

“Something Warmly, Infuriatingly Feminine”:ⁱ

Racial (Un)Gendering in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

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In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a novel clearly concerned with masculinity, femininity is a surprising site of controversy. Critic Anne Folwell Stanford claims that Ellison exclusively employs simplistic stereotypes of femininity; she insists that Ellison's female characters, "are constructed along the spectrum that replicated the classic duality embodied in the representations of women—Madonna or whore, mother or seductress—reinforcing and adding to the bulk of literature that produces women's characters according to this bifurcated vision" (117). According to this argument, the women of *Invisible Man* are just as invisible as the protagonist himself. However, other critics, such as Claudia Tate and Shelly Eversley, have found the potential for new meaning in the construction of femininity in Ellison's novel. Tate asks Ellison's readers to look beneath the "stereotypical exteriors of his female characters" in the same way in which Ellison asks his readers to look beneath the racial archetypes in our society (163). Both critics agree that women are vital to the Invisible Man's journey towards self-identity. Eversley goes as far as to say, "While they are the most consistent and crucial symbols in *Invisible Man*, women are also 'more than symbols.' Indeed they become sites of *revelation* that transcend the simple opposition between black and white to offer new complexity to the novel's organizing themes" (173). While Eversley correctly recognizes the female characters as much more than stereotypical symbols of femininity in the novel, her claim that the female characters "transcend" the ubiquitous juxtaposition of black and white is highly problematic; rather, these female characters *forefront* this juxtaposition and its connections to gender and sexuality. Through key interactions between the Invisible Man and females in the novel, Ralph Ellison illustrates the way in which the construction of black gender identities have been determined through certain projections of white society in America.

All of the female figures in *Invisible Man* are explicitly either black or white, and their characters, along with the Invisible Man's interactions with them, are deeply defined by their race. In order to explore the meaning beneath these moments in the text, it is first necessary to discuss some of the theories surrounding black and white women in regards to the intersection of race and gender. In *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White recognizes the unique position of African American women within American gender ideology. White identifies "impossible task" of the black woman; she is subject not only to the barriers inherent to being a woman in a patriarchal society, but she is also subject to the stereotypes and discrimination that are a product of racism that still survives in our country long after the abolishment of slavery. According to White, "If she is rescued from the myth of the Negro, the myth of woman traps her. If she escapes the myth of woman, the myth of Negro still ensnares her. Since the myth of woman and the myth of the Negro are so similar, to extract her from one gives the appearance of freeing her from both" (28). African American women are subject to a two-pronged oppression that is rarely considered together. Implicit in White's argument is the call to consider race and gender as deeply interconnected and inextricable.

In her essay entitled "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers uses a similar approach to unpack the complex position of African American women in American ideology. Spillers opens her argument by refuting the notion that gender identities and gender dominance are inherent. She points to the Moynihan Report of 1965 as an example of the assumption that African American men and women must adhere to traditional Western gender roles simply because that is the way in which white American society constructed the gender divide. According to Spillers,

At a time when current critical discourses appear to compel us more and more decidedly toward gender 'undecidability,' it would appear reactionary, if not dumb, to insist on the

integrity of female/male gender. But undressing these confluences of meaning, as they appear under the rule of dominance, would restore...the *potential* for gender differentiation as it might express itself along a range of stress points, including human biology in its intersection with the project of culture (66).

As Spillers later unpacks, “the rule of dominance” refers to the specific conditions of slavery in the United States. Like Ellison in *Invisible Man*, Spillers uses the past and “the project of culture” as tools to gain a better understanding of the present; she argues that the relationship of the white oppressor and the black oppressed in slavery is fundamental to African American history. In this context, Spillers goes on to make the argument that because of the conditions of slavery, access to femininity, as it was defined in North American society, was a sort of cultural capital only available to white women, leaving black women, who were identified as slaves rather than women, “ungendered” (68).

The distinction between body and flesh is central to Spiller’s theory of the ungendered through its implications of the relationship between captive and captor. The physical body has clear implications for understandings of gender; however, the flesh comes before as the most basic level of living physicality. The institution of slavery, in its indiscriminate seizing of bodies regardless of their gender, breaks down the possibility for gender identity and both “the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related or gender-specific” (67). In this process, the captive bodies in slavery are reduced to flesh, which becomes the site of the physical cruelty of slavery. This element is particularly important in the ungendering of African women because their flesh was “not only the target of rape...but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males” (68). In these inflictions of visceral pain, the connection between flesh, body, and gendered identity is lost. In the wake of slavery and the ungendering of the black female body, the dominant culture,

white society, is doomed then to “misname” the “power of the female” because of its inability to understand the different construction of femininity that occurs in oppression (80). Spillers looks specifically at the notion of motherhood and the African-American matriarch, as popularized by the Moynihan Report, as an example of this misnaming because motherhood was not a legitimate social institution among slaves. Only white women had access to this “procedure of cultural inheritance” (80).

Theorist Judith Butler similarly stresses the importance of history in gender constitution; however, she focuses on the performative quality in this connection. Like Spillers, Butler argues that gender identity is not inherent, “rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time— an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (519). Time, specifically past, plays a critical role in Butler’s definition of gender performance. She cites Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir when explaining the notion of the gendered body as a *historical* idea. The gendered body must be understood as a product of “cultural and historical possibilities,” just as Spillers does in looking to the past in order to explain the present condition of black gender roles (521). The past is abstractly recorded through the evolution of specific gender roles in our society and thus is inextricably linked to contemporary gender perceptions. Butler explains, “In other words, the body *is* a historical situation, as Beauvoir has claimed, and is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation” (521). The notion of reproduction is particularly significant because it suggests the way in which gender roles are passed on and enforced between different groups, both generationally and cross-culturally.

