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### Re-visioning Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man for a Class of Urban Immigrant Youth

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**CAMILLE GOODISON**

**Re-visioning Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* for a Class of Urban Immigrant Youth**

In this essay, I will explore Ralph Ellison's 1952 classic novel, *Invisible Man*, as a text that has contemporary and relatable themes for a modern-day classroom of mostly urban youth. This essay is also a personal journey into how Ellison's inventive approaches to form helped create a work that lends itself to contemporary reimagining. It asks the question, can Ellison's interest in creating a living Afro-American literary tradition rooted in the lore of the 'peasant' or common folk have contemporary applications? How does Ellison's belief that everyday folk expression has value hold up for today's readers? I try to answer these questions through a combination of personal narrative, textual analysis, and, with the permission of my students, through samples of the work they created in class, in order to demonstrate the still relevant power of Ellison's belief in first-person storytelling.

**Ellison and Language**

Ellison's novel teaches that there is power in being able to name things. *Invisible Man*'s nameless narrator regrets that he allows others to name him—for example, the Brotherhood (a political organization he joins), and almost everyone else. Given the particular history, conditions, and circumstances of African Diaspora people, Standard English alone may be insufficient to express fully what it means to live with a legacy that includes conquest, enslavement and institutionalized racism. The verbal and tonal dexterities of the Afro-Atlantic languages include an impressively nuanced range of

expression not otherwise available in Standard English. I would say that in addition to Standard English, the many vernaculars that have come out of this history of enslavement, increase the possibility for more precise descriptions of what it feels like to live in these two worlds, black and white. *Invisible Man* shows how these myriad black expressions, which sprang organically from a shared history of oppression, have served the black community throughout time and have kept the community functional in oftentimes less-than-ideal situations.

In the novel there are explicit and entertaining versions of traditional black genres, including sermons, tall tales, jokes, legends, folktales, eulogies, as well as jive talk (raw, ugly truth clothed in humor), testifying, testimonial, prophesy, oratory, preacherly uplift, blues songs, courting songs, praise songs, ring shout, proverbs, absurdist raps, satirical toasts, self-parodying boasts, hipster talk, man-on-the-street wisdom, prayers and trials. The range and variety are impressive and also entirely the point. American Literary scholar, Henry Louis Gates, wrote extensively on this topic in his book *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. In his book, Gates notes Ralph Ellison's specific uses of vernacular in the novel.

At the start of the novel, *Invisible Man*, as an undergraduate down South, takes college board member, Mr. Norton to the Golden Day, a bar and brothel. One of its patrons, a veteran of the First World War explains to Mr. Norton that he lost some fundamentals while studying in France. Mr. Norton asks, what fundamentals, and the vet replies, "Things about life. Such things as most peasants and folk people almost always know through experience, though seldom through conscious thought" (91). The veteran continues, prophetically, as if he can see the unpleasant adventures in store for the young

Invisible Man: “He fails to understand the simple facts of life... He registers with his senses but short-circuits his brain... Already he’s learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He’s invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams! The mechanical man!” (94). It has sometimes been noted how difficult it can be for marginalized individuals within mainstream society to express their full range of emotions, particularly emotions perceived as negative, like sadness and hurt. This exchange with Norton and the vet foreshadows Invisible Man’s journey. Invisible Man will have to reclaim his humanity, his right to be. How he will do that is through conversation, storytelling, and listening. He will reacquaint himself with the language of his ancestors, a language that allows for full expression of all the emotions he feels. Consider Invisible Man’s ironic observation, near the end of the novel, that his grandfather never had any doubts about his humanity, that was left to his free offspring. The power of freely expressed, authentic emotion should not be ignored.

The novel’s prologue includes Invisible Man’s vision of himself descending, Dante-like, into a cave where he hears a woman singing a deeply moving spiritual full of sorrow. He descends lower and hears an elaborate call-and-response sermon on the “Blackness of Blackness.” The sermon is a mixture of the tragic and the comic, the profound and the absurd. This episode is book-ended by Invisible Man hearing Louis Armstrong singing, “What did I do to be so black and blue?” The range of black speech and sound depicted here, at the start of the novel, is no accident and understanding that range is key to understanding the true nature of the Invisible Man’s journey. His journey to wholeness will depend in part on reclaiming the humanity inherent within that rich black oral tradition.

