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## *Risking Ralph Ellison*

When Ralph Ellison said that “the joke [is] at the center of the American identity,” he also meant that the joker is at the center of American life. In a rapidly changing liberal society, with fluctuating standards and values, the joker is an “American virtuoso of identity who thrives on chaos and swift change.”<sup>1</sup> For the joker, identity is not a fixed principle, established once and for all, but a fluid masquerade, an ironic display of masks and styles, gestures and titles, which accrue around a space that comes to be known as the “self.”

A great deal of work on identity politics has focused on similar constructions of racial identity through complex cultural appropriations linked to masking, minstrelsy, and passing. But Ellison is more optimistic about these dynamics: he sees the absurd mix of styles that emerges from what he calls “pluralistic turbulence” as the only appropriate response to the absurdities of American politics and history.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, anyone who assumes too serious a relationship with his own identity – anyone who refuses to play the joker – will likely be duped by more powerful jokers still.

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In Ellison’s most important and best known work, *Invisible Man* (1952), the narrator does not learn how to joke until the end, when he finally concludes, “[I]t was better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others.”<sup>3</sup> Even then, however, the Invisible Man hardly proves a comfortable and confident joker. He retracts a joke he plays on a drunken woman attempting to seduce him, and he abandons the joke he plays on the Brotherhood almost as soon as he undertakes it. Ellison endorses joking as a survival strategy in liberal societies, but he also worries about the power jokers could acquire, and the violence they might do with it. If the joke really is at the center of American identity, *Invisible Man* raises the possibility that those in power might claim joking as their own prerogative, and systematically deironize politics and identity for everyone else. Ellison poses that problem but doesn’t resolve it, issuing an insightful and still-relevant caution about the politics of mid-century liberalism. Liberal society might facilitate joking through its own chaotic turbulence, Ellison hopes, but it also might inhibit joking, if it merely simulates that turbulence by structuring daily life ever more comprehensively through the modern calculus of risk.

Ellison's master metaphor for American liberal society in *Invisible Man* is the game. The Invisible Man equates experience with a game dozens of times, and Bledsoe and Burnside "the vet" both urge him to play it better. Ellison stocks the novel with many different kinds of games, the most prominent of which is boxing, but he grounds his analysis of joking specifically in the dynamics of gambling. When the Invisible Man eventually wonders, "What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment," he begins to see the world as Ellison does, as a game ideally suited to jokers, rather than agents of brute force. The Invisible Man clearly has poker in mind because he goes on to wonder whether history has an "ace in the hole."<sup>4</sup> Poker, especially stud poker, surfaces regularly throughout the novel at a number of key moments. The seven letters the Invisible Man receives from Bledsoe seem to him like "a hand of high trump cards" in a game of seven card stud; Burnside advises him to "Play the game, but raise the ante."<sup>5</sup> And in an oblique but telling reference, a taxi driver archly pronounces the Invisible Man a "game stud."<sup>6</sup>

That Ellison prefers the term "joker" over the traditional African American folk term "trickster" reveals much. Brer Rabbit and other tricksters defy and disrupt the plantation hierarchy from within, but that hierarchy is fundamentally unshakeable. Jokers, however, disrupt a different kind of hierarchy, the aristocracy of kings, queens, and jacks who rule the deck of cards. Whereas Southern slave-owners patterned their social relations on fixed aristocratic castes precisely to inhibit social mobility, the aristocracy of the deck of cards undergoes periodic reshuffling. Standing in for modern liberal society, the deck of cards acknowledges real power disparities,

but it also expects regular power upheavals. More importantly, it makes the joker the most consequential card in the deck, because only the joker can change identities, temporarily usurping and using royal power while leaving the basic power structure intact. Such disingenuousness has an important role for poker players, too, because poker rewards, and even requires, the sanctioned deceit otherwise known as bluffing. Poker often functions in American culture as a metaphor for the entire system of liberal-capitalist competition between equals. With no house to take a cut, and no referee to enforce the rules, the players manage things for themselves. The preferred game of cowboys and rugged westerners in countless frontier novels, poker allows stoic heroes like Owen Wister's Virginian to act out key liberal values in a world both refreshingly and terrifyingly free of law and order.