The notion of enforcement ensures that gender be performed correctly and in accordance with the dominant culture. While Butler recognizes that there are individualized ways of “doing” one’s gender, she stresses the idea of gender performance as the project of a society (525). This

concept relates to Spiller's theory of the ungendered, which is dependent upon the interchange between black and white societies. If we consider ungendering a sort of gendering in itself, we can recognize the way in which it was physically performed through the specific acts of oppression upon the flesh that Spillers identifies. In concluding her argument, Butler writes, "I envision the critical genealogy of gender to rely on a phenomenological set of presuppositions, most important among them the expanded conception of an 'act' which is both socially shared and historically constituted, and which is performative" (530). Thus thinking strictly in terms of the traditional gender binary, to "be" a woman, one must "compel" one's physical body to repeatedly physically enact an idea of womanhood that has been shaped by culture and history (522). In turn, this theory would apply more specifically to enacting one's racialized gender; however, as Spillers explains, black gendering has been continually distorted and manipulated within American society, resulting in the consistent misnaming of black women.

Following in this pattern of misnaming African American femininity, Deborah Gray White explains the emergence of such misnamed types of black women in slavery, the Jezebel and the Mammy. White notes, "Although much of race and sex ideology that abounds in America has its roots in history that is older than the nation, it was during the slavery era that the ideas were molded into a peculiar American mythology" (27). The labeling of black women as Jezebels or Mammies was central to this mythology and the project of (mis)naming by white society. The Jezebel was an ultra-sexualized figure that rejected the Victorian sensibilities of white American society. She was a sexual threat in the way in which she supposedly tempted white men (29-30). The Mammy, on the other hand, was the all-giving surrogate black mother to the master's white children and in charge of all matters relating to the household. Unlike the Jezebel, the Mammy was entirely asexual and never figured as a threat to domesticity (47-49).

These two popular stereotypes of female slaves have far outlived slavery and remain current evidence of the misnaming of black femininity and its consequences for the construction of black femininity in American society. In the middle of the 20th century, Ralph Ellison continues to play with these same archetypes in the black female characters of *Invisible Man*.

While black femininity struggles to define itself against the expectations of American gender ideology, black masculinity maintains a complex relationship to white femininity. Black masculinity was subject to the uniquely sexualized projections of white male society, especially in their connection to white women. Ellison comments on this relationship early on in *Invisible Man*, when the narrator, on his way to New York, meets the vet from the Golden Day, who sarcastically suggests to him that he might even dance with a white girl in the North. Perhaps the most insightful character of the entire novel, the “insane” veteran says of narrator: “so much of his freedom will have to be symbolic. And what will be his or any man’s most easily accessible symbol of freedom? Why, a woman of course. In twenty minutes he can inflate that symbol with all the freedom which he’ll be too busy working to enjoy the rest of the time” (153). The vet not only draws the connection between freedom and white women, but he also implies the way in which this connection is a tool of oppression by white society. He tells the Invisible Man that his freedom will have to be “symbolic,” not real, and thus white women become convoluted tools that are supposedly granting freedom, but are actually withholding the real thing. The conflation of white women with freedom originates, not within black society, but within white society as a covert tool of further oppression. To understand the cultural evolution of this notion, it is necessary to again return to the time of slavery in American history.

In 1894, almost thirty years after the end of the Civil War, Frederick Douglass asks the question, “Why is the Negro lynched?” He goes on to answer, explaining,

It is the charge of assaults by Negroes upon white women. This new charge, once fairly started on the wings of rumor, no matter by whom or in what manner originated, whether well or ill-founded, whether true or false, is certain to raise a mob and to subject the accused to immediate torture or death (752).

While Douglass carefully does not defend the crime, he argues against its prevalence and in his argument he implies the motives surrounding white society's accusation. He notes that the crime is "certain" to create a mob and justify death, unlike a non-sexual crime. The sexual nature of the crime is therefore critical because of the way in which it conflates sex between a black man and white woman with "invading the sacred rights of [white] women and endangering the home of whites" (754). Douglass implies that white society figures black men as more than simply a sexual threat to women, but as a threat to white domesticity. Douglass by no means creates the connection between white women and black men; rather he merely recognizes the emergence of this connection as a tool for enforcing racial and gender inequality in American society. What is more, he observes it through the *performance* of lynching, demonstrating the way in which the construction of black masculinity is already a performance for the consumption of white society.

Only about seventy-five years after Douglass provides this social commentary, the connection between white women and freedom manifests itself in Eldridge Cleaver's collection of essays, *Soul On Ice*. His essay entitled "The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs" recounts a conversation between a group of incarcerated African American men ("Black Eunuchs"). While some of Cleaver's story is extraneous and unpolished, his essay is still significant in the way in which it attempts to explore the evolving symbolic relationship between white women and freedom. At one point a prisoner says, "I know that the white man made the black woman the symbol of slavery and the white woman the symbol of freedom. Every time I embrace a black woman I'm embracing slavery, and when I put my arms around a white woman, well, I'm hugging freedom" (160). The conflation of possessing a white woman and possessing freedom is

clear, but additionally these words show an awareness of white male society's part in creating this dynamic. Nevertheless, Cleaver still furthers the association and in his essay he is unable to move past it despite his attempt to recognize it as a tool of oppression.

When read together, Douglass and Cleaver describe the evolution of the relationship between black men and white women, a relationship that is further complicated by Eric Lott's analysis of blackface minstrelsy. Lott argues that as a popular form of entertainment, blackface minstrelsy exposes the underlying social consciousness, or rather "racial unconscious," of the construction of black gender roles in American society ("Love and Theft," 23). According to Lott, "the form of the early minstrel show (1843 to the 1860s) underscores the white fascination with commodified 'black' bodies" ("Love and Theft," 27). In other words, this racial performance reflected more upon white society than the African American community and in this way, the tradition of blackface minstrelsy provides insight into the gender roles that were projected onto black men and women by white Americans. It illuminates some of the complex way in which these roles were constructed based on white society's anxieties, imposed onto the black community, and then ultimately internalized in American culture. Blackface minstrelsy was instrumental in creating a concept of "blackness" that was strangely invented through borrowing (stealing) some authentic elements of black slave culture, but also based upon fabrications according to white society's perverse desire and fascination. The result was a hybrid category of blackness that was both performed and enforced by white society for white society.

