



**THE BLACK ATLANTIC TRADITION
AND THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN NOVEL:
SIGNIFYIN(G) AND THE FIGURE OF ESU ELEGBARA
IN RALPH W. ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN***

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Abstract:

By exploring the black Atlantic tradition, the present article aims to demonstrate that the narrator's grandfather in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* is not only an emblem of the black vernacular, but a correlative of the West African god and trickster Esu Elegbara. Likewise, the black characters, Tarp, Clifton, and Rinehart, function as interpreters of the grandfather's 'double-voiced' text viewed as metaphoric of the black vernacular and evocative of Ifa, the 'ambiguous' West African religious texts. The first part of this article presents the main tenets of the black Atlantic tradition constituting the approach to be deployed. This is an integrative model comprising West African mythology and the African-American model of "Signifyin(g)." The second part examines the ways whereby the protagonist is guided into establishing linkage with the black vernacular. After examining those linguistic and functional aspects demonstrating the correlation between the grandfather and Esu, I will consider Tarp's and Clifton's Signifyin(g) strategies meant to enhance the protagonist's interpretive ability. I will subsequently investigate Rinehart's masquerading tricks inspiring both the protagonist's subversion of fix identities and his positive reception of the ambivalence of his grandfather's 'Signification.' Such interpretive enterprise ultimately brings about the protagonist's emancipation from the alienating discourse of "Progress" and his realization of self-identification and self-expression through the black vernacular.

Keywords: the black Atlantic tradition; the black vernacular; Signifyin(g); Esu; Ifa texts; the "vernacular matrix"; West African mythology

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Since its inception, almost seven decades ago, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) has rarely ceased to attract the attention of critics and readers. There is almost no critical approach or theory that has not been employed to examine one aspect of the novel or another. Some critics have highlighted as the novel's main distinctive character those narrative techniques derived from the black vernacular, polished and introduced to the coteries of modernism. Others have stressed Ellison's intellectual and political perspective reflected in the narrative's representation and dramatization of the symbiotic relation between African-American culture and American culture. Though several studies have indeed looked at Ellison's exploration of the black vernacular and particular aspects of African-American culture in the narrative, they have scarcely evoked the indigenous paradigm of the black Atlantic tradition. By exploring this critical model consisting of West African mythology integrated with the African-American model of Signifyin(g), this paper aims to demonstrate that *Invisible Man*'s anonymous grandfather is not only an emblem of the black vernacular, but a correlative of the West African god and trickster Esu Elegbara. Likewise, those black characters who all master strategies of trickery or masquerading and obliquely evoke the grandfather – namely, Tarp, Clifton, and Rinehart –, rise, each at a particular stage, to guide the protagonist's understanding of and linkage with his grandfather's text viewed as metaphoric of the black vernacular. The grandfather's ambivalent language is both a "paradigmatic text," as it represents the working of the black vernacular's rhetorical strategies of Signifyin(g) in the novel, and an equivalent of Ifa, the cryptic religious texts including the world of possibility of humans following West African mythology. While the old man accordingly displays several of those characteristics the Yoruban people attribute - according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1989) - to the trickster-god Esu, each of the characters Tarp, Clifton, and Rinehart plays an interpretive role summoning that of the West African 'babalawo,' the interpreter of Ifa texts. The first part of the present article involves, then, an overview of the black Atlantic tradition constituting the approach to be deployed. This is an integrative model comprising West African mythology together with the hermeneutics it involves and the African-American model of "Signifyin(g)" along with rhetorical strategies it encompasses. In the process, guided by Gates (1989), the focus will be on the Yoruban perception and representation of Esu, the implied view of the text as represented by Ifa, and textual interpretation and understanding as read in Yoruban hermeneutics. Integrated with this model is the theory of language and language interpretation inherent in the African-American form of "Signifyin(g)." In considering this model, the emphasis will mainly be on the investigation of those indigenous views of language, language use, and language interpretation that Gates (1989) has elevated onto a critical theory. As to the second part of this article, it examines the 'interpretive process' whereby the protagonist is guided into a genuine emancipation from the alienating discourse of "Progress" and true inscription in the black vernacular. After investigating those linguistic and functional aspects demonstrating the correlation between the grandfather and Esu, I will consider Tarp's and Clifton's Signifyin(g) strategies meant to empower the protagonist's interpretive ability. I will subsequently investigate Rinehart's

masquerading tricks inspiring the protagonist's subversion of fix identities and his admiration of the ambivalence of his grandfather's 'Signification.' Such 'cooperative interpretive' enterprise ultimately brings about the protagonist's writing of his life story, a text that testifies to his recuperation of his 'agency' and his acquisition of a dialogical 'voice.'

The black Atlantic tradition constituting the critical model to explore in the present article is an integrated black vernacular-based paradigm of practical reading. It consists of two critical models, the African-American theory of Signifyin(g) and the West African model of textual interpretation involved in Yoruban mythology. According to Gates (1989), the black Atlantic tradition has two emblems; one, Esu, is the sign and emblem of language use and interpretation in West African tradition and the other, the Signifyin(g) Monkey, is the symbol of African-American rhetoric and language interpretation. Gates (1989) advances that Signifyin(g) is part and parcel of pan-African cultural and linguistic products surviving the Middle Passage. "The Signifying Monkey" tale, in which is rooted the black vernacular trope called "Signifyin(g)," is, according to him, originated in African mythology wherein to be found the Signifyin(g) Monkey's "ancestor" or "equivalent," Esu Elegbara. The "Signifyin(g) Monkey" actually comprises a long poem telling of a conversation between the lion and the monkey. The core of the toast is that the monkey maliciously plots a fight between the lion and the elephant by lying to the former, telling him that the elephant has disclaimed him the title of the king of the jungle and invited him to fight for it, if he were to reclaim it. As the trick works, the lion fights indeed with the elephant only to eventually get severely beaten. In turn, the lion beats the monkey for what has turned out to be his well crafted language trick. Defending himself, the monkey blames the lion for having taken his double-toned language at face value. The poem largely known as "The Signifying Monkey" is ultimately read as inherently encompassing an indigenous black vernacular discourse on language use.

The Yoruba (Nigeria) and Fon (Benin) peoples possess, according to Gates (1989), a text of divination, called Ifa, consisting of ambiguous and highly structured poems that call for an elaborate process of interpretation for knowledge of one's fate. As Gates (1989) advances, conceived of as "the metaphor for the literary text," Ifa texts, their nature, the process of their interpretation by the "babalawo" or the "bokonos" — the West African "priests" —, the decisive role that Esu plays in the whole process of interpretation and the nature of meaning ultimately derived constitute, together, one basis of the black Atlantic system of interpretation. The other basis relates to those rhetorical strategies for which the Signifyin(g) Monkey stands. Out of such a system are to be generated principles and aspects of a 'distinct' indigenous black tradition. These principles revolve around the notion of the text together with the indetermination of meaning it involves and double voiceness along with literary revision it entails.

