Copy Wright: What Is an (Invisible) Author?

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I am a negro and was born some time during the war in Elbert County, Ga., and I reckon by this time I must be a little over forty years old. My mother was not married when I was born, and I never knew who my father was or anything about him.


I am near white. [. . .] I might be white if I wanted to be. And therein lies the anomaly which to the uninitiated seems strange beyond belief.


My eyes are light blue, my hair is light brown, my features are undeniably Nordic, my skin is white; yet in my veins run a few drops of negro blood. Therefore, in America, I am a negro.


I am an invisible man. [. . .] I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

—Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

Autobiographical Acts

I AM A NEGRO.” “I am near white.” “Therefore, in America, I am a negro.” “I am invisible.” With such self-descriptions these four nameless voices introduced their personal histories by racially categorizing the faces they did not show. They spoke from within a continuous practice of testimony that in the first half of the twentieth century moved from genuine anonymity to authored invisibility. Though

the anonymous texts remain uncollected and unstudied, there are enough similar testimonies to raise the possibility that “I am [name withheld]” was the twentieth-century successor to the ex-slave narrators’ “I was born,” but one that interrupted the master narrative of emancipation and racial progress. Titles such as “The New Slavery in the South” (NS 409) and “More Slavery at the South” made no bones about the matter. Antebellum narrators, such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, became household names and formed the first well-known generation of African American authors. In these later self-narratives, the substitution of “I am” for a signature marked the spot where the parables of liberation and uplift went underground to lament the dream deferred. For the peon, the nurse, and other southerners, the only vestige of the underground railroad was journalistic; they sent their accounts rather than themselves northward. The two “white Negroes” above are in the North, but dare not say where. Outspoken as they all are, they continue to elude literary historians as they once did the Klan.

From 1940 onwards there came an emergence of sorts in that breakthrough moment of black authorship when Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and others managed both to sell books and to speak for the voiceless or, as Wright put it in American Hunger, “to voice the words in them that they could not say, to be a witness for their living” (and to make a living in the process, it might be added). But the loss was not repaired. A distinction easily missed is that the voiceless were not the anonymous, who in fact did find words to witness for their living, though at the cost of their names. To be considered below is the role that the nameless “I am”s play in this curious history of authorship’s disappearance and reappearance within the strong continuities of African American autobiographical practice. This is an unstudied question, though not a hidden one. Ellison beckons to it: “I am what I am!” proclaims his anonymous narrator, wolfing down two yams. “They’re my birthmark,’ I said, ‘I yam what I am!” (IM 266).

The movement from the anonymity of “Negro Peon 1904” to the authored invisibility of Ellison’s novel obviously crosses the line between fact and fiction, though this is not an easy line to find. Invisible Man is fact-based fiction at a teasingly ambiguous distance from Ellison’s own autobiographical self-presentation. About the facticity of the other narratives excerpted above, we must trust the editors. “It is a reliable story, and we believe, a typical one,” attest the editors of the Independent about the dictated account of “Negro Peon 1904,” though of course “liberty” has been taken to “put it in a form suitable for publication” (NS 409). Within the authoring of this account, the respective contributions of the “Negro Peon” (his term?) and his white amanuensis are hard to determine. The Georgia man puts a human face on “the new slavery,”
but one that gradually loses its features as bondage strips him of family, ambition, individuality, and hope. The concluding words (his choice?) foreground peonage, not himself, as the subject of this “autobiography”: “I reckon I’ll die either in a coal mine or in an iron furnace. It don’t make much difference which. Either is better than a Georgia peon camp. And a Georgia peon camp is hell itself” (NS 414). But it was ever thus that the human faces on social problems are dispensable.

In some cases, we must forego the question of factuality as imponderable or extraneous, since anonymity may render the boundary between fact and fiction no less shifty and notional than the color line, especially when that line no longer reliably partitions the narrator from the white audience that he or she addresses. In fuller, but self-contradictory, possession of their identities are the writers of “The Adventures of a Near-White” (hereafter “Mr. Blank,” as he styles himself) and of “White, but Black” (hereafter “Mr. Therefore,” from his merely local and invisible racial identity, “Therefore, in America, I am a negro.”). They both announce at the outset that the defining fact of the life stories to follow is a racial illusion: namely, that they are Negroes in white men’s bodies, able to disappear racially—“los[ing] myself across the line,” as “Mr. Blank” puts it (ANW 373)—and thereby to spy on white people who have let down their guard. Their racial masquerade, enabled by the large and confusing advantage of optically white bodies, exposes the “legal fiction” of the color line and the “one drop of blood” codes. That they can fight fire with fire, fiction with fiction, and still establish themselves as factual reporters may be doubted. On occasion they drop their masks before shocked white interlocutors to teach an important lesson, only to be driven from a job, a church, or a railroad car. But even as they here disclose their racial masks for “the uninitiated,” they take up another mask, anonymity, almost as a warrant of the dangerous truth of their accounts and the risks of the no-man’s land in which they operate. In public spaces each man is at the mercy of bystanders and authorities who project whiteness and blackness onto him at will, most dangerously when the sight of a darker woman on his arm codes the black-identified narrator as a white miscegenator. In “White, but Black,” however, that chosen blackness hangs by a “therefore” and resides not in Harlem but on the “outskirts” (WB 492). Both on 145th Street and in midtown, the Nordic “Mr. Therefore” and his darker wife draw stares that unsee their marriage: “she a colored woman, and I her white lover” (WB 493). A quarter of a century and several riots later, the Invisible Man burrows below this collapsed boundary: “The joke, of course, is that I don’t live in Harlem but in a border area” (IM 5).

The combination of textual and racial anonymity constitutes a double masking even for narrators less perplexing than “Mr. Therefore” and
“Mr. Blank”: “I was, in a manner of speaking, raceless,” says a much later one-time passer, “Southern Man 1959,” whose two-week foray into the South was re-enacted for Ebony magazine by a professional model to protect his anonymity.9 The raceless, faceless narrators of 1913 and 1925 were hard-pressed to present a coherent autobiographical self; the liberal white readers of 1913 and 1925 may have felt the lack of their accustomed sympathetic distance, at least insofar as they recognized that they too inhabited the borderless racial wilderness from which these misembodied voices cried. They heard a racial discourse from within the North and from within whiteness.

