity, thereby leaving the new generation completely dependent on their captors' languages, practices, and beliefs by which to re-construct and negotiate new collective and independent identities. In addition to this, a disproportionate number of males were imported, creating a sexual imbalance within the community, and further complicating the possibility of forming familial ties. To this end, Berlin states:

The Africanization of the labour force marked a sharp deterioration in the conditions of slave life. With an eye for a quick profit, Chesapeake planters imported males disproportionately. Generally men outnumbered women more than two to one on slaveships entering the region; this sexual imbalance soon manifested itself in the plantation population, as the number of men and women which had previously been roughly equal, swung heavily

toward men. The sharply skewed sex ratio made it difficult for the newly arrived Africans to form families, let alone establish the deep lineages that framed so much of African life. The family linkages that had bound members of the charter generation attenuated.  
(57)

The disenfranchising of the African and black American population was probably the most powerful means of securing a slave society. With no “natural” familial bonds by which to establish societies and communities, newly arrived slaves suffered in isolation without any linguistic, religious, familial or communal ties. The earlier freedom secured by the *Charter Generation* all but disappeared in the *Plantation Generation* as new laws and legislations governing the slave society were passed. Also, the general structure of the societies changed. In societies with slaves, it was not uncommon to find master and slave toiling in the fields alongside each other. However, in the new slave society, master and slave lived in the separate worlds of the plantation house and the slave quarters. These systematic forms of degradation remind us of the “silent fault lines” referred to by Erickson. Fault lines that divided “the people affected by the event from the people spared.”(Erickson 187). However, despite the disenfranchisement and the loss of their language, lineage and culture, the new generation of African slaves, like their ancestors of the *Charter Generation*, attempted to negotiate their identities in their new homeland. Sometimes newly arrived slaves found protection in the racial myths established by the planter class (Berlin 62). Hiding behind the image of the ignorant, naïve slave, newly arrived Africans could subtly rebel. Barely recovered from the destitution of the middle passage and the slave system, the newly arrived Africans attempted to rebuild a life and community. Creating new societies and a new culture was one of the only ways the trauma of the middle passage, as well as of slavery itself, could be countered. The institution of

slavery forced many people of different class, linguistic, ethnic, religious and cultural origins together, and although these differences were often points of contention within the slave community, it would only be through unification, based on this common trauma, that the slaves of the *Plantation Generation* could endeavour to subvert the efforts of the planter class. The identity of the victims could still be re-negotiated.

The following generation was one characterised by world wide revolutions, beginning with the American War for Independence (1775-1783), followed by the French Revolution (1789-1794) and ending with the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). The three revolutions all had a common aim: political, social and individual freedom. With the entire world crying for the rights of liberty, the hopes of many slaves on the plantations were restored. Certainly the principles that were at the root of the war of Independence, America's cry for political freedom from their British motherland, would extend itself to the millions of people held in bondage in her colonies. Many hoped that the freedom obtained by their masters from the British "oppressors" would shed new light on the slaves' position. However, as it is widely known, this was not to be the case. The oft quoted Declaration of Independence, which stated that "all men" were created equal, and had equal right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," came to be the key document upon which slaves and free blacks would attempt to decry the injustice and hypocrisy inherent to the slave system. However, emerging pseudo scientific documentation solidified the racial hierarchy, and claimed that Africans and black Americans were only five-eighths human and therefore the statement of "all men" being "created equal" did not apply (Berlin 104). Nevertheless, the struggles of the *Revolutionary Generation* were not completely in vain. At this point the colonies became divided between the slaveholding

states of the North and the “free” states of the North. Freedom in the North did not come overnight as most states adopted gradual emancipation legislations. In addition to this, gradual emancipation did not completely abolish slavery in the Northern states. It is documented that in 1810, there were close to thirty thousand slaves in the “free” states (Berlin 104). The slaves who were able to obtain their freedom through the gradualist legislations were often only able to do so after freeing themselves from the various legal, extralegal and illegal loop holes that would ensure slave owners their property. Even after the emancipation legislations were passed, some black Americans remained in varying forms of servitude, if not in outright bondage, until the mid-nineteenth century (Berlin 105). As an act of political defiance, newly freed slaves often renamed themselves. Berlin states that “this gesture of self-definition reversed the enslavement process and confirmed the free blacks’ newly won liberty, just as the loss of an African name had earlier symbolized enslavement.” (Berlin 105).

Although the gradual emancipation legislations of the North were far from being flawless, they were nevertheless an improvement for most slaves in the Northern states. In the *Revolutionary Generation*, different strata emerged within the slave society. The *gens de couleurs*, who, fleeing the revolution in Haiti, settled in some parts of the United States alongside newly freed slaves, established a class that was often referred to as the black bourgeoisie. Although some members of this class sought to distance themselves from their brothers and sisters in captivity, others sought to help those held in bondage. Sadly for most slaves in the Southern states, the *Revolutionary Generation* proved to be less notable. The victory of the Patriots during the American War of Independence only seemed to assert the power of the planter class, thus solidifying slavery in the Southern

states. Although there were now more free blacks in some areas of the South, the majority remained enslaved. The fate that would await the slaves in the *Migration Generation* would prove to be a fate similar to that of their African ancestors.

Although the exact dates and causes for what is sometimes referred to as the ‘second middle passage’ is debatable, a general consensus attributes the erosion of soil in the sea border states, as well as the invention of the cotton engine, as the major reasons for the western migration that characterised this period. During the period of 1810 and 1861, slavery underwent a major change that would eventually be seen as its last. Through the American expansion to the West which created the new states of Kansas, Texas, and Kentucky, and the cotton revolution that was occurring due to the invention of the cotton gin, many slaves who had for generations resided in the seaboard region were ruthlessly sold South. The mass production of tobacco, rice and indigo, had over exploited the land and the plantation economy of the seaboard states began to wane. A direct result of this was the decline of the pre-existing slave society. Since there was no longer a large demand for slave labour in the seaboard regions, many planters looked to sell their slaves to the “Deep South” where the demand for slave labour was high and large profits could be gained by selling black Americans to cotton planters. Once again, much like their African ancestors, the *Migration Generation* found themselves torn away from their families, loved ones, and also what had become their “home”, only to travel exorbitant distances, under harsh conditions, to an unknown location.

The *Migration Generation*, much like their ancestors of the *Plantation Generation*, were forced to re-construct a new black American identity and society in accordance with their new lives. An example provided for this type of re-negotiation is the formation of

kinship ties not based on blood relations. The *Migration Generation* redefined slavery and black American life in general. All over the country stricter laws were passed with the purpose of limiting the civil rights of free blacks in the North as well as in the South. However, the efforts of the earlier *Revolutionary Generation* may have been delayed but they were not in vain. The worldwide demise of slavery that had been taking place gave strength to abolitionist debates, and the protests of free blacks. Soon the rumour of abolition had spread to even the most remote plantations; the dawning of a *Freedom Generation* was approaching (Berlin 258).

With the end of the American Civil War in 1865, millions of African Americans held in bondage were freed. The jubilee anticipated by the first Africans captured and their descendants held in bondage for over three hundred years, had finally arrived. After the civil war the Republican government established different institutions in an attempt to reconstruct the Southern states, and the period immediately following emancipation represented for many a period of hope. The actions of the *Freedom Generation*, some of whom now had positions in the political, judicial and corporate realms, continued to cogitate the earlier generations of captivity while simultaneously reflecting the needs of their own generation (Berlin 270). However, as Berlin states:

The freedom generation could no more escape its past than previous generations of black men and women. Like those who came before them, they had no desire to deny their history, only to transform it in the spirit of the revolutionary possibilities presented by emancipation. Their successes – and failures – would resonate into the twenty-first century.  
(Berlin 270)

The events that occurred following emancipation effectively demonstrate Erickson's theories concerning traumatised communities. The prime example was the



instatement of segregation laws. Although the issue of the official beginning of Jim Crow is still widely debated, there is a general consensus that prior to emancipation, a type of de facto segregation existed. De facto segregation can be defined as segregation as “determined by social custom, habit or practice”, and is held in opposition to De jure segregation which is segregation by specific law (Smith 7). However, both De facto and De jure segregation demonstrate explicitly Erickson’s statement that, community trauma often opens “whatever fault lines once ran silently through the structure of the larger community, dividing it into divisive fragments”, De jure segregation demonstrating the “silent fault lines”, and De facto demonstrating the opening of these fault lines that divide a community into fragments. Jim Crow laws, which can be loosely defined as the legal practice of segregation between white and black Americans, clearly demonstrate white America’s attempt to distance itself from black America, which had been “touched” by slavery. To reiterate Erikson, through the legal practice of segregation, white America attempted to escape blacks as if they were “something spoiled, something contaminated, something polluted” (189), demonstrating Erikson’s theory of a corrosive community, and how slavery and segregation affected all communal ties in America, both black and white. Taking the previous historical contextualisation of slavery, can it not be concluded to some extent that the trauma shared by black Americans as well as their African ancestors, served as “a source of communality” similar to “common languages and common backgrounds” (Erikson 186). However, the question must be raised here again, how does this notion of collective trauma fit into the anti-essentialist debate? Are identities founded in notions of trauma and victimisation not problematic? Gilroy agrees that identity based

on victimisation or trauma is quite problematic; however he resolves the dilemma by suggesting:

If we are prepared to possess those histories [of colonial and imperial power] and consider setting them to work in defining more modest and more plausible understanding of democracy, tolerance, for difference, and cross-cultural recognition than currently exist, this historical argument can redirect attention towards some of the more general contemporary questions involved in thinking about identity. [...] The intellectual challenge defined here is that history of suffering should not be allocated exclusively to their victims. If they were the memory of trauma would disappear as the living memory of it died away. (Gilroy 114)

This brief historical contextualisation clearly demonstrates that the experiences of free blacks and racially mixed individuals share similar, but paradoxically quite different, origins. The recapitulation also debunks the notion of an archaic, essential Africa by revealing the complexity of the “racial” origins of the people held in bondage, as well as revealing the ‘history’ that created the myth of ‘race’. Recalling Derrida’s earlier theory, the identity of blacks held in slavery was something constantly being negotiated, shifted and altered, in accordance with the new situations in which they found themselves. Gilroy believes that it is this history of de-territorialisation that will be useful in modern discussions concerning identity. In accordance with his earlier intellectual challenge, Gilroy befittingly suggests:

When we think about the tense relationship between sameness and difference analytically, the interplay of consciousness, territory, and place becomes a major theme. It affords insights into the core conflicts over how democratic social and political life should be organized at the start of the twenty-first century. We should try to remember that the threshold between those two antagonistic conditions can be moved and that identity making has a history even though its historical character is often systematically concealed.[...] the de-territorialized history of the modern African Diaspora into the western hemisphere and the racial slavery through which it was accomplished has something useful to teach us about the workings of identity and identification and, beyond that, something valuable to impart about the claims of nationality and the nation-state upon the writing of history itself. (100 & 112)

In this last quotation, Gilroy evokes many important points. For example, the interplay of consciousness, territory and place is indeed a major theme when contemplating the subject of identity. When considering Derrida's theories on identity politics, it is understood that although there are no 'boundaries' as such for European identity, there are however physical geographical boundaries to designate Europe. As seen in the previous section, the history of black Americans, as well as people from the African Diaspora, has been one of movement, interruptions and dispersion. This tradition continues today through the immigration process and is further complicated by modern forms of globalization, most notably commercial media. As both Spillers and Gilroy note, mythologies are propagated through many different forms, such as photography, television and film, to name a few. How has the specific history of black Americans been propagated and understood as the history of North American and international 'blackness'? Gilroy importantly notes that there is a disturbing confusion between 'race' and culture. The colour of one's skin should not be confused with the specificity of one's culture, although often times, with the help of the modern media, it is. How is the difference within 'blackness' to be articulated, without betraying the similar histories? The unique aspect of 'blackness' in the United States is that although black Americans are by birth -- and have been for many generations -- American, the dominant hegemony has never treated the community as such. Also, the forms of systematic oppression which infringed on black Americans' civil rights and human rights are unique to that part of North America.<sup>2</sup> As a result, many within the black community have turned to the essentialist idea of an archaic

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Apartheid was a form of systematic oppression in South Africa, similar to segregation in the United States; however, the histories are significantly different, and should not be confused.

