# DIALOGICALLY DESTABILIZING DISCOURSES OF POWER/KNOWLEDGE IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*[1]

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## ABSTRACT

This paper offers a structural, rhetorical, and dialogical analysis of Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, arguing that attention to the ways in which contested terms, multi-valent tropes, and ambiguous symbols illustrate the functions of power/knowledge discourses allows for a new understanding of the novel's representation of how mid-Century American society produced and policed hierarchized subjects and structures of domination. This analysis looks at how Ellison's representations of race and African American culture are positioned within popular discourses and stereotypes in a way that draws attention to questions of authenticity and imposture, and reads the novel's representation of the protagonist's disillusioning journey as a counter to the conventional ideological determinations of the genre of the coming-of-age story, arguing for a fundamental rethinking the protagonist's ostensible quest for "visibility." This paper illustrates some of the major conceptual congruences between thematic and rhetorical aspects of Ellison's novel and the discourse theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault, and demonstrates the purchase of this analysis through examining the conflict over the meaning of the terms "boy" and "brother" in the novel, and unpacking the paradoxical complexity of the network of cultural-historical materials that construct the identity of the elderly African American couple whose belongings fill the snow-covered Harlem street in the "dispossession" scene.
**Keywords:** Ellison; Foucault; Bakhtin; Invisible Man; Discourse.

## INTRODUCTION

Is a "boy" really just a boy? What does it mean when a man you have just met calls you his "brother?" When and where are these forms of address operable as performatives and what kinds of performances do they require? Why are mere words powerful enough to shape who we are? And who polices the limits of these terms and conditions? Addressing the significance of these questions for an understanding of the narrative complexity of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* will require a critical approach that unites thematic analysis and cultural history with an examination of the rhetorical, structural, and dialogical aspects of the text, and I locate this approach in the

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[1] Dedicated to the memory of Morris Dickstein.

intersection of close reading and the discourse theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Michel Foucault. Reading the structural conflicts and "hidden polemics" within the narrative as theorizations of power/knowledge discourses will allow us to appreciate another dimension of the novel's radically unstable social vision and show us how its politics—especially its conceptualizations of how race, culture, and subjects are formed and how these forms are contested—must be understood as a function of its theory of the power of language.

Many formalist[2] readings of Ellison's text have evoked Stanley Fish's distinction between "rhetorical" and "dialectical" novels, suggesting that *Invisible Man* be understood as an example of the later for its pervasive engagement with subjects that disturb the reader's assumptions, thereby characterizing the novel's narrative structure as fundamentally subversive.[3] Other attempts to characterize the novel as a whole have largely centered upon a single trope or theme—Robert Stepto (1987) argues that Brother Tarp's broken leg shackle is the "master trope" of the novel; Horace Porter (2001) suggests the novel be characterized by its "jazz aesthetics;" Julia Sun-Joo Lee explores the possibility that the novel is imbued with "minstrel aesthetics;" A. Timothy Spaulding (2004) reads the novel's narrative form as embodying a "bebop aesthetic;" and Christopher Shinn (2002) proposes that we understand the text in terms of its "carnival poetics." However, most critical work on the formal properties of the novel is typically centered on the question of Ellison's literary style (particularly, the problem of individual expression and group representation), and work on the novel's generic dimensions has typically reflected Robert Bone's (1965) analysis of the novel's "tragicomic sensibility" and its "picaresque" hero, and has tended to analyze these

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[2] A word on "formalism:" the kinds of formalist readings that I develop here (and that I build upon) do not adhere to New Critical values (looking for the "autonomous text" or the unified tension of managed ambiguities), but instead aspire to read formal aspects of texts in terms of their function within larger social struggles over meaning, without necessarily searching for the kinds of stable binary codes of opposed terms dear to literary Structuralists.

[3] A text, Fish writes in *Self-Consuming Artifacts*, "is rhetorical if it satisfies the needs of its readers," since this form serves to "mirror and present for approval the opinions its readers hold," whereas a dialectical text is "disturbing," in that "it requires of its readers a searching and rigorous scrutiny of everything they believe in and live by" and asks "that its readers discover the truth for themselves" (1972, 1-2). For two seminal arguments characterizing the narrative of *Invisible Man* as triumphantly subversive, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1989) and Houston Baker, Jr. (1984).

properties in terms of the intersection of the pastiche techniques of Euro-American modernism and the cultural heritage of African American folk stories.[4]

Many scholars have engaged with the novel's rich array of contending voices, but analysis of the nature of this conflict is often subsumed within historical, aesthetic, or psychological readings that make no attempt to theorize what the structure of discursive conflicts itself might signify. Lloyd Brown, for example, argues that "generally... the role of rhetoric in *Invisible Man* is to illuminate the conflict between opposing values and experiences," and he maps the style of each "exhorter" in the novel onto a specific historical or ideological position (1970, 299). Berndt Ostendorf asserts that the function of vernacular speech in the novel (in contrast with so-called "standard" English) is "a working out of social and cultural conflicts," concluding that Ellison's "experimental" technique must be read as establishing only "temporary and transient" meanings (1988, 106, 95). Horace Porter observes that the novel is "loud" (like New York City, its primary setting), celebrating the text's "extravaganza of sounds . . . voices, idioms, and accents . . . sermons, speeches, folk rhymes, advertising slogans, [and] profanities shouted on Harlem streets," concluding that Ellison's ability to "riff" on literary and cultural themes, his virtuosic "philosophical flights of fancy," make him a "metaphysical rebel" who should be held at a remove "from all forms of ideological categorization" (2001, 76, 74, 90). Likewise, Gerald Gordon analyzes the ways that differing linguistic registers are both conflicting and interwoven throughout the novel—the language of the street is set against the language of power brokers, but also humor exists within pathos, vague sorrow and nostalgia amidst trauma, playfulness amidst chaos—but all with an eye towards delineating the stylistic debt that Ellison owes to Ernest Hemingway (1987).