The two men offered their contemporary readers “real” instances to put beside the fictions of black-to-white passing in the novels of William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, Pauline Hopkins, Charles Chestnutt, and others. But their self-presentations were not contained by the prevailing convention that passing should be shown to end badly.10 They continued to pass sporadically, sometimes unwillingly, perhaps inescapably. In contrast to the sharp outlines of the “tragic mulattoes” of the novelistic morality tales, “Mr. Blank” and “Mr. Therefore” were protean and indeterminate. They hid from the very readers with whom they shared forbidden knowledge. In the African American press in the 1950s, accounts of passing, always given for the sake of forever renouncing it, still called for anonymity.11 In mid-century, race leaders would admit to episodes of passing, but only episodes, and in the context of established authorial and political identities.12 In “The Confessions of an Unwilling Nordic” the distinguished historian Rayford W. Logan drolly recounts how in France in World War I white people insisted on reading his white officer’s uniform as his race lest his dark skin and frisés locks unsettle their vision of social reality—“a matter of the construction of their inner eyes,” as the Invisible Man puts it (IM 3). After the war, an American matron could not accept that a black man should be staying at a better hotel in Dax than she and speaking better French. He was, she insisted, a Polish prince pretending to be a Negro. The more he protested, the less she believed him: “That is the cleverest disguise I have ever heard in my life. A Polish prince passing for a “nigger.” That is too funny.”13 However, Logan’s bemused “Confessions” end violently. Returning to base one night he was assaulted by French sailors, crying “sale Américain,” “sacré Américain.” He was reminded by their blows that “I was not an American, but only a Negro,” and protested as much to no avail. He found another expedient: “Then, as one fist sought an unbruised spot on my face, I grabbed it and rubbed it over my hair.” “Mille pardons, mon ami,” they replied, “We thought you were white” (1050). In the dark, touch trumps uniform and race trumps nationality. The mirror-world of Europe transforms his blackness into a badge of safe passage in an anti-
lynching of sorts with a “whites only” line for victims. Even by the unwilling, the game of passing is played for high stakes. As Logan was being graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Williams College, a professor warned him about what a “dangerous anomaly” he had become. “‘Upon whatever career you embark, always be colored,’” cautioned his mentor. “‘Why—,’ I looked at my hands and felt my hair. ‘Why, that should not be very difficult,’ I concluded with a puzzled laugh” (1043).

Logan’s bout of Nordicism is only mock-transgression because it is unsought, temporary, transatlantic, and, above all, framed by two crucial facts: (1) his respected authorial name, and (2) his palpably black body. The Nordic-featured “Mr. Therefore” is also a writer but can offer neither name nor body to keep his authorship from being drawn into the contradictions of his identity. He has courageously passed in the South to report on race relations but apparently has not explained this fact in his writings. He concludes with his introduction to a famous author in London, who greets him at the door with obvious bafflement. As an arbiter of racial identity, Logan’s white mentor gave wise, if unneeded, advice. Here the London author gets the last word: “‘Pardon me,’ he said, ‘but I expected from your writings to see an elderly colored man. Instead you are a young white man.’ I laughed as naturally as the circumstances would permit, and assured him that though guilty of being young, I was innocent of being white. ‘Do you mean to tell me they class you as negro in America?’ I assured him that I was so labeled. ‘What damned fools Americans must be on the race question!’ he exclaimed” (WB 499). Like Logan in France, “Mr. Therefore” can view the race problem with irony from a vantage beyond America and outside of his American race. His urbane rejoinder, “innocent of being white,” mirrors the “guilty of being black” that his few drops of blood make him in America. Yet his English admirer has been reading texts that are “innocent of being white” in quite another sense; he takes them for the authoritative testimony of a black man writing about race.

This curious case of authorship (black) framed and explained in anonymous discourse (“white, but black”) lends itself to the influential distinction drawn by Michel Foucault in “What is an Author?”4 between the “writer,” source of the text, and the “author” as a secondary formation derived from texts and then reapplied to them so as to organize and limit interpretation of what now become the “author’s works.” The blue-eyed, sandy-haired writer of “White, but Black” is internationally received as a black author, though the visibly black body that is presumed by readers to emanate those works does not in fact exist. Authorship is, in Foucault’s words, “the principle of thrill in the proliferation of meaning” (W 159), separating the masters from the scribblers, and keeping the laundry lists, letters, and random jottings of
“authors” from cluttering the perceived coherence of their “works.” The one-at-a-time rule for African American authors may be the single most famous such principle of economy. In Chester Himes’s words: “You know there is only one black writer. Just as soon as he makes it, they tear him down. [...] Whitey has always pitted one black against the other.”

“Mr. Therefore” is not in that league, but he rigorously anticipates the expectation that black authors speak from “authentic” experience (that is, black and their own). Inevitably he feels the contradictory pulls of the “double audience,” black and white, “with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view” that James Weldon Johnson described in “The Dilemma of the Negro Author” in 1928.

For Rayford Logan as a professor at Howard University and a celebrated historian, a range of cultural contradictions—between his skin color and his Phi Beta Kappa key, the white establishment and his black constituency, his writer’s life and authorial identity—were sufficiently resolved to allow witty, signed “confessions” about passing. “Mr. Therefore,” by contrast, steps aside from his authorial identity to comment anonymously on the contradictions that create and beset that identity. Unable to be “authentically” black or white by conventional standards, he moves to another level of analysis that questions racial authenticity itself and dissolves whiteness in the irony of “innocent of being white”—an analysis that is about bodies like his, but detached from that body by anonymity. Foucault envisions some such step away from authorship and to higher discursive power as the final stage in the processes that created the “author” as “the privileged moment of individualization” (W 141) in cultural history and that will uncreate the “author” as belief in individual subjectivity fades. There comes an epoch when all discourses will “develop in the anonymity of a murmur” (W 160). In the age of authorship, the reader asks, “Who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality?” (W 160). The account to be given for “Mr. Therefore’s” authorship is too eccentric to be generally absorbed. More manageable to him are the questions that Foucault imagines for the post-authorial age of anonymity: “What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself?” (W 160). Having translated his personal experiences into “a document on the race problem,” “Mr. Therefore” poses the question of who can appropriate the discourse of blackness and how it circulates (differently in Europe from in America, for example). To be sure, Foucault’s monocultural model foresaw no such applications, and the poststructuralist death of the Author (Man, Subject) continues to cut against the claims to subjectivity being made by cultural minorities, feminists, and third world peoples. Nonetheless, the points of applica-
bility and breakdown of Foucault’s model merit some attention, especially since James Weldon Johnson’s first major solution to the “dilemma of the Negro author” was an anonymous novel of 1912 about an Ex-Coloured Man, which “passed” for autobiography and which Ellison answered with his own novel about an anonymous autobiographer. In a few pages, our double masquerader, “Mr. Therefore,” seems to have opened up the Pandora’s box of authorship with rich, anarchic results. We might retitlle his memoir, “Author, but Writer.”

Ellison’s anticipations of “What Is an Author?” are particularly striking in the novel’s depiction of a complete disconnect between writer and author. Foucault’s model elucidates a parable about authorship little discussed by Ellison’s critics. In his “days of certainty” with the Communist-like Brotherhood, the Invisible Man is an “author”—a black face for a white movement. As “author” he is largely a fiction; his articles and letters come from other hands. Indeed, the name that he is making for himself is one given him by the Brotherhood. He is so disengaged that he is duped by a warning note written by one of his own ghostwriters, Brother Jack, who ventriloquizes an unnamed but concerned black comrade. When a portrait of Frederick Douglass is hung in his Brotherhood office by a truly loyal black comrade, the Invisible Man is scarcely aware that Douglass was an author, having heard of him only from his grandfather’s tales. Black authorship has been reabsorbed into orality. Having come to realize how he has been exploited by the Brotherhood, the Invisible Man finally becomes a writer from the underground, and by withholding his name, forestalls the white-controlled mechanisms of author formation that keep the “double audience” divided and antagonistic. Having failed to control his authorial presence as a political celebrity, he creates a text that governs itself as it tells the larger tale of its own creation, and one whose anonymity expresses and protects his invisibility.

