Make
the Great American Novels
Great Again!

A Diachronic Discussion on the Black Experience in America

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Introduction

Donald Trump is the first white President of the United States of America. Thus sounded a claim voiced by American author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates less than a year into Trump's presidency (Coates 2017: 344). Even without unfolding and examining such a claim in greater detail, one immediately notices that Coates' accusation explicitly draws up the American racial battle lines. His indictment proves clearly that any suggestion of America to have moved into a post-racial era, (even) after eight years with a black President, is doomed to fail.

One of Coates' main charges against Trump is that the President defines himself and everything with which he wants to be associated on a dangerous assumption of what 'whiteness' is, namely the opposite or the negation of 'blackness'. Trump has accepted and thrived on this conception of whiteness, which, according to Coates, rests on a political and ideological legacy of white supremacism that is centuries old. Attacking the understanding of whiteness and blackness as essentially being determined by phenotypes, Coates argues that race is not a real biological thing but a political idea and tool. He suggests that America never before has had a President who so clearly defines himself as the negation of the preceding President, "who just so happens to be our first black President". The idea of a white President assumes a black President just as the idea of a white America presupposes a black America (MSNBC 2017). It is this false distinction based on skin color that Trump managed to generate into political capital. Coates argues therefore that Trump was elected by and for a white America, suggesting that his political ascend is impossible to distinguish from an idealistic rise of white America at the expense of its negation—black America.

Besides verbalizing Trump's political skin color, Coates has had his hands full with his literary productivity as he is a national correspondence for *The Atlantic* and has authored and edited two highly acclaimed pieces of non-fiction; *Between the World and Me* (2015), which won the 2015 National Book Award for non-fiction and *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy* (2017). This has not only given him a platform as a public intellectual; he is also now considered the most important voice of his generation on race issues as he has managed to bring back to the table, if it ever left, the discussions of race and racism in America.

It did not take long, however, before Coates was thrown to the lions. One of the critical responses to him came from Cornel West, another high profile public intellectual on race matters. West suggested that Coates is "the neoliberal face of the black freedom struggle", accusing

Coates' analysis of the problems that black America faces to be too narrow, essential, and dangerously misleading because it omits crucial factors as the power of corporate America, U.S. foreign and military policies, and the complex dynamics of class, gender, and sexuality in black America. This led West to conclude that Coates "represents the neoliberal wing that sounds militant about white supremacy but renders black fightback invisible" (West 2017). The two had a brief head-to-head moment on Twitter before Coates left the platform, saying that he did not come for this, that this was not what his writings were about, and that he did not want to be considered the public intellectual who fought Cornel West. Nevertheless, the moment "was pegged by some as a feud between America's top black intellectuals" (Sharma 2018).

Such discussions within the black community about race relations and the position of the black man and his experience are by no means a new phenomenon. At the turn of the twentieth century, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois offered significantly different approaches to prosperity for black America. Washington called for a slow, yet steady and pragmatic progress from below, where blacks should partake in "educational programs of vocational training" (Baym 2012: 673). He suggested that if blacks could accept being temporarily separate and unequal in social and political issues, they would eventually reap the fruits of true social equality when whites had seen the productivity of their industrial and vocational work. "The best way to ensure progress and peace in the South was for whites to respect the blacks' desire for improved economic opportunities and for blacks to respect the whites' desire for social separation of the races" (Gates & McKay 2004: 570). Thus, blacks and whites would mutually benefit from 'casting down their buckets' among each other (Washington 2012: 690-91).

Du Bois rejected Washington's philosophy, arguing that to voluntarily surrender social and political rights would keep blacks in a state of second-class citizenship and reduce them into a condition of semi-slavery (Du Bois 1903: 34), which he claimed that Washington accepted as a building block in his long-termed, pragmatic vision. Instead, Du Bois declared that true progress had to come from above. The black race's 'exceptional men' had to pull their "duller brethren" and lift them to a better life (59). This Talented Tenth would be generated in higher education such as universities, which were all-important institutions for knowledge and culture to be transferred from one generation to the next, and where proper training of the intellect would be founded on critical knowledge, human sympathy, and an insight into what it means to be human. Such foundation, Du Bois argued, was in itself the object of life, and the vocational aspects in

life were simply the means to uphold a life, learned in trade and industrial schools (Du Bois 1903-B).

Similarly, the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) witnessed Malcolm X accuse Martin Luther King Jr. and his philosophy of being nothing but a twentieth-century, modern, religious Uncle Tom, who prevented 'so-called Negroes' their true freedom (Haley & Malcolm X 1965: 345). This incontrovertibly demonstrates that the dialectics of the black experience has been and continues to be a crucial, hot topic in the American public sphere, especially within the black community.

Debates on the black experience in America are not confined to discussions between public intellectuals. What it means to be a black man in America has equally been a recurring theme in fiction, including novels that have been highly acclaimed both by critics and popular opinion. An example of such is Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man*, which frequently appears on lists of what is considered examples of the Great American Novel[1] (Temple 2017).

A generation prior to Ellison's novel, Richard Wright published *Native Son* in 1940. Neither Wright nor his novel has the same canonical position in American literature as Ellison and his novel has, which is proved by the existence of a *Cambridge Companion* edition in Ellison's name. That being said, *The Cambridge Companion to American Novelists* does allocate a chapter to Wright, suggesting that his work is not considered completely on the periphery of American literature. It states that Wright's *Native Son* was the first portrayal of what may be called black social realism, and Wright defied therefore the Harlem Renaissance writers' 'celebration of the race' because he felt they either failed or did not care to portray a realistic account of many black people's poor socioeconomic conditions and the fates to which these conditions often destined them. The novel offered an insight—arguably an extreme insight—into a "distinctively black psychology," which only an intersectional condition as harsh as Bigger's, the protagonist, could produce. Nonetheless, *Native Son* came to define and influence "the entire spectrum of African-American literature of the post-World War II period" (Dow 2013: 161), making Wright one of the first African-Americans "to gain a major reputation in twentieth-century American literature" (156).

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[1] The original idea of the Great American Novel was conceptualized as a novel that could carry and define "evolving 'national imaginaries'" and thereby represent what was the 'quintessential American experience' (Graham 2014).

This paper rests on the assumption that literature—fiction and non-fiction—has a didactic element to it, i.e. that people can learn something from reading literature. Good fiction can therefore be regarded as a didactic experiment that provides its readers with an insight into what kind of perceived reality and experience the work of fiction presents. Non-fiction can similarly be consciousness-raising as it both can account—perhaps more directly than fiction—for specific problems in society and also offer proposals for why and how society is structured, created, and organized the way it is. Fiction and non-fiction can thus differ in form and content, but both can have a function of identity building to their readers. As the above shows, dialectics on identity building for African-Americans exists both in the traditions of African-American fiction, e.g. Ellison's and Wright's novels, and non-fiction, e.g. black public intellectuals' discussions and published work on black identity.

This paper will therefore present different generations of African-American public intellectuals' views and understandings of the black experience and what it means and has meant to be a black man in America, hereunder what these voices consider to be crucial for building of a such African-American identity. These voices are W. E. B. Du Bois, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Cornel West and Ta-Nehisi Coates. The paper will then scrutinize the different aspects of identity building present in Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's *Native Son* and how these novels account for the black male experience. The paper will finally let the different views loose and discuss how their didactic functions fit into contemporary American society.

It should be noted that the paper by no means is under the delusion that it can step outside the hermeneutic circles of the novels in question. As already mentioned, both novels (and authors) are acclaimed—Ellison and his novel arguably more than Wright and his novel—for being literary representations of the black man's experience in America, and the paper has chosen these novels exactly because of their being conceived as such. Du Bois, Gates, West, and Coates have for the same reason been chosen as the public intellectuals in this paper as each is considered to be an important voice in the public domain regarding the African-American experience. In short, the paper attempts to bring the views on black male identity building of the two well-known novels into a discussion with public intellectuals, who discuss the same issue among themselves.

The paper therefore aims to investigate and discuss the following research questions: What are the didactic functions of identity building in *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*? In what aspects are these similar, and in what aspects do they differ? What can these fictional texts offer and bring to contemporary discussions about the black condition and experience?

In order to scrutinize these questions, the paper utilizes the approach of cultural text studies (CTS). This approach distinguishes itself as it allows for text to be examined as culture and for culture to be examined as text. CTS

> is "*cultural text* studies" in the sense that the object of study consists of all readable cultural phenomena which are regarded as texts in a much more broadly defined sense than in the traditional field of literary studies. Yet it is also "cultural *text studies*", in the sense that, while the approach is "cultural" […] the work often entails an intense engagement with texts and close readings thereof. (Sørensen 2006: 5, original emphasis)

Utilizing the CTS approach allows this paper to present how each public intellectual accounts for what it means to be part of the black experience in America. Similarly, the paper analyzes Ellison's and Wright's fictional texts for the same purpose. Having first accounted for the synchronic dimension of the paper, a diachronic and analytic discussion will then follow of what each of these views on the black experience can offer to contemporary discussions on what all the views have in common—what it means to be a black man in America.

The Public Intellectuals

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois

Du Bois (1868-1963) was arguably one of the most influential and important intellectuals and activist in America, especially regarding the African-American condition in and since the turn of the twentieth century, and he continues to be referred to and cited by modern scholars and intellectuals, which this paper also will manifest. He taught and wrote on a wide range of issues, but the so-called 'Negro problem' in America and its complexity was something he particularly dedicated his time to in the early 1900s. From early on in his career, Du Bois did not just settle with life inside the academy. Increasingly dedicating his time to political and social activism, Du Bois fought for civil and political rights for African-Americans, exemplified by becoming leader of the Niagara Movement just as he helped create the NAACP—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the early 1900s (Baym 2012: 883-84).

The Du Boisian Trinity

In his 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois mentions three different elements that this paper considers to be irrefutably interconnected: The color-line, the veil, and the concept of double-consciousness. This paper deems these three constituents to be some of, if not the most important concepts of Du Bois' work, and the following provides a brief presentation of each.

Already in the second sentence of his forethought to *Souls*, Du Bois declares that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (v). He defines the *color-line* to be the mere relationship that exists and has existed between "the darker to the lighter races of men" (9). The color-line is therefore by definition not exclusively an American entity, but he does, however, suggest that it without a doubt does have particular specifications in an American context. He says that the Civil War was the ultimate culmination of competing perceptions on just how the relationship between blacks and whites should manifest itself (9).

After the Union's victory, a new American reality demanded answer to a complex problem: "What shall be done with Negroes?" (9). Du Bois argues that the pre-Civil War thought of the American South did not change in its essence with the Emancipation Proclamation. Instead, the South did everything in its power to uphold its belief that God sincerely had created the black man as a *tertium quid*—a third ambiguous entity that existed somewhere in-between man and animal (55). As a direct answer to the efforts by some organizations such as the Freedman's Bureau, who in the last decades of the nineteenth century attempted to establish schools and school

systems for black people, the white South enhanced its racial prejudices against black people by creating new segregation laws and tightening existing ones. Du Bois says that up to the turn of the century, the South took every possible measure to enhance its social and legal separation of black and white people. Each and every element in Southern life was separated into either a black or a white world. This was an omnipresent separation that included everything: Work, government, family, friends, schools, churches, public bathrooms, hotels, movie theaters, means of public transportation, housing policies, the publishing industry, hospitals, jails and asylums, and graveyards. All combined, this proved the new world of de facto and de jure segregation in the American South (57-59). In short, the color-line can be said to be the chasm between the black and the white world for any of the above-listed categories, whether it be a physical or psychological chasm.

The *veil* is the term that Du Bois most often revisits and uses to clarify his arguments throughout his book. He connects the veil with the inevitable experience any black person in America must encounter in life, and he remembers well the very day and moment when the shadow of the veil for the first time swept across himself. He was a young boy and participated in an exchange of visiting-cards with other young kids.

> The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, – refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different form the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from the world by a vast veil. (2)

Such inescapable experience of being told that you are unlike others, that you are different, is hence any African-American's first real encounter with the veil.

Du Bois states that he was able to live happily within the veil for years, and that he had no desire to tear it down. He hated and held content for the white world on the other side because he knew that it was the white world that had created the veil, behind which he lived. This attitude changed, however, and indeed must change, according to Du Bois, if the Negro begins to develop feelings and desires for a life with better and "dazzling opportunities" (2) that only exist in the world outside the veil, such as e.g. proper education. The Negro must therefore tear down the veil created by the white world if he wants to pursue these "dazzling opportunities" for a general and true improvement of his life because the veil hangs "between us [the Negroes] and Opportunity" (41).

It is important to mention that Du Bois does not consider "the Black World beyond the Veil" (49) to be bad, poor, or bad in its own right. Instead, what is truly tragic is the fact that the white world was successful in establishing the veil as a "Veil of Race" (48), in its quest to explicitly and deliberately divide the two worlds from each other. As a consequence, the real problem comes into existence when black Americans who live behind the veil obey and consent to the laws and logic of that exact veil. Put differently, the true tragedy is when these people turn their own logic into either a "tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in my own house?" (2). The worst case scenario is if these people descend to the rationality of the veil and actually consider themselves to be less than other people, clownish, simple, and limited (47) simply due to the color of their skin.

This leads us to the last important constituent of Du Bois' theory, namely his concept of *double-consciousness*. Du Bois' own words do here deserve full citation: Besides being subjected to the veil, behind which he is born, the Negro is

> gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

On the basis of this, the double-consciousness is perceived almost as a black man's schizophrenic state of mind, where a constant internal battle takes place on how to navigate and live in America as a black man. It is this two-ness, Du Bois argues, that makes it impossible for the Negro to escape this schizophrenia because there does not exist a place for him to conceive himself as an individual; neither is he solely an American, nor is he only a black man. Instead, the double-consciousness traps him in a never-ending battle between these two, apparently irreconcilable, states of being.

Du Bois even suggests that this internal struggle essentially is the history of the Negro in America. Ever since he came in chains to the shores of America, the Negro has tried to merge the

two identities into a single new one in its own right. The Negro's aim has simply been to be considered as a black American without being degraded, condemned, and "without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (3) for striving towards this aim. In other words, the Negro basically wishes to be considered and to be equal to other Americans. The problem for him, according to Du Bois, is that white America has since the Emancipation regarded him as weak and without agency due to his spare attempts of going here and there. The white man has considered the black man as attempting to navigate socially, culturally, politically, and economically without a compass. This reflects to some degree what Washington also identified as a problem for the Negro. Due to social and political inexperience, Washington argued, the Negro should not automatically and ignorantly search for a place at the top of society (Washington 2012: 691). Washington and Du Bois thus agree on the perception of the freed Negro, but whereas the former argues that Negro eagerness for political and social ascend has to be kept under control; that Negro prosperity should come organically from below as a result from hard work, Du Bois explains the poor perception of the Negro as being a direct result of his own double-consciousness. His strive to satisfyingly fulfill the needs and ideals of his dual Negro and American consciousness is, according to Du Bois, nothing but a waste of double aims (Du Bois 1903: 2-3).

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Gates (b. 1050) is an American scholar, Harvard professor, literary critic, and historian. Having dedicated much of his career to African-American literary theory, the paper has in the following converted some of these theories into representations of his views on the African-American experience.

Exclusive Humanity

Gates argues that a false assumption about the concept of race has prevailed in Western societies ever since the Enlightenment. Pseudoscience has since then claimed that race is a biologically "ineffaceable quantity, which irresistibly determine[s] the shape and contour of thought and feeling as surely as it d[oes] the shape and contour of human anatomy" (1986: 3). This discourse has continued to dominate conversations and policies on race, and even though modern science has proved that it biologically speaking is disingenuous nonsense to speak of e.g. the white, black, Aryan, and even Jewish races, such dubious discourse is still alive and well (4). Gates warns

against a perception of race as "an objective term of classification, when in fact it is a dangerous trope" (5).

Discourse on race becomes a dangerous trope when it not only *de*scribes people on a racial basis, but especially when it categorically *a*scribes unique features as belonging to a certain race—from physical capabilities over cultural capacities to human value. "The biological criteria used to determine "difference" in sex simply do not hold when applied to "race". Yet we carelessly use language in such a way as to *will* this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations" (5, original emphasis). In search for 'natural' authority, Western culture, in particular, has attempted to reduce race into qualities that are natural, absolute, and essential (6). What this will ultimately does and historically has done is to arrange people hierarchically—not just in terms of which person or group of people is 'better' than others within the realm of humanity, but also who ultimately can and cannot be considered 'worthy of membership' to exactly that group. As an example, different races have not been considered to occupy the same position on the Great Chain of Being (8). René Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* embodied the philosophical debate on slavery of the eighteenth century, because

> *reason* was privileged, or valorized, above all other human characteristics. Writing […] was taken to be the *visible* sign of reason. Blacks were "reasonable," and hence "men," if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery of "the arts and sciences," the eighteenth century's formula for writing. (8, original emphasis)

According to this rationale, literate people, then, had a visual proof of their belonging to humanity while illiterate people could not prove their humanity.

The Importance of Voice

Referring to a 1740 South Carolinian law that criminalized the mere act of teaching slaves to read and write, Gates demonstrates how important it was for existing power structures in America to defend and justify themselves and their conceptualization of literacy as belonging to the so-called civilized white world. The first literary productions of black people in America was therefore "not an activity of mind; rather it was a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity" (9).

It was through these first literary productions, e.g. poetry and autobiographical slave narratives, that black people in America began to generate their own voice as an attempt to crave and produce both an individual and collective history. "Text created author; and black authors, it was hoped, would create, or re-create, the image of the race in European discourse" (11). The black face and voice were therefore interdependent—a voice needed a face for its own existence, and the voice gave the face profile and individuality in turn.

