

INVISIBLE MAN

**GORDON PARKS AND
RALPH ELLISON IN HARLEM**

MICHAL RAZ-RUSSO

**WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY DOUGLAS DRUICK,
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HARLEM IS NOW HERE

Jean-Christophe Cloutier

Both Gordon Roger Parks and Ralph Waldo Ellison “arrived” in 1948. Parks became the first African American staff photographer at *Life* magazine after the publication of his story “Harlem Gang Leader” in November of that year, while Ellison published, to rave reviews and immediate acclaim, “Battle Royal,” a story that eventually became the first chapter of his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. These accomplishments can be linked back to the short-lived *’48: The Magazine of the Year*, where “Battle Royal” appeared in January 1948, and where a photo essay by Parks and Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” was set to appear. The back cover of the magazine’s June issue advertised that next month’s edition would include a “Photo-Report” by Ellison and Parks titled “Harlem Is Nowhere,” and offered this tantalizing preview: “‘A thousand clinics could not cure the sense of unreality that haunts Harlem as it haunts the world.’ A brilliant writer and a distinguished photographer, with a sensitive comprehension of their own people, examine New York’s troubled Negro city as a laboratory for universal problems” (fig. 10).¹ But this historic collaboration between Parks and Ellison never appeared; the magazine filed for bankruptcy just days before the July issue was to be printed. “Harlem Is Nowhere” is Ellison’s essay on the Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic, a grassroots psychiatric facility he famously called “an underground extension of democracy” and “one of Harlem’s most important institutions.”² It was eventually included in his first collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*, published in 1964, but without pictures. In fact, only a cryptic editorial note

accompanied the essay: “Unpublished. Written for *Magazine of the Year*, 1948.” There was no mention of photographs, and no mention of Parks.

The story of the vanished photo essay offers insight into both Ellison’s and Parks’ professional trajectories, as their collaboration was pivotal in their respective careers as writers and photographers. The two men lent a hand to the clinic’s founder, Dr. Fredric Wertham, in turning his dream of a free psychiatric clinic in Harlem into a reality. The Lafargue Clinic itself became something like a cipher for crucial contemporary issues: segregation, juvenile delinquency, and the lack of institutional care for African Americans. Photography, mass culture iconography, and the judicial battles for African American rights are intertwined with the history of this groundbreaking facility; in 1946, Richard Wright had published a photo essay on the clinic, “Psychiatry Comes to Harlem,” with pictures by Richard Saunders, and Lafargue’s studies of the effects of segregation on black as well as white children were instrumental in the 1954 Supreme Court decision, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, to abolish school segregation.³ Not only did Ellison see Parks’ photographs as an integral part of his planned essay on Harlem and the Lafargue Clinic, but, as his papers reveal, he conceived of the clinic itself as a “special kind of camera” on the problems of the day.

The “Nowhere” photo essay did not follow the more common template found in mainstream magazines, where text and images were often conceived

¹ Back cover, *’48: The Magazine of the Year*, June 1948, box 4, Lafargue Clinic Records, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. Hereafter LFR.

² Ralph Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 320.

³ Thurgood Marshall, who argued *Brown* before the Supreme Court, thanked Wertham and his colleagues at the clinic for their important contribution to the victory. Thurgood Marshall, letter to Fredric Wertham, May 25, 1954, box 52, Fredric Wertham Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter FWP. For a comprehensive account of the legal ramifications of Wertham’s work commissioned by the NAACP, see James E. Reibman, “Ellison’s Expanding Circle: Legal and Psychological Ramifications of Invisibility: Ralph Ellison, Fredric Wertham, M.D., and the Lafargue Clinic: Civil Rights and Psychiatric Services in Harlem,” *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 26 (2001), 1041–55.

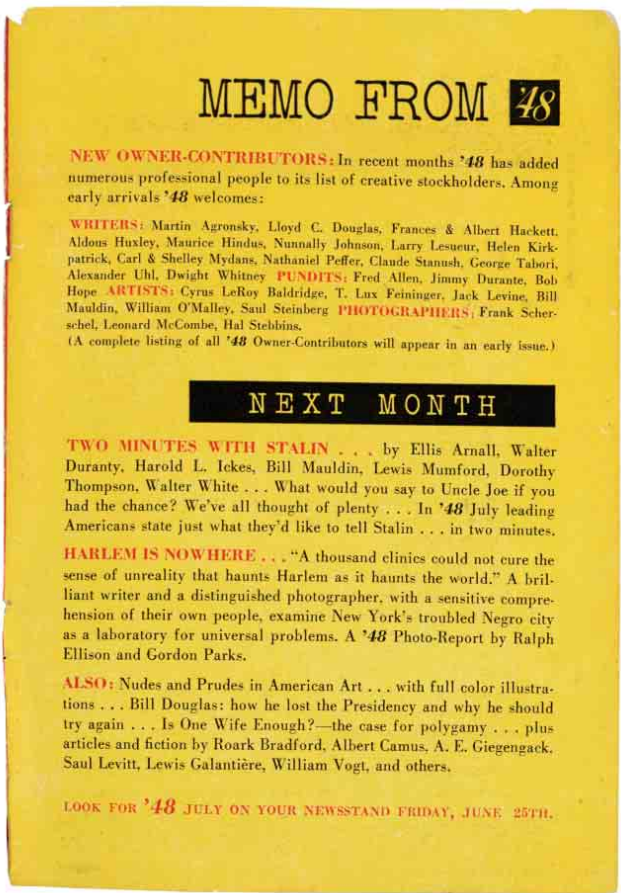


Fig. 10 “Memo from ‘48,” ‘48: *The Magazine of the Year*, June 1948

separately. Rather, Ellison was invested in the photographic dimension as much as he was in writing the text, even printing some of Parks’ photos himself. In turn, Parks’ images were so influential that Ellison fashioned around them much of his prose, and his subsequent novel as well. In approaching this psychiatric facility through the camera, Ellison and Parks turned to photography not simply to provide a documentary record of the “reality” of the “Negro problem,”⁴ but moreover to capture the “sense of unreality that haunts Harlem as it haunts the world.”⁵ Instead of treating Harlem as a mere pictorial opportunity—after all, Harlem seems eternally ready for its close-up—Ellison titled his “shooting script” for Parks “Pictorial Problem.”⁶ For him, Harlem is a site where “the real and the unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence.”⁷ Indeed, the photographs Parks shot for “Harlem Gang Leader,” published on November 1, 1948, in *Life*, were taken in the immediate aftermath of those shot for “Harlem Is Nowhere.” So close were the two projects, in fact, that the lost “Nowhere” images, partially published here for the first time, were found intermingled with

the contact sheets, negatives, and prints belonging to the “Harlem Gang Leader” files now in the Gordon Parks Foundation holdings.⁸ The archive reveals the decisive role played by the “Nowhere” collaboration in shaping each artist’s evolving conception of black invisibility, as well as the direction of their broader social, intellectual, and aesthetic interventions to come.

