

# Masquerade, Magic, and Carnival in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

The element of carnival-masquerade offers a wide lens through which to view black-white race relations by mirroring and magnifying racial practices in the United States. Perhaps no work of African American literature exemplifies this point more sharply than Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), which intensifies the narrator's perceptions of race by viewing various images of whiteness and blackness through carnival's distorted mirrors.<sup>1</sup> While this grotesque exaggeration reflects the particularly jaundiced twentieth-century condition of race in the United States, it also involves a re-assessment of carnivalesque perception itself, for precisely in the simultaneously distorted and imagined field of vision, the *Invisible Man* gains a sense of his own potential to maneuver, be creative, and magically "see around corners" (13). Carnival, as it were, includes an ambiguous space in which subjects assume several racial and class positions to negotiate as well as consent to specific power relations through psychic and social forms of masquerade: not just during carnival but also in the more normalized "carnivalisms" that appear in the cross-cultural and intra-racial performances of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> The discussion that follows analyzes the theoretical terms of engagement concerning the concept and practice of carnival-masquerade and then addresses how these ideas on carnival relate to Ellison's *Invisible Man* and African American culture more generally. Along these lines I suggest that carnival emerges in the text—and in historical context—in a complex mutuality of U.S. racial imagining that involves masking, magic, and ritual sacrifice. These elements create the condition of possibility for a distinct carnival poetics that the *Invisible Man* can use to redefine himself in terms of the socially responsible and artistic rôle that he intends to play. This carnival poetics, I argue, is significantly mediated through play itself—the space of creative distortion and experimentation in the African American tradition.

## Theoretical Considerations: From the "Carnavalesque" to a New World Carnival Poetics

The festival of carnival, as a concept and cultural practice, has been expressly noted by literary critics such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, Robert Da Matta, and Richard D. E. Burton, among others. It often facilitates a nostalgic return to the familiar pre-Lenten street world of lavish costumes and masquerade, laughing choruses, parades, pageantry, and grotesque con-

---

**Christopher A. Shinn** is Assistant Professor of English at Florida State University and specializes in the interdisciplinary study of contemporary diasporas. He is currently working on a book-length project entitled *Black Dragon: Toward an Afro-Asiatic Imagination*. He would like to thank Nathaniel Mackey for his helpful suggestions in writing this essay.

---

sumption of drugs, food, and intoxicants. Ellison's work indeed includes elements of carnival-masquerade that have led a number of literary scholars to propose theoretical connections and critical analyses of Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the carnivalesque. These critics include, among others, Elliott Butler-Evans, Dale Peterson, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, and Wilson Harris. With the exception of Wilson Harris, whose inventive references to "carnival muses" and "carnival twinship" place Ellison's *Invisible Man* within the wider spatio-temporal configuration of the Americas, these other writers almost exclusively apply Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of the "carnavalesque," "heteroglossia," or "parody" to the study of African American culture, proposing multiple theoretical affiliations of the Bakhtinian "carnavalesque" and a distinct, socio-linguistically-coded "blackness."

Butler-Evans, Peterson, Gates, and Baker connect Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" and Ellison's double-voiced narrator and narrations in terms of African American signifying practices and Bakhtin's analysis of parody. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., uses Bakhtin's definition of parody to illustrate how Signifyin(g) in African American culture enables its speaker to pose challenging and oppositional verbal self-assertions. For Bakhtin parody fundamentally operates in the form of disguise: Its dialogic exchanges parade as versions of the "same" (characteristically using similar figures of speech), yet within these utterances deliberately incisive double meanings and implied cut-downs are introduced. "[In] parody, as in stylization," Bakhtin explains, "the author employs the speech of another, but, in contradistinction to stylization, he introduces into that other speech an intention which is directly opposed to the original one. The second voice, having lodged in the other speech, clashes antagonistically with the original, host voice and forces it to serve directly opposite aims. Speech becomes

a battlefield for opposing intentions" ("Typology" 185-86). Ellison's use of "double-voiced discourse," then, exemplifies how Signifyin(g) works in producing lively cultural exchanges within an African American cultural tradition as well as within a larger U.S. discourse on the politics of literary representation. Ellison responds to these cultural forces by "signifying back and black."<sup>3</sup>

Although Gates never directly invokes the world of carnival, his juxtaposition of Bakhtinian parody and Ellison's Signifyin(g) leads Elliott Butler-Evans, Houston Baker, and Dale Peterson, in turn, to build upon a socio-linguistic "blackness" en route to the Bakhtinian "carnavalesque." In his essay "The Politics of Carnival and Heteroglossia in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Dialogic Criticism and African American Literature," Elliott Butler-Evans identifies Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" as a "spirit" that "displaces hierarchies and subverts the dominant order" through the cultural formation of complex polyphonic narratives (118). Butler-Evans focuses on how the heteroglossic voices of carnival—from Trueblood's "primordial, vernacular Black voice" to the "'literariness' of the protagonist's voice"—transform the African American narrative into an "alternative textual modality" that moves away from the limitations of an "eminently commodifiable classic realism to a textual construct with a far more complicated and indeterminate structure"—what he later associates with specific dialogic forms of communication among various "black" and "American" (U.S.) cultures, employing techniques of "pastiche" in Gates's post-structuralist terms (117-18).

Following the socio-linguistic acts of the black vernacular discussed by Butler-Evans and Gates, Dale Peterson contributes to this "on-going African American dialogue with Russian dialogism" (96), assembling a number of scholars in conversation, among whom

are Mikhail Bakhtin, V. N. Voloshinov, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Houston Baker, and Hazel Carby. Peterson offers a critical interpretation of Baker's reading of the Jim Trueblood episode in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, affirming the use of a "bluesy, trickster discourse as a victorious paradigm" (96). In this particular literary analysis, Jim Trueblood succeeds in gaining the sympathies of the white philanthropist Mr. Norton (and subsequently earns for himself the sum of \$100) precisely because he tells his story as an implicit psycho-semantic dialogue with a wide range of white and black signifying systems, strategically dislodging "white" fears and desire within "black" images and projections. Baker's interpretive model follows Julia Kristeva's theory of "'carnivalized' discourse," which Kristeva proposes as an extension of Bakhtin—what Peterson then describes as "the subversive implanting of multiple referents and multiple pitches of address in premeditated acts of 'carnivalized' discourse" (96). Peterson responds in favor of Baker's analysis of the folkloric trickster figure—performing "masterfully" in playful acts of signifying and masquerade—as a celebrated means and mode of African American expressive culture.

These literary approaches to African American signifying practices confirm the "carnivalized" moments of specific semantic-oriented forms of reversal and parodization, focusing almost entirely on the performativity of language within postmodern discourse. In the spirit of diversification, Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" and the dialogic issues that it raises might be set alongside other sites of carnival, not simply the premodern carnival in Europe and the world of Rabelais—important as they are—but also the annual carnival festivals elsewhere in the so-called New World. The notion of carnival-masquerade which, among others, Baker, Butler-Evans, and Peterson all mention, applies not only to parodic twists of language—"carnivalized discourse"—but to performa-

tive spaces of carnival rituals and masking within, among other places, a wider New World African diaspora. Indeed, performance studies opens up a larger sphere of black cultural expression of which language (text, speech acts, rhetorical tropes, etc.) is one, but not the only, constitutive part. To these significant critical discussions one might introduce, then, a wider field of imagination of the Americas that proposes other locations and symbols of carnival as well as enlarges the circle of performance-oriented popular rituals in which carnival and black aesthetics might be further and intricately interconnected. To this end the Guyanese writer Wilson Harris offers a creative approach to carnival that accomplishes in part this critical re-location, traveling in non-rectilinear thought from Mexico to the Caribbean and South America.

