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INVISIBLE IN THE WHITE HOUSE:
RETHINKING ELLISON THROUGH BARACK OBAMA'S
GLOBAL READING LIST

Abstract: For readers of Ralph Ellison, the ascent and presidency of Barack Obama had special resonance. Not only is Obama, too, a reader of Ellison, the memoir *Dreams from My Father* (1995) contains structural echoes of *Invisible Man*, and observers have long acknowledged continuities between Ellison and the former US president's political style. Shortly before the 2008 election, David Samuels wrote in *The New Republic* that Obama's "blank screen" approach to his own racial identity make him a descendent of *Invisible Man*; and in the recent biopic *Barry* (2016), a young Obama is portrayed reading *Invisible Man* beside a basketball court, where he picks up the nickname "Invisible." Timothy Parrish even claims that when Obama was elected, "the nation had elected and was pursuing his [Ellison's] vision." The oft-cited Ellison-Obama association helps to explain the disappointment many Ellison fans felt when Obama, speaking with the *NY Times'* Michiko Kakutani about his White House reading list shortly before leaving office, failed to name the writer. Yet the Kakutani interview, when taken in the context of Obama's status as an heir to Ellison *and* what proved to be Obama's decidedly global reading list, provides an opportunity to attune our perceptions of both figures. This account begins with Ellison's theory of how presidents shape American cultural life, in his defense of Lyndon B. Johnson ("The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner" (1968)). It also reconsiders the Ellison-Obama association in the context of Obama's global reading list and political orientation. Where does the domestic-policy-oriented, Ellisonian President Obama end, and where does the globalist Obama begin? Finally, if Obama's most conspicuous omission in the Kakutani interview was Ellison, his most stunning admission was that his White House years made him an avid (if critical) reader of V.S. Naipaul. The talk concludes by considering Obama's "realistic" Naipaul foreign-policy baseline in the context of Ellison's famous restraint and caution.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison, Barack Obama, V.S. Naipaul, Lyndon B. Johnson, Michiko Kakutani

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НЕВИДИМКА В БЕЛОМ ДОМЕ: БАРАК ОБАМА КАК ЧИТАТЕЛЬ МИРОВОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ И НОВЫЙ ВЗГЛЯД НА ЭЛЛИСОНА

Аннотация: Для тех, кто читал Ральфа Эллисона, карьерный взлет и вступление Барака Обамы на пост президента обладали особым смыслом. Сам Обама не только читал Эллисона: в его воспоминаниях «Мечты моего отца» можно обнаружить композиционные аллюзии на «Невидимку»; давно отмечалась и политическая преемственность между Эллисоном и бывшим президентом США. Незадолго до выборов 2008 года Дэвид Сэмюэлс в журнале *The New Republic* писал, что неосознание Обамой собственной расовой идентичности позволяет назвать его преемником «Невидимки», а в недавно снятом биографическом фильме «Барри» (2016) мы видим, как молодой Обама рядом с баскетбольной площадкой читает «Невидимку» и получает прозвище «Невидимый». Тимоти Пэрриш даже утверждает, что, избрав Обаму, «нация избрала точку зрения Эллисона и стремилась ее держаться». Столь часто возникающая ассоциация между Эллисоном и Обамой объясняет разочарование, которое многие поклонники Эллисона испытали, когда Обама, незадолго до своего ухода с поста президента рассказывая корреспонденту *NY Times* Митико Какутани, что он читал в Белом доме, не назвал этого имени. Однако интервью, которое взяла у тогдашнего президента Какутани, если рассматривать его в связи с восприятием Обамы как духовного наследника Эллисона, а также в связи с перечнем произведений всемирной литературы, перечисленных Обамой, позволяет получить более конкретное представление об обеих этих фигурах. В статье сначала анализируются взгляды Эллисона на то, как президенты влияют на культурную жизнь Америки, высказанные им в связи с его защитой Линдона Б. Джонсона (эссе «Миф о заблуждавшемся белом южанине», 1968). Кроме того, связь между Эллисоном и Обамой переосмысливается в контексте списка мировой литературы, приведенного Обамой, и политической позиции. Где проходит граница между президентом Обамой, сосредоточенным на внутренней политике, близким по взглядам к Эллисону, и Обамой-глобалистом? Наконец, еще более, чем бросающееся в глаза отсутствие упоминания об Эллисоне в интервью с Какутани, поражает заявление Обамы, что за годы в Белом доме он пристрастился к чтению В.С. Найпола (пусть даже и критически к нему относясь). Завершается разговор рассмотрением «реалистического» курса внешней политики, подсказанного Обаме Найполом, в контексте знаменитых эллисоновских принципов осторожности и сдержанности.