Both the written and spoken voice were of paramount importance for African-Americans to establish both a personal and collective face and identity. Without these voices, Gates argues, blacks would have been considered to be without any true self-consciousness and history. They would, in other words, not have been able to present and represent a 'black self' without the consciousness these voices provided them, and Gates even claims that there "could be no presence of Africans in history without this power of representation" (1987: 104). He also refers to Derrida, who equated the spoken voice directly to consciousness itself, the existence of which he rendered impossible without the voice, as he said that "the voice *is* consciousness" (106, original emphasis).

Blacks would have been considered 'invisible'—not from a lack of face, but from a lack of voice—because without the latter, Gates suggests, one is not an active, independent part of history; instead, one is defaced from it (104). The creation of a black identity and face is thus dependent on a black voice because proclamation via language signifies a self before anything else. The use of language demonstrates individual, personal subjectivity, and this language would enable blacks to "become social and historical entities. In short, [blacks] could inscribe their selves only in language" (105).

Different mediums of voice can be used for different purposes. Whereas black writing arguably gave birth to the African-American voice, Gates points to Frederick Douglass as a pioneer for using the black spoken voice in social affairs and radical activism because he considered a powerful and authoritative human voice the best tool for social reform: "Humanity, justice and liberty [...] demand the service of the living human voice" (106).

Police Arrest and Intersectionality

In 2009, Gates was in the public eye after being arrested at his home. After having pushed his front door through because it was jammed, the police soon arrived on a tip-off of a possible break-in. Gates and the white officer argued back and forth, both demanding to know the identity

of the other, which Gates provided. Having entered the residence without a warrant and being unable to arrest Gates inside the house, the officer turned around and walked outside with Gates right behind him, still demanding to know the officer's identity. Once outside the house, Gates was arrested for tumultuous behavior because the cop, as Gates puts it, was "responding to a profile" of a black man with backpack, breaking and entering a house. Gates has said that the episode at its core was not about him but instead a demonstration of something much more problematic and fundamental—a culture that specifically creates a profile on black men, who then are targeted by that same culture (Themantesdotcom 2009).

This indisputably shows that even identifying yourself to the police, proving that you are not committing a crime such as breaking and entering, does not necessarily entail that you are let off the hook if you are black. You can do everything that is required of you and still fall victim to a culture that has its predestined mind fixed on a certain profile, and if you are targeted as fitting to that profile, you are left at the mercy of that culture, which may or may not treat you accordingly to your actions, whatever they may be. Gates claims that this portrays a culture where white authority cannot "stand a black man standing up for his rights" (ibid). He argues furthermore that the episode elegantly reflects the exact condition of vulnerability that African-American males live under on an everyday basis. Gates even suggests that such experience is not exclusive to black males, but that similar conditions exist for anyone considered non-white or from the lower social classes. Any member of such groups does not stand a chance "to capricious forces like a rogue policeman" (ibid).

The last part of Gates' argumentation is of particular interest. Not only does he express concern for black males specifically but also for any deviation from the white normativity of America, which he accuses to be at center of the above-mentioned culture that profiles targets and targets profiles. In other words, any experience or condition that deviates from the white norm of America may be said to constitute a problem or danger to that very norm. This points to the concept of intersectionality.

Intersectionality cannot be considered or defined as being one thing, yet alone a single theory. Instead, the term covers several different approaches that each can be utilized as critical theories. Perhaps the best known utilization of intersectionality as critical theory is that of Kimberle Crenshaw, who coined the term in a 1989 article. She accounts for the term as a way to understand how e.g. women of color can be and often are victims of intersectional discrimination.

Her analysis is based on a perception that identifies any individual as consisting of numerous identity axes, e.g. gender, race, class, and ethnicity. Her argument is, then, that women of color are victims of discrimination where the two axes of gender and race intersect and that black women therefore are "multiply-burdened" (1989: 140).

In a 2016 TED-TALK, Crenshaw exemplifies this with a black woman who was denied a job at a car manufacturing plant. She filled a lawsuit against the company as she felt she was denied the job because she was a black woman. A judge dismissed her claim with the explanation that the plant both had black and female employees. The problem for the black woman was that the black employees were only men, and the female employees were only white. According to Crenshaw, this illustrates how "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (1989: 140). This can be considered as an oppressive top-down conception of intersectionality.

Another way to understand intersectionality is in a bottom-up perspective, which Patricia H. Collins and Sirma Bilge to a large extent offer in their 2016 *Intersectionality*. Part of this work is a thorough examination of how movements since the 1960s effectively have utilized intersectional approaches in their fight for social justice. The authors pay particular attention to what they call the synergy of critical inquiry and praxis. Put briefly, African-American female workers had great difficulty having their specific voice heard during the movements of anti-racism, feminism, and unions that began organizing in the 1960s (2016: 3). These black women began therefore to organize with other silenced groups such as Chicanas, Asian-American women, and Native American women. According to the authors, this became a different feminism that nonetheless was original in its own right (65).

This critical praxis would eventually also come to be the launch of the critical inquiry part of Collins' and Bilge's assessment of intersectionality. The first critical publications that explicitly verbalized the de facto intersectional experience came into being during the 1970s (65-70). With universities as example, the authors state that even though traditional scholarship did not welcome the new critical ideas and radical analyses with open arms, the critical activism of the 1960s and 1970s was in the preceding decades gradually able to get a foothold in the very institutions against which it originally had protested (77-79). Even though these critical practices and thoughts did not work under the banner of intersectionality, Collins and Bilge nonetheless consider this long journey to be, in effect, the first example of intersectionality in action (31-32).

Cornel West

An American philosopher, university professor, political activist, social critic, author, and public intellectual, West (b. 1953) mirrors one of Du Bois' key statements when he argues that the color-line remains one of, if not the biggest problem for America in the twenty-first century. He claims that America as a democracy still faces a massive challenge in terms of critically understanding, illuminating, and discussing how its own economy, government, criminal justice system, education, mass media, and culture as such are "used and developed against black people" (1993: vii). He says that the prime objective for any democracy must be to protect its citizens against such arbitrary economic, social, and government powers and institutions.

Even though the CRM of the 1960s in particular brought significant progress to many sides in American society, white supremacy and its legacy continues to penetrate institutions such as law enforcement, education, health, and jobs. West argues that an increase in class division alongside the growing separation between black communities and the rest of American society are results of an ongoing unfair redistribution of wealth that produces wealth inequality. The black communities themselves undergo dramatic processes of stratification when the achievements of its middle class account for what may be called black progress meanwhile black poor and working classes are subjected to "unprecedented increases in prison populations and overlooked victims of police abuse. Decrepit schools, inadequate health care, unavailable childcare, and too few jobs with a living wage set the stage for this social misery" (viii).

In continuation of the injustices of wealth distribution, West identifies the expansion of corporate power to be a crucially important factor for societal and cultural problems in America. In a time of an ever-expanding culture of late-capitalism that puts everything and everyone up for sale, he argues, this omnipresent culture, which dictates and demands to buy and sell, advertise, and promote commercialization and commodification, weakens any non-market initiatives that promote and endorse people to care for, share with, nurture for, and connect with one another. Such things may be softer and more intangible than the logic and culture of late-capitalism that encourages "short-term stimulation and instant titillation" (ix). This furthermore results in a hungry need for personal gaining rather than a quest for a shared common good. Such craving for personal success not only weakens but also, as consequence, dismantles the lower and working classes' rights and powers. No democracy, he argues, can sustain such lack of fairness and justice to all its citizens.

According to West, black America has in the last part of the twentieth century been hit most severely by these late-capitalist market forces because the impact of these forces has been made alongside structural and institutional white supremacy. He argues that "for a hated and hunted people whose prize possessions have been subversive memory, personal integrity, and self-respect, to become captive to historical amnesia, materialistic obsessions, and personal accommodation for acceptance at any costs yields black nihilism and collective suicide" (ix).

Politics of Conversion

The way the 'Negro problem' is talked about, West claims, is in and of itself part of the reason why the problem of the color-line de facto has continued to exist into the twenty-first century. He accuses both liberal and conservative attitudes of falling short in their proposals to come up with satisfactory solutions to the so-called 'Negro problem':

> The liberal notion that more government programs can solve racial problems is simplistic— precisely because it focuses *solely* on the economic dimension. And the conservative idea that what is needed is a change in the moral behavior of poor black urban dwellers (especially poor black men, who, they say, should stay married, support their children, and stop committing so much crime) highlights immoral actions while ignoring public responsibility for the immoral circumstances that haunt our fellow citizens. (2)

According to West, both points of view make the mistake that has prevailed in America, namely identifying blacks as a specific 'problem people'. The very discourse that surrounds African-Americans suggests, in other words, that they constitute specific societal problems for white America, instead of seeing blacks as fellow Americans with certain problems. This rhetoric makes all Americans blind to what essentially matters, and this way of talking about black people, Gates argues, says more about America as a country than it does about the so-called 'problem people' (2-3).

On the one hand, West criticizes liberals' sole focus on improving the structures under which these 'problem people' live. In doing this, liberals avoid any criticism of black people, however appropriate and justifiable that may be, which really is to confiscate blacks of a universal human quality—to make mistakes as human beings. On the other hand, he denounces conservatives who say that no special attention should be given to black communities—a stand that

regards black people responsible for their own problems, insinuating that no such thing as a distinctive black social experience or condition exists, wherefore public resources should not be given to black sniveling. As a result, both attitudes towards black people are thus illustrative of a discourse that requires that black America should be like white America; that white America does not consider black America to be part of the 'real' America; that black America problematically exists on or outside the periphery of American society proper (3).

West's proposed solution to get rid of the existing discourse is a turning away from the narrowness in which both liberal structuralists and conservative behaviorists thrive. First of all, he wants to establish a discursive and behavioral framework in which the entirety of America comes to an understanding of the country's motto, *E Pluribus Unum*—out of many, one. "[W]e need to begin with a frank acknowledgment of the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us. […] If we go down, we go down together" (4). Such new discursive framework can enable Americans to understand that the social and cultural crisis most definitely is not exclusively black but American (6).

But what is it in black communities themselves that calls for a discursive change? West says that it is one thing to talk about the more obvious obstacles in black America that can be arranged in statistics—unemployment, infant mortality, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, and crime. Another and much more complex thing is to face "the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse op meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America" (12). Any discourse on black communities where these latter elements are absent is fertile soil for what West identifies as *the threat of black nihilism* to American society. It is of paramount importance to articulate and expose such impalpable things that do not fit into statistics but are too common in black America—psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair—especially in a time where black nihilism thrives and thus generates a black experience with an excessive lack of hope, meaning, and self-love (13-14).

Of what does this new discourse consist, then? West's answer to the black nihilistic threat to American society is what he labels *politics of conversion*. He sees black nihilism as a sickness of the soul—a disease best and most efficiently fought with a true desire for a new hope and will to fight; a disease that can only be cured with internal love and care. This means that politics of

conversion should not rest solely on external factors such as analyses that identify how intersectional subordination operates nor on a societal consensus about what it means to have true social justice (18-19). As with any other internal disease, black nihilism must be overcome by an individual's affirmation of his or her own worth. The affirmation and concern of and from others must be parallel to this. Ultimately, politics of conversion requires that ethics of love be central as the last attempt to generate "a sense of agency among a downtrodden people"—an agency that points towards the self in terms of better self-evaluation that furthermore can yield political resistance in communities of hardship (19).

Politics of conversion takes the best from both liberal structuralism and conservative behaviorism. It acknowledges that structural conditions have a very direct impact on people's lives, but it does, at the same time, confront and critique actions and behaviors of people that are self-destructive. Unlike conservative behaviorism, however, politics of conversion understands and examines such actions as a result of unfair or "inhumane circumstances" without blaming the structures exclusively. In short, the policy paves the way for anyone who has "the audacity to take the nihilistic threat by the neck and turn back its deadly assaults" (20).

It can finally be said that in his understanding of American race relations, West utilizes a somewhat intersectional approach, but it must, however, also be mentioned that West sees race as the most predominant identity factor, which has shaped the general American experience throughout history and continues to do so. He says that the oppression and degradation of black bodies has functioned as the linchpin of the building and continuity of America as a nation and the American experience, calling race "the most explosive issue in American life" (107). Without the presence of black bodies, new-settlers and immigrants could never have constructed an identity for themselves as 'white' because

> black slavery and racial caste served as the floor upon which white class, ethnic, and gender struggles could be diffused and diverted. In other words, white poverty could be ignored and whites' paranoia of each other could be overlooked primarily owing to the distinctive black feature: the basic racial divide of black and white peoples. (108)

American identity would and could therefore not have been what it is, West argues, had it not been for the presence of black bodies.

<u>Ta-Nehisi Coates</u>

Black Bodies

In 2015, Coates published *Between the World and Me*, a book-length letter to his son, explaining the dangers of being considered and living as a black man in America. Published in the time of excessive focus on police brutality, i.e. the shooting and killing of African-Americans, Coates cites the fates of people like Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, and Marlene Pinnock. He argues that cases like these unfortunately do not demonstrate something new: "There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy" (Coates 2015: 10). When it was known that the police officers who shot Michael Brown would go free, Coates writes that his son began to cry.

> I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would
> be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this
> is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must
> find some way to live within the all of it. (11-12)

Police brutality is therefore simply an inseparable part of the reality that black bodies must realize and acknowledge as an inherent part of their existing as such.

Coates' usage of the term *black bodies* is very deliberate. He opens his book by saying that 'people' as a word most certainly has not been seen as universally inclusive for all individuals, especially in an American context, but instead has been used as an explicit political and ideological term throughout American history. 'People' has in other words been used to define and exclude an out-group of 'others'. America has as a direct result accepted the existence of 'race' and built upon the assumption that it is a quality from nature, on which human beings' identities are based. This has allowed for an uncritical conception of different races, which, according to Coates, is and has been poisonous for America as it has yielded a perception of race as the father of racism instead of the other way around (6-7).

In continuation of his suggesting that racism is the father of race, Coates says that the definition of whiteness is not static and has historically never been so. He points to America's history of immigration to prove that the perception of whiteness has nothing to do with skin color. Coates has claimed that Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants were originally not considered white when they came to America (Late Show 2017). This supports his claim, given in the

introduction, that whiteness is ultimately an idea and therefore has nothing to do with the actual color of people's skin.

In his letter to his son, Coates nonetheless proposes that many people want to hold on to a conception of race as an actual real thing. Such people "have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white" (Coates 2015: 7). Historically speaking, he says that these people, however, were something different before they were able to consider themselves white, whether that be British new-settlers in the colonies of North America or different ethnic groups from continental Europe. Nevertheless, these human beings began to build their own white image—not so much on a basis of their own productivity and craftsmanship, "but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children (8). Put differently, he essentially argues that whiteness was created by these people through actions that demanded the destruction of the black body. Coates and West thus agree that immigrants and new-settlers originally utilized an exterior element in the creation of their own 'whiteness'.

The Dream

A crucial element in Coates' argument is his account of who and what he identifies as *the Dream* and *the Dreamers*. He refers to an interview where a white journalist asked him about whether or not there was any hope for better so-called race relations.

> It was like asking me to awaken her from the most gorgeous dream. I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. […] And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like a blanket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. (10-11)

One can almost see the picturesque landscape of harmony, which Coates argues to have seen all his life, but which never has been permitted him for the single reason of the pigmentation of his skin. It is a dream in which only people who consider themselves white have the possibility to live. The foundation of the Dream is therefore its inhabitants' ability to maintain a belief of not just their living in it but also its justification. Such justification, Coates says, has required and

continues to demand a tremendous mettle in order to ignore vast historical and contemporary so-
cial problems, e.g. housing discrimination, the unfathomable injustice of America's prison sys-
tems, and police brutality, all of which the Dream has permitted and continues to permit. Dream-
ers must for this reason "believe that their possession of the Dream is the natural result of grit,
honor, and good works" (98).

Framing the existence of the Dream as a result of one's hard work and honor alongside an
almost patriotic and utopian depiction of suburban idealism bears clear connotations to idea of
the American Dream, which James Truslow Adams described as the

> dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every-
> one, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement […] [It is]
> a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to
> attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recog-
> nized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances
> of birth or position. (Adams 1931: 404)

When Coates claims that the idea of the Dream is created on behalf of black bodies, it is obvious
that he deems the Dream impossible for blacks to reach. It is created for the delight and relish of
the people who consider themselves to be white at the expense of blacks, and the current state of
the American condition stems from centuries of considered appropriateness of this fact. Refer-
ring to the Russian author and historian Solzhenitsyn, Coates writes that for a human being to do
evil, he must above all other things sincerely believe in the propriety of his actions; that they are
in unison with the laws of nature. Coates argues that the exact same goes for the Dream (2015:
98). This ultimately demonstrates that the pursuit of the American Dream—the search for a bet-
ter life, accessible opportunities for anyone who really wants it and puts their hearts into it, no
matter their conditions—is nothing but a hoax, a lie for anyone not in a position to consider
themselves white.

Analysis

The following analyses investigate primarily how the two concepts of violence and voice are portrayed in *Invisible Man* and *Native Son* respectively. Because it deems the Battle Royal to be of great value as social commentary, the paper analyzes this first chapter in Ellison's novel for its exceptional descriptions of violence against and humiliation of black bodies. In connection hereof, a presentation of the portrayal and conception of the American Dream is offered.

The analysis then turns to chapter twenty and twenty-one, where the narrator stumbles upon Clifton, a former associate from the Brotherhood, who gets shot and killed by a white police officer, after having, apparently illegally, sold Sambo dolls in the street. The paper investigates how the narrator turns this horrific experience, this seemingly meaningless loss of life into something positive by giving a voice to Clifton at the funeral, ensuring that Clifton will not go down in history as a 'transitory one'.

For *Native Son*, the two concepts violence and voice are undeniably intertwined as Bigger's primary and only means of expression is his body. The analysis will demonstrate how Bigger's bodily means of expression distances himself from his friends just as his need to give in to his own bodily desires tragicomically becomes what seals his own fate.

