

“And Suddenly You Can See The Stars”:
Writing as a Means of Self-Creation and Resistance in Ellison and Coates

Brook Nasser is a senior majoring in English and minoring in Middle East Studies. She is from Topeka, Kansas. This English article was supervised by Dr. Iris Fischer.

Abstract:

This paper focuses on two works belonging to the African-American literary canon: Ralph Ellison’s 1947 novel *Invisible Man* and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s 2015 memoir *Between the World and Me*. I seek to understand the importance of the act of writing in both texts by applying existential principles from Jean-Paul Sartre to the writing in these works in order to understand how it functions as a means of both self-objectification and self-creation. In addition to writing’s personal nature, I also consider social aspects by examining some of the ways in which these works support and defy conventions of the African-American literary canon. External influences, including popular culture and current events, also influence these texts, and the books in turn demonstrate an ability to change the world by interacting with it. Ultimately, these two texts demonstrate how the act of writing shapes and creates both the writer and the world around him.

Physical acts of writing have long been used to record history, transmit information, and create art. The works of Ralph Ellison and Ta-Nehisi Coates fulfill each of these functions, but they also demonstrate additional purposes of writing. Both Ellison’s narrator in his seminal 1947 novel *Invisible Man* and Coates in his provocative 2015 memoir *Between the World and Me* describe the act of writing as foundational to their lives. In both works, the men reflect upon their past experiences using a medium that can also convey their stories to a larger audience. In addition to serving as a means of communication, writing also facilitates self-discovery, for deliberately putting words on a page allows authors to reflect upon their lives from a different perspective and to draw connections between seemingly random sequences of events. Though many people consider writing a solitary process, these authors, who demonstrate their awareness of

audience and context, reveal the inherently social nature of writing. Through writing, both Ellison’s narrator and Coates reach a greater understanding of essential and social aspects of their identities and begin to effect change on the world around them.

Before a book can be published and read by the wider world, an individual must sit down and write, but a text does not exist fully formed in the author’s mind before they begin this grueling process. *Invisible Man* shows how the narrator discovers himself only as he embarks on this arduous process, and increased self-knowledge proves to be his underlying motivation to write. The narrator frames his story with a prologue set in the present, at which point he is “invisible and live[s] in a hole” (Ellison 6). While he states, “I believe in nothing if not action,” the narrator designates this time as a period of “hibernation” (Ellison 13). After everything he has experienced, which he describes in the bulk of the text, the

narrator realizes, “All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was” (15). However, pushed by painful circumstances into his hole, he now sees, “I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer” (15). At last, he looks within and attempts to find these answers from the proper source for the first time in his life. As literary critic Donald B. Gibson writes in his 1981 book *The Politics of Literary Expression*, “the narrator’s physical retreat from the world is analogous to his retreat into himself, into his psyche” (60). However, his answers cannot immediately come from his internal self because the narrator’s mind is “disturbed and agitated,” and the prologue reads like a confusing, incoherent, jumbled metaphor (Gibson 60). Through the act of writing, however, the Invisible Man can make sense of the past and of himself.

The epilogue reveals that the narrator does in fact reach the answers to the questions he had been asking all his life. He explains, “After years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled” (Ellison 573). Writing down his experiences allows the narrator to understand how much he has been influenced by others and how little he has known himself. After writing, he concludes, “The world is just as concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me” (Ellison 576). This realization of his position in the world could not have been reached simply by living these experiences or even by his brief retirement from the world. The narrator, time and time again, has been exploited and manipulated by others: as a student, as an employee, and as a member of the

Brotherhood, a quasi-communist organization. However, he never realizes how profoundly he has been wronged until he sits down and endures the physical process of recording his memories. As Gibson writes, “The epilogue, also an expression of the narrator’s most private, subjective thoughts and feelings, differs from the prologue in that the consciousness revealed there is in a healthier state” (61). What creates this distinction between the epilogue and the prologue are the 557 pages that separate them, which confirm that the act of writing has allowed the narrator to sort and reorder his mind and discover who he is.