However, even as *Invisible Man* absorbs and extends this traditional account of poker, the novel also presents a second set of references to a very different kind of gamble, the lottery. When the Invisible Man pays Mary Rambo a hundred dollars, he pretends the money came from "playing the numbers." Later, he compares his superstitions to those of "chronic numbers players." But of all the gamblers in the novel, the most important is B. P. Rinehart, the "number man," who runs an illegal private lottery in Harlem.<sup>7</sup> Unlike poker games, lotteries are centrally organized and vertically structured. They inhibit interactions between players and make each bet a private affair between a single player and the house. So if poker idealizes liberalism as free and voluntary play among equals, the lottery introduces important cautions and qualifications, and suggests that a liberal society might be more systematically structured and centralized

than it first appears. This is especially true given that “Rine the gambler” is also the most flamboyant and successful joker in *Invisible Man*; for like the joker in a deck of cards, Rinehart has no identity except when passing for someone else. By shadowing its persistent references to poker with equally persistent references to the lottery, and by linking both to jokers and joking, *Invisible Man* asks readers to consider that perhaps American liberal society is not just a game that facilitates joking, but is, instead, a game perpetrated by a joker. That joker promises to dispense what the Invisible Man calls “infinite possibilities” through the energizing risks of gambling, but he does so without actually participating in the game.<sup>8</sup>

Poker and lotteries do share certain basic features intrinsic to all gambles. In both, players make deliberate choices that lead to, or correspond with, one of a number of different possible outcomes that cannot be known in advance. Possible outcomes are always finite and limited, however, so when the die is cast the player does not exactly throw open the doors to chaos and anarchy. Instead he or she starts an operation that has just six possible results: gambles generate uncertainty, but they structure and limit uncertainty, too. Compared to the potentially limitless set of contingencies one might experience in daily life, the gamble actually narrows the possibilities considerably. In doing so, the gamble compels deliberate choice at the moment of uncertainty, as the gambler bets on the future course of events and accepts full responsibility for the outcome.

Traditional liberal economic theory tends to treat gambles in terms of rational choice. Informed agents choose to take risks through investments, in occupational hazards, or at the roulette table, having calculated whether they

stand to gain or lose in the process. But rational choice theory has never been very good at explaining why people bet against the odds or the house, and so it charges many gamblers with calculating badly, acting irrationally, or substituting superstition for reason. Ellison turns that argument on its head. The Invisible Man’s determination to “play in face of certain defeat” sounds like an irrational choice, but it also may have a more political purpose.<sup>9</sup> To put it simply, free and responsible individuals do more than just choose to gamble; the ritual of the gamble also validates players as responsible and free. At the moment of the gamble more than one thing can happen, which confirms the open-endedness of the world. At the same time, the gamble compels an act of choice at precisely the point where multiple paths branch toward the future. The differences between those possible outcomes confirm that the gambler’s choices are decisive. Thus it matters not at all whether the gambler wins or loses; it only matters that the gamble structures his or her choices as *real* choices, both freely made and genuinely consequential, which losing demonstrates just as well as winning.

