A Heap of Signifying

Narrative, Materiality, and Reification in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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April 11, 2002

With characteristic directness and witty, pregnant intentions, Ralph Ellison's nameless protagonist begins his prologue with a simple physical fact: "I am an invisible man" (IM 3). This statement carries the import of the whole narrative that is to follow; the novel's main project is to illuminate the circumstances and implications of this invisibility. The statement is direct, unadorned, and unqualified in its description of a corporeal reality. Yet, the immediately ensuing sentences explain that what sounds like a description of the narrator's literal body is not actually to be taken as such: "No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids…That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact" (3). We are told explicitly that the simplicity of the opening statement conceals a much more complex set of social dynamics. Though invisibility is initially presented as if it were a physical state, this protagonist is not *really* invisible at all (read H. G. Wells if you want that); his state of invisibility, rather, is the medium through which he narrates his state of being in society—a state that is dynamic, understood through experience, and more ontological than physical. Indeed, even what sounds like a physical "disposition of the eyes" is actually "A matter of the construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality" (3). None of this apparently physical condition is actually to be taken literally. Thus, embedded in a simple affirmation of physical fact—"I *am* an invisible man"—is a complex set of social and mental conditions.

In this way Ellison's multi-nuanced novel seems to veer continually between real and surreal planes, between mimesis and metaphor, without ever resting fully in either one. Much of the novel stays within the bounds of conventional realistic storytelling, but even the episodes

whose content is the farthest removed from mimesis are narrated in the same matter-of-fact storytelling manner, and so the lines between these modes—mimetic and non-realistic narrative—are blurred. The most striking departures from verisimilitude are material in nature, taking the form of physical spaces and interactions with material things. These material details carry the weight of narrative itself: rather than being peripheral to the flow of narrative, as is the conventional role of material description, they seem to convey it within themselves. They are not simply metaphoric substitutions or metonymic distillations, but are material condensations that evoke a vision in the reader of the narrative content that they replace—more than metaphoric because they are not simply evocative stand-ins; more than metonymic because they are not themselves elements of narrative content that is to be conveyed.

This material condensation has two related effects. First, it calls attention to the complete disjunction between any narrative and the events which the narrative conveys. Second, Ellison's full utilization of this disjunction, which allows him to tell his narrative in material terms, conveys with particular effectiveness the play of reification between the narrator and the world around him. The narrator lives in a system that relentlessly ignores his human individuality and tries to force him into its own agenda like an object of manufacture. In order to strike back, he lays hold of the things that materialize his suppression, and finds ways to use them to his own advantage. Thus, Ellison's condensation of narration into materiality frees narrative and description from their conventional roles, and conveys vividly and tangibly the narrator's reification and struggle for agency.

Much of conventional criticism does not allow material descriptions to carry such complex implications. Naomi Schor discusses how "The detail has until very recently been viewed in the West with suspicion if not downright hostility" (Schor 3). The suppression of the

detail she explains as being the result of thought that favors theoretical principles over particular instances: “The censure of the particular is one of the enabling gestures of neo-classicism, which recycled into the modern age the classical equation of the Ideal with the absence of all particularity” (Schor 3). A discussion of the detail is “bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose ‘prosiness’ is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women” (Schor 4). Thus, the detail is devalued by a phallocentric and logocentric order, which considers it peripheral and subordinate. The more recent revalorization of the detail she attributes to poststructuralist thought that is secular, deconstructionist, democratizing, and feminist.

Narrative theory, similarly, tends to assume that description, and therefore detailed discussion of physical things, is peripheral to narrative. Marc Blanchard explores the state of description as a digression in temporally directed narrative impulse:

> In all *basic* narratives…the narrator’s primary concern is with articulating data or facts in a logical and chronological perspective. Anything that might be interpreted to convey more than data or facts; anything that could be construed as not directly related to the development of the action, such as contextual indications of time and place, of the milieu in which the characters evolve, would be considered as extraneous to the narrative itself, and routinely referred to as *description*, while the core of the narrative would be defined as *narration*. (Blanchard 17)

In Blanchard’s summary of conventional views on narrative, the goal of narration is to convey facts that operate chronologically. Description, and more generally the enterprise of bringing the reader closer to material things, are peripheral because they require a temporary suspension of the temporal locomotion that narrative theory takes to be the core of storytelling. Invisible Man has descriptions of this kind: the sweeping views of the college campus that seem connected to no particular point in the chronology; the morning in New York as the narrator sets off for

Emerson's office: "Far down the island the skyscrapers rose tall and mysterious in the thin, pastel haze. A milk truck went past" (IM 172). These descriptions do feel peripheral—but they are displaced from centrality not simply by narrative impulse, but by a more directed type of description as well.

The memorable and important descriptions in Invisible Man are those that are not separable from the flow of the narrative. The factory hospital episode may effectively be brought into dialogue with Blanchard, because its descriptions constitute its flow of action. Because the detail of the scene is so indistinct, and because the narrator is passive while events happen around him and to him, the scene *is* description:

> I was sitting in a cold, white rigid chair and a man was looking at me out of a bright third eye that glowed from the center of his forehead…A huge iridescent bubble seemed to enfold me. Gentle hands moved over me, bringing vague impressions of memory…Other voices emerged. Faces hovered above me like inscrutable fish peering myopically through a glass aquarium wall. (IM 231, 238-9)

Because it is narrated purely from the passive protagonist's first-person perspective, the scene consists only of phenomena that he observes. Its *events*, therefore, occur either when he observes and describes something happening around him, or when he discerns something new about his surroundings ("when I strained my neck I discovered that I was not lying *on* an operating table but *in* a kind of glass and nickel box" [233]). Both types of events may be narrated only through description.

More important than the events that occur within the scene is the way in which the descriptions seem to convey more than their own substance. The scene, which will be examined in more detail later, uses the setting of a medical institution and the appearance of medical procedure to suggest the narrator's loss of self at the hands of a few in control. This scene is the novel's most obvious departure from verisimilitude, when unreal details are consistently narrated

straightforwardly, without any caveats to explain that they are metaphors. However indistinct these details may be, their delivery gives us nothing that outwardly suggests that they are not a physical reality. Is our understanding of the scene to stop at the belief that the narrator is actually trapped in a glass box, with doctors floating over him muttering nonsense about his history and condition, or are we to infer that this scene actually means something else, in the same way that he is not "really" invisible? Indeed, many details in the scene demand that we interpret a significance wholly different from what the narrative conveys at its literal level: Instead of discussing medical conditions and treatments, the doctors are actually referring with clinical frigidity to the narrator's race and social identity, and to a concerted attempt to eradicate his sense of self-identity. The doctors' manipulation of the narrator, typified by this unreal hospital space, is emblematic of the much more complex position the narrator holds in some much larger society.

