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Postmodern Intimations: Musing on Invisibility: William Faulkner, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison

PHILIP WEINSTEIN

In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema.

—FRANTZ FANON

Three modern novelists of race relations: what in their work begins to appear—within our contemporary optic—as implicitly postmodern? How does their representation of the “invisible” racial subject intersect with a later postmodernism’s more wholesale deconstruction of the subject? That is my question, and—since I plan to be critical myself—it may be best to begin on a cautionary note. Critics invested in postmodernism can be remarkably simpleminded about modernism. Their most strident remarks often have a *déjà-vu* quality, indicting modernism with the very naivetes that modernism used (a generation earlier) to indict realism: the centered subject, a foundational project, claims of disinterestedness and universality. Since this lazyminded approach to modernism drives me crazy, I need to be careful not to oversimplify postmodernism in the same ways.¹ For postmodern fiction has evolved in numerous directions, making a unified field theory impossible. How could the same characterizations have a purchase on textual worlds as different as Barthelme’s parodic games, Italo Calvino’s self-generating narratives, Gabriel García-Márquez’s magic realism, and Toni Morrison’s brooding reframing of American history?²

In what follows, the postmodernist generalizations I shall offer refer mainly to the brilliant, brittle American fictions of the ’60s and ’70s—typically white-male authored, self-reflexive, terminally playful. Its practitioners include Donald Barthelme, John Hawkes, Robert Coover, and John Barth; its philosophers include Roland Barthes, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Richard Rorty; its commentators include Brian McHale and Linda Hutcheon. (These names, I know, hardly make up a school, but they do suggest some familial contours.) Rather than trying to say that such-and-such is postmodernism (a fruitless endeavor), I am talking about some of its salient tendencies. A penchant for the performance of roles rather than genuine identity, an insistence on parody, a conviction that texts cannot access the real but derive from and rewrite other texts, a suspicion about master narratives and a consequent leaning toward the “local,” a Nietzschean preference for play/construction rather than truth/correspondence, a recurrence to pragmatic terms like “conversation,” “utility,” and “pleasure,” a pervasive anxiety that the global spread of technological capitalism has erased the very meaning of “the individual” and that amnesiac/schizophrenic flight represents one of the few options still remaining: these are the stances I have in mind and that operate, in miniature, in Barthelme’s minimalist definition of the “sentence”: the sentence is “a manmade object, not the one we wanted of course, but still a construction of man, a structure to be treasured for its weakness, as opposed to the strength of stones.”³ Barthelme’s postmodern “sentence” rebukes an earlier time’s more ambitious sentence: play-artifice rather than truth-correspondence, language’s weakness rather than its strength, a tone of wry acceptance of

irreducible linguistic conditions rather than a raging desire to overcome them and somehow speak the real itself. These orientations radiate out of that little “sentence” and serve as context for the following argument about Faulkner, Wright, and Ellison.

I want to launch this musing on postmodern Yoknapatawpha, however, by citing a fourth novelist from the that postmodernist group identified above, John Barth. Before moving into the arena of borderline postmodern practices—as glimpsed in Faulkner, Wright, and Ellison—let’s start with the real thing (slipping past postmodernism’s horror at the notion of any “real thing”). Barth opens his 1958 novel *The End of the Road* with these arresting words, “In a sense, I am Jacob Horner.”⁴ In a sense only. Here we have a salient version of the postmodern subject: a fictional role I perform, a linguistic phrase that stands in for me (who I would be if my name really identified me). This sentence hooked me when I read it years ago, and even more the funny/terrible moment when putative Jacob Horner talks Rennie Morgan into eavesdropping on her dignified, all-American-type husband Joe. Rennie demurs: “*Real* people aren’t any different when they’re alone.... What you see of them is authentic.” To this Horner replies: “Horseshit. Nobody’s authentic. Let’s look” (67). What they see is Joe Morgan in front of the mirror antically practicing the military moves that support his all-American mask, then rushing back to his writing desk, “his tongue gripped purposefully between his lips at the side of his mouth ... masturbating and picking his nose at the same time. I believe he also hummed a sprightly tune in rhythm with his work” (70–1).

Musing on invisibility: for postmodern Barth identity is pure mask. The chasm between the role-playing self visibly performed in public and the incoherent self invisibly enacted in private is breathtaking, scandalous. This chasm between visible and invisible invalidates the very concept of authenticity: a state in which concealed and revealed would both refer to an essential core. As the sinister “Doctor” in Barth’s novel explains to Jacob Horner, identity has nothing to do with essence but is rather a matter of visibly asserted masks, “Don’t think there’s anything behind them: *ego* means *I*, and *I* means *ego*, and the ego by definition is a mask.... If you sometimes have the feeling that your mask is *insincere*—impossible word!—it’s only because one of your masks is incompatible with another” (90). Behind the mask, beneath the role, deeper than the language that proclaims it, there is—nothing: a nothing that passes itself off as a something. As Baudrillard writes, “To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has,” whereas “to simulate is to feign to have what one hasn’t.”⁵ Dissimulation is a staple of Western narratives—what the Victorians comfortably called hypocrisy, a fullness of motive seeking to conceal itself but always outed by the end of a Victorian novel: Uriah Heep in a hundred different incarnations populates reassuringly the vast stage of Victorian fiction. Simulation, however, is postmodern. Identity in Barth’s *The End of the Road* is a simulation, not a mask hypocritically concealing an essence but a mask deceptively standing in for a void. It’s an exhilarating idea.

For Faulkner’s Joe Christmas, however, it is an unbearable idea, generating unassuageable nausea. Being no one—lacking essential identity, empty at the core—is worse by far than having to be black: “‘I aint a nigger’ [little Joe Christmas says to the black man working at the orphan yard] and the nigger says ‘You are worse than that. You don’t know what you are. And more than that, you wont never know. You’ll live and you’ll die and you won’t never know.’”⁶

It is desperate in Faulkner not to know who we are—who our parents are, what our culture is, what racial, gender, and classed narratives have been internalized and shaped our identity. These arrangements have fundamentally formed and deformed us, prior to consent and at a level beneath consciousness. It is not possible in Faulkner to lack deep identity, although it is recurrent to suffer—often fatally—from conflicting forms of identity that have been willy-nilly “installed” within us. “Memory believes before knowing remembers”: Joe Christmas’s entire life exhibits a stunning unconscious consistency. The crisis-moments Faulkner chooses to narrate Joe’s becoming accumulate to produce not a simulated selfhood masking emptiness but an overfilled identity—intolerably coherent, however decentered—that must in the course of time erupt. His modernist invisibility has little in common with that of John Barth’s postmodern characters. Seen or not seen, Christmas is, unfortunately, culturally marked to the core, doomed to be who he is.