The “I am”s of “Mr. Blank” and “Mr. Therefore” simultaneously make and break the autobiographical contract with the reader by introducing and at once concealing the subject who will recount the paradoxes of becoming white to fight white racism. Ellison rehearsed a similar encounter in Vermont for the cadets at West Point in 1974: “One afternoon I wrote some words while sitting in an old barn looking out on the mountains, and these words were ‘I am an invisible man.’ I didn’t know quite what they meant, and I didn’t know where the idea came from, but the moment I started to abandon them, I thought: ‘Well, maybe I should try to discover exactly what it was that lay behind the statement. What type of man would make that type of statement, would conceive of himself in such terms? What lay behind him?’”18 This existential moment could be taken as le degré zéro de l’autobiographie: the
encounter with a self that is only the presentation of its own mask and that does not exist outside of the unfolding autobiographical act. The scene is almost theological in its abstraction, and indeed Ellison’s date with destiny—his call to authorship—while looking out at the mountains may echo on the lower frequencies a famous hillside encounter with the invisible: “And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3.14); recall “I yam what I am” above. Later, in an introduction written for the 1980 edition of the novel, Ellison described this emergence as “nothing more substantial than a taunting, disembodied voice” (IM xiv) when the “spokesman for invisibility intruded” (IM xvi). The anonymity and invisibility of this “I am” make the author-centered question “Who really spoke?” fruitfully unanswerable and thereby kick the question upstairs to address the circulation of discourses in the culture. In the novel this speaking void, a “blues-toned laughter-at-wounds” (IM xviii), channels more anonymous discourses than Foucault considered: blues, jazz, folklore, street talk (all the while creating Ellison as the Great American Author being venerated at West Point). Trevor McNeely argues that in creating a narrator so hard to disentangle from himself, and one conceived of as being spoken through by the discourses of the culture as much as articulating them himself, Ellison may anticipate Foucault in narrativizing the “fictionality” of his own authorial position, that is, “recognizing that the voice that speaks with his name is not ‘his.’” In the Epilogue, the reader is also invited beyond the bounds of individual subjectivity: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (IM 581). Beyond question, Ellison’s call to authorship by the invisible “I am” issued from highly evolved literary and philosophical self-consciousness. Not to be forgotten, however, is that “I am [name withheld],” was also an ordinary way to proceed in African American autobiography in these years. What Ellison has done is to throw out the gradations (“Negro,” “mulatto,” “near-white”) so as to create one non-position, “I am invisible,” that is big enough to swallow America whole. We know that a similar phrase from Harlem street talk, “I’m nowhere,” had caught his ear somewhat earlier.

Before surveying these autobiographies in more detail, it may be helpful to tease out another subtext in Ellison’s tale of the genesis of invisibility, for his voicing of anonymity answers an earlier emphatic rejection of it. In the automythology of African American authorship, the text to beat was Richard Wright’s “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” (1940). Needing to explain how a black author could create Bigger Thomas without being Bigger, Wright recalled all the objections to the violent truth of Bigger Thomas that he anticipated from his Communist comrades and from the image-conscious black middle class. But Bigger made him do it: “What Bigger meant had claimed me because I felt with
all my being that he was more important than what any person, white or black, would say or try to make of him, more important than any political analysis designed to explain or deny him, more important, even, than my own sense of fear, shame, and diffidence” (HB 870). Wright even had doubts about starting with the rat in chapter 1 of Native Son: “But the rat would not leave me . . .” (HB 880). Even more than for Ellison on the mountain years later, it was an intrusion. Therein, of course, lies the heroic tale of how Wright went out on a limb and became the Great African American Author who got America to buy his novel (215,000 copies in the first three weeks) and, for a while, his politics.

By the early 1950s, however, that limb had broken. Wright was in Paris, and Ellison, the patient master of the lowered profile, was improvising the “music of invisibility.” By no coincidence the last words of “How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” reverberate in the first words of Invisible Man. Wright ends by touting the claims of the Negro as a subject fit to join the American canon: The Negro, he observes, is tragic enough for Henry James; gloomy enough for Nathaniel Hawthorne. “And if Poe were alive, he would not have to invent horror; horror would invent him” (HB 881). Agreeing that Poe was more haunted than haunting, Ellison’s narrator speaks from the cultural depths (a coal hole, Hollywood) to signify on Wright’s self-promotion into the ranks of James, Hawthorne, and Poe: “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms” (IM 3). Ellison rings other changes on Wright: With bone black protagonists like Bigger, Wright banished the theme of passing;22 Ellison brings back racial masquerade, if no longer just passing, as a governing trope. With Bigger and others, Wright focused on those who could not speak for themselves. About one of his first real-life models in Chicago, an immigrant from the South, he said, “I would make his life more intelligible to others than it was to himself” (AH 316). In returning to the traditional forms of autobiography, Ellison creates a subject who makes sense of his life for himself—if slowly and too late. Ellison makes his own claims on canonical status, but they are double-voiced claims in the key of anonymity.

In what follows, this paper considers the tendencies of the anonymous self-narratives as a form, before considering how they frame three historically significant acts of authored autobiography: James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man,23 published anonymously in 1912; Wright’s first published self-narrative, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch”24 (1937); and Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952). This brief and impressionistic survey ends with reflections on how Ellison’s novel anticipates the archaeology of
anonymity and authorship sketched in Foucault’s “What is an Author?” Both texts conclude by addressing the modern reader’s anxious need to know “Who really spoke?” (W 160) and recommend the wisdom of leaving the question unanswered. In place of Foucault’s once-and-future anonymity, Ellison suggests something closer to “still and always.”

Up from Anonymity

Historically these early twentieth-century self-narratives manifest what we might call “secondary anonymity.” They are not, that is, an oral or folkloric form gradually emerging into literacy and authorship, but rather modifications of an author-generating form that has gone underground. With the substitution of “Jim Crow” for “slavery,” they continue the political work of antebellum slave narrative. Before getting to “I was born,” these twentieth-century witnesses—northerners and southerners alike—locate themselves through an introductory “I am” on the map of American race, for they have not escaped to a place from which they can proclaim their names or release photographs. We do not expect “Free at last!” from “Anonymous.” They still work with a tripartite geography: the South, the North, and an idealized Europe. But the circulation among these locales has stalled, for the North no longer offers refuge or promises intervention.

In anatomizing the conventions of slave narrative, James Olney speaks of the “triangular relationship of narrator, audience, and sponsors.”25 Between the slave narrator and the white audience stand the testimonials, prefaces, and introductions written by white abolitionist friends or amaneuenses. Fugitives who found themselves protected, promoted, and scripted by the abolitionists could become in effect the intellectual property of the movement more than the proprietors of their own texts. As Olney puts it, “the narrative lives of the ex-slaves were as much possessed and used by the abolitionists as their actual lives had been by slaveholders” (SN 154). Having suffered comparable entrapment by the Brotherhood, the Invisible Man escapes underground. That disappearance was well understood by the twentieth-century autobiographers, who found protection in anonymity rather than in white sponsors and who spoke to the audience without mediation and frankly.26 About her automatic and categorical lack of “respectability,” “Southern Colored Woman 1902” remarks, “You cannot insult a colored woman, you know.”27 She is patronless and, behind the veil, cannot be insulted or patronized.

