

# Negotiations of Race and Gender in Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man"

**Verfasser:** Beate Kerpen  
Kapellenstraße 4  
54317 Korlingen

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My identity might begin with the fact of race, but it didn't, couldn't, end there.

At least that's what I would choose to believe.

---

Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father*

On November 4, 2008, Barack Hussein Obama was elected the first black president of the United States, marking a historic moment in the nation's coping with the legacies of slavery, segregation, and racial discrimination. Less than sixty years earlier, African Americans had still been second-class citizens obliged to travel in the back of the bus and deprived of the right to vote. Even today, the deep-structure of social inequality in the United States suspiciously often replicates racial patterns, as black people are disproportionately hit by poverty, unemployment, disease-related mortality, incarceration, or school drop-out (Roediger). For African Americans all over the country, the Obama election represented the belief that even the last racial barriers were bound to fall, promising to give black people eventually the equal share in the American Dream for which their grandparents, parents, or themselves had fought during the 1950s and 60s.

Apart from reinvigorating the hopes for definitive racial equality, however, the election of Barack Obama epitomized the restitution of black manhood after its devastating history of over three hundred years of physical and psychological enslavement (Akbar). For the black psychologist Na'im Akbar, Obama is a representative of a new generation of black males who have the 'audacity' to self-consciously affirm their racial background while refusing to let themselves be reduced to the narrow confines of race. The ease with which Obama both embraced and transcended his African roots in order to become the first black president of *all* Americans is the outcome of three hundred years of intense struggle, debate, affirmative action, and juridico-political intervention to resurrect black manhood from the painful debris of slavery.

As its very title suggests, Ralph Waldo Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) fully engages in the debate over black manhood. Being born in 1914 in Oklahoma City, Ellison grew up in a time when black people were facing severe discrimination, segregation, disenfranchisement, economic exploitation, and cruel victimization. Particularly for black males, life in the Jim Crow South was a thoroughly emasculating experience (Leak 42) which elided the castrating

effects of political accommodation with the material threat of lynching and castration at the slightest provocation.

Although Ellison grew up in the young frontier state of Oklahoma which had no tradition of slavery and where the climate of race relations was consequently much milder than elsewhere, the teenaged Ralph became the victim of various violent assaults, humiliating prank jokes, and abusive treatment by white racists (Jackson 79-82). Yet, in his 1964 introduction to *Shadow and Act*, Ellison invokes his adolescence in remarkably affirmative terms, conceiving of himself and his friends as “Renaissance Men” (xiii) living in a world of “possibility” (xiv):

[W]e felt ... that we were supposed to be whoever we would and could be and do anything and everything which other boys did, and do it better” (xvii). ... We fabricated our own heroes and ideals ... with an outrageous and irreverent sense of freedom .... We were ... members of a wild, free outlaw tribe which transcended the category of race.... [W]e were Americans ..., ‘frontiersmen’.” (xv)

Just one year earlier, in his “Message to the Grassroots” address, Malcolm X had offered a starkly different depiction of black people’s existence in the United States:

[W]e are all ... second-class citizens, ex-slaves. You are nothing but ... ex-slave[s]. You don’t like to be told that. But what else are you? You are ex-slaves. You didn’t come here on the “Mayflower.” You came here on a slave ship – in chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. And you were brought here by the people who came here on the “Mayflower.” ..., the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers. They were the ones who brought you here. (Malcolm X)

It is telling how both black men invoke national symbols – the frontier and the “Mayflower” – to define their relation to the American nation: While the militant black leader projects blacks as the victims of the American history of discovery and conquest, the writer refuses to envisage himself in the devastating terms laid down by Malcolm and inscribes himself into the narrative of the frontier. By appropriating the archetypal realm of white American freedom and manhood as the land of his youth, Ellison retrospectively chooses an identity for himself which is boldly self-assertive and unhampered by his racial background.

*Invisible Man* (1952) is a novel about black male identity which ponders Malcolm X’s question of what *else* black men are besides being racial subjects. In his discussion of black manhood, Ellison’s trope of invisibility captures not only the social, economic, and political marginality of his black protagonist in the Jim Crow south and the urban north of the 1930s; But equally the deeply-ingrained racist prejudices attending his ‘highly visible’ dark skin

which render him “*un-visible*” as an individual (Ellison, *Introduction to Invisible* xv) and which reduce him to a range of “fixed, stereotypical images” (Szymańko 25); Thirdly, the notion of ‘invisible manhood’ reverberates within the realm of gender, broaching the issue of symbolic and concrete emasculation.

The present study sets out to unravel the nexus of race, gender, and by extension, sexuality, in Ralph Ellison’s depiction of black manhood. While the first part of it examines the discursive construction of black masculinity in Western discourses since the Enlightenment, the second focuses exclusively on *Invisible Man*. Beginning with the plight of black men in the context of the United States, chapter one probes into the significance of the emergence of lynching and castration. The ritualistic deployment of emasculation in the aftermaths of the abolition of slavery testifies to a paradigmatic shift in the construction of black masculinity, as racial alterity became increasingly translated into a logic of gender difference. Simultaneously, lynching and castration practices were subtended by a range of repressed fears and fantasies about racial and sexual border crossing, which accounts for the appearance of the myth of the aggressively over-endowed rapists and the preoccupation with miscegenation.

The second chapter embeds the construction of African American masculinity within the broader framework of Western race thinking since the Enlightenment, dismantling how Western discourses have strategically interwoven essentialist notions about race and gender in order to construe the black man as the inferior Other which was forestalled from citizenship. Apart from exploring the significance of the abjected Other for the white Western identity, the analysis further examines the nexus between discourse and power, revealing how the discursive Othering of the black man secured the perpetuation of the exploitative systems of colonialism and slavery.

Chapter three analyzes the predicament of inhabiting a black body in the scopic regime of racism. Apart from probing into the black subject’s predicament of having to develop a corporeal ego from a body which looks different from the defined norm, the third chapter explores the mechanisms by which racist and sexist domination are reproduced within the field of vision. The scopic regime of racism not only reproduces symbolic castration within the visual field by conferring upon the black male the spectularity of the female body, but it further imposes on the black male body an extreme visibility/virility which codifies it as both an object of racial and sexual desire, and of panoptic surveillance.

The second part of “Negotiations of Race and Gender in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” begins with an analysis of key scenes, such as the Battle Royal, the Sybil rape, the Trueblood episode, or the encounter with the young gay Emerson, in order to analyze, along the lines of race and gender, the ‘invisible’ black male identities which Ellison seeks to transcend. Apart from exploring the oscillation between the paradigms of hypermasculinity and castration, chapter four traces the processes by which the black body becomes a surface onto which whites displace their hidden fears and fantasies.

Eventually, chapter five turns to the self-conscious narrator speaking from the hole. Analyzing the castration dream as the entrance into self-consciousness, the chapter argues that Ellison rejects phallogentric models of black manhood in favor of a black male subject whose agency derives from its embrace of vernacular culture as well as from its narrative intervention in discourse.



