

The Confederacy of Sages and the Agon of Black Power: Ellison's Hidden Heart

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At a time when A&E Networks has replaced its Biography Channel with “FYI”—a “lifestyle channel” geared to “an upscale, younger audience that is active online” and eager for “personalized experience”—the progenitors of the new acronym pride themselves on not only a carefully branded indefiniteness that allows it to signify “For Your Inspiration, For Your Imagination, or For Your Innovation” but also the marketing power of debuting in an estimated seventy million homes. As we contemplate the centennial of Ralph Ellison’s birth, it is quite likely that his literary career will reach contemporary and future audiences through visual media orchestrated as such rather than through the premillennial conventions of book-shaped literary biography. The now decade-old PBS American Masters documentary biography *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey* (2005), the first and still the only substantive filmed treatment of Ellison’s life and works, demonstrates the possibilities and the perils of this redoubtable reality.¹

Although the PBS documentary does not adhere slavishly to the conventional three-act linear structure of popular television documentaries like those of A&E filmmaker Avon Kirkland’s production, it does chart a narrative trajectory that launches its subject from a framing “set-up” with familiarizing dramatic conflicts onto an unraveling road of trials and triumphs that vex and beckon the title figure’s questing soul, before veering finally toward resolution

in a tertiary segment that orchestrates a plausible reconciliation of the psychological and sociological gauntlets dramatized along the way. Interspersed with expressionistic and surrealist scenes adapted cinematically from *Invisible Man* and signature short fiction by Ellison, the film's poetic and performative threads complement and counterpoint an otherwise naturalistic "portrait of an artist" whose twinned forays through the worlds of art and public opinion the producers synchronize scenically precisely two-thirds through the storyline. There, some fifteen years after the triumphant 1952 appearance of the pioneering novelist's watershed book, at paired moments of wrenching personal crisis in late 1967, Ralph Ellison endures, first, a public confrontation on a largely white Iowa college campus with a young black motorcycle-riding militant in a black beret and black leather jacket, who publicly brands him "nothing but an Uncle Tom," a "sell-out," and a "disgrace to [his] race." The following month, in psychological lockstep, he confronts, in private, a catastrophic fire at his secluded summer home in Massachusetts—quite likely arson, the Ellisons always believed,² though unmentioned as such in the film—wherein more than three hundred manuscript pages of his long-awaited second novel go up in smoke.

In the first dramatic crisis, edited evocatively to emphasize the pathos of the intraracial cross-generational confrontation, a key witness—then a young black student leader, now a graying federal judge—reports how, after forcefully defying the accuser (who abruptly departed), Ellison became "emotionally unglued," began to sob and, his head on the student's shoulder, protested over and over, "I'm not an Uncle Tom, I'm not an Uncle Tom," in a teary-eyed, cathartic release of emotion that presumably needs no broader narrative contextualization. No less filled with pathos, but with no participating witnesses this time to re-create the moment's emotional trauma, the succeeding crisis-by-fire nonetheless reverberates throughout the remainder of the film as a kind of hollow exculpation for the ultimate failure of Ellison's grand ambitions to write the unwritable Great American Novel. Buttressed by rounds of damning indictments from Amiri Baraka—Ellison's prime antagonist during the ideological trench warfare of the Black Arts Movement years—and in tandem with scholarly detractors who tally Ellison's ostensible sins of omission and commission, a seemingly authoritative chronicle of his solitary ambition, his vaunting and idiosyncratic hubris, his defensive withdrawal from intergenerational exchange, and his corollary but anticlimactic demise, etches itself onto the screen and into the archives.

Since this oft-repeated frame story has gained considerable cachet with scholarly and now popular audiences, some cautionary words of countervailing recollection seem in order, which this essay will outline. For if, as Ellison once wryly counseled his intellectual sparring partner Stanley Edgar Hyman, we "change the joke and slip the yoke," the film's overly tidy version of Ellison's journey seems less a portrait of himself that he, or those who knew him most unguardedly, could recognize and fully affirm than the product of an ambivalent attempt to "hit a straight lick with a crooked stick." For despite the chorus of

fervid antagonists and nonplussed observers captured on screen and in print to date, a significantly different narrative arc—half-hidden behind barriers partly of Ellison’s own devising—remains to be made visible. Some of the “Special Features” outtake interviews on the American Masters production provide clues to such an alternative storyline—allusions to the sometimes jarringly different public and private faces Ellison presented to the world; references to markers of his personal style that were in fact generational rather than idiosyncratically personal; features of his motives and personality rooted in the constrained strategic possibilities of a jarringly discordant time and milieu; organizational affiliations that hint at emotional drives beyond imaginative isolation and heroic individualism; and a lifetime of submerged and modulated anger that a devotion to art and an abhorrence of the theatrics of political protest held in only testy equilibrium.

It may be useful to remember that, besieged as he was by reiterated partisan dismay at his fervent valorizations of art and corollary deflations of politics, Ellison, in his justifiably famous essay “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” poses the eternal problem of the relation between art and politics by subjecting it to a characteristically wily double perspective. First, astride W. H. Auden’s canonical assertions that “in our age, the mere making of a work of art is itself a political act” and that “*Homo Laborans* is also *Homo Ludens*,” Ellison surmises by extension that “without doubt, even the most *engagé* writer—and I refer to true artists, not to artists *manqués*—begins his career in play and puzzlement, in dreaming over the details of the world in which he becomes conscious of himself.” He then turns double perspective into dialectic by adroitly pairing the first move with a contra-canonical feint courtesy of the black vernacular: “Let Tar Baby, that enigmatic figure from Negro folklore, stand for the world. He leans, black and gleaming, against the wall of life, utterly noncommittal under our scrutiny, our questioning, starkly unmoving before our naïve attempts at intimidation. Then we touch him playfully and before we can say *Sonny Liston!* We find ourselves stuck. Our playful investigations become a labor, a fearful struggle, an *agon*. Slowly we perceive that our task is to learn the proper way of freeing ourselves.”³

First delivered as a lecture, six months before the triumphal Civil Rights Act of 1964, and ten months before young Cassius Clay, soon to become Muhammad Ali, “shocked the world” by dethroning the fearsome heavyweight champion Sonny Liston, Ellison’s essay had inadvertently fabricated a trenchant metaphor for his own generation’s looming agon with the changing mindscape of radical artistic and political leadership surging up within African American communities, which his own playful investigations in fiction and cultural criticism had foreshadowed. His subsequent combat with this new ultra-black Tar Baby would force him to confront not just his hidden name, however, but his hidden heart as well; and though played out largely behind the curtains of public notoriety, the script for its agonistic movement from purpose to passion

to perception and covert catharsis has been within our own investigative reach all along.

