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Anxiety of Synecdoche: Displacing the Essential in *Invisible Man*

Benjamin Bascom

Locating an essentialized black identity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* has both baffled and frustrated scholars of African American literature. While early critics initially praised the novel for its humanistic and existential rendering of the plight of a black youth, later members of the Black Arts movement lambasted Ellison for failing to produce art that effectively fought against racism. Indicating such sentiment, Black Studies programs in the sixties and early seventies generally did not assign the book, asserting that "Ralph Ellison is not a black writer" (Rampersad 462). Although Ellison argued that "literature is colorblind," critics felt that his political aesthetics proved a "middle class snobbishness—even contempt—towards Negro people" (quoted in Schaub 92). While this antagonism towards Ralph Ellison's novel has generally worn off, the mode of his political engagement—especially the contour of his perception of black essentialism vis-à-vis a constructivist identity—continues to engage scholars, who attempt to conceptualize the political aesthetics of the novel. Through this paper, I will trace the trajectory of Ellison's reception by the Black Arts Movement—as well as his move to question notions of essentialist racial identity—in order to re-conceptualize how forces of context and choice impact the creation of self. Through doing so, I will illustrate how the Invisible Man remains "invisible" through his rejection of black community and inability to reassert his own subjectivity.

Conflicts of Race Essentialism

The notion of an essential identity characteristic—whether it is in the form of race, sexuality, or gender—receives much attention in discussions of identity politics. While some scholars such as Jeffrey Nealon argue that the “new” constructivist approach to identity has become the essentialized *a priori* subject category, contemporary theory still seeks to interrogate the modes of identity that arise within culture, specifically searching out how deployments of power inform and construct identity categories. In conversation with poststructuralist identity discourse, Paul Gilroy’s *Against Race* argues that all subscribers to *a priori* racial identity categories are inchoate fascist communities (66). In Gilroy’s assessment, these communities create modes of internal and external membership that build the fodder for racial genocide. While Gilroy’s rhetoric signals a politics associated with late 1990s inclusivity, his analysis demonstrates how racial categories have always been fabricated on visual lines, thereby making such lines permeable to forms of technology that enhance the visual field either through magnifying or piercing the body. Through the Invisible Man’s anxiety about representing a black community, it appears as if Ellison rejects essentialist notions concerning skin color and racial community and similarly moves to conceptualize a political economy where racial inheritance does not predetermine one’s place in society. In this sense, Ellison presciently foresees Gilroy’s assessment that “the boundaries of ‘race’ have moved across the threshold of the skin” (47).

The question to consider, if one believes Gilroy, is where has “race” moved? This question is particularly resonant when considering that displacing or replacing racial categories is quite different from negating their existence. For instance, for racial politics to re-signify on racial signifiers, difference is not completely eliminated in favor of homogeneity. However, if difference is negated—absolved or even ignored—then the power relationships that assert the invisibility of race need to be carefully scrutinized. In *Against Race*, Gilroy points out that through technologies that peer into the skin—like biotechnology, gene therapy, and other medico-scientific projects—the “source” of racial identity has moved to a new playing field of signification. For instance, as technology forces the racializing gaze into the molecular level, the seemingly monolithic characteristic of skin color loses its prominence in determining racial heritage. Instead, cellular similarities make previous racial demarcations an anachronism. This anatomical search for racial identity is best seen in the genome project’s drive to discover genetic factors that determine racial communities (Gilroy 29, 37).

Linguistically, one can argue that the Black Aesthetic “moved

race” by shifting the adjectival significance of an already existent (and essentialized) African American racial identity: in other words, from “black is bad” to “black is beautiful.” With academe harboring negative assumptions regarding race—exemplified by the poet Louis Simpson’s statement that “[he is] not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro”—the Black Aesthetic endeavored to redefine what blackness meant within both America’s socioeconomic and academic contexts (quoted in Fuller 5). As Simpson’s poem indicates, many within academia assumed intellectual differences were because of one’s skin color. Within the larger project of remapping blackness, the Black Aesthetic moved black artistic expression outside of racist systems that, albeit unintentionally, remained fixed to the eighteenth-century Eurocentric ideologies that still defined blackness as an aberration (Gayle 92). With this move, however, blackness remained an undergirding identity within the collective consciousness of black Americans, and the Black Aesthetic worked to alter assumed negative associations stemming from that essential identity. With the heavy weight of history assuming essentialized notions of blackness, the Black Aesthetic sought to eradicate negative connotations of blackness, thereby continuing a similar project that Alain Locke began with *The New Negro*, forming a new, healthy, racial identity (Turner 67). However, in doing so, the artists of the Black Aesthetic still tried to inhabit a space of an authentic black essence, a space unmediated by the cultural stigma of past racial oppression. In summary, race remained essentialized within the Black Aesthetic, the only thing changing being a new definition-bestowing paradigm.