Valery Smith (2004) offers a persuasive account of how the narrative structure can be read in terms of the protagonist's psychological development as an emerging artist—providing my argument with the imperative to analyze how "his experiences

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[4] In this vein, see also Schafer and Rovit in Reilly (1970).

teach him that the act of naming is linked inextricably to issues of power and control"—but her focus on pursuing a psychological reading of the protagonist precludes the possibility of extending this insight into the function of language and power into a wider conceptual terrain (Smith 2004, 27). For example, Smith suggests that Tod Clifton's death and the protagonist's impromptu oration at the funeral "precipitates the invisible man's thorough and lasting reexamination of himself and his relation to authority and ideology," but, I argue, the complex nature of how the narrative structure of the novel itself conceives of (or "theorizes," so to speak) the nature of authority and ideology is something that can be glimpsed even in the novel's earliest chapter and can be fully understood only in relation to discursive conflicts that transcend individual speakers (Smith 2004, 38). Christopher Diller (2014) provides a compellingly fresh take on reading the novel's generic dimensions, arguing that many aspects of *Invisible Man* are structured by a "not-so-Hidden subtext that simultaneously depends and signifies on some of the central tropes and assumptions of the sentimental novel," but his focus is primarily on Ellison's re-deployment of generic conventions in order to "[forge] white moral accountability" (490, 496).

Of recent scholarship on the novel, Johnnie Wilcox's "Black Power: Minstrelsy and Electricity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (2007) and Lesley Larkin's chapter on Ellison in her *Black Literature from James Weldon Johnson to Percival Everett* (2015) come closest to exploring the kind of critical approach I pursue here. Through an analysis of the trope of electricity, Wilcox argues for a reading of the protagonist as a proto-cyborg, suggesting that the theoretical models of Deleuze and Guattari open up the possibility of understanding how the novel teaches that "blackness is a network effect, more the product of connections between inorganic and organic systems than the result of the innate essence or autonomous behavior of those bodies [that are named "Black"]" (Wilcox 2007, 1003). Providing the useful caution that that racism is never a monolithic force and that "race" must always be treated as a suspect term—similar in kind to Barbara and Karen Fields' insistence, in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (2014), that we must remember to recognize that race is not an explanation for anything; it is one of the things that needs to be explained—Wilcox

demonstrates the necessity of thinking through the contexts and interconnections that constitute every particular "racial formation" or act of "racial desiring" in the novel (2007, 988). Much like his attempt to delineate the "ensemble" of elements within the episode of racist violence from which the protagonist derived his self-identification as an "invisible man" in the novel's prologue, I endeavor to demonstrate how discourse theory provides a means of analyzing other narratologically significant moments of social conflict (such as the protagonist's fight with Brother Maceo in the bar or his confrontations with Ras), moments in which the black/white binary structure of American racial formations is not the determining factor, but something *structurally similar* is.

Through a parallel kind of focus on what she describes as "transaction[s] with audiences at scenes of racialization," Larkin analyzes structural and rhetorical aspects of the novel in order to counter new-Liberal attempts to "universalize" (i.e., deracinate) the novel's significance,[5] and she productively extends the above mentioned work on the novel's contending voices while rejecting the relativizing conclusions many critics have drawn. For example, while Herman Beavers looks at narrative conflicts and instabilities and suggests that *Invisible Man*'s political agenda can be encapsulated in the way that the novel "dramatizes the politics of interpretation" (2004, 193), Larkin argues that "the unwieldy speech situations Ellison renders not only warn readers against final interpretations but also contribute to a linguistic theory that foregrounds context and audience participation in the production of racial meanings" (Larkin 2015, 96, 94). Larkin also provides my argument with the crucial insight that racial discourse in the novel is not something that should be glossed over in search of some putatively "universal" or transcendent meaning. In fact, quite the opposite: we must learn to

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[5] Some examples of these "universalizing reading projects:" Robert Bone sees the "invisibility" of blackness in the novel as a metaphor for the condition of the "individual" in the "machine age" (1965, 197); Robert O'Meally suggests that "Invisibility is a metaphor that has moved from its original literary context to become a key metaphor for its era" (1988, 2); Horace Porter writes that "Invisibility, Ellison's modernist theme, characterizes the anonymity of modern life" (2001, 76); and Albert Murray asserts that *Invisible Man* is "a proto-typical story about being not only a twentieth century American but also a twentieth century man, the Negro's obvious predicament symbolizing everybody's essential predicament" (1990, 167).

appreciate the novel's insistence that racial discourse is itself a meaningful force, since it is something that "operates in, through, and on psychology, culture, and the body," and therefore we must come to appreciate "the role of racialization in the development of selfhood at public, private, and aesthetic scenes of reading–including the scene of reading in which [Ellison's] readers are immediately engaged" (102). With our eyes on the contextual and transactional nature of literary meaning, let us now explore how these kinds of insights and approaches can bring to light new dimensions of Ellison's multidimensional novel.

"BOY" VS. "BOY"

The novel's first chapter, the "Battle Royal," not only introduces the nightmarish mental and physical contortions required of African Americans living under Jim Crow, it introduces the structure that constitutes the narrative (between the prologue and epilogue), in which the narrator's retrospective commentary is juxtaposed against descriptions of the naïve protagonist's experiences.[6] Simultaneously conjuring Booker T. Washington's accommodationist stance in the protagonist's speech ("cast down your buckets where you are") and evoking the disciplinary brutality brought down upon the backs of enslaved people in the narrator's commentary ("my back felt as though it had been beaten with wires"), this scene dialogically[7] outlines the themes of Black leadership, political strategy, Jim Crow segregation, artistic representation, and cultural self-definition that pervade the novel, as many critics have noted (29). The predominant critical focus on these overtly political themes, however, is not prepared to address the interpretive problem that is hidden in plain sight here—both within and on the very

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[6] While it has become conventional to refer to him simply as the Invisible Man, I believe that his narratologically dual nature in the novel is significant, so I maintain a differentiation between the *protagonist* (who undergoes the action of the novel) and the *narrator* (who reflects on the action with a retrospective point of view).

[7] While many critics have argued that *Invisible Man* is *dialectically* structured, and Fredrick Jameson has claimed that Bakhtinian dialogical analysis is essentially indistinguishable from orthodox Marxist dialectics (1981, 84), in this paper I adhere to Robert Young's assertion that, in Bakhtin's thinking, "dialogism cannot be confused with dialectics [because] dialogism cannot be resolved; it has no teleology. It is unfinalizable and open ended" (Young 1985, 76). For analysis of how Ellison's "experimental" aesthetics is characterized by its celebration of the "open ended" play of differences, see: Ostendorf (1988, 95) and Wright (2005).

surface of the racial caste system that constitutes the cultural field of the Battle Royal—the problem of (representational) naming and (racial) terminology.

