

**Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Theology**

Podcast with **M. Cooper Harriss** (12 June 2017).

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[**Brad Stoddard**](http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/persons/brad-stoddard/) (**BS**) : *Hello. This is Brad Stoddard of the Religious Studies Project. Today I have the pleasure of talking with* [*Cooper Harriss*](http://indiana.edu/~relstud/people/profiles/harriss_cooper)*. Cooper is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Indiana University and he just completed his first book, entitled* [Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Theology](https://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref%3Dnb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Daps&field-keywords=Ralph+Ellison%27s+Invisible+Theology)*, soon to be published with NYU Press. Cooper – welcome to the Religious Studies Project*.

**Cooper Harriss** (**CH**): Thank you so much for having me, Brad. It’s a delight to be here.

**BS**: *Thanks. Will you introduce your book to the listeners?*

**CH:** Yes. I'm delighted to – thank you all for listening! *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Theology* is a book that examines what I would call overlooked, or under appreciated, religious and theological dimensions of the concept of race. The concept of race, as we now know it, emerges somewhere around the mid-twentieth century where, you know, these two turns [took place], one to a kind of materialism and, on the other hand, a turn to critical theory: you have the rise of black studies in the 1960s; you have the emergence of political sensibilities that defines race according to these terms. It has remained a popular way, you know: of the ways that we talk about American culture; the ways that we think about our political process; the ways that we imagine marginalisation of people. We often do this in political, materialist and economic terms. What I'm interested in is the way that Ellison's term “invisibility” – [*The Invisible Man*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Invisible-Man-Penguin-Modern-Classics-ebook/dp/B01D9ADQPI/ref%3Dsr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1496861295&sr=8-2&keywords=the+invisible+man+ralph+ellison), 1952, was his novel – the term invisibility has come to signify this kind of marginalisation. If you go to your institution's library and punch in "invisible" in a title search you're going to get hundreds or thousands of titles back: invisible women, invisible children in our Houston Schools. . . title after title, after title, that deals in terms of a political, materialist marginalisation. That's great. My question becomes: why is it that we're using. . . why is it that invisible carries that valence when it also is a metaphysical property – you might even say a ghost – or these kinds of things. So I work from that. And I think about how Ellison is actually working from an alternative understanding of racial dynamics in American culture, or even broader cultural systems of the West. He was very much at odds with the emergence of this definition of race. He is trying to think humanistically at a time when everybody else is turning to the social sciences. He's aghast at the [Moynihan Report](http://web.stanford.edu/~mrosenfe/Moynihan%27s%20The%20Negro%20Family.pdf) which defines poverty in sociological systems. He is dissatisfied with the kind of activist, political mentality that goes into the production and the criticism of African American culture. And so, what I see him doing is actually trying to work through this in an alternative way. And one way, really, to strike hard back at that materialist move is to think theologically. So, what is it about this concept of race – and for Ellison this means blackness – what is it about it that has an alternative prime dimension? And so I began by looking at . . . these four or five ways of looking at *Invisible Man*. We look at biblical invisibility; we look at invisibility of puritan sources – [Cotton Mather](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cotton_Mather) and [Hutchinson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anne_Hutchinson); we look at Luther and Shakespeare; we move onto Kongo religion and think about invisibility and [*Death and the Invisible Powers*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Death-Invisible-Powers-World-Belief/dp/0253208084/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496861891&sr=8-1&keywords=Death+and+the+invisible+powers) and its relationship to [*Racecraft*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Racecraft-Soul-Inequality-American-Life-x/dp/1781683131/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496861963&sr=8-1&keywords=Racecraft) – this fantastic book by Barbara and Karen Fields, that compares the way that the new scholars think about race with a kind of magic. So, racecraft and witchcraft. These kinds of things. On the other hand, I look at more contemporary things: [Clint Eastwood's empty chair](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=933hKyKNPFQ), drones. What are