The following examples, drawn mainly from the Independent under its reformist editor, Hamilton Holt, cannot claim to be a representative
sample. They do, however, show strong regularities in their echoes and reversals of the conventions of slave narrative. These revoicings of old formulas can be tabularized by excerpting James Olney’s aptly named “Master Plan for Slave Narratives,” from which the italicized rubric below is quoted verbatim (SN 152–53). Parallels from authored texts are also noted.

A. An engraved portrait, signed by the narrator. As noted, the picture and name are replaced by an ekphrastic but concealing “I am.”

C. A handful of testimonials and/or one or more prefaces or introductions written either by a white abolitionist friend of the narrator . . . or a white amanuensis/editor/author actually responsible for the text. Though sponsorship has been eliminated, the function is narratively represented in the passing narratives by white arbiters of racial identity, who range from wise to pernicious: The Ex-Coloured Man’s millionaire: “My boy, you are by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man.” (TA 144); a white physician: “You stay out here, boy,’ he said, ‘and become a white man” (ANW 375); “Mr. Therefore’s” London author (above); Rayford Logan’s Williams professor (above); Emma of the Brotherhood: “But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?” (IM 305).

E. The actual narrative:

1. a first sentence beginning, “I was born . . .,” then specifying a place but not a date of birth. The “Negro Peon 1904” is uncertain about date (NS 409). Otherwise, identifying details are suppressed; “born and reared in the south” (MS 196) is typical.

3. a description of a cruel, master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping . . . . Male narrators remain close to slave narrative here: At age seventeen the “Negro Peon 1904” is whipped for trying to leave a farm job for one with higher pay (NS 409). Others get into a fight with white boys: “Mr. Blank” (ANW 373); Communist Angelo Herndon28; Wright (EL 225).

5. record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write. The ineffectuality and reverse effects of education are frequently noted. “Mr. Therefore” debunks the belief that “education will solve the race problem” (WB 498) and hears a pernicious argument from a southern clergyman: If the Negro gets an education, he will seek “social equality” and “the next thing he’ll want to do will be to marry a white woman” (WB 496). “Southern Colored Woman 1904” notes: “The Southern whites dislike more and more the educated colored man”; and, “In the natural order of things our children will be better educated than we, they will have our accumulations and their own. With the added dislike and hatred of the white man, I shudder to think of the outcome.”

10. description of successful attempt(s) to escape . . . . “Negro Peon 1904”
notes the absence of this climactic event in his tale: “But I didn’t tell you how I got out. I didn’t get out—they put me out” (NS 414). Other narrators lament that they have no place to escape to. The “Southern Colored Woman 1904” envies a named autobiographer, an immigrant from China: “Fortunate Lee Chew! You can go back to your village and enjoy your money. This is my village, my home, yet I am an outcast” (RP 587).

11. taking a new last name (frequently one suggested by a white abolitionist) to accord with the new social identity as a free man. . . . Entrenched social pathologies rather than new identities are the organizing theme. The narrator’s anonymity is often compounded by self-effacement into typicality. “Negro Nurse 1912,” who tends white children but sees her own daughters only one afternoon every two weeks, lets herself rhetorically be her class, and her class be their ancestors: “The most that can be said of us negro household servants in the South—and I speak as one of them—is that we are to the extent of our ability willing and faithful slaves” (MS 197). To her successive employers she has been merely “Mammy”; to the reader, she is “A Negro Nurse.” The tendency of these autobiographical subjects to disappear into their “problem” is inscribed in the two formulaic elements of the titles: (1) “life story” or “autobiography” and (2) “Negro problem” or “race problem.” Wright signifies on this yoking in the title, “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch.”

To be sure, not all African American narrators, even in the Independent, were anonymous, and in these years the most famous adaptation of slave narrative garnered celebrity for its author and proclaimed a new era: Booker T. Washington’s Up From Slavery (1901), which begins, “I was born a slave” and which embeds numerous letters, news articles, and testimonials to attest to the status and patronage that Washington enjoys. Though Washington was a regular contributor to the Independent, his adaptation of the former slaves’ ascent narratives is countered by the anonymous and patronless autobiographers. They tell tales not of liberation but of stagnation and forego the slave narrators’ emphasis on personal and historical “development.” Illiteracy is dangerous, but literacy is not liberation, and education can bring white reprisal. These anecdotal accounts show few traces of the abolitionists’ shaping of slaves’ tales into conversion narrative, that is, the inspiring account of how the children of darkness see a great light and come northward to freedom. Instead we find accounts, told from behind the veil, of surviving and owning the darkness.

The embedding and subversion of the conventions of slave narrative in The Autobiography and Invisible Man have been well analyzed by Robert Stepto, Lucinda MacKethan, Valerie Smith, and other critics. Through
his movements north, south, and to Europe, the Ex-Coloured Man ultimately “escapes” only into the bondage of stultifying whiteness, where he ends up as one of Washington’s admirers and patrons. The Invisible Man’s education and “freedom ride” north finally win him promotion to a coal hole (Washington began his ascent from a coal mine). Those references are surely intended: the portrait of Douglass appears incongruously in Johnson’s novel (hanging amid prizefighters in a gambling club) as it does in Ellison’s. However, the above survey also suggests that this stalling and reversal of “development” was a dominant theme in the practice of anonymous autobiography in these years. The nameless “I am” is not likely to tell a Horatio Alger story about him- or herself.

The combination of anonymity and passing pushes the rhetorical situation to crisis, as “Mr. Blank” and “Mr. Therefore” show. These misembodied and unidentified writers are doubly suspect and yet strangely credible, for as racial spies they have good reason not to “out” themselves. “Mr. Blank” is a college graduate, has prominent white relatives in his native South, and has lived in New York. Otherwise, his narrative persona and message shift. At the beginning and the end, he speaks as the anonymous voice of an invisible population, the million or more Americans who could easily claim white privilege across the color line but honorably choose not to. Yet the picaresque title, “The Adventures of a Near-White” reflects his own “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” role of crossing the line. “Sometime I shall possibly decide to be one or the other for all time, but just now the game is too interesting” (ANW 376). As the concealed trickster, he twists white Americans that everyone they accept as white is not necessarily so. He does not estimate the size of this population of maskers, but they too are granted invisibility by other Negroes: “We see them and we see them not, for we understand” (ANW 376). His associative string of anecdotes suggests that he cannot find a stable position in relation to the shifty and uncertain, but fiercely enforced, color line. At whichever end of the railroad car he seats himself, he may get ushered to the other. After having a good breakfast by himself in a New York restaurant, he returns with some darker friends for lunch and sits, having turned black, as he realizes, for an hour without ever being visible to a waiter. On the other hand, dark women turn him dangerously white.

