

## Tradition of Ambivalent Estrangement: Democratic Intertextuality in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*<sup>1)</sup>

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### 1. Introduction: Signifying President

On January 20<sup>th</sup> 2009, then president-elect Barak Obama took the oath of office, putting his left hand on the red velvet bible upon which Abraham Lincoln was sworn in at his inauguration. The significance of this moment lies not only in the fact that Obama became the first African American President in United States history but also in terms of Obama's symbolic allusion to Lincoln. As Bruce Newman points out, Obama's reference to Lincoln has political purpose. By alluding to Lincoln, Obama "reassures voters that he shares their values and will try to emulate their hero" (Newman). More importantly, Obama, drawing on Lincoln, proclaims his belief in democracy by transcending racial and political differences. While Obama's allusion to Lincoln signals one of the most important historical moments of the United States, Obama is hardly the first black intellectual to deftly appropriate preceding figures of white authority. Indeed, African American culture has a long history of creating powerful literature through the appropriation of white literary tradition.

In light of Obama's cultural and political gesture, this article endeavors to explore the ways in which the works of African American writers, namely Frederick Douglass and Ralph Ellison, embody democratic sensibilities through intertextual relations with white canonical texts. The article argues that Douglass and Ellison appropriate — or "signify upon" in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s terms — the white literary tradition in order to simultaneously criticize and revise it. Through their complex appropriation of the white literary tradition, Douglass and Ellison critique the duplicity of American democracy while in the same breath displaying their credence to the American democratic ideal. Before setting out on the analysis of each text, we will turn to a theoretical thread that runs through this article, namely Henry Louis

Gates Jr.'s concept of "Signifyin(g)," which connects the abolitionist autobiographer (Douglass) and the highly technical modernist writer (Ellison) separated by a time of one hundred years.

## 2. Signifyin(g) as a Black Literary Tradition

Gates, in his *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, a theoretical work heavily informed by post-structuralism, argues that Signifyin(g) has its origin in African American vernacular tradition.<sup>2)</sup> Signifyin(g) represents complex intertextual relationships in the black American literary tradition, relationships which, I argue, can be termed "ambivalent estrangement." According to Gates, black writers learn to write by reading literature, mainly the canonical texts of the Western tradition written in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French. Consequently, texts written by black writers resemble other Western texts. As Gates mentions, "texts have a curious habit of generating other texts that resemble themselves," and such a phenomenon is not rare (xxii). Nevertheless, it is significant to note that texts written by black writers are slightly different from the original Western texts that they try to emulate. They always repeat "with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use" (xxiii). As Gates clarifies, the main characteristic of Signifyin(g) is repetition with a difference or a formal revision, which is based on "the black vernacular" (xxii).

This raises another question of the function of such revision. Do the texts written by black writers differ from Western texts only in terms of the language? As stated by Gates, this is not the case, because such a revision alters the meaning of the text. Altering the meaning of the texts enables one to criticize the original texts. Gates argues that "this production of meaning involves a positioning or a critiquing both of received literary conventions and of subject matter represented in canonical texts" (113). Thus, black writers do not simply imitate Western texts but criticize the themes and conventions of such texts because, as Gates implies, the original texts may be complicit with the formation of a societal hierarchy where black people are always already marginalized. This dovetails with Toni Morrison's claim in *Playing in the Dark* where Morrison traces the racially and politically loaded ways in which literary canons are constructed and consumed.

It seems natural that the concept of Signifyin(g) assumes symbolic power similar to parody and pastiche. Indeed, Gates repeatedly points out the similarities between Signifyin(g) and the characteristics of parody and pastiche. Citing *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Gates explains the definition of parody and pastiche as follows: "Pastiche, which caricatures the manner of an original without adherence to its actual words, and parody proper, in which

an original, usually well known, is distorted, with the minimum of verbal or literal change, to convey a new sense, often incongruous with the form" (107). As cited by Gates, both pastiche and parody function as caricatures of the original text. Thus, they function as "literary criticism" (107). This poses a new question: what is the difference between signification and parody or pastiche? Gates indicates that their differences mainly lie in their origins: while parody and pastiche trace their origins to Western literary tradition, signification originates from the black vernacular tradition. It is deduced that signification is a type of literary criticism that originated in and developed within the African American vernacular tradition as a symbolic weapon used by African American authors. Gates calls this type of Signifyin(g) "motivated signifyin(g)" (xxvi).

