



# *An Invisible Man (Ralph Ellison) reincarnates in Manchild in the Promised Land (Claude Brown) and becomes Shadows of Your Black Memory (Donato Ndongo)*

di Rosetta Codling

## LACK OF IDENTITY AND DETACHMENT FROM THE BLACK DIASPORIC SELF

### 1. The birth of the first tragic, Diasporic hero - Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

Unlike almost every other literary tradition, the Afro American literary tradition was generated as a response to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century allegations that persons of African descent did not, could not, create literature.  
(Gates, Henry, Louis, Jr. 1987. *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial Self."*)

Kenneth W. Warren's book *What Was African American Literature* (2011) explored the role of Jim Crow in America and its relationship to contemporary black literature.

One important disclosure in his treatise was the role of Jim Crow as a (possible) catalyst for the development of early African American literature.<sup>1</sup> Warren, noted for his extensive research into the life and times of W.E. Du Bois, provided historical insight into the period that groomed Ralph Ellison.<sup>2</sup> W.E. Du Bois played an essential role in the development of African-American intellectualism, philosophy, and

---

<sup>1</sup> The 'politics of exclusion' manifested itself in the development of legislated and unwritten laws called Jim Crow. These laws were meant to maintain the old, southern order during the Reconstruction Period in America. These laws prevented blacks from eating at white establishments, trying on apparel before a purchase, living in white districts, attending white schools, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Warren is the author of *What is the African American Literature* (2011). This work explores pre-contemporary African American literature.



literature. Sentiments that involved a lack of identity and feelings of detachment, within the black Diasporic self, were acknowledged by Du Bois and termed as Double Consciousness.<sup>3</sup> Double Consciousness impacted upon almost every writer in the sphere of black world literature. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1994), Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, 1965, and Donato Ndongo's *Shadows of Your Black Memory*, 2007, were developed from the awareness of this imposed, altered state of the Black psyche.<sup>4</sup>

All resulted from Du Bois' excavation of the fibers of the black soul. Richard Wright was one of the first to conceptualize and gave form to the introspective, black anti-hero. His protagonist Bigger Thomas was pivotal in the development of *Native Son* (2001), *Black Boy* (2008), *The Outsider* (2008), and the entire *American Hunger* trilogy.<sup>5</sup> The character, Bigger Thomas, was a neo-prototype of the youthful, black male.

One must comprehend the importance of Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* in order to fully conceptualize Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Without Richard Wright and his *American Hunger* trilogy, *Invisible Man* may not have come into existence. The tragic hero, Bigger Thomas (*Native Son*), was a character, authentically, spawned from the depths of the racism in southern America.<sup>6</sup> Subjugated by southern Jim Crowism, his family ran north. Desperately, his family sought shelter from the poverty and inequality.

The family's hopes were quickly dashed when the racism of the south followed them to the north. Although the racism was more subtle, less visible (than the brand of racism practiced in the Deep South), it was just as deadly. In truth, the shackles of American 'apartheid' followed Bigger and his family.<sup>7</sup> Could Wright and Ellison have envisioned Jim Crowism as a form of internal, institutionalized colonialism? ?

Arnold Rampersad's monumental work *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (2008) cites the degree of influence and the impact of Richard Wright upon Ralph Ellison's burgeoning style and characterization. For, it was through the influence and guidance of Richard Wright that Ellison's classic *The Invisible Man* (1994) was conceptualized (Rampersad,

---

<sup>3</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois conceptualized the dual psyche of the African American. The term he used was Double Consciousness. This is the state of consciousness that African Americans must assume for survival. The African American must see his/her 'self' through the white lens of contempt and disdain in America. And he/she must, also, retain a sense of 'self' through a personal lens (as a dignified and honorable human being). Things are further complicated by the individual's attempt to reconcile the conflicting images (if such a thing is possible)..

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wright developed the *American Hunger* series as a means to chronicle the passage of a black male through America's Great Migration period.

<sup>5</sup> Bigger Thomas is a symbolic character that embodies the traits of many black males that fled the south. They came north, seeking equality and decent wages.

