“It Makes You Feel You Ain’t a Man”: Masculinity and the Black Intellectual in Ellison’s \textit{Invisible Man} \\
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Critics have accused Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* of asserting a black masculinity that erases the claims of other genders and sexualities to the same visibility that the text laments is unavailable to black men. Women are notably absent from the novel, and where they appear, Ellison’s narrator, the Invisible Man himself, often views women instrumentally and according to common archetypes of racialized femininity, such as the white woman as the forbidden fruit or the black female as a nurse or mammy figure. Female characters are never the object of sustained individual inquiry. Consequently, certain feminist critics, such as Carolyn Sylvander in 1975 and Ann Stanford in 1993 have charged that Ellison’s text renders women invisible and fails to articulate their claims to social recognition. Similarly, Daniel Kim asserts that when Ellison’s narrator encounters a male erotic gaze, such as in the Battle Royal scene, he rejects it with a vehemence that emasculates homosexuality. In fact, however, *Invisible Man* undertakes a critical examination gender in its narration of the protagonist’s development of his individual sense of manhood among other constructions inculcated by various communities. When the narrator tells his story, he figures himself as a black intellectual, driven by his education and his desire to take responsibility for the leadership of black Americans, which cooperates and competes with his urge to realize a universal or cosmopolitan humanity and to achieve a dignity. These competing impulses, all a part of the self-awareness achieved in narration, cause the narrator to vacillate between several communities. The black intellectual project incorporates a synthesis and mediation between of the communities that cannot embrace the whole of the intellectual. The narrator finds that no community embraces his full individual identity, though many realize parts and thus appeal to him in different ways. Black intellectualism itself is not so much a category as a characteristic indeterminacy. In this process of distinguishing his individual identity in light of the aspects realized and distorted in various communities, Ellison’s narrator draws the line
between himself as a man and his community largely in light of the masculinity he wishes to perform. The full narration of his black intellectual odyssey reveals a developing sense of his own masculinity as relates to the possibilities and demands of his shifting communities. He resists efforts on the part of many others to graft certain gender roles onto him. Pseudo-scientific efforts have historically described and categorized black gender as both effeminate and hypersexualized. Various communities attempt to tame, remove, experiment with, and exploit the narrator’s assertiveness, his creative potential (both ideological and otherwise), and his sexuality. As he becomes aware of them, he resists these efforts to appropriate his black masculinity. Through his speeches and his narration, the narrator critically traces a development in his sense of self, including his gender; he mindfully examines his individual manhood as relates to the masculinities assigned to him by his communities. I will use John S. Wright’s framing of the development of the narrator’s leadership and intellectual project to show that the narrator’s recounting of his experience, stage by stage, creates a full yet developing sense of identity, which distinguishes him as both a leader and an individual man. *Invisible Man* does not ignore the claims of gender; in fact, it resists the notion that one’s gender ought to be relegated to how groups and social science define it and incorporates that resistance into intellectual self-definition. The narrator’s sense of his masculinity develops as part of the intellectual process of black intellectual leadership he undertakes in these processes of self-creation.

Many feminist critics do not see *Invisible Man*’s critical inquiry into gender. Carolyn Sylvander writes “While Ellison uses the artist’s skill to depict and explore and evaluate the humanity of Black men, to thereby confute the effects of stereotyping, he remains blind to the humanity of his women characters” (Sylvander, 77). Stanford, often citing Sylvander, says that “the very premise of the novel’s universality ignores the problematic of gender, and thus
perpetuates the invisibility it seeks to undo” (Stanford, 20). Both critics misunderstand Ellison’s focus and message. A text can be guilty of some reinscription of what it resists. This may occur in the mere articulation of the force being resisted, here the typification of gender. But any examination that does not pose the force it resists as a straw-man will have to counter the dangerous possibilities it opens in this articulation with a recoverable discourse of resistance. Sylvander and Stanford do not see how the narrative of the Invisible Man is an expression of his interior development as he becomes more and more self-conscious. The narrative is not presented as a theory of how one ought to treat others, but is rather an examination of self within groups of others, and an attempt to master one’s various experiences. In his self-conscious narration, the narrator looks at others as experiences whose meaning lies in their relationship with his development. This means that the narration does not fully allow others to speak and provide their own perspective, including female characters. However, the narrative does not make a science of defining femininity, be it black or white femininity, as others do to his black masculinity. The stereotypes of gender are not given as fact and stereotype is not the only source of gender identity present. Where he looks at women as forbidden fruit, the narrative leads the reader to believe that this perspective is the result of a coercive culture, not the conclusion of a studied expression of gender. The only sustained study of gender is the narrator’s own, and regarding this, there is evidence that the narrator’s manhood is a critical question for him throughout the text.

The Invisible Man eventually demonstrates a desire to assert a particular self-determined black masculinity in opposition to the preponderance of others who try submit him to their own fantasies or constructions of black masculinity. Daniel Kim notes that in Ellison’s nonfiction book *Shadow and Act*, Ellison recalls studying sociologist Robert E. Park, in college, who wrote
that Negroes represented the “lady of the races” (Kim, 310). The textbook said of the Negro “He is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His metier is expression rather than action,” (Park in Kim, 310). Park says that black men were more disposed to art and enjoyment than to analysis and action. This does the twin damage of falsely essentializing both blackness and gender in one motion, setting up a twin invisibility against which *Invisible Man* works to restore complexity. Sociology, even when practiced by those in sympathy with blacks in America, attempted to make a science of discrimination and prove the intellectual inferiority of blacks by deploying systematized assumptions as facts. This realization casts some light on “science” as it emerges in *Invisible Man*, where it is practiced in the paint factory, the hospital, and among the Brotherhood’s theorists. The passage of Robert Park’s that Ellison cites describes blacks as “genial, sunny, and social” with an “attachment to external, physical things” and “a disposition for expression rather than enterprise and action” (Kim, 310). It also says that, unlike other races, the black man is not disposed to intellectualism or idealism, introspection, or pioneering like other races – but instead is only a happy artist, making him a lady among the races. Ellison responded by saying that he had “no intention of being bound” (Kim, 310) by such a definition of his relationship to literature. *Invisible Man* is an examination of race and individuality, a picture of unblinking and critical introspective activity, and a melding of artistic liberty and intellectual rigor. The narrator partakes in the novel’s refutation of Park’s thesis by creating a theory of self-understanding while undertaking a critical examination of his life path. Through his study, this narrator asserts a controlled but present masculinity, which Kim finds homophobic in its refusal, to the point of demonizing the idea of a feminine role. Kim reads in *Invisible Man*, “an unbridled masculine anger at black feminization” that upholds – or at least “does not quarrel with” – a subordinate view of femininity and a “loathing for a form of masculine subjectivity”
that is comparable to stereotypical femininity (325). Kim’s concern is overly sensitive and fails to note the consistent resistance to many attempts to determine his gender and sexuality as feminine, hypersexual, savage, or mechanical. The gendering forces he experiences are constant, but not consistent, therefore it is not one form of gender he resists, but all constraints, misreadings, and instrumental overreadings imposed on his masculinity.