While blackface minstrelsy sheds some light onto the social conditions that allowed for white society to project the strange symbolic relationship between black men and white women, blackface minstrelsy also strengthened stereotypes about black women. Lott explains, "The minstrel show's 'black' female bodies clinched the horror of engulfing womanhood, gorging

women depleting the bankbook” (“Love and Theft,” 33). Not only did such performances distort and manipulate black femininity in the very ways Spiller’s suggests in her analysis of the ungendered, but also they further emasculated African American men by implying that they could not exert power over their women within the United State’s patriarchal society. In this way the minstrel tradition enforced white society’s gender norms and projected gendered expectations onto African American society.

As Lott eloquently notes, “The notion of the black dancer ‘imitating himself’ indicates minstrelsy’s fundamental consequence for black culture, the dispossession and control by whites of black forms that would not be recovered for a long time” (“Seeming Counterfeit,” 229). One of these “fundamental consequences” was regarding the construction of black gender and sexuality; blackface minstrelsy is one example of the way in which white American society imposed their “pale gaze” onto African American men and women, specifically in the construction of gendered relationships. Ultimately blackface minstrelsy demonstrates the way in which no sooner is there recognition of a cultural “other,” then it is subjected to the “gaze” of dominant society. The notion that black gender and sexuality is a product of this “pale gaze” is critical in the way in which Ralph Ellison uses gender, specifically femininity, as a tool to forefront the complicated racial tensions of *Invisible Man*. In “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” Ellison writes that blackface “was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved” (*The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, 103). As Ellison and Lott both go on to explain, this “catharsis” was more than comedic, it was deeply sexual and the tradition of blackface minstrelsy set the stage for this sort of racialized and gendered performance from black men and women in regular social activity. Of course, it is critical to remember that *Invisible Man* is a

novel written by a black man that tells the story of a black male character who seems trapped (and struggling against) this very performance of blackness.

The Invisible Man's first encounter with a woman, specifically a white woman, in the novel is literally a performance for white society, where the affluent white men of the community are watching from the sidelines. The narrator describes, "A sea of faces, some hostile, some amused, ringed around us, and in the center, facing us, stood a magnificent blonde— stark naked" (19). In the "Battle Royal," the Invisible Man, along with a group of other adolescent African American males, participates in what seems to be a boxing match; however, it quickly shows itself to be a humiliating exhibit for the entertainment of the white male audience. The Invisible Man takes part in the event with the promise of being able to read the graduation speech he wrote on the future of black society in America, a darkly ironic undertaking on multiple levels. While Ellison does not overtly reference blackface minstrelsy, this incident is strongly reminiscent of this significant tradition of popular culture. As in blackface minstrelsy, the young men of the Battle Royal are forced to perform black stereotypes that cast them as both primitive and emasculated. Their utter humiliation and helplessness in the situation gives the white men absolute power. The difference in age between the adolescents and the middle aged and older men is haunting because it speaks to the way in which the white men will always view black men as boys, no matter their age. By opening his novel with this critical scene, Ellison draws immediate attention to the power of white projection in the construction of African American gender roles in American culture.

Specifically, Ellison draws attention to the construction of black gender roles through the explicit sexuality of the magnificent blonde. Critically, the blonde is not described through her beauty, but through her sexual allure. The narrator recalls, "I was strongly attracted and looked in

spite of myself... The hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask, the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon's butt" (19). The Invisible Man cannot deny his desire for the naked white woman, demonstrated through his unwavering gaze. Yet his description of her is not aesthetically pleasing; he compares her to a cartoonish baby doll and an animal's bottom, which seems both crude and darkly comical. Early in the novel Ellison makes the important differentiation between beauty and erotic desire. Ellison describes his character's physical characteristics, beyond race, sparingly, making any such description included in his novel significant. The magnificent blonde becomes not so magnificent once the reader envisions her make-up caked face and artificially yellow hair. The "mask" of her make-up invokes the mask of blackface, one of the first hints that as a woman she, too, is subject to the projections of white society that the narrator struggles against for the entire novel. The character of the magnificent blonde therefore functions not only through her explicit sexualizing of the Battle Royal, but she also introduces the reader to the complexities of femininity and its interconnected relationship to race.

One such interconnection is that of the role of the white woman as a symbol of freedom within black masculine ideology. Claudia Tate claims that the magnificent blonde "is not just any woman; she represents the forbidden white woman" (166). The young Invisible Man succinctly expresses a similar sentiment to what Cleaver expresses in "The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs." He says, "I wanted at one and the same time... to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed on her belly her thighs formed a capital V" (19). Just as Cleaver conflates hugging a white woman with "hugging freedom," the American flag tattoo above the magnificent blonde's

genitalia suggests the possibility of possessing America, and the liberty its flag stands for, through possessing the woman sexually (160). In this way, Ellison draws a clear connection between freedom in America and white women early on in *Invisible Man*. Their desirability therefore is much more than erotic, but also a desire for freedom in American society. Yet as Douglass, Lott, and even Cleaver help to untangle, this desire is not innate to black male culture, but is a construction of white society. The narrator has a visceral reaction to his desire for the white woman that makes her repulsive while at the same time he desires her more than anything else at that moment. In the protagonist's response, Ellison demonstrates the perverse power of the white society's projections within black American culture. At an early age, the Invisible Man cannot identify where these feelings come from, but he is strongly torn.

The magnificent blonde enables a strange triangle of sexuality to emerge between herself, the young black men, and the white men. She is a misguided representation of freedom to the young African American men, who cannot help but desire her physically as they attempt to hide their erections (20). To the white men she is likewise an object of lust, but she also acts to further erotically link the white men to the black adolescents through the performance. The tone of the event is sexual before the magnificent blonde even enters, when the white male spectators puff on "black cigars" (17). Critic Douglas Steward identifies the cigars as black phalluses, an image reinforced by the boys' sexual arousal later (524). However, the magnificent blonde's presence brings the homoerotic themes to the surface through eliciting these physical reactions from the adolescent boys. Steward explains, "The erection spectacle operates to position the black boys as the erotic objects of the white homosocial gaze while simultaneously excluding them from the advantage that homosociality confers on the white men" (524). Thus the sexual relationship between the boys and the men is one sided and indeed works to reinforce a hierarchy of power

that seeks to control the threat of black male sexuality. Ellison himself refers to the Battle Royal as “a ritual in preservation of caste lines” (Baker, 833). The older men exert their social power over the young men through subjecting them to this performance in an effort to ease their own anxiety regarding sexual and masculine superiority.

