

Not for Sale:
Liberation from Commodified Identity in Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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English

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”

Try as we might, it is nearly impossible to escape the labeling tendencies of our modern world. The process begins as soon as we are born. Hospital attendants are responsible for birth records that document a child's nationality and race, labels sure to influence the child's remaining life in both subtle and blatant ways. Gender designations forecast a lifetime of characteristics and propensities supposedly the exclusive domain of “male” or “female.” And woe to the infant whose physical and mental capacities are in any way damaged—a host of labels awaits (disabled, slow, deformed, handicapped) to ensure a lifetime of exclusion, derision, and limitation. Of course, labeling as a phenomenon is not exclusive to our moment of birth; however long we live, we can rest assured that labels and the expectations they entail await us at every turn (child, teenager, adult, senior citizen, etc.). The menace of labeling is not that it is uniformly insulting—some labels such as genius, millionaire, and celebrity have more than their fair share of advantages—but that it is uniformly *limiting*. If the modern age has taught anything, it is that human beings are infinitely complex. The notion that identity can be summed up in one word is categorically naive and arguably anti-human. The threat posed by such a notion becomes especially insidious when the label is harvested and actively fostered in a conscious attempt to limit, and even threaten, the people to whom it applies. Herein lies the nature of Ralph Ellison's protest in his landmark novel, *Invisible Man*. By walking us through the life of his nameless narrator, who is besieged by manufactured labels and identities at every stage prior to his ultimate epiphany, Ellison demonstrates the ubiquitous and anti-human nature of societal labeling. Complicating the invisible man's journey towards self-discovery is a market system that attempts to reduce him to a commodity, an object to be bought and sold. The mission, then, of the invisible man's odyssey from his southern roots to New York is to extricate himself from these commodified identities and formulate his own sense of self.

Some critics, notably Houston A. Baker, Jr., have discussed the role of commerce in certain sections of *Invisible Man*, but none to my knowledge has analyzed the tendency of the novel's major episodes to culminate in a commercial experience that propels the narrator further along the path to enlightenment. For my discussion of how commercial forces function in the narrator's gradual divorce from imposed identities, I will be relying extensively on relevant sections of Grace Elizabeth Hale's *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. In this work, Hale demonstrates how late nineteenth-century America's expanding

industry and commercialism threatened the South's traditional color line, thus precipitating a backlash in which white southerners exploited market forces to oppress, dehumanize, and even murder African-Americans. In its discussion of both the promise and menace of market culture vis-à-vis African-American progress, Hale's analysis provides an illuminating context for many of the invisible man's experiences.

Hale's discussion of commercialism's effect on racial relations in the South begins with "the battleground" of "rapidly expanding railroads and streetcars" (126). On this battleground, threats to slavery-born notions of white superiority came in the form of African-American first-class travelers whose "visible dress and deportment ... belied any notion of southern blacks' racial inferiority." Finding such cues as clothing and speech no longer reliable as indicators of racial differences, white identity experienced a major crisis. First-class trains seemed evidence of Booker T. Washington's theory that economics rather than politics would be the arena in which racial hierarchies would ultimately be destroyed. According to Hale, southern blacks struggled to ensure that "[the] marketplace ... would not join the polling place as a potential arena of racial exclusion. [They] were determined to have unmediated access to the increasing variety of products ... that their money enabled them to buy" (128). White southerners' response to this challenge was to bulwark their racist belief system with more blatant indicators of racial difference: "Segregation made racial identity visible in a rational and systematic way, despite the anonymity of social relations within train cars" (130). As obvious then as in hindsight, the policy of "separate but equal" existed in name only; to restrict African-Americans to inferior places was to effectively proclaim that as a race they were inferior to white people (131).