He savors the absurdity of what he witnesses as he straddles the color line, where the contradictions of racism collapse other social codes. When he registers to vote in the South, he finds that the white clerk is surreptitiously tagging the cards “W” (white) or “C” (colored). Despite his “C” companion, Mr. Blank is tagged “W” because the clerk fears to ask the race question of a (seeming) white man. White chivalry for once erases the lurking taint of black blood and permits precisely what the
clerk is there to prevent: the admission of that blood to “W” franchise. Throughout these “Adventures,” white solidarity has only fallible eyes to protect itself and, whatever the assumption (“He’s white”; “He’s black”), fears to ask the question.

When identity is revealed, language itself can break down, and with it social relations. In another anecdote, “Mr. Blank” buys cigars from a druggist over the months, but finds at a certain point that it is always others who wait on him. Again, it is to be assumed that the race question has never been asked. Finally he returns at a moment when the druggist, working alone, will have to wait on him. The druggist asks him to take his business elsewhere: “I didn’t know that you were a n______, or that you were not a white man until a few days ago. [. . .] You have always been a gentleman, and I have always thought of you as Mr. Blank. Since I found out that I tried to dissociate you from that term, and I can’t do it. I don’t think that I could ever call you anything else.” (ANW 375). Even the euphemized “n______,” spelled out elsewhere in the text, suggests the druggist’s own gentility, in irreconcilable conflict with his racism. The gentleman cannot be served (though other Negroes are) because he cannot be named, being neither “Mr.” (obligatory for a gentleman) nor “not-Mr.” (obligatory for a Negro). Better than he knows, “Mr. Blank” has pulled up the roots of his moniker in being effaced (blank) by being white (blanc).

“Mr. Blank” is not a self-conscious literary artist, but connections can be made between the name that is withheld from the text and the name that keeps falling away from him in the events recounted. Working as a bellboy, “Mr. Blank” recoils at being called the generic “George” by a white patron. The head bellman tells him, “‘Grin at him, kow-tow, and be a nigger and you’ll get the money. I don’t like it myself, but I have to do it’” (ANW 374). The Invisible Man’s grandfather gives similar advice more militantly on his deathbed: “I want you to overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction . . . .” (IM 16). “Mr. Blank” cannot bear the role and quits the job. But white advice in the North also does violence to his sense of self: “You stay out here, boy,” [the physician] said, “and become a white man” (ANW 375). Instead he goes south again, though he apparently does not remain there.

“Mr. Blank” does not manage to organize these picaresque “adventures,” which also proclaim “tragedy” (ANW 374), around an entirely coherent self. His heart lies with the black community, but he cannot reconcile the arbitrariness and performativity of race that he experiences in daily life with the essentialism of his sentiment that he truly is a Negro, or at least will be. He hears the “call of the blood” (ANW 376), but still enjoys his Jekyll and Hyde role. At the heart of these confessions,
he seems to paraphrase St. Augustine, “Make me a Negro, o Lord, but not yet!”

“Mr. Therefore,” as we have seen, suffers a severe case of invisibility avant la lettre. Both black and white stares can unmake his marriage: “she a colored woman, I her white lover” (WB 493). The desiring gaze of white women poses dangers they do not suspect. He knows that in Europe his wife’s and his own complexions would be read differently or not read at all. In a New York restaurant they found themselves being snubbed by a haughty waiter, but suddenly started receiving solicitous service when the waiter heard them speaking French: “It was Madame this and Madame that . . . .” (WB 492). Though appalled at the waiter’s combination of racism and snobbishness, he foregrounds the cosmopolitanism of his own gaze. When he first saw his wife “of olive-brown skin, with lustrous black hair” he “thought instantly of a mantilla-clad Castilian in some lovely old Spanish town” (WB 492). It is also in Europe, as we have seen, that he can “out” himself and put a face to his “works.” But in America, whatever he does or does not do, he is left with no non-transgressive position, no place to be, as he jests, “innocent of being white” (WB 490).

The autobiographical selves that “Mr. Blank” and “Mr. Therefore” present are organized around their protest against the fracturing of self in racist America, that is, the “dangerous anomaly” averted by Logan and the “anomaly . . . strange beyond belief” proclaimed by “Mr. Blank.” Their self-presentations share two major propositions: (1) “You can’t see me” (that is, “I am textually and racially anonymous”); and (2) “I’m trapped.” That narrative instability is writ large in Johnson’s and Ellison’s novelizations of anonymous autobiography.

Human Documents

Like Invisible Man, which pervasively echoes it,31 The Autobiography spins out a parable about writing—writing music, as well as writing autobiography—from the position of a failed musician and failed colored man who by anonymity also excludes himself from authorship. The Invisible Man’s final turn from political ranting to jazz-inflected writing offers a less defeatist, if still lonely, rendition of the same synaesthesia: “And so I play the invisible music of my isolation” (IM 13). Johnson published the novel anonymously in 1912 and allowed it to “pass” for autobiography,32 perhaps because, as William L. Andrews speculates,33 black novels did not sell but lives did in the wake of slave-narrative and Washington’s Up from Slavery. As mentioned, for African Americans in imperilled or embarrassed positions—passers, above all—
Anonymity was virtually a warrant of truth. Though The Autobiography received little in the way of reviews or sales, it was generally accepted as “a human document,” as Johnson later tactfully described his hoax. That it was “a work of fiction founded on hard fact,” as Jessie Fauset suspected in her review in The Crisis (5 [November 1912], 38), became clear in 1927 when it was reissued under Johnson’s name. But the autobiographical assumption—that the writer writes what he is—showed its remarkable power in the construction of the “black author function.” Like Wright later with Bigger and Ellison with the Invisible Man, Johnson found himself habitually confused for his protagonist and tried to set the record straight with his own life story, Along This Way. However, to this day, it is not straight. Apart from the career of passing, based on a friend of Johnson’s, the autobiography so broadly echoes the perceptions of The Autobiography that the question still remains debated as if, in a kind of loop, Along This Way were fiction-based fact. For fact-checkers the combination of anonymity and passing tends to queer the deal, which in this case was already thrown off kilter by Carl Van Vechten’s clarification of the “facts” about The Autobiography in his introduction to the 1927 edition: “The Autobiography, of course, in the matter of specific incident, has little enough to do with Mr. Johnson’s own life, but it is imbued with his own personality and feeling, his views of the subjects discussed, so that to a person who has no previous knowledge of the author’s own history, it reads like real autobiography. It would be truer, perhaps, to say that it reads like a composite autobiography of the Negro race in the United States in modern times” (TA xxxiii–xxxiv). In other words, though Johnson is a man of remarkable attainment—a famous composer and poet in 1927 and executive secretary of the NAACP—if you do not know him personally, his life does not matter in comparison to his representativeness, his ability to relate “a composite autobiography” that reads like a “real autobiography.” As Samira Kawash observes, “The distinction between true history and fictional narrative is not in the text but in the reader” (PB 60). Van Vechten’s logic is not so curious, however, for a generation of readers for whom African American autobiography was often anonymous and self-authenticating, that is, real by standards that had nothing to do with the writer’s untraceable life. As the editors of the Independent put it: “It is a reliable story, and we believe, a typical one” (NS 409). That the human faces on social problems should disappear in the process of presenting themselves was too familiar to give pause. And in any proximity to miscegenation, where the passers always are, decency forbids one to ask too many questions. Best not to know.