For behind the highly visible media spectacle of his public encounters with the youthful architects of Black Power and Black Art, Ralph Ellison was struggling, between 1969 and 1972, to fashion a more private and less theatrical cross-generational dialectic within an initially clandestine confederacy of distinguished elder black scholars and civil rights policy veterans called the Haverford Group, wherein the simplistic public dichotomy of “integrationism” versus “separatism” foundered amid the ragged paradoxes and ambiguities of an American social contract still riven by the riddles of *e pluribus unum*. A decade ago, resurging memories of past conversations with him through the years—and my research then for the first volume of an intellectual biography of Ralph Ellison—guided me into contact with unplumbed transcripts and books in the Ellison and Kenneth Clark Papers at the Library of Congress that help make more visible this less familiar face of Ellison’s American journey—as something other than isolated and idiosyncratic, as not uniformly vilified or rejected by the leading architects of Black Power and Black Art, and as not single-mindedly obsessed with a recalcitrant second novel as the sine qua non of his intellectual and artistic legacy.

Michael Lackey’s recent publication of some of the pertinent materials in *The Haverford Discussions: A Black Integrationist Manifesto for Racial Justice*⁴ represents an important first step toward understanding better both the murky depths of the nation’s stormy passage from Civil Rights to Black Power in the 1960s and 1970s and the contesting personal careers of a whole generational cohort of senior black public intellectuals—Ralph Ellison among them—who tried to mediate, and meditate on, the African American cultural and intrafamilial conflicts that accompanied this watershed of modern American history.⁵ Kept initially out of public purview by the Haverford Group’s own inclinations, the traces they left reveal the astonishing spectacle of some of the most sophisticated black thinkers of the twentieth century suddenly and bewilderingly wrenched from center stage in the Freedom Movement by sociopolitical, psychological, and rhetorical forces that appeared to defy the very terms on which their own generational achievements and their familial relationships with younger black Americans had been founded.

By the closing years of the 1960s, despite passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a heavily reported “rising tide of discontent” in black communities nationwide had precipitated a steady stream of urban riots and rebellions, convulsing more than a hundred cities yearly, including Atlanta, San Francisco, Oakland, Baltimore, Seattle, Tacoma, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Columbus, Newark, Chicago, New York, and most explosively Detroit—and the intellectual reverberations were intense. In 1967, the dual personal crises Ralph Ellison suffered so poignantly in the American Masters storyline were in fact foregrounded by the publication earlier that year of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, by

the English translation of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and then by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton's *Black Power* and Harold Cruse's *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*—these last three fueling a black separatist upsurge that threatened to drown out comforting civil rights dreams of racial integration. King's book, his last before his assassination, was a litany of wrenching questions and desperate attempts at rational answers: What had happened since the March on Washington and "Negro Revolution" of 1963, with its enrapturing civic dream? Why had the martyrdom of Malcolm X and his transfixing autobiographical tale of self-transformation so transformed in turn the consciousness of black youth? Why the widening repudiation of nonviolence and the manifest theoretical allure of Frantz Fanon's psychotherapeutic warfare of decolonization? Was the intensifying white backlash merely guilt-driven defensiveness or potentially genocidal? With King's consensus gone and his ministerial stance on black liberation under siege, the impassioned moral exhortation of his earlier books had largely been replaced in this unintended coda by analytical examination that probed the illusion of racial achievement and its consequences—apathy and then disenchantment at continued black demands on the part of whites, disillusion and nihilistic despair on the part of blacks. Black Power was, King believed, a transient slogan that reflected one reality—that advances come from strength—and disregarded another, that "the Negro cannot do it alone." Addressing his differences with C.O.R.E. and S.N.C.C. at length, King still felt that the "Black Power" slogan was a tactical error and that nonviolence was still morally and pragmatically preferable. Where do we go then? To black power, *lower case*, through ideological persuasion, economic coercion, political independence, alliances, activism, and ultimately to education—which made the requisite "deep analysis" possible.⁶ Having led the movement from its old Southern strategy of lunch counter sit-ins and freedom rides to an assault on institutionalized racism in Northern housing and jobs and civic amenities, King, however, had found himself publicly stoned by Northern whites and booed and called "Uncle Tom"—like Ralph Ellison—by blacks.

Ellison's unsettling confrontation that same fall with the Black Pantheresque motorcycle rider had taken place on the Northern white campus of Grinnell College to which Ellison had come, in the very company of Martin Luther King himself and other dignitaries, to discuss "Urban Culture and the Negro."⁷ But a year earlier an interview with Ellison published in the *New York Times* made clear how he actually perceived King in relation to the broader dynamics of American political power and leadership. "Real power comes from the mastery of political technique plus the discovery of such organizational techniques as will win the support of followers who, in turn, will allow these leaders to achieve their will," he said.⁸ "The leaders who function most effectively are the ones who grasp the complexities of American life, not those who simply rant against it. This is still a racist society; but just recognizing this and having the ability to bring crowds into the street is no guarantee that a leader will know how to guide his followers, or that he has any real power."⁹

