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THE BODY AND *INVISIBLE MAN*

Ralph Ellison's Novel in Twenty-First-Century Performance and Public Spaces

PATRICE RANKINE

"For Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and our countless other Hopes Shot Down."

A disconnect between what actually happened and how the media reported it is palpable in *The Riots* (a theatrical presentation of the 2011 London riots by Gillian Slovo). As the fires blazed, real stories got lost amid the rush to condemn rioters. While politicians squabble and journalists continue to pontificate, what can theater contribute to the debate? "The advantage we have is space," argues Slovo. "We have two hours to deal with one issue. . . . You read a newspaper on your own . . . but we need to create a space in which people can think about what has happened together" (Allfree).

The cultural significance of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in the twenty-first century is not simply a matter of the novel's place within the canonical American "great books," or its permanence globally among literary masterpieces from the time of its publication in 1952.¹ As if its satirical and profoundly intelligent treatment of American identity during segregation were not enough, *Invisible Man* graced the American stage in 2012 with Oren Jacoby's adaptation, which Christopher McElroen directed.² The Court Theatre's three-hour-plus performance—meriting two intermissions—gives audiences another perspective on the novel. In *Invisible Man* a young college student meets disappointment in the South when he is kicked out of a

segregated school for a mistake he makes; similar to the slaves of a previous generation, he travels to New York in hope of a better future, but he faces disappointments there as well.³ My interest here is not in writing a review article about the performance of *Invisible Man*. Rather, the theatrical production of *Invisible Man* provides an opportunity to revisit Ellison's writing from two distinct vantage points: namely, the novel as a literary genre, and the performance of race in contemporary theaters, whether a staged production or within a spontaneous (unstaged), social drama, such as twenty-first-century city streets.⁴ In this latter context, the riot with which the novel closes is pivotal.

It is noteworthy that during his lifetime, Ellison resisted adaptation of *Invisible Man* for the stage.⁵ Perhaps he saw and disliked the theatrical version or the film adaptation of other novels, such as *Native Son*, which his literary rival and sometimes friend Richard Wright brought to the stage with the help of playwright Paul Green. Ellison's resistance to the staging of a novel that he also criticized on formal grounds would not be out of character.⁶ Everything he ever said about artistic form, whether in interviews or in his essays, amounted to an insistence upon distinctions between and among genres. Ellison's dogged protestation approached the level of a kind of artistic purity, despite the wise advice of his character Mr. Emerson Jr. in *Invisible Man* to resist purity. In the novel, Emerson comes to Invisible Man's aid and tells him that the letters the protagonist thinks will allow him entry into a job in New York City are in fact damning. He seeks to comfort the protagonist and assures him, whether soothingly or cynically, that "all our motives are impure" (IM 186). Within this context, the performance of *Invisible Man* is an ironic, cautionary tale about the pitfalls of such artistic purity. Such irony is of value to Ellison criticism because of what many continue to treat as the writer's "failure" to produce a second novel within his lifetime, itself a reflection of a kind of purity, at least in the context of criticism, an inability to hold Ellison to any other standard but that which he himself established, that of novelist.⁷

In addition to the reflection on Ellisonian thought that it allows in general, the performance of *Invisible Man* also calls attention to something that the novel cannot do, if we hold the genre to the formal standards that Ellison and others proclaimed. To be specific, the novel cannot—in fact, must not—focus on the corporeal reality of race, whereas performance, by its very nature, would call attention to such a fact, no matter the reaction to this phenomenon on the part of particular audience members.

Ellison never describes the protagonist of *Invisible Man* as black, even though *other* characters in the novel see him as Negro, to use the nomenclature of the social framework of Ellison's mid-century novel. Certainly *Invisible Man* evokes Louis Armstrong's invocation of "what did I do to be so black and blue" from the start of the novel, in the prologue, even if blackness and the blues can be metaphorical (IM 14). And a white Southerner refers to him as a "ginger colored nigger" during the violent battle royal scene (IM 21), where black boys are pitted against one another to the bloody finish. So the reader knows that the protagonist is black. Nevertheless, despite the strong narrative framework and description of what amounts to a fictional version of segregated America, Ellison—remarkably—describes race as a kind of external imposition on the individual and on American life, a truth that is always there though often not directly addressed, part of a larger set of social concerns, including class, sex, Communism, and democracy. While the novel can *describe* race from various perspectives, through embodiment the *performance* of race in *Invisible Man* must be visceral and inescapable, physical rather than intellectual, whatever the audience's reaction to race's corporeality. Performance reveals what race really is—performance. As tautological as this sounds, the stage version of *Invisible Man*, where race is shown to be a corporeal presence dependent upon physical and verbal gestures, allows the material to interact with the twenty-first-century global environment in somewhat unexpected ways.

THE NOVEL FORM

Ellison articulated his theory of the novel in a number of essays and interviews, in particular in "The World and the Jug," published in *Shadow and Act*; "Society, Morality, and the Novel" and "The Novel as a Function of American Democracy," published in *Going to the Territory*; and in a roundtable discussion for the Southern Historical Society, with William Styron, Robert Penn Warren, and C. Vann Woodward, where comparisons between fiction (through the novel) and history emerge (CRE). While other articles show Ellison's sustained interest in the American novel, these essays best characterize his dedication to a particular formal approach, which he derived mainly from Georg Lukács. Ellison directly cites Lukács in the Southern Historical Society discussion. He calls attention to Lukács's observations on the "increasing concreteness of the novel" (CRE 150). The novelist "move[s]

about inside of his subject” and possibly brings a “new outlook” to his readers, whatever their previous “prejudices” (CRE 150, 151). The understanding of Lukács that Ellison demonstrates in the discussion would only be sharpened in his later essays.