## Ellison's Use of Folklore

The Invisible Man's walking through the streets of Harlem as a greenhorn has a personal resonance. It is a visually disorienting setup, although not in a bad way. I call it a gentler shade of strange. Harlem's streets are a contrast to the idyllic, familiar, slow-moving rural college campus Invisible Man has just left. In Harlem he meets Peter Wheatstraw, described by Ellison as "the Devil's only son-in-law." Wheatstraw, appearing as a street bum, pushes a cart piled high with discarded blueprints through the streets of Harlem. On seeing Invisible Man, Wheatstraw decides to engage him:

"Oh gooddog, daddy-o," he said..."who got the damn dog? Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before! Hell, ain't nobody out here this morning but us colored—Why you trying to deny me?... Is you got him, or ain't you?"

"A *dog*?"

"Yeah, *the* dog."

"[N]ot this morning," I said "Wait a minute, daddy. Now don't go get mad. Damn, man! I thought sho *you* had him... Well maybe it's the other way around," he said.

"Maybe he got holt to you."

"Maybe," I said.

"If he is, you lucky it's just a dog—'cause, man, I tell you I believe it's a bear that's got holt to me"

"A bear?"

"Hell, yes! *The* bear. Caint you see these patches where he's been clawing at my behind?... Man, this Harlem ain't nothing but a bear's den. ...[I]f times don't get better soon I'm going to grab that bear and turn him everyway but loose!"

"Don't let him get you down," I said.

"No, daddy-o, I'm going to start with one my own size!" (173-4)

Wheatstraw's name suggests famous St. Louis bluesman, William 'Peetie Wheatstraw' Bunch, as well as the devil in African American folklore. African American musicians and artists from Robert Johnson to Jimmy Hendrix have made creative use of the friendly devil at the crossroads motif. Friendly because there is no explicitly evil intent on the part of these mischievous characters. The crossroads, in the traditional lore, sometimes represent a place the hero goes to make some important life decision. This friendly devil can be a figure with supernatural powers, or a person who is able to facilitate communication between the spiritual or ancestral worlds and that of the living. In a coming of age novel such as this, the devil-at-the-crossroads idea could indicate the increasing stakes for the young Invisible Man as he leaves home for the wider world. Wheatstraw, and subsequent similar characters, helped me see Ellison's novel as essentially an elaborate folktale.

Wheatstraw could easily have been a character in one of the Anansi stories I heard as a child in Jamaica. Anansi, known to take the form of a spider, is a popular figure in childhood folktales from the Caribbean. Like Wheatstraw, Anansi can be mischievous as he sets out on his adventures, encountering various people, people he may choose to engage with (in the words of Wheatstraw) "shit, grit and mother-wit" (176). Like

Wheatstraw, Anansi's targets sometimes come around to admiring the trickster's pluck and inventiveness.

The above exchange between Wheatstraw and Invisible Man contains many of the same elements one would find in a traditional Anansi folktale. There is the serendipitous meeting which feels almost accidental. There is also the sly exchange between the two men. In this particular exchange, Wheatstraw makes references to a dog and a bear. The dog here could be a reference to a blue mood or downheartedness. And, indeed, Invisible Man is feeling blue. The bear would be the equivalent of The Man or a tormentor. In the Brer Rabbit stories of African American lore, the large, ravenous bear was a frequent antagonist of the smaller, but quicker trickster rabbit, the hero of the stories. The exchange with Wheatstraw reminds Invisible Man of those stories he used to hear as a child, featuring the characters of Jack the Rabbit and Jack the Bear. Invisible Man, through this exchange with Wheatstraw, is reminded of what he's left behind in the South and he feels a wave of homesickness. But it isn't all sadness.

Invisible Man and Wheatstraw develop a rapport that works to the obvious benefit of the socially anxious newcomer. At a particular point Wheatstraw says, "I thought you was trying to deny me at first, but now I be pretty glad to see you..." (176). The use of "be" is appropriate here for Wheatstraw's true meaning. Saying "I am" would not convey what Wheatstraw means to say which is, he was, is, and will always be glad to see the young man. Using the unconjugated form of the verb "to be" allows Wheatstraw to make a strong statement of support and love, a love which is unconditional and timeless.