This chapter features the term "boy"[8] thirty-eight times in its eighteen pages, the first ten appearing in the represented thoughts of the protagonist before it then appears in the mouths of the (white) spectators. Significantly, these first ten appearances of the term all appear to function *literally* (to describe young, male characters), but the eleventh appearance—"'See that boy over there?' one of the [white spectators] said. 'I want you to run across at the bell and give it to him right in the belly. If you don't get him, I'm going to get you'"—bristles with the charged atmosphere of ferocious racism in which this "entertainment" exists, a charge that quickly becomes the outburst "let me at that big nigger!" before the fight has even begun (21).[9] In all, fifteen of the instances of the term "boy" appear in this latter, figurative (i.e., racist) sense, creating what appears to be a near even division between the two senses of the term. The chapter closes, however, in a dream sequence in which the protagonist is instructed to read an "official envelope stamped with the state seal," and, confronting the contents of the prize letter he believes to be a ticket to some kind of respectable social position, he discovers instead that it reads "To Whom It May Concern [...] Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (33).

The disturbing clarity of this final phrase, in which "boy" is structurally analogous with "nigger," would seem to dovetail with the allegorical structure of the entire episode, in which the protagonist is a pawn in a white-dominated game he is helpless to understand. The attentive reader, however, is beginning to see the price that must be paid for this apparent clarity: in a violent scene in which it is crucial to recognize the difference between a *descriptive* deployment of a term and its *racially-charged*

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[8] Suggesting an intertextual interpretation of the literary-historical provenance of this term, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reads Ellison's title as a philosophically-charged play on works by Richard Wright: "Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* [are] titles connoting race, self, and presence, [which] Ellison tropes with *Invisible Man*, with invisibility as an ironic response of absence to the would-be presence of blacks and natives, while man suggests a more mature and stronger status than either son or boy" (1989, 125).

[9] Of the sixteen times that the N-word appears in the novel, five are spoken by white, male spectators in this short scene, underscoring the discursive structure of white supremacy that orients the "the most important men of the town" (Ellison 1952, 18).

deployment as an instantiation of a discourse of power, the readerly experience of locating a meaning—for the trope as well as the episode—is only available within the experience of reading through/against conflicting representations. The tension between the literal and figurative meanings of "boy" in this scene thus serves as a point of entry into understanding the novel's overarching structure of sustained conceptual conflicts, conflicts which both incorporate and transcend individual voices. Thus, from its very beginning, the novel is dialogically structured by interpretive conflicts which encourage readers to see how apparently "neutral"[10] terms like "boy" can be implicated in the functioning of power, to see the ways that racial ideologies operate with almost invisible impunity in certain institutional contexts, and to better understand how discourses, norms, and power structures function to propel and police the forms of socialization that the protagonist must undergo.

DISCURSIVE CONFLICT AS NARRATIVE STRATEGY

Many critics have noted that meaning in *Invisible Man* is unsettled by the incessant instabilities in the narrative text itself, and one critic has remarked that, in confronting the complexities of Ellison's novel, he could not shake off the feeling that he was "engaged in [analyzing] a discourse which actively verged on discrediting itself" (Nadel 1988, xii).[11] Observing this tendency on another register, Kenneth Warren argues that "*Invisible Man* proceeds by allowing its multiple voices to reach their fullest amplitudes, only to deflate them with irony or demystification" (2003, 106), and Elliot Butler-Evans suggests that even the "privileged" voice of the narrator is not immune from this kind of ironic destabilization, since "the dialogic nature of the narrative often leads to a subversion of that point of view" (1995, 127). If we consider the possibility that it is

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[10] While there is clearly a significant difference between the two meanings of "boy" here, Bakhtin argues that no word can simply "exist in a neutral or impersonal language," since it has always already existed "in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" (1981, 294).

[11] Similarly, Thomas Schaub finds Ellison's novel to be "a prolonged dramatic discourse upon the ambivalence of the word" (1991, 105), while Lawrence Chisolm suggests that Ellison "puts words under the pressure of experience and raises the pressure until the words become unstable" (1974, 31).

discursive stability itself that is being "discredited" here, we may then be led to ask different questions about how the novel conceives of discourses in general—and why this discrediting is necessary.[12] In what follows, I argue that these apparent rhetorical instabilities are not simply *dysfunctional* (i.e., interpretive hazards, or "snares"[13]), they are *functionally constitutive* and politically significant aspects of how the text destabilizes the racial ideologies that organize the power-knowledge discourses facilitating the protagonist's socialization. Strategic ambiguity—dual-functioning tropes and concepts—is thus understood as a politically-significant discursive conflict staged at the level of readerly interpretation.

The significant influence of history—both literary and racial/political—on Ellison's text is well established. Many critics have commented on Ellison's relation to his literary "ancestors" in terms of T. S. Eliot's theory of literary history in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and comments on Ellison's interest in pursuing a subtler form of "protest" in his art frequently follow up on to his suggestion that "[i]t might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before" (Ellison 1964, 137). However, more narrowly focused critical work on the nature of the narrative itself, particularly concerning its use of conflicting voices as a structuring principle, is largely indebted to the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston Baker Jr., as these two critics inaugurated the possibility of reading Ellison's text as polyphonic.[14] Gates, Jr.'s attention to Ellison's novel is largely in service of delineating "Signifying" as a theory of African American literary history—analyzing *Invisible Man*'s relation to Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ishmael Reed—but he provides an important insight into how Bakhtin's concept of the "hidden polemic"[15] opens up the possibility of understanding

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[12] As Dale Peterson notes in "Response and Call: The African American Dialogue with Bakhtin and What It Signifies," it is important to remember that, in Bakhtin's analysis of dialogical narrative relativity or "polyphony," there is no "sympathy for the radical Deconstructionist move toward 'the endless play of signifiers,'" since linguistic utterances are always understood to be socially positioned and resonant with historical contexts (1993, 762)

[13] In *S/Z*, Barthes defines "snares" as one of the "hermeneutic codes" of a literary text, suggesting that these deceptive symbols and/or descriptions function to avoid or defer the ultimate revelation of truth by insinuating a kind of rhetorical chicanery into what otherwise appears to be a revelation of narrative truth (Barthes 1974).

[14] See Gates (1989) and Baker (1984).

[15] "In hidden polemic the author's discourse is oriented toward its referential object, as is any other discourse, but at the same time each assertion about that object is constructed in such a way that, besides its referential meaning, the

how Ellison's novelistic language must be read as always already "populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others" (Bakhtin 1981, 294). While Gates and Baker ultimately read Ellison's dialogism as producing a fundamentally subversive perspective on the discourses it engages, I am more interested in exploring dialogism's essentially open-ended nature by extending this type of Bakhtinian approach through the addition of the discourse theory of Michel Foucault. In this way, I argue that the novel's many structures of conflicting "intentions"—both within individual tropes and episodes, as well as between speakers and narrative levels—can be read as functioning to facilitate a conceptualization of how power/knowledge discourses work.