The act of writing clearly allows the Invisible Man to understand himself, and an explanation of how this happens can be found in the writings of French existential philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre provides an example of a waiter who, through his gestures and movements, is not in and of himself a waiter but rather “is playing at being a waiter in a café.” He explains, “The child plays with his body in order to explore it, to take inventory of it; the waiter in the café plays with his condition in order to realize it” (Sartre 386). Like the Invisible Man, through recording his experiences, he reflects upon and “plays with” his memories by putting mental images into words and by recording his memories in the text. Writing constitutes a process: texts must go through different drafts, paragraphs must be rearranged, words must be replaced. The active cognition required in writing forces the author to relive past experiences and to determine how best to tell his story. One can imagine a waiter dropping a plate or spilling a drink, attempting new strategies until they more successfully fill their assigned role;

similarly, a writer must draft a story, paragraph, or single phrase over and over until it is right and will most effectively communicate their meaning to an audience. In both these roles, the importance of performing for an audience can clearly be seen. The waiter cannot be a waiter without someone to wait upon; similarly, the narrator writes for an audience, serving them his words in a way he hopes they will accept.

Since the Invisible Man discovers his identity in his hole, where he has no need to interact with people, some might conclude that this shows that social identities must be discarded in order to know who one truly is. Gibson presents this view and asserts that Ellison “argues the individualist’s position—that human beings are creatures of will and their lives are what they make of them” (Gibson 60). In fact, Gibson argues that the location of the Invisible Man in his hole allows him “to divest himself of social roles entirely, the implication being that his essential self is other than social” (63). In Gibson’s perspective, the entire novel argues for what he calls “a solipsistic extreme,” and it “leaves us with the firmly established proposition that the only dependable source of truth, reasonableness, judgment, and reliability is the individual psyche of the discrete individual” (91). In his work about the Invisible Man’s individualism, Gibson writes that the narrator’s struggle between selfhood and society is a universal binary. He writes, “We must, in fact, and we do, act in the world, accommodating ourselves, however uncomfortably or inconsistently, to the disparity between self-identity and social identity, between who and what we think we are and what the world thinks we are” (Gibson 91). While differences between how one perceives oneself and how one is

perceived by others inevitably exist, these social identities are not, as Gibson asserts, presented as “false” in the novel (86). Instead, they are shown to shape one’s essential identity.

Though social aspects such as race and class may seem extraneous to a person’s essential identity, the narrator shows that even one’s location becomes a part of who one is when he muses, “Perhaps to lose a sense of *where* you are implies the danger of losing a sense of *who* you are” (Ellison 577). Without understanding one’s geographical and social position, it is impossible to acquire any knowledge about who one really is. Notably, the narrator himself does not reflect upon or record his life until he lives soundly in his hole and has exerted control over the physical space, illuminating it to his liking with “1,369 lights” (Ellison 7). Knowing and being secure in one’s location is shown to be a prerequisite of knowing one’s identity.

The connection between one’s essential identity and social identity is confirmed by Sartre, who shows how, by evoking the emotion shame, other people play a major role in an individual’s identity. Shame, Sartre explains, occurs when a person sees himself through the eyes of another, such as the interaction between the author and his imagined audience, and it allows a person to understand himself in a new way. Shame is “apprehension of something and this something is me”; it reveals the true nature of the self as an object positioned a certain way in the world (Sartre 391). Sartre continues, “By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other...Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me”

(392). The very idea of an audience introduces a different perspective, which allows the writer to imagine viewing himself through a potential reader's eyes. The Invisible Man demonstrates his imagination of the invisible audience, even directly addressing its members with phrases like, "So there you have all of it that's important," or "Let me be honest with you" (Ellison 572). This self-objectification by putting oneself on display for one's audience not only expedites the process of self-discovery, but Sartre also argues that the aspect of shame through the appearance of the Other is necessary to know who one truly is. Sartre asserts, "I need the Other in order to realize fully all the structures of my being" (393). By recording his experiences, knowing they can be read, the Invisible Man renders himself visible to the imagined Other in a manner that allows him to see every aspect of himself fully and to discover who he truly is.