Inherent in the racial categories that critics acknowledge *Invisible Man* resists, are gendered and sexual assumptions. Siobhan B. Somerville describes further the racial and gendered categorization against which Ellison sets his narrator. Somerville emphasizes the intersection of racial and sexual classification at the end of the nineteenth to the start of the twentieth centuries in America. She says that this moment in U.S. history was obsessed with classifying abnormal bodies, which is to say any body that was not white, male, and heterosexual, and diagnosing their difference scientifically. Somerville notes that there is an inherent instability to cultural categories of difference, making it not only possible but prudent to view the forces that mark and constrain an individual on the basis of race as also being implicated in building a problematic organization of gender and sexuality. Ellison would be sympathetic to Somerville’s line of inquiry, which critiques the cultural systemization of bodies into categories of normative and non-normative. She writes “That the physical body offers transparent evidence of its history, identity and behavior is a deeply held cultural fiction in the United States…During the nineteenth century, human anatomy was treated as a legible text, over which various fields of science, including the nascent field of sexology, competed for authority as literate readers and interpreters of its meaning” (Somerville, 9). Somerville identifies an effective historical belief in American culture that one’s body, in its race and sex, reveals
something deeper about the person’s identity. It fell to medical and sexological literature to do the work of defining the truths about bodies (Somerville, 16).

Studies like comparative anatomy examined parts of the body assuming that they were the most meaningfully readable indicator of a person’s true nature, rather than the person’s speech, behavior, and action. Somerville quotes comparative anatomist Carl Vogt, for instance, as saying “the grown-up Negro partakes, as regards his intellectual faculties, of the nature of the child, the female, and the senile white,” (24) assuming the negro to be a black man and the child, female and senile white to be lesser white incarnations of the white man. Thus, scientific determinism assumes black intellectual activity to be inherently female, which mirrors the sociological perspective that Kim cites as being foundational to Ellison’s enterprise. Also, scientific assertions concerning racial difference were articulated by describing the black body’s gender as abnormal, specifically its sexuality (26). Often, this sexual abnormality was described as black males and females showing less sexual difference than their white counterparts, again posing the black male as emasculated (27). Somerville says that, starting with the “New Negro” movement of the 1920s, African American literature began resisting this categorization that posed black race as being indicative of a certain gender and sexual identity: “African Americans found in fiction an important medium for instantiating political agency and for contesting dominant cultural stereotypes… Because existing cultural stereotypes of African Americans were largely sexualized, the new discourse of sexual pathology was intertwined with these racialized images. To varying degrees, these authors were able to resist, contest, and appropriate these dominant discourses” (Somerville, 11). Thus, we see in the opening of Invisible Man, the narrator reflecting on how, on his black intellectual journey he eagerly and yet shamefully
participated in certain gendered performances, building a narrative about participation and difference in his communities that will frequently center around negotiations of masculinity.

The black intellectual finds himself or herself in a precarious position between white and black American culture, where both cultures make claims on his responsibility and begrudge his otherness. W.E.B. Du Bois was among the most successful black thinkers to explain the position of an educated black man torn by his strangeness in two communities: “He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world” (Du Bois, 3). The communicative legwork of creating an external synthesis, making way for black culture in American culture, poses a daunting challenge to be undertaken by the educated black leader or artisan: the intellectual. Historically, Du Bois says of this figure, “The would-be black savant was confronted by the paradox that the knowledge his people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge which would teach the white world… was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people” (Du Bois, 4). Du Bois believed that it was the responsibility of the black intellectual to communicate the black condition to the white American intelligentsia. He notes in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* that “between these two worlds… there is almost no community of intellectual life or point of transference where the thoughts and feelings of one race can come into direct contact and sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of the other” (134). The black intellectual figure would maintain this crucial, complicated, and lonely position of responsibility between black and white cultures, finding articulation in Ellison’s work more than fifty years later.
Harold Cruse gives insight into what form and function Cruse understood black intellectualism to continue to take in his 1967 study, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Cruse cites sociologist Milton M. Gordon who says that in an America marked by continuing stratification according to ethnic groups, the intellectual and artistic class poses an alternative “compartment” where men and women of different cultural backgrounds join “because of an overriding common interest in ideas, the creative arts, and mutual professional concerns” (Gordon in Cruse, 9). Cruse points out two corollaries to this seemingly harmonious arrangement, however: “While the Negro intellectual is not fully integrated into the intellectual class stratum, his is [also], in the main, socially detached from his own Negro ethnic world” (Cruse, 9). Cruse understands the black intellectual, then, to be neither fully welcomed into the white intellectual sphere nor a part of his own cultural background. The intellectual makes himself an individual, creating his own way, playing to two skeptical audiences. Cruse focuses his study on black intellectualism on how black intellectuals fare as “spokesmen on behalf of their ethnic group, the Negro masses” (10). He wonders how their analysis of the struggles of the black people can be authentic, given their separation, and also how “their creative output” ought to be evaluated. Many black critics throughout the twentieth century have felt that black creativity ought to be mostly instrumental for communicating the plight of black America as a whole, rather than concerned with aesthetic excellence. *Invisible Man* approaches responsibility towards community through marking out the identity of an individual, the protagonist, as he finds his way through a maze of demands and representations, experimenting towards a manhood that fits his own developing concept of himself and his responsibilities.

While criticizing Cruse for the historical contingency of his positions, Jerry Gafio Watts acknowledges the necessary individualism of the black intellectual, outside any established
group or way of being. Following a more grounded study of black intellectualism – Watts examines, for instance, the resources and audiences available to black scholars and artists – Watts’s conclusion on the indeterminate social place of the black intellectual mirrors the indeterminacy expressed by Cruse and Du Bois:

The condition of being simultaneously denied access to the main-stream (read white-controlled) intellectual resources and critical audiences while being a member of an ethnic group that did not have the resources and/or educational attainment sufficient to sustain serious traditional intellectual activity placed traditional black intellectuals [as contrasted with those of the black nationalist movements] in a unique vice. I refer to this precarious betwixt-between social status as social marginality. For most of the twentieth century black traditional intellectuals have been socially marginal to the white and black communities. (15)

Again, black intellectuals sit on the boundary between leadership of a downtrodden people and the chorus of cosmopolitan culture and intellectual voices. They must either invent ways of carrying out their intellectual work independent of these communities that cannot embrace their full self-realization or compromise themselves in order to be embraced. Some will use what Watts refers to as “social marginality facilitators,” existing but inadequate mechanisms for gaining resources or an audience or a space to do their cultural work. Watts lists the Communist Party USA and expatriation as two possibilities of such facilitators; the Brotherhood in Invisible Man seems to resemble the Communist Party USA. But Ellison seems to say that in the course of exploring various ways of being and being heard, the black intellectual will find that even these facilitators are not sufficient to create the sort of unique identity that he or she seeks.

