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O'Brien, Sean Joseph (2019) Blacking out: Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and the historicity of Anti-Blackness. *Cultural Critique* 105 , pp. 80-105. ISSN 0882-4371.

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Blacking Out: Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man and the Historicity of Anti-Blackness

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Abstract: Triangulating black unemployment, anti-black police violence and the spread of riots in moments of financial crisis, this essay reads Ralph Ellison's visionary 1952 novel Invisible Man in relation to what Giovanni Arrighi identifies as the US systemic cycle of accumulation. In his structuralist account of developments in the capitalist world-system, Arrighi adopts Fernand Braudel's model of the longue durée, with its seasonal logic of hegemonic transition whereby autumn for one declining global hegemon means spring for the next. For Ellison's unnamed narrator, whose struggle for visibility is presciently tied to the rise and fall of American growth, spring too carries its "stenches of death." When the US cycle reaches its own crisis of accumulation in the late 1960s, and the long American century enters its autumnal downturn, the expulsion of labour from the site of production will sound the death knell for African American Bildung. Anticipating the coming of autumn in terms of exhaustion and abjection, Invisible Man envisions the end of American economic hegemony as a crushing experience of social death. Tracing the relationship between precarity and the American novel across this transitional period, the present essay revisits Ellison's literary milestone to chart the decline of the American century from within its zenith.

Keywords: financial crisis, precarity, anti-blackness, the American century, Invisible Man, the Bildungsroman, deindustrialization, social death, riot

There's a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring—I hope spring. But don't let me trick you, there is a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me. And if nothing more, invisibility has taught my nose to classify the stench of death.

-Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

Since the 2008 financial crisis, US labour markets have crept sluggishly toward recovery. Official unemployment rates have fallen from 10 percent in 2009 to 3.9 percent as of August 2018, even as real wages have stagnated and productivity growth has been negligible. Black unemployment rates, however, have remained high—at a historic low of 6.1 per cent, they are still well above the national average—while the discrepancy between black and non-black unemployment, regardless of educational background, has hardly budged in fifty years.¹ This figure skyrockets and the racial gap becomes a chasm when it is adjusted to account for black underemployment and incarceration rates, both of which began to climb with deindustrialization and spiked following the crash in 2008. African Americans swell the ranks of a bloated and precarious service sector, while the rate of imprisonment for black men has increased by more than five hundred percent over the past four decades, skewering claims that black precarity has simply become more visible in recent years through the proliferation of new media.² Meanwhile, in the post-2008 period, anti-black police violence once again took centre stage in America: in 2015, black Americans were nine times as likely as other Americans to be killed by police.³ Under generalized conditions of rising precarity—and in response to the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland—a wave of riots swept the US. This triangulation of black unemployment, anti-black police violence and the spread of

riots in moments of financial crisis suggests that racialization—that set of ascriptive processes that produces race as a sociological category and naturalizes dispossession along lines of phenotypical difference—mediates the unfolding relationship between cycles of accumulation and cycles of struggle.

Turning to the early post-war period to historicize the entangled forms of precarity and struggle that mark the present, this essay reads Ralph Ellison's visionary 1952 novel Invisible Man in relation to what Giovanni Arrighi identifies as the US systemic cycle of accumulation. For Arrighi, the economic shift in the latter half of the twentieth century from industry to finance signals a crisis in American hegemony—the latest in a series of systemic cycles of accumulation, each with its geopolitical hegemonic centre, which has come to a close with a period of financialization—wherein capital, having exhausted the profitability of manufacture, abandons commodity production and leaps into liquidity.⁴ In his structuralist account of late-twentieth-century developments in the capitalist world-system, Arrighi adopts Fernand Braudel's model of the longue durée, with its seasonal logic of hegemonic transition whereby autumn for one declining hegemon means spring for the next. For Ellison's unnamed narrator, whose struggle for visibility is presciently tied to the rise and fall of American growth, spring too carries its “stenches of death” (580). When the US faces its own crisis of accumulation in the late 1960s, and the long American century enters its autumnal downturn in the early 1970s, the expulsion of labour from the site of production will sound the death knell for African American Bildung. Anticipating the coming of autumn in terms of exhaustion and abjection, Invisible Man envisions the end of American economic hegemony as a crushing experience of social death. In what follows, I trace the relationship between racialized precarity and the postwar American novel

across this transitional period, revisiting Ellison's literary milestone to chart the decline of the American century from within its zenith.

Invisible Man stages a series of expulsions from conventional sites of entrance into twentieth-century American civil society. Living in exile beneath the street, the nameless narrator recounts how he was expelled from college, jettisoned from the Liberty Paints factory, and cast aside by the Brotherhood before dropping from the radar of social life altogether to “take up residence underground” (571). His expulsion from each of these historic institutions—the industrial college, the factory union, and the political party—occasion shifts in narrative form: Ellison's realist first-person narration dissolves into surrealist passages that, through references to “drowned passions” (113), confinement (235) and transportation (249-50), gesture back to the violent discontinuity of the Middle Passage, in the process suspending the subject and narrative telos of this canonical modernist Bildungsroman. Set against the exhaustion of Jim Crow legislation, this series of expulsions represents not so much an exclusionary logic, but rather plots the systemic movement from integration to expulsion that characterizes the US cycle of accumulation in the long twentieth century. Navigating this dynamic over the course of the narrative in a protracted struggle between optimism and pessimism, the narrator's alternating experiences of social integration and abjection constitute distinct historical moments of racialization, and, as I will argue, track a movement by which racial blackness shifts for the narrator between an affirmative category of identification and an external constraint to overcome.