First, the babalawo's 'reading' of the texts of Ifa and the consultant's 'interpretation' of such a 'reading' demonstrate the conception of the text as being "*dynamic rather than fixed, as the text of a book is fixed*" (Gates, 1989, p. 26). Thus, being the conception of the text, there seems to be a certain tacit knowledge amongst the Yorubans

that one can hardly have access to the truth about his/her fate. This is why, Gates (1989) explains, one comes to the babalawo again and again and provides abundant food for Esu - the governor of understanding - time and again, seeking to reach the meaning that always escapes him/her. In fact, Gates argues, the Yoruban system figures out rhetorically the disclosure of meaning as it places Esu, the absent, above and before Ifa, the present, in the interpretive process and, accordingly, leaves the burden of "processing a meaning" to the consultant: "*Esu the absent one supersedes Ifa's presence in the ritual. Hence, all that is left is a series of differences, the relationship among which the reader (propitiate) must ponder to begin to produce some sort of meaning*" (p. 41). Moreover, Esu himself is believed to dwell at the "crossroads," that is in the liminal space between meaning and understanding and in the threshold between language and language decoding. As such, he -whose animosity to presence, immediacy, and transparency is generally taken for granted by both the babalawo and the consultant - endlessly displaces meaning: "*there is no direct access, or contact with truth or meaning because Esu governs understanding*" (p. 41). To accordingly highlight the open-endedness of Ifa texts in a hermeneutics that privileges the ambiguous and the figurative is, as Gates points out, to value close reading and hence the central role of the reader /critic in the interpretive process.

Second, the black tradition is essentially double-voiced. Actually, Esu's and the Signifyin(g) Monkey's most striking analogy has to do with interpreting a language that conceals rhetorical figures and style. One configuration of double-voiceness relates to the writing/speaking dichotomy which the tradition settles by deriding the conventional views that conceive of the dichotomy as an instance of binary oppositions and of one mode of expression as superior to the other. With Esu's role of linkage and the "sign of Odu," which is a chirographic system which the babalawo uses to decode Ifa, a liminal space between writing and speaking is conceived, a space serving, according to Gates, "*to define a complex notion of writing, a spoken and written writing*" (p. 26). One important implication of such a state of affairs is that "*[w]e can privilege neither speaking nor writing . . . since both (by definition) must be figured in terms of the other, existing only as a figure of the other in a bipolar moment of figuration*" (p. 40). By reinforcing "linkage" and "mediation" rather than "mutual exclusivity" and "binary opposition," the Yoruban rhetoric comes up with a text being 'between' speaking and writing; the text of Ifa is, indeed, "*neither spoken nor written*" (p. 40).

Double-voiceness in African-American tradition has to do with that complex relation between "Signification" and "signification" explained by Gates (1989) as follows:

"[w]hereas in standard English usage signification can be represented signified/signifier and that which is signified is a concept, or concepts, in the black homonym, this relation of semantics has been supplanted by a relation of rhetoric, wherein the signifier "Signification" is associated with a concept that stands for the rhetorical structures of the black vernacular, the trope of tropes that is Signifyin(g). . . The black term of Signifyin(g) has as its associated concept all of the rhetorical figures subsumed in the term Signify. To Signify, in other words, is to engage in certain rhetorical games." (p. 48)

Just like Ifa viewed from West African hermeneutics, a text, approached from the perspective of Signifyin(g), does not lend itself to a definitive interpretation. This is because, in the black vernacular oral tradition, a text “exists as a sequence of signifiers, effecting meaning through their differential relation and calling attention to itself by rhyming, repetition, and several of the rhetorical figures used in larger cultural language games” (Gates, 1989, p. 53). Accordingly, Signifyin(g) “epitomises all of the rhetorical play in the black vernacular,” that is, “the open rhetorical status of the black vernacular” (p. 53). Signifyin(g) as subsuming rhetorical plays is to be found in the vernacular speech of the African-American characters in certain African-American narratives such as *Invisible Man*.

Invisible Man's grandfather, Brother Tarp, Tod Clifton, and Rinehart are the characters that have really passed on to the young narrator the heart of that black folk wisdom acquired during a life-long experience of white racial oppression. The ‘black vernacular’ as a text subsuming a worldview, a medium, a voice, and an ever-regenerating strategy of coping with life under racial segregation constitutes the core of the legacy of those characters. The black vernacular in which the narrator is called to inscribe is a complex construct evoking Houston Baker, Jr.'s “ancestral matrix;” that is, “an ancestral matrix that has produced a forceful and indigenous American creativity”. As Baker explains, “a matrix is a womb, a network, a fossil-bearing rock, a rocky trace of a gemstone's removal, a principal metal in an alloy, a mat or a mat for reproducing print or phonograph record” (Baker, 1984, p. 3). Conceived as such, the black vernacular is the means to truly emancipate *Invisible Man* from the dominant and alienating discourse of “Progress” and, simultaneously, the “fossil-bearing rock” to produce his ‘voice,’ a voice to eventually materialize in his written life story.

The necessity to inscribe *Invisible Man* in the “ancestral matrix” is actually motivated by his ‘alienation’ resulting from his assimilation of the ideology of racial “Progress” disseminated by the college. The extent of his alienation continues to intensify as he goes on his activism with the Brotherhood, an organization claiming to work for the advancement of the black race but ultimately revealed to be racist. Indeed, in the process of assimilating the black students into genteel American culture, the college has systematically worked to discard the vernacular culture and ultimately produce a generation that barely has genuine linkage with their “ancestral matrix.” In the process, this institution has devised procedures of rarifying the black vernacular culture and measures of fetishizing some of its products, assigning them the mere function of entertainment. Other forms of black culture are used for propagating the success of the college founders’ strategic program of the black race advancement. While accordingly the spirituals are performed on the occasion of the visits of the supporters of the college, the museum of slavery tokens is exploited to relentlessly remind students of those claimed humanitarian and civilizing missions of the college. Therefore, rather than working to link black students to their “ancestral matrix,” the college actually wrestles to repress the black vernacular.