Thus, material metaphor is made inseparable from the flow of the narrative. Throughout Invisible Man, narrative elements—the narrator's experiences and his psychological and ontological states—are condensed and transmuted into material spaces and things in a technique I will call *material narration*. Most importantly, this technique conveys a play of reification. The narrator lives and is attempting to succeed in a world that relentlessly reifies him, forcing him through materially-narrated spaces in which he becomes trapped in a mechanical process of production. He slowly realizes that his best recourse is to seize hold of the physical things into which he is reified and use them to his advantage. These things are material condensations of the experiences in which he has been reified, which ultimately serve as weapons with which to strike back and which materialize the core of his self-identity; they are his handholds on the workings of the machine that manipulates him, which he uses to subvert the machine from within. In this

essay I will examine the material narration of Invisible Man and the way it condenses relationships of reification and power, first through the spaces that effect the narrator's reification, and then through the things that constitute his recourse.

Material narration is made possible by the fundamental disjunction between any narrative and the events it narrates. "Narrativity," in the words of Paul Ricoeur, is "the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent," while "temporality" is "that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity" (Ricoeur 165). Ricoeur's construal of the terms underscores that narrative is a construction in language that refers to a temporal space. Ricoeur does not, however, make much of the distance between these two entities—the fact that narrative's referent is fully absent from the narrative itself. Narrative as it is present to the reader consists only of the particular string of signifiers laid out on the page, which subsist in the signifying system of language. On the other hand, this temporal referent, in the direction of which narrative always points, cannot be present in the narrative. A *narrative* thus refers to what I will call a *story*, a set of events presumed to have existed in its own temporality, which is wholly absent form the narrative itself. The defining characteristic of fiction is that its referent has never existed—and thus the false referent must be constructed in the reader's act of interpretation.

Jacques Derrida observes on the level of the individual linguistic sign that the signified cannot be present in the signifier, and that the signifier is thereby open to an infinite field of interpretation which he calls "play" (Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play," 289).[1] The story, in the same way, is an absent signified, to which the narrative seems to refer but which is in no way accessible to the reader. Therefore, just as the operation of play fills the absence of the linguistic signified, the reader is compelled to fill the absence of the referent story by interpretation—the

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[1] See also Derrida, "Différance," in Kamuf, 61.

process which, infinite in its operation, gives narrative its significance. Interpretation frees sense-making from verisimilitude, by allowing us to interpret behind the present (perhaps unreal) narrative a story that has comprehensible significance to the reader. Put differently, the impenetrable space between the story and the narrative allows the writer room for non-realist narrative techniques—metaphor, allegory, deviation from linearity—because interpretation is able to fill out the ambiguities of such tropic displacement. In this way, the signifier-signified relationship of language serves as a message-carrying intermediary and simultaneously as a barrier. It is an opaque veil interjected between the story and the narrative itself, thus removing the story from the reader and making accessible only an image of it, altered in whatever way the author-storyteller chooses.[2] Despite the full degree of freedom granted by the disjunction between narrative and referent, narrative conventionally only uses an established set of accepted freedoms such as the manipulation of temporality, metaphor, and so on, because of the natural assumption that narrative will mimic mundane storytelling. Material narration allows Invisible Man to take advantage of this disjunction much more fully.

In Invisible Man, material narration condenses relationships of reification into material spaces and things. Georg Lukács explicates the principle of reification in his essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”: “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity,’ an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people” (Lukács 83). One party (the subject), who generally has a degree of control over the other party, views the other (the object) purely in terms of the product which the subject receives from the object. This relation distances the object so far from the subject that the object is flattened into

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[2]Cf. Jacques Derrida’s metaphor of the hymen in his essay “The Double Session,” in Kamuf 171-199.

the few characteristics most convenient to the subject, and ceases to appear to the subject as a human being. Most simply, this takes the form of Marx's commodity fetishism, when workers are viewed not as human individuals but as units of productivity. At the same time, the statement "I am an invisible man" recounts a subtler instance of reification. "Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows," the narrator is judged at sight, and his existence is assumed to have no deeper substance than the superficial role which the spectators have constructed for him (IM 3); they see in the narrator not a human individual but the means for the fulfillment of their own narrow agendas—"only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me" (3).

Perhaps the novel's simplest relationship of reification is visible in the messengers that the narrator sees moving through the Wall Street district, in his first days in New York. "Here and there," he says, "I saw Negroes who hurried along with leather pouches strapped to their wrists" (164), pouches which he speculates must contain something important, perhaps a million dollars. These men shuttle their cargo back and forth like conveyor belts in a machine. Their job assumes no human characteristics except the ability to move; to whomever has hired them, they are only important in that they provide a specific delivery to a specific place. The fact that they are physically attached to their cargo makes it especially clear that their employers equate them with the contents of their pouches. Though they remind the narrator "fleetingly of prisoners carrying their leg irons as they escaped from a chain gang" (164), he does not realize that they are still bound by intangible chains. Though a leather pouch may feel preferable to iron shackles on one's wrists, the messengers are still slaves to the great machine that refuses to see their humanity. Ironically, at this point the narrator eyes them with a sort of admiration, still believing

that the cargo in their pouches gives them personal importance, in the same way that he believes in the sense of self-importance he draws from the leather case in his own hand.

Though the narrator fails to understand it, these messengers are suffering under the simple conflation of a person with a thing. Mark Seltzer notes that the anxiety inherent in an interchangeability between persons and things is not new; though he does not advance a theory of material narration—*condensation* of narrative into things—his study of late nineteenth-century naturalist fiction reveals that such an anxiety is characteristic of the machine age. Seltzer demonstrates that the greatest inhumanity of chattel slavery, the institution that continually casts its shadow over the Invisible Man's heritage, is that it literally treats human beings like things. Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel Uncle Tom's Cabin, Seltzer points out, articulates this extreme degree of reification in its original subtitle: "The Man That Was a Thing" (Seltzer 48). Furthermore, Seltzer finds in Henry James' writing "the notion of 'The American' as an artifact and product, something mass-produced and reproduced" (Seltzer 49). The anxieties of reification and of mass-production are the same: fear of being viewed as a commodity, from the other side of the coldly isolating window of someone else's self-interest. Seltzer's examples serve to strengthen the conclusion that the conflation of a person with a thing, and of one's life with a machine, is inherently threatening. Nineteenth-century naturalism thus helps to explain why the situation of the leather-bound messengers in Ellison's novel is so ominous; it does not, however, predict the protagonist's reification by every member of the concerted whole of society, or the material distillation of Ellison's narrative.