At the same time, however, signification also pays homage to the signified texts. One such example can be found in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. According to Gates, Walker revises and echoes Zora Neal Hurston's "explicit and implicit strategies of narration" (xxvi). Gates describes Walker's signification on Hurston's texts as "unmotivated Signifyin(g)" (xxvi), whose defining characteristic includes not negative critique but admiration.

To sum up, the concept of Signifyin(g) boils down to the following four points: (1) Signifyin(g) traces its origin to the black vernacular tradition; (2) It provides unique characteristics of revision or repetition with differences to the African American literary tradition; (3) It has the potential to criticize the themes and conventions of the original texts, which is exactly the case of parody and pastiche, and as a result, it functions as a literary criticism; and (4) in some cases, it pays homage to the signified text. All in all, Gates repeatedly emphasizes that the black literary tradition has certain ambivalent feelings toward their "master" texts. Taking cues from these theoretical notions, we will now turn to the intertextual analyses of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

### 3. Frederick Douglass and Benjamin Franklin

Douglass' *Narrative* is an autobiography that depicts a former slave's (Douglass himself) account of his life in bondage, beginning with his unknown paternal parentage (his real father was his white master) and ending with his hard-earned freedom in the North. Because *Narrative* is an abolitionist work with a specific purpose to fight slavery, it follows the characteristics of the long tradition of slave narratives. Douglass "exposes crimes and cruelties of his former masters, overseers, and other slaveholders, highlighting essential inhumanity of slavery" (Stauffer 204). As various critics point out, Douglass' work was one of the most successful documents that have been published in the history of abolitionism.

According to John Stauffer, *Narrative* “was an immediate bestseller and made him [Douglass] internationally famous. ... By 1848 11,000 copies had been published in the United States alone, and it had gone through nine editions in England. By 1850 30,000 copies had been sold” (204).

While Douglass’ *Narrative* unmistakably adheres to the convention of the slave autobiography, it also appears to have been consciously drawn up along the lines of the archetypal American success story, namely Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*. Indeed, it is not very difficult to find striking similarities between Franklin’s *Autobiography* and Douglass’ *Narrative*. Each story has the typical narrative structure of the rags-to-riches story. In *Autobiography*, Franklin describes the remarkable “progress” he achieves in life: from his humble origins as the son of a candle-maker to one of the founding fathers of the United States. What Franklin emphasizes is the importance of breaking away from inherited social statuses and creating an original, independent identity. In a similar vein, Douglass, in his *Narrative*, depicts his escapement from slavery in the Southern plantation to his eventual freedom in the North. Douglass, in the manner of Franklin, gains a new identity in the Free States.<sup>3</sup> His progressive movement from slave to free man implicates the presence of a fluid identity, an identity that is always in a state of evolution.

It is important to notice that at the center of each narrative lies a shared notion of ideal manhood, that is, the concept of self-made man. There are two significant components of the ways in which they achieve this ideal manhood; one is their struggle with and their eventual break away from paternalism; the other is achieving financial independence. In the first part of *Autobiography*, Franklin delineates his opposition toward, and independence from, the paternalistic authority of his father Josiah and elder brother James: “But my brother was passionate and had often beaten me, which I took extremely amiss. I fancy his harsh and tyrannical treatment of me might be a means of impressing me with that aversion to arbitrary power that has struck to me through my whole life” (33). After the break with his paternal figures, Franklin achieves financial success by establishing his own printing house. In a sense, Franklin’s personal narrative is comparable to a “how-to-book” on achieving socio-economic success. He delineates some secrets to be a successful business man:

In order to secure my credit and character as a tradesman, I took care not only to be in reality industrious and frugal, but to avoid all *appearances* of the contrary. I dressed plain and was seen at no places of idle diversion. I never went out a fishing or shooting. ... Thus being esteemed an industrious, thriving, young man, and paying duly for what I bought, the merchants who imported stationary solicited my custom;

others proposed supplying me with books and I went on swimmingly (78, original italics).