Additionally, Ellison's novel, I suggest, elaborates a theory of subject formation that is conceptually parallel in many ways with Michel Foucault's notion of how power-knowledge discourses not only work *on* us as we are, but *make* us what we are, and thus we can read Ellison's text as facilitating a conceptualization of what resistance to the policing function of social norms looks like once the "repressive hypothesis"[16] no longer reigns supreme. In the following section I will demonstrate the purchase of this approach through examining two aspects of Ellison's novel that have received very little scholarly attention to date: the conflict over the meaning of the term "brother" throughout the novel, and the paradoxical complexity of the network of cultural-historical materials that construct the identity of the African American couple whose belongings fill the snow-covered Harlem street in the "dispossession" scene.

DISCOURSES OF DOMINATION

Since the fundamental outlines of Foucault's analysis of the disciplinary mechanisms of surveillance and the "productive" role of power-knowledge discourses are too well-

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author's discourse brings a polemical attack to bear against another speech act, another assertion, on the same topic. Here one utterance focused on its referential object clashes with another utterance on the grounds of the referent itself" (Bakhtin 1971, 87).

[16] This phrase, the title of Part Two of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, refers to the (mistaken) conventional wisdom that social structures are exclusively maintained through top-down "repressive" practices of restriction and prohibition.

known to require recapitulation here, I will begin by orienting the purchase of this approach around the relevant interpretive problematic by touching upon a few of the structural and thematic aspects of Ellison's novel that are conceptually congruent with Foucauldian discourse theory. In each novelistic episode, each chapter of the protagonist's coming-of-age journey, the deep structure of the protagonist's struggle for self-determination is centered on the conflict between his desire to strategically actualize his grandfather's ambiguous advice—"overcome [the enemy] with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction" (16)—and the problematic nature of actually performing this "agreement" while positioned within the historical forces that conspire to keep him "running" (in place) after illusions.[17] It is this deep structure of conflicted consent within the protagonist's every perception of every choice that allows *Invisible Man* to move its conceptualization of domination and resistance beyond what Foucault refers to as "the repressive hypothesis." Nowhere is Foucault's assertion that a disciplinary regime functions by producing subjects who are "caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (1977, 210) more clearly illustrated than in the invisible man's gut-wrenching realization at the end of the novel that "you carry part of your sickness within you," a realization that, through the second-person pronoun, appears to implicate the reader as readily as the speaker implicates himself in the terrible knowledge that, once you have shed the illusions that support the social roles you have been prescribed,

> you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. *That* is the real soul-sickness, the spear in the side, the drag by the neck through the

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[17] Due to space constraints, I am unable to engage here with the other subject that is most frequently associated with discussions of the Grandfather, namely the narrator's statements in the Epilogue that we might "affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men" (574). While many commentators are content to read this as a pro-democracy sentiment—a sentiment that is in accord with many of Ellison's own comments and commitments—the political vision of the novel itself is considerably more ambivalent, even within the narrator's own statements in this epilogue, which do little more than invite the reader to wrestle with this thorny subject. For analysis of conflicting interpretations of this "principle," see Steven Ealy (2016, 272-3).

> mob-angry town, the Grand Inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip in the belly with the guts hanging out ..." (575; emphasis in original)

The profusion of powerful metaphors here underscores how heavily this knowledge weighs upon the protagonist's mind, and while many critics have emphasized the "eyes who look through you unseeingly" in this pivotal insight, what interests me here—what is, in fact, tearing the narrator apart inside—is the "blame." Not only has he come to realize by the end of the novel that he had been "a tool at the very moment [he] had thought [himself] free," he has emerged from the recurrent travails that set him "running" with the knowledge that the mechanisms that produced him as a "tool" were only able function by orchestrating his consent—his will to cooperate, his desire to succeed in the terms of the dominant regime—which we might read as illustrating Foucault's assertion that power produces effects at the level of desire (553).[18]

Recognizing the centrality of the problem of consent in the novel suggests that we rethink the now-common assumption that the protagonist is driven by the aspiration to be seen, to be rendered "visible," even if only in the eyes of readers.[19] Describing his "irresponsible" hibernation in the prologue as an unwillingness to become beholden to any social regime—in terms that suggest we must understand this rejection vis-à-vis his grandfather's advice—he states that "responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement" (14). Crucially, both for our analysis of the protagonist's self-understanding and our ability to conceptualize the theoretical implications of the novel as a whole, the suggestion here is that, not only has he discovered the trapdoor beneath his grandfather's "curse"—rendered in the Epilogue as the realization that "by pretending to agree [he] had indeed agreed" (553)—the narrator

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[18] Foucault writes that, because a power-knowledge discourse "produces effects at the level of desire," the subject may believe that they are using social structures to achieve their chosen ends, when the subject is actually carrying out the dictates of the social discourse, both in the structure of their desires and actions taken to fulfill them (1980, 59).

[19] For paradigmatic arguments on this point, see, for example: Robert Bone's argument that Ellison's novel succeeds in making blackness "visible" (1965, 197), Klein's assertion that "it is the function of every episode [of the novel] to confirm the fact that this black man is condemned to a hopeless struggle to be seen" (1970, 112), and Daryl Michael Scott's suggestion that ultimately, "Ellison's protagonist triumphed" because, as a "now visible man," he has "developed a positive individual identity" (1997, 168).

has come to understand the profound implications of Foucault's theory that "recognition" may only be available for a subject through the terms established by the very regime of truth that holds them in a dominated position; in other words, "visibility is a trap" (1977, 200).

The ultimate significance of how *Invisible Man* moves beyond a simple "repressive" concept of power (and towards a concept of policing that locates domination within discursive structures and social norms) can be located in how this conceptual move leads to a profound shift in the way that resistance to domination is understood. When we come to conceive of power as a structure of discourses that are not merely *external* to the subject but *constitute* it as such, *bound* it, and *meet* it at every point where it encounters the social order, we may also come to understand, Foucault writes, that "discourses are not 'once and for all' subservient to power" because there is a "complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1978, 101). What I will attempt to illustrate in the following analyses of the tropes and terms that produce the characters in the novel as social subjects—the terms that constitute individuals as "brothers" and/or as "Black"—is that this radical refiguration of policing as a discourse enables the subject to actualize their agency in a way that is as subtle as it is significant; since tropes and terms are no longer understood to be simply passive or neutral—that is, merely external to the subject's "true" essence—then the ability to confront, critique, or even contradict these terms becomes of paramount importance: where there is discourse, there is power, and, as Foucault contends, "where there is power, there is resistance" (95).