Ключевые слова: Р. Эллисон, Барак Обама, В.С. Найпол, Линдон Джонсон, Митико Какутани

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For many readers of Ralph Ellison, the ascent and presidency of Barack Obama had special resonance. Beyond the obvious interest Ellison would have had in the election of the first African American president—Timothy Parrish has called Ellison “American literature’s most self-consciously national writer” [Parrish 2012: 194] – observers have long acknowledged specific continuities between Ellison’s work and the former US president’s political style. Shortly before the 2008 election, David Samuels wrote in *The New Republic* that Obama’s “blank screen” approach to his own racial identity make him a virtual descendent of *Invisible Man*. Bryan Crable engages this question in greater depth in his essay on the optics of the Obama presidency, “*Invisible Man* in the Age of Obama: Ellison on (Color) Blindness, Visibility, and the Hopes for a Postracial America.” In the 2016 Netflix biopic *Barry*, directed by Vikram Gandhi, a young, fictionalized Obama is portrayed reading *Invisible Man* beside a basketball court, where he picks up the nickname “Invisible.” In one scene, Obama is even called Ralph Ellison. In his 2012 monograph *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America*, Parrish even goes so far as to claim that, in a sense, when Obama was elected, “the nation had elected and was pursuing his [Ellison’s] vision.” While Parrish and others have rightly lamented that Obama’s election was a some forty-years belated fulfillment of the progress of the Civil Rights movement, an event best read, as Parrish puts it, as a “startling twist” in post-*Brown* US history [Parrish 2012: 228], the event nevertheless can feel, or at least may have felt at the time, like a partial fulfillment of Ellison’s vision, and a step in the direction of a post-racial America.

The Ellison-Obama association also has resonance because Obama, perhaps the most literary US president since Abraham Lincoln, is a prolific reader and writer. His memoir *Dreams from My Father* (1995) contains both structural and thematic echoes of *Invisible Man*. The book includes repeated themes of invisibility, lying in wait, and pursuing solitude (“I had grown too comfortable in my solitude,” Obama writes, “the safest place I knew” [Obama 2004: 4]. This is not a coincidence. According to Greg Grandin, Obama “modeled his much praised memoir, ‘Dreams From My Father,’ on Ellison’s 1952 novel ‘Invisible Man.’” But as Grandin also points out, there is a significant difference in the case of Obama’s book. He writes, “where Ellison’s young, idealistic black protagonist remains anonymous – the book ends with him alone in his underground apartment – Mr. Obama won the White House” [Grandin 2014].

The Ellison-Obama association looms in the background of much of contemporary Ellison scholarship. It also explains the disappointment some

Ellison fans felt when Obama, speaking with the *NY Times*' Michiko Kakutani in the Oval Office exactly one week before leaving office, failed to name the writer. Obama listed an exceptionally diverse set of books, including Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, the *Three-Body Problem* series by Chinese science fiction writer Liu Cixin, Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, as well as the work of writers Junot Diaz and Jhumpa Lahiri. But even when Kakutani asked directly if there were any special "touchstones" in his reading while in office, texts to which he returned for "comfort," Ellison made no appearance. Instead, Obama identifies three other writers. First, he cites Shakespeare, although no specific play beyond a statement that he now thought *The Tempest* was *not* as boring as it was during high school. Just as appropriately, he mentions Toni Morrison, specifically *Song of Solomon*, which for him is the book he thinks of whenever he thinks about "people going through hardship. That it's not just pain, but there's joy and glory and mystery" [Kakutani 2017]. And then he mentions V.S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, when it comes to articulating a "baseline" for his thinking about foreign policy. In the only actual passage he recites in the interview, Obama quotes the rather chilling opening of the book, which reads, "The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it." Obama neglects to mention that this line does not belong to Naipaul exactly, but rather to the Nobel laureate's first-person narrator Salim, who writes retrospectively about his experience barely surviving a revolution in an unnamed African country. But Obama goes on to explain the apparently profound impression this passage left on him:

I always think about that line, and I think about his novels when I'm thinking about the hardness of the world sometimes, particularly in foreign policy, and I resist and fight against sometimes that very cynical, more realistic view of the world. And yet, there are times when it feels as if that may be true... So in that sense, I'm using writing like that as a foil or something to debate against. [Kakutani 2017]

The specific politics of the Naipaul passage, as well as the politics of Obama's use of Naipaul as a "baseline" are worth exploring in greater detail. I return to them at the end of this account. For now, however, let it suffice to acknowledge Obama's interest in Naipaul as evidence of the level of importance of Obama's use of literature while occupying the office of President of the United States. Here, a passage from a novel apparently has the ability to

weigh in on foreign policy decisions, as if Naipaul were a kind of informal adviser to the presidency.

The Kakutani interview, and in particular the Naipaul reference, when taken in the context of Obama's status as an heir to Ellison provide an opportunity to attune our perceptions of both Ellison and Obama (and possibly Naipaul as well, who died in August 2018). This account offers Obama's reading list – and just as importantly the list as a presidential gesture —as an occasion for rethinking Ellison, his theory of how presidents shape American cultural life, and Obama's status as Ellison's heir now, in the age of Donald Trump's presidency.

A logical starting point may be Ellison's remarks about the president to whom he was the closest personally, Lyndon B. Johnson, in particular his thoughts on the cultural function and significance of the US presidency. Under Johnson's initiative, Ellison was a charter member of the National Endowment for the Arts. Ellison wrote about Johnson in the greatest detail in the 1968 essay "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner." Ellison originally wrote this essay in 1967-8 after being asked by James MacGregor Burns to write a prefatory essay for a volume titled *To Heal and to Build*, a commemorative collection of Johnson's speeches, which contained commentary by a number of invited contributors. Ellison was given considerable latitude in the subject of his essay by the editor. As Burns instructed in a letter to Ellison, "Your essay can speak for *yourself* – and let the president's speeches speak for him" [Burns 1967]. Ellison chose to focus on what he calls the president's "style," offering a defense of Johnson's achievements on the basis of his support of the Civil Rights movement and the concrete political gains his policies afforded African Americans. The essay responds directly to criticism Ellison received from fellow attendees of the 1965 National Festival for the Arts, who accused Ellison of being a "sell out" to the "establishment" for his belief that Johnson's advocacy for black civil rights could be separated from the president's problematic involvement in the Vietnam War [Ellison 1986a: 77]. According to Ellison, Johnson "spelled out the meaning of full integration for Negroes in a way that no one, no President, not Abraham Lincoln nor Franklin Roosevelt, no matter how much we loved and respected them, has ever done before. There was no hedging in it, no escape clauses" [Ellison 1986a: 77]. In fact, for Ellison many supposedly enlightened Northern liberals had become "the new apologists for segregation" [Ellison 1986a: 77], despite their moral posturing and public style.

In "The Myth of the Flawed White Southerner," Ellison offers a theory for why this is. Indeed, the Northern liberals in question partly mistrusted

Johnson on the basis of the war. They also did so because they misread the president's regional mannerisms, which—famously—contributed to a general public perception that the Texan Johnson possessed a brand of Southern or Western swagger, which, for some, took on the appearance of arrogance. Johnson undoubtedly capitalized upon the regional flair of his rhetorical style. This president was renowned for the so-called “Johnson treatment,” where he would personally dominate colleagues and rivals in high-pressure *tête-à-tête* encounters. But when it came to his relation to the public, perceptions that Johnson was out of touch because of dominative posturing and regional style were, in Ellison's view, mistaken. Indeed, Ellison is quick to remind his reader that even Lincoln was, in the first place, a “backwoods politician who fought through the tragic years of the Civil War to keep the nation whole,” and not the iconic, universalist figure murdered at Ford's Theater, whom Americans remember him as. Matters of political “style” functioned for Ellison something more like literary “style,” or Henry James' notion of “felt life” [Ellison 1986a: 81].¹ To become preoccupied with the style of Johnson's political performance – or, to extend the literary metaphor, its tone, or its form – was to miss the important content of what Ellison viewed as Johnson's considerably emancipated political commitments and acts: a little like reading, say, the narrative of Huck Finn, another flawed, white Southerner to be sure, and focusing on perceived flaws with his regional diction rather than his brave, eleventh-hour impulse to “steal” his friend Jim free from slavery.