Some consideration of Lukács’s formal approach to the novel is worthwhile here in order to contextualize Ellison’s comments. Lukács’s treatise, first published in 1920, anticipates Mikhail Bakhtin’s distinction between the epic and the novel. According to Lukács, the epic conveys the “heaviness” of life, “an inability to liberate oneself from the bonds of sheer brutal materiality” (57–58). The novel, in contrast, has “seekers” as its heroes, those who will not accept the heaviness of life but construct out of the brutal materiality their individual approach: “The epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life” (Lukács 60). Lukács draws distinctions between inside and outside, the material world and the containers (forms) through which artists forge meaning—Ellison’s “world and the jug,” the latter the container that is crafted, holds a shape, and serves a purpose. That is, the novel is the jug, the written material, the fluid it holds. To use another metaphor, Lukács defines artistic form in terms of home, but society (the world) cannot define home for the individual. Lukács hits upon a general existential problem that Ellison will take up in specific, local terms; namely, that a novel, as a formal structure of process, of individual “seekers,” *cannot* define people in static terms. The novel’s material is fluid, whereas the epic is static. Thus, for Ellison, race, as a social construct, cannot ultimately hold any fixed meaning for the novelist because it is part of the fluid material that he must manipulate.

For Lukács, “every art form is defined by the metaphysical dissonance of life which it accepts and organises as the basis of a totality complete in itself” (71). Whatever enters the novel, however fragmented and dissonant it is, comes out on the other end of the process. The novel is something “complete in itself,” what might be called a narrative whole. For Ellison, the novel form allows for an optimism regarding race in America. The writer’s responsibility is “to the unfettered and replenishing power of his own imagination” (CRE 152). While the historians in Ellison’s conversation at the Southern Historical Association return, time and again, to the material realities of race and segregation in America, Ellison shifts focus from “the dead baggage of facts” (152). How can history explain that Ellison hears firsthand “from Negro students that I attended college with at Tuskegee” (153) positive things about certain white racists? Shouldn’t these students hate their

ostensible oppressors? There is for Ellison something incongruous about lived experience when it is set against raw facts. Although history does not tell the entire story, the novel form, as defined by Lukács and embraced by Ellison, can contain these “incongruous juxtapositions.”⁸ The novel insists on crafting a complete, fictive entity out of the brutal materiality that is the fact of life. What comes on the other end of the narrative experience is an individual invention, unique and separate from anything that came before, and from the facts of history.

As Lukács had it, the novel must move toward “disillusionment” (Lukács 144). That is, chaos, not the “conventional world” (144), is where a novel’s protagonist ends up, but this chaos is a laboratory of creative possibility, “the novel’s ability to forge images which would strengthen man’s will to say no to chaos and affirm him in his task of humanizing himself and the world” (CERE 701). Here again, the muck with which one enters into the abyss, the underworld of creative possibilities that is the material of lived experience, is only the stuff out of which the individual crafts Lukács’s “totality.” The novelist is “committed to optimism” (CERE 706), whereas the reality of race can be grueling. The “inherent ambiguity” of the novel benefits from a psychological and emotional distance. This is why the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is *retelling* his story, once he has organized its narrative structure, after the fact, as it were, rather than as he undergoes the existential crises he experiences. In the end, Ellison advances Lukács’s ideas to the extent that he sees the novel, and no other artistic form, as having reached a particular pitch in America where it becomes the place for working out the democratic process itself, a site of “maximum freedom” of expression (CERE 763).

Ellison’s approach to the novel is a useful contrast to theater and performance. Early in “The Novel as a Function of American Democracy,” Ellison directly contrasts how the novel functions to theater, wherein the former is “a literary form which could project the shiftings of society with a facility and an intimacy that had not existed before, either in the theater or in romantic poetry” (CERE 755). Whereas performance can be visceral and emotional in its display of experiences, a good novel, in Ellison’s estimation, cannot afford to be. Lack of a certain kind of intelligence—that is, an emotional appeal rather than an appeal to reason—was Ellison’s ultimate problem with *Native Son*. This is not to say that performances fail to be logical or considered, but they depend on emotional reactions, whereas novels, as defined here, cannot. Ellison certainly understood racial categories as cultural distinctions, but he thought that the novel was the means by which Americans could transcend these material realities. Within this context, the fault with *Native Son* was the

extent to which it beat its reader over the head with the poverty and degradation of Wright's character, Bigger Thomas. Bigger is not a novelistic hero who crafts his own sense of the world out of the chaos that surrounds him. Rather, he is a symbol of that chaos, as James Baldwin argued in "Everybody's Protest Novel." Such a character could never appeal to Ellison, and in the end *Native Son* is branded "protest fiction," rather than a novel by Ellison's or Lukács's definition.