"BROTHER" VS. "BROTHER"

The term "brother" appears an incredible six hundred and seventy-three times in the novel: three hundred and twenty-four times as a stand-alone noun, two hundred and thirty-eight times as part of a character's institutional title (e.g. "Brother Jack"), and an additional one hundred and eleven times in the name of the Marxist organization the

"Brotherhood."[20] Clearly, this is a remarkable number of recurrences, even within a long novel, but the question emerges: *how* does the immense quantity of recurrences impact the term's function over the course of the novel, does the term accumulate clarity or, like a form of currency, does it lose value through inflation? I argue that not only is this latter proposition the case, but this is precisely the point: the over-saturation of the text with a performative term achieves the wearing away of the "natural" appearance of performativity as a form of social cohesion.

Deployed exclusively in its figurative sense throughout the novel, the term "brother" contains a variety of potential functions as a kinship metaphor, but the ones that concern us here are its performative function as a signal of inclusion in the African American community or as a signal of inclusion in the Marxist organization the "Brotherhood." Clearly, the age-old theoretical conflict over the primacy of race or class is dialogically staged by the novel at the level of the term through which both competing forms of alliance might be performatively constructed. Far from simply suggesting their equivalence, however, the novel's double-voiced deployment of this term suggests (racial) "brotherhood" and (class/political) "Brotherhood" exist in a state of irresolvable tension, each vying for primacy, and each succeeding and failing in differing contexts. But it is less the *fact* of this tension than its *location* that is significant: by locating the problem of membership[21] within a conflicted performative speech act (that may or may not succeed), *Invisible Man* suggests that social symbolic action (calling someone "brother") is both the result of an individual's identity *and* a force that contributes to the formation of that identity, thereby implying that identity is inherently unstable and continuously redefined through speech acts and symbolic communication.

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[20] The capitalization of the term (when not used in a title) is, as far as I can tell, completely unsystematic and varies even within an individual speakers' usage during single conversations (the confrontation in the Harlem bar late in the novel is a case in point).

[21] Further complicating the problem of allegiance, the novel suggests that membership (as identity) is not necessarily consciously chosen: walking in upon a union meeting at Liberty Paints, the narrator reflects, "it was as though by entering the room I had automatically applied for membership"—a membership that was thrust upon him by circumstance (222). Later, greeted by a couple of passing "zoot-suiters" he realizes "It was as though by dressing and walking in a certain way I had enlisted in a fraternity in which I was recognized at a glance—not by features, but by clothes, by uniform, by gait" (485). I will return to this analysis of the power of circumstance below in my discussion of Rinehartism.

Significantly, the meaning of the term in the novel (its functional value as a form of linguistic currency) is repeatedly rendered confused and depicted as an explicit site of contestation, underscoring Bakhtin's notion that a literary discourse is never simply reducible to its "referential" function, since it "finds the object at which it [is] directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value, [and] already enveloped in an obscuring mist" (1981, 276). Furthermore, within *Invisible Man*'s dialogical deployment of the term "brother" (as a discourse of cultural/institutional inclusion), it is possible to detect what Bakhtin refers to as the novel's "participation in historical becoming and social struggle," the fact that literary discourses are always "still warm from that [social-historical] struggle and hostility, [and] still fraught with hostile intentions and accents" (331). In this spirit, we might note here that, the term "brother" also conjures the political valences of the contemporary railroad-worker's union known as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters—both a race and class-based alliance simultaneously—and evokes the concerns of the popular depression-era Broadway show tune "Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?" But, to suggest that Ellison is simply signifying on the popular contemporary resonances of the term "brother" does nothing to resolve the complex function it serves within the novel, since, in addition to the question of reading the literal meaning against the figurative or the historical against the novelistic, there is the question of how the use of this term functions (or fails to function) in each instance of its deployment to "position"[22] the protagonist within the structures of social belonging that attend this term's performative functions when it is used to "hail" a putative member of the "B/brotherhood."

The simmering conflict within the deployment of the term "brother" comes to a head at two important points in the novel, the first of which occurs on the streets of Harlem when the militant Black nationalist character Ras the Exhorter condemns the protagonist's involvement with the Brotherhood, declaring "Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men brother?" (370) Through Ras' attempt to

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[22] I use this term in the sense Stuart Hall develops in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," to which I will return to below.

use the concept of racial authenticity to police the boundaries of the term's meaning, the novel explicitly dramatizes the link between the problem of identity and the problem of allegiance that lies at the heart of the conflict over the divergent ways that the term can function—for, the narrative asks, is "brotherhood" something to be chosen or something to be born into, and who is/not granted the privilege of choice? In this way, the novel represents the term "brother" as the terrain upon which the protagonist's status as a social subject is formed and contested, opening up the possibility of seeing how this status is not necessarily established in advance (and then merely described or modified through its representation in discourse), but is produced and contested within the terrain of discursive representation itself.

The second explicit instance in which the conflict over the meaning of "brotherhood" comes to a head occurs when the protagonist, who is now a well-known representative of the Brotherhood, attempts to greet some fellow (Black) patrons in a bar in Harlem. "Good evening, Brothers," the protagonist cheerfully offers, but the other patrons disdainfully repulse his attempt at friendliness, disparage him for getting "white fever," and begin asking each other sarcastically if the protagonist is *literally* one of their kin. "I wouldn't be his kin even if I was," one hostile patron says to the other—refusing both the literal and the figurative meanings of the term—thereby destabilizing the protagonist's ability to mobilize either performative function of the term and effectively revoking his discursive status as a member of the black community (423-4). This hostile refusal of performativity fundamentally destabilizes one of the structures of meaning that the novel itself has previously mobilized, making even the protagonist's previously uncontested ability to claim racial solidarity into something conditional that might be resisted or even revoked at will (275).[23]

While the protagonist eventually rejects his position within the Brotherhood—after realizing their plan to manipulate the Black citizens of Harlem into

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[23] A similar destabilization of the cultural solidarity of Black "brotherhood" occurs in the novel-ending riot scene where, fleeing from Ras's militant black nationalist thugs, the protagonist suggests that the simple bond of racial solidarity is no longer available to him, even to save his own life: "If only I could turn around and drop my arms and say, 'Look, men, give me a break, we're all black folks together . . .'" (560).

