The Collective Identity of “Brother” in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

The narrator of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is never named. Because the narrator does not have a name, any name can be his. This makes him all the more invisible, all the more anonymous, yet all the more omnipresent. We do not know who he is, so he could be anyone, anywhere. Although the narrator’s name is never revealed, two names are applied to the narrator throughout the novel: Rinehart and Brother. The narrator steals the identity of a man named Rinehart after being mistaken for him a number of times. The narrator is given the name Brother, which becomes his identity for over one-fourth of this bildungsroman. Analyzing the word “Brother” suggests the narrator possesses a collective identity, as shown through the proper noun’s political, racial, and gender implications.

The narrator joins the Communist Party (CP) and plunges into its political mission. The CP “Brotherhood” calls him “Brother,” both a proper noun and a name. However, it is not his name only. There are many Brothers—Brother Tarp, Brother Jack, Brother Hambro. In contrast to the narrator, the other Brothers all bear their personal names as well as the title. The narrator’s given name is never said. This is complicated by the fact that Brother Jack gave the narrator a new name at the first party he went to:

> “This is your new identity,” Brother Jack said. “Open it.”
> Inside I found a name written on a slip of paper.
> “That is your new name,” Brother Jack said. “Start thinking of yourself by that name from this moment. Get it down so that even if you are called in the middle of the night you will respond. Very soon you shall be known by it all over the country. You are to answer to no other, understand?” (Ellison 309)

Names are an intrinsic part of identity. Names are given at birth. Names are the first words given to a stranger. Lovers scream names during sex. Families carve names into a gravestone after death. The fact the Communist Party had already prepared a name for the narrator shows the degree of possession that the party had over the narrator. Brother was more than a new name; it
was a new way of life. The narrator was forced to leave his past behind and become a new person in order to better fit into the CP’s narrative.

It could be argued only the word “Brother” was written on this slip of paper, rather than a full name that the reader never learns. Either way, the lack of name fits into the larger literary history of dispossessing African American men and women of their names and thereby their humanity. Critic Earle Vincent Bryan discusses the inability of other people to see black men and the tendency to put other names onto them. Bryan links the importance of names to identity, arguing that by disregarding a name, one renders another person “inconsequential.” (Bryan 264)

For the narrator to never have a name takes this trope to a new level.

Earlier at the party, before Brother Jack gave him his name, the narrator had observed an interaction that illustrated the degree to which he was a cog in a well calculated plan. In this interaction, one party member said to another, “‘But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?’” (Ellison 303). The other member swiftly countered this question, but it indicated the gaze of the party members; the narrator was a specimen. The CP handpicked and groomed him for the role he was expected to play, choosing him as a black man for his voice, giving him a new identity, and then an ideology to cling to: the Communist ideology.

For the narrator, this name and ideology melded into one. He has no name without his identification as a brother; he does not exist without his party. But in much the same way, the party begins to exist because of him; he becomes a powerful figurehead for the movement, to the point where the party becomes fearful of his influence. Yes, they had wanted a black Brother to increase their authority in Harlem. But they did not want one to be so powerful as to undermine white Brothers’ of their existing influence. And so the man known only as Brother becomes comes to encompass the popular worth of all the other Brothers.
The party member who asked if the narrator’s skin was dark enough rightly pointed out that the narrator was chosen for being black. Historically, the Communist Party moved into Harlem in the early 1930s as part of their movement for unemployment relief and workers’ rights. The Scottsboro Trials were the main event that integrated the CP into the black Harlem community. The CP helped make the 1931 Alabama lynching of nine falsely accused black men into a national spectacle, and in doing so, the organization gained a reputation of being antiracist. (D’Amato)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “brother” is used colloquially chiefly between African Americans to indicate “A (fellow) black man.” It is also used “as a form of address.” In this context, the first recorded usage of “brother” was in the 1910 *N.Y. Evening Journal*. (OED)

Nearly forty years later, “brother” was still used between black men in New York. For Ras the Exhorter, one cannot be both a brother to white communists and to fellow African Americans. Ras says to the narrator:

“You my brother, mahn. Brothers are the same color, how the hell you call these white men *brother*? Shit, mahn. That’s shit. Brothers are the same color. We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! You—*Godahm*, mahn!” (Ellison 370)

A black man can only be a “brother” to another black man, according to Ras. Race takes precedence as the greatest identifier, and to pretend to be brothers with a man of another race is simply inconceivable. Ras says “you *my* brother,” showing a possession of the narrator and the narrator’s blackness. Indeed, for Ras politics and race are one and the same.

Even as a prominent CP member, the narrator’s blackness defines him, but there is not an easy balance between race and party. Brother Westram poses a solution: “I think we ought to have some way of showing what we are. We ought to have some banners and things like that. ‘Specially for us black brothers” (Ellison 394). Westram said they should be able to show “what
we are.” This turn of phrase could just as easily read as “who we are.” By saying “what,” he loses his identity as a person, and becomes an object, a movement, something bigger than just a name, bigger than a lone black man. Westram expresses the need for black communists to be identifiable, referring to an incident where a black Brother mistakenly beat up a white Brother. The narrator’s racial identity will always exist simultaneously with his racial one.