Harris invests the term *carnival* with various meanings that intersect with the Homeric, Anancy (African), Christian, and pre-Christian traditions and provide a critical linchpin in reading Ellison's *Invisible Man* within the space of a cross-cultural and inter-American imagination. Principal among the gods of world mythology are the vanished (hence, "invisible") and vanquished pre-Columbian "carnival gods"—what Harris identifies as "masquerading 'block' gods" reigning from Mexico to the Caribbean to the Guianas: Quetzalcoatl, Kukulcan, Huracan, and Yourokon (*Essays* 12, 105-06).<sup>4</sup> Each Amerindian masked deity reappears in present-day public festivals of carnival in folk art and popular rituals, no longer a symbol of the splendor of pre-Columbian civilizations, but of the indigenous carnival gods who have since "disappeared." Through such reappearances, carnival festivals in the Americas remain inseparably linked to the history of New World conquest and European colonization. For Harris carnival further invokes the presence of the Cyclopean (Homeric) mask and the "trick of Anancy [African] 'death' " (189)<sup>5</sup> as

dark, feuding "carnival twins"—e.g., the fraternal bond of Western civilization and enslaved Africans and New World Africans—a "twinship" that necessitates as well as aestheticizes the tricks and duplicity of New World carnival-masquerade (110). The principal vision of carnival becomes one in which a traditional Christian festival mingles with pre- or rather non-Christian traditions to form an intolerable, but interpenetrating, "mutuality." The pre-Columbian gods and the *conquistadores* co-exist in a "womb of space" (109) that is at once vital and gratuitously violated: Its principal life-force remains "darkened and blocked" (118), while the ruined and dying gods struggle to be reborn. Harris thus thematizes a sense of "an uncapturable, ineffable wholeness, a heterogeneous inclusiveness" (Mackey 254) that characterizes carnival as a series of concentric horizons that actually form not a complete Emersonian circle but intuitively curve into a distinct New World arc—what he refers to repeatedly as a "rainbow arc or bridge between [or among] cultures" (*Essays* 110). Carnival becomes one of the privileged metaphors to which Harris refers in choice critical moments in order to outline the "[world] theater of the grave and cradle," tomb of death/womb of space (110).

What might, then, be called a New World carnival poetics becomes a fertile space of the imagination in which the element of carnival half-, or more-than-half-, circles the Americas. In bringing this carnival poetics to bear on Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Harris selects moments in which a number of "carnival twinships" surface dramatically in deep agonistic play: the constant face-to-face encounters between the Cyclopean monster-mask and the Anancy [African] death-mask; or, to

cite another instance, the deep attractions between "carnival muses" (the naked blonde woman in the battle royal scene; Matty Lou, Trueblood's incestuous, impregnated daughter; or the blues mother, Mary Rambo) and the "repetitively," yet "cyclically reawakening," dying god (Invisible Man, Mr. Norton, Jim Trueblood). These characters alternate between functioning as a kind of Greek chorus and entering the dramatic action as principal actors themselves. Harris describes the carnival muses as "feminine muses of gold, blood, music [with] their rich evolutionary potential or their tragically debased fertility" (109). In other words, the carnival

**The carnival-riot in *Invisible Man* reflects Harlem's social discontent and Ellison's literary commitment to representing existing conditions of poverty and exploitation.**

muses can give life and material existence ("gold, blood, music") or, as objects of desire and fetishization, transfer their own "tragically based fertility" to the perilous world of the symbolic dying god. As a consequence, all characters suffer from that tragic "mutuality" of contending cultures that produced white-black relations tied to shameful acts of incest, miscegenation, murder, rape, mob lynching, and black social misery. The female carnival muses, like the pre-Columbian carnival gods, are consistently subject to debasement, disadvantage, and conquest even as they represent carnival's rituals of regeneration.

The *Invisible Man's* encounter with the naked blonde woman in the battle royal scene, for instance, suggest how he gradually learns his predicament and is, by turns, "bleakly" potentialized" (109). He becomes psychically and materially aware of his own myopic Homeric-Cyclopean vision: helpless, on the one hand, to alter the course set in motion by the "mutated 'stone' of history" ("fate") and, on the other hand, to change the patterns of singular vision under which he is seen

(110). With her spectacularized body sporting an American flag on her white skin, the naked blonde woman emblemizes the psychic and social projections of her white male audience. She stands in for their own cultural fantasies as conquerors, performing their sexual desires symbolically on stage as they possess her in their mind's eye. She towers over them as the "white goddess," though her debasement functions as a means by which they achieve their own sense of male divinity (111). The Invisible Man and his schoolmates are actors along with the naked blonde woman in this carnivalized ritual drama (a psychic and social re-enactment of the stages leading up to the primal scene of lynching), for their own spectacularization and debasement symbolically instantiate for the audience its co-extensive beliefs in male divinity and white superiority. For Harris the Invisible Man oscillates between seeing the naked blonde woman and wanting to murder her (along with the male viewers who attempt to carry on another implied violent ritual<sup>6</sup>), or psychically identifying with her as a fetishized object of desire and destruction. Watching her with transfixed eyes as she gyrates on stage, the Invisible Man confesses, "I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor, or go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her" (19).

This first act leads to the Invisible Man's self-discovery of the Homeric-Cyclopean mask that represents symbolic white power—which he covets and wears, and by which he himself is "knocked out"—though, at the same time, this ritual event introduces the Anancy mask that the Invisible Man wants Tatlock and himself to wear in tandem, as he suggests, without success—namely, that Tatlock fake his own death ("Fake like I knocked you

out, you can have the prize' " [24]). As Harris explains,

It is the debased white goddess who presides in terror at the boxing ring of history that ushers in the first ruse or trick of Anancy "death," half electrocuted, half punch-drunk, invisible man and his awakening into himself as clothed in a Cyclopean (Homeric) mask. "A blow to my head . . . sent my right eye popping like a jack-in-the-box . . ."

The Cyclopean mask he himself wears in the deadly boxing ring phase is the start of an inner, pre-figurative acquaintance with others in clinical envelope and political theater whom he will encounter. They too carry the Cyclopean birthmark. One is a doctor in a hospital who peers menacingly with a "bright third eye that glowed from the center of his forehead." Another is Brother Jack in Harlem whose eye squints at invisible man with Cyclopean irritation.

What invisible man begins to learn figuratively and painfully, within the Cyclopean code that he inhabits, is the fascination of helplessness, the proneness to fall back into, with each arousal from, the Cyclopean nightmare that pursues him as much in his own skull, or Anancy skin, as in rituals of entertainment others impose on him—repulsive arts, exploited sciences, fake renaissances. (111)

The Invisible Man comes to consciousness of his own victimization, but according to Harris this revelation will not prevent him from wearing and embracing the Cyclopean mask and imposing limitations on his own vision in the dangerous internalized spaces of "political theater." He accepts his own domination with every momentary or prolonged "fascination of helplessness," leading to a return of the "Cyclopean nightmare" (111). By the same token, however, the possibility for bridging these otherwise antithetical forces into a complex and co-existent community remains alive within a "womb of space" that the carnival muses creatively embody, offering a "rich evolutionary potential" in the midst of a "tragically debased fertility" (109).

