

Knucklebones and Knocking-bones: The Accidental Trickster in Ellison's *Invisible Man*

In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," published in *Partisan Review* in 1958, Ralph Ellison discusses with his friend Stanley Edgar Hyman the relationship between African American literature and African American folklore. In particular, Ellison finds Hyman's conception of the trickster simplistic and even misguided. Tricksters, Ellison argues, are not unique to African American folklore; indeed, "from a proper distance *all* archetypes would appear to be tricksters and confidence men" (102), whether they emerge in Ellison's own *Invisible Man* or Homer's *The Odyssey*. Ellison is not denying the influence of "Negro American folklore" in his work, but he is questioning the reductive binary on which Hyman relies, a binary that designates certain archetypes as "Negro" (or African) and other archetypes as "American" (or European). As a writer who claimed both "Negro" and "American" literary ancestry, Ellison resists such easy categorization. More troubling to him, however, is Hyman's contention that the "'darker' entertainer" or African American minstrel is descended from the folkloric trickster figure. To be sure, it is overly easy to make such an argument, to see the "'darker' entertainer as "a skilled man of intelligence . . . parodying a subhuman grotesque" (112). But such a theory of appropriation and subversion is, in Ellison's words, all too "kind." Minstrelsy, he argues, is an act of "self-humiliation" and "symbolic self-maiming," reducing the blackface entertainer into a "'sacrificial' figure" rather than elevating him to the status of taunting trickster (112).

In distinguishing the minstrel from the trickster, Ellison highlights the fraudulence of popular theatrical representations of blackness. He writes,

The role with which they [darker entertainers] are identified is not, despite its "blackness," Negro American (indeed, Negroes are repelled by it); it does not find its popularity among Negroes but among whites; and although it resembles the role of the clown familiar to Negro variety-house audiences, it derives not from the Negro but from the Anglo-Saxon branch of American folklore. In other words, this "'darker' entertainer" is white. (101)

With their pseudo-Negro dialect, faces smeared with burnt cork, and outlandish costumes, black minstrels are reduced to "a negative sign," a vessel of all things "grotesque and unacceptable" (103). Indeed, Ellison goes so far as to call minstrelsy a "ritual of exorcism" (103), allowing the white audience to enjoy "blackness" in a safe, comedic context. By calling the darker entertainer "white," Ellison argues that minstrelsy originates not in Africa (as Hyman believes) but right here at home. Indeed, even if the darker entertainer *is* descended from the folkloric trickster, he has so adjusted to "the contours of 'white' symbolic needs" that no

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amount of burnt cork or greasepaint can mask his true racial (and racist) origins.

Although Ellison ends his essay on a more gracious note, thanking Hyman for the "service" he performs in elucidating the African American folk tradition, he maintains that Hyman "distort[s] [literature's] content to fit his theory" of folk tradition and archetypes. As evidence, Ellison cites and then rejects Hyman's overzealous (mis)readings of *Invisible Man*, a section of the essay that would make any literary critic—including this one—flinch. Yet Ellison's admonition is a valid one. None of the characters in *Invisible Man* are meant to be perfect archetypes; indeed, Ellison's modernist convictions would have precluded such completeness or flatness of character. And while Ellison concedes that Rhinehart "would seem a perfect example of Hyman's trickster figure," he adamantly denies that the Invisible Man fits such an archetype: "He certainly is not a smart man playing dumb. For the novel, his memoir is one long, loud rant, howl and laugh. Confession, not concealment, is his mode" (111).

If the Invisible Man is not a trickster, then what is he? Lest I fall into Hymanian oversimplification, let me immediately acknowledge the futility of identifying any neat archetype. After all, the Invisible Man revels in his mercurialness, mocking those who would try to pin him down. Ellison's impassioned words in *Partisan Review* yield useful insights, not only about critical interpretation but also about Ellison's vexed relationship with minstrelsy and "darky" entertainment. On the one hand, minstrelsy allowed black performers as esteemed as Josephine Baker and James Weldon Johnson access to the theatrical stage; on the other hand, the "blackness" they performed was hopelessly phony and "white." The Invisible Man himself attempts to navigate notions of blackness, and from the Battle Royal to Tod Clifton's Sambo spiel, he is forced to confront the legacy of "darky" perfor-

mance. Indeed, at times the Invisible Man seems practically to flirt, however unconsciously, with minstrelsy. In this performance, he is certainly no trickster, no "smart man playing dumb," but perhaps more accurately, a "dumb man playing dumb"—unconsciously enacting the basest racial stereotypes. Yet even this characterization is unduly simplistic, for the Invisible Man's story is retrospective and, however confessional and ragged, indicative of some narratological and epistemological sophistication.