The paper is fully aware of the difference in quantity of the two analyses, but as the analysis of *Native Son* will manifest, Bigger does simply not possess the same productive voice that the narrator in *Invisible Man* has. The paper unfolds this difference between the two characters in its subsequent analysis of the implied author stances as it argues this fact to be a deliberate choice on Wright's behalf. The two protagonists will furthermore be included in the final discussion of the paper.

Lastly, it should be noted that parts of the following analyses will utilize terms borrowed from the psychoanalytic school of thought, with which the terms in question usually are associated. The paper has chosen to incorporate these terms in parts of the analyses, especially, but not only, in *Native Son*, because it considers these terms to have supportive explanatory value of good and precise quality. Having said that, it should be stressed that the paper has deliberately not wished to do its analyses in the psychoanalytic tradition exclusively.

Invisible Man

A nameless black man narrates *Invisible Man* and tells his story of how he came to live in a hole in the ground. Told from the first-person perspective, it is a framed narrative as the narrator in the prologue lets us know that what follows is how he ended in the hole, and the epilogue concludes the narrative with the narrator's final thoughts and comments on what to do next. It is an extraordinary journey that unfolds over a period longer than twenty years (Ellison 1952: 15) and covers violent boxing matches with blindfolded boxers; the protagonist's departure and de facto expulsion from a college reminiscent of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute; his travel up North to New York City where he works different jobs before meeting a group that calls itself the Brotherhood; his witnessing of a friend being shot and killed by the police; his break with the Brotherhood; and a finale with excessive riots in Harlem.

The Scam of the American Dream

In the first chapter of *Invisible Man*, the narrator is to take part in the Battle Royal—an entertaining event in the biggest ballroom of the best hotel in the city—before he can give his speech that eventually will give him access to further education. The Battle Royal is constituted of ten black boys who are to fight each other until the last man is standing.

All the important 'white big shots' of the city—bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants, and a pastor— are present and eager for the entertainment that soon commences. They are enjoying themselves in their fancy clothing, drinking and eating, smoking black cigars. As the ten black boys approach the arena in which the fight will take place, the narrator senses how the big shots "were becoming increasingly excited over something we still could not see" (18). The narrator is then brought closer to the front of the ballroom where the smell of tobacco and whisky becomes more intense for each step. When they are pushed into place, the narrator faces something that horrifies him and almost makes him wet his pants—a completely naked, magnificent blonde.

The way this 'magnificent blonde' is described, especially in terms of colors, is very important. Her "hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask, the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue" (19). The colors ascribed to her are, in other words, the exact same as those in the Stars and Stripes, America's flag, namely red, white, and blue: Her face is heavily rouged, her eyes are smeared in blue,

and though her skin and hair are not described explicitly as white, she is a blond with light-colored hair. As if the symbolism is not strong enough already, the boys see "a small American flag tattooed upon her belly" (19), which drives home the symbolism of the woman and her colors. The magnificent blonde symbolizes therefore America, or, more accurately, how the white men want to perceive America. Since the narrator says the big shots get aroused by her, it is fair to say that they are more than very interested in her; they want her; they desire her. Therefore, the dancer symbolizes not just America but the American Dream.

We therefore have a situation where the white men get aroused by their perception of the dancer whereas the young black men do not take part in this excessive excitement because they do not have the same perception of what is happening. They literally cannot see what is exciting, proved by the above quote where the boys approach the arena. Before the fight starts, the blonde begins to dance with what seems a faint smile directed at the white big shots, who watch her with big fascination and desire. The narrator notices how one of the men, drooling with loose lips, follows her movements in an almost hypnotic manner.

> As the dancer flung herself about with a detached expression on her face, the men began reaching out to touch her. I could see their beefy fingers sink into the soft flesh. […] It was mad. Chairs went crashing, drinks were spilt, as they ran laughing and howling after her. They caught her just as she reached a door, raised her from the floor, and tossed her as college boys are tossed at a hazing, and above her red, fixed-smiling lips I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys. (20)

This part embodies several important elements. First of all, the narrator indicates that the better he sees the magnificent blonde; the closer he examines her true countenance, the more he realizes that she has absolutely no personal desire to be in the situation in which she finds herself. Describing her facial expression as "detached" clearly suggests that it is not of her own free will she is situated in these surroundings. Moreover, as the white big shots begin to grab her because they are caught up in their own delirious stimulation—a mix of alcohol, smoking, having black bodies about to fight each other, and an apparently beautiful show-woman at their disposal—the dancer's countenance is filled with "terror and disgust" towards the white men. This tells us that the woman realizes that she, dressed as the Star-Spangled Banner, has no control of what will happen to her because of the white men's tumultuous, bestial behavior. She is an object, treated according to the wild white big shots' mercy, will, and desire. It is only the narrator

who really sees her true feelings of fear for the situation. The white big shots are not capable to see this due to their being in a state of delirium. As a result, this scene demonstrates that is only the black narrator who is capable of seeing the woman for what she truly is, or more perhaps more accurately, what she is not: The image of the American Dream is ultimately fake—it is literally covered in make-up to maintain its outer image. Nothing but the white men's ecstatic desire for it keeps it alive.

Furthermore, it is important to understand what the white big shots represent. The bankers and merchants obviously represent capitalism; the teachers represent education; the lawyers and judges represent politics and how it is performed and articulated; and finally, the fire chiefs and doctors represent the safety and security of citizens. In other words, the white men personify the most fundamental and important hegemonic structures of America—capitalism, education, politics, and general welfare. The fact that these men in their crazed lust for the dancer cannot contain and control themselves but instead start to reach out for her, penetrate her flesh with their "beefy fingers", and desirously run after her like little children proves that they essentially treat and see her, the American Dream, as a whore. The narrator's description of how the men throw her in the air, make her breasts flatten, and have "her legs flung wildly as she spun" (20-21) definitely supports this claim. This scene represents therefore how America's fundamental hegemonic structures metaphorically rape their own idea or constructed perception of the American Dream[2].

Combining these observations results in what suits hand in glove with Coates' assessment of the (American) Dream as something that does not exist for blacks but only exists for whites, or for people, as he puts it, who think of themselves as white. It is the white big shots who go for the woman, not the young black men. On top of this, historical awareness of race relations in America would furthermore suggest that the worst thing a black man could do was to engage physically, and sometimes even non-physically with a white woman. This ultimate stigmatization of black men was a complete silencing of any sexual relations with white females, and failing to comply to this rule could very well cost a black man his life. One of the perhaps best

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[2] National personifications are typically female in America's foundation myth. John Gast's 1872 painting *American Progress* portrays a young, white, female figure who allegorically encourages and leads the way for new-settlers in the East towards the unknown Western frontier, thereby also illustrating the concept of manifest destiny—the belief, reminiscent of the white man's burden, that new-settlers were morally obliged and destined to expand westwards (Mountjoy 2009: 19).

known real-life examples hereof is the lynching of the fourteen-years-old Emmett Till, who in 1955 was beaten, mutilated, and shot in the head for allegedly having menacingly grabbed and whistled at a white woman in a Mississippian grocery store (Pérez-Peña 2017 and Ray 2018).

Nonetheless, the narrator is eventually able to see the American Dream and the fake image she truly is. It should, however, also be noted that he has a desire for her as well. The narrator tells how he, when seeing the dancer for the first time, wants to be with her and at the same time run and get away from her. He is caught in-between wanting "to sink through the floor […] to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her" (Ellison 1952: 19). He admits that he actually, at least partly, desires the woman, but knowing that he has to control and behave himself for the sake of his own safety, he realizes that he must effectively silence his own black body and its immediate, spontaneous needs. This proves nevertheless that Ellison's protagonist holds an awareness of the social realities and conditions in which he finds himself, knowing that he must obey and follow the rules set by others. He would, of course, stand no chance whatsoever if he here were to give in to his bodily needs as he is surrounded by white authorities, but the scene does make it clear that he is extremely self-conscious of how he is supposed to behave in the moment. Surely one could suggest that by being so self-aware of the situation, no matter how admirable it may be, he allows himself to be dictated by external, oppressive power structures, but doing the opposite, on the other hand, would most likely prove devastating for him and in the worst case have lethal consequences. In other words, and as a consequence of the surrounding white structures, the narrator here accepts the complete exclusion and silencing of his black body. As the paper later will present, this is one of the main differences between him and Bigger.

On the basis of the above, the paper does not wholly agree with Cheng who says that the female dancer is present for "the white audience to witness the "bestial" nature of the black boys" (2005: 129). Cheng is undisputedly correct when arguing that both the dancer and the black boys are positioned "in the scopic regime of white male desire", and it is also true that the white big shots play on what *they* consider to be black psychology, namely one that supposedly craves the white female body beastly and wildly. Nonetheless, Cheng's argument falls short because she fails to mention or perhaps see the very important fact that the narrator, exactly due to his awareness of the situation, is capable of containing himself and his desire for the dancer, which is in stark contrast to the white men. It is therefore not exclusively the black boys' sexual

appetites that are exposed in this scene as Cheng claims. What the scene arguably does present is more generally the male sexual desire for the dancer, no matter of skin color, but it cannot be debated that it is the white sexual desire for the dancer, the American Dream, that is exposed as being out of control.

In short, the black narrator may want the same thing as the white big shots; he may want the idea of the woman, the symbol of the American Dream. He knows, however, that acting on his desires and instincts could prove devastating for him. He is also able, in contrast to the white men, to see the true artificiality of the American Dream; to see her true facial expression that clearly tells she is terrified of what is happening. This demonstrates that the narrator knows that he can never achieve the American Dream as it is presented here, whether real or not. On the other hand, the scene also suggests that it does not matter for the dominant, hegemonic white structures if the American Dream is fake and made up or not. They simply thrive on the mere idea of her—an idea they want to maintain and what ultimately is all-important for them. The paper will later return to a more thorough discussion on Ellison's implied author stance in this scene.

Violence against Black Bodies

Another important aspect of the Battle Royal is its chaotic violence. After the American Dream has made her escape from the elated white big shots, the black boys are pushed into a ring and ordered to literally fight each other blindly. They are, in other words, forced to take part in a primitive performance of black masculinity. The entire scene is extremely grotesque, and the narrator describes how he

> felt a sudden fit of blind terror. I was unused to darkness. It was as though I
> had suddenly found myself in a dark room filled with poisonous cottonmouths.
> I could hear the bleary voices yelling insistently for the battle royal to begin.
> (Ellison 1952: 21)

Due to the blindfold, he feels that he has lost all his dignity; that he is reduced to the state of a baby, unable to control his emotions (23). Once again, the color symbolism is more than tangible since the black boys are blindfolded with white cloths. As Blair (2005: 58) states, this is the Du Boisian veil that is lowered onto the black boys, literally separating and blinding them from the white world. The scene is beyond chaos: The black boys stand tremblingly against the ropes;

chairs fly through the air; blows pound the narrator from all sides as his head and neck are hit severely, resulting in the filling of his mouth with his own warm blood. He describes it as a completely anarchic, hysterical fight, and the room is spinning around him with sweating black bodies, surrounded by joyous white faces (Ellison 1952: 21-23). The complete chaos of the scene proves that the narrator can make absolutely no sense of it. It is beyond meaningless for him.

When the fight is over, the black boys are told they can collect their 'price money' from a rug. To ridicule and degrade them even further, the rug is electrified, resulting in their being physically tortured when they try to collect the coins and what appears as gold. "I tried frantically to remove my hand but could not let go. A hot, violent force tore through my body, shaking me like a wet rat. […] My muscles jumped, my nerves jangled, writhed" (27). Essentially, the scene connotes imagery that resembles slavery. The narrator sees how one of the boys, screaming and sweating "like a circus seal", is lifted into the air because of the intensity of the electricity, and as the current continuously hurts him, "his elbows beat[] a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitch[ed] like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies" before he rolls off the rug (27). The narrator attempts to get away from the rug and reaches for one of the chairs in which one of the white men sits:

> I tried not to be obvious, yet when I grabbed his leg, trying to tumble him out of the chair, he raised up roaring with laughter, and, looking at me with soberness dead in the eye, kicked me viciously in the chest. The chair leg flew out of my hand and I felt myself going and rolled. It was as though I had rolled through a bed of hot coals. (28)

So not only does the Battle Royal embody black boys who fight each other; when they try to escape the pain and horror of the scene, their white surroundings literally kick them fiercely back in place.

Tricking black boys into believing that they can collect gold after having fought each other blindly until the last man standing, only to torture them with electricity and corporal punishment if they attempt to get away, must be the very definition of cruel dehumanization. This extraordinary cruelty undoubtedly violates the Eight Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which says that cruel and unusual punishments may not be inflicted upon others in order to avoid barbaric mistreatment on citizens by the government (U.S. Const. amend. VIII;

Stevenson & Stinneford; Levy 2016). It is nevertheless precisely such barbaric methods of pun-
ishment, in the forms of electrical torture and physical punishment, that are used against the
black boys by the official America, represented by the white big shots as personifications of the
hegemonic structures of America. This is furthermore a sad and terrible example of just how the
fundamental structures in American democracy fail its most important obligation, which West
identified to be the mere protection of its citizens against arbitrary economic and government
structures and institutions. As a result, the scene demonstrates the scope and intensity of the arbi-
trary powers that are "used and developed against black people" (West 1993: vii).

   This entails an important question: For what are the black boys treated as they are? The
answer to this question is twofold. The white men treat the black boys in this manner for the sake
of their own entertainment and enjoyment, and it is at the same time a way of ripping the boys'
masculinity and humanization away from them. One could suggest that the simple aspect of win-
ning a fight would be a characterization of masculinity. As primitive as such an enactment of
masculinity may be, it would nonetheless qualify as a stamp of being physically tougher and
stronger than others, but even this simple idea of masculinity is deliberately taken away from the
black boys in this act of complete denigration and dehumanization. This absolute denigration
takes form in a combination of depriving the black boys of even their simplest and most primi-
tive idea of masculinity, blinding them with white cloths, and silencing them. The combination
of the narrator's feeling as if he stumbles about like a baby, his mouth being filled with his own
blood, and the physical torture proves that the he has absolutely no control over his own body. It
is literally made impossible for him to articulate his disgust, frustration, and horror of the situa-
tion.

   The way the black boys are toyed with is ultimately due to what can only be described as
the white men's sadistic enjoyment of this bizarre scenario. They have made sure that the black
boys' bodies are silenced, they have ordered them into meaningless, grotesque, and chaotic vio-
lence in the fight itself, they have blindfolded them, and they have tricked them into electrical
torture. All this combined depicts a symbolic castration of the black boys. This process is com-
pleted when the narrator feels "limp as a dish rag" (Ellison 1952: 29), proving that the Battle
Royal has taken away every last drop of his masculinity before he can give his speech. The fact
that his back also feels "as though it had been beaten with wires" (29) clearly stresses that the en-
tire scene resembles one of slavery and torture due to the intense and cruel violence depicted in

it. Even though the narrator has been subjected to this horrific treatment, he desperately attempts to parrot the wishes of his white surroundings, which Blair (2005: 77) also mentions in her analysis, in order for them to give him the final license he needs for further education. This is proved when he without hesitation submits and 'yeses' to the white men's intense critique of him when he, in his speech, has a slip of his tongue by saying "social equality" instead of "social responsibility" (Ellison 1952: 30-31).

Surely these scenes portray clear structures and patterns of power, of which the already mentioned identification of the white men as being representative of the hegemonic societal structures is an example. Another illustration of clear power structures at play in this scene is the employment of metaphorical circus imagery. The chapter is set off with the death scene of the narrator's grandfather, who tells him to "[l]ive with your head in the lion's mouth" (16); grey and foggy smoke fills the ballroom (18, 19, 22), at one point becoming "agonizing" next to "a swirl of lights" (23); the mere fact that the black boys are present for the sole purpose of performing for the sake of the white men's entertainment; this 'performance' takes place in a large room with a high ceiling where chairs are "arranged in neat rows around three sides of a portable boxing ring. The fourth side was clear, revealing a gleaming space of polished floor" (17). These are all clear examples of circus imagery.

This scenery of a circus points indisputably to objectification. Since the white men enjoy themselves with big black cigars and alcohol meanwhile black bodies fight and destroy each other, it would be ludicrous to suggest anything else than obvious power structures are at play in this scene. With the circus imagery in mind, there is very little, if anything, that would object to the claim that the white men do not consider the fighting black boys as human as themselves by any stretch of the imagination. When the white men scream and yell at the fighting black boys things like "Get going in there!" (21), "Get going, black boy! Mix it up!" (22), "Slug him, black boy! Knock his guts out!" "Uppercut him! Kill him! Kill that big boy!" (23), "I got my money on the big boy" (25), it is clear that the white men consider the black boys as nothing but wild animals, fighting for their lives. These outcries demonstrate the white men's true sadistic hopes for what is about to take place. They do not just crave a boxing match. What they really want the black boys to do is to lose whatever last drop of sanity or dignity they may have; to actually kill each other in wild rage.

This obviously point to a hierarchy where the white men consider themselves at the top and the wild beasts—the fighting black boys—at the bottom. The above-mentioned scene where the narrator is violently kicked back onto the electrified rug by one of the white men also suggests that the black boys essentially are whipped animals, once again giving evidence to the circus imagery. This entire bizarre scenery is therefore the text's way of expressing the continuous reality of the Great Chain of Being, where all humans do not deserve or are not 'worthy' of the same position. In short, the white men maintain the perception of themselves as being in a higher position than anyone else, whether that be a white woman whom they, without any ability to restrain themselves, treat as a whore, or whether it be black boys whom they degrade completely and force into horrific and beastly, animalistic actions for the sake of their own personal entertainment.