By the end of the novel, the narrator will understand that he, like the messengers, is caught in a great machine that treats him both a thing and as a product that must be properly manufactured. The power structures that manipulate and reify him are mechanical operations,

which are sometimes only metaphorically machine-like, but which are at key points made physical and spatial. The scholarship, given to him at the smoker, sends him into the machine; after that, the clearest physical components of the machine are the drive with Norton, the bus and subway rides on the way to Harlem, Liberty Paints, and the factory hospital.

The smoker is our first view of the machination that carries the narrator through society. In the battle royal, the guests reify the boys into entertainment. The boys are made into a machine that is constructed and then set in motion as they are allowed to wander blindly, doing to each other what they will. They are thus treated as things to be viewed. When the boys are lined up around the rug and told to fight for the money scattered on it, they are reified again in the same way, as if they were nickelodeons switched on by the coins. This time the rug is charged with electricity—the lifeblood that hums through modern machinery, a force that should pass not through living flesh but through solenoids and telegraph wires. During his speech as well, the narrator is treated not as a human speaker but as a nickelodeon or a doll that makes noise when wound up. Finally, the scholarship sends him metaphorically into the great social machine. The men clearly intend to have the college mold the narrator into the product they want. The M. C. gives him the scholarship "to encourage him in the right direction": to help him "keep developing as you are" and "to lead his people in the proper paths" (IM 32), which evidently means to hold to Booker T. Washington's deferential thought and to accept disrespect from important white men. This will "help shape the destiny of your people" in the way the men want it (32). What the men consider "proper," of course, is for the narrator to let the men feel as if they are "doing right by him," but to "know his place at all times" (31). They intend to have the college turn him out, an object of production, as a young leader conditioned to be submissive.

Mr. Norton knows even more specifically what he wants the narrator to be: "a good farmer, a chef, a preacher, doctor, singer, mechanic" (43-4). All of these professions would keep the narrator in control of small machines, while people like Norton and Bledsoe control the big ones. When the narrator drives with Norton, he remains superficially in control of a small machine. At the same time, he is, still unwittingly, being manipulated by the larger machine: Norton is actually in control of the car ("Shall I continue in this direction, sir?" asks the narrator [45]), and, more importantly, Norton and his like are the force that drives the great machine that is the college. Norton seems to see his whole philanthropic venture as a process that produces some elevated end for which he is responsible, in which the individual student is only a gear in the machinery of production: "*You* are important because if you fail *I* have failed by one individual, one defective cog" (45). Thus, Norton reifies the narrator doubly. On the smaller scale, the narrator is no more than a means of conveyance; when he asks Norton, "Will you need me this evening, sir?" and Norton replies, "No, I won't be needing the machine," the narrator's *me* is made equivalent to the *machine* (108). On the larger scale, Norton reduces the narrator to the outcome of his own philanthropy, an enterprise to which Norton seems driven not for the narrator's benefit but for his own—or rather, to better serve the icon of his lost daughter. In the end, when the narrator encounters Norton on a subway platform, Norton's failure to recognize him proves that he was never interested in the narrator personally: as a driver, the narrator was a service rendered; as a student, he was generic.

Furthermore, the school itself acts as a machine in which the narrator is refabricated. The school's purpose is to take in young black boys and girls in need of enlightenment, and to turn them out as the product it wishes them to be (good farmers, mechanics, etc.). This creates a grand and indistinct sense of elevating the race's dignity, producing young bookish visionaries

and failing to acknowledge the Truebloods and the veterans. (It seems no accident that, as Homer Barbee tells the story, the Founder collapses when asked point-blank, "Tell us what is to be done, sir! For God's sake, tell us! Tell us in the name of the son they snatched from me last week!" [125]—like Norton, when confronted with the harsh reality outside his own academic philanthropy, the Founder breaks down under the weight of the demand for present action.) And of course, when the narrator crosses the best interests of the machine, he is discarded as chaff. When he is expelled, he finds out that, though the machine caters to Mr. Norton's wishes, it is Dr. Bledsoe who actually runs it. Expulsion is the narrator's first sense that he is being manipulated, and soon afterward, with the bus and subway rides on the way to Harlem, he finds himself being carried by a physical string of machines to the next stage of the assembly line.

The most important instance of spatial material narration—perhaps the most significant metaphoric episode in the novel—occurs after the bus takes the narrator to New York, in the two successive chapters in Liberty Paints and the factory hospital. Each of these chapters narrates its respective scene as if it were physical reality, using a wealth of visual, material and physical detail, but at the same time strongly implies that its space actually condenses the narrator's much more complex situation as an individual within society and as a young black man from the rural South. The power structures in which the narrator finds himself in the paint plant and the hospital are not contained within these spaces, but must be extended to the entire society the narrator inhabits. This technique is metaphoric in nature but farther-reaching than either metaphor or metonymy: the narrative recounts a particular, concrete situation, coherent and understandable in its own reality, which causes the reader's interpretation to construct a concrete story that is fully absent from the narrative.

The reader experiences the paint factory as an excess of detail recognizable as signifying many things other than the manufacture of paint. From the description that opens the chapter, the symbolism of Liberty Paints (named for the essence of Americanism) is American and patriotic: the "huge electric sign" reads "KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS"; the flags flying over each of the buildings in the complex give the impression of "watching some vast patriotic ceremony from a distance" (IM 196); the company logo is "a screaming eagle" (198). The fact that they "make a lot of paint for the government" (197) links the plant to the heart of the American order. While these details could all be diegetic, creations of the owners of the factory, the great mass of detail coalesces into a statement recognizable to the reader: the American system steadily manufactures artificial, concealing whiteness. This recognition provokes the assumption that the factory condenses many aspects of the narrator's reality that are not all located in this complex of buildings—that its space contains social interactions that reach into the larger society, beyond the relationships in the factory. To begin with, the factory reifies color. Blackness and whiteness—easily identifiable, in a novel so centrally concerned with race, as social and human characteristics—are made, in their abstract form, into commodities. Whiteness is manufactured and sold, so colors and their interactions are transfigured from human phenomena into selling points. The result is a system that privileges and revolves around whiteness, without questioning the implications of doing so.

As one might expect from a paint plant, the imagery turns color-coded soon after the narrator starts the job. While displaying explicitly American symbolism, the plant is strongly identified with its main product: pure visual whiteness. When the narrator finishes painting a sample, Kimbro looks at it and exclaims, "That's it, as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig and as sound as the all-mighty dollar!…It's the purest white that can be found.