Perhaps the Invisible Man's inconsistency is linked to his ghostly status, for born of Ellison, he is haunted by theatrical and literary articulations of "blackness." Here, it may be helpful to invoke Henry Louis Gates's study of white signifying versus black Signifyin(g). The two terms paradoxically share, in Gates's words, "a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity" (45). In the academic critical community, signifying may be traced to Derridean and Saussurean linguistic theories, which attach a particular signified (or concept) to a particular signifier (or sound-image). In the black vernacular tradition, however, the signifier is emptied out—or opened up—to include a multiplicity of rhetorical figures. Thus, standard English signifying is transmuted into black vernacular Signifyin(g), a multivalent and multivocal trope that is skillfully wielded by the folkloric trickster hero.

The minstrel, however, is no trickster.¹ Rather than Signifyin(g) blackness, he signifies *white* perceptions of blackness. In other words, the minstrel's burnt-cork mask, his white gloves, his grotesque lips, his "nigger" dialect subscribe to a white model of linguistics, of signifying rather than Signifyin(g). An entire race is reduced to clumsy, exaggerated metonyms so that even colored performers must darken their natural complexion to signify blackness "correctly." Ellison writes, "The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the 'thing' in more ways

than one), and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign" (103). The white audience controls signification; the white audience appends meaning to the sign; the white audience signifies. In this way, the darky entertainer ultimately represents not blackness, but whiteness. Hence, Ellison's observation, "This 'darky' entertainer is white."

Given minstrelsy's contentious history, it is perhaps unsurprising that critics of *Invisible Man* have avoided this topic in favor of a less fraught form of African American performance: jazz. A. Timothy Spaulding has explored how the novel's narrative form embodies a "bebop aesthetic" while Michael Borshuk links Ellison's "jazz aesthetic" of dialogism, intertextuality, and parody to the development of African American modernism.² To argue for a kind of "minstrel aesthetics," conversely, seems almost laughable, if not plain wrong. Yet *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott's seminal work on blackface minstrelsy, has compellingly revealed the cultural impact of black dialect, music, and dance on the 19th-century American imagination. Is there room in minstrel performance for jazz-like subversion and improvisation? In other words, with Christopher Shinn, I wonder whether, behind the minstrel mask, could the Invisible Man be a trickster?³

Frederick Douglass and the Dictionary of White American Usage

More than 100 years before Ellison, Frederick Douglass had expressed the same discomfort with darky entertainment and its fundamentally "white" complexion after attending a performance of Gavitt's Ethiopian Serenaders, a group purportedly composed of "colored people" who nevertheless blackened their faces with burnt cork and lamp black, and cartoonishly outlined their lips, "the better to express their characters."

These minstrels, Douglass wrote, proffer only "an imitation of white performers, and not even a tolerable representation of the character of colored people" (Douglass, "Gavitt's"). Black performers, he argued, "must cease to exaggerate the exaggerations of our enemies; and represent the colored man rather as he is, than as Ethiopian Minstrels usually represent him to be" (141-42). Rather than performing fictive, white representations of blackness, the colored man must locate and disseminate his own, authentic representations of his race.

Yet how is the colored man to do so in a world defined by whites? Gates echoes this plaint, in the semiotic context of *The Signifying Monkey*: "What did/do black people signify in a society in which they were intentionally introduced as the subjugated, as the enslaved cipher?" (47). Minstrelsy, like putative standard English, transforms the black subject into an "enslaved cipher" or, in Ellison's words, a "negative sign." Theatrical and linguistic representations of blackness are thus linked in their enslavement to white modes of definition. Indeed, minstrelsy, by attaching white meanings to blackness, becomes a lexicon of blackface, a Webster's Dictionary of what it means to be (or act) black. Yet in cataloguing and performing the attributes of the Negro, minstrelsy relies on white vocabulary and becomes *not* a performative Dictionary of American Negro Usage, but an entry in what could be called the Dictionary of White American Usage.

In a retrospective review of *An Appeal in Favor of that class of Americans called Africans*, an antebellum tract by the abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, Ellison himself refers to this "unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage" when defining the word "signifying" as "rhetorical understatements" (qtd. in Gates 105). Gates elaborates, "Ellison's stress on 'the unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage' reminds us of the problem of definitions, of signification itself, when one is

translating between two languages" (105). Signifyin(g) becomes one way of decoding and, more importantly, redefining the "negative sign" and "enslaved cipher" of white-defined blackness. One result is what Gates calls a "black double-voicedness" and what Gary Saul Morson, paraphrasing Bakhtin, calls a "special sort of palimpsest in which the uppermost inscription is a commentary on the one beneath it, which the reader (or audience) can know only by reading through the commentary that obscures in the very process of evaluating" (49-50). Signifyin(g) is "ghosted over" signifying in the way the "unwritten" dictionary of American Negro usage is ghosted over the dictionary of Standard (White) English usage.⁴ As in a photograph in which one image is superimposed upon another, black discourse lies atop white discourse, enacting the Gatesian "relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity." Thus, both visually and aurally, Signifyin(g) is a strategy of layered figuration—one image, voice, or rhetorical device atop another.