The Story of Transitories

One of the most significant moments of personal revelation in *Invisible Man* is found in the last part of chapter twenty, where the narrator unfolds his inner thoughts on those he calls 'transitory ones' (439) and their faiths. This part of the book is an intense description of the narrator's new consciousness of people very much like himself. This sudden wave of new awareness has its origins in an episode where the narrator has seen Clifton's, a former member of the Brotherhood, who has disappeared and left the organization without the narrator's knowing why, being shot and killed by a police officer. Violence against a black body is hence also here decisive for the plot.

The narrator stumbles upon a group of people gathered around a little show on the sidewalk, and he sees Clifton is at center, entertaining the crowd with little Sambo dolls, which he tries to sell for 25 cents apiece. The narrator is disgusted by the dolls, their looks, their dancing as Clifton moves one

> up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face. It's no jumping-jack, but *what*, I thought, seeing the doll throwing itself about with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public, dancing as though it received a perverse pleasure from its motions. (431, original emphasis)

Just as the American Dream at the Battle Royal was symbolized as a magnificent blonde, whose characteristics were described as those of a kewpie doll (19), another doll is present in this scene. The sambo doll's "black, mask-like face" is here described as a detached, separate part from the rest of the doll's parts and the movements it performs. The fact that we are explicitly told that its black face is "mask-like" clearly points to its being a symbol of blackface[3], which is further proved by its "performing a degrading act in public".

Clifton sings songs to go with the dancing dolls, and some of the lines go

> *Shake him, stretch him by the neck and set him down,/—He'll do the rest. Yes!* *[…] Shake him, shake him you cannot brake him […] He's more than a toy, ladies and gentlemen, he's Sambo, the dancing doll, the twentieth-century miracle […] Sambo-Woogie, you don't have to feed him, he sleeps collapsed, he'll kill your depression / And your dispossession, he lives upon the sunshine of your lordly smile / And only twenty-five cents, the brotherly two bits of a dollar because he wants me to eat / It gives him pleasure to see me eat. You simply take him and shake him … and he does the rest.* (431-33, original italics)

Besides actually being a literal blackface, it is also not difficult to see the resemblances between the Sambo doll and the black slave or simply the racist perception of the black man in America. In the time of slavery, the black man was also victim of having his body destroyed, and post-Civil War America witnessed how blacks' necks very literally were stretched in lynchings. When Clifton's song says "you cannot brake him," it reflects the infinite reality of these horrors for African-Americans in those times—killing and destroying one simply made room for the next in line.

The fact that Clifton sings that the blackface Sambo doll lives off its owner's "lordly smile" as the only thing he needs in life is of particular interest. It is here worth mentioning Malcolm X's ideas on the difference between the House Negro and the Field Negro. The House Negro was favored by the white master because he 'played up' to the master and as such was unwilling to radical changes. His life was relatively good, compared to the Field Negro, because he

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[3] Originating from minstrel shows in the mid-nineteenth century, blackface is one of the worst, most degrading symbols of cultural racism. White actors would paint their faces black and wear clothes that often would be "shabby, ratty formal wear to further a ridiculous feel to the characters" (Lant 2014: 366). Such primitive means were used to stereotypically and exaggeratedly depict black people as simple, lazy and stupid buffoons. Blackface is hence a cultural embodiment of American racism, especially that of the South, to perceive black people as second-class people.

did not work as hard, he lived better, and he ate better. In contrast, the Field Negro hated the master. He wanted to escape his enslavement and seize true freedom. This was because he in truth caught hell in the plantation fields from which he could clearly see and feel the injustices being forced upon him. Malcolm X's argument is that the House Negro, due to his position and seemingly 'better life' close to the white master, is unaware of the discrimination and oppression of which he himself is a part. He cannot see that it is the white master who has placed this passive mentality in his head because he feels connected to the enslaver. As of this, "the House Negro is being bought off, tricked into accepting oppression by the master bestowing benefits on them that are withheld from the Field Negro" (Andrews 2014: 23-24).

Malcolm X said that the personification of the House Negro mentality was Uncle Tom, the title character of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Andrews argues, however, that there is a distinction between being a House Negro and an Uncle Tom: The former is not always the latter because the House Negro's position "would rarely have afforded him/her the chance to practically help their comrades in the Field, because of the strictures of bondage" (26). Having said that, the latter is however always the former. As Malcolm X puts it in his "Message to Grassroots" speech:

> Just as the slavemaster of that day used Tom, the house Negro, to keep the field Negroes in check, the same old slavemaster today has Negroes who are nothing but modern Uncle Toms, 20th century Uncle Toms, to keep you and me in check, keep us under control, keep us passive and peaceful and nonviolent. (Malcolm X 1963)

In Malcolm X's perspective, then, Uncle Tom embodied the worst aspects of the House Negro mentality imaginable. Uncle Tom was the House Negro mentality incarnate because his actions and beliefs kept both Field Negroes and other House Negroes in their places. It is exactly this House Negro mentality the narrator sees in Clifton's selling blackface Sambo dolls and singing the lyrics as quoted above. Singing that the blackface Sambo doll lives off the sunshine of his master's lordly smile, and that he wishes to see his master or owner eat because that on its own is a source of pleasure clearly carries weight to support this claim of House Negro mentality.

Having mentioned the dualism of Malcolm X's House and Field Negro mentalities, it is here also worth mentioning Du Bois' double-consciousness. Du Bois would here argue that Clifton sadly has changed his mentality and attitude from being one of the North to one of the old

South. Whereas Clifton up until this scene has had a mentality that tended towards radicalism and revolt against the oppressive structures he saw in society, the mentality of the old South has now tempted him into a state of pretence and hypocrisy against his own interests (Du Bois 1903: 122). Du Bois says that such Southern mentality feeds and prolongs the old, negative image of the Negro; an image in which he is "the frank, honest, simple old servant who st[ands] for the earlier religious age of submission and humility" (123). Much alike what the analysis of *Native Son* later will argue to be the case for Bigger, this scene depicts how Clifton has lost the ability to consider himself both black and American simultaneously. In his final moments, Clifton identifies himself solely as a Negro, and perhaps even worse; the narrator sees him as an Uncle Tom Negro with the House Negro mentality of the old South.

The narrator cannot cope with that he witnesses here, feeling betrayed, physically constricted, and helpless. All of a sudden, Clifton runs away as a policeman approaches. We are not told why Clifton runs off, but his actions indicate that he knows that he cannot get caught by the police while selling Sambo dolls in the street. The narrator says that he cannot look Clifton in his eyes again, afraid that he may hurt Clifton because of his anger and astonishment of the scene.

> What had happened to Clifton? It was all so wrong, so unexpected. How on earth could he drop from Brotherhood to this in so short a time? And why if he had to fall back did he try to carry the whole structure with him? […] It was as though he had chosen […] to fall outside of *history*. […] "To plunge," he had said. But he knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls. (Ellison 1952: 434, original emphasis)

Several things are of noteworthy importance here. Firstly, the phrase "the whole structure" is very significant. It is not explicitly stated to which exact structure is referred. At first sight, one could think that "the whole structure" is an anaphor for the Brotherhood, as the Brotherhood is an organization with a clear top-down structure in terms of responsibility and power, and because the Brotherhood is explicitly mentioned in the preceding sentence. This is however the first and only time in the novel that the Brotherhood is referred to as a structure, and it therefore seems odd and somewhat out of place to directly link the words Brotherhood and structure here.

This paper proposes instead that the narrator here speaks of the black community in its entirety. There are two aspects that individually and unitedly support this claim. First, the seman-

tic content of the sentence accounts for an implicit distinction within it. It is implied that the narrator perhaps could accept Clifton to "fall back" on his own, but that should not necessarily entail that everyone else, "the whole structure" of which Clifton undeniably has been a 'member,' should be part of his personal depression.

This brings us to the second argument, which builds on the above analysis of the Sambo dolls scene, where it was argued that the blackface Sambo dolls embodied the essential racist image of blacks. The scene suggests, therefore, that Clifton prostitutes the entirety of his own identity—being an African-American—for his own self-interest in the form of short-termed monetary gain. As Anderson describes the scene, Clifton has lost the balance of life he thought he had found in the Brotherhood, and once he has left the group, "he loses his balance and fatally plunges "outside of history" without finding or crafting a strong new identity" (Anderson 2005: 88-89). In the most tragic way imaginable, Clifton instead sells out of himself and his own identity when he literally tries to make a personal profit by selling Sambo dolls—the metaphorical and actual image of American racism towards blacks. As Anderson indicates, a clearer signal for losing personal and collective pride and having fallen into decay is difficult to imagine.

The narrator sees this as an overwhelming demonstration of Clifton's feelings of despair and powerlessness, which even engulf the narrator, and who can argue against any such feeling of betrayal when you see your former friend metaphorically, but sadly also very literally, sell his own body and identity, which you share? The paper also agrees with Cheng's reading of the scene. She says that it appears irrational for Clifton to dramatize, to expose, and to actively and voluntarily submit to the stereotype of the dumb black person who blindly does whatever he is told even if it in effect is against his own interest. His break from the Brotherhood shows that he has come to realize that the organization simply duped and used him as a tool to fit that exact stereotype, and precisely because of his being aware thereof, the great surprise and contradiction it is to see his selling blackface Sambo dolls only gets that much bigger. As Cheng puts it, his final actions are to act and submit himself to that stereotype, rather than deny it (2005: 130).

The second element of crucial importance in the quote above is what the narrator identifies as falling or plunging "outside of history". This is directly linked to individuals he labels as 'transitory ones'. As mentioned, the scene ends with Clifton's being shot by the police, but it is the narrator's subsequent thought process that matters:

> Why should a man deliberately plunge outside of history and peddle an obscenity, my mind went on abstractedly. Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to "define" himself. (Ellison 1952: 438)

By calling it "to disarm himself," the narrator suggests that merely being a part of a group as the Brotherhood was a weapon on its own that could be used actively. The paper finds therefore that the narrator arguably saw Clifton as already being dead in his leaving the Brotherhood, and the policeman's shooting was hence just the last physical nail driven into his coffin.

The reason for Clifton's actual death is beyond tragic. He may know that he cannot sell Sambo dolls in the street, but there still seems to be a long way from selling dolls illegally to getting shot and killed by a policeman. The officer ultimately catches Clifton and starts harassing him by repeatedly pushing him into the ground. Clifton does not want to submit to any such harassment and decides to hit the officer, who falls to the ground. "[P]ropping himself on his elbows like a drunk trying to get his head up," the officer's next course of action is simply to shoot Clifton to the ground with numerous shots (436). From a perspective of the 2010s, this scene is highly reminiscent of one episode that paved the way for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The paper will later return to this similarity.

The bigger problem in the scene is as mentioned that the narrator feels that Clifton gave up the possibility to account for himself. Because he left the companionship that the Brotherhood supposedly provided him, he effectively stood in solitude, and he thus gave the opportunity of telling his story to someone else. As the narrator puts it, Clifton "plunge[d] into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside of history" (439). As the narrator sees it now, the only one who holds a patent for the final moments of Clifton's life is the police who shot him, and by their comments just after the shooting, nothing suggests that he will be remembered at all—at best be mentioned as a troublemaker in a police report: "He's a cooked pigeon […] You ain't got any friend anymore" (438) is what the police tell the narrator after the shooting. Hence, there is absolutely nothing to suggest that Clifton's posthumous reputation will be one of respect and sincerity, if it will exist at all, for the very reason that he, according to the narrator, gave up his own voice and left his reputation to be told by others.

The narrator imagines the worst scenario possible—the loss of Clifton's personal history and his own participation in the greater history of society—to be the most likely result of Clifton's abandoning his own voice.

> All things, it is said, are duly recorded—all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down […]. But the cop would be Clifton's historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner […] And I, the only witness for the defense, knew neither the extent of his guilt nor the nature of his crime. Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down? (439).

If the cop is perceived as the final historian of Clifton's life, he will end up exactly as merely a 'transitory one' in history, proved by the police's indifferent comments on Clifton's death as quoted above. The narrator has here come to understand the importance of having a personal voice.

This goes hand in hand with Gates' views on the importance of maintaining one's own voice and personal agency—a never-ending fight to keep the authority of determining and defining one's own and really any (black) person's "essential self" (Gates 1987: 119). The narrator says that he considered himself as a 'transitory one' before he met the Brotherhood, and the agency he feels it gave him, in terms of having his own voice and being a part of a collective voice, exceeds anything else. As quoted above, the narrator asserts that by giving up his voice, Clifton chose to fall or "plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices" (Ellison 1952: 439), which clearly mirrors and gives weight to Gates' assertion. What all people have and cannot be taken away from them is their voice. Is must therefore follow that one's voice can only be taken away by oneself, which is exactly what Clifton did by leaving what he earlier fought for, only to symbolically and literally sell black bodies in the form of Sambo dolls.

Regeneration of Voice

The subsequent chapter plays a crucial part in the novel as the narrator here picks up the pieces of what he has just experienced. This part is extremely important because the narrator here finds and gives himself a voice that he utilizes as a tool of self-empowerment just as it also becomes a tool of empowerment on Clifton's behalf and the black community as a whole.

The narrator decides that giving a speech at Clifton's funeral is the best way to honor his memory. As he is about to begin, his thoughts keep debating, nonetheless, over why and for what purpose people actually have come. He does not feel, initially, that he can tell them something

new, and he cannot find any words worthy of the situation. He just looks at the crowd, wondering for what they have come, and what they want to hear. "What are you waiting for me to tell you?" (455). He tells them that they might as well go home because Clifton is as dead as he will ever be. At first, he rants and raves at the crowd, telling them that he cannot say anything but the obvious:

> His name was Clifton and he was tall and some folks thought him handsome. And though he didn't believe it, I think he was. His name was Clifton and his face was black and his hair was thick with tight-rolled curls—or call them naps or kinks. He's dead, uninterested, and, except to a few young girls, it doesn't matter … Have you got it? Can you see him? (455)

He continues with these obvious, seemingly indifferent observations of the man who was Clifton and repeatedly says that "his name was Clifton". He constantly echoes his anger to the crowd, telling them to go home, asking them what more they want to hear. The more he does so, though, the more the crowd listens "intently" (455). What started as the narrator's claim to be unable to give a speech on the memory of Clifton has now turned into a full-scale commemorative speech, mentioning in ever greater details everything about Clifton, covering a wide range from his political work over his clothes to his death.

What this flow of seemingly trivial information about Clifton's person does is exactly what Clifton, according to the narrator, was incapable of doing himself, namely giving him, his life, and his identity a voice. One their own, each of these apparent insignificant details of his life may seem indifferent and without an obvious purpose. Mentioning all of them subsequently in a steady flow, one by own, on the other hand, paints a much more complex, nuanced, and detailed picture of Clifton as a human being. This picture challenges that of Clifton as merely being a 'transitory one' and instead opens up for the possibility to perceive him as an individual with personal, unique qualities rather than as a mere statistic whose final destination was the police reports. Almost as a notional orator, the narrator makes sure, through his speech, that it is not the police officer who shot Clifton who gets to be his final historian, judge, and witness as the narrator feared immediately after Clifton was shot. Instead of letting go of Clifton, and instead of letting him plunge into the nothingness of the empty police reports as the latest example of black troublemakers, the narrator's speech records Clifton's life as something that must be known,

seen, heard, and considered important. In short, it is the narrator, then, who becomes Clifton's final historian through his notional oration.

The narrator's repeated mentioning of Clifton's name is of extraordinary importance. He explicitly mentions Clifton by name twenty-two times in his speech, and he deliberately says, word by word, that "His name was Clifton" no less than nine times. It is an extremely important detail that he mentions Clifton by name, instead of talking about him and his tragic fate as if he were a nameless victim. By constantly going back to his name, the narrator makes sure that Clifton's memory will not be one of a nonentity but rather one of an actual human being—an individual of flesh and blood, who must be remembered. What this intense focus on Clifton's name does is to avoid his being reduced to a simple statistic.

The difference in politics between the Brotherhood and the narrator also emerges here. For the Brotherhood, the most important thing is to have members because it focuses more on being a group, leaving little, if any, room for each of the individuals of whom that group consists. This is demonstrated "in Brother Jack's casual remark that "individuals don't count" for they are "incapable of rising to the necessity of the historical situation"" (Posnock 2005: 211; Ellison 1952: 291). The narrator defies this reasoning in his commemorative speech of Clifton, in which he mentions, as demonstrated, each and every feature of Clifton's characteristics as an individual who must have a place of his own in history. This scene marks therefore also the beginning of the narrator's own split with the Brotherhood.

The funeral scene becomes then a process where a nameless body, about whom the police did not care the least, is transformed into an individual with a name, who then finally becomes the face and the symbol of the harsh and horrific realities in which all members of the black community live. In short, the narrator carries out this process by giving a voice to Clifton. Though it may not be Clifton's own voice that is present here, it is nonetheless *a* voice in his name. This completes the process, which started with the narrator's feeling that Clifton had given up his voice and identity by selling blackface Sambo dolls. As Gates' view on voice says, Clifton had prior to his getting killed become an indirect and "passive participant in his own drama" (Gates 1987: 120), but due to the narrator's comprehensive and personal funeral speech, Clifton's memory is now one of an active voice.

Native Son

Wright's 1940 novel is told by an omniscient narrator from the third-person perspective. It tells the tragic story of the twenty-years-old black Bigger Thomas, who finds himself in a state of constant despair. Being housed in a rat-infested one-room apartment with little heat during the winter on Chicago's South Side in the 1930s, Bigger's family lives on a day-to-day basis with next to no money and off the rations that welfare programs provide them. These circumstances force Bigger to drop the time he spends with his friends in their gang and instead accept his latest relief job offer as a personal chauffeur for the rich white Dalton family, alongside attending the furnace in their basement. Even though he originally loathes the idea of his new job, Bigger's attitude changes when he learns that the lovely Mary is Mr. Dalton's daughter, and with her in mind, Bigger then envisions the new job as a chance for upward social mobility.