It should also be emphasized that Franklin's famous thirteen virtues such as "temperance," "order," "frugality," and "sincerity," which enable him to become a national hero as well as a successful businessperson, derive from staunch Puritan work ethics, and Franklin presents these virtues as key factors of his success as a capitalistic entrepreneur.<sup>4)</sup> Interestingly, as Robert S. Levine and James Cox point out, Franklin's opposition to his father and brother and acquisition of economic autonomy symbolically correspond to American independence from the paternal imperialism of Britain: "What literally happens in the form of Franklin's work is that the history of the revolution, in which Franklin played such a conspicuous part, is displaced by the narrative of Franklin's early life, so that Franklin's personal history stands in place of the revolution" (Cox 16).

If Franklin's *Autobiography* establishes the anti-colonial sentiments of America, Douglass' *Narrative* marks a symbolic departure from domestic colonialism. Douglass highlights the problematic nature of the paternalistic slave masters who "hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them" (382). In the manner of Franklin/America, Douglass gains [psychological] liberation through a revolutionary dual against Mr. Covey, one of his slave masters: "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (394). After his break with the paternal master, Douglass starts a series of jobs available to him in order to save funds to buy himself. One such job is calking in the ship-yard in Baltimore. Douglass states that he works very hard and excels at the job, and it brings him a huge profit that eventually leads to his freedom: "In the course of one year ... I was able to command the highest wages given to the most experienced calkers. ... After learning how to calk, I sought my own employment, made my own contracts, and collected the money which I earned. My pathway became much more smooth than before; my condition was now much more comfortable" (415). It is important to note that Douglass conforms to the dominant ideology of Protestant capitalism developed by Franklin, and thereby asserts his right to independence and freedom in the manner of the Franklinean self-made man. To borrow William Andrews' words, Douglass presents himself as "an exemplar of the traditional Protestant work ethic, worthy of the admiration and sympathy of northern middle-class America" (112).

By describing his successful struggle with his origins and through his reenactment of the archetypal American identity, Douglass emphasizes his American heritage. To borrow W.E.B.

Du Bois' classic term, Douglass builds up the American side of his "double-consciousness" (5). However, it is highly ironic that the very act of reproducing white literary tradition paradoxically pulls him back to his black identity. As we have seen, Gates claims that such an act of repetition is a distinct characteristic of black literary tradition. In light of Gates' argument, Douglass' mimetic proclamation of American identity ironically becomes a token of his black identity. Hence, his *Narrative* emerges as an indicator of the tension between his double-consciousness. That is, in Douglass' signification on Franklin, we can also find his challenge toward the mainstream American society.

Douglass finds potential for political agency in his performative gesture of copying. It is of great import to notice that in addition to reproducing the myth of American identity, Douglass, in *Narrative*, emphasizes the significance of the practice of copying. Interestingly, this act of copying in itself encompasses political potentials and egalitarian characteristics, both in a literal and metaphorical sense. One of the most striking scenes in *Narrative* is when Douglass describes the way he learned how to write:

My mistress used to go to class meeting at the Wilk Street meeting-house every Monday afternoon, and leave me to take care of house. When left thus, I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in master Thomas's copy-book, copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write. (372)

Considering the fact that, at that time, learning to read and write were privileges given only to white citizens, Douglass' copying is an act of transgression and therefore assumes a political nature in that literacy gained from the copying act enables Douglass to write anti-slavery narratives that acquired and appealed to a huge readership. As Douglass himself realizes, literacy also plays a crucial role in his emancipation: "It [literacy] was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery and to freedom" (364).

Furthermore, Douglass' act of copying demonstrates his democratic sensibilities in a metaphorical way. Here, Walter Benjamin's analysis of modern media's reproducibility is particularly useful. Benjamin argues that the ability of modern media to copy or reproduce the work of art takes away the "aura" of the original work (Benjamin 21). According to Benjamin, aura is the uniqueness and authority of an artwork that works to create figurative distance and psychological inapproachability. What he emphasizes is that the disappearance

of "aura" is good because it works to promote egalitarian sensibilities. Following Benjamin's insight, it seems entirely possible to consider Douglass' act of copying as a symbolic gesture that enables him to break the "aura" of white privileges. Douglass' act of copying, an act that is simultaneously constitutive and performative, effectively demonstrates Douglass' democratic sensibilities.