Ellison’s response to this “crisis,” in his fiction and his non-fiction, is an insistence on creative individualism. Pamela Jensen writes “As many commentators have pointed out, Ellison’s overriding theme is the unity of all human experience and the stubborn intransigence of individuality; no human being – unless is he is [sic], like the narrator of Invisible Man at the beginning of his journey, invisible to himself – is reducible to the conditions or the names
imposed on him, whether by segregationists or by sociologists” (Jensen, 143). Ellison rejects the notion that one’s background keeps one from being an independent individual, even as one embraces his own cultural and regional particularity. Jensen exaggerates the radical nature of Ellison’s undeniable emphasis on the individual’s separation from group, but Ellison does establish the possibility of a man who borrows from cultures and arranges his principles as he sees fit to create himself. What is more, Jensen reads Ellison’s nonfiction as saying that the meeting of two cultures produces a “clash of group against group” (138-139) and this clash produces a new and vibrant culture. For Ellison, cultural meeting can be a site of creation.

Ellison’s work carries the cultural inheritance of jazz and Brer Rabbit alongside the writings of Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and hero legends. Ellison says that an individual in democratic society ought to communicate his principles to the world, “creating endless series of man-made or man-imagined positives. By so doing, they nudge us toward that state of human rectitude for which, ideally, we strive” (Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, 18). Thus, Ellison posits that an individual should be motivated by his principles, which can come from his background associations, not to accept the limits of his condition, but to find a creativity that embraces his humanity and individuality. The narrator undertakes such a positive creation by narrating his story and therein exploring his individuality.

A part of the identity the narrator describes shows a disposition towards a feeling of common humanity that transcends the particular demands of a community, though those outlets, the marginality facilitators that help him approach this feeling, turn out to have demands of their own. Paradoxically, a part of what marks the narrator as an independent individual within Harlem is his desire to realize a more universal humanity. The paradox is in his being unique (within the community) in his desire to not be particular (as part of the community). Meanwhile,
his narration shows a contradictory desire to be recognized in his particular gender and background. This is not problematic because the honest narration of an individual’s desires is bound to expose competing contradictory yet coexisting desires like these, and indeed, such seems to be the mark of the black intellectual.

The Invisible Man expresses his desire to be more than simply a member of a community in his first appearance as a speaker for the Brotherhood. He says it is an odd feeling, “something that I’m sure I’d never experience anywhere else in the world” (345). In establishing a connection with his audience, an audience of mixed race attending a rally of the revolutionary group, the Brotherhood, Ellison’s narrator feels an intermingling of his desires to lead, to be welcome, and to live a life of ideals in the unique moment of speaking for that crowd. He speaks for the crowd, which is an ideological community, rather than a community of particularities of background. The fact of the crowd’s integration is significant to the narrator, as evidenced by his acknowledgement of its “black and white eyes” (345) and his insistence that they are an “uncommon people” (342). Ellison’s wordplay suggests not only that they are strange but also that they do not share a common background, not only that the eyes are black retinas against the white ball of the eye but that these eyes are shared by black and white members of the narrator’s audience. In this moment, of speaking to and for such a people, the narrator says he feels like he has suddenly “become more human” (346):

Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human. I feel able to get things done! I feel that I can see sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history and in it I can hear the footsteps of militant fraternity…I feel that here, after a long and desperate and uncommonly blind journey, I have come home… Home! With your eyes upon me I feel that I’ve found my true family! My true people! My true country! I am a new citizen of the country of your vision, a native of your fraternal land. (346)
This feeling of humanity is a shared identification across boundaries, where suddenly the narrator has found an area in which he does not feel limited in speaking for himself. Whereas before he was “un-commonly blind,” (343) his speaking to a shared interest, to issues of common humanity, helps him to see the others with him. A lack of sight then, a vital trope in *Invisible Man*, lies in assuming that there is nothing common in a relationship. Here, the fraternity comes not from a lack of sight, but from a realization of a lack of boundaries; the audience is blurred and faceless, but present and communicative. Also of note, caught up in a temporary feeling of independence from boundaries, the narrator seems mistaken in his assumption that he was “born a man.” As his narrative shows, his manhood is frequently in question, and cannot be assumed a given. An investigation of his continued experience in the Brotherhood and beyond leads to the realization that manhood is not inherent but constructed. He is given his manhood by others throughout much of the text, until he is gradually able to construct his own manhood through his narrative. In this speech, though, the narrator establishes a desire to be more than a particularized man – a part of a wider humanity. He sees the Brotherhood as a potential vehicle for this desire, and while the Brotherhood fails him, this desire is a real part of the narrator that his narrative must recognize: “As a Brotherhood spokesman I would represent not only my own group but one that was much larger. The audience was mixed, their claims broader than race” (353). As he continues on this transcendent trajectory, the narrator experiences the draw of various aspects of his identity that are imbedded in the particularities of his background. Nevertheless, Ellison’s narrator is distinguished by his concern with the common and human, and its appeal manifests in his time with the Brotherhood.

Even as Ellison’s narrator experiences the appeal of a universalizing cosmopolitan discourse, he also wants to maintain control of his own individual masculinity. The Invisible
Man engages in a near constant struggle to escape and exceed the roles and masculinities others attempt to graft onto him. This struggle culminates in a dream after the narrator dives underground during the race riot at the conclusion of his story. The dream allows the narrator to express and explore sensations he derives from reality that cannot be plausibly articulated as part of his waking experience. The narrator dreams that all the people who had “run him” hold him captive on the shore of a river. There they castrate him and throw his male parts onto a bridge spanning the river. They ask him “How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” (569) implying that the masculinity the Invisible Man had developed was unreal and that he had no real manhood of his own to assert. The narrator counters that “it’s not invisible,” that “there hang not only my generations wasting upon the water… But your sun… And your moon… Your world” (570). The Invisible Man suggests that this action by those he has met in his journey encapsulates their obsession made plain at last: that they have been obsessed with his masculinity or with his potential, his seed. “There’s your universe,” he says of his genitalia “and that drip-drop upon the water you hear is all the history you’ve made, all you’re going to make” (570). The narrator points out that stealing away his masculinity has been the all-consuming purpose of the many who have delayed and undercut his self-actualization, where masculinity is tied with creation, with seed, with the potential to make. His dream ends in fright as the bridge, now endowed with his masculinity, seems to walk away “striding like a robot, an iron man” (570). The narrator has already alluded to the mechanized nature of his world during another dreamlike scene of potential castration at the factory hospital. The departure of the bridge suggests that the narrator’s struggle continues as the machine of his world moves on with his masculinity held hostage and the rest of him left behind. The narrator’s evolution vacillates in this way between
ventures into the world beyond his own racial boundaries and subsequent attempts to recoup his particular masculinity.