Following his expulsion from the college, *Invisible Man* works as a speaker for the Brotherhood. In using the black vernacular in his addresses of black audiences, on the

urge of the organization, he only works to disseminate the ideology of "Progress," packed in the black vernacular. The training he has undertaken together with the surveillance to which his vocabularies and semantic are subjected have, together, reduced his version of the black vernacular into a mere ornament. Whereas this superficial form is maintained for attracting more black supporters, it is emptied of the core of the black vernacular, that is, the 'worldview,' the 'perspective,' and the 'voice.' Paradoxically enough, the narrator goes on seeking emancipation through the Brotherhood's discourse of "Progress," a discourse that only continues to further degrade him, to render him an 'invisible' entity. Therefore, in working to link the young man to the vernacular text of his grandfather, Tarp, Clifton, and Rinehart work, in fact, to retrieve him from his alienation, that is, to raise his awareness of his actual status as 'invisible.'

While there is a large agreement amongst critics of *Invisible Man* on the idea that these characters are essentially trickster figures,ⁱⁱ few critics have so far, to my knowledge, explored the connection which the grandfather, Brother, Clifton, Tarp, or Rinehart can be said to have with Esu. To my mind, the critic who has come closer to linking the grandfather with Esu, without eventually doing so, is Robert Stepto. As he points out,

"Ellison's narrator's grandfather is an unknown and mobile . . . [H]e will travel with and reappear before his youthful kinsman in word and image many times before the narrative's tale is finally complete. The grandfather . . . is . . . a huge and looming question mark—an enigma. . . . The grandfather is, in short, a 'Mr. In-Between,' a Vergilian guide." (1979, p.179)

Though Stepto emphasizes those peculiar aspects of the old man such as "mobile," "enigma," "a 'Mr. In-Between,'" "a Vergilian guide," striking aspects marking Esu, he does not quite summon the Pan-African trickster.

The grandfather is, nevertheless, differentiated by his demonstration of attributes recalling those traits marking Esu, aspects relating to the character, language use, and actions and functions. The first such feature is the grandfather's text, a text that is analogous to Ifa in its subsumed worldview and in its formal strategies, hence its being a metaphor for the black vernacular as the 'black folk wisdom text.' If Ifa, "*in which all*

ⁱⁱ See, for example, Leon Forrest. 2004. Luminosity from the Lower Frequencies. In John F. Callahan (ed.), *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*. (pp. 267–286). Oxford: Oxford UP. See also Floyd R. Horowitz. (2000). Ralph Ellison's Modern Version of Bear and Brer Rabbit in *Invisible Man*. In Robert J. Butler (ed.), *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*. (pp. 45-49). Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press. See as well George Kent. Ralph Ellison and Afro-American Folk and Cultural Tradition. In Robert J. Butler (ed.), *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison*. (pp. 45-50). Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press. These seminal essays have all dealt with folk tricksters in *Invisible Man*, focusing chiefly on the grandfather and Trueblood; yet, neither figure has actually been connected to Esu. Philippe Whyte, likewise, discusses aspects of trickery in *Invisible Man*, arguing that the narrative is essentially a trickster tale, without, however, making any connection with Pan-African trickery whose central figure is Esu. See Philippe Whyte. *Invisible Man as a Trickster Tale*. In Harold Bloom (ed.), *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*. (pp. 61-80). Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999.

human possibilities are inscribed" (Gates, 1989, 41), is about one's existence and fate in a world framed by a cosmology representing life as involving unpredictability and uncertainty, the grandfather's text of 'black folk wisdom' is about strategies of coping with life in a racially segregated society. If we consider that homology between the "blues matrix" and the "vernacular matrix" explained by Baker (1984), the existential/ontological dimension displayed in the blues can then be said to be inherent in the black vernacular. Explaining this existential/ontological aspect, Albert Murray says,

"In fact, the whole point of the blues idiom lyric is to state the facts of life. Not unlike ancient tragedy, it would have the people for whom it is composed and performed confront, acknowledge, and proceed in spite of, and even in terms of, the ugliness and meanness inherent in the human condition. Not by rendering capitulation tolerable, however, and certainly not by consoling those who would compromise their integrity, but in its orientation to continuity in the face of adversity and absurdity." (1973, pp. 36- 37)

Because they actually express an unwritten ontological outlook, the blues call for a peculiar type of heroism; that is, *"the candid acknowledgement and sober acceptance of adversity as an inescapable condition of human existence – and perhaps in consequence an affirmation disposition towards all obstacles"* (Murray, 1973, pp. 106-107). In this sense, the grandfather's 'black folk wisdom text' involves the same ontological/existential worldview expressed in the blues.

In addition to their ontological character, the grandfather's text of 'black folk wisdom' and Ifa texts are actually absent in their totality. They only appear in fragments, now and again, more than often under ever changing forms and manifestations. To be sure, Ifa encompasses and manifests itself in those spoken words of the babalawo, visual objects such as the Odu signatures, and signs interpreted as expressive of Esu's satisfaction, warning, or wrath (hurricanes, spoiled ceremonies, etc.). In turn, the grandfather's text, representing the "vernacular matrix," unfolds in a multitude of forms. Along with the deathbed words and those echoes the narrator associates with the old man's voice, a series of symbols inscribed in it emerge one following the other: the old man's portrait, the golden message, the anonymous letter, the portrait of Douglass, Tarp's leg chain, Clifton's toy, and Rinehart's masks.

Moreover, both the grandfather's text of 'black folk wisdom' and Ifa texts are characteristically cryptic and open-ended. The grandfather's text never lends itself to a final conclusive interpretation. Not only does the narrator come up with one incomplete reading after another, but he is as well uncertain as to a determinate meaning of such a text. Even in the Epilogue, conceived retrospectively as he grows into a mature writer, he ultimately self-consciously decides not to assign any final meaning to it. Ifa, a highly complex and metaphorical religious text of fate, involves, in turn, a disclosure of meaning, since, as Gates (1989) explains, the Yorubans tacitly know that one can hardly have access to the truth about his/her fate even after one's consultation of the babalawo,

because Esu - the governor of understanding - is the ultimate power that, only if pleased, guides one into reaching only an ever-escapable meaning. The interpretive process eventually leaves the burden of "*processing a meaning*" to the consultant (pp. 40-41). If Esu has interpreters of Ifa, such as the babalawo or the bokonos, the grandfather's text also has Brother Tarp, Tod Clifton, and Rinehart as its actual interpreters.