<sup>6</sup> Black migrants from the south suffered the hostility of the European refugees in America. The Italians and the Irish (in cities) rioted against the new emigrants. Also, the mode of racism in the north proved to more subtle, but just as demeaning and restrictive as the mode of racism of the south.

<sup>7</sup> Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* treaded new literary territory for African American literature. It was the most complex and philosophical work of its time. Ellison's work was an uncontested triumph in African American literature until Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*.



2008). Wright's novel *The Outsider* premiered to less than favorable reviews at about the same time as Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Wright's prose was described as "strained and fumbling (Rampersad 2007: 275)." Thus, a great divide was being staged by the literary critics against Ellison and Wright.<sup>8</sup> Arnold Rampersad notes that eventually.... "[Ellison] and Wright had gone their separate ways as artists and Americans, and he (Ellison) had emerged, by almost all accounts, the finer thinker and writer. (Rampersad 2008: 275)." Ellison's characterization of the detached, identity 'barren,' protagonist (in the form of the invisible man), changed the black literary form. Most importantly, Ellison's single novel changed the very state of the African-American and Black literary canon itself.<sup>8</sup>

Nameless, the main character of *Invisible Man*, narrated the symbolically universal life of a beleaguered, black male.<sup>9</sup> Within the early stages of the book, the hero embarked upon an allegorical search for himself. Longing to assert himself, within the Deep South of American, the hero attempted to pursue a scholarship to afford higher education. But, the White society perceived him as being inherently inferior and incapable. As a result of the subjugation, Ellison's narrator learned there were rewards only for 'self-debasement' in such a society. Therefore, the narrator's (first) awakening to this reality forms the first stage in the processing of self-realization in this novel. Ellison's protagonist bore the tragic flaw of lacking a Black identity.

This deficiency rendered him to be aloof from his ontological self.<sup>10</sup> Ellison wrote:

All my life I had been looking for something and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory....I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I could answer. (Ellison 1994 :15)

The author (Ellison) would have us understand that Jim Crowism/colonialism seeps into the soul of the victim so intensely that he/she lacks a true image of himself/herself.<sup>11</sup> In pursuit of one's phantom, fleeting image, the victim is directed to the colonial mirror which reflects the disfigured image ordained by the oppressor. This, in short, was the crisis of the narrator in *Invisible Man*. He could not see himself clearly at the beginning. The first setting of this work is in the Deep South of America during the Jim Crow, pre-Civil Rights era. The naive, tragic hero of Ellison sought clarity

---

<sup>8</sup> Richard Wright's *The Outsider* was overshadowed by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The critics pitted the writers against each other. And, tragically, Ralph Ellison began to see himself as the more intellectual writer. Eventually, Ellison severed ties with his former mentor.

<sup>9</sup> The main character of *Invisible Man* was symbolically nameless. Also, he was representative of many indigenous, blacks which must assume the same Double Consciousness as Ellison's famed protagonist. Donato Ndongo's own nameless protagonist, ironically, assumes a similar profile and conscious state in the work *Shadows of Your Black Memory*.

<sup>10</sup> The invisible man lacked a sense of his ontological self. This void rendered him unable to discern the 'black, Diasporic space' which he inhabited.

<sup>11</sup> Colonial powers foster negative, false images upon subjugated peoples. This control facilitates psychological genocide.



of vision from the very ones that fostered Jim Crow policies.<sup>12</sup> His misguided endeavor would be the source of much pain and anguish before he reached a central epiphany.

## 2. The birth of the indigenous, urban, Diasporic hero – Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*

The rise of urban lit does not repudiate the black literary past, but it does suggest other ways and means of producing black literature and other ends for it as well.  
[Early, Gerald (2009). *What Is African American Literature?*]

Claude Brown's novel *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965) represented the commencement of a new genre of urban literature for the masses. Claude Brown was unlike other African-American novelists. Unlike Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, he did not subscribe to a European or American school of literary philosophy.