THE CLINIC AS CAMERA AS WEAPON

The Lafargue Clinic opened on March 8, 1946, mainly as a result of the collaboration of Richard Wright, the Reverend Shelton Hale Bishop—who appears in Parks’ “Harlem Gang Leader” story⁹—and Dr. Fredric Wertham, who became notorious for his crusade against crime and horror comic books in the 1950s. Wertham, the clinic’s director, was a respected psychiatrist in charge of the mental hygiene clinic at Queens General Hospital and president of the Association for the Advancement of Psychotherapy. He had been attempting to open such a clinic for more than a decade but had been unable to secure financial backing. Upon Ellison’s

suggestion, the Reverend Bishop, rector of St. Philip’s Parish House, offered two dingy rooms in the church basement for the clinic, rent free. As the first mental hygiene clinic established in Harlem, Lafargue represented a form of direct social action. Hilde L. Mossé, the clinic’s physician-in-charge, put its emergence into context: “Discrimination was so intense that it was almost impossible for any black person to get psychiatric care anywhere in New York except in city and state hospitals where the care was minimal.”¹⁰ The clinic’s antisegregation stance operated on the level of clientele and in terms of the regular staff: Dr. André Tweed was the first black psychiatrist employed by a mental hygiene clinic in New York City—and was one of only eight African American psychiatrists working in the United States at the time.¹¹ Moreover, the entire staff worked on a volunteer basis, receiving no remuneration.

By the time the “Harlem Is Nowhere” assignment came along, Ellison had been living in the neighborhood for a decade, and was familiar with the marginalized and sometimes fantastic denizens populating its overcrowded streets. Both he and Parks had witnessed firsthand the eruptions of violence during the 1943 Harlem riot, and Ellison had written an article covering the riot, “Harlem 24 Hours After—Peace and Quiet Reign,” for the *New York Post*.¹² Offering insight into these events, and perhaps into their earliest contact, Ellison’s archive includes a previously unknown set of four images taken by Parks on what was probably the second day of the riot, August 2 (p. 89).¹³ Three of the frames show children: an openly gleeful teenager wields a toy rifle whose barrel hides the eyes of the boy behind him; a girl holds her head with a bored or jaded look directed at events occurring outside the frame; and a trio of boys appear seriously absorbed by the action to their left. The children experiencing this race riot in early 1940s Harlem will be in their prime by the time of the civil rights era, when a new series of riots will erupt in many American cities. The 1943 riot left a deep impression on Ellison—not only did he re-create such a scene in the concluding chapters of *Invisible Man*, but the experience led him to articulate in writing his view of the relation between crime and the African American community.

In an unpublished text written soon after the riot titled “Let Us Consider the Harlem ‘Crime Wave,’” Ellison expresses his youthful anger at the

⁹ See Russell Lord, *Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl / The Gordon Parks Foundation / New Orleans Museum of Art, 2013), pl. 90.

¹⁰ Hilde L. Mossé, “Child Psychiatry and Social Action: An Integral Part of the History of American Child Psychiatry” (1981; unpublished), 3, box 2, folder 1, LFR. For more on Fredric Wertham and the Lafargue Clinic, see Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), and Dennis Doyle, “‘Where the Need Is Greatest’: Social Psychiatry and Race-Blind Universalism in Harlem’s Lafargue Clinic, 1946–1958,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83, no. 4 (Winter 2009), 746–74.

¹¹ Lawrence P. Jackson, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 332.

¹² Ralph Ellison, “Harlem 24 Hours After—Peace and Quiet Reign,” *New York Post*, August 3, 1943, 4.

¹³ The name “Gordon Parks” is inscribed on the back of this contact sheet, found in PR 13 CN 2010: 045, container 7, folder 7, Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. One of the images shows a rack of newspapers, which allows for an approximate dating. The *New York Amsterdam News*, in front at the bottom, is the issue of July 31, but papers behind it seem to be from after the riot: a copy of *The Sunday News* shows a Chester Gould *Dick Tracy* strip; August 1, 1943, the day the riot broke out, was a Sunday. The *Journal and Guide* states on its front page that “Harlem’s Brief Disorder Not Considered a Riot,” and in two of the other newspapers on the same rack comparisons are made to the June 20 race riot that took place in Detroit. The first frame on the contact sheet, that of a teenage boy holding a toy rifle, also corresponds with a line in “Harlem Is Nowhere”: “boy gangsters wielding homemade pistols (which in the South of their origin are but toy symbols of adolescent yearning for manhood) shoot down their young rivals” (322).

¹⁴ Ralph Ellison, “Let Us Consider the Harlem ‘Crime Wave,’” l:101, REP.

¹⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; New York: Vintage, 1995), 6.

¹⁶ Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ For more on Ellison’s growing relation to photography and examples of his work, see the “Photography” reference file in l:207, and correspondence with his wife, Fanny, l:15, REP.

¹⁸ Lawrence Lee, letter to Ralph Ellison, July 30, 1947, l: 162, REP. Only after proposing the Lafargue article does Lee ask whether Ellison might be willing to show the magazine some of his fiction for possible publication. This led to the publication of “Battle Royal” in the January 1948 issue of the magazine.

⁴ Richard Wright, introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (1945; New York: Harcourt, 1970), xx-xxi, xxv. See also Richard Wright, letter to Ida Guggenheimer, July 20 1945, box 1, Ida Guggenheimer papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library.

⁵ Back cover, ‘48: *The Magazine of the Year*, June 1948. In “Harlem Is Nowhere,” Ellison omits the end of the sentence, “as it haunts the world.”

⁶ Ellison refers to the document he prepared for the project as a “shooting script,” in a letter to Edward Weinfeld, September 29, 1948, l:100, Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereafter REP. The manuscript itself is also located in l:100.

⁷ Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” 322.