Spring in America

Set during the Great Depression of the 1930s and published on the eve of the post-war boom,

Invisible Man is a novel of transition—its expansive scope and scale spanning the horizons of the American century—and, from the present vantage of American decline, offers a prescient glance at the contemporary reign of finance. In a pivotal scene, the narrator stumbles upon the possessions of an elderly couple “piled in a jumble along the walk over the curb into the street, like a lot of junk waiting to be hauled away” (267). The narrator is moved by the sight of the eviction: “with this sense of dispossession came a pang of vague recognition: this junk, these shabby chairs, these heavy, old-fashioned pressing irons, zinc washtubs with dented bottoms—all throbbed with more meaning than there should have been” (217). As an angry crowd gathers near the entrance, he delivers a speech about dispossession that foregrounds the logic of plunder at work in the post-war project of urban redevelopment. Rallying the crowd in support of Primus Provo, an evicted eighty-seven year old former slave and day labourer, the narrator cries, “look at all he’s accumulated in eighty-seven years, strewn in the snow like chicken-guts... Where has all his labor gone?” (277-8). Galvanized by the narrator’s speech, the crowd erupts into revelry, carrying the elderly couple’s belongings back into the building in what feels “like a holiday” (282) before the police arrive and shut down the festivities under the pretense of riot control.

Drawing on Aimé Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism, Myka Tucker-Abramson has argued that “Invisible Man records the process by which high finance and the state systematically ‘raided’ the ‘internal colony’ of African Americans in the post-war era” (2013, 57). In her reading of the eviction scene, she cites the Housing Act of 1949, which authorized the redevelopment of urban centres according to the racialized logic of “blight,” as a key moment in the violent spatial reorganization of surplus organized by Washington and executed by Wall Street (56). Ellison’s narrator parrots this duplicitous logic of development, exclaiming, “Just look at this junk! Should two old folks live in such junk, cooped up in a filthy room? It’s a great

danger, a fire hazard!” (Ellison 277). In these representations of urban renewal, the novel harkens back to depression-era evictions in Harlem, but also prefigures the new slum clearance policies that characterize finance-driven urban planning projects in the early post-war period.⁵ Balancing the novel’s multiple timelines, Tucker-Abramson suggests that “Invisible Man is less a novel about the Great Depression than it is a novel about the space between its writing and its setting” (2015, 11). Rather than a straightforward critique of the racist exclusions that defined the Jim Crow era, Ellison’s novel offers an ambiguous image of African American integration into the post-war regime of American hegemony.

Following the Great Depression and the mass destruction of World War II, the British Empire entered terminal crisis, and the US emerged as global hegemon of the capitalist world-system. In *The Long Twentieth Century*, Arrighi argues that the US secured global ascendancy after World War II in part through absorbing “the propertyless masses of the West” (65). The “systemic chaos” (64) of the period immediately following the war prompted the US to undertake a massive operation of capture, formally integrating populations both domestically and internationally in order to stabilize global capital and secure hegemony in the world-system. Arrighi’s theory of hegemonic transition draws on the work of Braudel, for whom the financialization of the global economy in the late nineteenth century marked the beginning of the end for the British, just as it had for the Genoese and the Dutch in previous “long centuries.” As Braudel so eloquently puts it, “every capitalist development of this order seems, by reaching the stage of financial expansion, to have in some sense announced its maturity: it [is] a sign of autumn” (246). But if the British cycle of accumulation was in terminal decline by the end of World War II, the American cycle was just getting underway. William I. Robinson writes, “In the longue durée, the declining hegemon’s autumn is another rising hegemon’s spring” (273),

and the early post-war period, which marked high points for Fordism and Keynesianism, saw the rise of American hegemony in the world-system. Peacetime ushered in a new age of prosperity: after the long winter of war, a new optimism bloomed. The various Keynesian accords and Fordist agreements of the early post-war period, which functioned as both instruments of economic growth and a means of pacifying class conflict, facilitated the rise of American hegemony by integrating the reproductive circuits of capital and labour through standardized mass production and consumption: in Arrighi's words, "the vertical integration of processes of production and exchange...became the single most important feature of the US regime of accumulation" (291-2). This is true in the narrow sense of "bureaucratically managed corporations," which Arrighi notes "began expanding transnationally as soon as they had completed their continent-wide integration within the United States" (290). But the corporate model of vertical integration, as Arrighi suggests, also operated as a general socioeconomic principle governing capitalist society in the period of twentieth-century industrial expansion.

This moment at mid-century marks the inauguration of what Jodi Melamed calls "racial liberalism," the first in "a series of successive official or state-recognized US antiracisms" (1), which mandated the incorporation of African Americans into the formal economy and civil society both as a Cold War containment strategy and a means of expanding labour and commodity markets. The systematic integration of African Americans into US civil society resulted in what Melamed describes as "a formally anti-racist, liberal capitalist modernity articulated under conditions of US global ascendancy" (4). Invisible Man depicts this integrationist racial regime in the Wall Street-led financing of the black southern college, anti-discriminatory hiring policies at the Liberty Paints factory, and the turn (however equivocal) to a politics of racial inclusion by the Marxist-Leninist party, the Brotherhood. Indeed, black

Americans would secure increasing economic progress relative to whites until the economic crisis of the 1970s.⁶ Underlining these kinds of developments in African American economic status, Sidney Wilhelm notes that “Negro income relative to white reached an all-time high in 1952” (80), the same year Invisible Man was published, and the assimilationist logic of this process of integration is illustrated in the narrator’s disturbing psychiatric treatment at a mental hospital—a program designed to pacify him so that, upon his release, “society will suffer no traumata on his account” (Ellison 236).⁷ And yet, as Tucker-Abramson notes, insofar as “the state is only visible within Invisible Man through the figures of the police” (2013, 34), the novel also seems to predict the collapse of this social-democratic arrangement. Anticipating not only the integrationist logic of the post-war boom, Tucker-Abramson suggests, but also a later neoliberal moment when the post-welfare security state would abandon its role as mediator, Invisible Man asks what possibilities exist for an anti-racist politics in a moment when post-Reconstruction era forms of critique that challenged the racist exclusionary practices of Jim Crow appear increasingly obsolete.⁸

