Destabilizing Boundaries:
Political Possibilities in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

Kei OKAJIMA

0. Introduction

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, which was published in 1952, is a memoir in which the nameless protagonist looks back at his life from a “hole” in New York. The protagonist narrates how he becomes aware of his “invisibility” through his experiences in the South and adventures in New York; at the same time, he exposes the falseness, perfidy, and contradictions in America. The protagonist’s memoir, which the protagonist himself writes in the hole, is inserted between the prologue and epilogue, which depict the present conditions of the protagonist’s invisibility.

The novel, which received the 1953 National Book Award (this was the first time that the award was presented to an African American novelist) for better or for worse, has been considered an inner-directed, “apolitical” novel. In other words, it has been thought that the novel is mainly concerned with the private issues of personal identity rather than public issues such as racial oppression and injustice in society. For example, critics R.W.B. Lewis and Richard Chase, who have rediscovered the so-called American Renaissance novelists and advocate the romance tradition, maintain that the theme of the novel is the search for identity by an “innocent” protagonist (Lewis 190).

Nevertheless, Ellison himself presents totally different views on his work. In his introduction to *Invisible Man*, he offers the following statement: “While fiction is but a form of symbolic action, a mere game of ‘as if,’ therein lies its true function and its potential for effecting change” (xxxviii). That is, despite the opinions of critics on the novel, Ellison believes that works of art, including novels, have the potential to change society.

Unfortunately for Ellison, people did not understand his ideas on art until the 1990s, when the discussion about popular culture as a subtle expression of politics began in the realm of cultural studies. For instance, in an article published in 1990, the African American cultural critic George Lipsitz regards Ellison as a pioneer in the field of cultural studies. As claimed by Lipsitz, Ellison conceived of art as cultural practices that critique dominant values. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, when the radicalized Black Power movement occurred, Ellison and the novel were criticized severely for being “apolitical.” For example, Irving Howe, the then leftist critic, denounces the novel for its lack of the “some impulsion
to protest" against social conditions of black Americans (168). Further, John Oliver Killens, an African
American novelist, lambastes the novel:

But how does Ellison present the Negro people? . . . The main character of the book is a young
Uncle Tom who is obsessed with getting to the “top” by pleasing the Big White folks. . . . It is a
vicious distortion of Negro life. (qtd. in Neal, 62–63)

Howe and Killens unanimously assert that African American novelists should depict the miserable social
reality of black Americans and protest the injustice and unequal treatment that is meted out to them.

However, according to Ellison, there are limitations to such a realistic approach. It is of great import
to note that the realistic approach can create and strengthen stereotypical images of black Americans
as penurious, angry, and victimized members of American society. Ellison does not portray the simple
dichotomy between white and black people, the rich and the poor, and the ruling and the ruled. Rather,
he depicts a more nuanced view of America. Ellison destabilizes the social boundaries that separate
America on several levels in order to bring about a “change” in America. By destabilizing artificial
boundaries, Ellison tries to present new possibilities for America as well as African Americans.

In this essay, the focus is mainly on the prologue of the novel, which depicts the protagonist after he
realizes his invisibility. The first section examines the significance of the title of the novel Invisible Man.
Ellison delineates the new image of an African American through his portrayal of the protagonist. The
second section discusses how Ellison deals with social boundaries in the novel. Finally, the third section
focuses on how Invisible Man led to social change. Through these analyses, this essay aims to disclose
political aspects in the novel.

1. Who is “Invisible Man”? : Paradigm Shift of the African American Image

The title of the novel, Invisible Man, suggests new images of African Americans. Here the use of the
term “new images” implies that Ellison, unlike the realistic protest novelists, does not limit the portrayal
of his protagonist to a mere victim of injustice and racism in America, the stereotypical image of African
American people that is often described in protest novels.