As an operational point of reference, Ellison suggested that longtime Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., though originally a Baptist minister like King and despite his logistical skirmishes then in the House of Representatives, knew the relationships of power better and, because he did, was a uniquely effective leader—and one who saw himself as the real originator of the Black Power concept. Decades before Martin Luther King, Jr., in the wake of the threatened 1941 March on Washington originally planned by A. Philip Randolph, Powell had begun translating militancy and street protest into effective political strategy: instituting mass marches and business boycotts against discrimination; implementing racial quotas in city employment; desegregating the use of congressional facilities by his staff; and engineering the series of “Powell Amendments” that anticipated the Civil Rights Act of 1964 by requiring the cutoff of federal funds to institutions practicing discrimination. This double-edged tactic, developed in collaboration with NAACP operative Clarence Mitchell, was that “on bill after bill that proposed federal expenditures, Powell would offer ‘our customary amendment,’ requiring that federal funds be denied to any jurisdiction that maintained segregation; Liberals would be embarrassed, Southern politicians angered.”¹⁰

These signature maneuvers won him the monicker “The Great Amender” and subsequently became integrated into Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights legislation. Alongside them, in both his 1965 “Black Position Paper for 20 Million Negroes”¹¹ and his 1966 commencement address at Howard University,¹² Powell had proclaimed “Black Power” to be a “godly form of power” that was neither black nationalist nor integrationist and that could be linked to freedom struggles abroad. By contrast, Ellison observed, “Martin Luther King has limitations when he functions politically because he is [functioning as] a churchman; [and] once the struggle is moved from the streets into the elaborate process of politics, his framework restrains him.” While admiring King for adapting a “very old Negro tradition,” Ellison himself was not nonviolent; moreover, he had little sympathy for those (King was not being referenced here) who present themselves as the only true voice of black people or who insist that the only authentic sound thereof is “a long wail of despair or of degradation.”¹³

So from this vantage point, Carmichael and Hamilton’s *Black Power* was not the unprecedented thunderbolt to Ellison that it seemed to so many others. That potential was fulfilled instead by Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, and precisely because Cruse’s scathing critique of the black intelligentsia, however polemical and *ad hominem* at points, mounted the most sustained and historically specific indictment yet of African American philosophical and strategic failures in cultural theory and politics—and it mirrored in an uncanny variety of ways the stances that Ellison himself had taken decades earlier during his own novitiate amid the radical left of the 1930s and 1940s. “Stormy Weather,” Ellison’s *New Masses* review of Langston Hughes’s autobiography *The Big Sea*, had outlined in 1940 a critique of the Harlem Renaissance that could be linked on a line of direct genealogical descent to Cruse’s pivotal

reading of the earlier movement's failure to build cultural foundations for African American theater on which the Black Arts theater of the 1960s might have been erected. Echoing facets of Ellison's famous critical exchanges with Jewish leftist critic Irving Howe, Cruse indicted Negro intellectuals for not developing a cultural philosophy independent of radical Anglo American and Jewish intellectuals; as a consequence of this failure, in the ongoing triangular warfare between a dominant Anglo American cultural nationalism and the "blocked" ethnic nationalisms of Jewish Americans and African Americans, black people had been unable to develop collective power because their ideas and strategies had not been rooted in their greatest social, political, and, yes, economic asset—their group culture—because of a sycophantic focus on Anglo and Jewish American institutions, audiences, philanthropists, and critics. In his anatomy of "Individualism and the Open Society," Cruse formulated an ideological black *Realpolitik* that "integrated" power, morality, and economic self-interest into a cultural nationalist "policy of the possible" and a reconception of the "American Dilemma" which recognized that

America, which idealizes the rights of the individual above everything else, is in reality a nation dominated by the social power of groups, classes, in-groups, cliques—both ethnic and religious. The individual in America has few rights that are not backed up by the political, economic and social power of one group or another. Hence the individual Negro has, proportionately, very few rights indeed because his ethnic group (whether or not he actually identifies with it) has very little political, economic, or social power (beyond moral grounds) to wield. Thus, it can be seen that those Negroes, and there are very many of them, who have accepted the full essence of the Great American Ideal of individualism are in serious trouble trying to function in America.¹⁴

Neither a Pan-Africanist nor an Afrocentrist, but convinced that African American communities would remain separate and unequal because of tenacious racism and white supremacy, and weary of what he saw as the self-defeating black embrace of both liberal and leftist integrationist politics, Cruse charted an independent course toward a constitutionally reconfigured and formally federated pluralist society in which black ownership and control of African American cultural industries would be the primary desideratum for building real economic and political power. Critical, like Ellison, of the flamboyant street-corner militancy, empty sloganeering, and lack of substantive programs in the initial wave of Black Power rhetoric, Cruse was as attentive to the alternative revolutionary cultural potential of the new media technologies as Ellison was; and his focus on the substantive philosophical differences between "integrationism" and "cultural pluralism" resonated with Ellison's longstanding an-

ti-assimilationist approach to the history of American intergroup relationships and their future potential. Moreover, at a level of empathetic engagement with Ellison's personal ideological skirmishes, Cruse had gone out of his way in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* to defend Ellison's artistic achievements and personal integrity against the "distorted" dialogue spearheaded at the 1965 Harlem Writers Conferences by the accusations of rival novelist John Oliver Killens and historian John Henrik Clarke—accusations reiterated in steady drum-beat thereafter—that Ellison, like James Baldwin, had been "in flight from his own people" but, unlike Baldwin, had not returned to the struggle.¹⁵ Moreover, expanding on leads Cruse framed in *The Crisis*, Larry Neal, coeditor alongside LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka of *Black Fire*, the manifesto anthology of the Black Arts Movement, subsequently repudiated his earlier derogation of Ellison's cultural politics (and Baraka's by implication) with a spirited defense thereof ("Ellison's Zoot Suit") in the special December 1970 issue of Hoyt Fuller's *Black World*,¹⁶ arguably the leading Black Arts journal, as part of its effort to provide a less jaundiced but still partisan Black Arts perspective on Ellison's "literary works and status." Aligning himself also with Cruse, Ishmael Reed, one of the most eclectic, charismatic, and vociferous Black Arts leaders and dissenters, adamantly defended his own dissenting opinion on Ellison as early as a 1968 interview, "When State Magicians Fail," insisting