To situate Faulknerian invisibility further and then move from it to the different kinds of invisibility operative in Wright and Ellison, I want first to backtrack to Dostoevsky. Whatever else they are doing, all three later writers are engaged in revising Dostoevsky, for *Notes from Underground* gives us Western literature’s first invisible man. A low-grade Russian civil servant, Dostoevsky’s underground man tortures himself by walking up and down Nevsky Prospect in St. Petersburg: invisible. He spends years seeking revenge for the insult of being, precisely, ignored. (An officer had ignored him by removing him bodily from the edge of a billiards table without noticing him). Ignored by others, he is also incoherent to himself: “And now I am living out my life in my corner, taunting myself with the spiteful ... consolation that it is even impossible for an intelligent man seriously to become anything ... only fools become something.”⁷ The two states seem inseparable yet incompatible: on the one hand, to be coherent for oneself (to be anything) involves being coherent for some others, i.e., recognizable to them. On the other hand, he passionately rejects all the terms for recognizability that his culture offers him: “only fools become something.”

It is not so much that he is invisible as that he does not count: the forms of visible identity available to him are in the eyes of others socially demeaning and in his own eyes ideologically repellent. What he looks like is a failed petty bureaucrat, yet one who fiercely opposes that humiliating take upon him. Repudiate as he might St. Petersburg’s official codes for self-making, he is alienated from any more traditional resources and is incapable of piecing together a viable identity of his own. He thus remains cravenly dependent for his self-esteem upon the very ones he scorns and who in turn scorn him.⁸ “I’ll show them” is the motto of the resentful misfit who cannot rise to conceptual rebellion and exit from the game altogether. His “refusal to accept a definition of himself ... in terms imposed by the alien world of European culture” avails him nothing.⁹ Dostoevsky pursues this plight of an overly intelligent man who will not be a disempowered functionary, yet who remains ensnared within a bureaucratized social system that has dispossessed him of all native resources for self-making. In this text he goes underground, but by the following year Dostoevsky has found his way into the more sinister form of revenge such unharnessed and resentful energy must eventually take: murder, radical repudiation of the social pact that disempowers him.¹⁰ Invisibility translates here as a humiliating impotence within a bureaucratized culture’s identity norms, and Dostoevsky’s next

hero, Raskolnikov, even more pinched and beleaguered, launches with his murderous act the novel that the subsequent ones I'm exploring could be named: *Crime and Punishment*.

Dostoevsky's philosophic murder enters Faulkner's American canvas as a race murder. It is race—rather than any set of maverick ideas beyond traditional good and evil—that *Light in August* knows to be most explosively invisible. Raskolnikov, scorning both the pieties of his orthodox upbringing and the secular/bureaucratic assumptions of St. Petersburg, raging at his fate as an insignificant intellectual misfit, aspires to Nietzschean revenge, a guiltfree murder.¹¹ Joe Christmas, by contrast, wouldn't recognize an iconoclastic idea if it hit him over the head: what he will not, cannot, make sense of—what releases his acts of violence—is an incoherent racial inheritance. Christmas himself is achingly visible (his parchment-colored skin is abusively witnessed by all), but his racial identity is invisible, socially disappeared, biologically unknowable. Faulkner creates him discontinuously, through a series of violent scenes: beating Joe Brown in the early chapters, then the toothbrush-vomiting scene when the dietitian calls him a “little nigger bastard,” followed by his adolescent beating of the black girl in the shed, his being ritually beaten by McEachern over the catechism, his being beaten by Max and the stranger at the end of his romance with Bobbie, and finally his beating Joanna Burden during their foredoomed affair. The question of Joe's invisible racial identity coils within most of these scenes of assault; he can access his racial identity only *as* a violent question. (When a prostitute fails to be scandalized by his announcement that he “is” black, he nearly kills her; he requires repudiation to know himself.)

Deep identity in *Light in August* is perversely secured by such acts of passionate aggression calling themselves “training.” In Christmas, Faulkner shows us a man who is Calvinist in his behavior (“*I had to do it,*” he thinks before killing Joanna, “already in the past tense” [280]) though believing in nothing, as well as a man who is black in the behavior visited upon him (“nigger murderer” the town delights in labeling him), though he himself is not culturally black nor is any biological basis for his racial identity knowable. The social engine producing narratives of normative identity is thus stripped of legitimacy—its knowledge base shown to be a patchwork of rumor or assumption—but it does not therefore dismantle itself, it just becomes more lethally effective. The training imposed by social code now passes outside the realm of conscious pedagogy altogether, moving automatically into the muscles rather than engaging the brain, issuing in murderous behavior that requires no foundation in articulable belief or demonstrable fact. Identity in Jefferson is lodged deeper than thought, producing a community that—at its worst—assumes everything and interrogates nothing. As Byron tells Hightower, “[Hines] knew somehow that the fellow [who called himself Mexican] had nigger blood. Maybe the circus folks told him. I don't know. He aint never said how he found out, like that never made any difference. And I reckon it didn't, after the next night” (374). That is, by the next night, the fellow (Milly's lover, also invisibly black) is as dead as Joe will be by the end of the novel. In the oppressively racist world of *Light in August*, no underground space exists in which the subject might be free of a culture's lethally polar predications; everyone must simply *be* white or black.¹² Racial invisibility emerges as worse than useless, enraging white folks in search of their tag and bringing down violence upon the putative black man, producing in Joe a ceaseless sadomasochism that he would gladly

trade in for peaceful self-acceptance.