# I.

## **The Discursive Construction of Black Masculinity:**

### **Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality**

## 1. The Plight of Black Men: A History of Lynchings and Castrations

Lynching constituted “a defining and traumatic moment” (Schwenk 312) in the lives of African Americans until the 1960s or well beyond. It epitomized the vulnerability of black people in the face of legal arbitrariness and moral double standards in the racist society of the United States – a trauma which has shaped and haunted the imagination of black writers up to this day. Many elderly African Americans still live to remember the histories and news photographs of violated black bodies hanging from trees or being laid out in open caskets while the younger generations have witnessed on TV what they have felt to be modern enactments of the paradigmatic violence against black bodies (Cunningham 134), such as the brutal Rodney King beating by Los Angeles police officers in 1991, or the discursive framing of “Willie” Horton as the prototype of the black-man-as-rapist during the 1988 presidential campaign.<sup>1</sup>

The threat of lynching had particularly devastating effects on the psyche of black males. Not only were black men, quantitatively, the primary target of mob violence but lynching constituted “the final part of [their] emasculation” (Harris x). Since the days of chattel slavery, African American males had been deprived of the privileges of patriarchal manhood, be they sexual, economic, or political (Ibid.). Even after the abolition of slavery, black men continued to be dispossessed of their manhood as whites instituted mob activity as a new method to keep blacks under control. Hidden under (significantly white) bed sheets, the former masters and overseers now organized in the Ku Klux Klan to force the freedmen back into a social position of political submission and economic quasi slavery.

Yet, lynching also represents the black man’s emasculation in a literal way: From the end of the nineteenth century onwards, lynch mobs increasingly often castrated their black victims, especially when the black male was accused of the ‘unforgiveable crime’ – sexual intercourse with a white woman, no matter if rape or romance. Castration became a ritual which reminded the black male “of how fragile his possession of himself, his manhood,

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<sup>1</sup> Many other examples from the past two or three decades could be cited to support the claim that contemporary media representations of black males continue to be informed by the legacy and rhetoric of racism and lynching. According to Elizabeth Alexander, black bodies in pain for public consumption still function as an American spectacle, e.g. the Clarence Thomas Senate hearings, the Mike Tyson rape trial, or Magic Johnson’s televised press conference about his AIDS infection (92). See Alexander; Cunningham 132-135; Saint-Aubin 1057 f.. Sabine Sielke analyzes how recent discussions about rape incidents have continued to deploy the “rhetoric of rape” which “draws upon a whole cultural register generated in the course of late-nineteenth-century interracial conflicts and national identity formation,” and which relies on the presupposition of the black rapist, the pure white woman, and the consequential lynching campaign. See Sielke, *Rape* 1.

[could] be” (Marriott 15); At the same time, it testified to a paradigmatic shift in the discursive construction of black masculinity, as racial alterity became increasingly translated into a logic of sexual and sexualized difference (Wiegman, *Lynching* 467).

### **1.1. Lynching: Some facts and figures**

It is impossible to give exact figures of the number of people lynched in the United States. Starting in 1882, the *Chicago Tribune* was the first to take systematic account of lynchings occurring throughout the country (White 227) – prior to this date no reliable data exists at all (R. Gibson). Following in the wake of the *Chicago Tribune*, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Tuskegee Institute became two other major sources of lynching statistics. While all three institutions based their collections of data on ‘official’ accounts, such as newspaper reports, not all lynching incidents ‘made it’ into the city newspapers, either because they were not ‘spectacular’ enough to be of public interest, or because they had occurred in the rural areas and simply went unnoticed (R. Gibson). In order to make up for the information gap, the three institutions had to use additional, ostensibly less reliable sources of knowledge, such as eye-witnesses. Pursuing largely different policies in the evaluation of their informants’ accounts, however, the three have come up with highly divergent figures; Tuskegee providing the highest number of lynchings, and the NAACP, following a policy of under-statement, the lowest (White 229).

In 1905, James Elbert Cutler was the first scholar to conduct a thorough investigation of the history of lynching in the United States. He compared and cross-checked data provided by the *Chicago Tribune* with other sources of evidence such as personal correspondence or additional newspaper files. Cutler arrived at the conclusion that between 1882 and 1903 a total number of 3,337 lynchings had occurred in the United States – in nearly 62 % of the cases the victim was black (White 228-31). According to the famous anti-lynching activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, however, the true number was much higher: Trying to account for the cases not documented in the official records, Wells-Barnett estimated that by 1895 roughly 10,000 people had been “tried by Judge Lynch” (8). Relying nonetheless on Cutler’s earlier ‘less dramatic’ figures, Walter White undertook an extensive investigation into lynching which spanned the years from 1882 through the 1920s. According to White’s study, the number of people lynched by 1927 totaled 4,951 – 92 females and 4,859 males (White 227). In terms of racial distribution, he found out that 71 % of all lynching victims were African Americans (Ibid.), which means that the number of lynchings perpetrated for racist motives had increased

by nearly 10 % after the turn of the century. White's findings therefore not only manifested a rise of racism during the early decades of the twentieth century but unequivocally identified black males as the primary target of mob violence. This tendency was most evident in the former slave states of the South (Ibid. 234): In Louisiana and Alabama, black males made up 85 % of all recorded lynching victims; in Georgia and Mississippi, even over 90 %.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2. The history of lynching

Emerging in the second half of the eighteenth century, lynching was not originally invented as a racist practice, but constituted an extra-legal system of justice to enforce the law on the Frontier where trial courts were out of reach (White 3; 83 f.). Although researchers have not definitely agreed on the word's etymology yet, White assumes that the term 'to lynch' derives from the name of the chief magistrate of such an extra-legal 'court,' Charles Lynch from Virginia, who reputedly punished criminals and Tories hampering the struggle for freedom from England (83 f.). Although occasionally including capital punishment, the verb 'to lynch' did not originally mean 'to put to death' but referred to some sort of personal castigation, such as whipping or being ridden out of town on a rail (Cutler 116; Harris 6). Contrary to later developments, the majority of lynching victims were not black but white men. Given that slavery had become firmly established as a practice, black bodies had a concrete market value which the white masters did not want to lose senselessly (White 92). Ironically, therefore, it was under the system of chattel slavery that blacks were quite well protected against execution by a mob – a privilege white males sentenced to death did not enjoy.

Beginning in the 1830s, however, lynching underwent a major semantic and conceptual change to signify "the ritualistic murder" of blacks (Zangrando 4). This shift started in the agitated socio-economic landscape of the decades preceding the Civil War (1861-1865), when heightened anti-slavery feeling and the demand for the emancipation of black people began to threaten and destabilize the system of white supremacy. It was in this context that lynching first came to be used systematically against blacks to dissuade them from rebellion, particularly through the deployment of unprecedented cruelties and tortures (White 23-39).

