Parlance and Personhood: The Absurd Use of Language in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*[1]

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In an essay titled "On Faulkner," French Algerian philosopher and novelist Albert Camus clearly states that "the great problem of modern tragedy is language," since characters' language "must at the same time be simple enough to be our own and lofty enough to reach the tragic" (317). In other words, the channels through which the reader perceives a protagonist's intellectual clarity is their given language and internal thought process. In existential terms, the employment of language is akin to asserting identity, and this is especially true when referring to how marginalized characters approach the language of their broader society. I argue that in Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1915) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the language used by their respective protagonists reflects a larger existential struggle with their marginalized identities, in that the protagonists' attempts to appropriate hegemonic language reflect their broader aspiration for control in their precarious lives.

Through a series of "sketches" in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus offers an aesthetic component to his theory of the Absurd, in which he argues that an absurd work of art must contain "thought in its most lucid form" (97). Specifically, a work of art must be lucid about its own absurdity before it can convey its absurdity to the audience. This compelling point poses a particularly difficult question: how lucid can a white author be when creating a work grappling with absurdity rooted in systemic racism? In American literature, it is not uncommon for white authors to address how racial identity can impact a marginalized individual's psyche and

understanding of themselves. Despite their attention to African American identity and subjugation in the American landscape, few white authors have tried to create a *racially absurd* work of art. This would constitute a work of art that meets the definition of absurdity ascribed by the existentialists while additionally explicating the existential impact of systemic racism.

On the surface, *The Trial* may not appear to be a racially absurd novel, since race is not mentioned once in the narrative of Josef K.'s arrest, trial, and execution. However, despite the typically abstract nature of Franz Kafka's literature, it could be argued that K.'s absurd condition is allegorical for growing antisemitism in Europe in the early twentieth century. Kafka's Jewishness allowed him to source from his own experiences of racial absurdity when constructing his absurd narratives. Camus asserts that *The Trial* "is more particular and more personal to Kafka," and Kafka certainly does not dissuade this association by naming his protagonist Josef K. (Camus 125). Therefore, a personal analysis of Kafka's own racially absurd condition may lend itself to a more thorough analysis of *The Trial*. Biographer Saul Friedländer describes early twentieth century Prague as "an increasingly secularized society" where most Jews adopted a strategy of assimilating to Western Europe to avoid ostracization (40). Because of this, Kafka and his younger Jewish cohort developed an absurd condition of "paradoxical behavior," involving the "imitation of all social mannerisms of surrounding Gentile society and yet the need to proclaim on every possible occasion that one was a Jew" (*Ibid.* 40-1). Therefore, given Kafka's own interaction with racial absurdity, it is not a stretch of the imagination to also understand Josef K.'s existential crisis as being rooted in ethnicity or race.

Published in 1952, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* also addresses the concept of racial absurdity, particularly the absurd condition facing post-war Black America. The novel follows an unnamed protagonist who is expelled from his historically Black college and sent to Harlem to find work. The protagonist's migration to Harlem is the trigger of his existential crisis, as he struggles to find the meaning of his existence as an African American man. This culminates in the protagonist choosing to embrace the "invisibility" inherent to white perception of his Black identity, hiding from society in an underground apartment to conscientiously enter "a state

of hibernation" (Ellison 6). Unlike *The Trial*, *Invisible Man* was published amid the postwar existentialist movement, as philosophers like Camus and Sartre grappled with the horrors of the European landscape in the first half of the twentieth century and its implications for the rationale for human existence.

Additionally, *Invisible Man* explicitly commits their protagonist to a specific marginalized identity, while Kafka never implies Josef K. has any marginalized identity whatsoever. In both novels, the protagonists' journeys feature similar motifs and themes consistent with existentialist narratives and theories. In Kafka's world, there is a solidarity and equal level of crisis amongst those battling with the legal system, even if they are not explicitly described as a "race," and Josef K.'s race is itself never defined. Given this and the predicate knowledge of Kafka's own racial absurdity, both novels depict their protagonists' battles with racially absurd conditions. This is especially true when juxtaposing *The Trial* with Ellison's work, which clearly indicates racial identity as a predominant factor in its protagonist's absurd condition.

Esther Merle Jackson writes that *Invisible Man* functions as "the imitation of a search for intellectual clarity at work" and is, in essence, "a philosophical novel" (368). Ellison's use of the first-person contributes greatly to this description since the narrator's clarity over his existential dilemma confirms it as such. In addition, the narration is particularly "lucid," a la Camus. The narrator speaks both without dialect (as was common at the time) and with a unique consciousness of the predicaments he finds himself in on his journey into invisibility, in which he "eventually realizes how much the narrative recitation of his experiences bestows much of the freedom denied to him in his daily existence" (Bland Jr. 141). The framing of the novel during the narrator's planned "hiding" allows the narrator to have clarity and hindsight about his experiences, which contradict his naïve behavior during those events.