⁸ This discovery was made possible by the careful analysis done by Michal Raz-Russo and the archivists at the Gordon Parks Foundation (Amanda Smith, Archivist/Education and Exhibitions Coordinator; James L. Jordan, Archive Manager). In a thorough review of all contact sheets and prints made in Harlem at the archive, Raz-Russo found that some had previously been thought to be part of the 1952 project, “A Man Becomes Invisible” *Invisible Man* and vice versa (some photographs from 1952 were thought to be from 1943/1948). Raz-Russo, Smith, and Jordan confirmed that many of the contact sheets and prints included in the “Harlem Gang Leader” files (specifically those labeled as the “A Man Becomes Invisible” *Life* story) did not quite belong. As a result, critical corrections to print dates were made to significant portions of this material. See Raz-Russo’s essay in this volume.

mainstream media’s depiction of a “crime wave” in Harlem. He argues that the crimes perpetrated there are fundamentally a “manifestation of our collective will to life.” Indeed, he qualifies the rise of some juvenile gangs and “hotstuff men,” who resell stolen merchandise, as “good for the community.” Clearly influenced by Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Ellison even suggests that “the moment we seek to exert our own humanity we must commit a crime.”¹⁴ This last sentiment would eventually find creative expression in the prologue to *Invisible Man*, where Ellison’s protagonist emerges from his underground lair and proceeds to brutally assault a white man who denies his existence. This narrator further describes his hole as being lit up like “a photographer’s dream night.”¹⁵ The apparently casual reference suggests an awareness of the ideal lighting conditions for night photography and implies that the novel’s unnamed protagonist has dabbled in photographic technique. In reality, his creator is the one who had been training as a professional photographer throughout the 1940s. As literary and cultural scholar Sara Blair elucidates in her critical study of Ellison’s development as a photographer, he was shooting almost daily, making prints, and studying Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassai, Robert Doisneau, and other masters; he even had “Ralph Ellison—Photographer” letterhead.¹⁶ His professional work centered primarily on portraits and street photography, but also showed quite an eclectic range—from pictures of art for museum publications to special events such as dog shows.¹⁷

In July 1947, *The Magazine of the Year* first contacted Ellison to propose an “article, probably to be illustrated with photographs, on the Lafargue Clinic.”¹⁸ Dr. Wertham had recommended Ellison as the writer, and told him that the magazine’s idea was “to treat the subject as a community problem rather than as the healing of individual patients.”¹⁹ Ellison was attracted to such an approach but knew it would take a great photographer to pull it off in the way he intended.²⁰ By October, having brought Parks on board as photographer, Ellison decided to accept the assignment.²¹ He sought Parks’ help in particular not only because he admired his urban nimbleness and superior skill with a camera, but also because he had discerned Parks’ staunch commitment to conveying the individual humanity of his subjects. Coincidentally, Parks had recently shot photographs for an *Ebony* article on Harlem’s other psychiatric facility, the Northside Testing and

Consultation Center, founded by Drs. Mamie and Kenneth Clark.²² All the pieces were now in place, and the *Magazine of the Year* editors were eager to see “this joint venture as a new departure in photo-reporting.”²³ Ellison had high hopes for “Harlem Is Nowhere,” as a letter to Richard Wright under-scores: “I am working on a piece describing the social conditions of Harlem which make the clinic a necessity. I’ve worked out a scheme to do it with photographs which should make for something new in photo-journalism—if Gordon Parks is able to capture those aspects of Harlem reality which are so clear to me.”²⁴ Ellison wanted not just to photograph the clinic but moreover to capture its *raison d’être*, and the “scheme” he devised for Parks demanded an intuitive transfer of vision between the two.²⁵

Ellison and Parks dove into the project with remarkable energy and creativity; they wanted this to be a “new departure in photo-reporting.” A key set of notes on “Lafargue” in Ellison’s archive bear witness to the genesis of their conceptual approach and the centrality of photography to the project. “Simply by existing and performing its special task,” Ellison writes, the clinic formed “a perspective through which many aspects of Harlem reality come to focus,” and thus “assumed an importance that is seemingly all out of proportion to the relatively small number of patients that [it] is able to treat.”²⁶ In these notes, Ellison tellingly likens the clinic to a “special type of camera with which, through a special arrangement of mirrors and filters that split and bend the light rays entering the [lens] in three directions, it is possible to expose simultaneously three sheets of film which, developed and combined, reproduce a given scene in color”²⁷—here describing the parallaxic process that occurs inside what were then called three-color cameras.²⁸ For Ellison and Parks, then, the clinic enabled a new perspective capable of piercing through those “three sheets of film” to document a new form of symbolic reality.

Ellison goes on to list these sheets and what they represent: “Let the physical conditions of Harlem stand for one sheet of film; let Negro Americans stand for another; let the color aspects of American democracy stand for the third; and let the clinic stand for the camera that brings the three together.”²⁹ Here, the clinic is the agent capable of a superimposing the neighborhood itself, African Americans as a whole, and the tenets of American democracy in a single frame. In other words, the shots that

the clinic-camera takes of Harlem portray subjects who are fully integrated into American citizenry, which suggests that the inner mechanisms of this instrument can solve the discrepancies between the nation’s principles and its failure to practice them. The metaphor of bringing “together” the three separate sheets further preserves the interracial spirit of democracy in which the institution was founded. If, for Ellison, photography can be an “extension of democracy,” for Parks the camera becomes a different kind of instrument that can be used for the cause: a “weapon.”³⁰ By bringing into focus the disparity between American dream and “reality,” this early collaboration between Parks and Ellison confirmed an ethos that would define their respective oeuvres.

THE PICTORIAL PROBLEM

Parks and Ellison hit the streets with cameras blazing. They worked closely on the project, shooting, developing, printing, all the while refining their approach and aesthetic goals.³¹ “To undertake this writing job,” Ellison later explained, “it was necessary to interrupt work on a novel.” This became “quite a time-consuming assignment. I began work with a free lance photographer (Gordon R. Parks) during the winter months of ’47 and ’48 writing and directing the shooting script and at the same time compiling research for the article.”³² Arising squarely amid the early years of *Invisible Man*’s composition, this endeavor became—to borrow one of Ellison’s own images from an early “Nowhere” draft—“like a sunken log that shapes the currents between a river’s banks, remaining to affect the tide of the speaker’s moods.”³³

Entries in Ellison’s 1948 appointment calendar—often made by his wife, Fanny, herself an amateur photographer—outline the intense collaboration between Ellison and Parks in February and March, when the bulk of the “Nowhere” images were taken: February 6, “Parks”; February 10, “Parks by”; February 14, “Took photos”; February 15, “Sewed. Developed. Ralph – Enlarged”; February 16, “Dark room”; February 18, “Downtown with Parks”; February 19, “supposed to work with Parks on Story,” then, later that day, “Ralph developed; Parks slept; Wertham called”; February 24, “Clinic”; February 25, “Worked with Parks all day, printing”; March 2, “Clinic”; March 4, “Layout with Gordon & Lauterbach” [a ’48 editor]; March 6, “Ralph took

¹⁹ Fredric Wertham, letter to Ralph Ellison, August 2, 1947, I:77, REP.

²⁰ Ralph Ellison, letter to Fredric Wertham, August 17, 1947, I:77, REP.

²¹ See Lawrence Lee, letter to Ralph Ellison, October 15, 1947, I:162, REP. Lee writes: “Your note to Mr. Laas contained the information that you are planning to do the article on the Lafargue Clinic.”