Still, the significance of lynching as a full-blown racist practice did not become evident until after the Civil War. The socio-economic transformations wrought by the abolition of slavery, the electoral reforms, and the unrealized promise of land redistribution during and after the Reconstruction years (1865-1876) radically upset the social and political structures

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<sup>2</sup> For the complete charts of lynching statistics organized by year, state, sex, and race, see White 230-69.

of the antebellum South (Gates, *Preface* 11). With the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, blacks were granted full citizenship and legal rights. As a consequence of this ‘assault’ on whites’ heretofore uncontested social and political leadership, the Reconstruction period saw anti-black sentiment escalate. Contrary to the promise of racial equality which Reconstruction had seemed to offer, racial hatred was fomented by white elites throughout the South (D’Emilio and Freedman 216), so that, by the end of the nineteenth century, new methods of racial control had been devised, turning *de jure* discrimination into a comprehensive system of *de facto* racial inequality. And from the start, as John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman have pointed out, “the system of Jim Crow relied on lynching as its ultimate weapon of enforcement” (Ibid.).

In direct analogy to the events following the abolition of slavery, the number of black people lynched shot up in the decades after Reconstruction, the peak years being 1892 and 1893 (White 231). Black people had not only “ceased to be valuable as property” (Cutler 135) but they had entered into a competitive relationship with whites for education, suffrage, and economic success (Wiegman, *Lynching* 455-8). Particularly the black male constituted a threat to the heretofore unquestioned supremacy of white males. In the social order of the late nineteenth-century in which women, irrespective of their color, were still unenfranchised and “subjugat[ed] to patriarchal masters” (Melbourne 3), the black male had politically advanced “over white middle-class women” (Marable 72). Having achieved the right to vote through the Fifteenth Amendment, black males were now legally aligned with their white ‘brothers’ in the shared (male) leadership of society (Wiegman, *Lynching* 457-9). It was the “loss of security of the white patronym and an attendant displacement of the primacy of the white male” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 452) which gave impetus to the practice of lynching after the Civil War. Mob violence had become a major device to force black people, particularly black males, back into “social and economic subordination” (Schwenk 312). As James Cutler points out, it was in this context that the verb ‘to lynch’ was resemanticized to mean “to put to death” (116).

### **1.3. Lynching as a communal ritual**

The changed significance of lynching as a racial castigation also becomes manifest with regard to the way it was performed. As the lynching of black people became an increasingly

common practice after Reconstruction, it had established a range of fixed “ingredients.”<sup>3</sup> Lynchings were public events that attracted large crowds of spectators – sometimes through literal advertisement in the newspaper (Harris 6). Under the auspices of the town’s leading citizens, people from all strata of the white society came together, bringing along their children as well as food and drink, making “a holiday of the occasion” (Ibid.). Lynchings were grotesque festivities with “drunken, orgy-like atmospheres” (Comer 134). The crowd was in a frenzy while the victim was being tortured. Beatings, mutilations, dismemberments, and the gathering of body parts as trophies constituted fixed elements of the ritual before the final *dénouement* of hanging and burning alive (Harris 2). As a special “rite (or right)” of lynching (Marriott 5), whites took pictures of the gruesome scene thus conserving the mutilated black corpse for the family photo album. These photographs were both visual signifiers for “the position accorded blacks in southern racial discourse” (Cunningham 132), as well as “public portraits” which permitted whites to fashion the self through the image of the dead black man (Marriott 5f.): Looking straight into the camera, some grinning, others pointing to the hanged black victim, whites posed as judges and executioners in the lives of black people, crafting an identity from the scene of annihilation (Ibid. 5 f.).<sup>4</sup>

In the wake of the abolition of slavery, organized mob violence against black individuals emerged as “an American ritual” (Harris 1). Having lost its initial rationale of chastising individuals guilty of crime, lynching had become a ceremony for whites to vent their anger and anxieties over the legal emancipation of blacks. Through the eradication of one black scapegoat, whites found a way to enact and ritually assert “certain *beliefs* ... vital to the [white] community” (Ibid. 11), most notably their “racial, economic, psychological, and moral superiority” over blacks (Ibid. 18 f.). As the following analysis of lynching and castration practices as well as the narrative of the black rapist will show, the ritualistic destruction of black males functioned as a valve through which whites released not only deep-

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<sup>3</sup> For newspaper reports illustrating the “ingredients” of lynching, see Harris 1-19; For further information on lynching and mob violence see: Cutler; Evans; McGovern, James R.. *Anatomy of a Lynching: The Killing of Claude Neal*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982; The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918*. 1919. New York: Arno Press, 1969; Trelease, Allen W.. *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction*. New York: Harper and Row, 1971; Wells-Barnett; Whitefield, Stephen J.. *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till*. New York: Free Press, 1988. 16-19; Williamson, Joel. *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South since Emancipation*. New York: Oxford UP, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Various photographs of lynching scenes have been reprinted in Marriott 4, 7, 8. For further examples of artefacts from popular culture, such as postcards or cartoons, showing lynching scenes, see: Henry Louis Gates Jr.. “The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black.” *Representations* 24 (Fall 1988): 129-155.

seated fears and anxieties about the liberated black man but a series of repressed sexual desires and fantasies as well.

#### 1.4. Castration

Castration testifies to the “complicated process of sexualization and engendering” that mediated the black man’s “transformation from chattel to citizenry” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 446) in the aftermath of the Civil War. The formerly unequivocal binary of white master/black slave had officially been dissolved in favor of a socio-political system of racial equality. In the patriarchal order of the post-bellum era, only gender remained in place as an unquestioned category of difference granting power to males and denying it to females. The black man’s social status after Emancipation was therefore rearticulated, on the basis of his gender, as one of social sameness with the white male (Ibid. 447).

For Robyn Wiegman, the ritualized deployment of castration attests to white males’ refusal of “extend[ing] ... the privileges of patriarchy” to black men (*Lynching* 450): By cutting off the primary signs of power in patriarchal culture – the testicles and the penis – they interrupted the “privilege of the phallus” and thereby disavowed the black man’s “(masculine) potentiality for citizenship” (Ibid. 446). On the symbolic level of the body, castration reinterpreted the black man’s essential (racial) difference as one of gender difference by literally inscribing onto the black body the “phallic lack characteristic of the feminine” (Ibid. 450).