Harris's reading of Ellison's *Invisible Man* offers an imaginative

expansion of the carnival concept itself that concomitantly sharpens the terms of engagement and opens up a richly metaphorical sense of a New World carnival poetics. It puts in check the particular utopian dimension of carnival that literary critics have often stressed and upon which an Ellisonian-Bakhtinian connection via Baker and Butler-Evans has been theoretically proposed. As the carnival concept travels from premodern Europe to the New World, it retains, on the one hand, the critical ideas of Bakhtin on dialogism, parody, and masquerade that one discovers in comparable forms within African American cultural practices of Signifyin(g). In addition, Dostoyevsky's own "tragicomic" vision further links Bakhtin and Ellison within the complex network of Dostoyevsky's "underground"—moving in a discursive line that bridges Rabelais and Dostoyevsky for Bakhtin, and Dostoyevsky and the Invisible Man for Ellison. Not unrelated to these connections is the fact that both Bakhtin and Ellison probe new left possibilities from below state- or party-censored lines: the Bolshevik Revolution, Stalinism, and the politically left Brotherhood (similar in form to the American Communist Party). The "carnavalesque" informs how these particular utopian-Rabelaisian or myopic-Cyclopean visions are, in many ways, deeply imbricated in potential intertextual readings of their own works. A New World carnival poetics implies that situating the "carnavalesque" within the singular domain of Bakhtin-Ellison, despite its conceptual and creative possibilities, presents various limitations. The strategy here is not to reject Bakhtin's model of the "carnavalesque," but to put it in dialogue with other critical paradigms that represent various inter-American geographical locations, carnival poetics, and performances of New World African identities.

### Magic, Phantom, and Mannequin in African American Culture

America's pleasure attractions, carnival amusements, and carnival festivals invite a world of play that substantially includes magic, the occult, carnival-masquerade, and spirit possession. American variety shows frequently juxtapose the aboriginal and the paranormal, primitiveness and modernity, the soul and the body to divulge and display the hidden secrets of origins and supernatural powers. As Victor Turner suggests, masks, disguises, and "other fictions of some kind of play are devices to make visible what has been hidden, even unconscious," allowing "the mysteries [to] revel in the streets"—or, for that matter, the circus tent, the amusement park, or the theater playhouse (*Performance* 125). Normally enforced divisions can be symbolically crossed in the numinous spaces of carnival, and the social taboos associated with race and mysticism can be entertained and given expression in a collective realm of fear and fantasy, revelation and masquerade. They provide a secular version of institutional religion that explores the ineffable, the esoteric, the exotic, and the unmentionable. Ellison's *Invisible Man* engages these forms of carnival in relation to his principal guiding metaphor, namely "invisibility" as disappearing act, unseen object, and clairvoyance. The entrance into the otherworldly region of imagination becomes a negotiation of power, play, and opposition in "this" world—requiring a "second sight"<sup>7</sup> that pushes the Invisible Man to the extreme outer limits of self and other and forces him to contend with the elements of carnival on a wholly different symbolic level.

It is no coincidence that along these lines the more grave constructions of "whiteness" and "blackness" in the United States have often historically relied on the power and authority of magic. While the element of play may

seem frivolous and trivial, it can also connect with the specter of racial imagining that provokes, to use Richard Slotkin's phrase, "regeneration through violence"—the violence which enacts the myth of purity of both race and nation. Ellison's "tragicomic" vision (mentioned previously in relation to Harris's New World carnival poetics) thus combines the element of carnival-masquerade and the history of racial violence in America. The "magical" and the "mythical" intersect in intensely fierce oppositions that bring together, and estrange, whites and blacks, violent rituals and carnivalesque play. The highest rank of the Ku Klux Klan is not incidentally the "Imperial Wizard," who convenes order in the secret society and under him, among others, follows the head of the local chapter, the "Exalted Cyclops," and the state chief executive, the "Grand Dragon." The organization fashionably refers to itself as the "Invisible Empire," and historians have noted that the Klan during Reconstruction initially hooded themselves white in part in order to parade as ghosts (Trelease).<sup>8</sup> Ellison's tropes of invisibility, the Cyclops, spooks, magic, and whiteness, then, signify multiply in terms of the Invisible Man's dual sense of invisibility and in the implied oppositions to right-wing Anglo-Saxonism that is invoked by continual narrative allusions to lynching.<sup>9</sup> Colonel William J. Simmons of the Ku Klux Klan largely invented the Klan's ceremonial titles and ritual practices to inculcate "a sense of mystery and power" as well as to introduce an occult dominion of white sorcery—or its modern equivalent, scientific racism—for countering black witchcraft.<sup>10</sup> In Thomas Dixon's, Jr.'s *The Clansman* (1905), for example, Dr. Cameron uses a powerful microscope made in France to detect in the eyes of the recently deceased white rape victim Marion the image of her black rapist Gus. Through this quasi-mystical scientific technology, the reflections of Gus, the "black beast," remain imprinted on Marion's eyes "like words writ-

ten on paper in invisible ink" and provide irrefutable evidence of the crime (313). This miracle of seeing the invisible directly opposes the "native" African powers of the occult that one finds in many of Dixon's Negro characters: old Aleck, "a born African orator, undoubtedly descended from a long line of savage spell-binders"; the mulatto Lieutenant-Governor Silas Lynch, who captivated audiences "as by magic"; or Pinchback, whose father was a "medicine-man in an African jungle" and routinely administered poisons (93-249).

The turn toward the occult in Dixon's *The Clansman* follows a common nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century pattern that, on the one hand, calls on mysticism and science to confirm the "facts" of irreducible racial difference—what Sander L. Gilman and Nancy Stepan call "scientific racism"—and, on the other hand, opens up unexplored regions of the supernatural to maintain white supremacy, notably in opposition to "native" African powers. The American circus show, carnival, and variety act attempt to sustain the claims of occult science and white supremacist beliefs by creating the spectacle of the aboriginal and the paranormal, the savage and the spiritualist, within what Charlie Holland classifies under "strange feats and clever turns." Extraordinary acts in variety, vaudeville, and sideshows at the turn of the twentieth century routinely included among their special features scientific wonders (e.g., curious electrical displays, motion pictures, cameras), magic (e.g., tricks of conjuring, card-sharpening illusion, spiritualism, and theosophy), acrobatic acts (e.g., bodily contortions and feats of strength), and displays of savages, exotic animals, and other "freaks of nature."<sup>11</sup> The combination of scientific, quasi-mystical, and popular discourses mutually reinforced each other in seeking to establish the racial inferiority of blacks and served to promulgate the fascination with, and fear of, the occult and

things "African." It also led to the religiously syncretic construction of "whiteness" within the Ku Klux Klan's own quasi-mystical beliefs that mixed occult science, Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, Masonic, and magical elements to ward off the powerful effects of the "born African orator," the vodou "medicine-man in an African jungle," and the "savage spell-binders."