Bigger's Intersectionality

Bigger is a character with no money, no education, and his interests are restricted to short-termed stimulations for which he and his pals in their gang search, e.g. going to the movies, talking about girls, and planning robberies of stores. They are, nevertheless, extremely conscious of their social positions and the boundaries they face.

In the beginning of the book, Bigger tells Gus, a friend and fellow gang member, that he is sure that he could become a pilot if he was given the chance. Gus snorts in return: "If you wasn't black and if you had some money and if they'd let you go to that aviation school, you *could* fly a plane" (Wright 1940: 20, original emphasis). Bigger is for good reason utterly annoyed by all the 'ifs' in Gus' answer because it embodies with all clarity the different axes that constitute the intersectional identity that is Bigger's life, and it is exactly this very intersectional condition that denies him any hope for having any such dreams as e.g. becoming a pilot. His lack of money proves that he belongs to the poor, lower-class of Chicago's South Side; his lack of education suggests that whatever help school could have provided in order for him to improve or to get out of his dire straits, is made impossible; in connection hereof, he neither has a father (figure) nor role model whatsoever, who could set an example for him to follow; and to top it all, his black skin gives the finishing touch that stresses his bad lot in life.

Bigger is no stupid character, though. He is limited and bounded by his surroundings, but it is important to state that he is very much aware of these limitations to his being and hence not

a simple goof without the ability to reflect over his position. Thus, the paper agrees with Matthews (2014: 280) who argues that Bigger wants to fly a plane exactly because he knows it is a privilege that belongs to an existence beyond his own. What is troublesome for Bigger, then, is not so much that he does not know or realize what obstacles he faces in life. Rather, it is his choice of means in the encounter with his hindrances that ultimately becomes his downfall and results in his tragic destiny. Consequently, the small degree of personal agency that Bigger does have against the harsh conditions that surround him is unfortunately more negative and destructive than positive and constructive.

A dual relationship of fear and hate accounts for a large part of Bigger's life, manifesting itself both in his external and internal worlds. He shares his family's despair over the external conditions of their living situation. Undeniably intertwined with the resentment against his exterior world is Bigger's inner fear and hatred for his own skin color—something he cannot and never will be able to change. This self-hate poses a threat to his own existence; a threat equally as, if not bigger than that of the exterior world.

The fear of the external is shown in the very beginning of the book, where yet another day begins with Bigger's arguing and fighting with his entire family over their living conditions and his needing to take a job for the sake of their survival.

> He shut [his family's] voices out of his head. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough. (Wright 1940: 12)

Besides foreshadowing his tragic destiny, this quote clearly demonstrates that the hate Bigger allegedly has for his family stems from his realizing their dire situation. At the same time, he knows that there is nothing he can do to change the situation for the better. If he were to fully cope with their situation wholeheartedly, he would simply be dragged into an even greater and more intense state of fear and despair. As mentioned above, Bigger is no stupid character, which is proved by the awareness he has of his own and his family's hopeless condition but also in his

hate for the choice he faces: Either, he can take the job, work for the white Dalton family, and be miserable but nonetheless continue to survive, "or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action" (15).

Warnes (2007: 42) says that the novel in general "presents America as a nation of 'riven consciousness', a nation divided by another 'color curtain'". The paper agrees with this assertion, but it also claims that an expansion of it is in order. The riven consciousness and the dividing color curtain are not only elements that are true for American society as depicted in the book— both are also very much true for Bigger as an individual. Furthermore, Warnes' choice of words clearly connotes Du Bois' double-consciousness and veil. The duality in Bigger's mind, as depicted above, is therefore an example of double-consciousness. Bigger cannot escape the unhealthy self-consciousness he possesses, which only and constantly, as Du Bois' theory states, "lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (1903: 2). One could even make the claim that Bigger is such an extreme case of this condition that he actually borders to transcend it: In his own view, Bigger is nothing but a black man, incapable of seeing himself as an American.

This claim is supported when he asks Gus if he knows where the white folks live in the city, to which Gus answers that they live "[o]ver across the 'line'" (Wright 1940: 26). Bigger tells Gus no; they live inside of him because he can feel them as a fire in his stomach every time he thinks of them. He says that when he thinks of his being black and their being white, a feeling of his doing something he cannot help or control grows inside of him (25-27). The fact that Wright marks the word 'line' in quotation marks literally spells out the division that Du Bois presented as "the problem of the color-line", whether that be a physical or imaginary line. This also marks what Warnes identifies as the color curtain, or what Du Bois and this paper would call the veil, which divides Bigger from the rest of the world.

Already here, the reader senses that Bigger is a tragedy in the making because Bigger essentially accepts the rationale of his white surroundings. He unfortunately believes that his black body, in and of itself, is the problem, and little does he understand that the white surroundings he hates, fears, and sometimes admires can only be exactly white, as both West and Coates propose, as long as his black body exists next to them.

Gus is not particularly helpful to Bigger's feelings of being internally torn apart by the white feeling that lives inside him. In response to Bigger, Gus merely says, "Aw, nigger, quit

thinking about it. You'll go nuts" (25). In addition to Bigger's fear of allowing the harsh reality penetrate fully into his consciousness, this interaction beautifully demonstrates the first glimpse of the boys' lack of (productive) sublimation. In fact, this is a rare example of an attempt on Bigger's behalf to sublimate the bad feelings he knows are inside of him. He tries to articulately open up about how he feels by expressing his concerns to his friend, but sadly, Gus demolishes Bigger's attempt to sublimate his inner feelings by dismissing it out of hand. Instead of listening to his friend, he stops Bigger and simply says, "Aw, what the hell […] Let's go in the poolroom" (27). This is a tragic scene that proves how Bigger, even among his friends, cannot find the inclination required to effectively change even their mere attitudes towards their grim conditions. Instead, they choose the short-termed stimulation at hand—playing pool.

Lack of Sublimation

It is obvious that Bigger is aware of his inner feelings that tell him he is inferior both to his internal and external conditions. This is also brilliantly portrayed in the gang's latest stimulation. With Bigger as the most determined, the group discusses whether or not to follow through on their plans to rob a white store instead of the usual black ones. Bigger presents the idea as a genuine lust and with big determination, which essentially is nothing but an attempt on his behalf to demonstrate authoritative domination and courage, especially towards Gus, with whom Bigger here tries to 'out-perform' and compare himself—as one alpha male against another. As he raises the proposition to rob the white store, Bigger teases Gus, asking him if he is afraid to carry through with the plan: "You scared 'cause he's a white man? […] Aw, you scared; that's all. He's a white man and you scared" (29). He mocks Gus for the obvious reason that he is scared of doing the job himself, and if Gus consents to do the job, he will have no choice but to partake in his own fear. He feels physically uncomfortable as Gus takes a long time to say whether he is in or not: Bigger's muscles tighten, he gets hot all over his body, his teeth are edging, and he feels as if "something would soon snap within him" (31).

> Like a man about to shoot himself and dreading to shoot and feeling it all at once and powerfully, he watched Gus and waited for him to say yes […] Bigger's teeth clamped so tight that his jaws ached. He edged toward Gus, not looking at Gus, but feeling the presence of Gus all over his body, through him, in and out of him, and hating himself and Gus (32)

What strikes here is that Bigger redirects his fear from the white surroundings to Gus because he senses that Gus shares his own feeling about the enterprise. Because they both fear it tremendously, it is not Gus' person or attitude towards the plan that Bigger actually hates. What he really sees in Gus is a perfect reflection of himself—a young black man with the exact same concerns as himself. The fact that he can feel Gus' presence and being all over, moving in and out of his own body, proves this point. What is important to understand is therefore not that Bigger hates Gus. He loathes instead the reflection of his own cowardice and fear he sees in Gus, but because he cannot lose face and be humiliated in front of his friends, he turns his self-loathing into what resembles himself the most. In other words, what this scene actually signifies is that Bigger's external and internal worlds mutually reinforce his hatred and fear of both. Consequently, Bigger is close to leap at Gus, but Jack, another gang member, comes between them. They all cool down and agree to meet at three o'clock to rob the white store.

As Bigger returns to their meeting place twelve minutes to three, he still feels physically uncomfortable about the situation, feeling how the "ball of hot tightness grow[s] larger and heavier in his stomach and chest" (44). He sees that Gus is the only one who has not shown up yet, which makes him feel slightly less nervous and tense obviously because he sees this as a way out of doing the robbery. This ray of hope soon ceases to exist because he suddenly sees Gus' approaching their meeting spot, resulting in the beginning of an internal and emotional breakdown for Bigger. He feels sick, and once again, "his muscles stiffened" (46). If he earlier had shown any signs of even partial sublimation for his frustration, anger, and fear, he simply cannot control himself now. As Gus walks past him, he kicks Gus to the ground, laughing loudly, hard, and hysterically. Bigger does not even seem to be fully aware of the violence he commits—his seething feelings of fear, hate, and rage have reached the boiling point: "The muscles of his body gave a tightening lunge and he saw his fist come down on the side of Gus's head; he had struck him really before he was conscious of doing so" (47). The chaos continues as Bigger slams Gus against the floor, threatens him with a knife to his face and demands Gus to lick it, before mimicking that he will cut a hole in Gus' stomach. Bigger puts an end to this chaotic insanity by telling Gus that this "ought to teach you not to be late next time, see?" (49). Bigger has here out-measured Gus through the means of his body—the only way possible for him to do so—and proved that he is the strong alpha male of the group by 'making Gus his bitch' (Jones 2007: 45) as a result from successfully hiding his fear behind a mask of violent and excessive aggression (46).

What all of this clearly shows is that Bigger simply has no way of sublimating his anger, fear, and rage after a certain point. He cannot restrain himself from his bodily impulses and instincts, and not even the first meeting ends without his attempting to violently assault Gus. Only Jack's intervention stops him before he goes completely out of control as he does in the second scene, where Bigger cathartically realizes a split second thought he had just before Jack interfered. Before his first leap at Gus, Bigger fantasized about how good it would feel in all of his being to attack Gus; how satisfying it would be to see and feel his own limps crush Gus; how rewarding his "fist and arm and body would feel if he hit Gus squarely in the mouth, drawing blood; Gus would fall and he would walk out and the whole thing would be over and the robbery would not take place" (Wright 1940: 33). A such extreme and graphic fantasy must be said to be bordering on psychopathy. In fact, Ewen explicitly states that psychopathy deliberately occurs when a person cannot find a way to sublimate his destructive and "malignant instincts into behavior that society will accept" (Ewen 2010: 1). This is exactly what happens for Bigger. His big problem is that he cannot sublimate his feelings constructively—his actions are at best an extremely primitive form of sublimation—and therefore has no other option than to excessively utilize his body as outlet for his rage and fear.

In short, these scenes depict how Bigger simply cannot control the intensity of his bodily needs. He is simply incapable of rejecting his body's destructive instinct to his surroundings, but he also has an urge to give in to these physical desires of violence and destruction. In other words, the above depicts how Bigger needs to follow his destructive instinct in order to obtain what he actually wants—avoid robbing the white store at all costs. Having said that, this analysis furthermore proves that Bigger not only has to follow his destructive instinct to get what he wants, but that he, at the same time, also finds great pleasure in the very destruction he here executes. The fact that he "watche[s] Gus with lips twisted in a crooked smile" (Wright 1940: 49) while carrying out his astonishingly graphic and almost psychopathic fantasy definitely proves this point.

Killing Mary

Not only does Bigger's intersectionality leave him his body as his primary means of expression; it is also his only means. The above analysis showed how Bigger gave in to the violent and destructive instincts of his body by excessively beating Gus, thereby realizing his destructive fan-

tasy. At the story's point of no return, when Bigger kills Mary, we see yet another and crucial example of Bigger's inability to sublimate and control his inner needs, ultimately driving him into his destined tragic fate. This time it is his fantasy about Mary—his sexual desire for her—that proves to be the beginning of his end. Once again, it is Bigger's intersectional condition that haunts him and prevents him for doing the right thing.

This point of no return is set as Bigger has driven Mary home after she and Jan, her communist boyfriend, have asked Bigger to join them for a night out of eating and drinking—a scene to which the paper will return in its discussion on Wright's implied author stance. Mary has drunk too much whiskey to take care of herself, and already before they reach her home, Bigger is aware of how her "legs sprawled wide apart" (101) in drunken exhaustion, and he cannot stop thinking of her dress, which "was pulled up so far that he could see where her stockings ended on her thighs" (102). It is obvious that Bigger here has an increasingly difficult time containing his lust for Mary, and he is quick to 'help' supporting her body so he can feel its softness and smell the lovely scent from her hair, making his teeth grit and his arms tighten even more around her soft body. Bigger knows that he is about to cross a line, if he has not already done so, as he wonders "what a white man would think seeing him here with her like this" (102). Once again, he cannot control his feelings because he continues to be caught in

> a mingled feeling of helplessness, admiration, and hate. If her father saw him here with her now, his job would be over. But she was beautiful, slender with an air that made him feel that she did not hate him with the hate of other white people. But, for all of that, she was white and he hated her. […] And, too, in spite of his hate for her, he was excited standing here watching her like this. (103)

Bigger may have an internal split in feelings about what is happening, but his actions leave no room for anything but his lust for Mary. He places his hands under her waist so he can feel the forbidden fruit of her breasts, and her hair continues to fall in his face, at one point brushing his lips, which sexually excites him as his skin warms, he feels his muscles flex and tighten, and he feels his entire being getting drunk from the odor of her hair and skin. Still torn between "excitement and fear" (104), Bigger somewhat tries to do the right thing by telling Mary that she has to pull herself together and help him to help her put her to bed. No matter how noble his intensions may be, and despite his fear of what may happen if he gets caught being in Mary's room, Bigger's excitement nonetheless trumps his fears. He lets himself feel the nice, soft curves

of Mary's body (104), and he keeps getting "reeled from the scent of her hair and skin" (106). Finally, Bigger cannot behave himself anymore. Holding his arms tightly around her, he fixes his gaze on her slightly moist lips and pulls her face towards him, letting her lips touch his, "like something he had imagined" (106). He kisses her several times like this, and the fact that we are told he has imagined and therefore hoped for this to happen suggests that he all along has tried his best not to let his fear of getting caught get in the way of tasting the forbidden fruit. This sense of imagination is something the paper will come back to even more minutely.

Having realized his desire to kiss Mary, one could assume that Bigger had achieved what he wanted. The following is the exact point of no return in the story:

> He lifted [Mary] and laid her on the bed. Something urged him to leave at once, but he leaned over her, excited, looking at her face in the dim light, not wanting to take his hands from her breasts. […] He tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him. He was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. Then he stiffened. The door behind him had creaked. (106-07)

The blind Mrs. Dalton now enters the room, and in his fear of sounds from Mary that could reveal his presence, Bigger decides to cover her mouth with a pillow in a desperate act of impulsive panic, which results in her death. The combination of Mary's murder and the blind Mrs. Dalton, who stands in the door as a silent, ghostlike white blur (107), turns this scene into one of gothic reminiscence. The very description of Mrs. Dalton's presence symbolizes that she is the white American specter that wants to silence Bigger's black sexuality and disruptively intervene in his engagement with the white female. This is proved by the fact that when Bigger sees Mrs. Dalton standing in the doorway, he feels as if "a hysterical terror seized him, as though he were falling from a great height in a dream" (107). Bryant (2005: 544) calls this point of no return a "moment of gothic cathexis" where the catalytic, binary forces of fear and desire, whiteness and blackness, and privilege and poverty meet.

A crucial element that is important to note in this scene is that Bigger apparently feels that something urges him to leave the room before Mrs. Dalton appears. If he had submitted to this urge, he could have had time to leave the room and save himself from the grotesque situation in which he instead finds himself. This paper argues that this sudden urge is his own conscience, his superego, if you will, telling him that he has now had more than enough adventure for the

day, and that he should stop himself while the going is good, instead of playing with fire one moment too many. This is not the first time Bigger's superego attempts to stop him. The same thing happened when he imagined what any white man would think if he saw Bigger's holding his arms tightly around the drunken Mary's white body, touching her breasts in the driveway. Both scenes illustrate that Bigger understands and is aware of the risks of his actions and how forbidden they are. However, it is exactly because he knows how transgressive, dangerous, and socially inappropriate these actions are that he nonetheless follows through with them. They are simply too irresistible for him.

This unarguably proves that Bigger does not act rationally. If he were rational, he would have stopped and submitted his actions to the thoughts he had in the driveway and the urge he felt to leave Mary's room, which his consciousness provided him. Instead, he deliberately chooses to ignore them, and thence, there is no turning back for him. Bigger's reluctance to rationalize—his unwillingness to do what he knows is the right thing—is therefore the crucial tragicomic element that ultimately seals his own fate. In other words, Bigger's superego cannot control his instinctive and, in this case, sexual needs that drive him to carry through with his desires.

Similar to the Gus-scene, it is not just Bigger's instinctive needs, what we may call the cravings of his id, that are satisfied here. His consciousness or ego, if you will, similarly achieves cathexis here. As stated above, Bigger knows very well how dangerous and inappropriate his actions are. The stimulation he can get from carrying through with them therefore gets proportionally bigger, exactly because of this awareness. He does all the things he knows he should not do, but if he were to succeed, if he the next day could tell his friends that he did the most illegal and dangerous thing imaginable—that he was out with a lovely white girl; that he watched how her dress did not cover everything it should; that he felt the softness of her body and breasts and smelt the odor of her hair; and even that he kissed her in her own bedroom—he would have achieved something that he could brag about until the day he dies. Therefore, it is not just a cathexis of Bigger's id that takes place here but also very much an ego-cathexis.