Africa as a source of inspiration. This has also been a common trend throughout the Caribbean. Although Caribbean people have never experienced institutionalised segregation, the history is one of systemic psychological oppression. This de-territorialisation, be it physical or psychological, is, as Gilroy states, something to be considered in the organisation of a political future. Gilroy also makes an important point when he recalls the systematic concealment of history, and the interplay of identity and the writing of history. However this is also where Gilroy's debate becomes problematic. If the interplay of history, psychology and sociology is to be considered in modern day discussions concerning political identity, how can this be done without evoking the language of 'race'? If one thinks in terms of psychoanalysis, the technique used to heal and overcome a traumatic event is the verbal articulation of the specific trauma in question. Although renouncing 'race' is in fact the only *ethical* response, how *practical* is it in terms of bringing "political culture back to life" and initiating the healing process that is needed for political advancement of blacks in North America as well as the rest of the African diaspora? Gilroy believes that in order to bring political discussion about black identity back to life, one must look to the example set by the African diaspora, particularly among Caribbeans and blacks residing in Great Britain. However, if one must look to the cosmopolitan example set by the black Caribbean diaspora, and simultaneously reject notions of 'race' in order to open a postmodern discussion of identity, recalling Derrida's earlier question, how is one to present oneself or to identify oneself, if one cannot use the language necessary to articulate one's history? Gilroy adds another 'devoir', that is, the renunciation of 'race'. Gilroy's 'ethical' response to the question of 'race', culture and identity leaves us again, like Invisible Man, in a state of hibernation and inaction. How is

the postmodern black North American subject to speak of identity, whilst rejecting all notions of 'race' and the vocabulary of raciology? Would acting as such, in an 'ethical' manner, only render the subaltern subject voiceless? Would avoiding the language of raciology continue to conceal a history that has shaped, and continues to shape the identity of individuals worldwide? Has this tactic of un-articulation, silence, and avoidance not already been utilised? The problem with Gilroy's theory is revealed when considering the example of planetary blackness that he provides for us, the figure of world famous Reggae musician, Bob Marley. Gilroy uses Bob Marley as an example, because Marley's music has succeeded in transcending 'racial', cultural and even linguistic barriers, rendering him a figure of world peace and cultural harmony. However, what Gilroy underplays, is that Marley, and much of his music, was significantly inspired by the Rastafarian movement, an Afro-centric movement which emerged from the Garveyites. The Garveyites were followers of Marcus Garvey, the political figure who began one of the first and most significant Black Nationalist movements, Back to Africa, in the 1920's. Rastafarianism can also be understood as the re-interpretation and re-construction of Judeo-Christian texts and religions from an 'African' perspective. The Emperor of Ethiopia, His Majesty Haile Selasse, is the most significant figure within Rastafarianism, and many Rastafarians look to Ethiopia as the Promised Land. Bob Marley was able to transcend all boundaries, only after having established an unequivocal identity within the Rastafarian movement. Marley identified himself as African, Jamaican, and Rastafarian, despite his mixed-'race' heritage. It was only after having articulated his identity that Marley was able to transcend 'race' and emerge as a world figure. As Derrida suggests, contrary to Gilroy's theory, the answer

may not lie in the *anti-cap*, but in *l'autre du cap*. For an alternative to Gilroy's stance 'against race', we will now turn the discussion to cultural theorist, Stuart Hall.

### ***Chapter 3***

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall begins by asking: "From where does he/she (new black subject) speak?" (392) How is the identity of the modern black subject to be articulated? Much like Arac, Gilroy, and Derrida, Hall agrees that identity is in no way "transparent" or "unproblematic" (Hall 392). Much like Gilroy, Hall disagrees with the notion of an 'authentic', static, identity. Instead, he suggests that identity is not an essence, but rather a positioning (Hall 395). From this point, Hall attempts to define what he refers to as *positions of enunciation* (395). Hall defines the term by stating that we all speak and write from a position, that is to say, everyone speaks from a particular place and time and from a specific culture and history, a culture and history that affects each individual in similar as well as different ways (392). Although Hall rejects the notion of an essential identity, he does not reject the notion of collective similarities. There are, Hall suggests, two different ways of thinking about 'cultural identity'.

"The first position defines 'cultural identity' in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective 'one true self' hiding inside the many other more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as 'one people', with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This 'oneness', underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of 'Caribbeaness', of the black experience. It is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express through cinematic representation." (Hall 393)

What is interesting about Hall's theory of positioning is that it places emphasis, not on a geographical location, but rather on a shared history and ancestry. This, of course, resolves the dilemma, or rather provides the necessary modification, to the physical boundaries of Europe evoked in Derrida's thesis, as well as the cultural identity



of the European which is dependent on the geographical location. Also, in evoking a shared history, Hall's theory is consistent with Gilroy's suggestion that the discourse of identity and culture can be furthered through the history of de-territorialization which is characteristic of the African diaspora.

One may object to Hall's description of 'cultural identity' and 'oneness', because at first it may seem headed downwards on the slippery slope of essentialism. However, Hall skillfully reminds the reader that such a conception of cultural identity has played a considerable part in previous post-colonial movements, which have had immeasurable impact on the lives of black people everywhere. Hall recognizes that the mythic return to an archaic Africa is impossible. He suggests instead that one should not only excavate histories 'hidden' by colonialism, or 'rediscover' an identity but, in addition to these, construct and produce an identity, through a re-telling of the past (Hall 393). This type of imaginative rediscovery, Hall informs us, has facilitated the emergence of some of the most important social movements of our time. Hall believes that this type of re-construction of the past is critical in the healing process for the 'loss of identity' which is characteristic of the African diasporic experience.

However, Hall does not undermine the possible trap set by essentialism. He suggests that the second way to understand 'cultural identity' is through the recognition that:

"...as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant *difference* which constitute 'what we really are'; - or rather since history has intervened - 'what we have become' [...]. Cultural identity in this second sense is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are

subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. It is only from this second position that we can properly understand the traumatic character of ‘the colonial experience’.”(Hall 394)

The traumatic character referred to by Hall is the way in which black people have, and black identity has, been positioned by dominant regimes. It is to be noted that the dominant hegemony in both the Caribbean and the United States, had the power to have black people see and experience themselves as ‘Other’(Hall 394). This notion has been presented by both black American as well as Caribbean theorists, such as W. Dubois and Frantz Fanon. To this end, Hall states:

“Nevertheless, this idea of otherness as an inner compulsion changes our conception of ‘cultural identity’. In this perspective, cultural identity is not a fixed essence at all, lying unchanged outside history and culture. *It is not some universal and transcendental spirit inside us on which history has made no fundamental mark* (my emphasis)[...]It is not a fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return. *Of course, it is not a mere phantasm either. It is something – not a mere trick of the imagination. It has its histories – and histories have their real, material and symbolic effects.* (my emphasis) [...] Cultural identities are the points of identification or suture, which are made, *within the discourses of history and culture.*(my emphasis)” (Hall 395)

It has already been understood in the theories of Gilroy, Arac and Derrida, that identities are not static; they cannot be located in monolithic essential notions of self, culture, or ‘race’. As Hall emphasizes, ‘cultural identity’ has been, and continues to be affected by history, ‘culture’ and power. An example of this is the situation many black Caribbean people find themselves in once they have immigrated to North America. Suddenly, the history and culture of a community that is not their own is thrust upon them by the dominant regime. There is much multiplicity in the various Caribbean islands, such as Jamaica, Guadeloupe, Trinidad and Haiti, to name a few. Another

obvious example is the difference within the black population of the United States, which is comprised of an African ancestry composed of many different tribal origins and also of mixed race people, or newly arrived immigrants from the Caribbean, South America, and Africa itself. Added to the list are, of course, the offspring of all of these different groups. If one is to open a dialogue on black identity, from where does one begin? How is black identity within North America to be organised? The difficulty with the term ‘African-American’ must also be addressed here. Is not someone, who is of first generation African, who immigrates and settles in America, quite different from the descendants of racial slavery, who are American? However, as noted earlier, due to the transmission of racial mythologies, many newly arrived immigrants or children of immigrants, within the African diaspora, find themselves being affected by the history of slavery within North America. Many of the images of blacks which are propagated by the media, are not consistent with this diversity within blackness. Hall emphasizes, “Difference, therefore persists – in and alongside continuity”. He then asks the following question:

“How, then, to describe this play of ‘difference’ within identity? The common history – transportation, slavery, colonization, (to this I add migration) - has been profoundly formative. For all these societies, unifying us across our differences. But it does not constitute a common *origin*, since it was metaphorically as well as literally a translation. The inscription of the word difference is also specific and critical. I use the word ‘play’ because of the double meaning of the metaphor. [...] This cultural ‘play’ could not therefore be represented [...] as a simple, binary opposition – representation ‘past/present’, ‘them/us’. Its complexity exceeds this binary structure of representation. They become, not only what they have, at times certainly been – mutually excluding categories, but also what they sometimes are – different points along a sliding scale. (Hall 396)

This quotation demonstrates how differences exist within cultural and ‘racial’ identities. However, what remains is the problem of adhering to a pre-determined cultural identity which might lead one into the trap of essentialism. In the North America context, can the

formation of a new cultural identity be understood and represented, through the complete avoidance of the language of raciology? Recalling Hall, the act of enunciating requires one to speak from a specific, fixed position. As Derrida reminds us, in order to move forwards one must first identify oneself. How is the black North American subject to identify himself/herself, whilst avoiding the discourse of 'race', a discourse that unfortunately, has most probably shaped his/her personal experiences at some point in time? Could it be that the language of 'race' is needed in order to overcome the 'myths' created by history? Could raciology be used similarly to a vaccine, whereby small amounts of the language are evoked to guarantee immunity to a specific illness or condition? Hall attempts to provide an answer by presenting to the reader his notion of strategic essentialism.

