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“Like a Mad Geyser in the Moonlight”: The Harlem Riots of 1935 and 1943 and the use of
Surrealism in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Spring 2013

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Introduction

In one scene of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, seven white mannequin bodies hang suspended from a lamppost in Harlem while a riot rages on the streets below. On August 7, 1943, a photograph was published in *The New York Amsterdam News* that showed limbs and parts of white mannequins littering the streets of Harlem outside of a department store in the wake of the August 1, 1943 Harlem riot. Because of mass looting, mannequins were found on the streets of Harlem after the riot, clothes having been ripped off of the bodies of mannequins. This example is one demonstration of how Ralph Ellison took historical events and details and manipulated them in order to create an emotive and persuasive effect in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. While the image of white bodies as detritus littering the streets of Harlem is compelling on its own, Ellison "lynches" the models, hanging them from a lamppost as macabre victims of a violent and chaotic incident.

Ellison's novel offers a surrealist take on black political protest in Depression and World War II era America. The historical reality of the causes, events, and aftermaths of the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943 is notably different from Ellison's portrayal of a riot in the climactic scene of *Invisible Man*. The changes highlight Ellison's opinion regarding the effectiveness of black protest throughout the novel. The moment of *Invisible Man* in which Ellison's opinions about black political protest and his usage of surrealism as an aesthetic choice cohere is the scene of the Harlem riot. Ellison uses surrealism as a communicative tool, a choice predicated on his understanding of the shared mentalities among black Americans that existed in Harlem at the time. Imagery, hyperbole and descriptions of sensation immerse the reader in that emotive environment, a reality that focuses on merging the tangible urban reality with the just as present cognitive reality of Harlemites.

The first part of this essay will discuss the historical representation of the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943, riots that Ellison used as inspiration for his own depiction of a riot in *Invisible Man*. This section will highlight the events that preceded the riots. For example, in 1935, legal means of political protest were limited when picketing was made illegal. In 1943, during World War II, the irony of fighting for equality abroad when inequality still affronted black communities in America was desperately clear to black Americans. However, white politicians focused on war efforts and neglected to address black grievances. Part one will also discuss the riots as they unfolded, including the direct triggers and the damages in terms of property and casualties. Finally, it will discuss the outcomes of the two riots, especially heightened visibility of the discrimination and poverty disproportionately afflicting Harlem in contrast to the rest of New York City. It will examine the policy changes and efforts made to address the underlying causes of the riots, and it will understand the riots as an act of political protest with notable positive outcomes - outcomes that were not derived by many other means of black political protest movements in Harlem.

The second part of this essay will compare the historical facts of the causation, events, and outcomes of the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943 to Ralph Ellison's version of a riot in *Invisible Man*. This section will begin by briefly discussing Ellison's depiction of black political leadership and civil rights movements in his characters of The Founder at Tuskegee University, Ras the Exhorter of Harlem, and the Brotherhood. Because the riot is understood as the final and most exemplary depiction of several depictions of black political protest, it is necessary to understand the way in which Ellison portrays the preceding movements in the novel. Through unpacking these portrayals, it is clear that Ellison sees these movements of black political protest as either flawed, self-defeating or futile. This leads us to the larger theme of the section, which is

Ellison's depiction of a riot in *Invisible Man*. The essay will compare and contrast the historical facts of the Harlem riots with the riot scene in the novel and the following scene, in which the narrator falls down a manhole and continues his life in a subterranean chamber. It will also deconstruct why Ellison chose the riot and the subsequent fall as the final events of the narrator's life prior to writing his book, and argue that the riot is portrayed as the final, and most self-defeating movement of black protest in the novel.

The third and final part of this essay will investigate Ellison's use of a surreal aesthetic form in the novel and understand this form's political import. It will focus upon several surreal scenes of the novel and explain why these scenes may be classified as surreal. It will also concentrate on Ellison's own explanation of the surreal climate of Harlem, with particular attention paid to his essay, "Harlem is Nowhere". It will explain Ellison's understanding of W.E.B. DuBois' idea of double-consciousness, and also discuss the attuned ear Ellison has for music and sound that contributes to his writing style in the novel. Finally, it will explain why surrealism fits impeccably with Ellison's bleak outlook towards black political protest, despite not being historically accurate.

My goal in this essay is to understand the relationship between Ellison's description of a Harlem riot and the historical reality of the Harlem riots. There are particular notable instances in which Ellison twists history to emphasize his own political opinions, and these artistic movements cohere in a combination of history and hyperbolic flourish. This essay examines the reason Ellison chose to draw upon history and simultaneously warp it in a very deliberate way. Some scholars have seen Ellison's surrealist method as hyperbolic and self-indulgent, but there is a motivation behind this style. Ellison uses it to articulate his own opinion of black political protest.

Although many scholars and critics have discussed historical and cultural contexts for *Invisible Man*, there are few essays discussing the text in direct comparison with the Harlem riots. This lacuna is surprising, considering the importance of the scene. It comes directly before the fall into darkness and the epilogue, and the scene captures the absurdity, chaos, and unreality that haunt the nameless narrator throughout the novel. The riot is the explosion of the built-up tensions and frustrations of the novel, as well as an important insight on Ellison's own perception of the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943. In understanding his depiction of a riot in Harlem, it is essential to consider the mode in which Ellison writes his riot and how this style affects his message. Through studying interviews with Ellison and his own essays about Harlem, we can gain a greater sensitivity for his worldview and his conception of life, blackness and America. Microfilm copies of *The New York Amsterdam News*, its photographs and articles, provides a primary source of insights into the 1943 riot that are unavailable elsewhere. Thus, research illuminates both the history of the riots and the man Ralph Ellison was.

PART I: Harlem Riots of 1935 and 1943: Causes, Events and Outcomes

In 1935, Harlem experienced a violent and polarizing race riot. The direct cause was sixteen-year old Lino Rivera's theft of a penknife from a convenience store on 125th Street and his subsequent release from the store, unharmed. However, rumors immediately began to spread that Rivera had in actuality been hurt or murdered.¹ Later, people began protesting outside the store and a rock shattered the front window, beginning the riot. In her article, "The Politics of Disorder: Reexamining Harlem's Riots of 1935 and 1943", Cheryl Greenberg writes: "the riots erupted...when community organizations collapsed (1935) or proved ineffective (1943)."² Although there were explicit incidents that triggered both of the riots, the underlying tensions were what really caused them. These underlying tensions were aggravated in Harlem when the community did not feel that it had a cohesive organization or outlet that could be utilized to achieve meaningful reform.

In Depression-era Harlem, people were angry. Harlemites suffered from widespread poverty, unemployment and inflated housing prices. In vying for jobs, employers were far more likely to hire whites than blacks, and in general the economic crisis hit blacks far harder than whites. In his book, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, Dominic Capeci writes: "their morale was dampened by the slow pace of integration, by the hypocrisy of fighting abroad for something they did not have at home, and by the degrading treatment they received in industrial and military centers."³ These conditions combined turned Harlem into a powder keg. When these frustrations and grievances weren't being met with resolution or perceptible improvement, blacks

¹ Greenberg, Cheryl. "Or Does It Explode?": *Black Harlem in the Great Depression*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991, 3.

