



Shadow of Harlem: Black Visibility and Urban Survival in Colson Whitehead's *Harlem Shuffle*

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Abstract:

Colson Whitehead's *Harlem Shuffle* examines Black life in 1960s Harlem through the lens of crime, business and social pressure. This paper analyses how racial perception shapes identity and survival in the novel. The study focuses on Ray Carney, a furniture dealer navigating between respectable society and Harlem's criminal underground. His shifting identity reveals the personal cost of navigating a racially structured world. The study applies W.E.B Du Bois's double consciousness and Ralph Ellison's racial invisibility as its theoretical frameworks. Through close reading of Carney's business dealings and social interactions, the study examines how racial surveillance governs self-presentation and limits opportunity. His experience reflects twoness, invisibility in white civic spaces and the veil operating within Harlem through class divisions. The analysis finds that his fragmented identity is a structural imposition. It is reproduced by white non-recognition downtown and by class hierarchies within Harlem itself. This paper concludes that Harlem offers no true freedom. Black survival demands constant self-reinvention under an enduring racial gaze.

Keywords: Black visibility, Invisibility, Double consciousness, Racial identity, Harlem Shuffle.

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Introduction

Black identity in America has never been a private matter. It is shaped by history, race and the constant pressure of public judgment. From slavery to the civil rights movement, Black Americans have been forced to define themselves within systems that deny their full humanity. This struggle is not only political. It appears in daily choices, in speech, in dress and in silence. American literature has long recorded this experience. Writers like Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison gave literary form to the psychological and social weight of being Black in a white-dominated society. Colson Whitehead continues this tradition in *Harlem Shuffle*, a novel that places Black identity at the centre of urban life, economic ambition and racial conflict in 1960s New York. The 1960s setting is significant. It was a decade of civil rights legislation, urban unrest and rising Black economic ambition. However, legal progress did not dissolve racial hierarchy. Harlem in this period became a space where Black aspiration and racial limitation existed side by side.

Harlem Shuffle follows Ray Carney, a Harlem furniture dealer who tries to build a stable life through legitimate business. He maintains a respectable public image while remaining connected to Harlem's criminal underground. The racial weight of that world becomes clear downtown. Whitehead notes that "There weren't many white men who called him mister. Downtown, anyway" (4). In white commercial spaces, basic professional respect is withheld. Carney's respectability counts for nothing beyond Harlem's boundaries. He adjusts his behaviour and self-presentation depending on who is watching. Every interaction demands a different version of himself. Whitehead uses this tension to explore how Black selfhood survives under the pressure of constant performance. This paper reads Carney's experience through the lens of Du Bois's double consciousness and Ellison's racial invisibility. Both frameworks reveal what racial perception costs. Existing scholarship tends to treat Du Bois, Ellison and Whitehead within separate critical traditions. This paper brings them into direct

dialogue. It argues that reading *Harlem Shuffle* through double consciousness and racial invisibility reveals dimensions of Carney's experience that neither framework captures alone.

The study uses textual analysis to examine how racial perception operates on Harlem's streets, businesses and domestic spaces. It traces how stereotypes limit economic opportunity, how surveillance governs public behaviour and shapes personal relationships. Whitehead presents a Harlem where Black progress is genuine but never secure. Economic success does not guarantee social acceptance. Reading *Harlem Shuffle* through Du Bois and Ellison reveals the full weight of that fragility.

Literature Review

Critical scholarship on W.E.B Du Bois's double consciousness has largely examined the concept as a framework for understanding Black identity in America. Dennis argues that double consciousness describes an internal division within Black Americans. It compels them to see themselves through their own self-perception and through the dehumanising gaze of white society simultaneously. Dennis positions this division as a structural condition shaped by racial inequality. His study shows how fragmented selfhood emerges from social exclusion and racial pressure. However, Dennis does not extend this analysis to literary texts or to the everyday social spaces where Black identity is performed.

De Walt extends the discussion of Black identity by arguing that identity formation for African Americans involves constant renegotiation. Drawing on Du Bois, he shows that Black identity responds to historical pressure, spatial context and social expectation. De Walt's work remains largely theoretical. The literary and spatial dimensions of identity negotiation are left unexplored.