The narrator shows how acknowledging other people's perceptions through his awareness of the Other does in fact shape his own identity, and awareness of these perceptions prepares him to reunite with others. "To be unaware of one's form is to live a death," he writes. "I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my own invisibility" (Ellison 7). Maintaining ignorance of his invisible "form" – how he appears to others – equates to the absence of life. Through his writing, the narrator becomes keenly aware of how he appears to others, and he even shows that he considers invisibility to be a part of who he is, an innate aspect of himself. It was not caused by him choosing invisibility or from his body physically appearing as "a spook" or "Hollywood-movie ectoplasms"; instead, "I am invisible,

simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 3). At this point, he recognizes how the gaze of the Other renders him invisible, while acknowledging this social identity as an essential part of who he is. Achieving increased self-knowledge at the end of his writing does not affect his invisibility, for he writes, "I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless" (Ellison 581). Contrary to what Gibson argues, the narrator does not leave his social identities behind. His invisibility, which comes from the perceptions of those around him, remains an essential part of who he is. What has changed is his own understanding of it. While the narrator does embrace individual identity, this does not mean, contrary to Gibson's argument, that he also rejects the idea of pursuing group identity, whether for the purposes of "racial and class solidarity" or "to alleviate social oppression" (Gibson 91, 92). The narrator's attempts to unite with others, whether being a student at the college, working at the factory, or joining the Brotherhood, do always end in his exploitation, but the story does not end there. The issue lies not in the narrator's attempts to join other groups but instead in his doing so without a proper understanding of himself and his position in society. On the very last page of the epilogue he states, "There's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (Ellison 581). Uniting with others by identifying with a group is a futile endeavor only when the individual lacks an understanding of how social identities shape him. After reaching an understanding of himself by writing and viewing himself through the eyes of his imagined audience, the narrator has now

become ready to rejoin society, recognizing that even though he remains invisible he still must strive to impact the world.

Though he knows that other people's perceptions of him fundamentally shape his identity, the narrator realizes that he too can shape himself for his audience through the construction of his narrative. An example of this can be found in how he constructs his masculinity by retelling his life experiences. Literary scholar Jeffrey B. Leak's 2005 book *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature* focuses on how Ellison's novel addresses "issues of masculinity—what it means to negotiate blackness and maleness in the United States" (Leak 30). Specifically, the book "chronicles black male sexual development in the emasculating context of segregation" (Leak 42). The narrator endures several awkward sexual encounters with white women, and at the end of the novel Leak argues that he "emerges as asexual" (47). However, this conclusion puzzles Leak, since it is clear that the otherwise very transparent narrator "succumbs to the biological impulse but denies us access to this experience" (Leak 51). The presence of strong sexual urges appears as early as the first chapter, when "a magnificent blonde—stark naked" appears and the narrator reflects, "I was strongly attracted and looked in spite of myself. Had the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked" (Ellison 19). Yet when the narrator's sexual urges do reach fulfillment later in his life, with a woman married to one of the members of the Brotherhood, the scene "lacks the detailed narrative description characteristic of the Invisible Man" (Leak 50). This progression, or more accurately, regression, of sexual development shows how the narrator consciously crafts his text

for an audience, exposing himself in many intimate ways, yet constructing himself to be an asexual figure by the end, in spite of what his experiences may suggest to readers.

Self-discovery, gaining knowledge of one's social and essential identities through self-objectification; and self-creation, shaping oneself by describing one's experiences, prove to be the primary purposes of the Invisible Man's writings. Now that the narrator understands himself, he is ready to rejoin the world, and the contribution of Ellison's novel to the literary canon similarly allows him to shape the world around him by interacting with the literary tradition. In order to understand the literary context of Ellison's predecessors and contemporaries, a brief survey of the African-American literary canon is necessary. Early African-American literature in the United States was primarily composed by enslaved people; literary critic María Del Mar Gallego Durán's 1994 study on Frederick Douglass's seminal 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, shows how Douglass's writing represents a shift in his own lack of self-awareness to becoming a self-actualized individual, a process similar to what Ellison's narrator has completed. Douglass's personal development reveals a narrative structure corresponding to the traditional bildungsroman form, as he passes through several rites of passage to reach his new identity. His famous line, "You shall see how a slave was made a man," Durán writes, reveals that writing allows him "to create a new identity that can be accepted by the dominant social norms" (Durán 129). His new identity is that of a literate man, a person capable of writing his own words and

sharing his own story, and a person worthy of respect from the dominant white class.

