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**An Invisible Man, a Group of Old Men, and an
American Couple Walk into a Bar...**

How the deconstruction of pseudo identities leads to liberation for the prepared

Or to the downfall of the unprepared

A Thesis Presented by

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to

The Graduate School in Partial

Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Department of English

Stony Brook University

August 2016

Stony Brook University

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Abstract:

A large amount of American literature is based on themes of identity construction. Several authors make the argument that a true American identity is one that is self-created as opposed to ones made based on societal stereotypes. Yet often, the issue that arise from this central theme is that it takes traumatic episodes to come to this realization.

In *A Gathering of Old Men* by Ernest Gains, the old black men of the town are subjugated and have their identity placed upon them by society, with the label in this case being “them black folk.” Similarly, in *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison sets up the notion that Invisible

Man (IM), fails at his chosen identities due to the fact that they are based on societal expectations of what a black person should be rather than what IM wants out of life. Both of these set up the theory that identity has to be self-made and without outside influence.

In Paul Bowles *The Sheltering Sky*, the same theory holds true. Yet the issue with the Moresby's is that they are unaware that they have pseudo identities until it is too late. In this case, this lack of recognition leads to the subsequent trauma endured by both Kit and Port Moresby.

Using textual analysis and several key essays by Ralph Ellison, this thesis takes up the argument that all three of the novels utilize the idea of trauma as central to identity development. By using group trauma, *A Gathering of Old Men* sets up the idea that the old men have their individual identities removed. Ellison uses repeated individual traumatic episodes to show that IM never has a true identity of his own. Both have an awareness by the end of the novels, that they need to create their own identities and have them recognized. Yet Bowles makes the argument through *The Sheltering Sky* that if the protagonists do not have this awareness, it will lead to a traumatic episode within itself.

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American identity plays a unique role in this expository aspect of trauma. Many American novels stand out as definitively black or white, labeled as “African-American Literature.” Yet often, these labels are incorrect. Novels such as *A Gathering of Old Men* and *Invisible Man* are often placed in these genres of literature, but to do so would miss the entire point of the novels. These are not books about African-Americans, but rather stories about Americans who happen to be black. The characters are often marginalized, insulted, subjugated, and traumatized in order to demonstrate this. Ellison and Gains go to great strides to establish that their characters, the Old Men, Invisible Man, are victims of trauma. They have their identities ripped away from their very core and have to suffer in order to regain them or realize that they never had one to begin with. This pain inflicted upon the black community on occasion seeps out within the African-American population. The common thread being the overall trauma experienced by the black population; that is, their complete disregard by the white population. One of the most eloquently explained examples of this was written by Ralph Ellison in his essay, “Richard Wright’s Blues.” The essay encapsulates what the traumatic feel of the black population was and is. It is presented by Ellison within an explanation of the blues:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (Ellison 129)

The most remarkable aspect of this excerpt is its parallels to the definition of trauma. If one omits the word “blues,” and inserted “trauma” in its place, Ellison would be describing a coping mechanism. How does an individual within a neglected group deal with the trauma of being neglected? In addition, how do they cope when they are expected to never expose their true feelings? The answer is to do so submissively, through the manipulation of language and literature; under a mask, using the guise of imagery and symbolism. The preceding literature stands as examples of this type of “trauma literature.” Ellison forms the foundation for a type of traumatic central nervous system. And as with a central nervous system, when the synapses fire, they all relate back to the brain. In this case, the “brain” is the overall traumatic experience of being a black-American. The synapses are the related traumatic stories and poems.

To take this trauma one step further, one could look at *A Sheltering Sky*. When *A Gathering...* concludes, the audience is left with a few corpses, and no strong resolution. Only the awareness that the group of old men have been subjugated. When *Invisible Man* ends, and begins, the audience is again left with the same notion. Invisible Man knows he has been figuratively invisible, having assumed identities unknowingly placed upon him. Now he sits in his hole, waiting to reemerge with his new found identity. Again, though, he is waiting. Like the audience, waiting for the next step. In simple terms, after deconstructing the false identities, or taking down the unsound structure, and individual would have to recreate a new, genuine identity, or pour a new foundation. This is where *A Sheltering Sky* comes into play; the shedding of pseudo-identities and forging of new ones. But again, trauma plays a role.

As seen in *Invisible Man* and *A Gathering...*, the realization that one has no identity is traumatizing. In *A Sheltering Sky*, the same holds true. Yet the key distinction between IM and the group of old men to the Moresby's is that Port and Kit remain oblivious to what is occurring around them. Similar to stories of couples who go on a day hike in the woods, only to end up lost for weeks, resulting in one of the couple eating the other in a desperate attempt at survival, the Moresby's portray the typical, ignorant white Americans, ignorant to the fact they are paving their path into oblivion. By the end of the novel, they both will have shed their fake, American identities. Yet their unknowing and naive nature leaves them both psychologically shattered.

There are varied ways this concept of trauma could manifest in an individual or group of people. In *A Gathering of Old Men*, Ernest Gaines employs several methods to demonstrate the effect this trauma could have on a group of individuals. In this case, the trauma endured of an entire black community. Alan Gibbs, in his book, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives*, discusses similarly employed methods in several other novels. Yet a main distinction to draw here is that Gibbs seems to equate many of the novels he discusses as touchstones for subsequent authors. Essentially, Gibbs argues that the author did such a tremendous job expressing the trauma in a certain, unique method, that any works following them are basically cheap carbon copies. Gibbs seems to serve as a dismissive critic, something which Ellison also alludes to.

The prevailing stylistic technique that Gaines solicits to demonstrate *A Gathering of Old Men* as a trauma text is the use of "circling." Alan Gibbs defines this term as a form of:

Narrative procrastination, slowly circling around the central trauma of Yossarian's witnessing of Snowden's agonizing death. Through this spiraling narrative the reader experiences an extraordinary degree of repetition, with gradual additions to the Snowden story, whose totality is nevertheless deferred until the penultimate chapter of this lengthy novel. Circling as a form of evasive narration becomes a classic trope of trauma narrative... (52)

While Gaines utilizes this "classic trope" within his novel, he uses a slightly different variation.