Against such negative portrayals of the religio-mystical practices of African and New World African cultures, the African American literary tradition prior to the publication of Ellison's *Invisible Man* notably included various representations of conjuring, voodoo/hoodoo practices, mysticism, and occultism that, while confirming the powers of these spiritual arts for the black community's own cultural existence, often recognized their supernatural abilities to counter white power and authority. In Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, for instance, Sandy Jenkins bestows a conjurer's roots upon Douglass to be carried "always on the right side," so it "would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip [him]" (297). When the slavedriver Covey attempts to whip Douglass, he fails, and the roots prove to be a lucky charm. In Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), moreover, Linda Brent experiences a vision or visitation in which she hears the moaning of her children and then sees her children as figures in the moonlight (107). This divine sign, which she confesses might be considered superstition to her Christian readers, nonetheless confirms what she later discovers to be true, namely that her children are safe in the care of her grandmother away from her tormentor Dr. Flint. Charles Chestnut's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) consists of several conjure tales that imbue slaves with supernatural power: Aunt Peggy, who transforms a cruel master into a more kind and gentle one; Uncle Jube, who uses hoodoo to transform a couple into a wolf and a

black cat; and Uncle Julius, the storyteller, who carries a rabbit's foot for good luck and outwits his white listener John. In addition, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, in *Of One Blood* (1902-03), utilizes a number of elements of scientific occultism and voodoo, among which are a maternal grandmother, a "noted 'voodoo' doctor or witch," who reveals the secret of a triangular incestuous union, and the protagonist Reuel, who sees the future through occult visions and discovers that he is the long-awaited Ethiopian messianic king (603).<sup>12</sup> The most striking examples, however, come from Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), which describes the practices of hoodoo in New Orleans, and her study of vodun in Haiti in *Tell My Horse* (1938). In the 1920s, while doing ethnographic research in New Orleans, Hurston herself underwent a hoodoo initiation ceremony under the guidance of Samuel Thompson, grandnephew of the famous hoodoo priest Marie Leveau. Hurston thus helps to legitimate these religious folk traditions against those who would dismiss them as mere superstition and challenges the standard ethnographer's position, producing non-traditional auto-ethnography, within the lineage of Boasian anthropology.

These mystical and magical elements in the African American, Anglo-American, and white supremacist communities co-exist and contend with one another within Ellison's world of carnival-masquerade. All the tropes of invisibility, the disembodied voice, the magic of oratory, the ability to "see around corners," and the phenomenon of spirit-possession (i.e., to act the part of, and speak for, a higher power) can be linked to a myriad of white and black allusions to hoodoo, magic acts, role playing, and masquerade. The analogies between carnival and cult have indeed been expressly noted by Victor Turner and Richard D. E. Burton, among others, in terms of spirit-possession and masquerade in New World African cultures. These discus-

sions in turn relate to notions of role playing and race, identity and performance, in the specific context of African American culture that Ellison's *Invisible Man* symbolically enlarges. For Burton, "... cult and carnival interpenetrate as ways of transcending, expanding, or multiplying the self, the first through trance and vertigo and the simulation of spirits, the second as mimicry, theater and disguise. . . . possession always involves play in the sense of simulation and acting" (222).

In voodoo practices in Haiti, following its origins back to the Dahomean religion of *vodou* in West Africa, for example, the *loas* (deities, or *orixás* in Brazilian *candomblé*) possess humans, who are imagined to be horses and speak through them (see Mulira; Pinn; Bourguignon). The actors enter into trances, frequently utter foreign tongues (*glossolalia*) and speak on behalf of the *loas*—one of which might be, say, Legba in Haiti, Exu-Elegbára in Brazil, or Papa Legba in New Orleans. In so doing, these participants perform the parts or roles assigned to them as the possessed. Indeed, in the Brazilian carnival in Bahia, spirit-possession and theatrical performance are inseparably linked in the fantasia of carnival. In this regard Burton writes,

The continuity between possession cult and carnival and the ludic, theatrical, and agonic character of both is demonstrated in that, at carnival in Bahia (not discussed by Turner, whose focus is Rio), many *gremios* or carnival societies are in effect extensions of local *candomblé nago terreiros*, with many masqueraders dressing in the traditional costumes of the *orixás*, so much so that Bahians speak of carnival as *Candomblé de brincadeira* (Candomblé for fun), prompting Michelle Smith Okari to write that "Carnival is a *candomblé* without trance or possession by the *Orixá*" and Sheila Walker to describe it quite simply as "candomblé in the streets." (222)

Burton's analysis of possession cult and carnival demonstrates that the two ritual practices share masquerade as a common feature or, more generally, the "ludic, theatrical, or agonic charac-

ter of both." One is reminded here of Marcel Camus's award-winning film *Black Orpheus* (1958), based upon Vinicius de Moraes's play *Orfeu da Conceição*, which also connects spirit-possession and carnival among the descendants of African slaves in modern-day Rio de Janeiro. During carnival season, Orpheus and Eurydice fall in love only to discover that Death itself relentlessly pursues and eventually captures Eurydice. After she dies, Orpheus descends to the underworld to bring Eurydice back from the dead by searching for and attending an Afro-Brazilian Macumba ceremony. Camus thus mixes Greek mythology and New World African religions, Brazilian carnival and spirit-possession, the descent to Hades and a celebration of modern-day life in Rio de Janeiro. Carnival and spirit-possession come together to reflect the complex mutuality of European, African, and, indeed, Amerindian cultures under the legacy of colonialism and the shared experience of death.

Ellison's work traces the *Invisible Man's* descent to the underground, bringing together classical mythology, hoodoo practices, the history of Western civilization, and African American culture. He makes several allusions to Dante's *Inferno*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Homer's *Odyssey*, the Bible, and other sources which allude to the journey to the underworld. The varieties of carnival in the novel thus intersect with references to the dead, hell, departed souls, invisibility, ghosts, and cult practices. In 1939, while collecting folklore for the Federal Writers' Project in Harlem, Ellison came across a story that would eventually play into his novel's trope of invisibility (Levine 405-06). The story describes a black man in Florence, South Carolina, who called himself Sweet-the-monkey. According to the tale, as told by Leo Gurley, "Sweet could make himself invisible. You don't believe it? Well here's how he done it. Sweet-the-monkey cut open a black cat and took out his heart. Climbed up a tree backwards

and cursed God. After that he could do anything" (405-06). Sweet's powers of invisibility imply initiation into hoodoo and a pact with the devil. The reference to *monkey* also suggests not only a relativizing of the word used against him, but the Signifying Monkey, the celebrated trickster of African American folklore. The word *sweet* offers a measure of gloating and boast to boot.

Ellison derives his sense of invisibility in part from this source, and the Invisible Man, upon his arrival in Harlem, encounters the "Devil's only son-in-law," Peter Wheatstraw, who furthers this connection. Wheatstraw conveys a magical power in his voice that is steeped in folklore and song and enables him to "whistle a three-toned chord" and utter mysterious and strange "sphinxlike" riddles (*Invisible* 177). He advises the Invisible Man to claim his "roots"—aspects of lore and ancestry, magic, and conjuring. His cryptic words divulge secrets of the folkloric powers that enable him to survive and work his tongue-twisting magic. He can "'verse you but . . . won't curse you,'" meaning that he holds the ability to impart his artistic gifts as well as curse his enemies, as a hoodoo priest or conjurer can. His simple phrase "'roll 'em'" is full of meaning. It suggests that the Invisible Man learn to roll his words together, make them move, or *roll 'em* as in "roll heads"—i.e., kill and destroy. It also connotes the movies—roll the film—as if he were directing as well as starring in a film as one of Hollywood's "ectoplasms" (3). *Roll 'em*, moreover, infers rolling the eyes, tricking and deceiving and playing the game with panache, connecting with other tropes of ocularity, masquerade, and gaming such as rolling the dice.