For the purposes of this paper, I am interested in mapping the trajectory of “Black” art as an aesthetic functioning under essentialist connotations that likewise strives to overturn negative essentialist rhetoric. In such light, the “invisible,” yet institutionally present racial signifiers in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* call for a reassessment of the novel. Specifically, Ellison’s novel illustrates the synecdochal relationship between parts and wholes—self and community—which naturalizes difference between self and world into one monologic whole. In fact, by de-essentializing “race”—or showing what we associate with skin color—Ralph Ellison is able to hypothesize concerning the existence of a world beyond “the perceptual regime in which the racialized body is bounded and protected by its enclosing skin” (Gilroy 46). Replacing essentialized notions of racial identity with performativity and pastiche, Ellison positions his protagonist within a social system that defines subjects by intertextuality. With such context-bound and performative subjectivity, the *Invisible Man* assumedly frees himself from forces of over-determining essentialism.

Linguistic Technologies

Language tropes, like metaphor, simile, and personification, attempt to make visible that which is invisible, or comprehensible that which is incomprehensible. Through the means of figurative language, literature conjures up within the mind of the reader layers of meaning, depth, and richness to achieve awareness or experience in a thing other than that which is stated. These same tropes can likewise be considered literary technology, or *techné*, that create meaning. While creating meaning, these literary “tools” have negative residual effects upon concepts because the “purity” of the original concept is called into question by the fact of its comparison with something else. For instance, when Elizabethan poets write that their lovers’ eyes are like stars, the analogy cheapens the actual characteristics of the stars through the process of “elevating” the attributes of the eyes to a star-like status. (The same thing could be said about “eyes” being cheapened by its comparison with bright, intergalactic dust.) As such, tropes both clarify and obscure a subject. Because stars are not eyes, nor are eyes really like stars, the comparison creates a liminal space where boundaries obscure and identities cross; in a sense, obfuscating as well as clarifying meaning.

Tropes naturalize ideology, thereby oppressing classes and persons without the power of language. For instance, controlling a language’s meaning rules the discursive capabilities which language provides for identity categories. Historically, those who rule the land control the language, thereby empowering them to “tropize” others into restrictive categories. Wielding the power of tropes over any group leads to conditioned meanings and ingrained stereotypes that reflect anything but inherent attributes. For instance, in English the concept of “black” has become synonymous with evil and ugliness since the Christian era. However, Ralph Ellison considers the slippage which “blackness” has encountered by referencing that in antebellum American literature blackness functioned as “a symbol of man,” in order to sanitize the horrors of slavery (*SA*, 32). After Reconstruction, however, blackness became “an image of the unorganized, irrational forces of American life” (32). Contrary to the slippage of black’s signifying power, whiteness has generally signified purity and goodness. Due to the Euro-centricity of English, the ideologies and physical characteristics of the Caucasian have entrenched themselves into a system of meanings and references that effectively calls for anything “Other” to inhabit the locale of the unclean and the contaminated. As a function of power, language maintains and instills the ideology of the oppressing class.

Considering language's ability to convey ideology, synecdoche has a particularly unruly totalizing power because it amalgamates a part into a greater whole. The prime example of such is the sailor cry: "All hands on deck!" This statement not only signifies the calling forth of "hands" but the accompanying "bodies" which connect to the hands. However, through the use of this trope the body becomes the hand and the hand becomes the body, making two different things into synonyms. Problems surface whenever one assumes a synecdoche establishes one, unified whole: the body is not the hand, nor is the hand the body, despite how they are both parts of the same skeletal system. Metonymy takes the trope of synecdoche one step further by using a material object to represent an idea, or vice versa. For instance, the "White House" is a metonymy for "government" or "executive branch," while the physical "white house" is not any of these ideological mechanisms, but rather a house painted white that has a mythic stature in American consciousness. The important point I want to emphasize is that metonymy and synecdoche are tropes in disguise, tropes that lose their guise as tropes when the two terms they compare coalesce into the same thing. To clarify, metonymy and synecdoche erase or amalgamate difference in favor of achieving a unified and undifferentiated whole, to the point where the "White House" *becomes* two things: both a house and a branch of government. These tropes, then, become technology that enforces a subject to assume an identity based upon their relationship to parts and wholes.