I will return to this question of obsolescence in the novel, but I want to dwell for a moment on the sense of radical negativity that permeates the Harlem eviction scene. During his dispossession speech, the narrator shouts, “‘Dispossessed,’ eighty-seven years and dispossessed of what? They ain’t got nothing, they caint get nothing, they never had nothing. So who was dispossessed?” (279). Highlighting an apparently absolute inaccessibility to property, the narrator calls into question the very framework of expropriation that underpins the discourse of dispossession, and in doing so undermines the possibility of an affirmative black identity politics that would seek to secure visibility in civil society. Drawing on Frantz Fanon’s characterization of blackness as an experience of “crushing objecthood” (109), Frank Wilderson has theorized

this condition as one of “subjectivity under erasure” (2010, xi). For Wilderson, Jared Sexton and other theorists associated with the tendency in black studies known as Afro-Pessimism, the ontological objectification of blackness endures in what Saidiya Hartman calls “the afterlife of slavery” (6). This sense of an afterlife is suggested in the novel, too. As the narrator helps collect the elderly couple’s items, he discovers Primus Provo’s “FREE PAPERS,” signed “1859,” and is struck by how little time separates that moment from his own: “It has been longer than that, further removed in time, I told myself, and yet I knew that it hadn’t been” (Ellison 272). Looking at the couple’s belongings, he feels the moment of dispossession recede into the past, “around a corner into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago, not so much of my own memory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images, heard even when not listening at home” (273). For the narrator, an originary and constitutive dispossession, cast back through generations, marks blackness in the present in terms of a generalized inaccessibility to social life, represented here in the image of the home. “These old ones are out in the snow,” the narrator remarks to the Harlem crowd, “but we’re here with them” (279). Invisible Man would, in this sense, appear to affirm the Afro-pessimist notion of a black ontology. While I engage these recent developments in black studies below, the present argument reconsiders Ellison’s classic novel from a different angle. In its emphasis on the foreclosure of twentieth-century political possibilities, as I will show, Invisible Man recasts the idea of ontological blackness as the appearance of “race” in a logic of representation that encodes the process by which the class relation moves through phases of integration and expulsion over the course of the American century.

Kenneth Warren has argued that, with Invisible Man, Ellison “captured a bit of American reality...only as that reality was passing into history” (2003, 2). For Warren, the novel marks the historical eclipse of the Jim Crow period, and his reading of Invisible Man sets the stage for his

later book, What Was African American Literature? There, Warren argues that African American literature began with the implementation of Jim Crow legislation—against which African American writers sought to establish a distinctly black American literary canon, one that would facilitate black uplift and counter notions of inferiority—and so definitively ended with desegregation. But if the African American novel charted a narrative of racial progress in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, then what constitutes the end of that moment of possibility for African American Bildung needs to be understood within the context of a crisis of American “growth” more generally. Indeed, Ellison anticipates a moment in which, as Joshua Clover notes, “the literary novel moves to strip away or fracture the conventions of the bildungsroman, of the development of a character through consequent time” (2011, 42), since the crisis of a subjective narrative telos that appears in Invisible Man will become a defining problem for the postmodern novel as such. Reading Arrighi alongside Marx’s value-theoretical account of crisis, Clover suggests that “this subtraction of the singular and central character who familiarly populates the realist narrative is itself an expression of a homologous change in the sphere of production within the imperial core, which in the era of late capitalism is increasingly defined by...a decreasing ratio of workers to machines” (42). Invisible Man offers a surprisingly early and methodical instantiation of this link between periodic developments in capital accumulation and paradigmatic shifts in narrative form. Tracing this dialectic of literary form and political economy, the following pages examine three sites of expulsion in the novel, each of which represents an institution of twentieth-century American civil society predicated on and organized around the affirmation of labour: the university, the union and the party.

Racial Progress and American Growth

Adopting the position of the polite, labouring subject at a young age, the narrator finds promise in the reformist racial politics of Booker T. Washington at an unnamed university modeled after the Tuskegee Institute—the historically black college in the southern plantation districts founded on a vision of black progress through formal education, hard work and humility—where he learns to emulate his headmaster Dr. Bledsoe’s “posture of humility and meekness” (Ellison 115). However, an episode with Mr. Norton, one of the school’s white northern benefactors, leads to a confrontation with the headmaster, who consequently expels the narrator. A representative figure of economic support for racial reform efforts in the south, Mr. Norton is “a Bostonian, smoker of cigars, teller of polite Negro stories, shrewd banker, skilled scientist, director, philanthropist, forty years a bearer of the white man’s burden, and for sixty a symbol of the Great Traditions” (37). When Mr. Norton recounts the school’s historic founding on the former plantations of rural Alabama from the backseat, the chauffeuring narrator recognizes himself as a subject of History in Norton’s narrative of African-American Bildung:

As I drove, faded yellow pictures of the school’s early days displayed in the library flashed across the screen of my mind, coming fitfully and fragmentarily to life—photographs of men and women in wagons drawn by mule teams and oxen, dressed in black, dusty clothing, people who seemed almost without individuality, a black mob that seemed to be waiting, looking with blank faces, and among them the inevitable collection of white men and women in smiles, clear of features, striking, elegant and confident. Until now, and although I could recognize the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe among them, the figures in the photographs had never seemed actually to have been alive, but were more like signs or symbols one found on the last pages of the dictionary. (39)