Even though the narrator may appear naïve or foolish during the events leading up to his invisibility, his language never falters. The earliest example of this phenomenon is following the battle royal, as the narrator is ordered to "deliver a speech which he made at his graduation yesterday" (Ellison 29). Despite his physical injuries and the raucous behavior of the white spectators, he attempts to deliver this orotund speech beginning with, "We of the youngest

generation extol the wisdom of that great leader and educator" (29). Bland Jr. notes that this speech functions "both as a satire of Booker T. Washington's 1895 Atlanta Exposition Address…and a poorly delivered, poorly received speech" (143). However, the narrator's desire to deliver this speech despite his "dry mouth, filling up with blood," communicates something deeper about the narrator's psychology—mainly, that he is operating out of fear: "a few of the men, especially the superintendent, were listening and I was afraid. So I gulped it down, blood, saliva and all, and continued" (Ellison 30). It is important to understand the power dynamic between the narrator and the white spectators of this battle royal, as it reframes the narrator's speech as a linguistic defense mechanism against the acute physical, emotional, and intellectual violence both inflicted and threatened by his white spectators.

In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon addresses the importance of language to the black individual, in that it functions as a way to "position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture" (2). Although his chapter focuses on the relationship between the Martinican people and the French language, Fanon believes that "this same behavior can be found in any race subjected to colonization" (9). Ellison's narrator strives to orate in a manner that impresses his white spectators to simultaneously gain their respect and express his aspiration to become like them. As the narrator appeals to his white spectators through language to achieve validation, the majority of the picaresque narrative can be described as the "protagonist's unsatisfied pursuit of coherence," since validation necessitates coherence (Bland Jr. 140). Given this logic, the more professional language that the narrator uses, "the closer he comes to becoming a true human being" (Fanon 2). This phenomenon permeates both his spoken dialogue and his narration as he aims to convince both the other characters and the reader of his whiteness through language.

As previously mentioned, Franz Kafka struggled with his own ethnicity as a Jewish man in an increasingly secular Prague. One of the more dramatic manifestations of Kafka's personal absurdity is in his own writing. As a Jewish man writing in German, Kafka saw the German language as his main touchstone to the dominant culture, similar to how a Martinican might view the French language. However, like Fanon describes the Martinican, Kafka also felt a wave

of insecurity about his relationship with the German language as a Jewish man. In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka remarks that "most young Jews who began to write German wanted to leave Jewishness behind them" and describes Jewish writers as encountering "linguistic impossibilities… the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing German, the impossibility of writing differently" (qtd. in Friedländer 47). Therefore, it is worth understanding how these "linguistic impossibilities" act as manifestations of racial absurdity across *The Trial* and *Invisible Man*.

From the first sentence of *The Trial*, language plays an important role in the way that Josef K. and his actions are portrayed: "Someone must have been slandering Josef K., because without him having done anything wrong, he was arrested one morning" (Kafka 7).[2] Many English translations of this sentence omit the German subjunctive verb "getan hätte," which adds a narrative uncertainty over K.'s innocence. Fallowes supports such an interpretation of this linguistic choice, in that the "pointed subjunctive of the narrative voice cast enough doubt upon K.'s protestation of innocence to re-cast the protagonist as the original speaker-doer of wrong" (203). Thus, this first sentence reinforces the power of language as a medium of conviction and violence. Josef K.'s moral and legal guilt will be discussed later, but this first sentence instantly frames K. as a morally opaque figure.

Another (arguably more important) question to ask following this first sentence is this: who is the narrator of *The Trial*? The narration throughout is third person limited, as it perceives Josef K.'s feelings about his situation in a removed position. However, the inclusion of the subjunctive "getan hätte" clearly inserts a more opinionated tone to the narration, which makes us question its "epistemic authority," as Hammer describes (230). This choice works twofold, as it makes the reader believe that K. possibly has some influence on the narration and immediately establishes K.'s steadfast claim of innocence. The choice of the word "wrong (*Böses*)" adds additional ambiguity, as it is unclear whether the idea of "wrong" is relative to a given moral code or to the literal, pragmatic law. Regardless of this ambiguity, K. is absolutely sure of his innocence on all fronts thus demonstrating an immediate linguistic defense mechanism from this first sentence.

Similar to the narratorial defensiveness present in *The Trial*, in *Invisible Man*, the narrator's greatest moments of verbosity occur when he is most seriously threatened and, particularly, when his racial identity is threatened. The battle royal scene acts as the exemplary instance of the narrator's use of this linguistic defense mechanism, as he struggles to deliver his speech following the orchestrated brawl. Fanon argues that language itself can exist as a manifestation of a racial defense mechanism, particularly because many white people are openly antagonistic to black people who attempt to speak in this formal manner, for "there is nothing more sensational than a black man speaking properly" (19). Therefore, the black man cannot haphazardly use this formal affectation—they must be persistently vigilant about their speaking, for "the slightest mistake is seized upon" (8).