Rather than the circling revolving around one person's trauma such as with Gibb's case of Yossarian, Gaines' trauma is not that of an individual but rather the trauma of the entire black population of Bayonne, Louisiana. As with other trauma narratives mentioned by Gibbs, the divulgence of information is presented in bits and pieces, progressively developing and building throughout the varied narrative voice. At times the narrators seem unreliable due to their bias, but they still add pertinent information. This gradual revelation of information is a key aspect in trauma narratives.

Gaines adopts heteroglossic narration as his own form of circling. By using varied narrative voices in each chapter, Gaines aims to slowly immerse the reader into the trauma, first hand. The presentation of evidence of the trauma is similar to that of *Catch-22*. Each chapter in *A Gathering of Old Men* serves "gradual additions" to the reader's awareness of what has occurred in Bayonne. This measured dosage of information is given incrementally, starting with the most basic of interpretations of facts. Snookum's ignorant understanding of events can be seen in the short sequence from the beginning of *A Gathering of Old Men*:

‘Something to do with Mathu and Beau. Beau laying on his back in Mathu’s yard. And Mathu squatting there with that shotgun.’ Janey’s face changed quick. She was mad at first, now she was scared. She pushed the gate open and grabbed me in the collar.

‘That shot I heard?’ she said. ‘That shot I heard?’

‘That hurt,’ I said, jerking away from her. ‘Y’all got any tea cakes or plarines in there?’ (Gaines 8-9)

Snookum’s simplistic and uninformed viewpoint at the start of the narration serves a purpose. Like a child, the reader is ignorant to the surrounding reality. The only thing Snookum and the reader knows is that someone is lying on the ground with another person kneeling next to him holding a shotgun. The reader is unaware if the person on the ground is black or white, alive or dead.

Similarly, the reader doesn’t know the race of the “squatting” person. Even the time period is ambiguous. It could be the antebellum south or present day south. Little is presented to fully comprehend the situation. Yet through the progression of narrators divulging more information, the reader will become more conscious of the ultimate traumatic event that was inflicted upon the black community; the total disregard of their contributions to the makeup of Bayonne. The narrators, like the reader, also mature. They do not mature in the sense that they present unbiased viewpoints, but rather in the fact that they are telling the story as it unfolded. Often, like the character of Luke Will, they are racist, but this racism serves a purpose as well; to expose the discrimination in Bayonne that resulted in the trauma felt by the black population.

Gaines’ selective and calculated use of narrators serves an ultimate purpose. Candy and Mapes are denied their own chapters because they did were not directly involved in the trauma. On the surface, Candy would seem to be an ideal candidate to tell the story. Yet,

that is the problem with her. She is on the surface of the story, not fully immersed in either side. In Miss Merle's chapter, Miss Merle reveals Candy's unique upbringing.

I had known Candy over twenty-five years. She was no more than five or six when her mother and father were killed in a car wreck, and I had helped raise her. Surely, Mathu here in the quarters, and I at the main house had done as much to raise her as her uncle and aunt. Maybe even more than they. Yes, he and I had done more than they... (Gaines 15-16)

Candy is a type of outsider. She is a member of the white community because she is white. She is part of the black community because they raised her. She has not personally endured any of the trauma administered to the black community, only witnessed it. She has not inflicted any of the traumatic episodes either, but again, only witnessed it. Since the white segment of Candy's life is essentially useless, her aunt is oblivious to the world and her uncle is a drunk, the black segment serves as her caregiver. Yet at the end of the day, she is still white. Her family owns much of the land that the black community struggles to live on.

The same is true of Mapes. While he is racist, he is still willing to accept and respect certain black men, like Mathu, labeling him as alien. At one point, he even states "I admire the nigger [Mathu]. He's a better man than most I've met, black or white..." (Gaines 74). Even if Mapes was lying at this point, Rufe later on confirms this point saying that the sheriff respected Mathu and would hunt and fish with him, (Gaines 84). In addition to this, Mapes also recognizes the trauma inflicted upon the black community. He says "I don't want to hurt you, Gable. You've had enough trouble in your life already" (Gaines 69). Mapes is not a noble character. He berates, beats, and disrespects many of the seventeen men who confess to the shooting. Yet his willingness to accept men of good character, black or white, and his

recognition that the black community has experienced many hardships stand to exclude him from the trauma. Gaines wants the trauma to only be revealed to the reader by the perpetrators and receptors of it. The first person involvement allows the reader to directly absorb the trauma from the hands involved. The individuals with the blood on their hands along with the bleeding victims.

While the apparent disregard of Candy and Mapes voices can be explained, the character of Charlie is also denied his own chapter. This would seem contradictory to the argument that Gaines only reveals the trauma through either the victims or perpetrators hands. For one, Charlie was black and endured all the same hardships that the overall black community did. He was discriminated towards, worked like a mule, belittled, and physically abused. More importantly, Charlie was the actual shooter of Beau. So, why would Gaines not give him a voice? The most likely answer is that he did not want it to be identified as the trauma of an individual. The trauma he is trying to convey is that of the group. As Gibbs puts it, a “collective trauma.” Had Gaines written in a chapter for Charlie, it would have taken away the sense of collective trauma that the community of black people endured, and instead made it the trauma of only one person; Charlie. If he had his own section, it would be “Charlie shot Beau because Beau did this and that.” Gaines wants the reader to understand that the trauma was suffered by a collective group, not simply an individual.

This idea of the collective trauma also aids to explain the ending of the novel. Many readers are perplexed by the culminating chapter. At three and a half pages, it seems abrupt and dismissive for such an intensive build-up on the theme of trauma. Lou Dimes gives the aftermath of the shooting and the book ends. Many readers are left with a sense of emptiness. Yet this is Gaines point. He is again serving Ellison’s idea of African American trauma. If Gaines has gone in length to what happened to individuals, it would take away from the

collective trauma. The main individuals responsible for the action, Charlie, Luke Will, and Beau are all dead, so it is impossible for the story to focus on them. The reader is left with the feeling of “what’s next?” That is Gaines point. What is next is unknown. The dismissiveness shown to the black populous was left unsettled during Ellison’s time, and now during present day. Will the shooting lead to a radicalization of views? Or will it lead to a reinforcement of past views? Time will reveal the answer, not Gaines.