Anonymous writers are disruptive autobiographical subjects. They
report on lives that do not culminate happily in the writing of the life, for this final act of self-fashioning is tainted with self-denial. Their date with destiny turns out to be an appointment with anonymity. Critics divide sharply in finding or not finding redemption in the protagonists’ acts of writing these two “human documents.” The Invisible Man says that he will end his “hibernation” and emerge, though still invisible. But how? Is this text his emergence? He has at least burned his false identity papers—the diploma, party name, paper Sambo doll, and anonymous note from Brother Jack. The Ex-Coloured Man remains hostage to the overwhelming symbolisms of the “yellowing manuscripts” and “sacrificed talent” of his music. Might these pages about his descent into whiteness be compensation and memorial for the yellowing scores, the yellowbellied cowardice of his life, the high-yellow body that has issued dazzling white children who must never, never read his secrets in black and white? He comes by his anonymity honestly: The absent white father did not give his name to his bastard, and the white children enforce their father’s anonymity here.

Redemption in both cases seems to be in the eye of the critic, for these suspects are uncooperative. They won’t give us their names. They won’t even be serious, though they pose tragically. The prologue and epilogue of The Autobiography, like that of Invisible Man, show an anguish narrator who mocks even as he moans. The Ex-Coloured Man calls his passing a “capital joke” (TA 117), which he despises (the Invisible Man’s opening “joke” was that he doesn’t live in Harlem). And if passing is a joke, so is this narrative: “I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society” (TA 3). In his Epilogue, the Invisible Man raises the stakes of the Ex-Coloured Man’s joke beyond passing and the account of it: “Our fate is to become one, and yet many—This is not prophecy, but description. Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. No one of us seems to know who he is or where he’s going” (IM 577). E pluribus unum: We are all lost together.

Like Ellison, Johnson closely observes the white strings attached to black artistic production and the tendency of free men to become the intellectual property of their patrons. Thanks to the bad faith of white patronage, the Invisible Man circles through a series of false opportunities: in his Tuskegee-like college, until a white patron, Mr. Norton, proves his undoing; in carrying seven kill-the-bearer job recommendations to patrons of the college in New York; and finally in letting the Brotherhood usurp his identity, “authorize” him, and send him out to
stump for unity in a way that will actually cause riots. He does at least escape into a nameless underground, where he “can see the darkness of lightness” (IM 6). In The Autobiography, the yellowness of whiteness haunts a protagonist whose first patron was the absent father, his “white master” (SD 52), followed by a sugar daddy who “loaned” him to his friends and took him to Europe in place of his valet. The protagonist is so blind to his own experience of neo-slavery that he forgets about its persistence in the South and conceives in Europe the ambition of going back to appropriate, ennoble, and commodify ragtime and slave songs. Thereby he hopes to serve his black heritage and let it serve him, fully aware that “I should have greater chances of attracting attention as a coloured composer than as a white one” (TA 147). He forsakes that racialized attention at a lynching, which induces a “shame” powerful enough to drive him from the South, blackness, and music. He is last seen sitting in Carnegie Hall listening to Booker T. Washington at a benefit for Hampton Institute. Rather than flee the white patrons, he becomes one, having learned, like his father, to see market value in human property. The portrait of Douglass in the gambling club has value because it is signed. The property that defines him is not intellectual but real. Both as a slumlord and as a narrator he provides a site for black life that he does not recognize as captivity. Through this autobiographer who is his own patron Johnson in 1912 circumvented the questions about who found or sponsored this document. As with Invisible Man, the abuses of patronage obscure the absence of the literary marketplace from the narrative and forestall dicey questions about Johnson’s and Ellison’s own appropriations of racial tragedy.

It is ironic that Johnson should in 1927 choose his friend, Carl Van Vechten, the famous patron of the Harlem Renaissance writers, to introduce this extraordinary satire on white patronage. In the next decade, a more militant generation would look back scornfully at how these writers came before white audiences “in the knee pants of servility.” Wright made that charge in his “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” in New Challenge, which he co-edited.37 The journal folded after one issue for want of advertising, subscribers, and, above all, the hoped-for support of the Communist Party (CPUSA).38 A patronage-free position was not easily found. Wright provides the great model of visible authorship and the exception in this line of anonymous autobiographers, but a subtler exception in the salad days of the late 1930s than might be expected.
Copy Wright

In 1937, the reader of a Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) anthology, *American Stuff,* would find the usual “rainbow of America” collection of aspiring amateurs and anonymous “folk” artists recorded by well-meaning collectors. The African American voices are mostly anonymous, including “Six Negro Market Songs of Harlem,” recorded by Frank Byrd; “Twenty-One Negro Spirituals,” recorded by South Carolina Project Workers; “A Gullah Story,” recorded by Genevieve W. Chandler; and “Seven Negro Convict Songs,” recorded by John A. Lomax. The “Notes on Contributors” reveal that Richard Wright left Mississippi at fifteen on his own and did everything from washing dishes to functioning as executive secretary of the Chicago John Reed Club (301). His class position is clear, as are his politics. He also claims pieces in *New Masses, Anvil,* and *Left Front,* but no titles. In 1937 he was availing himself of the two major sources of patronage available to aspiring writers, the FWP and the organs of the CPUSA, and consequently wrote far more anonymous than signed pieces in that year. Ironically he began his emergence as a famous Chicago author while serving as the anonymous voice of Harlem in the FWP’s *New York Panorama* (1938) and *New York City Guide* (1939) and as the “Harlem Bureau” of the *Daily Worker* (July to December, 1937). The “Harlem Bureau” was in fact the byline for whatever reporter, black or white, reported on items of interest to African Americans, and a way of establishing a black “author” in the symbolic geography of the *Worker.*

Anonymity did not sit lightly on the future father of Bigger Thomas. As he set off to New York to seek fame and fortune, waggish friends printed a headline for a fictitious newspaper, *The Chicago View:* “Dick Wright Noted Author Off to N.Y.” In *American Stuff* the young Marxist steps forward from anonymity with marked self-consciousness about the form that he is adapting, starting with a catchy riff on the formulaic compound title: “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow [the race problem]: An Autobiographical Sketch [autobiography].” “Ethics” starts with the equivalent of Olney’s first whippings (E.3) motif: As a small child he was beaten into a fever for standing up to a gang of white boys—but beaten by his mother, who feared for his life. Under the “barriers against literacy” (E.5), the protagonist is largely unschooled and finds that his hopes to learn skills in an optical company are thwarted by resentful white employees. His “Jim Crow education” is, instead, a course of learning silence, accommodation, resignation. Though the writer has obviously migrated to the North, no narrative is given of ‘successful escape’ (E.10); he ends as a uniformed delivery boy in the South. The
only anticipation of the future writer is his ruse in smuggling books out of a whites-only library by borrowing a card from a sympathetic white man and writing a note that effaces his own literacy and individuality: “Please let this nigger boy have the following books” (EL 235). It is a gesture reminiscent of the culminating self-cancelling of the anonymous autobiographers, and though “Ethics” is signed, it is rigorously generic. In the nine vignettes the African Americans remain nameless and are presented as typical: “a Negro woman” kicked into a store; “my fellow Negro porters”; “the Negro maids”; “the boy who had been castrated.” The writer himself is called “boy” and “nigger,” becoming “Richard” only in an account of being falsely accused of failing to say “Mister” to a white man. Only the prizefighter Jack Johnson is named, who is listed at the end under a long catalogue of topics that were “taboo from the white man’s point of view.” Johnson cannot be forgiven for beating a white man, just as young protagonist is not forgiven for fighting back against white boys. The well-intentioned and naive “Richard” is nearly as generic as the surrounding characters and, like them, created by his class position. His development is outstripped by the unfolding horrors of the world around him: “I was learning fast, but not quite fast enough” (EL 231).

