Matricide in the City (2006)

Chapters twelve to fifteen of *The Invisible Man*, in which the invisible man moves away from the mother-figure Mary toward Jack and the Brotherhood, might be read as staging the Freudian drama of the child’s move away from his mother at the father’s command. But since with Freud the child prefers to remain united to the mother, and since the invisible man—despite his claims to the contrary—clearly does not want to remain alongside Mary, the drama here isn’t a Freudian one. What it is, instead, is a dramatization of the story behind modern, thriving New York in the 1920s, for New Yorkers believed their freedom depended on detaching themselves from the influence of the preceding age, an age of smothering subservience, lorded over by Victorian matriarchs, and in creating its counterpart, its counter—an unforgiving Masculine era.

In *Terrible Honesty*, an examination of New York in the ’20s, Ann Douglas argues that “slaying of the Titaness—the Mother God of the Victorian era—was the most important instigation of the modern urban era” (252). “Cultural matricide,” she argues, “gave fresh access to an adventurous new world of uninhibited self-expression and cultural diversity, a world the Titaness’s bulk had seemed designed expressly to block” (253). She says she finds it peculiar that moderns felt the need to slay the Victorian matriarch, the Titaness—that is, the “[w]hite middle-class women [who] had seized the reins of national culture in mid-and late-[American] Victorian era” (6)—since the “women they criticized most savagely were dead and buried by the 1920s” (243). But she concludes that moderns imagined the Victorian matriarch as a Goddess, as something too powerful to be counted on not to linger—to more than linger—on.

Why they imagined her this way becomes more evident, I think, if we take John Watson’s—the behaviorist, popular 20s “child expert,” and mother-hater supreme—conception of the typical child’s experience along side his/her mother as an indication of how mothers actually interacted with their children at the time. Watson wanted children to spend as little time with their mothers as possible, for he believed that from infancy on children experience their mothers as oppressors—as far more a source of trauma than nurturance—for “[m]ost mothers [. . .] displace[d] their unsatisfied sexual longings onto to their children under the guise of ‘affection.’” (43).
To support his attack on the myth of selfless maternal devotion, Watson attends to how infants react to their mothers’ handling of them. The revulsion he claims children experienced, and which he himself experienced while watching mothers swarm over them, is akin to the revulsion the invisible man experiences after finding himself pressed up against a large woman in a subway train while on his way to Harlem—that is, when he found himself “crushed against a huge woman in black who shook her head and smiled while [he] [ . . . ] stared with horror at a large mole that arose out of the oil whiteness of her skin like a black mountain sweeping out of rainwet plain” (Ellison 158).

If most moderns had in fact experienced their mothers’ bodies this way, if their earliest experiences were of such intolerable smothering, it would explain why they felt the need to distance themselves so strongly from maternal figures, and why, also, they feared they would never quite extricate themselves from them. But because this encounter is by accident, that is, because it is not one in which the wide-bodied woman encouraged his enmeshment within her, it is not one which illustrates why moderns feared that unless they slew the Matriarch they would remain her proxy and pet. More than a hint of this, however, can be found in the invisible man’s accounting of his time with Mary.

Just as his first negative encounter in New York was his being sandwiched against the large-bodied woman in the subway train, his second emergence, following his leaving the factory hospital, is introduced so that once again it seems as if he will find himself in an anxious situation, brought upon by grossly large maternal masses. But though his “wild, infant eyes” are confronted with “[t]wo huge women [ . . . ] [who] seemed to struggle with their massive bodies as they came [toward him], their flowered hips trembling like threatening flames” (251), they pass him by without incident. He hasn’t long escaped, however, for just afterwards another wide-bodied woman—Mary—rescues him from the streets, and becomes his constant, becomes his only, company for some time thereafter. Living with Mary, he finds himself in the sort of exclusive mother-child dyad Watson rails against. He describes himself as childish several times while living with her, and in her over-solicitousness, with her presumed intimacy, it is clear she is meant to be conceived as a mother-figure—the sort of black mama ostensibly to be found everywhere in the South, and the sort moderns believed everywhere to be found in their Victorian American (read: Boston-centered) past. He says “he had no friends and desired none” (258), but he clearly
desires some sort of relief from Mary’s company. His first instinct was in fact to “inwardly reject” (252) her, and living with her invites upon him experiences he would but cannot repel. He complains about her “constant talk of leadership and responsibility” (258), but one senses that what bothers him most is not so much what, specifically, she asks of him—though this clearly does bother him—but her constant pressure, her pressing, her manifest presence, for he is equally disturbed by her “silent” as he is by her audible “pressure” (259) for him to become a race leader. Indeed, he makes his stay with Mary seem a perpetual intake of her in one unpleasant way or another, for he calls attention not only to how agitated her voice makes him feel but to how repulsed he is by the smelly cabbage meals he feels compelled to eat. (We note she seems to be forever feeding him—never clearly, we note, at his bequest.)