As Hale notes, however, the cultural desires of white southerners were complicated by economic desires—excluding paying customers meant less profit. This "contradiction between market incentives and the desire to encode white racial supremacy" ensured that the battle for white supremacy would not end on train cars (133): "The problem for the white southern elite ... was how to reconstruct a powerful and collective definition of whiteness within this new semi-public commercial sphere, which depended ... for its profitability upon both white and black buyers" (137). The solution? First of all, construct white supremacy as a "value other than profit" (145). In other words, even though segregation might result in decreased profits, it helped to maintain white superiority, which was certainly an idea white southerners were willing to "pay" for. Secondly, instead of fighting against market forces, recruit them in the fight against African-American progress. Commercial culture provided a revolutionary new vehicle for the transfer of ideas. By commodifying African-American identity in the form of advertisements and products promoting racist, dehumanizing stereotypes, black inferiority could essentially be "sold" to the entire nation. Now "racial images performed as minstrel entertainment and advertisements for the new consumer products. Not just African American labor but the commercialization of their racist representation could be turned into white profit" (150). Thus, the world was introduced to images of mammy-figure Aunt Jemima, "African American adults absurdly trying to mimic their 'white superiors,'" exaggerated southern dialects like "Sartin shoo Dis Chile Dun Gone Rung Up De Debble," "Nigger Head" products, and a myriad of other degrading representations of blacks (156, 158, 159). Such racist representations were not isolated to advertisements:

In the late nineteenth-century black-figured items, from mammy dolls to jolly nigger banks, became profitable commodities themselves. ... Black-figured commodities waited silently and smiling to entertain and assure their white owners. Whether playfully socializing children or humoring adults, Aunt Jemima and her friends signified and magnified whiteness with their uncomplicated subservience. And as importantly, black-figured commodities advertised themselves. (160-161)

Thus, the same commercial market that had helped challenge racial hierarchies was now being used to maintain them.

The true horror of this exploitative system is evident in its relationship to lynching. Here is where the rise of the southern general store plays a prominent role. As Hale points out, the general store developed into a public space much like the train in that whites and blacks intermingled in these areas of commerce relatively free from the regulatory controls imposed by segregation. However, a rather ghastly reminder of racial hierarchy existed in many of these stores, which “[displayed] souvenir body parts and picture postcards of lynchings” (174). No matter how much of consumer culture African-Americans could participate in, the commercial elements of lynching belonged exclusively to whites: “Only whites, whether they endorsed the violence or not, could experience the ‘amusement’ of a black man burned. Only African Americans could be extralegally and publicly tortured and killed. ... The violence both helped create a white consuming public and the structure of segregation where consumption could take place without threatening white supremacy” (206). In addition to the racial intermingling fostered by railway and general store economics, consumption was threatening white supremacy in other ways: segregated shopping areas were for the most part impractical; African-American dollars could be used to demand more respectful service; and status symbols such as cars purchased by African-Americans suggested some blacks were, at least in a financial sense, superior to whites. To further threaten the illusion of white racial dominance, segregation created “autonomous black spaces [and] autonomous black bodies”—places where African-Americans owned their own businesses and shopped among themselves—that existed largely unhindered by white influence (199). Again, the consumer market threatened racial hierarchy; again, the market must be exploited in order to regain control: “Whites, then, had only violence to hide the emptiness of their allegedly greater worth” (197). Lynchings in this context represent white society’s panicked reaction to consumerism’s erosion of clear indicators of racial difference.

The marriage of consumer culture with white southerners’ most desperate fight for racial dominance came in the grisly form of spectacle lynchings. In spectacle lynchings, many of the industrial and commercial developments of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century were employed to oppress, dehumanize, and murder African-Americans. Railroads transported white audiences to lynching sites, sometimes even providing special routes specifically for this purpose; eyewitness accounts were published and distributed, first in pamphlets, then more objectively in newspapers; photographs of the crowd were taken and distributed to solidify “[the] story of lynching as the entire white community in action, using savagery to protect ‘Southern’ civilization”; and as mentioned before, souvenirs of the lynching—including severed body parts—were sold in general stores and publicly displayed in homes (207, 208). The African-American body, legally enslaved in the past, was once again something to be bought and sold:

“lynchings reversed the de commodification of black bodies begun with emancipation. In spectacle lynchings, blacks themselves became consumer items; the sites of their murders became new spaces of consumption” (229).