Nobody makes a paint any whiter. This batch right here is heading for a national monument!" (202) The paint's primary quality is purely visual and visually pure. Through his string of similes, Kimbro asserts both that whiteness is quintessentially American and that America is essentially white: he praises the paint's whiteness by invoking George Washington's powdered wig, a defining characteristic of America's most storied founding father; "the all-mighty dollar," the central agent in American capitalism, shares its fortitude with whiteness. Each of the quintessential American symbols, Kimbro asserts, is white as can be. Furthermore, the paint's destinations—government buildings and national monuments—are whitewashed, or rather, impenetrably white-encrusted.

As Kimbro assigns the narrator his first task, the paint is "milky brown…but he stirred it vigorously until it became glossy white" (199). The narrator is perplexed when Kimbro tells him the "dead black" dope is going to fix the white paint, but he follows directions and drops the black liquid into the whiteness, "seeing them settle upon the surface and become blacker still," and finally stirs the blackness into the paint "'til it disappears" (200). Several factors lend these descriptions an excess of significance beyond their apparent mundanity. First, the narrator's insistence on the strangeness of dropping a black liquid into the white paint ("But when I looked into the white graduate I hesitated; the liquid inside was dead black. Was he trying to kid me?" [200]) places particular emphasis on the color of the substances, and on the foreignness of the black drops to the white mass. As soon as the narrator drops the dope into the paint, the narration zeroes tightly in on the surface of the paint in the bucket, describing the drops in close detail and maintaining an insistence on color, appearance, and especially the interaction between the two colors: "Slowly, I measured the glistening black drops, seeing them settle upon the surface and become blacker still, spreading suddenly out to the edges" (200). This is not the

simple narration of an action without particular significance, but a closely concentrated account of the dynamics between an undifferentiated black substance and an undifferentiated white substance. When the black is dropped into the white, it remains colloidally separated, looks especially and distinctly black, and moves rapidly to the margins. Despite the presence of the black substance, the white remains, as the sign outside proclaims, "PURE." Furthermore, as Lucius Brockway keeps the paint plant running while remaining unseen in the basement, the black actually *repairs* and holds together the white. When the mixture is muddled, the indispensable black substance becomes invisible. To this entire dynamic is added everything the reader knows about these two colors, their significance as human attributes, and the dominance of one over the other. The reader's interpretation, therefore, is able to recognize the drops as a physical condensation of human interactions into tiny quantities of abstract substances.

The language of the paint factory continues to denote a play of visibility, invisibility, and concealment. When Kimbro looks at the narrator's sample, he adds that the whiteness "will cover just about everything" (202). Brockway elaborates later: "Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through!" (217). Hence, the paint is "Optic White" (201). It absorbs and hides the black drops, and covers everything with a coating that unconditionally makes it *look* white. Even the material with the blackest core is covered, made invisible, and made to conform to the purest visual whiteness. Yet, Kimbro also makes it clear that, like the narrator's invisibility as introduced in the prologue, the paint's whiteness is partially in the eyes of the observer. When the narrator finishes painting the samples, Kimbro picks up one that has been tainted with the remover. The narrator tells us that "a gray tinge glowed through the whiteness, and Kimbro had failed to detect it" but only mutters "That's the way it oughta be" (205). This time the blackness

is partially revealed through the whiteness, but Kimbro's eyes work selectively and see only white.

Lucius Brockway himself deserves some further attention. If we believe what Brockway says about his own position in the factory (which we have no reason to doubt; his obvious expertise gives him unusual credibility), Brockway's presence is and has always been essential to the factory. "Everybody knows I been here ever since there's been a here," he says (209), and "caint a single doggone drop of paint move out of the factory lessen it comes through Lucius Brockway's hands" (215). His skill is essential to the quality of the finished product; as he tells the story, when he was ill and an apparently-qualified engineer was hired to fill in, "they started to having so much paint go bad they didn't know what to do" (215). Yet, even as he creates the "guts" (214) of all the paint made in the factory, Brockway remains in the basement unseen, unacknowledged, it seems, by everybody except Sparland himself: "A whole lots of folks wonders about that [what he does in the basement] without gitting anywhere" (215). The visible, superficial coloring is added in the more important-looking labs upstairs, but Brockway is responsible for the colorless foundation. Thus, Brockway is fully reified. His products come through the pipes from the basement but nobody ever sees him or acknowledges his presence. To most of the factory, his existence is nothing more than the physical presence of his product. Brockway seems to be following the advice given by the narrator's grandfather: though he firmly maintains essential influence in the factory, he gives no impression of it, and remains in the basement, unassuming and unnoticed. The basement makes physical Brockway's reification—his product is physically the only evidence of him—and his position at once beneath the surface and at the root.

Thus, Liberty Paints is a space characterized by a consistent dynamic: within the context of obvious American national symbols, white façades cover and obscure blackness, forcing the influence of the blackness to be buried and ignored. Such concealment is the same as the social dynamic that creates the narrator's invisibility, but here it is removed one step farther below the surface of the narrative. It is recounted in a straightforwardly literal manner, while the complex surplus of detail causes the reader to infer a much larger significance. Most importantly, its physical space contains and condenses generalized interactions between people. The buildings, Brockway's basement, and the paint itself are materializations of the world in which the narrator lives, and are essentially literal reifications that narrate the social reifications explained in Lukács' theory.

While the plant shows the reification of color in abstract terms, the factory hospital makes reification specific to the narrator himself and to his background, and shows his discovery that he is caught in a machine. Like the factory itself, the hospital scene is narrated through detailed physical description. At the same time, the details, though clearly structured as a narrative, are indistinct and unreal: the buzzing and "barber-chair thumping," the view of "two indefinite young women" and "a third, a desert of heat waves away" (232). Each sensory detail makes the scene less rather than more concrete. The mechanical imagery, however, is clear: the multiple electrical shocks; the doctors' references to "My little gadget" (235) and "The machine" (236); finally, the narrator's thoughts of "short-circuiting the machine," and his conclusion that "I had no desire to destroy myself even if it destroyed the machine" (243). The narrator is clearly being manipulated in a space ruled by a "gadget." Yet, the gadget is only the doctors' tool to effect their own transformations on the narrator, so the manipulation that the narrative materializes in the machine is in fact the doctors' manipulation.