Just as moderns believed the Victorian Titaness inhibited individuation and individualism, the invisible man begins to complain of how he had “lost his direction” (258). After voicing the complaint, he flees Mary’s home, extremely agitated. Unlike, as I will soon explore, his room, the streets outside of Mary’s home cannot quite be imagined as part of her surround. Though when she first met the invisible man on the street near her place, she showed she was telling the truth when she bragged of how “everybody kn[ew] [her] [. . .] around this part of Harlem” (252) by successfully recruiting some men to help her take the invisible man back to her home, and though the streets of Harlem do seem haunted by a presence who would claim its streets—Ras, the Exhorter, who at times, in that he imagines himself someone who is a true “son of Mama Africa” (370), as someone who has not “betray[ed] his own mama” (371), seems the good son who always abides his mother—the streets of Harlem are just as frequently made to seem peopled by those who would forget the past entirely, who would forget all about their irrelevant ancestors and their now fully redundant ways. But he actually finds respite from home after wandering to a part of Harlem situated within downtown. Downtown, we note, is delineated throughout the text as a location, if not quite opposed to, certainly clearly differentiated from Harlem; it is for instance the place the Brotherhood relocates him to once his influence in Harlem had become too strong for their liking.

He considers taking in a movie—but what he actually takes in are a few yams he purchases from a street vendor. In that he makes of the purchase a declaration of his intention to not abandon his Southern roots, the purchase seems to move him closer
to becoming the person Mary prefers he become. But the reason I think it actually reads more as a repudiation than as an acceptance of her, is that he believes it an act in defiance of those who would have him “do only what was expected of [him]” (266)—that is, an act in defiance of people just like Mary.

After purchasing the yam, after expressing how suddenly empowered and free he feels, he subsequently also expresses a covert desire for matricide. Thinking of Bledsoe, of revenging himself upon him, he imagines him reacting to an accusation as if he had been accused “of raping an old woman of ninety-nine years” (265). Whether or not one agrees that what he is expressing here is his unconscious desire for Mary to be punished for all her stifling attention, the kinds of experiences he has with her are of the sort that moderns believed moved desires for matricide. Douglas writes: “It is the mother’s infernal overattentiveness, her grotesque solicitude, what the feminist critic Madelon Sprengnether calls ‘the threat of castration imminent in her overwhelming love,’ her conviction that her child cannot live in the world without her guidance and pity, her self-serving, self-sanctified efforts to keep her child out of what Sidney Howard called ‘the dangerous place[s],’ where young people take risks and experience adversity and pain, and perhaps, grow up—it is all this that drives men to matricide, Wertham, [a modern New York psychiatrist] implies” (246).

Mary has certainly been this sort of a mother-figure to the invisible man, almost to the letter. But it should of course seem debatable as to whether or not he is airing here his own desire for matricide, for such a desire, though it must in some way surface, is supposed to be suppressed: the superego will not permit its overt expression, as inhibiting the overt expression of such a betrayal is in fact its principle function. Of course, if he fabricated the next event he participates in there would be no debate as to whether or not he was indulging in thoughts of matricide, but clearly his stumbling upon the eviction of an eighty-nine-year-old woman is Ralph Ellison’s responsibility, not his own. However, though he says he felt shame in being “witness” to something he “did not wish to see,” he does admit the eviction “fascinated” (Ellison 270) him. And though he isn’t responsible for the violent incident, he hijacks its momentum by associating what was happening to the old woman with what very possibly could happen to Mary, for he identifies her first as “motherly-looking” (267), then as “somebody’s mother,” then as his own mother, and finally—though later, after he has met Jack—as Mary.