Ellison peppers his novel with folkloric archetypes like the shapeshifting wise guide. Wheatstraw fits that description, based on how he suddenly appears at the right

place and at the right time and with the right message of good humor and hope for the hero of the story. The character of Lucius Brockway, the contentious systems operator that Invisible Man meets on his first job in New York, appears later in the novel, and he too could easily be another version of Wheatstraw. Brockway and Wheatstraw are impish shapeshifters, eager for a verbal sparring with the less-experienced Invisible Man. They use a combination of humor and well-meaning teasing to provoke some feeling or idea in the awkward youth, a feeling or idea that nudges him from his naïve worldview. He gets a taste of their worldview instead which helps him open his eyes to the reality around him. Sometimes a friendly adversary is precisely what a young mind needs to wake up. The youth is annoyed or bothered by the men at first, but then grows in a begrudging affection and respect once he catches on and is able to begin matching wits with them.

Lucius Brockway, barely five feet tall, lives three levels underground in a fiery furnace. He could be a rabbit, for he is described as having cottony white hair that resembles a rabbit's tail, or he could be a devil, for his name suggests Lucifer. He could be adversary or angel or both. He looks harmless enough, out of the way, but with his knowledge of the complicated network of pipes, he is the only one who truly understands how everything works. He explains to Invisible Man, "I learned it by doing it" (215). Lucius' boss is the "Old Man" who, according to Lucius, knows that "we the machines inside the machine" (217). Whatever the world thinks of these invisible men, those who *really* know how things work, like the Old Man, know the value of these invisible men's lived experience.

Reading *Invisible Man*, these characters and themes resonated with those of my youth. Growing up on the island of Jamaica, my sisters and I would tune into the popular

children's program *Ring Ding*, starring Jamaican folklorist, Louise Bennett. We would very attentively take in the games, songs, and various performances. Our rich world of storytelling often featured characters not unlike Ellison's Pete Wheatstraw and Lucius Brockway, albeit with different names and different accents. Invisible Man's arrival to Harlem reflected my own sudden arrival in Brooklyn. We both experienced a much faster pace where we met people who could be either allies or adversaries, and where our old ways were tested. It was while reading this novel in college, for the first time, that I thought fondly of my youth in Jamaica and of the stories I was told as a child. I saw the value of embracing the wisdom and joy within them, as well as the love that was passed on to me from the adults who shared those stories with me. As a recent arrival to the United States, I worked at assimilating to my new world. *Invisible Man* helped me to rethink whether assimilation need involve discarding the wise worldview within those inherited folktales.

The newly-arrived-to-Harlem version of Invisible Man appears to be ashamed of his Southern roots. In chapter nine, immediately upon his arrival to New York from the South, he stops for breakfast at a drugstore in Harlem. He rejects the special he is offered of a full, hearty traditional Southern breakfast including pork chops, grits, eggs and biscuits. Despite his true yearning for the special, he requests toast and orange juice instead. He displays some self-consciousness at being offered the traditional Southern breakfast. He is eager to show himself as an experienced New Yorker, above and removed from his less sophisticated Southern roots. He maintains this tension between who he is, a Southern fellow at heart, and the person he is trying to be, a city slicker. We mostly see this in his testy exchanges with those in the city who mistake him for the

simple country lad he really is. It is not until much later, after a series of disenchanting experiences, that Invisible Man seems to soften towards his true beginnings. On one occasion, he walks through the streets of Harlem listing what he sees—“barber shops, beauty parlors, confectioneries, luncheonettes, fish houses, hog maw joints” (262). There is a feeling of nostalgia and new found appreciation. Such lists, too, are very much in keeping with the oral tradition.