This is not to suggest that style, whether presidential or literary, is finally separable from content, which in the case of politics of course means policy. This is a reality the Trump era has made all too obvious, where anti-immigrant rhetoric, for instance calls to “build a wall” along the US-Mexico border, has impacted policy and created perilous new political realities. The way politicians use words, their rhetoric and style, construct reality through insidious channels as well: Trump's shameful equivocations in the wake of the August 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia have been cited as racist “dog whistles” alerting white supremacists that their conduct now receives tacit presidential approval. Indeed, the continuity between style and content lies at the heart of Ellison's worldview as a reader of both politics and literature. Ellison's best explanation of this comes in

¹ Here is Ellison's definition of James' term: “that quality conveyed by the speaker's knowledge and feeling for the regional, racial, religious, and class unities and differences within the land, and his awareness of the hopes and values of a diverse people struggling to achieve the American promise in their own time, in their own place, and with the means at hand” [Ellison 1986a: 81].

his own reading of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In the essay “Society, Morality, and the Novel,” Ellison responds to Ernest Hemingway’s oft-misquoted line about the Twain novel’s centrality to American literature.² According to Hemingway, Twain’s importance begins and ends on the surfaces of style, tone, and form, which were such priorities for the modernists; for Hemingway, Twain authorized American authors to write in their own regional voices, and Huck’s moral decision to save Jim from slavery is just an unrealistic aesthetic mistake. But Ellison saw this part of the novel as essential, and for reasons that are at once philosophical, political, and formal:

it is exactly that part of the action which represents the *formal externalization* of Huck-Twain’s moral position; and if one may speak of ritual here, it is in this part of the action that the fundamental American commitment, the myth, is made manifest. Without this attempt *Huckleberry Finn* becomes the simple boy’s book that many would rather it be, a fantasy born of pure delight and not really serious at all. [Ellison 1986b: 267-8, italics mine]

Ellison’s specific terminology in this passage, and throughout many of his critical essays, emerges from his friend Kenneth Burke, who was an enormous impact on his thinking of literature as a form of communication.³ The opacity of Burke’s thought slightly conceals Ellison’s point, which is actually a simple one: that the form of Twain’s novel, an essential component of which is the first-person narrator’s personal style, is exactly as important as to the book’s “seriousness” as its moral argument. For Ellison, this is nothing less than a “fundamental American commitment.” It matters, in other words, that the moral argument for saving Jim is made in Huck’s voice. Similarly, President Johnson’s style may appear – because of stereotype, because of the history of race conflict in the US—to conflict with his policy. Yet Ellison implies that Johnson as advocate for Civil Rights has more power

² Hemingway is often quoted as saying, “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*...it’s the best book we’ve had. All American writing comes from that.” In fact he wrote, in the travelogue *Green Hills of Africa*, the following: “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. *If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating.* But it’s the best book we’ve had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since” [Ellison 1986b: 22, italics mine].

³ For a detailed exploration of the importance of Burke to Ellison’s thought and art, see [Crale 2012].

because it comes wrapped in a Texas drawl, rather than a classic or stereotypical Northern liberal voice

Of course, actual representation for historically marginalized groups was also very important to Ellison. This was another aspect of Ellison's opinion on the failure on behalf of some of his colleagues to understand Johnson: they neglected to acknowledge the real opportunities Johnson created for the arts and humanities, especially for people of color in these fields. Johnson was not a literary president on the scale of Obama, and his personal reading was not a matter of broad cultural interest. But Johnson cared about honoring the arts, humanities, and literature in a way that exceeded many of his predecessors, and he was an advocate for historically marginalized voices, in particular by inviting African American writers and artists to the White House. Johnson's advancements along these lines quite literally opened the space for Kakutani's eventual interview with Obama, and Ellison's attention to Johnson's advancements matters. Our interest in what presidents think about literary voices – especially historically marginalized voices – depends considerably on the aspect of Johnson's presidency that Ellison admired and the institutions in which he took on a foundational role.