If you look at the debates between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, or look at Marcus Garvey, there was always dissent within the movement. That's why I dig Harold Cruse so much. Everybody ought to read his book *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. . . . This is a new movement. We don't want fascism. We don't want some goon in a black leather jacket telling us what to do when he is going to end up beating on his own people, but grin before the white media. The artists will function as they will. Ralph Ellison, William Melvin Kelley, Charles Wright, Bob Kaufman are all great artists; they're helping the movement a lot more than some of the black power people, some of whom are even besmirching the name of Malcolm X because he's dead and can't defend himself.¹⁷

Such politicized alliances aside, Ellison's multilayered attention to Cruse's explosive book was replicated in black intellectual circles nationwide; and the formation of what would come to be called the Haverford Group sprang directly from its prosecutorial dissection of the crisis of black intellectuals—as magnified irrefutably at the moment in the ongoing exclusion of both black public and private intellectuals from an expanding world of public policy enclaves and "think tanks" in the American academy and the private sector. The proximate spur for creating the Haverford Group came six months after the 1968

assassination of Martin Luther King, when Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study announced an upcoming meeting of "80 World Intellectuals to Hold [a] Seminar on [the] Problems of the U.S.," as a planned advisory for the winner of the upcoming presidential election—who would turn out to be Richard Nixon, riding the long coattails of the white backlash, rather than Hubert Humphrey, the liberal heir apparent. Despite the continuing onslaught of urban riots and an attendant Kerner Commission Report earlier during the year that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal," no black scholars or intellectuals were initially mentioned as invited participants at Princeton; and only *Black Power* co-author Charles Hamilton and *Crisis* author Harold Cruse were eventually added to the list of invitees.¹⁸

Enter Ann Cooke Reid, a Yale-trained drama scholar and legendary theater impresario at several historically black colleges and universities. Having also reacted intensely on her own part to Cruse's book, and having taken specific umbrage at "the kind of people who were excluded" from Princeton's "grand international meeting of intellectuals," she vigilantly approached renowned black psychologist Kenneth Clark, author of *The Dark Ghetto* (1965) and president of New York's recently founded Metropolitan Applied Research Center (MARC), about initiating an effort "to get some of these people together without organization, without politics, without institutional representation, [to] have a small quiet conversation."¹⁹

In the decade since his co-leading role (with his wife, psychologist Mamie Phipps Clark) in the "doll studies" that had undergirded the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* school desegregation case, Kenneth Clark had become the single best known African American social scientist, public intellectual, and drum major for racial integration; and in 1963 he had orchestrated for public television audiences a galvanizing trio of interviews about the problems of racial integration with personal friends James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X—a conjunction unreplicated thereafter. But with his award-winning book *The Dark Ghetto*, Clark had himself helped push the integrationist mythos of the "American Dilemma" and the "American Dream" through which race relations and African American life were conventionally viewed by liberals toward a new, more ominous paradigm:

Ghettos are the consequences of the imposition of external power and the institutionalization of powerlessness. In this respect they are in fact social, political, educational, and—above all—economic colonies. Those confined within ghetto walls are subject peoples. They are victims of the greed, cruelty, insensitivity, guilt and fear of their masters.²⁰

Writing here two years before Carmichael and Hamilton made the analogy of internal colonialism central to articulating the political program of the Black Power movement, Clark had formulated the concept so provocatively

that the coauthors of *Black Power* eventually used it as the opening epigraph for their own book's first chapter. Clark, however, had been wrestling with the new Black Power paradigm on multiple fronts—most troublingly on the pragmatic battlefields of personal organizational leadership. If intellectually his metaphor of evolving domestic colonialism implied a corollary *global* perspective and battlefield strategies, Clark, at the organizational level, had spent the years since 1963 in internecine warfare with the “godly form of black power” wielded *locally* by none other than Adam Clayton Powell. This battle was over control of the ambitious anti-poverty program, HARYOU (Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited), that Clark himself had founded as a demonstration project to fight the intensifying social isolation, economic dependence, and declining educational and municipal services that “internal colonies” like Harlem now faced.²¹ Drawing on the resources of the Congressional office, longstanding machine politics alliances, and clandestine deal making, Powell's skilled and relentless maneuvering had driven Clark out of his own organization and forced him to reevaluate the dynamics and “pathos of power” and leadership in a milieu that he now increasingly viewed as simultaneously a prison and a cocoon as well as a colony.

From his more secure bastion in MARC, an action-oriented proto-think tank dedicated to serving the urban poor, Clark responded energetically to Ann Cooke Reid's initiative. He agreed to fund the Haverford Group's secretarial staff and its first meeting in the spring of 1969, and to invite a collection of leading African American public intellectuals to analyze and confront the issues raised by the proliferating Black Power and black separatist ideologies and organizations.²² Clark's invitees were as distinguished and battle-tested a group of senior black intellectuals as could have been imagined at the time; nearly all had been torch-bearing pioneers “advancing the race” in one field or another despite oftentimes awe-inspiring personal histories of hardship and segregation—and several of them had mentored or intellectually engaged members of the insurgent Black Power student leadership. Ann Cooke Reid herself, who served as coordinator of the first session, had been only the second black theater Ph.D. in the country; and in the course of building outstanding theater programs at Spelman College and Howard University, she had built the Howard Players Theater Group into the first American collegiate theater ensemble to be invited by the U.S. State Department and a foreign government (Norway) to perform abroad, back in 1948. Several of the students she mentored at Howard—including LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Richard Wesley, Ted Shine, and Joseph Walker—were emerging leaders in the Black Theater wing of the Black Arts Movement.²³ St. Clair Drake, Professor of Anthropology at Stanford, was the son of a Baptist minister who had renounced his ministry in the 1920s to become an itinerant organizer for Marcus Garvey. Drake's interest in anthropology, kindled by subsequent experiences of poverty and caste in the Caribbean and the American South, led him to a transatlantic career of activist field research and union organizing—and near-lynching—which laid the conceptual groundwork

for his later joint authorship of the sociological classic *Black Metropolis* (1946). During the Haverford Group's inaugural year, Drake was busy founding Stanford's Center for Afro-American Studies on a model that rejected separatist and Afrocentrist racialism; and he directly resisted efforts by Stokely Carmichael himself to redirect that academic enterprise to separatist ends.²⁴