After another scene in the book it would seem that being a black member of the CP is not always the safest thing. The narrator walks into Barrelhouse’s bar in Harlem and calls two men he recognizes “brother.” They don’t take it well, and bring it up with Barrel:

“Look here, Barrel, we wanted to ask you one question.” The tall one said. “We just wanted to know if you could tell us just whose brother this here cat’s supposed to be? He come in here, just now calling everybody brother.”

“He’s my brother,” Barrel said, holding the foaming glass between his long fingers.

“Anything wrong with that?”

“Look, fellow,” I said down the bar, “that’s our way of speaking. I meant no harm in calling you brother. I’m sorry you misunderstood me.”

“Brother, here’s your beer,” Barrelhouse said.

“So he’s your brother, eh, Barrel?” (Ellison 425)

In this tense passage, MacAdams, the “tall one,” had asked whose brother the narrator is, dispossessing the narrator of both his identity as a CP member and as a fellow black man. MacAdams pretends to see “brother” only as a term between relations. The conversation continues, and MacAdams says to Barrelhouse, “I hear [the narrator] got the white fever and left” (Ellison 425). This illustrates that the term ‘brother’ encompasses simultaneously the racial and the political identity of the narrator, both of which people strip him of when they do not agree with him. Without the name ‘Brother’ the narrator loses two identity markers and is thereby ostracized from both his political and racial communities.

The gendered term “brother” brings with it images of masculinity and inherited male power. Every time one of the men calls another a brother, it affirms their male identity. The
Oxford English Dictionary cites the first usage of the word brother as “a male comrade or companion” in early Old English. Among its usage in the CP and between African Americans, brother is always used to refer to men.

The CP is very much a boy’s club. The party sends the narrator to deal with the “women question” when they want to get rid of him. They do not expect or even want him to succeed in gaining women’s rights. Moreover, only men mentor the narrator. This male dominance is exemplified when Brother Tarp and the narrator discuss Fredrick Douglas. Brother Tarp asks if the narrator knows about Douglas, to which the narrator replies:

“Not much. My grandfather used to tell me about him though.”
“That’s enough. He was a great man. You just take a look at him once and a while. You have everything you need—paper and stuff like that?”
“Yes, I have Brother Tarp. And thanks for the portrait of Douglas.”
“Don’t thank me, son,” he said from the door. “He belongs to all of us.” (Ellison 394)

There are four men in this scene: the narrator, Brother Tarp, Fredrick Douglas, and the narrator’s grandfather. Most of the pronouns are gendered. Brother Tarp calls Douglas “a great man,” rather than a great person. Indeed, due to the extent of Douglas’ influence, the narrator need only “look at him once and a while” and, presumably, be inspired. Tarp calls the narrator “son” adopting the role of mentor along with the other two men: the grandfather and Douglas. By saying “son” rather than a gender neutral term, like child or kid, he reinforces the patriarchal passage of knowledge. Tarp closes by saying “he belongs to all of us,” again referring to Douglas by his gender identity. In using the word “us,” Tarp pulls the narrator into this collective of men.

In Ellison’s *Invisible Man* we see the intersection of race, gender, and politics converge in the term Brother. The following graph is a numerical representation of words pertaining to these three areas of identification. The graph measures the frequency of the words “brother,” “man,” “black,” and “brotherhood.” The x-axis divides the 581-page book into ten parts. The y-
axis indicates the raw frequency of the words. Raw frequency measures the number of times a word is used in a given section. Each of the dots indicate the number of times each word is said per segment. The dots are marked by a different color per word, connected by lines. (Sinclair and Rockwell)

This raw frequency graph not only shows the high rate at which these identities are referred to, but also the evolution of the importance of these concepts throughout the text. For example, the orange line shows the usage of the word “man,” whose frequency ends on a positive trajectory. It also reveals a correlation between the identities represented by these words, such as how at document segment seven the use of “man” drops, but “brother,” “black,” and “brotherhood” go up. Perhaps in this area of the book, “man” comes up less often due to heightened importance of the racial identity of the narrator, but also because “brother” encapsulates some of the male identity.
The third and fourth most frequent unique words in *Invisible Man* are “man” (used 590 times) and “brother” (used 464 times).\(^1\) As Susan Hockey, one of the leaders in applying electronic tools to the humanities, writes, “simple statistical tools […] provide concrete evidence to support or refute hypotheses or interpretations which have in the past been based on human reading and somewhat serendipitous noting of interesting features” (Hockey 66). This graph does just that—it provides quantitative evidence to substantiate my claims. A survey of the substantial literary analysis and criticism around *Invisible Man* reveals that few have applied computerized textual analysis tools to the novel, but the merits of doing so has been noted. (Nadel 157)

The term brother is associated with the political Communist identity, the racial African American identity, and the gendered male identity. Each of these groups contributes to the collective identity of the narrator. Yet, even as the narrator is called Brother, he can only be called this noun by people who are part of each of his identity groups. This excludes people who are not black, people who are not Communist, and people who are not men. He is only a member of groups, not an individual outside of these identities. Indeed, Brother provides a false sense of identity for the narrator, and when it falls away, he reaches for the next closest identity—Rinehart. While Brother provides a name for the narrator to be called, it, like Rinehart, does not truly belong to him. Brother, after all, is a title, not a name. It shows what he is—a black, Communist man—not who he is. And so he remains, both to himself and to others, an *Invisible Man*.

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\(^1\) This calculation excludes “stopwords” such as determiners and prepositions.
Works Cited