Wheatstraw attributes these natural and supernatural talents with being born "'a seventh son of a seventh son'"—which, according to African American folk beliefs, becomes a "sign of special supernatural or conjure powers" (Schrager 569). It echoes Du

Boisian double-consciousness and likewise operates as both a curse and a blessing. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes, "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (45). Being a seventh son becomes a curse insofar as it alienates and renders black Americans invisible and unseen (the "veil" signifies the color line), yet it also constitutes a blessing in that it bestows a measure of clairvoyance and "second-sight"—i.e., spiritual vision—combining the gospel tradition and, at least for Wheatstraw, African American folk beliefs in conjuring. The "caul" connects with the veil and, according to hoodoo practices, contains power to heal the sick, foretell the future, and administer mystic spells (Haskins 78). Wheatstraw's being "'bawn with a caul over both eyes'" marks him as one born with the gift of clairvoyance and derives from a specific Ashanti heritage. "'Raised on black cat bones,'" as Leon Forrest explains, "is from Afro-American version of voodoo and the context is this: in voodoo, which always reverses meaning (as does so much of Negro idiom): you throw a live black cat into a boiling pot of hot water; after the flesh has fallen away you pick out its bones and gnaw away, and if you are lucky, and gnaw down upon the right bone, you will become *invisible*" (315). The supernatural powers of invisibility, as Wheatstraw's formula suggests, belong to the special individual in the African American community who invokes linguistic and folkloric authority to transform him- or herself into a hoodoo priest or conjurer.

Along these lines, no one seems more invisible, endowed with the spiritual gift of "tongues," and adept at masking in the tradition of the folkloric trickster than B. P. Rinehart, who, despite always being referred to and "spotted," never actually appears. He represents the master of carnival disguise and, in one of his many masquerades, functions as a self-avowed "spiritual technologist" who has a special

way station in "New Orleans, the home of mystery" (*Invisible* 495). He represents the Southern black preacher and hoodoo priest and practitioner all in one, claiming to "See all, Know all, Tell all, Cure all," and promises to reveal hidden secrets with his prophetic vision (495). He professes to know end-times revelation and seems omnipresent and omnipotent, virtually accepted by all. Rinehart intimately knows the black community to which he belongs—its particular cadences and short riffs, its vibrato and shouts, its costumes and masks—and, like Peter Wheatstraw, can use this cultural inheritance to assume a role that borders on, and crosses into, the supernatural.

Ellison locates the conduit for this power in the disembodied voice. The fact that Ellison refers to the Invisible Man's voice as "disembodied" and, no less, "taunting" attests to its spiritual or ghostly qualities, but the voice itself contains the power to mesmerize and control "as if by magic" ("Introduction," *Invisible* xvii). As in Dixon's *The Clansman*, oratory represents a mode of African occult expression. As was mentioned earlier, *The Clansman* describes old Aleck, "a born African orator, undoubtedly descended from a long line of savage spell-binders," and the mulatto Lieutenant-Governor Silas Lynch, who captivates audiences "as [if] by magic," among others. Rinehart might be characterized as self-possessed, and he can possess others at will. As the spiritual technologist, he undoubtedly masters the voice of divinity, much like his deacon, who leads the congregation in prayers, assuming the voice of an old-time backwoods preacher: His voice "rose and fell in a rhythmical, dreamlike recital—part enumeration of earthy trials undergone by the congregation, part rapt display of vocal virtuosity, part appeal to God" (*Invisible* 496). The congregation, swayed by this prayer and carried away by the gospel music, begins to "shout in the unknown tongue" as the spirit gives utterance.

For the Invisible Man, the "whole scene quivered vague and mysterious in the green light" (498). The voice can indeed produce an emotional revivalism in the audience, as if they were possessed and inhabited by the speaker who stands in as the spokesperson for God—or as if, to use the language of voodoo, he were conjuring a deity to ride the congregation.

By reclaiming his African American cultural heritage, and bringing it to bear on his wider American experiences, the Invisible Man likewise discovers his own taunting, disembodied voice and the magical or mystical powers of invisibility that are available to him. Ultimately, on "lower frequencies" (read here with implied psychic and spiritualist connotations), he intends to "speak for you" (581). As in spirit-possession, as we have seen, an actor speaks on behalf of the *loa* or deity. Possession, however, involves a number of related linguistic and symbolic functions such as ventriloquism and double-voiced narrations. It suggests that voice can liberate, free, and empower the speaker as well as control, mimic, and dispossess the speaker and the ones addressed. Before he is able to draw from his cultural traditions of oratory, black preaching, storytelling, the use of words and naming, and, indeed, hoodoo practices and spirit-possession, and subsequently employ them effectively to stir the Harlem crowd to socially responsible action, the Invisible Man must first experience his own death. This means that, above all, he must kill the hoodoo double under which he is cursed.

Possession involves a struggle for power to control or be controlled, inhabit and be inhabited. In the midst of the carnival-riot, several doubles emerge in which, within the pairing, one determines the fate of the other. These "carnival twinships"—to use Wilson Harris's term—surface in the novel in relation to African American folk practices of hoodoo; indeed, in Haitian voodoo, the presence of twins (*marassa*) constitutes an essential fea-

ture of the folk religion (Bourguignon). Ellison's twins include, among others, the Sambo doll and Tod Clifton, the mannequin(s) and Sybil, and the Invisible Man and his Brotherhood identity (for which he is given a name that he then becomes). The Sambo doll and Clifton, for instance, mirror each other as they reflect aspects of the minstrel tradition; Clifton becomes a puppet of the Brotherhood, manipulated and made to dance. As he stands on the street corner peddling Sambo dolls, he uses ventriloquism to speak outside of himself and from inside the Sambo doll (432). Clifton performs the part of a vendor in an amusement park concession booth with his particular carnival inflections, turning into the fetishized doll that he is attempting to sell. The transference between the doll and Clifton renders the latter inanimate and makes the former a play object possessed by him.

In addition to the Sambo doll, which symbolizes the spirit-possession of Clifton and the Invisible Man by the Brotherhood, Ellison mirrors the Invisible Man's victimization in still another doll—this time the female mannequin-as-Sybil, the modern, commodified equivalent of the curio shop doll which, like the hoodoo doll, is pinned. During the carnival-riot scene, "Ras bent down from the horse, saw me [the Invisible Man] and flung, of all things, a spear, and I fell forward at the movement of his arm, catching myself upon my hands as a tumbler would, and heard the shock of it piercing one of the hanging dummies. I stood, my briefcase coming with me . . . 'Betrayer!' Ras shouted" (557). The mannequin-as-Sybil is hung and speared in a curious inversion of a lynching scene (and by Ras, no less, the Ethiopian king<sup>13</sup>), speared Christ-like and pinned hoodoo-like as well. The mannequin-as-Sybil represents the "carnival muse," the female victim and symbol of the modern metropolis in the Harlem store window, with shades of the ritual sacrifice of virgins among the Aztecs that Wilson Harris men-

tions. Ellison thus combines lynching and ritual sacrifice in relation to the modern social roles women must play (dancing like the kewpie doll, the naked blonde woman in the battle royal, for instance) and the minstrel-like performances of black men in the novel (dancing as Sambo dolls). Even as they mirror one another, however, they reflect these white and black images unevenly, as though on display in America's distorted carnival mirrors. Upon the mannequin-as-Sybil the Harlem mob exacts its revenge, attempting to exorcize the ghost of the past. In her drunken stupor, Sybil not insignificantly calls the Invisible Man her "brute and boo'ful buck'" (528)—becoming more "booo'ful'" and "boooooo'ful!" with every toast and turn—suggesting the ghostly, the phantasmal, as the novel's distant inferences to the Ku Klux Klan and lynching echo and re-emerge.