Most important is the way in which the machine remakes the narrator into the product it desires him to be, like a thing that must be reformed or recast. The doctors reify the narrator by viewing him only in terms of their own agenda and their own narrow conception of what he is and should be. His experience in the machine ends with clear birth imagery, indicating that he has been recreated: "I felt a tug at my belly and looked down to see one of the physicians pull the cord which was attached to the stomach node, jerking me forward…I recoiled inwardly as though the cord were part of me" (243-4). When a doctor tells him, "Well, boy, it looks as though you're cured…You're a new man" (245), it is obvious that the process is supposed to have made him into someone he was not beforehand, maintaining a disjunction between the product, a "new man," and the condescending address, "boy." The new man is one who has trouble remembering who he is and how society has treated him. The string of questions the doctors thrust at him—"WHAT IS YOUR NAME," "WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER'S NAME," and finally "BOY, WHO WAS BRER RABBIT?" (239-42)—force the narrator to question fundamental elements of his childhood and his roots. When the questions only confuse the narrator, he tells us that the doctors "seemed pleased" (242). This suggests that the goal of the questions is not so much to coerce the narrator to remember, as to make sure that he cannot: if he loses his memory, he loses his own concept of self, and can be remanufactured into the man the doctors want him to be: marginal, submissive, mass-produced.

Once they have made sure that he is not able to identify himself firmly as having come from anywhere in particular, he no longer has the agency to control his own identity. His identity is for him not to decide but to "discover" (243)—the hermeneutic reading of a pre-established system, not his own act of interpretive creation. While he is held in the machine, furthermore, he is forced to connect his identity with its humiliation and subordination. Finally,

when he is given “a pair of white overalls” (244), he has been whitewashed—like the black drops in the bucket of paint, his identity and agency are lost in whiteness. What is more, his mind feels “blank, as though I had just begun to live” (233), and the process has removed from his consciousness his understanding of the artificial preeminence of the factory’s concealing whiteness: “Why couldn’t I remember what kind of factory it was? And why a *factory* hospital?” (245) Even while he is losing himself in whiteness, he is losing his memory of the reification of color: of the way the black drops lose themselves in the whiteness, of Brockway’s assertion that the white paint would render a piece of coal unidentifiable, and of the way colors are produced in a factory that determines all of these interactions. His inability to understand the phrase “factory hospital” indicates that the machine is suppressing his understanding that he is being reified and mechanically remade—the machine, at the same time that it is confiscating his own agency, is also stripping him of the understanding of what it is doing. In effect, the machine’s ideal product is the same as the college’s: in the vet’s prescient words, one who has “learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He’s invisible, a walking personification of the Negative…The mechanical man!” (94)

It is not difficult to see that this scene can only be understood by extrapolating its significance outside the physical space of the hospital. The process of interpretation fills in the absent signified of the story, and creates for the narrative an understandable significance. The reader’s interpretive process takes place within his or her own world, not the world of the narrative, and so the story which the reader constructs through interpretive extrapolation is a synthesis of the evocations present in the narrative with the reader’s own concept of the world, history, and the milieu in which Ellison wrote. Thus the reader takes the fictional narrative and extends it back into verisimilitude by recognizing that the hospital’s interactions condense larger

social dynamics. The story, therefore, is absent and verisimilar, while the narrative is present and unreal.[3] Most importantly, the disjunction between this story and the narrative is complete. By constructing a narrative that does not follow the constraints of verisimilitude, Ellison takes full advantage of the story's absence, leaving the resolution of the narrative's significance to the reader.

Nearly the same argument is advanced by J. Hillis Miller when he observes, in a move similar to Derrida's elucidation of the absence of the referent, that "there is in no region of narrative or of its analysis a literal ground—in history, consciousness, society, the physical world, or whatever—for which the other regions are figures" (Miller 23-4). Narrative always operates through referentiality, but the referent is nowhere to be found—it must be constructed in the act of interpretation. Hence: "Storytelling, usually thought of as the putting into language of someone's experience of life, is in its writing or reading a hiatus in that experience. Narrative is the allegorizing along a temporal line of this perpetual displacement from immediacy" (Miller 21). Narrative is not a fixed signifier in language with a firm relationship to a real (non-fictional) signified, but is in fact a hiatus from real sequence, a space of its own that occupies its own space in time, from whose surface real events are displaced. Non-fictional events must still bear on the reader's understanding of fiction, but they only interact intertextually with the narrative in the reader's interpretation—as, for example, the reader recognizes in Ellison's novel the historical institution of slavery, the neighborhood of Harlem, and the relationship between North and South.

The material spaces construct the physical environment through which the protagonist's reification is narrated. Their physicality underscores both the incontestable machination through

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[3] This syntax, though not the concept, is consciously indebted to Roland Barthes, "Myth Today" in

which the narrator finds himself carried, and the ways in which the narrator's world attempts to reduce him to a thing. The physical spaces condense sets of social interactions, thereby narrating them with much more powerful and sweeping effects than if they were given only as a few specific examples. The essential problem the narrator encounters in these spaces is that of agency: if he is confined in a machine that manipulates both his body and his consciousness, where can he find room to act as an individual? Each time he tries to define himself with regard to his place in the world, he finds that the world does not see him—where, then, is the *I am* that finally asserts, "I am an invisible man" (3) and "I am nobody but myself" (15)?

The answer lies in the narrator's ability first to uncover that self whose identity is not contingent on his place in the world. He is then able to seize the physical things into which he is reified and turn them back on themselves. He obtains a series of small objects, each of which is a material token of some part of his experience, and most of which are physical instances of Lukácsean reification. These tokens collect in a vortex of things that constitutes the material condensation both of his personal experience and of the humiliations that society inflicts on him.[4] In the narrator's continual process of observation and cognitive synthesis, these things are pulled from the world around him into a collection, centered on his briefcase, that he carries wherever he goes. In addition to being the physical collection of his experience, they are also the physical tools which he uses to strike back against his reification. In many cases, it is a lucid

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Mythologies (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) 123-4.

[4] The term *vortex* I borrow loosely from Ezra Pound and the Vorticists to denote a concentrated locus of signification, reaching its arms in many directions, and, in the case of Invisible Man, drawing into its center various elements of its surroundings. To borrow Pound's words on the poetic image, the narrator's collection is a "VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing" (Materer 20). The term is also apropos in its connection to Pound's reading of Plotinus: Timothy Materer writes that Pound's poem "Plotinus" "draws on Plotinus's description of the soul's inherently circular motion 'about the source of its own existence'" (Materer 15). Whether or not we can say that the vortex is the narrator's soul ("I don't know if Tod Clifton had a soul," he tells the audience at Clifton's funeral; "I don't know if *you* have a soul" [IM 458-9]), ultimately it becomes his essence, the crystallization of his experience and the core of his self-identity.

vision of a thing's significance—and hence of the human relationship contained within the thing—that allows him to grasp the thing and use it to his advantage. The vortex thus materializes his power of understanding along with the experience and self-assertion which his understanding permits.