What would Ralph Ellison say about Barack Obama's reading list? Although it is impossible to know for sure, his essay on Johnson illustrates in detail why we should care what presidents think about literature in the first place. This writer with an explicit "national interest" saw an important connection between presidential support and enfranchised literary activity, which accelerated for writers from historically marginalized backgrounds during the Johnson administration. What, then, might it be possible for us to learn about the Ellison-Obama connection, Obama's presidential style, and for that matter his politics, from his omission of Ellison in the interview with Kakutani? And should anything be made of the fact that this was one of Obama's final presidential activities before handing over the Oval Office to Donald Trump, whose presidential style has been defined by race-baiting and dog-whistles (the success of which one suspects would stun even Ellison's own Senator Sunraider)? Or Trump's brazen insults to historically marginalized groups, and conspicuous denials that his style and tone are necessarily connected with his actual beliefs or policy?

One thought experiment might be to focus on Obama's unusual but insistent inclusion of V.S. Naipaul, who, again, may be the most conspicuous outlier on the former president's diverse reading list. In some ways, Naipaul could hardly be any more different from Ralph Ellison, at least in terms of his career trajectory. While Ellison published exactly one novel during his

lifetime, and battled through the complexities of his long, unfinished second book, Naipaul, who received the Nobel Prize in 2001, published some thirty books of fiction and nonfiction. Ellison may be, as Parrish puts it, America's most "self-consciously national writer"; Naipaul, on the other hand, has perennially insisted upon his ultimate postcolonial placelessness, which he considers the core of his art. In a 1971 interview with Adrian Rowe-Evans, he explained,

One must make a pattern of one's observations; one's daily distress; one's daily knowledge of homelessness, placelessness; one's lack of representation in the world; one's lack of status. These, for me, are not just ideas; when I talk about being an exile or a refugee I'm not just using a metaphor, I'm speaking literally. If daily one lives with this, then daily one has to incorporate the experience into something bigger. Because one doesn't have a side, doesn't have a country, doesn't have a community; one is entirely an individual. [Rowe-Evans 1979: 31]

Yet despite this very different orientation from Ellison toward the political infrastructure in which he finds himself, Naipaul, too, was born the descendent of forced laborers brought to the Americas under unjust conditions. Like Ellison, his work protests this long colonial history. Although Naipaul's grandparents were not slaves, exploitative labor lies in Naipaul's family background as well; the writer's ancestors were part of the large group of indentured servants brought to work the sugarcane fields of Colonial Trinidad after slavery was banned in the Empire. He won a government scholarship to Oxford where he read English, and then—after a series of failed initial attempts—he began publishing fiction in the mid-1950s.

Naipaul's *oeuvre*, which spans six decades, can be thought of in two major movements: a period of socially realistic, fictionalized accounts of his own upbringing in Trinidad, including his most famous work *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), and then a series of novels and nonfiction travel books mainly about India, Africa, the Islamic world, the American South, as well as his own autobiographical experience in England. This second half of Naipaul's career has been controversial for a few reasons, in part because these works sometimes display – as in the lines cited by Obama from *A Bend in the River* (1979)—a brutal realism that can be taken as something bordering on conservatism, although this perception has perhaps been aggravated by the writer's unfortunate habit of making what often appear to be deliberately incendiary public remarks. His antagonistic relationship to critics and interviewers is notorious, although Naipaul has always distanced himself

from his public persona and directed critics to his books. As he put it in the opening remarks of his Nobel lecture in 2001, “Everything about me of value is in my books.”

Ellison asks, at the end of *Invisible Man*, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak *for* you?” [Ellison 1995: 581]. If we might have wished to find Ellison cited in Obama’s exit-reading list, that is because this question should be all the more urgent for an American president, who indeed has a responsibility to speak – on the highest possible frequency, despite any regional alliances – for those groups historically and systematically excluded from supposedly enshrined national ideals of equality and justice. If we find Naipaul, instead, this may be a mark of Obama’s cosmopolitanism, and more importantly his willingness to inhabit contradiction. The alarming “realism” of the line he deadpans to Kakutani at the same time strikes one as rather chilling, especially offered as a foreign-policy baseline – however problemantized by Obama – on the eve of the Trump era. Yet perhaps it is better read as a kind of warning? For Obama to read Naipaul *in plain sight* of the author’s dark vision of political reality demonstrates his inclination to inhabit political worldviews with which he does not agree in order to understand them. Perhaps Obama offers Naipaul’s line as a warning, or even a call to action?