The hanging of Sybil functions as a reversal of the primal lynching scene; in place of the black body, the white woman, or her carnival twin, is sacrificed. The culprits who perform this act of revenge are not hooded white Klansmen but looters from the black community, and the hanging constitutes less a ritual act (to be re-enacted) than a momentary display of carnival madness. Combined here are the death rituals of hanging and lynching, ancient sacrifices and modern mannequins, the guide Sybil and the black male victim at once. Sybil becomes the symbol and ritual of "America": the ritual of violence that her fantasy rape recalls, the Southern ritual of lynching and the birth of a nation, and a replay of the rape scene in which Marion is chased by Gus that the Invisible Man muses upon and mutters about under his breath. She takes the place of the Invisible Man's lynching by Ras, and by her sacrifice she mirrors the Invisible Man's symbolic destruction.

These scenes provide a critical link to the Invisible Man's entry into the underworld, for Sybil, the "carnival muse" with her "debased fertility,"

also represents Aeneas's guide to Hades. Her name literally means 'cave dweller,' referring to the cave at Cumae, near Lake Avernus, dedicated to Triple Hecate, which forms the entrance to the underworld (Walker 966); in the novel, following his encounter with Sybil, the Invisible Man significantly enters into his own underground, cavern-like hole. The priestesses of Sybil (known as sybils), moreover, were said to be possessed by her oracular spirit, and they routinely "called up the dead there [at the cave] for necromantic interviews. By the same door, Aeneas descended into the womb of the earth (his mother Aphrodite)" (966)—corresponding to what Harris calls the "womb of space." The cult of Sybil, according to legend, elicited conjurations and pleas for rings of invisibility that were bestowed as part of the graces of "the Blessed Virgin of Fairies, 'sibyllia,' or the 'three sisters of fairies, Milia, Achilia, Sibyllia,'" who appeared "in form and shape of fair women, in white vestures" (967). The Invisible Man's meeting with Sybil sets in motion his discovery of the magical powers of invisibility, which comes after the final ritual sacrifice of the mannequins "in the form and shape of fair women" and which follows his own symbolic death and foray into the underground.

Sybil in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, although suggesting these mythological and magical elements of folklore, hardly lives up to her divine reputation. In fact, Claudia Tate refers to her as the "prophetic and pathetic Sybil" (63) among a host of other female characters in the novel: Mary Rambo, the old slave woman, the naked blonde woman of the battle royal, the wealthy and sophisticated Emma, and the anonymous seductress. All of these women, however, help guide the Invisible Man in his quest toward freedom, functioning in their posts as did the "underground station masters of the American slave era" before them (Tate 64). They also constitute incarnations of the carnival muses or co-per-

formers in the sideshows of America's carnival amusements, mirroring the abject spiritual or material conditions of the Invisible Man with whom they come into contact. Sybil also partakes of the founding myth of her own white female victimization, sexually titillated at the thought of being raped by a "black brute." She meets the Invisible Man at the Chthonian bar—another reference pertaining to the gods and spirits of the underworld—and she summons him home with her "to join her in a very revolting ritual" (517), while he intends to use her to extract information about leaders of the Brotherhood to exact his revenge. Both fail miserably in their attempt to exploit each other, for Sybil becomes too drunk to relay information or tell what has happened (or, actually, what has *not* happened) and the Invisible Man becomes too conscious of his moral responsibility to act out the part of the black brute or to rape her as a vengeful act against the white-controlled Brotherhood. These scenes hold a critical purpose in staging the development of the Invisible Man, and none seems more important than this "final battle royal," leading to the entrance of the underworld, that she precipitates as a character and symbol of the Invisible Man's own "prophetic and pathetic" roles (Tate 170).

Ellison characterizes the Invisible Man's descent to the underworld as an extreme emotional frenzy, orgiastic convulsion, and a trance-like state of consciousness somewhere between dreaming and waking—what, akin to an "acute fever," William James suggests actually offers the conditions of possibility for religious experience (6). In the underground the Invisible Man sustains an intensity of emotion that suggests a religious experience through specific allusions to a subterranean world, the dimensionless room, the narrow passage, a "state neither of dreaming or waking," loss of bodily control, and, above all, the vision or dream which follows. Indeed, in the candomblé ritual of spirit possession,

as Joseph Page notes, "The person possessed will shake convulsively, scream, gyrate wildly about the room, and flop to the floor like a rag doll" (362). All of the Invisible Man's outbursts occur after he almost ceremonially burns the doll of Clifton and the paper with his Brotherhood name written on it and experiences a vision of his own death in the absolute darkness. The Invisible Man then declares that "the end is the beginning"—echoing a common religious motif. All this imagery occurs with shades of the medieval world of Dante's *Inferno*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and the fire-and-brimstone typology of the Bible. Ellison describes this emotionally cathartic episode as a kind of initiation in which the Invisible Man becomes a "seer" rather than being the "unseen," discovers his own clairvoyance and "second sight," and, after his own symbolic death, beholds his mystical and magical possibilities.

### Magic, Mirror, and Lamp in Ellison's Carnival Poetics

No longer willing to allow his magical gifts to be used against him, or to relinquish them in pursuit of the dreams and visions of others, the Invisible Man of the Prologue and Epilogue (the narrator as self-conscious artist) turns America's negative aspects of vision, by which he is seen, into a creative "second sight." The carnival mirrors that distort and negate his being-in-the-world enable him ironically to develop his own distinctive carnival poetics. By *carnival poetics*, I mean to suggest that the very absurdities of racial imagining that determine the paternalism toward a childlike "other,"<sup>14</sup> or the freakishness of race that shocks its curious and bemused onlookers, can become a useful, even creative distortion. This reverse process can make these viewers unknowingly complicit with their own duping through artfully crafted masquerade. It

can create an opportunity for the alienated artistic "other" to "reflect back and black" against the jostling of black and white images that Ellison links to Western aesthetic apprehension. For the Invisible Man, light and darkness especially hold imaginative possibilities to overturn the conventional metaphors of race that correspond to the mutually exclusive categories of "whiteness" and "blackness," an imaginative capacity to reflect a wider array of color, dimensionality, and space that alters Western perception itself. The 1,369 lights that he uses to illuminate his black hole represent not only his personal enlightenment (and the Enlightenment) but also his stolen magic lamp, kindling his active modern imagination. This light allows him to "feel [his] vital aliveness" and inspires him to "develop a certain ingenuity" (*Invisible* 7). Within the negative space of ambiguity, experimentation, creativity, and self-expression, the possibility of developing a carnival poetics emerges.

A carnival poetics recalls Wilson Harris's formulations of carnival as the complex and uneven mutuality of Western and non-Western cultures in the New World, a fecund combination of festive, partially regenerative New World traditions and the (neo)colonial violence and New World conquest that it attempts to efface—but always represents. For Harris, carnival-masquerade offers "unsuspecting resources" or "variables" of the Imagination, all of which can generate alternative realities to the singular vision of Reality that governs everyday practices of representation (*Essays* 211). While Harris's scope encompasses the history, geography, and traditions of the Americas (among other spaces and locales), Ellison addresses the specific U.S. context with attention to the influences of Western culture and, more implicitly, West Indian cultures in the United States. Harris describes this process of imagination as the "play of unstructured vision" (100)—which correlates fittingly with the Invisible Man's artis-

tic experimental vision, calling attention to asymmetry, unfinished and fragmented parts, and the relative instability of meaning and language.