In order to fully grasp what Hall refers to as 'difference, which is not pure otherness', he evokes Derrida's theory on difference. Derrida writes the term *différance*, which is translated to English as difference, or to defer. Like Derrida, Hall believes that meaning is constantly deferred, "never finished or completed, but keeps on moving to encompass other, additional or supplementary meanings, which [...] disturb the classical economy of language and representation." (397). Hall elaborates on this idea by stating:

"For its signification depends upon the endless repositioning of its deferential terms, meaning, in any specific instance, depends on the contingent and arbitrary stop – the necessary and temporary 'break' in the infinite semiosis of language. This does not detract from the original insight. It only threatens to do so if we mistake this 'cut' of identity - this *positioning*, which makes meaning possible – as a natural and permanent, rather than an arbitrary and contingent 'ending' – where as I understand every such positioning as 'strategic' and arbitrary, in the sense that there is no permanent equivalence between the particular sentence we close, and its true meaning, as such. Meaning continues to unfold, so to speak, beyond the arbitrary which makes it at any moment possible. It is always either over – or under-determinate, either an excess or a supplement. There is always something 'left over'." (Hall 397-398)

Hall's theory of strategic essentialism provides the necessary tools with which to unravel the *philosophème* presented earlier. Unlike Gilroy's extreme view of going 'against race', Hall's theory is more consistent with Derrida's notion of *l'autre du cap*. Hall's theory of strategic essentialism allows for action, which is imperative to any new developments which are to be made in the re-awakening of the politics of culture. Although Gilroy's suggestion is in fact the most 'ethical', it does not allow for the healing properties of enunciation. As Hall importantly points out, the strategic use of essentialism is necessary for social change. Many earlier movements, despite their obvious flaws, were significant in promoting and igniting larger social awareness, which then gave way to political advancement. Movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and Negritude brought international attention to the treatment of blacks in the United States and the history of Colonialism. An example of Hall's notion of strategic essentialism is found in the work and writings of black American author, Richard Wright. The following section will demonstrate Hall's notion of strategic essentialism by considering how Wright's novel, Native Son, although problematic, was a necessary pre-cursor for the development of black American fiction.

From its first publication, Native Son was heralded as an instant classic. Within weeks of its release, Wright's second novel became a best seller, appearing in a strong position on book club lists that appealed to respective white and black demographics. Native Son was the first novel by a black American to depict with force and conviction the reality of the black existence in the United States, under Jim Crow legislation. Not only did the book depict current social and political actuality, but also for the first time, the inner consciousness of the American Negro was revealed. Through the portrayal of

Bigger Thomas, a lower class youth living in the slums of Chicago, readers became aware of the profound psychological impact of racism on underprivileged black youths. The impact of Bigger's story on the general public was exponential, profoundly affecting the manner in which both black and white Americans contemplated the "race problem".

As Wright reveals to us in the appendix, "How Bigger was Born", protagonist Bigger Thomas was actually the fictional composition of five people Wright had previously known while living in the South. Bigger was rebellious to white oppression, ignored all authority from both the white and black community, rejected the principles of humility that governed the black southern collective at the time, and was generally characterised as the "Bad Nigger" type. In his review, Kenneth Kinnamon describes common characteristics of the "Bigger Type", as having a "violent, aggressive personality", and using sadism as the only means by which to realise the self (111). The first Bigger was a schoolyard bully, observed by Wright during his elementary school days in Mississippi. The other Biggers, numbers two through five, moved to progressively overt political actions, be it refusing to pay rent, violating racial taboos, or blatantly defying Jim Crow laws on street cars. However, it was while living in Chicago that Wright came across the "Bigger type" that would most impact his work (Kinnamon 111). This new Bigger was a young black man, Robert Nixon, on trial for the alleged murder of a young white woman. The case came up while Wright was in the midst of writing the first draft for Native Son. The Chicago press embellished reporting on the case by alluding to a sexual nature to the crime and referring to Nixon using animalistic epithets. The press played on racial taboos and the collective white myth of the black male sexual predator, as well as the latent fear of miscegenation and bestiality. Wright

modeled much of the unfolding of Bigger's trial from actual events and newspaper clippings of Nixon's. It was generally concluded, by the Chicago press, that the only cure for Nixon would be death (Kinnamon14). As mentioned earlier, when Native Son emerged, it was widely received with critical acclaim. For the first time, American racism and the psychological effects produced by it were discussed in a bold, frank manner, as never seen before. Clifton Fadiman described the novel as a "deep experience" as opposed to just merely a book. Alain Locke stated that, "in the present crisis [...] the social importance of the novel overshadows its artistic significance" because the book was not simply "a plea for the Negro, but a challenge to the nation and its own enlightened interest." (Kinnamon 20). Ralph Ellison stated that Native Son displayed a emotional and psychological complexity as never seen before in Negro writing, and that the artistic sensibility of the novel overcame sociological and cultural isolation of Negro life and created a window of unlimited amounts of intellectual and imaginative opportunities for future generations (Kinnamon13). Ellison also added that prior to the publication of Native Son;

"... [In] American Negro literature there existed no background for dealing with such problems as were now emerging. For literature is a product of social relations, and the black middle class – despite its favoured position – hardly less than the Negro workers had been excluded from participation in those institutions necessary for dealing with such problems is to be formed; this literature had developed no techniques for grappling with the deeper American realities. In American literature this background was to be found in the work of such men as Dreiser and Upton Sinclair; but Jim Crow is intellectual as well as social and political, and the themes and problems with which these writers were concerned were not recognized by Negro writers as being related to the Negro American experience. [...] *Native Son*, examined against past Negro fiction, represents the take-off in a leap which promises to carry over a whole tradition, and marks the merging of the imaginative depiction of American Negro life into the broad stream of American

literature. For the Negro writer it has suggested a path which he might follow to reach the maturity, clarifying and increasing social responsibility.” (Kinnamon 17)

Native Son is the story of a young black youth named Bigger Thomas, living in the slums of Chicago’s south side. Bigger is poor, black, uneducated, but perhaps most importantly, Bigger is frustrated. Living in a one room apartment with his mother, sister and brother, Bigger is constantly pressured by his mother to find a job, and often subjected to forms of verbal abuse. Bigger cannot find solace in his mother’s religion, and as a result, often feels alienated from his family. Most of his days are spent loitering in a local pool hall, bullying his comrades, and committing petty crimes such as robbery.

Bigger’s main source of frustration seems to stem from the contradictory nature of his environment; the wonders of the American Dream are constantly being held tauntingly within his vision, but always kept out of his grasp due to social moeurs and laws. Bigger dimly understands the injustice of his situation, although he has no means by which to articulate his feelings, aside from acting in a hostile and aggressive manner. While looking for employment, Bigger is offered a position in the home of a white philanthropist, Mr. Dalton, to do work around the house, mainly as a chauffeur and a keeper of the furnace which is located in the basement of the Dalton residence. This is symbolic of the nature of black American life, demonstrating the heights to which one such as Bigger must aspire, but is then forced to accept his position in the hot uncomfortable underworld of society (Kinnamon, *Emergence of Richard Wright* 135). The very thought of the injustice stifles him.

One evening while working, Bigger is instructed to drive the Dalton’s young daughter, Mary, to a meeting at a nearby university. The meeting turns out to be a pretext



created by Mary, and Bigger soon finds himself driving a drunken Mary and her communist boyfriend, Jan, around town. Arriving home, Bigger realises that Mary is in such a state of intoxication that he is forced to carry her upstairs to her bedroom. While Bigger is putting Mary to bed, Mrs. Dalton, Mary's blind mother, hears the commotion and enters the bedroom. Knowing the precarious situation in which he has found himself, Bigger in a panic, attempts to conceal Mary's slurred speech by placing a pillow over her face. Underestimating his own physical power, Bigger accidentally kills Mary. In a state of complete frenzy, desperate to conceal his crime, Bigger decapitates the dead girl, and attempts to burn her corpse in the furnace. However, despite his efforts, the crime is discovered, and Bigger flees from the authorities. Bigger confides in his lover, Bessie, about his crime and decides to take her with him in his flight. However, Bigger soon realises that having an additional person with him will be to his detriment, and then after raping her, he kills Bessie by smashing her skull with a brick.

Shortly after, Bigger is apprehended, and finds himself being defended in court by a young Jewish lawyer named Max. In Max's courtroom speech, the reader discovers the reasons behind Bigger's motives for murder. When Max presents his appeal to the judge, the reader learns that society has fostered the frustration and anger that lead to the murders of Mary and Bessie.

“But did Bigger Thomas really *murder*? At the risk of offending the sensibilities of this Court, I ask the question in the light of the ideals by which I *we* live! Looked at from the outside, maybe it was murder; yes. But to him it was *not* murder. If it was murder, then what was the motive? The prosecution has shouted, stormed and threatened, but he has not said *why* Bigger Thomas killed! He has not said why because he does not know. The truth is, Your Honour there was no motive as you and I understand motives within the scope of our laws today. The truth is, this boy did not kill! Oh, yes; Mary Dalton is dead. Bigger Thomas smothered her to death. Bessie Mears is dead.

Bigger Thomas battered her with a brick in an abandoned building. But did he murder? Did he kill? Listen: what Bigger Thomas did early that Sunday morning in the Dalton home and what he did that Sunday night in that empty building was but a tiny aspect of what he has been doing all his life long! He was *living*, only as he knew how, and as we have forced him to live. The actions that resulted in the death of those two women were as instinctive as breathing or blinking one's eye. It was an act of *creation!*" (Wright 366)

This last scene is a point of contention for many critics. Some, such as Malcolm Cowley felt that it was the novel's strongest, because it provided critical insight into Bigger's thoughts as well as the impending racial situation in America in the 1930's. Others, such as Clifton Fadiman, however, felt that this is precisely what rendered the scene stylistically weak; Max is blatantly manipulated as the mouthpiece for Wright's social agenda, infusing the speech too heavily with propagandistic messages (Kinnamon 17). Max's speech does not convince the judge, particularly because it does not treat Bigger as an individual, but rather as an intangible collective component, and Bigger is sentenced to death.

The story of Bigger Thomas was no doubt received with much controversy. Locke praises the novel for its artistic courage, precisely because many of the criticisms against the book can be blatantly seen from the outset. What does a story such as Bigger's mean in the greater realm of society? Were the members of the black bourgeoisie not right in affirming that such a novel would only support pre-existing stereotypes and cultural beliefs? Wouldn't Bigger be received by the white community as a prototype for all black males, confirming the notion of the virile aggressor who commits crimes without any concrete, definable motives? However, as Locke stated, these concerns must give way to the greater realisation that the story of the "Bigger Type" must be told.