Before examining the way that Ellison negotiates the two dictionaries and the two modes of "black" representation in *Invisible Man*, I want to revisit Douglass. As Ellison's literary antecedent whose lofty figure hangs—literally—over the Invisible Man, Douglass is one of the first African American writers to recount and demonstrate his mastery of literacy and language. In her essay, "While I am Writing: Webster's 1825 *Spelling Book*, the Ell, and Frederick Douglass's Positioning of Language," literary critic Daneen Wardrop catalogues the ways that Douglass's signifiers "jostle and disrupt the dominating signifying system" (649). In particular, Wardrop describes three episodes of significance to this discussion. The first is Douglass's attempt to learn the mean-

ing of *abolition*. He writes, "The dictionary afforded me little or no help. I found it was 'the act of abolishing;' but then I did not know what was to be abolished" (56). Wardrop explains, "We see that the accepted authority for the dominating (written) discourse can have no meaning for Douglass. He must find his own signified for the signifier" (651). The dictionary definition of *abolition* is a tautology, mystifying rather than illuminating.

As a guide to presumably standard English usage, the antebellum dictionary censors certain "dangerous" definitions, thus relegating abolition's real meaning to the unwritten, unspoken dictionary of American Negro usage. Indeed, abolition is an example of a double-voiced palimpsest, the definition of which word white slaveowners mean to restrict and obscure. To one race, it denotes "the act of abolishing"; to another, it signifies "freedom."

Still, knowledge manages to slip through, as when Mr. Auld warns his wife against teaching Douglass to read. Douglass writes, "That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn" (49-50). Wardrop describes Douglass's subversive interpretation of Mr. Auld's words as a "designat[ion]" of "(black) signifieds for (white) signifiers" (651). In other words, Douglass re-defines language for his own purposes, referring to his own internal dictionary rather than the hegemonic white dictionary. Yet Douglass is also exploiting the ambiguity of language, the same ambiguity that allows Signifyin(g) to exist both *inside* and *beside* signifying. In Douglass's case, his master's proscription against Douglass's learning to read, becomes prescription, an *agnominatio*, or repetition of a word with an alteration of one

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letter and one sound, that quietly yet drastically destabilizes meaning. Douglass listens to Auld's words, then quietly yet drastically tweaks them to reverse their meaning entirely.

Determined to learn how to write, Douglass painstakingly copies the Italics in his Master Thomas's Webster's Spelling Book. Wardrop effectively analyzes the ways that this Spelling Book could have taught Douglass the "skewered signifiers of a culture" (651) such that I am interested in what happens next. Taking Master Thomas's used copybooks, Douglass begins "copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas" (58). Much has been written about the ways that Douglass is relegated to the margins, forced to write in the spaces left by his white master.⁵ Wardrop calls this marginalization "a palimpsest of a particular kind; the black slave pens over the white spaces" (653). While this layering certainly develops, Douglass's palimpsest is of a different and more subversive kind. We have seen how a palimpsest is a double-voiced (or double-sighted), "ghosted" kind of writing: Signifyin(g) superimposed upon signifying. Thus, in writing in the margins of Master Thomas's text, Douglass effectively writes *over* it. Douglass says his "hand" begins to look like his master's, a provocative claim given that handwriting is an individual's imprint, unique to him or her and representative of a distinct identity. Here, however, Douglass's handwriting becomes like his master's, and their identities seem to elide. The ambiguity that arises allows Douglass to mimic his master's writing style while redirecting the content of his words. In other words, Douglass becomes a ghostwriter, both in the sense of shadowing his master's handwriting and in the sense of writing in the name (or hand) of another.

Ellison's *Invisible Man* is also a ghostwriter: he is a self-described "phantom" (5) who literally writes out his tale. Yet he is also a ghostwriter

who undergoes several incarnations of blackness during the course of his narrative and who must constantly shift between two discursive vocabularies, white and black. Indeed, the *Invisible Man* ultimately coins his own, hybrid vocabulary, comprised of what I call "ghost-words." A Merriam-Webster on-line dictionary defines *ghost word* as "a word form never in established usage." The OED traces the term's origin to an 1886 journal report that proclaims them words with "no real existence." This same report declares, "We should jealously guard against all chances of giving any undeserved record of words which had never any real existence, being mere coinages due to the blunders of printers or scribes, or to the perfervid imaginations of ignorant or blundering editors." Ghost-words are marginalized words, words that appear in no dictionary of "established," or white, usage. As such, they theoretically constitute the language of blackness, a language catalogued in Ellison's "unwritten dictionary of American Negro usage."

Yet ghost-words are fundamentally "blunders" and mistakes, and this lack of authorial (or editorial) deliberation or consciousness renders them the prototype, rather than the archetype, of black discourse. The OED provides the following example: "The word meant is *estures*, bad spelling of *estres*; and *eftures* is a ghost-word." This accidental *agnominatio* is a critical first step towards fully-developed, "double-voiced" language, but it is a language still caught between the vocabulary of Standard American English usage and that of black vernacular.