Using Hale’s *Making Whiteness* as a context for discussing *Invisible Man*, it is striking how frequently Ellison, fifty years earlier, articulated many of the same arguments. Specifically, the narrative cycle repeated throughout the invisible man’s retelling of his life story is one in which commercial interests both promise and threaten his freedom; additionally, the threat of lynching always looms in the background, albeit in a metaphorical sense. The suggestion seems to be that pursuing identity through commercial means threatens the loss of one’s true self, thereby resulting in a metaphorical death.

The first episode in the novel where this pattern occurs is the infamous battle royal, a scene in which the narrator, under the pretext of delivering a prize-winning speech for a white audience, is duped into participating in a vicious boxing match with other black men. An early intimation of the commercial nature of this scene appears when the narrator identifies himself as “a potential Booker T. Washington” (Ellison 18). Hale refers to Washington while describing the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. During the exposition’s opening ceremonies, Washington gave a speech promoting segregation; his deference was consistent with his general view that African-Americans should “avoid politics and seek instead the rewards of ‘industry, thrift, intelligence, and property,’ through which they would earn white respect” (148). Unfortunately, he overestimated such an approach: “Washington, like other black leaders, felt the racist portrayals of ‘happy darkies’ would fade in the face of economic and racial uplift. He did not foresee that racist representations would prove as profitable as racial bondage and that the emancipation of images would be almost as difficult as the freeing of slaves” (151). As the battle royal unfolds, the similarities between the narrator and Booker T. Washington become more pronounced. Not only is he there ostensibly to deliver a speech on “social responsibility,” he seems deferential to the brazen racism of his environment. The “most important men of the town,” the white southern elite, are there (Ellison 18). They have orchestrated this event to enact a metaphorical lynching of the black men involved in the battle. The first indication that the battle royal is a kind of lynching fantasy is the appearance of the naked white woman. The fighters are made to gaze upon her, a sublimation of the black-man-rapes-innocent-white-woman myth that became a clichéd opening to the lynching ritual. A white man throws ice water on a fighter who has fainted and forces him to be propped up by the narrator and another fighter so the reawakened one can continue to look. Another indication of the execution-like atmosphere of this event is the fact that the fighters are blindfolded. Once the fighters are unleashed upon each other, white audience members betray their murderous desires. One man shouts, “Tear him limb from limb,” while another screams, “Kill that big boy!” (21, 23).

Why do the fighters allow themselves to be degraded this way? The narrator discovers that they have been lured into the battle royal by the promise of money. Initially, the promise of payment is fulfilled in an absurd manner. An electrified rug containing dollars, coins, and gold pieces (later revealed to be car advertisement tokens) is brought before the battle-weary fighters. After being told they will receive whatever they grab, the fighters scramble for the money despite the “hot, violent force” that tears through their bodies as a result (27). The narrator hears “booming laughter” from the audience—one is reminded of the spectacle lynchings discussed by Hale in which white southerners viewed the ritualized torture of African-Americans as a form of

entertainment. This second phase of abuse and humiliation continues until the narrator “[sends] the rug sliding out of place” (28). The fighters are finally paid and the narrator is told to give his speech. The audience finds it hilarious that “the smartest boy ... out there in Greenwood” has difficulty delivering his speech because of his injuries and exhaustion from the battle royal (29). Another oblique reference to lynching occurs when the narrator says “my dry mouth, filling up with blood from the cut, almost strangled me” (30). When the audience goads him into repeating a multi-syllabic phrase—“social responsibility”—the narrator inadvertently says “social equality” instead (31). For the first time since he began his speech, the room is silent. In a now hostile atmosphere, he is given an opportunity to correct himself, and he promptly complies. As a reward for playing the part of the humble, subservient Negro, he is awarded a leather briefcase and a scholarship. In a dream that night, the narrator finds a letter in his new briefcase that contains the following message: “To Whom It May Concern ... Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (33). His subconscious, at least, seems aware of the true import of that day’s experiences—his “prize” is little more than something to put him “in his place,” a segregated school with limited vocational opportunities. For the white southern elite, the briefcase and scholarship are payment to keep a promising African-American from challenging their racial order. Unfortunately, the invisible man eagerly buys into their farce.