As Nancy Stepan and many others have pointed out, the analogy between race and gender had long existed in Western discourse.<sup>5</sup> Since the days of Enlightenment, various academic disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and craniology, had sprung up to identify and catalogue distinctive traits of foreign races, fostering “an extensive discourse on racial inequality” (Stepan 39). When attention came to be focused increasingly on sexual difference in the course of the nineteenth century (Ibid.), the “putatively natural presupposition of sexual difference” came to abet “the construction of a black/white conception of racial difference” (Kim 73). In the biosocial science of human variation, racial difference was translated into a vocabulary of gender and vice versa, so that “lower races represented the ‘female’ type of the

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<sup>5</sup> Carroll; Kim 65-82; Weigel, Sigrid. “Die nahe Fremde – Das Territorium des Weiblichen. Zum Verhältnis von Wilden und Frauen im Diskurs der Aufklärung.“ *Die andere Welt. Studien zum Exotismus*. Ed. Thomas Koebner and Gerhard Pickerodt. Frankfurt/Main: Athenäum, 1987. 171-199.

human species, and females the ‘lower race’ of gender” (Stepan 39 f.).<sup>6</sup> The famous American sociologist Robert Park has provided a prominent example of the scientific language of “racial feminization” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 465) in his 1921 textbook *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, where he describes “the Negro” as “the lady among the races” (Park and Burgess 138 f.). The practice of castration made of such metaphors hard facts: the dis-membered black male visibly belonged to “the fragmented and decidedly feminized realm of the body” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 449), thus offering proof of the black male’s essential distance from white manhood both in terms of his racial difference and with regard to his lack of masculinity.

The symbolic conflation of blackness and femininity is moreover inherent to the very act of castration, not just to its result. In “a patriarchal culture where power is gendered masculine and powerlessness feminine” (Carroll 144), the castrator and the castrated engage in heavily gendered roles in their encounter. Holding a position of active execution and control over the entire scenario, the (white) castrator enacts an outspokenly masculine role for which the weapon he bears functions as a potent symbol: A phallic instrument in itself, the knife produces the irrevocable cut through which the black body is bereaved of its claim to phallic agency. Being relegated to the feminine role of “submission and yielding to the control of others” (Melbourne 4), the (black) castrated, on the contrary, becomes the “bearer,” not the “maker,” of the American debate over race and sex (Mulvey 15; Saunders 1-5). (T)His part is passive, indeed, receptive of the castrator’s knife/phallus, and ends in the physical feminization through the castrating cut.

The subtextual analogy of race, gender, and power in the scenario of white-on-black castration was sometimes staged in a highly explicit fashion, as the following verbatim account from an eyewitness of the 1934 lynching of Claude Neal reveals: “After taking the nigger to the woods ... they cut off his penis. He was made to eat it. Then they cut off his testicles and made him eat them and say he liked it” (qtd. in Evans 38). The observer describes the lynching and castration scene in terms of a grotesque sexual encounter between the white mob and Claude Neal. By feeding the black man his own bloody excised sexual organs, the white males symbolically engage in oral intercourse with the black man, forcing the latter to take the passive, feminine part. Trudier Harris has come to a similar conclusion in her interpretation of lynching and castration as a “communal rape” of the black man (23). She not only reiterates the idea of racial feminization by envisioning the black man as the victim

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<sup>6</sup> For examples of the race-gender analogy in anthropometric, medical, and embryological sciences see Gould, Stephen J.. *The Mismeasure of Man*. New York: Norton, 1981; Haller, John S. and Haller, Robin S.. *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1974.



of rape, but further highlights the ironic ambivalence of the construction of black males in public discourse whose racial feminization, or phallic lack, through castration was usually preceded by the narrative of the hypermasculine, overendowed rapist.

The disciplinary practice of lynching and castration offered triple empowerment to the white male: Socially, he could reaffirm his superiority over the black race after Emancipation; Symbolically, castration enabled him to ‘fuck,’ or, in Harris’ words, “rape” the black man like a woman and thereby assert his patriarchal authority; And sexually, castration effected “a symbolic transfer of sexual power” (Harris 22) from the emasculated black man to his white castrator. In the lynching of Claude Neal, this enhanced masculine potency is symbolized by the white man’s hold of the black man’s penis (which, by implication, is bigger and more potent than his own). By using it in a sexually explicit manner, he avails himself of the black man’s dreaded yet craved for hypermasculine potential, which his own white racial identity prohibits as “sexual excess” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 464).

Lynching and castration practices not only disclose white males’ fascination with black men’s sex and sexuality, however, but further reveal a persistent undercurrent of homoeroticism which, arguably, motivated it. As both Robyn Wiegman and Trudier Harris have pointed out, the performance of castration enabled “a perverse level of physical intimacy” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 465) with the black male. White castrators “spent an inordinate amount of time examining the genitals of the black men whom they were about to kill,” giving the impression of “fondling, of envious caress” (Harris 22). Kester’s description of the grotesque sucking scene described above renders the homoerotic dimension of castration entirely explicit: In a kind of *ersatz* action, the black man is made to enact a sexual fantasy outlawed by the white racial and cultural identity. Castration therefore constitutes both “a sadistic enactment of the homoerotic” and “its most extreme disavowal” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 465).

The ritualistic “destruction of the phallic black beast” (Ibid. 464) through castration thus afforded white males with an occasion to indulge in a series of repressed desires incompatible with their white racial identity. “[C]rav[ing] the very thing he is forced to destroy” (Harris 22), the white man exploits the pretext of castigation to break, for a short moment, a series of sexual taboos, such as homoeroticism, interracial sex, and bestial hyper-sexuality. It is through the violent chop of the knife that he finally restores himself to ‘normality,’ triumphing not only over the black male but also over his own unholy fantasies. As the black psychiatrist James Comer has pointed out, lynchings “served as a catharsis by purging the evil the whites feared in themselves and ‘projected’ onto the blacks” (134). Lynching and

castration therefore offered a socially sanctioned way for white males to live through some of their innermost lusts and longings while promising a safe retreat back into their white civilized identity.

### 1.5. The myth of the black rapist

Although mob violence became a retribution for all kinds of transgressions ranging from felonious assault to minor offenses or for no reason at all, the Southern folk tradition held that black males were lynched for having committed “the nameless crime” – the rape of a white woman (R. Gibson). This perception is greatly distorted, as Cutler’s study reveals since just 34 % of the officially recorded lynchings between 1882 and 1903 were on the charge of rape “either attempted, alleged, or actually committed” (175 f.). To put this percentage into perspective, at the time, any kind of contact between a black man and a white woman was liable to be interpreted as rape (Ibid.), pushing the true figure even lower. Notwithstanding these facts, the narrative of black-on-white rape and the attendant image of the mythically endowed black beast became deeply rooted in the white imagination as the primary “means for inciting and explaining the mob’s violence” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 446 f.). The following folk rhyme illustrates the significance of (white) American folkloric forms, literature, and art for the construction of black masculinity:

Black Man [seeing an attractive white woman]: Oh, Lord, will I ever?

White Man: No, nigger, never!

Black Man: As long as there’s life, there’s hope.