On several later occasions, while in Harlem, Invisible Man surrenders to a kind of emotional ecstasy. He begins to feel the history and struggles of his people. For example, he gives a speech supporting an elderly couple being evicted from their apartment. He is moved by the contents of their possessions. The list of items takes up a full page and includes knocking bones, straightening comb, curling iron, lucky stone, whisky bottle filled with rock candy and camphor, a small Ethiopian flag, a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln, and so on (271). There is a romantic element in all this cataloguing, relying as it does on evoking a particular feeling or emotion, a technique, again, common to oral storytelling. The long list of items serves as shorthand, too, for the wide universe—a universe including deep pain and suffering— that can only be named through the particulars.

### **Reading the Novel: Feeling and Form**

In deciding to teach Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, I thought of what the novel meant to me, when I was that young college student and life felt overwhelming at times. I respected the fact that my students, who are mostly immigrant and minority, prefer direct and practical approaches to their education that connect with their personal and

professional lives. Although there are many paths one could take in reading the novel, I chose to focus on what originally captured me—the personal connection.

*Invisible Man* encapsulates a near-encyclopedic history of a people from slavery to modern times. The novel covers centuries of Western history and culture and does so with feeling. Ellison decided it was not enough to recite the usual historical events or even to describe them. He wanted to make the reader *feel* everything. How and why he did that was of the greatest interest to me. I thought my students would benefit from seeing and feeling the emotional rollercoaster that is the novel. At the end, it is a gentle book containing a still-fresh message about being yourself.

Several times Ellison places *Invisible Man* in environments, common or fantastical (for example, the factory hospital scene), where events are presented with a distancing effect that makes them seem slightly surreal. His walking through Harlem, cited above, is an example:

I walked slowly on, blinking my eyes in the chill air, my mind a blur... The whole of Harlem seemed to fall apart in the swirl of snow. I imagined I was lost and for a moment there was an eerie quiet. I imagined I heard the fall of snow upon snow... what did it mean? I walked, my eyes focused into the endless succession of barber shops, beauty parlors, confectioneries, luncheonettes, fish houses, and hog maw joints.... (262)

These are common sites one might see while walking the streets of Harlem, and yet Ellison presents this everyday scene in a near-fantastical or dreamy way. He uses language to evoke specific emotions in the reader. There are many scenes throughout the novel that evoke a feeling of being knocked off one's feet, a kind of disorientation or

destabilization. By using the technique of defamiliarization, or making-strange, Ellison allows the reader to see with new eyes. We can better enter the world of the homesick, disenchanted young man, where everything is new and strange, and experience Harlem in real time just as he is feeling it.

Other scenes within the novel where feelings of strangeness or alienation dominate often reference sight, vision, visibility, blindness, and eyes. The earlier reference to blinking or squinting eyes while walking about the streets of Harlem could be one such scene, and the scene where Brotherhood leader, Brother Jack's glass eye falls into a glass of water could be another. Jack argues with the Invisible Man over whether the Brotherhood was using Harlem for their own selfish political ends: " 'So it makes you uncomfortable...' he said, sweeping up the glass and causing the eye to turn over in the water so that now it seemed to peer down at me..." (474-5). Ellison shows how the refusal of others to see the Invisible Man as an individual, if at all, causes feelings of separation, if not outright frustration and anger.

An earlier scene from chapter eleven describes the Invisible Man waking up in the hospital after suffering a nasty accident on his first job at the paint factory. This entire episode is one of the strangest in the novel and presents a picture of profound alienation. Our young protagonist is examined by a man described as having a medical device around his head that appears almost like a third eye in the center of his forehead. During the Invisible Man's medical examination, he finds himself surrounded by people described as having piercing eyes. Faces hover over him and he feels like fish at an aquarium. As he is being peered at by all those eyes, he remembers scenes from his childhood such as his grandmother sitting him on her knees to sing him folksongs. One of

the examiners asks, what is his name. What is his mother's name? And, eventually, "Boy, who was Brer Rabbit?" (242). Feeling profoundly estranged from his environment, the Invisible Man is forced to revisit childhood memories and experiences a kind of rebirth. These many eye scenes serve as messages about identity and the importance of knowing the self. Finding your true place in the world through self-examination, self-awareness and insight.