Zouankouan examines how invisibility emerges when society refuses to recognise Black individuals beyond racial stereotypes. The narrator becomes invisible because others fail

to acknowledge his humanity and individuality. Zouankouan identifies invisibility as a condition produced by social perception and exclusion. His study highlights the relationship between recognition, identity and power. However, the connection between invisibility and Du Bois's double consciousness remains underdeveloped.

Costa situates *Harlem Shuffle* within the African American urban literary tradition. He argues that Harlem functions as both a place of oppression and a place of resistance. Costa draws a direct parallel between Whitehead's Harlem and Ellison's underground New York, where both protagonists navigate between legitimate and hidden geographies. Costa also examines how racial capitalism limits Black economic ambition. However, his focus remains on space and capitalism, while Carney's shifting identity under racial perception remains outside his analysis.

Abinaya and Raja argue that Whitehead exposes both racial discrimination and class divisions within the Black community. Their study focuses on Ray Carney's struggle for social respectability while confronting prejudice, economic hardship and social exclusion. Although their analysis highlights the role of race and class in shaping Carney's experiences, the psychological consequences of these pressures receive limited attention.

Across these studies, Du Bois, Ellison and Whitehead are treated within separate critical frameworks. This separation limits a fuller understanding of how racial scrutiny limits Black identity. This study fills that gap through a combined reading of double consciousness, racial invisibility and Whitehead's novel.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach based on close textual reading of Colson Whitehead's *Harlem Shuffle*. It focuses on selected key passages that represent urban

spaces, social interactions and moments of racial conflict. The study is grounded in W.E.B Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, particularly his ideas of twoness and the veil as discussed in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and Ralph Ellison's concept of racial invisibility as developed in *Invisible Man*. These concepts serve as analytical tools to examine how racial perception shapes identity and governs public behaviour. The analysis focuses on key passages involving Ray Carney. It examines dialogue, character movement and social interaction to trace how racial surveillance operates across Harlem.

Through this approach, the study demonstrates how racial perception functions as a controlling mechanism within American urban society. Literature is treated here as a site where social conditions are recorded and made visible.

Theoretical Framework

Double consciousness shapes Black identity through a deep and unavoidable division of self. Du Bois describes this condition as “a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, ch. 1). This internal division produces a fragmented sense of self. Black Americans must constantly negotiate between their own self-perception and the dehumanising gaze of white society.

Du Bois extends this division through the concept of twoness. He argues that “one ever feels his twoness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, ch. 1). Twoness extends double consciousness beyond psychology into lived social experience. Black Americans inhabit two identities simultaneously. One is shaped for white social acceptance. The other remains personal and

interior. This dual existence shapes public behaviour, economic choices and personal relationships. The tension is never resolved. It is managed as a daily necessity.

Du Bois further develops the concept of the veil to explain the racial barrier between Black and white social worlds. He writes that the Black man is “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, —a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (Du Bois, ch. 1). The veil operates as an invisible racial boundary. It denies Black individuals full social recognition. Crossing it demands constant identity adjustment. This performance is not chosen. It is imposed by racial structure.

Racial invisibility operates alongside double consciousness as a mechanism of social control. Ellison’s narrator declares that “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... When they approach me they see only surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination -- indeed, everything and anything except me” (Ellison, Prologue). Invisibility is not physical absence. It is enforced non-recognition produced by the racial gaze. Ellison connects this directly to non-recognition, arguing that “to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see?... Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement” (Ellison, Prologue). Non-recognition denies Black individuals their social existence. In response, Black individuals construct performative identities to demand acknowledgement. Both double consciousness and invisibility place Black individuals under continuous pressure to negotiate their identity.

Ellison identifies social erasure as the systemic consequence of invisibility. He writes that “without light I am not visible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one’s form is to live a death” (Ellison, Prologue). Erasure operates at a communal level. It denies recognition to Black economic progress and cultural achievement. It functions as a systemic mechanism

that suppresses collective Black identity. Together, these frameworks move the reading of Carney beyond moral or economic analysis. They reveal the cost of living under racial surveillance in American urban society.