Ultimately the scene is a strange combination of fantasy and nightmare for those involved. In the triangle of sexual relationships, it possesses the same “air of a collective masturbation fantasy” for the white middle-aged men that Eric Lott identifies in early examples of blackface minstrelsy (“Love and Theft,” 27). For the young men it is a humiliating experience that they cannot avoid as much as they may try (recall the largest boy trying to hide his erection with his boxing gloves), and indeed the magnificent blonde, too, is full of “terror” and “disgust” (20). This episode stands as the narrator’s first sexual experience and his first direct encounter with a woman in the novel. This introduction immediately positions femininity in a critical position between black and white masculinity; the magnificent blonde’s presence intensifies the racial tensions of the scene and draws out the workings of white society’s projections on black gender roles and sexuality. The Invisible Man’s experience at the Battle Royal prepares the reader for the confusing relationship he continues to have with race and gender, which continue to be brought to the surface and further explored through his interactions with women throughout the rest of the novel.

The Invisible Man’s next interaction with a white woman is during his time at the College and it stands in stark contrast to the highly eroticized character of the magnificent blonde. This interaction is more abstract in that the narrator meets this white woman merely through her photograph, which her father, and one of the College’s white founders, Mr. Norton,

keeps in his vest pocket. Mr. Norton's daughter passed away before she reached womanhood and he credits her as his inspiration for his philanthropy. He describes her as,

A being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet... She was rare, a perfect creature, a work of purest art. A delicate flower that bloomed in the liquid light of the moon. A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical maiden, gracious and queenly. I found it difficult to believe her my own... (42).

Shelly Eversley remarks that in her description, Mr. Norton's daughter is "a reversed image, a negative, of the Battle Royal's 'whore'" (179). Indeed, superficially these two opposing images of femininity seem to uphold the classic Madonna-whore binary that Anne Stanford originally noted in Ellison's novel. However, as with the magnificent blonde, Mr. Norton's daughter proves to be a more complex figure in the novel in the way in which she abstractly relates to the characters around her, not only to the men, but also to the daughter of a black sharecropper who appears in the following scene.

The narrator does not meet Mr. Norton's daughter directly, but rather through "the tinted miniature framed in engraved platinum" (43). The physical framing of the girl's image is critical to the expression of her femininity. In his book on the construction of black masculinity, Maurice O. Wallace discusses of the significance of framing in images of African American men. His theoretical analysis can likewise be used in exploring the framing of any gendered subject, including that of a white young woman. Just as Wallace claims that the frame "formalizes a delimited two-dimensional vision of black men in (white) America," the frame around Mr. Norton's daughter presents the bounded view of her femininity and sexuality (30). Wallace explains that in the act of framing an image, what is *unseen*, that is, what is not within the frame, becomes just as significant as the portion of the image that is seen. Mr. Norton's daughter is a bodiless head and thus she lacks any evidence of female sexuality through the presence of

breasts or hips. Indeed, she is pure to the point of “fantasy” for her father, who has constructed her within the boundaries of this small, framed image (Eversley, 178). Basing his theory off of the work of Martin Heidegger, Wallace argues that the framed picture “is always subject to reproducing blind spots that tell more about the scopic criminality of the one who enframes than that of the enframed one” (29). In this way, Mr. Norton’s desire to understand his daughter as sexually pure, untouched by any man, hints conversely at his own desire to possess her, suggested earlier in when he says, “I found it difficult to believe her my own...” (42). His desire to possess her is laced with sexual undertones that become more pronounced throughout the following events.

As with most of his early interactions with women, the Invisible Man appears oblivious to the forces of gender and race that are at work in the moment. Yet it remains significant that the first two white women he encounters within the novel are both defined exclusively by their looks. Neither of the characters have any dialogue and the white men in the scene ultimately control their movements; literally in the case with the photograph of Mr. Norton’s daughter, but indirectly it is also the case with the magnificent blonde who has been brought to the Battle Royal for the purpose of entertainment. The women’s physical descriptions are their primary means of definition in the mind of the Invisible Man. In the moment of seeing the photograph of Mr. Norton’s daughter, the Invisible Man remembers thinking her to be “very beautiful” (43). Through their physical appearance, these women become objects of desire for the men who look upon them. Thus the narrator’s early experience with white women constructs them as desirable based upon their looks, a key element of which is the light color of their skin. In addition, white women are consistently placed both physically and metaphorically out of reach for the narrator. Critically, this positioning is always structured through the white men of the scene, drawing

attention to their part in the construction of this dynamic. At the time the Invisible Man does not seem to have any higher understanding of the relationship between himself as a young black man and these white women, but he hints that his perspective changes throughout his journey when he notes that now “she would appear as ordinary as an expensive piece of machine-tooled jewelry and just as lifeless” (43). This retrospective comment suggests that he loses his admiration for the young white woman, instead viewing her, and others like her, as cold, superficial copies (recall the etymology of the term “stereotype”) of the notion of white female purity.