The 20th century saw a shift in African-American literature from slave narratives to a new novelistic form, and Ellison's work was influenced by both traditions. In this fictional context, the bildungsroman, which had provided the model for Douglass's autobiography, continued to thrive. In her 1995 book *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman*, African-American and Caribbean literary scholar Geta Leseur describes the traits that unite bildungsroman novels. She writes, "As a form it tends to be highly autobiographical, and the hero, often a male, tends to be gifted or extraordinarily sensitive. In the traditional Black form, the hero rejects the constraints of home and sets out on a journey through the world" (Leseur 18). *Invisible Man* closely adheres to this form since the narrator recounts his journey to a greater understanding of himself and the world around him. In an interview, Ellison himself notes that he considered his novel to be about "a struggle through illusion to reality" (Chester 45). The narrator's growth and maturation are clear throughout the novel; according to Leseur, the three parts of the book "move the narrator from purpose to passion to perception" (73). In addition to evaluating growth, the Black bildungsroman also grapples with an individual's marginalized position in society. Leseur writes that in this tradition, novels "reveal a concern with defining an African American racial, historical, cultural, and political reality... Issues of self-identity merge with issues of African American consciousness and identity" (73). This aspect is clearly shared by the *Invisible Man* and Frederick Douglass before him, though their historical contexts differed. Frederick Douglass lived as an intelligent man, his self-identity, in a

system that assumed he was little more than an animal, the imposed African-American identity. Even though the *Invisible Man* was able to attend college and seek employment, he was never accepted as an equal citizen because of the color of his skin. The fact that both writers struggle with their places in the white-dominated culture demonstrates simultaneously how much and how little the country progressed in the century between their writings. Their struggles against injustice and use of the bildungsroman form both unite Ellison with writers before him in the African-American literary canon.

Though he does embrace some traditions, such as the bildungsroman form, as an author Ellison expressed the importance of resisting the canon. In terms of art, Ellison states in an interview, "If the Negro, or any other writer, is going to do what is expected of him, he's lost the battle before he takes the field" (Chester 40). Writing a novel that defies existing classification and resists typical conventions of genre, then, allows an author to succeed by crafting a new work, which contributes not only to the literary canon but also to the world. Ellison continues,

"I feel that with my decision to devote myself to the novel I took on one of the responsibilities inherited by those who practice the craft in the United States: that of describing for all that fragment of the huge diverse American experience which I know best, and which offers me the possibility of contributing not only to the growth of the literature but to the shaping of the culture as I should like it to be. The American novel is in this sense a conquest of the frontier; as it describes our experience, it creates it." (Chester 49)

A connection can be made here between creation of the American experience and creation of the self. By describing experiences, as a part of a collective group or as an individual, an author gives shape to these seemingly disconnected events and crafts a new narrative. Resisting conventions, such as those of the literary canon or how he should behave as an African-American man, allows the writer to make his mark on the world by describing experiences in his own unique way. Ellison here implicitly addresses expectations associated with his race, which manifest in assumptions about what “the Negro” writer should write. By resisting others’ expectations about his writings, the author can affect the world in lasting ways. Indeed, Ellison worked within the literary tradition but also contributed to it. Leak writes, “*Invisible Man* has become an urtext, the literary point of origin for questions regarding twentieth-century African American cultural discourse and the formation of black masculinity” (31). The groundbreaking nature of his novel solidified it as a part of the African-American literary canon.