Otherwise appearing as an ahistorical, nebulous “mob”—empty signifiers, devoid of substance or subjectivity—the racialized figures in the pictures are granted the possibility of individuality through white financial investments in the institutions of black “industrial” education. As a trustee with ties to Wall Street, Mr. Norton points to a particular historical arrangement of twentieth-century global capital that provided possibilities for black social life in American civil society.⁹ After the stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing economic slump, “world capitalism retreated into the igloos of its nation-state economies and their associated empires” (Hobsbawm, 132; quoted in Arrighi, 238). During this period, the centre of haute finance began to shift from London to New York but Wall Street remained subordinate to the US government’s New Deal, which directed investments toward black educational efforts in the South in order to secure and develop the national economy. It is this arrangement that the narrator jeopardizes when, driving through a former slave quarter, he and Mr. Norton encounter Jim Trueblood, “a sharecropper who had brought disgrace upon the black community” (Ellison 46) when he impregnated his own daughter, causing the school a great deal of embarrassment. The narrator is subsequently expelled and sent to New York City, his journey north mirroring the Great Migration between 1915 and 1960, during which over six million African Americans left the Jim Crow south in search of social and economic freedom. Driven by agricultural mechanization in the rural south and employment opportunities in the northern and western industrial regions, the Great Migration challenged the basis of the Tuskegee institute, whose programs were in large part based on an agricultural economy. But these developments in American agriculture and industry **must also be understood within the context of** rising US hegemony and the changing systemic conditions underlying American growth.

The second site of integration and expulsion appears in the guise of the Liberty Paints factory in New York, which represents the next institution of twentieth-century American civil society to meet its historical exhaustion as part of the US cycle of accumulation. Liberty Paints enjoys an exclusive contract with the US government, producing heavily symbolic “Optic White” paint for the White House. Like the university, the factory offers opportunities for black social life partly as a result of national and financial investments in the exploitation of black labour. Ostensibly engaged in anti-discriminatory hiring practices, Liberty Paints employs the narrator because he provides a source of cheap labour: under conditions of increasing demand for labour and rising labour costs, anti-discriminatory hiring policies enabled companies to reduce expenses and avoid the profit squeeze that rising worker militancy threatened. “They have a new racket around here,” an office boy tells the narrator: “The wise guys firing the regular guys and putting on you colored boys. Pretty smart,” he said. “That way they don’t have to pay union wages” (197). Such hiring practices at Liberty Paints would suggest that the narrator now finds himself approaching the peak of the American century, the novel’s timeline having progressed from the Great Depression, through the Great Migration, to the Great Acceleration of the post-war era. And once again, it is the financial arrangements supporting the factory’s economic vitality that the narrator appears to threaten, this time by fouling a shipment of “Optic White” due to leave for Washington. After botching the shipment the narrator is reassigned to the basement in a plot development that foreshadows his final subterranean entombment, but also offers an image of expulsion from the formal economy and the wage that characterizes the exhaustion of industrial manufacture in the late twentieth century. In the dark space of the basement, he meets the apprehensive and hot-tempered Lucius Brockway, who mutters to him furtively that they are the “machines inside the machine” (217), invoking the slave relation

(wherein, in Marxist parlance, slaves are not identified with the variable capital of living labour power but with the fixed capital of dead labour embodied in the form of machinery). In this way, dispossession of the commodity labour power links the slave relation to unemployment in the novel, as both operate, approximately, as ascriptive processes of racialization tied to expulsion and abjection. It is telling, then, that when the two men get into a violent fight, Brockway sets off a chemical explosion that not only lands the narrator out of work but propels him entirely out of consciousness—an expulsion simultaneously economic and ontological.

The final site of integration and expulsion our narrator encounters arrives in the form of the Brotherhood, a fictionalized left political party modeled on the American Communist Party, and the third institution of twentieth-century American civil society to spiral into historical exhaustion in the novel.¹⁰ Supported financially by the liberal intelligentsia, the Brotherhood offers the narrator a chance at public life through participation in party politics. Given a new identity by Brother Jack, the narrator enjoys success with his speeches, and as the party increases its influence in Harlem he feels he is becoming “more human,” able to “see sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history” (346). Embracing his new identity as a means to avoid the “disintegration” (353) that threatens him, the narrator believes membership in the party grants him “a part in making the big decisions, of seeing through the mystery of how the country, the world, really operate[s]” (355). Having successfully harnessed the momentum generated by the narrator’s speeches in Harlem, the Brotherhood then moves to contain the black radicalism developing in the city, and after being cautioned against pushing a “black agenda,” the narrator is expelled from the Harlem office and sent to another office uptown. Drifting through the black markets of the informal economy one afternoon, the narrator witnesses a police shooting that sparks a riot, and in what might be read as the definitive expulsion of the novel, falls through an

open manhole while being chased by black nationalists. They replace the cover, trapping him underground. Amidst a convergence of unemployment, anti-black police violence and a spread of riots, the narrator drops from the radar of social life entirely. The novel thus links the narrator's ever-present fear of social death to the confinement and regulation of racialized surplus populations, and racialization emerges as a process entangled with developments in political economy that underwrite the rise and fall of US economic hegemony. In other words, it is not simply being embodied that is a problem, but the fact of being in history, caught up in its volatile unfolding.