White Man: And as long as there’s trees, there’s rope. (qtd. in Dance 101)<sup>7</sup>

The myth of the overly endowed black rapist and the rise of lynching in the context of black people’s emancipation at the end of the nineteenth century (Sielke, *Black Beauties* 103) testifies to the fact that the renegotiated status of black masculinity stirred, apart from economic and political fears, great sexual anxieties in white males (Marable 71). Under the system of slavery, white males had enjoyed the exclusive entitlement not only to white women but particularly to interracial sex. Michel Foucault has discussed the significance of sex for the maintenance and reproduction of hegemonic dominance in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), where he argues that power places sex “in a binary system: licit and illicit, permitted and forbidden” (83) in order to perpetuate its own claims to hegemony. While the black slave’s miscegenation was instituted as an absolute taboo for which he could be

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<sup>7</sup> For further examples of racist jokes and rhymes see Dance 101-109.

castrated and killed, the white master's interracial sex and rape as well as his fathering of extramarital, racially mixed children, was legally covered by the 'one-drop criterion': Abrogated the Anglo-American tradition of primogeniture, Southern state legislature ruled that children with up to one drop of black blood did not inherit their (white) father's property, but followed the condition of their (black slave) mother. The master's prerogative of racial and sexual border crossing not only reveals the entwined economies of power and pleasure, but simultaneously enabled the white male to augment his supply of free slave labor (JanMohamed, *Sexuality* 104).

The emergence of the possibility of the inverse case of interracial sex after the abolition of slavery posed a threat to the system of white masculine racial and patriarchal supremacy. While the white-master-black-slave kind of interracial sex had worked to further cement the white man's double role of master/father over both blacks (irrespective of their gender) and women (irrespective of their race) (Schwenk 321), the potentiality of the inverse kink of miscegenation threatened to explode the white male's politico-sexual supremacy over blacks while jeopardizing the ultimate trophy of his paternal/patriarchal control – the subservient white woman (Evans 30). Reconstruction thus tossed white males in “a [sexual] war with two fronts” (Ibid.), namely to assert their own right to have sex with black women, while keeping black males out of white women's beds (and, of course, vice versa!).

The “rape mythos” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 456) responded to the intricacies of Southern race, sex, and power relations by organizing them into a “triangle of desire” which positioned black and white men “as adversaries in a contest over the body of women” (Cunningham 135). Figuring the black male as a sexual monster, a brutish aggressor with a dreadfully big penis ready to deflower the pure and fragile white woman, the rape scenario envisioned the white man's role as that of the ultimate protector, not just of womanhood but of white American culture and civilization at large (Harris 20).<sup>8</sup> The discursive framing of black males as overly endowed beasts not only permitted white males to rationalize the institution of the interracial taboo which barred black men *access* to white women (and thus extended white males' power over black males to the realm of sexual control); it further worked to justify the perversity of lynching and castration by making it appear a just retribution for the transgression (Sielke, *Black Beauties* 103). At the same time, the reinvestment of the image of the “chaste, virtuous and sexually passive” (Evans 30) white woman consolidated the white male's paternalistic dominance over (white) woman: Placing her in a position in need of his

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<sup>8</sup> Katrin Schwenk critiques Harris for not including the role of the black woman in her exploration of lynching and rape, thus limiting her discussion to the one-sided discourse of race while failing to take into account the added complexities of gender (319 ff.). See also Evans 30 f..

protection permitted him to trade his shelter for her “acquiescence to [her] status as property” (Schwenk 321). In a time when the first female voices were becoming loud to claim women’s suffrage, the creation of the myth of the black man as a rapist monster helped to perpetuate not just antebellum racial hierarchies but gender and class hierarchies as well (Harris 19; Schwenk 321).

In her psychoanalytic reading of the rape mythos, Jane Gaines suggests that the construction of the black male as rapist is at base a displacement of the white male’s unconscious craving and conflict as regards his own rape of black women. Gaines argues that the sexual triangle underlying the rape mythos presents

a sexual scenario to rival the Oedipal myth: the black woman sexually violated by the white man but the fact of her rape repressed and displaced onto the virginal white woman, and thus used symbolically as the justification for the actual castration of the black man. (24)

Transporting his own psychic disquiets onto the black male body, the white man seeks resolution for a range of subconscious fears and fantasies that compound questions of race with questions of sex. The mutation of the gentle Uncle Tom into a “violent sex offender” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 459) at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century tells the tale of not only deep national crisis and anxiety but of a crisis of white masculinity in the face of the socio-political and sexual threats posed by the black male after Emancipation. At the same time, the figure of the black rapist reflected back to whites their own displaced fears of and fantasies about racial and sexual border crossing, such as homoeroticism, interracial sex, or rape. It was through the public destruction of the phallic black beast, no matter if discursively or physically, that these dark desires could be disavowed, restoring the normal order of race and sex relations, so that whites ultimately “create[d] the image [they] must castrate” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 464).

## 2. The Discursive Construction of the Black Man as Other

The contradictory projections of black manhood as “feminized docility” on the one hand and “hypermasculinized phallicity” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 459) on the other indicates that racial alterity is complexly imbricated with gender and sexual difference (Silverman, *Threshold* 31). It further shows that ideas about ‘the black man’ have not been stable over time but have been shaped historically, culturally, and politically (Hall 91, 93). When the black Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon asserted in 1952 that “[t]he Negro is not. Any more than the white man” (231), he radically repudiated the century-old belief in racial essentialism in favor of a black subjectivity not circumscribed by its biological attributes. The rise of poststructuralism and postmodernism in the 1960s has provided scholars with the theoretical framework to systematically rethink traditional paradigms such as race, gender, or sexuality, question their validity, investigate their discursive formation, and debunk the relationship between discourse, knowledge, and power.

Under the culturalist assumption that blackness, like masculinity or sexuality, is not ‘natural,’ but a politically and culturally constructed category (Julien and Mercer 5; Stanton 16), the subsequent section sets out to investigate the discursive formation of the black subject as ‘the Other’ in the Western discourses of the Enlightenment. Beginning with some theoretical considerations as regards the symbolic category of ‘the Other,’ the present chapter will dismantle the ocularcentrism of the concept of ‘race,’ as well as some discursive strategies by which black males were forestalled from the prevailing notion of ‘manhood’ in the discourses of the Western Enlightenment. While the construction of the black Other permitted the Western self to envision and strengthen its own identity (Lewis 29), it further put whites in a position of authority and control, which set the stage for the expropriation, exploitation, and enslavement of non-white peoples.

### 2.1. Subject formation via difference: Othering and identity

One of the seminal texts to theorize the processes of identity formation via Othering is Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). According to Said, the Orient did not exist as a ‘fact’ of nature but was a “European invention” (1) of the post-Enlightenment era. By constructing the Orient as an “ontological and epistemological” antithesis to the Occident (Ibid. 2), European culture “gained in strength and identity” by setting itself off against the Other (Ibid. 3). One of

the major achievements of *Orientalism* is its dismantling of the mechanisms of discursive and representational strategies by which statements *about* the Other are naturalized into essentialist concepts of Otherness. Building on Foucault's definition of discourse as a system of statements through which the world is brought into being, Said conceives of the Orient as a phenomenon that came alive in the Western texts about it (20), both in openly imaginative genres and in the so-called "truthful texts" like history, political treatises, or philological analyses (21). According to Said, generations of scholars, artists, writers, and politicians produced the Orient by making it "visible, clear, 'there' in discourse about it" (22), which is why he does not conceive of the Orient as a 'presence' but a "delivered presence, ... a *re-presence*" (21). By "render[ing] [the Orient's] mysteries plain for and to the West" (Ibid. 21), Western discourse and modes of representation (to which Said refers as "Orientalism") turned 'the Orient' into an object of Western knowledge, and thus bestowed "intellectual authority" upon the West (Ibid. 19). Postulating Western culture and identity to be superior to that of the Orient (Ibid. 7), Orientalism put the Occident in a position of legitimized power, domination, and hegemony over the Orient (Ibid. 5).