THE STAGE

Of course, every art form and literary genre has a claim to uniqueness, exceptionalism, and an ability to do what other forms cannot. The American stage has certainly been a place for unparalleled responses to the material realities of life in the United States. Through costume and set design, theater had an indelible place in American modernism, setting forth the rubric of modern style in ways that poetry and fiction could not, even in the hands of T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound (Walker). Throughout the twentieth century, the American stage was a place where antiestablishment rhetoric and modes of life could be tried on, as plays like *Waiting for Lefty* make apparent (Krasner). The American stage was also instrumental in the penetration of the racial subject into the modern American imagination. Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*, published in 1920 and starring Paul Robeson in the lead role, certainly was not realistic theater, but it put a black actor in a serious role on Broadway for the first time. What theater can do in a specific way is bring corporeal realities to bear on audience members, whatever their reactions to these realities. As performance theorist Harvey Young argues in *Embodying Black Experience*, the reality of "the black body" as a phenomenon, a thing-in-the-world, is perhaps best couched in terms of history and memory, whereas Ellison was perhaps interested in fiction and creative forgetfulness.

When Ellison presents such events in *Invisible Man* as the battle royal, the bloody contest that white racists set up to have black boys compete in a group boxing match for scraps of money, the key is ambiguity. In the scene, the white woman with the American flag tattooed on her body is as much a focal point as any, as Sandra Adell has argued in *Double-Consciousness/Double Bind*. Performance of this scene onstage, however, calls for precision and presence: the director might make choices about what the scene means, fix upon those choices, and present the actors whose bodies will play the role. The same is the case with the eviction scene later in the novel, or with

the riots with which the novel closes. The novelist can play with ambiguity and move his reader from individual experiences toward the totality of the form. Not so for the theater director. Lack clarity here and lose your theater audience!

At the same time, performance does, as Young argues, allow for presence and historical repetition. An event such as a riot happens once. As will be evident, Ellison's attempt to move beyond the historical reality of such an event as a riot through the novel is one of his contributions beyond the 1950s, as these events recur. In this case, the novel and performance work in tandem, the latter reliving the events, the former imagining a world without them. The enactment of a riot can act on the mind in therapeutic ways. By seeing the events onstage, audiences can relive the traumatic events again and again, perhaps discussing those events together in "talkbacks," in a controlled environment.

Theater played this role in 2011 in London with Gillian Slovo's *The Riots*, where performers acted out skits derived from the real-life riots, which began in Tottenham and spread across the United Kingdom during the fall of 2011.⁹ The facts, such as they were, are worth recounting.¹⁰ On August 6, 2011, police officers killed Mark Duggan. Friends say Mark was unarmed; officers say he shot at them first. An independent commission later corroborated that Mark was unarmed at the time of his murder, although he did possess an illegal firearm. Beginning in Tottenham, young adults damaged property and threw their bodies in the way of buildings, automobiles, and police. The riots began on August 6, 2011, but by the end there were 3,100 arrests, over 1,000 charges, and 3,443 crimes committed.¹¹ Such repetition as what was staged in *The Riots* allows audiences to relive the terrible events but with the purpose of discussion and healing. Given the uncontrolled chaos of riots, it is not surprising that Ellison would seek to master the riots he lived through, in the novel form. Ellison's private "intimacy" (CERE 755), which the novel form allows, contrasts with what Slovo sought to achieve with her play *The Riots*; namely, to "think about what happened together" (quoted in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter). Further comparisons between the London riots and the historical riots in Harlem as they are represented in *Invisible Man* follow. Most important for the moment is the fixity of the event as the novelist represents it, as opposed to the way in which such an event can be relived and repeated onstage. In the novel as Ellison conceives it in 1952, the individual reads and reflects silently upon the events. (This isolation is certainly not the case at other points in the history of reading. Ancient Greeks and Romans, for example, always read aloud and mostly in

groups.) In a theater, individuals must confront one another's reactions to the staged event, even if in silence. Living bodies are seated next to one another in a theater space, and there are bodies onstage.

THE BODY AND JACOBY'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

The body is a focal point in performance and the instrument through which individuals enact a number of dramas (Schechner). Individuals enact these dramas in formal and informal theaters.¹² For the context with which I am concerned, the performance of scenes from *Invisible Man* onstage, it is worth focusing on two theaters, the street, where riots and conflict take place, and the dramatic stage, where conflicts can be relived and further dramatized—heightened, as it were. The differences between these theaters are important to my discussion here. The street, if one thinks in terms of such acts as a mugging or a demonstration, can be chaotic and overtly political, at times improvisational, and given to a set of rules independent of the home, a courtroom, or other public and private spaces. The other theater, the dramatic stage, is structured, primarily sanitized (and perhaps sacred),¹³ and has its own rules of engagement. The potential sterility—sanitized, sacred—of theater is why Richard Schechner and others pushed for an “environmental theater” in the 1960s and 1970s (Schechner). This environmental theater would be a theater more spontaneous, closer to the ritual and communal origins of the practice. The street and the theater, as Schechner's approach demonstrates, have much in common and a great deal that separate them, but conceiving of them together brings focus to a unifying factor that makes them different from a novel—the body. The novel can, in fact, call the reader's attention to corporeal realities, but performance is another matter entirely, evoking visceral and immediate reactions. As is clear from the very opening of *Invisible Man*, the body can move through streets in invisible, undetected ways. The white man that the protagonist bumps into at the novel's opening does not see him. The protagonist contemplates this lack of recognition in terms of conflict. He can choose to react violently, or peacefully. That is, his body can be a factor in disorder and disruption, or it can in certain ways remain unseen. Bodies bring to life not the totality to which the novel moves, but rather the potential civic conflict that might underpin particular moments of materiality, to borrow again from Lukács's language.