²² “Problem Kids: New Harlem Clinic Rescues Ghetto Youth,” *Ebony*, July 1947, 24. I am grateful to John Edwin Mason for sharing this information. For more on this topic, see Mason’s “Good Poor Kids Gone Wrong: The Backstory to Gordon Parks’s ‘Harlem Gang Leader,’” <http://www.virginia.edu/artmuseum/pdf/mason-parks-online-essay.pdf>.

²³ Richard E. Lauterbach, letter to Ralph Ellison, January 29, 1948, I:162, REP.

²⁴ Ralph Ellison, letter to Richard Wright, February 1, 1948, box 97, folder 1314, Richard Wright Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

²⁵ Parks’ own interest in pursuing the project may also have stemmed from his self-described incentive to “keep my camera moving where it might do the most good,” namely in following Richard Wright’s example not only in producing a photo essay on Lafargue (“Psychiatry Comes to Harlem,” published in *Free World*, September 1946), but also in continuing the work begun in what he called his “bible.” Wright and Edwin Rosskam’s *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Viking, 1941); see Gordon Parks, *Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 110.

²⁶ Ellison, I:203, REP.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Known also as “color separation cameras” and “one-shot” color cameras, these produced three separate single-color negatives to create the three primary-color elements of the photographed subject. By the 1930s, the three negatives were made simultaneously. These one-shot cameras were fitted with an “internal arrangements of half-silvered mirrors to divide the light from the lens into three parts, and direct each part to a plate”; it was these parts that combined to form full-color images. See http://camera-wiki.org/wiki/Three-color_camera.

²⁹ Ellison, I:203, REP.

³⁰ Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

³¹ Maren Stange even specifies that Ellison’s essay was written, “according to Parks, in part at the photographer’s Westchester house.” Stange, “Gordon Parks: A World of Possibility,” in *Bare Witness: Photographs by Gordon Parks* (Stanford, CA: Skira in association with the Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford University, 2006), 17.

³² Ellison, I:100, REP.

³³ Ibid.

pics—Ralph and Gordon worked”; March 10, “’48 with Parks . . . & Lauterbach ‘layout’”; March 16, “Enlarged portrait for Parks.”³⁴

Thus, contrary to what previous scholarship has claimed, the project *was* completed, and by mid-April, Ellison received from ’48 the final layout of the photo essay so he could begin composing captions for each image. The editors had assigned a key letter to each picture from A to M, a system reflected in Ellison’s caption drafts (pp. 57–62).³⁵

The fact that Ellison printed their combined negatives—as the calendar further suggests—helps explain the presence of “Harlem Is Nowhere” prints in his own papers at the Library of Congress (p. 98), and suggests a truly collaborative relationship between he and Parks over several months. In his narrative account of the completion of “Harlem Is Nowhere,” Ellison blames the weather and the challenging nature of the subject matter for the lengthy photo shoot—in comparison, the “actual writing” took just “another three weeks.”³⁶ Ellison’s explanation of the timeline suggests that he first wrote the shooting script, spent several months taking photographs with Parks, and only then sat down to write the essay; in other words, not only the captions but the essay itself was written directly under the influence of the images he and Parks had accumulated.

Two sets of working drafts for the captions are preserved in Ellison’s archive; these drafts are the best clues for identifying from among Parks’ photographs the specific pictures that were to be used in the final “Harlem Is Nowhere,” and are thus instrumental in differentiating them from the images Parks later combined with those he took for “Harlem Gang Leader,” now at the Gordon Parks Foundation.³⁷ The Ellison archive further yields a few scribbled notes indicating the ideas he brainstormed for this photo essay. Notable phrases that match up strikingly with the contact sheets and prints nestled within the “Harlem Gang Leader” files include “Maze, Decay, Filth”; “tripping on garbage cans,” “start arguments, fighting,” “dope pad,” “Rebirth & transcendence,” “repetitions [*sic*] of symbols & ritual, clash between private rites and public situations, comic books, horror stories,” and, written upside down on the same sheet, “Symbols of Authority; shot of Cop while at low angle”³⁸ (pp. 73, 96–97). In Ellison’s notes as in the photographs, Harlem emerges as a

schizophrenic maze zigzagging between filth and rebirth, decay and transcendence, powerlessness and agency.

In the actual shooting script he wrote for Parks, Ellison clarifies the “Pictorial Problem” at hand. Put simply: “Prints must present scenes that are at once both document and symbol; both reality and (for the reader) psychologically disturbing ‘image.’”³⁹ The problem for the camera, Ellison continues, “is to approach material in this twofold manner”: presenting “the crowding, delinquency, family disorientation, unemployment” while remaining “alert to those aspects of the Harlem scene that appear in the dreams of the individual as symbol (underground tunnels, mazes, basements, broken stairways, long narrow hallways, burning buildings; white policemen; decay)” and so on.⁴⁰ These instructions precisely reflect the content of “Harlem Is Nowhere,” but Parks’ photographs—here published together for the first time—bring that content to life with trenchant force, a visceral reflection of that “labyrinthine existence among streets that explode monotonously . . . and clutter underfoot with garbage and decay,” and where “its ordinary aspects (its crimes, casual violence, crumbling buildings with littered areas, ill-smelling halls and vermin-invaded rooms) are indistinguishable from the distorted images that appear in dreams.”⁴¹ Parks’ photographs are startling in their ability to grapple with the complex, allegorical goals of Ellison’s script.

Because the Lafargue Clinic could be reached only by navigating “a disturbing narrow maze-like series of halls and stairways,” Ellison wanted to play up the irony of its basement location, which meant that its affable staff of professionals “had to go ‘underground’ to carry out their work,” and thus he planned to open and close the essay with the idea of a maze (caption B, p. 65; caption C, p. 67; caption M, p. 85). “The opening shot to be one of the general community, leading into shot that will emphasize the maze-like aspect of ghetto living.” The image chosen to illustrate this idea was likely *Harlem Rooftops* (p. 67), which was also used as the spread opening Parks’ “Harlem Gang Leader.” In the context of “Harlem Is Nowhere,” *Harlem Rooftops* seems like a perfect embodiment of caption C: “Harlem the largest ‘Negro’ city in the U.S. A physical ruin that for many represents a psychological maze. Bright spot in photo rises near Lafargue Clinic.”⁴² The detail of the rising “bright spot” matches the