Shortly after Mr. Norton shows the Invisible Man the small portrait of his daughter, they come on the sharecropper, Trueblood, and his family. Upon seeing their log cabin, Mr. Norton insists upon stopping the car and talking to the inhabitants. Until this point of the novel, it seems that despite the underlying complexity of Ellison’s female characters, they remain contained strictly within the Madonna-whore/mother-seductress dichotomy of female sexuality. Trueblood’s teenage daughter, Matty Lou, directly challenges this traditional binary; however, she does so in a way that exposes and complicates the relationship between black femininity and white femininity. Matty Lou is represented as a mother through the physical evidence of her pregnancy: she “moved with the weary, full-fronted motions of far-gone pregnancy” (47). Yet her father allegedly impregnated her and he implies in his story that she tempted him— “I’m pullin’ away and shushin’ her to be quiet so’s not to wake her Ma, when she grabs holt to me and holds tight”— casting her as a seductress as well (60). However, even Matty Lou’s protests fit into the Jezebel type; as Deborah Gray White explains, in slavery times, white society was so “convinced that slave women were lewd and lascivious, that they invited sexual overtures from white men, and that any resistance they displayed was mere feigning” (30). Clearly there are critical differences in the comparison of Matty Lou to the Jezebel figure, specifically in that the

man making the sexual overtures was not white, but black and her father. However, this difference only serves to further illustrate the power of Trueblood's narrative, whether or not it is true, which in turn is a demonstration of the way in which these stereotypes permeated the consciousness of both white and black society in America. Matty Lou not only fulfills two sides of the traditional dichotomy, but she also appeals to the two stereotypes of black women from slavery: the Mammy and the Jezebel.

It is fitting that Matty Lou should be so cast in roles reminiscent of slavery for Trueblood tells the tale to Mr. Norton and the narrator as they are cast in the physical shadow of the log cabin that survived since slavery times (47). Matty Lou's connection to the figure of the Mammy is more tenuous because she herself is the biological mother (unlike the Mammy), but the connection remains present for in modern times the Mammy stereotype has evolved to include a range of black motherly figures. Matty Lou's position as a seductress is perhaps more notable in its implications; unlike the magnificent blonde, the first white seductress of the novel, Matty Lou's eroticism is not based on an ultra-sexualized body; rather, her role as a seductress stems from her role as a daughter, the first abstract connection between her and Mr. Norton's daughter. As with the women before her, Matty Lou has no dialogue. Her character is represented almost entirely through her father's speech and Trueblood specifically portrays any desire he has for her through their relationship as father and daughter. He says, "maybe sometimes a man can look at a little ole pigtail gal and see him a whore— you'all know that?" (59). Of course, this rhetorical question is particularly striking for Mr. Norton who has just spoken to the narrator extensively of the pure beauty of his daughter. Thus the story of Trueblood and Matty Lou acts as a reflection of Mr. Norton's own covert desire for his daughter.

Mr. Norton's unforgettable exclamation, "You have survived," followed by, "You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!" hints at the multi-layer relationship between the elderly white man and the poor black sharecropper (51). Just as in the Battle Royal, the white audience looks to the black subject for entertainment. The validity of the entertainment does not matter, only that it will fulfill the expectations of the white audience. Behind the performances is the strange mixture of envy and superiority that Eric Lott identifies in his analysis of blackface minstrelsy. Trueblood's tale confirms stereotypes of black men's moral and religious inferiority, yet at the same time, Mr. Norton expresses fascination and jealousy for the act that Trueblood allegedly committed. Mr. Norton already suggests to the reader that he fosters desire for his own daughter, though he tries to hide it by thinking of her in terms of strict purity. The narrator recalls that when Mr. Norton reaches into his coat for his wallet, "The platinum-framed miniature came with it, but he did not look at it this time" (69). Mr. Norton does not want to admit these feelings, but is nevertheless drawn to Trueblood's tale. Trueblood's story then represents the sexuality that Mr. Norton wishes he could have expressed, but fears because of its immorality. In her discussion of gender constitution, Judith Butler notes the roles of social sanctions and taboos in regulating the performance of one's gender (520). The dynamic between Trueblood and Mr. Norton demonstrates the way in which black and white gender and sexuality are regulated and constructed against each other. Central to the "pale gaze" is the projection of sexual deviance on to black men and women.

The taboo nature of Trueblood's alleged act is critical not only to Mr. Norton's relationship to Trueblood, but also to Matty Lou's portrayal in the novel. In his close analysis of the Trueblood episode in *Invisible Man*, Houston A. Baker, Jr. explains that in a Freudian perspective, Trueblood's account seems "to represent a historical regression... Insofar as Freud's

notions of totemism represent a myth of progressive and social evolution, the farmer's story acts as a countermyth of inversive social dissolution" (832). Trueblood becomes symbolic of primitive life, sexuality, and power, which threaten the organized structure of civilized society. The fact that Matty Lou is desired in the context of incest and taboo holds heavy implications for her sexuality. While she challenges the classic female dichotomy of mothers and seductresses, Matty Lou's sexuality is limited by her race; she remains part of the lexicon of female slave stereotypes and even her desirability is tainted by the taboo she represents. While the men surrounding her likewise control the magnificent blonde's sexuality, her desirability is still associated with freedom and victory, while Matty Lou's desirability is unclean and embarrassing. Even Matty Lou's role as a mother is tainted by the way in which it serves as a physical reminder of the story her father tells.

Additionally, the fact that Matty Lou's story is related to us through the tale told by Trueblood is significant in understanding the way in which the gendered and sexualized projections of white society were ultimately internalized and performed in different ways in African American society. Ellison provides his reader with many hints that Trueblood's tale is a fabrication, told by the sharecropper with the purpose of getting money from the white community members. From the beginning of the episode, it is clear that this is not Trueblood's first time sharing the story with a complete stranger; he is "without surprise" when Mr. Norton says he must talk to him, and his manner is one "as though he had told the story many, many times" (51, 54). Perhaps most convincingly is how "willingly" Trueblood shares his story "with a kind of satisfaction and no trace of hesitancy or shame," suggesting that the events of the story are completely untrue (53). Indeed, Trueblood benefits immensely from his performance, receiving charity and steady work from the white community. Yet the performative quality of

Trueblood's tale is key; his erotic and taboo story fulfills the white male imagination of black men's primitive sexuality while affirming the white man's moral and social superiority. Through the mere act of fabricating the story, Trueblood not only demonstrates a keen awareness of the expectations and desires of white society, but he also illustrates some of the consequences of the racialized and gendered projections of white society. The Trueblood episode in *Invisible Man* is an exaggerated example of the performative dynamic in "pale gaze" of American culture. At this point in the novel, the narrator does not seem to yet understand this critical relationship in that he attributes his shame to the content of Trueblood's story, rather than his embracing of white society's expectations and stereotypes of black masculinity. Trueblood's key performance includes constructing Matty Lou as a hybrid of female slave stereotypes.