Locke articulates the dilemma faced by black American writers when he states:

“Minorities have their artistic troubles as well as their social and economic ones, and one of them is to secure proper imaginative representation, particularly in fiction and drama. For here the warped social perspective induces a twisted artistic one. In these arts characterization must be abstract enough to be typical, individual enough to be convincingly human. The delicate balance between the type and the concrete individual can be struck more easily where social groups, on the one hand, have not been made supersensitive and morbid by caste and persecution, or on the other, where majority prejudice does not encourage hasty and fallacious generalization. An artist is then free to create with a single eye his own artistic vision. Under such circumstances, Macbeth’s deed does not make all Scotchmen treacherous hosts, nor Emma Bovary’s infidelity blot the escutcheon of all French bourgeois spouses. Nana and Magda represent their type, and not their respective nations, and *An American Tragedy* scarcely becomes a national libel. But it is often a different matter with Shylock, and oftener still with Uncle Tom or Porgy, and for that matter, too, with the denizens of *Tobacco Road*, or even Southern colonels, if too realistically portrayed. All of which is apropos of the Negro literary phenomenon of 1940, Bigger Thomas. What about Bigger? Is he typical, or as some hotly contest, misrepresentative? And whose “native son” is he anyway?”  
(Kinnamon 19)

Although the novel does in many ways, fall into the trap of essentialism, it is important to note that the publication of Native Son created, at the time, a contemporary discourse with which to discuss the reality faced by many blacks in the United States. Also, it must be noted that after having published Bigger’s story, Wright was able to produce his autobiography *Black Boy*. Only after having given a voice to the collective experience, could Wright speak of his own life, from his specific position. The story of poverty, abuse, malnutrition and most importantly, the oppression that Wright dealt with as a child was a reality for the blacks living in all parts of America. After the collective trauma of the middle passage, slavery, and the enstatement of Jim Crow segregation laws, black Americans, the “affected”, were left divided, isolated and estranged from the rest of America that had been “spared” from institutionalized forms of oppression and

debasement. However, because the story of Bigger and Wright was part of a collective reality, one that affected in one way or another the twelve million blacks living in America, the story of Bigger, among other things, could serve as Erickson states, “[as a] basis for communality,” inviting blacks, who were people “without homes or citizenship or any other niche in the larger order of things” to come together, and discuss their social issues on a larger platform (186). By giving Bigger a voice, Wright opened up a platform from which the subaltern Biggers of America could speak. Wright’s autobiography, Black Boy, in comparison, is as poignant as Native Son; however, the text is richer, and one may even be inclined to say, more effective, because Wright’s personal development is clearly defined not only by his social environment, but also significantly by his personal interactions with members of his family and friends. The reader is more sympathetic with Wright, as Wright unfolds into a three dimensional character, and as one explicitly learns of the personal and social obstacles young Richard must overcome. The story of Bigger leaves no room for negotiation. Bigger must die; this is his fate as determined by his environment. However, although a large proportion of oppressed Blacks living in the South did live under tragic circumstances, tragedy was not the defining principle of their lives. Other forms of negotiation, aside from religious or violent ones, were available, as Wright’s life proves. An important question to ask here is: what was the fate of the other Biggers that influenced the synthesis of Bigger Thomas? It may be speculated that Wright did not become a Bigger because Wright’s personal life, the other element necessary in the formation of an identity, was clearly different from Bigger’s.

There is no doubt that Wright himself realised his “Bigger” potential; in Black Boy, Wright remembers a daydream, of fighting back against his oppressors.

Remembering the story a black woman who avenged her husband by striking out and killing members of the mob responsible for her husband’s death, Wright relates to the reader the explicit details of his fantasy.

“I resolved that I would emulate the black woman if I were ever faced with a white mob; I would conceal a weapon, pretend that I had been crushed by the wrong done to one of my loved ones; then, just when they thought I had accepted their cruelty as the law of my life, I would let go with my gun and kill as many of them as possible before they killed me. The story of the woman’s deception gave form and meaning to confused and defensive feelings that had long been sleeping in me.”  
(Black Boy 73-74)

The reader is left to conclude that the oppressive environment of the segregated South had fostered the same feelings found in Bigger, in Wright himself; hence the urgency of Max’s final speech, stating that white America had “forced” Bigger, Wright, and millions of others, to entertain daydreams of murder, harbour feelings of anger and hostility, thus creating a threat to society at large. The story of Bigger had to be told, even if only for utilitarian purposes, but more importantly, it had to be told by Wright, who, growing up with the same social, economic, educational and racial barriers, possessed potential for the Bigger type. As Kinnamon states; “That a novelist rather than a criminal emerged [...] is a phenomenon not easily explained.”(Kinnamon, *Emergence of Richard Wright* 3).

This last point, however, excellently demonstrates the irony inherent in Wright’s writings. Wright was a strong proponent of literary naturalism or environmental determinism, which claims that a specific environment will produce a specific personality

type; however he himself somehow defied this theory: Wright did not become a Bigger. Despite his delinquent childhood, he did not end up a thief, a drunkard, or a murderer. Instead he became a critically acclaimed novelist who, arguably, influenced significant change in the world around him. This allows the reader to question the effectiveness of the mythic identity, or character, in accurately portraying a cultural group. Alain Locke is correct in underscoring the problematic of art, especially literature, for an artist from any marginalised group; whatever character is produced will undoubtedly be taken as an “authentic” and at times the only representation, and thus the only way to understand a larger whole. However, what happens when a minority writer explicitly states that the character he or she is creating is in fact a prototype? Did the articulation of a social myth then allow Wright to speak more openly about his own personal identity? What must also be considered is the impact Native Son had on future generations of black American authors. The generation of scholars whose work was influenced by Wright, such as Baldwin, C.L.R. James and Ellison, produced remarkable works which demonstrated the difference within the larger collective. Although the story of Bigger Thomas needed to be told, and had an important social impact at the time at which it was written, Wright also demonstrates the key aspect of the concept of ‘strategic’ essentialism.

Wright’s novel became most problematic, due not to Bigger’s prototypic character, but rather that the novel came to be seen as the Negro Literature *par excellence*. Suddenly, the gritty naturalist form of the protest novel became the prototype for all literature for black Americans. This debate raged on, particularly in the Black Arts movement of the 1950’s and 60’s, where many sought an art form that spoke not only of an educated and privileged elite, but also of the masses. Due in part to widespread

political disillusionment, it was felt that the integrationalist approach, undertaken in writings from the Harlem Renaissance, could not accurately portray black life in America, nor reflect the situation faced by many black Americans. In response to this author and scholar, James Baldwin, Wright's young protégé, published the scholarly article, "Everybody's Protest Novel". This article articulates the problem of the protest novel, mainly that the form forces categories on a world which cannot be categorized, flattening out all other societal dimensions. In the protest novel, Baldwin states:

"...we (black Americans) find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorization.[...] We take our shape, it is true, within and against that cage of reality bequeathed us at our birth; and yet it is precisely through our dependence on this reality that we are most endlessly betrayed."  
(Baldwin, 'Everybody's Protest Novel' 1658)

The protest novel fails, due to this insistence on categorization, which is itself a rejection of life and humanity. This article by Baldwin caused a feud to erupt within the black artistic community, which eventually favoured Wright and left Baldwin and Ellison by the way side. However, modern scholarship has re-evaluated Baldwin's theory, and whilst the impact and necessity of Native Son has not been diminished, Baldwin's critical review is also given great significance. The emergence of the Black Arts and its political sister, the Black Power movement of the 1950's and 60's, was greatly needed in the United States. Race relations were strained, particularly because the non violent approach adopted by Martin Luther King Jr. was met with police brutality, disillusioning many black Americans with regard to the effectiveness of passive resistance. Instead, the Black Power and Black Arts movements offered a more proactive approach by which to

overcome oppression.<sup>1</sup> Also, the movements were greatly influenced by the fall of colonialism that was occurring worldwide. Suddenly, the economic history and origins of slavery and racist ideologies began to surface and a growing sense of “race” pride took hold. Slavery was no longer a source of shame and debasement, but rather a wrong inflicted on a collective by the dominant hegemony. Influenced strongly by the writings of Caribbean psychiatrist and intellectual, Frantz Fanon, many within the African diaspora, in America as elsewhere, began to reconstruct the notion of Africa as a motherland, and African heritage a source of pride. One of the strengths in the Black Arts movements was its emphasis that art be removed from the ivory tower of academia and be made available to the general public. As such, a great emphasis was placed on poetry, which could be written in a short period, and was widely accessible. However, as is now recognized, the shortcoming of the Black Arts movement was that it created an essential, authentic notion of blackness which alienated many within the community, mainly women and people of same sexual orientation, seeing that the ‘blackness’ articulated during the Black Arts movement did not include, or downright discriminated against, these two groups (McKay 1791-1806).

Richard Wright’s Native Son, and the Black Arts movement which sprung from it, demonstrate Hall’s emphasis that essentialism : “...only threatens to do so [detract from original insight] if we mistake this ‘cut’ of identity - this *positioning*, which makes meaning possible – as a natural and permanent.” (398). If meaning is interpreted as natural and permanent, individuals and cultures may fall into significant limitations, and therefore all positioning of cultural and individual identities should be understood as

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<sup>1</sup> The Black Power movement was influenced by the ideologies of Malcom X and the Nation of Islam. It must be noted that after a life-altering visit to Mecca, Malcom X broke with his earlier ideologies and sought alliance with other leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.



temporary, allowing simultaneously for the assertion and negotiation of an identity. The next chapter will discuss how Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man addresses the issue of identification.

## ***Chapter 4***

In 1952, approximately a decade after the publication of Native Son, Ralph Ellison attempted to depict the problematic nature of black American identity in his novel Invisible Man. The reader follows the novel's protagonist in his personal journey of self-actualisation and definition, encountering along the way a host of characters that aid in his self-discovery, demonstrating for both the reader and the protagonist the complex nature of identity. Much like Native Son, Invisible Man was proclaimed an instant classic; awarded the Prix de Rome in 1955 and the Medal of Freedom in 1969, it earned Ellison an honorary doctorate from Harvard University in 1974. The novel seems to ask the following questions: how is one to posit oneself and be seen as an independent entity in a society whose very foundation is contingent on monolithic notions of 'race'? How is one to negotiate through a world where myths of a racial binary are the very threads used to weave the complex societal fabric? Also, anticipating the recent debate put forth by Gilroy, how do notions of 'race' infringe on questions of humanity? More importantly, how is identity dependent on the latter concept? This chapter will examine these questions at greater length through an analysis of Ellison's work in relation to the earlier theories introduced in the first chapter. First, however, a short account of Ellison's life will be presented in order to gain greater insight into his masterpiece, Invisible Man.

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City on March 11<sup>th</sup>, 1913, in a small middle class neighbourhood to Lewis and Ida Ellison. The Ellisons were part of a lineage of successful black American men. A former slave, Grandfather Ellison, held public office during Reconstruction. William Ellison, Lewis' uncle, was the local school teacher in Abbeville, South Carolina. Lewis Ellison, himself, had served in the military during the

American imperial expansion, and was sent to fulfil various duties in New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and the Philippines. At the time of Ralph Ellison's birth, many black Americans were moving west to Oklahoma, a place heralded by black American organizations as a virtual Black Atlantis. Ida and Lewis were among many black Americans to migrate from their native south to the west to escape the institutionalised racist practices of newly implemented segregation legislation. For Lewis and Ida, like many other blacks in America at the turn of the century, Oklahoma seemed to represent a promised land. Established in the period following slavery, the West was a new America, without the history of oppression and slavery that dominated the other states. The West was heralded as a place with no history; therefore the possibilities for the future remained in this new territory, the irony being that the Oklahoma Territory had been wrested from native American tribes such as the Choctaw, Cree, Cherokee and Chickasaw, a fact which was skilfully downplayed by propagandistic publications (Jackson 11). Among the thousands of black Americans fleeing to Oklahoma during what later was known as the Great Migration, were a significant number of educated black professionals, commonly referred to as the black Bourgeoisie. The black Bourgeois were generally descendents of slaves who had acquired the ability to read, or had gained some form of capital and education for their freed children. This group stressed self-reliance and placed an emphasis on a formal education in the Liberal Arts. Due to Lewis' military service, the Ellisons were regarded as an honourable and respectable couple, allowing their inclusion in the elitist group. It would seem natural that, with the expectations of a bright future, Lewis and Ida, would attempt to pass on that hope to their first-born son, by bestowing him with the name of one of the greatest American intellectuals, Ralph Waldo Emerson.