Fig. 11 Ralph Ellison, *Untitled*, c. 1948. Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 12 Ralph Ellison, *Untitled*, Harlem, New York, c. 1948. Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

white fog emerging from the rooftops close to the center of the frame. Ellison’s papers also include many examples of his own attempts at creating images similar to *Harlem Rooftops* (fig. 11).⁴³ As an image, the maze connotes feelings of disorientation, futility, claustrophobia, shortsightedness, and loss of agency. The idea, Ellison told Parks, was “to begin with the ‘maze’ of psychological dispossession, and end with the maze (the clinic) through which the individual is helped to rediscover himself; the ‘maze’ in which he is given ‘the courage to live in a hostile world.’”⁴⁴ This final phrase echoes the concluding sentence of “Harlem Is Nowhere,” while the sentiment as a whole is represented in the photograph associated with the drafts for the final caption, M: “New patients of Lafargue psychiatric clinic are sometimes upset by labyrinthine hall leading to basement quarters. Behind its improvised cubicles, many find it leads to answers to the most perplexing questions” (p. 85).⁴⁵

The script also asks for a “shot of a filthy area way with a confusion of exits, or a shot (preferably from above) of the garbage strewn interconnecting courtyards sometimes found behind the rows of brownstones”⁴⁶—many examples of which can be found in both Parks’ and Ellison’s files (fig. 12 is one such print by Ellison) and in the work of other Harlem photographers, including Aaron Siskind and Roy DeCarava. All these share a kinship with what is expressed in caption D (p. 69), but also relate to the print *Off on My Own* (p. 65), which accompanies

caption B: “Who am I? Where am I? How did I come to be? Behind the endless walls of his ghetto man searches for a social identity. Refugees from southern feudalism, many Negroes wander dazed in the mazes of northern ghettos, the displaced persons of American democracy.” Notably, two contact sheets in Ellison’s papers include other frames of the same narrow passageway through which the man in *Off on My Own* is walking, but in which he does not appear (fig. 13).⁴⁷ It is impossible to determine who shot the scene first and under what circumstances the decision was made to include the figure. Ellison may have created variants of Parks’ images, or they may conceivably be Parks’ own shots. Regardless, the intermingling of these alternative frames is strong evidence that *Off On My Own* was originally part of “Harlem Is Nowhere,” and confirms how closely the two photographers worked together.

Some illustrations were designed to function via juxtaposition and contrast in the final layout, such as those intended for captions E and F (pp. 71, 73), and I and J (pp. 79, 81); based on the text, caption I’s “cynical, furtive, violent” adolescent was to be seen “on opposite page” to caption J’s image in order to “contrast poignantly with resignation of man still in his prime” such as can be found in *Street Scene* (p. 81). Similarly, the “individual failures” of caption E were to be positioned “above” the “man (below) who has been struck by car” (caption F). The idea was to stress that whenever “failures” such as those described in caption E are “taken as proof of inferiority of all

⁴³ Figure 11 is only one of many differently cropped prints taken of Harlem rooftops. Most were made from the same negative as figure 11, but one print, not shown here, was taken from a vantage point reminiscent of Parks’ *Harlem Rooftops*. See PR 13 CN 2010:045, container 5, folder 2, Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

⁴⁴ Ellison, I:100, REP. In Ellison’s copy of Robert Bendiner’s article “Psychiatry for the Needy” (published in *Tomorrow*, May 1946), which describes Dr. Wertham’s efforts at the clinic, Ellison jotted a notation in the margins—“Later maze / End of piece”—next to a penciled line indicating the sections to which the note refers (I:197, REP).

⁴⁵ The caption written on the typescript glued to the copy of the photo associated with caption M found in the Fredric Wertham papers is different from the extant drafts in Ellison’s files. It reads: “A patient waiting in one of the cubicles of the LAFARGUE CLINIC. The Lafargue Clinic aims to transform despair, not into hope but into determination.” FWP, box 215, folder 6. My thanks to Gabriel Mendes for locating this photograph. A note to Ellison from Hesketh Wertham, Dr. Wertham’s wife, regards two photographs by Parks: “The pictures came and in very good shape, and I have already sent them on [to] the Encyclopedia Britannica. Their deadline for photos is in just a few days, so the timing was just right. I wrote them to credit Gordon Parks. If they use one or both of them (which is what I’d wish!) then of course the Clinic would buy them from Parks. You’ll tell him? I said if they did not use either of them they shd send the picture back to us.” Hesketh Wertham, letter to Ralph Ellison, September 1, 1948, I:77, REP. Mrs. Wertham is probably referring to a contest the *Encyclopædia Britannica* held for the year’s best photographs of documentary journalism. The fifth such contest was held in 1948, and that year Wilson Hicks—the photography editor at *Life* who hired Gordon Parks in August—was one of the judges. Unfortunately, no pictures by Parks appear in *The Great Pictures*, the published volume of the contest. Since Mrs. Wertham mentions two photographs, it is likely that the images in question were the only two from “Harlem Is Nowhere” representing scenes from within the Lafargue Clinic, namely those associated with captions A and M. Thanks to Mendes, we now know that the picture accompanied by caption M was returned to Wertham—or that he somehow had another copy—as it is currently in his papers at the Library of Congress. We have yet to find a photograph by Parks for caption A.

⁴⁶ Ellison, I:100, REP.

⁴⁷ Although note shown here, this same contact sheet also includes a frame showing multiple comic books. Comics were a major subject of study at the Lafargue Clinic, and the children on page 69 (caption D) can be seen reading a horror comic. For an analysis of Ellison’s relation to comic books and the Lafargue Clinic, see Jean-Christophe Cloutier, “The Comic-Book World of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 294–319.

⁴⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Penguin, 1989), 5.

⁴⁹ Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” 321.

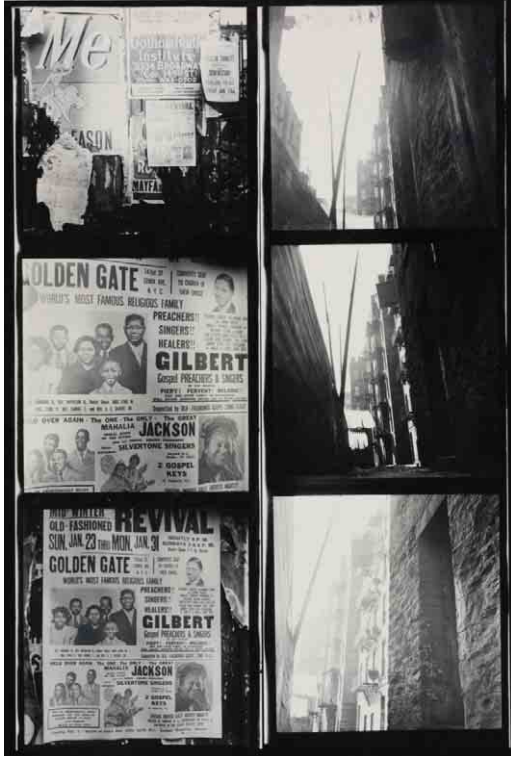


Fig. 13 Ralph Ellison, contact sheet (detail), Harlem, New York, c. 1948. Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Negroes,” this “injures the entire group as vitally” as the car-stricken man beneath (see fig. 14 for Ellison’s own version of a suitable image to accompany caption E). With such an arrangement, the images veer closer to the symbolic than the documentary, as is the case with the image chosen here to illustrate caption F (p. 73). Variant frames in the contact sheets containing this particular Parks image reveal that the recumbent man on the sidewalk apparently was not hit by a car but is simply resting; he uses his hand as a pillow (p. 75). This particular frame—with headlights peeking from within the gloom behind the man, whose body, from this angle, looks twisted as if broken—was chosen to accompany caption F because it so adeptly furnished the implied symbolic context, and seemed an ideal partner to the image selected to illustrate caption E (p. 71).