Other than those attributes of the grandfather highlighted in the deathbed scene, almost no other detail about him is provided in the narrative. The scene, appearing at the opening of the novel, presents the old man as rather mysterious:

"He was an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who caused the trouble. On his deathbed he called my father to him and said, 'Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been traitor all my born days, spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.' . . . 'Learn it to the young-uns,' he whispered fiercely; then he died. But my folks were more alarmed over his last words than over his dying. It was as though he had not died at all, his words caused so much anxiety." (Ellison, 1965, pp. 18-19)

While this depiction displays aspects of the narrator's grandfather that actually recall those major features distinguishing Esu, it presents the deathbed words as metaphoric for the "vernacular matrix," or the text of 'black folk wisdom' in the narrative. As represented, the old man shows, akin to Esu as portrayed by Gates (1989, p. 6), one feature and its opposite at the same time, and his character and actions usually subvert conventional assumptions and beliefs. To be sure, the grandfather is mysterious and peculiar, but quite renowned for his sincerity and intelligence. After his death, it occurs to the people that "he had not died at all." Rather than stirring grief, his death provokes people's preoccupation with interpreting his 'double-voiced' words, that is, his Signifyin(g) text. Instead of demonstration of those usual aspects of a weak dying person, the account emphasizes the power, the presence, and the authority of the grandfather. It is as though the most salient part of the old man's person – his message, presence, and authority – would remain here in this world and only his physical part would rest there in the other world. In this, he is redolent of Esu, whose "*legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world*" (1989, p. 6). Further, conceived of as a moment between life and death, the deathbed scene summons the typical locale and the "mediation" role of Esu, his living in "threshold" sites and "gateways," and his ever oscillation between this world and that world of the gods. The grandfather will subsequently recur in the narrative as a metaphor of the black vernacular and as a power that is, akin to Esu, mobile, omnipresent, and supervising.

The old man's double-voiced message composed principally of dense images is metaphoric of the text of 'black folk wisdom.' For one reason, the message reflects that

black vernacular ontological/existential 'worldview' stressing adversity and heroism as registered in the blues. In his deathbed words he densely states the facts of life, as he has experienced them. His words are reminiscent of that existential call recurring in the blues lyrics, the call to "*confront, acknowledge, and proceed in spite of, and even in terms of, the ugliness and meanness inherent in the human condition*" (Murray, 1973, p. 36). This philosophical perspective is noticeably reflected in the old man's advice, "*Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war*". In one interpretation, the old man regrets, and blames himself for, agreeing to a compromise subsequent to the Civil War, a compromise, considered in retrospect, equating a real defeat. According to his outlook, agreeing to such a compromise means compromising one's integrity, surrendering when one has to continue the fight. Seen from the existentialist perspective of the blues, submission is not tolerable, nor is that "*consolation of those who would compromise their integrity*". This is because these acts contradict with the basic principle of heroism, that is, "*continuity in the face of adversity and absurdity*" (Murray, 1973, p. 37). Expressing this existentialist perspective being inherent in the black vernacular, the deathbed words are metaphoric of the black vernacular existentialist/ontological perspective in the same way Ifa is emblematic of West African cosmology.

For another reason, being a representation of strategies of Signification, the grandfather's text is a 'paradigmatic Signifyin(g) text.' It foreshadows, that is, subsequent occurrences of Signifyin(g) in the narrative subtexts or embedded narratives as representations of the black vernacular. Trueblood story exemplifies a subtext that involves striking Signifyin(g) on Mr. Emerson, a college philanthropist driven to the black man's cabin by Invisible Man when he was a student in the college. The sharecropper tells the white man a story wherein are magnified those white racial stereotypes about the Negro as a debased entity. Though the story is dubious, Emerson awards the black man a thousand dollars for it, probably because it legitimizes his support of the college's ideology of advancing the black race. Another Signifyin(g) instance that Invisible Man has not initially understood and to which he would return and revisit as a mature narrator is to be found in the scene of his meeting, on his arrival to New York, with Wheatstraw. This black cartman Signifies on the narrator's over-optimism, insinuating that life in New York requires that one resort to continuous variety and change. In turn, all the black characters to consider shortly are Signifyin(g) on Invisible Man aiming to liberate him from the ideology of "Progress." As such, while their modes of Signification exemplify the workings of this rhetorical strategy, they contribute to both the development of the protagonist and the structure of the narrative as a bildungsroman. Labeling the grandfather's deathbed words a 'paradigmatic Signifyin(g) text' points therefore not only to the narrative's imitation of the examples of the black vernacular mode of speaking including Signifyin(g), but also to the deployment of Signification as an integral aspect of plot and character development.

The second appearance of the grandfather comes after the narrator, excited after his reward of a scholarship to the college of black youths, meets with mockery the gaze emanating from his grandfather's portrait. As the narrator tells us,

"When I reached home everyone was excited. Next day the neighbours came to congratulate me. I *even felt safe from grandfather*, whose deathbed *curse* usually *spoiled my triumphs*. I stood beneath his photograph with my brief case in hand and smiled triumphantly into his stolid black peasant's face. It was a face that *fascinated* me. *The eyes seemed to follow everywhere I went.*" (Ellison, p. 31; emphasis added)

The portrait might be seen as a fragment in that total text of the grandfather, the 'black folk wisdom text,' a fragment manifested in the form of a picture, bringing to mind those visual representations of Ifa texts. It can accordingly be said to function as a metaphor for the grandfather's deathbed words in the same way that these words are, in turn, metaphoric of the "vernacular matrix." It also suggests the metamorphosis character of Esu, his ability to emerge in a range of forms and manifestations. He can transmute both into inanimate entities like winds and floods and flesh- and- blood entities such as that horseman in the famous West African story of the two friends, the horseman who rises to spoil and eventually repair the strong friendship of two peasants (Gates, 1989, pp. 32-35). This portrait, moreover, displays the old man as having a "spoiling" power. Despite his absence, he is, somehow, ubiquitous, for his "gaze," akin to that of Esu - the "guardian of the gateways" - stands for a striking omnipresence and, together with it, an overwhelming power of surveillance.

Astonishingly enough, the grandfather ruins the protagonist's relaxation and his enthusiasm as early as the first night following his "triumphant smile" into the old man's face. The grandfather's subversive act summons Esu, who would, at the most unexpected moment, emerge and ruin happy celebrations, disrupt satisfaction and confidence, and subvert relations of connection and harmony. As Esu's unpredictable disruptive power may come under countless forms and manifestations, for he ever metamorphoses, the protagonist's disturbing dream of his father might be considered a form of disruption suggesting the tricks of Esu. The first part of the young man's dream is actually about his going to circus with his grandfather who refuses to laugh at the clowns possibly because they suggest to him the Black Face associated with Minstrelsy Theater. Still metaphorically living in this world as an omniscient power and the guardian of the tradition, the grandfather emerges to warn the protagonist against those degrading tricks of the kind previously experienced by generations of black people in slave plantations and in antebellum America. If he then refuses to laugh at the clowns, it is ostensibly because he is Signifyin(g) on the young man, urging him to be cautious enough not to remain, like the blacks used by whites in Minstrelsy, a toy at the white man's hands.