All of Faulkner's art is marshaled to give us the pathos of this undoing, for if we (like everyone else) never learn *who* he racially "is," we do learn—we alone learn—what it is like to *be* Joe Christmas: Faulkner positions us overwhelmingly inside his sentient mind and nerves during the first half of the novel. Reversing expected sequences, giving us effects before we can fathom their causes, the form of *Light in August* patiently reveals the constructedness—the ungivenness—of all forms of racial, gender, and religious conviction, even as it shows the murderous insistence of a culture that cannot afford to interrogate its convictions.¹³ Modernist constructedness is thus a far cry from postmodern randomness.¹⁴ The convictions represented in *Light in August* may be startlingly arbitrary in the sense of ungrounded, but they are anything but arbitrary in the consequences they unleash. Put otherwise, he is not Joe Christmas in a sense, but Joe Christmas all the way. Though everyone inside the novel (including Joe) gets his identity wrong, though there is no way in Faulkner's 1930s South for anyone to get his identity "right," Joe Christmas has identity in surplus. "Horseshit. Nobody's authentic," Jacob Horner proclaimed. Christmas, however—not that it does him any good—is authentic. Mangled and mangling, abused and abusive, wounding others and finally crucified himself, Christmas's viciously acquired racial, gendered, and religious identity reveals the contradictory insistences of an entire culture: this is exactly why he matters. The mounting tension between the peace he inchoately seeks, inside, and the violence he suffers and is doomed in turn to inflict, outside, fuels the entire novel—giving us not the weightlessness of postmodern absurdity but the gravity of modernist tragedy.

A glimpse at the protagonists' names may help to make the same point. Raskolnikov's name carries the word "transgression" within it, but no one in the text finds him therefore fated. (He has a mother and a sister whose lives move along different emotional and ideological axes. There are several ways of being Raskolnikov; it is almost a normal name, lightly predictive for the reader but not compelling for the character.) At the other extreme is Jacob Horner. His name means nothing to him—there is and can be no family of Horners—it merely exists as the arbitrary word that others (including the reader) use to label him; it in no way serves to anchor his being or communalize his options. So far, Dostoevsky's realism and Barth's postmodernism; in between we have Faulkner's modernism. Joe Christmas's misnomer is no less absurd than "in a sense" Jacob Horner: but Faulkner's narrative loads this absurd name with increasing significance. Joe's name carries his entire past—not the family of Christmases who might (like Raskolnikovs) have bestowed it but the drunken workers at the Memphis orphanage who inflict the name as a bad joke on Christmas Eve, the scar of a name that McEachern dislikes and will seek to alter but which Joe secretly maintains, the sign of a set of ineradicable memories and the portent of a doomed future. It is as unprivate, unserviceable, unsustainable, as a name can be, one that can neither be lived into normatively (like Raskolnikov) nor jettisoned like a no longer useful mask in a game one is no longer playing (like Horner). The symbolic order in *Light in August* thus all but screams its dysfunction at us in its way of allocating identity-narratives to its subjects. Yet Joe's painful, touching way of making that name his own ends by indissolubly fusing the polarity of "must matter" and "cant matter" that energizes Faulknerian narrative—a time-soaked polarity that, separated out, would

give us the simpler coherences of Raskolnikov on the one hand, and Horner on the other. I turn now to Richard Wright.

Native Son appears eight years after *Light in August* as a sustained meditation upon both that book and *Crime and Punishment*. Since I have made this sort of cross-cultural literary claim more than once, I should acknowledge that, in a critical climate suffused with identity politics and committed to materialist cultural studies, my insistence that a black writer's text is deeply affected by the work of two white writers (one of them a nineteenth-century Russian) may seem offensively naive. I do not deny that it took a nightmarish childhood in racist Mississippi to launch Richard Wright's career, but that experience alone could not have produced his voice. As Ralph Ellison said in another context, the "main source of any novel is other novels; these constitute the culture of the form, and my loyalty to our group does nothing to change that."¹⁵ Wright, I want to argue, is thinking through Dostoevsky and Faulkner, as well as the aggregate of his own cultural experience and imagination, when he composes *Native Son*.

The reverse of Joe Christmas, however, Bigger Thomas has visible racial identity—it is all people see—but he himself is not: his skin wholly conceals him. Faulkner's text, focused on his white culture's fear of racial contamination, zeroes in on the hysterical effects of a racial code when the visual cues it draws on to sustain its narratives are not forthcoming. Wright's text, however, focused on the deformity his culture has undergone at the hands of virulent white racism, zeroes in on the invisibly deformed subject wearing his all too visible black mask. As in *Light in August*, racial identity in *Native Son* may ultimately reduce to a set of convictions that constrain behavior, but Bigger eventually learns—more interestingly than Joe—how to do things with these convictions.¹⁶ Until then, though, the convictions and practices that constitute the reality of race do things to him, things that seem to well up from his solar plexus through his arms and mind: "Mixed images of violence ran like sand through his mind, dry and fast, vanishing. He could stab Gus with his knife.... He could do a lot of things to Gus for making him feel this way."¹⁷ Like Faulkner, Wright positions the reader immovably inside his protagonist's sensorium—virtually in Bigger's gut—and we as readers remain privy to his knotted contortions. The cultural codes that sustain racism have trained Bigger's mind by tyrannically controlling the feel and deployment of his body. At Dalton's house "He stood with his knees slightly bent, his lips partly open, his shoulders stooped; and his eyes held a look that went only to the surface of things. There was an organic conviction in him that this was the way white folks wanted him to be when in their presence" (54). Organic: Joe Christmas, the creation of a white author, is allowed to escape the race dimension of this awful organtraining—in more senses than one Faulkner gives him a "white" body—but Bigger's body is physical inheritor of hundreds of years of fearful servitude. It is an unconsciously trained body, the training begun long before Bigger's birth. Thus when Jan and Mary seek to change his bodily norms overnight (a naively arrogant move that precisely reveals their privilege), Wright conveys Bigger's bodily distress as these two white people cozy up next to him: "they made him feel his black skin by just standing here looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin" (76). "Organically," like Joe

Christmas, Bigger feels his culturally imposed body-borders being transgressed—“the man” is suffocating him—and he realizes, like Joe, that “something is going to happen to me.” His race-engineered body is going to explode.