To use Gates's mathematical model of signification, putative standard English and black vernacular represent the intersecting "x" and "y" axes of linguistic discourse. Such a model more accurately describes the "perpendicular," rather than "parallel," relationship between the two "discursive universes." To this model, I would propose a third axis, a "z" axis, if you will. Representing the third discursive uni-

verse of ghost-language, the "z" axis splits the space between "x" and "y" axis and adds a third dimension to the previously two-dimensional graph. In other words, ghost language is a hybrid language, hovering in that liminal space between "x" and "y." If we map the minstrel and trickster figures onto this graph, the former would lie along the "x" axis, or the axis of hegemonic white articulation (signifying), and the latter would lie along the "y" axis, or the axis of black vernacular (Signifyin(g)). The Invisible Man, then, is neither minstrel nor trickster; he is an unstable hybrid of both.

Knucklebones and Knocking-bones

But enough of abstractions. Throughout Ellison's text, the repercussions of the Battle Royal event resound, and its depiction of (coerced) black performance provides troubling commentary on "darker" entertainment. Following the fight, the Invisible Man and his fellow victims are summoned to a rug covered with gold pieces and bills and told, "You get all you grab" (26). The Invisible Man describes what ensues: "I lunged for a yellow coin lying on the blue design of the carpet, touching it and sending a surprised shriek to join those rising around me. I tried frantically to remove my hand but could not let go. A hot, violent force tore through my body, shaking me like a wet rat. The rug was electrified. . . . My muscles jumped, my nerves jangled, writhed (27). The white spectators, by activating the electric current, successfully override Invisible Man his physical impulses and force him to respond as a puppet, his body jerking and shaking uncontrollably. Indeed, the Invisible Man reacts like someone possessed. Deprived of volition, he enacts the whims of his audience and performs, however unwillingly, the physical burlesque of blackness. He describes

another "boy" who "literally dance[d] upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies" (27). Despite the boy's obvious pain, the white audience responds with "booming laughter," as if his physical agony enacts physical comedy—in other words, as if his pain is voluntary, rather than coerced.

The battle royal functions as a brutal form of minstrelsy, with the audience paying the Invisible Man to perform white notions of blackness, all the while egging him on with cries of "That's right, Sambo" and "Slug him, black boy!" (26, 23). Still, in his narration, the Invisible Man implies that he is somehow complicit in the performance. He continues to snatch coins and heed the goadings of the spectators, and afterwards, he accepts a five-dollar payment for his services and writes, "I did not even mind when I discovered that the gold pieces I had scrambled for were brass pocket tokens advertising a certain make of automobile" (32). Even the Invisible Man's long-awaited speech becomes another act in this grotesque minstrel show, as the M.C. announces, "I'm told that he is the smartest boy we've got out there in Greenwood. I'm told that he knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary" (29). Such an introduction is more befitting a vaudeville performer than an earnest orator, and the M.C.'s possessive language—"he's the smartest boy *we've* got"—and crack about the "pocket-sized dictionary" undermines the Invisible Man's academic accomplishments. This paternalistic rhetoric confirms the Invisible Man's emasculated "boy"-like status. He is allotted only a certain amount of knowledge in the form of an abridged, "pocket-sized" dictionary—a dictionary carefully vetted by his white sponsors and purged of threatening "big words," words such as Douglass's *abolition*. The only "big words" that the Invisible Man knows are impotent phrases like "social responsibility," words that his white patrons have

deemed safe for him, and, therefore, meaningless to themselves. The Invisible Man not only relies on an edited (and censored) pocket-sized dictionary, he is himself securely "in the pocket" of his white patrons.

Yet the Invisible Man "slips" during his oratory, substituting "social equality" for "social responsibility" at the precise moment that the audience heckles him to repeat his "big words." Despite its immediate effect, his slip is unintentionally subversive, for until this point, the Invisible Man had faithfully and doggedly delivered the white-sanctioned, accommodationist rhetoric of Booker T. Washington. His inadvertent linguistic "trick" substitutes one big word for another: "equality" for "responsibility." Yet one word appears in the "pocket-sized dictionary" and the other does not; one has been sanctioned and the other censored. "You weren't being smart, were you, boy?" one man calls out, "you sure that about 'equality' was a mistake?" The Invisible Man replies, "I was swallowing blood," an explanation that is simultaneously evasive and illuminating. On the one hand, the Invisible Man does not know what compels his act of linguistic treachery and so offers a limp (bloodless?) excuse. On the other hand, the blood in his mouth—evidence of his recent abuse and exploitation—triggers his act of linguistic defiance. From signifying blackness by ventriloquizing white-authorized rhetoric, the Invisible Man is now, however unwittingly, Signifyin(g) blackness. The moment of transgression is short-lived for, duly chastised, he reverts to his deployment of standard discourse, and then gratefully accepts the briefcase and scholarship to a Negro college. Still, he has unconsciously broken his minstrel routine and become, for a brief moment, an accidental trickster.