Where some readers see the masculinity the narrator projects towards women in *Invisible Man* as failing to heed gender’s call for visibility, Albertha Sistrunk-Krakue takes a rehabilitative view towards the female characters of *Invisible Man*. If we go through several of the noteworthy female characters of the novel, we can see how the narration does not marginalize the issue of gender. Instead, female characters are used as sites where the narrator can examine the gender roles he is assigned and the sort of gender he prefers to perform, himself. The first female the narrator encounters is the white dancer at the Battle Royal, who leads the narrator to recognize a commonality in their fates as sexual objects for the white male gaze. The narrator resents being in such a feminized position, and moves between contradictory but authentic feelings of wanting to destroy the woman and wanting to protect her, both feelings emerging from the mere fact of their shared experience. In the Brotherhood, the narrator encounters several other white women, and his relation to them changes. At first, he is intimidated by Jack’s mistress, Edna, who leads him to recognize the access he has through the Brotherhood to sexual relations with white women when she dances with him. He maintains respect for her, and after he decides to bring down the Brotherhood through strategic passivity, he decides not to attempt to seduce her into giving him information, concluding that “she was too sophisticated and erudite to be used” (Sistrunk-Krakue), showing that female characters too can resist categorical instrumentality. Instead, he seduces Sybil, but the effectiveness of his seduction frightens him, and he breaks off his plan and chooses not to have sex with Sybil. Sybil sees the narrator and other black men as “‘brute bucks,’ sexual entertainers, and ‘super’ bedfellows” (Sistrunk-Krakue). She takes the narrator to her bed in an effort to convince him to act out a fantasy of hers of being raped by a
black man. The Invisible Man begins to comply with this fantasy, but becomes disgusted with his complicity in her hypersexualization of his image. The dignity of his own image of his masculinity is so effective as keep him from complying with Sybil’s demands of his masculinity, even as it hinders his plan for overthrowing the Brotherhood. Earlier, the Invisible Man takes another white woman as a sexual partner. She too seems not to appreciate his particularity outside her understanding of him as a black man. She says she appreciates how he speaks with a “throbbing vitality”: It’s so powerful, so – so primitive… Yes, primitive; no one has told you, Brother, that at times you have tom-toms beating in your voice?” (Invisible Man, 413). The Invisible Man realizes the effect that he has; she does not see him, but a fantasy of her own creation. At this point, though, he has not embraced his particularity and potential for free creation so much that he rejects her advances. Rather, he yields to “biological… desire” (416), which is too an undeniable aspect of his masculinity. Thus, white women make demands of his masculinity to serve their purposes, but they themselves do not conform to uniform types. Moreover, they lead the narrator to evaluate the masculinity and sexuality he wishes to perform, prompting an awareness that gender need not be confined to the assumptions of others.

Of the black women of the novel, none are more fascinating than Mary Rambo, the narrator’s adopted mother figure who plucks him out of the streets of Harlem and gives him a place to stay. Sylvander objects to Mary’s depiction, finding her to be inhuman: “Introduced as a saint, then lied to and abandoned as fallen angel, Mary is not a person in the book” (Sylvander, 78-79). Sylvander is right to compare her to the Virgin Mary, seemingly becoming a mother without any sexual inclination. However, the supposedly saintly Mary is not without fault. Besides her interest in the lottery, Mary occupies a burdened place in the narrator’s mind because she calls on him to do “something that’s a credit to the race,” (255) a demand that she says she
makes of him because of his youth and of his being from the south. This articulates the responsibility the narrator already feels as a black intellectual, but also utilizes his particularity for the benefit of a community he does not feel fully able to integrate with or represent. She makes him answerable to the obligation of a son to a mother, a relationship that finds an echo when the narrator recalls his mother before speaking in the eviction scene: “why did I, standing in the crowd, see like a vision my mother hanging wash on a cold windy day…” (Invisible Man, 273). This memory is stirred by the sight of an old black couple’s belongings being tossed into the street. As he examines them, they evoke in the narrator a sense of a shared black southern past, a shared memory, connected to his origin and birth. Motherhood appears as both a personal and a shared aspect of the narrator’s experience, one that reminds him of his responsibility to the piece of himself that is shared with other blacks. Thus, the spectre of motherhood, in Mary and his mother, prompts the narrator to activity, setting off to help the Brotherhood in one instance and delivering a speech at the eviction in the other. Mary leads him to question his responsibility to his particular relationships with his origins. She reminds him that his past must be integrated into the man he develops into.

John S. Wright usefully casts Ellison’s narrator as a bildungsroman protagonist caught in a picaresque, with trials that should be rites of passage on the way to leadership instead becoming runarounds to master, to become conscious within, before asserting his independence and moving forward. This assertion often comes in distinguishing his model of manhood from the model his community demands he fulfill. Wright says that Ellison was studying heroism in the Lord Raglan tradition while writing Invisible Man and sees its influences in how Ellison’s narrator faces the various trials he undergoes (Wright, 157). He writes that Ellison’s narrator is always in a war of wills (his grandfather says as much (Invisible Man, 16)), trying to master his
current society such that he can become usefully conscious in it. With difficulty, the narrator repeatedly masters his situation in order to take up a prescribed leadership role, which he then struggles to fulfill. Eventually he sheds off the identities the community places on him and realizes his independence from that system, which I pose as his individual manhood. Wright says this moment of realization of individuality constitutes his maximum heroic insight (Wright, 158). Following a contextually prescribed path to leadership, Ellison’s narrator never manages to be seen as the leader and man he wants to be. Yet, the narrator seems primed for leadership: he is formally educated, he is politically passionate, he struggles to be philosophically self-conscious, and most importantly he wants to lead (160). His best victories in this regard are his moments of revelation at his own complex position, such as his speeches at the eviction and Clifton’s funeral. His defeats are when other forces, who are more conscious of the picaresque nature of his world, lead him to unwittingly serve them, moments where his masculinity is used instrumentally by others.

The end of the novel is not a hopelessness of failed leadership, Wright suggests, but rather a study of how individuals and groups “conceive their experience and choose (or fail to choose) ideas, techniques, and attitudes that defy whatever or whoever limits their possibilities” (167, emphasis Wright’s). The narrator reclaims himself in the end by virtue of narrating his story and turning it into a study of leadership, including a confrontation with various archetypes of black manhood and “marginality facilitators,” to borrow Watts’s concept. The development of defiance and definition against the limits of possibility occurs for Ellison’s narrator in working through his particular manhood. Gender provides a representative realm for self-definition, in which it is easier to express the difference between the image the protagonist wishes to express and what observers see. With gender, the difference is striking, identifiable, and cuts to
something fundamental, though not fixed, in identity. Wright conceives of leadership as being implicated in this creative process that evolves with experience, providing a link between the narrator’s manhood and his leadership: “At its most lifegiving, leadership entails a creatively improvised assertion of the leader’s whole self within and against group will; and at its most eviscerating, it merely camouflages the self’s public retreat into sanctioned dissimulation” (164). When the narrator narrates, he is able to achieve a sense of his manhood within and against the group wills that offer alternative standards of masculinity. He builds a sense of himself that is not constrained by any one context and its definitions and expectations, but reaches across experience and the many aspects of identity, liberating his manhood and making it his own. Wright holds to a “gestalt” theory of leadership, where a leader creatively integrates disparate elements of experience into an organic and effective whole. The leader is necessarily, then, simultaneously an artist, a self-narrator, and a conscious creator and reviser of his own identity: an intellectual.