Once it does explode, something unexpected happens, and here is where *Native Son* departs from its parameters of Faulknerian doom. This apparently naturalist novel—the story of a man destroyed by social forces he can neither understand nor resist—suddenly becomes briefly postmodern. That is, it begins not only to foreground the linguistic but to see language as prior to the scenes language launches.¹⁸ *Native Son* starts to play with its culture’s differential narratives for licensing identity. Trapped within the very citadel of patriarchal space—the smothered girl’s bedroom inside the Dalton mansion—Bigger starts (perhaps for the first time in his life) to reflect:

And, after all, was not Jan a *Red*? ... Fingerprints! He had read about them in magazines.... But suppose he told them that he had come to get the trunk? That was it! The *trunk*! His fingerprints had a right to be here.... But there was still a *better way*! Make them think that Jan did it. Reds’d do anything. Didn’t the papers say so? ... If Mary were missing when they got up, would they not think that she had already gone to Detroit? He.... Yes! He could, he could put her *in* the trunk! She was small. Yes; put her in the trunk.... He stooped to put her in the trunk. Could he get her in? ... He pushed her head into a corner, but her legs were too long and would not go in.... [then after carrying her in the trunk down to the basement] He stared at the furnace. He trembled with another idea. He—he could, he—he could put her, he could put her in the furnace. He would *burn* her! That was the safest thing to do.... He had all but her shoulders in ... her clothes were ablaze and smoke was filling the interior.... He gripped her shoulders and pushed hard, but the body would not go any farther. He tried again, but her head still remained out.... He got his knife from his pocket and opened it and stood by the furnace, looking at Mary’s white throat. Could he do it? ... Gently, he sawed the blade into the flesh and struck a bone. He gritted his teeth and cut harder.... But the bone made it difficult.... He whacked harder, but the head would not come off.... He *had* to burn this girl. With eyes glazed, with nerves tingling with excitement, he looked about the basement. He saw a hatchet. Yes! ... He ... sent the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat with all the strength of his body. The head rolled off. (100–6, emphases in original)

Bigger pulls off precisely the murder that *Crime and Punishment* is committed to make fail. Seeking a stance beyond his culture’s imprisoning norms of good and evil, Raskolnikov committed murder—only to find himself sinking into the torments of traditional guilt. His body could not bear the consequences of what his rebellious mind had irresponsibly proposed. The cautionary core of Dostoevsky’s novel centers on just this lawfulness lodged within the subject at a level beneath thought. Bigger, however, rises into the freedom of amoral crime—a freedom profoundly troubling in its gender configuration yet intoxicating in its liberation from a white scenario of values.¹⁹ Dismembering Mary, once clear of biblical codes of judgment (codes produced by and for “the man”), reduces to a hatchet job, an engineering problem. In a setting suddenly departing from humanism and reduced to pure pragmatics, Mary is so much matter to be disposed of. From this guiltless height Bigger assumes his own invisibility, resurveys the entire scene (its race-saturated biases startlingly visible to him, as though highlighted by ultraviolet), and he recognizes others’ systemic blindness: “The very manner in which [his sister Vera] sat showed a fear so deep as to be an organic part of her” (122). “Organic”: the word now characterizes behavior *others* take as nature but which Bigger decodes as training. This newfound grasp of the racial narrative being performed serves as a skeleton key that momentarily opens all doors.

He begins to manipulate, undetected, the part he earlier merely enacted. His “yessuh” sounds no different but it has become artful; his culture’s repertory of scripts now cues—rather

than suffocates—his “dumb nigger” agency. Communism, racism, the Leopold-Loeb case: these once opaque phenomena now become so many miniature narratives he is able to deploy, providing grist for his mill, motives for his gestures. He mixes and matches, making it up as he goes—a Lévi-Straussian bricoleur before Derrida ever glossed the term. Wright shows all the plays and players in this unfolding scenario to be scripted, but Bigger’s invisibility consists in alone recognizing—and exploiting—the script he speaks. Not for a moment does he believe a word of it; he has become “in a sense Bigger Thomas.” We are in the world of arbitrary language games, and in the presence of a sort of negotiated freedom that Michel de Certeau calls “tactics”: “The space of a tactic,” de Certeau writes, “is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver ... within enemy territory.”²⁰ Bigger needed a hatchet to take care of Mary, but all he needs is linguistic self-consciousness to handle Dalton and his minions. Like Hawthorne’s Wakefield, Bigger thus becomes sublimely present at his own absence, watching others not see him. Wright fiendishly stations him in the very guts of the white master’s home—tender of its flame and visible keeper of its domestic viability, secret murderer of its precious offspring. A successful Raskolnikov, a focused Joe Christmas, the invisible Bigger exults in the drama of Mary’s corpse being only a few feet away from some of the most powerful men in Chicago speculating on its whereabouts.

I’ve called these scenes postmodern, by which I mean that they enact an almost manic release in Bigger’s performance of roles others take to be natural. All is script and pastiche here; we are beyond the modernist longing for some authentic discourse uninflected by ideology. And Bigger is beyond ideology.²¹ If for Dostoevsky the religious law has ceased to compel intellectual assent, it remains precious and—stubbornly encoded in Raskolnikov’s body regardless of his mind’s presumption—it ensures the transgressor’s defeat. If for Faulkner the law has become racedeformed, a license for torture and murder when in the hands of Hines or McEachern or Grimm, we yet continue to register (from an implicitly white perspective) the gravity of social training, the tragic consequences of social training gone wrong. Like *Light in August*, *Native Son* knows that the law is the law, and it will make its protagonist die the death for his transgression, but it lets him briefly exercise his powers (enjoy a tactical success) before doing so.

More, Wright reveals, as perhaps only a black writer could reveal—in the dark comedy of Bigger’s violent release—a racial world suddenly emptied of justification and tonically clarified. (Joe Christmas’s crime is never revelatory in this way, never anything but an unavoidable mistake; Bigger’s crime is no mistake at all, but terrifyingly pedagogic.) As linguistically limited as Joe, Bigger has yet learned to manipulate others’ speech, to maneuver on their space, and to behave—nihilistically—as if there were no deeper purposes legitimizing this drama, ordering its unfolding. Indeed, Bigger reads this Foucauldian power scene so effectively that Wright is unable to provide any later justificatory narrative (including Max’s) that Bigger will accept as a mirror for his own motives and behavior. Bigger cannot be mirrored; the text can provide no ideological frame that might hold him within its focus. In this protopostmodern novel everyone suddenly speaks only *language*. Awaiting his execution,

Bigger remains not only invisible to others (his executioners think him a black beast while even Max sees him as just a black victim), but opaque to himself as well, lacking any conceptual schema that might turn his exalted moments of release into a new self-narrative. “Only through the intersubjectivity of community can consciousness become *self-consciousness*,” Houston Baker says of the absence of epiphany here.²² There are no others on this stage whom Bigger might recognize as potential extensions of himself, in whose company he might verbally reaccess himself. Instead, “he smiled a faint, wry, bitter smile. He heard the ring of steel against steel as a far door clanged shut” (502). On this implacable note *Native Son* ends.

Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” serves as the obvious segue between *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*. The postmodern elements glimpsed in *Native Son* are here more fully displayed; once again Dostoevsky gives Wright his cue. On the run from the cops for a murder he didn’t commit, Fred Daniels goes literally underground, diving into a sewer. Become invisible himself, Daniels is now permitted to see everything. His sewer (no longer malodorous, transformed into a place of promise rather than of excretion) becomes a sort of Deleuzian rhizome, a line of escape underlying (and opening into) all the institutions of the city above ground (church, movie house, morgue, typing office, butcher shop, etc.). It is as though Wright had taken Bigger’s furnace scenario of *Native Son* and made it *movable*. The earlier text’s concealment transforms into the later text’s mobility. To use de Certeau’s terms, a *tactical* invisibility (confined to the enemy’s territory) opens into a *strategic* invisibility (command of a new space liberated from the enemy’s control).

A limitlessly networked Daniels outdoes not only Bigger Thomas but Robinson Crusoe in his capacity to gather up a culture’s entire arsenal of goods. But Wright has Daniels do with those purloined goods what no realist novelist like Defoe could imagine: Daniels undoes their symbolic exchange value and recodes them as material objects of play. Light bulbs, paper money, guns with cartridges, diamonds: all of these are spread out and rearranged in Daniels’s underground lair, regaining their original innocence, cleansed of their capitalist function as items men once competed for. This Utopian fantasy of a play-space—this deliberate infantilizing of capitalism’s motives and objects that hold adults in thrall above—cannot elude the consequences of past time forever, and Daniels eventually chooses to exit from his underground kingdom of invisibility, suicidally confessing to the same cops who originally chased him. In an uncanny echo of both Raskolnikov and Christmas, Daniels thinks: “Why was this sense of guilt so seemingly innate, so easy to come by, to think, to feel, so verily physical? It seemed that when one felt this guilt one was retracing in one’s feelings a faint pattern designed long before ... but which had been forgotten by the conscious mind, creating in one’s life a state of eternal anxiety.”²³ Ultimately, the white man’s guilt-centered law recaptures him, instilling its anxieties, and the black man relinquishes his interlude of invisibility, moves to accept his doom. In both these texts, then, the inevitable execution of a black man (recalling the race logic of *Light in August*) is only interrupted, played with, briefly reconceived outside the law-supported necessity of racist annihilation. These are the hints that Ellison drew on to compose the jewel in this crown of invisibility I have been analyzing.

Rewriting Fred Daniels’s underground sewer, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* opens in a

Certeauvian play-space, replete with 1369 lights tactically “borrowed” from and operated by Monopolated Light and Power. The fact that “the man” monopolizes all the space above launches Ellison’s postmodern revision of Dostoevskian and Faulknerian invisibility. Just as invisibility is mainly a defect in *Notes from Underground* and *Light in August* (it launches no new models of selfhood, provides no landscape beyond the reach of hegemonic norms), it remains here—at the level of plot and theme—pure liability, the motif of victimization. But Ellison turns invisibility, at the same time, into an extraordinary formal resource. Invisible Man is not only unseen by others, his body is unseen by the text, and therefore unseen by the reader. Such furnishing of invisibility subtly turns the abuse that lodges in this novel’s plot into the privilege that nourishes its narrative procedure, its way of producing its elusive, anonymous protagonist. Freed (so to speak) of a finite and penetrable body, immune to lasting bodily pain, he is allowed to become for the reader a mobile and inexhaustible repository of “soul.”²⁴ As Ellison wrote in “What America Would Be Like Without Blacks”:

Without the presence of Negro American style, our jokes, our tall tales, even our sports would be lacking in the sudden turns, the shocks, the swift changes of pace (all jazz-shaped) that serve to remind us that the world is ever unexplored, and that while a complete mastery of life is mere illusion, the real secret of the game is to make life swing. It is the ability to articulate this tragicomic attitude toward life that explains much of the mysterious power and attractiveness of that quality of Negro American style known as “soul.”²⁵

Invisible Man pulses with the insouciance of such articulated “soul.” The memorable scenes in the novel are hallucinatorily written, with the narrator somehow adroitly detached even while technically present—immured yet uncaught. Beginning with the Battle Royal, then going on to the hypnotic Trueblood monologue and the manic scene at the Golden Day, followed by the extraordinary explosions at the Liberty Paints factory and the subsequent hospital scene, this book stages a set of carnivalistic tours de force—birthings and testings—that exceed anyone’s sense of statistical reality, of what can happen to any single, embodied player. Few of these scandalous encounters would have their tonic effect, though, without a sort of comic-book bodily immunity on the part of the narrator. Even the Battle Royal and the hospital scenes (the ones where the most physical violence comes his way) are bathed in an unbruised narrational poise that allows supreme lucidity. He is never tired for long; he can’t be kept down; his experience never damagingly entangles him. But we don’t watch him anyway (we can’t see him): we watch instead what he hallucinatorily narrates for us to see. That is, he performs at all times (and not only during the set speeches) as an orator, seducing most tellingly not his plotted audience but his myriad reader. This is seduction shorn of mastery, lucidity without omniscience—mastery and omniscience are “illusions”—but the secret is “to make life swing,” and Ellison’s narrator swings. All eyes and thought and forward-moving ambition (kept clear by Ellison of love or hate relations that might articulate his bodiness, halt his trajectory, and reveal his personal dimensionality), Invisible Man enacts a journey that stages instead the absurdity of institutional America.