Invisible Man formalizes this political-economic relationship to racial blackness in a series of blackouts: situations that interrupt the progress of the narrator's Bildung and formally disrupt the developmental narrative telos of the novel following each instance of expulsion. In these moments of breakdown, italicized surrealist passages in Ellison's prose conjure visions of the Middle Passage, and highlight a play of tension between optimism and pessimism characteristic of the field of black studies itself. In an early passage, as the narrator is facing expulsion from the university, the inside of the campus church transforms into the hold of a slave ship:

Ha! a river of word-sounds filled with drowned passions, floating, Ha! with wrecks of unachievable ambitions and stillborn revolts, sweeping their ears, Ha! ranged stiff before me, necks stretched forward with listening ears, Ha! a-spraying the ceiling and a-drumming the dark-stained after rafter, that seasoned crossarm of tortuous timber mellowed in the kiln of a thousand voices. (113)

These dreamlike musical passages accompany moments of blackout for the narrator, ontological ruptures in the narrative that resonate with Frantz Fanon's argument that, for those racialized as

black, the Middle Passage “wiped out [their] metaphysics” (110). It is in the context of these blackouts that the narrator’s treatment at the factory hospital following the explosion at Liberty Paints again raises the spectre of social death, as the grim events here gesture towards Orlando Patterson’s three constituent elements of slavery: gratuitous violence, natal alienation and generalized dishonour.¹¹ The narrator awakens in a cage and is administered shock therapy without his consent, his imprisonment in confined space a “part of the treatment” (Ellison 235). Unable to remember his name, his mother, or his place of birth, he is reduced to “blackness and bewilderment and pain” (240). Leaving the treatment facility, the subway train carries him as if crossing an ocean, as he is “moved now as against a current sweeping swiftly against me” (249), and as “the train plunge[s],” he is “sucked under and out into late afternoon Harlem” (250). When he emerges onto Lennox Avenue, the sensation of drowning intensifies: “I saw myself going down, my legs watery beneath me” (251). As he begins to blackout again, two black people from the neighborhood catch him and carry him to safety under the watchful eye of the policeman “ordering the crowd to move on” (252), their voices merging in erratically italicized staccato sentences that invoke scenes of post-Middle Passage collective survival on the plantation. The final instance of experimental prose follows the narrator’s expulsion from the Brotherhood, when in the midst of the riot he falls through the open manhole into the blackness below, and in the thralls of a nightmarish vision, laments the “generations wasting upon the water” (570). These shifts in narrative form mark moments of transformation in his experience of racial blackness, as the weight of social death casts its shadow over the optimism of racial progress.

Blacking Out

In “The Fire Next Time,” James Baldwin asks, “Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?” (94). Calling into question the possibility of black emancipation in American civil society, Baldwin foregrounds what Sexton describes as “a tension emergent in the field of black studies...regarding the theoretical status of the concept of social death” (2011). This tension lies at the heart of current conversations between two entangled tendencies in black studies: black optimism, a position associated most immediately with Fred Moten’s critical output, but also with thinkers like Cornel West and Houston A. Baker Jr., which emphasizes the experience of blackness as testament to the vitality of black social life, and afro-pessimism, a counter-tendency in black studies that stresses the fact of blackness as a marker of social death.¹² Black optimism underlines the improvisational and generative capacity of blackness, and indeed chimes with references to the black jazz tradition that appear throughout Ellison’s novel. Drawing in part on black experimental music and literature, Moten argues blackness is a form of “stolen life” that is lived in and as “fugitive movement,” an underground existence that is nevertheless irreducible to “whatever externally imposed social logic,” since it precedes and exceeds “every enclosure” (2008, 179). Afro-pessimism, on the other hand, rejects all positive theories of black identity and affirmative political philosophies of black subjectivity. In Sexton’s words, it is “an intellectual disposition...that posits a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way,” wherein “racial slavery” designates a “matrix of social, political and economic relations surviving the era of abolition” (2011). Despite their “dehiscence,” it would be reductive to cast this discussion in strictly binary terms. Indeed, in the course of his own reading of Moten, Sexton argues that the two tendencies are fundamentally entwined and imply one another: “Black optimism is not the negation of the negation that is afro-pessimism, just as black social life does not negate black social death by inhabiting it and vitalizing it. A living death is as much

a death as it is a living.”¹³ At stake in my reading of *Invisible Man*, rather, is the reproduction of this “relation of nonrelation” (Moten 2013, 749) as a form of continuity and recurrence over the course of the American century, bearing in mind Sexton’s reminder that “one can account for historically varying instances of anti-blackness while maintaining the claim that slavery is here and now” (2016).

Afro-pessimists contend that, in order to grasp the historicity of anti-blackness, we need to look beyond the wage relation to the racialized figure of the prison slave (and the prison slave-in-waiting). For Wilderson, the Gramscian figure of the formally “free” waged-worker cannot account for the gratuitous violence visited upon the black body, whose suffering is defined by a “relation of terror as opposed to a relation of hegemony” (2003, 22). This is because, according to Wilderson, Marxism expresses a “desire to democratize work and thus help to keep in place and insure the coherence of Reformation and Enlightenment foundational values of productivity and progress,” and is therefore scandalized by “the Black subject’s incommensurability with, or disarticulation of, Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness” (21). Whereas the Gramscian worker struggles against exploitation and alienation within the rational symbolic order of civil society, Wilderson argues, the slave suffers under the despotic irrationality of accumulation and fungibility. But Wilderson lets Gramsci stand in for Marxism tout court. Here is a resolutely humanist Marxism, one in which “the Gramscian subject, the worker, represents a demand that can indeed be satisfied by way of a successful war of position” (22). Predicated on the affirmation of wage labour, the “free” waged-worker and the institutions of civil society, the Gramscian grammar of suffering presupposes the conditions of black social death in Wilderson’s view, and so is inadequate to the task of confronting anti-blackness. Thus, Afro-Pessimism’s focus is instead on the libidinal

economy of anti-blackness, and the ontological position of the slave as a negative- or *non*-relationality against which the Enlightenment subject of Gramsci's humanist Marxism constitutes itself qua subject.