In the second part of the dream, the grandfather leads the narrator to a maze of repetitive and inconsequential actions:

"He told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. 'them's years,' he said. 'Now open that one.' And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. 'Read it,' my grandfather said. 'Out loud. "To Whom it May Concern," I intoned. 'Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.'
I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears."(Ellison, pp. 31-32)

This act of 'mise en abyme' culminating, as it were, in the revelation of a coded message actually suggests the grandfather's Signifyin(g) on the process of the white men's degradation of the narrator. Such a process has actually already started with the young man's speech that only celebrates humility as equivalent to the responsibility of his people. Because the speech testifies to his actual assimilation of the school's ideology of "Progress," it has awarded him a briefcase and a scholarship to the college of black youths. Considered from the black vernacular perspective, the event pleasing the narrator is, in fact, subsumed in an intrinsically 'double-faceted' reality. Similar to all Signifyin(g) gestures calling attention to the implied or hidden strategies beneath the surface of the displayed words or actions, the act of awarding the narrator a scholarship has under its surface strategies and implications he should seriously consider. An act such as this might well lead to other implications and repercussions that, in turn, could lead to further implications and repercussions in an endless network, precisely akin to the share play of a 'signifier' underneath Signification. Not interpreting such act in this way shows the hermeneutical immaturity of the narrator and his alienation from the "vernacular matrix." Strikingly enough, as the narrative sheds out its skins, it is revealed that the college director's letters to "the school's friends in New York," all revolve around the plea: "I beg of you, sir, to help him [the narrator] continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler" (Ellison, p.156). While this request recalls the golden message in the protagonist's dream, it justifies that emphasis in the black vernacular tradition on the implications of acts and words. As can be read in the "Signifying Monkey" toast, a founding text of the black tradition, not only is the lion in the tale humiliated because he has assigned a single literal meaning to the monkey's double-voiced account, but also because he has not questioned that animal's motivation eventually turning out to be malicious.

Conceived of as a correlative of Esu, the grandfather possesses, as a marker of his "doubleness," a set of powers and traits and, at the same time, exactly their "opposites." His powers of disruption, destruction, and disconnection coexist simultaneously with his force enhancing harmony, rebirth, reconstruction, and understanding, just redolent of Esu as Gates explains (1989, p. 6). He also has, like Esu, the utmost power of "mediation" that helps or brings about a "connection" of the "parts" into "wholeness" or into a "system." He, therefore, boosts abilities to "link" entities being, in fact, only in appearance disconnected or "fragmented." Interestingly, the portrait episode and the protagonist's dream are early signs revealing the young man's 'hermeneutic illiteracy.'

At this stage, the young man can neither perceive those hidden, but existing, "connections" between "intentions" and "actions," or between "meanings" and "understanding," nor "link" fragments of texts into a "whole," more inclusive text, a fact to which also relates his incapacity to go beyond the literal meaning of language. Without his grandfather functioning, akin to Esu, as a "figure of mediation" the so-far hermeneutically illiterate young man cannot perceive the 'motivation' behind the town's 'big shots' action of awarding him a scholarship, nor can he decode the ambiguous message contained in the envelope.

The third rise of the grandfather occurs at the period between Bledsoe's pronouncement of the protagonist's expulsion from the college and his writing of the letters the young man has to take to "some of the school's friends" in New York. Such emergence takes place, again, at a 'liminal' moment that is quite appropriate for the eruption of the trickster:

"And now to drive me wild I felt suddenly that my grandfather was hovering over me, grinning triumphantly out of the dark. I simply could not endure it. For despite anguish and anger, I knew of no other way of living, nor other forms of success available to such as me . . . It was either that or admit that my grandfather had made sense. Which was impossible . . . Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment." (Ellison, p.123; emphasis added)

Summoning Esu, being as (Gates, 1989) points out, "*the guardian of the crossroads*" (p. 6), "*the master of the roads,*" and "*the master of 'all steps taken'*" (p. 31), the grandfather's force emerges when the protagonist is situated in a 'dilemma,' being unable to make a choice between two opposite options, or, at times, in the liminal space between some of his many falls and rises. Reproducing himself anew, for he is a "mutable figure" reminiscent of Esu, the grandfather comes under the form of an invisible flying disturbing force hovering over the narrator. That power of linkage is remarkably noticeable here; so is that of disruption. As a "figure of mediation," the old man erupts in order to instigate the protagonist's thinking linkage. Rather than consider each separate fragment of his experience, the narrator is called to 'link' into a 'whole' text both those fragments of his experience so far and those emergences of his grandfather to this point. He should, moreover, perceive of that whole text of his grandfather as a Signifyin(g) text on the text of his fate. His actual expulsion from the college, at this stage, is, therefore, only another yet fragment of the convoluted and open-ended text of his fate. His dream is, in this respect, one instance of Signification in that open-ended and more inclusive Signifyin(g) text of his grandfather, the 'black folk wisdom text.'

By erupting at this juncture, the old man challenges the protagonist into an awareness of what the Yoruban people express in the proverb about Esu, "*he spoke yesterday, it comes to pass today*" (Gates 1989, p. 39). This awareness, if possessed, is an asset, for "*if fate can be foretold, it can also be changed by [Esu]*" (p. 28). Following West

African mythology, knowledge and change of one's fate require a recurring process of interpretation of Ifa texts, a process involving an active engagement of the concerned person and the babalawo. The protagonist, however, does not sufficiently mull over his fate. Caught in thinking within an 'either-or' rhetoric (either submit to punishment or go back home), he quickly excludes the possibility that his grandfather has made sense, hence rushing to the conclusion of accepting punishment. This binary rhetoric that is antithetical to the black tradition and, along with it, the narrator's inability to think connections further confirm his alienation from the black vernacular. Neither does he consider linking his present predicament with the entire text of his fate, nor conceive of the present as actually connected to the past.