“Play the game but don’t believe in it,”²⁶ the Golden Day vet advises him, and though he may not catch up to this advice until many disillusionments later, its mix of naive investment and ironic detachment continuously enriches the texture of Ellison’s narrative voice. Like Bigger momentarily, like Fred Daniels when underground, Invisible Man learns to play the

prejudicial language games that play him. “I rapes real good when I’m drunk” (521), he assures Sybil, and this tactical exploitation of the stereotype he knows he embodies for others—this use of his invisibility—is almost wholly outside Joe Christmas’s range. (Christmas, lacking any sense for how to manage racial prejudice except through violence, does rape, and not just when drunk.) Invisible Man adroitly talks his way out of almost every dilemma that entraps him. His wit and detachment—subtly abetted by bodily invisibility—grant him a sidestepping resourcefulness outside the range of Faulkner’s and Wright’s less vocal and more exposed, more finite protagonists. More than just a capacity to manage “the sudden turns, the shocks, the swift changes of pace,” such adaptability on the part of his protagonist allows Ellison to reprise earlier fictional dilemmas and make them speak their larger-than-life potential: Bigger’s crowded family scene blossoms into Trueblood’s domestic scandal, Bigger and Gus’s J. P. Morgan riff manically escalates into the Golden Day’s General Pershing extravaganza. At its extreme such metamorphic flexibility in this novel takes on the name of Rinehart. An almost mythic figure, Rinehart supremely embodies (but that’s not the right verb) the elasticity I’ve been describing in Invisible Man. You cannot see Rinehart; you only see his racial insignia—his dark glasses, his white hat—and these allow him to function in all the games he undertakes: runner, preacher, gambler, lover. He is the ultimate in unsanctioned performativity, in depthless simulacra: “And sitting there trembling I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart’s multiple personalities and turned away” (499).

“Turned away”: I want to start to close this talk by suggesting why Ellison’s novel turns away from its own postmodern investment in identity as simulacra, feigned and useful/discardable entities. The main reason lodges deep in the novel’s political imagination. The ever-mobile Rinehart—lacking any core—carries no political promise, the static Ras the Destroyer—arrested on his single core-idea—promises only violence. In between, however, is the politics of race hauntingly voiced by Invisible Man himself. The Saul-become-Paul moment occurs when he wanders into the Harlem scene of eviction. Contingent wandering here catalyzes essential vocation, as he watches an old black couple being turned out, their lifetime possessions cast into the street: a portrait of them when young, a pair of “knocking bones,” pots of plants, a straightening comb, a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln, some cracked pieces of china, a folded lace fan, an old breast pump.... Hearing the old woman sob, registering it like the child who sees “the tears of its parents.... I turned away, feeling myself being drawn to the old couple by a warm, dark, rising whirlpool of emotion which I feared” (270). At this point he launches into his song/sermon of dispossession, a self-authenticating speech that takes these “evicted” items and reattaches them to the historical narrative that supplies their human meaning. The political resonance of that time-soaked narrative—its locating of objects within an overwhelmingly coherent racial history—is exactly the reverse of postmodern amnesia and its array of verbal signs emptied of reference, carrying only exchange value. Here is Baudrillard on the postmodern semiotic event: “At the limit of an always increasing elimination of references and finalities, an ever increasing loss of resemblances and designations, we find the digital and programmatic sign, whose ‘value’ is purely tactical”—a far cry from the sign as “bound, impregnated, and heavy with connotation” (22), the sign as metonymic reminder of a shared racial past.²⁷

Ellison’s novel achieves its surreal elasticity precisely by bypassing its protagonist’s finite

and embodied racial past. Apart from his grandfather he is without family connections; almost no experience seems to come earlier (or lodge deeper) than his college years. He has little unconscious life, few memories that believe before knowing remembers. Yet this novel draws decisively on the larger race history in which, all along, he involuntarily participates. (Here is his deepest difference from both Joe Christmas and Bigger Thomas, the one simply lacking in a race history—Faulkner could not supply it—the other seeking to escape a race history he registers as pure deformation.) However Invisible Man may try to soar beyond himself, body and past magically transcended, he remains inextricably race-oriented. His brotherhood speeches succeed only insofar as they sound this bass note of racial inheritance and dispossession.²⁸ Like a rhythmic undercurrent, this novel intimates the larger history of black bondage and freedom through its deployment of vivid, time-saturated, race-imbued items: Tod Clifton's Sambo doll, Tarp's leg shackle, the resonance of yams and chittlings, the snatches and "echoes of blues-toned laughter" (xvi). The narrator may seem deathless (bodiless, invisible), but his alter-ego, Tod Clifton, is not. Ellison reminds us that Tod's name signals death (in German), and Tod's massive funeral ceremony releases into articulation the long history of blacks cut down in their promise. Here, in the rise and fall of this intensely described, poignantly finite, black body, Ellison returns to the pain of racial visibility that attaches American blacks to their ongoing history on these shores. In thus joining Faulkner and Wright in acknowledging a racial injustice that concludes in murder rather than hibernation, Ellison concedes the disfiguring power of the gaze, the injustice it has long caused and still causes—all this as necessarily prelude to the liberating politics such shared and testimonial suffering may yet launch.

Jacob Horner may be himself only "in a sense," but that novel too closes on the death of Rennie Morgan. We may not be ourselves for sure, but our bodies do surely become extinguished in time. My first-person plural pronoun is appropriately all-inclusive, yet can it be an accident that the desire to escape such extinction—a desire that underwrites the very trope of invisibility—attaches so readily to male protagonists? That it is especially males who seek to run, fly, and flee the fixing, finite-making, yet also communal gaze of the other: the gaze that makes you *seen*? Rennie Morgan is visible to a fault, so are Joanna Burden in *Light in August* and Bessie Mears in *Native Son*. Not only are all three of these women condemned by their texts to death, two of their deaths suggestively revolve about the phenomenon of pregnancy. Is the fact that each of us traces in our altering body a single, unrepeatable existence on earth a condition males never tire of imaginatively transcending, even as this condition registers so differently in the pregnant woman's body, a site that conjoins—simultaneously and unbearably—the realities of generativity, penetrability, and extinction? Is the fact, likewise, that these are among the loneliest narratives in American literature—hypnotic stories of invisible men who register the otherness of the social as shock and wound rather than awakening and possibility—is this cherishing of privacy better seen as a resource to be tapped or a neurosis to be analyzed?