fighting a race riot, he declares to Ras "I am no longer their brother"—what the novel accomplishes is much more radical than a mere repudiation of membership in one organization in favor of another; it is a disavowal of the fundamental nature of discursive membership as a mode of social belonging, a disavowal emblematized in the ritualistic emptying of his prized calfskin briefcase and burning of his identification cards in the novel's closing scene (557). The narrative arc of the novel, with its series of indoctrinations and disavowals, is thus analogous with the structure of this conflict over the meaning of "brotherhood:" through the significance of this central conflict of allegiance, staged at the level of the term which would performatively establish him as one kind of "brother" or another, the novel offers a radical (in the root sense) reassessment of the nature and conditions of socialized subjectivity itself, moving away from the binary structure of the dominant racial ideology (and the attendant "repressive hypothesis") and towards a model of subjectivity that hinges on the contingent and performative nature of discourses. In this way, *Invisible Man* refuses the ideological prescriptions of its own generic form as a coming-of-age novel,[24] and it does so while refiguring the concept of what constitutes domination, moving away from the binary logic of the "repressive hypothesis" and, as we will see in the following scenes, towards a concept of domination that functions through the policing power of ever-present norms. Through a close reading of the dialogical structure of the protagonist's insights and the symbolic structure through which the identity of the old Black couple is constructed in the dispossession scene we will begin to see the extent to which the novel is invested in representing the instability of all discourses.

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[24] I have written elsewhere of the ways that the protagonist's ineradicable desire for individuality and self-determination (and the eventual choice to shed all prescribed social roles in favor of individuality and "invisibility") runs directly against the grain of the *Bildungsroman*, and I argue that this can be read as an "immanent critique" of the ideological determinations of the genre (See Baldwin 2013).

POSITIONED IN DISPOSSESSION

Typically analyzed in terms of its function as a pivotal moment in the protagonist's development as a speechmaker, for my argument, the significance of the dispossession scene is best understood in relation to the scene that immediately precedes it in the narrative. After an explosion at Liberty Paints lands him in the "factory hospital" where he is "treated" by some form of electro-lobotomy, the protagonist has a break down on a Harlem street and is taken in by Mary Rambo, a maternal Black character who is constantly trying to turn him into a "race man" that will lead his people towards social advancement. Resisting Mary's attempts to dissolve his identity into the ranks of upstanding Black citizens—people like Mary, he thinks, "seldom know where their personalities end and yours begins; they think in terms of 'we'" —he aimlessly wanders the streets of Harlem, reflecting on how his anonymity in New York City affords him the chance to reflect critically on his inherited culture and inclinations (316). Meeting a dialect-speaking old Black southerner selling yams and dispensing wisdom—that is, meeting an over-determined "folk" stereotype that nonetheless wisely warns him "everything what looks good ain't necessarily good"—the protagonist stumbles upon a pivotal insight into the nature and function of social propriety (264).

Walking the street and eating his hot, buttered yam at the same time—an act he understands to be unquestionably improper—the protagonist is suddenly "overcome by an intense feeling of freedom" as he realizes that, here, on the streets of Harlem, he "no longer had to worry about who saw [him] or what was proper" (264). Freedom, here, is directly tied to an individualist conception of self-determination. He then contemplates how the upstanding southern Black college chancellor Dr. Bledsoe might lose all his hard-won social prestige simply by the public revelation that he enjoyed eating chitterlings.[25] Reflecting on the close ties between decorum, race, and class standing, the protagonist imagines that this public humiliation would cause Dr. Bledsoe to "drop

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[25] Chitterlings are a food made from pig intestines—one of the "undesirable" cuts of pork that were commonly available to enslaved African Americans in the southern US—that dates from the colonial period and still forms part of what is known as "soul food."

his head in shame" as he would discover that "his white folks would desert him;" not only would he "lose caste," the protagonist thinks, but "weekly newspapers would attack him [with photographs and captions reading] *Prominent Educator Reverts to Field-Niggerism*" (264-5; emphasis in original). Even something as apparently natural and "essential" as gastronomic preferences functions as/within a discourse of power, he realizes, and the stakes involved in conformity and deviance can be extremely high at any point in the network.

And yet, he then realizes that even the ability to critically recognize the policing function of norms does nothing to *actually* liberate him from what he terms the "problem of choice," since, he realizes, inclinations and disinclinations are both social and personal—both self-determined and structures of power—and there is no clear way to differentiate them: "But what of those things which you actually didn't like," he muses, "not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education—but because you actually found them distasteful? . . . How could you know?" (266) Thus, like with every other strategic escape he contemplates in the novel, every "agreement" he knowingly or unknowingly makes for the sake of other ends, the pivotal insight he achieves here is dialogically qualified within the structure of the novel by the fact that *there is always another trap.*[26] The most important point here, however, is that the protagonist's attempt to embrace his southern Black roots—"I yam what I yam!" he triumphantly declares—is dialectically qualified in the narrative by his subsequent awareness of how power produces effects at the level of desire and how racial and class structures are policed though the very desires, humiliations, and stereotypes that construct this presumptive "essence." The provisional and dialectical nature of how these pivotal revelations are structured here offers a key to the interpretation of the dispossession scene that follows.

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[26] For example, his escape from the world represented by the Battle Royal is to craft an ode to accommodationism, but it lands him in an institution offering something like a "more efficient blinding;" the letter of introduction he receives from Dr. Bledsoe is supposed to open doors, but it turns out to be another ploy to "keep him running;" even the role he achieves as political organizer/orator for the Brotherhood's ostensible struggle to liberate all people turns him into a tool that perpetuates racial disparities.

Located at the novel's midpoint, this brief episode contains a dizzying quantity of symbolic elements by which the identity of the African American couple is constituted, and this produces a representation of the cultural and historical constitution of "blackness" whose complexity is unique in the narrative. It is in the confrontation with this constellation of symbolic elements that the protagonist begins to realize that "it is [the old Black couple's] status as historical subjects, not tenants, that is at stake," as Herman Beavers argues (2006, 196), but it is a realization that complicates his own burgeoning identity as a historical subject as well, since "[the protagonist's] own life is reconstructed through the lives of [his] imaginary forebearers" (Porter 2001, 81).