The novel begins with a puzzling confession by the nameless protagonist: “I am an invisible man”
(3). Despite the use of the word “invisible,” which implies absence, the protagonist seems to assert his
presence in any case. Henry Louis Gates Jr., who compares the protagonist in Invisible Man with Bigger
Thomas in Richard Wright’s Native Son, argues the same point:

Bigger’s voicelessness and powerlessness to act . . . signifies an absence, despite the metaphor of
presence found in the novel's title; the reverse obtains in *Invisible Man*, where the absence implied by invisibility is undermined by the presence of the narrator as the author of his own text. (106)

By letting his protagonist narrate his own story, Ellison emphasizes the presence of the protagonist rather than the absence implied by the title, *Invisible Man*.

On the surface, the confession "I am an invisible man" suggests the protagonist's absence. However, the protagonist's confession can be read as an arcane claim of his presence in society. Scholars such as Albert Murray and Danielle Allen maintain that the term “invisible man” is an Ellisionian pun: “*Invisible Man* equals IM equals I'M equals I AM" (Allen 53).

The protagonist has ambivalent feelings about his invisibility, which apparently fills him with indignation. According to the protagonist, he is invisible because “people refuse to see” him (3). Moreover, those who refuse to see him have something wrong with the “construction of their inner eyes” (3). A straightforward interpretation of the protagonist's narration would imply that he impeaches those of poor vision for their failure to see him. However, on the other hand, the protagonist scoffs at these blind people by calling them “sleepwalkers” (5). The protagonist's ambivalent feelings are evident in a scene in which he bumps into a white man and fights him. In the bargain, the protagonist almost ends up killing the man:

I kicked him repeatedly, in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood . . . it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually; that he, as far as he knew, was in the midst of a walking nightmare! . . . It unnerved me. I was both disgusted and ashamed. I was like a drunken man myself, wavering about on my weakened legs. Then I was amused. Something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him within inch of his life. I began to laugh at this crazy discovery. . . . I ran away into the dark, laughing so hard I feared I might rupture myself. The next day I saw his picture in the *Daily News*, beneath a caption stating that he had been "mugged." Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man! (4–5, emphasis mine, italics his)

What is significant in the scene is that at the end of the event, the sense of amusement prevails over the anger. As claimed by Allen, Ellison assumes that anger develops into laughter: “Ellison . . . interpreted the physiology of laughter as indicating an evolution from the gesture of the threat—open mouth, bared teeth, guttural sounds—to the gesture asking for cooperation and, even, love” (50–51). Taking Ellison's concept of laughter and anger into consideration, it is inferred that the protagonist is a detached figure who has overcome his anger and regards his invisibility with ironic laughter.
The protagonist's insistence on his invisibility euphemistically signifies the blindness of the people he comes to contact with. Indeed, blindness is a prominent motif in the novel. For instance, Homer Barbee, an African American reverend who praises the founder of the black college in which the protagonist is enrolled, is physically blind. In addition, Brother Jack, who exploits the protagonist in the Brotherhood, a leftist organization, has a glass eye. Above all, the protagonist himself has been blind to the realities around him, until he recognizes his invisibility. According to the protagonist, these characters live in darkness or nightmares.

In contrast to the blind people living in nightmares, the protagonist, who now recognizes his invisibility, lives in a hole full of light. He equips his hole with 1369 light bulbs and says that his hole is the brightest spot in all of New York. As stated by the protagonist, light plays a vital role for the invisible man:

And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. . . . Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility. (6-7, emphasis mine, italics his)

Light gives the protagonist his "form" and thus brings about self-knowledge. Shelly Eversley insists that "metaphorically light represents knowledge"; hence, the protagonist living in a hole replete with light can be said to have self-knowledge. In other words, he knows who he is.

This section examined the new image of an African American figure that Ellison tries to depict through his protagonist. Ellison blurs the boundaries between presence and absence, anger and laughter, and darkness and light. By blurring these boundaries, he metaphorically destabilizes the simple dichotomy that often classifies African Americans as the subjugated.