When Ralph was but the age of three he witnessed an accident that would directly lead to the death of his father. Exceedingly proud of his first-born son, Lewis often took young Ralph with him carting coal and ice to the local merchants around the town. One day, while delivering a large block of ice, Lewis slipped and fell down a flight of stairs. The ice sliced through his side, puncturing the wall of his stomach and causing massive internal haemorrhage (Jackson 19). Gravely wounded, Lewis Ellison was taken to a nearby hospital where doctors proposed a new experimental surgery to save his life. On a day in mid-July, 1916, Ralph Ellison entered the hospital room where he would see his father for the last time. Before entering the surgical room, Lewis made a joke with his small child. This event demonstrated for Ralph the tragicomic, which would later become one of the major proponents of his writing. Lewis Ellison died a few days later.

In addition to this personal change in the Ellison family, there were also larger social changes taking place; most importantly however, was the recognition that Oklahoma had then become a Jim Crow state. All around young Ralph, things began to change; local schools no longer admitted black students, certain parts of town prohibited blacks from taking up residency, and lynching became increasingly commonplace. Relegated to the familiar position of second class citizens, many blacks were devastated and questioned the possibility of ever being free in their own country. A result of the implementation of Jim Crow legislation was the emergence of many groups championing black pride. These groups stressed the diverse ancestry of American blacks, and attempted to instil a sense of self worth within the community in order to counteract the negative stereotypes imposed by the dominant white hegemony. A member of many socialist parties, Ida attempted to instil similar values in her two young sons, teaching

them the importance of self worth and pride. During Lewis' life in Oklahoma, literate blacks and whites often visited the Ellison household. Ida attempted to continue this tradition by exposing Ralph and his brother, Herbert, to the homes and lifestyles of her friends. This was a concerted effort to broaden the young boys' perspective on the world beyond the black community, the United States, and most importantly, the segregated South. Often working as a domestic labourer, Ida brought home used copies of *Vanity Fair* for Ralph in order to stimulate his young intellect. During the years following the death of Lewis Ellison, the family moved around to a succession of homes; among these was the home of Reverend J.E. Toombs, who had his own private home and library. At Reverend Toom's, Ralph developed his lifelong passion for literature. Another incident, which is often cited by scholars of Ellison, as well as Ellison himself, was the fostering of a friendship between Ellison and a young white American boy named Henry "Hoolie" Davis. Through the alliance with "Hoolie" Ralph was further exposed to literature, as the Davis family owned an extensive library. A year his elder, and educated at home by a private tutor, "Hoolie" provided Ralph with a companion who could intellectually challenge him. In addition to this, Ellison's friendship with "Hoolie", offered him an easy introduction to the white world, quite different from the introductions received by many other blacks across the United States. This left a lasting impression on Ellison, who for the rest of his life was able to see the beauty in both black and white American heritage.

Race pride and respect for the hybrid nature of American culture and heritage were further stressed by the teaching staff at Frederic Douglass High School. The school curriculum also promoted the works of black intellectuals and writers such as W.E.B. Dubois and Phyllis Wheatley. Sophisticated and challenging ideas were introduced to the

students, by adding to the curriculum ideas and journals stemming from the New Negro Movement, as well as stressing the mixed heritage of black Americans. Students were often reminded that they were many generations removed from their African-born ancestors; they were not African, but rather Americans of mixed blood lineage (Jackson 51).

Although efforts were made to counteract white racism, Ellison was not immune to the emotional upset caused by discriminatory practices. An example of this was when the local Zoo became segregated, permitting only white entry, and Mrs. Ellison was humiliated by guards who asked her to leave the premises. Another instance cited by Ellison was when, as a young boy, he entered a nearby town looking for work. An older white man noticed that Ellison was greatly tired from his journey and invited him to sit on a wooden crate. As Ellison sat down he felt the jolt of an electric current surge through his bottom – the crate had been rigged, much to the amusement of the older man (Jackson 80).

Young Ellison, nevertheless, focused not on the negative occurrences in the South but rather on personal interests that he had begun developing at Frederick Douglass High School. In his pre-adolescent years, Ellison lived next door to Frank Mead, who sparked Ellison's interest in the arts, such as drawing and painting. Frank's father, Joseph Mead, was the first person to introduce young Ralph to music, through sporadic trumpet lessons. Shortly after, the high school music instructor noticed Ralph's musical inclination and encouraged the young pupil's interest in the trumpet. Music became Ralph's main passion, in which he wholeheartedly invested his time, so much so that he neglected other subjects, such as English. When Ralph became interested in the art form, a severe divide

was occurring within the black American community with regard to music. Jazz was the topic of many debates within the black community. The bourgeoisie class generally regarded the form as unacceptable, because it had been born in the red-light district of New Orleans, and uncivilized, because it did not conform to the classical standards set by white society. The younger generation, however, noticed the musical complexity in the genre. Ellison and his peers sought to master both the classical form of music as well as the Jazz form. They did not see the tension between the two, for in order to play either form one had to be an exceptional musician, and this was the main goal of their endeavours. Later on, Ralph had the good fortune of taking advanced trumpet lessons from a German immigrant named Ludwig Hebestreter, who would give Ellison lessons in exchange for the service of having his lawn mowed. These experiences undoubtedly shaped Ellison's outlook on race-relations within the United States, giving him a unique understanding of the correlation between the opposing sides of any binary situation, exemplified in the facility with which Ellison seemed capable of reconciling the tension between two seemingly irreconcilable oppositions.

Ellison graduated a year behind his class, in May of 1932, and in July of 1933, Ellison hoboed his way to Tuskegee School of Music. Young Ralph studied as a member of the music department under the tutelage of William Dawson. Unfortunately, there was much tension between Ralph and his instructor which led to his break with the music department in 1935. Although it was not a definite break, that summer Ellison left Tuskegee and moved to New York City in an attempt to find a summer job. Shortly after arriving in New York, Ellison had the fortune of crossing paths with poet, Langston Hughes. The year before, Hughes had lectured at Tuskegee, and had greatly impressed



young Ralph. A year later, encountering Hughes in the lobby of the YMCA, where he had been renting a room, Ralph seized the opportunity to approach the older man. Hughes took the young man as his protégé, introducing Ellison into Harlem society, as well as to new theories such as the Communist and Marxist doctrines. A year after arriving in New York, Ellison was introduced by Hughes to Richard Wright. Wright encouraged Ellison to begin writing for various Communist journals, and had his first fictional piece, “Hymie’s Bull”, published in The New Challenge. Shortly after “Hymie’s Bull” had been submitted for publication, Ida Ellison became gravely ill, and Ellison left New York for Ohio, where Ida died in the winter of 1937 (Jackson 190). Ellison remained in Ohio for over a year, to help sort out various family affairs after his mother’s death. It was during this time that he developed doubts concerning the Communist doctrine. Noticing that Communist journals very seldom reached the rural areas, Ellison concluded that the Communists were preaching to the converted liberal minds of Northern urbanites. Returning to New York in the spring of 1938, Ellison was further disillusioned concerning the agenda of the left. This disillusionment was due largely to the Communist Party’s failure to use Joe Louis’ boxing victory as an opportunity to organise black Harlemites and promote social change. According to popular belief, the leftist party avoided dealing with specific social problems in Harlem, such as overcrowded housing, high rent prices and unemployment, because these issues could lead to a popular rise in black determinism and thus undermine the agenda of the popular front, demonstrating for Ellison, as well as many other supporters of the left, the party’s interest in international directives over actual social conditions in Harlem (Jackson 285-288). Although Ellison continued reviewing for various Marxist publications, he saw limitations on the

individual in the Russian ideology. As Ellison grew increasingly disillusioned with the Communist and Marxists movements, his interest in the art form of Blues lyrics grew substantially (Jackson 256). Continuing as a reviewer for the New Masses, his editors dismissed his new theories on the Blues. It was also at this time, in the spring of 1942, that Ellison became a key writer for The Negro Quarterly. These events and the ensuing challenges of the following year later proved to be the definitive years in the development of Ellison's distinctive fictional voice.

In 1943, Ellison faced impending military service, causing much exhaustion, fatigue and nervousness for the young writer. Due to the hypocrisy inherent in the fact that people who were denied equal rights in their country of origin were drafted to fight in the name of democracy, black Americans held an antagonistic attitude concerning World War II. This, and the continuing housing crisis, led to frequent riots in Harlem. These pressing personal, social and political issues no doubt provided Ellison with fertile soil to produce fiction, and during this period Ellison produced his first notable literary achievement, "The King of the Bingo Game". Addressing the psychological dilemmas of the modern man, "The King of the Bingo Game", demonstrated Ellison's unique literary style. Shortly after its release, another of Ellison's fictional works, "Flying Home", was published in the 1944 edition of Cross Section, an anthology featuring many respected authors, including, Richard Wright. After many years, Ralph Ellison was finally building a note-worthy reputation. However, it was the short story, "In a Strange Country", which accurately demonstrated Ellison's manipulation of complex narrative voices, and new critical insight. The story was based on Ellison's experience overseas working as a cook for the U.S. Army, and displayed the fruition of the larger concepts of Invisible Man,

such as the racial complexity of blackness, as well as the use of technology to impose racial differences (Jackson 297). The publication of “In a Strange Country” led to a book contract for the sum of fifteen hundred dollars. Unfortunately, shortly after signing the contract, Ellison was drafted once again and did not return to New York until April of 1945. While serving his military term, Ellison became increasingly interested in the field of Psychology, which gave him insight into the psychology of American culture (Jackson 310). Returning to New York in 1945, the publication of a critical essay, entitled “Richard Wright’s Blues” marked Ellison’s arrival upon the literary scene. In this essay, Ellison put forward his theories of blues as an art form that provided emotional and psychological catharsis and highlighted the power of art in black cultural behaviour; this essay also introduced his signature concept of the tragic-comic (Jackson 315). After the publication of “Richard Wright’s Blues”, Ellison was awarded an eighteen hundred dollar fellowship from the Rosenwald committee. This fellowship, in conjunction with his book contract, released Ellison from the obligation of reviewer, allowing him to focus on the development of his personal narrative and authoritative style. Unlike Wright, Ellison wanted to release black writing from the constraints of protest fiction. Instead, as demonstrated in the concept of the tragic-comic, Ellison attempted to explain American race relations through the infusion of Hegel’s binary notions and Freud’s psychoanalysis (Jackson 322). With the release of his ground breaking article, Ellison’s true genius began to emerge, and he finally gained the praise and respect of the greatest minds in his field.

After the publication of “Richard Wright’s Blues”, Ellison moved farther and farther away from the literary Harlemites, and established himself as an artist, as opposed

to an art critic. With the financial support of his wife Fanny, Ellison began working on Invisible Man in 1945. Ellison had been working, alongside Wright, in the opening of the LaFargue Mental Hygiene Clinic. Both authors thought that political action should be taken, not solely through political protest, but also through the application of social sciences, such as psychiatry, in order to heal actual wounds within the larger community. During this time, Ellison took notice, and was subsequently influenced by, the zoot suit sub culture. Recently introduced to the existentialist philosophy, Ellison saw historical and philosophical significance in the black American experience. He felt that American blacks, who daily lived with the horror and chaos of poverty and discrimination, had a philosophical upper hand over French Existentialists. In his new artistic endeavours, Ellison disassociated himself from writers he termed “sloganeers”, black writers who were using race as the steam with which to power the engine of their literary undertakings, and sought to write a novel that provided psychological and philosophical insight on the black American existence (Jackson 339). Ellison wanted to move away from the literary tradition of the protest novel and instead describe cultural practices and behaviours, as well as the paradoxical logic that defined United States race relations (Jackson 341). With these thoughts in mind, Ellison began writing Invisible Man.