The Invisible Man as writer in turn mirrors Ellison's own attempts to hone his craft and experiment with symbolic forms (and vice versa). Working contemporaneously with high modernism's attempts to create alternative perceptual realities, Ellison found himself increasingly attracted to the marvelous and the magical by way of the symbol. He explains, "... symbols serve a dual function: they allow the artist to speak of complex experiences and to annihilate time with simple lines and curves; and they allow the viewer and orientation, both emotional and associative, which goes so deep that a total culture may resound in a simple rhythm, an image" (*Shadow* 171).<sup>15</sup> Ellison relates the symbol here to other presentational modes—rhythm or music and the image—all of which hold the capacity to express "a total culture" and magically "annihilate time." Ellison suggests an example in Louis Armstrong's blaring trumpet notes that, in each stylistic expression, potentially make poetry or music of invisibility. Through Surrealism especially, Ellison would discover a mode and medium in which his interest in magic dream realities might be reflected in the tormented consciousness of the Invisible Man; and the multiple dream sequences, bizarre twists, and grotesque mirroring with which he imbues his novel was to express the conditions of race in America by way of a magical reality that could not be experienced but in multiple dimensions at once.

According to modernist poet André Breton, Surrealism works as a "purely psychic automatism through which we undertake to express, in words, writing, or any other activity, the actual functioning of thought, thought dictated apart from any control by reason and any aesthetic or moral consideration. Surrealism rests upon belief in the higher reality of spe-

cific forms of associations, previously neglected, in the omnipotence of dreams, and in the disinterested play of thinking" (qtd. in "Surrealism" 1115). Automatism connects with spirit possession and magic, and now art. The turn to theosophy, dreams and the unconscious, and the "disinterested play of thinking" closely approximates the Invisible Man's magical and mystical vision with its specific attention to possession, dreams, and the unconscious (the "underground"). In his introduction to the 1980 edition of *Invisible Man*, moreover, Ellison himself confesses that a "taunting disembodied voice" called to him to write down what "it" dictated in automatic or mimetic fashion: "For while I had structured my short stories out of familiar experiences and possessed concrete images of my characters and their backgrounds, now I was confronted by nothing more substantial than a taunting, disembodied voice . . . yet the voice [an 'ironic, down-home voice'] was so persuasive with echoes of blues-toned laughter that I found myself being nudged toward a frame of mind in which, suddenly, current events, memories and artifacts began combining to form a vague but intriguing new perspective" (xv-xvi). What emerged was a new hybrid literary form—as Albert Murray suggests, "indeed something different and something more than run-of-the-mill U.S. fiction," something that broke from social realist fiction and "employed a startling effecting fusion of narrating realism and surrealism . . . it achieved a unique but compelling combination of the naturalistic, the ridiculous, and the downright hallucinatory" (167).

Ellison himself is reacting against constraints imposed upon him as an artist, against the confinement of African American fiction to social realist fiction, protest fiction. In the 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons," Irving Howe criticized him, as well as James Baldwin, of being overly refined, "literary to a fault" (98). Howe instead privileges Richard Wright's more mili-

tant approach to the task of writing. In "The World and the Jug," Ellison responds by rejecting what he considers to be Howe's narrow definitions of *art* and *protest*, stating that art can be political without sacrificing craftsmanship—and, conversely, that politics might be more creatively cast. Although accused of lacking political concern, Ellison, on the contrary, seems to be preoccupied in his novel with questions of property ownership, labor disputes, eviction, public utility rates, equal rights, and black leadership. Most of all, the carnival-riot reflects Harlem's social discontent and Ellison's literary commitment to representing existing conditions of poverty and exploitation. In fact, this riot was based on the Harlem riot of 1943, which Ellison himself reported for the *New York Post*. In addition to his practice of radical politics in the 1930s and 1940s, Ellison makes it known in his introduction to the 1980 edition of *Invisible Man* that he "agitated earlier for the release of Angelo Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys, had marched behind Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., in his effort to desegregate the stores along 125th Street, and had been part of a throng which blocked off Fifth Avenue in protest of the role being played by Germany and Italy in the Spanish Civil War" (xvii).

Above all, Ellison defended the freedom of the artist not for art's sake alone but against the black writer's

becoming the sacrificial victim in America's working out of the political (as blacks are by necessity, according to Howe, symbols of the political). To limit the black author to one variable emotion, anger, and one form, protest—and to fall in step with the militant left in reaction to the controlling right—seems more and more to corner the black writer; the Invisible Man's writerly vision, however, is primarily committed to "see[ing] around corners" (italics mine). Instead of viewing black people as tragic figures in America's social drama, divesting them ultimately of multidimensionality as people, Ellison turned in part toward the aesthetic spaces of carnival and elements of blues-toned laughter and the magic and merits of invisibility. According to Ellison, "Wright believed in the much abused notion that novels are 'weapons'—the counterpart of the dreary notion, common among minority groups, that novels are instruments of good social relations, [whereas] true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core" (*Shadow* 114). For Ellison this celebration indeed becomes a clear protest against black nihilism and white supremacist rituals of annihilation—a tenacious will to survive not simply by responding violently but by affirming the essence of a carnival life-principle.

## Notes

1. This reference to "distorted mirrors" comes from the novel's "Prologue," in which the Invisible Man states that he feels "surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass" (3).

2. For scholarly work on the intersections of "performance" and "everyday life," see Victor Turner (*From Ritual and Anthropology*); Richard Schechner; Erving Goffman (*Presentation and Frame*); Dwight Conquergood; Judith Butler (*Gender and Bodies*). Recent scholarship on identity politics and black performance-oriented traditions abounds. In particular, see Stuart Hall; Sandra L. Richards.

3. The phrase *signifying back and black* is a paraphrase of Houston Baker's notions of "speaking back and black" (24)—"back" through the wearing of the minstrel mask ("mastery of form") and "black" through the creation of an African American tradition ("deformation of mastery").

4. For an extensive discussion on the pre-Columbian "carnival gods," see Harris's essay "The Schizophrenic Sea," in which he discusses the interrelated meanings of "carnival twinships" and "masquerade and myth" (cf. *The Womb of Space*).

5. As Nathaniel Mackey explains, *Anancy* refers to an Ashanti spider trickster figure that is also widely known in the Caribbean through folk tales and the limbo dance. *Limbo* refers to the "West

Indian dance in which the dancer maneuvers his or her way underneath a bar that is gradually lowered. The outspread, spiderlike sprawl of the limbo dancer's limbs relates the dance to the Africa-derived Anancy tales" (168). The dancer frequently wears an Anancy mask to symbolize the spiderlike role that he or she assumes, ritualizing Anancy's "faked death"; i.e., coming close to the ground—the grave—but not actually making contact with it. According to Harris, this act symbolizes the "curious psychic re-assembly of the parts of the dead god or gods. And that re-assembly which issued from a state of cramp to articulate a new growth—and to point to the necessity for a new kind of drama, novel and poem—is a creative phenomenon of the first importance in the imagination of a people violated by economic fates" (*Essays* 159).

6. In their drunken stupor, the white men seize the naked blonde woman and begin tossing her in the air. The terror that she experiences suggests that she fears the worst—being sexually violated, raped, and murdered.

7. W. E. B. Du Bois discusses the powers of vision, a "second sight," produced out of double-consciousness by which being black forces and enables one to see behind veils, across color lines, and within a liminal space that divides the earthly and spiritual worlds (5).

8. See also Alexander; Lay.

9. Ellison makes several allusions to lynching related to interracial sexual unions of white women and black men: the blonde white woman dancing in front of the black men at the battle royal, Sybil and references to D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), among others. He also reflects absolute "whiteness" through absolute "blackness," using aspects of racial revenge as an act of mimicry of Klan rituals. For instance, Bledsoe threatens the Invisible Man, stating, "I'll have every Negro in the country hanging from tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am." Similarly, as the Invisible Man prepares to leave his college, he sees that "the wisteria . . . hung from the trees on ropelike vines" (143). Ras the Destroyer, moreover, attempts to exact revenge for what he interprets as the betrayal of the African race. In calling for an eye-for-an-eye, Ras reverses the lynching ritual, as the Invisible Man notes, "I should die by hanging alone, as though only hanging would settle things, even the score" (560).