The narrator's reversal of the things' significance is an act of Signifyin(g), to use the term as explicated by Henry Louis Gates. In his chapter "The Signifying Monkey and the Language of Signifyin(g)," Gates describes the practice of Signifyin(g) as a multifaceted rhetorical method of self-assertion through clever wordplay. One Signifyin(g) act is to use an existing figure to assert oneself over and above its established meaning, as "Who is buried in Grant's tomb?"—"Your mama" (Gates 66), or as in many renditions of jazz standards that display the musician's ability more than they pay homage to the original composition. Gates explains how the use of the word "signify" itself is an instance of Signifyin(g), in which a word in mainstream white usage has been voided of its significance and (re)filled with a new one:

> It is not sufficient merely to reveal that black people colonized a white sign…Black people vacated this signifier, then—incredibly—substituted as its concept a signified that stands for the system of rhetorical strategies peculiar to their own vernacular tradition…By an act of will, some historically nameless community of remarkably self-conscious speakers of English defined their ontological status as one of profound difference vis-à-vis the rest of society. (Gates 47)

Gates describes how this new sign, "Signification," exists on an axis *perpendicular* to the conventional use of the word, intersecting only at the point of the linguistic signifier; it puns, revises, and negates the meaning of the existing sign. The weight of the signifier has been reversed, and with it the white majority's hold on the English language.

Kimberly W. Benston presents a related theory of "the topos of (un)naming in Afro-American literature," in his essay of that title. Citing such renamed figures as Malcolm X and

Muhammad Ali, Benston explains renaming oneself as releasing history's grasp—for the African-American, the old and lingering binds of slavery and the imposed names of masters—on one's present being, and reasserting one's own independent self: "For the Afro-American, then, self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past are endlessly interwoven: naming is inevitably genealogical revisionism" (Benston, "I Yam" 152). Renaming oneself voids the historically-imposed mark of its significance and Signifies on it, asserting the self over and above coercive ties to the past. Forcible un-naming from without, on the other hand, as by "the brand of 'nigger,'" (Benston, "I Yam" 156) is a violent act of reification—flattening an individual to a signifier and a category—and of the removal of human worth and identity. "'Nigger' is a mechanism of control by contraction," writes Benston; "it subsumes the complexities of human experience into a tractable sign while manifesting an essential inability to *see* (to grasp, to apprehend) the signified" (Benston, "I Yam" 157). To rename oneself is to seize hold of the names produced by others' refusal to see one's being, and to assert the power that that being has of itself and over itself.

In the same way, when the narrator seizes hold of the bank cast in the image of a grinning black minstrel and smashes it, he seizes an image into which he is reified, perceives its significance clearly enough to be outraged, and turns the image against itself. Each of the things in the vortex is a similar materialization of a way in which society reifies him; by the end of the novel, he understands the significance of each of these things, and is able to Signify on each of them—in one way or another, to use each one against itself and to his own advantage.

The vortex begins with and centers on the briefcase. From its presentation to the narrator, the briefcase is imbued, in excess of its material being, with tangible significance: its apparent weight transcends its physicality and is pregnant at once with optimism and foreboding.

The entire scene of the smoker is made unreal by the men's exaggerated reactions, by their sadistic merriment during the cruel battle royal, and finally by the sharp incongruity between their treatment of the boys during the battle royal and their behavior after the speech which the narrator perceives to be exaggerated politeness. The scene's disjunction is exemplified by the "rope of bloody saliva…drooled upon the leather" (IM 32): the narrator believes the gift of the briefcase to be a gesture of genuine encouragement when it is in fact the token of a brutal reification; its fine leather contrasts sharply with the blood drawn as the men treat the boys like circus animals. More importantly, the briefcase already holds great significance for the narrator, because in it are condensed his potential for education and his hopeful ambition, and the dignity and respectability he imagines his place in society will afford. Its polished leather thus materializes a portion of his consciousness. The briefcase is the material locus of the hopes with which he starts out, into which his individual experiences and humiliations will be placed. At the same time, it is the physical impetus that keeps the reified narrator moving—like the coins on the rug, it is the nickel dropped in the nickelodeon. As the narrator begins to understand his position in the world, and makes the briefcase the locus of his knowledge and retaliation, this act of reversing its significance will be his first act of Signifyin(g) against the system.

When the narrator gets to New York, he still believes the briefcase to be emblematic of the good treatment he will receive from the world according to his merit. Newly arrived, he observes in the street, "Many of the men gripped dispatch cases and brief cases and I gripped mine with a sense of importance" (164). He holds to it now because he feels that possessing it allows him to participate in the world of important people; that there are people like Bledsoe and Norton who run the world and carry briefcases, and that eventually, if he works hard enough, he will become one of them. At this point his hopes constitute his self-identity—his concept of self

and of his position in the world—and therefore his self-identity, and the importance of the briefcase, reside outside himself. He has renounced his rural Southern heritage, believing that he can rise above it, and now defines himself in terms of the success that his intelligence and education will bring him. At the same time, the briefcase is evidence of his reification because it is a material thing by which he may be manipulated, and is, therefore, the conveyor that sends him into the machine. It is the scholarship that actually leads him into the first stage of the mechanical process, and the hopes embodied in the briefcase that cause him to accept the scholarship with optimism. Like the pouches strapped to the wrists of the black messengers moving through the streets of New York, the briefcase is the leather handcuff that leads the narrator through the machine, and ensures that he stays in his place.

Yet, even when he has come to an understanding of the way he has been manipulated, the narrator remains just as attached to the briefcase. Near the end, when he is shot during the riot in Harlem, he says as he begins to stand up:

> I wiped my face, my head ringing. Something was missing.
> "Here, buddy, this yours?"
> It was my brief case, extended to me by its handles. I seized it with sudden panic, as though something infinitely precious had almost been lost to me. (536-7)

By this point, the briefcase cannot still be precious because it was a gift from the school superintendent, because it contained a scholarship, or because it makes him feel respectable. It must be important to him because of something else, something rooted in his own possession of the case and not in what it says about someone else's esteem of him.

This shift in the briefcase's significance is underscored as he clings tenaciously to the briefcase in the total disorder of the riot. Getting up, he sees a man in the street who has been shot dead, and, realizing the interchangeability between the man, Clifton, and himself, he feels

the nauseating vertigo of total disillusionment with his own place in the world: "I realized suddenly that it might have been me huddled there, feeling too that I had seen him there before, in the bright light of noon, long ago…how long? Knew his name, I thought, and suddenly my knees flowed forward" (537). Yet, even as he crumples to the ground (as Clifton crumpled), he still holds to the case, the "fist that gripped the brief case bruising against the street" (537). Soon afterward, in the burning tenement as he dashes down the stairs, he says, "I moved, feeling something slip and was halfway down the next flight before realizing that my brief case was gone. For a second I hesitated, but I'd had it too long to leave it now" (548). To go back for it means to risk his life, but it is too essential a part of him for him to let go of it. When he picks it up and finds "an oily footstep" in the leather, his attitude towards it is still clearly protective: "The oil won't come off easily, I thought with a pang" (548).