Matty Lou introduces the historic stereotypes of the Mammy and the Jezebel into Ralph Ellison's novel, but these themes continue to be explored throughout the rest of *Invisible Man*, particularly in the character of Mary Rambo. Stanford, specifically, accuses Ellison of casting Mary as a two dimensional Mammy replica. Deborah Gray White explains the Mammy as, "in short, surrogate mistress and mother" to the white family she served (49). She "was the woman who could do anything, and do it better than everyone else. Because of her expertise in all domestic matters, she was the premier house servant and all others were her subordinates" (47). White brings out the unique power dynamic of the Mammy figure; while her slave status put her clearly on a lower social level, she held a certain amount of domestic power that was traditionally respected even by the white community. Ellison introduces Mary, in the tradition of the Mammy stereotype, as an all-caring and *non-sexual* maternal figure (even her name is a reference to virgin motherhood). The Invisible Man meets her upon his release from the ironically named Liberty Paint Factory Hospital. Without knowing anything about the narrator,

she says to him, “*Men’s House, Men’s House, shucks that ain’t no place for nobody in your condition what’s weak and needs a woman to keep an eye on you for awhile*” (252). In this way, Mary embraces the narrator in the same way that the Mammy would be expected to embrace a family member in need. Also like the Mammy, Mary is presented as entirely asexual; she receives little to no physical description in the novel, and *never* is described for her alluring body or her beauty. Yet, as Shelly Eversley points out, the crucial difference between Mary and the Mammy stereotype is that, “as the protagonist’s surrogate mother— not his mammy— she nurtures not the master’s white child, but a black one” (181). This simple but critical point is the core for a more positive and productive reading of Mary’s character. It demonstrates that despite her stereotypical qualities, she has moved past central expectations in a deeply significant example of progress.

Yet the fact that Mary is not figured as a biological mother, but a metaphorical one, complicates her portrayal in *Invisible Man*. Motherhood is a key element in Hortense Spillers’ argument regarding the ungendered in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”; she claims that historically for African American women, “Motherhood as a female blood-rite, is denied, at the *very same time* that it becomes the founding term of a human and social enactment” (80). Spillers argues that motherhood as we know it in American society is a type of cultural capital to which slave women never had access, making the evolution of mothering in black society different than that of white society. As Spillers explains, “the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually *misnames* the power of the female regarding the enslaved community” (80). In this context, Mary’s label as a mother or a Mammy figure serves as an example of the way in which black women are continued to be seen in the terms dictated by white culture. The

vocabulary to describe Mary is itself steeped in the history of slavery and the dominant influence of white society. The power of the dominant culture to name exceeds simply the power to label and stereotype. In many ways, Mary is a modern, independent woman yet her figure she remains trapped within the language of her past because no critic can fully discuss her character without recognizing the influence of the Mammy stereotype. To ignore this element would be to ignore an essential aspect of her character in the novel; however, in acknowledging her connection to the historical figure of the Mammy, it is critical to also acknowledge the way in which American categories have changed relatively little since times of slavery.

To the narrator, Mary clearly symbolizes a connection to history that undeniably stems from her Mammy qualities. The Invisible Man explains, “Nor did I think of Mary as a ‘friend’; she was something more— a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face” (258). Ellison’s use of the word “past” gives this moment productive ambiguity; in one sense the narrator could be referring to his personal past in the South, where he grew up, but in another sense he could be referring the collective past of the African American community. This is a mixed past, one that includes both the accomplishments of Frederick Douglass and the damaging consequences of blackface minstrelsy. In this way, Mary, too, is mixed for the narrator; on one hand she encourages the Invisible Man to become a revolutionary leader of his people, but on the other hand, she allows a “jolly nigger bank” in her own home (319). As a result, the narrator struggles between feeling love and appreciation for Mary and resenting and disliking her as a remnant of a painful history that he still does not fully understand. Stanford argues that Mary moves “from one cliché to another, becoming the tar baby from whom the Invisible Man must escape in order to continue his search for identity” (123). While Stanford’s point is well taken, Mary’s fluctuation between

stereotypes is valuable for exactly this reason in the way in which it problematizes African American past. Her very name embodies this struggle: “Mary” being in reference to the Virgin Mary, and “Rambo” being reminiscent of the stereotypical slave name “Sambo,” which Harriet Beecher Stowe popularized in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. These contradictions are exactly what the Invisible Man must struggle with in his search for understanding racialized and gendered identity in America.

Even as a combination of clichés, Mary Rambo’s character contains substantial hints of greater depth and complexity that defy accusations that Ellison used only traditional female stereotypes in his novel. Ellison’s use of stereotypes in his depiction of Mary is powerful precisely *because* of the intelligence and awareness that lies beneath the surface of her character. She tells the Invisible Man, in a moment of wisdom rivaling that of the “insane” veteran, “You have to take care of yourself, son. Don’t let this Harlem git you. I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean? Don’t git corrupted” (255). Like the grandfather’s advice, Ellison leaves Mary’s words open to vast interpretation; however, in general terms Mary seems to be urging the narrator not to be complacent in his new surroundings and to continually question the seemingly endless possibilities of New York City. Despite his mixed reactions to Mary, the narrator, too, recognizes the strength of Mary’s character; he says, “Hell, she knew very well how to live here, much better than I with my college training” (295). Mary enables the Invisible Man to reflect on his own past in a productive and critical way. He realizes that even though she has far less formal education than he, Mary possesses an understanding of the world that is equally valuable.ⁱⁱ

However, this realization does not prevent the Invisible Man from rejecting Mary and everything he believes that she stands for upon his entrance into the Brotherhood. The “jolly

nigger bank” becomes instrumental in his final movement away from Mary, both physically and metaphorically. Upon the morning of his departure, he sees the bank: “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” (319). The figure of the bank represents a vast array of disturbing black stereotypes left over from slavery. Moreover, the “piece of early Americana” literally turns the black man into a comic object, a piece of décor or a souvenir to be owned and sold. In one of his few bursts of anger throughout the novel, the Invisible Man remembers being, “enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around” (319). The narrator, already internalizing the “political correctness” of the Brotherhood, is repulsed by the display of such an object. However, the reader also sees his own immediate doubt in the Brotherhood’s convictions through his insertion of “or whatever” when trying to describe Mary’s fault. The bank is somehow more threatening than the other physical reminders of slavery that the Invisible Man encounters such as Dr. Bledsoe’s shackle or Brother Tarp’s chain (though Brother Tarp has a complex relationship with the Brotherhood); it is more threatening because it not only exposes a painful history, but it also serves as a reminder of *how little* society has truly changed. Mary’s placement of the object on the floor suggests the narrator is incorrect in his assumptions of her “lack of discrimination”; rather, she allows it to serve as an important reminder but does not empower it by placing it in a spot of prominence.