The artist and the leader are joined, more so than even Wright admits. Wright finds that the narrator is at his best when he is a blues-master like Trueblood. The narrator rejects this model when he meets Trueblood, the sharecropper who accidentally rapes his daughter while he is caught in a mystic dream, but he redeems the Trueblood model in assembling the narration, as will be discussed later. The narrator achieves such transcendence during Clifton’s funeral, or in his speech at the eviction in Harlem, or when reflecting on a song at church during college, all of which take up the question of manhood or gender at some point (178). The narrator is a most compelling leader when he is in free self-expression, artfully being himself, discovering himself, and expressing himself and his boundaries and lack thereof as a human and as a man. This is why the Brotherhood recognizes, three times, the potential and power of the narrator’s speeches:
at the eviction, at the Brotherhood rally, and at Clifton’s funeral. These speeches are not calculated acts of mastery, but moments of pouring himself out, narrating the whole of himself, raw and unplanned. Narrating also serves as artistry, which is why Wright is correct to call it “an act of conscious leadership in which one man’s will to selfhood brings to comic and tragic clarity his and his reader-followers’ common property in the buggy, jiving, blue-black rites of man” (185). Important here is that Wright positions the narrator’s trials as rites of manhood, as if they were tests that demand a certain masculine output out of him, as defined by the community and not the individual. In putting his experience into narrative form, while still continuing to care for the world and prepare for re-entry into it, the narrator accomplishes real intellectual work: examining his encounters, becoming conscious of its successes and failings, and integrating his experience into a more complete and effective identity with which to retake the will to leadership. Vitally, this process must include an examination of his limits, as these are a part of both realizing the self and preparing for leadership. To examine one’s limits is to examine one’s particularity, and in this case to produce a sense of one’s masculinity, as determined by the Invisible Man’s tragic but revealing rites of passage to manhood.

The Invisible Man’s intellectualism, leadership, and masculinity seem to be on trial from the opening of his story in the Battle Royal scene. The white superintendent of the narrator’s southern black school invites the narrator to give his graduation speech concerning humility as the essence of progress for the American black community at a smoker meeting of the town’s white elite: “It was a triumph for our whole community” (Invisible Man, 17). The narrator is somewhat concerned at being pressed into service as a part of a blindfolded boxing match, not out of fear for the danger to which he is being submitted or outrage at the spectacle, but because “I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech. In those pre-
invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington” (18). Wright compares the speech the narrator delivers to Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise Address. The narrator at this point is uncreative and does not confront his oppressive condition. Rather, he tries to master the situation according to its rules. He has not discovered that the spokesperson role that the town has offered him serves the white elites better than it serves him and his. At the end, the superintendent congratulates him, saying “He makes a good speech and some day he’ll lead his people in the proper paths. And I don’t have to tell you that that is important in these days and times” (32). The superintendent explicitly encourages the narrator down a certain path and defines it as leadership: an ironic move, demanding conformity and calling it leadership. The only moment of real creativity, where the narrator follows his own impulse rather than trying to play the white townsmen’s game is when he inserts a new and unmastered term into his diligently prepared speech. As the townsmen ask him to repeat the term “social responsibility,” the narrator throws out a political term whose spectre haunts his white audience – “social equality” – shocking it to momentary anger before he disowns his creative production and thus convinces them he poses no threat. The white elites are willing to entertain his illusions of leadership as long as the narrator does not threaten to assert his individuality through reflection or creation.

The narrator’s masculinity suffers the same treatment as his impulse to leadership. His maleness is not ripped out but seized and turned to someone else’s purpose. Here, as in the case of the narrator’s speech, the narrator’s masculinity is deployed to entertain the whites present at the smoker with a display of their own mastery. While I disagree with Daniel Kim’s conclusion regarding the text’s violence towards homosexuality at large, his readings of the ways in which the audience sexually objectifies the narrator and the ways in which the narrator expresses
frustration with the feminized and homoeroticized position he occupies are valid and useful. The narrator does indeed convey shock, disgust, and even hatred regarding the way others see his gender at various points. But whereas Kim concludes that this expression does violence to femininity and homosexuality alike, I read it as an authentic resistance within the moment to a categorization that does not fit his own sense of his masculinity. As other characters continue to misread the narrator’s masculinity for their own purposes, his narrative becomes a more comprehensive critique of categorization in general and of instrumentalizing his masculinity in particular. But this conclusion does not invalidate Kim’s useful analysis of individual scenes like the Battle Royal and the narrator’s disdain for being feminized within them.

When the narrator and his classmates enter the smoker, they are arrayed before a naked white female dancer. Kim believes the white men place the young black men between themselves and the dancer to mediate the sexual gaze that they believe does not become them. It may be that the white men want to see the effect the dancer produces on the black men, as she figures as a sort of forbidden fruit, moving them to a sexual excitement outside of their control: “Some of the boys stood with lowered heads, trembling. I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear. My teeth chattered, my skin turned to goose flesh, my knees knocked. Yet I was strongly attracted and looked in spite of myself. Had the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked” (19). While the narrator is unable to look away, some of his accidental companions are unable to look, one even fainting, others moved to erection, some begging to leave. The white audience yells at them, “some threatening us if we looked and others if we did not” (20). It is as if the event is conceived to divorce the black men from control of their masculinity; no reaction is correct and the situation is constructed to provoke a reaction. Kim believes that the narrator’s confused embarrassment is important, as it incorporates a sexual impulse, an impulse to vanish
because his sexuality is on display, and a violent impulse to destroy that which moves him thus, but also an awareness that the dancer’s condition mirrors his own: “An awareness in the narrator begins to emerge here… that he and the woman are both being made to play a similarly debasing role. Both of them have been made to offer up their bodies for the visual enjoyment of white men” (Kim, 315). All the while, some white men attempt to enforce among one another a more modest and controlled reaction. When some reach out to the dancer, “some of the others tried to stop them” (20). While the “big shots” of the white crowd lose control of themselves, their lack of control is not on display. It is as if they wish the black men to stand in place of a chaotic masculinity and wild sexuality that they are unwilling to identify with themselves. The black men rehearse the impulse that the white men attempt to repress among themselves. Placing the former before them, the latter can content themselves that they have achieved a control of their masculinity that they have robbed from others.