² Greenberg, Cheryl. "The Politics of Disorder: Reexamining Harlem's Riots of 1935 and 1943." *Journal of Urban History* 18.4 (1992): 397.

³ Capeci, Dominic J. *The Harlem Riot of 1943*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1977, xii.

in Harlem were on edge. As Greenberg writes, “as a result of this combination of economic hardship and racial discrimination, blacks at all levels were ‘last hired, first fired’ during the Depression years. Five percent of the city’s population, blacks made up 15 percent of the unemployed.”⁴ Blacks in Harlem also paid more for rent and food than did whites and had higher mortality and crime rates. Although there existed aid offices, “massive need outran available resources.”⁵ Thus Harlem suffered from poverty and the discrimination that faced blacks in New York City at the time.

Another riot occurred in 1943 Harlem. This time, a white police officer attempted to arrest a black woman and was interrupted by another black woman. This black woman’s son, a soldier by the name of Robert Bandy, then intervened and punched the police officer. While the police officer attempted to put Bandy under arrest, another black man punched the officer from behind and Bandy ran. As he ran away, the cop shot him and Bandy was subsequently taken to the hospital, still under arrest. A rumor quickly spread that a black soldier had been killed by a white cop while trying to protect his mother.⁶ As with the 1935 riot, this incident catalyzed discontent in a Harlem neighborhood beset by a wide array of social and economic problems. As in 1935, the neighborhood was keenly aware of the inequalities between the white and black communities in New York City. Harlem had made many strides since 1935 and was certainly better off economically, but relative to white neighborhoods, it was still massively disadvantaged.

In Greenberg’s work, she points to a lag in organized and legal forms of protest that prefaced both of the riots in Harlem. In 1935, the riot occurred shortly after picketing was ruled

⁴ Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder,” 398.

⁵ Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder,” 399.

⁶ Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder,” 427.

illegal. She writes: “The riot occurred within three months of the court injunction that had effectively shut down organized political action. When the picket line no longer offered a vehicle for protest, other action was likely to take its place.”⁷ Group efforts had previously been concentrated into picketing, especially with the pervasive and ultimately somewhat ineffectual “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign, in which blacks protested Harlem stores that refused to hire black workers, even while gaining much of their revenue from blacks. Without this public and communal outlet for social critique, blacks felt even more disadvantaged and shunted by white individuals in power. In 1943, Harlemites were incredibly dismayed by wartime concentration on fighting fascism abroad, which in turn was signified by political leaders’ abating interest in the racism still plaguing black individuals in their own country. Also, Mayor LaGuardia’s decreased attention to discriminatory practices in New York City hit blacks hard, as LaGuardia had played a pivotal role in championing the rights of New York’s blacks following the 1935 riot. By 1943, his attention had waned, and “although Mayor LaGuardia concerned himself with both racism and the war effort, when faced with a choice between the two, he consistently chose the latter.”⁸ Thus, by 1943, Harlemites felt intensified perception of social inequities, just as in 1935, and also felt that they did not have organized community resources to address them collectively in a way that would produce change. In contrast to 1935, when community organizations had fallen apart, in 1943 such efforts existed but fell upon deaf ears. Thus, “The bitterness of the betrayal of friends like LaGuardia, of failures to root out discrimination, was intensified by the war’s lofty rhetoric.”⁹ A collective emotional undercurrent sparked a wave of violent protest that could not be ignored.

⁷ Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder,” 415.

⁸ Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder,” 422-423.

⁹ Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder,” 425.

In many artistic portrayals of race riots, they are imagined as violent and anger-fueled moments that are chaotic and ultimately seem to be senseless and ineffectual at communicating specific grievances and inciting redress for these grievances. In fact, Harlem's riots seem to have won more redress and attention to discriminatory institutions and practices than did many other legal protest movements of the time. Riots of that scale, which engaged a vast variety of Harlem residents across the social spectrum, were impossible for Mayor LaGuardia and the residents of New York City to ignore. Most heartening was LaGuardia's response to the March 19, 1935 riot, after which he ordered a commission to investigate the riot and form a complete and detailed report on it. Although the report claimed that, socially, the "'Respectable' [were] not found among rioters",¹⁰ it nevertheless admitted that the sentiments and motivations of the rioters were shared by black people of all classes in Harlem. It also attacked justifications offered regarding the hiring practices in large public utility companies that refused to hire black workers in the vast majority of their positions, saying: "the reasons offered by the officials of the public utilities are on the whole merely rationalizations of policies and practices which have no basis in reason or fact".¹¹ It goes on to decry the lack of jobs for black individuals as well as the union policies against blacks that also exist. The report concludes by commenting on the deplorable housing conditions, healthcare options and educational institutions in Harlem that cause the significantly higher death rate. It also states that "attacks by the police upon the security of the homes and the persons of the citizens are doing more than anything else to create a disrespect for authority and to bring about mass resistance to the injustices suffered by the

¹⁰ Fogelson, Robert M., and Richard E. Rubenstein, eds. *Mass Violence in America: The Complete Report of Mayor LaGuardia's Commission on the Harlem Riot of March 19, 1935*. New York, NY: Arno & The New York Times, 1969, 17.

¹¹ Fogelson and Rubenstein, *Mass Violence*, 33.

community.”¹² These official acknowledgements of racialized persecution in Harlem set the stage for reforms and constituted a long-awaited recognition of the inequalities faced in the neighborhood.

The commission made recommendations in its conclusion in regard to employment, relief, housing, education, health and crime. After the riot, these recommendations actually coalesced into a functional reform movement with an array of representative organizations in Harlem. In her article, Greenberg assesses these changes, noting immediately after the riot, the Emergency Relief Bureau (ERB) established an Advisory Committee on Negro Problems, a new Central Harlem Health Center opened, and Harlem Hospital got a new wing. Within a year of the riots, the city budget included 4 new school buildings and the Harlem River Houses, the first black public housing project, opened in 1937. Also, city hospitals finally agreed to take on black nurses.¹³ These reforms were vital to calming the shared mental state of Harlemites, as was the 1938 Supreme court ruling that “racially based picketing to redress racially based complaints was constitutional”.¹⁴ By the 1943 riot, however, there was again a feeling in Harlem that the needs of the inhabitants were not being addressed. Frustrated by LaGuardia’s apathy and the insufficient movements of organized protest, as war raged in Europe and the Pacific, another riot occurred.

This riot also prompted relief efforts and heightened visibility of the discrimination facing blacks of Harlem, just like the 1935 riot. Although President Roosevelt was unfortunately of the opinion that racial harmony was a gradual process and basically attempted a hands-off approach to reform, Mayor LaGuardia was more sympathetic. Roosevelt thought that the racial

¹² Fogelson and Rubenstein, *Mass Violence*, 128.

¹³ Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder,” 418.