Another section where Ellison depicts the isolating creepiness of alienation occurs in later parts of the book when all of Invisible Man's good intentions literally go up in smoke. There is a riot in Harlem after popular, idealistic youth leader Brother Tod Clifton is killed by a policeman. The leftwing Brotherhood and their cultural nationalist rivals each exploit the situation for their own advantage. Given his position as someone who wants to respect all sides, the Invisible Man finds himself in a precarious spot and is finally driven underground. He puts on a pair of dark glasses that he buys as a disguise from Ras the Exhorter, the black nationalist figure who views Invisible Man suspiciously. Suddenly, Invisible Man enters a spooky underworld, and Ellison writes, "My eyes adjusted quickly; the world took on a dark green intensity ...A couple of men approached, eating up the walk with long jaunty strides that caused their heavy silk sports shirts to flounce..." (484). The men mistake Invisible Man for Harlem player Rhinehart, and a new set of strange adventures begin. Here is a seemingly ordinary description of mistaken identity, but the emotional effect is greater due to the combination of dark glasses, the sudden appearance of the hipsters with their distinct lingo, and the sinister turns in the plot. The carnivalesque feel intensifies once Invisible Man settles further into his life behind the dark glasses. The sinister and amusing games of pretend give way to a

true masquerade of growing fires and garishly outfitted rioters in stolen gear. “A holy holiday for Clifton,” a rioter says in explaining the chaotic scenes (544). It is strange on top of strange. Separately and together, the individual strange scenes evoke the discomfort, and ironically, freedom born in chaos, that Invisible Man is feeling.

Ellison also employs repeating images for mood and emphasis. During the riot, for example, all of Harlem now seems to be on fire. We see a red doorway where someone who calls Invisible Man by his Brotherhood name identifies him. This red doorway, amid the fire and flames of the riot, resembles an earlier scene with Lucius Brockway when Invisible Man was trapped several feet underground in the furnace room with his hostile, impish co-worker who struggles with him. Both scenes evoke the color red, fire, heat, and carnival-like chaos. Another version of meeting the devil at the crossroads. Similarly, the tall tales of riot leader, Dupree, echo the novel’s earlier scenes with the sharecropper Trueblood. Trueblood has his own sordid tall tale, which like Dupree’s goes on for pages. Like Dupree, Trueblood is considered an embarrassment to more respectable members of the black community. One of the results of Trueblood’s telling his tall tale to the white college trustee was Invisible Man’s forced exile to Harlem. Trueblood and Dupree are men on the margins of black existence, telling their own tragi-comic stories, stories that can go on for a long while. Some of what they share is probably dubious, but within the questionable subjectivity are definite truths about what it is like to live on the margins of society.

There are other book-end style repeating images, that is images we see at the start of the novel that reappear at the end. For example, a passing mention of blue gray smoke during the famous Battle Royale fight scene in chapter one, and later blue gray haze

during the Harlem riot. The colors are an obvious reference to the Civil War, and perhaps a commentary on the sad, unfulfilled promises of that war. Ellison's intent seems to be to present an entire span of American history and to do so through evoking particular feelings and emotions, by way of carefully crafted images and details. Ellison reminds us that history is made not just by people, but of the people, and once again it is the particulars that matter.

### **Classroom Approaches**

As a creative writer, I felt free to approach the teaching of the work in terms of form. To ensure a thorough reading of the novel, I did my best to include necessary background information. We watched the PBS documentary, *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*, on the life and work of Ellison, as well as, *Seeing Red* a documentary on the history of the Communist Party USA. My lectures included background information on black music, specifically blues and jazz, the history of the music, the role of improvisation, and the music of the artists specifically referenced in the novel. We also discussed the historical significance of men like Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey and how their ideas influenced the politics of the novel. By providing this important background information, I could then create classroom exercises that got under Ellison's broader historical vision and highlight the more individual and personal notes that Ellison felt were equally, if not more important. That is, the creative exercises would tease out those person-by-person particulars Ellison felt most significant to understanding our real place in history.