With this accomplished, they usher the black students to the Battle Royal, where they are made to punish one another for their uncontrolled masculinity. Blindfolded, the narrator and the other boxers all sustain great punishment. The white men watch the spectacle of black men who attempt to assert their masculinity being put in their places, both by the boxing match and the subsequent chase after coins on an electrocuted carpet. The white onlookers also experience the vicarious thrill of seeing other men do what they cannot. Kim notes that the white men allow others to carry out the impulse that they decline to associate with themselves but do not hesitate to indulge through spectatorship:

The bodies of the black boys serve two distinct, though related functions: they serve as the objects of physical violence and also as its agents. This distinction suggests that there are two vicissitudes to the scopic desire that the townspeople satisfy in these spectacles, the first deriving from the sight of a black male body convulsed [in] pain, and the second from the sight of a black male body itself inflicting that pain. (313)
Thus, the smoker serves as an opportunity for the white men to watch a spectacle that serves their impulses. The narrator’s gender and sexuality are played with as he becomes both subject of and object within the audience’s sexual gaze. The runaround his masculinity receives reflects that of his ambition to lead. He is allowed to aspire to leadership only so long as he is also made to follow the prescribed path of his white audience, making him both manipulated subject and fantastic object of the white gaze within that framing. The play with masculinity serves as a more violent and visual marker for the similar process occurring within the narrator’s aspirations for black leadership. The smoker channels both pursuits into a category that traps and nullifies his attempt at self-creation: that of performer for the white gaze.

As Ellison’s narrator recalls the events that led to his leaving college for New York, he caps off the story with advice from the veteran who speaks with him and the college trustee Norton at the Golden Day Inn as both men prepare to be exiled North: “‘Now is the time for offering fatherly advice,’ he said, ‘but I’ll have to spare you that – since I guess I’m nobody’s father except my own. Perhaps that’s the advice to give you: Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you’ll discover it. Last of all, leave the Mr. Norton’s alone, and if you don’t know what I mean, think about it.” (Invisible Man, 156). In fact, even in the college chapters of his life, the narrator encounters a few potential father-figures: in the veteran, but also in Mr. Norton, Trueblood, and Bledsoe. In these father figures, one can see the models of masculinity that define the narrator’s context. Trueblood, Norton, and Bledsoe are all figures with suspicious relationships with their progeny. The narrator never discusses his own father, making him a sort of foster child as regards models of manhood. So, the narrative concentrates on other figures that provide examples of what sorts of potential masculinity are available, each with his own approach to sexuality, assertiveness, and leadership. The narrator
follows unquestioningly some of the models these figures set out and rejects others out of hand. Thus, he is unable to approach his experience with them critically, until he narrates his encounter, at which point they become available as masculinities to consider and learn from before rejecting on the way to assembling his own gestalt of masculinity and leadership. As he recounts them, the narrator finds that these father figures are untrustworthy models, but worthy studies in masculinity, fathering, and leadership.

Critics have suggested something insidious in Mr. Norton’s position as a father. Mr. Norton says he wishes to construct “a living memorial to [his] daughter” (45) through the fruits of his investment in the school, which is to say, the narrator and his classmates: “through you and your fellow students I become, let us say, three hundred teachers, seven hundred trained mechanics, eight hundred skilled farmers, and so on” (45). Not only does Norton identify the college students as the continuing legacy of his fertility after the death of his daughter, he seems, according to many critics, to have a sexual interest in his daughter. Says Vernon Mitchell, “Norton’s hyperbolic descriptions of his daughter are fraught with sensuousness and ecstasy, subtly revealing his prurient desire” (Mitchell, 45). He cites Norton’s descriptions of his daughter, such as “She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood.” (Invisible Man, 42). Observing also that Norton describes his daughter with religious imagery, Norton would seem to have a complicated relationship with his progeny, one not in control of his filial attitudes. Mitchell further connects Norton’s strange fatherhood with that of Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, by drawing the reader’s attention to a scene in the Golden Day. There, one of the black World War I veterans greets Norton as his grandfather: “I should know my grandfather! He’s Thomas Jefferson and I’m his grandson – on the field n----- side,”
Mitchell believes that this interlude recalls that Thomas Jefferson fathered several children by his slaves: “Norton’s presence, therefore, triggers painful and unnerving recollections: images undoubtedly mirroring the assaults on Jefferson’s slaves and on Trueblood’s daughter” (Mitchell, 46). All of which frames Norton as a potential father figure for the narrator, but one with transgressive sexual implications. Still, Norton occupies a place of great respect for the narrator. The veteran observes to Norton regarding the narrator that “you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force” (95). Indeed, the narrator allows Norton to maintain a mystical father-like role; he hopes that he will make contact with him in New York and is disappointed when the letters Bledsoe gives him, ostensibly to help him secure employment, do not include a letter to Norton (150). So long as Norton remains an unquestioned father figure for the narrator, the narrator is unable to be his own father. But as he reflects on his experience with Norton in narration, he gains critical insight into their relationship, and is able to confront him anew, underground in New York, without the sense of problematic filial obligation. He concludes in regards to his past “Sometimes I feel the need to reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for all of it is part of me” (579). So, consideration of Norton as a perverse father figure he submitted to in college is revealing in his study of his changing identity over time, showing him something about the man he has been and is now.

An examination of models of masculinity and fatherhood in the pre-Harlem portion of *Invisible Man* would be incomplete without accounting for the simultaneous misfortune and mastery exhibited by Jim Trueblood. Trueblood is introduced as “a sharecropper who had brought disgrace upon the black community” (46), but who, before his offense, had been known as the “one who told the old stories with a sense of humor and a magic that made them come alive” (46). Trueblood’s story is concerned with situating his transgression against his daughter
as being outside his culpability. He describes his thought process upon waking inside his daughter, that he feels if he did not move himself, he would not have sinned: “But once a man gits hisself in a tight spot like that there ain’t much he can do. It ain’t up to him no longer. There I was, tryin’ to git away with all my might, yet having to move without movin’” (59). He draws a distinction between a sin of necessity and a sin of conscious activity. He explains his philosophy on the matter with a practiced speech, but one that belies a conscious reflection, a philosophical activity examining the boundaries of his responsibility and his control. His storytelling holds in it a lesson for the narrator on leadership as well as on humanity versus masculinity, one that the narrator closes himself off to at the time, but which he opens up for examination in retelling the tale. The boundary Trueblood’s sense of moral responsibility encounters is that of his manhood: “There was only one way I can figger that I could git out: that was with a knife. But… I knowed that was too much to pay to keep from sinnin’” (60). John Wright believes that in narrating the story of the impossibility of his situation, of being caught between unconscionable sin and his manhood, that Trueblood transcends his lack of freedom: “In his full awareness, then, of the irredeemable cost of freedom from sin and the attendant consequences of freely sinning, Trueblood gives eloquent testimony to his own tragic sense of life and to that need for transcendence he finally satisfies only in the resolving poetry of the blues” (Wright, 176). Whether or not Trueblood transcends his impossible situation in his heroic awareness of himself and the impossibilities of his situation, his story has many aspects that the narrator can learn from. However, Trueblood’s testimony should resonate with a person for whom compulsion, necessity, responsibility, and masculinity are reoccurring questions. The narrator closes himself off from Trueblood’s experience, though, having internalized the value system of his college which views Trueblood as only a drag on the respectability of the college.
Bledsoe proves a treacherous but fascinating model of leadership and manhood for Ellison’s narrator. The narrator says that A. Herbert Bledsoe, the president of the college is “the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy complexioned wife” (Invisible Man, 101). Wright concludes “it is Bledsoe’s mode of leadership as well-heeled sycophancy that claims the leader-neophyte’s attention in his college years” (Wright, 164). The narrator’s understanding of leadership is somewhat flawed at this point. He wants to matter and to be effective, believing that there are tools and trappings that one must acquire to achieve this privilege. He does not understand that in order to gain the position of a Bledsoe, he must sacrifice himself. Trudier Harris views such a sacrifice to be a symbolic castration, trading masculinity for power: “By bowing and scraping to the right white men, some black men have been able to attain a measure of status and financial security within their own communities. They have traded outward signs of masculinity in dealing with the white world for the power that accrues to them in keeping the black community in line for the local whites” (Harris, 39-40).