If these dynamics were limited to casinos and card games, they would be interesting but isolated cultural phenomena. Ellison, though, recognizes that gambling is really just one manifestation of a much broader politicizing of risk by a burgeoning risk industry. Modern risk analysis turns a whole range of activities into gambles: statistical prediction and analysis makes eating shellfish, driving small cars, breathing urban air, or even exposing oneself to the sun seem like wagers in an uncertain game. The point is not that these kinds of activities are gambles in any essential way, but that

modern society defines them as such, by estimating odds, publishing that information widely, and then asking citizens both to choose wisely among the various options and to bear responsibility for the results. Purveyors of risk information usually claim that their rational and scientific assessments help individuals choose safer or more beneficial courses of action. Perhaps so, but in the process they also confront risk consumers with an ever proliferating array of private risk situations. Attempting to mitigate one risk, such as the risk of breast cancer, forces an encounter with a new risk, such as the risk of radiation from a mammogram. The island of safety and security that risk analysis promises to deliver never comes into view because each risk decision only delivers us to ever more numerous and vexing risk assessments still.

German risk theorist Ulrich Beck argues that residents of modern risk societies undergo what he calls risk “individualization,” a process in which the apparatus of risk analysis produces citizens who regard themselves, and agree to be regarded, as private, decisive, and responsible agents, capable of navigating a complex and changing world. According to Beck, in a risk society “new forms of ‘guilt ascription’ come into being,” as risk experts “dump their contradictions and conflicts at the feet of the individual and leave him or her with the well-intentioned invitation to judge all this critically on the basis of his or her own notions.”<sup>10</sup> I would take Beck’s analysis a step further and say that encounters with risk actually produce liberal individuals, ideal subjects thereby validated as responsible and free, and so theoretically equipped to go it alone. In this context, institutionalized gambling is but one of many instruments of liberal subject formation, and not

substantively different from risk institutions like the weather bureau or a department of public health. Even as institutions of risk analysis cater to an alleged capacity for free choice, they also create the capacity for free choice by structuring uncertainty in ways that afford agents with endless opportunities for decisive action. Gamblers, then, do not really gamble at all, but simply lay claim to liberalism’s most cherished virtues – freedom and responsibility – which, at worst, they buy at the cost of their long-term losses.

Although *Invisible Man* acknowledges the appeal of these dynamics, it also recognizes their danger. Again and again, the Invisible Man discovers that he had been “[a] tool just at the very moment I had thought myself most free.”<sup>11</sup> The primary gamble through which this occurs is not a conventional gamble at all, but the risky business of improvisational speaking. To speak without a script, to voice words spontaneously and impulsively, promises freedom from rigid prescription and plan. Superficially, the novel can be read as the story of the Invisible Man’s growing ability to speak spontaneously and for himself. His first speech after the Battle Royal cribs Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Exposition address. In it the Invisible Man “spoke automatically” and “could not leave out a single word. All had to be said, each memorized nuance considered, rendered.” Only when he deviates from the script, either by accident or impulse, and says “social equality” instead of “social responsibility,” does he seem to speak for himself.<sup>12</sup> Eventually such impulsivity becomes the norm. When he speaks at the eviction he confesses, “I didn’t know what I was going to say.” During his first speech to the Brotherhood he admits that he “gave up trying to memorize phrases and simply allowed

the excitement to carry me along.” By speaking improvisationally, the Invisible Man courts risk, hazarding something that might be lost in the process, which turns out to be nothing less than the self: “If they laugh, I’ll die!”<sup>13</sup>

The novel predicates its apparent approval of improvisation’s risks on the aesthetics of jazz, about which Ellison himself was expert. One common account of jazz sees it as a proving ground for spontaneous, free, and improvisational self-assertion. If early versions of that argument sometimes linked jazz improvisation to suspect notions of African primitivism or libidinal irrationality, more recent arguments read improvisation more productively, as an escape from false consciousness or as opposition to Western rationality. Such claims have a great deal of merit, but mapping them onto the Invisible Man’s oratorical improvisations implies a similar affirmation of his own unscripted impulses, a reading the novel finally does not sustain.