The Invisible Man has tasted blood in his mouth, yet he persists in swallowing his bitterness and injury. Indeed, he is not yet conscious that he has been wronged. At the Golden Day,

one of the vets tells Mr. Norton: "He [the Invisible Man] has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. . . . Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it. . . . He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" (94). Just as the Invisible Man swallows injustice but does not "digest" it, so, too, does he accept without question his invisibility and insignificance (or in-Signification). His designation as "the Negative" recalls Ellison's description of the "negative sign" of minstrelsy. The Invisible Man does not embody authentic blackness; he embodies Mr. Norton's "dreams" of blackness. Described alternately as a "walking zombie" and "automaton," as well as a "mechanical man," the Invisible Man becomes a puppet or doll, manipulated by those around him as he was manipulated by the white spectators at the battle royal (94-95). More troubling, though, is his hermeneutic illiteracy. He "takes in" facts but he does not understand what they mean. In this way, he is a negative sign surrounded by other negative signs, an inscrutable figure that, like "the simple facts of life," has been arbitrarily accorded definition by a white authority. Needling Mr. Norton, the vet says, "To you he [the Invisible Man] is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement" (95). Like Gates's "enslaved cipher," the Invisible Man is imprisoned within the parameters of a white evaluative model. He has no meaning, no signification apart from his white patron, just as the marks, "A," "B," and "C" have no meaning when detached from the so-called "scorecard."

The Invisible Man is a "negative sign," both in the sense of containing all insidious, "negative," white perceptions of blackness, but also in the sense of being a vessel of blankness, emptiness, "negative" space. Describing photographs taken during the early days of his College, the Invisible Man writes:

[There were] photographs of men and women in wagons drawn by mule teams and oxen, dressed in black, dusty clothing, people who seemed almost without individuality, a black mob that seemed to be waiting, looking with blank faces, and among them the inevitable collection of white men and women in smiles, clear of features, striking, elegant and confident. (39)

Here, Ellison's professional background in photography allows the Invisible Man to express in provocative visual terms the difference between the races. As in a poorly-lit photograph, black and blank become conflated, with features and identities obliterated by shadow. White men and women, however, are comparatively well-lit, their physical and dispositional qualities delineated sharply. The Invisible Man adds, "the figures in the photographs had never seemed actually to have been alive, but were more like signs or symbols one found on the last pages of the dictionary" (39). In fact, the figures in the picture—especially the black figures—are doubly inscrutable, obscured by time and their very blackness. Unlike the words and definitions that comprise the bulk of the dictionary, they are marginalized—relegated to the back of the book in the space reserved for punctuation marks and proofreading symbols. These incomprehensible signs are also, quite literally, marginalia. Jotted in the empty spaces between and around the main text, they evoke Douglass's assiduous copying in the margins of his master's copybook. And like the marks on Mr. Norton's "scorecard of achievement," these signs and symbols are meaningless unless attached to some model of white hermeneutic discourse. They, too, are "enslaved ciphers."

Previously, the Invisible Man had felt little connection when gazing upon the photographed faces of his black predecessors. Now, however, he remarks, "I felt that I was sharing in a great work and, with the car leaping leisurely beneath the pressure of my foot, I identified myself with the rich

man reminiscing on the rear seat" (38). In what seems an appalling act of racial denial, the Invisible Man "identifie[s]" himself with Mr. Norton and, by extension, the other white figures in photographs. But Ellison suggests in part that this act of betrayal could also be an act of survival. Where the Invisible Man had formerly felt alienated from his school's past history, he now feels integrated; where he had formerly felt dispossessed and "blank" like the black faces in the photograph, he now feels an identity forming. That he can only define his worth through the mediating presence of a white man intimates Ellison's notion of the African American's vexed plight. How can he forge an identity when the only options are whiteness or blankness—two options that are, in fact, one and the same? It is no wonder, then, that the Invisible Man has been read as a minstrel figure. His access to alternate "black" identities denied, he accepts the only mask offered to him—the mask of the "darker" performer who embodies hegemonic whiteness.

Particularly effective at donning this mask is Dr. Bledsoe, who, despite his pretensions of power over his white patrons, slips into blackface (or blankface) all too easily. Infuriated that the Invisible Man has driven Mr. Norton to the slave-quarter section of the college, Dr. Bledsoe swiftly changes his persona when addressing his white patron. The Invisible Man describes his masking: "As we [Dr. Bledsoe and I] approached a mirror Dr. Bledsoe stopped and composed his angry face like a sculptor, making it a bland mask, leaving only the sparkle of his eyes to betray the emotion that I had seen only a moment before." Swallowing his bile as the Invisible Man had swallowed his blood, Dr. Bledsoe now adopts a tone of subservience and sycophancy. His voice is full of "a strange grandmotherly concern," and he "croon[s]" his apologies to Mr. Norton, affecting the behavior of a faithful servant toward his master. Even in his dress, Dr.