As a consequence, both the Mary-scene and the scene where Bigger attacks Gus illustrate clearly how Bigger's id and ego are intertwined. It is not just the drives of his id that produce the outcomes of the scenes. A large element of ego gratification is also present. In the Mary-scene, Bigger knows, as mentioned, that he is not innocent in his actions; he indubitably knows that what he does is wrong, but this fact simply increases the cathexis he wishes to obtain. The more

dangerous and titillating it is, the better for him. This proves, however, also the irrationality of it. In the Gus-scene, Bigger tried to compare and measure himself against Gus in order to be the dominant of the two, but as the analysis also proved, Bigger felt perhaps the greatest amount of cathartic satisfaction when he finally got to physically attack Gus as a way to fulfil his violent and psychopathic fantasy. Both these examples prove that Bigger's ego is a façade of his id—"an external, cortical, layer of it" (Ewen 2010: 18).

Self-Hate

Bigger's internal frustration of his own identity affects his self-perception as much as his interactions with the white world do. This poisonous internal condition plays a crucial part in what drives Bigger to kill Mary. The following unfolds how Bigger's experience in the cinema plays a vital part in this.

Bigger and Jack have bought tickets for *Trader Horn*. When they get to their seats, both start masturbating, joking with each other about how quickly the other will come. They glance at and talk to each other in a way that suggests that this is not uncommon practice when at the cinema[4] (Wright 1940: 37-38). Before the movie begins, a newsreel is shown, which immediately catches Bigger's attention because it shows "images of smiling, dark-haired white girls lolling on the gleaming sands of a beach" (39). Both Bigger and Jack are stunned by the beauty of the girls. Bigger pays particular interest to a "smiling white girl whose waist was encircled by the arms of a man" (40), whom the commentator of the newsreel identifies as Mary Dalton. Bigger tells Jack that she is the daughter of the man for whom he is about to work.

> [T]he next scene showed only the girl's legs running over the sparkling sands; they were followed by the legs of the man running in pursuit. The words droned on: *Ha! He's after her! There! He's got her! Oh, boy, don't you wish you were down here in Florida?* The close-up faded and another came, showing two pairs of legs standing close together. Oh, boy! said the voice. Slowly the girl's legs strained upward until only the tips of her toes touched the sand. (40, original italics)

Bigger is extremely fascinated by these images, and Jack keeps him further in suspense when saying that he has heard that "them rich white women'll go to bed with anybody" (41). The fact

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[4] Some critics see this as suggestive of a possible homoeroticism in the boys' lives (Ellis 2006: 185; Jones 2007: 46). Even though this argument has some validity to it, Bigger's heterosexual desires are equally as, if not more important for the scene.

that Bigger merely laughs off Jack's comment obviously demonstrates that he immediately feels attracted to Mary when he sees her on the screen.

Coates would identify this as an illustration of the picturesque Dream, which only belongs to people who consider themselves white, and which is denied people without such privilege. Bigger, however, is drawn to the Dream he sees in the newsreel, and he pays no attention to *Trader Horn* when it begins. Instead, he transforms its images to his own internal movie: On screen, naked black men and women dance wildly to the sound of beating drums, but for Bigger, the African scenes are "replaced by images in his own mind of white men and women dressed in black and white clothes, laughing, talking, drinking, and dancing. Those were smart people; they knew how to get hold on money" (41-42). The fact that Bigger leaves the theater frowning at the sounds "of tom-toms and the screams of black men and women dancing free and wild" (43) further proves his condemnatory hatred and condescension of those with the same skin color as himself. He finds the people in the movie ridiculous and out of sync with his black world of "fear and hysteria" (43).

As the paper argued earlier, there are clear parallels between the action that Bigger sees on the newsreel and that of his own when putting Mary to bed. On the beach, Mary's waist is encircled by a man's arms, and at the house, Bigger "tighten[s] his arms about her, holding her up" (102) just as he saw it on the newsreel, where Mary kissed the man "who lifted her up and swung her around" (40). In other words, he attempts to emulate the scene from the newsreel at Mary's house, and because kissing her feels just "like something he had imagined" (106), he has succeeded in doing so. The above block quote that minutely details how Mary enjoys herself and her time in Florida with her boyfriend is therefore a precise description of Bigger's own desire for and dream about Mary—the unobtainable white girl.

The scene also demonstrates how quickly Bigger can move his thoughts and attention away from his own black girlfriend, Bessie, to a white girl. As he and Jack masturbate in their seats, Bigger at first says "I wished I had Bessie here now" (37), but not even five minutes pass before his attention is directed towards fantasies about Mary, the lovely white girl on screen. Bigger also compares the two at the Daltons' house. When he has carried Mary into her room, he cannot help his physical excitement: "His senses reeled from the scent of [Mary's] hair and skin. She was much smaller than Bessie, his girl, but much softer" (106). First of all, at no point in the story has Mary put on fragrances or perfumes. In fact, the only smell that comes off of her is an

intense smell of alcohol from the whiskey she has drunk. This is proved when Mrs. Dalton quickly steps away from Mary when she enters the room to find out if it is Mary who makes noises in her room: "You're dead drunk! You *stink* with whiskey!" (109). This proves that the only thing Bigger and his senses are actually "reeled from" and seduced by is nothing else than the mere whiteness of Mary's skin. Secondly, the fact that Bigger all of a sudden compares Mary's and Bessie's heights makes no sense as it comes out of nowhere, and it makes absolutely no sense whatsoever to say that even though Mary is shorter than Bessie, Mary's skin and body are "much softer" than Bessie's. This proves only that Bigger goes to great lengths to convince himself of Mary's superiority to Bessie, and Bessie stands no chance in this competition, solely due to the color of her skin.

Implied Author Stances

It is worth appraising the relationship between the characters and the narrators in both *Invisible Man* and *Native Son* respectively. As mentioned in the beginning of the analyses, there is an obvious difference in the perspectives of the narratives: Ellison's protagonist tells his own story from the first-person perspective whereas a more distant, third-person, omniscient narrator tells Bigger's story, guiding us through the plot in Wright's book. This relatively simple and obvious distinction in narration technique is in and of itself crucial to investigate in order to further explore these texts.

Ellison's Three Levels

For clarity, it can be helpful to understand how Ellison's book is structured. As mentioned in the beginning of the analysis, *Invisible Man* is a framed narrative, and the novel consists thus of three levels: The first layer is constituted of us as readers, reading the book. When doing so, we encounter the second level, namely the narrator's voice, who in the prologue tells us that he is an invisible man, who now lives in a hole in the ground in New York City, and who wants to tell us his story of how he came to end up as such. The end of the prologue and the beginning of the first chapter set up the third level of the book, namely the plot in which the narrator is the protagonist and an active character himself.

The fact that *Invisible Man* is a framed narrative is an important detail for examining its implied author stance. To illustrate this, the narrator says that before the Battle Royal commenced, his perception of the whole thing became increasingly blurrier and dimmer for each step

he took towards the arena due to the density of the grey, foggy cigar smoke and the intensity of the reek from the whiskey, both coming from the white men. As a result, he could not see, then, about what the white men got ever more excited. From the position he actually tells his story— the hole in the ground in New York City—he obviously now knows that it was the white female dancer, the American Dream, who was the object of their excitement. When he got close enough—when the white men's actions no longer disrupted his perception—he was able to truly see the artificiality of their American Dream.

Because the narrator tells his story in retrospect, he has a knowledge of an omniscient narrator, which he obviously did not possess while partaking in the plot as the protagonist. So even though the narrator and the protagonist are one and the same, the former knows more than the latter. This may seem as a somewhat trivial detail without much value, but this paper argues that quite the opposite is the case. By telling the story as a framed narrative and thus create a such distinction between the protagonist and the narrator, Ellison can cleverly 'hide behind' or 'use' his characters, including the narrator, to account for his own stance on the themes and dilemmas he addresses.

As the analysis identified, the narrator eventually came to see the true feelings of terror and disgust in the countenance of the American Dream, whom the white big shots had covered in make-up and treated like a whore. Having said that, the narrator did nonetheless also admit his own dreams and desires about the female American Dream, but his awareness of the surroundings in the situation forced him to keep himself silenced and disciplined. It is exactly at this split, this duality of feelings towards the blond dancer that Ellison's implied author stance regarding the mere idea of the American Dream manifests itself. The conscious awareness of the situation, which the narrator possesses, suggests one very important thing, namely the ability to see the scam of the American Dream as the pretentious simulation it is, as depicted at the Battle Royal.

The fact that Ellison deliberately equips his narrator with this awareness suggests two things: It is first and foremost an illustration of how the narrator *and* Ellison basically do not perceive the American Dream in the same way white America is depicted to deliriously perceive it. Secondly, and more importantly, by giving his narrator this awareness, Ellison indicates moreover that he simply does not *want* to perceive the American Dream in the same drunken and ecstatic manner like the white big shots do. In other words, Ellison does not want the American

Dream that white America has generated; he does not want the white American Dream. He wants something different.

This obviously begs a new question: What American Dream does Ellison want? This question can be answered twofold. First, let's look at *Invisible Man* from a more general perspective and its form. In terms of its internal form, the plot time stretches over twenty years (Ellison 1952: 15), and the protagonist is not inflexibly locked in the same place throughout the story but travels instead from the American South up North. In terms of the narrative form, the protagonist is moreover the narrator of his own story. He has or takes, in other words, the privilege it is to account for his own story instead of giving that platform to someone else. These relatively complex forms of time and place—especially when compared to *Native Son*—combined with the narrator's voicing of his own story suggest that Ellison utilized a somewhat rich form, both of and within his story, in order to support its equally complex content.

As argued in the analysis, a very important theme in *Invisible Man* is for black individuals to have a voice that marks their own unique existence. Having a voice is a crucial means that enables one, or gives one the opportunity, to avoid plunging outside of history, to fight against the surroundings that want one's existence silenced, and to link one's face and identity to that specific voice. In other words, Ellison used the forms of and within his story to counter any type of determinism and destiny carved in stone for black people. These forms, instead, stress and hail the aspect of individualism no matter how complicated and complex it may be—not just for African-Americans but for the American identity as a whole.

Crane agrees with this claim as he suggests that the narrator finds freedom

> in the realization that certainty is an illusion. If he rejects a vision of "the world [as] nailed down" and the false certainties of "rank" or "limit," Ellison's protagonist discovers, his world can "become one of infinite possibilities," a surprising and ironic outcome for a black man living in a racist society. (Crane 2005: 105)

As argued above, the narrator's extraordinary journey in terms of time and place is an example of this rejection of deterministic certainty. One must here of course not be blind to the fact that the narrator, towards the end of the novel, has seen through the Brotherhood's actions and policies, realizing that they have toyed with him—much like the blackface Sambo dolls had an invisible string in their backs that allowed for the person behind them to manipulate and control their

every movement (Ellison 1952: 446). As the analysis suggested, this was also what Clifton most likely had come to realize, which was the thing that finally pushed him over the edge. On top of this, the narrator witnesses excessive riots in Harlem, only to literally be trapped in a hole in the ground towards the end.

The narrator says that he has chosen to stay in his hole because he has come to realize that "men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health. Hence again I have stayed in my hole, because up above there's an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern" (576). Having said that, it is absolutely crucial to mention that no matter how dark and depressing all the final things in the novel undoubtedly are, the narrator decides that he cannot and will not spend the rest of his life in the hole because that would in and of itself be a submission to the very logic that in effect put him there. He explicitly says that he wants to leave the hole (580-81), thereby not allowing what Crane calls the false certainties of rank and limit to determine his role in society. Conventionally speaking, *Invisible Man* borrows then from the picaresque narrative form, proved by the complex, episodic journey over time and place. It is moreover a Bildungsroman, or an anti-Bildungsroman, as Giles (2002) puts it, because the protagonist's development does not reach a final conclusion or simply fails.

This paper suggests therefore that Ellison wanted to deconstruct and transcend the certainty and determinism that would put African-Americans into such holes in the ground. It consequently agrees with Crane, who proposes that in order to create such new perspective, a focus on diversity must fuel that new judgment. He states that Ellison envisioned a process of "ceaseless contention" (2005: 109) that should incorporate all the parochial ideas of what it means to have an American identity. Crane quotes Ellison when he writes that

> [b]ecause the "American cultural identity" is "tentative, controversial, constantly changing," Ellison finds that "the ideal level of sensibility to which the American artist would address himself tends to transcend the lines of class, religion, region, and race – floating, as it were, free in the crowd." (109)

This tells us that Ellison puts great responsibility into the artist's work because the artist must disregard and transcend the limitations and boundaries that any identity axis or its intersections may set for him, whatever that may be. For Ellison, it is crucial that the American artist can do this, proved when he claims that it "is the very *spirit* of art to be defiant of categories and obstacles (108, original emphasis).

The essence of this argument is also what constitutes the Ellisonian vision for America. The new perspective on human beings, which Crane mentions, must no longer be one of a deterministic, top-down certainty that labels individuals on the basis of their intersectional identity axes but instead focuses on people's diversity in a collective and liberating bottom-up perspective. Put differently, Ellison's American Dream is one where anyone is able, but also allowed, to transcend and disregard the limitations and boundaries that one's intersectional identity axes set for one, whatever they may be. In short, this leads us to conclude that Ellison envisions a new, organic, and complex American identity—one which, instead of being exclusive and conservatively reactionary, is inclusive and progressively collective.

Wright's Stance

The same richness of the forms in *Invisible Man*, both in terms of narrative technique of the story and time and place within the story, does definitely not exist in Wright's novel. In fact, *Native Son* represents the exact opposite. Bigger's story and life are, if not already pre-destined long before we meet him, then at least settled within very few days, and he never escapes the streets and neighborhoods in which he grew up, except for going to jail and court. He is, in other words, "confined to Chicago's Black Belt" (Matthews 2014: 289). Equally as important is the fact that Bigger does not tell his own story but instead has an omniscient narrator account for his life on his behalf from the third-person perspective. Wright uses hence the tragic mode for Bigger's story.

As the analysis suggested, Bigger's intersectionality is a direct burden for himself but also a hindrance for others to help and understand him due to its intensity. It is within this depth of Bigger's intersectional condition that Wright's implied author stance to a large extent appears. A good example of this is the scene where Mary and Jan have asked Bigger to join them in a night out. They are apparently well-meaning in their support towards Bigger, whom they simultaneously use as their personal chauffeur meanwhile casting him as a fellow comrade. Nothing suggests that they are not sincere in their support, nor that they are not genuinely interested in his problematic conditions. The problem is, however, that they cannot see the absurdity of indulging "in a little racial tourism" (Warnes 2007: 7) in their eagerness to demonstrate solidarity and comradeship towards Bigger—all they want to do is to experience what his people 'are like'.

One thing is to sympathize with Bigger as a black man and 'his kind of people' in general, admirable as that may be, but another thing is to fully grasp how much Bigger is a victim of

his intersectionality—not solely of his black skin color. This lack of tact for his overall condition, i.e. their failure to completely cope with his full situation, generates in effect even more rage within him. Therefore, the paper agrees with Matthews who says that Mary's and Jan's "naïve and clumsy attempts to treat him as an equal backfire, making Bigger even more uncomfortable and angry" (2014: 290) because the mere presence of their white bodies makes him

> very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of that black skin. […] Maybe they did not despise him? But they did make him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him, one holding his hand and the other smiling […] At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate. (Wright: 1940: 84-85)

As a result, their interest in him is counterproductive, to say the least, because Bigger, as mentioned earlier, is not stupid or naïve. What Mary and Jan consider to be an act of grace—going to the black neighborhood and eating the food they eat—he considers to be an act of slumming. As a consequence, Bigger gets furious because he knows that he does not and can never have such privilege, which he essentially feels they rub in his face by their mere presence. What their actions in effect do is to further divide the gulf between their world and that of Bigger.

Matthews states that Bigger as such does not feel self-hate, nor that he wants to be white himself. What he does want and envy is "the power and privileges that come with whiteness" (2014: 289). This paper agrees with the last part of this claim but disagrees with the first part. Matthews is correct in asserting that the two are not inseparably linked, but the big problem for Bigger is that he considers them to be just that. As the analysis demonstrated, Bigger thinks less of himself precisely because he is black. In the cinema, he saw the good life of the 'white American Dream' in the newsreel, and as he saw *Trader Horn*, he internally transformed the images of black people into images of whites. With this in mind, the above 'slumming-scene' is a nightmare for Bigger because it, for him, is a demonstration of what he cannot have but desires the most. His biggest dream is to be white and have the active choice of 'slumming'; to be a racial tourist and pay a visit to the worst neighborhoods in town where black people live whenever he desires. That dream will never come true, and he is well aware of this fact. This is why he loathes Mary and Jan and their visit—it is a manifestation of the reality of his living nightmare.

Wright's implied author stance is therefore very much present in this 'slumming-scene'. Wright was a member of the Communist Party while writing the novel (Warnes 2007: 49), and

the critical focus on societal structures, e.g. class and race, is obvious in the novel, generally speaking, and in this scene particularly. By nuancing the race aspect of his novel with that of class, Wright creates an intersection of the two and suggests that no one can fully understand the complexity of the hardships that Bigger faces if one only focuses on one of his identity axes. This is therefore a demonstration of Crenshaw's argument that says that the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of its constituents, in this case race and class. It is precisely such intersectional understanding of Bigger's problems that Mary and Jan lack in this scene, wherefore Bigger considers Mary and Jan to be as blind as Mrs. Dalton (Afflerbach 2015: 95).

An Explicit Stand?

It is not only in Bigger's intersectionality that Wright's author stance appears. The long speech at the end of the book by Bigger's lawyer, Max, has been subject to much critical debate. On the one hand, some critics have praised the speech "because it urges the judge and the country to break with its history of hatred and repression", and others have similarly "praised its liberating effect on Bigger". On the other hand, some critics have objected to the speech as they consider it to throw the novel "badly out of focus" (Goldstein 2007: 21). It is in connection with this last-mentioned criticism that Wright's almost explicit author stance appears.

Due to the intensity of his intersectionality, it would be ludicrous to conceive of the possibility that Bigger could narrate his own story, much less to say account soberly for his behavior, why he killed Mary and Bessie, and his general perception and understanding of the world. As the analysis showed, Bigger's primary and only means of expression is his body, which excludes any idea of his explaining himself, which therefore, then, precludes *Native Son* from becoming a Bildungsroman.

