

Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" as a Parable of Our Time

By Clint Smith

December 4, 2016



Ralph Ellison in Harlem in 1966. Photograph by David Attie / Getty

In 2012, I was a high-school English teacher in Prince George's County, Maryland, when Trayvon Martin, a boy who looked like so many of my students, was killed in the suburbs of Florida. Before then, I had envisioned my classroom as a place for my students to escape the world's harsher realities, but Martin's death made the dream of such escapism seem impossible and irrelevant. Looking for guidance, I picked up Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, "Invisible Man," which had been a fixture of the "next to read" pile on my bookshelf for years. "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me," Ellison writes in the prologue. The unnamed black protagonist of the novel, set between the South in the nineteen-twenties and Harlem in the nineteen-thirties, wrestles with the cognitive dissonance of opportunity served up alongside indignity. He receives a scholarship to college from a group of white men in his town after engaging in a blindfolded boxing match with other black boys, to the delight of the white spectators. In New York, he is pulled out of poverty and given a prominent position in a communist-inspired "Brotherhood" only to realize that these brothers are using him as a political

pawn. This complicated kind of progress seemed to me to accurately reflect how, for the marginalized in America, choices have never been clear or easy. I put the book on my syllabus.

The school was situated inside the beltway of Prince George's County, and my classroom was filled with almost exclusively black and brown students, many of them undocumented immigrants. While Ellison wrote of invisibility as a black man caught in the discord of early-twentieth-century racism, this particular group of students read the idea of invisibility not as a metaphor but as a necessity, a way of insuring one's protection. I was expecting that the class would relate the novel to the current climate of violence toward black bodies. But, as they often did, my students presented a compelling case that broadened the scope of the discussion.

Before my time in the classroom, immigration was rarely at the forefront of my consciousness. I did not come from a family of immigrants but from a group of people who had been brought to this country involuntarily, centuries ago. I cannot point to a map and say, "That is the country I came from"; our ancestry lies in the cotton fields of Mississippi and in the swamps of southern Florida. The repercussions of immigration did not feel as concrete to me as they did to the more than eleven million unauthorized immigrants across the country.

The day after Donald Trump was elected, one of my former students, from that same class, sent me a text message. We had not spoken in some time. She wrote, "I know I shouldn't be, but I'm a little scared. Unsure of what's going to happen." She continued, "I know I wasn't born here, but this has become my country. I've been here for so long, with a lot of shame, I don't even know my own country's history, but I know plenty of this one." In his interview with "60 Minutes," Trump reiterated that he would move immediately to deport or incarcerate two to three million undocumented immigrants. As for the rest, he said, "after everything gets normalized, we're going to make a determination." After I listened to the interview, I began looking over the essays from a writing assignment I had given a different group of students, years ago. The students were asked to write their own short memoirs, and many of them used the exercise as an opportunity to write about what it meant to be an undocumented person in the United States. Their stories narrated the weeks-long journeys they had taken as young children to escape violence and poverty in their home countries, crossing the border in the back of pickup trucks, walking across deserts, and wading through rivers in the middle of the night. Others discussed how they did not know that they were undocumented until they attempted to get a driver's license or to apply to college, only to be told by their parents that they did not have Social Security numbers.

One student stood up in front of the class to read his memoir and said that, every day, coming home from school, he feared that he might find that his parents had disappeared. After that, many students revealed their status, and that of their families, to their classmates for the first time. The essays told of parents who would not drive for fear that being pulled over for a broken taillight would result in deportation; who had never been on an airplane; who were working jobs for below minimum wage in abhorrent conditions, unable to report their employers for fear of being

arrested themselves. It was a remarkable scene, to witness young people collectively shatter one another's sense of social isolation.

"Invisible Man" ends with the protagonist being chased by policemen during a riot in Harlem, and falling into a manhole in the middle of the street. The police put the cover of the manhole back in place, trapping the narrator underground. "I'm an invisible man and it placed me in a hole—or showed me the hole I was in, if you will—and I reluctantly accepted the fact," he says.

I imagine that if I were to read this book with my students now, our conversation would be different. I wonder if any of my students would ever stand up in class to read their own stories, or if they would instead remain silent. I think of all the young people who, because of DACA, had emerged to be seen by their country as human, as deserving of grace, as deserving of a chance. I think of how they turned over their names, birth dates, addresses to the government in anticipation of a pathway out of the shadows. I revisit the final pages of "Invisible Man" and think of how many things that once existed above ground in our country might now become trapped beneath the surface.

Clint Smith is a writer, a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University, and the author of "Counting Descent."