Perhaps Ellison rejected theater because the presence of the body onstage—its presentness—was too complicated, too unwieldy, for him to control

the outcome. Onstage, the body is the site of dramatic action, the focal point of the audience's attention, usually finely adorned so as to emphasize its beauty and orderliness, but also at times wracked and haggard, if that is what the role requires. The dramatic stage can call attention to the body in ways that everyday interactions do not. Everyday conflicts might be relived on stage, whereas in the novel form, such conflicts are brought to narrative order. Put otherwise, Ellison wanted *his* approaches to blackness—"what did I do to be so black and blue"—to linger in the reader's mind, not the quotidian realities of race as it was lived in segregated America of the 1950s.

It would have been hard to ignore the body during Jacoby's adaptation of *Invisible Man*. The reader of the battle royal scene in *Invisible Man* might imagine the violence and bloodshed that Ralph Ellison describes; seeing the blood spew from the boy's mouth, his guts a gallery of dysfunction and misuse, even in the make-believe setting of a play, involves other senses. Phillip Zarrilli talks about the body to which the *viewer's* attention is being called, as in the staged version of *Invisible Man*, the "latent body" (Zarrilli 656). The actor's body is a surface phenomenon, an "aesthetic body" that, under normal circumstance, does not feature physical pain, unless the role calls for that (Zarrilli 656). Under normal circumstances, the body in which blood circulates and food digests is latent because we do not pay attention to it. At times of pain or discomfort, when we bleed, digest food, or shit, the unseemly functioning of our bodies becomes more apparent:

The normative disappearance of both surface and recessive bodies is reversed when we experience pain or dysfunction. In pain, sensory intensification in the body demands direct thematization. Pain is an affective call which has the "quality of compulsion," i.e., the pain seizes and constricts our attention. I must act now to the body to relieve the discomfort. (Zarrilli 661)

The distinction between the aesthetic body and the latent body, the "surface" and "recessive," allows the black body onstage to serve a civic function. Audience members see the aesthetic body onstage (dressed, composed, and, at times, even decorous) transform into the latent body (guts, pain, and unseemly functions), and the blackness of this body does not go unnoticed. At some point, Teagle F. Bougere's black body in the role of *Invisible Man* is not his own, but it is rather the theoretical black body that Young describes, the "second body" that "shadows or doubles the real one" (Young 7). Audience members who perhaps do not normally come into contact with the black

body might now view it, as they did with *Emperor Jones*, ostensibly suffering pain, unnecessarily in the case of *Invisible Man*, due to its dehumanization at the hands of others.

Without real parallel in the novel, the body onstage calls for a visceral reaction; it cannot be put down, as a novel can, though one might turn away. For the audience members in the theater watching *Invisible Man* onstage bleeding during the battle royal scene, perhaps their own latent bodies become more sensitive to what might have been the experience of blacks in America during the period with which the novel is concerned, the 1950s. The reality of Jim Crow America, where Ralph Ellison himself once sat for a job interview in a chair that was wired for electricity, bearing the discomfort and shock at how someone could be entertained by this harm to his body, is made phenomenon again, through the performance of the novel (Jackson, *Ralph Ellison* 79–80). There was apparently little connection between young Ralph Ellison's black body and that of his white interviewer, but this is only through a mistake of dehumanization, the travesty of segregation and Jim Crow.

The intensity of the performance adds to the corporeal experience. The body onstage is unmistakably wracked, not so much by the staged blows and fake blood that gushes from the actor's mouth, even if for a moment the audience is caught up in its suspension of disbelief. Rather, Bougere hurls his body into the role of *Invisible Man* for the 205 minutes of the play. Bougere is able to transform the intensity of performance, the discomfort to his latent body, into his embodiment of a segregated American experience of the 1950s. Theater critic Chris Jones describes the experience of viewing Teagle's performance as follows:

It's a hugely empathetic performance from an actor who clearly understands he's playing an African-American everyman, buffeted by forces, switching endlessly from positive to negative, without regard to the care of the influencer. Bougere shows us a man who finally learns he cannot control the acts of others, even as the lesson comes with great personal pain.¹⁴

Invisible Man depends on Bougere to shoulder the load, as it were. There are of course other actors onstage throughout *Invisible Man*. They take on multiple roles. *Chicago Sun-Times* reviewer Hedy Weiss calls A. C. Smith's performance in his roles "blistering,"¹⁵ and she argues that Smith calls to mind Idi Amin (or even Forest Whitaker's incantatory rendition). Smith plays the

college administrator Bledsoe, whose expulsion of Invisible Man from college, along with his damning letters, hurls the protagonist in a downward spiral.