The idea of *A Gathering of Old Men* as a trauma narrative can again be seen in a parallel to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Alan Gibbs points out that:

The ex-slaves perpetual consciousness of trauma may be linked to the fact that for them it has consisted of an accumulation of incidents of abuse rather than a single, sudden event ‘outside the range of normal experience... ‘Normal experience’ for the African-Americans in *Beloved* consists precisely of exposure to regular, horrific and traumatizing brutality. (76)

Gibbs continues on to state how “physical and psychological brutalization,” are continuously demonstrated throughout *Beloved*. Similarly, *A Gathering of Old Men* repeatedly exhibits the viciousness that the black community has endured throughout time. Each subsequent chapter seems to mention one story or another of abuse, some old and some new, again relating back to the prior ambiguous use of time mentioned. The reader hears the second-hand tragedy of Jacob’s mulatto sister during Rufe’s chapter. Later on, during another of Rufe’s chapters, Tucker presents the story of his brother, Silas, with a strong parallel to the folk-legend of John Henry. The difference here, though, is that Silas is beaten by the white people as punishment for performing better than the tractor. Gaines also takes his own twist to demonstrating the abuse by giving the reader the perpetrator perspective. During Tea-Jack’s chapter, the reader learns how even though desegregation occurred, the

local bar still would not allow black people to drink in his establishment (Gaines 152-153). It was not through physical abuse, but rather the use of passive-aggressive psychological acts; dirty looks and spilling their drinks on the counter. By doing this, the black customers “soon found out they wasn’t welcomed” (Gaines 153). The revelation of the brutalization stands to further expound the trauma.

What is this trauma, though? It is the same trauma that Ellison alludes to in his essay, and also the same as the trauma hidden within Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask”:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks, and shades our
eyes,-This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile.
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be over-
wise, In counting all our tears
and sighs?
Nay, let them see only us, while
We wear the mask.

We Smile, but, O great Christ, our
cries To thee from tortured souls
arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask! (Dunbar 14)

This is the trauma of the black-American. It is not only the fact that they must wear a mask, but that they are the only ones whom realize it. It is the “brutal experience,” endured by

Black American's, and for Dunbar, it is a collective trauma. The repetitive use of plural pronouns, "We," and "ours," serves to support that. As Ellison stated, it's the attempt to keep the painful experience alive in order to remember where they came from and the contributions they have made.

Dunbar's line, "We sing, but oh the clay is vile," resonates that idea of the painful experience and presents the sense of the dichotomy that exists within the trauma. This dichotomy is the strong bond to the land, yet all the pain that is associated with that bond. This is the trauma within the trauma that Gaines wants the reader to grasp. The complete disregard of the role the black community has had in the structure of Bayonne. But what have they done to help build up the community? This is also exposed by Gaines. The gradual realization of the abuses endured by the black community reveals the dichotomy that exists within the African-American population. There exists a strong tie to the land because they have helped develop it. Their families have worked the land for generations, since the days of slavery. Yet a bitterness is also tied to that fact. They have suffered extreme hardships while cultivating that land. At first, it is the hardship of slavery. Later on, it evolves into segregation. Besides Jim Crowe laws, they are excluded from purchasing good property. The fertile land is given to prominent white families, like the Boutan family.

This dichotomy, the idea that they are part of the land but have also bled on that same land, literally and figuratively, is present throughout much of the novel. It also serves as support for the notion that *A Gathering of Old Men* is a trauma text. Early on in the novel, while on the way to make a stand, the group of old men first go to the town's graveyard for "black folk" (Gaines 44). As they walk to their own family plots, they reminisce, at times internally

and other times to each other, about passed family members. The scene outlines the bitter sweetness that the black men have with the land. At one point, Cherry says to Dirty Red;

“They getting rid of these graveyards more and more.
These white folk coming up today don’t have no
respect for the dead.”

Dirty Red cracked another pecan with his teeth.

“Graveyard pecans always taste good,” he said.

“You tried any of them?”

“I’ll gather up a few before we leave,” I said.

(Gaines 47)

The graveyards are disappearing, literally rotting away, and the land is being taken over by the white farmers. The cemeteries prove to be fertile ground, evident by the abundance of pecans all over the place. The imagery is almost overwhelming at this point. The black community is literally a part of the earth. The crops grows out of them, making them indivisible from it. Yet, they are in danger of being forgotten and their contributions are going unrecognized. As the burial grounds fade into the landscape, neglected by both time and people, the ancestors that helped build up the town become an endangered species; vanishing because they will be forgotten. This holds especially true because this gathering of old men represents the last first-hand witnesses to the contribution that they and their families have made to the town. As time passes and they pass, the real danger is that all they have done for Bayonne will rot like the tombstones that have sunken to the ground and been overtaken by weeds.

This disregard by the white community extends beyond the scope of *A Gathering of Old Men*, though. This trauma is not simply a work of fiction, but has its foundations in the real world. Dunbar was not speaking of fictional characters wearing a mask, but of actual people

figuratively wearing a mask. In *Richard Wright's Blues*, Ellison was making reference to Richard Wright's autobiography, not to Dirty Red's or Tee Jack's. Ellison points out in his essay that besides the standard painful experience African Americans must endure, there is also a literate culture that marginalizes them:

American criticism has so thoroughly excluded the Negro that it fails to recognize some of the most basic tenets of Western democratic thought when encountering them in a black skin. They forget that human life possesses an innate dignity and mankind an innate sense of nobility; that all men possess the tendency to dream and the compulsion to make their dreams a reality; that the need to be ever dissatisfied and the urge to seek satisfaction is implicit in the human organism...

Perhaps all this... has been forgotten because the critics recognize neither the Negro humanity nor the full extent to which the Southern community renders the fulfillment of human destiny impossible. (Ellison 131)

The critic, like much of the rest of American society, does not recognize black-Americans as individuals. They do not see them as people with hopes and dreams, but as a group, a "them."