The most obvious problem with that reading is that Brother Jack informs the Invisible Man that “you were not hired to think,” only to speak.<sup>14</sup> His improvisation thus must be purely formal, merely channeling the ideas of others. Ellison’s reservations about improvisation appear more subtly in the novel’s treatment of a conflicted source, Ralph Waldo Ellison’s own namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson. *Invisible Man* is haunted by Emerson. Two characters named Emerson play key roles in the Invisible Man’s fortunes, and a third, Mr. Norton, espouses an obviously parodic theory of Emersonian transcendentalism and self-reliance. Ellison’s quarrel seems to be specifically with “Self-Reliance” and with the sovereign self that dominates that essay, and which commands circumstance, answers only to its inner

constitution, and grandiosely writes “on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*.”<sup>15</sup> Ellison might approve of the whim itself, but he largely rejects Emerson’s confidence that whims issue from stable selves that precede such impulsivity. In *Invisible Man*, the only people who command circumstance to this degree are powerful despots like Bledsoe, or powerful egotists like Mr. Norton, who advises the narrator, “Self-reliance is a most worthy virtue.”<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, Ellison’s Emerson is not the exuberant egotist of “Self-Reliance,” but the depressive stoic of “Experience” and, more importantly, the visionary daredevil of “Circles,” whose identity also turns out to be tied to the experience of risk.

Emerson’s “Circles” describes a world that could be the Invisible Man’s own: “The universe is fluid and volatile”; “The new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet”; “Permanence is a word of degrees”; “All that we reckoned settled, shakes and rattles”; “People wish to be settled: only as far as they are unsettled, is there any hope for them”; “Life is a series of surprises”; “The way of life is wonderful: it is by abandonment.”<sup>17</sup> Such a richly contingent world is ever ripe for the visionary self, at home in these dynamic conditions. Ellison would agree to a considerable degree, but more than Emerson, Ellison worries about the political and institutional sources of that self. Late in “Circles,” Emerson tells a parable of precarious life that helps to clarify the nature of their disagreement. “Geoffrey draws on his boots to go through the woods, that his feet may be safer from the bite of snakes,” Emerson says. He continues:

Aaron never thinks of such a peril. In many years, neither is harmed by such

an accident. Yet it seems to me that with every precaution you take against such an evil, you put yourself into the power of the evil. I suppose that the highest prudence is the lowest prudence.<sup>18</sup>

Aaron's risk-taking, his vulnerability to harm, in fact protects him from the greater danger of precaution. But crucially, Aaron "never thinks of such a peril," acting with a blithe indifference that registers as openness to experience. A listener, rather than a reader, can more easily detect a telling pun: the ear would not be able to tell whether Aaron "never thinks of such a *peril*," the snakes, or whether he never thinks of "such *apparel*," the boots. In fact, Aaron must never think of either. Just as "a peril" is both the double and the opposite of protective "apparel," so, too, the instinct for precaution is embedded in the very perception of danger. This helps explain why Emerson finally dismisses the deliberate, conscious courting of risk through "gaming," an artificial contrivance he likens to "drunkenness" and "the use of opium and alcohol."<sup>19</sup> The courting of danger simply inverts, rather than escapes, the cringing care for safety. For Ellison the case is different. There simply is no available mode of pure improvisation that lacks consciousness of risk; there can be no natural spontaneity that has not been transformed already into a self-conscious and deliberate game.

As a result, the novel finally punctures the Emersonian fantasy that improvisational speech might release a real, true, or stable self that preexists the act of speaking. Indeed it is during improvisational moments most of all when the Invisible Man becomes aware that he is speaking for someone else, a possibility that haunts his composition of the book and that finds expression in its famous last line. After the Invisible Man's

first Brotherhood speech, he says, "What had come out was completely uncalculated, as though another self within me had taken over and held forth." Later he says, "I had uttered words that had possessed me."<sup>20</sup> Sometimes in Emerson the spontaneous self is literally reborn, but at this moment when the Invisible Man feels that "the new is being born," his journey down an auditorium tunnel toward the light replays his earlier and more violent rebirth at the factory hospital, where doctors performed some sort of lobotomizing electro-shock treatment without his consent. Nothing damages the fantasy of self-reliant improvisation more than the thought that flits through the Invisible Man's mind when he likens the microphones at the Brotherhood speech – "shiny electric gadgets," he calls them – to the "little gadget" of the lobotomy device.<sup>21</sup> Linking an instrument of improvisational speaking with one of psychiatric control and even punishment, Ellison finally collapses any meaningful distinction between them.