Ellison struggled with the novel for approximately six years. He received substantial encouragement, as well as an extension on his contract, when his “Battle Royal” scene was published in the British journal 48. However, following this the creative process proved to be long and painful for Ellison. This was due in part to the pressure felt after the publication of the “Battle Royal” and in part to the testimonial nature of the novel, which mixed fiction with autobiography, which raised topics that

Ellison was still grappling with himself. Finally, on February 4 1952, Ellison submitted the book for publication, and Invisible Man was released two months later by Random House. Upon its publication, Invisible Man was instantly heralded a classic; Ellison was awarded many medals, awards and prizes, most notably the National Book Award Gold Medal and the John B. Russwurm Award in 1953. Ellison's genius had finally been recognised.

The story of Invisible Man focuses on the nameless protagonist's journey in the search for his identity. The novel begins with the Prologue in which Invisible Man attempts to explain his invisibility to his audience. The reader follows the Invisible Man through his journey, from a naïve student in the South, to a rabble rousing member of the Brotherhood in the North, and finally to his underground "hole", into which he has been chased, and from which he has not yet emerged. The reader understands the protagonist's invisibility is mainly due to his attempts at conforming to identities that have been provided for him by both black and white America. We first encounter Invisible Man as a naïve high school graduate, preparing to give a speech in front of local white patrons. Invisible Man refers to himself as a figure similar to Booker T. Washington, aspiring to be a great oratory leader. He is to deliver his speech, however, only after having undergone the Battle Royal, where he is put in a ring, blindfolded, and pitted against a dozen other black youths. The battle is fought and Invisible Man emerges the victor, and must deliver his speech to the crowd of drunken patrons, who pay him little attention. After delivering his speech, Invisible Man is awarded a calf skin briefcase along with a scholarship to the local Negro college. Later that night Invisible Man dreams of his grandfather and of finding a note in his briefcase that dictates "Keep this Nigger -Boy

running.”(Ellison 33). Running is exactly what Invisible Man does, from that point on, until he is chased into a hole at the end of the novel. After the Battle Royal, Invisible Man is in the college, where he is given the duty of escorting a wealthy Northern patron, Mr. Norton, around the campus. Critic Philip Brian Harper accentuates the importance of this scene as it is the first instance where identity is called into question. In this particular scene, Invisible Man in driving Mr. Norton around the campus, and continually looks in the rear view mirror. In the mirror, Invisible Man does not see his own reflection, but rather that of Mr. Norton. Harper draws attention to Lacan’s mirror stage, and with this concludes that in order to analyse Invisible Man’s attempts in developing his own identity, this must be assessed through the two aspects of “idealization” and “differentiation”, addressed in Lacan’s text. Harper concludes:

What this scene in the novel represents, then, is the intersection of psychology by politics, such that the achievement of self-image that helps constitute psychic “stability” however imperfect that achievement must necessarily be – is the privilege only of the few of optimum economic, social, and political standing, whose very success at self-definition sets them up as an impediment to the self-constitutive efforts of those less fortunate. (119)

Here Harper’s emphasis on the contingency of individual psychology on economic, social and political standing, recollects Hall’s earlier statement that individuals and cultures and their identities are positioned by the discourse of history and power. This once again raises the question, how is individual identity shaped by these different discourses?

While chauffeuring Mr. Norton around campus, Invisible Man takes the elderly patron to visit Jim Trueblood, a sharecropper who has impregnated his young daughter, and has been ostracised by the black community. Trueblood tells his story to Mr. Norton in exchange for financial capital and Mr. Norton, shaken by the story, asks the

protagonist for alcohol to soothe his frazzled nerves. Invisible Man takes Mr. Norton to the Golden Day, a nearby brothel frequented by 'insane' black war veterans. The explicit social commentary Ellison makes here clearly draws on the actual conditions of blacks who fought for their country in World War I. In the introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ellison asks the question, "how could you treat a Negro as an equal during times of war and then deny him equality during times of peace?" (xii). Ellison reminds his audience that after the war, a German soldier could easily migrate to the United States and receive better treatment than an American of colour, highlighting for Ellison the hypocrisy inherent within the American democratic principles and practices. Many veterans returning from the war in Europe were no doubt aware of this dilemma, which could easily render any individual 'insane'. The reader is forced to question the nature of the veterans' insanity; was their shell shocked state a result of traumas experienced during the war, or traumas of their everyday experience as American citizens? Here Ellison seems to anticipate the later theories on trauma, presented in this thesis by Caruth, Erickson and Hirsh. What happens to the individual who is daily faced with the trauma of discrimination and discriminatory practices? How does the historical trauma experienced by a community affect the individual?

At the Golden Day, chaos breaks loose; Mr. Norton is injured, and Invisible Man is aided by a veteran who served as a physician in Europe. This doctor immediately diagnoses Mr. Norton's condition, prior to which only the most skilled physicians in the country had been able to diagnose. The veteran implores Invisible Man to stay, as he retells his story of living in France, becoming a famous physician and returning to the United States with the hope that his "knowledge" would bring him "dignity." However,

the latter is denied him when he is chased out of his city by “men in masks”. The reader is left to conclude that this denial is what has rendered the doctor ‘insane’. It is also interesting to note that the physician is the first to diagnose the protagonist’s invisibility. After having told his story, the veteran asks Invisible Man if he understands its significance; however the meaning is lost on Invisible Man, to which the doctor states:

“You see,” he said turning to Mr.Norton, “he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. *Understand*. Understand? It’s worse than that. He registers with his sense but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn’t digest it. Already he is – well, bless my soul! Behold! A walking zombie! Already he’s learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He’s invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!”(Ellison 94)

By referring to Invisible Man as mechanical, the doctor raises the question of humanity; the evocation of a machine implies the absence of humanity. A correlation between invisibility and humanity follows; invisibility is the result of the repression of one’s humanity. The veteran then concludes:

“But seriously, because you both fail to understand what is happening to you. You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see – and you, looking for destiny! It’s classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region and he sees far less than you. Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less – a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force--” (Ellison 95)

Here Ellison stresses the idea that larger notions of race have stripped both black and white communities of their visibility, their humanity. Here Gilroy’s argument that race-thinking does not permit one to think in terms of humanity is demonstrated. The physician’s speech is cut short by Mr.Norton who, disliking the vet’s opinion, presses Invisible Man to take him back to the campus. At the campus, Invisible Man loses the



“only identity he has ever known” when he is expelled from the college by head, Dr.

Bledsoe. Here Harper notes:

Once we recognise the implication of the operative political economy in the psychic affect on the black subject, it is clear that the campus of the Negro college is by no means separate from the site at which industrial capitalism operates but rather continuous with it, and the Invisible Man’s seeming exile to the world of business emerges as his unwitting strike towards the very root of his problem of psychic self-definition. (121)

After being expelled, Invisible Man finds himself headed North, equipped with sealed letters of reference from Dr. Bledsoe. Interestingly enough, the vet appears on the same bus that is to take Invisible Man North, which is no doubt connected with the events of the previous evening. The vet predicts with accuracy what Invisible Man’s new experience will be like, and leaves Invisible Man with the advice that he should become his own father. The vet once again correctly guesses that his meaning will escape the protagonist by asking that Invisible Man ‘thinks about it.’ The implication that meaning has escaped Invisible Man is similar to Hall’s theory outlined earlier, that meaning is often deferred. This theory is further demonstrated in the following scene. Although the physician’s exact meaning has escaped Invisible Man, a seed appears to have been planted in his mind. Arriving North, Invisible Man questions how a millionaire such as Mr. Norton earned his money; this is the first instance in the novel where Invisible Man questions the nature of his environment. However, instead of becoming aware of the intricate economic dependency between the North and the South, Invisible Man ignores his question. Nevertheless, he is forced to re-evaluate his earlier thought when, upon discovering that his recommendation letters discouraged would-be employers from hiring him, Invisible Man, finds work in the Optic White paint factory. One of his occupations at the factory is to mix black primer into the paint which gives it an optic white

characteristic. Here again, Invisible Man begins to question the inter-related nature of the paint's black primer and white appearance. Invisible Man is once more confronted by these thoughts in his second occupation working as an assistant in the basement of the plant to Mister Lucius Brockway. While working with Brockway, Invisible Man slowly discovers the answer to his earlier question. However, before internalising the answer, he is injured in an explosion. To this event Harper notes:

The protagonist's simultaneous recognition of the nature of whiteness and the inability of blackness similarly to establish itself due to interrelated factors of economics and racial politics is figured in the text as an explosion in the factory boiler room, which the Invisible Man recalls by noting, 'In that clear instant of consciousness I opened my eyes to a blinding flash.' (225) The flash, which is both revealing and blinding – which both marks and terminates the 'clear instance of consciousness' in which eyes are opened – represents the beginnings of Invisible Man's true crisis of identity. (125)

At the precise moment that Invisible Man begins to gain awareness, he is caught in an explosion, which causes slight amnesia. Invisible man is aware that in the explosion, he “lost irrevocably an important victory” (Ellison 230). This victory is certainly related to his understanding of the complex structure of his society and how this has shaped his existence, humanity and identity.

As Harper suggests, it is at this point, more specifically when Invisible Man is taken to the factory hospital to be treated, that his true crisis with identity begins. Awakening in the hospital, the protagonist does not remember his reason for being there. Also, Invisible Man notes that his mind was “blank, as if I had just begun to live” (Ellison 233), suggesting that this scene is a re-birth of sorts. This idea of re-birth again calls into question the notions of psychology and identity. Harper provides the following analysis of the factory hospital scene:

“The boiler-room accident sends him to the company hospital where he awakes to a disorienting array of voices, mirrors, and elements of a ‘white world’ (233), that, he says, ‘I could no more escape than I could think of my identity’ (237). His inability to remember his name – which he equates with his ‘identity’ – in the face of the white medical staff’s questions, racial jokes, and mirrored equipment indicates his inability to posit his own ideal image through either conventional ‘reflective’ techniques or the color-coded opposition by which white identity distinguishes itself. The protagonist does recognize that his ‘freedom’ and his identity ‘are involved with each other,’ thinking to himself, ‘when I discover who I am, I’ll be free’ (237). Yet his discovery of his identity seems equally contingent upon the achievement of his freedom – freedom from the limits on black self-achievement that seem endemic in the interrelation of blacks and whites and thus escapable through reimmersion in the black community.”(125)

Harper’s analysis is quite strong, particularly the explicit parallel between freedom, identity and the limitations which have been placed on black identity, a parallel which recalls Gilroy and Hall and is quite valuable for the purposes of this thesis. It must also be noted, that although the protagonist is brought to the hospital for a physical trauma that he has suffered, he is treated through the use of psychiatric techniques. This of course is similar to the explanation provided earlier by Caruth, of physical trauma and psychological trauma. The reader questions again what it is that Invisible Man is being treated for. Invisible Man awakens to hear discussions of a new treatment versus a lobotomy to cure his ailment. However, Invisible Man cannot decipher if he or someone else is the subject of discussion, concluding that “some of it sounded like a discussion of history...” (Ellison 236). Here, Invisible Man’s confusion between history and psychology asks the question evoked earlier in this thesis: How are the disciplines of history and psychology related? The debate in the hospital continues, and the doctors decide that the protagonist’s psychology is of no importance.