¹⁴ Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder,” 418.

crisis of the nation was something that should be left to local authorities, and he kept his focus on the theatres of war as opposed to the race crisis at home.¹⁵ After the riot, however, LaGuardia started to try to amend his heretofore-diminished attention to black complaints. “Immediately after the riot, he announced that discrimination in tenant selection was unlawful and that he would implement whatever judicial decision emerged from the controversy over Stuyvesant Town.”¹⁶ Stuyvesant Town was a housing project set to be built in Harlem that was supposed to be white only, and LaGuardia didn’t oppose this until three days after the 1943 riot.¹⁷ In addition, LaGuardia made other plans to erect housing units and took definitive action in terms of price regulation and rent control. In his book *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, Dominic Capeci writes: “within one week of the riot, the Office of Price Administration announced plans to open an office in Harlem and to appoint black administrative assistants and food price specialists.”¹⁸ A month later, it was announced that the OPA would be looking into establishing rent control in New York City. Before the year ended, that was enacted. A People’s Unity Festival was organized on the Upper West Side in August, which “pledged to ‘cement the solidarity’ of all racial, religious and ethnic groups.”¹⁹ Also, Benjamin J. Davis, Jr., a black man and a Communist, was elected to City Council.²⁰ Other blacks were elected as well, who could not have gained these positions without white support, a testimony to some increase in racial tolerance.

¹⁵ Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 156.

¹⁶ Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 157.

¹⁷ Greenberg, “The Politics of Disorder,” 423.

¹⁸ Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 158.

¹⁹ Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 160.

²⁰ Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 161.

For these reasons, it is clear that the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943 were not simply anarchistic and untargeted expressions of rage, but rather a reaction to issues of discrimination and inequity that seemed irresolvable. When Harlemites came to feel that their organized and codified avenues of protest were incapable of producing redress for the ills that harmed their community, they had no productive outlet in which to channel their emotions. The 1935 riot reflected the intense feeling of the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” movement by targeting white-owned businesses that refused to hire black workers in Harlem, and the 1943 riot also was aimed towards white-owned property. These were not random acts perpetrated by thugs or misguided youths; rather, the rioters represented the perception of oppression shared by a much larger portion of the Harlem population. The riots succeeded where organized protest fell short, by gaining visibility for Harlem in terms of white audiences in the local and national political sphere who had been content to overlook the crying needs of the Harlem community. Because of the riots, Mayor LaGuardia made the needs of Harlem a priority and made undeniable changes in legislation and reform in order to alleviate poverty and inequity.

Although the black struggle for civil rights was unmistakably a slowly won battle with few momentous victories during the time of the Great Depression and World War II, the Harlem riots were actually, in comparison to the other organized efforts going on before they erupted, effective tools that seized attention for racial issues in the city of New York as a whole and in the neighborhood itself. When these struggles erupted, they could not be ignored, and photographs and newspaper coverage made sure of this. In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, however, the riots of 1935 and 1943 are used as inspiration for the final scenes of the novel. In this literary work, the riots are portrayed in a different light and the creative intentions of the novel diverge from the historical record in a notable manner. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* is swept up in the

violence of this era, but political and social themes are subordinated to the design of the novel and the development of Ellison's narrator.

PART II: Depiction of Riots in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

In the concluding chapters of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the riot exemplifies the pattern of discrimination that blights the life of the 'invisible man'. The reader sees a desperate, violent attempt to gain a political foothold in both New York City and the United States, but Ellison's focus is his narrator's unsuccessful struggles to win equality and fair recognition of his needs and remarkable talents. *Invisible Man*, while deconstructing the complications of individual identity through the characterization of the narrator, follows the arc of black political protest movements without dwelling on specific instances of discrimination or practical battles won or lost in Harlem.

Ellison focuses on black leadership throughout the novel as a way of showing the difficulties African Americans face in organizing each other and confronting white society. From The Founder at the main character's college, who is modeled on Booker T. Washington, to the Brotherhood, representative of the communist movement, to finally Ras the Exhorter, representative of the black nationalist movement, Ellison depicts – and critiques - the figureheads of black leadership and associations throughout the novel. The riot that culminates the novel leads directly into the main character's seclusion in an underground chamber in which he devotes himself to stealing light from "Monopolated Light and Power" and writing the novel itself. Because of the representation of the riot and the events that precede and follow the riot in *Invisible Man*, it is clear that Ralph Ellison did not believe in the positive reforms that resulted from the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943. Instead, he portrayed these chaotic events as a sign of the fruitlessness of black civil rights struggles at the time.

The history of black protest in *Invisible Man* begins with Ellison's criticism of Booker T. Washington. Without specifically naming real historical figures, Ellison creates composite characters who capture facets of real historical actors who played a defining role in 20th century

Afro-American history. The narrator mentions the statue of Washington that stands at Tuskegee Institute of him lifting a veil off of a crouched black man at his feet and wonders “whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.”²¹ This first part critiques the philosophy of his Washington-like character, particularly his ideology that “in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”²² This is an idea explicitly referenced on the first page of the first chapter of *Invisible Man*.²³ Washington held the idea that blacks could make economic and social strides with the help of whites, and could still stay socially separate from them in America. Ellison clearly sees this as a misguided approach to black uplift and strides for equality. In the novel, the character of Reverend Homer A. Barbee gives a speech glorifying The Founder (or Washington), but Barbee is blind, a telling characteristic that shows Ellison’s disillusionment with Washington’s camp of black strategists.

Ras the Exhorter, who is modeled obliquely on Marcus Garvey, leads a movement that is much akin to Garvey’s Black Nationalist party. In Eric J. Sundquist’s collection of essays, *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man*, Sundquist writes “Garvey’s adamant black nationalism especially set him at odds with the Communist Party, which disavowed racial separatism in favor of an integrated class struggle against capitalism.”²⁴ Garvey was an advocate of African Americans returning to Africa to establish a separate sovereign state there. He also was one of the originators of the Black Power movement and encouraged racial solidarity and pride. As Sundquist writes:

²¹ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 36.

²² Washington, Booker T. "The Atlanta Exposition Address." *Up From Slavery, An Autobiography*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1963, 160.

²³ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 15.

²⁴ Sundquist, Eric J. *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's, 1995, 183.

Ellison's character Ras the Exhorter (also called Ras the Destroyer) is carefully distinguished from Marcus Garvey (*Invisible Man* 367). Nonetheless, his powerful arguments in favor of black nationalism and an Afrocentric philosophy, as well as his street speeches while mounted on a ladder...reflect Garvey's influence and the continuing importance of Ethiopianist thought in the Harlem of the 1930's.²⁵

Ellison portrays Ras as a leader inspired by but not entirely based upon Marcus Garvey. Ras is a powerful speaker, but he also incites violence and discord as well as being portrayed as an extremist with nightmarish qualities. It is clear from Ellison's portrayal that he does not see Ras's nationalism as a force for good, but rather as ineffective and violence-promoting ranting. After one of his speeches, Ras attempts to send his men after the narrator to harm him for his Brotherhood involvement, until the narrator announces this malevolent intention to the crowd Ras is inciting.²⁶ Finally, at the end of the novel, Ras calls for blood because he accuses the narrator of being an "Uncle Tom".²⁷ In Ellison's work, Ras is able to rally groups of Harlemites together, but he is unable to exact political reform with his methodology, only incite unnecessary violence, typically against other black New Yorkers, which Ellison clearly sees as movement in the wrong direction.