The Invisible Man’s clearly misdirected reactions to Mary and her bank foreshadow the problematic attitude of the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood, as a socialist party, is undeniably advocating for some version of freedom, though the Invisible Man eventually learns the cost of this freedom. The Brotherhood attempts to appeal to the “political unconscious” of the working class, just as Eric Lott explains that blackface minstrelsy was a creation of the “political

unconscious” of the working class. Yet the Brotherhood does not want to recognize racial difference, rather, they want to ignore it. In a euphoric moment after his first experience speaking for the Brotherhood (which was met with mixed reactions from the Brotherhood itself), the narrator sees a future “not limited by black and white” (355). However, as suggested early on by Emma, Brother Jack’s girlfriend, this understanding is not actually the case. Upon her first meeting with him she questions the Invisible Man, saying to those around them (specifically *not* to him), “But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?” (303). Race, therefore, remains just as central an issue within the Brotherhood as outside it. However, while in the outside world the Invisible Man is asked to perform his blackness (beginning at the Battle Royal), within the Brotherhood, the Invisible Man is asked to ignore and reject the history of his race by performing “whiteness.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, the Invisible Man seems to be asked to perform a kind of ungendered whiteness. Yet despite his loyalty and dedication to the Brotherhood, the Invisible Man finds that he cannot escape his race, even in a supposedly colorblind community. This experience calls attention to the way in which whiteness is just as culturally constructed as blackness.

This condition manifests itself specifically with the Invisible Man’s sexual interactions with women following his entrance into the Brotherhood, where the woman’s desire for him is always based upon his blackness. His experiences with women oddly culminate in his encounter with Sybil, the seemingly pathetic white housewife who wants the narrator to help her fulfill her savage rape fantasy. This episode stands apart from the others because of the awareness that the Invisible Man possesses at the end of the interaction, an interaction that directly precedes his entrance into the riot and his ultimate escape underground. Sybil’s name comes from the Greek *sibylla*, meaning “prophetess.” While there are accounts of sybils throughout history, the most

well known are perhaps those of Greco-Roman mythology, who appear in the epic poems of Homer and Virgil and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Sybil is not Ellison's first reference to Ancient Greek and Roman mythology (recall the blind preacher, Reverend Homer A. Barbee) and again the reference seems ironic; Ellison superficially depicts Sybil as silly and unattractive so the notion of her as some sort of great oracle or prophetess is laughable. Yet, her name also eerily suggests the possibility for deeper meaning in her superficial character, if only symbolic meaning. There is something significant about her name as a connection to the future that indirectly drives the narrator out of the streets and underground. The Invisible Man holds a certain tenderness for Sybil that he does not show for any other woman up to that point, even in his recollections of his own mother.

While the Invisible Man has undergone extraordinary changes since his experience with the magnificent blonde at the beginning of the novel, a specific change happens to him during his encounter with Sybil. In the beginning of their interaction, the narrator seems to approach it with similar naïveté as he did his affair with the anonymous white woman, despite Sybil's explicit request for him to act out the part of the savage rapist. He recalls, "I was confounded and amused and it quickly became quite a contest, with me trying to keep the two of us in touch with reality and with her casting me in fantasies in which I was Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are-possible" (517). He not only recognizes that she has cast him in the role of the black savage, but he also recognizes that she has retained his identity as a member of the Brotherhood, making him simultaneously safe and dangerous in her mind. Yet despite the narrator's recognition of the situation, he does not have a strong response; he is only "confounded and amused," not angry, or even simply frustrated, with the situation.

However, as the encounter progresses, Sybil seems to push the Invisible Man to a moment of self reflection and heightened awareness about his own response; he says,

I couldn't deliver and I couldn't be angry either. I thought of lecturing her on the respect due to one's bedmate in our society, but I no longer deluded myself that I knew either the society or where I fitted into it. Besides, I thought, she thinks you're an entertainer. That's something else they're taught (520-1).

At this point, the narrator seems to recognize the way in which his relationship with Sybil, and women in general, is emblematic of his place within American society as a black man. She, like the rest of white society, expects him to “entertain” her, specifically through a performance of his primitive, bestial sexuality. While the circumstances are undoubtedly different, the narrator again finds himself in the position he was in the Battle Royal of his adolescence. The players in the exchange have changed, but the performance that he is asked to give remains very much the same. Not only that, but the Invisible Man recognizes the cycle and reproduction of this racialized and gendered culture; he does not fault Sybil because he sees her attitude as something that has been “taught” and passed down. Critically he switches from talking specifically of Sybil to using the plural pronoun “they,” suggesting again that his relationship with Sybil speaks for a larger social condition.