“‘The machine will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative side effects of a knife,’ the voice said. ‘You see, instead of severing the prefrontal lobe, a single lobe, that is, we apply pressure in the proper degrees to

the major centres of nerve control – [...] ‘And what’s more’ the voice went on triumphantly, “the patient is both physically and neurally whole.’

‘But what of his psychology?’

‘Absolutely of no importance!’ the voice said. ‘the patient will live as he has to live, and with absolute integrity. Who could ask more? He’ll experience no major conflict of motives, and what is even better, society will suffer no traumata on his account.’

There was a pause. A pen scratched on paper. Then, ‘Why not castration, doctor?’ a voice asked waggishly, causing me to start, a pain tearing though me.[...]

‘There goes your love of blood again,’ the first voice laughed. [...]

‘It’s not so funny. It would be more scientific to try and define the case. It has been developing some three hundred years –’

(Ellison 236)

This scene is of particular importance with regard to the present essay for several reasons. The explicit confusion concerning the subject of the doctors’ discussion, forces the protagonist as well as the reader to question the correlation between the individual and the larger social group in question. Also, the juxtaposition of a lobotomy and castration, stress the idea of impotence that is implicit in both procedures, and the reader becomes aware of the underlying discourse of power. In addition, the discussion in question which appears to be ‘about history’, is infused with the language of psychoanalysis, sociology, and science, obliging one to consider the relationship between the different fields, as well as their correlation with economic power. This section is also of interest because, in the hospital, Invisible Man first questions the issue of humanity by stating:

“But we are all human, I thought, wondering what I meant.”

(Ellison 239)

Although unable to grasp the exact meaning of his statement, the Invisible Man seems to subconsciously understand that his current situation has been brought about by the relationship of history, sociology, science, psychology, economics and power, all of which are contingent on the larger notion of humanity. Humanity is the key to his

visibility, his identity. Although the precise meaning escapes him at this moment, the issue of humanity will return again during his story. Invisible Man is finally released from the psychological testing as an electrical cord attached to his stomach node is cut, recalling again the idea of Invisible Man's newfound awareness as a rebirth.

After being 'treated' in the hospital, Invisible Man is discharged and finds himself being rescued by Mary Hambro, a motherly landlady who provides him with room and board, while he searches for employment. This represents Invisible Man's re immersion into the black community, and also signals another issue to be addressed in the search for identity. Earlier on in the novel, it is understood that for Invisible Man to be successful in his endeavours to establish an identity, this would be contingent on his separation from the "mob", that is the black community. For this reason, Mary's comment that he is to become a race leader, who will defend the rights of the black community, immensely annoys the protagonist. Harper rightly notes here that Mary is favouring the notion of the individual for the sole purpose of the betterment of the larger collective. Invisible Man remarks here that people like Mary seem only to think in terms of "we", in opposition to himself who thinks in terms of "me" (Harper 129). Here Invisible Man asks, where does the individual begin and the collective end? More importantly, can this tension ever be resolved, and can one find individuality without neglecting the collective? To this end Harper adds:

The Invisible Man has every desire to resolve the tension between himself and his community in his own favour, as a blow for the individual. It is ironic that he sees a way to do this by inadvertently taking the advice that Mary urges on him – he becomes a "race leader" (252; 308). [...] The concept of leading one's people itself embodies a paradox in that leadership implies an individual subjectivity that, in its very force, stands in opposition to the community meant to be lead but which the leader too is supposedly – and in the Invisible Man's case, inescapably – a member. Thus the very tension the protagonist had hoped to evade by casting

his inner struggle as one himself between himself and the community confronts him again when he seems to have won his battle for individual subjectivity, and he is hard-pressed to maintain the delicate balance necessary to his continued success as a leader of his people.(130)

After delivering a powerful speech which arouses Harlemites to protest against an eviction, Invisible Man is recruited by Brother Jack and joins the Brotherhood (a fictional version of the Communist Party of the 1930's). Jack uses language such as political progress, in order to persuade Invisible Man to think in terms of the larger collective. Paradoxically, Brother Jack also manipulates Invisible Man, by appealing to him and flattering his ego on a personal, individual level. (Harper 130) Jack appeals also to the financial demands of Invisible Man, and by offering him money, Invisible Man accepts to take on a new name, from which can be inferred, an identity defined by Jack. During the Invisible Man's first official speech as a member of the Brotherhood, the notion of humanity is once again recalled. An unprepared Invisible Man faces with a crowd gathered by the Brotherhood. Speaking from his heart, Invisible Man wins the crowd's favour when he speaks of humanity:

“My voice fell to a husky whisper, ‘I feel, I feel suddenly that I’ve become *more human*. Do you understand? More human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human.”  
(Ellison 346)

Later that night, re-playing the evening in his mind, Invisible Man is baffled by this last statement. His thoughts first wander to his grandfather, although he dismisses the latter, and asks, ‘What had an old slave to do with humanity?’(Ellison 354) Here again, Ellison is making an explicit commentary; the institution of slavery relied on the pseudo-scientific myth that blacks were sub-human: An old slave had everything to do with

humanity. Invisible Man then remembers a lecture given by a high school teacher about Joyce's novel, who stated:

‘Stephen’s problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the *uncreated* features of his face. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals.’  
(Ellison 354)

This last section is of particular importance with regard to this thesis, because it articulates Derrida's contemporary thoughts on identity. In order to posit an identity, the lines of one's face or '*visage*' must be created and defined. However, Invisible Man dismisses his professor as his source as well. His teacher had not spoken of humanity. Failing to remember his earlier discussion with the war veteran, Invisible Man continues to ponder his own words:

“‘More human’...Did I mean that I had become less of what I was, less Negro, or that I was less a being apart; less an exile from down home, the South?...But all this is negative. To become less – in order to become more? Perhaps that was it, but in what way *more* human? [...] It was a mystery once more, as at the eviction I had uttered words that possessed me.”  
(Ellison 354)

Again, although the precise meaning of his own words have escaped Invisible Man, the articulation of the words have allowed Invisible Man to advance in his thought process on his own humanity, and have helped to move the Harlem Community. This recalls Hall's theory of strategic essentialism.

Hall's theory is anticipated in the novel, through the presentation of the Brotherhood's nemesis, the African Nationalist Ras the Exhorter. Taking on his new position in the movement, Invisible Man suggests that an alliance be made between his group and Ras'. However, the members of the Brotherhood downplay Ras the Exhorter as being a racist nationalist and discourage any camaraderie between their group and his.

Nevertheless the reader discovers that some of the members within the Brotherhood have an ambivalent attitude towards Ras, and other Nationalist movements. In a private discussion with the protagonist, Brother Tod Clifton acknowledges his great admiration for Black Nationalist Leader, Marcus Garvey.

“‘How do you think we’ll do?’ I said when we had finished.  
 ‘It’ll go big man,’ he said ‘It’ll be bigger than anything since Garvey.’ [...]’  
 ‘Well, we’re not Garvey, and he didn’t last.’  
 ‘No but he *must* have had something,’ he said with a sudden passion. ‘He must have had something to move all those people! Our people are *hell* to move. He must have had plenty!’ (Ellison 367)

Although an easy comparison is made between the fictional character of Ras and Marcus Garvey, another interesting way of interpreting the figure of Ras is as a personification of the Rastafarian movement which was emerging at the time of the novel’s publication.

When questioned as to the origins of Ras’ name, Brother Clifton discloses the information that Ras is a title of respect in the East (Ellison 376). This recalls Ras Tafari Makonnen, the pre-coronation name of Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I, from which the previously named Garveyites adopted the name Rastafarian. General feelings of ambivalence towards Ras are further revealed during a run-in between Invisible Man, Brother Clifton, and the Nationalist Leader. Although fighting against Ras, and concluding that he is ‘crazy’, Invisible Man and Brother Clifton nevertheless find themselves being moved by Ras’ discourse on pride and solidarity within the black diaspora. Invisible Man admits to being “caught in the crude, insane eloquence of his plea”, and does not know if he was “angry or amazed” (Ellison 374). This ambivalence in attitude suggests the dilemma with Afro-centric movements. As Hall importantly emphasises, despite their flaws, several Black Nationalist movements have significantly contributed to the political advancement of the African diaspora and therefore cannot be



easily dismissed. It is also during this encounter that Ras questions whether Invisible Man and Brother Clifton are asleep or awake. This metaphor is later applied by Invisible Man himself, in the beginning/end prologue. This encounter also leads Brother Clifton to reveal the concept of falling outside of history, a concept that becomes a major tenet in the novel.

“[ ...] ‘But it’s on the inside that Ras is strong,’ Clifton said. ‘On the inside he’s dangerous. [...] Did you hear how he was talking? Did you hear what he was saying?’

‘I heard him, sure,’ I said.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I suppose sometimes a man has to plunge outside history...’

‘What?’

‘Plunge outside, turn his back... Otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts.’”  
(Ellison 377)

Clifton’s evocation of history and the ways in which people are affected and live ‘inside’ of history, can be directly related to Hall’s theory that people have been positioned by and speak from a particular history.

Shortly after the encounter with Ras and his gang of thugs, Invisible Man receives an anonymous note telling him to ‘know his place’, and not move too quickly. Following this incident, Invisible Man is removed, under false pretences, from the Harlem District and sent downtown to deal with the women’s question. Invisible Man remains downtown for several months before being urgently called back to Harlem due to the disappearance of Brother Tod Clifton.

Arriving back in Harlem, Invisible Man is dismayed by the discovery that the Brotherhood has fallen out of favour, the headquarters abandoned and the community significantly neglected. Searching for answers, Invisible Man stumbles across Brother Clifton, who has become a street vendor, peddling racist paraphernalia. Invisible Man is

shocked and outraged by his friend's new occupation, and is further horrified as he bears witness to Brother Clifton's murder, when he is shot down by a policeman. This is a defining event for Invisible Man, as he grasps the meaning of 'falling outside of history'. Invisible Man asks; "Where were the historians today? And how would they put it [Clifton's death] down?"(Invisible Man 439) Invisible Man becomes aware of the role of power in the recording of history, when he arrives at the conclusion that the police officer will be Brother Clifton's historian, and will record him as a petty criminal, with no acknowledgement of Clifton's prior activity within and contribution to the community. Again, the question is raised about how people are positioned by history, and the play of economic and social power in the construction and telling of history. Riding on the subway later that day, Invisible Man attentively observes Hep Cats and is sensitive to their exclusion from society and history. The protagonist concedes that he has also failed to 'see' the young zoot suiters, realising that:

"They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them."  
(Ellison 443)

Hearing a blues song playing in a nearby store, Invisible Man wonders:

"Was this all that would be recorded? Was this the only true history of the times, a mood blared by trumpets, trombones, saxophones and drums, a song with turgid, inadequate words?"  
(Ellison 443)

This, of course, recalls Ellison's earlier theory of the blues as a strategy for psychological catharsis; however, this passage also articulates quite effectively the voicelessness of the subaltern. How is the subaltern to articulate their experiences? Although the importance of music in the articulation of a group's experiences should not be downplayed, the scene suggests that the sole medium of music is an insufficient means to give voice to the

experiences of a subaltern group. Following his observance of the hep cats, Invisible Man attempts to give a voice to Brother Clifton's life by organising a public funeral. At the funeral, Invisible Man delivers a speech and again invokes the discourse of humanity and history, only this time he successfully articulates the way in which one is contingent on the other.