### 3. Ralph Ellison and Ralph Emerson

Compared with Douglass' reproduction of the American archetype, Ralph Ellison demonstrates a more complex relationship with white literary tradition. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison simultaneously satirizes and revises the philosophy of his namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson.<sup>5)</sup> The central point of Ellison's criticism is pointed toward the Emersonian notion of U.S. imperialism based on white supremacy. And yet, Ellison does not entirely discard Emersonian thoughts. Ellison consciously revises and applies Emersonian philosophies to his novel.

As Alan Nadel rightly argues, Mr. Norton, the white trustee of the black college in which the protagonist is enrolled, tries to model his life around Emersonian principles (112). Norton introduces himself as "a New Englander, like Emerson" and asks the protagonist if he has already studied Emerson in the college (41). Upon hearing a negative answer, Norton continues: "You must learn about him [Emerson], for he was important to your people. He had a hand in your destiny. ... I had a feeling that your people were somehow connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what would happen to me. ... Yes, you are my fate, young man" (41-42). According to Norton, one of the reasons he established the college was because he felt his "fate" to be connected to that of the black people. It should be noted here that "fate" is one of Emerson's key terms. Surely, Norton's use of the word "fate" in this context is an instance of Ellisonian signification upon Emerson. Emerson's understanding of "fate" will be discussed shortly afterwards in this section.

Norton then tells the protagonist of the more significant reason for his interest in the school: the school is "a living memorial" to his young deceased daughter (45). He describes his daughter as follows: "She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. ... She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art" (42). The repetition of the word "pure" is remarkable here. Despite Norton's emphasis on his connection to black people's fate, his repeated use of the word "pure" to describe his daughter connotes his purist belief. In other words, his main objective is to protect his daughter's purity and by extension white racial innocence. His real motive speaks

for the white anxiety about miscegenation that has been the critical point at issue after emancipation. The Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution ratified in 1865 not only abolished de jure slavery but also meant 4 million ex-slaves' participation in the US body politics. Needless to say, a series of racial segregation laws such as the anti-miscegenation law and Jim Crow was enforced to maintain the racial, sexual, and social division between white and black people, which had been made possible under the peculiar institution. Given such racial anxiety, Mr. Norton's black college is comparable to a Foucauldian bio-political device to create "docile bodies" and teach them to keep their "proper place" in the society (Foucault 135). Hence, the repetition of the word "pure" works to indicate that Norton's benevolence is superficial.

Significantly, Norton's purist belief echoes certain aspects of Emersonian thought. In Emerson's essay "Fate," which is directly linked to Norton's word quoted above, Emerson asserts his belief in fatalism.<sup>6</sup> According to Emerson, one's fate is predetermined by his/her race: "the scale of tribes, and the steadiness with which victory adheres to one tribe and defeat to another, is as uniform as the superposition of strata. We know in history what weight belongs to race" (*Conduct* 158). Here, Emerson argues that one's race is a determinative element of his/her victory or defeat and the racial hierarchy thus constructed is natural. Emerson then goes on to cite John Knox's words, which he regards as the "unforgettable truth": "Nature respects race, and not hybrids... Every race has its own *habitat*" (*Conduct* 158, original italics). By citing Knox's words, Emerson indicates his belief that each race should conform to its determined racial category and never allow miscegenation.

Moreover, as Kun Jong Lee points out, Emerson's advocacy of Anglo-Saxonism is apparent in this essay.<sup>7</sup> Emerson argues that the Saxons stand at the top of the racial hierarchy: "Cold and sea will train an imperial Saxon race, which nature cannot bear to lose, and after cooping it up for a thousand years in yonder England, gives a hundred Englands, a hundred Mexicos. All the bloods it shall absorb and domineer" (*Conduct* 32). Emerson observes that the "imperial Saxon race" dominates all other races. According to his fatalistic belief, it is predetermined that victory always belongs to the Saxon race.