Accordingly, when the Invisible Man wonders, "[W]hat if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment," his second metaphor, the laboratory, reveals his real target. The problem with the members of the Brotherhood is not that they think like communists, but that they think like scientists, "cultivating scientific objectivity" and affirming that "everything could be controlled." In rejecting the merits of the gamble, the Brotherhood's scientific rationality endorses the rigid and riskless dynamics of the machine. "Don't kid yourself," the Invisible Man finally retorts, "The only scientific objectivity is a machine."<sup>22</sup> As if to remedy this situation by transforming the laboratory into a gambler's den, the novel arranges a gallery of failed and unreliable instruments that cannot, or do not, stabilize

the world. Clocks refuse to agree; blueprints lie abandoned; even a steam gauge in the paint factory's "uproar department" proves defective.<sup>23</sup> That machines break and fail is entirely for the best in a novel more worried that machine rationality might succeed too well. For in this regard, Ellison and Emerson wholly agree that a fluid and volatile world is far superior to a rational and mechanical one. The greatest danger in Ellison's novel would be the imposition of a logic so complete that hierarchies of status and power never could be shuffled again.

Remarkably, then, Ellison refuses to wax nostalgic for the alleged purity of the living human voice, despite the novel's skepticism about machine rationality. Although the novel is preoccupied with jazz music, it does not represent a single live jazz musician. The Invisible Man hears live organ music, a blues song, and boogie-woogie church hymns, but he only hears jazz through mechanical recordings on the radio-phonograph in his basement, in "groovy music on the juke," and over a "record shop loudspeaker."<sup>24</sup> There is no pure and natural human voice in the novel that can try to claim the spontaneity and authenticity of jazz improvisation because there can be no pure and natural self prior to the systems that give rise to it. Even the radio-phonograph in the Prologue, which at first seems an instrument of liberation, becomes, by novel's end, just another identity-producing gadget. The jazz music it plays actually replays earlier performances, which it rehearses over and over again, the same way every time.

Rather than countering the machine with an allegedly spontaneous and natural human voice, the Invisible Man pits machine rationality against machine ra-

tionality, through his plan to play five separate recordings of Louis Armstrong's "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue" simultaneously. Mechanical cacophony, contrived through imperfect synchronization, mixes up mechanical routine. Once the Invisible Man recognizes that his own voice is already engraved by other voices, once he understands that even his improvisations are just reassemblies of other speeches, he also realizes that his best option is to practice an eclectic and messy misalignment of forms and styles that can be combined – though never created – anew.

Despite Ellison's obvious skepticism about liberal individualism in its most traditional forms, Emersonian and otherwise, he attempts to rehabilitate and affirm the individual by defining him or her in far more qualified terms. Rather than recovering that natural, Adamic innocence that Emerson called "originality," Ellison prefers to "improvise upon the given," as he put it in one of his most important essays on art and music, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station."<sup>25</sup> Improvisation turns out not to be a matter of authentic or spontaneous self-expression at all, but a method of assembling a specific cultural inheritance, which accumulates over time and even against one's will, like the clutter that gathers in the Invisible Man's briefcase. In other words, improvisation does not necessarily militate against conformity, as in Emerson, but against mechanical rigidity, whether in private identity or social structure. In this way, an individual's improvisations are really the source of the "cacophonous motion" and the "chaos of American society" that Ellison prizes most, and that scramble all relations of status and power so that no hierarchy can ever become permanently and intractably fixed. Ellison's

“pluralistic turbulence” generates pluralistic mingling, and so, too, a messy mix of classes, races, nations, languages, cultures, styles, and aesthetics that never do settle down: “in this country things are always all shook up, so that people are constantly moving around and rubbing off on one another culturally.”<sup>26</sup> No one ever starts from scratch, nor is anyone purely and entirely himself. Jazz improvisation is valuable not because it liberates the player from the composer’s score, but because it reassembles preexisting scores, mixing up the codes, misaligning the records, and shuffling the deck.