Ellison's most bleak depiction is that of his disappointment and anger with the work of the Communist party in reference to Harlem and to black New Yorkers. Although the Black Nationalist movement and the rhetoric of Booker T. Washington are definitely cited as troublesome and ineffective examples of black leadership, it seems that the failure of the Brotherhood or the Communist Party is the most personally disappointing to Ellison. Along with his friend and mentor Richard Wright, Ellison had been an original supporter of the Communist Party, but was disillusioned with it after witnessing its failures in relation to black civil rights

²⁵ Sundquist, *Cultural Contexts*, 184.

²⁶ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 482.

²⁷ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 557.

struggles in New York City. As Sundquist writes: “By the early 1940s Ellison, too, had become overtly suspicious of the [Communist] party’s international agenda and its manipulation of African Americans.”²⁸ Ellison was initially attracted to the party because of its potential ability to negotiate interracial alliances as opposed to more separatist rhetoric, but ultimately found that the Party was less interested in promoting these alliances and more concerned with its own international agendas. Ellison even sensed a trouble with Marxism’s theoretical viewpoints, as he articulated in a letter to Richard Wright as early as 1940. According to Lawrence Jackson in his book *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius*, “he sensed real limits in Marxism’s application to the problem of the individual, but had not solved the problem.”²⁹ Finally, when New York’s Communist offices decided to back out of publicizing and promoting racial disparity in the city in favor of international war struggles, Ellison had had enough: “in a 1945 letter to Richard Wright, Ellison signaled his final disgust at the American Communist Party’s decision to abandon black rights, a move that led to its loss of political viability.”³⁰

This disgust appears in *Invisible Man*’s depiction of the Brotherhood leadership and manipulation. The initial move of the Brotherhood of taking away the narrator’s name and habitation in favor a name that they impose is a signifier of Ellison’s belief that the Communist Party undervalued individuality and subordinated issues of race in favor of overall Party goals. From there, we see Ellison’s dismay as the Brotherhood moves the narrator out of Harlem to work on women’s issues. When he finds out that Brother Jack is half-blind and that the Brotherhood has manipulated the riot for their own propaganda purposes, it is too late for the

²⁸ Sundquist, *Cultural Contexts*, 19.

²⁹ Jackson, Lawrence. *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius*. New York: Wiley, 2002, 228.

³⁰ Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius*, 254.

narrator. He sees that the anonymous letter that has warned him not to “go too fast” for he lives in a “white man’s world,” and he later recognizes the handwriting as Brother Jack’s.³¹

These three depictions – of Booker T. Washington’s rhetoric, Garveyism and Black Nationalism, and the Communist Party – all epitomize attempts at black organization and leadership that Ellison sees as flawed, self-defeating, or futile. Washington urges separatism and a kind of “meekness” and pandering to whites in order to achieve black civil rights achievements. Nationalism offers something of the opposite – radical separatism that recognizes blacks as a race equal to, but incompatible with, whites. The Communist party - which Ellison himself identified with for so long – seems the most disappointing of the three, because although it promotes an agenda of equality and collaboration between blacks and whites, it ultimately puts this issue to the wayside in order to promote its own agenda at any cost.

In New York City, the Invisible Man begins his political career by delivering a speech to an angry crowd witnessing the eviction of an elderly black couple in Harlem. He incites the crowd to action by advising them to curb their anger after a white officer has hit a black woman, but his speech is truncated by the furious crowd’s violent outburst. He has discordant desires – both to quell the imminent violence, and to participate in it as a form of momentary resistance. These desires are representative of black Americans’ attempts to attain reform through non-violent, legal channels and ultimately their recourse to violence because of the lack of perceptible change that results from these reasoning or moderate methods. From here, he is recruited into the Brotherhood, a move spearheaded by Brother Jack. The activities of the Brotherhood are elaborated on at length, finally showing their inadequacy. However, it seems that Ellison neglects to show the community organizations of Harlem at the time that were making efforts to

³¹ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 383, 568.

fight inequality and mass poverty in the neighborhood. There is no real allusion to the NAACP, nor to Church-based and focused protest organizations that spearheaded such movements as the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign. He leaves out peaceful protest movements like picketing and boycotts spearheaded by black organizations and shows just the Brotherhood’s initiatives and eventual retreat and the wild fury of Ras. It doesn’t seem that Ellison understands the final riot as a form of black protest, predated by the failure or ineffectiveness of black organizations, although that would be more historically accurate. Instead, Ellison’s riot is depicted as more of a psychological “boiling over” consisting of undirected violence and crime, without more organized and purposeful movements leading up to it.

The riot within *Invisible Man* begins in a way similar to how the riots of 1935 and 1943 historically unfolded. There is an altercation between whites and blacks, and a black child (or in the case of 1943, an elderly woman and her son, a soldier) are either arrested or wounded unfairly. In the novel, the Invisible Man arrives to the riot in the midst of the violence and hears that it was started for various reasons – that a cop shot a woman, or maybe slapped a kid and his mother, or a white woman tried to steal a black woman’s man, or that it was simply started by Ras the Destroyer.³² This is consistent with the way gossip spread and warped stories during the riots in Harlem in 1935 and 1943. In both cases, the historic and artistic representation, the catalyst was not the event itself, but rather the community’s built-up anger from other racialized injustices of this type, particularly police brutality. The quotes that Ellison uses from the rioters makes it seem as though the rioters of his novel do not particularly care about protesting actual injustices. They relish more the chance for a violent outburst as a kind of brutal and unfocused retaliation against their race’s marginalization. A man, Dupre, is quoted, saying: “Damn *who*

³² Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 540-541.

started it...All I want is for it to last a while".³³ Another man, who is drinking whiskey, says to the narrator: "Hell, man, it just exploded. These is dog days."³⁴ Next, the rioters pass by a store that the black owner is defending. The rioters that the narrator accompanies are rude and aggressive toward him, saying both: "You probably as rotten as the others" and "Hey! You sho you ain't got some white blood?"³⁵ Even after the black man defends himself, the rioters still question whether or not they should harm him.

Harlem Stores Afte



Figure 1: Store marked as under black ownership.³⁶

³³ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 541.

³⁴ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 541.

³⁵ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 542.

³⁶ "SAVED BY 'COLORED' marked on the front window of this Harlem Florist Shop". (Photograph). *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 7, 1943.