Other photographs, however, powerfully literalize symbolic experiences—none more so than the frame corresponding to caption H, “When things take on special significance because you’re black. A cold, accusing, unseen eye seems to judge your every act. It makes you feel guilty, hostile, ‘nowhere’” (p. 77). At first, the symbolism is triggered more by Ellison’s



Fig. 14 Ralph Ellison, *Untitled*, Harlem, New York, c. 1948. Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

caption than by the image, since the latter includes “*The UNSEEN EYE IS WATCHING YOU*” painted underneath a giant eye on the wall behind the young boy—a boy bearing a bandage on his forehead in a way that connotes both psychic and physical wounds. Perhaps one of the most “psychologically disturbing” images in the lot, this photo at once represents the boy’s subjected status—framed as he is by overshadowing whiteness—and renders the viewer complicit with the “unseen eye” the caption describes. While the document invokes the theme of Big Brother surveillance, the Harlem context points to that “double-consciousness” W. E. B. Du Bois eloquently described as “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”⁴⁸ As Ellison writes in his essay, “Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro’s perpetual alienation in the land of his birth.”⁴⁹

Remarkably, what originated as chiefly a photographic directive—to have “scenes that are at once both document and symbol”—ultimately became the guiding principle behind Ellison’s crafting of his National Book Award-winning novel *Invisible Man*.

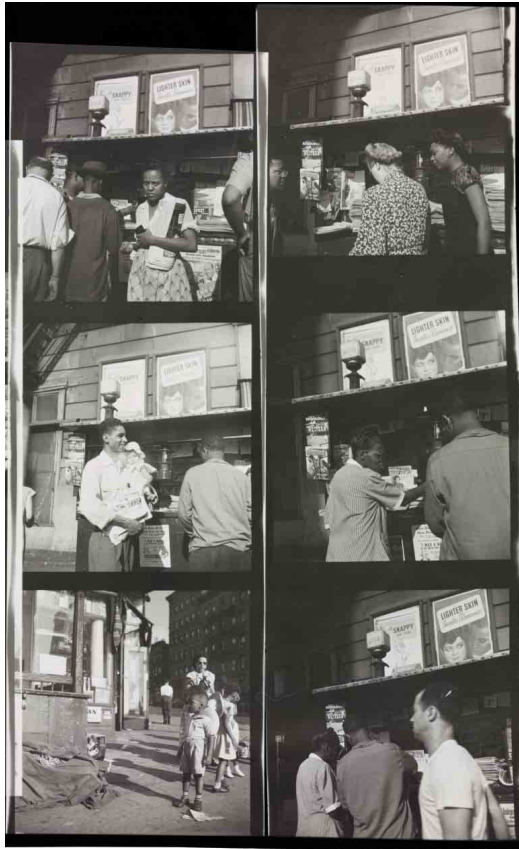


Fig. 15 Ralph Ellison, contact sheet (detail), Harlem, New York, c. 1948. Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.



Fig. 16 Ralph Ellison, contact sheet (detail), Harlem, New York, c. 1948. Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The concepts underlying Ellison’s efforts to write and conceive “Harlem Is Nowhere” are precisely those that inform his novelistic practice, to the extent that looking at the shooting script today feels like finding the set of instructions Ellison adhered to as a novelist. Also fascinating is the realization occasioned by these materials of the extent to which Ellison’s collaboration with Parks forged his novelistic vision. Parks’ strategies for solving the problem of creating pictures that were simultaneously document and symbol gave Ellison a visual model for his own aesthetic project. In turn, this collaboration with Ellison, as historian Erika Doss has observed, “was instrumental in terms of shaping Parks’ post-war understanding of race and representation.”⁵⁰

Their initial collaboration had gone so well, in fact, that Parks attempted to enlist Ellison in his initial work at *Life* shortly after the “Harlem Is Nowhere” project was completed. “It was a project with Ellison that gave [Parks] confidence to approach the notoriously gruff *Life* picture editor Wilson Hicks in 1948,” photo historian Maren Stange has suggested.⁵¹ Parks confirmed this in an interview, adding: “I had

copies of the photographs and took them over to *Life*.”⁵² In other words, the portfolio Hicks consulted when Parks applied for a staff job at *Life* included the images intended for “Harlem Is Nowhere.”⁵³ What all previous narratives of Parks’ entry at *Life* have elided, however, is that Parks seems to have initially wanted to continue collaborating with Ellison for the “Harlem Gang Leader” assignment. On August 13, 1948, Ellison wrote to a friend that he’d just “had some talks with *Life* concerning a photo-essay assignment with Gordon Parks in which I am not interested and against which Fanny is dead set, although, God knows, we do need the dough.”⁵⁴ Given the date of the letter, this could only be what became Parks’ “Harlem Gang Leader,” published in *Life*’s November 1, 1948, issue. We know that Ellison was ultimately not involved with “Gang Leader,” but this evidence does bring “Harlem Is Nowhere” and “Harlem Gang Leader,” whose contact sheets are intertwined, even closer.

Ellison and Parks did combine forces once again after the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952, in a memorable feature for *Life* titled “A Man Becomes

⁵⁰ Erika Doss, “Visualizing Black America: Gordon Parks at *Life*, 1948–1971,” in *Looking at Life Magazine*, ed. Erika Doss (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 231.

⁵¹ Stange, “Gordon Parks: A World of Possibility,” 17.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Parks’ portfolio also included examples of his work as a government and fashion photographer.

⁵⁴ Ralph Ellison, letter to Stanley Edgar Hyman, August 13, 1948, I:51, REP.

⁵⁵ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 259.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 262.

⁵⁷ See Michal Raz-Russo’s essay in this volume for a discussion of Parks’ *Window/Mysticism* image.