“He had struggled for the Brotherhood on a hundred street corners and he thought it would make him more human, but he died like any dog in the road. [...] It was a normal mistake of which many are guilty: He thought he was a man and that men were not meant to be pushed around. But it was hot and he forgot his history, he forgot the time and place. He lost his hold on reality.”  
(Ellison 457)

The funeral is cause for further disillusionment. Seeing Tod Clifton's death as the perfect *élément déclencheur* to bring about social change, Invisible Man is outraged when the Brotherhood discourages him against organising the Harlem community. The protagonist realises that he has been a tool used to further the political ends of the party, and the actual conditions in Harlem were of no consequence to the Brotherhood.

Leaving the headquarters, Invisible Man becomes aware that the zoot suit counter culture also has certain liberating benefits; the uniform of the counter culture can be used as a tool of manipulation and subversion. Invisible Man resolves to use the mask of passivity to subvert the aims of the Brotherhood;

“I was to be a justifier, my task would be to deny the unpredictable human element of all Harlem so that they could ignore it when it in any way interfered with their plans. I was to keep ever before them the picture of a bright, passive, good-humoured, receptive mass ever willing to accept their every scheme.”  
(Ellison 514)

Invisible Man's plan appears to be successful when he is called to a riot in the heart of Harlem. However during the riot, the protagonist becomes dreadfully aware that his attempts have once again been in vain. The dualistic nature of the riot occurs to him; that the riot is not just a rebellion but a slaughter, the unarmed Harlemites being gravely outnumbered by the larger New York police force. The riot will have severe consequences, mainly that of a large death toll which will have an immeasurable effect on the community.

“I could see it now, see it clearly and in growing magnitude. It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the moment I had thought myself free. By pretending to agree I *had* agreed, had made myself responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the streets, and all the others whom now the night was making ripe for death.”  
(Ellison 553)

In failing to articulate, guide and harness the Harlemites' frustration and anger, Invisible Man had allowed the community to implode. During the riot, Invisible Man finds himself confronted by Ras, who has now replaced Exhorter, with Destroyer. During this encounter Invisible Man realises the similarity of their positions.

“...and I faced him, knowing I was no worse than he, nor any better, and that all the months of illusion and the night of chaos required but a few simple words, a mild, even a meek, muted action to clear the air. To awaken them and me. [...]  
'But can anyone see it,' I shouted. 'It's true, I was betrayed by those who I thought were our friends – but they counted on this man, too. They needed this *destroyer* to do their work. They deserted you so that in your despair you'd follow this man to your destruction. Can't you see it? They want you guilty of your own murder, your own sacrifice!’  
(Ellison 558)

By highlighting the dualistic nature of the riots, the brotherhood and Ras' nationalist movement, Ellison anticipates Gilroy's argument concerning the danger of such movements, precisely because they can be easily manipulated for greater political ends. However, Invisible Man is ignored by Ras and his posse, and threatened by the angry gang. It is important to note that Invisible Man is faced with an angry mob of Afrocentric black nationalists who wish to hang him for his alliance with a communist party led by whites.

“They came behind me like a draft of flames and I led them through and around to the avenue, and if they'd fired they could have me, but it was important to them that they hang me, lynch me even, since that was the way they ran, had been taught to run. I should die by hanging alone, as though only hanging would settle things, even the score.”  
(Ellison 560)

Here the confusion between an Afrocentric mob, and the practices of white supremacy mobs of the south creates an ironic tension that anticipates Gilroy's thesis that black nationalist movements ironically “borrow wholesale” from the racist ideologies of white supremacist groups.

After being chased by Ras' gang of thugs, Invisible Man is threatened by looters and falls into an open manhole. Invisible Man concludes that he is in a hole, both physically and metaphorically. In the hole, Invisible Man dreams that he is castrated by Emerson, Bledsoe, Norton, Jack and Ras. Here, the reference to castration is rather poignant due to the allusion of impotence that is easily associated with it. Invisible Man has dreamed of castration, which in many cultural mythologies signifies the worst violation, or nightmare, to be inflicted on the male body. Castration, of course, recalls notions of vulnerability, loss of virility, humiliation, and finally powerlessness. In the

context of black American history, this suggestion is extremely powerful because it also recalls the history of lynch mobs, the vigilante justice system that terrorized the black community for approximately one hundred years after slavery. Many black American men were accosted, dismembered, hung, and finally burned by mobs of angry whites. However, it must be stressed here that Invisible Man only *dreams* of castration; his actual person has not been physically violated. This mention of dreams is a psychological reference, indicating that a sort of mental castration or impotence has occurred, recalling the discourse of power evoked earlier in the hospital scene. The allusion of dreams also alludes to Cauth's earlier definition of Trauma, and the manner in which trauma manifests itself in nightmares. This also recalls the theories of post-memory, and how the memory of vigilante lynch mobs, and everything entailed within that history, continues to play itself out in the psychology of black Americans. Shortly after concluding that he is in a 'hole', the protagonist informs the reader that he is in a state of hibernation, temporary inaction. Eliciting the temporary nature of impotence, this is by no means a permanent condition. This impermanent state of inaction has been brought upon by Invisible Man's search for an identity and his realisation of its complex relationship with history, power and race. The prologue comes full circle, and the Invisible Man informs the reader that, after having tried to conform to different identities, the passive school boy of the South, and the rabble rouser of the North, he has not found his identity amongst pre-existing myths, and is thus 'invisible' to his community as well as the dominant hegemony, because he has failed to be seen for his true identity.

As Jonathan Arac states;

In a single sentence, the narrator sets himself up against all the powers the book has conjured. These forces map as "un-American", subaltern-American and

hegemonic-American.[...] Here is the sentence: 'I looked at Ras on his horse and at their handful of guns and recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run from the Jacks and the Emersons and Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine.' This passage signposts one beginning for a discursive cluster, involving *identity*, that is still alive, and troubling, today. (Arac 196)

Arac's conclusion seems to support the present thesis. Issues of involving identity are still troubling today, and the discursive set by Ellison in Invisible Man is still helpful in identifying some of these issues. Invisible Man's inability to completely reject the cultural history of the larger collective to which he belongs, coupled with his unwillingness to forego his individuality, contribute a sense of ambivalence to his story. This element of ambivalence, the breaking down of Manichean binaries, and the demonstration of the complexity of 'race' and identity, had been up to the point of the publication of Ellison's work, unprecedented.

Although some of Ellison's later statements concerning 'high' art and the Black Arts movements are somewhat disconcerting, the genius of Ellison's work cannot be denied. Part of the mastery of Invisible Man is that it weaves together many different elements within black American history, art and culture. Most notably is Ellison's combination of fiction and auto-biography, which alludes not only to Richard Wright's Native Son and Black Boy, but also to the form of the slave narrative, a literary form which was paramount in helping secure freedom for so many black Americans. In addition to this, Invisible Man draws on the rich history of folk tales, blues and jazz music, as well as public sermons and speeches, all of which demonstrate the ways in which blacks historically chose to speak of blackness to the dominant white hegemony,

as well as within their own community. As the novel progresses, it evokes both actual and literary history, beginning with the protagonist's grandfather, an ex-slave, to the disillusioned black war veterans of the first and second world wars, and finally ending with communism and Afrocentrism. As Spillers highlights, throughout the text *Invisible Man* vacillates forward and backwards in history, and the text should not be interpreted as a rejection of history completely. Rather;

[...] *Invisible Man* embraces history as an act of consciousness. Paradoxically, history is both given to him and constructed by him, the emphatic identification of contemplated active modes, and his refusal of the historical commitment, to remember and go forward, is certain death. *Invisible Man* charts the adventures of a black personality in the recovery of his own historical burden. This restorative act, to get well and remember and reconstruct simultaneously, is the dominating motif of the novel, and its various typological features support this central decision. (Spillers 69-70)

This act of simultaneous construction, remembrance, and healing, *Invisible Man*, is a precursor to Hall's theory outlined earlier. Through the articulating ambivalence towards all of these historical elements, as well as his contradictory feelings towards Ras, *Invisible Man* demonstrates a desire to embrace, grow and heal, from their respective strengths and weaknesses. In addition, through the evocation of this rich history, it becomes clear to the reader that the protagonist does not wish for pure individualism. Rather, his experience demonstrates the profound ways in which history, economics, and power shape human psychology and identity. As stated in the earlier citation of Harper:

[...] the intersection of psychology by politics, such that the achievement of self-image that helps constitute psychic "stability" however imperfect that achievement must necessarily be – is the privilege only of the few of optimum economic, social, and political standing[...] (119)

Through the emphasis placed on the interplay history and psychology, Ellison



was a forerunner of many modern theorists regarding the issues of collective and intergenerational trauma, as well as theorist of identity politics.

The fusing together of fiction and biography, as well as his theory of the tragic-comic are ways in which Ellison seeks to break down pre-existing binaries and categories. By providing a host of different characters, the reader becomes aware that the black community is in fact more complex than would be imagined, breaking down essentialist and mythical notions of 'race' and 'blackness'. This is emphasised by the protagonist's inability to clearly categorise, or identify with, any of these characters, and by his refusal to associate solely to the larger collective. However, the protagonist's ambivalence towards pure individualism predicts the flaw in Gilroy's anti-essentialist debate.

The narrator's inability to ever truly grasp meanings and his rejection of compartmentalisation give the novel a slippery texture. This constant movement seems to demonstrate Derrida's and Hall's theories that identities, be they individual or cultural are constantly evolving and changing. Like Derrida and Hall, for *Invisible Man*, identity is in a constant state of motion, and meaning is always deferred. However, attention should also be called to the closing of the prologue where *Invisible Man* states:

"In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the *mind*. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as individuals. Thus, having tried to give a pattern to the chaos which lives within the patters of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge. [...] I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but I'm coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernation can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play."  
(Ellison 581)

Invisible Man's story, as well as his final commitment to social responsibility and action, expresses a desire for a new approach to identity -- an approach which will break down pre-existing myths, embrace cultural histories, without repeating earlier errors, and which will allow for all aspects of individual identity. This expression is quite similar to Derrida's earlier idea that, in order to advance, one must first present oneself. Invisible Man must emerge, regardless of imperfect conditions under which he is emerging, because emerging, or stepping forth and presenting oneself, is the first step in self-definition, and in so doing the individual's right to humanity will be ensured.

By carefully fusing together the discourses of psychology, sociology, history, mythology, economics, politics, and race, Ellison instigates a contemporary discussion, calling into question the interplay of these various disciplines on the formation of both individual and cultural identity. In so doing, Ellison's work is of great significance with regards to the contemporary discussions presented by Derrida, Gilroy and Hall, and many other discussions which are certain to follow in the near future. Through this expression, *Invisible Man* articulates the need for a new discursive in the political discussion of 'race' and identity, a discourse which will encompass and include the embracing of a cultural framework and the freedom of independent identity negotiation. Invisible Man's final commitment to action is an expression of a desire to articulate his past, to heal from it, to present himself and finally to move forward. This commitment is made with the greater hope that the individual will eventually be freed from the dehumanising limitations imposed on one's identity by the myth of 'race'.

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