John Hope Franklin, son of an Oklahoma lawyer whose office had been burned down during the infamous 1921 Tulsa Riot, had always remembered being told by a supercilious white instructor that he would "never be able to command the English language," and he had converted that rebuff into psychological fuel for becoming a high school valedictorian and eventually, after graduating from Fisk University, the first African American (since W. E. B. Du Bois) from an historically black institution to enter the graduate history program at Harvard directly.²⁵ He had gone on to publish in 1947 a magisterial history of African Americans, *From Slavery to Freedom*; and during the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case, he had been commissioned by Thurgood Marshall to lead a team of scholars documenting the historical portion of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund briefs. In 1965, Franklin joined some forty other scholars on the Selma to Montgomery March; and having served as the first black president for several national academic organizations, he was chairing the History Department at the University of Chicago during the early Haverford Group sessions.²⁶

William Henry Hastie, former dean of the Howard Law School and the first black federal judge, as well as a member of what became known as President Franklin Roosevelt's "black cabinet," built a distinguished, multifaceted career as a civil rights attorney, as a law school professor (Thurgood Marshall had been one of his first students), and after President Harry Truman appointed him Governor of the U.S. Virgin Islands in 1946,²⁷ he became the first African American to hold this position since P. B. S. Pinchback of Louisiana during Reconstruction. The oldest member of the Haverford Group as well, Hastie was still serving on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit—after having written the decisions in more than four hundred cases—when Kenneth Clark invited him to join the Haverford enclave.²⁸

Robert Weaver, the nation's first African American U.S. cabinet secretary, built a varied career fighting discrimination in housing and employment as a government administrator, writer, and educator during the Great Depression, which eventually led in the 1960s to his becoming the Kennedy administration's primary adviser on housing and urban affairs and, during the Johnson administration in 1965, the first head of the newly created Department of Housing and Urban Development. The mid-1960s cycle of inner-city riots that exposed urban decay and the rising tide of discontent pushed Weaver into the subsequent role of a Johnson administration spokesman for the Great Society and the War on Poverty; and he played a crucial role in the passage and implementation of legislative initiatives such as the Model Cities Act and the Fair Housing section of the 1968 Civil Rights Act, which culminated Weaver's three decades of advocacy and research. Clark's invitation to join the Haverford Group in 1969

came as Weaver was making the transition from government affairs to managing graduate students in the C.U.N.Y. professoriate.²⁹

Adelaide Cromwell, the second woman scholar in the Haverford Group and the descendant of three generations of college-educated Washingtonians and Boston Black Brahmins, graduated from Smith College and earned a Master's degree from the University of Pennsylvania and then a Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard's Radcliffe College in 1946. She embarked on an impressive academic career that led her to become the first African American faculty member at Hunter College and then Smith, before she settled finally at Boston University, where she cofounded that university's African Studies Program in 1953; and then in 1969, the year she, too, joined the Haverford Group, Cromwell inaugurated an Afro-American Studies Program unique for its focus on independent, modern Africa and the issues surrounding contemporary African and Afro-American elites.³⁰

The most distinguished "man of letters" in the group, besides Ellison, J. Saunders Redding, the first African American to hold an endowed chair at an Ivy League university, was the son of two Howard University graduates and had performed so brilliantly at Brown University in earning a bachelor of philosophy and a master of arts degree in the 1920s that he qualified for Phi Beta Kappa—but the racism of the institution blocked his being awarded that honor until the 1940s, after he had made a name for himself by publishing his landmark history of African American literature, *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), and a memoiristic travelogue of Southern black life, *No Day of Triumph* (1942), which was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and praised by Richard Wright.³¹ Redding was also a Shakespearean scholar and a radical integrationist whose cosmopolitan outlook (one of his books was *An American in India: A Personal Report on the Indian Dilemma and the Nature of Her Conflicts*) put him in opposition to both black and white academic establishments during the segregated 1930s and 1940s. More pointedly, Redding was an acolyte of W. E. B. Du Bois's "literature of purpose or necessity" and the ideal of developing a group aesthetic rooted in the vernacular forms of black folklore, spirituals, and sermons rather than the urban modernism of the Harlem Renaissance. *To Make a Poet Black* called for a "spiritual and physical return to the earth" three decades before Addison Gayle's *The Black Aesthetic* announced a corollary Black Arts Movement "return to the roots" for the 1970s. When the Haverford Group members agreed at their first meeting to begin publishing essays that would confront the presumably faulty intellectual premises of the leading black separatists, Redding took the lead with a missive titled "The Black Revolution in American Studies"; and Baraka's furious "A Reply to Saunders Reddings' [*sic*] 'The Black Revolution in American Studies'" made it clear that the real battleground would not be on the terms of formalist academic theory and methodology but on those of specific generational consciousness, sensibility, and perceived psychological reality—grounds on which Redding and the Haverford sages would be hard-pressed to win.³²

At the outset, besides this stunning roster of those who actively signed on, Kenneth Clark's list of potential Haverford Group invitees had also included James Baldwin, Julian Bond, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ralph Bunche, and Percy Julian—none of whom, for various reasons, were able or willing to participate.³³ Cruse, although also high on that list and also not a participant, was present nonetheless—in absentia, as a hovering specter throughout the proceedings. What difference the presence of any or all of these others might have made to the submerged legacy of the group can be measured in only the provinces of counterfactual speculation. But Lawrence Jackson's brilliant intellectual history *The Indignant Generation* (2011) has anatomized the broad contours of the generational juncture in rigorous detail; and Michael Lackey's rich introduction to *The Haverford Discussions* has now amplified the precise positional and rhetorical dimensions of the intellectual combat between this generational collective of black public intellectuals and their self-proclaimed "New Breed" opposition. What is important for my purposes here is to draw a more precise focus specifically on Ralph Ellison's perspectives and otherwise undivulged personal experience of these events, so that we can better grasp the full emotional arc of his own still contested life story.