The invisible man, just prior to recounting the fateful day that leads to his college expulsion, describes the statue of his college’s founder, a figure generally believed to be based on Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee (the college Ellison himself attended). In hindsight, the invisible man recognizes the statue’s symbolism: “I see the bronze statue of the college Founder, the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place” (36). Most likely an allusion by Ellison to the veil metaphor introduced at the beginning of W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, the narrator’s thoughts also echo Hale’s discussion of Washington—the faith he invested in the liberating power of economics; the bondage he failed to foresee in the proliferation of racist images. The blindness motif reappears in the narrator’s account of the sermon/speech delivered by Homer A. Barbee. When the sermon is over, the invisible man realizes that Barbee, the man who has just painted such a saintly picture of the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe, is blind. In his article, “Copy Wright: What is an (Invisible) Author?” Frederick T. Griffiths describes Barbee’s speech as “minstrelsy” and the man himself as “[literally] fronting for the white bankers who sit behind him on the podium” (338). The narrator also acknowledges the college’s debt to white patronage: “And how [the millionaires] arrived! Came smiling, inspecting, encouraging, conversing in whispers, speechmaking into the wide-open ears of our black and yellow faces—and each leaving a sizeable check as he departed” (Ellison 37).

The controlling incentive behind this patronage becomes clearer when we view it in relation to the Trueblood episode. In this section of the novel, the narrator wanders off campus while chauffeuring one of the college’s most important patrons, Mr. Norton. They come to the house of a poor African-American sharecropper by the name of Trueblood. After learning from the narrator that Trueblood has impregnated his own daughter, Mr. Norton demands to stop. He confronts Trueblood and asks him to describe what happened. When Trueblood concludes the story of how he was driven to commit his foul act, Mr. Norton shocks the narrator by giving

Trueblood a one-hundred dollar bill. The commercial nature of this act is obvious, but whereas critics like A. Timothy Spaulding view it in terms of Trueblood “[‘selling’] his titillating and disturbing story to Norton for \$100,” the real motivation behind this transaction is perhaps more sinister (489). Mr. Norton’s “generosity” at this point in the novel seems to have less to do with entertainment than with a compulsion (perhaps subconscious) to compensate Trueblood for perpetuating the stereotype of the savage, oversexed black male. After all, Mr. Norton is not alone in his compensation to Trueblood. As Trueblood himself attests, “[The white folks] gave me help. That’s what I don’t understand. I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin’ me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man” (Ellison 67). In this respect, Trueblood is similar to the fighters of the battle royal; he is paid to behave like an animal and rewarded for providing “evidence” of racial inferiority. In the same way that products and advertisements during this time attempt to sell African-American stereotypes, people such as Trueblood are rewarded for embodying them.