In addition, the American critic does not realize the debilitating ability of the Southern community against the black community. This is something that Gaines writes about thirty years later. To read Gibbs, though, one gets the sense that he would feel Gaines was regurgitating Morrison's "narrative techniques." Gibbs states that, "... precisely because of this novel's [*Beloved*] deserved impact, its narrative techniques have been unmoored and reused without an understanding of their organic interdependence with the novel's thematic context," (Gibbs 76). This comment, at the end of his chapter analyzing *Beloved*

as a trauma text, seems to place Gibbs precisely into Ellison's description of the exclusionary American critic. Gibbs repeatedly marginalizes authors whom he deems unworthy. He has an evident narrow view of what is considered to be an author worthy of artistic trope; that is, only authors recognized by awards like Pulitzer and Newbury. To Gibbs, these are the ideals. All others fall into the cheap copy category. Gibbs does not recognize the issues within the race. He sees an individual characteristic and labels it as the norm, disregarding the overall point. He fails to recognize that this is not a "narrative technique," but a representation of actual peoples lives.

Is *A Gathering of Old Men* a perfect book? No, not necessarily. Gaines' heteroglossic style is not as developed as Faulkner or Baldwin. Yet that seems to be an incorporation of Gaines' style. Faulkner and Baldwin were telling individual stories. On the other hand, Gaines wants a story about a group and the trauma that they have endured. Gaines wants to contribute to the already established trope of black-American trauma writing. As Ellison points out, this is the method to cope with the trauma; "...to finger its jagged grain." Gaines wants to expose an old, established issue in Southern culture. Black men are constantly marginalized, repeatedly treated as second class citizens not worthy of note, praise, or recognition. By leaving the ending abrupt, Gaines leaves the door open for the reader to decide where to go. Having now been exposed to the trauma, will the reader take part in it as a perpetrator, as a victim, or as a bystander who may help resolve the issue? Most people do not see the trauma, they see only the mask Dunbar describes being put as a front. Gibbs does not see the trauma, but rather a mask decorated with stylistic technique.

Ellison knows the pain, though. Gaines recognizes it as well and points out that the black men are, too, aware of it:

‘Y’all look,’ [Johnny Paul] said. ‘Look now. Y’all see anything? What y’all see?’

‘I see nothing but weeds, Johnny Paul,’ Mapes said. ‘If that’s what you’re trying to say.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Johnny Paul said. He didn’t look at Mapes; he was still looking up the Quarters. ‘Yes, sir, I figured that’s all you would see. But what do the rest don’t see? What y’all don’t see Rufe?’ (Gaines 88)

Only by recognizing the pain and suffering, by exposing it and retelling it, can one finally accept it and move on. Then the individual can finally remove the mask.

From the onset of *Invisible Man*, the narrator, Invisible Man, is unknowingly assuming the identities forced upon him by society. This is the prevailing, recurrent theme of the novel. Invisible Man, or IM, is playing the roles placed upon him by outside society. However, as opposed to the characters in *A Gathering of Old Men*, IM is unaware of the false role he is playing in his everyday life. The old men from *Gathering* fully comprehend that as individuals they are being subverted and a generic “them black folk” identity is being thrust upon them by the majority of white people from the town. Conversely, IM is ignorant to the false identities that he assumes. At times he inadvertently takes the role, and other times they are pushed onto him, but it is only at the end of the novel that IM comprehends his lack of a genuine, true identity.

Gaines establishes through *Gathering*... that his characters are not seen as individuals, but rather a group of lesser blacks, primarily through the use of heteroglossic narration, but also through the use of circling techniques previously mentioned. However, unlike Gaine’s use of circling technique, Ellison’s application more closely resembles that of Gibbs’ original description of circling. The divergence between Ellison and Gaines stems from the previously mentioned protagonists awareness of their situations; Gaine’s

characters know they are being labeled; Ellison's protagonist is oblivious to his forced identities. This is made up of a repetitive notion of contradictory events and episodes used to parallel the notion of forced identity; two opposing ideas at play simultaneously echoing the theme of two identities at odds with each other, the natural and the forced. Ellison is meticulous throughout his novel to demonstrate that the genuine American identity is not one set thing or another, but a compilation of unique and dynamic characteristics self-created by the individual.

Ellison wastes no time in starting the use of circling, beginning with chapter one in *Invisible Man*. IM is invited to give his graduation speech "at a gathering of the town's leading white citizens" (17). However, this gathering proves to be a series of humiliations and full of contradictions. First, Invisible Man and with nine other of his classmates are forced to watch a naked white girl dance in front of them. This demonstration is very difficult for Invisible Man because as a man, he wants to watch. However, as a black man in the South, he knows he should not even look at white women, let alone naked ones. This is further complicated by the drunken shouts of the "leading white citizens," some of whom yell at Invisible Man and his classmates to look, while others yell at them not to (19-20).

At this point, two of the protagonist's identities, the man and the submissive black man, are in conflict with each other. Ellison wants to establish the contradictions early on in his novel; Invisible Man cannot naturally and comfortably do what a heterosexual male would want to do, look at a naked women dance, because IM is black and they are white. After this scene, the boys are blindfolded and made to fight each other and the reader again witnesses the two identities in conflict:

A lucky blow to his chin and I had him going too – until I heard a loud voice yell, “I got my money on the big boy.”
Hearing this, I almost dropped my guard. I was confused:
Should I try to win against the voice out there? Would not this go against my speech... (25)

The narrator wants to win the fight, but to win would be going against one of the leading white citizens who is yelling in the background that he has money on Tatlock. Invisible Man’s two identities are fighting each other again here but before one can overpower the other, Invisible Man is literally knocked out. Despite the humiliation associated with witnessing the naked white woman and the unfairness of a blindfolded fight, the narrator still wants to give his speech: “I wanted to give my speech more than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge my true ability, and now this stupid clown [Tatlock] was ruining my chances” (25). Even though these men have stripped him of all his dignity, he still wants to impress them by giving his speech on humility, a speech that he doesn’t even agree with. As a black man in the South, Invisible Man’s identity of the submissive black man is prevalent. Relying on that viewpoint, Invisible Man believes that the “leading white citizens” approval is a vital part of life. What this view fails to see is the apparent contradiction presented which is that the “leading white citizens” whom Invisible Man seeks to impress with his speech have just beaten the hell out of him. The submissive black man’s identity has overpowered that of the regular man so much that it forces him to swallow his own blood rather than disrupt his speech (*Invisible Man*, 30).