Ellison and Wright emigrated North, as Jim Crow refugees. Claude Brown represented the first born of the Jim Crow refugees. As a result of his own urban, social status, he fashioned a contemporary, tragic, Diasporic hero for the post-Jim Crow, pre-Civil Rights era of urban America. Romulus Linney, in his essay termed "Growing Up the Hard Way, 1965" states that the story (known as *Manchild in the Promised Land*) is a "Pilgrim's Progress through the deadly realities of the 28-year-old author's childhood and youth the 1940's and 1950's (Linney 1965: pp. 1,4)." Brown's novel distinguished itself as not being part of the elite intellectualism of the W.E. Dubois movement of the Harlem Renaissance of old. Indeed, negative critiques of his novel attested to this. The critic George Dennison ("Cooling It," 1966) declared..."While reading [the] book (*Manchild in the Promised Land*), I thought of the somber pride of Richard Wright in *Black Boy*, and the strong, sweet spirit of Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*. There were no such qualities in *Manchild in the Promised Land*. There is no voice. Brown was trapped in the secondary environment of issues and opinions, the world of commerce and newspapers, and the need to make it. (Dennison 1966: 84)." Yet, it was evident that the Harlem that Claude Brown was born into... was a different Harlem. Michelle Alexander in her work *The New Jim Crow*, 2010, cites the political role that drugs played in the black communities of urban America. Alexander states that drug use 'contained' the urban communities and blinded many from focusing upon issues regarding internal colonialism. Mere superficial attempts were made by government agencies to abate the proliferation of drugs being trafficked into black communities (Alexander 2010: 5,6,7). The sweet voice that George Dennison recalled in *Invisible Man* was quelled by

---

<sup>12</sup> One aspect of Double Consciousness involves the (futile) attempts made by African Americans to change white America's negative image of African Americans and African American culture.



the changes in Harlem. And Brown's protagonist was born in the author's own image and times. Claude Brown hungered to make it out of Harlem. He yearned to escape the hopeless life of heroin addiction, gang culture, and near-death experiences in the same manner. This was the Harlem that imprisoned him. Perhaps, Brown wanted to escape the internal colonialism of urban American too. Consider the issue of Brown's desire to escape from such a life. Was his desire less honorable than the causes of Wright and Ellison? The hopelessness of the urban ghettos was as stifling as the Jim Crowism of the south. *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and the author Claude Brown, were perceived more favorably by the literary critic Arnold Rampersad declared, in his review "*The Children of Ham*," Brown to be "the true modern poet of Harlem (Rampersad 1976: p. 25)." *Manchild in the Promised Land* was a book for the masses. This was a true work of urban literature. Brown spoke to his readers, authentically, in the modern language of the streets, in the opening sequence. Yet, the insightfulness of Claude Brown character was akin to Ralph Ellison's nameless urchin. Each of these characters internalized the hopelessness of being in the lower rank of the American cast system (from within and without).<sup>13</sup>

Brown states:

Mama seemed silly to me. She was bothered because most of the parents in the neighborhood didn't allow their children to play with me. What she didn't know was that I never wanted to play with them. My friends were daring like me, tough like me, dirty like me, ragged like me, cursed like me, and had a great love of trouble like me. (Brown 1965: 21)

Brown's protagonist, initially, accepted his exiled state here. He was an outcast among outcasts. He was shunned by the community, but finds kinship among other outcasts. He was in denial or ignorant of his black 'self' and his link to a Diaspora. Lacking an identity, he readily accepted his detachment from the community at-large. And most importantly, he was without the means to see that his lack of identity and detachment extends beyond the borders of his Harlem community.

---

<sup>13</sup> African languages are older than European languages. As a result, the spectrum of philosophical application, interpretation, and usage is more complex and varied. Pitch also is a component of many African languages and dialects. Often what is spoken orally may be decoded on the basic, the intermediate, and the 'mastery' level. This is the intricate capacity of orality.



### 3. Africa's birthing of the universal, black protagonist

Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark---weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more---but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bear teeth..  
(Morrison, Toni, 2008, *A Mercy*)

Donato Ndongo's *Shadows of Your Black Memory* was the story of a colonial child that migrated from Equatorial Guinea to Spain in the hopes of becoming a priest and acquiring Eurocentrism. This allegorical story was unique.