After leaving Trueblood, the narrator encounters, at two different moments, the specter of lynching. The first occurs at the Golden Day in a quasi-inversion of the lynching paradigm. Already a segregated consumer space, the Golden Day is a place where the paying customers feel free to behave as they please, free from the interruptions and conventions of the outside world. When Mr. Norton, a representative of white authority, appears, he brings in with him a reminder of the outside world. Since he is on their turf, however, the customers feel emboldened to reveal their true feelings about the authority Mr. Norton represents. Initially, this catharsis takes the form of an attack on another symbol of white authority, Supercargo. Though he is an African-American, Supercargo is the authority in charge of controlling the customers of the Golden Day, who are all patients of a nearby mental-health hospital. His association with white society’s attempts to control African-Americans begins with the narrator’s symbolic description of the change he notices in Supercargo’s appearance: “I hardly recognized him without his hard-starched white uniform. Usually he walked around threatening the men with a strait jacket which he always carried over his arm, and usually they were quiet and submissive in his presence” (82). When he is literally caught with his pants down, the patients seize the opportunity and attack him relentlessly: “he lost consciousness. They began throwing cold beer on him, reviving him, only to kick him unconscious again. Soon he was drenched in blood and beer” (84). One member of the mob voices the reason for the attack: “He’s the white folks’ man!” (84). During the ensuing chaos, Mr. Norton is pushed around and passes out. One of the patients, whom the narrator refers to as “the vet,” seems to recognize the precariousness of the white man’s situation, and helps the narrator bring him upstairs. Once they arrive upstairs and Mr. Norton has regained consciousness, the patient explains himself: “They might suddenly realize that you are what you are, and then your life wouldn’t be worth a piece of bankrupt stock. ... Such men are beyond money, and with Supercargo down, out like a felled ox, they know nothing of value” (93). By invoking the language of the market—bankrupt, stock, money, value—the vet suggests the regulatory role economics plays in relation to the racial hierarchy the men below have begun to challenge. Even though there is a tangible threat to Mr. Norton’s safety in this scene, made more pronounced when a prostitute pushes him down the stairs, the bar’s owner, Halley, recognizes that the white man “*caint* die!” and proceeds to rescue him (97). The reversal of the lynching paradigm fails—Mr. Norton cannot be killed. Ellison has once again articulated one of Hale’s arguments in *Making Whiteness*. In this case, the failure of the Golden Day patrons to

successfully lynch Mr. Norton echoes Hale's observation that lynching is the exclusive domain of white society.

Perhaps the portion of *Invisible Man* most clearly illuminated by Hale's arguments is the Liberty Paints section. While approaching the plant for the first time, the narrator notices an electric sign with the message, "KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS" (196). The racial implications of this message are clear, and when we learn that the company "[makes] a lot of paint for the government," the government's complicity in racial hierarchy is made clear (197). The fact that employees refer to their superiors as "Colonel" and "slave driver" suggests that the plant is a microcosm of the Old South (198, 199). When the invisible man receives instructions for his first assignment, he becomes confused. He is supposed to help make a paint called "Optic White," but the drops he has been instructed to add to the paint are "dead black" (200). After receiving clarification from his supervisor, Kimbro, he adds the drops to the paint: "Slowly, I measured the glistening drops, seeing them settle upon the surface and become blacker still, spreading suddenly out to the edges" (200). Ironically, the result of this combination, according to Kimbro, is a paint "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" (201-202). On a symbolic level, the composition of Optic White demonstrates Hale's argument of how the segregated lives of African-Americans were essential in the creation of "whiteness." The narrator's description of the black drops spreading to the edge signifies the marginalization of African-Americans, and the final appearance of the paint suggests how white dominance rendered African-American lives invisible.

Another symbolic lesson is evident in the narrator's next assignment at Liberty Paints. The narrator descends to the hellish environs where his next supervisor, Lucius Brockway, works, and learns what is made there: "Right down here is where the real paint is made. Without what I do they couldn't do nothing, they be making bricks without straw. ... caint a single doggone drop of paint move out of the factory lessen it comes through Lucius Brockway's hands" (214-15). If Liberty Paints is a microcosm of the Old South, then Lucius Brockway represents the foundation of black labor that made the Old South possible. As Brockway puts it himself, "*we the machines inside the machine*" (217). His isolated work in the nether regions of the plant is a physical reminder of his lower place in society; yet his loyalty to those in control is critical for the plant to operate smoothly. As he tells the narrator, "this here's the uproar department and I'm in charge" (212). He is constantly checking pressure gauges and tells the narrator to do the same: "I'm warning you to keep an eye on 'em. You caint forgit down here, 'cause if you do, you liable to blow up something" (217). Brockway's warning here bears more than a slight resemblance to Washington's oratories on social responsibility—whether at Liberty Paints or society at large, the status quo must be maintained or else the situation becomes explosive. This latter point, unfortunately, is one the narrator ultimately learns by experience. While fighting with Brockway to the degree that he threatens to kill the old man, he forgets to check the gauges. By the time he realizes his mistake, it is too late—one of the machines explodes and the invisible man ends up in the factory hospital.