The adaptation of the novel is by no means seamless. It is not necessarily clear, for example, how Smith's role as Bledsoe connects to the less developed ones later in the performance. The inability to tie together all the loose strands is, in fact, one of many places where performance differs from the novel form. As Jacoby develops the play and brings it to the stage in Washington, DC, and elsewhere, he—or others who bring it to stage—might be able to rewrite and refocus his adaptation. (The final version of this essay was completed before many of the productions subsequent to that of Chicago's Court Theatre.) Reviewers all point to the challenge of bringing the novel to stage. As Lauren McEwen puts it, "the novel is lengthy, forcing Jacoby to skim over some parts."¹⁶ Early critical responses to the Boston run in 2012–13 reveal that the space of theater remains a challenging one for the novel's surrealism. As reviewer Bill Marx puts it, "An adaptor has to make choices, and the approach here is to focus on the novel's most straightforward narrative strand."¹⁷

Whatever comes of subsequent performances, the weight of *Invisible Man* was primarily on Bougere's shoulders at Chicago's Court Theatre. An otherwise fit man, the paunch he shows from the beginning of the play, the staged version of the novel's prologue, is suggestive of the place where he has held the rigors of his role. By the end of the performance, there is no doubt where the gut comes from, both for Bougere and, possibly, for Invisible Man. The gut is the materialization of difficult experiences, evidence of the latent body. Performance allows Teagle to enact the guts of a segregated body in ways that the reader of a novel can only imagine. In Weiss's words, "you could feel the sheer weight of it all as Bougere visibly exhaled at the close of Saturday's opening night performance. He was understandably exhausted beyond all reckoning after his journey as the superhuman Everyman who is no longer invisible, at least to himself."¹⁸

EMBODYING THE RIOTS

While Bougere's performance calls attention to the individual black body, race is often a collective experience made real in relation to others; in no place is shared, civic pain clearer than in the riot at the end of the novel. The riot onstage is, of course, the act of an ensemble. The riot onstage represents the actual, civic theater in which groups often act—the streets. As was the

case as the novel *Invisible Man* comes to a close, there is an attempt onstage to prepare the audience for what comes at the end, even if it is ultimately an unsuccessful one. That is, the scene does not fully translate to the stage because the writer and director have not given it enough motivation; the links that might seem apparent to a reader are lost in the translation to stage. From the early reviews, this is as much the case in the later performances of the play as it was in Chicago. As Marx puts it,

Given that theater audiences are uncomfortable with abstraction, the emphasis on the book's realism is understandable: photographs of the period are projected throughout the show. But predictably, as the novel becomes increasingly surreal, especially during the climactic race riot, the adaptation loses considerable steam and impact. The conflagration flies by on stage in an incomprehensible few minutes (if you haven't read the book, I am not sure you will know what is happening) leading to an abrupt and somewhat confused dramatic wrap-up.¹⁹

Marx concurs that some aspects of the staging are successful. Throughout the performance, as Marx describes, McElroen uses old photographs, some harkening to the daguerreotypes of the mid-1800s, to contextualize the individual experience of the protagonist within a familial, collective frame. The photographic panels provide an architectural structure for such scenes as the eviction of a family in Harlem, which shapes the context for the riot that comes later. In the novel, *Invisible Man* stumbles upon this family as he walks through the streets of Harlem. Items from their lives and their family history are sprawled across the street, as police officers enforce their eviction: slave papers, old photographs, family letters, and so on. The protagonist does not know the family personally, but he acts on their behalf by uttering an impromptu speech that draws the attention of members of the Brotherhood. The incident moves the novel to its final third, the protagonist's experiences in Harlem, which culminates in the riot with which this third ends (although the novel itself closes with an epilogue). The Brotherhood, the quasi-Communist organization that pretends to transcend race in favor of universal humanity, is shown to be itself a sham. In the staged version, the framework of the photographs helps to draw attention to the communal aspect of the family's experience, the idea that these people are not alone in their suffering but are part of a group, members of which have similar experiences daily—a shared drama.

Some further background is necessary to establish the riot's significance to the novel. In some ways, as Marx asserts, McElroen fails to convey the importance of the events that lead to the riots in the novel, which include the Brotherhood's abandonment of "the Harlem district." When the Brotherhood counts Harlem a strategic loss and leaves the area, despondency sets in for many of the local leaders left in the wake. Having seen the death of a significant black member of the Brotherhood, Tod Clifton, *Invisible Man* thinks the riot is for Tod. Here again, actual riots—the Harlem riots of the first half of the twentieth century, the London riots of 2011—help to convey what is at stake in Ellison's novel. Similar to Mark Duggan in the riots throughout the United Kingdom in 2011, Tod ("Death") Clifton is a type of catalyst, a symbol that will be repeated in other personages. Some time prior to the riot, *Invisible Man* spots Tod downtown, near Bryant Park (Forty-Second Street), selling Sambo dolls, when the protagonist himself leaves Harlem to purchase shoes downtown (retail therapy, as it were, to compensate for the chaos he sees in Harlem, which results from the Brotherhood's departure). As Tod is selling merchandise without a license, a police officer comes to chase him away, and he kills Tod. As with so many incidents involving bodies on city streets, both in the United States and internationally, the killing is ultimately inexplicable, and yet painfully familiar: an armed officer shooting an unarmed citizen, the State reaches into—or beyond?—its proscribed role in policing bodies that we once thought were our own, and lives are lost or traumatically disrupted. Was Mark Duggan armed? Was Tod Clifton a lawbreaker or an upstanding citizen? Whatever the answers, the person provides the catalyst for the events that ensue.