From his encounter with Sybil, the Invisible Man comes face to face with the way in which he is trapped within the Brotherhood and American society through his inability to enact any sort of masculine power. While the narrator does not actually fulfill Sybil's rape fantasy, he tricks her into thinking that he did, avoiding confrontation. In his analysis of this moment, Douglas Steward explains, “Still, his adoption of the role to which he has been called is not a testament to his masculinity. On the contrary, as [Frederick] Radford contends, the narrator's interpellation into this role means that he is ‘effectively emasculated as a sexual individual by total absorption into the white myth’” (529). By trying to appease Sybil in a performance of

extreme, primitive masculinity, the narrator is instead emasculated because of his submission to the “white myth,” the projections of white society. In this way, the narrator’s interactions with women throughout the novel are significant because of the way in which they allow the “white myth” to play out and the way in which they demonstrate its far reaching affects in terms of gender and race relations. Steward goes on to explain that Sybil puts the Invisible Man into a “no win” situation; according to Steward, “Trapped in a perceived choice between (1) being socially castrated like a woman or a homosexual and (2) adhering to the brutishly virile black male, the invisible man chooses to mime the stereotype, only to find that there really *was* no choice; he is castrated either way” (532). In this way, the “white myth” at first seems to ensnare him with no escape. No matter in what way he appeases Sybil, he is unable to exert his own identity and this realization frames his entrance into the riot.

While Sybil is the last woman that the Invisible Man has a significant interaction with, he does encounter femininity once more before journeying underground. As he moves through the riot, he recalls,

Ahead of me the body hung, white, naked, and horribly feminine from a lamppost... They were mannequins— “Dummies!” I said aloud. Hairless, bald, and sterilely feminine. And I recalled the boys in blonde wigs, expecting the relief of laughter, but suddenly was more devastated by the humor than by the horror. But are they unreal, I thought; *are* they? What if one, even *one* is real— is... Sybil? I hugged my brief case, backing away, and ran... (556).

He sees the white bodies of mannequins, which have been lynched, hung from the lamppost. The sight is disturbing on a number of levels; remembering Douglass’s commentary on the lynching of black men, it is at once a frightening reversal of bodies and races. The blonde hair of the mannequins, reminiscent of the defining feature of the magnificent blonde, has been ripped off, leaving the fake bodies “hairless, bald, and sterilely feminine.” In one sense, the absence of hair on these superficial bodies is a literal attempt to ungender them, reducing them to “sterile,”

genderless flesh. Their lack of true gender is absolutely tied to the Invisible Man's impression that they are "unreal." Implicit in the act of ungendering is the act of objectifying; leaving the narrator with the anxiety that even one might be real. This moment seems to suggest the possibility for the ungendering of the white female body as an act of retribution for the damages done to the black gendered body. The fact that the Invisible Man fears that one of the bodies could belong to Sybil enhances this idea, for it is his experience with Sybil that brings the narrator to realize the broad social implications of race and gender for both white and black society. In seeing the bodies of the mannequins, the Invisible Man realizes the possible cycle of racial ungendering that could happen within society.

The ending of *Invisible Man* is literally both the ending and the beginning of the novel. While after the riot the Invisible Man retreats underground, he says he is ready to "shake off the old skin and come up for breath" (580). In this richly suggestive line, the narrator not only expresses his plan to re-enter the world, but he also implies that his re-entrance will be accompanied by a reimagining of his own "skin," his race and flesh. As Ellison's novel illustrates, the conception of race is inextricable from that of gender, so a reimagining of one must include the other. The narrator's own identity has been transformed throughout *Invisible Man*, from the naïve adolescent of the Battle Royal to the critical and questioning young man who is "more devastated by the humor than by the horror" in the scene of the mannequins (556). Yet the extent of his transformation is perhaps most realized in the Invisible Man's enigmatic last line, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581). The narrator addresses the reader, pulling him or her, regardless of race or gender, into the narrator's struggles one final time. In this way, the Invisible Man's ultimate realization, that which allows him to begin to come out of hibernation, is not one specifically about blackness or masculinity, but one

about all races and genders. He realizes that his experience speaks for a larger cycle of social inequality within our culture that extends beyond boundaries of race and gender.

Ultimately, the struggles of the Invisible Man in his encounters with women throughout Ralph Ellison's novel call for the rethinking of African American gender identities. Hortense Spillers also asks for such a critical re-analysis of gender roles, claiming that "undressing these confections of meaning, as they appear under the rule of dominance, would restore, as figurative possibility, not only Power to the Female (for Maternity), but also Power to the Male (for Paternity)" (66). Just as any discussion of black society must also consider white society, any discussion of femininity must also consider masculinity. Ralph Ellison recognizes this relationship in the scheme of gender and race when he writes, "For out of the counterfeit of the black American's identity there arises a profound doubt in the white man's mind as to the authenticity of his own image of himself" ("Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, 107). The gendered projections of white society, dating back to American slavery, hold heavy implications for African American gender and culture, as is played out in *Invisible Man*. Yet the "pale gaze" of these projections also holds implications regarding white gender roles in American society. Ellison's comment therefore speaks to the mutually dependent relationship of racial gendering. In order to finally begin to "undress" the layers of meaning and stereotypes surrounding gender and race in American culture, we must look outside of a singular race or gender and recognize the complex interconnections at play within our society.

Notes

ⁱ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 519. This quote is also used in James Smethurst's essay entitled "'Something Warmly, Infuriatingly Feminine': Gender, Sexuality, and the Work of Ralph Ellison," which I discovered after completing my essay.

ⁱⁱ About ten years after Ellison published *Invisible Man*, he published a short story entitled "Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar." This story was in fact a chapter that had been edited out of the novel where Mary is featured prominently as a nurse at the Liberty Paints Factory Hospital, who aids in the Invisible Man's escape. Some critics have argued that this story gives more agency and power to Mary's character, yet I believe that through comments such as, "Lord, here I is feeding another baby," this story does not significantly challenge Mary's portrayal in the novel (249). Ellison made the clear choice not to include the episode in the final version of the novel so it is important not to overly read into this secondary text; however, the way in which it reinforces the novel's depiction of Mary, while being credited as giving her exceptional agency, demonstrates the way in which Mary's character is just as complex in the novel, though perhaps in a more subtle way.

ⁱⁱⁱ In his rebellion from the Brotherhood, Tod Clifton, the other young black brother, resorts to performing with a Sambo doll on the streets of New York City. In this action, he goes from a performance of "whiteness" in the Brotherhood, to a performance of blackness, both of which are performances for a working class audience. The Invisible Man expresses his own mixed emotions regarding the performance when he says he "struggled between the desire to join in the laughter and to leap upon it with both feet" (432).

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