This fictional confrontation is in stark contrast to reports following the riot of 1935 that saw violence and property damage as focused exclusively on white property and businesses and mostly the ones that had been previously targeted in the terminated “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign. In 1943, however, violence was less focused and approximately 150 food stores were damaged, indeed, some fifty were damaged “so badly that their reopening was questionable”.³⁷ The majority of the Harlem stores were under white ownership, and the smaller number of black owners were usually spared the wrath of the mob. As seen in Figure 1, however, from the August 7th, 1943 issue of *The New York Amsterdam News*, stores under black ownership did indeed feel the need to distinguish themselves from white-owned stores during the riot. Widespread and undirected violence of the riot is consistent with Ellison’s portrayal, and due to Ellison’s characters’ allusion to the hot weather, it can be assumed that Ellison was basing his portrayal more on the August 1943 riot than on the March 1935 riot. In the 1943 riot, the city reported 185 wounded, almost all of whom were African American, and six people died. Of the six black men dead, four were killed by white policemen, and “one each by a black member of the City Patrol Corps and a black bartender”.³⁸ Indeed, there were no black men publicly lynched in the streets for being “Uncle Toms” in a way that would substantiate the threat that the narrator faces at the hands of Ras the Destroyer. And unlike the seeming thugs that are portrayed in the novel as rioting, in fact, hoodlums were not the only participants in the lootings and riots, as discussed by Cheryl Greenberg in her article and book regarding the riots.

In *Invisible Man*, a memorable scene in the riot is the decision of a group of black men to burn down their own tenement building (after evacuating the building of all its occupants). They cite their problems with the tenement building, including its bedbugs and their landlord’s refusal

³⁷ Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 106-107.

³⁸ Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 116.

to maintain the building, and one man says, “my kid died from the t-bees in that deathtrap, but I bet a man ain’t no more go’n be *born* in there.”³⁹ With this set of reasoning behind their actions, the men douse the building in kerosene and light it on fire. Although sporadic fires were started throughout the riot, particularly the riot of 1943, there is no report of black individuals burning down an entirely black occupied tenement house, which is an image that frames the riot as a self-defeating act and a impassioned yet ineffective attempt to achieve some kind of justice. The August 7, 1943 issue of *The New York Amsterdam News*, with its office located in Harlem, reported much property damage and looting, but in none of its myriad articles on the riot does the weekly newspaper make any reference to the demolition of a tenement building in Harlem in 1943. Such an event surely would have warranted mention in one of these articles. In the novel, when the tenement is burned, the narrator repeats multiple times that the men have “organized it and carried it through alone; the decision their own and their own action. Capable of their own action...”⁴⁰ The repetition of this last phrase seems to frame it as a commentary on previous black political actions as disorganized and incapable of affecting real change, however, it seems an unfair condemnation. Blacks were capable of forming community organizations and making moves to change policies and conditions in Harlem. Although it is true that these initiatives fell short or were insufficient in the years immediately preceding the riots, it doesn’t mean that they did not exist productively in times before that.

³⁹ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 547.

⁴⁰ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 548.



Figure 2: Mannequin Bodies Litter Harlem Streets⁴¹

The representation of the six white mannequins hanging from a streetlight is a chilling image in the novel. It seems to emphasize the wish of the black community for whites to be punished for their racism and economic and social superiority over blacks, yet the lack of any actual white deaths in the riot shows that murder was not the chosen avenue of retribution. Instead, the bodies are faceless props, existing wholly as a symbolic motion towards the unwitting perpetrators of black oppression. They are the unreal, symbolic targets of black wrath. The hanged bodies represent a system of oppression and racism that is faceless, inhuman, and shrouded in anonymity. In reality, white mannequin bodies actually did litter the streets in Harlem due to the looting of department stores, in which individuals would actually steal clothes

⁴¹ "FORTUNATE IS IT that the above are not demolished human forms". (Photograph). *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 7, 1943.

off of the mannequins. It seems a theatrical touch of Ellison's, however, to show these mannequin bodies hung up, as if the space of the novel were actually the set of a play instead of a space of urban reality. Figure 2, seen on the previous page, was discovered in a microfilm copy of the August 7, 1943 issue of *The New York Amsterdam News*. In the caption, the white mannequin bodies are described as "'raped' dummy models in front of Blumstein, Harlem's largest department store".⁴² It is interesting to wonder if Ellison saw this newspaper photo and noted its caption. It seems he wasn't the first author to connect sexuality and violence to the naked, white, plastic forms on the streets of Harlem.

The final confrontation between the narrator and Ras the Destroyer is obviously not based on historical evidence. Ras attempts to incite his group to hang the narrator from the lamppost with the mannequins as yet another example of a guilty party. The narrator resists and attempts to show Ras how the Brotherhood has planned this riot for their own benefit, but Ras pays no attention. He is intent on hanging the narrator as a symbol of a race-traitor. Of the six black deaths that occurred in the 1943 riot, other blacks perpetrated just two, and those were in response to burglary or in self-defense. Like many of the images in the novel, this final face-off between Ras and the narrator is used more as a metaphor that illustrates the ways in which black intellectuals and organizers found themselves unwittingly pitted against one another as opposed to working in tandem against the white-dominated system of indoctrinated racism. Ellison uses this image much as he uses the unforgettable image of the battle royale in the South or the fight between the narrator and Lucius Brockway at the Liberty Paints plant. All of these images show outright violence erupting between blacks. In the case of the battle royale, the violence is explicitly orchestrated for the entertainment of whites in power, while in the later cases the white

⁴² *New York Amsterdam News*, August 7, 1943.

profiteer or onlooker is less explicit, yet still existent. However, the face-off between Ras and the narrator is off-base with the factual history of the riots, serving as more of an artistic brushstroke to blend in Ellison's overall political opinion regarding black protest rather than a portrayal of reality.

The riot is cut off suddenly when the narrator falls down a manhole into utter darkness and, in order to have light, proceeds to burn the documents from his past that he holds in his briefcase. He cuts ties with his past, rejecting its utter futility by lighting it afire. We leave him as we found him in the beginning, writing in a basement in which he steals light for 1,369 light bulbs from "Monopolated Light and Power". He is the Invisible Man, all his efforts unseen and ineffective because of the oppression that constricts and engulfs him. We are shown that the arc of all his political involvement and the aftermath of the race riots have resulted in his decision to resort to a last political movement: that of artistic representation.

Although Ellison seems to use the riot as his crowning example of the futility of black protest, in fact the riot of 1943 actually caused politicians and Mayor LaGuardia to make real reforms and to speak up about the poverty and discrimination facing black Americans even during the seemingly more pressing calamity of World War II, as discussed in Part One. The symbolism of the narrator being pursued and threatened by other black Americans and then subsequently falling into a dark hole underground seems to show Ellison's opinion that black protest at the time simply "exploded" into undirected, disorganized chaos without a political agenda, motivation, or an explicitly positive outcome or response. Judging, however, from the intricate reports on the immediate response by officials in the aftermath of the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943, it is easy to see that there was a political agenda for the riots that was noticeably addressed in the days and months that followed. Primarily, there was Mayor LaGuardia's vocal

response via radio and other outlets, and also his movements to eradicate housing and consumer issues. There were also movements made by smaller committees, like the Emergency Conference for Interracial Unity on September 25, 1943 at Hunter College, and events held to discuss racial unity.⁴³ To Ellison, however, any response or reform following the riot of his novel is wholly absent.