It is therefore not a problem in itself that Max does everything he can to defend Bigger from the death sentence, but even the form of the speech allows for critics to suggest that the speech does not solely belong to Max. It covers no less than thirty-two pages[5], and once Max has begun talking, every single word on these thirty-two pages is part of the speech. Put differently, the omniscient narrator, who until then has known and accounted for things like characters' thoughts and feelings, ceases to exist during the speech. Due to its length and the fact that these pages consist of absolutely nothing whatsoever but the speech itself, Goldstein's argument—that

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[5] Wright 1940: 483-514

the speech throws the novel out of focus—carries some weight. The form of the speech almost has resemblance of an essay, and as a consequence, the reader can fairly ask the question, 'Who is the actual speaker here?'

The content of the speech covers a wide range of elements: Max says that Bigger's intersectional condition makes him into not just a criminal but a black criminal (Wright 1940: 484); that the dominant structures in the city saw Bigger's crimes "as an excuse to terrorize the entire Negro population, to arrest hundreds of Communists, to raid labor union headquarters and workers' organizations" (488); that this case is not a matter of injustice because the "concept of injustice rests upon a premise of equal claims" (491); that the mob outside the court and Bigger hate each other "because they fear, and they fear because they feel that the deepest feelings of their lives are being assaulted and outraged. And they do not know why" (494); that Bigger's crime existed long before he killed Mary, and that the accidental "nature of his crime took the guise of a sudden and violent rent in the veil behind which he lived, a rent which allowed his feelings of resentment and estrangement to leap forth and find objective and concrete form" (496); and that Mary and Jan could not understand that Bigger could not honestly believe in their well-meaning actions: "Social custom had shoved him so far away from them that they were not real to him" (501). These are just a few examples of the grand constituents of the speech. In short, combining the content and form of the speech therefore allows for the suggestion that Wright uses Max' platform in the courtroom to account for his own stance in terms of political and social convictions.

The critique of the speech fits very well with the overall impression of *Native Son* as a novel that deviates from the general tradition of African-American narrative literature. Besides the slave narratives—literature to which African-Americans honestly can claim a genuine copyright—newer and less realist African-American literary works that followed Wright generally "revel in the black voice from start to finish" (Warnes 2007: 13) just as they delegate the storytelling to a single black narrator, preferring the first-person narrator to the third-person narrator with a clear subjective, self-declared, authoritative voice. In stark contrast to *Native Son*, this is exactly what this paper has argued to be the case for Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Summary of Findings

The analyses have identified how violence and means of expression differ tremendously in Ellison's and Wright's novels. Ellison's protagonist conceives violence as an external, destructive, and meaningless tool. At the Battle Royal, he found his black body the object of complete denigration for the simple and sadistic pleasure of his white surroundings. He experienced to have his black body tortured, blinded, and silenced just as his psyche and mental stamina was tested due to the presence of the female personification of the American Dream. He managed, though, to keep a sober awareness of the situation and kept cool despite internal dispute.

Clifton's death was for the protagonist a similar result of incomprehensible, unnecessary violence against a black body, who already had hit rock bottom by selling his own identity. However, whereas the protagonist in his speech at the Battle Royal simply parroted the rationale and worldview of his white surroundings, he took matters into his own hands at the funeral by restoring a voice in Clifton's name and thereby giving a unique and individual personality to a black body.

This is in stark contrast to Bigger, whose intense intersectional condition leaves him no way to productively channel or sublimate his anger at, fear of, and frustrations of both his internal and external worlds. For lack of a better, Bigger thus turns actively to his body as means of expression, e.g. through the use of violence against others just as he consciously chooses to give in to his sexual desires even though he knows it is the wrong thing to do. Bigger can therefore be said to possess the necessary awareness of his surroundings, but he lacks the coolness and self-discipline that Ellison's protagonist e.g. displayed at the Battle Royal. What ultimately seals Bigger's fate is the combination of his hatred towards his own skin color and the jealous desire he has for privileges of the white world.

On the basis of this joint analysis of *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*, the black male experience in these novels can overall be said to be parceled out in different elements. It is an experience that manifests itself in a search for a voice that has resonance in society and for other people; it is a feeling of being obliterated and to be rendered redundant without such voice, whatever form it may take; it is a feeling of being considered invisible, both physically and psychologically; and it is a feeling of being dispensable, especially without friends, good comradeship, or role models, who can guide and support you.

Violence is undeniably a key factor for both novels and their presentations of the black experience. Whereas *Invisible Man* presents violence as a phenomenon used against black individuals, *Native Son* presents it as the last or only tool available for an individual like Bigger to find any personal agency in life. What the novels do have in common in their usages of violence as key components, though, is that both reflect problems in contemporary American society where violence also is a key factor—the BLM movement and the racial profile of American mass incarceration.

As the analysis touched upon, Clifton's death-scene sadly mirrors almost too perfectly the killing of Eric Garner, an African-American who in 2014 also was killed by the police. The only differences between the two killings are that Clifton sold Sambo dolls and was shot to death, and Garner allegedly sold cigarettes illegally and was choked to death. Alongside the killings of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, Garner's death was a crucial element in the organization of the BLM movement (Day 2015). Understanding this movement in a larger context calls furthermore for an introduction of the problems and discussions regarding the racial aspect of America's mass incarceration. This will also allow for a return to the discussion between West and Coates that set off this paper. Consequently, the paper will in the following not leave the two novels completely but instead use them in a broader discussion on BLM and mass incarceration in America.

Discussion

Law and Order!

As the introduction declared, any suggestion that America has moved into a post-racial era is destined to face harsh criticism. Both *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* were published in the later part of explicit or 'legal' Jim Crow, where segregation laws still constituted a large part of American reality. Even though the efforts of the CRM in the mid-twentieth century resulted in several Civil Rights Acts and thus ended de jure Jim Crow and segregation, many of the same problems of the time and in Ellison's and Wright's novels de facto continued and still exist in our time. As the title of civil rights lawyer, advocate, and legal scholar Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* connotes, a de facto equality before the law does not exist in America. In a nutshell, it was the activism and efforts of the CRM itself that eventually would be the absurd rationale behind what Alexander calls the new Jim Crow. A growing rhetoric of 'law and order' during the CRM era ensured that public legislators and "law enforcement officials attempted to generate and mobilize white opposition to the [CRM] (Alexander 2010: 40). Such rhetoric necessarily denotes that the law is broken and that society faces a criminal threat.

In order to understand how the new Jim Crow came into being, a brief overview of the political, economic, and social realities in the time directly after slavery is necessary. Slavery was first and foremost an economic system, and when the Civil War put an end to it as a legal institution, the Southern economy was left in tatters. In order to rebuild its economy, the South turned its gaze once again to the four million black people who until recently had been personal property and the backbone of Southern economic production for centuries. Even though the thirteenth amendment had made slavery unconstitutional, a clause in the very same amendment was quickly used as a loophole to further exploit black manual labor (DuVernay 2016: 02:50-03:32). The amendment reads: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted*, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (U.S. Const. amend. XIII, emphasis added). Professor of history Kevin Gannon argues that since this clause is part of the constitutional language, i.e. America's legal structure, "it's there to be used as a tool for whichever purposes one wants to use it" (DuVernay 2016: 02:20-02:29). The freedom this amendment grants all American citizens does in other words not apply to people convicted of a crime. So, if one is convicted of a crime,

one can in effect, legally and in concurrence with the Constitution, be subjected to the condition of slavery or 'involuntary servitude'.

The South was quick to use this clause as a loophole to regenerate a workforce that could rebuild its economy. Black criminality became mythologized in rhetoric that declared black men be wild and uncivilized and that they posed a threat particularly to white women. Such rhetoric created an image of black men as rapacious, menacing, and evil. In effect, it was an image that essentially depicted them as dangerous and therefore had to be banished. This image of black males played a crucial part in creating America's first prison boom—immediately after the Civil War—when blacks were arrested en masse for crimes such as loitering or vagrancy (3:33-04:46), and the South soon had a workforce, then, to rebuild its economy. Whereas the earlier workforce had been personal property, the new one was now generated through the post-Civil War mythology of black criminality.

Just as blacks had obtained constitutional freedom from slavery in the 1860s, the efforts of the CRM generated further juridical freedom and civil rights for black people a century later. Overall crime rates were, unfortunately, on the rise at the same time as the movement gained steam, and American politicians were quick to draw parallels between the CRM and the contemporary increase in crime. In his 1966 essay "If Mob Rule Takes Hold in the U.S.", Nixon declared that the rise in crime rates was a direct result of the policies that the CRM represented. Referring to Dr. King's philosophy of civil disobedience against unjust laws, the soon-to-be President claimed that the decline of law and order could "be traced directly to the spread of the corrosive doctrine that every citizen possesses an inherent right to decide for himself which laws to obey and when to obey them" (Coates: 2017: 252). In short, the political and juridical rationale of the time was then to say that if Negroes would be granted the same freedom and rights as whites, the nation would be repaid with crime (DuVernay 2016: 13:38-13:55).

Mass Incarceration

The era of mass incarceration was born with Nixon's mantra of 'law and order' and his 'war on crime'. These policies included an excessive focus on drugs, which Nixon proclaimed to be public enemy number one, but as formerly incarcerated author James Kilgore argues, these mantras were dog-whistle politics that actually referred to the political fight against and targeting of black political movements of the time such as Black Power and the Black Panthers—the new, more

radical Left—but also the anti-war movement and the movements for women's and gay libera-tion (15:22-15:38). Coates refers to H. R. Haldman, Nixon's Chief of Staff, who in his diary wrote that Nixon considered blacks to constitute the *entirety* of welfare and social problems. The strategy of Nixon's political campaigns was therefore to appeal to the racist, anti-black voters, and the political objective was to orchestrate a system that deliberately could target blacks as dangerous and criminal. Luckily for Nixon, he did not have to forge a new name for his system. "A centuries-long legacy of equating blacks with criminals and moral degenerates did the work for him (Coates 2017: 253).

Thus, the era of mass incarceration was born, and there is no mistaking its effects:

> From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, America's incarceration rate doubled, from about 150 people per 100,000 to about 300 per 100,000. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, it doubled again. By 2007, it had reached a historic high of 767 people per 100,000 […] America's prison and jail population from 1970 until today has increased sevenfold, from some 300,000 people to 2.2 million. (230-31)

America compromises 5 % of the world's population. It is therefore extremely thought-provoking that the Land of the Free imprisons 25 % of all incarcerated people in the world. Moreover, there is a clear racial aspect to American incarceration numbers:

> In 2000, one in 10 black males between the ages of 20 and 40 was incarcer-ated—10 times the rate of their white peers. In 2010, a third of all black male high-school dropouts between the ages of 20 and 39 were imprisoned, com-pared with only 13 percent of their white peers. (231)

Incomprehensible as these figures may seem, they simply quantify America's long history of de-liberately targeting blacks as criminals.

On top of the historical legacy of criminalizing African-Americans and their overrepre-sentation in the American prison system, the concept of the prison-industrial complex (PIC) must not be overlooked. Similarly to America's military-industrial complex—the interdependency be-tween America's military and private industry that created much of the country's economic boom in the decades that followed WW2 —the PIC has for decades been a multibillion dollar in-dustry, heavily financed by private investment (Ross 2014: 712). The natural resource needed for

the profit-oriented production in the business model of the PIC is logically human beings as prisoners. As a consequence, critics of the PIC argue that the system focuses more on profit, which can only come from a continued influx of prisoners, than it focuses on "the rehabilitation of criminals or a reduction in crime rates" (710).

The PIC has become so integral a part of America's economic system that it is impossible to reform radically. Millions of American jobs are directly linked to the prison system, including everything from prison guards, administrators, and service workers to those employed in the fields of police protection and legislative activities. What is more, a wide range of companies and organizations benefit and profit indirectly from the many prisons that mass incarceration generates. Alexander points to phone companies, charging ridiculous rates for communication between inmates and their friends and families; gun manufacturers, producing and selling weapons to prison guards and police; private health care organizations, providing expensive and terrible health care for prisoners; the U.S. military, relying on cheap prison labor for production of military gear; corporations that use cheap prison labor to keep wages at a minimum; and to come full circle, politicians who promise to construct new prisons, usually in white rural communities, guaranteeing jobs directly linked to the local community (Alexander 2010: 230-32).

Coates is particularly concerned with America's mass incarceration. One of his many concerns is how America systematically has enforced one law and initiative after another, supposedly to reduce crime rates. While the Nixon era paved the way for the beginning of mass incarceration with ever stricter laws against crimes, the following decades did their uppermost best to follow suit. A few examples of different initiatives taken in the latter part of the twentieth century include the introduction of mandatory minimum sentences for different crimes in the 1980s (Coates 2017: 254), and the initiative of 'Three Strikes and You're Out' that "mandated at least a twenty-five-year sentence for a third "strikeable offense"" in the 1990s (233). Coates argues that there is absolutely no statistical connection between tougher laws on crime and a falling crime rate. The effect that rising incarceration rates and longer prison terms do have is that prisons cease to function as institutions of rehabilitation and instead are used as convenient places of incapacitation (253-54). In concordance with Alexander, Coates furthermore says that the prison industry for decades has been used as a solution to the employment problems that all races in the lowest classes face in a deindustrialized America: "[J]obs for whites, and warehousing for blacks" (258).

The policies that specifically have targeted black people as criminals and the discrimination blacks have faced for decades in terms of housing policies and employment opportunities have left deep scars on black family structures. Of all black males born since the 1970s, one in every four has gone to jail. The figure is 70 % for those who dropped out of high school. As a consequence, more than a million black kids had a father in jail, at the turn of the twenty-first century. "Prison is no longer a rare or extreme event among our nation's most marginalized groups. […] Rather it has now become a normal and anticipated marker in the transition to adulthood" (234).

A report from the National Research Council has noted that more than half of the fathers in state prisons continue to be the primary breadwinner in their family (235). The economic hardships these families must face speak for themselves, and if the family stays intact throughout the sentence period, whatever savings it may have had will undoubtedly have been consumed by the factors that Alexander identified, e.g. excessive expenses "for phone time, travel costs for visits, and legal fees" (235), leaving the family in ever greater financial ruins. Whether the family stays together or not, the father is in desperate need of a job once out of jail. Studies show, however, that the consequences of incarceration are more severe for black men and their families—and continue to be so long after leaving prison, if not for the rest of their lives—compared to the same scenario for white men. One study found that not only do black men with a criminal background have a harder time finding a job than white men with a criminal record; it is also more difficult for black men *without* a criminal record to find employment compared to white men *with* a criminal past (239-40). If the family does not stay intact, nothing awaits the former inmate after prison. Being deprived of job opportunities and cut off from his children and family, homelessness is a certain destiny for many black men who have spent time in prison. As Coates puts it, "one can readily see the difficulty of eluding the ever-present grasp of incarceration, even once an individual is physically out of prison" (235), suggesting that once the former incarcerated is 'back' on the margins of society, American history leaves little hope for him to return to a normal way of life.

Black Role Models
For the many young African-Americans with fathers in prison, it is difficult to break the negative social heritage, Coates says, because so many grow up without a father figure or role model. He

cites Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who already in 1965 argued that young African-Americans with-out a father were considerably vulnerable to a negative social heritage, from which it would be more than difficult to break.

> [M]ost Negro youth are in *danger* of being caught up in the tangle of pathol-ogy that affects their world, and probably a majority are so entrapped. Many of those who escape do so for one generation only: as things now are, their children may have to run the gauntlet all over again. (227, original emphasis)

Since more than a million black kids at the beginning of this century have a father in prison as a result of decades with policies that have led to mass incarceration, Moynihan's words are as rele-vant as ever.

One thing is to not have a father figure in your own household. Another thing is to be de-prived of your public leaders and role models. This is exactly what happened during and after the CRM, leading up to the era of mass incarceration, and Anthony Jones proposes, in DuVernay's documentary *13th*, that this is one of the most important reasons for African-Americans' vulnera-bility to the structural forces in America that historically have wanted and continue to want to in-carcerate and criminalize black Americans. A whole generation of black leadership, e.g. Mal-colm X and Martin Luther King Jr., was stripped from the black community. Jones also argues that a leader as Fred Hampton simply "had to go", not only because he was a leading figure of the Black Panthers, but also because he apparently posed a particularly dangerous threat due to his ability to unite different groups of people—whites, blacks, Native Americans, and Hispan-ics—in his fight for justice. As a result, Hampton was in effect executed by Chicago police in 1969, shot and killed with two bullets to his head at close range, while sleeping in his house next to his pregnant wife. Having eliminated and got rid of so many black leaders, the blitzkrieg of policies that started the era of mass incarceration could be unleashed, as Jones puts it, leaving the black community without public guidance and leadership (DuVernay 2016: 43:15-46:30).

The lack of a father figure or public role model is also very central to *Native Son*. At home, Bigger does not have a father, who could discipline and teach him how to behave and nav-igate in order to stay safe and be on the right track. This job is necessarily allocated to Bigger's single mom, who then in turn does not have the time and resources needed to give her son the support and comfort any mother wants to give her children. Neither does Bigger have anyone he
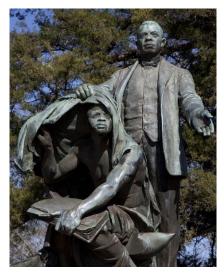
looks up to outside his home. It is arguably this lack of role model, both at home and in the public sphere, that leaves a vacuum in Bigger's life—one he attempts to fill by himself, e.g. by trying to become the dominant figure in his gang, proved in his need for measuring himself up against Gus.