Bledsoe manages to "make himself look humble" (102). No matter how elegant his "striped trousers" and "swallow-tail coat," he looks as if he is wearing a costume: "Somehow, his trousers inevitably bagged at the knees and the coat slouched in the shoulders" (114-15). Like the black dandy popular in minstrel shows, Dr. Bledsoe is a black man dressed in the sophisticated attire of a white man. But lest he seem threatening, even subversive, Dr. Bledsoe makes sure the clothes don't quite "fit." He pays homage to whiteness but does not presume to appropriate it. Instead, he treats his white patrons with ingratiating respect, letting "his teeth flash" as he grins from behind his black mask.

The legacy of minstrelsy haunts the Invisible Man even after he leaves Dr. Bledsoe's college and heads north. The horror of the Battle Royal is re-enacted in the examination room of the factory hospital, as the Invisible Man is again electrocuted and again deprived of volition. He explains, "I wanted to be angry, murderously angry. But somehow the pulse of current smashing through my body prevented me. Something had been disconnected" (237). Subjected to the experimental whims of his doctors, the Invisible Man is effectively debilitated. He becomes a puppet, his limbs and his emotions controlled not by his own will but by the will of his doctors. He becomes a dancing Sambo doll, spasming on the examination table like his fellow battle royal participant on the electrified carpet. One doctor exclaims, "Look, he's dancing" and another observes, "They really do have rhythm, don't they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!" (237). The Invisible Man exists in a curious state of limbo, divorced from his native blackness, but divorced, too, from his coerced "darker" blackness. He cries, "Where did my body end and the crystal and white world begin?" and observes, "I seemed to exist in some other dimension, utterly alone." Between the axis of white signifying and the axis of

black Signifyin(g), the Invisible Man floats, and his physical disorientation mirrors his linguistic disorientation (237-38).

Indeed, the Invisible Man flits from one axis of signification to another. At one moment, he can be seen struggling toward the axis of standard white signifying: "I heard a friendly voice, uttering familiar words to which I could assign no meaning. I listened intensely, aware of the form and movement of sentences and grasping the now subtle rhythmical differences between progressions of sound that questioned and those that made a statement. But still their meanings were lost in the vast whiteness in which I myself was lost" (238). The Invisible Man descends once more into semiotic illiteracy, recognizing signifiers but fishing helplessly for the appropriate signified in the abyss of "whiteness." At other times, however, he reacts to the doctor's voice by inclining towards the axis of black Signifyin(g). Presented with the question, "WHO WAS YOUR MOTHER?" the Invisible Man "looked at [the doctor], feeling a quick dislike and thinking, half in amusement, I don't play the dozens. And how's *your* old lady today?" (241). Of course, the Invisible Man does not voice his response, just as he does not voice his irritated reaction to questions of Buckeye the Rabbit, an "old identity" he both recognizes and wishes to conceal. But he does begin to suspect he has been roped into a "game" in which the doctors are "taking part." "I felt like a clown," the Invisible Man remarks—and so he is, inadvertently acting the minstrel, the Sambo doll, the "darker" entertainer. Such awareness becomes an uncertain, but important, first step towards self-realization.

Yet the artifacts of blackface are stubbornly durable, co-existing among the venerated artifacts of postbellum emancipation and retaining a strange magnetism despite the passage of nearly a century. Surveying the possessions (or dispossessions) of the elderly black

couple evicted from their apartment, the Invisible Man spies the expected treasures, both symbolic and sentimental: the "faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln," the magazine photograph of a movie star, the "fragile paper, coming apart with age, written in black ink grown yellow [that read] FREE PAPERS" (271). Yet scattered among these iconic artifacts are also a "pair of crudely carved and polished bones, 'knocking bones,' used in black-face minstrelsy; the flat ribs of a cow, a steer or sheep, flat bones that gave off a sound, when struck, like heavy castanets (had he been a minstrel?) or the wooden block of a set of drums" (271). Nearby, in a basket, are "a straightening comb [and] switches of false hair," and among the contents knocked from a drawer is a "card with a picture of what looked like a white man in black-face seated in the door of a cabin strumming a banjo beneath a bar of music and the lyric 'Going back to my old cabin home' " (272). "Nauseated," the Invisible Man almost vomits, releasing the bile of so much injustice and racial self-hatred, but "it wouldn't come up, only a bitter spurt of gall filled my mouth and splattered the old folk's possessions" (272). Torn between the talismanic powers of one set of emblems and another, the Invisible Man's inner equilibrium is radically destabilized. He does not yet understand his emotions, but somewhere, "around a corner into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago," he summons the memory of "linked verbal echoes, images, heard even when not listening at home" (273). These discarded possessions are Signifyin(g), vibrating with "more meaning than there should have been" and seizing the Invisible Man with a "discomfort so far beyond their intrinsic meaning as objects" (273). Yet their effect on him is still ghostly, more a presentiment of semiotic doubleness than its actualization.

