

Toward Counternarratives of Critical Thinking and Writing

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This next year is the seventieth anniversary of the publication of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, an occasion that has prompted us, as editors, to reread the novel as a text very much about writing pedagogy and history. Editing is, of course, a pedagogical process in guiding a manuscript through revisions to the endpoint of publication, which inscribes the text in history while conferring upon its author the cultural capital that facilitates future publications. Because history in this way shapes and is shaped by textual production, we take this moment to commemorate the *publication* of Ellison's novel by reflecting on the power we hold as editors and considering what we might learn from *Invisible Man* about our own editorial praxis.

The novel depicts a power structure that has created a master narrative through what Slevin (2001) would call a "teleology of improvement," in which students are defined as *lacking* the discourse that will award them the cultural capital necessary for upward mobility in "the spiral of history" (Ellison, 1972, p. 6). Students "improve" by suppressing their home discourses as they learn how to reproduce a dominant one. The result is a symbolic violence, which the novel's unnamed narrator eventually discovers. Having excelled as a writer and speaker by repeating the dominant discourse learned in school and college and through social activism, he finds that his efforts have only perpetuated a power structure that denies him racial equality and that his upward mobility has really been an endless cycle of manipulation: "Beware of those who speak of the *spiral* of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy" (p. 6).

This symbolic violence renders the narrator invisible. Repeatedly knocked downward and backward in the spiral, he comes to identify with the "I" of the song "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue?" In the title's reference to bruising as the effect of physical punishment, the colors black and blue mark the skin as universal, as a synecdoche for humankind. But when the "I" is embodied by Louis Armstrong through his performance of the song, "black" is reassigned to the color of skin itself, as a synecdoche for a particular race, and the physical effect of punishment becomes symbolic: being black and downcast is punishment the narrator will inevitably suffer, regardless of what he does or does not do. However, the "I" also exists, therefore, prior to race, which is a "construction of their inner eyes" (p. 3), making him invisible to the power structure. Living apart from the spiral of history, he steals electricity from Monopolated Light & Power to play on a phonograph "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue?" Between the song's notations, its inscription in history, he explores space and time:

Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its

nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. (p. 8)

The narrator's appropriation of power enables him to exercise a mobility that varies from the prescribed pattern of history, but lacking an alternative pattern to follow, his mobility is chaos. The world mirrors back to him an absence, and he experiences at times the anguish of doubting whether he really exists at all.

Beyond the control of the master narrative, but existing in chaos, the narrator slips into the breaks and encounters on a lower frequency of the music the image of an old slave, who informs him that freedom "*ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head*" (p. 11). The narrator is perplexed by her message but is nevertheless prompted to write down his experience: "Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?" (p. 14). The message confuses the narrator because it is a *threshold concept*. Introduced to writing studies largely through the work of Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015), a threshold concept can be troublesome because it often conflicts with one's preconceptions about writing. Learning tends, therefore, to follow a process of liminality in which one crosses back and forth over the threshold, vacillating between preconception and reconception, to gain a partial understanding, until permanently crossing the threshold to fully acquire the concept. Its acquisition brings about an ontological transformation in which one is able to see and practice writing in a new way.

The threshold concept provides the narrator with a way to reflect on his narrative, which follows the liminal process of learning. For example, in his description of an elderly couple being evicted in Harlem, he notices the jumble of their belongings on the sidewalk and momentarily crosses the threshold:

I turned and stared at the jumble, no longer looking at what was before my eyes, but inwardly-outwardly, around a corner in the dark, far-away and long-ago, not so much my own memory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images heard even when not listening at home. (p. 267)

The narrator sees the jumble as traces of a generic repertoire—an emerging pattern to the chaos—long suppressed by a teleology of improvement that had, to borrow from Slevin (2001), "rendered [it] invisible, interpreted in terms of what is lacking rather than in terms of what is, in all its complexity, different" (p. 161). Writing makes these elements of the narrator's generic repertoire—its remembered words, linked verbal echoes, images heard—visible, and although he turns away from the jumble to resume his apparent trajectory in the spiral of history, these elements recur at a low frequency in his narrative, becoming increasingly visible as the teleology of improvement is undone. Through his reflective writing, the narrator is gradually made visible to himself, recovering the generic elements of a home discourse, which provides an alternative pattern by which to exist, a counternarrative to the spiral of history.

Toward the end of the novel, the narrator, in "having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties" (p. 567), shifts his attention to address readers as he locates them in the master narrative and counternarrative simultaneously. As readers who happen to be editors of *DH*, we tend to perpetuate a master narrative whenever we enact a teleology of improvement in our feedback to authors. But to see a manuscript not

as *lacking* but as *different* is to promote a counternarrative that not only contests the certitude upon which a master narrative rests and governs editorial choices but also redistributes cultural capital along new and diverse lines of inquiry. In order for us to better recognize lack as difference, we will introduce in 2022 a new section of the journal—“The Lower Frequencies”—devoted to addressing inequities in critical thinking and writing pedagogy. And so, we invite readers to consider this volume in terms of our reimagining of *DH* as a site for joining counternarrative to master narrative, changing history from a spiral to a double helix, in which narratives are neither master nor counter and pedagogies are less teleological and more improvisational.

References

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