This protection of the briefcase would be irrational if the case were not a vital extension of the narrator's being. The final explanation of its importance lies in the centrality of his experience to his self-identity. Experience allows him to see his reification in the world, and to revert back to that kernel of self that is detached from any investment in his social standing. As the grandfather is, in Ellison's own words, "a weak man who knows the nature of his oppressor's weakness" (Ellison, Shadow and Act, 56), the narrator gains, in his understanding, the power to recognize the significance of the things that reify him, and thus to use them against the machine. Each of the things in the briefcase is a piece of a particular experience or sentiment that is essential to his understanding of himself and of the world: the high school diploma, scholarship document, Brotherhood name, anonymous letter, shattered bank, Sambo doll, leg chain, and green glasses. These various things may be classified generally as deceptions, humiliations, and

ripostes. More importantly, each one is a physical fragment of his reification in the eyes of those around him, and by the end of the novel, he learns to use each one to his advantage.

The scholarship and high-school diploma are the two items representative of deceptions early in the narrator's life, and are two early nickels in the nickelodeon. Neither is described in any detail; of the diploma we know only that it comes out of the briefcase at the end of the novel. The scholarship is described simply as "an official-looking document" (IM 32). The document in the narrator's dream, however, is a dream-image of the scholarship document, and is "an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold," delivered in "an official envelope stamped with the state seal" (33). Both the scholarship and the diploma are official government-issue documents that purport to be highly beneficial to the narrator's progress, and seem to give the narrator academic credibility that ultimately proves useless to him. They are credentials that the narrator takes to be genuine, but his credulity only contributes to their actual purpose: in the dream document's words, to "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (33).

The Brotherhood name and the anonymous letter are similar items from the second half of the novel. Both are physical tools Jack uses to manipulate the reified narrator, and, again, are the nickels that keep the narrator moving according to Jack's predetermined agenda. The party at the Chthonian, where Emma gives the narrator the name, is rife with strong overtones of reification. When Jack introduces the narrator to Emma, her penetrating gaze seems to allow that the narrator is only barely more than a commodity:

> It was not the harsh uninterested-in-you-as-a-human-being stare that I'd known in the South, the kind that swept over a black man as though he were a horse or an insect; it was something more, a direct, what-type-of-mere-man-have-we-here kind of look that seemed to go beneath my skin. (302)

As soon as Emma thinks she is out of earshot, she reveals what she is thinking as she stares at him: "But don't you think he should be a little blacker?" (303) Though she may not be fully

uninterested in the narrator as a human being, she is only interested in him insofar as he can play a predetermined role in the Brotherhood. Jack's retort, "We're not interested in his looks but in his voice" (303), purports to be more sensitively concerned with the narrator's humanity, but still reduces him to the attributes that may prove useful to Jack's own agenda. The narrator clearly articulates this reification: "Maybe she wants to see me sweat coal tar, ink, shoe polish, graphite. What was I, a man or a natural resource?" (303) When Jack has Emma give the narrator his new name written on a slip of paper, he accomplishes a change in the narrator's identity through the exchange of a physical token, as if the narrator were a thing identifiable only by the label pasted on it. Furthermore, by giving the narrator the envelope and telling him, "*This* is your new identity" (309, my emphasis), Jack exchanges the narrator's identity for a slip of paper, assuming that he can write what he will on the narrator and shuttle him around as if he were an envelope. Finally, when Jack, asked where he found the narrator, tells Emma, "The people always throw up their leaders, you know," Emma responds in words that apparently Jack has spoken some other time: "'*Throw* them up,' she said. 'Nonsense, they chew them up and spit them out. Their leaders are made, not born. Then they're destroyed. You've always said that'" (302). Jack obviously sees a leader as something to be made, as the school manufactures its students and as the factory hospital remanufactures the narrator. The narrator is raw material to be run through this assembly line, and a tool to be used.

The anonymous letter is another physical tool by which Jack manipulates the narrator. Purporting to be from a black "friend" ("remember that you are one of *us*," it says), the letter advises the narrator to "take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people," and that "if you get too big *they* will cut you down" (383). At the end of the novel, the narrator notices that it, like the name, is in Jack's handwriting. Jack is obviously

trying to keep reins on the narrator's status as a leader; in the same way that he hires the narrator to speak in Harlem but then moves him away when he decides to, Jack sends him the letter to make sure he does not gain too much force independent of the committee's plan. Jack sees race as a card he can play when it is in the Brotherhood's interest, and can withdraw when it is not. The narrator, in the same way, he views as a strategic tool that he can use however he sees fit.

At the end of the novel, when the narrator falls into a dark coal bin and finds he must burn the papers in order to see, his understanding that the papers are reifications and not credentials gives him the freedom to use them to his advantage. Because these tools of reification are material, he is able to destroy them in order to serve his own interests. He would not be able to do so, however, if it were not for his understanding that the papers do not possess the importance or legitimacy they purport to possess. The diploma and the scholarship, for example, appear to be documents that should earn him respect, and if they were important as credentials he most likely would not burn them. By the end of the novel, however, he has realized that they do not bring him respect, and so they are worth more to him when he uses them for his own purposes.

The broken bank and the Sambo doll are two humiliating images into which the narrator sees himself reified as entertainment. Like the papers, the narrator destroys both of them, the latter by burning and the former by smashing. The bank depicts "a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro" (319), a brutally stereotyped image that immediately enrages the narrator. A stereotype is itself a reification; to stereotype is to flatten the other into a generalized image according to one's own preconceived categories. It is also to mass-produce mechanically: stereotype printing uses a cast plate rather than movable type, expecting many copies to be made. The bank thus reduces the narrator (and many like him) to a mass-produced image, and an

especially humiliating one at that. The narrator himself is obliquely conflated with the stereotyped bank by the fact that his "head was splitting" (319) just before he splits the bank's head. Even after he has broken the bank, he finds himself unable to get rid of the broken pieces, as the image and the neighbors' suspicion attach themselves to him in a persistent complex of stereotypes: "We keep our place clean and respectable and we don't want you field niggers coming up from the South and ruining things," shouts a woman when he tries to drop the bank into her trash can (328). The bank becomes a token of the narrator's painful understanding of the backward light in which many people still see him. Its physicality, however, gives him recourse against both the bank's own humiliation and that which other people impose on him. First, he is able to pick up the bank, strangle it and smash it. Then, as he tries to get rid of it, it becomes a focal point of his reaction against such humiliation: "Next time I'd throw it into the street," he concludes (329).