Just as Ellison’s *Invisible Man* shaped the African-American literary canon at the time of its publication in 1947, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s memoir *Between the World and Me* exhibits awareness of its position in this very same canon. First, this paper examines his motivations to write. He explains how his mother taught him to read and write, and every time he got into trouble at school, “she would make [him] write about it” by having him “answer a series of questions” (Coates 29). Rather than serving to change his conduct, Coates writes, “These were the earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness...She was

teaching me how to ruthlessly interrogate the subject that elicited the most sympathy and rationalizing—myself” (29-30). From his earliest years, Coates uses writing as more than a functional means of communication; instead, he learns to extrapolate meaning from his experiences, no matter how illogical his behavior may have been as a disobedient young student, in order to reach a better understanding of himself. These exercises his mother enforced created a pattern, teaching Coates to use writing to discover who he is.

This youthful purpose of Coates’s writing remains consistent in his writings today. In a 2015 interview by author Jason Diamond, the interviewer quotes Coates as saying, “I have spent much of my studies searching for the right question by which I might understand the breach between the world and me,” and then asks, “Do you get any closer to understanding that breach by writing?” Coates responds,

“Yes. That’s the primary reason to write. You just understand more and more and more, and you just begin to get it. You see the architecture. It’s the sky slowly revealing itself, and suddenly you can see the stars and how they relate to each other, and you can see Mars and Venus. Yes, that’s the reason to write.” (Coates, Interview)

Throughout his entire life, from his elementary school years to his success as a National Book Award winner, Coates’s primary motivation to write has been to discover himself. This does not merely include who he is beneath the surface, but also the architecture and the stars above him – the context of his life, or in Ellison’s terms, his social identity. Where he is, why

he behaves certain ways, and how history and racism have affected him all contribute to his essential identity. Furthermore, *Between the World and Me* allows him to create himself for his wider audience. Coates cannot include every piece of information or every life experience in such a slim volume. Rather, he deliberately chooses which anecdotes to include and which to exclude. In this way, he constructs his identity for readers, building himself from his own memories by capturing them in words.

Though *Between the World and Me* is not a novel, Coates nevertheless invokes references to the African-American literary canon, including to the bildungsroman form which Ellison embraces. In the Black tradition, the bildungsroman often aims to “expose those conditions that robbed the writer of a memorable and happy childhood” (Leseur 27). Coates examines his own early years in Baltimore with a scrutinizing eye, focusing on several key moments throughout his youth, such as a frightening interaction with a gun-wielding boy with small eyes (19). In addition to this attention to his childhood, Coates’s writing demonstrates a certain urgency, since he has already seen ways in which his book’s young addressee, his son, has been affected by the discriminatory acts of others, such as seeing the killers of Michael Brown go free and being pushed by a white woman at a movie theater. Coates moves on from his childhood to discuss his experiences at Howard University, which he calls “the Mecca.” Howard serves as a place where he can acquire knowledge, not only academically, but also about the diversity of the world. The book’s inclusion of movement toward a city, in this case New York City, incorporates another common

trait of bildungsroman novels that Ellison also shares (Leseur 25). While based on his life, Coates’s work still adheres at least in part to the bildungsroman structure in order to grapple with the African-American literary canon.

Coates refers extensively to the world around him through the use of allusions. While allusions have existed as a common device since the beginning of literature, they function in this text as more than a mere tool to help readers better understand the writer and his context. Rather, allusions to the African-American literary canon allow Coates to comment on, challenge, and contribute to these traditions. In American literary scholar Alan Nadel’s 1991 book *Invisible Criticism*, the word “allusion” is defined as “an author’s conscious reference to a literary precursor” (32). Finding a balance between working within the literary canon and asserting their individual voices can be a challenge for writers. Nadel writes that the issue manifests as determining “how to speak to and through tradition without sacrificing the speaker’s voice or denying the tradition it attempts to engage” (xii). Though referring to the past does broaden the new work, it also simultaneously “diminishes the immediate work” because “the act of affirmation is also an act of subordination; implicit in the affirmation of the past is the sense that the past is a standard to which the present ought be adapted” (Nadel 28). In this way, allusions to prior canonical works may potentially limit the new text. An effective artist must “both invoke and overcome his or her historical sense”; he must remain aware of the context in which he writes yet at the same time be careful not to crush his own work beneath the weight of history (Nadel 29). Importantly, if he succeeds and “the

new work...manifests tradition, then since the tradition has a new component, it is no longer the same tradition. Its own manifestation has altered it" (Nadel 30). In spite of the possibility of being overshadowed, Coates chooses to center his work within the canon because by summoning history, despite the risks of minimizing his own text, he can exert his influence on the very tradition that influenced his writings. In this way, a new text can shape tradition by alluding to the past.