There are no mentions made of the city above ground after the riot, because the riot's futility has finally literally submerged the narrator below ground. This seems to be a metaphor for the oppression the narrator has faced throughout his life, with the white system intending continually to keep him "down" or to "keep this nigger-boy running".⁴⁴ Finally, he actually runs and falls, down into a hole of utter darkness beneath the city. The juxtaposition of the riot before the fall, however, is an unfair slight to the motives and outcomes of the riot itself as an act of black protest. Although racial movements towards equality during and before World War II did not inspire massive changes in either policy or (more importantly) prejudice, they were nonetheless the building blocks for civil rights movements to follow. The Harlem riots lent more national and local visibility to the mentalities and hardships of Harlemites than did any of the legal and organized forms of black protest in the area during the time. For this reason, it is unfair of Ellison to sequester the riot scene to the end of the novel, posing the imagery within it as harrowing examples of blacks defeating and combating one another due to the designs of white puppeteers. The images of blacks destroying black-owned businesses, a black-occupied tenement house, and then finally black intellectuals and organizers (the narrator) portray the riot in a much more negative light than the riots in actuality. The property damages of the riots were mostly against white-owned Harlem businesses and the black deaths that occurred were

⁴³ Capeci, *The Harlem Riot of 1943*, 160.

⁴⁴ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 33.

perpetrated either by whites or by blacks in defense of themselves or their property. Ellison, however, molds his portrayal of the riot to position it vis-à-vis the overarching themes of *Invisible Man*. In this way, although it is an inaccurate depiction of the riot, it is an accurate representation of his personal opinions on the limitations of black protest and the ineffectuality of black voices seeking changes during and before World War II. In other words, to a certain degree Ellison sacrifices historical realism to unravel the central questions tied to the consequences of racism on the individual that inspire the novel.

Ellison's narrator finally finds himself in a basement illuminated with light, where he writes his story, speaks of his invisibility and attempts to gain the visibility he has so far been denied by writing of his life. In this way, Ellison seems to note that the most profound way for a black intellectual in America to become "visible" or make noteworthy political movements is through publication. He shows the black protest movements with which he has been affiliated or familiarized with and how they have ultimately fallen through or produced no tangible policy changes. The readers follow his dismay with the conditions in Harlem and the lack of communal organization or audibility of its residents. The reader is not, however, given any window into actual productive forms of black protest, and the race riot at the end is Ellison's final powder keg of desperation and disorganized self-defeat – not a movement that urged officials and organizations to take notice of black civil rights struggles at the time. Either Ellison did not see the riot in this way, or artistically he chose not to portray it in this way in order to calcify his book's convictions. Ellison believed that artistic portrayal is the last bastion for black protesters and intellectuals of the time because he was disillusioned by the mediocrity of reform measures made in answer to black protest movements overall.

Ellison's surrealist technique draws a bleak and dismal view of reality. This is far from an apolitical work because it highlights the problems that Ellison sees in black movements and philosophies, but it disavows identifying a constructive way for black people to escape from the cage designed for them by white society and themselves. The failures of Booker T. Washington's philosophy, the movement of Garveyism and Black Nationalism and Communism that are obliquely represented in the book all boil down to the same darkness of the final riot. There is a sense of hopelessness in all of these efforts, and a sense that there is something missing that is not precisely accounted for in *Invisible Man*. Ellison tries to make his argument for this in the novel with his arc of political protest that ends in the riot: that these methods are ultimately self-defeating and inchoate, finally put into a semblance of order through the narrator's own mind, which warps his own perception into the details, leading to a surreal work of art.

PART III: Surrealist Style as Ellison's Tool to Depict Political Protest

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* gains a good deal of its power from a writing style enlivened by surreal and unreal imagery. The definition of surrealism that we work with here is that of the Oxford English Dictionary, which calls it: "a movement in art and literature seeking to express the subconscious mind by any of a number of different techniques, including the irrational juxtaposition of realistic images, the creation of mysterious symbols, and automatism."⁴⁵ *Invisible Man* is a book of political protest crafted with surrealist sensibilities, a book that follows its nameless narrator through different channels in which black Americans struggled for equality post-emancipation. Surrealism is exhibited in scenes marked by their fantastic nature and inchoate fragments of imagery and words. Through his depictions of different frameworks of black intellectual and political thought, as well as his final depiction of unbounded chaos that constitutes the riot at the end of the novel, Ellison paints a grave and dark perspective of black movements towards equality at the time. His writing style is a movement to portray the reality of the lived environment while pointedly acknowledging the inner-workings of the human mind that comprehend and siphon the information of the world.

In Ellison's 1948 essay "Harlem is Nowhere", Ellison works with the idea popularized by W.E.B. DuBois, of double consciousness. Double consciousness can be seen as identity confusion relating specifically to African Americans, who see themselves in a certain way yet are perceived in a wholly different way by the individuals in the America that surrounds them. In his essay, "Harlem is Nowhere", Ellison writes: "Not quite citizens and yet Americans, full of the tensions of modern man but regarded as primitives, Negro Americans are in desperate search

⁴⁵ "surrealism, n.". OED Online. March 2013. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/195019?redirectedFrom=surrealism&> (accessed April 23, 2013).

for an identity.”⁴⁶ This kind of identity tension leads to a constant confusion and mental strife that Ellison sees as a shared mental experience of black inhabitants in Harlem. This environment, although unseen and tangibly unaccounted for, is just as real as the physical environment, Ellison believes, and therefore just as important to articulate in a work of fiction. Ellison writes: “[Harlem] explains the nature of a world so fluid and shifting that often within the mind the real and the unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence.”⁴⁷ He finds the neighborhood to be a location of contradictions and surprises, filled with the hoi polloi – their patches of histories and experiences. At the same time, these black inhabitants exist without the ability to feel realized because of the psychological confusion that characterizes their sense of identity: “One ‘is’ literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a ‘displaced person’ of American democracy.”⁴⁸ This is the psychological framework that Ellison recognizes in Harlem that powers his portrayal of the locale in *Invisible Man*.

From this description of Harlem and Ellison’s imagination and conception of Harlem, the reader can concur that his surrealism is a type of realism in itself. While realist depictions give privilege to the urban environment and the reality of the streets as well as more narrow human thoughts, surrealism highlights the mind space of the individual (the narrator, in this case). This mind space is prone to collect and incorporate dream-like imagery into the unfolding of the plot line. It also favors interior dialogues and mental confusions that give the text a more personal and hyperbolic feel. It takes real events and warps them into fantasy and luscious imagery, perhaps self-indulgent, but only because the individual is presiding in the account rather than the

⁴⁶ Ellison, Ralph. "Harlem Is Nowhere." *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*. By Eric J. Sundquist. Boston: Bedford of St. Martin's, 1995, 244.

⁴⁷ Ellison, “Harlem is Nowhere,” 243.