Indeed, the functioning of social reality itself is premised upon visibility—to others and, reciprocally, to oneself as well. As John McGowan puts it in his study of postmodernism, "Just as the self is recognized by the community as a member of that group who occupies a certain position and possesses certain abilities, so the self must recognize the individual recognized by

the group as himself” (246). From underground man to invisible man: here precisely is the cost of invisibility, the cultural price that nonrecognition imposes, the isolation it both suffers from and seeks out. Richard Rorty tends to find such nonreciprocity productively liberating: the postmodern ironist, he writes, “is not in the business of supplying himself and his fellow ironists with a method, a platform, or a rationale. He is just doing the same thing all ironists do—attempting autonomy” (97). Autonomy, yes, but didn’t Faulkner’s ironical Mr. Compson seek out the same value, imagining himself as socially invisible and betraying the responsibilities of community in the same way? It may be Levinas rather than Barthes who best points us to the requirement that we *be* visible—recognizable to, answerable for, the array of others who necessarily constitute our scene. As Edith Wyschogrod (a writer deeply influenced by Levinas) claims, “It is the vulnerability of the other that challenges the structure of the self as an egology. When the other appears she does not emerge as an object in the world or even a person ... but as a proscriptive moral datum. Coordinate with her sheer existence, built into it as it were, is her vulnerability which acts as a solicitation and a proscription: ‘Do not injure me.’”²⁹

“Do not injure me”: to what extent do the invisible men in the texts I’ve examined exercise an “egology” perilously restricted to the first-personal singular pronoun, and disturbingly liable to the injuring of others—especially women—in their pursuit of autonomy? Such questions go further than I can take them, but I could not relinquish this musing on invisibility without at least suggesting the profound uninnocence of the trope. Be that as it may, I began with one postmodernist, Barth, on the ruse of “not being there,” and I conclude with another postmodernist, Rushdie, on the stakes of “being there.” As Rushdie beautifully puts it in *The Satanic Verses*, “The world is the place we prove real by dying in it.”³⁰ Faulkner, Wright, and Ellison (good modernists all) would not have worded it that way, but their imagination of race finds the world proved real for kindred reasons. Without the concomitant reality of others irrevocably related to us, vulnerable to pain and ultimately to death—as we are—the individual trajectory would have little resonance, its autonomy be of little value. All three writers compel our attention insofar as they honor the gravity of our group-shared yet unrepeatable passage, the ultimate cost and value of our inhabiting bodies that remain—however misrecognized—visible in space and extensive in time.

NOTES

1. Apart from numerous brilliant articles, the booklength studies of postmodernism from which I have most benefited are those of Andreas Huyssen (*After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986]), John McGowan (*Postmodernism and Its Critics* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991]), and David Harvey (*The Condition of Postmodernity* [Oxford: Blackwell’s, 1989]). Each of these writers refuses to romanticize postmodernism as a heroic repudiation of all that has gone before. Instead, they explore the intricate ways in which postmodern developments both proceed from and call into question a range of modernist assumptions (beginning with the Enlightenment), within a broad spectrum of human endeavors (arts, sciences, philosophy, and architecture, most prominently). They all refuse, that is, the shrill rhetorical amazement that, in Robert Siegel’s words, we could “ever have supposed that representations were anything but words, that consciousness was anything but words, that ‘Man’ was more than a representation, a life in words punctuated by bursts of the inhuman” (“Postmodernism TM”, in *Modern Fiction Studies* 41:1 [Spring 1995]: 178). More persuasive, in my view, is Linda Hutcheon’s qualified claim that “It is not that representation now dominates or effaces the referent, but that it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* [London: Routledge, 1989], 34).

2. For the purposes of this argument, Morrison and Calvino are both considered postmodernists. It might be more fruitful, however, to analyze Morrison’s work within a postcolonial frame of assumptions, for the reconception of a stable (but not bourgeois-appropriative) subject is as important a task of postcolonial literature as the dismantling of the bourgeois-appropriative

subject is critical to much postmodern literature.

3. Donald Barthelme, "Sentence," in Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung, ed., *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Moral Turn of Postmodernism* (Heidelberg, 1996), 118.

4. John Barth, *The End of the Road* (1958; New York: Bantam, 1967), 1. Subsequent citation refers to this edition.

5. Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," in *The Baudrillard Reader*, trans. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 167.

6. William Faulkner, *Light in August: The Corrected Text*, ed. Noel Polk (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 384. Subsequent citation refers to this edition.

7. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage, 1994), 5.

8. Dostoevskyan commentary, cushioned by existentialist clichés, typically misses this darker, failed dimension of the Underground Man, preferring instead to speak of his rebellion as an "affirmation of the supreme worth of the individual" (Michael Lynch, *Creative Revolt: A Study of Wright, Ellison, and Dostoevsky* [New York: Peter Lang, 1990], 37).

9. Joseph Frank, "Ralph Ellison and a Literary 'Ancestor': Dostoevsky," in *The New Criterion* 2:1(1983): 12.

10. The "underground" is not only a capacious and fluid concept in Dostoevsky's work—embracing simultaneously geographic, economic, psychological, religious, and philosophic realms—but its usage also alters significantly during his career. The mainly negative resonance of "underground" in the 1865 *Notes* gives way to a range of creative reverberations in Dostoevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1882). See Monroe Beardsley's essay (in *Notes from Underground*, trans. Serge Shishkoff [New York: Crowell, 1969], 229–60) for further commentary.

11. See Joseph Frank's five-volume biography of Dostoevsky (esp. vols. 2 and 3) for a useful mapping of the ideological climate operative in St. Petersburg during the 1850s and 1860s, when Dostoevsky was coming into his powers as a novelist. For an extraordinary reading of the functioning of ideology within Dostoevsky's work, see Mikhail Bakhtin's *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics* (trans. Caryl Emerson [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984]).

12. Such rabid insistence on racial markers may testify to a postwar American South of the 1920s in which these markers were becoming suddenly less reliable. Daniel Singal argues that "[t]owns that had been relatively stable suddenly experienced a sizable influx of strangers whose origins were wholly unknown. Where once it had been highly unlikely for a resident to have 'black blood' without the town knowing of it, the system of community genealogy was now doomed" (*The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919–1945* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982], 182).

13. For further commentary on the creative interplay (in Faulkner's great work) of the forms of modernist doubt with the contents of traditional knowledge, see my *What Else But Love? The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 167–72, 185–9.