While this critique of the Gramscian theory of hegemony has been central to the development of Afro-Pessimist thought, the concept of social death can be read productively alongside and in relation to the Marxian critique of value, in which labour figures not as a humanist category to be liberated but a capitalist category to be abolished. Recent work in communization theory, for example, has sought to bridge Afro-pessimism with an analysis of the capitalist value-form by considering the process of racialization in relation to the production of surplus populations.¹⁴ In this analysis, capital accumulation necessitates the expulsion of human labour from production, gradually dispossessing populations of the commodity labour power. For some theorists, this material process of abjection is what produces the abstraction "blackness" in an era of deindustrialization:

When the commodity labour power no longer exists, the human container that would have possessed this labour power endures as an empty shell. All that is left is a physical residuum, an inert fleshy materiality that marks the lack of labour power, a purely physical existence without a subjectivity. The human container is desocialized, or in other words, a thing that is without any social utility.

Ultimately this purely physical existence is reduced to mere appearance, in which the phenotypical attribute comes to mediate and determine the form of social existence of this human container once it is integrated into the class relation. Consequently, "blackness" appears as a representation of the lack of labour power, its positive instantiation. The phenotypical attribute "blackness" comes to

naturalize this lack as an inherent attribute of the human container itself whereas it is merely the social representation of the absence of labour power.

(“Inextinguishable Fire”)

Deindustrialization—and the expulsion of labour from the site of production—is simultaneously a process of abjection at the level of class composition, a casting-off that has visibly racializing effects on the sociological appearance of unemployment. This value-theoretical account of racialized surplus populations compliments Arrighi’s account of the integration of African Americans into the industrial economy during the rise of US hegemony, when considered in light of the subsequent exhaustion of the US cycle of accumulation and the concomitant increase in black unemployment and incarceration rates.¹⁵ The historical movement Arrighi traces from industrial expansion to financialization provocatively maps onto Loïc Wacquant’s periodizations of slavery and its functional surrogates, the third and fourth of which track the movement of African Americans from the northern ghettos, defined by “the conjoint urbanization and proletarianization of African-Americans from the Great Migration of 1914–30 to the 1960s,” to “the novel institutional complex formed by the remnants of the dark ghetto and the carceral apparatus” in which African Americans feature as “fixed surplus labour” (41-2). What’s more, the fortunes of both the Civil Rights and Black Power variants of twentieth-century black affirmationist politics are also tied to this history of American economic hegemony. If “the century’s apex of black radicalism” in the late 1960s marks “the beginning of the end of the short American century,” as Sexton argues (2011), this trajectory also mirrors the curve of black economic progress after World War II. The historicity of antiblackness is thus anchored to the US cycle of accumulation, while racial blackness assumes distinct forms of appearance in particular historical periods over the longue durée of capital accumulation.

It is precisely through the systemic movement from integration to expulsion that racial blackness appears in Invisible Man, shifting between an affirmative category of identification and an external constraint to overcome in accordance with the rise and fall of American growth. Wall Street finances the unnamed college modeled after the Tuskegee Institute, while Liberty Paints enjoys an exclusive contract with the White House, and the Brotherhood is funded by sympathetic members of a white, propertied class from Manhattan. The obsolescence of the institutions to which finance capital, the state and the bourgeoisie attach themselves in the American century indicates new historical roles to come for each of them, but also reflects a declining demand for labour. This is what the narrator means when he says, in the novel's conclusion, "Thus I have come a long way and returned and boomeranged a long way from the point in society toward which I originally aspired" (573). In this way, the novel recognizes the precarity of the black subject in a capitalist economy driven by logics that integrate and expel as the cycles of profitability dictate. Each institution is predicated on the affirmation of labour, and the historical promise of a social-democratic coalitional subject that will become increasingly untenable with the stagnation of American growth and the historical subjectivities it fleetingly made possible. Where the speaking subject of Ellison's narrative would otherwise substantiate categories of exclusion into positive identities, the "I" of Ellison's novel appears negatively, nameless and de-socialized. More than a meditation on the libidinal economy of the symbolic and gratuitous violence that Afro-pessimists argue is constitutive of black ontology, Invisible Man offers an experiential analogue to what Clover has called "the political economy of social death," emphasizing its defining characteristics as "automation, weakening profits, and the Last Hired/First Fired policies that ejected vast numbers of African-Americans from the urban industrial jobs which had drawn them during the great migrations" (2016a). James Boggs, a

black autoworker from Detroit, also saw this future on the horizon: in 1963, he published The American Revolution, arguing that the capitalist tendency to automate production would create a population of “surplus people who are the expendables of automation” (36). Making the dynamic between automation and racial blackness explicit, the final surrealist passage of the novel ends with the narrator’s vision of “a robot, an iron man, whose iron legs clanged doomfully as it moved,” before he awakens “in the blackness” (Ellison 570).