The fourth emergence of the grandfather occurs in the midst of the protagonist's satisfaction at the beginning of his career as orator for the Brotherhood. Interestingly, this appearance is preceded by an important event; Tarp, a black old activist in the organization, fixes in the neophyte orator's office a portrait of Frederick Douglass. While the portrait can be seen as another yet symbol in the 'black folk wisdom text,' a text comprising far more than just words, it could also function as a 'link' between the protagonist and the old man, just as is Odu a link between the babalawo's client and Esu. The portrait might additionally be seen as a subtext configuring the heroism involved in the deathbed words; for Frederick Douglass is the most telling 'model' of that 'heroism' and that 'fight' emphasized in those words. As the narrative proceeds, the narrator tells us, "*I sat now facing the portrait of Frederick Douglass, feeling a sudden piety, remembering and refusing to hear the echoes of my grandfather's voice*" (Ellison, p. 306). One breath later, the mature narrator explains retrospectively that split rendering his personality double whilst being a participant; and that quite justifies his denial of his past and his grandfather:

"There were two of me: the old self . . . and the new public self that spoke for the Brotherhood and was becoming so much more important than the other that I seemed to run a foot-race against myself. . . . Still I liked my work during those days of certainty...the Brotherhood was a world within a world and I was determined to discover all its secrets and to advance as far as I could." (Ellison, p. 307; emphasis added)

This is, in fact, another perfect situation for the eruption of the disruptive power of the grandfather as a trickster corresponding to Esu. There are aspects here he cannot but spoil: a challenge of the trickster's power suggested by the narrator's refusal to listen to his grandfather's voice, a belief in the fixity, oneness, and totality of the self-displayed in the protagonist's happiness with "the new public self" he is, and a strong faith in the Brotherhood as a form of 'final truth.'

The grandfather emerges in connection, suggestively enough, with a letter that is "*unstamped, and appeared to be the least important item in the morning's mail*" (Ellison, p. 309). Having read the letter, the narrator gets utterly upset by the appearance of his grandfather:

"And looking up, I received another shock. Framed there in the grey, early morning light of the door, my grandfather seemed to look from his eyes. I gave a quick gasp, then there was a silence in which I could hear his wheezing breath as he eyed me unperturbed."
(Ellison, p. 309)

The grandfather's frequent rise in relation with envelopes and letters is an interesting indication that the letter disturbing the narrator has some connection with the old man's trickeries. Akin to Esu, the grandfather functions both as a "messenger" and as an "interpreter." In this respect, in examining how "Esu is the sole messenger of the gods" in West African mythology, Gates (1989) concludes that "*Esu's most direct Western kinsman is Hermes*" (pp. 6; 8) and that Esu, akin to Hermes, lends his name to hermeneutics. In addition, similar to the Signifyin(g) Monkey, Esu is the "*master of style and stylus*" (p. 6). While the Signification involved in the deathbed words demonstrates the grandfather's mastery of style, the overall advice and warning included in the anonymous letter are, in a sense, a 'stylization' of those words. As if in a didactic gesture, the densely metaphoric message is stylized and rendered literal, "*do not go too fast; they do not want you to go too fast*" (Ellison, p. 310). This way, the old man also displays an aspect of his function of establishing linkage, a function recalling Esu. As Gates points out, "*linguistically, Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation, the word (as a form of the verb to be) that links a subject with its predicate*" (Gates, 1989, p. 6). In this regard, the grandfather functions as a "messenger" and as a "copula." On the one hand, he 'guides' the protagonist's 'understanding' of the text of his own fate so as to have it altered toward the direction of self-emancipation. On the other, he is the ultimate force that transmits the core of folk wisdom as a text to the protagonist to ultimately 'link' him to the "vernacular matrix" and hence to his African-American community.

The portrait of Douglass actually stimulates the narrator's meditation on what he names "unexpected transformation." Yet, his interpretation of the portrait fails both in establishing appropriate 'connections' between his own career and that of Douglass and in retrieving the hidden meaning inherent in his grandfather's 'black folk wisdom text.' Such constrained interpretation results from the narrator's unshaken faith in the conclusiveness of his identity as an activist in an allegedly righteous organization, the Brotherhood. His concluding words, "*I am what they think I am*" (Ellison, p. 306), confirm his adoption of an identity that is constructed and assigned to him by the discourse of the Brotherhood to which he shows blind loyalty. This form of alienation is further manifested in his utmost approval of his actual status, "*the new public self that [speaks] for the Brotherhood*" (p. 307); for rather than equipping him with a liberating 'voice,' this status actually deprives him of both the 'voice' marking his singularity and his individual and a collective 'agency' as an African-American.

The inaccurate response of *Invisible Man* to his grandfather's words and the flawed analogy that he draws between Douglass and himself are noticeably exposed in his comment on Douglass:

"Douglass came north to escape and find work in the shipyards; a big fellow in a sailor's suit who, like me, had taken another name. What had his true name been? Whatever it was, it was as Douglass that he became himself, defined himself. And not as a boatright as he'd expected, but as an orator." (Ellison, p. 308)

Though the protagonist identifies with Douglass, he does so only after a misreading that valorizes the black leader as "orator" while overlooking the black leader's status as the founder of African-American discourse with the marked African-American subversive 'voice' and 'agency' included. This gesture indicates that the young man is not actually able to decode Tarp's Signifyin(g) utterance alluding to the connection between "writing" and "leadership": "He [Douglass] was a great man. You just take a look at him once in a while. *You have everything you need- paper and stuff like that?*" (Ellison, p. 306; emphasis added). Instead of conceiving of the double-toned question as a form of Signifyin(g), that is, as an indirect gentle request, and accordingly think over the possibility of realizing leadership through "writing," he takes the question at face value and simply answers it as such. Similarly, he highlights what Douglass "became" - that is, in the narrator's view, 'orator' -, not what he formerly was - that is, an illiterate slave. This misreading overlooks the core of the black leader's life story, that is his state as an "ex-slave" who has struggled to acquire literacy and freedom as prerequisites and conditions for 'self-emancipation' and its outcome of the 'construction' of the African-American discourse through the 'writing' medium.

Striving to emancipate the young man from his persisting alienation, Tarp inscribes him in a striking 'interpretive process.' The old man uses both his leg chain - a symbolic visual object recalling the babalawo's chirographic cryptogram, i.e., his bids of black palm nuts - and a tale reminiscent of the Yoruban priest's loud reading of the "signatures of Odu" poems while interpreting a consultant's fate inscribed in Ifa. Handing the iron object to the narrator, the old man explains:

*"I'd like to pass it on to you, son. . . . I think it's got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we're really fighting against. I don't think of it in terms of but two words, *yes* and *no*; but it signifies a heap more. . . . "I want you to take it. I guess it's a kind of luck piece. Anyway, it's the one I filed to get away."* (Ellison, p. 313; emphasis in original)

In punctuating his gesture of handling the chain to the young man with the words "it's the one I filed to get away," he highlights the symbolic value of 'self-emancipation' which the object and the related tale hold. The narrator has hence to engage in the interpretation of the old man's words and the implications of his chain in the same manner the babalawo's consultant would invest in the enterprise of decoding Ifa. As Gates puts it, "*[f]airly frequently, the consultant cannot recognize his situation in the metaphorical language of the poem, despite the fact that Ifa has inscribed the person's fate into the appropriate Odu, signified by the patterns formed by the palm nuts*" (1989, p. 21). Ultimately,

because the story comprises a series of metaphors and is ostensibly consciously embellished, it shares exactly both the character of his grandfather's cryptic language and the main feature of the poems constituting the "signatures of Odu." Indeed, these poems are, according to Gates, "lyrical . . . [,] so metaphorical and so ambiguous that they may be classified as enigmas, or riddles, which must be read or interpreted" (1989, p. 21).