the. . . spectacular imaginaries, the profound scary secrets of this world that we live in? How does something like the gaze of the drone that's chasing down – the legacy of the colonised other, right, that is invisibly hovering here – (**5:00**) what is the relationship between that and what Ellison's understanding to be in play at the very end of the Jim Crow era? And, in between that, I offer a kind of chronological assessment of Ellison’s career, using various lenses or methods that I draw from religious studies. I think about poetic justice, I think about the notion of poetic justice as it relates to racial identity in the renaissance; I look at *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, in the context of three other important books that are out that year: one by Paul Tillich, [*The Courage to Be*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/d/Books/Courage-Paul-Tillich-1952-12-01/B01JXVHVUI/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496863619&sr=8-1&keywords=The+Courage+to+Be%2C+1952); one by Reinhold Niebuhr, [*The Irony of American History*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/d/Books/Irony-American-History-Reinhold-Niebuhr/0226583988/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496863695&sr=8-1&keywords=The+Irony+of+American+History%2C+1952), and then Perry Miller's [*Errand into the Wilderness*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Errand-Wilderness-Torchbooks-Perry-Miller/dp/0061311391/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496863765&sr=8-1&keywords=Errand+into+the+Wilderness) which is – he published it before, but delivered it at Brown University in ‘52. I also uncover Ellison’s close relationship with [Nathan A. Scott Junior](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathan_A._Scott_Jr.), who was a Professor of Theology and Literature at the University of Chicago Divinity school. He and Ellison became great friends when Ellison was on a visiting assignment there. And what I've found in their correspondence – in Ellison’s papers in the Library of Congress – is that Scott recognises a kind of sensibility in Ellison; a kind of religious sensibility. He tries to get him involved in what we would call “religion and literature”, he called it “theology and literature”. But he sees Ellison as a writer who is invested in these kinds of issues and questions. Ellison was also a huge fan of 19th century American literature. In fact, when he was asked to come teach places – he taught at Rutgers; he had a Schweitzer Chair at NYU; he taught at Chicago; he had other, sort of, shorter appointments – it was often assumed that a famous African American novelist would come and teach, maybe, African American literature. And he would say, “No! I want to teach a course on Civil War literature, or a course on 19th Century American literature”, which at the time was very white-core. He's drawing on larger influences, but he's also flummoxing a lot of the expectations. So he's teaching [Melville and Hawthorne](http://www.melville.org/hawthrne.htm), instead of these expectations. I'm also interested in Ellison's second novel, which he never finished. He started writing almost immediately after *Invisible Man* was published in 1952, and he never finished it. He saved it, for the last time, on his computer December 31st 1993. He died in March of ‘94. He's writing, and writing, and re-writing. And he says that he's trying to capture something about race in America. The problem is, he’s doing it from roughly 1954 to 1994. He's doing it from, basically, [Brown v. Board](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brown_v._Board_of_Education) to the [Million Man March](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Million_Man_March). What does race in America mean during that time? Well, it's constantly changing: you can never get a hand on it. And so, I use the kind-of changing dynamics of American civil religion as a way to pin down what it is that he's unable to capture. Because he was, he was invested in a highly centripetal understanding of what we would call American civil religion. I use the trope invisible theology in a couple of ways: on the one hand, it is the fact that this theological sensibility has largely escaped the attention of scholars. If you look at most writing that talks about Ellison at all, in what we would call religious terms, it talks about his preachers , who are cultural figures – who may as well be Jazz players! Not that that's not important, but it’s a different. . . but nobody really understands him to draw on these kinds of, this strong theological, historical and cultural legacy. And so invisible theology is the theological dimension that has not been seen. But also, it is a theology of invisibility. (**10:00)** Which is to say that the condition of being black in America – the concept of race itself, as a condition of invisibility – taps into a longer religious and theological genealogy of the concept of invisibility. And, actually, you can see ways that it passes through Ellison, and it’s really helpful for understanding both the present and the future tense.