A political economy of social death is demonstrated most substantially, perhaps, through the character of Tod Clifton, a talented organizer who leaves the Brotherhood in protest of their disingenuous stance on race to hawk dancing Sambo dolls in Manhattan. Clifton’s death at the hands of police appears to anticipate the moment when American industry will give way to a financialized economy, governed by a post-welfare security state whose purpose, it seems, has been increasingly directed toward the violent policing of a growing and racialized surplus population. As Sianne Ngai notes, Clifton’s puppet show, in which the dolls appear to dance of their own volition, registers “the increasingly ambiguous status of human agency in a Fordist era” (91). For Ngai, “it is the cultural representation of the African-American that most visibly harnesses the affective qualities of liveliness, effusiveness, spontaneity, and zeal to a disturbing racial epistemology, and makes these variants of ‘animatedness’ function as bodily (hence self-evident) signs of the raced subject’s naturalness or authenticity” (95). Ngai draws attention to the way in which Clifton must resort to a positive, racializing and identity-affirming performance-based work in an illicit economy in order to survive. Yet insofar as Invisible Man situates the process of racialization within the context of Fordist automation, and anticipates the subsequent shift to a performance-driven post-Fordist economy, Ellison’s novel allows us to see Clifton’s death as a consequence of his expulsion from the formal economy and the wage. Race, having a

material function for capital, emerges in the novel as an economically modulated demographic rather than an identity category that precedes mediation. Racialization figures as a feature of exploitation tied to the recomposition of American industry, while exploitation becomes properly legible only when read across the history of racial domination. As such, Invisible Man affirms Stuart Hall's assertion that "race is the modality by which class is 'lived,' the medium through which class relations are experienced, [and] the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'" (342).

By way of conclusion, then, let us turn to the riot that erupts in the wake of Clifton's death. The periodic frequency of the riot, as Clover has argued, follows the Arrighian logic by which capital moves cyclically from phases of circulation through periods of production and back to circulation (as in, for example, the contemporary reign of finance). Mapping the historical predominance of the riot onto the periods of mercantilism and financialization that bookend industrial expansion, he argues that the riot is "a political antagonism that erupts in the sphere of circulation and is proper to it" (2012).¹⁶ Unlike the strike, which occurs in the sphere of production where workers appear in their capacity as workers, the riot intervenes in the sphere of circulation, and, rather than affirming worker identity, proceeds instead through the negation of the commodity relation and the world as it is form-determined by value. The prevalence of looting in riots typifies this logic, and the riot of Invisible Man is no different, featuring "a crowd of men and women carrying cases of beer, cheese, chains of linked sausage, watermelons, sacks of sugar, hams, cornmeal, fuel lamps" (Ellison 555). Like the surrealist passages that suspend the narrative telos of the Bildungsroman, the riot in the novel erupts in "a sudden and brilliant suspension of time" (535). What fills the void opened up by the riot, however, is not a sense of stasis but one of radical negativity and possibility. This is not to suggest that the riot is somehow

impervious to capture; indeed, the Brotherhood helps orchestrate the riot in the novel to meet its own political ends. And yet, as this reading of Invisible Man suggests, it is in the arena of circulation that the question of politics will play out in the era of finance, as the site of struggle shifts from the factory floor to the streets. The novel offers no moral argument for the riot as a political form, but instead attests to the structural and cyclical shifts that will underwrite its proliferation in the decades to come. In the words of the narrator, whose lived experiences embody the history of such abstract processes, “This is not prophecy, but description” (577).

This is the shape the arc of African American experience takes over the course the American century, as shifting historical experiences of racial blackness first sustain then undermine the sociological foundations of black Bildung and the African American novel. Invisible Man is a narrative of changing circumstances for racialized people in the post-war US, a chronicle of black precarity that captures the possibilities and limitations of African American subjectivity and literature in the twentieth century. The novel charts a series of contradictions tied to the movement of integration and expulsion that characterizes the US cycle of accumulation. The narrator knows that “there is a death in the smell of spring” (580), since the horizon of the US cycle of accumulation appears, in the end, to promise only social death. It cannot be any wonder, then, that he becomes “ill of affirmation” (573), as his optimism meets a pessimistic end at every turn. Even as he decides, having told his story, that “the hibernation is over,” and that it is finally time to “shake off the old skin and come up for breath,” he understands that he is “no less invisible without it” (580-81). In this way, Ellison anticipates the exhaustion of industrial expansion in the post-war period, which registers in the novel as a crisis both of narrative form and of an affirmative anti-racist politics. The novel thus suggests that the history of literary forms and political possibilities are similarly tied to cycles of profitability, and

that in the long American century some forms of invisibility are socially necessary. As the narrator concludes, “there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). And here we see, finally, the constitutive role of racialized unemployment and anti-black police violence in a post-industrial economy, and thus the necessity of an abolitionist anti-racism that is also categorically anti-capitalist.

Acknowledgements: A debt of gratitude is owed to Imre Szeman and Amy De’Ath. This research is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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¹ All employment data are taken from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. For a comparison of overall unemployment rates since 2006 and current black unemployment rates, see “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey” (2016) and “Unemployment Rates by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity” (2016). For a rundown of productivity gains (and lack thereof) in the US since the 2008 financial crisis, see “Below Trend: The U.S. Productivity Slowdown Since the Great Recession” (2017).

² For an account of racialized underemployment rates since the 2008 financial crisis, see “All Races Hurt by Recession, Racial and Ethnic Disparities Persist” (The Economic Policy Institute 2017). For an overview of the impact of black incarceration rates on the rate of black unemployment, and the discrepancy between black and white unemployment rates when adjusted for incarceration rates, see “America Has Locked Up So Many Black People It Has Warped Our Sense of Reality” (Guo 2016).

³ For comprehensive data regarding police killings in America, see the ongoing Guardian study, “The Counted: People Killed by Police in the US.”

⁴ Arrighi identifies four systemic cycles of accumulation, each increasing in scope and intensity but contracting in duration: “a Genoese cycle, from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries; a Dutch cycle, from the late sixteenth century through most of the eighteenth century; a British cycle, from the latter half of the eighteenth century through the early twentieth century; and a US cycle, which began in the late nineteenth century and has continued into the current phase of financial expansion” (6-7).