As the published transcripts of the opening Haverford Group session reveal, when the members tried to anticipate what rhetorical strategies they should expect to face while confronting black separatists and revolutionaries, it was Ellison who took the lead in warning, "We can expect them to try to put us on the defensive with charges of being brain-washed, and with epithets of 'Uncle Tom' and so on."³⁴ This prediction was one indication that the memory of his tearful Iowa encounter two years earlier remained painfully alive in his own consciousness, though transformed now into strategically covert but clear-eyed commitment. Among the positioning personal statements ultimately posted by each Haverford Group member, Ellison's stands apart, not only as the most manifestly eloquent and inspirational but also as the most intensely personal; and his opening paragraph bears quoting in full:

In spite of all the writing I do, and for all of the lectures I give each year, there are many matters which I don't write about; nor except with my wife and a few intimate friends, do I discuss them. Perhaps this is because they have to do with ideas, emotions and attitudes which grow out of my situation as a Negro American and with those undefined and uncoded aspects of our lives which require the sympathy and insight usually found only among those who have been conditioned and disciplined by our specific group experience. Today such in-group discussion is no mere luxury; it is a necessity; both for ourselves, for our restless youth and for the American intellectual community as a whole. There is no question but that my own participation in our discussions at Haverford had

something of the effect of a catharsis. I was cleansed of some of my doubts and confusions and, thankfully, I was stimulated—not by the sound of my own all too familiar voice, but by your ideas and by your passion. If this is to any extent true of the other participants I believe our enterprise was well worth the effort and should be continued on a permanent basis. Certainly it points to the necessity of our no longer working in isolation from one another; and it is clear that we have much to offer that has been missing from discussions in the larger American intellectual community. There is simply no avoiding the fact that there are many aspects of American life which can only be described, analyzed, and defined by black intellectuals, for no other group possesses an adequate perspective or so urgent a need.³⁵

By comparison, Ellison's old friend and fellow Oklahoman John Hope Franklin, not unlike most of the other Haverford sages, confined his position statement to an impersonal defense of "the integrity of the field of Afro-American Studies," which ultimately rests, Franklin asserted, "on its validity as an intellectual discipline and not as a rallying point for some abstract proposed reordering of society."³⁶ Reflecting later on his experience with the Haverford cohort in his autobiography, *Mirror to America*, Franklin devotes only a passing paragraph to it, and then primarily as a short-lived staging ground that prepared the way for the first formal academic African American think tank, the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies at Howard University, which Kenneth Clark and his MARC initiative had also helped incubate during 1969.³⁷

More than any other member of the Haverford Group, in other words, Ellison also seems to have taken to heart the "deep structure" of Harold Cruse's indictment in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*—that the widening divide between "Negro" elders and "Black" youth was intrafamilial as well as intellectual; and Ellison's statement, which positioned him initially as "stuck" with the language and metaphors of integration, quickly repositioned him athwart that divide by turning linguistically, on the one hand, to the language of "cultural pluralism" that Cruse employed and, on the other, to the psychology of restored filial and parental reciprocity that resonated in his own emotional depths:

Today that sense of having shared creatively in the common American experiment is under an assault by passionate young blacks who have lost their mooring in tradition. They are romantic, earnest and ignorant, a state for which I believe that we as intellectuals are responsible, because in pursuing our specialties we have failed to interpret the past and define the present and project the future in ways that are available to the young. Far too frequently black youth has been forced

to depend upon intellectuals of other groups ... [who often] appear so obsessively concerned with defining our life styles, character, traditions and values as to reduce us to silence and pliable inaction. Frequently they seem motivated by a desire to manipulate our image for political and economic purposes of their own; and some have taken the concepts of Negro sociologists and turned them against us, creating thereby much confusion and great resentment. But whatever their motives, there is the fact that they are functioning as intellectuals; and it is their legitimate task, as it is ours, to explore the wholeness of American life and the interrelationships between the various groups which compose it.³⁸

Cruse had subtitled his book "A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership"; and Ellison embraced its implications and rhetorical thrust more expansively than any of his Haverford colleagues:

That they have co-opted our role is a criticism of ourselves, for we have failed to address ourselves effectively to many of the broader problems of American life, and we have failed to follow up our often creative analysis of specifically Negro American problems into the broader areas where they inevitably lead. In other words, we often forget that the only way to be an effective Negro intellectual is by being a most perceptive and responsible American intellectual. I believe that the state of black youth points to our failure and if we have failed them, then we have failed American youth generally. For all their talk of black separatism—really another version of secessionism, an old American illusion which arises whenever groups reach an explosive point of frustration—and for all their stance of alienation, they are really acting out a state of despair.³⁹

Ellison's tack here correlated with what Martin Luther King, Jr. had alleged in *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* but where King delineated what he saw as the incipient ethical nihilism of the Black Power vanguard, Ellison instead broached a psychodynamic explanation of the destabilizing intrapsychic stresses that the new racial frontier posed for the New Breed generation:

They are frightened by the existence of opportunities for competing with their white peers on a basis of equality which did not exist for us. They suffer traumatically from the shock of sudden opportunity. The shackles have been struck from

at least one of their ankles and the skin is sensitive to the turbulent air and the illusory possibility of absolutely unrestrained movement. Actually they are in the position of pioneers who must enter an unknown territory armed only with the knowledge and skills which they've brought with them from the past; but instead of plunging in and testing themselves against the unknown, they choose rather to argue with the deficiencies of the past and to direct accusations against their parents. They accuse us of lacking manhood and courage and they have declared themselves a "new breed," which perhaps they are.⁴⁰