The narrator struggles to deliver his speech following the fight due to his injuries, which cause him to let his guard down and make a fatal error in the eyes of the town's big shots—he advocates for "social equality" rather than "social responsibility" (Ellison 30-31). The outrage of his white spectators demonstrates their scrutiny over how Black speakers choose their language. Following the narrator's traumatic experience at the battle royal, he dreams that his prize plaque says, "To Whom It May Concern, Keep This N– boy Running," which becomes one of the main existential catchphrases of the novel (33). The juxtaposition between the incredibly formal "To Whom It May Concern" and the demeaning, racist "N– boy" indicates a sarcastic mockery of the narrator's formal tone as well as his linguistic marginalization.

Additionally, this plaque acts not as an award for the narrator, but rather as a "badge of office" for his white spectators, keeping this power dynamic consistent and preventing his white aspiration from being fully realized (Ellison 32). Ellison revisits this mantra through Dr. Bledsoe's letter to the narrator's potential employers in Harlem, where he instructs them to "help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler" (191). By essentially regurgitating the content of this mantra in a bureaucratic, Emersonian dialect, Ellison's narrator rediscovers "to his chagrin that he had been betrayed" since the moment he began to affiliate with whiteness and white institutions (Lane 66). Thus, these early

events in the novel demonstrate the awakening of the narrator's racial consciousness and his first interaction with acute racial absurdity, all of which is fueled and facilitated through language.

Josef K.'s arrest (*Verhaftung*) also suggests his initiation to racial absurdity, as his arrest effectively throws him into a new "race"—the Condemned. K.'s arrest is not sensational in the slightest—he wakes up to two "guards" (*Wächter*) informing him of his arrest. As Fallowes notes, the immediate effects of this utterance on K.'s life pertain mainly to "changes and disruptions to the protagonist's routine," as his immediate concern upon waking up to these guards is whether or not his breakfast arrives (204). This concern demonstrates clear absurdity on K.'s behalf, as he is not conscious of the significant threat to his identity. However, the clearly absurd nature of the arrest itself negates any serious concern K. might have. The behavior of the guards fuels the absurdity of the situation, as they are unwilling to tell K. why he is being arrested, and they converse with K. not in an interrogative manner, but in a quasi-Socratic dialogue. Consider the following exchange:

> "Why didn't she enter?" asked [K.]. "She may not," said the large guard. "You are under arrest." "How can I be under arrest? And especially in this manner?" "Now you started again," said the guard and plunged a buttered roll into the honeypot. "We are not answering such questions." "You will have to answer them," said K. (Kafka 10)

The "relative banality" of this conversation seeks to undermine the level to which K.'s power and role in society is threatened (Fallowes 204). This banality is mirrored by K.'s remark that the guards are "friendly enough" (*förmlich freundschaftlich*), which shows his subjective, interpersonal exegesis of their strange behavior (Kafka 9). Thus, Kafka is clearly trying to create an absurd space from this scene, which creates the illusion of safety or homeliness in the face of grave danger to personal identity.

But as the arrest continues, K. becomes more concerned about this threat and utilizes a further linguistic mechanism to protect his identity. After K. resigns to his bed, he falls into his first moment of suicidal ideation: "It would be so senseless to kill himself that, even if he wanted to do it, he wouldn't have been capable because of the senselessness" (Kafka 12). However, this suicidal

ideation is also intertwined with the reader's newfound knowledge that K. has a "relatively high position" at the bank, meaning he arguably carries more economic and social power than the Praguian Jew (12). This incident serves as the first of K.'s many "inchoate moments of revolt," yet the immediate consideration of suicide is notable as it diagnoses K.'s dilemma as undoubtedly existential (Dern 97-8). In his explication of the possible justifications for suicide, Camus explains that one being "undermined" is the trigger for suicidal ideation, for "beginning to think is beginning to be undermined" (4). Even from this opening scene, the court begins to undermine K. philosophically and pragmatically. Philosophically, the court "fails utterly in the attempt at inducing self-awareness and humility," suggesting the immediate externalities it has on K.'s understanding of his existence (Marson 50). Pragmatically, K.'s arrest undermines his higher social status, revealing the insecurity that his social status masks.

Because of this "undermining," K. projects his insecurity onto the guards: "If the mental limitation of the guards was not so remarkable, one would have assumed that they too, due to the same conviction, would have seen no danger in leaving him alone" (Kafka 12). The word choice of "mental limitation" (*geistige Beschränktheit*) is a very formal and verbose description of stupidity, which marks another instance of K. utilizing highly formal (and arguably bureaucratic) language to reassert his identity in the face of absurdity. This behavior is itself absurd because K. "immediately begins to think and act in terms of his outraged rights and personal prerogatives," suggesting that these are futile, absurd issues for K. to focus on (Marson 49). We understand through this narration how Josef K.'s perception of the guards demonstrates not only his own insecurity over his precarious, absurd situation, but how this newfound precarity and absurdity influences (and is influenced by) his troublesome worldview.