Importantly, this Emersonian notion of Anglo-Saxonism resonates with Paul Kramer's accounts of racial Anglo-Saxonism rampant in the last half of the nineteenth century in America. As stated by Kramer, Anglo-Saxonism functioned as "a historical and political rationale for a U.S. overseas colonial empire" (1321). By alluding to the common racial history with the British Empire, which symbolizes "order, force, and power," American imperialists attempted to justify their imperial projects, especially those in the Philippines and the Caribbean Sea (1322). To put it bluntly, Anglo-Saxonism was a form of racial exceptionalism



used to legitimate the construction of the U.S. Empire. In a sense, Emerson anticipated and advocated this racial exceptionalist discourse in his essay. Given the above remarks in Emerson's "Fate," Norton's use of the same word seems to be another form of irony. Indeed, Norton's fate is connected to that of black people only in the sense that he dominates and exploits them.

Ellison makes it clear that Norton's purist discourse is enacted by and guaranteed through his incestuous desire. After the protagonist and Norton drive out of the college campus, they turn into an area populated by old slave cabins, where Jim Trueblood, the black sharecropper who impregnated his own daughter, lives. Norton, after learning that Trueblood committed this "monstrous thing," speaks to Trueblood (49): "'Is it true ... I mean did you?' ... 'you did and unharmed!' he [Norton] shouted, his blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation" (51). This scene exposes Norton's incestuous desire for his own daughter. More significantly, however, Norton's desire is not merely sexually motivated. Indeed, it has politically charged connotations connected to his purist belief. If each race commits incest, blood will never mix with the blood of other races; that is, incest ensures racial purity, precluding any potential racial amalgamation and thus maintaining a race-based social hierarchy. As Anne Anlin Cheng comments, "After all, is not incest the perversely logical conclusion of the pursuit of racial purity? It is therefore hardly a coincidence that Mr. Norton's story runs into Trueblood's story, the two fathers being foils for one another" (127). After listening to Trueblood's incestuous story, Norton gives Trueblood some money. As Lee astutely observes, Norton's money works to prevent miscegenation and maintains the racial hierarchy, which leads to the reinforcement of white supremacy based on the racial division (337). Through the depiction of the white advocate of Emerson, Ellison indirectly draws attention to the supremacist belief in Emersonian thought.

We can find more direct reference to the historical Emerson and his imperialistic philosophy in the figure of a rich entrepreneur named Mr. Emerson. The protagonist visits Mr. Emerson's office in New York for a job. He is tricked by Bledsoe, the college superintendent, who convinces him that he should earn money for the next semester during summer. However, the fact is that the protagonist is expelled from college because he jeopardized the college's relationship with Norton. Bledsoe provides the protagonist with seven reference letters addressed to trustees in New York; however, these letters actually ask the trustees to prevent the protagonist from returning to the college. Mr. Emerson is one of the seven trustees that the letter is addressed to. The protagonist, without having any knowledge of this conspiracy, hopefully visits Emerson's office with the letter for a job interview.

Mr. Emerson is the president of an import firm and an affluent capitalist. Mark Busby calls Mr. Emerson “the twentieth-century capitalist version of Emersonian individualism” (73). His office is “like a museum,” where his accomplishments such as paintings, bronzes, tapestries, and natural products from various countries are displayed on “a series of ebony pedestals” (*IM* 180). Edith Schor argues that the black supporters “are emblematic of the source of his wealth; exploitation of blacks has made this northerner ... a world power” (70). Further, there are colored birds imprisoned in a cage. These birds somehow remind the protagonist of his college museum that displays “a few cracked relics” of slavery (181). Ellison’s implication is that these “colored” birds in a cage are comparable to the “colored” people who are imprisoned in the artificial racial hierarchies and “displayed” as the accomplishments of the dominant racial group. Through these descriptions, it is inferred that Mr. Emerson’s success relies upon his imperialistic business that exploits colored people not only in the U.S. but also in “various countries.” Of course, this character is easily aligned with Emerson’s Eurocentric view which we have just seen.