Signifyin(g) on the protagonist for having misread the portrait of Douglass, and attempting to render him hermeneutically more competent, Tarp keeps insinuating to him aspects of similarities between his iron link together with the story associated and the portrait of Douglass. To begin with, telling the young man about the link, Tarp says, '[i]t was lucky to me and I think it might be lucky to you. You just keep it with you and look at it once in a while' (Ellison, p. 314; emphasis added), which Signifies on, by repeating with difference, his words in the context of Douglass, 'you just take a look at him once in a while... He belongs to all of us' (p. 306; emphasis added). Likewise, in establishing connection between "me" and "you," Tarp does not actually only repeat with alteration his previous utterance about Douglass, namely that the leader "belongs to all of us," but also the words in the anonymous letter, that is, "remember that you are one of us." The man is, then, very likely Signifyin(g) on the protagonist's being alienated by the brotherhood's ideology of "Progress."

Once Tarp mysteriously disappears, Tod Clifton, another African-American activist of the Brotherhood, emerges. Clifton is, in this respect, similar to Tarp, an 'interpreter' of the 'black folk wisdom text' and a 'mediator' between the protagonist and his grandfather. By rising at this juncture, he is expected to complete Tarp's venture of emancipating the protagonist from the alienating ideology of "Progress" and integrating him in the "vernacular matrix." Clifton's gestures of selling and playing with the paper dolls may be said to be a 'performance' intending to Signify on the Brotherhood's manipulation and its use of African-Americans in a manner that is much like the Minstrelsy's using of Black Face and African-American clowns only to degrade and laugh at the "Black race." In fact, the narrator describes Clifton's theatrical show as different from all conventional performances and his toy as bearing a sign of intended challenge:

"A grinning doll of orange-and-black tissue paper with flat cardboard discs forming its head and feet and which some mysterious mechanism was causing to move up and down in 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 emotions." (Ellison, 1965, p. 347; emphasis in original)

Through this degrading performance, Clifton allegedly seeks to mock those black viewers being members of the Brotherhood. The "mysterious mechanism" automating the toy possibly symbolizes the secret plans, the hidden motives, and the 'invisible' powers of white alliances manipulating from afar the Brotherhood. In a subsequent

showdown with some local leaders of the organization, the narrator will discover the hidden intentions to subdue African-Americans through the ideology of "Progress." Jack, the leader of the organization, will then tell the young man, "[y]ou were not hired to think . . . you were hired to talk . . . we furnish all ideas" (Ellison, p. 377). Clifton's show might accordingly be Signifyin(g) on exactly this state of affairs and on the viewers' inability to perceive it. John F. Callahan argues, in this respect, that the "ironic minstrel show" aims specifically at the protagonist because "[he] fails to interpret Clifton's departure as a response to the Brotherhood's betrayal of political principle and his (*Invisible Man*) betrayal of fraternal principle." Through Clifton's show, Callahan concludes, the protagonist "realize[s] that others see him as the Brotherhood's ventriloquist's dummy" (1989, p. 75). In the same vein, Susan L. Blake stresses the power hidden in the visible powerlessness of the doll:

"Tod Clifton, selling Sambo dolls, even being shot by the police, is in greater control of his own destiny than the protagonist, who is still being manipulated, like one of Clifton's dolls, by the Brotherhood. . . Sambo is, in effect, the lesson the protagonist has rejected all along: that, in the terms of the white world he has been relying on for guidance and identity, he is nobody, invisible, Sambo—something his advisers have been telling him from the beginning." (1986, pp. 89-90)

While Blake's interpretation alludes to the act of Signifyin(g) involved in Clifton's show, it consolidates the contention that Clifton's theatrical show is, akin to Tarp's link and tale, another yet manifestation of the grandfather's text.

The killing of Clifton and the subsequent funeral organized in his honor is that moment of epiphany that brings about a profound change in the protagonist's worldview and his interpretive abilities. At the outset of his reflection on the event, he judges Clifton's show and his death from the perspective of the ideology of "Progress" as possessing no political value - because, he thinks, "*politically, individuals were without meaning*" (Ellison, p. 359). Soon, however, as he reflects on the sublime character of the performance of "There's Many a Thousand Gone," he is driven into a recognition of what Paul Gilroy calls the "unity of ethics and politics" in black "subculture" (1993, 39). Following such a recognition, he asserts that politics is indeed an "act of love," an act that reflects one's humanity, communal sense, and ethical values. This hermeneutical ability and the political consciousness it brings about is translated in his understanding that no other political organization than those genuine African-American organizations constituted by African-Americans themselves, can actually claim to be the 'voice' of African-American people. Disclaiming the Brotherhood's capacity of representing African-Americans, he tells the organization's leaders, during his show down with them, that "*the Brotherhood isn't the Negro people; no organization is*" (Ellison, p. 377). Finally, to mark his break with the organization, he highlights the 'unwritten' history of African-Americans that the Brotherhood's historiographical model renders 'invisible.' Addressing one of the organization's leaders, he says,

“[a]sk your wife to take you around to the gin mills and the baker shops and the juke joints and the churches, Brother. Yes, and the beauty parlours on Saturday when they’re frying hair. *A whole unrecorded history is spoken then, Brother. You wouldn’t believe it but it’s true... I’ll stand on that as I stand on what I see and feel and on what I’ve heard, and what I know.*” (Ellison, p. 379; emphasis added)

Developed and enacted in settings standing by their “oral” character, these distinct forms of culture and aesthetics function, as Gilroy (1993) notes, as a “counterculture,” and a “grounded aesthetics” incorporated in “modern” America. As such, they can inform both politically and aesthetically *Invisible Man*’s anticipated ‘voice.’