Firstly, it was written in Spanish by a writer from the lone, Spanish speaking country in Africa today. Secondly, this novel qualified as being part of the 'Empire Writes Back' genre in Spanish.

One of the leading Afro-Hispanic educators and scholars, Dr. Marvin A. Lewis, stated in his work *An Introduction to the Literature of Equatorial Guinea* (2007), that "*Darkness of Your Black Memory* (\*The title in the original Spanish version) is one of the most analyzed works in Equatorial Guinean literature. Its basic theme is the impact of Spanish Colonialism upon Equatorial Guinea and the cultural resistance inherent in that society (Lewis 2007: 139)."

The main character of this work was nameless. He migrated from a Eurocentric state to an Afrocentric state in the process of finding his black identity. Several challenges faced Equatorial Guinea as a nation..... "The national identity dilemma [was] exacerbated further by the presence of four ethnic groups---Bubi, Fang, Ndowne, Annobonese—all competing for primacy (Lewis 2007: 1)." And Dr. Lewis writes of Ndongo's main character, declaring that... "the protagonist is torn between the Catholic Church and the African world-view and [was] initiated into both ritualistic practices. (Lewis 2007: 141)." Yet, few have considered the fact that Donato Ndongo, was also a pupil of African-American (Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Claude Brown) and Nigerian (Chinua Achebe) literature (Codling and Cooper, *The Donato Ndomgo Interview*, 2010). In fact, during an interview conducted by Rosetta Codling and translated by Phyllis Cooper in Madrid, Spain, Ndongo attested to the impact that several African-American writers and the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe had upon his own writing style (Codling & Cooper, 2010). Ndongo's narrator in his work *Shadows of Your Black Memory* was as nameless as Ellison's own *Invisible Man*. Yet, Ndongo's character migrates to Europe, not a city in North America. Ndongo's protagonist was corrupted by his early Catholic environment. Claude Brown's character, also, was corrupted by the poverty imposed upon his urban environment. Ellison and Brown fight an internal enemy. But, the corrupting enemy in *Shadows of Your Dark Memory* stemmed from a direct, external, colonial source...the Catholic Church of Spain. The Catholic Church colonized the mind of the Equatorial Guineans. This mode of



'psychological' colonization spawned a form of Double Consciousness for Ndongo's main character too. The prevailing sentiment was that the church represented Modernity and civilization itself. Equatorial Guinea and the people within were viewed as heathens and uncultured (Ndongo, *Shadows of Your Black Memory*, 2007). Ndongo's narrator was so anonymous that he merely exists (he did not thrive) in his native culture and home. He was exiled from his Diasporic, black self. The protagonist of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* cites his drill:

At eight o'clock each morning we had to gather at the school with one arm raised in patriotic fascist salute, and then strut military style past the red and yellow Spanish flag... We marched fast, while our elders left their chores in the bush, carrying with them the remembrance of our clear and distant gaze and our uplifted faces: I go forward with my Mother Spain and onward to God; I wish to honor my Nation; an immense desire urges me forward, lyrically inspiring the duties of my hono-o-o-or. (Ndongo 2007: 16-17)

Ndongo's narrator communicated, in this passage, his immersion in a culture and a way of being that is foreign and Eurocentric.

The fascism of Spain, the ethos of military indoctrination, and colonialism seeped deeply into the psyche of the African hero of *Shadows of Your Black Memory*.

The boy shunned the indigenous and assumed the badge of honor of a foreign, colonial state. Ndongo's tragic narrator, likened to Claude's Brown's protagonist, was an innocent. He knew only the few crumbs of life tossed to him by his oppressor.