2. "Invisible Man" and the Boundaries

This section analyzes how the protagonist subverts the social boundaries. After recognizing his invisibility, the protagonist destabilizes several types of boundaries in society. In the epilogue, he urges us to transcend the artificial boundaries: "Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos" (576). In terms of space, the protagonist goes beyond a boundary between Harlem and the white district. He lives in a section of the basement of a building that is rented strictly to whites; the building itself is located not in Harlem but "in a border area" (5). Moreover, his living in the hole, the three-dimensional underground space, can be interpreted as a deviation from two-dimensional surface
boundaries. Since the protagonist lives in a subterranean space, he ignores the social boundaries that are drawn superficially on the ground.

The image of going underground is a leitmotif of the novel. One such scene occurs in the prologue, where the protagonist enters and descends into a jazz song by Louis Armstrong, “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue”:

That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depth. And beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Welt-Schmerz as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory. . . . (9, italics his)

The protagonist encounters the history of America in the visionary world that transcends time and space. By cutting across the boundaries of time and space, the protagonist sees symbolical figures of American miscegenation: an old slave woman who has had several sons with her white master and “a beautiful girl the color of ivory,” who appears to be of mixed race. Although “the color of ivory” may imply a white person, it seems to have a more nuanced meaning here. In the novel, Ellison often uses the emblematic description “pure white” rather than “the color of ivory” to refer to white characters. Moreover, the color ivory cannot be “pure white” as it contains a slight hint of yellow. In addition, the origin of the word “ivory” can be traced to Africa. Given these factors, it becomes evident that Ellison uses the description “the color of ivory” to signify the girl’s mixed race origins.

Further, jazz is a “hybrid” form of music that developed in nineteen-century New Orleans and is a mixture of influences from French, Spanish, African, and Creole cultures. Besides, as claimed by Steven C. Tracy, jazz performers have realized “interracial collaboration” in the early stages (98). Thus, jazz functions as an important metaphor for hybrid America.

Moreover, Louis Armstrong also plays an emblematic role here. Armstrong is often regarded as a trickster. Tracy argues that Armstrong, with a huge grin on his face, challenged “social and musical boundaries” (99). Armstrong transformed innocuous light-weight songs through “his highly individual style, vocal timbre, and personality” (Tracy 99). The song “What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue” is one of such songs. As stated by Tracy, Armstrong sings roughly one-third of the original song that was written by Andy Razaf in 1929. By eliminating most of the stanza, Armstrong places a special emphasis on the interracial tragedy of the lyrics: “My only sin is in my skin” and “I’m white inside, it don’t help my case” (qtd. in Tracy, 101). Armstrong, with his “military instrument” challenges racial boundaries that marginalize black people (Ellison 8). The protagonist, in a sense, echoes Armstrong’s challenge to
subvert the boundaries when he “feel [s] its vibration” (8, italics his), not only with his ear but with his whole body.

Ellison maintains that the fundamental character of America lies under artificial boundaries. It is true that in reality, social boundaries separating white and black Americans are drawn by such legal systems as the racist Jim Crow. However, Ellison asserts that the underlying nature of America is its hybridism, which is hidden under boundaries. Through the textual analysis of the narrative of the protagonist who transcends the artificial boundaries, it is deduced that Ellison denounces the artificial boundaries drawn in society.

Indeed, Ellison also refers to social boundaries in his real life. He makes an interesting remark about these boundaries in his letter to Albert Murray: “Jack Johnson is really my mentor, because he knew if you operated with skill and style you could rise above all that-being-a-credit-to-your-race-crap...” (Trading 132, italics his). Jack Johnson, whom Ellison regards as his mentor, was an African American boxer who won a heavyweight championship against Jim Jeffries, a former white champion, in 1910. After winning the championship, Johnson married Lucille Cameron, an 18-year old white girl. Gail Bederman puts it, “by winning the heavyweight championship and by flaunting his success with white women, Johnson crossed the line and the white public demanded punishment” (4). Thus, Johnson transcended all the social taboos in the white supremacist society. Johnson tells Ellison that one’s value does not rest on what one is but what one does.