One of Ellison’s most richly imagined metaphors for the effects of such pluralistic turbulence appears in “Chew Station” as a “light-skinned, blue-eyed, Afro-American-featured individual” who stops Manhattan traffic and pedestrians alike with his “Volkswagen Beetle decked out with a gleaming Rolls-Royce radiator,” from which he emerges wearing “black riding boots and fawn-colored riding breeches” and a “dashy dashiki.” American, European, and African forms and styles blend the cultures of the *Volk* and the aristocratic elite. The resulting figure bursts from his vehicle like “a dozen circus clowns,” which is to say that he is not only a little ridiculous, but also a self-conscious “American Joker.”<sup>27</sup> His eclectic reassembly of recognizable forms recycles available materials and makes a joke of them in the process.

In contrast, the Invisible Man’s problem in most of the novel is not that he lacks a true self, or even a useable self, but that he lacks the ability to play jokes like this, as even Tod Clifton finally learns to do. Against Burnside the vet’s advice to “Play the game, but don’t believe in it. . . . Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy!” the Invisible Man

continues to believe in the game too readily and too often. Burnside should know: he pronounces himself “more clown than fool,” which is to say, more given to joking than to mental illness.<sup>28</sup> When he tells the Invisible Man to “raise the ante,” Burnside’s poker slang reminds the Invisible Man that he had better learn how to bluff, too, given the hand he was dealt, and given that no one, really, is ever exempt from the game. Even Brother Jack is in the game, despite his pretensions to scientific objectivity. His name marks him as a minor aristocrat among the face cards and, as such, a key player in power’s most formidable configurations. Though Jack would deny it, the Invisible Man eventually concludes that even Jack is out to “ball the jack,” gamblers’ slang for staking everything on a single bet. Bledsoe is more candid about his role in the game: “after you win the game, you take the prize and you keep it,” he says. And having done so, he is “still the king,” not just royalty, but the mightiest face card of all.<sup>29</sup> These kings and jacks are jokers, too, of course, for every king is only a joker in the master’s clothes. The stratagems they use to claim and keep power show why the Invisible Man, if he is to keep his shirt, will have to stop believing in the game and assume the ironic detachment that would allow him to start playing it instead.

If poker thrives on, and even requires, the ironic distance of joking, the lottery positively inhibits joking. What joke could a lottery player contrive? Structurally resistant to irony, the lottery requires players to believe in the game, even though the real winners are those who operate the racket. In *Invisible Man*, the real lottery winner is Rinehart himself, with whom Mary Rambo may be placing her bets in a lottery she has been “playing for years,” despite her mount-



ing debt.<sup>30</sup> Jack and Bledsoe do not need to play the numbers because they have no shortage of ways to experience their own freedom and power, but Rinehart sells liberal selfhood to Mary Rambo on the installment plan. Like any other commodity, the prerogatives of liberal selfhood are in greatest demand where they seem to be in the shortest supply, and so the numbers game has always flourished among the poor and the working classes, for whom structural inequalities most limit options and opportunities. The risk apparatus of modern liberalism, including all of Beck's methods of risk individualization, are thus especially good at keeping people like Mary Rambo committed to key liberal ideals, ideals that entail, most importantly, accepting responsibility for one's own fortunes. As an instrument of risk individualization, as a technology of liberal self-production, the lottery eliminates opportunities for irony, producing a more traditional, self-reliant liberal identity, and fixing it in place. The only thing worse than having no jokers in such a game is having a joker in charge of the game, as Rinehart takes charge of the numbers. The joke is on the players, courtesy of "Rine the rascal."<sup>31</sup> He doesn't play the lottery himself, but he doesn't need to: he takes the bets, keeps the profits, and knows the score.