Invisible Man’s project of ‘emancipation’ from the ideology of “Progress” begins with his work to undermine stereotypical constructions of identity. In order to materialize what Leslie Antonette names a “*refusal to maintain a visible marker of difference*” (1998, p. 83), he considers appropriating the trick of masquerading adopted by Rinehart, the trickster figure he has observed disguising himself in a manner that evokes Esu. One reason why Esu is actually both prized and feared is that his disguise challenges all attempts to ‘fix’ him as essentially this or that. Similarly, through masquerading tricks suggesting Esu’s transmutation and resulting trickeries, Rinehart dismantles the very basic idea of constituting identity. His play on the conventional notion of identity can, in fact, be seen in his many disguises each of which earns him a name and a social status: Rine the runner, Rine the gambler, Rine the briber, Rine the lover, and Rine the Reverend. Rinehart’s identity, per se, remains, in fact, beyond the grasp and constitution of conventional discourse because, as Kimberly Benston explains, “[u]nlike the namers of fixed cultural ‘fates’, Rinehart finds freedom in the inherent indeterminacy of the world’s enabling terms, ‘operating’, so to speak, in the *mise-en-abyme* of meaning’s ‘fluidity of forms’” (1984, p. 161). This “*mise en abyme*” of fixed cultural signifiers, suggested by Rinehart’s trick, involves an insight into a deconstruction of the conventional notion of identity based on the fetish construct of race/color, according to which the protagonist is rendered to an “invisible.” Inspired by Rinehart’s masquerading, the young man will expectantly remain unidentifiable and ultimately uncontained by the dominant racial discourse. Nevertheless, despite its inspiring a variety of ways to undermine the surveilling white gaze, the stratagem barely suggests actual means of self-expression that *Invisible Man* would ponder.

Although the grandfather’s stratagem of “yessing the whites” resembles Rinehart’s masks, it offers, different from it, an insight into an emancipating ‘voice.’ In fact, the old man’s linguistic ‘mask’ consists of blurring signification by Signification, a stratagem originating and subsumed in that peculiar system of communication devised by slaves to undermine the surveillance system of the plantation. Sidonie Smith uses the term “mask” as a substitute for Signifyin(g) in her examination of the slaves’ trickeries. As she explains,

"The alternative to self-assertion was the fabrication of a mask, prerequisite for a less onerous existence, even for sheer survival itself. The slave learned to perfect the game of 'puttin' on ole Massa!' Deceit, cunning, fawning ingratiation, stupidity—these were only some of the many faces of his mask, a subtle psychological device to prevent the master from knowing what was really happening in the mind and heart of the 'darky'". (1987, p. 14-15)

Verbal communication is, indeed, in the midst of this complex masking enterprise subsumed, according to Gates (1989), by the umbrella-term of Signifyin(g) or Signification. The power of Signifyin(g) is that rather than being constantly oppositional, it might hide diverse positions, a point Geneva Smitherman makes in explaining that:

"The roots of African American speech lie in the counter language, the resistance, discourse that was created as a communication system intelligible to the dominant master class. Enslaved Africans and their descendants assigned alternative and sometimes oppositional semantics to English words." (2006, p.3)

What Smitherman labels "alternative semantics" might well include those more complex and puzzling instances of Signifying implying, like the deathbed words, both affirmation and rejection.

As a participant, *Invisible Man* could never understand the meaning of "yessing the whites." Back then, he interpreted those words from the monologic perspective of signification as involving plain binarism; 'yessing' is, to his understanding back then, 'Yes' as exclusively opposed to 'No,' which merely implies exaggerated affirmation. However, in the Epilogue of the narrative, he revisits, as a writer, this understanding from the perspective of Signification and concludes that "Yessing" subverts, indeed, the idea of binarism. This stratagem is not 'Yes' or 'No,' but 'Yes' and 'No' considered 'interrelated' and yet 'different.' With this interpretation, the narrator is inspired two strategic acts. The first is a fluid judgment of American cultural and racial reality. This judgment is outstandingly reflected in the narrator's conclusion: *"And here is the cream of the joke: weren't we part of them as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?"* (Ellison, p.463). While emphasizing cultural difference, this fluid perspective destabilizes those essentialist racialized constructions of American identity. It undermines both the hegemonic racist discourse of the Brotherhood maintaining the supremacy of the White race and its reversed replica of Ras the Destroyer's Afrocentrism. By ironically portraying Ras as imitating in an awkward manner a stereotypical representation of an African chief man and mobilizing Harlem rioters to act for the project of a black nation, Ellison means to depict the 'danger' of Ras's project. Though eloquently rendered, his Afrocentric project holds the same dichotomism of 'White/Black' marking the Brotherhood's racist discourse and the same belief in the purity, origins, and the fixity of identity. By accordingly underlining symbiotic relations between cultures and ethnicities, the ambivalence involved in "Yessing" does not only dismantle those hegemonic

constructions of identity that have produced the dominated African-American group as 'Other,' but provides the basis of a black vernacular 'voice.' The second material strategic act into which translates "Yessing" is that act of 'writing.' Meditating on the composition of his life story, anticipated to be, just akin to his grandfather's deathbed words, characteristically duplicitous, the narrator confesses, "[t]he very act of trying to put it all down has *confused* me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness. So it is that now *I denounce and defend. . . I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no... I hate and I love*" (467; emphasis added). Invisible Man's self-consciously rendered reflection on his expression finally settles on the double-voiceness of the black Atlantic tradition as the outlook, the 'vision,' to frame his representation of reality.

Ultimately, two intertwined gestures reflect Invisible Man's final emancipation and his genuine inscription in the "vernacular matrix," guided by the 'guardians' of the black vernacular text of 'black folk wisdom.' One such gesture is his thunderous refusal of all the names and roles assigned to him by the dominant discourse, and the other is the 'writing' of his life story. While the former expresses his actual recuperation of his agency, the latter stands as a material expression of his self-representation. After his awareness of his invisibility, Invisible Man affirms his self-identification. In asserting, "*I am nobody but myself*" (Ellison, p.17), he erases that alienating identity displayed in his statement, "*I am what they think I am*" (p. 306). Only subsequent to the erasure of that self he thought was visible but was actually not does he set out to compose his experience. Deep in these gestures lies a striking, albeit oblique, isomorphism with Douglass's projects of self-authentication, self expression and the resulting construction of the African-American discourse, acts reflected in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845). This isomorphism confirms Invisible Man's actual revisiting, as a narrator/writer, of his previous flawed interpretation, as a participant, of the portrait of Douglass. This revision, testifying to his response to the calls of the guardians and interpreters of the black vernacular, yields wonders. As though disguised as Invisible Man, Ellison articulates in *Invisible Man* a political/ethical stand as well as an aesthetic/ literary sensibility that exemplify that interaction between autopoiesis, poetics and politics originating in Douglass's Narrative.

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