Bledsoe gives up responsibility to his black community and therein a piece of himself in order to keep his power. He sacrifices both his humanity and his black manhood to achieve his position: “I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am” he says, and continues “I had to wait and plan and lick around… Yes, I had to act the n-----!" (Invisible Man, 143). Harris calls attention to the transformation Bledsoe undergoes before speaking to Norton: “Dr. Bledsoe stopped and composed his angry face like a sculptor, making it a bland mask” (Invisible Man, 102). Then he affects an attitude towards Norton that Ellison calls “grandmotherly” (IM, 103) and that Harris alternately finds evokes a “eunich” (Harris, 42) and a
“mammy figure” (Harris, 43), before assuming another role for the narrator’s punishment, that of a slave driver, in Harris’s approximation. While Harris’s analysis is not parsing in its focus, it does show how the forces arrayed against the narrator attempt to cast the pursuit of leadership as a stripping away of human dignity and masculinity alike. It also shows a model of masculinity in which the subject sacrifices his masculinity in order to fit the demands and others place on him. In exile, the narrator begins his journey to asserting an individual dignity, which eventually turns, with help from the Brotherhood towards a cosmopolitan sense of humanity and then towards examination of his boundaries as a particular man.

Ellison’s narrator arrives in Harlem with a feeling of wonder at his newfound freedom, in this place where white motorists obey black policemen (Invisible Man, 159). However, he begins to feel like a stranger in the black community. He feels the people around him know and understand less than he does, a feeling which leads him to disgust. As he wakes up after being recruited by the Brotherhood, in his rented room at Mary’s residence, he suddenly finds his environment intolerable. His side itches, his heat has been turned off, and his neighbors are pounding on the steam line in an effort to get their heat turned back on. He simultaneously finds a bank of Mary’s depicting an old stereotypical image of a red-lipped grinning black man, and is “enraged by the tolerance” (319) that would lead Mary to keep such an object. The bank portrays a masculinity born of white fantasy, one at once submissive, avaricious, gluttonous, and stupidly happy. This stereotypical characterization of black manhood comes to literally weigh upon the narrator, as he carries the bank, in pieces, around with him until he falls underground and undertakes the project of narration. The juxtapositions of this stereotypical image with the neighboring Harlem residents who fail to demonstrate the dignity the narrator would like to see from his people, along with his existing feeling of discomfort with his environment, lead the
narrator to beat against the pipe himself: “‘Why don’t you act like responsible people living in the twentieth century?’ I yelled, aiming a blow at the pipe. ‘Get rid of your cottonpatch ways! Act civilized!’” (320). However, protesting in this mode does not prove effective and, what is more, it makes the narrator an indistinguishable part of the cacophony he protests. Here, though not everywhere, the narrator wishes to separate himself from the community of which circumstance makes him a part, feeling it has “no respect for the individual” (321). The dialogue that follows with Mary shows some hints at addressing the inevitability of a group having parts that are unpalatable to others of its individual constituents, from talk of filtering bitter coffee grounds – “even with the best of filters you apt to find a ground or two at the bottom of your cup” (323) – to hidden filth and cockroaches in people’s living places – “Just let a little knocking start and here it comes crawling out. All you have to do is shake things up a bit” (326). As the narrator walks to his first event with the Brotherhood, others of his community return the favor and reject him as an other who does not belong, one finding him backwards – “We keep our place clean and respectable and we don’t want you field n-----s coming up from the South and ruining things” (328) – and another believing him to be too young and revolutionary “You young New York Negroes is a blip!” (330). The narrator’s experience at this point shows a failure to connect with the people he aspires to lead. His attempts to blend into the community fail and his efforts to distinguish himself garner him animosity. None in the uneducated black community see him for what he believes himself to be, instead assigning him to categories that do not get at his composite and ungroupable identity, including his masculinity. It is little wonder, then, that he soon after embraces the common humanity of the Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood acts for Ellison’s narrator as that elite intellectual community of thinkers, activists, and leaders that DuBois, Cruse, and Watts say draws the black intellectual’s
inclination. A part of this draw is that it aspires to represent a universal human image. This aspiration frees the black intellectual’s sense of what he can do from the boundaries of his community. However, it fails to account for the particularity with which he conceives of himself, looking either to efface his individuality or to otherwise demand that he be something that he is not. In the case of the Brotherhood, Ellison’s narrator navigates between his longing to embrace something larger than himself and the longing to realize himself. On the one hand, he feels that fulfilling his role as Brotherhood spokesperson means masking his true self, that he would become their idea of the black man they want to use, rather than being free to be his own man. The Brotherhood makes him adopt a new name and the narrator feels as if it is this new name that is acting in his stead: “it went so fast and smoothly that it seemed not to happen to me but to someone who actually bore my new name… And yet I am what they think I am…” (379). This last sentence does not imply that the new identity fits the narrator’s full experience, but that it is defining his present being more than the whole of him. As he prepares to make his first speech on the Brotherhood’s behalf, the narrator feels that he needs to suppress his experience from the south:

This was a new phase, I realized, a new beginning, and I would have to take that part of myself that looked on with remote eyes and keep it always at the distance of the campus, the hospital machine, the battle royal – all now far behind. Perhaps the part of me that observed listlessly but saw all, missing nothing, was still the malicious, arguing part; the cynical, disbelieving part – the traitor self that always threatened internal discord. Whatever it was, I knew that I’d have to keep it pressed down. I had to. For if I were successful tonight, I’d be on the road to something big. No more flying apart at the seams, no more remembering forgotten pains…

The narrator realizes that he is venturing into new territory that might have seemed impossible earlier in his experience. However, he does himself wrong to bury that experience. Those betrayals that haunt him and evoke a skeptical and critical voice in the present might aid him as
he approaches the potential of new betrayal. The looming failure of the Brotherhood to allow the narrator to serve the black community, and through it himself, suggests that the narrator would do better at the outset to integrate his experience into his present whole and allow his leadership to emerge from honest reflection rather than a science that effaces the individual. The Brotherhood’s science recalls that early twentieth century obsession with types of bodies that fails to recognize distinct individuals. The Brotherhood’s science, which also studies “the women question,” is among the real force of gender violence in *Invisible Man* and the narrator comes to resist its work on him. His success at the Brotherhood rally results from his own individual reflection in the course of his speech. His success does not prevent stress on his seams or an escape from forgotten pains. In fact, his continued success leads to increased pressure on the various loyalties within him.