Moreover, Bigger does not have access to any personal sphere, where he can do what would normally be considered private and intimate. Instead, he masturbates in the cinema, he fights in the streets and in public pool bars, and the only 'sexual intimacy' he has with Bessie, his girlfriend, which actually is his raping of her, takes place in an abandoned building in the city while they are on their run from the police, instead of at Bessie's place where their flight begins.

Putting Bigger in surroundings that are so unquestionably bleak is one of the main criticisms of Wright (Warnes: 2007: 58). If Bigger did not have any private settings to which he could go, and if his conditions of existence were so terrible, why did Wright, who after all created him, not give him any private spheres? Why did Wright not let Bigger meet someone who could introduce him to more productive or creative forms of sublimation, e.g. the wonders of literature and the satisfaction of intellectual stimulation that a visit to the library could bring him, or why did Bigger not join a sports club, where he productively and constructively could sublimate all his anger and fear and still use his body as outlet for his rage? Of course, Wright did not provide Bigger any of this because he wanted to show how American societal structures oppose and work against any advancement for blacks. Even if Bigger did meet someone who would take him to the library, what would indicate that he could develop an inclination to further cultivate and stimulate this new way of life?

What Wright wants *Native Son* to show is the existence of oppressive structures in American society that you simply cannot escape if you live, as Bigger does, on the wrong side of the intersections. If you are black, uneducated, poor, and have a broken family structure, there is not much you can do to improve your life. In Bigger's case, one could say that if he had acted according to the urge he felt in Mary's room, his fate would have been different since he would not accidentally have killed Mary and therefore not face the destiny of the electric chair. This is arguably true, but if Bigger had acted differently, he would be back in his rat-infested home, living on the margins of society without a job, money, and education. In other words, had he done the right thing, he would simply have postponed his tragic destiny as nothing indicates from his earlier life that he not eventually would be arrested.

Things are not equally as bleak for Ellison's protagonist. The difference may not be as big in terms of the external, surrounding societal structures that destine the protagonists to a hole in the ground and a prison cell respectively. The internal or personal structures of the two, however, differ tremendously. In contrast to Bigger, who does not have *any* role models whatsoever, Ellison's protagonist is at least not unfamiliar with the concept of role models.

Before the Battle Royal began, Ellison's protagonist said that he in those pre-invisible days "visualized [him]self as a potential Booker T. Washington" (Ellison 1952: 18). It must nonetheless be said that Ellison is highly critical of Washington and his policies, and after the Battle Royal, the protagonist also shows disapproval of him several times. For example, when the protagonist thinks of the statue of the college founder outside his college, a statue with "hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave;" he is "puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether [he is] witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding" (36). The resemblance between this description and the monument of Washington outside the Tuskegee Institute—the school Washington founded, whose focus was on industrial and vocational education—speaks for itself:

Lifting the Veil of Ignorance Monument at the Tuskegee Institute by sculptor Charles Keck, unveiled on April 15th, 1922

Similarly, when the narrator is about to join the Brotherhood, Brother Jack asks him what he thinks of Washington, and whether he would like to become the Washington of his own generation. The narrator is not sure if this is a serious question, searching Brother Jack's eyes for laughter, before saying that "naturally, I think [Washington] was an important figure. At least most

people say so" (305), only to later think "to hell with this Booker T. Washington business" (311) for himself.

This suggests two things. First, Ellison's protagonist has indeed had a role model, whom he nonetheless has come to neglect. Secondly, this development in attitude towards Washington demonstrates that the narrator is able to think for himself and make a judgment of his own, disregarding what other people may feel and say about the same thing. This shows that he knows what he stands for just as he similarly knows what he does not stand for, which is equally as important for personal identity building. This is in stark contrast to Bigger. Had Bigger had a role model, it would be laughable, even ludicrous, to assume that he soberly and critically would be able to change his mind, especially if his friends maintained a positive image of the same role model. This is yet another example that demonstrates how Ellison's book deals much more with the individual's responsibility, instead of having one's surrounding structures dictate and determine everything in your life, including in whom or what you should or should not believe.

The same argument is true for comradeship and group identity on a lower and more personal day-to-day basis. Ellison's narrator eventually enters into the grouping of the Brotherhood whose self-declared goal, at least originally, is to work for a better world for all people (304). After having been an integral part of the Brotherhood and its work, he leaves the organization after realizing, just as Clifton did, that the Brotherhood actually pulled the strings for their own benefit and stopped caring for the work that needed to be done for the black community in New York City. Once again, the protagonist rejects what he formerly believed in, not allowing for any false security to determine what he should or should not do. This is yet another manifestation of how Ellison's book puts the individual at the center of interests. In short, the protagonist's philosophy of life is 'to your own self be true'.

Cautionary Tales

James Baldwin, who played a significant role in the CRM, famously criticized *Native Son* for painting a picture of blacks that was too dark and depressive. He argued that it went too far in reducing blacks to objects without personal agency, whose destinies instead were passively being molded by and pushed through their dominant, surrounding white structures (Baldwin 1955). In the era of the CRM, where serious attempts were made to challenge the status quo; where real efforts were made to change the social, political, and economic structures of American society as

a whole, one can understand why such critique of the novel was dominant. However, as this paper has demonstrated, American history—before, during, and after the CRM—does definitely not leave the impression that the structural forces in *Native Son* are wildly and unnecessarily exaggerated.

Wright's novel can therefore be seen as a cautionary tale, warning what will happen to people who live on the wrong side of the intersections if the existing, dominant structures in American society continue to prevail. It elegantly warns against the social tragedies these structures can create if systematic oppression, direct and indirect, continues to exist against black people. In order to get his message across, Wright had to sacrifice Bigger as a character to these surroundings. From a present perspective, the real tragedy, however, is that *Native Son* arguably is an unfortunate foreshadowing of the methodical and structural targeting of blacks in the latter part of the twentieth century. The era of mass incarceration with its biased focus on incarcerating African-Americans—what Alexander's calls the new, 'colorblind' Jim Crow—makes this argument difficult to reject.

Even though *Invisible Man* hails the importance of individuality and detests the structural determinism of *Native Son*, parts of Ellison's novel also serve as a cautionary tale. As mentioned, the circumstances that created the BLM movement unfortunately mirror those of Clifton's death very accurately. The narrator's thoughts after Clifton's death and his eulogy were both manifestations of his need to verbalize the frustration he felt of what had happened. He had an innate need to articulate what he could not rationalize. Because he felt that Clifton's death was a complete waste of good potential, he was in a state of deep despair, and as the beginning of his speech showed, he actually wanted to resign and withdraw from any activist commitment, feeling that the whole thing was too tragic and meaningless. Due to this verbalization of wasted potential and opportunity, he nonetheless gave hope and inspiration to the crowd.

The BLM movement was created on the exact same grounds. Facing one black person's death after another as a result of excessive police brutality, BLM was established to generate a movement of 'enough is enough' against a culture that legitimizes the targeting and profiling of blacks as criminals and dangerous. Besides the already mentioned examples of Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and Trayvon Martin, BLM tries to form an opposition that sheds light on a culture where black men attempt to run away from an officer who shoots them in the back and who is more concerned about the camera that records the scene than the person he just shot (New York

Times 2015; CNN 2015); where black men are shot while sitting in their car with their girlfriend and daughter next to them (ABC News 2016); where black men are shot twenty times in their own backyard for being 'armed' with a cellphone that 'looked like' a gun (ABC News 2018); and where black men are being arrested in Starbucks, waiting for a business meeting. (Associated Press 2018). This may sound like the fates of fictional characters, but they are the actual fates of Walter Scott, Philando Castile, Stephon Clark, Rashon Nelson, and Donte Robinson who all have in common that they were black men in America at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Coates vs. West
Similar to Coates, West is also an active voice in the criticism of America's mass incarceration, which he identifies as the direct outcome of "the multileveled assault on poor and vulnerable people" that continues to exist in America (West 2012: ix). He concurs with Coates' assessment that black people are particularly vulnerable to be held in bondage by the PIC, especially those from the lower and working classes. He agrees that the racial caste system, which undeniably exists under the surface of 'colorblind' legislative politics, is alive and well, and that American state power deliberately has turned a blind eye to its own systematic destruction of black and poor communities, leaving these "devastated by mass unemployment, social neglect, economic abandonment, and intense police surveillance" (ix-x).

West and Coates thus agree on the racial aspect of American mass incarceration, but their approaches to the matter are nonetheless significantly different. As the above shows, West insists on explicitly having class incorporated in his analysis. He seldom talks about black people as one unity in social issues but instead contends that blacks from the poor and working classes are in particularly exposed positions, precisely due to their socioeconomic status. Coates, on the other hand, tends generally to talk about race and the racial aspect in American mass incarceration in a much broader way.

Illustrative of this difference in approach, Coates has publically said that if he could decide, his solution to this "public policy disaster"—American mass incarceration and its excessive bias against black males—would be to immediately find ways to get all people out of prison. This would not only include inmates who had had 'three strikes' and those in jail for small-scale marijuana possession. It would also include those convicted of gun crimes and murder (Aspen Institute 2015). He says that this would obviously require specific programs and policies that

could support former inmates, but he does not offer specific proposals for how this would work in action.

West would say that as noble as such a proposal may sound, it illustrates why Coates and his analyses are too narrow and essential since it does not take the intensity of economic institutions—public and private—into account. First of all, West would possibly agree that it would be a good thing to get 'low-scale criminals' out of jail, and it would also be good to get rid of mandatory minimum sentences, thereby reducing both the number of people and the amount of time spent in jail. Having said that, West would, on the basis of his politics of conversion, maintain that people convicted of gun and murder crimes have to be held accountable for their actions and hence need to be judged for their crimes accordingly.

Second, he would furthermore say that mass incarceration, which indisputably is a massive and serious problem on its own, is a piece in a much larger puzzle of societal problems where corporate power and market forces are much too comprehensive. He would point to the U.S. military as an example. As pointed out by Alexander, the military leans to some extent on inmates' production of military gear, and fewer inmates would therefore mean less or more expensive equipment for the military. West utilizes in other words an intersectional analysis to understand a massive problem such as mass incarceration, and he would say that mass incarceration is a symptom of American social, economic, and political problems that are extremely complex and thus transcend Coates' essentialism on race. West acknowledges that race undoubtedly is an important factor in these problems, but the solutions needed are too complex to carry race as the only element.

More generally speaking, Coates and West differ radically in their views on the future of race relations in America. On the one hand, Coates says that he "would have to make s*** up" (Late Show 2017) if he were to answer positively to the question whether he sees any possibility for a future America with better race relations and politics. Surely this is an answer of a pessimist, but Coates would undoubtedly say that he is simply being a realist. Of the two novels this paper has discussed, Coates would sympathize more with Bigger than Ellison's protagonist because Bigger is the perfect example of how America's structures leave African-Americans as victims. As of this, Coates is much like Malcolm X (West 1993: 102), who, throughout most of his political and activist career, represented a philosophy of black essentialism—that before anything else, black people are exactly black with everything that entails. It therefore follows that

since his main focus is on structures as the determining factors for black lives, Coates subscribes to the same black essentialism as Malcolm X.

West, on the other hand, would point to Ellison's protagonist as illustrative of how blacks should navigate in America. He would argue that Coates' pessimistic and deterministic rationale is exactly the black nihilism that is dangerous for black people and black communities. *Invisible Man*'s focus on the individual appeals much more to West's politics of conversion, which emphasizes the need for individuals to affirm their own personal worth, which then can generate a sense of positive agency and self-evaluation. Even though Ellison's protagonist ultimately finds himself in a hole in the ground, he has had a critical awareness of his surroundings, and he has acted accordingly. As the analysis made clear, he demonstrated such awareness and self-discipline already at the Battle Royal, when seeing the magnificent blonde. This is the all-important, essential difference between him and Bigger. Bigger may also have an awareness of his oppressive surroundings, but he fails to act accordingly.

If we really have to draw up the battle lines, Coates would say that Bigger's actions have little to do with personal responsibility because his surrounding structures are so powerful that they directly or indirectly force him to go over the edge in his search for personal agency. West's philosophy would of course not turn a blind eye to the oppressive structures and surroundings in Bigger's life, and it would agree that they do have a very direct impact on his life. West's philosophy would, however, criticize Bigger for acting in ways that are self-destructive and do not help or benefit anyone—least of all himself—especially when he knows what the right thing to do is.

Both intellectuals would agree that each protagonist is victim of inhumane circumstances, but whereas Coates exclusively would blame American society, West would also point to a personal responsibility. Therefore, the two would also disagree on Ellison's protagonist's desire to leave his hole in the ground. West would applaud and support this decision because the protagonist, via his critical awareness and individuality, has the ability to pick himself up, get out of the hole, and continue his life and fight for better conditions for himself and other blacks in America. Coates, on the other hand, would encourage him to stay in the hole because it is a safer and better place for him to be, and nothing in American history, neither before nor after Ellison wrote the novel, suggests that things will be better for him in the world outside the hole.

Two Great American Novels

Just as changing demographics since the late nineteenth century made it ever more difficult for writers in "an increasingly heterogeneous nation" to capture the true, quintessential American experience and spirit in the Great American Novel (Graham 2014), the exact same is true for literature that attempts to depict the African-American experience. Both experiences are too complex to be compressed into a single novel.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* may justifiably be worthy of carrying the literary distinction of being *a* Great American Novel, but Wright's novel, which was the first of its kind to use dark, depressing social realism in order to show how grim and bleak the life of blacks could be within the structures of American society, did unquestionably influence and thus set the stage for the next literary generations that portrayed the black experience. Ellison was part of this next generation, and this paper claims that it would have been difficult for him to write *Invisible Man*, had he not had Wright's depressing novel to go against. By contrasting his novel to *Native Son*, Ellison could present a different story, where a black man still faced oppressive structures in society, but where personal agency at least not was non-existing.

Whether or not *Native Son* deserves the badge of being exemplary of the Great American Novel is not for this paper to decide. On their own, each novel deserves, nonetheless, to be considered literary classics, and reading them comparatively and along each other allows for the novels to communicate with each other, almost in a 'call-response' relationship, which makes each better, richer, and more nuanced. Being published 66 and 78 years ago respectively, both continue to be as relevant as ever, especially due to the critical and didactic synergy that exists between them. Just as they in their own time portrayed different views on the African-American experience, the synergy of the two maintains to be illustrative of the difference of opinion within the black community itself, proved by the current disagreement between Coates and West. The paper suggests therefore that instead of arguing which of the two novels deserves to be considered an example of the Great American Novel and which does not, the synergy of the two ensures that both deserve to be perceived jointly as Great American Novel*s*, which, on the basis of the call-response relationship that exists in their critical and didactic synergy, have given a joint account of what it means to live under the conditions of being a black man in America—an experience more complex and nuanced than either novel can portray on its own.

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Summary

Discussions about the black experience continue to be a controversial topic in America's public sphere. In 2017, Cornel West accused Ta-Nehisi Coates, who has been called the greatest writer and public intellectual on race issues of his generation, of being a neo-liberal voice in contemporary discussions about the black experience in America. Similar debates have existed between public intellectuals since the beginning of the twentieth century, and the same topic has been a theme for well-perceived literary fiction by American authors such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, proving that dialectics about the black experience has roots in both non-fictional and fictional literature.

This paper has accounted for four different public intellectuals, who each has offered what they believe to be crucial in understanding the black experience in America. First, W. E. B. Du Bois' concepts of the color-line, the veil, and double-consciousness were examined in order to give an understanding of what Du Bois perceived as crucial for black mentality. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s theories offered insight into how literacy historically has been used as means to prove the existence and absence of humanity for different 'races'. Third, Cornel West called for a need to understand the magnitude and complexity of structural forces in modern society that demand people to focus on personal gain rather than fighting for a shared common good. West's politics of conversion was moreover introduced, which, besides focusing on the structural forces in society, also demands that people are responsible for behaving to the best of their ability. The paper finally presented Coates' view on how black bodies throughout American history have been used to generate a dream—a dream he argues to be unobtainable for African-Americans, and which only exists for people who consider themselves white.

Invisible Man and *Native Son* were subsequently analyzed in order to investigate how these novels portray violence and voice as aspects of identity building. Though both protagonists realize that they live under oppressive and cruel societal structures, the paper identified a tremendous difference in how each gave agency to himself.

For *Invisible Man*, the suggestion was made that the white personifications of the most fundamental and important hegemonic structures in American society lived in a state of so wild excitement that they either were unable or did not want to see the artificiality of their own American Dream. Seeing this Dream with a different set of eyes, Ellison's protagonist could, on the other hand, see how fake and pretentious it was. He also witnessed how these surroundings did

everything within their powers to silence, dehumanize, and ridicule him and his body. When he later saw how a former companion had lost all dignity by selling his own black identity, Ellison's protagonist felt that the subsequent police shooting merely was the physical manifestation of this former friend's death. The narrator managed, nevertheless, to re-establish a proper and worthy memory of Clifton, his friend, through the means of his voice.

For *Native Son*, the paper identified that Bigger had a tremendous fear, anger, and hate for both his external and internal worlds. The depth of his intersectional condition left him without any productive means to sublimate these negative and destructive feelings, which constituted most of his life, and it was argued that this deep intersectional condition destined Bigger to his tragic fate. The only satisfaction Bigger had in life was to give in to his physical needs—both when this resulted in violent assaults on his friends, and when it drew him to Mary Dalton's white skin.

After these analyses, the paper took a step back in a broader discussion on how American society historically has criminalized African-Americans and how it minutely has hollowed out much of black political and activist opposition. This has led to the era of mass incarceration, where a clear bias against black males exists. Recent years, though, have seen the evolvement of the Black Lives Matter movement—an explicit opposition to an oppressive police culture that excessively targets black Americans. As of this, the paper proposed that Ellison's and Wright's novels can be seen as cautionary tales for what could happen if the problems these books presented were not dealt with or taken seriously. This finally allowed for an incorporation of the difference between Coates and West in a discussion about how these novels fit on their philosophies and what these intellectuals would make of the novels.