Ellison does not shy away from contradictions and uses them throughout the novel to establish his premise on identity. By the end of this chapter, it is apparent that IM is in

the dark to the reality of his situation. During the fight, he literally is blinded and plunged into the darkness because he has a “band of white cloth” (21) placed over his eyes. He has been blinded by whiteness, just as he is blind to the fact that these “leading white men” are really just drunken idiots. Even when the blond man on page twenty-six calls him a Sambo doll, drawing attention to the fact that these white men are just using him and his schoolmates as a form of entertainment, Invisible man cannot see the reality of the situation. IM looks towards the white men as a form of social loci used to outline the societal construct of his identity: Who is he allowed to look at? Who is he allowed to hit? What is he allowed to say? The dissenting action and traumatizing experiences endured by IM during the Battle Royale scene stand to highlight the pseudo-identity shackling IM. This is Ellison’s version of circling. By establishing contradictions over and over again, Ellison hopes to show the contradictory nature of the American identity, and he continuously revolves around this point, beginning at the end and ending at the beginning; with IM sitting in an abandoned warehouse stealing electricity from the power company, essentially living off the grid.

Next comes the case of Jim Trueblood, maybe the most authentic of all characters in *Invisible Man*. History has left Jim Trueblood on the dusty, unpaved roads of the past, evidence by the fact that he is a sharecropper during the thirties and living in an old slave cabin in the Slave Quarters outside of the campus. Instead of moving forward in society like the students at the school do, Trueblood is the shadowy remnant of a world most people have forgotten or, at least, moved past. He is a byproduct of progress; the leftovers from the non-progressive; a vestiges organ on black society. As an uneducated, unemployed, penniless black man, no one wants to or does anything to help Trueblood,

plunging him further into a situation that he cannot escape from. Trueblood sleeps in his cold cabin, too poor to afford coal to heat it. Because of this, he is forced to share his bed with his wife and daughter, thus setting up the subsequent incestuous act. Trueblood sits up at night wondering how he will feed his family the next day. When Trueblood's situation worsens and he finds himself no longer dreaming, but awake and having sex with his own daughter, the complications of being born black are once again presented. He says to Norton:

...once a man gits hisself in a tight spot like that there ain't much he can do. It ain't up to him no longer. There I was, tryin' to git away with all my might, ye having to move *without* movin'. I flew in but had to walk out. I had to move without movin.' I done thought 'bout it since a heap, and when you think right hard you see that's the way things is always been with me. That's just about been my life. (59-60)

Trueblood has found himself in a contradictory situation. He has to move but it's too late; he wants to leave, but finds that he has woken up in the actual world as a prisoner of his own dream. As a shadow cannot control the actions of the person, Trueblood is like a shadow of the past, and therefore is unable to do anything to escape his situation. This whole scenario leaves Trueblood isolated in the world. His only resolve is to sing a blues solo. Despite the horrible reality of the situation, Trueblood acknowledges he cannot change who he is and what he has done and also that he must move on. As a man, he has to take responsibility for his actions. This is something that IM does not comprehend. His submissive identity is too overwhelmed by the fact a neglected black man could tell a powerful white man this story. Because Trueblood is black, he has been left in a situation that he cannot control and whose only solution is to sing the blues.

This makes Trueblood both black and blue.

The inclusion of the Trueblood scene in the novel can seem almost contradictory to Ellison's theme. In a novel trying to show the error of living assumed roles, why would Ellison include such a stereotypical character? In *Ellison's Zoot Suit*, Larry Neal included an excerpt from two "Negro left-winger[s]" whom did not approve of *Invisible Man*. One of which, John O. Killens wrote the following in an article in 1952, soon after the initial publication of *Invisible*

Man:

But how does Ellison present the Negro people? The thousands of exploited farmers in the South [are] represented by a sharecropper who made both his wife and daughter pregnant... The Negro people need Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* like we need a hole in the head or a stab in the back. It is a vicious distortion of Negro life.
(87)

At first glance, the reader might be tempted to agree with Killen's interpretation. However, to do so would be to ignore the rest of the novel. Ellison was trying to make a larger point. Trueblood is telling his story to Mr. Norton, a rich, white trustee of the school. Norton himself seems to have a strange infatuation with his own daughter, evident by the very long description that he gives on her beauty (Ellison, *Invisible* 42-43). The difference is that Trueblood never had the urge to sleep with his daughter, but ends up doing so anyway. Norton, on the other hand, unconsciously wants to sleep with his own daughter, but never realized it until he met Trueblood and heard his story, and by that point it is too late anyway, since Norton's daughter has died. At this point, the divide can be noted here between the rich white man and the poor black man. After the incestuous incident,

Trueblood has few options of what course to follow. He tries to pray, but can't, and then he tries to sing a church song, but ends up singing the blues (Ellison, *Invisible* 66). Religion is no answer for the sin that Trueblood has committed. God will not answer the echoing prayers of Oedipus' ancestor. The only salvation that can be found, the only answer to be given, is contained within the blues. This step, this proclamation of his mistake, starts Trueblood off on a better path. Norton, on the other hand, has no blues to sing. Unable to accept the reality of his own situation and its consequences, Norton's only resolve is to black out, but not before giving Trueblood one hundred dollars. Trueblood has benefited from his misdeed, unlike Norton whom winds up in a brothel with a cut on his head. Ellison's point here is that, yes, there are black people that do live up to the roles of stereotypes, but that they have a cultural form in effect that helps them deal with it. White culture, specifically upper class white culture, does not have an outlet like the blues. In his portrayal of this stereotype, Ellison is taking away the upper hand of the rich, white man. Killen's has completely missed this point. In addition, Trueblood lives up to his name. He uses his own identity through the blues to cope with his traumatic episode. He is not ignorant of his situation like IM, but rather, just ignorant. What Ellison does here again, as he did with the Battle Royale scene, is circle around the theme of the novel, the authentic makeup of an identity, as opposed to IM's assumed identities. Again, Ellison uses contradictions and parallels to circle the main point.