In the end, Ellison's novel permits nothing to stand as a master metaphor for "the beautiful absurdity of . . . American identity," not even poker, which the lottery finally challenges and undermines.<sup>32</sup> Several years after publishing *Invisible Man* Ellison offered a more pointed caution about the lottery when he acknowledged that Rinehart "transforms (for winners, of course) pennies into dollars, and thus he feeds (and

feeds on) the poor."<sup>33</sup> Those parentheses seem to mark minor qualifications, but in fact they quarantine devastating facts that Ellison could not incorporate into his more optimistic accounts of joking. Crucially, Ellison penned this extra caution about Rinehart in 1958, just a few years before state-sponsored and state-run lotteries began replacing private games like Rinehart's, following the widespread legalization of gambling in the United States. Ellison may not have anticipated the incorporation of the lottery into the apparatus of the state, but he certainly did recognize that if society were structured like a lottery, it might fix identity in place and stabilize, rather than shuffle, hierarchies of status and power. Unlike the fanciful game in Jorge Luis Borges's "The Lottery in Babylon" (1941), with its ruthless egalitarianism, Ellison's more culturally specific lottery suggests that Americans' widespread enthusiasm for chaos and swift change might be used against them institutionally and even governmentally, inculcating low-income quietism while shifting costs and responsibilities down the socioeconomic scale. If liberalism really is more like the lottery than like poker, the joke is on the players, because the capacities they regard as innate – the capacities they believe they bring to the table – are really produced through their participation in the game.

Ellison never does link American society exclusively with either poker games or lotteries, and so he avoids committing to either a naively optimistic or a cynically paranoid view of American society. Instead he keeps both versions in play and tacitly acknowledges that even his own faith in democratic pluralism might already be compromised, if it turns out to be enrolled in a higher game still. For a writer who really was a committed lib-

eral pluralist, that is an extraordinary concession, and one that shows how rigorously Ellison could scrutinize even his own most cherished positions. That is to say, Ellison himself finally refuses to believe in the game completely and uncritically, and in fact ironizes his own political commitments. No doubt one of the things he liked about liberalism was that it changes substantively and continually over time, as it has through its vari-

ous classical, corporate, and social-democratic permutations. More than fifty years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, when liberalism and now neoliberalism increasingly seem like the only game in town, Ellison's fear that the joker might capture the operation without anyone knowing it seems more relevant than ever to how the game is being played.

ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 108, 110. All references to Ellison's *Collected Essays* refer to one of two essays: "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," originally published in *Partisan Review* in 1958, and "The Little Man at Chehaw Station," originally published in *The American Scholar* in 1977–1978.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 504.
- <sup>3</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1952), 559.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 441.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 163, 153.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 324, 381, 491.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 577.
- <sup>10</sup> Ulrich Beck, *The Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992), 136–137. For important reflections on related risk dynamics, see the essays collected in Tom Baker and Jonathan Simon, *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
- <sup>11</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 553.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–31.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 290, 341, 276.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.
- <sup>15</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson and Jean Ferguson Carr (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1987), 30.
- <sup>16</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 108.
- <sup>17</sup> Emerson, *The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ferguson and Carr, 179–180, 184, 189–190.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

- <sup>20</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 353 – 354.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 346, 341, 235.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 505, 382.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 322, 175, 212.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 425, 443.
- <sup>25</sup> Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Callahan, 511.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 508, 504, 518.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 509 – 511.
- <sup>28</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 153 – 154.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 576, 142 – 143.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 498.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 559.
- <sup>33</sup> Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. Callahan, 110.