**BS**: *Are there any relevant biographical details about Ellison that we should know about?*

**CH**: Well, I'm so glad you asked about the biographical details! One thing about him is that he falls outside many of the major narratives that we use to talk about African American culture. Often we fall into the rural south / urban north binary. Ellison was from Oklahoma. He's been into this migration through Alabama and Tuskegee into Harlem, where he lives the rest of his life. But he understands himself to be outside of the major migration narrative of the 20th century. He's outside of many of the major arguments, as well. He's not a social scientist: he dislikes that approach to culture; he feels like it's demeaning – that it takes away human elements. He believes that human beings are capable of extraordinary actions, even if they don't always and can't always fulfil them. And so, he becomes a bit of an outlier. He's a bit of a pariah. He's sometimes called Uncle Tom. But he fights back and lashes back against that with, I think, a very clear cultural sensibility which is something like this: whatever it is that our experience and our life is, whatever the cruelty or the dispossession, or the exclusion, or the violence may be, that there’s a sensibility of a kind of exception to these conditions – that we are human being, and we are meaning-making creatures, and there are ways in which we take these situations and imbue them with a kind of meaning that goes beyond material realities in the present. You might say that – 65 years earlier – he was taking lemons and making lemonade, if you catch my drift.

**BS**: *I have a question about your methodology*.

**CH**: Yes.

**BS:** *Early on, in your introduction, you identify Ellison as a secular writer. So, methodologically, how do you get from secular writings to theology? How do you make that interpretive move? And what scholars of religion provide you with the methodological tools to make that move?*

**CH**: Yes. So Ellison is what we call a secular writer. He had no specific religious commitments. He's not writing out of a specific tradition, he's not identified as such. And yes, what I see is a kind of analogy here. I actually go with Schleiermacher – though I think it goes. . . we could think about it through Schleiermacher, through Geerz and Durkheim and on. . . And what I'm interested in is this relationship between particularity and universality. And of course Schleiermacher's definition of religion in the second discourse in [*On religion: [Speeches] to its Cultured Despisers*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Religion-Speeches-its-Cultured-Despisers-x/dp/1631741233/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496864798&sr=8-1&keywords=On+religion%3A+speeches+to+its+cultured+despisers#reader_1631741233), defines religion as this kind of aggregation between universal and particular. And what I do is, I take Ellison’s concept of race which. . . race itself is, of course, a secular concept. It's one which comes out of the social sciences, in terns of its definition. And I say that, actually, what Ellison is doing with racial identity, within cultural expression, is analogous to Schleiermacher’s understanding of his definition of religion: that to be . . . that African American cultural expression is highly particularised for Ellison. It is what he grew up with, it's what he knows. It's what any person can gather from the kind of the mother wit of their early existence, and their ongoing interaction with other people in the world. It’s highly particularised. And yet, it also interacts, corresponds to, comes into contact with, must negotiate a larger sense of being human. And so, for him, the notion of the human is something of a universal. Now, what he wouldn't say is that. . . often this turns into: “The human is the white and the universal.” He would say, “No!” He would say that, actually, this set of correspondences applies to everybody. He has a lovely way of putting it. It's one of my favourites. (**15:00**) He says that, the negro writer – this is his term – the negro writer writes out of a sense of a specific wound. The wound for us is the experience of being black in America. We think about slavery, we can talk about these other aspects . But he said, “All novelists deal with this kind of sensibility. All novels are about outsiders. All novels deal with a kind of wounded. . . all novels deals with. . . ” – I'm blanking the specific term he uses here, but all novels are about. . . . So, what he says is, “I write out of my experience and I am creating something meaningful out of disaster, calamity, love, awesomeness – but it is directed specifically at my context.” Ellison was often asked, “Why don't you write protest novels?” By that, what the questioner would mean is: “Why don't you put in your novels that racism is bad, and give very clear instances of that to display, to show it?”And what Ellison said to that was, “Actually, every novel is a protest novel. Every art protests against something.” He says, “For me, I can write novels within my particular mode. And so, that is a particular rendering of a more universal genre or form. But it is not unique to African American writers.” Dostoevsky is protesting against the limits of 19th century nationalism; Don Quixote protests against the things that Cervantes is invested in. He goes back to Sophocles and says, “Sophocles is protesting against something. We may not know what it is, but what unites Sophocles, Shakespeare and Cervantes to me is that we are addressing something about a human condition”, which Ellison understood to be a universal that we have to enter through the highly specific, through a sense of particularity. And so, what I say is that Ellison's understanding of literature, or even cultural production, has this religious sensibility here. And so, this is the how the secular writer writes religiously. And then, the question also becomes: "So how does it become theology?" Right? And I sit smiling,here, that this is the Religious Studies [Project] podcast! One of the things I'm really interested in is, well, annihilating this hard-fast wall that's erected between theology and religious studies as these kinds of signifiers. So, one of the things that I say is that “religion becomes the process, theology becomes the meaning”. So, in other words, if the process is about the aggregation of the particular and universal, the theology is: what is the meaning that arises out of that? And what I hope your peers will see is that there is a kind of co-functionality between religion and theology: that they require one-another to make sense of one-another. And I don't mean this in a highly confessional sense, but I also think that there can be more. . . an understanding, and more inter-play to be in play between them, within the process. And I think Ellison gives us a fantastic vehicle for understanding that.