The narrator's return to consciousness in the factory hospital marks a new beginning, as if he is being reborn. His *tabula rasa* state is made clear when he comments, "My mind was blank, as though I had just begun to live" (233). Despite his metaphorical rebirth, however, old motifs still haunt him. For example, he is given electro-shock therapy, which, in its effects,

recalls the electrified rug at the battle royal: “The pulse came swift and staccato, increasing gradually until I fairly danced between the nodes. My teeth chattered. I closed my eyes and bit my lips to smother my screams. Warm blood filled my mouth” (237). Echoes of the battle royal continue when it becomes clear that one of the hospital workers finds the narrator’s suffering amusing: “Look, he’s dancing ... They really do have rhythm, don’t they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!” (237). As infuriating as this treatment might be for the narrator, it pales in comparison to some of the alternatives the hospital workers considered—“a prefrontal lobotomy” and “castration” (236). The loss of manhood threatened by both a lobotomy (mentally) and castration (physically), as well as the fact that the narrator’s shock-therapy entertains a white audience, evokes another lynching scenario. Fortunately, the narrator is spared the suggested butcheries and even experiences the first seeds of what will prove to be his ultimate enlightenment. While trying to determine a way to escape his current imprisonment, he has the following realization: “There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I’ll be free” (243). Before leaving the hospital to continue his search for his identity, the narrator is ushered into a meeting with an unfamiliar man who promises him that he will be “adequately compensated for [his] experience” (247). There is, of course, a catch: “We require an affidavit releasing the company of responsibility” (247). Any protest the narrator might raise regarding his near fatal accident and subsequent treatment at Liberty Paints is thus squashed by a simple commercial transaction. His acquiescence has been effectively bought.

The opportunity to formulate a new identity comes soon enough in the form of the Brotherhood. That this path to identity is a dead-end is foreshadowed in a number of ways. First of all, after meeting Brother Jack for the first time and realizing it was he who followed the narrator after his eviction speech, the narrator imagines the scene: “No doubt he was laughing at me. I must have looked silly hurtling across the roofs, and like a black-face comedian shrinking from a ghost when the white pigeons shot up around me. To hell with him. ... He only wanted to use me for something” (294). The invisible man’s intuition that he is being exploited finds symbolic form in an object he finds in the house of Mary Rambo, the mammy figure with whom he is staying:

Then near the door I saw something which I’d never noticed there before: the cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose white eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest. It was a bank, a piece of early Americana, the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth. (319)

Hale discusses the same object in *Making Whiteness*: “Figured in blackface, a cast-iron mechanical bank from the 1880s swallowed any money inserted into its grinning, thick-red-lipped, white-toothed mouth” (161). The bank’s appearance in *Invisible Man* seems to signify the new identity the Brotherhood has purchased for the narrator—namely, to be their mouthpiece. For the job of giving speeches that help advance the Brotherhood’s causes, the narrator is offered three hundred dollars up front and a salary of sixty dollars per week. The narrator is shocked by the organization’s munificence, and hardly considers denying the offer:

“Sixty a week! There was nothing I could say” (Ellison 310). The transaction is made complete when Brother Jack instructs Emma, a wealthy female member of the Brotherhood, to give the narrator a slip of paper: “‘This is your new identity,’ Brother Jack said” (309). Never mind that Emma wonders if “he should be a little blacker” (303); Brother Jack is happy with his purchase.

When the narrator first discovers the demeaning Negro bank, he is filled with hatred for it. He grabs it and makes a revealing observation while studying it: “In my hand its expression seemed more of a strangulation than a grin. It was choking, filled to the throat with coins” (319). The mention of strangulation is a grim reminder of lynching, that horrific spectacle that treats African-Americans as commodities made to be destroyed. After smashing the bank, the narrator is stymied several times in attempting to get rid of its pieces until, utterly frustrated, he finally stores them in the briefcase given to him the night of the battle royal. This reminder of the dangers lurking in commodified identity will not be leaving him soon.