Invisible,” as Michal Raz-Russo’s essay in this book deftly explores. In truth, however, Ellison had never left Parks behind: he even smuggled some images and captions from “Harlem Is Nowhere” into his novel—almost, one might say, as an homage to their aborted collaboration. About midway through the novel, in the scene following the narrator’s escape from the Factory Hospital, his inner doubts lead him to ask two of the same questions that were meant for caption B: “Who was I, how had I come to be?”⁵⁵ His eyes then focus on a series of artifacts in a store window that closely recall caption K, where we find “the values and yearnings of a civilization in a jumble” (p. 83):

“A flash of red and gold from a window filled with religious articles caught my eye. And behind the film of frost etching the glass I saw two brashly painted plaster images of Mary and Jesus surrounded by dream books, love powders, God-Is-Love signs, money-drawing oil and plastic dice. . . . I passed on to a window decorated with switches of wiry false hair, ointments guaranteed to produce the miracle of whitening black skin.”⁵⁶



Fig. 17 Gordon Parks, contact sheet (detail), 1952. The Gordon Parks Foundation

The mention of the ointments calls to mind a contact sheet in Ellison’s archive that includes an advertisement for “Lighter Skin” (fig. 15). Another contact sheet related to the above novelistic scene in Ellison’s files includes three frames that share a clear kinship with Parks’ more artfully realized *Window/Mysticism*, used in the 1952 *Life* story (p. 115), and that may represent Ellison’s attempt to photographically capture his own version of caption K (fig. 16).⁵⁷ Indeed, despite the four-year gap, one of the dream books in figure 16, the *Afro Dream Book*, can also be found in a frame on one of Parks’ *Window/Mysticism* contact sheets (fig. 17). Tracing the genesis of these novelistic scenes back to the “Nowhere” images offers critical insight into the photographic origins of Ellison’s craft, and into the influence of Parks on his novel.

HARLEM WENT NOWHERE

Given the indisputable importance of photography to “Harlem Is Nowhere”—and *Invisible Man*—why would Ellison choose not to include the photographs when he finally published the essay in 1964 in *Shadow and Act*? As fate would have it, less than



Fig. 18 Ralph Ellison, *Untitled*, Harlem, New York, c. 1948. Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

a month after the photo essay was completed—when it was “actually in the forms and ready to go on the presses”—’48: *The Magazine of the Year* suspended publication and filed for bankruptcy.⁵⁸ Its lawyers then kept “Harlem Is Nowhere” as evidence for why the magazine should be allowed to stay in business.⁵⁹ In late September, Ellison, in an irritated letter to the magazine’s counsel, requested that his article “and the set of photographs prepared for its illustration be returned to me.”⁶⁰ Caught up in litigation until August 1951, the materials were never returned to him.⁶¹ Still, even though he no longer had Parks’ accompanying photographs, Ellison did try to place “Harlem Is Nowhere” in *Harper’s Magazine* in late 1948. He received the rejection notice four days into the new year: “We are distinctly impressed but not enough to want to run it. The chief criticism has been that the clinic never quite emerges and that the rest is too generalized; I hope it isn’t entirely imagination on my part that it is still a ‘picture’ story and that it suffers the lack of the pictures to pin it down.”⁶² It was painfully obvious: Ellison’s essay was nowhere without Parks’ pictures.

“Harlem Is Nowhere” then languished in Ellison’s “cluttered files” for years until it surfaced in *Shadow and Act*.⁶³ As the book awaited release, staff at *Harper’s*—perhaps unaware that the magazine had once rejected the essay—contacted Ellison’s agency about what they now called his “superb essay on Harlem,” wondering whether he’d like to devote a whole new essay on the subject. “He could make this one more personal,” they wrote, “or he could expand on that section in the Harlem essay.”⁶⁴ Ellison half agreed; he gave *Harper’s* the old essay yet effected some changes that are too consequential to ignore. He removed the opening and closing paragraphs, and at long last, the *Harper’s* version of “Harlem Is Nowhere” appeared in August 1964 with “pictures to pin it down.” But these were not those taken by Parks in 1948. Instead, Ellison chose work by another photographer whose star was on the rise—none other than Harlem-born Roy DeCarava.

In yet another twist of this complex history, two of the four photographs Ellison selected for the *Harper’s* version had already appeared in DeCarava’s earlier

⁵⁸ Richard E. Lauterbach, letter to Ralph Ellison, May 17, 1948, I:100, REP.

⁵⁹ See the documents issued by the United States District Court, Southern District of New York, and correspondence from the law offices of Nemeroff, Jelline, Danzig & Paley, and the memo from the law offices of Krause, Hirsch, Levin & Heilpern, pertaining to the bankruptcy case of Associated Magazine Contributors, Inc., July to October, 1948, I:100, REP. *The Magazine of the Year* was owned by Associated Magazine Contributors, Inc.

⁶⁰ Ellison, letter to Weinfeld, I:100, REP. By September 9, 1948, the debtor had officially been adjudged a bankrupt.

⁶¹ On July 22, 1948, Ellison filed a claim to receive the payment he was owed, \$306.40, for “an article, at the agreed price of ten cents a word, consisting of 2770 words, titled: HARLEM IS NOWHERE; plus picture captions numbering 295 words.” See I:100, REP, and docket for Bankruptcy Case 85638, National Archives and Records Administration for the Northeast Region, United States District Court, Southern District of New York. As archivist Bonnie Marie Sauer revealed to the author in a telephone conversation in July 2008, evidence “deemed unimportant” at the time was destroyed, which in this case likely included the finalized “Harlem Is Nowhere” kept by ‘48: *The Magazine of the Year*.

⁶² Letter, Office of the Editor, *Harper’s Magazine*, to Ralph Ellison, January 4, 1949, I:50, REP.

⁶³ In a letter to Robert O’Meally dated March 7, 1984, Ellison refers to his personal papers as his “cluttered files.” II:32, REP. A memo dated March 10, 1964, from a Random House editor discussing Ellison’s future *Shadow and Act* reveals that Ellison thought the surviving “Harlem Is Nowhere” photographs were now at *Life*: “When Ralph Ellison originally did the article ‘Harlem is Nowhere’ photographs to accompany it were taken by Gordon Parks. These pictures, Ralph believes, are owned by *Life*.” Jim (James) Silberman to Tony (C. A.) Wimpfheimer, Random House Records, Box 656, Folder “Ellison, Ralph The Shadow and The Act Production,” Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁶⁴ Willie Morris, letter to Lisel Eisenheimer, May 4, 1964, I:50, REP. Two years later, Morris also wanted to publish Ellison’s Senate hearing testimonies on “The Crisis in Our Cities,” explaining that “*Harper’s* would be the logical place since we ran *Harlem is Nowhere*” (September 2 [ca. 1966]). This testimony appeared as “Harlem’s America” in *The New Leader*, September 26, 1966, 22–35.

⁶⁵ Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1955). The photographs by DeCarava that were used in *Harper’s* are: *Man Sitting On Stoop With Baby* (1952), *Graduation* (1949), *Half Man* (1953), and an untitled image DeCarava included in *The Sound I Saw* (New York: Phaidon, 2001).