He ends up assisting the old woman by speaking to and garnering support from a
gathered crowd; and we note that he thereby again looks to be developing into the person Mary wants him to become: just as was true with his eating of the yams, his oral performance links him to Southern ways. But because he had just described his experience with Mary as “exceedingly irritating,” as it involved constantly listening to her preaching, his opportunity to speak and have others attend to him outside her home, actually works to counter and repudiate uncomfortable past experiences with her. Moreover, because so soon afterwards he finds himself in Jack’s company—that is, along side someone who approved of his action but who wants him to repudiate his past, to repudiate Mary—it is an action which by itself does not necessary identify him with her.

Jack is the one responsible for construing the eviction of the old woman as “A Death on the City pavements” (290). He is the one who is ostensibly responsible for the invisible man imagining Mary “being ground to bits by New York” (295). The blame’s on him, on somebody else—and this is how moderns would have it too. For he is thereby made to seem the sort of ruthless but also formidable father-figure they hoped would help define their era, help distinguish it from their Victorian predecessors’, help them slay the Victorian Titaness, once and for all. Douglas writes: “Really to kill such a god, to finish her off for good and all, the moderns needed another god; to free themselves from the devouring, engulfing mother god, a savage and masculine god was required, and for this purpose they reinstated the punitive god of their Calvinist forebears, a god operating by inscrutable and malign laws and recast in the image of Calvin’s heir Freud” (Douglas 243).

Douglas goes on to suggest that what the moderns most liked about Freud was his emphasis on, his substantiation of, masculine power. She writes, “[w]hat is apparently at issue in Totem and Taboo [—a book, incidentally, she identifies as ‘offer[ing] the tale of the murdered father as a front behind which Freud can accomplish the murder of the mother’ [230]—] [. . .] is male authority and male conflict, male transgression and male retribution” (231). It is a book which “furthers masculine cultural hegemony by hypothesizing the origins of history and religion in an altogether patriarchal story, a world of, to borrow a title from Hemingway, ‘Men Without Women’” (231). As I began by suggesting, Jack can very easily be imagined, particularly at this point of the text, as the Freudian Father. Though obviously he is not intent on keeping Mary “all to himself,” he is evidently another parental-figure who would take the invisible man under his wing, and whose near first instruction is
for him to leave her behind.

Jack and the Brotherhood are unwaveringly committed to discouraging him away from Mary. The invisible man now airs few complaints about her, and instead conveys his regret that he would, alas, have to leave her. But he does voice one more: comparing his stay with Mary to his initial involvement with the Brotherhood, he says: “[T]here are many things about people like Mary that I dislike. For one thing, they seldom know where their personalities end and yours begins; they usually think in terms of ‘we’ while I have always tended to think in terms of ‘me’—and that has caused some friction, even with my own family. Brother Jack and the others talked in terms of ‘we,’ but it was a different, bigger ‘we’” (Ellison 316).

The Brotherhood, though a communist organization, is in its ethos, its manners, strongly reminiscent of New York in the ‘20s. As was true of New York then, the Brotherhood is unsentimental and ahistorical: Jack, presenting the Brotherhood’s view of things, says that history necessitates that people such as Mary—hangers-on, that is—need more than just be gradually left behind, but rather pruned away so that they don’t block the emergence of the new. The Brotherhood speaks in precise, “scientific” language; it prefers clear delineation and crispness to soft, feminine verbal blending, making it the perfect embodiment of “urban moderns,” “whose primary ethos” “was accuracy, precision, and perfect pitch and timing” (Douglas 8). Just as it believes words ought to be distinct from one another, just as it clearly differentiates the “woman’s question” from all others, just as it would have the invisible man not confuse the “class struggle with the ass struggle” (Ellison 418), the Brotherhood desires and helps ensure that each of its members have a clearly defined, differentiated, secure space to inhabit.