⁴⁸ Ellison, “Harlem is Nowhere,” 246.

urban reality. It is indulging the mind, and allowing the writer to work less as a cartographer and more as an artist.

Before Ralph Ellison was a writer, he was a musician. His first forays into writing were in the realm of poetry. In a 1974 interview with John Hersey, Ellison explains: “My basic sense of artistic form is musical...I think that basically my instinctive approach to writing is through sound.”⁴⁹ Ellison also always said that he approached writing as he approached playing music: with lots of practice in order to hone the craft. This musical background is important to the way Ellison uses his ear to put together his piece. In Lawrence Jackson’s *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius*, Jackson explains how Ellison spent time in Harlem talking to people, interviewing them, even knocking on doors and hanging around at playgrounds. He says: “Ellison sought the roots of the divergent folklore of Harlem.”⁵⁰ This attention to listening, to sound, and to gathering fragments shaped Ellison’s ability to create surreal or wild-seeming images that would become the basis for *Invisible Man*. These pieces of individuals, their stories and lives, are what gives humanity to the novel but also make it a disjointed read, comparable to the sonority of the tangled oral histories Ellison utilizes, or to the music of jazz that he references explicitly in the novel.

There are a few scenes of the book that work as vivid examples of the technique that Ellison employs and exactly how a reader can define it as surreal. First is the scene in the first chapter, in which the narrator is invited to engage in a battle royal between his other black schoolmates before he may deliver a speech to the powerful white citizens of his town. The battle royal takes place in a room “foggy with cigar smoke” in which “a clarinet [is] vibrating

⁴⁹ Hersey, John. "A Completion of Personality": A Talk with Ralph Ellison." *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*. Ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1995, 283.

⁵⁰ Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: The Emergence of Genius*, 223.

sensuously”.⁵¹ The first thing he and the other young black students are accosted with is an unreal vision of a naked, made-up blonde girl with an American flag tattooed on her lower abdomen. As the boys look, with horror, embarrassment and attraction, the woman begins to dance slowly in front of them. The narrator relates his reverie with the scene, saying: “She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some grey and threatening sea. I was transported.”⁵² This shows his mind’s contradictions of both delicate beauty and rapture with an undercurrent of looming danger, also his removal from the actual environment into his own mind and his own perception laced with emotions.

This otherworldly introduction leads up to the fight itself, in which all the participants are blindfolded and displaced, able to discern their surroundings with hearing, robbed of the essential sense of sight. The fight is described in its physical insanity with excessive use of metaphor and sensual language. The narrator discovers he can see, somewhat, through his blindfold and notices “the black, sweat-washed forms weaving in the smoky-blue atmosphere like drunken dancers weaving to the rapid drum-like thuds of blows.”⁵³ This excerpt highlights Ellison’s use of simile as well as his musical sensitivity in describing the scene as an obscure, dream like experience. His repeated nods to the smoky haziness of the room and the distorted vision afforded him through his blindfold shows the narrator’s augmented disorientation in a scene that is already uncanny. After the fight, the participants are invited to fight each other for the prize money that is situated on an electrified carpet. The white voyeurs observe as the black boys are electrocuted and scramble for their coins. The prelude, event and aftermath of the fight are all marked by staccato commentary by the white observers and the unnerving sounds of

⁵¹ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 18.

⁵² Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 19.

⁵³ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 23.

fighting, electrocution, and clarinet music. Not only the details and articulation of the events are surreal, but also the events themselves seem to be surreal vignettes – the white woman exposed with the American flag tattoo, the battle royal of black students for the amusement of whites, and the electrocution of black students attempting to collect payment. This entire scene highlights Ellison’s technique that he exercises throughout *Invisible Man* – to weave his social and political commentary into his novel through deliberately surreal aesthetic choices.

Another gripping example of Ellison’s use of surrealism is in chapter eleven of *Invisible Man*, when we find the narrator at a hospital after an explosion in the basement of the paint factory where he was briefly employed. The scene is disorienting and the actual facts are obscured by the narrator’s condition – stunned and under the influence of unspecified drugs. In the beginning, the narrator hears in his mind the beginning notes of Beethoven’s fifth symphony repeating hypnotically. As the scene continues, he lies in the hospital, in “a glass and nickel box,”⁵⁴ while he hears but cannot respond to the conversations of the doctors above him, who intend to medically experiment upon him. He describes the scene sensually, saying: “No sound beyond the sluggish inner roar of the blood. I couldn’t open my eyes. I seemed to exist in some other dimension, utterly alone.”⁵⁵ Because of the narrator’s mental condition in this chapter, the articulation of the chapter’s events is hazy, inchoate and difficult to discern. At the same time, this articulation is effective because it reflects the fashion in which an individual’s mind might process the world were he to have just undergone some sort of electroshock therapy and been drugged in a hospital. The chapter incorporates fragments of song lyrics, pieces of the narrator’s personal history, and his understanding of the surrounding sensual environment. His perception, as with the battle royal, is incomplete, and so the mode of literary articulation used by Ellison

⁵⁴ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 233.

⁵⁵ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 238.

chooses to match the perception of the narrator in its surreal nature as well. Like in the battle royal scene, in which Ellison writes, “I was transported,” here he also refers to feeling removed, saying “I seemed to exist in some other dimension”. These proclamations show us that the narrator himself can grasp the otherworldliness of the environment he is in, and so Ellison’s aesthetic choices match up with the narrator’s perception of the unreality that surrounds him.

Surrealism is more concentrated on manipulating or playing with the associative tendencies of the human mind and allowing people to understand metaphors as they relate to the reality. In this way it is richer than realism because in its oblique imagery it is more relatable. It deals with the terrain of the mind rather than the terrain of a specific locale. In Ellison’s Hersey interview he reveals that he thinks his book sprang from a kind of ‘magic circle’, or “from that amorphous level which lies somewhere between the emotions and the intellect, between the consciousness and the unconscious, which supports our creative powers but which we cannot control.”⁵⁶ The emotional power of the novel is what gives it its throbbing poignancy, the images that become stamped upon the mind and force the reader to determine their meaning.

Despite the unreality, it is hard to forget the image of seven white mannequins hanging from a lamppost in a rioting Harlem. The same goes for the scene of black men coating with gasoline and burning down their own tenement building, or a black man falling through a manhole to create light for himself by burning, one by one, the papers held in his briefcase. Although the reality of these images is improbable, the weight of them in terms of making an artistic statement is undeniable. They also create a politicized statement. The riot scene is the scene in which Ellison’s political protest and surreal technique collide to their most heightened effect. The scenes in the riot are indubitably surreal, and unlike other scenes of the novel where

⁵⁶ Hersey, “A Completion of Personality,” 283.

the surreal nature of the events is heightened because of the narrator's own affected perception, here he can clearly take in the dream-like wildness of his surroundings. In the battle royal he is blindfolded or gazing through smoke and in the hospital he perceives the world from under the influence of myriad drugs and possible electroshock therapy, but in the riot everything is surreal even though his perception is unhindered except by darkness. This is where Ellison uses his surreal technique and his opinion of political protest to their greatest effect.