While K. uses his performance of white, hegemonic language as means to defend himself, Ellison's narrator incorporates his linguistic defense mechanism not just for himself, but for other Black characters as well. An example of this is the narrator's speech in response to the eviction of an older black couple after his arrival in Harlem. Upon seeing the possessions of the older married couple dumped on the sidewalk and the police denying the wife's request to

go back inside solely to pray, the narrator realizes his motivation for the speech he eventually gives—rather than solely out of fear, the narrator expresses both his discomfort and empathy, since "with this dispossession came a pang of vague recognition" (273). "Dispossession" becomes a frequent keyword in the narrator's speeches once he enters the Brotherhood and arguably could be a way of describing his own existential crisis. Although the narrator flashbacks to a scene of his mother "banging wash on a cold windy day," this is one of the few references, if any, to the narrator's family (273). The narrator's exclusion of his family may simply indicate his focus shifting towards his new reality, and his language reflects his newfound identity as an "articulate survivor" (Stepto 363). Additionally, the narrator's horrific encounter with the incestuous Jim Trueblood could also function as a deterrent for the narrator referencing family.

The narrator's most notable reference to his family comes through the memories of his "yessing" grandfather, a self-proclaimed "traitor and a spy" who serves as both a paragon and cautionary tale of internalized invisibility (Ellison 16). Even though his grandfather was a former slave, the narrator does not think of him when he sees the free papers of the evicted tenant (272). This suggests a selective memory on behalf of the narrator for what (and who) he chooses to be dispossessed of; indeed, this moment comes during the point at which the narrator is fearful or suspicious of his grandfather, since the advice he provides him "will result in either expulsion or internal explosion," neither of which are desirable to the narrator at this given moment (Trimmer 46). Thus, the narrator abandons his grandfather for the sake of self-preservation.

The narrator's internal aegis proves useful as he speaks to the other outraged members of the community. He is not speaking to a group of scrutinizing white spectators – rather, he is speaking to other people of color that sympathize with the older couple's dispossession. However, his initial speech is still not well-received, since the narrator's academic, non-violent approach does not satisfy them:

> "That wise man," I said, "you can read about him, who when that fugitive escaped from the mob and ran to his school for protection, that wise man who was strong

> enough to do the legal thing, the law-abiding thing, to turn him over to the forces of law and order…"
>
> "Yeah," a voice rang out, "yeah, so they could lynch his ass."
>
> Oh God, this wasn't it at all. Poor technique and not at all what I intended. (Ellison 276)

Obviously, this speech is given to a reactive, mobile audience that "offers its own retort when provoked" (Hanlon 92). The narrator realizes his absurd position at this moment, in that his "poor technique" does not, nor will it ever, achieve the ends he believes it will. Fanon echoes not only the futility of colonized peoples' false hope surrounding language, but its danger:

> When another desperately tries to prove to me that the black man is as intelligent as any white man, my response is that neither did intelligence save anybody, for if equality among men is proclaimed in the name of intelligence and philosophy, it is also true that these concepts have been used to justify the extermination of man. (12)

Therefore, the narrator chooses to redirect at this point, and rather than advocating for greater legal, peaceful action to achieve justice for the Black community, he questions the laws themselves and acknowledges the futility in abiding by them. The hostility of the audience proves effective, in that their interference with the narrator's speech serves to "tease a sort of repressed eloquence from him" (Hanlon 92). This revised eloquent speech culminates in the protesters mobbing the police officer preventing entrance to the apartment, demonstrating how the narrator is capable of using his language to effectively persuade and captivate his audience in the same way that his audience effectively persuades him. This moment proves to be revelatory for the narrator, as it serves as a prototype of speaking for others "on the lower frequencies" (Ellison 581).

The Trial also demonstrates the power of speech, particularly in the way that speech constitutes power over others. As previously mentioned, the impetus for the novel's actions depends upon the implied slander (*Verleumdung*) of Josef K., which sets the precedent of language as a mode of power and force. Again, the narrative voice does not explicitly state whether this slander actually occurred, but this initial sentence characterizes "the protagonist's own subjective

experience of language as a form of violence," thus establishing K.'s victim complex and his emphasis on language as both construction and demolition of identity (Fallowes 202). Throughout the remainder of the novel, K. attempts to use language as a bridge between himself and the hellish bureaucracy of the legal system, yet his inability to verbally dismantle the legal system further intensifies his linguistic defense.

This transformation initiates during his first investigation (*Untersuchung*). K. initially struggles to find the investigation room, and once he does, he discovers a "middle-sized, two-windowed room" fully packed and a gallery that was "likewise fully occupied," sitting in the middle of what is likely a tenement house (Kafka 32). This absurd space only serves to increase K.'s linguistic defense and his insecurity around his speech, which he begins by declaring, "I do not want success as an orator…I might not be successful at doing that too" (36). However, this begs the question: if K. does not want success as an orator, then what is the goal of his speech? Put simply, K. is lying, while implicitly stating his direct intention—oratorical success.