Some bit of Ellison's sublime prose is worth lingering on; it is a scene that would have to be staged in slow motion, given its complex movement, and so it was:

They were coming my way, passing a newsstand, and I saw the rails in the asphalt and a fire plug at the curb and the flying birds, and thought, You'll have to follow and pay his fine . . . just as the cop pushed him, jolting him *forward* and Clifton trying to keep the box [with the Sambo dolls] from swinging against his leg and saying something over his shoulder and going *forward* as one of the pigeons swung down into the street and up again, leaving a feather floating white in the dazzling backlight of the sun, and I could see the cop push Clifton again, stepping solidly *forward* in his black shirt, his arm shooting out stiffly, sending him in a head-snapping *forward* stumble

until he caught himself, saying something over his shoulder again, the two moving in a kind of march that I'd seen many times, but never with anyone like Clifton. (IM 329; emphasis added)

While this is not the place for extended prose analysis, the passage in *Invisible Man* is truly remarkable. Ellison conveys the urgency in so many ways that the scene feels surreal. The sentence marches “forward” with little punctuation, no break, as the officer pushes repeatedly, moving “forward,” in “a kind of march” that the narrator is not alone in having “seen many times” before. (The word *forward* is repeated four times just in the cited passage.) The scene feels surreal, like someone else's, but it is not. No one would expect “anyone like Clifton,” a clean-cut, upright, and beautiful black man, to succumb to such an experience. And yet, there it is, time and again. Lives are lost or traumatically disrupted.

To return momentarily to distinctions previously made about the novel form, particularly its difference from epic poetry, it would not be inconsistent to describe this scene in *Invisible Man* as epic. The scene is trapped, momentarily, in the “sheer brutal materiality” of the murder (Lukács 58), although Ellison seems to want to race “forward,” outside of the moment. Part of the scene's epic “heaviness” is in its similes. As has been noted, Sandra Adell presents part of Ellison's power as his ability to capture various subject-perspectives, and this passage is no exception. Clifton is gone, but the cop must now deal with the trauma of his hasty act, the learned and unconscious responses: “I looked back to Clifton, the cop was waving me away with his gun, sounding *like a boy* with a changing voice” (IM 330; emphasis added). The cop, the “boy,” has taken a life and must deal with the consequences, and here Ellison rises to the level of a Homeric simile not unlike that deployed when Patroclus enters battle on behalf of Achilles in the *Iliad*: “Meanwhile the armed band that was about Patroclus marched on till they sprang high in hope upon the Trojans. They came swarming out *like wasps* whose nests are by the roadside, and *whom silly children love to tease*, whereon anyone who happens to be passing may get stung” (passage from Homer, *Iliad* 16, Samuel Butler translation; emphasis added).²⁰ Just as war is—painfully—child's play in Homeric epic, the violence of the street involves players who are no more than children at the proverbial end of the day. But the genre of the novel does not stop here. It moves forward, from brutality to dissolution, pain to resolution, epic to the formal attributes of the novel.

The riot in *Invisible Man* is representative of actual civil disturbances in Harlem during the twentieth century; namely, the Harlem riots of 1935 and

1943. Ellison recorded firsthand versions of the former for the Federal Writers' Project. As is the case of the historical riots, Ellison's fictive representation of *riot* presents a kind of autopsy of civil unrest itself, but what is more, he is interested in the symbolic value given to individual lives during disruptive events. Always walking a tightrope between sociology and psychology, the group and the individual, society and its fictions, Ellison understood the anatomy of civil unrest, where bodies momentarily disrupt the prescribed norms. A perceived injustice done to a member of the local community ignites each of the Harlem riots. Here again is Mark Duggan, and even Tod Clifton. In his reflections on the riots, Ellison would have had his own account and that of leading social scientists and philosophers. Alain Locke describes the touchstone event of the 1935 riot in his article "Harlem: Dark Weather-Vane":

Its immediate causes were trivial,—the theft of a ten-cent pocket-knife by a Negro lad of sixteen in Kresge's department store on 125 Street. It was rumored that the boy had been beaten in the basement by store detectives and was gravely injured or dead; by tragic coincidence an ambulance called to treat one of the Kresge employees, whose hand the boy had bitten, seemed to confirm the rumor and a hearse left temporarily outside its garage in an alley at rear of the store to corroborate this. As a matter of fact the boy had given back the stolen knife and had been released through the basement door. But it must be remembered that this store, though the bulk of its trade was with Negroes, has always discriminated against Negroes in employment.²¹

The triviality of the cause of the 1935 riot is echoed in 1943, when a police officer shot a black US Army soldier who tried to help a woman arrested for disturbing the peace at Braddock Hotel (Knopf). The man was shot in the shoulder, but rumor spread through the street that he had been killed. Here again, as was the case with Mark Duggan in 2011, rumor overshadows the facts of the event. A black boy, a black soldier, Tod Clifton: Tod, "death," born to die, but still not trivial or meaningless.

In *Invisible Man*, the cause of the riot is as potentially meaningless and trivial as its historical counterparts. The hero, however, ever in search of meaning, constructs a higher cause: "Clifton, I thought. It's for Clifton. A night for Clifton" (IM 408). The protagonist credits Clifton. The touchstone, however, in the minds of many, is shockingly trivial. *Invisible Man* overhears

the looters: “About eight o’clock down on Lenox and 123rd this paddy slapped a kid for grabbing a Baby Ruth and the kid’s mama took it up and then the paddy slapped her and that’s when hell broke loose” (IM 408). Versions of the story proliferate, but on all counts, the community gives value to the individual life; the life takes on ritualistic, symbolic meaning. Order and disorder follow: a funeral, civil unrest, ritualized violence.