“Ethics” re-enters the now famous world of Johnson’s The Autobiography in more militant terms. The Ex-Coloured Man’s earliest memory is of how he was spanked for digging up “a hedge of various coloured glass bottles stuck in the ground neck down” (TA 4), which his mother had put around her flower beds. The art historian Robert Farris Thompson argues that the bottles are an African survival, the “flash of spirit.”41 The colored glass becomes a resonant image when, upon discovering his African blood, the protagonist finds that “my thoughts were coloured” (TA 21) by that realization. He describes this “dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each and every coloured man in the United States” as the “narrow neck of this one funnel” (the upside down bottles) through which colored people’s thoughts and energies must pass. Liberation of sorts is soon found in the “glass-doored bookcase” (TA 25) and ultimately, but anxiously, in the “dazzling white” (TA 198) wife whom he courts “under false colours” (TA 200). The glass and the consequent maternal spanking (now a traumatic beating) begin “Ethics” as well, but as the childhood preliminaries to race war. Unlike the unique and pampered little “coloured” boy, the protagonist is typical and, for several pages, nameless. On the wrong side of the tracks, he and his pals stage mock battles in the cinders, which are harmless black missiles. When a white gang attacks and wounds him with a broken milk bottle (white and cutting), he goes to his mother for comfort and gets severely beaten, as he very nearly will in the optical company when he
again stands out, hoping for skills. He later gets hit on the head by a whisky bottle thrown by white youths and finds security only when, as a bellboy, he can deliver liquor to white whores and their clients without seeming to look. The iridescent ironies of “colour” for Johnson of the NAACP have become the undeclared war of black and white for Wright of the CPUSA.

“Ethics” is little analyzed because its anecdotes have been reused, mixed with much else, in Wright’s famous 1945 autobiography, Black Boy. But Black Boy is a study in celebrity, based on what Margaret Walker called the “daemonic genius” of Wright. It is a portrait of the artist as a young man and a rough but unmistakable version of the Horatio Alger story. This “black boy” is anything but typical. In contrast, “Ethics” is a study in obscurity and, like the anonymous autobiographies, a portrait of a world whose inhabitants are going nowhere, but now one whose pressures are building to revolutionary eruption. As the narrator proceeds—not upward, but sideways—in his “Jim Crow education,” the culture of “boy,” “nigger,” and “bitch” is shown increasingly to be supported by an infrastructure of black compliance, which is strained to the breaking point. Like “Mr. Blank” and “Mr. Therefore,” Wright starts with a puzzle about the construction of racial identities, not “Therefore, in America, I am a negro,” but “My first lesson in how to live as a Negro came when I was quite small” (EL 225). White readers who cannot remember learning to live white may be puzzled that a biological phenomenon as conspicuous as being born with a race (as Negroes are) should in fact require tutoring. “Negro education in the South” was itself a familiar journalistic topic, but this is something else.

In tight vignettes, “Richard” learns to recognize and interpret the voices of resignation of the stultifying culture that is enveloping him. This militant auto-ethnography plays against the patronizing folklore collectors elsewhere in American Stuff. As the anthology was in press, Wright went after one of his co-contributors, John Lomax, in a Daily Worker article on the Blues artist “Lead Belly.”42 Lomax, in this account, “beguiled” the singer into helping him gather songs from southern prisons without remuneration and cheated him of money from a singing tour. In “Ethics” Wright is both the recorder of folk ways and the recorded. It is the whites who speak dialect, as “Richard” does for their benefit only to lower his profile.

At the end, Wright lifts, and does not lift, the curtain for the well-meaning, naive white reader. The Preface to the anonymous 1912 edition of Johnson’s The Autobiography by “The Publishers,” but in fact dictated by Johnson, makes a remarkable claim with calculated naivete: “In this these pages it is as though a veil had been drawn aside: the reader is given a view of the inner life of the Negro in America, is
initiated into the free-masonry, as it were, of race” (xl). Wright goes Johnson one better by reducing Negro life to a “single sentence”: “How do Negroes feel about the way they have to live? How do they discuss it when alone among themselves? I think this question can be answered in a single sentence. A friend of mine who ran an elevator once told me: ‘Lawd, man! Ef it wuzn’t fer them polices ’n’ them ol’ lynch-mobs, there wouldn’t be nothin’ but uproar down here!’” (EL 237). The ironies here are finely wrought, as the single, momentous, veil-lifting sentence leads to the first patch of black dialect in “Ethics,” which rumbles revolution only for those who have ears to hear it. Elevators go down, but they do not stay there, and uproar does not stay put. In Invisible Man, the black-run “uproar department” (IM 212) in the bowels of Liberty Paints finally explodes.

As Wright’s star rose, “Ethics” was republished in ways that virtually reverse its humble and subversive position in American Stuff. After the success of Native Son, “Ethics” was incorporated as an introduction to an enlarged edition of Uncle Tom’s Children in 1940 and the incidents were then incorporated and amplified in Black Boy. The anti-Bildungsroman of “Ethics” became a portrait of the artist as a young man, and a study not of politically explosive obscurity (by an aspiring writer) but of celebrity against all odds (by the black author). Yet as published in 1945 Black Boy offered a cleaner ascent narrative than Wright originally wrote in his American Hunger manuscript, which went on to expose racism in Chicago and the totalitarianism of the CPUSA. The Book-of-the-Month Club pressured him to end—not unlike the slave narrators—with his escape northward from Memphis and to insert a final note of “hope.”43 Ironically, the tale of the bad Marxist patrons was excised by the capitalist marketplace. The master narrative of progress was ripe for uproar from another anonymous autobiographer.

What Is an (Invisible) Author?

In evoking the Red 1930s, Invisible Man incorporates the experience of Dick Wright and other strivers as they tried to use and mostly got used by the CPUSA. Wright arrived in New York in 1937 with his “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” though he did not follow through on all of it, especially its last section, “The Need for Collective Work.” Margaret Walker claims that Wright appropriated the ideas of “Blueprint” from the South Side Writers Group in Chicago and published it under his own name.44 So much for collective work. Another recent arrival in New York, the earnest young Invisible Man, on his way to the seventh and last of the mysteriously unhelpful patrons, runs across the urban bluesman,
Peter Wheatstraw, who pushes a cart piled high with discarded blueprints. Says Peter, “I guess somebody done changed their plans’” (IM 175). At the time the protagonist, a young man in a hurry, does not quite grasp what the bluesman is telling him. Yet in his mildness and naivete, the Invisible Man resembles the compliant, endlessly well-meaning “Richard” of “Ethics” far more than he does the difficult and destined “Richard” of Black Boy.