Invisible Technologies

Ellison frames his 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man* within the context of a post-racial world by intending "to reveal the human complexity which stereotypes ... conceal" (xxii). Stereotypes, defined as meanings and associations attached to specific individuals that connect them to groups or larger communities, presage racism yet similarly keep racism functioning. In his article about stereotypes and "social types," Russell Nash asserts that "[stereotypes] ignore individual differences among minority group members, and if minority individuals have 'majority group virtues,' these are somehow still interpreted as vices" (349). In this sense, racist-based identities—identities impelled upon subjects rather than elected by individuals—are established by attaching metaphysical assumptions to skin color.

In *Invisible Man*, the protagonist struggles to distance himself from the all-racial ideologies associated with a darker skinned body. He endeavors to move beyond the physical conditions associated with a black sharecropper identity by attending school, refusing to eat "black"

food, and distancing himself from the Trueblood, post-Reconstruction blacks. Ironically, he fears that if he shows any affinity to “black” things that he will be hindered from achieving his dreams of becoming a black educator. In this sense, the process of stereotyping can be described as the process of synecdoche, or the induction of a part into the whole, or a naturalization of a particularity into a universal. The Invisible Man (hereafter referenced as IM) distances himself from those things which signify Trueblood, because he assumes that any similar behaviors—or too much physical proximity—would accordingly thrust him into a metonymic relationship with others negatively associated with the same things; in a sense, he is afraid of becoming a “them.”

Of course, the IM’s rejection of Trueblood is more tantamount to his rejection of the black community in general. However, the Invisible Man’s skin color positions him into signifying for the larger black community, despite his efforts to transcend skin color politics. In her article that analyzes the relationship between visibility and blackness in *Invisible Man*, Kimberly Lamm argues that “the face [is] an image suspended between the concept of race and the physicality of the body” (814). Continuing on these same lines, Lamm asserts that the IM’s “face is not only a synecdoche for the body; it is the body’s most explicit locus of perception, communication, and expression” (814).

Within the society that IM lives, the color of his face predetermines his “racial” community. Regardless of his attempts to redirect the system of his racial signification, he continues to signify “blackness.” For instance, the unnamed one-night stand with Sybil interpret the particularity of the IM’s skin color as a sign of overwhelming sexuality. They tempt and “beg” him to personify their fantasy, which in turn validates the metonymic system within which they had placed the IM—a system in which blackness equals unrestrained sexuality. Refusing to actually consummate sex with Sybil, he still feels obligated to lie to her, which reinforces the societal stereotype within which he is placed. Writing on her belly “SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED BY SANTA CLAUS” connects the mythic identity of black sexuality with the childhood belief in Santa Claus. Both Santa and the IM perform a societal function of validating a preconceived belief: in the case of Santa, that goodness will be rewarded with presents on Christmas Day, and in the IM’s case, that a body exists upon which nymphomaniacs can fulfill sexual fantasy. They are both metonymic figures with a potential autonomous selfhood that is displaced by the societal role that they are expected to play. Harkening back to the IM’s frustrated, “I am nobody but myself” rhetoric (15), Ellison illustrates the cost of being a subject determined by the society: a

dispossession of the self as one loses the autonomy to act out of context. The IM is predetermined to act out certain behaviors because of the racial context within which society places his physical “blackness.”

Don Lee, a poet during the Black Arts movement, likewise laments the position in which Eurocentric ideologies have placed African Americans, asserting that the American capitalist-bourgeoisie has calculatedly deprived African Americans of an authentic cultural identity. In the poem “FOR BLACK PEOPLE,” Lee uses the hollowed out signifier “blk” to portray the way the American economy has marketed those of African descent as laborers void of an inner essence, reality, and culture (56). To Lee’s view, white America has turned black American cultural expressions into commodities. Through this commoditization, Black Americans have lost their selfhood, or autonomous identity. This sentiment assumes that pre-social identities exist within unmediated space. Lee takes this issue one step further by arguing that white-encoded racial differences inscribed upon the black body have become appropriated into whiteness: liberal, hippie women have turned their hair into afros: “miss perm [a white woman] and processed-down [a black woman trying to distance herself from “blackness”] looked at each / other with educated eyes that said: / i hate you” (57). To clarify, white women visually signify blackness as a way to naturalize racial difference into one conglomerate whole that white America consumes. To Lee, white America has hailed blackness as the other, but likewise appropriates black cultural difference into a posh, fashionable style. Furthermore, the white sector of society becomes viewed as the ultimate power holders as they can wear blackness and still remain ideologically white.