Perhaps McElroen was not daring enough in his staging of the novel, but the significance of the riot was indeed lost in performance. There is something even more haunting, more riveting about Ellison’s imagined body of Clifton and the rioters than the performance conveyed. In this case as well, *The Riots* provides a worthwhile contrast in that Slovo takes on the corporeal reality of civic spaces directly.²² For *Invisible Man*, perhaps because the actor who plays Tod, Chris Boykin, does not move through his multiple roles as fluidly as A. C. Smith did, his presence as Tod, “our hope shot down” (IM 450), remains shadowy.²³ Jacoby and McElroen fail to connect effectively the death of Clifton to the riot that follows a number of episodes later. As *Tribune* reviewer Chris Jones puts it, “One of the key emotional moments in the piece, the death of a Harlem organizer named Tod Clifton, does not carry enough focus.”²⁴

Jacoby and McElroen shy away from what a riot onstage might signify. The chaos of such an experience would call for therapeutic intervention, if staged with the immediacy of what an actual riot might evoke. The London riots, staged in *The Riots*, are only the most recent example of a phenomenon for which *Invisible Man* provides a meaningful autopsy.

THE MUCK OF GENRES AND THE PERSISTENCE OF RACE

Ellison once wrote, in his essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” that between archetypes and literature “there must needs be the living human being in a specific texture of time, place and circumstances” (CERE 101). Between sociology and fiction stands the incident; *Invisible Man* resonates uncannily with the events of August 2011 in the United Kingdom. Even Ellison would have found the apocalyptic scale staggering. Prime Minister David Cameron proved to be at a total loss as to how to deal with the riots, which he called “sickening” and characterized as “criminality pure and simple.”²⁵ Cameron was not alone in his simple-minded condemnation; a survey of comments from ministers of Parliament and Nick Clegg’s coalition government affirms that few leaders in 2011 in the United Kingdom had the foresight of New

York's mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, in 1935, whose commission and report Locke discusses in his essay. The riots in 2011 certainly were sickening, but not for the reasons Cameron states in his August 9 message. They were certainly not "criminality pure and simple."

Addressing the cause and finding the means to redress such social ills as race and its link to class and poverty calls for deep reflection and thoughtful responses. Cameron was not up for the task, but he was not alone in his shortcomings. Though a work of fiction, *Invisible Man* contains some of the genius with which citizens in London in 2011 might come to terms with these circumstances. Yet, in the end, perhaps there is some relevance to Rampersad's criticism of Ellison, his sense that Ellison himself, though brilliant, sometimes hid behind fiction, and specifically the novel form, in order to avoid his own responsibility regarding the social dramas through which he lived. It is true that Ellison avoided certain theaters of racial enactment, barely speaking publically about the civil rights movement or the violence that ensued in the 1960s in its wake. But this is not to say that Ellison avoided the issue of race. Race is an American reality through which Ellison hoped to work, a brutality for which he sought resolution. He thought that the novel form was the best genre to come to terms with race because of its optimism. That is, the novel, in and of itself, moves beyond materiality toward something transcendent. As such, the novel form is a culminating American genre. The optimism reflected in it is akin to the democratic process and, specifically, the openness of the American constitution. As Ellison puts it in "Society, Morality, and the Novel,"

One might deliberately overemphasize and say that most prose fiction in the United States—even the most banal bedroom farce or the most rarefied, stylized, and understated comedy of manners—is basically "about" the values and cost of living in a democracy (CERE 702).

At the end of *Invisible Man*, the protagonist famously "affirm[s] the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence" (IM 574). That is, to account for the cost of democracy, one emphasizes the values upon which that democracy was built. Such an approach might not make it all worthwhile, but for the optimism of the novel form, there is really no other way forward.

At the same time, race remains a reality.²⁶ Even the beauty of the aesthetic body evident in black dance is a result of toil, a bluesy attempt to make

poetry out of pain (Manning). Blackness is an embodied experience that is individual and collective. Individual and group experiences can be enacted on stage in a way entirely foreign to the novel. Riots might be the most unwieldy example of a collective action that amounted to material realities that Ellison would rather have distilled to mythic significance than relived as they occurred. At the same time, there is therapeutic value in “staging” or reliving such experiences, as Slovo points out in the emphasis on the value of watching the enactment of riots as a community. Ellison recognized this, which is perhaps part of the reason he thought the novel form was the best, most controlled form of analysis.