By this point, the two works shown here have demonstrated two different realizations of identity; the conscious one by the group of black men in *A Gathering of Old Men*, and the gradual realization by IM in *Invisible Man*. Yet in both cases, the realization is insidious for the reader. As the story progresses, the reader becomes more

aware of this lack of identity. One could assume at this point that this labeling is confined to the African American community. Yet as stated by Paul Bowles himself, the notion of deconstructing identity, removing the generic labels that mark a person's pseudo outward characteristics, is something that is the key to any person's ability to discover their true self. When D.H. Lawrence spoke of Poe and Bowles he stated:

‘The destruction of the ego has always seemed an important thing. I took it for Granted that that was what really one was looking for in order to attain knowledge and the ability to live... It's the stripping away of all the things that differentiate one person from another person. By stripping them away one arrives at a sort of basic working truth which will help one to go on.’ Such stripping is the painful, sometimes “ghastly process” Lawrence identifies...
(Stewart as qtd. in Pound, 426)

Again, as with Gaines and Ellison's works, the idea of “stripping away” is presented in Bowles writing. But the issue of how to strip this away is left unanswered in *A Gathering* and *Invisible Man*. *A Gathering*... leaves the reader with the sense that the black community is labeled as a group of *them*, as in *them black folks*. It is up to the reader to recognize the mask that is placed upon them and remove it. *Invisible Man* leaves the reader with the sense that IM knows he has been labeled and is waiting to reemerge into society with his new, self-created identity. Yet how can one create this new identity without the influence of society? This is the question that runs parallel to the theme of deconstructing identity in *A Sheltering Sky*.

The novel sets up the idea that identity, true unadulterated, uninfluenced identity, can only be discovered by removing oneself from society; in this novel's case, by the

Moresby's traveling to the Sahara. The further Port travels into the desert, the more his identity unravels and he, himself, falls apart. From the start of the novel, Port makes a point to state that he was a "traveler" as opposed to a "tourist," with the key distinction being that "[the tourist] accepts his own civilization without question; not so the traveler, who compares it with the others, and rejects those elements he finds not to his liking" (*Sheltering* 6). So, somewhere in his consciousness, Port is aware that he does not accept certain aspects of himself, but he still unaware that he has started on a quest of deconstructing his identity as well as a quest of selfdestruction.

To further this point of false identities, Bowles directly asserted that neither Port nor Kit are the protagonist, but rather, "The desert is the protagonist. I wanted to tell... what the desert can do to us... It's all one: they're [the desert and the sky] both the same, part of nature" (qtd. in Pound 430). By using nature as the protagonist, Bowles sets up the notion that an identity, in this case nature, can have a sense of purity. This vastness of the purity takes over the minds of Port and Kit. Repeatedly throughout the novel, the idea of light vs. dark and the nothingness presented by the desert, are shown. At one point, Kit and Port have a discussion about the sky.

Port states:

'You know... the sky here is very strange. I often have the sensation that when I look at it that it's a solid thing, protecting us from what's behind.'

Kit shuddered slightly as she said: 'From what's behind?'

'Yes.'

'But what is behind?' Her voice was very small.

'Nothing, I suppose. Just darkness. Absolute night.' (*Sheltering* 94)

The sky holds back openness; the notion of a world without influence, “just darkness.” Without society, a person can only identify by what is left inside of them. This is something IM and the group of old men knew. Port and Kit are aware of the darkness, but wholly unprepared to venture into the nothingness.

While Port moves further into the Sahara, he acknowledges his quest into the unknown from almost an admiring standpoint. Yet the mistake Port makes is that this venture will rectify his marriage. “He had felt a definite desire to strengthen the sentimental bonds between them. At times he had said to himself that subconsciously he had had that in mind when he had conceived this expedition with Kit from New York into the unknown” (*Sheltering* 98). Port feels as though traveling into the unknown will somehow force the two of them, him and Kit, into falling in love with each other. As Andrew Martino points out, “Their journey into the Sahara fails to reunite them, in fact it does just the opposite; it leads them further away from each other” (89). Port seems ignorant of the fact that his own identity as well as Kits are false, and that this lack of identity is the real reason their marriage is collapsing. Again, the idealistic and naïve viewpoint of Port can be seen just a few pages later: “It was merely that the institution of tourist travel in this part of the world, never well developed in any case, had been, not interrupted, but utterly destroyed by the world... In a sense this state of affairs pleased him, it made him feel like he was pioneering” (*Sheltering* 101). Port has the sense that he is on some type of adventure, virtually ignorant or at least dismissive, of the dangers posed by “pioneering” into the unknown. He is oblivious to what the “darkness” of the Sahara

will do to a person. It is only much later that he becomes “aware of the destruction at the end of his quest” (Pounds 430).

At the peak of this venture in darkness is Port’s loss of his passport. Pound states that “When he [Port] loses his passport, last vestige of the social man, his momentary disorientation quickly gives way to feverish exaltation at the unknown quality of his next destination, El Ga’a, and he begins purposely too avoid information about his traveling conditions” (430). Port takes the loss of his passport as a liberating experience, making him a man whom no longer has any ties to society. This loss of the passport parallels IM’s act towards the end of *Invisible Man*, when he literally burns the contents of his briefcase as a symbol gesture of his rejection of societal labels. Yet Port still is in the dark, while IM was aware of what was occurring which again can be seen in that IM voluntarily rejects his papers while Port has his passport stolen. It is only when Port is mortally ill that he begins to see the cohesive structures of his life, to see with “clarity... through all the apparent twists of his past life” (Pounds 431). The travel into the desert has cleared his mind, and as Port lies dying in the back of the truck, he thinks to himself, “The twisting roads of the past became alien, faded from his memory; it had been one strict, undeviating course inland to the desert, and now he was very nearly at the center” (*Sheltering* 192). All apparent roads have led to this point. But unlike IM and the group of old men, Port is trying to forget the painful experiences, dismiss them, in order to accept the fact that he has lived under a false identity. The painful experiences have led him to this realization, but only to the realization that the pain permeated from the shallowness of his past consciousness.