There are many plausible reasons for why Ellison failed to come to mind for President Obama when Michiko Kakutani asked him about his White House reading, and Naipaul cannot be thought of as a “replacement” for Ellison in any straightforward way. What we can learn about Obama from his mention of Naipaul has more to do with what it tells us about his *style* as an outgoing president than it does, say, about some kind of reappraisal of Ellison that took place over the course of his career. Ultimately, the safest inclination may be to think that Ellison’s relation to Obama is one of an influence that perhaps became increasingly latent, but there is a sense in which Ellison might have in a way led Obama to Naipaul, or at least might have opened that door of possibility.

One further item closes the connection between Ellison and Naipaul, and illustrates how Obama’s list, although it does not mention Ellison, nevertheless provides an interesting context for rethinking Ellison further. Perhaps the most under-read and underrated of Naipaul’s books is his one book about the United States, a travel narrative he published in 1989 called *A Turn in the South*. Like his other travel books, the book consists largely in interviews, only this time – rather than to his usual destinations in India, Africa, or the Islamic world – he travels to the American South. Here, as in his

other books, Naipaul attempts to use his “outsider’s perspective” to take the pulse of a troubled region, to examine through many interviews how people live, what they value, and in this case to document especially how they talk about slavery, Reconstruction, and other moments in what Naipaul calls the South’s “unmentionable past” [Naipaul 1990: 12]. Before Naipaul embarks on his Southern sojourn, however, he makes a stop in New York, where he meets up briefly in Harlem with a friend of a friend, who happens to be Al Murray. Naipaul acknowledges Murray as a friend of Ellison’s, although his discussion focuses on Murray’s lifestyle, and on his observations of Harlem. Naipaul himself is “demoralized” by the devastation of late-1980s Harlem, which – using a not terribly original metaphor—reminds him, in its disrepair, of a district that might have experienced a “war” [Naipaul 1990: 22]. But Murray manages to get him to witness sunnier aspects of life in the neighborhood. Naipaul writes, “To the west was a multicolored row of buildings that a famous black artist, a friend of Al’s, had made the subject of a picture. And when Al looked down at the street below he saw the two or three churches and the house of the local congressman: buildings standing for important aspects of local life. . . . So with Al’s help, my eye changed. And where at first I had only seen Harlem and gloom, I began on the high balcony to see the comparative order of the area where Al lived” [Naipaul 1990: 22]. Together they walk the streets of Harlem and admire the wide sidewalks, and Naipaul even buys a copy of *The Souls of Black Folk* at a vibrant local bookstore.

But a few moments later, waiting for a bus with Murray, Ellison re-emerges for one final appearance in Naipaul’s book. The moment is brief, but worth noting. Here is Naipaul: “I didn’t take a taxi back. There were no taxis in the streets. Al waited a little while with me, talking of Ralph Ellison, until a bus came. And then, unwillingly, I saw again, and more slowly this time, stop by stop, what I had seen on the way out: a whole section of a great city in decay” [Naipaul 1990: 23].

What was the content of this final conversation between Murray and Naipaul about Ellison? We cannot know for sure. But Naipaul’s “unwilling” yet seemingly inevitable return from a hopeful, positive mood to a more desolate view of Harlem follows a pattern uncannily similar to Obama’s claim that he frequently returns to Naipaul’s “realistic” opening line in *A Bend in the River* as a desolate but still pertinent vision of political reality. American readers of Ellison might have hoped to hear Obama say, in his final days in the White House, that he was going underground like Invisible Man to lurk and to wait, that he would continue, “on the lower frequencies,” to try to speak for all. But ultimately it was to the “baseline” of Naipaul that

Obama returned: “The world is what it is: men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.” The configuration of Obama’s contradictions are different from Johnson’s, but perhaps whatever surprise we might register at his reference to Naipaul also has to do with a misinterpretation of his style? Perhaps his reference to Naipaul takes on greater significance in this context, as a warning – shrouded in the relatively lighthearted exercise of an exit reading list by a president – that now, and for the foreseeable future, a different, harsher political order is at hand in the US. In this world, which, for now, “is what it is,” marginalized groups will need to protest actively to avoid becoming “nothing,” to avoid losing their “place in it.” Here, a figure such as Naipaul’s narrator Salim from *A Bend in the River*—who like *Invisible Man* writes retrospectively, as a bitter survivor – may indeed become a vital, instructive literary guide.

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