To encourage engagement with themes of the text, one of the assignments asked students to interview a family member or other notable person about an event or a story the subject had experienced or heard that they felt like sharing. I wanted students to discover if, through listening, they could discern ‘the story’ of their subject or if they could put the subject’s story in appropriate social and historical contexts. My hope was that these interviews might yield a meaningful experience for students, even if they did not manage to capture a particularly momentous narrative. The students were encouraged to present their findings to the class using film or other media. This assignment encouraged students to use their skills from their technology classes. They enjoyed showing off their subjects and giving their classmates other ways of knowing them through the words and images of family, friends, and other loved ones. Because we had covered a great deal of material on history and culture, particularly music, other creative work was accepted as long as it showed an engagement with class discussions of the text. One student wrote and recorded a blues song about a girl he loved. His song stuck to the iambic rules of the blues, although the student struggled with the rhymes.

To tease out some of the themes in the novel, we read a variety of short fiction that connected with the novel in form and content. For example, short stories by surrealist writer, Aimee Bender, helped students understand the use of folktales in literary work, as well as show how *Invisible Man* talks about intuition, instinct, and deep awareness of the heart-mind versus pure intellect. At this point in the class, I asked the students to create a fairy or folktale of their own, keeping in mind certain established fairytale motifs of the quest story and hero’s journey. I suggested they offer no explanation for the journey, the quest, the aid, or the hero. I also suggested avoiding any temptation to philosophize,

explain, summarize, or find meaning. Trust the reader, I instructed them. Just offer straight action and dialogue. Using Ellison as an example, I encouraged the students to choose their details carefully.

The students also read the work of Native American writer, Sherman Alexie. I used Alexie's work to make textural comparisons, illustrating how their stories are informed by oral literature, folklore and mythology. Alexie and Ellison's stories often have a hero on a quest, or reference a trickster figure caught between two worlds, or simply use language that plays with the features of both oral and written forms of storytelling. Alexie's stories, are often a mix of history, myth, fiction, and journalism. His stories sound like hand-me-down tales filled with fanciful happenings, but on closer inspection reveal actual, lesser-known history. As with some of the tall tales within *Invisible Man*, Ellison offers historical fact, but told as they are from the loser's vantage point they can sound improbable. We discussed how they could write a fictional mythology based on true history.

We also read "The Nose" and "The Overcoat" by nineteenth-century Russian writer, Nikolai Gogol, as well as, "The Metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka. Gogol, like Ellison, was inspired by the stories and culture of the so-called peasant and viewed their folktales as among the finest literature. In their stories, Gogol and Kafka describe well what it looks and feels like to be on the margins of society, suffering indignities from an absurd ruling class. These and other reasons make these authors fitting companions for study alongside Ellison. These writers also made it possible to further discuss the distancing effect or 'making strange' technique that Ellison uses. With these works of fiction, I hoped to bring my students to a greater understanding of this aspect of the

novel. Once they had that understanding, I assigned a creative piece that encouraged students to play with an unreliable narrator or some other feature that destabilizes the reader. This assignment could be an opportunity to push students to travel to the furthest limits of their imagination. I told them to be as wild as they want to be. Whereas other assignments may require a strict form or have a set of rules to consider, here I tried to keep it loose. I took a random image or word from the text and asked students to write around that image in whatever way they wanted. For example, I selected an odd image from “The Nose,” a nose in a rag in a corner, and told students to simply write without thinking about it too much. Once students understand that satire can use silliness or exaggeration to make a greater point about something or someone, I guided them towards crafting their most ridiculous story with their most ridiculous characters. I told the students not to worry if whatever they ended up with did not make sense. It didn’t have to.

### **Student Samples**

The shorter creative writing assignments served the added purpose in helping my students open up to doing more traditional literary analysis. These more informal writing assignments helped create a mood where students could feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings. Students could more easily bring in their own personal experiences in class discussions and see more clearly connections between their own lives and similar or relatable themes from the novel.