Then, the protagonist sees young Emerson. Young Emerson is depicted as a northern liberal who compares himself to “Huckleberry” and tries to help the tricked protagonist (188). Despite his good intentions, however, young Emerson shows his ethical limitations when he tries to hire the protagonist as his valet. This offer connects to another characteristic of young Emerson: his homosexuality.<sup>8)</sup> That Young Emerson has intimate desires for the protagonist is implied in the first instance where he is described: “he [young Emerson] looked at me with a strange interest in his eyes ... moving with a long hip-swinging stride that caused me to frown” (180). Young Emerson invites the protagonist to a party held at “the Club Calamus” (185). Clearly, Ellison uses the name “Calamus” to hint at Walt Whitman’s poem about a homosexual love affair. In the end, Young Emerson’s benevolence is self-motivated and superficial rather than galvanized by socio-political justice.

The protagonist persistently implores young Emerson to let him meet young Emerson’s father but in vain. As Lee acutely argues, old Emerson’s absence can also be considered as Ellison’s critique on Emerson: “Old Emerson’s inaccessibility to the narrator suggests symbolically that Emersonianism is not intended for the black” (338). Indeed, Emerson considered white people, mainly the Saxons, as his audience. Evidence of this can be found in his essay “Self-Reliance.” In this essay Emerson asserts the importance of self-trust and individualism: “If we cannot at once rise to the sanctities of obedience and faith, let us at least resist our temptations; let us enter into the state of war and wake Thor and Woden, courage and constancy, in our Saxon breasts” (*Writings*160). Here Emerson uses the pronouns “we,” “us,” and “our” to refer to “Saxon.” Emerson’s message was intended only for white people

(more precisely Saxons). Thus, by showing Mr. Emerson's inaccessibility to the protagonist, Ellison indicates that the Emersonian doctrine is not addressed to black people. After all, the protagonist is never allowed to see Mr. Emerson in person.

As we have seen, Ellison indirectly refers to and criticizes his namesake through his depiction of the white characters. In particular, Ellison highlights the racist and white supremacist aspects of Emerson. However, despite Ellison's critique of the negative aspects of the Emersonian doctrine, some of the Emersonian concepts play significant roles in the novel. That is, Ellison practices not only negative signification on Emerson but also "unmotivated Signifyin(g)." Ellison shows ambivalent feelings toward his namesake. This is probably why Gates calls Ellison a "complex Signifier" (115). Ellison incorporates Emerson's ideas into his work through a deep understanding and deft handling of his philosophy.

First of all, Ellison borrows the structure of the novel from the Emersonian concept of nature. In his essay "Circles," Emerson observes: "There are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. ...New arts destroy the old. See the investment of capital in aqueducts, made useless by hydraulics; sails, by steam; steam by electricity" (*Writings* 279-80). According to Emerson, nature never stays the same; it is constantly changing. His idea of a fluid nature connects with the circular characteristic of nature: "... there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning" (*Writings* 279). That is, Emerson's circle is comparable to a spiral that is constantly creating more circles. Ellison directly echoes this idea by making the structure of the novel circular: the last part of the protagonist's memoir connects with the beginning of the novel. In the prologue, when the protagonist begins to narrate his story, he states that "the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead" (6). Furthermore, the novel ends where the protagonist begins a new phase in his life. That is, the novel ends with a beginning. The novel's structure of endings in the beginning and beginnings in the end undeniably reflects the Emersonian idea of the circle.

This euphemistically suggests that black Americans are entering a new phase of their history after the end of their subjugated roles, which foreshadows the inception of the full-scale civil rights movement. Ellison conceives of America as a country characterized by fluidity. In his address at the presentation ceremony of the National Book Award, Ellison states: "Thus to see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom, I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism" (*Collected* 153). Ellison aims to liberate the novel from the tradition of "narrow naturalism," which ossifies the stereotypical images of black people, and thereby to demonstrate the fluidity of America.