⁶⁶ Ralph Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” *Harper’s Magazine*, August 1964, 53–57. It is interesting to note the idea of fatherhood that the DeCarava photographs evoke; this is also a central theme in Ellison’s unfinished second novel, posthumously published as *Three Days Before the Shooting* . . . , ed. John F. Callahan and Adam Bradley (New York: Modern Library, 2010).

⁶⁷ DeCarava’s photographs appeared in two major magazines in August 1964; aside from *Harper’s*, he had his first cover of *Newsweek* (August 3), also regarding the unrest in Harlem. See John Edwin Mason, “Roy DeCarava, the Kamoinge Workshop, and *Newsweek* Magazine, 1964,” July 18, 2013, http://johnedwinmason.typepad.com/john_edwin_mason_photogra/2013/07/decarava-kamoinge-newsweek.html, accessed July 6, 2015.

⁶⁸ The Editors, headnote to Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” *Harper’s Magazine*, 53.

⁶⁹ Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts, *Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America* (London: Granta, 2011), 116.

⁷⁰ Ellison, “Harlem Is Nowhere,” 326.

collaboration with another literary giant, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, from 1955, coauthored by Langston Hughes.⁶⁵ Although DeCarava’s images share a definite kinship—as symbols and as documents—with what Parks produced in 1948, things are not the same. The first image in the *Harper’s* version initially seems to be a reproduction of *Man Sitting on Stoop with Baby* (taken in 1952, the year *Invisible Man* was published), which appears in *Sweet Flypaper*, but comparison reveals that an alternative frame of the image was chosen for “Harlem Is Nowhere”: here the man bows his head, whereas in *Sweet Flypaper*, his head is proudly upright and the child is nestled in his arms.⁶⁶ Clearly, DeCarava had given Ellison access to his archive of negatives. More important, this small change, along with the vertiginous temporal collapse involving three decades—prose composed in 1948 frames this man and child from 1952 and brings them into the Harlem of 1964—irrevocably intensifies the symbolic charge of the image. The man who was once part of a happy neighborhood scene has now become a concerned father cradling his baby close to his body, shielding it from a hostile world. Two weeks before this issue of *Harper’s* hit the stands, on July 16, 1964, James Powell, an African American teenager, was shot and killed by a white police officer. The following days saw the eruption of the third great Harlem riot, what is now regarded as the precursor to the long hot summer civil rights riots of the late 1960s.⁶⁷

In this respect, the abiding subjection of the African American community nullifies the photo essay’s belatedness; what the clinic/camera/weapon was able to capture in 1948 by 1964 still represents a vision of an America to come, of a “promise” yet to be fulfilled in this laboratory for the realization of national ideals. As the *Harper’s* editors put it, “Little has changed in the everyday life of the ghetto in the past sixteen years.”⁶⁸ The other difference brought to the essay corroborates this point; in the text itself, as Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts stresses in her history of Harlem named after Ellison’s essay, he excised the first four and final three paragraphs, thereby gutting mentions of the Lafargue Clinic, which, it should be pointed out, closed in 1959.⁶⁹ Although the closing of the clinic is only a small change among so many upheavals in the intervening years, its elision from the *Harper’s* version is significant: Ellison had called the clinic an “underground extension of democracy,” and a “special kind of camera” that “reproduces in color” the nation’s democratic promise.

Its disappearance from the scene and the essay is symptomatic of how, between the original publication date of “Harlem Is Nowhere” and the civil rights movement, the fight for democracy had forcibly shifted aboveground. Although the 1964 version is missing Parks’ photos, his images were so instrumental in shaping Ellison’s prose in the first place that viewing the Ellison–DeCarava collaboration is like uncovering a palimpsest of the essay’s earlier, lost manifestations, its invisible and counterfactual past lives. What Ellison’s final installment ultimately suggests is that what once protected the Harlem community from what he described as the “hostility that bombards the individual from so many directions” had simply vanished. When such institutional presences disappear, he predicted in 1948, “the results are the spontaneous outbreaks called the ‘Harlem riots’ of 1935 and 1943” . . . and 1964.⁷⁰

Parks and Ellison had experienced these violent outbreaks firsthand, and in their respective works they allowed the individual humanity of those embroiled in the clashes to emerge as a means of correcting racial profiling in the mass media of the day. One previously unpublished image in particular, taken by Ellison around the same time as the “Harlem Is Nowhere” project, approximates the resonant photographic portraiture Parks was noted for (fig. 18). The image shows a woman being forcibly seized by policemen on a Harlem sidewalk. Caught violently in movement, by white hands, the black woman’s body only has a single element in perfect focus on the photograph: her anguished yet defiant face. Her mouth, ajar, reveals a smidgen of white teeth on one side, implying their absence on the other. Her hair is in motion as if from the brusque handling of the officers, whose blurry white faces make them blanket representatives of police brutality. Indeed, the blur-riens of the image as a whole captures the velocity and mayhem of a street arrest. The woman wears a necklace and a ring and has a diagonal scar, apparently long healed, running from her forehead to her upper lip. As her face is the only section in focus, the viewer’s eyes ceaselessly return to her unnerving expression. The “psychological disturbance” of the image is heightened by the presence of bystanders who seem to be witnessing this capture calmly.

The contact sheet where this frame appears underscores the fleetingness of the woman’s visibility; in the other shots Ellison took during her arrest she is already gone, nowhere, invisible (fig. 19). Today, the



Fig. 19 Ralph Ellison, contact sheet (detail), Harlem, New York, c. 1948. Ralph Ellison Papers, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

very tear on the left side of the only surviving print embodies the violent materiality of a life roughly lived, damaged, yet preserved in time. In this context, the photograph evokes another central concept from *Invisible Man*: that history is “not like an arrow, but a boomerang”; we’d better “keep a steel helmet handy” if we aim to survive its blowback.⁷¹ The figure of the boomerang also provides an underlying logic to Ellison’s choice to describe 1964 Harlem with the essay he had composed, under the watchful eye of Parks’ photographs, in 1948.

The history and legacy of “Harlem Is Nowhere” brings into relief the commitment to honoring and representing the individual humanity of African Americans shared by Ellison, Parks, Hughes, and DeCarava. Richard Wright had also diagnosed, in his own 1946 photo essay on the Lafargue Clinic, what he called the “consistent sabotage of [African American] democratic aspirations,” a sabotage that often took place in unseen ways or under blind

eyes.⁷² Yet just as Ellison and Parks glimpsed an alternative future for Harlem when they turned the Lafargue Clinic into a camera—and thus into a portable weapon of democratic self-fashioning—this exhibition and catalogue, at long last, gather the fruits of their collaborative vision for all the world to see. “Harlem Is Nowhere” is now here.

⁷¹ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 6.

⁷² Richard Wright, “Psychiatry Comes to Harlem,” *Free World*, September 1946, 49–50.

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