Some of the simpler pieces were the most enjoyable. I enjoyed reading their elaborate works of fiction, as well as, the more personal writing about things like family

traditions. For example, Rabina's short essay on the Indian winter festival of Diwali, which commemorates when "one of the Sikh Gurus, along with other innocent kings, were freed from prison." Rabina wrote about how his community prepared for this festival through attending prayers at the "Gurdwara or Sikh Temple." He described the boxes of various Indian sweets devoured by celebrants. He also talked about spending the holiday with his friends, missing India, and missing his family:

My friend played a new album by one of our favorite singers. We started to sing along to a song about a beautiful girl who was adored for her beauty, talents and values. The next song brought tears to all of us men. The lyrics started off about a guy singing to his mother, telling her how much he misses home, how hard it is to live without his mother, father and siblings. We laid down on the sofa or the floor, just still. Not saying a word. I remembered the times I would come home from work and my mother would have a big meal cooked for me; when my father bought me my first motorcycle, and how I would buy gifts for my sisters on Raksha Bandha. No one spoke for a good half an hour. Then I looked at my friends and said, 'Thanks, guys.' One asked, 'For what?' And I said, 'For being my family.'"

Rabina included various details about the religious and cultural aspects of this particular festival to Sikhs and Indians. But, as you can see, there are also more personal elements here that mirror the kinds of emotions the Invisible Man spoke about on his arrival to Harlem. We can see the shared feelings of homesickness and sadness, but also joy at being able to share those feelings with friends or others similarly situated.

Food comes up a few times in the novel as shorthand for honoring traditions, belonging, or cultural authenticity. For a food writing assignment, another student, Amanda, described watching her *abuela* make *Coquito* in an enormous *cauldron*. The essay began by describing the house where her grandmother taught Amanda's mother, who was not Puerto Rican, how to make the drink. Amanda wrote, "She lived in a house that was made out of whole bricks. The kitchen in her house was so massive, open and white; my child's eyes thought it was a castle." In her essay about making this celebratory drink, Amanda began from the point of view of a child. It was not until the end that the reader realized this piece was really about how an important family tradition got passed down from one generation to the next. She explained, "I make myself comfortable and begin the task of making *Coquito* for the first time. I tell my son Aidan that I am making *Coquito*, and he too is fascinated by the *cauldron*, as well as the rows and towers of cans [coconut milk, evaporated milk, cream of coconut, and condensed milk]. As I separate the egg yolk from the white, and cradle the yolk in my hand, I tell him, 'You have to pop and drip.' I repeat this, the same way my mother did to me more than seventeen years ago." Amanda's writing mentioned the ingredients and other details of this family recipe. She talked about the unique preparations for making the drink, rituals that are passed on within her family from parent to child. One of the things I enjoyed about her writing was the self-awareness of what it means to pass on a tradition, the communal aspect of it, but also the individual take. It is not simply about keeping a tradition alive, but it is also about the potentially tender and loving nature of relationship, in this case from grandmother to mother and mother to son. It is also about recognizing

all the ways in which we learn, that is, not just formally in school, another theme of Ellison's novel.

At the end of the semester, students submitted a final portfolio that included their term paper and revised versions of their favorite pieces of creative writing. Our discussions included talk about Ellison taking inspiration from fine artists like Romare Bearden. I encouraged them to view their own work as art, so the need for careful attention to presentation. Jade presented her fairytale, "The Ring," about cynical Anna and her more romantic and out-of-luck suitor, Lorenzo, as a chapbook. She submitted her final portfolio as a neatly bound book. Jade's portfolio included pieces she wrote on her own that were inspired by her reading of the novel and our class discussions. Some of these spoke of genealogy or described scenes from black history and culture. She included a quote that she ascribed to me: "There is no wrong answer in interpreting art. Your interpretation can be personal and open... Your opinion is truly your own."

I enjoyed hearing what my students thought of the novel and witnessing how they interpreted Ellison's themes from sixty years ago. I enjoyed reading of their concerns and their joys, and I'm glad they felt safe enough to invite me to take part in some of their cultural celebrations. In teaching Ellison's novel, I saw myself in my students. In the end, the novel encouraged me to learn more about American history, and how it informs the present, as a way of learning more about our collective and individual identities, and understanding how both are intertwined. It's a story about deep listening and attention. This kind of listening is about, at first, listening to you, and learning how to do that moment by moment. It is only after doing that can you then begin looking outward at the larger community and finding your role within it. Ultimately reading the novel in this

way is not merely about learning to overcome differences or even finding your true identity. For me, it is about what Wheatstraw said at the start: wrangling with the bear, but first starting with one your own size.

#### Works Cited

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. Random House, 1995.

Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford UP, 1988.