The invisible man would have done well to heed the warnings suggested by the bank. On the night of his first official speech for the Brotherhood, other foreboding signs appear. During the course of his speech, the invisible man raises the audience’s emotions to a fever pitch and, in the midst of such encouragement, strays outside his designated space: “I suddenly felt naked, sensing that ... something was about to be said that I shouldn’t reveal” (345). Since the narrator intimates a more personal approach to his speech, Brother Jack appears beside him, “pretending to adjust the microphone. ‘Careful now,’ he whispered. ‘Don’t end your usefulness before you’ve begun’” (345). The invisible man seems to ignore the admonishment: “I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become *more human*. ... I feel the urge to affirm my feelings” (346). Having asserted his individuality, the narrator has committed a grievous sin in the eyes of the Brotherhood. The connection he made with his audience is later belittled as being “wild, hysterical, politically irresponsible, and dangerous” (349). The limitations of the Brotherhood are beginning to surface.

The Brotherhood’s willful ignorance of the needs of African-Americans is most tragically foreshadowed by the fate of Tod Clifton, a character Morris Dickstein refers to as “the poster boy for the Harlem Brotherhood” (46). When the narrator first meets Clifton, he “[senses] a possible rival,” thus signaling his identification with him (Ellison 363). The narrator’s concern dissipates when it becomes clear that Brother Clifton “knew his business,” and the two become friends and powerful workmates (367). However, after a violent run-in with the militant black segregationist, Ras the Exhorter, Clifton disappears. The next time the narrator sees him, Clifton is selling Sambo dolls on the street. In his article “Bliss, or Blackface Sentiment,” Barry Shank argues that “Sambo, the dancing doll, enacts some of the worst stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy” (58). The narrator is dumbfounded by what he sees; he feels “betrayed” (Ellison 433). As he attempts to make sense of the scene, he wonders “Why had [Clifton] picked that way to earn a quarter?” (435). Dickstein offers a possible solution when he suggests that the strings of the Sambo doll “symbolize how [Clifton] himself felt manipulated [by the Brotherhood]” (46). The white members of the Brotherhood used him as a poster boy for black support; he had been allotted no more humanity than the “paper manifestation of blackface pleasure” represented by the Sambo doll (Shank 59). Before the narrator is able to recognize his own implication in this exploitation by the Brotherhood, he becomes distracted by tensions developing between Clifton and a white police officer. The police officer is trailing Clifton and starts to push him. When this harassment continues, Clifton turns around and knocks the officer

to the ground. Anticipating that he will surely be arrested for this, he places “his hands high, waiting” (Ellison 436). Clifton’s gesture of submission is apparently not enough; the police officer proceeds to shoot and kill him. As Shank points out, “[the] juxtaposition is startling. Interrupted selling apparently demeaning images, Clifton dies because he won’t be insulted or humiliated by the cop” (59). As Clifton lies bloody and lifeless on the sidewalk, the narrator notices “[a] round-headed, apple-cheeked boy with thickly freckled nose and Slavic eyes lean[ing] over the fence of the park above, and now as he saw me turn, he shrilled something to someone behind him, his face lighting up with ecstasy” (Ellison 437). A few moments later, the reason for the boy’s ecstasy becomes clear: “‘Hey, Mickey,’ the boy ... called, ‘the guy’s out cold!’” (438). The scene is becoming an all too familiar one—a white audience entertained by the suffering (and in this case, death) of a black man.

At this point in the narrative, the invisible man realizes he must make a change. He seems aware of the ultimate betrayal he will face at the hands of the Brotherhood and realizes the identity they have imposed upon him is an empty one. He begins to understand why Clifton would want to “plunge outside of history” (438), but decides to “[pursue] a less suicidal way of reclaiming his individuality” (Dickstein 46).