Ellison saves the moment of full-fledged Signifyin(g) for Tod Clifton's

Sambo show, a performance the Invisible Man initially takes at (black)face-value. The Invisible Man conflates Tod with his paper doll, describing him as "riding easily back and forth in his knees, flexing his legs without shifting his feet," in seeming imitation of the "bouncing doll" (433) that he manipulates. Yet Tod Clifton is no minstrel. In ventriloquizing the voice of his puppet, Tod is acting the trickster, ostensibly splicing conventional blackface rhetoric but injecting his lyrics with devastating irony:

He's more than a toy, ladies and gentlemen, he's Sambo, the dancing doll, the twentieth-century miracle.

Look at that rumba, that suzy-q, he's Sambo-Boogie,

Sambo-Woogie, you don't have to feed him, he sleeps collapsed, he'll kill your depression

And your dispossession, he lives upon the sunshine of your lordly smile

And only twenty-five cents, the brotherly two bits of a dollar because he wants me to eat.

It gives him pleasure to see me eat.
(433; original italics)

Sambo re-enacts the antebellum master-slave relationship, performing for his white owner and supposedly thriving under a system of benign neglect, a phrase that Ellison, in his 1981 Introduction to the novel, calls "double-dealing and insidious" and translates as "Keep those Negroes running—but in their same old place" (xv). Tod's insertion of the phrase, "he'll kill your depression / And your dispossession" does not evoke white alienation so much as the "dispossession," or eviction, of the elderly black couple. And Tod's plea for "the brotherly two bits of a dollar" is a cunning pun on Brother Tobitt, the Invisible Man's colleague who is more of an adversary than a true "brother."

Tod's verbal punning on the word "bits" does not end there. Sambo may not need to be fed, but Tod does. The "bits" of money transmute into food, invoking the other Sambo figure whom the Invisible Man encounters at Mary's house:

[I saw] the cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose white eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest. It was a bank, a piece of early Americana, the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth. (319)

"FEED ME," the Sambo bank has emblazoned across its chest. "FEED ME," the Sambo doll appeals to his audience. Yet the Signifyin(g) continues, for Tod is also making a homonymic pun (antanaclasis) on the word *bit*, evoking its alternate meaning as a restraining device. Where refractory slaves had been punished by wearing a bit, the present-day Sambo is "rewarded" by having his mouth stuffed with bits. Both "bits" are instruments of degradation, and both effectively silence their victims, the former by rigging the black man's mouth shut, the latter by choking him with money. In fact, this episode is also Signifyin(g) on the battle royal, when the group of hapless black victims must lunge after gold coins and choke back their blood in a brutal version of blackface performance.⁶

John F. Callahan argues that Tod's "ironic minstrel show" forces the Invisible Man to recognize himself as "the Brotherhood's ventriloquist dummy" (75). Like the Sambo doll, he has been a mere mouthpiece for Brother Jack's rhetoric, a carefully trained puppet who sermonizes the Brotherhood's beliefs but does not formulate them, himself. "You were not hired to think," Brother Jack snaps at the Invisible Man. "For all of us, the committee does the thinking. For *all* of us. And you were hired to talk" (469-70). Yet Tod thinks and talks, and in his subversive minstrel act, he deliberately mocks his former self. The Sambo doll is no different from the boy "dancing" on his back across the electrified carpet or the Invisible Man convulsing on the examining table. None have volition;

all are seized, or "possessed," by an external force. In the case of the Sambo doll, however, the man manipulating the strings is black, not white. Studying one of the dolls, the Invisible Man realizes, "Clifton had been making it dance all the time and the black thread had been invisible" (446). While critics have noted that the thread, like the narrator, is "black" and "invisible," none have adequately accounted for its symbolism.⁷ Connected, as it is, between the Sambo puppet and its trickster master, the thread could be seen as a metaphor for the Invisible Man's unresolved, "in-between" status. Whether negotiating two separate linguistic universes or two separate modes of "blackness," he finds himself pulled in opposite directions. Yet Ellison's chiasmic inversion, through Tod Clifton, of the conventional white puppeteer/black puppet relationship proves that such archetypal roles are overly simplistic and, moreover, ripe for revision: Tod Clifton, the puppet master, is black, and his "'darker' entertainer [puppet] is white." It is up to the Invisible Man, the "thread" suspended between the two poles, to determine the preeminence of one mode of blackness over another. Indeed, if the relation between the two poles is perpendicular, rather than parallel, and the Invisible Man forms a third axis perpendicular to the previous two, he becomes the plane of commonality: the three-dimensional hinge, rather than two-dimensional pivot, on which chiasmic transformation depends.