14. To put it perhaps more succinctly: if *As I Lay Dying's* "just a shape to fill a lack" is Faulkner's most haunting formulation for the arbitrariness of words, then a good deal of postmodern fiction takes this arbitrariness as inalterable. The human drama becomes parody because it is unavoidably told second-hand, in that realm of weakness we call words. But Faulkner seemed to believe that, although we *tell* our lives "in the air," we *live* our lives, unspeakably, "on the ground." In his most compelling work he invents, as no postmodernist seeks to, an unspeakable ground language. This local distinction is also a larger one between modernist and postmodernist ambitions. As Gianni Vattino puts it in *The End of Modernity* (1985, trans. Jon R. Snyder [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988]), "From architecture to the novel to poetry to the figurative arts, the postmodern displays, as its most common and imposing trait, an effort to free itself from the logic of overcoming, development, and innovation" (105).

15. Ellison cited in Thomas Whitaker, "Spokesman for Invisibility," in Kimberley W. Benston, ed., *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1997), 401.

16. Although I stand by this claim as generally true of Joe Christmas, *Light in August* offers several moments of memorable exception: whenever Joe muses sardonically on his racial "inheritance," and most movingly during the last days of his flight from trial (331–9). The man who returns voluntarily to Mottstown, enters a white barbershop and gets a shave, then waits patiently until he is "recognized" by the white racists—this is someone so abreast of the signs of his own racial constructedness that he all but performs these signs as a sort of Irigarayan mimicry: waiting bemusedly for someone to take his social play for social reality, as prelude to the business of executing him. What Joe is actually thinking and feeling during this mysterious "endgame" is scrupulously kept from us: all Faulkner lets us see are the rabidly inadequate constructions of him made by others.

17. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940; New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 29–30. This edition uses the Library of America restored text of *Native Son*; subsequent citation refers to this edition.

18. Only Ross Pudaloff, to my knowledge, has glimpsed this postmodern dimension of *Native Son*: "Wright himself specifically called for literature to go 'beyond the realism of the novel' in order to create a novel 'bigger, different, freer, more open.' Such a novel ... is Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, especially in its characterization of Tyrone Slothrop.... [Slothrop's] discovery [that he has no inherent self] ... does not, however, allow him to express his true feelings and develop the authentic self that Marxism, Freudianism, the traditional novel, and nineteenth-century culture as a whole promised. Rather,

Slothrop disappears; he scatters. He has no self and no identity beyond that which was imposed on him.... [*Native Son*] prefigures the writings of Thomas Pynchon and Ishmael Reed more than it extends the literary and philosophical traditions of realism or modernism" ("Celebrity as Identity: *Native Son* and Mass Culture," in Henry Lewis Gates and Anthony Appiah, ed. *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* [New York: Amistad Press, 1993], 119).

19. Faced with Mary's corpse, most commentary on *Native Son* is (not surprisingly) concerned to downplay Bigger's transformation. John Reilly's remarks are typically corrective: "With false confidence growing out of a failure to comprehend that the exhilaration he feels after murdering Mary is private and ephemeral..." ("Giving Bigger a Voice: The Politics of Narrative in *Native Son*," in Kenneth Kinamon, ed., *New Essays on Native Son* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990], 54–5). Reilly has reinserted the act of murder within a larger humanist schema that undoes its liberating effect. Wright's text, however, scrupulously follows Bigger's moment by moment consciousness, refusing to harness his movement of mind to greater paradigms of either indictment or approbation.

20. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Stephen Rendall (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988), 37.

21. By "beyond" I do not mean that Bigger has found his way into some region untouched by ideology. I mean, rather, that *Native Son* proposes no ideological schema that can contain Bigger's gesture and render it coherent—by proposing a way of life within which that gesture would become replicable and self-orienting.

22. Houston Baker, "Reassessing (W)right: A Meditation on the Black (W)hole," in *Modern Critical Views*, Richard Wright, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 137.

23. Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," in *Eight Men* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1987), 68.

24. Invisible Man's invisibility has been, virtually since the book's appearance in 1952, a debated issue. Noting how a range of critics in the 1960s worried about this dimension of the protagonist, Thomas Whitaker argues that the book's rhetorical power requires this bodily absence and vocal flexibility. Invisible Man's eloquence exceeds any single ownership of it; his "form is no 'object' but a nexus of conversations with ancestors, contemporaries, and readers" ("Spokesman for Invisibility," in Benston, 401). He registers most deeply as a *linguistic* enterprise. Not all contemporary readers agree with Whitaker, and Claudia Tate makes a compelling counterclaim: "I predict that the Invisible Man's efforts to leave the underground, though valiant, will be aborted time and again, since he has no mother to give him birth.... He is knowledge without matter; he is a child unborn, suspended between the fact of his conception and the impossibility of his birth" ("Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," in Benston, 171). Tate's argument allows one to glimpse a disturbingly unintended irony in Invisible Man's rewriting of Stephen Dedalus's "the uncreated conscience of his race" as "the uncreated features of his face" (354): these facial features remain, precisely, uncreated.

25. Ralph Ellison, "What Would America Be without Blacks?" in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 109–10.

26. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Vintage, 1989), 153. Subsequent citation refers to this edition.

27. Baudrillard, "Symbolic Exchange and Death," in *The Baudrillard Reader*, 139–40.

28. Michel Fabre cites a letter from Ellison to Wright—written years before *Invisible Man* was published—that sheds light on the later novel's dynamic of memory and forgetting: "Back when I first knew you [Ellison writes], remember, I often speculated as to what it was that made the difference between us and the others who shot up from the same region.... I think it is because the past which filters through your book [*Native Son*] has always been tender and alive and aching within us. We are the ones who had no comforting amnesia of childhood, and for whom the trauma of passing from the country to the city of destruction brought no anaesthesia of consciousness, but left our nerves peeled and quivering" ("From *Native Son* to *Invisible Man*: Some Notes on Ralph Ellison's Evolution in the 1950s," in Benston, 211). That Ellison could see a tenderness toward the past in *Native Son*—where it seems to me none exists whatsoever—reveals just how important such memories were to him (rather than Wright) as he negotiated his journey northward to the city. Eleven years later *Invisible Man* will makes good on this intricate temporal investment, even as the novel works repeatedly to deprive its protagonist of the specifics of his own past. What emerges, miraculously, is the sense of a *people's* past.

29. Edith Wyschogrod, "Towards a Postmodern Ethics: Corporeality and Alterity," in *Ethics and Aesthetics*, 66.

30. Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (Dover: The Consortium, 1992), 533.