From this psychotherapeutic frame of reference, the New Breed suffered from a mode of *proto*-traumatic stress disorder that Ellison couched not in terms of the physiological processes from which putative mental phenomena such as Otto Rank's "birth trauma" had been theorized, but instead from the residual physiology of slave emancipation and in terms of a reformulated "frontier hypothesis" that posits an interracial boundary zone wherein new presumptively *de*-racialized trauma might either be converted cathartically into healthy, forward-looking consciousness or else regress into an exculpatory fixation on past delimitation, parental or otherwise. Regardless of the outcome, the responsibilities of his own generation in addressing the intrafamilial crisis remained clear and inescapable, alongside the need to avoid premature public disclosure:

One thing is certain, they have thrown us a challenge and I believe that we should meet them head on. I don't think that we should be put in the position of apologizing for our backgrounds, values and goals; but I do think that we must provide a forum wherein the unwritten wisdom of the group can be intellectualized and passed on to those who are sincerely seeking for answers and orientation.

Finally, I hope that this group continues in some form, but I hope that we won't rush our discussions into public print.⁴¹

After originally convening and operationalizing the Haverford Group, Kenneth Clark had surrendered the role of leading it to the members' own deliberation. Without being formally designated as such, Ralph Ellison became in fact the guiding voice and his position statement the most consistent point of reference. That Ellison describes his own experiences within the group as having "something of the effect of a catharsis" is a measure of its centrality in his own life at a crucial juncture, and of a markedly personal continuity in the life of his imagination which was more than fortuitous: It calls up the whole chain of psychotherapeutic allusions and contexts in his literary career that cannot be

explored here but that cohere in the kind of gestalt-like patterning of psychic wholes to which Ellison was insistently attuned. To mention a particularly pertinent one that might move this discussion toward a closing: the pivotal scene in chapter 17 of *Invisible Man* in which the narrator and his Brotherhood comrade, Tod Clifton, first confront the West Indian nationalist Ras the Exhorter, a scene whose genesis Ellison later described as the rechanneled angry after-effect of a real world encounter he and Fanny Ellison had with paternalistic white liberals “who thought the best way to be friendly was to tell us what it was like to be Negro.”⁴² Structured to heighten the narrator’s awareness of the difference between the Brotherhood’s self-serving abstract ideology and the passionate fanaticism of black separatist *blood* brotherhood, the scene pivots on a brawl between Ras’s men, on the one hand, and the narrator and Tod Clifton on the other, in the course of which Ras, knife in hand, and having Clifton at his mercy on the ground, draws his knife back three times, refuses to kill other black men he and his followers have labeled sellouts and “Uncle Toms”—then, sobbing uncontrollably, delivers the book’s most passionate speech of black solidarity. In the novel’s psychic economy, this scenario develops as a frenetic *embodiment* of dramatized catharsis—of cognitively *heightened* release and transformation that begins autonomically as an uncontrolled purgation of pent-up emotion but ends in consciously articulated illumination that haunts “Jack-the-Bear” prophylactically thereafter.

As such, it reflects Ellison’s modern understanding of the duality of Aristotle’s ancient concept of catharsis as a phenomenon with both aesthetic and ethical effects on the audiences of ancient Greek tragedy: In modern psychoanalytic terms, catharsis has come to represent a release from tension and anxiety by way of reliving past experiences, especially those that have been repressed as socially taboo or traumatic to the patient.⁴³ As theater spectators of stage tragedy, we typically watch the actors passively, though they may arouse us to some emotions that may or may not have something to do with our own lives. The kind of catharsis experienced by theater spectators under ordinary circumstances remains secondary and comparatively passive. Modern therapeutic psychodrama, by contrast, attempts to create an “as if” situation in which the patient-protagonist reenacts scenes drawn literally from his *own* life and thereby releases for the first time private emotions he was unaware of, or could not or dare not show—a progression now differentiated as “mental” or “cognitive” catharsis, which ideally produces enduring changes in the self that are generated from within. Each such cognitive catharsis is specific, unique, and unrepeatable because of its relation to a specific problem; but the cathartic experience is followed by the patient-protagonist’s return to the realities of the present, and accompanied by an “integration” both of the experience acquired during the psychodramatic action and of the corresponding emotions released by the cognitive catharsis.⁴⁴ Simple emotional discharge, then, is not the goal of psychodrama, nor is catharsis itself the only important factor, but instead the release of emotions associated with the patient-protagonist’s conscious insight

into the origin and meaning of those emotions in such a way as to bring about ultimately constructive changes in the actual work of living wholly.

As an experimental novel driven in part by such psychoanalytic premises, *Invisible Man*, Ellison readily acknowledged, charts psychodynamically its protagonist's journey—again using Kenneth Burke's "dramatic" terms instead of Aristotle's or Freud's—from "purpose to passion to perception." At one of the early moments of heightened narratorial perception—in the novel's phantasmagoric reversal of racial hierarchy at the Golden Day bordello—the crazy vet who superintends madcap proceedings in which the narrator and Mr. Norton are at *his* mercy jokes that Mr. Norton might free himself from the repressed incestuous desires that obsess him by availing himself of one of the resident whores whose "catharsis is absolutely tremendous."⁴⁵ This joking riff about catharsis, as a merely physiological release of tension or trauma through sex or tears or laughter, satirizes the more limited "hydraulic" or noncognitive form of release that Ellison knew, from his own early immersion in Freudian psychology and in the clinical practices of Harry Stack Sullivan and Fredric Wertham, had ultimately been rejected by Freud's followers and most other schools of modern psychotherapy, precisely because it failed to produce lasting psychodynamic changes.⁴⁶ Like the tears he himself shed automatically and unself-consciously at the campus confrontation in 1967, the form of catharsis the vet teases Mr. Norton with offers little more than hydraulic discharge, and thereby warrants pathos or satiric deflation. By contrast, the power of the later scene with Ras the Exhorter's anger, tears, and stayed violence—the Exhorter's preparatory tears and sobs are crucial—is schematized psychodramatically but not satirically. Ellison provided an overarching novelistic rationale for the cathartic aesthetic and moral logic of such a scene, and others like it elsewhere in his work, in a 1974 interview with John Hershey:

Hersey: How much is anger a motive force for novelists of all kinds? Does the artist start with anger more than with other emotions?