K.'s statement is ironic since his entire identity depends on being a successful orator who accredits himself through bureaucratic dialect. Consider K.'s rejection of the deputy director's offer to join him on his sailing boat, as he characterizes this offer as a "reconciliation attempt" (*Versöhnungsversuch*) (Kafka 29). This description obviously demonstrates K.'s attempt to socially contextualize and structuralize a simple, friendly meeting between colleagues, and it underlines how the professional world has intruded upon K.'s personal life. Marson argues that K. behaves "like the most nervous office-boy," in that he "misses…the opportunity to organize himself into the upper hierarchy of the bank via the friendship with Hasterer," which demonstrates the "first incursion of the court into K.'s bank life" (107). Thus, the trial once again serves as a means of "undermining" K. in Camus' sense, which forces K. to reconcile his problematic relationship between the personal and the professional.

This problematic relationship comes to a head at the investigation. Following his dishonesty over his speech's intention, K. immediately begins to rant, not about the legal situation he finds himself in, but rather the "inconvenience and ephemeral anger"

caused by his arrest (Kafka 37). Particularly, K. projects his anger onto the guards that arrested him:

> The adjoining room was occupied by two abrasive guards. If I were a dangerous thief, one could not have imagined better precautions. Moreover, these guards were demoralized lowlifes, they babbled my ears off, they wanted to take bribes, they wanted to elicit me under the pretense of laundry and clothing, they wanted money in order to allegedly bring me breakfast, after which they had shamelessly eaten my own breakfast before my very eyes. (36)

K. is aware of his marginalized status throughout the investigation, for "surely [K.] knows that it is this very hierarchy that he is addressing" when he begins criticizing their treatment of him (Marson 120). Obviously, these accusations do very little to protect Josef K. from his (still) unexplained legal trouble. The examining magistrate declares: "I only wanted to make clear…you might not have been made aware of it yet—that today, you have robbed yourself of the advantages that a hearing always gives to an arrested person" (Kafka 39). Kavanagh declares that this moment demonstrates the reversal of a semiotic code between K. and the bureaucracy and a form of ego death for K., as he goes from feeling "unassailable self-justification" through blaming the guards to "unappealable condemnation" through this magistrate's simple utterance (248). This, therefore, reveals the absurdity of K.'s linguistic condition, in that the more he attempts to defend himself, the worse his situation inevitably becomes.

Although K.'s accusations against the guards do not improve his own condition, they worsen the conditions of the guards. Soon after this first investigation, while he is at work, K. stumbles upon the two guards from his arrest as they are being whipped. They cry out to him: "Herr! We are to be whipped because you bleated about us to the examining magistrate" (64). Ignoring the psychosexual elements of this scene (which will be revisited), this moment demonstrates the two aforementioned, overarching themes: the power of language as a measure of violence and the problematic relationship between K.'s professional and personal lives. As Fallowes notes, this scene shows how K. "unwillingly issues a form of *Verleumdung*" through his testimony, thus causing similar tangible

effects as the ones he suffers from someone's implied slander of him (202). Additionally, this scene forces the legal situation directly into Kafka's space, and the psychosexual nature of this scene only serves to exacerbate the embarrassment and intrusion this incident puts on K.'s professional life.

On the other hand, while the bureaucracy and broader society reject K.'s linguistic ability to overcome his circumstances, the eviction speech in *Invisible Man* not only makes the narrator cognizant of his orating abilities, but his white spectators become cognizant as well. Bland Jr. argues that through this moment, the narrator "most convincingly begins the process that links him to the importance of controlling language as a way of defining reality," in that his utterances alone are enough to rouse and imbue the audience's consciousness with this injustice. This process is significant for the narrator's existence, both theoretically and pragmatically. Theoretically, the speech adds a newfound meaning to the narrator's existence by displaying his gift for oration: "Ellison figures this reinvention as a moment of rebirth" (Hanlon 93). Pragmatically, this speech serves as the impetus for the narrator's induction into the Brotherhood, as Brother Jack is astounded by his "effective piece of eloquence" and consequently hunts him down to offer him a position (Ellison 289). Although Brother Jack is giving the narrator an arguably life-altering opportunity, the narrator is forced to "be" for the Other, a la Sartre.

Brother Jack's conduct in this scene clearly foreshadows the eventual censorship and lack of individuality the narrator suffers as a member of the Brotherhood, a victim to this "army of fools" found "outside university circles" (Fanon 18). For example, Brother Jack asks the narrator where he learned to speak, which obviously alludes to the idea that the narrator required a formal, "white" education to pick up this skill (Ellison 289). This is mirrored through the narrator's eventual sabbatical to learn the Brotherhood's literature, which only serves to "define history and exclude from it those who don't confirm their theories" (Nadel 137). One part of the comic relief in this scene is Brother Jack uncouthly eating a piece of cheesecake, yet this act shows Ellison's clear demonstration of how Brother Jack's mindless and inappropriate consumption of this "piece" mirrors his eventual mindless and inappropriate consumption of this "piece of eloquence" (Ellison 289).