As Port's illness progresses, his thinking becomes more lucid. He begins to pioneer through his own consciousness. "He followed the course of his thoughts because he was tied on behind. Often the way was vertiginous, but he could not let go. There was no repetition in the landscape; it was always new territory and the peril increased constantly" (*Sheltering* 216). Similar to the desert, where the landscape is always changing but always the same, the new, uncharted territory of Port's mind increases his "peril." He searches for the meaning of his consciousness, his identity, but there is nothing to find. It was based on shallowness and cultural labels. This "peril" is his discovery of his lack of identity, and as he lies alone and dying in the room, Kit having run away due to the stress, Port sees in his mind:

The thin sky stretched out to protect him. Slowly the split would occur, the sky draw back, and he would see what he never had doubted lay behind advance upon him with the speed of a million winds. His cry was a separate thing beside him in the desert. It went on and on. (*Sheltering* 227)

Port finally sees beyond the sky, and as stated previously, there is nothing there. He has left his society and culture behind, gone to the uncharted frontier as an explorer. Yet this journey was too much for him, too extreme of a journey for the unprepared. The travel has not left him in a basement waiting to reemerge, but rather left him dead on a floor in middle of nowhere. Kit is not in any better position.

Where Port's exercise in deconstructing his identity left him physically defeated, evident by the fact that he dies, the self-discovery will leave Kit psychologically distorted

and not much better off than her spouse. Kit's identity is based on Port. Port's only functions were to be that of the traveler, but also that of a husband. Although their marriage was strained, it provided some sense of continuity for each of them. "Once Port is dead – a death which comes slowly – Kit is forced to confront a life with Port as ground to the familiar" (Martino 93). Unlike Port's disintegration of identity which leads to death, Kit's leads to madness enshrined on some sort of primal form of sexuality. Andrew Martino reiterates this argument within his article:

Each one of them is in search of a renewed intimacy with one another, yet neither one is willing to make the first move toward that intimacy. Moreover, Port's path leads ultimately to his death, while Kit's leads to madness. In each case the security of what is familiar is irrecoverably left behind. (90)

Port and Kit's relationship has drifted apart. They travel into the desert to rectify it, but are too different, so therefore incapable, of doing so. Port is restless and needs vastness; Kit needs stability offered by society.

The sexuality of Kit is presented early on in the novel. While separated from Port, she gets drunk and sleeps with their friend, Tunner. As she drinks and loses her inhibitions, she wanders from her "civilized" cabin on the train, into the "wilderness" of the fourth-class cabin.

Even in this structured environment, as Kit travels further from her comfort zone of first class, her anxieties increase and she feels the innate desire to go back. She repeatedly uses

negative phrases such as “fearfully,” “stumbling,” “disgust,” and “shudder,” to describe her feelings of her surroundings. She also describes the sense of helplessness felt; “Someone was pushing her from behind, obliging her to go in the car... Under his gaze she felt like a badly behaved child” (*Sheltering* 76). The helplessness combined with fear leads her to retreat to the security of her cabin with Tunner and enter a repressed sexuality that she could not express with Port, since the two were no longer intimate with one another. As she gives into this primal sense, the omniscient narration gives a glimpse of her mindset: “She could no longer think, nor were there any more images in her head. She was only aware of the softness of the woolen bathrobe next to her skin, and then of the nearness and warmth of a being that did not frighten her” (*Sheltering* 80). The sexuality gives her some sense of control over the seemingly uncontrollable situation she has been forced into.

Kit is at the whim of Port. As previously stated by Martino, her frail identity is based on perception of stability. From the start of the novel, she sets up the notion that any variance to how she is perceived will ultimately lead to disgrace. When Port describes a dream to Tunner in Kit’s presence, she is mortified by his actions, and this later on leads to an argument:

“What is it?” he [Port] asked.

“Nothing.” She paused. “I’m just a little upset. I don’t think you should have told that dream in front of Tunner...He’s a gossip. You know that. I don’t trust him. He always makes a good story.”

“But who’s he going to gossip with here?” said Port, exasperated.

Kit in turn was annoyed.

“Oh, not here!” she snapped. “You seem to forget we’ll be back in New York some day.” (*Sheltering* 12)

Just the notion that sometime in the distant future, Tunner might potentially tell some obscure story to her socialite friends scares Kit. And when the conversation is pushed, Kit quickly backs off and walks out of the room. When the issue of trust and Tunner is still pursued by Port, she becomes aggravated and insists that he drops the subject. This becomes the blueprint for Kit and Port’s relationship. She displays her uncomfortableness at situations, but when pressed, she quickly backs off to avoid a conflict. She does not want to disrupt the persona that she feels is created for Port. The ultimate irony of this brief scene is the foreshadowing it sets up; that just days later, she sleeps with Tunner, betraying her trust with Port and ignoring her mistrust of Tunner.

Despite this loss of trust, the most tragic aspect of Kit’s personality is her awareness of her lack of freedom juxtaposed with her reliance on Port. She states later on, directly, that “Other people rule [her] life,” and that “against her will she forced herself to admit that she still belonged to Port, even though he did not come to claim her – and that she still lived in a world illuminated by the distant light of a possible miracle: he might yet return to her” (*Sheltering* 37). Again, as the case was with Port, the idea of light vs. dark and the nothingness that is held behind is displayed. Whereas Port travels towards the nothingness in a futile attempt at rediscovery, Kit is left in the dark, holding onto glimmers of light in the distance. Yet without the support of her husband, since they split at any sort of confrontation, she is left isolated. When Port dies, he leaves her literally alone in middle of nowhere.

As Port abandons Kit in the psychological sense, she abandons him in the physical sense. Having traveled way off the grid into the Sahara, far off from civilization, and become deathly ill, Port has further isolated Kit and sets her up for her breakdown. As her identity was based on his gaze, she cannot deal with his dying and leads her to disregard his corpse in a dirty little room in an effort to repress the traumatic episode. After Port dies, Kit goes off into the desert and begins wandering aimlessly. She has brought little with her. When she encounters a caravan, she wastes no time in again establishing her sexuality as a form of dealing with trauma. While she is unable to communicate with anyone in the caravan, she almost instantly has the sense of “helplessness and accept[s] it” (*Sheltering* 266), allowing Belqassim to have sex with her. She even describes it, rationalizing the rape, as a “friendly carnal presence,” and “little by little she found herself considering him [Belqassim] with affection” (*Sheltering* 267). Unable to cope with the tragedy of her husbands’ death, and now with the more tragic act of rape she has endured, Kit deconstructs her identity into a primal form of sexuality, where she feels as though that is all she has to offer.