The rhythms of the Invisible Man’s fitful progress to his autobiographical act reflect the wrenching cycles of advance and decline sketched in this study: the emergence of sponsored authorship in the antislavery movement, and then the withdrawal into the anonymity of the lives in the Independent (Douglass’s portrait appears and disappears in Brotherhood headquarters); the brilliant zenith and quick end of the Harlem Renaissance, as the patrons scattered in the crash of 1929; and the voice and no voice that the Communist Party gave to African Americans. The grandparents of the human property of slave times remain at risk of becoming the intellectual property of their latter-day “rescuers.” The Invisible Man runs through his share of patrons, and he becomes a writer, but he finally knows enough to keep the two things separate. Like the Ex-Coloured Man, he does not, as is often noted, “develop,” come to know himself, and get better on the schedule expected by novel readers. The nameless “I am”s also did not expect to be saved by self-improvement. As Wright put it in “Ethics,” learn as fast as you can, but it won’t be fast enough. You can’t beat history.

In the Epilogue the Invisible Man baits and consoles his readers with the unanswerability of the question, “Who really spoke?” Was it nobody? Everybody? All of us? That’s both the Foucauldian question seventeen years early and quite an old issue. “Literature does not want to be signed,” observed E. M. Forster in 1925. “While the author wrote, he forgot his name; while we read, we forget both his name and our own.”45 In their parallels and polarities, Foucault and Ellison make an interesting pair. Foucault’s monoculturalism is an Ellisonian target; designs on canonical standing, such as Ellison’s, are Foucault’s target (though his own authorship is the deus ex machina of the Foucauldian cosmos, as Séan Burke has argued46). Both had graduated from Marxism and witnessed tremors in late capitalism that seemed revolutionary, but of different sorts: in Harlem in 1942 and on the Left Bank in 1968. Where Foucault debunks the writing subject, Ellison depicts a subjectivity forming itself in the act of writing—or perhaps unforming itself into an invisibility that may not be so far from the self-erasure that Barthes and Foucault find in Mallarmé, Proust, and others. The “music of invisibility,” as Ellison’s protagonist calls it, is a jazz improvisation that mocks and transcends the bugaboos of originality, individual subjectivity, and
named authorship. Jazz can “leav[e] the originator as anonymous as the creators of the architecture called Gothic,” as Ellison observes in “The Charlie Christian Story” (whose name and genius he is trying to memorialize).

The phases articulated by Foucault in his archaeology of the “author” are not far to seek in Ellison’s parable: orality; patronage and criminalization; commodified authorship; the future anonymity. But in the novel these phases intersect, reverse, and have corrupt as well as generative forms. Foucault’s oral phase of authors who are not particular individuals, such as Homer and Hermes Trismegistus, is present by travesty in Ellison’s own blind Homer, Homer A. Barbee, who serves the hero cult of the Founder at the Tuskegee-like college. Literally fronting for the white bankers who sit behind him on the podium, this civilizer/uncivilizer (Homer the barbarian) stages minstrelsy that apes the heroics of an earlier age of minstrels. The genuine oral artist, the incestuous Trueblood, is fended off as a barbarian at the gates. The age of patronage and protection has been described above. What follows is the current age of authorial ownership and commodification, though *Invisible Man* has little to say about the literary market place. Central to the view of Wright, Ellison, and others is that the modern era and its predecessor are not separated by centuries, but collide in the lives of individuals. The Great Migration northward is a journey forward in time. For Wright, the John Reed Club in Chicago was “my first contact with the modern world” (*AH* 381). Ellison similarly describes a leap “from the feudal folk forms of the South to the industrial urban forms of the North [that] is so rapid that it throws up personalities as fluid and changeable as molten metal rendered iridescent from the effect of cooling air.” What Foucault sees as an irreversible process stretching over centuries, Ellison depicts as the experience of a single generation always vulnerable to regression, return, and, as in Foucault’s asylum, the cultural collisions that generate madness. The vets in the bedlam of the Golden Day were not shell-shocked in France but by their return to Alabama. That authorship is a secondary construct beyond the control of the writer is not news. Just look for the white strings attached. To Wright’s cost, *Invisible Man* played its own famous role in the workings of the one-author-at-a-time rule, and “copy Ellison” prevailed for a season. Copyright still provided a living for a few, but authorship itself remained only partly black-owned.

Despite all of these differences, Foucault’s contention that anonymity opens up a rich and productive space outside of the pathologies of authorship (and, it can be added, patronage) does find some confirmation in the above survey, and at more cultural levels than he theorized. He may have suspected as much, for in 1977 he wrote an introduction
for a never published “anthology of existences,” “la vie des hommes infâmes,” to gather “[s]ingular lives, those which have become, through I know not what accidents, strange poems.”51 In the first half of the twentieth century uncountable strange, anonymous lives lay behind and beyond the famous writers who both made African American authorship visible and problematized its “blackness.” Names removed, an anthology of existences could be compiled: “Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro” (TA 210). “I am near white.” “Therefore, in America, I am a negro.” “I am an invisible man.” There is also a haiku that Wright wrote near the end of his life:

I am nobody
A red sinking autumn sun
Took my name away.52

AMHERST COLLEGE

NOTES

2 [“Mr. Blank”], “The Adventures of a Near-White,” Independent, 75 (14 August 1913), 373–76 (373); hereafter cited in text as ANW.
3 [“Mr. Therefore”], “White, but Black: A Document on the Race Problem,” Century Magazine, 109 (February 1925), 492–99 (492); hereafter cited in text as WB.
4 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (1952) (New York, 1980); hereafter cited in text as IM.
8 See notes 2 and 3.
12 The light-skinned Walter White, director of the NAACP, recounted a foray into the
22 Werner Sollors (*Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* [New York, 1997], p. 284) attributes the end of passing as a theme to the influence of Wright and Zora Neale Hurston.
26 Editorial introductions are infrequent and terse, indicating dictated texts, witnessing to the “culture and recognized standing” of the writer, or justifying anonymity because of the risk to the life of the writer.


41 Cited by Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, p. 100.

42 Richard Wright, “Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and his People,” *Daily Worker*, 12 August 1937, 7.

43 The fullest account of the incident is given by Hazel Rowley, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New York, 2001), pp. 284–91. Most of the excluded parts of *American Hunger* were soon published separately in journals and anthologies.


48 That anonymity did not disappear with the emergence of a commercial culture is argued by Robert J. Griffin, “Anonymity and Authorship,” *New Literary History*, 30 (1999), 877–95.


50 Alan Nadel points out a striking series of coincidences between Ellison’s portrayal of invisibility and the description of madmen in *Madness and Civilization*, “who ultimately internalized their own invisibility as the price for ostensible freedom.” See Invisible *Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (Iowa City, Iowa, 1988), p. 15.