Following this initial offer and its denial by Brother Jack, the narrator gives Brother Jack a second chance and is brought to a party with other members of the Brotherhood at the *Chthonian*. At this party, the narrator experiences numerous microaggressions as the sole black man among a sea of white "Brothers," thrusting him into a position of Sartrean *Otherhood*. The most significant microaggression in this scene occurs when a man asks the narrator to sing a spiritual while asserting that "*all* colored people sing" (Ellison 312). As he requests this spiritual, he shifts into stereotypical African American dialect:

> "How about a spiritual, Brother? Or one of those real good ole Negro work songs? Like this: *Ah went to Atlanta – nevah been there befo',*" he sang, his arms held out from his body like a penguin's wings, glass in one hand, cigar in the other. "*White man sleep in a feather bed, N– sleep on the flo'*… Ha! Ha! How about it, Brother?" (312)

Since the narrator speaks with no dialect whatsoever, this act of "speaking pidgin" represents the projection of stereotypes surrounding language onto the narrator, thus undermining the narrator's use of language to put himself "on an equal footing" with his white acquaintances (Fanon 19). Like the dreamed prize plaque, this "brutal joke of course had its antecedents in slavery," when black slaves performed spirituals during work to counteract their dehumanization (Forrest 316). Fanon believes that the act of speaking pidgin is akin to "imprisoning the black man and creating a conflictual situation where the white man infects the black man with extremely toxic foreign bodies" (18-19). Although Brother Jack objects to this stereotyping, it is clear that the stereotypes surrounding black people and language permeate the Brotherhood in its rhetoric, thus setting up the narrator to eventually being "spoken for" as he regurgitates its literature.

This very issue of language control causes the protagonist to disconnect from the Brotherhood. The narrator delivers a long, poetic eulogy for his former fellow Brother Tod Clifton, which again highlights both the narrator's oratorial ability and his endowed racial consciousness:

> [Tod Clifton] thought he was a man and that men were not meant to be pushed around. But it was hot downtown and he forgot his history, he forgot the time

> and the place. He lost his hold on reality. There was a cop and a waiting audience but he was Tod Clifton and cops are everywhere. The cop? What about him? He was a cop. A good citizen. But this cop had an itching finger and an eager ear for a word that rhymed with 'trigger,' and when Clifton fell he had found it. (Ellison 457)

However, this speech fails to appease the Brotherhood for a few reasons. Obviously, in making this speech, the narrator fails to pay tribute to the Brotherhood's literature, and therefore they cannot support this speech. In the narrator's defense of his eulogy to senior members of the Brotherhood, he argues that he depended upon "personal responsibility" to write the speech rather than the Brotherhood's literature, which dumbfounds Brother Jack (463). Jack's rejection of "personal responsibility" clashes against the earlier call for "social responsibility" by the white spectators of the battle royal, thus putting the narrator in an absurd conundrum where he cannot control his utterances. This repetition reasserts his status "outside organizational or official history" (Whitaker 392). Furthermore, Tod Clifton, the recipient of this eulogy, abandoned the Brotherhood shortly before his death, as he realized its futility in improving the conditions of the Black community. Thus, the Brotherhood's hostile response to the narrator's eulogy is a reinforcement of the transactional, "token" role of Black speakers within the Brotherhood "because [the narrator] cannot perform any action…that would disclose him as a determinate individual" (Whitaker 393). This further supports Ellison's criticism of white control over Black language as an impetus to absurdity.

So far, it has been demonstrated that both Kafka and Ellison depict their racially othered characters using language to aspire to whiteness, which manifests their larger existential crises in their respective novels. Thus, it is important to understand how they are aesthetically separate in terms of racial absurdity. According to Camus, an absurd man is concerned with "experiencing and describing" their absurd experience rather than trying to explain and rationalize it (94). In this sense, both novels start from the antithetical, paradoxical position: they attempt to make sense out of a senseless world. However, that is the context in which they encounter the Absurd. For Josef K., his attempt to deal with his legal woes forces him to further interact with his absurd existence as a

Condemned man. For Ellison's narrator, his attempt to live and work in Harlem forces him to interact with a racially absurd space, thus placing him in even closer contact with his absurd condition. But eventually, according to Camus, these men must step away from trying to explain what is occurring to them and take a more passive position in order to embrace their conditions.