Clifton's Sambo dolls are similar images of humiliation. Each is "a grinning doll of orange-and-black tissue paper," dancing "in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion…with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public" (431). The dolls are reifications similar to the bank, just as humiliating and even more blatant. Clifton sells them explicitly as entertainment, without regard to their unscrupulous and condescending misrepresentation of human beings. Again, the narrator is immediately angered, at the image itself and at Clifton for peddling it; to participate in such reification, particularly as a business venture, seems inexcusable. And again, because the doll is material, the narrator can take physical action against it as his anger manifests itself as phlegm welling in his throat: "There was a flash of whiteness and a splatter like heavy rain striking a newspaper and I saw the doll go over backwards, wilting into a dripping rag of frilled tissue" (433). Then, after Clifton

hurries the crowd around the corner in avoidance of the police, he stops himself before he steps on the doll, and "reached down instead, picking it up and walking off in the same motion" (434). Though destruction is a powerful ability, possession is even greater, and Sambo fits easily in the narrator's pocket. This, then, is an inherent weakness of reification: the reduction of humans to things cannot last, because things are helpless against possession and destruction.

Finally, Tarp's leg chain and the green glasses are two different means of Signifyin(g) against the machine. Of the chain link, George E. Kent writes, "Symbolically, it is a bitter link in the chain of black tradition, meant to serve as a reminder of roots and inescapable contours in the profile of black reality" (Kent in Benston, Speaking for You 101). Like the papers from Jack, the link is a physical remnant of the tools used to reify Brother Tarp, and perhaps the narrator had he been in Tarp's place. Like the bank and the doll, the link forces the narrator to confront some of the cruelest of realities regarding his and Tarp's position in the social order. And as he does with the bank and doll, he is able to take the link in hand and use it to strike back: "Finding no words to ask him more about it, I slipped the link over my knuckles and struck it sharply against the desk." Brother Tarp's reaction underscores the significance of the act: "Now there's a way I never thought of using it…It's pretty good. It's pretty good" (389). Understanding of ball-and-chain reality is powerful in its own right, but the chain link promises to serve as a weapon as well. When Tarp tells the narrator it has "a heap of signifying wrapped up in it" (388), he means a heap of *significance*, but also a heap of *signifyin'*—of self-assertion against oppression, and of turning a symbol of oppression around into a symbol of combat. It signifies "two words, *yes* and *no*," Tarp says (388)—taking hold of the physical forces that say *no* and using them to speak one's own *yes*.

The dark glasses, on the other hand, are a means not of violently combating the machine but of manipulating it from below. When he slips on the glasses and hat, the narrator has come to an understanding of the way in which the world reifies him according to his appearance. Onlookers identify him not as an individual but as a set of supposedly recognizable characteristics that they rationalize according to a preconceived system; and therefore the glasses and hat cause him to be dropped immediately into a stereotyped category. He realizes that as a result there is nothing preventing him from moving in and out of the onlookers' categories at will: like Rhinehart, he can define the grounds on which he interacts with the world simply by choosing to present one of an array of outward characteristics. Like the boy in Gates' example who gets a piece of cake by telling his mother that his brother needs a piece of cake, the narrator Signifies on his onlookers by carefully controlling his outward persona in such a way as to manipulate their conception of him. He has taken advantage of his reified state, and from it has gained control over his position in the world.

By the end of the novel, this collection of things constitutes an arsenal of material manifestations of the narrator's power to define himself against his society's reifying machinery. Each of the things threatens to collapse his being into a tool to be used for someone else's purposes, but in each case he is able to reverse the tool's grasp on him. His power of understanding is central to each act of Signifyin(g) and self-assertion; his ability to see the things for what they are shows him the fraudulent nature of their power over him and gives him the resolve to use them for his own purposes. His possession of the glasses, for example, would be meaningless except for his comprehension of Rhinehart's stratagem and his understanding of his own ability to be similarly protean. He would not pocket the Sambo doll if not for his indignant understanding of the humiliation inherent in its image; and he would not burn the diploma if he

still believed it would earn him respect. He is able to see his reifications clearly while his oppressors do not, and therefore he can see his ability to seize them and use them to retaliate.

Ultimately, the things that collect in the vortex constitute the narrator's concrete self-identity. After he has spent most of the novel trying to achieve a sense of place in other people's schemes, the vortex collects the things he learns by his own powers of observation and cognition. Late in the novel, leaning on a stone wall and seething against the Brotherhood, he finds in experience his only true self identity and his own most effective weapon:

> I leaned there, aching to humiliate them, to refute them. And now all past humiliations became precious parts of my experience, and for the first time, leaning against that stone wall in the sweltering night, I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. *They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me*, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became even if they conquered the world, could take that, or could change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. (507-8, my emphasis)

When the narrator needs a weapon with which to defend himself against humiliation and reification, he returns to his past humiliations for strength. Finally, having tried to define himself as a potential Booker T. Washington, a Brotherhood demagogue, or at least a competent worker, he now sees that he must protect himself from attack rather than investing himself in what others can give him. Therefore, he *is* that which he must protect—he is himself, he is the rage that wells in him against humiliation, he is what he knows. The vortex is the physical manifestation of all of these important elements: the circumstances that humiliate him, the things he knows, and the tools he can use to strike back.

Hence he comes to his most important conclusion: "I am nobody but myself" (15). The hole is the final space of the novel, and materializes the state of solitude and alterity in which the

narrator ends up. We have never before seen him in a space that was fully his own or that he fully controlled; the college, the factory, and even the apartments in which he lives are always under someone else's control. He finally is able to appropriate the hole as his own space, and correspondingly, he completely detaches his identity from all its previous connections: "And now I realized that I couldn't return to Mary's, or to any part of my old life" (571). Occupying the hole is his final act of Signifyin(g) in the novel. He has learned to take advantage of his invisibility and live in the hole unnoticed, living "rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites" (5-6) and receiving free current from Monopolated Light and Power. Stealing electricity is a way of asserting his ability to act in his own interest. "That is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power," he says, "The deeper reason, I mean: It allows me to feel my vital aliveness" (7). Having been kept running so long for other people's reasons, the hole is now the space where he can exercise his own agency. "*Monopolated* Light & Power," then, is named ironically because it has no control over him. Thus, the hole is the final space whose significance exceeds its materiality: condensed in it is the narrator's state of being marginal to society ("I don't live in Harlem but in a border area" [5]), his individual will and agency, his power of understanding and his ability to find ways to turn the situation in his favor, and, ultimately, his resolve to reemerge from his hibernation.

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