The Brotherhood offers the invisible man a room to live in. His new room is spacious but not grand, the landlady polite but business-like. He exults in the space, and also delineates it, makes claim to it, identifies with it, in a way he chooses not do with his room at Mary’s. His stay with Mary was never about making claim to a space: it was, rather, actually all about resisting becoming too involved in her own space—the true reason behind his choosing not to concern himself with her affairs. His new apartment is never scene to invasion, and in this it is different from his room at Mary’s. (His office is vulnerable to “invasions,” but we note that when brothers invade his space, he takes pleasure in his repelling them from it.) We sense just how much his room at Mary’s is not so much his space but rather part of Mary’s—part of
Mary—the last day and night he spends there. He describes the experience so that her home becomes all about invasion, permeability, filth and shame—that is, as something to be left behind in great urgency! Noise enters his room, but so too, very nearly, does Mary. She has her hand on his room’s doorknob, and unless he is unclothed she would enter and discover him in an ostensibly shameful act—his breaking of the bank. This minor disaster is worth our attending to, for again it dramatizes just how much Mary inhibits him. He fears Mary might misconceive what happened, resulting in upset and embarrassment. Yet on the street “breaking” (263) the yam showed his disregard for how others saw him, and was an exultant, freeing experience. (We should also consider the breaking the bank a sort of displaced matricide: the bank is of a rotund figure whose sole role is to—hand to mouth—ingest coins, which well captures both his experience of Mary’s neediness and as well all his constant intake of her prepared food—that is, near the entirety of how he experienced his living with her.) He can break the bank, but cannot force a clean break from her: their familiarity with one another, their casual, familiar discourse, even, inhibits him from effecting a routine tenant-landlord departure—from managing something akin to the evicting police officer’s “just ‘doing [his] [. . .] job, ma’am.’” He aims to pay her back in full, to owe nothing more to her, but she manages to make the one hundred-dollar bill—a bill, whose crispness and large denomination make it seem charmed to ward off “simple” folk like Mary—into another claim upon him: she will now have the resources to take him back whenever he feels the need to return. Again, since her home is at the time associated with swarming cockroaches, oily coffee, cabbage smells, bodily invasion, powerlessness and ineptness, “home will always be there for you” is much more here an affliction than it is in any way a rescuing balm.

Fortunately the Brotherhood is behind him and will not see him go astray. They are the ones who chose his apartment for him, they are the ones who evict him from Harlem when he is becoming too familiar with the people there, they are ones who rescue him when he finds himself confusing the “ass for the class struggle”—that is, when he makes a mash of his handling of the “woman’s question.” And the invisible man makes clear that the Brotherhood will always be there: though he leaves them, they are at the end of his account portrayed as being well in charge of things.

After his stay with her, the nature of his subsequent life shows how the Brotherhood helped him secure a break from Mary, and he never does return to her
(though a hole in the ground is to be thanked for this as much as the Brotherhood). The grotesque last experience with her is fortuitous in that—because it can so readily be encapsulated as “grotesque”—it is made to seem something which can be countered, en totale, simply by coating himself in the brand spanking new. The delight he takes in purchasing new clothes—something he does at least twice in the text—also likens him to moderns, for they were all about the new, all about harshly ascribing even the just recently current as but the squallor of yesterday’s news. Moderns liked to believe they were living in a time of momentum in which experiences did not accumulate, build upon one another, but instead were mostly incommensurate—that what once held true “then” could not, would not, hold true now. New clothes identified their wearer as of the moment—distinctly in the clear, that is, from the deadening past and all its tendrils.

The past does prove to linger, though, for *Invisible Man* was actually written in the forties and yet seems still akin in spirit to works written in the ’20s. In fact, the ethos of ’20s New York more than lingers on today. Popular films continue to dramatize New York as a city whose it’s-not-personal masculine ethos matter of factly ruins all maternal claims on striving up-and-comers. Fair to assume, then, that the Matriarch must still be around for the “Brotherhood” to yet remain afoot: apparently, moderns needed, and we still need, more than just a new god in place to finish “[H]er off for good.”

**Works Cited**