While Coates does work within the bildungsroman context and includes many allusions to other writers throughout his text, he also avoids subordinating his own work to the canon by resisting a full embrace of the Black tradition. Traditionally, Leseur writes, as opposed to their European prototypes, "the African American bildungsromane do not seem to celebrate life as much. One feels sadness and sorrow for the characters. It almost seems a tragedy to have been born in the first place" (3). While *Between the World and Me* is undoubtedly filled with sorrow and descriptions of death and violence, Coates refuses to regret his own existence or that of his son. He writes, "I am speaking to you as I always have—as the sober and serious man I have always wanted you to be, who does not apologize for his human feelings, who does not make excuses for his height, his long arms, his beautiful smile" (Coates 107). Coates defiantly celebrates life; while the world is "terrible," it is also "beautiful"; though his son's life may be "brief," it remains "bright" (108). Even his son's birth, which was unplanned and occurred when he and his wife were young and still in school, is no cause for regret. "We'd summoned you out of ourselves," Coates writes, "and you were

not given a vote. If only for that reason, you deserved all the protection we could muster" (66). He clarifies, "If that sounds like a weight, it shouldn't. The truth is I owe you everything I have" (Coates 66). Coates does use the bildungsroman form to describe his own life, his own journey from ignorance to enlightenment at the Mecca to his career as a writer, but he refuses to play into every aspect of the canonical form. He refuses to look at life, even accidental life or life full of loss, as a tragedy. "I love you," he tells his son, "and I love the world, and I love it more with every new inch I discover" (Coates 71). With this fierce joy, Coates both embraces and expands the bounds of the literary canon, broadening the existing body of overwhelmingly tragic literature with his own contribution, which provides a defiantly delighted yet realistic look at the complexity of life.

While authors cannot always control every connection readers or critics draw between their texts and past works, the frequency of allusions in *Between the World and Me* demonstrates that Coates remains mindful of the literary canon framing his own book and made decisions based on his awareness of his readership. African-American literary critic Howard Rambsy II's 2016 article "The Remarkable Reception of Ta-Nehisi Coates" describes how Coates, who has blogged for *The Atlantic* since 2008, belongs to a new technological age of writers. Unlike Ellison, whose only significant work was *Invisible Man*, Coates has long attracted public attention and maintained a consistent readership, and he even "actively engaged his readers in the Comments section of his blog, responding to feedback from his readers" (Rambsy 197). His interactions with his readers demonstrate Coates's strong

capability of viewing himself through the eyes of the Other, which Sartre writes is necessary in order to understand oneself. Due to his prolific writing, Coates “clearly benefited from accumulative advantage,” and his June 2014 piece “The Case for Reparations” ignited national debate and established Coates as one of the country’s most-discussed bloggers (Rambsy 202). When *Between the World and Me* was published, several marketing decisions highlighted the text’s connections to canonical African-American writers, specifically “the epistolary format” as a reference to James Baldwin’s essay *The Fire Next Time*; “the book’s title,” borrowed from a Richard Wright poem; and the three epigraphs, from Wright, Amiri Baraka, and Baldwin (Rambsy 200).