A potential solution to his dilemma appears in the figure of Rinehart. In an effort to disguise himself from Ras the Exhorter’s goon-squad, the narrator purchases a pair of sunglasses: “They were of a green glass so dark that it appeared black, and I put them on immediately, plunging into blackness and moving outside” (Ellison 482). His use of the word “plunge” here signifies the narrator’s preparedness to forge a new identity for himself. He furthers his masquerade by purchasing a wide hat. After several people mistake him for someone named Rinehart, he realizes the possibilities open to him: “I trembled with excitement ... It works, I thought. ... There is a magic in it” (485). As the narrator continues to be mistaken for Rinehart, he learns of Rinehart’s multiple identities: “Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend” (498). The narrator begins to see Rinehart as a model for his own life: “His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home” (498). Kevin Bell comments on why the narrator finds Rinehart so fascinating: “Beholden to no principle and no cause, this apotheosis of the nonidentitarian moves darkly through Harlem like an anthropomorphic unit of chaos; his look, his voice, his stride, his clothing, his ‘identity’ absolutely improvisational and exchangeable” (31). Dickstein specifies what Rinehart means to Ellison and his narrator: “Only Rinehart ... can negotiate ... the boundary-free world of modern urban identity. ... This is the novel’s version of the malleable, self-fashioned identity that Ellison invokes in his essays, a way of stepping out of imposed roles and shaping them to your needs” (46). For all of the promise Rinehart represents, however, there is one limitation to his approach to identity—he is still enslaved by the world of commerce. Each one of his many identities appears to be motivated by money. Even as Reverend he seems incapable of breaking commercial ties. The first suggestion of this is symbolic—his church is located in a converted store. Once the narrator enters the church and is identified as the Reverend, one of the church’s sisters immediately speaks to him about financial matters: “I have to see Sister Judkins about the money she collected for the building fund. And, Rever’n, last night I sold ten recordings of your inspiring sermon” (Ellison 497). The fact that Rinehart is peddling even his religious sermons

suggests that his motives as Reverend are not strictly of a spiritual kind.

Rinehart's flaw—his enslavement by commercial culture—is one the invisible man will correct for himself. But before he does so, he must endure (only in his subconscious, fortunately) a final lynching scenario. Upon realizing that he has been used by the Brotherhood to help launch the Harlem riot, the invisible man vows for revenge and begins searching for Jack. On his way, a white mob threatens him, and as he tries to run away, he falls into an open manhole and “plunge[s]” underground (565). Rather than fighting to resurface, he rests there and observes “It’s a kind of death without hanging” (566). He later dreams that he is “*the prisoner of a group consisting of Jack and old Emerson and Bledsoe and Norton and Ras and the school superintendent and a number of others whom I failed to recognize, but all of whom had run me*” (569). They proceed to castrate him and laugh at his suffering. Upon waking, he makes an emancipatory resolution for himself: “I was through [with their world] and, in spite of the dream, I was whole. ... So I would stay here until I was chased out. ... I would take up residence underground” (571).

By electing to live underground, the narrator is ridding himself of the last vestiges of his former life. As he now acknowledges, “my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself” (573). He is resolved to henceforth be the agent of his own identity, never again to accept society’s attempts to trammel his “world ... of infinite possibilities” (576). Kevin Bell summarizes the narrator’s newfound resolve as follows: “Stripped by experience of every designating and confining ‘rank,’ the Invisible Man now rejects the logic of designation as a bad faith strategy against the cultural entropy that alone lends naming its meaning, that alone enables the thinking of identity its elevation above the nothingness it combats” (32). The Invisible Man now lives in a “border area,” which symbolizes his opposition to restrictive identities (Ellison 5). Most importantly, he is a Rinehart without Rinehart’s flaw—he has severed himself from the commercial world that has played such an integral role in limiting his identity. He tells us that he uses the service of Monopolated Light & Power and “pay[s] them nothing at all, and they don’t know it” (5). In addition to his free use of electricity, he “live[s] rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites” (5-6). Every aspect of his current existence is a challenge to the forces that formerly controlled his life, an emphatic refusal to ever sell himself again. By entering into a kind of earthly womb, he has dedicated himself to constant reinvention, to the essence of what it means to be *human*.

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