Said's discussion of the discursive formation of the Orient as the counter-image of the Occident is a good starting point for understanding the processes of Othering involved in the construction of subjectivity. According to Judith Butler, subjectivity is formed through the mechanics of "exclusion and abjection" (3). 'The Other' is an abstract category to designate the "domain of abject beings ... who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (Ibid.). Being an embodiment of deviance and monstrosity, the Other is "both liminal and structurally central to our perception of normal human subjectivity" since it renders the latter conceptually possible (Braidotti 141). As Butler points out, the Other occupies a highly ambivalent place in the psyche of the subject: Although lying by definition outside the self as a "site of dreaded identification," it simultaneously resides at all times "'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (Butler 3). Rosi Braidotti has argued along the same line that the Other is "both Same and Other, ... neither a total stranger nor completely familiar" (Braidotti 141), for which many other scholars have found telling images: Using the metaphor of a mirror, Sander Gilman describes the Other as a "reflection or distortion of the self" (23), Edward Said speaks of a kind of "underground self" (3), and Carola Kaplan conceptualizes it as "the undiscovered territory in the self". What these depictions have in common is the shared understanding that the Other contains subconscious elements of the self, which is why Kaja Silverman utilizes the Freudian defence mechanism of 'displacement' as a vantage point for theorizing the procedure of Othering: Since the psyche "works to constitute as alien and

external what it cannot accept about itself,” the Other is a site onto which the cultural consciousness displaces its most secret fears and fantasies (Silverman, *Threshold* 169), thus rendering them safe for dealing with. As the previous analysis of lynching and castration has shown, African Americans functioned as this deeply ambivalent Other in the white imagination. Offering a surface onto which the white self transferred its own tabooed anxieties and desires, such as interracial sex, homoeroticism, and rape, the black body permitted whites to purge themselves of that which they abjected in themselves through the corporeal annihilation – a literal abjection – of the blacks scapegoat.

The systematic Othering of certain groups (such as women, racial subjects, homosexuals, etc.) displays the Gordian knot of discourse and power. As Stefan Brandt argues, the division of cultural center and periphery is an effect of “the dominant rhetoric” which creates the “axiomatic boundaries” by which certain bodies are excluded from the privileged ranks of selfhood and banished into the cultural, political, and social margins (315). According to Sander Gilman, the construction of “hard line[s] of difference” between the self and the Other becomes particularly pronounced when the dominant order is afraid of losing its hegemonic position in the face of cultural alterity (21; 27). In order to maintain control (Ibid. 27), the dominant order invests the Other with a range of qualities that bear “little or no relationship to any external reality” (Ibid. 21) and which can even oscillate between diametrically opposed forms, as the contradictory projections of black masculinity discussed earlier have shown. The Other is “protean,” which means that it can take many different shapes and forms without ever appearing inappropriate, contradictory, or impossible (Gilman 21).

Notwithstanding its mutability, the Other is always the binary opposite of the self with regard to a number of categories of difference, such as race, class, gender, or sexuality. Each of these categories yields a dualism which works, individually or collectively, to rearticulate the fundamental dichotomy of self/Other. Abdul R. JanMohamed speaks of the “trope of manichean allegory” to describe the relationship between self and Other as a “field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions” (*Economy* 82) which put the self in a relation of “*positional* superiority” (*Sexuality* 106). The manichean allegory further works to align the dualism(s) characterizing the relationship of self and Other with the underlying binary of good and evil, thus transforming racial, social, historical, and cultural difference into moral and metaphysical difference (*Economy* 80; *Sexuality* 106). As John Hodge argues, the dualism of good and evil and the attendant notion of *morality* play a fundamental role in the justification of oppression: By projecting certain bodies as evil, the self believes to have “greater moral worth” (Hodge 89), so that oppressive acts and violence against the Other can be rationalized as joining “the

forces of good in the struggle against evil” (Ibid.). It was under this premise of moral authority that the West justified conquest, forced labor, and expropriation of non-white peoples during the colonial period (Bhabha 101).

On the level of semiotics, post-structuralists and feminists have long unveiled the violence and hierarchization that inheres any binary structure, since the resolution of dualisms insists on the domination of one term over the other: white over black, male over female, civilized over primitive, self over Other, and so on (Lewis 124; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 24). While the attributes characterizing the self are taken to be “the unmarked universal” (Burgett 244), those distinguishing the Other are perceived in terms of deviance. Many cultural critics have deconstructed the very ideas of normality and deviance as the result of “process[es] of signification” (Bhabha 50) which reflect the ideological framework of the hegemonic order, that is the “largely concealed structure of values, which informs and underlies our factual statements ... [and] which have some kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social power” (Eagleton 13). Othering is thus a process which circumscribes the fundamental nexus of discourse and power: The Other is constructed as an excluded and mastered subject in the language and signification of the hegemonic order, while it is precisely through the existence of the Other that the hegemonic order derives its power and further cements its dominance.

## **2.2. Race as a visual economy**

The idea of the racial Other attained prominence in the post-Renaissance era when Europeans were discovering and colonizing unknown lands in the Americas, Africa, the Middle East, India, and East Asia. In the face of sustained contact with different(-looking) human groups, the invention of the concept of ‘race’ permitted their systematic classification and ranking into a hierarchy of human variation. Discourses of racial difference crucially hinged upon what Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla have termed “embodied deviance,” that is

the historically and culturally specific belief that deviant social behavior ... manifests in the materiality of the body, as a cause or an effect, or perhaps as merely a suggestive trace.... [It designates] the scientific and popular postulate that the body of subjects classified as deviant are essentially marked in some recognizable fashion. (2)

While during the earliest contacts between white and black men the color of the skin failed to function as a criterion of human difference (Jordan 4; 12), in the course of the sixteenth century ‘race’ became increasingly constituted as “a visual phenomenon” hinging upon “the



[black] body as the locus of difference” (Wiegman, *American* 22). Postulating the physical and epidermal specificity of the white ethnicity as the unmarked norm (Julien and Mercer 6; Burgett 244), racial discourse sanctioned the interpretation of certain somatic features, such as dark skin, kinky hair, or the shape and size of the genitalia, as reliable indicators of an essential inner difference (Gilman 25). In the scopic regime of racism, whiteness “secured universal consent to its hegemony ... by masking its coercive force with the invisibility that marks off the Other as all too visible, *coloured*” (Julien and Mercer 6). Just as Jews wearing the star of David, blacks were subjected to a “hyperbolic visibility” which rested on “a compelling series of visual signifiers” (Silverman, *Threshold* 153).