Ellison's literary prediction of the large scale social movement resonates with the most

significant leitmotif of the novel; invisibility. Significantly, the protagonist's recognition in the epilogue, "I am invisible, not blind," echoes Emerson's renowned phrase in his essay "Nature" (576): "... all mean egoism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all" (*Writings* 6). It is notable that the two terms, "invisible" and "transparent," are synonyms. By "transparent," Emerson refers to a feeling of oneness with nature. He transcends his egoism and unifies with nature or the outer world. In other words, Emerson breaks the boundary between himself and nature. Invisible Man also uses the term "transparent" to explain his condition: "You go along for years knowing something is wrong, then suddenly you discover that you're as transparent as air" (575). While the invisible protagonist uses the term to signify the black citizens' socially and legally absent existence, it also denotes potential to transcend societal boundaries. His absent presence enables him to live surreptitiously in the basement of a building that was rented strictly to white people, which is located not in Harlem but in "a border area" (5). Thus, his invisibility functions as a symbolic marker of social deviation that works to liberate him from social boundaries that have historically restricted black Americans' socio-political mobility. While both Emerson and Ellison assert the importance of transcendence, the difference in their assertion lies in what to transcend: Emerson shatters the boundary between a man's inner world and the outer world, i.e., nature, Ellison subverts the social boundaries that separate Americans from each other.

Another important dimension to Ellisonian signification is represented in the novel's open-endedness. In the epilogue, the protagonist decides to leave his hole in order to terminate his "hibernation": "I must come out, I must emerge. I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (581). Yet, despite his resolution to terminate his hibernation, his next move remains unsaid. By leaving the protagonist's future open, it seems that Ellison invites his readers to fill in the protagonist's new life. This open-endedness, I argue, is the ultimate gesture that makes Ellison a genuine Emersonian philosopher. No doubt this open-endedness reflects a view of nature as a perpetual movement. Yet, of even higher importance is the fact that Ellison requires self-reliance on the part of his readers. Here, we should recall Emerson's dictum: "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men" (*Writings* 145). Following Emerson's insight, Ellison entrusts the final part of the novel to each reader's own thoughts. In other words, Ellison's final message is equivalent to Emerson's famous diction; "trust thyself" (*Writings* 146). By creating an open space at the end of the novel, Ellison aptly defies the attribution of any "fatalism" to his protagonist.

## 4. Conclusion

As we have seen, Douglass and Ellison adroitly create original, powerful literatures through their ambivalent estrangement from rhetorical symbols. At the heart of such ambivalence is their unshakable credence to democracy. Douglass expresses this by reproducing the American success story and thereby breaking through the "aura" of white privilege. Ellison, drawing on Emersonian philosophy, demonstrates his egalitarianism by creating a blank space in his novel for all readers to inscribe their own story. To conclude Douglass and Ellison aim to disrupt the double-standard of American democracy by their performative articulation of their democratic sensibilities.

### [Notes]

- 1) An earlier version of this article was presented orally at the Northeast MLA annual convention held in New Brunswick, NJ in 2011.
- 2) The concept of signification has been much studied by numerous scholars. However, there is no consensus on the definition and function of signification. This essay relies on Gate's concept of signification.
- 3) His gaining a new name "Douglass" in the North is symbolic of his new identity.
- 4) Takayuki Tatsumi, referring to Max Weber's famous *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, astutely points out that Franklin created a new social paradigm unique to America by converting Calvinistic work ethics into profit-oriented capitalistic principles (76).
- 5) Kun Jong Lee provides an excellent argument on the complex relationship between Ellison and Emerson in his article. His analysis of Emerson's racist dimension is especially helpful. My argument here is indebted to Lee's study but departs from it in the sense that this article aims to include Ellison in the larger paradigm of African American literary tradition rather than enumerating Emerson's racist statements in his journals.
- 6) Lee argues that Emerson's understanding of fatalism derives from his Calvinistic belief (333).
- 7) See Lee, 333.
- 8) Motoyuki Shibata argues that homosexual young Emerson implies Ellison's sarcasm to Leslie Fiedler, who finds the homosexual relationships between Huck and Jim. Shibata argues that Ellison was critical of Fiedler's view (17). Hence, homosexual young Emerson, who is the would-be "Huckleberry," functions as another signification.

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