Approaching a crowd who have come to condemn the injustice of the eviction, in which an old Black couple is being forcibly removed from their home and all of their belongings are being thrown into the snow-covered street, the protagonist makes a series of bumbling assumptions that characterize him as an outsider to this type of harsh urban reality, but he is quickly drawn into the scene as a participant when he begins to scrutinize the "clutter of household objects" that lay at his feet in the snow. Looking at a faded photograph of the old couple from when they were young, the protagonist imagines he can see that "even in that nineteenth-century day they had expected little," and this seems to him to be "both a reproach and a warning" (271). While the nature of the imagined "reproach" and "warning" is never explicitly elaborated, the fact that a perspective from the nineteenth century is interjected into the scene here is significant. Establishing a dialogical perspective on the scene's significance, this "reproach" from the past puts the protagonist's perspective on history and identity in dialogue with the political-historical realities that generated the present scene of dispossession, destabilizing the apparent simplicity of the actions unfolding before him by re-conceiving of them as part of an ongoing process. Thus, more than merely representing "a revelatory gestalt of the moment," as one critic suggests, the symbols that appear in this scene are structured to maintain a focus on the thorny problem of interpretation (Porter 2001, 80). From its very beginning, the symbolic value of the scene is anchored in a racial and historical structure that is relativized by its location in a dialogical

narrative discourse, and this relativity is compounded by contemplations of blackface minstrelsy.

The next "household items" that attract the protagonist's notice are a pair of "knocking bones," which begins to pull the narrative into confrontation with the way that the problem of understanding the nature of race relations in America is tied up with the problem of representation, in both the political and artistic senses: the protagonist imagines that these "crudely carved and polished bones" were probably "used to accompany music at country dances, [or] used in black face minstrels," and he wonders "had [the old man] been a minstrel?" (271). Invoking the history of American minstrelsy, a popular form of live entertainment that was "organized around the quite explicit 'borrowing' of black cultural materials for white dissemination (and profit)," the knocking bones bring the representative aspect of this old Black couple to the fore in a particularly fraught way, because this particular form of representation simultaneously "depended upon the material relations of slavery" for its subject matter, and "obscured these relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right, and natural" (Lott 1993, 23). Minstrelsy thus formed a discourse that functioned to "contain" the complex racial realities it ostensibly functioned to "explain" (and make palatable to white audiences), and the references to blackface that appear in and around this scene entangle the reader's interpretations of the old Black couple in the fraught issue of representing individual and collective identity through the racial ideologies of popular stereotypes.[27]

Popular for at least a century,[28] blackface minstrel shows depended upon denigrating stereotypes for their wide appeal and comedic effects (employing, for example, figures like the "coon" caricature, representing Black people as dim-witted,

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[27] References to blackface recur when the protagonist reflects on his escape from the police (he "must have looked… like a black-face comedian," he thinks), and again at his inaugural encounter with the Brotherhood, where a (white) female "brother" looks him over and whispers "don't you think he should be a little blacker?" to which the hero replies (in his mind) "What does she want, a black-face comedian?" (294, 303). Critics have read minstrel tropes into many other aspects of the novel, such as the "abstract mask" of the naked white woman preceding the Battle Royal, the protagonist's antics in that scene, Bledsoe's feigned humility before whites, the electro-shock "dancing" in the hospital scene, Mary's stereotype-l aden coin bank, and Tod Clifton's selling of "Sambo" dolls on the street.
[28] Roughly 1830-1930 (see Lott 1993). However, Ellison himself wrote of the impact that seeing a blackface version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 1940s had upon him (see Diller 2014).

lazy, buffoonish, happy-go-lucky, athletic, and musical, among others), and through the medium of the white audience's laughter these performances of "blackness" effectively naturalized the racial ideologies that they employed (Pilgrim 2000). In other words, through artistic representations on the minstrel stage that denied the equality of Black people, white society could (re)establish the self-evident "truth" of the racist principles upon which equal political representation could be denied to African Americans on the national political stage. Ellison's novel, on the other hand, dialogically complicates the meaning of the stereotypical images it employs—thereby negating the naturalizing function—by introducing a level of self-consciousness and self-contradiction into its symbols.

In this scene, as elsewhere in the novel, the meaning of individual symbols appears to be complicated by the way that they are structured in the narrative: after attending to the old photograph and the "knocking bones," the protagonist's observations assume a double or tripartite structure which seems to simultaneously establish and defer the establishment of the categorical differences that could produce clear and straightforward symbolic resonances. For example, the protagonist notices "an old lace fan studded with jet and mother-of-pearl," evoking a dark/light contrast that is convoluted by rhetoric that requires the reader to slow down and contemplate the variable nature of these tonal qualities in a way that is not simply black/white (271). Next, the protagonist observes in the street "a straightening comb," a "curling iron," and "false hair;" in the next moment, he sees an "Ethiopian flag," a "tintype [photograph] of Abraham Lincoln," and "the smiling image of a Hollywood star" (271). In both of these tripartite clusters of images there is an object of potentially "black" identification (the hair straightening comb; the Ethiopian flag), an object of potentially "white" identification (the hair curling iron; the image of Lincoln), and an object whose racial-cultural character is ambiguous (the nature of the "false hair" is undefined; the color of the Hollywood star is unknown; both images could be made to swing either way in the reader's imagination). Thus, while readers are initially led to read the old couple as members of a single, stable culturally and politically-demarcated group—African Americans—the complex nature of the symbolic clusters though which their identity is

constructed makes it increasingly difficult to determine exactly which aspects of their historical constitution make them *essentially* Black, and which ones, like blackface minstrelsy, constitute a discourse of performance, assumption, or stereotype.

Of the remaining "household items" that litter the snow-covered street, there are several that illustrate the problem of constructing an image of cultural authenticity out of historical artifacts: the protagonist notices the "Free Papers" that released the old man from enslavement in 1859, a collection of the folklore of "High John the Conqueror,"[29] and a "card with a picture of what *looked like* a white man in black-face seated in the door of a cabin strumming a banjo beneath a bar of music and the lyric 'Going back to my old cabin home'" (272; emphasis added). This conjunction of images—one historically concrete, one culturally genuine, and one culturally dubious—combine to produce an ambiguous impression of the old couple as Black Southerners. The image that *should* have served to anchor the symbolic value of the "Free Papers" to the symbolic geography of the South, the card that should have linked the banjo and the "old cabin home" to the material reality of Black history—as minstrelsy attempted to do, in its distorted fashion—becomes impossible to take at face value. While we cannot be absolutely sure that the card actually features a "*white* man in black-face"—since, one imagines, the old couple would surely have preferred a picture of a real, Black banjo player—the narrative's insistence that the racial identity of the man is suspect destabilizes the possibility of conceiving of cultural authenticity in terms of historical appearances alone. Julia Sun-Joo Lee suggests that, in this scene, the Invisible Man finds that he is "torn between the talismanic powers of one set of emblems and another" and his "inner equilibrium is radically destabilized" (2006, 470). But it is equally possible that it is the discourse of Black cultural inheritance that is "radically destabilized" here through its imbrication in the (racist) American ritual of blackface performance. To paraphrase the wise old yam vendor, "everything that looks Black ain't necessarily Black," and the narrative is structured to introduce a "hidden

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[29] In "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Zora Neale Hurston notes that, like Brer Rabbit and Jack the Bear, John the Conqueror is a "trickster-hero of West Africa [that] has been transplanted to America" (2000, 36).

polemic" into the reader's contemplation of the meaning of blackface for the construction and performance of Black identity.