Particularly with the rise of (pseudo-)scientific disciplines such as craniometry, physiognomy, and phrenology in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the idea that racial truth was lodged in the skin reached its zenith and entailed the systematic *observation* of black bodies both in science as well as in empirical philosophy. When the French aristocrat and diplomat Count Joseph de Gobineau presented his influential racial typology *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1854), he traced human variation to the ostensibly “obvious and unacculturated phenomenon” (Wiegman, *American* 24) of skin, claiming the existence of three original distinct human races, namely the white, the black, and the yellow. Resting on a Eurocentric perspective, his racial hierarchy championed whites, or Aryans, as the pinnacle of all human development and history, while peoples with darker shades of skin color were, proportionately to their epidermal darkness, categorized as inferior races on the hierarchy of human variation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 198-200).

The construction of ‘race’ as a visual economy debunks the ocularcentric working of Western rationality at large. The presumption that “bodies ... [were] territories for siting all sorts of cultural difference” (Terry and Urla 7) testifies to the scopic “desire to see, to fix cultural difference in a containable, *visible* object” (Bhabha 72). As Richard Rorty points out, “the compulsion to believe when staring at an object” is deeply embedded in Western culture and philosophical inquiry as the foundation of any knowledge (Rorty 162 f.).<sup>9</sup> Even today, as Maurice Wallace argues, the ocularcentric principle of knowledge remains evident in a range of metaphors with which “the recognizable truth of everyday life [is] articulated ... [:] ‘the

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<sup>9</sup> The ocularcentrism of Western rationality has constituted one of the central subjects of modern philosophical debate. Already in the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche critiqued and subverted the privileged position of vision in the history of modern rationality. In *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), he attacked the commonly accepted presupposition of an eye outside time and history, criticizing that “all seeing is essentially perspective, and so is all knowing” (255). Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Derrida, among others, have followed Nietzsche’s lead in their criticism of Western ocularcentrism. For a good overview over the different lines of the debate see: David Michael Levin, ed. *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.

truth is the light,' 'the mind's eye,' 'I see' in lieu of 'I understand'" (170). According to Jacques Derrida, "the whole history, the whole semantics of the European *idea*, in its Greek genealogy ... relates seeing to knowing" (12). Given that in Western rationality knowledge always implies command (or mastery) of the object of observation, the Derridean elision of vision and knowledge (*voir/savoir*) dilates to further entail power (*pouvoir*) (Wallace 171), equating racial dominance with the privilege of possessing hegemonic vision.

In his study *The Rhetoric of Empire* (1993), David Spurr substantiates how the Derridean triple bind of vision, knowledge, and power works in the colonialist descriptions of natives: "The eyes treat the body [of the native] as a landscape: it proceeds systematically from part to part, quantifying and spatializing, noting color and texture, and finally passing an aesthetic judgement which stresse[s] the body's role as object to be viewed" (Spurr 23). By describing the economy of colonial observation in a suggestive vocabulary of territorial conquest, Spurr stresses the inextricable relationship between the prerogative of vision and the colonialist seizure of foreign land and its people. Given that the privilege of visual penetration was predominantly reserved to white male travellers, journalists, anthropologists as well as to (pseudo-)scientists and philosophers, the empirical *observation* of 'Other bodies' exposed the "masculinist desire for epistemological mastery over nature, 'savages,' and femininity" (Terry and Urla 8). In this regard, the possession of vision, knowledge, and cultural hegemony is further elided with the phallus, so that, in the visual regime of racism, blacks are symbolically aligned with the feminine gender's characteristic lack of scopic agency, which will be discussed in further detail in chapter three.

### **2.3. The construction of the racial subject in European Enlightenment discourse**

The idea of racial hierarchy was also corroborated in eighteenth and nineteenth-century philosophical discourse. The greatest thinkers of the European Enlightenment like David Hume (1711-1776), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), or Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) elaborated on the notion that an individual's epidermal difference was tantamount to his or her moral and mental deficiency. As Gayatri Spivak argues in her study *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), central texts of European metaphysics not only tended to exclude the subaltern from their discussion (8) but actively prevented non-Europeans from occupying positions as fully human subjects (9). By producing "authoritative 'universal' narratives" which helped to form "the European ethico-political subject," the Western philosophical tradition foreclosed the possibility of subjectivity of those without "access to the position of

narrator” (Ibid. 8-9). Spivak therefore contends that European Enlightenment texts became complicit with the imperialist project by helping to inscribe into the Western consciousness “the binary opposition between master and native” (37).

David Hume’s essay “Of National Characters” (1748/54) provides a good example of the Eurocentric construction of the black native as the West’s degraded Other. Hume claimed that individuals living in certain non-European habitats were “inferior to the rest of the species” (32). On account of the extremely hot climate, Africans were not only “incapable of ... the higher attainments of the human mind” but also very promiscuous (Ibid. 32 f.) – a remark which foreshadows the prominent role sexuality would later come to play in the construction of black masculinity. In 1754 Hume added a footnote to his essay in which he made his standpoint on racial difference entirely explicit:

I am apt to suspect the negroes ... to be *naturally* (emphasis added) inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white.... No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences.... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen ... if *nature* (emphasis added) had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men. (33)

Symbolized by the binary opposition of the very colors white and black, Hume constructs Africans’ existence as the diametrical opposite to that of Europeans. The use of the grammatical form of *negation* (no arts, no sciences, etc.) not only characterizes blackness as absence but introduces a *negative* evaluative bias into the purportedly ‘objective’ observation.

By tracing human cultural and intellectual achievements to the color of the skin, Hume adduces the “evidence of the visible” (Bhabha 114) – the ugly black body – to demonstrate black people’s intrinsic inferiority. Apart from his blackness, as Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien argue, one of the most comprehensible and obvious ‘proofs’ of his essential Otherness “was the nakedness of the savage, the visibility of [his] sex” (106) – an unquestionable sign of his lack of civilization. However, “[t]he seemingly naked body of pure facts is veiled in value” (301), as David Theo Goldberg so aptly formulates the trouble with both the unclothed native and cultural difference in general: Despite the apparent honesty of corporeal signification, the body is not a “pre-cultural realm” speaking an unbiased truth (Wiegman, American 4), but is itself subject to the signifying processes through which the dominant order produces cultural meaning. Although no more than “insignificant elements within an incoherent conglomeration” (Silverman, *Threshold* 22), certain physical indices, like skin, are rendered meaningful as the signposts through which ‘difference’ or ‘normality’ are ostensibly identified. By ascribing to certain bodies (e.g. white, male) a universalism against “the infinite

particularity assigned to others” (e.g. black, female) (Wiegman, *American* 6), the dominant order reproduces its hegemony by banishing certain ‘deviant bodies’ to the cultural periphery.