Josef K.'s condition is too threatening for him to passively accept. Although K. is unaware of what his punishment will be upon sentencing, he desperately strives to work against it, while simultaneously attempting to play the charade of his normal, working life. Just as this balance begins to helplessly flounder, K. is assigned to give an Italian business partner of the bank a tour of art monuments. K. is selected because of his ability to speak Italian, even though the narrator concedes that "K.'s acquisition of Italian was indeed not very much but still sufficient" (145). In this case, language once again acts as a barrier between K. and an escape from his absurd condition.

The Italian business partner expresses his desire to visit the Cathedral, yet he never arrives to meet K., who waits outside in the rain and cold. As K. describes this situation to his mistress Leni, he affirms to himself that "they are chasing me" (148). In most English translations, this verb is usually changed to something like "harass," but this does not encapsulate the dread and impending terror of the original German reflexive verb *sich hetzen*, which is used in the context of animals attacking (i.e., to sic or hunt). Thus, this affirmation not only begins to depict the breakdown of K.'s human existence, but it reveals K.'s consciousness of his fate: "this absent-minded remark could be another brief surfacing of the repressed part of K. that is aware all is not well" (Marson 282). Through this remark, Kafka once again hints at the danger awaiting K. under the banality of these mundane bureaucratic tasks.

This recognition of absurdity amongst the mundane is echoed by Ellison's narrator following the Brotherhood's reprimand for his eulogy of Tod Clifton. Donning dark green sunglasses in an attempt to avoid harassment, the narrator inadvertently assumes the role of Rinehart, the archetypal hero of racial absurdity. As the narrator continues his journey through the city, he assumes the roles of "Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend," thus thrusting the narrator into

different positions of social and moral value depending on whom he encounters (Ellison 498). It is exactly Rinehart, who "refuses all content and all commitment" in both morally virtuous and unvirtuous manners (Bigsby 181). Thus, this unanticipated incident reshapes the narrator's conception of Black identity in the face of the racially Absurd.

The narrator understands the key to a racially absurd freedom: the acknowledgement that one is invisible. If a black person can understand that their identity is invisible to their white spectators, then they unlock "the recognition of possibility," through which they are free from pigeonholed objectification (Ellison 499). This also shows the narrator has not only the power to gain an absurd identity, but to reclaim the social power that comes from such a possibility, for Rinehart represents "the manipulated becoming the supreme manipulator of a lost society" (Harris 162). Therefore, Ellison's narrator adopts a position of absurd multiplicity of Black identity that lies in contrast to the "one single white figure:" i.e., white hegemony that affirms, and arguably necessitates, Black assimilation to white society (Ellison 508).

Through his realization of the "absurd joke" of his existence under the Brotherhood's thumb, the narrator undergoes an epiphany regarding his racial identity, which implicates specific consequences for the narrator's use of language (Ellison 508). Because the narrator understands that his freedom from the Absurd derives from the abandonment of white hegemony, he implicitly understands that he must stop aspiring to white standards of language, since this acts as the main influence of white control in his life. The first stage in which the narrator does this is through the performance of affirmation, or as he describes it, "yessing." The narrator realizes that trying to fight against the Brotherhood's reinforcement of his invisibility seems to exacerbate his existential crisis; the better alternative is to affirm their agendas in hopes of undermining them in order to "gain control of the whole charade" (Whitaker 393). Ellison's narrator clearly explicates this motivation: "That was all anyone wanted of us, that we should be heard and not seen, and then heard only in one big optimistic chorus of yassuh, yassuh, yassuh!" (509). This shows how language once again serves as the mode through which the narrator processes and reasserts his existential condition.

Additionally, it is important to understand the performative elements of the narrator's choice to affirm white identity. The narrator is clearly conscious that the Brotherhood's agenda does not serve the interests of Black communities or other communities they claim to protect, and therefore he must choose to express affirmation despite not believing it. This clear alienation between utterance and intent draws another comparison to Camus as he describes the role of the actor. To Camus, the actor is a clear example of an absurd archetype because of their "ephemeral" nature (77); in other words, to perform is to assume an identity that they do not possess, causing the actor to experience a "revelatory epitome" reflecting the Absurd (78). The narrator experiences such a "revelatory epitome" upon his performance as Rinehart, which makes him understand the way in which identity can be performed and acted out. This mirrors David Mikics's assertion that the narrator is a "prisoner of race, though his native innocence gives him a possibility of freedom" (196). In other words, even though the narrator understands that he is indeed limited by his racial identity, he possesses far more agency to change his day-to-day life through creating and staging new identities for himself.