The IM illustrates his fear of being appropriated by a totalizing system with his initial distaste for everything “black.” He purposely avoids the slavery artifacts that his college displays; he rejects the “grits” the New York café offers and instead desires “coffee and toast.” What he fails to realize is that his deferral of one system merely alters the direction he takes into another totalizing system. By asking for toast and coffee he establishes an identity within the busy, middle-class New Yorkers who he sees walking the streets with “self-importance,” carrying a *Wall Street Journal* under their arm (164). In this sense, his rejection of one synecdochizing system places him into another synecdoche: he asks for the “type” of breakfast with which he wants to be identified, which keeps him stuck in the ideology of synecdoche. Thus, the IM is forced to accept that whatever decision or action he makes carries with it the weight of assimilation and a possibly unwanted identification. Hence, race functions as a performative, systematized technology, rather than an inherent, essential characteristic.

Not only are totalizing tropes used on the IM by social institutions, but he uses similar techné on others, specifically in viewing Jack as the stereotypical white “massa.” During his last episode with the Brotherhood, and at the height of his own belligerence, the IM sees Jack’s fake eye pop-out and roll on the table. This action causes Jack to fall out of the stereotypical system in which the IM had placed him: “his gaze had lost its command” (474). This idea of “command” refers to the hegemonic power which white owners had over their slaves. Instead of commanding the respect and reverence he had previously, Jack’s depth (i.e., multifacetedness) no longer allows him to fit within the system in which the IM had viewed him. The IM describes this depth of characterization by noting: “Suddenly Jack smiled and slipped back into his fatherly role” (470). This slippage of identities—the bending out of common tropes and inhabiting of new identities—makes the IM feel uncomfortable and he quickly loses all the gall he had minutes before. He leaves the meeting feeling sobered, asking Jack for the number of his optometrist so that, in his words, “I may not-see myself as others see-me-not” (477). While the IM’s last comment may be interpreted as a subversive questioning of the Brotherhood’s ability to see and not appreciate difference without totalizing it, one can also read this clever comment about optometry as the IM’s recognition that he has been totalized into a synecdochal relationship with the Brotherhood. Furthermore, this specific scene illustrates the IM’s latent recognition that he too approaches others’ identities through synecdoche. Recognizing his own role as lingual technology—and how he similarly wields such ideological mechanisms upon others—he leaves with distaste for the image beyond the stereotype. Just as he indicts all aspects of black and white life, he too continues a synecdochizing relationship between the particular and the universal, or the part and whole, that reinscribes him into signifying for a larger community.

Torn between identities of blackness and the Brotherhood, the IM returns to Harlem disguised. Unbeknownst to him, he dresses in the garb of a man with multiple identities named Rinehart. After being mistaken for a pimp, a bookie, and a preacher, the IM enters his favorite bar, behaves as his old self, and yet his “friends” cannot see who he really is. During his heated verbal exchange with Brother Maceo, the IM feels “ready to beat [Brother Maceo] to his knees—not because [the IM] wanted to but because of place and circumstance” (489). His sense of self shifts from the stabilizing and potentially monolithic representation of a synecdoche, and becomes context bound, or situation-determined. In this sense, the IM starts to build an identity based upon place, based upon the montage of his surroundings. With a chameleon-like identity, the IM

recognizes the freedom associated with pastiche surroundings, where the definition of the self is context bound, as opposed to inherently bestowed through a pre-lingual or pre-social meaning. As Valerie Prince argues in her evaluation of “Home” in African American literature, the IM refuses to “ally himself with the collectivity” of blackness (53). Instead, the IM opts to invest into a relational identity codetermined by the existence of both black and whiteness. The IM attempts to move beyond all the repressive defining forces that had initially grouped him in groups with which he did not choose to associate—Bledsoe, Brother Jack, Ras, or Mr. Norton. These synecdochizing power figures had appropriated him into their respective political and socioeconomic systems, which predetermined what his life could actually mean or signify. The IM, in a pastiche-like presentation, wears the mask of Rinehart to navigate and position his self in relation to—not determined by—others.