In his interview with Jason Diamond, Coates himself discusses these choices to reference prior writers. Though it often reads like one, *Between the World and Me* did not result from a spontaneous outpouring of emotion; instead, just like any other published book, it passed through many revisions, and Coates explains that “the idea for the letter” was not the original basis of the book but instead occurred to him after he had already written “four different drafts of it,” and while using this format he “was really conscious of” his references to Baldwin’s essay. Finally, he evoked references to the African-American literary canon that even people who only glanced at the book’s jacket would detect. In regards to Toni Morrison’s endorsement, Coates comments,

"I didn't want anybody else... Toni Morrison is the goddess of black literature right now. There's a tradition that's behind *Between the World and Me* that I'm really trying

to evoke, and it's not just Baldwin, it's Richard Wright, it's Sonia Sanchez, it's [Amiri] Baraka; all of that is in there, it's all baked into that text even though Baldwin is the most obvious one. And our greatest living representation of that tradition is Toni Morrison." (Coates, Interview)

Though his non-fiction work may not exactly be analogous to the novels of Ellison and Morrison, Coates still deliberately highlights his connections to that tradition. Rambsy describes this decision from a marketing perspective, but the results extend beyond the number of copies sold or the prestige of awards won. By referencing prior African-American writers, a tradition that begins with the slave narratives and continues evolving today, Coates establishes his work as an extension of the literary canon. His allusions, both within the text and in places like the epigraphs and the dust jacket, unite him with the people who lived and worked and struggled before him, from Douglass to Ellison to Morrison, showing that the challenges faced by African-American writers may manifest in new forms but ultimately remain unchanged.

In addition to his references to the literary canon, Coates’s book also includes more modern allusions. He easily incorporates references to familiar musicians he loves, such as Nas, Ice Cube, and Wu-Tang Clan, among many others (26, 37, 56). Coates also frames his discussion of the American Dream in terms of familiar visual and sensory experiences, writing, “It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is treehouses and the Cub Scouts. The Dream smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake” (11). But, as Coates shows, the cultural canon does not end with benign

references to musicians and American holidays, as he continues to explain: “In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*” (103). Indeed, the United States boasts a long tradition of slavery, abuse, discrimination, and disenfranchisement. On a sustained sober note, Coates contrasts these bright aromatic images of the American Dream with repetitive allusions to people killed or injured based on the color of their skin. He reiterates the names of African Americans who were victims of the police in a way that feels almost as though he never ceases to mention them. In his slim text, he describes the deaths and injuries of Renisha McBride, John Crawford, Tamir Rice, Marlene Pinnock, Michael Brown, Elmer Clay Newman, Gary Hopkins, Freddie McCollum, Abner Louima, Anthony Baez, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Jordan Davis, Kajieme Powell, and Coates’s personal friend from Howard, Prince Jones (9, 11, 76, 95, 103, 105, 130, 145). With his friend, Coates recounts university memories of Prince and his interview with his mother, portraying the utter devastation of violence and how, as Dr. Jones says, “One racist act. It’s all it takes” (Coates 145). Coates’s continual remembrance of these lives demonstrates how police brutality and violence against African Americans remain a horrible part of the American canon, as they have since the birth of this nation. He writes, “Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free,” reminding readers of the horrifying tradition of American history (Coates 70). Coates does not merely interact with his literary predecessors; instead, he explains and resists the cultural contexts in which violence seeks justification. His book takes

advantage of its position in the African-American literary canon to criticize American culture.

Although a reader may easily be able to picture the Invisible Man snug in his well-lit hole, or Coates hunched over a desk, these writers’ interactions with the African-American literary canon, their awareness of their own historical and cultural context, and their interactions with imagined audiences all demonstrate that writing is far from a solitary action. Grappling with outside forces is necessary not only to produce a successful literary work, but also to discover one’s true self. By viewing himself through the eyes of the imagined audience, as Sartre suggests, a writer can understand himself in a new way and know how social identities shape who he is. By constructing his own experiences through the act of recording them, the author constructs his own identity. Through writing, one can comment on the past and present and change how they are perceived in readers’ minds by presenting them in a new way. Understanding how writing functions in *Invisible Man* and *Between the World and Me* allows us to understand not only what the act of writing signifies but also how identity is formed and functions. A writer’s awareness of the ways both history and his surroundings affect his own life allows him in turn to impact the world around him by introducing a unique perspective to the existing literary canon and by presenting tradition and familiar aspects of life in new ways. Ellison and Coates both show how writing is necessary to understand oneself and how understanding oneself and one’s influences is necessary before a person can grapple with the past and impact the present.

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