In his 1981 introduction to *Invisible Man*, written more than 30 years after its original publication, Ellison revisits the issues of minstrelsy he had first addressed in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke":

Shortly before the spokesman for invisibility intruded, I had seen, in a nearby Vermont village, a poster announcing the performance of a 'Tom Show,' that forgotten term for blackface minstrel versions of Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I had thought such entertainment a thing of the past, but

there in a quiet northern village it was alive and kicking . . . and that during World War II! . . . But what is commonly assumed to be past history is actually as much a part of the living present as William Faulkner insisted. Furtive, implacable and tricky, it inspires both the observer and the scene observed, artifacts, manners and atmosphere and it speaks even when no one will too listen. (xvi)

The Invisible Man is thus summoned, like a spirit (or demon), from Ellison's encounter with a minstrel poster and the deep-seated racial stereotypes it represents. In fact, the Invisible Man becomes the voice of "past history," not so much embodying blackface minstrelsy as reminding us of its lingering presence. In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison had called minstrel shows a "ritual of exorcism" for the white audience, allowing them to indulge their fascination with blackness while simultaneously purging themselves of their fears. With *Invisible Man*, however, Ellison introduces a different kind of ghost, a spirit that "speaks even when no one will listen" and who enters his white hosts in a stunning reversal of black dispossession. "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" the Invisible Man asks. Under the radar, on a subsonic bandwidth, the Invisible Man becomes the ventriloquist and the white reader the puppet. Soon, however, he plans to emerge from this "underground" register, for "even hibernations can be overdone" (581). He has already taken the first step towards full disclosure, even defining "hibernation" according to his own, revised lexicon: "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (13). The lilt of his definition and its internal rhyme mark the words as the Invisible Man's own. Moreover, his language predicts imminent redemption and resurrection, renewal and change.

To close, I return to Douglass. Gazing at Douglass's portrait, the Invisible Man remarks, "How magical

it was that he had talked his way from slavery to a government ministry, and so swiftly" (381). Douglass had managed to harness the "magic" of written and spoken words, a magic that leads to his spectacular rise in status.

"Perhaps," the Invisible Man wonders, "the sense of magic lay in the unexpected transformations. 'You start Saul, and end up Paul,' my grandfather had often said." But Douglass has also imbued "white written text" with a "black voice," a Signifyin(g) "trick" to which the Invisible Man pays homage in his closing line. Thus, Douglass teaches the Invisible Man that words, and the artifacts they represent, are, themselves, loci of unexpected transformation. From the debris of the past—the free papers, the old photographs, the knocking bones, the Sambo dolls—new meaning can yet be derived. Brother Tarp, for example, gives the Invisible Man a broken link to hold onto as "a keepsake and reminder," saying, "It's got a heap of signifyin' wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we're really fighting against. I don't think of it in terms of two words, *yes* and *no*; but it signifies a heap more" (388). An artifact of enslavement, previously representing white mastery ("*yes or no*"), now throbs with added meaning. Slipping the link over his knuckles, the Invisible Man "struck it sharply against the desk," and Brother Tarp chuckles, "'Now there's a way I never thought of using it'" (389). A fetter transforms into a weapon, an instrument of subjugation transforms into an instrument of liberation. This chiasmic inversion Signifies on Douglass's appropriation of white literacy and language ("he had talked his way from slavery to a government ministry"), but it may also Signify on another ignoble artifact of blackface minstrelsy. "Hear that sound?" The Invisible Man seems to taunt us. "Those aren't knocking-bones. *Those* are brass knuckles."

1. Lott does trace minstrelsy's lineage to the trickster figure in slave tales, as well as the harlequin of the *commedia dell'arte*, the clown of English pantomime, and the burlesque tramp, among others. For the purposes of my discussions of Signifyin(g), however, I assume an Ellisonian skepticism of the minstrel's affinity to the trickster, focusing less on historical lineage and more on the divergent ways that the minstrel and trickster represent and signify blackness.

2. See Spaulding and also Borshuk (*passim*).

3. See also Shinn.

4. Here, I use "ghosted" as a rough synonym for "superimposed." I coin this term to describe a photographic technique that superimposes (or "ghosts") one image over another. In more recent years, ghosting has described or referenced computer re-imaging or copying. The hard drive of a computer may be "ghosted," or superimposed, onto another media, to create a backup or "ghost" of the original files.

5. See Gates's and Davis's introduction to *The Slave's Narrative* and O'Meally.

6. Perhaps Ellison is also punning on the phrase, "to eat crow" when composing the Sambo doll's spiel. Such a phrase would accurately describe the humiliating aspect of minstrel performance, as well as allude to the seminal blackface character of Jim Crow.

7. See Nadel and Callahan.

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