Movement beyond the synecdochizing function likewise destabilizes the IM’s potential for any type of a stable identity. One function of a synecdoche—to connect an individual to a community—explains how an individual can either acquire or maintain a concept of a “home.” Home, here, refers to a sense of familial identity. In a family, an individual is part of something beyond the self—sister, brother, son, daughter, mother, father, uncle, aunt: the individual is both the self and the placeholder for an exterior relationship. Prince asserts that the IM, severed from the Self and his familial roots, “is not yet ready to make the conscious choice to identify with . . . his racial community” (53).

Unable to perceive a racial identity outside of socially determined constructs, he fights any system that positions him in similitude with the larger black community. In this sense, the IM’s rejection of a synecdochized identity displaces him from a viable black community, thus making him homeless. Without a place within the African American community and visually excluded from signifying for a “white” community, the IM is left as the penultimate existential hero, isolated and distanced from all human interaction. The potential for synecdoche to resemble the function by which an individual establishes a possession of home, and its similar function of informing and strengthening racial stereotypes, produces within the IM the type of “contradictions” he lamented Clifton was “jam-full of” (IM 467). In this sense, the IM not only refuses to be appropriated into a preset identity through rejecting societal and institutional mechanisms, he also rejects becoming a “self” through ignoring the larger community that stabilizes identity categories.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the concept of “possession” requires the techné of synecdoche, for to possess something

is to appropriate a thing until it becomes a “part of a whole.” For instance, one’s property or money needs the possessive pronoun “my” for others to understand that the thing has been “claimed.” Along these lines, one’s identity coincides with what one chooses to possess, or be possessed by. As this paper has dispensed with notions of an inherent and irreversible identity, modern identity politics likewise alludes to a decided connection between an individual and a social system. A “dispossession,” then, is to be without the power of synecdoche—or disempowered from utilizing the synecdochizing mechanism necessary to claim one’s identity from within a social totality. In this light, the formation of selfhood does not come biologically—as through skin color—but *gradually*, through decided associations and connections to a larger social totality. In summary, when synecdoche is used *upon* him, the IM becomes what he is not, but without the power to synecdochize, he fails to form an identity and remains invisible.

Invisible Communities

As touched on earlier, most Black Arts writers viewed Ellison as an anachronistic writer out of sync with key political movements in the sixties. Larry Neal described *Invisible Man* as “the kind of novel which ... has little bearing on the world as the ‘New Breed’ sees it” (quoted in Rampersad, 452). Furthermore, the novelist William Melvin Kelley commented that future generations will approach the music of James Brown to understand the black experience, instead of reading Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (quoted in Van Deberg, 208). These statements quite ironically parallel Ralph Ellison’s own sentiment concerning the fiction of his time: “When the white American ... says, ‘This is American reality,’ the Negro tends to answer ... ‘Perhaps, but you’ve left out this, and this, and this. And most of all, what you’d have the world accept as *me* isn’t even human’” (*SA*, 25). Considering that Ellison recognized that authentic black experience was left out in contemporary fiction, his political aesthetics center on making an oppressed segment of the American experience visible to the larger society. As such, the novel does not negate black identity, but instead it validates the pursuit to define and describe social modes of blackness. The protagonist “chooses the path of individualism instead of racial unity,” but does so to assert his individuality in the face of institutions and people that would consider him invisible (quoted in Nadel, 24). Imagining seeing “Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure,” the IM realizes that “[t]hey were all the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to

me” (508). *Invisible Man*, then, continues to be a provocative study of a subject’s identity within and without the context of community, and makes visible the ignored voices in modernist black experience.

The Black Arts movement, in its attempt to establish an aesthetic, political, and socioeconomic home for black Americans, viewed Ellison’s *Invisible Man* as unethically ignoring differences between black and white aesthetics (Gayle 92). Critics argued that Ellison bought into white superiority and tried to create a novel that broke out of black racial essentialism. However, despite this rupture, critics still asserted—as Richard Wright ironically assessed of his generation of writers—that Ellison tried to prove “that the Negro was not inferior,” therefore maintaining a disguised racial essentialism (45). However, in a striving post-racialized world—where social institutions risk legislative action if carry-overs from past racial ideologies blatantly inflect interactions between systems and individuals—*Invisible Man* functions as a cultural artifact from which to observe not only the performativity of identity, but the synecdochizing mechanism by which individuals and communities adopt racial identities. *Invisible Man*’s placement within any literary canon, then, is determined by who decides to build a sense of self from it. Despite the controversial history of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and its latter rejection by the Black Arts movement, the novel is able to be grafted on to any identity—regardless of skin color, nationality, or cultural heritage—because of its fervent questioning of the where and *how* the self is located.

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