## AWAKENING AND DEFINITION AS A BLACK 'SELF'

### 1. The self realization period of black intellectualism in novel form of Ralph Ellison

If you want to know about my life.....don't look at my face, don't look at my hands. Look at my feet and see how long I been standing on them.  
[Hughes, Langston (1961). *The Best of Simple* ]

*Invisible Man's* protagonist, in Ellison's novel, had a dream, an aspiration which was shared (but rarely realized) by most youths within his beleaguered caste. He wished to obtain a scholarship to a college noted for the education of Negro people. He wanted to achieve something credible and to rise above the poverty thrust upon him by Jim Crowism. For most.... "High school diplomas and white collar jobs were still out of reach for most black southern migrants then (Holt 2010: 289)" states



Thomas Holt in his work *Children of Fire: A History of African Americans* (2010). The invisible man graduated at the top of his high school class and delivered the graduation speech. His academic distinction was recognized and he was invited to the town's meeting of the leading white citizens.

At this meeting, the invisible man was compelled to witness and assume a role in acts which debase of his race at this meeting (Ellison 1994: 17-33). Similar acts committed against blacks, in those days, were ordained by the white powers in a fashion that followed...“the political logic of white supremacy ...patronage, or paternalism... [for] the overall structure for rural black-white relations”...and order (Holt 2010: 251).”

And Ellison's protagonist was rewarded, handsomely, for his compliance to participate in those acts with a college scholarship. Slowly, but not intensely, he was coming into an awareness of the reality of success in a white world. Still, the invisible man did not grasp his lessons well enough. He failed to grasp the vital principles of compulsory, philosophical hypocrisy that were necessary for the attainment of his dream. In short, he didn't even know how to play the 'game.' He failed to realize what must be surrendered in order to acquire the dream. In the early stages of the invisible man's college career, he angered his college president. After he, unknowingly, exposed a cherished, white benefactor to unpleasant conditions among the indigenous locals.. Mr. Bledsoe, the college president was so infuriated by naiveté of the young plebe that the boy was, covertly, purged from the academic community. The main character was oblivious to his fate. Until, a kindly man made it blatantly clear to the boy. Ellison's protagonist was transformed and he was forced to awaken to his true 'self.' Confronted with the bleak, futile reality of his state, the narrator resolved: “They'd sent me to the rookery, all right. I laughed and felt numb and weak...I stopped, gasping for breath, I decided that I would go back and kill Bledsoe. Yes, I thought, I owe it to the race and to myself (Ellison 1994: 191).” Finally, Ellison's protagonist knew the enemy was 'within' and 'without.' He vowed to kill the adversary's messenger, a debt he owed himself and his race

## 2. The surfacing of the black self in the urban literature of Claude Brown

In my dreams I'm not black, and if I am I'm only half black and an Indian. I'm a warrior riding across the plains, in my dreams we drive the Europeans back into the ocean, in my dreams sometimes I am black, blacker than I am now, the blackest black man, Hannibal riding an elephant over the Alps....in my dreams I have not been beat....My dreams are mine....  
[Sapphire (2011). *The Kid*]

A new sense of reality consumed Claude Brown's protagonist as he came into an awareness of himself. Tragic was his realization of his self. Ralph Ellison's main





character encountered the same reality too. Previously, Brown's character savored the joys of being an outcast; he reveled in the fruits of being a lair and a thief. He was respected for his disrespect of others and everything.

But, looming in the distance was the awareness that this was not a true snapshot of life.

Others were deceived, but he could no longer be. He resolved: "...everybody in Harlem needed something. Some people needed religion. The junkies needed drugs. Some people needed to get drunk on Saturday night and raise hell. A lot of people needed the numbers. Me, I needed to get out of Harlem" (Brown 1965: 203).

Claude Brown's protagonist commenced a journey toward autonomy (similar to that of the invisible man). But, Brown's protagonist was not fighting for the 'self' that sought intellectualism and higher learning. Brown's character was fighting for more immediate, basic needs. Harlem was filled with decay and he knew that he had to escape with his life....that was his immediate goal. He derived clarity from the carnage that surrounded him. "...[H]is own toughness and clarity of mind...from the agonies of the defeated friends he so deeply respected and loved, who [had] been destroyed. He [owed] his understanding to the damned of Harlem; upon their fallen lived he erect[ed] his own future and his truest guidance [was]...recorded in their hopeless struggles and despairs (Linney 1965: 14). Brown's character was awakened and he saw the various 'opiums' which oppressed people (Karl Marx spoke of this). Religion, drugs, gambling, and 'drink' were intoxicants dispensed by the American 'colonial' powers to blind the people of Harlem. The manchild of the promised land, depicted in Brown's novel, was no more. He was, instead, sobering to the notion of asserting his Black 'self,' independent of the intoxicants of the colonial power which once bridled him.