Johnson’s teaching to Ellison is depicted in a scene in which the protagonist introduces the gadgets that he is going to contrive. Using the electricity he draws illegally, the protagonist plans to invent such gadgets as “a gadget to place my coffee pot on the fire while I lie in bed” and “a gadget to warm my bed” (7). He calls himself a “thinker-tinker” and describes himself as follows: “Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison, and Franklin” (7). Undoubtedly, what makes the protagonist kin to these white inventors are not their racial connections but their inventions. The protagonist, like Jack Johnson, demonstrates his belief that he should not be restricted by social taboos and boundaries and instead be judged by what he does, rather than by what he is.

In this section, the role of the protagonist who destabilizes the existing social boundaries has been analyzed. Through the examination of the protagonist, we find Ellison’s skepticism toward artificial boundaries that are based on one’s race. Moreover, Ellison detects the hybrid character of America that is hidden under these boundaries. In the next section, the question of how this novel led to change will be discussed.
3. Social Impact of *Invisible Man*

Ellison believed that his boundary-challenging novel had the potential to bring about a change in America. As cited in the introduction of this essay, Ellison notes that fiction as a "mere game of ‘as if’" has its potential for causing change. It can be argued that it is crucial for Ellison to write even if the novel is a "mere game of ‘as if.’" In an interview with BBC, Ellison says that fiction displays "social power" that may lead to change:

And when successful he [the good novelist] provides the reader with a fresh vision of reality. For then through the symbolic action of his characters and plot he enables the reader to share forms of experience not immediately his own. And thus the reader is able to recognize meaning and value of the presented experience. . . . This may, or may not, lead to social change. . . . But it is, nevertheless, a form of social action, and an important task. Yes, and in its own right, a form of social power. (qtd. in Nash, 106)

In this interview, Ellison suggests that readers gain new perspectives on reality by sharing experiences with the characters in a novel. That is, Ellison's objective is to affect readers' perception of reality. In so doing, he aims to bring about a change in America. It seems that Ellison tries to encourage "change" in America by affecting readers' perception of their society.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* played a key role in ushering in the civil rights movement. After the publication of *Invisible Man*, the borderless world that Ellison describes in his novel started to become a reality. Ellison's belief that "Telling is not only a matter of retelling but also of foretelling" (xviii) indicates that he was certainly a man of vision. In 1954, two years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, a landmark decision was made by the United States Supreme Court in the case of Brown v. Board of Education. The decision stated that separate educational facilities were unequal and a violation of the right to equal educational opportunities for black children. Scholars such as Gregg Crane and Alfred L. Brophy consider *Invisible Man* as the germ of this decision (Brophy 119). The Brown decision, in a sense, functioned as a trigger for the further development of the civil rights movement. Although Ellison did not participate in the social activities himself, it would be no exaggeration to state that Ellison paved a path that led to the civil rights movement.

4. Conclusion

This essay has discussed the prologue of *Invisible Man*. In particular, the focal point of this essay has been Ellison's challenge to subvert the stereotypical images of African Americans and artificial boundar-
ies of society. In the novel, Ellison describes an African American character who is not a mere victim of society. The protagonist is a more nuanced figure who is far from the stereotypical image of African Americans often depicted in protest novels. Moreover, through the portrayal of his protagonist and the metaphorical use of jazz, Ellison illustrates his skepticism toward artificial social boundaries. At the same time, his identification of the hybrid character of America is symbolically presented.

Ellison believes in the potential of his art to influence American society. He encourages his readers to have different views on America. Thus, Ellison tries to bring about a change in America. *Invisible Man* played a significant role in the inception of the civil rights movement, which began with the Brown decision. By "effecting change," Ellison opens up new possibilities for black Americans and America.

Works Cited