**BS**: *Which contemporary scholars influence your methodological moves?*

**CH**: So, I have a couple of books, there are two outstanding recent books: one is J. Kameron Carter’s [*Race: A Theological Account*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Race-Theological-J-Kameron-Carter/dp/0195152794/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496865222&sr=8-1&keywords=Race%3A+A+theological+account), which does the kind of deep excavation that I don't pretend to do, but that inspires me. It's a gesture to the hard digging that he's done and, in a way, also of understanding the particularities of race to draw from these longer kinds of traditions. So again, it's not a universality per se, but it's certainly more universal than we had previously imagined longer legacies of race. Another one is Willie J. Jennings' [*Christian Imagination*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/d/Books/Christian-Imagination-Willie-James-Jennings/0300171366/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496865292&sr=8-1&keywords=Christian+Imagination)*.* And I see these as . . . they may not be in actuality . . . but for me, I read them close together and again, this kind of excavative project that looks at the depth, and resonance, and meaning of this concept that is taken on, with almost scientific valences. (**20:00)** I think two other scholars who strongly inspire me are Tracy Fessenden in her book [*Culture and Redemption*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Culture-Redemption-Religion-American-Literature-ebook/dp/B005646F7C/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496865434&sr=8-1&keywords=Culture+and+Redemption) (and just in case I got that wrong I'll say Tracy Fessenden in her book Redemption and Culture). Because I see, in my own project, a sense of having established the terms of social history, having established the terms of the kind-of focussing in on *not* the grand narratives but the smaller details. Not focussing on the grand narratives, but in certain moments, and being sensitive to the exclusions that are caused by the grand narratives. So focussing more on the micro-histories. What she does, or what I understand her to be doing – and I love this move – is: OK, so we have established that grand narratives are over with, because they exclude. So what happens if we create grand narratives that, actually, are built of this stuff that has been excluded? And that's what I see. . . . It's part of what Jennings is doing, in a way, and it's definitely what I want to do.

**BS**: *In the book, you recall a common question that is asked about Ralph Ellison and that question is, something along the lines of: “Is he a negro writer or is this a book about negroes?” – some version of that question, right?*

**CH**: Yes.

**BS**: *What's at stake in that answer? Let me ask it that way.*

**CH**: Sure, and you did a nice synopsis of the two versions of that question. One is, are you a negro writer, or a writer who happens to be a negro? Or is this *Invisible Man* a negro novel or a novel that happens to be about a negro? And then I think the question becomes, or the way that I answer that question, is "Yes." Right? Because that is the particular and that is . . . Schleiermacher's two poles. What is at stake in the question is, I think, a sense of how you understand, or how you want to understand. . . within these historical questions – historical people asking it. Would I have understood a negro novel to protest, to offer a very clear. . . to say very clearly, "racism is bad, oppression is bad, I'm going to give you endless horrific details that’s going to illustrate this in so many ways and then I'm going to give you a nice little lesson”, right? And that is overstating things – but something like [*Native Son*](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Native-Vintage-Classics-Richard-Wright/dp/0099282933/ref%3Dsr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1496853431&sr=8-1&keywords=Native+Son), which is a much more complicated novel than that, but Ellison didn't necessarily see it that way; that would be the negro novel. The novel that happens to be about a negro – I think the problem with that question is that it underestimates the power of the particular. In other words, in saying that the Invisible Man just happens to be a negro, it presumes that that element – the racial element – that particularity is not important. And so somewhere between those determinations is where I think we should be looking. And that's where Schleiermacher's particulars and universals become important. Because it's not about being particular. Nobody's all particular and nobody's all universal, right? We're all caught in the midst of this messy cloud of identity. And for Ellison that was precisely the point. And I think that is also what is so effective about his notion of invisibility, is that we're always constantly aggregating and changing and there's a kind-of sense of play that takes place within the process. Like, within the formation and within the production of culture through novels, but certainly other things as well.

**BS**: *A final question for you. We are conducting this interview, we are having this conversation in the early phase of the changes associated with President Elect Trump. Do you see any relevance to Ralph Ellison's Invisible Theology?*

**CH**: Yes, absolutely. I think, for a couple of reasons. (**25:00**) One, I think that it shows, first of all, I mean the. . . . I think that the fact that people are even remotely shocked at the outcome of this election shows how potent this concept of invisibility is: I mean, people were blindsided by it. And you listen to the responses and: "It's economics", and "It's this", and "It's that", and "It's the Press". But at the end of the day, we exist within this kind of structure of reality that is very old and imbued with a kind of realness that permeates the culture. And so, the fact that the kind of racial logic that has produced the results we see, I think, are in a different shade, perhaps, in a different hue: whiteness? Nell Painter had this great [piece](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/opinion/what-whiteness-means-in-the-trump-era.html?_r=0) in the New York Times this weekend, saying that whiteness is now a race. It's not just an unconscious thing, it's a race. And so we see this with the invisible theology. That whiteness has become, in a way, this kind of racial dispensation and the election shows that for certain.

**BS**: *Well thanks so much ,Cooper! This has been a fantastic conversation. And let me complement you, it is a superbly researched and meticulously well-read book. And it's an enjoyable read. So, congratulations on your first book!. And thanks for your time.*

**CH**: Thank you so much. Thanks for having me. And I hope that your listeners enjoy!

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