In retrospect, looking at a critique of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, by William Mathes, one must consider how symbolic and prophetic the novel and the main character became. Mathes wrote: "Brown is off to law school, having shared his farewell to Harlem....The civil rights movement could certainly use a non-pious, non-furious spokesman. And, perhaps more importantly, American letters could use a writer with Brown's instinctive sense of psychological drama, his apparently natural ability to communicate complex and highly evocative patterns of contemporary life (Mathes 1965: 459-460)." Mathes resolves..."Brown's story [was] a tragedy, contemporary tragedy. ...By the time Brown's book is a classic, the issues he documents will have destroyed or transformed our nation and the world, for that matter (Mathes 1965: 456-458)." Brown's book is a classic today. Brown was instinctive and he possessed a natural ability to communicate and convey the tragic elements of urban life. Mathes was wrong in his prediction that the 'self' of Brown's work would transform or destroy the nation and the world. Crack became the new drug of the 1980's and 1990's and it consumed entire communities in Harlem. No one really cared that crack ruined more lives in Harlem than heroin.



### 3. The emergence of a black universal 'quest' for self in Donato Ndongo

In the beginning there was a river. The river  
became a road and the road branched out to the whole world.  
(Okri, Ben. 1991. *The Famished Road*)

*Shadows of Your Black Memory* is by all means, exclusively, an African novel. The allegorical format adheres to the format as described by F. Abiola Irele in *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (2001). Ndongo's novel adheres to the principles that include of "three levels of orality...rhetorical uses of language...the use of proverbs and aphorisms...which channel communication in African cultures... a "formulaic" framework for speech acts, discursive modes, and indeed the structure of thought. (Irele 2001: 9)." *Shadows of Your Black Memory* is a work that adheres to a traditional African intellectualism. Following this model, one finds that the character Uncle Abeso, the protagonist's own uncle, provides a vehicle for the use of proverbs and aphorisms in the text. In fact, Dr. Marvin Lewis cited Uncle Abeso as being..." The most fervent champion and practitioner of their (Fang-Equatorial Guinean) culture... (Lewis 2007: 140)." Uncle Abeso, exactly, through conveyed his wisdom through proverbs and aphorisms:

"ambition is very bad, it's the worst sickness that a man can have..." (Ndongo 2007: 84)

"infinite patience and constant cleverness of your tribe, your caste, your people, would always triumph in the end over ostentation and arrogance" (Ndongo 2007: 85)

"Power is above all pain, feeling what the governed feel, knowing how to endure, this is what chief Abeso Motulu taught me; the heart of a chief should be the sum total of all the hearts of all of those under his protection" (Ndongo 2007: 125).

Uncle Abeso bestowed gentle wisdom upon his nephew to groom him for the 'self' to come. He knew that his nephew aspired to be a priest. He warned his nephew about blind ambition. He 'schooled' his nephew against the pitfalls of ostentation and arrogance. Patience, he told the boy, is a virtue. The uncle taught a lesson that his own teacher taught him too. He recalled the lesson of the burden of heart of a chief.

This lesson was that a chief is the embodiment of all the hearts of his tribe. The structure of thoughts, the domains of concepts, and the scopes of the wisdom in these passages are geared toward a (perhaps) African audience that would understand the levels of appeal in terms of African orality.<sup>13</sup>

Donato Ndongo conceded that Chinua Achebe was a great influence upon his life and his craft. He admired Achebe's ability to write of an African experience within a totally 'African vein' (Codling & Cooper, 2010). And it must be noted that reading Ralph



Ellison and Claude Brown impacted greatly upon Ndongo too (Codling, & Cooper, 2010). Therefore, the allegorical experiences of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* were the results of a universality of black literature across two continents and varied, colonial experiences.