Ras the Exhorter, leader of a revolutionary movement in Harlem, presses on these seams, these loyalties, asking “Where you think you from, going with the white folks? …What you trying to deny by betraying black people?” (371), suggesting that the Brotherhood’s aspiration towards universality (“We are for all the common people” (279)) leads the narrator from a foundational dimension of his identity. To explain why the narrator would do such a thing, Ras challenges his masculinity, suggesting that the Brotherhood lured him with the promise of white women: “Women? Godahm mahn! Is that equality? Is that the black mahn’s freedom?” (373). Ras’s challenge is striking in that the narrator does eventually look at the white women of the Brotherhood as a means of his own empowerment, at which point his black masculinity is both highly valued and co-opted out of his control to serve their ends more than his own. But even though Ras rightly alludes to this violence against the narrator’s masculinity, he too is complicit in attempting to commandeer that masculinity for his own black nationalistic purposes: “Ras is a
mahn – no white mahn have to tell him that… So why don’t you recognize your black duty, mahn, and come jine us” (374). There is a difficult relationship between manhood (or “mahnhood”) and recognition, here. The narrator seems to look for a community that will recognize both his humanity and allow him his own particular manhood, but when they will not, as they often fail to, he shows himself capable of building his own sense of both humanity and masculinity. The problem, then, must not be that he has no humanity or manhood independent of its recognition by others. Rather, what is problematic is others’ tendency to purposely blind themselves to these aspects of the narrator or build their own conceptions on top of his. The narrator can achieve existence as his own particular incarnation of black manhood, but that manhood is frequently invisible insofar as others mask it.

When the narrator speaks at the funeral of Clifton, a fellow black member of the Harlem headquarters of the Brotherhood, he says “He thought he was a man when he was only Tod Clifton… He thought he was a man and that men were not meant to be pushed around. But it was hot downtown and he forgot his history, he forgot the time and the place. He lost his hold on reality” (457). Clifton’s wanting to be “a man” here exposes the duality of the term in standing for the human being and for a particular male. Clifton, like the narrator, wants to be both. However, the constraints of his circumstance prove to be too real and inescapable to allow him to achieve the dignity of anonymous humanity or to his realize his own individualism, which is never really seen as he never has an audience ready to hear him. When Clifton is shot after being abandoned by the Brotherhood, while attempting a “fall outside history,” he unwrites the instrumental particularity the Brotherhood writes onto him with its science and strategy, but he is not able to write his own particularity on the world. His performance with the stereotypical paper puppet is not understood, even by the narrator, as metaphorical performance, with intentional
problematic violence, of what others graft onto his form, in this case minstrelsy. The narrator’s fall at the end is more effective because he is able to narrate his own history and thus more effectively control his production as an identity.

The narrator’s first moment of taking back his own identity and producing it organically, not through the Brotherhood’s control, is when he speaks at the eviction. This event follows a series of connected revelations, where the narrator begins to embrace the whole of his own experience. First, he purchases some yams from a street vendor and becomes exhilarated at realizing the freedom to enjoy something he likes in public. The yam conjures memories of his childhood in the South, and rather than denying this experience in order to embrace the demands of the goal placed before him as he has done until this point in the novel, he finds that he is not handicapped by his past, but instead “overcome by an intense feeling of freedom… It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper… What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked” (264). By embracing his cultural past in public, the Invisible Man unites private self and public perception and is on the path to authentic leadership, taking responsibility for his particularity while turning it into a common bond with his fellows. This development comes about when, moments later, the narrator stumbles on an old couple being evicted from their apartment. Looking at their private mementoes made public, “no longer looking at what was before my eyes but inwardly-outwardly, around a corner into the dark, far-away-and-long-ago, not so much of my own memory as of remembered words, of linked verbal echoes, images, heard even when not listening at home” (273), the narrator makes a connection to a common past from which he had been running. Out of this feeling of “in common” he is able to speak to the crowd in a way that does not compromise himself for his audience’s sake.
Through that speech, and what is held in common and what is challenged, he undertakes a self-exploration, moving from speaking about “that wise leader” who chose “to do the wise thing in spite of what he felt himself” (276) to “They’re facing a gun and we’re facing it with them” (279) finding with the old couple and the crowd that dispossession after eighty-seven years “makes you feel you ain’t a man” (279). Exploring the boundaries of their common ground, from a desire for violence, to a frustration with unrewarded work, to a desire for prayer, allows them to assert a manhood that is both shared and particular and helps each discover what he shares and does not with the community. Joining the Brotherhood is an exercise in common humanity, facilitating a service to something larger than himself and a common mankind. But its theoretical austerity, its pseudo-scientific approach to action, and its lack of care do not allow for this sort of self-probing of one’s particularity, and so it does not allow the true life of exploring his own mind that the narrator desires to pursue.

*Invisible Man* is a narrative of an evolving sense of self, as figured against various communities that, though they each offer fulfillment of some aspect of the narrator, confine the narrator to a way of being that he cannot fully embrace. It is thus a narrative of black intellectualism, with its attendant tensions between the overlapping and contradictory claims of individuality, universality, and various particular groups. From the Battle Royal, to paternalistic figures at college, to Harlem, and to the Brotherhood, it chronicles how the narrator develops himself through his attempts to find a community that realizes the various aspects of his identity. John Wright helps to show that through narration of these experiences, the narrator achieves an integrated view of his whole self. In narrating his experience, the Invisible Man recoups what appeals to him and sets him apart in these communities. Integral to the sense of self he develops against the views others take of him, which figure him according to some scientific,
instrumental, or fantastic category of black masculinity, is a study of his own gender. Each environment calls on him to fulfill an expectation of black masculinity that becomes uncomfortable to the narrator, either because it feminizes him, hypersexualizes him, or robs him of his assertive dignity. The study the narrator undertakes in reflecting on his experience reveals to him how these expectations force him to distinguish his particularity from the group and prompt a will to transcendence or independence that maintains his full sense of himself as a man. Thus, in cataloguing a journey of self-production and creative leadership, *Invisible Man* manages to take a critical analysis of the construction of gender, and demonstrates a resistance to social attempts to classify and limit one’s gender. The charge that *Invisible Man* ignores, freezes, essentializes, or erases gender concerns is therefore untrue.
Works Cited