As already mentioned, this revelation of identity performance is liberating for the narrator, since it frees him from white hegemony. However, his consequential choice to act out the affirmation of white identity conflicts with this newfound liberation. Obviously, the narrator is influenced by his grandfather's strategy to "overcome 'em with yeses," which he imparts while on his deathbed (Ellison 16). Trimmer argues that this advice serves as the foundational riddle through the novel, as the narrator further understands this phenomenon through the experiences of Bledsoe, Tod Clifton, Brother Tarp, Lucius Brockway and others, and that this moment depicts the narrator as "he seizes upon his grandfather's words as a weapon" (48). However, as the narrator decides to "agree 'em to death and destruction," he becomes conscious of the actual death and destruction that occurs through this linguistic affirmation. Not only does he lose his own moral foundation, but he in fact works against the actual interests of the Black community through this choice, as Trimmer notes: "Rinehartism cannot be the final solution to the riddle because, as the narrator discovers, adopting Rinehart's methodology leads to the destruction of Harlem and the betrayal of

his people" (49). Furthermore, in Camus' sense, this choice explicates the existential crisis experienced by the actor, for "the hero suffering from uncertainty takes the place of the man roaring for his revenge" (79). Like Camus' actor, Ellison's narrator takes on a performance to reclaim his absurd existence, but neither are left with a fulfilling solution—only a fleeting, temporary answer to an unabating crisis.

Although the narrator's performance of white affirmation is clearly not a means to a desirable reconciliation with the Absurd, Josef K. fails to even enact such a temporary "solution." Similar to Ellison's narrator, Josef K. is the recipient of an absurd riddle, which he receives from the prison chaplain during his trip to the Cathedral. After the chaplain approaches K. to discuss his legal situation, he informs K. of his absurd condition: "'In the court you delude yourself,' said the priest, 'this delusion is signified in the introductory sections of the law'" (Kafka 155). The chaplain proceeds to describe this introduction, in which a man is refused entry through a door where the law is found by a doorkeeper. Despite the many attempts by the man to gain entry, he is refused for his entire life, and dies waiting to be let in. The doorkeeper notably describes these attempts as "requests" (*Bitten*), thus accentuating the verbal defense against an absurd fate, mirroring K.'s own situation (156). Ingeborg Henel agrees with the suggestion that this parable demonstrates the flaws of K.'s linguistic defense, since K.'s appeal to such linguistic efforts is "symbolized in the pleading" of the man outside the door (43). This once again reinforces the absurd nature of K.'s attempts to linguistically battle his fate.

As K. objects to the doorkeeper's obtuseness, the chaplain defends the doorkeeper by arguing that "he is, where the fulfillment of his duty is concerned, neither to be stirred nor embittered" (Kafka 157). As an allegory to Josef K.'s situation, this remark demonstrates the total ineffectiveness of K.'s linguistic defense, as it will not undermine the white, Christian hegemony he opposes, which demonstrates the absurd character of his linguistic behavior. Thus, K. reaches his resignation in the face of the Absurd, which is accentuated by his silence at the end of this scene. However, this silence is not indicative of K. being conscious of the Absurd, for after K.'s final remark in this discussion, Kafka declares that "K. said that in conclusion, but that was not his final decree" (161). With this

comment, Kafka implicitly suggests that despite K.'s newfound consciousness of his linguistic impotence, he will continue his linguistic defense, thus cementing his fate as an Absurd archetype. In this way, K.'s absurdity mirrors the absurdity of the man from the doorkeeper legend, for it is made "abundantly clear that the man, by submitting to the prohibition, gives up his humanity and misses the meaning of his life" (Henel 41). Furthermore, since Kafka fails to provide K. reconciliation with his absurdity, he leaves K. "explaining and solving" rather than "experiencing and describing" (Camus 94). Because of this, the work fails to achieve aesthetic absurdity since it insists upon the idea of a solution to absurdity, thus approaching K.'s existential crisis with the intent to atone rather than resolve.

By the end of Ellison's frame narrative (that is, the period before the narrator's "hibernation"), the narrator reaches the apex of absurdity through "yessing." Following his unintentional performance, the narrator brings his "yessing" to the Brotherhood, just at the time when "the community was still going apart at the seams" (Ellison 513). Even though the narrator acknowledges that the current problems in his district and how they damage his predominantly black community, he goes forth with his affirmation of white narratives: "in spite of my sense of violated responsibility I was pleased by the developments and went ahead with my plan…I reported that things were quieting down and that we were getting a large part of the community interested in a clean-up campaign" (513-514). Although the narrator "is actually able to realize the unstable nature of identity and the world identity occupies" through this linguistic shift, he is sacrificing the needs of the larger Black community for the sake of his own internal peace and financial security (Bland Jr. 146). However, this leaves the narrator in a similar position to the Absurd as Josef K. by the penultimate scene of *The Trial.* Despite the narrator's understanding that language describes one's relationship to their identity and can be used to construct, change, and destroy, the narrator uses his language for the affirmation of validation of his own identity by his white spectators (per his grandfather's advice). However, this language only serves to construct a false reality that will never be validated, and thus refuting the problems facing the Black community and further subjugating Black existential identity on the aggregate.

Notes

[1] This article is an excerpt of my undergraduate thesis, "Existential Influences of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," made possible through a Joanne and Arthur Haberberger Fellowship, granted by Lycoming College in Williamsport, PA.
[2] All translations of *The Trial* are my own, unless otherwise noted.

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