Divided Selfhood and Performance

Whitehead introduces Ray Carney as a man caught between two versions of himself. Carney insists that “I may be broke, but I ain’t crooked” (Whitehead 18). This description reveals the core tension of his existence. To his customers and neighbours on 125th street, Carney is an honest furniture dealer building a decent life for his family. He provides instalment payment plans for working-class Harlem residents. He dresses professionally. He maintains a public image of integrity and ambition. Behind that image, he fences stolen goods through his store and maintains ties to Harlem’s criminal underground. His cousin Freddie regularly brings him jewellery and electronics of questionable origin. Freddie makes this complicity explicit, reminding Carney that “those other things, not just TVs. You never asked where they came from” (Whitehead 27). Carney accepts them without question and moves them through a discreet downtown jeweller.

This dual existence reflects Du Bois’s twoness directly. Carney inhabits two separate lives simultaneously. His respectable identity demands constant performance and discipline. His criminal identity demands silence and a different set of loyalties entirely. These two selves do not coexist peacefully. The tension between them requires daily management and calculation.

The furniture store itself becomes the physical symbol of this division. Carney runs his legitimate business through one entrance and his underground dealings through another. The building contains both versions of himself within a single structure. This architectural detail mirrors the psychological structure that Du Bois describes in double

consciousness. Carney cannot fully inhabit either world. His respectable life is undermined by his criminal connections. His criminal life is constrained by his desire for respectability. This threat becomes most visible when Carney is drawn into the robbery of the Hotel Theresa. He does not initiate the heist, but his ties to Harlem's criminal network make his involvement unavoidable. The operation places everything he has built in direct danger. Carney's dual existence is not a stable or controllable arrangement. It is a fragile balance, always at risk of falling apart. Whitehead uses the Hotel Theresa robbery to show that Du Bois's twoness carries concrete material consequences. The divided self produces real and measurable costs.

Carney's fragmented selfhood is further complicated by the pressure of class expectation. Carney's wife, Elizabeth comes from Strivers' Row, a prestigious Harlem neighbourhood. This dismissal is not simply personal. It represents the demand that Carney perform a version of Black respectability he cannot fully achieve, given his origins and his hidden activities. He must present himself as worthy to a family that measures worth by education, profession and neighbourhood. This performance is exhausting and unstable. It mirrors Du Bois's argument that double consciousness forces Black individuals to internalise the disapproving judgment of others. His pursuit of a larger apartment on Riverside Drive reflects this pressure directly. As Costa observes, Carney "increasingly discovers the falsity of the American Dream through living in Harlem" (95). It is not simply economic ambition. It is an attempt to satisfy an external standard of respectability that remains permanently out of reach. Divided selfhood in the novel is not only an internal condition. It is produced and sustained by the class hierarchies that surround him.

Visibility, Recognition and Urban Navigation

Carney's movement through New York City reveals how racial perception controls Black mobility and public recognition in 1960s America. When he visits white-owned

businesses in downtown Manhattan, the clerks pretend not to see him. He waits. He gestures. He clears his throat. Whitehead describes him as remaining, “a black ghost, store after store, accumulating the standard humiliations” (Whitehead 5). He is physically present but systematically erased by white perception. This experience maps directly onto Ellison’s concept of invisibility. His professional dress, his articulate speech and his commercial purpose count for nothing. White perception reduces him to a racial category rather than recognising him as an individual.

Ellison’s narrator states that those who approach him “see only my surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except me” (Ellison, Prologue). This refusal is not accidental. It is a mechanism of control. By withholding recognition, white-dominated institutions maintain the boundaries of racial hierarchy and limit Black access to economic opportunity.

When Aronowitz greets Carney with ““Can I help you, sir?” Can I help you as in *Can I help you?*” the repetition itself signals something unusual (Whitehead 5). Basic professional courtesy becomes an act of recognition that Carney rarely encounters in white commercial spaces. This single exchange earns Aronowitz his immediate loyalty and repeat custom. Carney returns to him repeatedly, recommends him and trusts him. A routine greeting carries enormous weight precisely because it is so rarely extended. Ellison argues that “responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement” (Ellison, Prologue). Aronowitz’s courtesy functions as exactly this kind of agreement. It acknowledges Carney’s existence as a full person rather than a racial obstruction.