Ellison's surrealist style incorporates a broad range of literary tools in order to paint a scene. He uses music – music from both the environment and from inside the narrator's own head. He also uses the narrator's own memory and personal history and plays upon fragments of songs and rhymes and folklore from youth. In addition to these auditory details there are the tactile details playing upon the sense of touch and there is imagery explained with use of metaphor and comparison. He also relies heavily on the narrator's own interior dialogue and pieces of dialogue that he hears from the individuals surrounding him. All of these attributes cohere to create a mystifyingly surreal terrain, where the reader is accosted both by the sound and fury outside of the narrator, in the physical environment, along with the interpretation and commentary of the narrator's mind. In addition, the scenes in many cases are bizarre or unlikely events – surreal sketches of questionable realities. Metaphor, in these scenes, creates a statement, but Ellison leaves it to the reader to interpret it in their own fashion. In Ellison's own words:

Fiction allows for a summing up. It allows for contemplation of the moral significance of human events. We don't always live up to the broader implications of this aspect of fiction, I think, because sometimes, out of a sense of frustration or disgust, we don't consider what a powerful effect vividly projected images of symbolic actions can have on readers.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Hersey, "A Completion of Personality," 300.

There is a purpose to Ellison's symbolism and surreal imagery, which is to communicate to readers on a very visceral level. The lucidity of his strange images does this, and so is more effective as a communicative tool than realism, which attempts to keep its details unfettered by poeticisms and hyperbole.

Critics of Ellison's novel saw it as a dramatization and disagreed with its bleak portrayal of black political protest and the capability of the black individual to make changes in America. In Lawrence P. Jackson's essay "Ralph Ellison's Politics of Integration", Jackson writes that Alain Locke called the novel "smothered in verbosity and hyperbole".⁵⁸ This is true, but it is verbose and hyperbolic because that is the style that best fits Ellison's conception of the unreality of Harlem that he discusses in his essay "Harlem is Nowhere" and his conception of the confusion of the modern black mind as well. Nick Aaron Ford read the novel as giving the message that "the only avenue open to the Negro who wants to keep his self-respect is complete withdrawal. That seems to be the meaning of this final episode."⁵⁹ The meaning of the final episode seems more to be that the only avenue open to a black man is to write and publish the confusion of his life so that others can understand it in the way that he does and empathize with his struggles.

Because of Ellison's own bleak outlook upon the political arc that is portrayed in *Invisible Man*, particularly his bleak outlook on the final riot, surrealism is a perfect way to articulate said darkness. Feeling utterly disillusioned with the Communist Party and dissatisfied with the rhetoric expounded upon by Booker T. Washington and Black Nationalism, Ellison uses surrealism to depict America in which the individual black man possesses a fractured sense of

⁵⁸ Jackson, Lawrence P. "Ralph Ellison's Politics of Integration." *A Historical Guide to Ralph Ellison*. By Steven C. Tracey. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. 181.

⁵⁹ Jackson, "Ralph Ellison's Politics of Integration," 182.

identity and exists in a sort of political vacuum, an intimate window into his own point of view. The surreal final riot is the last image that Ellison uses to convey this environment of dystopian chaos and highlight the mental confusion that characterizes Harlem and its black inhabitants. By using surrealism, he more effectively captures the sense of malaise and hopelessness that he, as a black citizen of Harlem, considers the riot to be tied to. He makes multiple references to blacks threatening one another to show he considers the riot to be another self-defeating event of blacks, orchestrated by the white dominant class to ensure that the racialized class stratification endures. Surrealism is perfect for this overture, because Ellison can show and dramatize emotion and feeling through imagery and through individual character's minds without attempting to adhere to realist structures.

Conclusion

Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* grapples with the individual struggle of a nameless black American who spends the book buoyed through ineffective black political protest movements and incapable of determining his own identity. The book utilizes a surrealist technique in order to elucidate the inchoate consciousness of black Harlemites and in turn to assist the reader in understanding both the tangible and mental environment of the Harlem neighborhood. The book also utilizes this aesthetic form to paint the scene of a riot in Harlem and portray it in a way that is historically inaccurate, yet politically poignant. Through an analysis of the description of the riot both historically and in *Invisible Man*, the reader is introduced to the differences in each portrayal. More important than noting these differences is understanding why Ellison made these choices, and what they say about his own opinions on black political protest. Clearly, he has a bleak outlook on their effectiveness, an outlook which is particularly highlighted in his portrayal of the riot in Harlem and his narrator's subsequent fall into darkness and social obscurity.

Were there more time available, it would be interesting to compare Ellison's surreal technique with Richard Wright's realist technique in his novel *Native Son*. Both works of fiction were published around the same time (*Native Son* in 1940, *Invisible Man* in 1952) and the two authors moved in similar circles in New York City and had similar inspirations. They both shared a background in working with Marxism and Communism, yet both rejected it eventually. They also were inspired by Existentialism and French philosophers like Sartre and others. An examination of Wright's work in contrast with Ellison's also would have necessitated delving into Wright's essay on his break from the Communist party, anthologized in the book *The God that Failed*. This would have provided context for the two writers' backgrounds and shared political opinions, while deconstructing their divergent literary aesthetic modes.

Regardless of this lacuna in this article, it still achieves its purpose of understanding Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in an original and luminary way. Through a historical analysis of the Harlem riots, followed by an analysis of Ellison's portrayal of a Harlem riot, it explains the author's surrealist form as a political tool, and a method very sensitive to an overlooked environment of Harlem: that of the mindsets of its occupants. It pays attentions to the changes made in Ellison's depiction and why he chose to make these changes. In summation, it provides an understanding of Ellison's form as a method used to dramatize his own pessimistic outlook on black American's movements towards equal rights at the time. Ellison's method of combining histories with his own fiction in an oblique way is present throughout the novel, in his composite characters based upon actual historical figures and in his navigation of American space. To a certain extent, this oblique representation shields him from abiding by factual history in his novel, because he doesn't explicitly claim that these composites are based on real things. The curiosity was, how accurately or inaccurately did Ellison portray a Harlem riot in contrast to the reality of the events themselves? Locating his motivations for manipulating the riot and focusing upon the way in which he did so was the goal of this article, which has been achieved.

As the 'invisible man' escapes from the crowd, a burst pipe drenches him in water. Directly after this, a policeman riding a black horse charges towards him, the horse passing directly over the narrator on the ground. As he crouches, the water beats into him, "like a blow, wet and thudding and cold."⁶⁰ As he escapes and looks back to see what he has left behind, his eyes fall on the busted pipe, and he sees it spray "like a mad geyser in the moonlight."⁶¹ As with Ellison's depiction of the riots, this phrase describes the calamity, the madness and – like the pipe itself – the brokenness that Ellison sees in Harlem. At the same time, it shadows it with

⁶⁰ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 561.

⁶¹ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 561.

magic and ambience of moonlight. Ellison colors the Harlem riots in this way: as futile, broken expressions made resonant with the imagery of dreams and the tenderness of the human mind.