In the final segment of *Shadows of Your Black Memory*, the protagonist realizes all the lessons of his uncle...far too late. The nameless character is able to name what will be lost forever. On a ship headed to the seat of colonial power, Spain, he laments:

More and more blacks boarded all huddling together: old folks, young people, infants. And the black man with the helmet and guitar sat down protected from the rain and began strumming; it was a distant rhythm, strange and warm, and stayed with you all afternoon, through the long, rainy night; it was with you in your cabin as the ship cut through the gulf. Many years later you would still sway to the pulse of that rocking motion, cradled by the waves and the warm music of the oyeng guitar. (Ndongo 2007: 157)

As the protagonist departed, he captured the scene of his life, his culture and his people within his mind...for memory sake. He knew that recalling events would be important. He knew that he would miss his parents, the camaraderie of his people, the music, and the land that bore him. He began to question his goal. Michael Ugarte, scholar of Equatorial Guinean literature and the translator of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* from Equatorial Guinean Spanish to English, states... "Such self-questioning is felt throughout this novel, not only on the level of individual psyche, but in the broader public domain as well (Ugarte, Michael. (2007) *Translator's Postscript* within *Shadows of Your Black Memory*: 161).

The protagonist, at the beginning of the text... and at the end... questioned his vocation and his aspirations. In doing so, he stood on the brink of realizing his true 'self,' and not the one ordained by others. The enlightenment came at a cost so dear.

### C. Mutual affiliation and repatriation of the black self for Ralph Ellison, Claude Brown, and Donato Ndongo

[T]he slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; the moved back again toward slavery.

[Du Bois, W.E.B. (1935). *Black Reconstruction in America*]

As part of the characterization process, in the works of Ralph Ellison, Claude Brown, and Donato Ndongo, the protagonists reached full potential only when each individual established his Diasporic identity. It was necessary for each individual



character come to an awareness of 'who he really is' and 'what he is a part of.' This repatriation (as Aime Cesaire terms it) was the final stage of indigenous development. Ralph Ellison was successful in endowing his tragic hero with the means to express the despair and anguish of an entire race of people. The words, deliberations and exasperations of his heroic nemesis were echoed by preceding generations of male, black Diasporic men. The Invisible man, in retrospect, stated:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe....I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. .... (Ellison 1994: 3)

The anonymous, famed, protagonist (of Ellison's creative devices) was aware that he failed to exist because his existence was not noted. The world refused to see or acknowledge him. Also, the narrator realized that he was among the invisible, divisible only by the masses of others that comprised his race.

This statement was important because it was a reckoning and an affirmation. He was part of a group or race of invisibles looming in the shadows the American society and consciousness.

Claude Brown's retrospective reflection in *Manchild in the Promised Land* is hauntingly similar to Ellison's tone in *Invisible Man*. Brown acknowledges the invisibility of hope and a future for himself and a black Diaspora, as he wrote:

The children of the disillusioned colored pioneers inherited the total lot of their parents—the disappointments, the anger. To add to their misery, they had little hope of deliverance. For where does one run to when he's already in the promised land (Brown 1965: 8).

Claude Brown's words were especially riveting because *Manchild in the Promised Land* premiered in 1965. *Invisible Man* premiered in 1952. Claude Brown's character was a reincarnation of the original of Ralph Ellison. Nothing has changed since. The 'colored' pioneers that he spoke of are the children of the Great Migration. Fleeing Jim Crow laws and unimaginable poverty, the refugees of racism forged north. They sought seeking equality, jobs, and better housing in the 'promised land.' Cameron McWhirter, in his book *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* (2011), notes the anger and resentment from whites which materialized into lynchings and riots in the cities in Connecticut, California, Chicago, and Washington (McWhirter 2011: 13). There was no deliverance, for the blacks, from what drove them north. In the 'utopian dreamland' of Harlem, there was more squalor, ever more destitute conditions, and confirmed despair. Claude Brown's definitive assessment came in the form of his question: "...where does one run when he's already in the promised land (Brown 1965: 8)?" Indeed, where does one run to?