10. Along these lines, neo-Nazi groups often claim that "a secret cabal of Jews" runs the country (Ezekiel 597). For these neo-Nazi groups the symbol of the swastika frequently possesses mythic and mystic powers that stem from its associations to infinity, the sun, and the Aryan race ("Swastika" 679).

11. For further discussion on circus acts, variety shows, and vaudeville, see Adams; Brown; McLean; Slide.

12. On Hopkins and the racial occult, see Gillman; Otten; Schragar.

13. Among the most dangerous rioters is in fact the West Indian immigrant Ras the Destroyer, presumably short for Ras Tafari, "Negus of Ethiopia," who leads a messianic revolt in a triumphant procession toward the Promised Land of Ethiopia. See Kehl; Barrett.

14. I am referring, for instance, to the way that Mr. Norton plays out his own ego-ideal in relation to black people.

15. He discusses the meaning of the symbol in relation to the art work of Pablo Picasso. He considered Picasso the "greatest wrestler with forms and techniques of them all." One might indeed compare Ellison and Picasso according to an evolving aesthetic practice that sought to create a simultaneity-of-vision—i.e., Cubism—and a deep expressive connection to one's subject matter in the complex use of symbols. One of the Invisible Man's former teachers accuses him of being "distorted in the interest of a design" ("Well what design and whose?" seems to be the question), but this condition seems to be in opposition to Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (MOMA, New York, 1907) with its fractured mask-like facial forms that broke with traditional geometrical planes, strict angularity, and singularity of vision. See "Pablo Picasso."

Adams, Blueford. "A Stupendous Mirror of Departed Empires": The Barnum Hippodromes and Circuses, 1874-1891." *American Literary History* 8.1 (1996): 34-56.

Alexander, Charles C. *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1965.

Baker, Houston. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Discourse Typology in Prose." *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*. Ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska. Cambridge: MIT P, 1971. 176-96.

—. *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

—. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984.

**Works  
Cited**

- Barrett, Leonard E., Sr. *The Rastafarians*. Boston: Beacon P, 1997.
- Bourguignon, Erika. "Voodoo." *Encyclopedia Americana*. 1998 ed. 28: 233-34.
- Brown, Bill. *The Material Unconscious*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1996.
- Burton, Richard D. E. *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
- . *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Butler-Evans, Elliott. "The Politics of Carnival and Heteroglossia in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Dialogic Criticism and African American Literature." *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*. Ed. David Palumbo-Liu. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1995. 117-39.
- Chestnutt, Charles. *The Conjure Woman*. Boston: Houghton, 1899.
- Conquergood, Dwight. "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance." *Literature in Performance* 5 (1985): 1-13.
- Da Matta, Robert. *Carnivals, Rogues, and Heroes: An Interpretation of the Brazilian Dilemma*. Trans. John Drury. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1991.
- Dixon, Thomas, Jr. *The Clansman*. 1905. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1970.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. 1845. Ed. Houston Baker. New York: Penguin, 1986.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952. New York: Vintage, 1980.
- . *Shadow and Act*. 1964. New York: Vintage, 1972.
- Ezekiel, Raphael S. "Talking About Race with America's Klansmen." *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1997. 586-88.
- Forrest, Leon. "Luminosity from the Lower Frequencies." *Speaking For You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*. Ed. Kimberly W. Benston. Washington: Howard UP, 1987. 308-21.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.
- Gillman, Susan. "Pauline Hopkins and the Occult: African-American Revisions of Nineteenth-Century Sciences." *American Literary History* 8.1 (1996): 57-82.
- Gilman, Sander L. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1974.
- . *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1959.
- Hall, Stuart. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Black Popular Culture*. Ed. Gina Dent. Seattle: Bay P, 1992. 21-33.
- Harris, Wilson. *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris: The Unfinished Genesis of the Imagination*. Ed. A. J. M. Bundy. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- . *The Womb of Space: The Cross-Cultural Imagination*. Westport: Greenwood P, 1983.
- Haskins, Jim. *Voodoo & Hoodoo*. New York: Stein and Day, 1978.
- Holland, Charles, ed. *Strange Feats and Clever Turns*. London: Holland & Palmer, 1998.
- Hopkins, Pauline Elizabeth. *Of One Blood. Or, the Hidden Self*. 1902-03. *The Magazine Novels of Pauline Hopkins*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. 439-621.
- Howe, Irving. "Black Boys and Native Sons." 1963. *A World More Attractive*. New York: Horizon, 1963. 98-122.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Mules and Men*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1935.
- . *Tell My Horse*. 1938. New York: Harper Perennial, 1990.
- Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. 1861. Ed. Jean Fagin Yellin. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987.
- James, William. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Longmans, 1902.
- Kehl, D. G. "Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the Rastafarians." *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 13.4 (1983): 9-11.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Word, Dialogue and Novel." *Desire in Language*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980. 64-91.
- Lay, Shawn, ed. *The Invisible Empire in the West*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1992.
- Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. New York: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Mackey, Nathaniel. *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- McLean, Albert F., Jr. *American Vaudeville as Ritual*. Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1965.

- Mulira, Jessie Gaston. "The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans." *Africanisms in American Culture*. Ed. Joseph E. Holloway. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 34-68.
- Murray, Albert. *The Omni Americans*. New York: Random, 1970.
- Otten, Thomas J. "Pauline Hopkins and the Hidden Self of Race." *English Literary History* 59.1 (1992): 227-56.
- "Pablo Picasso." *The Oxford Companion to Art*. Ed. Ian Chilvers and Harold Osborne. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 866-67.
- Peterson, Dale. "Response and Call: The African American Dialogue with Bakhtin and What It Signifies." *Bakhtin in Contexts*. Ed. Amy Mandelker. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1995. 89-98.
- Pinn, Anthony. *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*. Minneapolis: Fortress P, 1998.
- Schechner, Richard. "Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African-American Literature." *Performativity and Performance*. Ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick. London: Routledge, 1985. 64-88.
- Schrager, Cynthia D. "Both Sides of the Veil: Race, Science, and Mysticism in W. E. B. Du Bois." *American Quarterly* 48.4 (1996): 551-86.
- Slide, Anthony. *The Encyclopedia of Vaudeville*. Westport: Greenwood P, 1994.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1973.
- Stepan, Nancy. "The Hour of Eugenics": *Race, Gender and Nation in Latin America*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991.
- "Surrealism." *The Oxford Companion to Art*. Ed. Ian Chilves and Harold Osborne. New York: Oxford UP, 1997. 1115-17.
- "Swastika." *Collier's Encyclopedia*. 1997 ed. 23: 679.
- Tate, Claudia. "Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." *Speaking For You*. Ed. Kimberly Benston. Washington: Howard UP, 1987. 163-72.
- Trelease, Allen W. "Ku Klux Klan." *Encyclopedia Americana*. 1998 ed. 16: 558-59.
- Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance*. New York: *Performing Arts Journal Publications*, 1988.
- . *From Ritual to Theater*. New York: *Performing Arts Journal Publications*, 1982.
- Walker, Barbara G. "Sybil." *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco: Harper, 1983. 966-67.

Shinn, Christopher A. "Masquerade, Magic, and Carnival in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*." *African American Review* 36.2 (2002): 243. Literary Reference Center. EBSCO. Web. 15 Feb. 2011.