Carney responds to systemic non-recognition by constructing and maintaining a careful public performance. He maintains a polished professional appearance. He speaks with deliberate authority. He cultivates relationships with both legitimate and illegitimate networks.

This is not freedom. It is the only available response to an environment that withholds recognition based on skin colour. This constant self-monitoring is the lived expression of Du Bois's double consciousness. In Whitehead's Harlem, recognition is never freely given. It must be earned through relentless performance.

The Veil, Erasure and Black Achievement

Harlem's internal structure reveals how the veil operates not only between Black and white worlds but within Black communal life itself. Du Bois describes the veil as the condition of being born into "a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois, ch. 1). In *Harlem Shuffle*, this condition shapes every level of Carney's experience. The veil does not simply separate Black Harlem from white Manhattan. It produces further divisions within the Black community based on class, education and skin tone.

Elizabeth's father, Leland makes this judgment explicit. He dismisses Carney openly and refuses to treat his business as a legitimate enterprise. This dismissal functions as an internal version of the veil. It reproduces within Black communities the same exclusions imposed from outside. Those who have achieved proximity to white standards of respectability use those standards to judge and exclude others. Strivers' Row represents this aspirational tier. Its residents measure worth through profession, education and neighbourhood. Carney navigates this internal boundary with the same careful performance he uses in white commercial spaces. This pressure extends into domestic life. Elizabeth's mother sees their small apartment as evidence that "her daughter had settled for less than she deserved" (Whitehead 21). The home itself becomes a site of racial and class judgment.

In Whitehead's New York, Black and white worlds occupy the same city but remain fundamentally separate. Carney navigates this divide daily. This geographical division maps

the veil onto the urban landscape of 1960s New York. Carney crosses this boundary daily. Downtown, he suppresses his identity to navigate white commercial spaces. In Harlem, he performs respectability to maintain his standing. Neither crossing offers freedom. Both demand self-concealment.

Ellison's concept of erasure operates at this communal level throughout the novel. Carney's economic progress does not translate into civic acceptance or personal security. His association with the criminal underground threatens his respectable image at every turn. The Harlem Riot of 1964, which forms the backdrop of the novel's final section, demonstrates that collective Black progress is equally vulnerable. The riot exposes how far Black economic advancement can be tolerated without ever being truly recognised. As Abinaya and Raja observe, Carney "dedicates his life to become a respectable businessman but people have ill-treated him due to his antecedence" (Abinaya and Raja 1770). Economic progress does not dissolve racial stigma. The past follows Carney into every space he attempts to occupy. Even those within Harlem recognise its limitations. Whitehead observes that there is "no shortage of reasons to get out of Harlem if you could swing it" (Whitehead 12). Harlem is not presented as a place of liberation. It is a place of managed survival where even its own residents feel the weight of its boundaries. Carney's endurance depends on navigating erasure across multiple fronts simultaneously.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how racial surveillance shapes Black identity and survival in Colson Whitehead's *Harlem Shuffle*. Drawing on Du Bois's double consciousness and Ellison's racial invisibility, it has traced how Ray Carney navigates a racially structured urban world. Carney is not simply a furniture dealer with criminal connections. He is a Black man holding competing versions of himself together under relentless external pressure.

The analysis has shown that these conditions are not abstract. Twoness is visible in Carney's daily negotiation between his respectable and criminal lives. Invisibility is confirmed by his erasure in white civic spaces. The veil operates not only between Black and white worlds but within Harlem itself, where class divisions reproduce the exclusions imposed from outside.

Whitehead uses Harlem's urban geography to make these conditions tangible. Streets, storefronts and neighbourhoods are not neutral backdrops. They are sites where racial hierarchy is enforced, negotiated and occasionally resisted. Black achievement within them is real. It is also structurally fragile.

This paper contributes to African American literary scholarship by demonstrating that Du Bois and Ellison remain essential frameworks for reading contemporary Black fiction. Their concepts describe conditions that Whitehead locates firmly in everyday urban life. The colour line continues to shape Black selfhood in America. Carney's story is not exceptional. It reflects a broader and enduring structural condition. Neither economic progress nor individual effort can fully dissolve it.

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