Donato Ndongo provides the most current observation on the state of the invisible man... previously reincarnated. For, the new, millennium, 'invisible man' now lurks in *Shadows of Your Black Memory*. Ndongo's own anonymous protagonist addressed his newfound affiliation with his black, African 'self.' He was conscious of the need for 'repatriation' to his black Diaspora. He spoke in a similar, retrospective tones or voices in the narratives of Ellison and Brown. He said:

And you took your last look back, remember?... as if to confirm to yourself that you left your dear motherland behind for good, or as a desire to preserve the face of your mother, my poor mother, but they had already disappeared from your view and your life...you were now alone with Father Ortiz in the space between the past and the future, and the present was a black man rowing in silence toward the ship. (Ndongo 2007: 155)

Ironically, Ndongo's character fled to the 'promised land' in a fashion similar to that of the protagonists of Ralph Ellison and Claude Brown. This was another ill-fated quest being repeated in another realm of the black Diaspora. The protagonist of *Shadows of Your Black Memory* sought to flee his indigenous state and 'all' that it entailed. But, upon the vessel which was to bring him to the 'promised land,' he reached an epiphany. He was actually leaving what was promised and bequeathed by his ancestors. He came to realize that his connection to his native 'self' was fleeting. The past was gone. The future was at hand. For this tragic hero, something precious was lost forever. Thus, Ndongo's character is representative of the 'Collective I' of Africa and Black America.

In closing, *The Invisible Man* of Ralph Ellison, the *Manchild of the Promised Land* of Claude Brown, and the *Shadows of Your Black Memory* of Donato Ndongo are always with us. These works represent the black, allegorical struggle for identity without end.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander M., 2010, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the age of Colorblindness*, The New Press, New York.  
Brown C., 1965, *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Touchstone Press, New York, (NY).  
Codling R. & Cooper, P., 2011, "The Donato Interview", in *Examiner.com*, 16 October 2011,  
<<http://www.examiner.com/books-in-atlanta/the-donato-ndongo-interview-1>>  
Dennison G., 1966, "Cooling It," in *Commentary*, pp.62-84.  
Ellison R., 1994, *Invisible Man*, Modern Library, New York, (NY).  
Holt, T.C., 2010, *Children of Fire: A History of African Americans*, Hill and Wang, New York.  
Irele F.A., 2001, *The African Imagination*, Oxford University Press, New York.



- Lewis M., 2007, *An Introduction to the Literature of Equatorial Guinea: Between Colonialism and Dictatorship*, University of Missouri Press, Missouri.
- Linney R.S., 1965, "Growing up the Hard Way", in *New York Times Book Review*, pp. 1-4.
- Masolo D.A., 1994, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana.
- Mathes W., 1965, "A Negro Pepys," in *Antioch Review*, vol. XXV, n. 3, pp. 459-460.
- McWhirter C. 2011, *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*, Henry Holt and Company, New York.
- Ndongo D., 2007, *Shadows of Your Black Memory*, Swan Isle Press, Chicago.
- Rampersad A., 1976, "The Children of Ham," in *The New Republic*, vol. 174, n. 19, 19, May 8, pp. 25-26.
- Rampersad A., 2007, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*, Vintage Books, New York.
- Warren K.W., 2011, *What Was African American Literature?*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts.

---

**Rosetta Codling** is a retired teacher/ professor of English literature, World literature, and Philosophy. She is an Independent Scholar of 'global' black literature. Dr. Codling's publishing credits include: *The Journal of African Literature* (2010-2011), *Saraba Magazine* (2010), *Critical Studies in Stylistics and Narrative Styles* (2010), *The African Studies Quarterly* (2010), and the extensive work entitled *The Metamorphosis of the historical nature of the writing of Toni Morrison* (2004). In 2011, she was solicited to conduct a CNN Dialogues interview with the author of the book *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, Heidi Durrow.

[Rsi4784212@aol.com](mailto:Rsi4784212@aol.com)