Ultimately, in addition to the way that the old couple's "status as historical subjects" is at stake in this scene, the way that their identity is symbolically constituted—through a paradoxical structure of discursive artifacts—suggests not that cultural identity for members of the African diaspora is reducible to any one history or "essence," but, as Stuart Hall suggests, "is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth;" diasporic cultural identities, Hall maintains, are "not an essence but a positioning" (1990, 226). The interpretive conflict that the reader experiences in determining the meanings of these "positions" for Black characters—are they actually agreeing or merely performing their agreement?—underscores the novel's insistence that the conflict involved in establishing the "historical status" of identity is carried out at the level of the contested terms through which it is described. The fact that Black minstrels—like, perhaps, the old Harlemite being evicted here—participated in, altered, and profited from performances of these monstrously distorted images adds another layer of irony to the paradoxical structure of the way the old man's identity is constructed through a web of conflicted tropes, underscoring Wilcox's assertions that the novel instructs its readers to consider how "blackness" is less an "essence" or a form of "autonomous behavior" than it is "a network effect" (2007, 1003). This reading of the old couple, then, might productively be linked to Gates' reading of the "blackness of blackness" sermon in the novel's prologue, in which Ellison's narrative effects a "critique the received idea of blackness as a negative essence, as a natural, transcendent signified." Implicit in such a critique, Gates goes on to claim in typically elliptical fashion, "is an equally thorough critique of blackness as a presence, which is merely another transcendent signified," concluding that such a critique, therefore, "is a critique of the structure of the sign itself and constitutes a profound critique" (Gates 1989, 245-6). The profound nature of Ellison's critique in this scene, I suggest, lies not only in its critique of the "signs" of Black culture, but also in its insistence that while the network of cultural discourses that make up an African American identity may rest on

problematic and unstable assumptions, they are no less real and meaningful as means of understanding one's position in a problematic and unstable world.

The complex imbrications of authentic cultural inheritance, imposture (or counterfeit performance), and stereotype in the novel's representations of how "blackness" and African American identity are constructed suggests, not that there is simply an essential "true" self that is buried beneath "false" constructions and waiting to be made "visible," but instead that, as Judith Butler would say, all these constructions—essence, authenticity, imposture—must be understood as positions within a larger discourse of power/knowledge, a "regime of truth" (here, the American racial ideologies of white supremacy) which "offers the terms that make self-recognition possible" and "decides what will and will not be a recognized form of being" (2005, 22). Foucauldian discourse theory, then, adds another layer of significance to what Gates reads as Ellison's "implicit critique of the nature of the sign itself, of a transcendent signified, an essence, which supposedly exists prior to its figuration" by allowing for an analysis of this "implicit" linguistic theory in terms of the subject formations and cultural formations within the novel (Gates 1989, 246).

Now, if nothing is essentially stable and nothing is simply "true," it may be tempting to read Rinehart as the figure in the novel who, in his inherent multiplicity, offers a strategy for actualizing the Grandfather's advice and navigating the "vast, seething, hot world of fluidity" by learning to "[hide] right out in the open,"[30] as the Veteran on the bus suggests he must, and, indeed, the protagonist does try "Rinehartism" on for a spell with some success (498, 153-4). Accordingly, John Wright has commented that not only is "Rine the rascal" at home in this "boundaryless" world, he is "the narrative's ultimate image of social mastery" (2006, 118). However, it is worth remembering how the narrator ultimately reflects that, having "caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities" he decides to turn away

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[30] The Veteran's enigmatic advice that the Invisible Man must learn to "play the game [...] but don't believe in it" would seem to suggest precisely the strategy that Rinehart represents, but, as I argue below, the novel ultimately concludes that even withholding belief cannot protect you from the ravages of a game whose very structure maintains your subjugation (153).

(499). He does so, I will suggest, for a very specific reason—and not, as he declares, simply because "it was too vast and confusing to contemplate"—and that reason is illustrated by the episode in which, dressed as Rinehart, the protagonist sets out to "test" the power of his disguise on Brother Maceo in a Harlem bar. After a bit of banter about pork ribs goes horribly wrong, Maceo reads the protagonist as a violent, razor-wielding hipster, and events quickly spiral out of control, with the protagonist powerless to stop it: "Here I set out to test a disguise on a friend and now I was ready to beat him to his knees—not because I wanted to but because of place and circumstance" (489). In the ensuing violence—in which, much like in the prologue, one person is blinded by how "the construction of their *inner* eyes" leads them to mis-read the other person, and they lash out—the reader comes to understand that roles and disguises are themselves a social force that can exceed the power of personal choice (3; emphasis in original). In other words, Rinehartism may hold out the promise of allowing you to "BEHOLD THE INVISIBLE," as the protean Reverend's handbill advertises, but your attempt to "play the game" will keep you caught up in a power situation of which you are yourself the bearer—like the "boys" who fight each other for meaningless tokens in the Battle Royal—until you realize, in all its painful clarity, that "visibility is a trap" (496).

In this paper I have incorporated Bakhtin's conceptualizations of novelistic dialogism and Foucault's notions of power/knowledge discourses into a close reading of *Invisible Man* in order to demonstrate how these theoretical models open up new ways of understanding Ellison's novel, particularly how the novel conceives of the role of language in subject formation and domination/resistance. Exploring how the narrative structure itself signifies something to the reader (sometimes over the heads of the characters, if you will), I have been concerned less with arguing that the novel is wholly subversive of the discourses it represents than I have been concerned with illustrating the ways that the novel communicates to readers how to understand the nature and function of power/knowledge discourses in general, thereby destabilizing their hegemony by resisting their naturalizing function. Analyzing some of the formal aspects of the novel's radically unstable social vision in terms of Bakhtin's concept of the "hidden polemic" within novelistic language, and reading its politics as a function

of its theory of the performative power of language, has led to a rethinking some of the novel's central conceptual propositions, from the quest for "visibility" to the strategic dissimulations of Rinehartism, and if this analysis has put in check certain utopian impulses in the critical tradition of reading *Invisible Man* as triumphantly carnivalesque, it is in service of emphasizing another form of triumph: the triumph of form over the discourse of interpretive over-determinations that too frequently attend readings of Black literature.

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