By aligning Ellison’s approach to race to what he had to say about the novel as a literary form, it becomes clear that some of the biographical objections to Ellison as a person, such as that of Rampersad, go a bit far. As is evident here, Ellison had a particular approach to the artistic form of the novel, which he, as a self-proclaimed novelist, valued above all other artistic forms. The genealogy of Ellison’s approach to the novel can be traced directly (and primarily) to Lukács, who saw the novel as a culminating form in which the materiality of lived experience might be, at least momentarily, worked out. The novel was the “jug” in which Ellison poured the “world” of real experiences. Ellison’s elevation of the novel (to a point of ill-advised purity) meant his rejection of other artistic forms, such as theater, especially as it pertained to the particularly mucky and unresolved reality of race in America. The recent stagings of *Invisible Man* reveal a number of things. In the first place, the stage versions of *Invisible Man* help to highlight their difference from the novel. Live performance reveals how visceral the experience of race in America can be, and this is true of both the past of segregation and of the reality of America in the early twenty-first century, where the phenomenon of a black president only points to an as-yet unrealized integration of American lives. In this difference between page and stage, the extent to which the reality of black bodies remains a rarity in certain corners of American life is striking. The disturbing event of a riot unveils disturbances beneath the seemingly calm surface. If there was any question as to the relevance of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* in the twenty-first century, or that of his broader artistic vision, the challenging attempts to stage the novel should, for quite some time to come, serve as a resounding answer in the affirmative. During a time when riots can—seemingly inexplicably (to David Cameron)—erupt in poor and ethnic neighborhoods across London and the United Kingdom, Ellison’s concerns and worldview remain urgent.

NOTES

1. On Ellison's work being among "great books," see, for example, Bloom, *How to Read and Why*. For Ellison's place in a black American literary canon, see Gates, *Figures in Black*.

2. The play's Chicago run was from January 12 through February 19. A survey of the relevant reviews appears on the "Theatre in Chicago" website at <http://www.theatreinchicago.com/invisible-man/4749/> (accessed 23 December 2014), and on the Court Theatre's website, <http://www.courttheatre.org/> (accessed 4 February 2014). The Studio Theatre run in Washington, DC, was in September and October 2012 and moved to Boston (through the Huntington Theatre Company and the Boston University Theatre) in December 2012 through the beginning of February 2013. This chapter focuses on the play's debut at Court Theatre in Chicago, where I attended one of the performances.

3. For a review of scholarship, see Patrice Rankine, *Ulysses in Black*, as well as the work of the writers in this volume.

4. On everyday life or "social drama" as theater and performance, see Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*.

5. See Chris Jones's January 22, 2012, review in the *Chicago Tribune*, "Invisible Man, Visibly in Pain," and Hedy Weiss's *Sun-Times* review of the same date, "Hypnotic 'Invisible Man.'"

6. For Ellison's subtle critique during Wright's lifetime, see "Richard Wright's Blues," in 1953, published in *Shadow and Act*, and upon Wright's death, "Remembering Richard Wright," published in 1986, in *Going to the Territory*. In a 1968 interview, Ellison could assert that "something is missing" in Wright's novel (CRE). The contrast extends back to the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952. For more, see Gates, *Figures in Black*, and Rampersad, *Biography*.

7. See, most recently, Rampersad, *Biography*.

8. Ellison found such "incongruous juxtapositions" to be the norm in American society. See the essay "Going to the Territory" in the collection of the same name (120–44).

9. See Ester Addley's article in the *Guardian* from November 22, 2011.

10. My summary here is derived from Richard Adams's August 9, 2011, article in the *Guardian* and Simon Rogers's August 11, 2011, report in the *Guardian*.

11. Numbers are taken from British Broadcasting Company reports of August 15, 2011, and August 25, 2011.

12. See Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*.

13. For theater as a sacred space, see Mamet, *Three Uses of the Knife*, and Woodruff, *Necessity of Theater*, although these are only two of many to make the claim.

14. Jones, "Invisible Man, Visibly in Pain."

15. Weiss, "Hypnotic 'Invisible Man.'"

16. *Washington Post*, August 9, 2012, available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/therootsdcpost/invisible-man-play-on-its-way-to-dc/2012/08/09/e54b29fa-db50-11e1-bd1f-8f2b57de6d94_blog.html (accessed 23 December 2014).

17. At <http://artsfuse.org/75350/fuse-theater-review-seeing-the-invisible-man/> (accessed 23 December 2014).

18. Weiss, "Hypnotic 'Invisible Man.'"

19. At <http://artsfuse.org/75350/fuse-theater-review-seeing-the-invisible-man> (accessed 23 December 2014).

20. A copy of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from Ellison's library are in the Library of Congress's Ellison Reading Room. One salivates at the marginalia that might be contained in them.

21. Locke's report, "Harlem: Dark Weather-Vane," is available online at <http://newdeal.feri.org/survey/36457.htm>.

22. Slovo apparently had some fifty-four hours of interviews on the riot, from various perspectives: police officers, rioters, bystanders, neighbors, and so on. See Dominic Cavendish's article "The Riots: Duo Who Turned a Crisis into a Drama" for the *Telegraph* on August 11, 2011.

23. It is worth noting that certain roles that might be deemed as key to the novel are not even listed along with the actors, who each play various roles. Tod Clifton, for example, is not listed as a role. Next to Boykin's role are listed "Tatlock, Sylvester, Ensemble." The choice of what constitutes a key role (and the process toward that choice) is of interest here.

24. Jones, "Invisible Man, Visibly in Pain."

25. See the August 9, 2011, video on the *Guardian* website, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/video/2011/aug/09/david-cameron-riots-criminality-video> (accessed 23 December 2014).

26. Living with race—that is, the daily enactment of race—which is embodied, takes its toll on the latent body. See, for example, studies on health discrepancies between blacks and whites in America, some of which seem to be epiphenomena—that is, experiential rather than genetic differences—in the *Washington Post*, "Race Gap Persists in Health Care, Three Studies Say," August 18, 2005 (Stein).