⁵ As early as 1977, John Callahan noted that “there is no mention of the Great Depression” in the novel, and that Ellison seems “unwilling to restrict the Provos’ condition to one point in time...because of the danger that, if he did so, what has been archetypal in black experience

might be laid simply at the door of hard time” (134). Callahan’s suggestion that Ellison’s representation of African American experience exceeds any one particular historical moment is well taken, and I agree that the novel cannot be confined to the Depression era, but I want to insist nevertheless that there remains a historicity to the narrative’s representation of anti-blackness that ties the postwar African American novel to the protean relationship between racialization and economic forces constituting (and reconstituting) blackness over the course of the American century.

⁶ Black economic progress relative to whites would climb into the 1970s, after which the trend stalls, collapsing in full after the 2008 financial crisis to levels just above those of the pre-civil rights era. By 2010, black men earned 75 cents for every dollar white men made, and only 65 cents when adjusted for incarceration rates. For an analysis of the relationship between the sharp decline in black economic progress and the steep rise in black incarceration rates in the post-civil rights era, see “The Prison Boom and the Lack of Black Progress after Smith and Welch” (Neal and Rick 2014).

⁷ Tucker-Abramson argues that “this scene marks a notable break in Ellison’s focus and orientation,” insofar as “the aim of this exercise, importantly, is not exclusion. The protagonist is not being expelled or moved to the basement, but is being prepared to re-enter society” (2015, 14).

⁸ This essay owes a great deal to Tucker-Abramson’s reading of Invisible Man, which also looks to the vacillating formal structure of the novel in order to grasp its historicity against the backdrop of rising US hegemony. But where Tucker-Abramson traces the transition from exclusion to integration that characterizes the era of industrial expansion in the US, my focus here is on the subsequent movement from integration to expulsion that constitutes the novel’s

horizon. For Tucker-Abramson, the novel's horizon is keyed to the shift from Keynesianism to neoliberalism, which she identifies in its nascent form in the 1950s. This leads her to equate representations of the superfluity of black Americans in the novel with their integration into the postwar US hegemonic regime—as “simultaneously absorbing and dispossessing the black male body” (2013, 49). My argument is rather that racialized superfluity appears in the novel as a threat of expulsion from the formal economy and the wage and a vision of impending exhaustion. Given that *Invisible Man* was published at the peak of the American century, more than two decades before Arrighi's signal crisis of 1973, this might seem “a misapplication of the Arrighian logic of the long twentieth century (according to which, strictly speaking, American anxiety of this kind would not appear until after the 1970s),” to quote Jed Esty, and yet “the cycles of hegemonic rise and fall accelerate over time so that the cultural awareness of American decline almost begins to overlap the cultural assimilation of American dominance” (2016, 334, n. 18).

⁹ The ties between American finance and Tuskegee University can be traced through the school's history, reflecting an important relationship between the politics of racial progress and the financial interests of American capital. The normal school that became Tuskegee University was the invention of Lewis Adams, a former slave, and George W. Campbell, a banker, merchant and former slaveholder, based on their shared commitment to Black education efforts in the south. As a spokesman for Black “industrial” education, Booker T. Washington would develop a network of wealthy American philanthropists that included such illustrious figures of American finance as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller.

¹⁰ It is pertinent to add here that, as Callahan has argued, Ellison's depiction of *The Brotherhood* represents not only the American Communist Party, but also the Democratic and Republican

parties, supporting my claim that Ellison is interested in documenting the general exhaustion of the political party as a twentieth century political form. See “Chaos, Complexity and Possibility: The Historical Frequencies of Ralph Waldo Ellison” (1977). For a more recent and comprehensive account of the influence of Ellison’s relationship with the communist left on Invisible Man, see Barbara Foley’s Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (2010).

¹¹ According to Patterson, “Slavery is the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons” (13). Patterson maintains that social death, rather than forced work, is constitutive of slavery. As I want to show, however, it is less a matter of work per se than it is the dispossession of the commodity labour power in the post-industrial era that links the logic of social death to the recomposition of American industry with the exhaustion of the US cycle of accumulation.

¹² The term Afro-pessimism is Frank B. Wilderson III’s. See Red, White & Black, 58. It is important to note that neither black optimism nor afro-pessimism represent consistent tendencies or schools of thought. In addition to the works referenced in this essay, a partial list of texts informing, engaging or critiquing the scholarly conversation around blackness, slavery and the concept of social death would also include Fred Moten’s In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (2003), Saidiya Hartman’s Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (1997), Hortense Spillers’s Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture (2003), Achille Mbembe’s On the Postcolony (2001), and a series of essays by Jared Sexton, including “Unbearable Blackness” (2015).

¹³ What may have appeared to some as a divisive debate between afro-pessimism and black optimism was only ever a difference of emphasis. Indeed, despite a “preference for the terms life

and optimism over death and pessimism,” Moten himself opens his highly influential essay “Blackness and Nothingness” with the claim that, “In the past decade, the most exciting and generative advance in black critical theory, which is to say critical theory, is the announcement and enactment of Afro-pessimism in the work of Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton” (2013, 737-738).

¹⁴ See, for example, Chris Chen, “The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes toward an Abolitionist Antiracism” (2013), as well as a series of essays by the anonymous R.L., including “Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death” (2012), “Inextinguishable Fire: Ferguson and Beyond” (2013), and “Notes on Racial Domination” (2016).

¹⁵ Aaron Benanav and John Clegg elaborate their theory of a post-industrial surplus population through a reading of Marx’s “general law of capital accumulation,” which charts the general movement of constant over variable capital as it is written into the most basic coding of capital over time. See “Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital” (2014). For a sustained examination of mass incarceration as a governmental apparatus for the management of racialized surplus populations in the post-industrial era, see Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California (2007).

¹⁶ Clover has since developed his theory of riot in Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings (2016b).