Ellison: I don't think that he necessarily starts with anger. Indeed, anger can get in the way, as it does for a fighter. If the writer starts with anger, then if he is truly writing he immediately translates it through his craft into consciousness, and thus into understanding, into insight, perception. Perhaps that's where the morality of fiction lies. You see a situation which outrages you, but as you write about the characters who embody that which outrages, your sense of craft and the moral role of your craft demands that you depict those characters in the breadth of their humanity. You try to give them the density of the human rather than the narrow intensity of the demonic. That means that you try to delineate them as men and women who possess feelings and ideals, no mat-

ter how much you reject their feelings and ideals. Anyway, I find this happening in my own work: it humanizes *me*. So the main motive is not to express raw anger, but to present—as sentimental as it might sound—the wonder of life, in the fullness of which all these outrageous things occur.⁴⁷

On more than one occasion, Ralph Ellison confessed to being a writer whose novelistic ambitions—in the aftermath of his extraordinary first-time success—found themselves repeatedly prey to shock waves of social agony and upheaval that outstripped both his considerable powers of prophecy and his compositional control. But neither the anger and dismissals by his critics and political opponents nor the ill-winds of unforeseeable household catastrophe blocked him from wrestling unceasingly with the intractable wonders and terrors of modern life and the vagaries of his own pioneering imagination. His leading role in the short-lived confederacy and communion of sages called the Haverford Group provided him, by his own testimony, an interregnum of clear-eyed, life-altering, self-conscious catharsis that revitalized his sense of self and calling, that helped him avoid retreating into social and spiritual isolation, and that enabled him to rededicate himself to the dual tasks of nurturing younger generations and of building a whole, healthy, plural American society. For contemporary observers turning to the technologies of either the word or the screen to probe the uncertain past, observers who are anxious for a richer understanding of Ralph Ellison's proper place in our lives and imaginations, and who are ready and willing—as he was—to let “black and gleaming” Tar Baby stand for the world, this now more visible link in the arc and agon of his erstwhile hidden heart invites a fuller reckoning.

Notes

1. “Ralph Ellison: An American Journey,” directed by Avon Kirkland. American Masters, 2005.
2. Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 442.
3. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: Modern Library, 2011), 191–92.
4. Michael Lackey, *The Haverford Discussions: A Black Integrationist Manifesto for Racial Justice* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013).
5. *Ibid.*
6. Review of Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* *Virginia Kirkus Review*, April 15, 1967.
7. Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison*, 439.
8. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 105.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Charles V. Hamilton, *Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.: The Political Biography of an American Dilemma* (New York and Toronto: Atheneum and Collier Macmillan Canada, 1991), 226–35.
11. Nelson George, “Black Beauty, Black Confusion (1965–70),” in *A Turbulent Voyage: Readings in African American Studies*, 3rd ed., ed. Floyd W. Hayes (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 200.
12. Wil Haygood, *King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.*, 322–25.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 7–8.
15. *Ibid.*, 505–11.

16. Larry Neal, "Ellison's Zoot Suit," *Black World* 20, no. 2 (Dec. 1970): 31–50.
17. Walt Shepperd, "When State Magicians Fail: An Interview with Ismael Reed," in *Conversations with Ismael Reed*, ed. Bruce Dick and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 7.
18. Lackey, *The Haverford Discussions*, 5–7.
19. *Ibid.*, 3.
20. Clark, *The Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. xi.
21. Damon Freeman, "Kenneth B. Clark and the Problem of Power," *Patterns of Prejudice* 42, nos. 4–5 (2008): 413–37.
22. Lackey, *The Haverford Discussions*, xii–xiii.
23. Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black Women*, book II (VNR AG, 1996), 143–47.
24. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds., *African American Lives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 243–44.
25. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds., *African American National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), vol. 3, 361–63.
26. *Ibid.*, 362.
27. Beginning in 1970 the residents of the U.S. Virgin Islands elected their governor.
28. Gates and Higginbotham, *African American National Biography*, vol. 4, 111–13.
29. Gates and Higginbotham, *African American Lives*, 262–63.
30. Andreae Downs, "Her Specialty: Celebrating the Black Brahmins," *Boston Globe*, Nov. 4, 2007.
31. Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Men*, (Detroit: Gale Research, 1998), 1000.
32. For the pertinent texts and commentary see Jefferson B. Kellogg and Robert H. Walker, eds., *Sources for American Studies* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983); and J. Saunders Redding, *A Scholar's Conscience: Selected Writings of J. Saunders Redding, 1942–1977*, ed. Faith Berry (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992).
33. Lackey, *The Haverford Discussions*, xiv, note 7.
34. *Ibid.*, xxx.
35. *Ibid.*, 111.
36. *Ibid.*, 114.
37. John Hope Franklin, *Mirror to America: The Autobiography of John Hope Franklin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 305–6.
38. Lackey, *The Haverford Discussions*, 113–14.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*
42. Graham and Singh, *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, 17–18.
43. Esta Powell, "Catharsis in Psychology and Beyond: A Historic Overview," in *The Primal Psychotherapy Page* (2007), 1.
44. *Ibid.*, 4–5.
45. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 30th anniversary ed. (New York: Vintage), 71.
46. Powell, "Catharsis in Psychology and Beyond," 4.
47. Graham and Singh, *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, 290–91.