As another older man rapes her Kit still offers little response or resistance and seems to cling to the primal feelings offered by her love making with Belqassim. In fact, she uses this as a coping mechanism to the trauma inflicted by the older man. She describes the sex with Belqassim with “affection,” and as having “the perfect balance between gentleness and violence that gave her a particular delight” (*Sheltering* 267). As time passes and the old man and Belqassim take turns raping Kit, she begins to rationalize the act by stating that since Belqassim was standing by as the old man had his way with her, it “no longer bothered her” (*Sheltering* 268). The apathy demonstrated by Kit is

interpreted by Alexa Weik on Mossner in her article “Encountering the Sahara.” Kit is “indifferent to the fact she is being raped repeatedly... [and] she seems to quietly enjoy the scant life of the well-adapted desert dwellers” (Mossner 231). Mossner also points out that the desert provides a shelter for Kit from her past memories (231). By removing herself from society by escaping into the desert and emerging herself within a culture that she cannot communicate with, Kit has a way to disregard her past identity. Without a foundation to build on, she is left only with what she has at hand; her sexuality. Yet even her sexuality is ambiguous. She is forced to dress as a man in order to hide from Belqassim’s wives. Combined with the forceful act of rape, she still has not truly embraced a new personality, but still has one forced upon her.

When she is discovered to be a woman, her safe ground becomes compromised and Kit is again forced to flee. This time, however, the trauma comes in a physical form rather than a psychological one; Belqassim’s other wives are slowly poisoning Kit. Before this, though, they beat and whip Kit. This act is seen by Andrew Martino as a form of robbing Kit of her identity; beating the whiteness out of her (Martino 100). The next act of Belqassim forcing her to marry him again asserts her as having an identity forced upon her. Belqassim takes the jewelry from his other wives and puts it on Kit and, as Martino points out, “she has gone from being the privileged white suburban housewife to the ‘African queen.’ In each case, she is owned by the men in her life” (Martino 100). Despite her resorting on her sexuality, Kit has not found a new identity, as the Old men and IM have, but rather reinvented the old one in a new environment.

As Kit continues to be poisoned and is no longer safe, she emerges from the desert back in the city. Yet when faced with the prospect of reintegrating into civilization and

being forced to recognize the trauma of her past, Kit again takes refuge in what she views as her only asset; her sexuality. As she begins to kiss Amar, her “savior,” she tells him “You must save me” (*Sheltering* 300). Amar’s assumption is that he is saving her from the trauma of being lost in the Sahara, but what Kit truly wants to be saved from is society and her past identity. With Port, Kit had safety in the sense that everything about her was dictated to her: where to go, whom to be friends with, what to bring, where to stay. When he died, that safety net was lost and Kit was left with the traumatic sense of her shattered identity.

By this point, Amar and his accomplice have stolen everything that Kit had left except for her passport, and as Andrew Martino points out, “Her passport is her only tangible proof of her identity – her existence... Unlike Port, whose passport is stolen from him by Eric Lyle, Kit is able to hold on to some evidence of her existence” (Martino 108). Port loss of his passport coincides with his illness and subsequent death. Kit’s passport stays with her for the entirety of the novel, her last association with Western civilization. She is left with the people at the consulate by Amar. When Miss Ferry informs her that she is being brought back to Tunner, Kit sneaks out of the cab and disappears into a crowd in the city, and as Martino states she is unable to “re-orient herself to the ‘structured world of civilization...’ Instead, she chooses the boundless and, for her, linguistically barren world of the Sahara” (108). Unlike IM and the group of old men, Kit cannot reemerge from her past. She has made too many mistakes, so she inevitably loses her mind and herself in the boundless landscape of the desert.

Invisible Man and *A Gathering of Old Men* sets up the notion that hope stems from the realization and recognition of identity; that by keeping the “painful details and

episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it," individuals can create an identity built on a series of traumas, among other things. The Moresby's do not have this outlet. They traverse into the desert, pioneer into the unknown, and rather than keeping the painful details alive, cower and hide from them. Port dies alone on the floor in a dirty room, realizing his mistakes too late. Kit is literally unable to face the consequences following his death and loses her mind in the process. They both lack the knowledge and skills that IM and the old men possess, which ultimately leads to their downfall. The Moresby's are ignorant of what seems to be the main point of both *Invisible Man* and *A Gathering of Old Men*, a point which Ralph Ellison makes in one of his essays entitled "The Charlie Christian Story." Ellison states that:

There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself, for true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity as an individual, as a member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it... (*The Collected Essays...* 267)

Jazz is the parallel for the American identity. It is being an individual while still being in a group; the contradiction of uniqueness creating sameness. By the end of *Invisible Man*, IM knows this. He sits waiting in his abandoned warehouse waiting to discover and create his own identity, his own improvisation on the past. He wants to build a persona not void or

negligent of past misdeeds of people like Trueblood or Raz, but one that embraces them. Similarly, Gaines wants the reader to be aware of all these men in a group, but still recognize them as individuals whom create a tapestry of southern society. They are men who built the town and are literally part of the foundation of the land. In both cases, the characters and the reader must have an awareness that these are individuals among a group. Without the group, they are nothing; a lost musician playing garbled notes under a bridge overpass. The true music, the art, comes from building on the past, both good and bad, and making a self-created persona. By rejecting society, the Moresby's are not practicing improvisation, but setting themselves up for failure. They have left the "chain of tradition" and repressed the "brutal experiences." They only perform half of the equation by losing their identities, but forget that the other part is being a member of the collective, the culture. They are not creating an individual assertion within and against the group, but only against it. Because of this, Port and Kit become the aimless garbler of music blurting out nonsensical notes for an audience of no one.

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