As Hume’s depiction indicates, black skin became one of the most important signifiers of socio-political marginality in Western discourse. Feeding off the religious symbolism of “light versus dark” (Burgett 243), the racial conception of ‘blackness’ lent itself to a range of age-old archetypes associated with the color black. According to Winthrop D. Jordan, Western cultures had established a working binary between white and black long before black individuals began to occupy a place in white peoples’ imagination (7). Since the early Middle Ages, Europeans had interpreted whiteness as a sign of virtue, purity, beauty, and holiness, while blackness was associated with baseness, sin, ugliness, and the devil (Ibid.). As for the humanist tradition, as Kevin Bell argues, ‘black’ has been since antiquity

the primary conceptual metaphor for the absence of information and thus of mental life.... Black ... [was] radical nothingness long before it f[ou]nd its radically (sub)human ‘referent’ [i.e. the African] – a referent whose presumable distance from legitimating Enlightenment and Idealist valuation [wa]s determined only by the suddenly defining tonality of its skin, this surface alone encoding all the information necessary to sanction its banishment. (28-30)

In agreement with Hume, Immanuel Kant elaborates on the connection between epidermal blackness and the ostensibly deficient intellectual endowment of blacks. In his essay “On National Characteristics” (1764) he asserts that the difference between the white and the black race “appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color” (55), affirming that “not a single [black person] was ever found who presented anything great in art or science or any other praiseworthy quality” (Ibid.). In conclusion he contends that “[t]he Negroes of Africa have *by nature* (emphasis added) no feeling that rises above the trifling” (Ibid.). Kant not only reiterates the notion of blackness “as a universalist figuration of void itself” (Bell 29) but echoes Hume’s assertion that this is “naturally” so. While neither of them presents any valid justification for their generalizing statement, both philosophers speak with a tone of scientific authority, masking the absence of foundation for their claim with the vagueness and the abstraction of the word ‘nature’ itself. At any rate, as Edward Said has pointed out, it is precisely through the repeated assertion and discussion that constructed ‘facts’ infiltrate the public consciousness and become *naturalized* as the ‘truth’ or “dominant fiction,” by which Kaja Silverman denotes any ideological narrative which “successfully passes for ‘reality’ within a given social formation” (*Male* 15f.). In that regard, both Hume and Kant engage in the construction of a ‘social reality’ which holds that blacks are categorically removed from

the attainment of Enlightenment ideals, such as civilization, art, or science, thereby constructing the black native as the inverse picture to the Enlightenment idea(1) of ratio-driven manhood. In 1784, Kant defined the Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity” (*Enlightenment*) through the deployment of his intellect: “*Sapere Aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding!” (Ibid.) was the foundational insight which propelled the arts and sciences and defined ‘manhood’ in terms of ingenuity, sophistication of the mind, and self-consciousness. By relating these ideals to the biological condition of race (for which skin color was a convenient shortcut), Kant and Hume, like many of their contemporaries, foreclosed the possibility of an enlightened black subject quite literally *at a glance*.

In his *The Philosophy of History* (1837), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is even more explicit in his banishment of blacks from the ranks of enlightened manhood. Characterizing black people’s existence as one of unconsciousness (93), Hegel further asserts that:

The Negro ... exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality – all that we call feeling – if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with *humanity* (emphasis added) to be found in this type of character. (93)

The juxtaposition of the symbolic categories of culture (“reverence,” “morality,” and “humanity”) and nature (“natural man,” “wild,” “untamed”) not only aligns whiteness with civility, and blackness with primitivism, but further invokes the subtext of gender relations. Traditionally, ‘culture’ has been understood to symbolize the masculine ability to domesticate, penetrate, and impose order; the chaos of ‘nature,’ on the contrary, represented the irrationality and hysteria of the feminine (Pennycook 62f.). The implicit alignment of racial difference with the phallic lack of femininity reveals how Enlightenment discourses furnished a double rationale for the subjugation of blacks, and the supremacy of whites, from the combined discourses of race and gender.

At the same time, the repeated allusion to nature divulges the strong undercurrent of sexuality governing the construction of racial difference. Given that sex was “the most basic form of naturalness,” the persistent mention of ‘nature’ ontologically reduced blacks to being sexual and therefore “*uncivilized or against civilization*” (Mercer and Julien 107). According to Western sexual mores, “one [wa]s civilised at the expense of sexuality, and sexual at the expense of civilisation,” which is why “the black, the savage, the nigger, [being] the absolute Other of civility, ... [wa]s endowed with the most monstrous and terrifying sexual proclivity” (Ibid. 108). The Western imagination conferred upon the black male subject a “hyperbolic

virility ..., a sexual organ whose proportions and capacities [we]re in dramatic excess of his white counterpart's" (Silverman, *Threshold* 30).

In accordance with Frantz Fanon, Paul Hoch argues that the mythic phallicism represents "those aspects of [the white male's] *own* sexuality which society has made taboo" (Hoch 54). Because

every intellectual gain requires a loss in sexual potential, [t]he civilized white man retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest.... Projecting his own desires onto the Negro, the white man behaves 'as if' the Negro really had them. (Fanon 165) ... [T]he Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). [He] is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions. (Ibid. 177)

Embodying all the purported 'dark things' the "white consciousness itself fears to contain or confront" (Johnson 228), the black man becomes an eroticized yet abjected Other stirring both fantasies and fears in the white consciousness. Being "the masculine icon," the black man is thought to embody "the essence of masculinity – masculinity in its purest, most unadulterated and therefore dangerous form" (Saint-Aubin 1058). As Silverman argues, "the differentiation of the white man from the black man on the basis of the black man's hyperbolic penis ... reverberates in disturbing ways within the domain of gender" since it "places the white man on the side of 'less' rather than 'more'" thus threatening to "erase the distinction between him and the white woman" (*Threshold* 31). In order to secure the white patriarchal order, therefore, the phallic rival is contained by confining him to the abjected areas of Western sexual acceptability. Imposing European sexual morality as the only permissible conduct, the white hegemonic order outlaws and pathologizes black people's "chaos of sexual abandon" (Mercer and Julien 107). Accordingly, the black man's surplus of virility was not a paternal signifier which associated him with the phallus, but, on the contrary, stressed the distance separating him from the latter (Silverman, *Threshold* 30). In the racist economy, therefore, sexuality functioned not only as a category of difference but as a mode of control (Gilman 24) since it permitted whites to inter-connect their conceptions of sexual morality with the imperialist project by justifying the latter as a mission to civilize the sexual savages (Mercer and Julien 106).

Attesting the black man to exhibit "nothing harmonious with *humanity*," Hegel openly pronounces his predecessors' contestation of black people's manhood affiliating blacks with beasts. Like animals, Hegel believes blacks to have no role to play in the universal history of the human evolution, claiming that Africa "has no movement or development to exhibit....

[It] ... is the unhistorical, undeveloped spirit still involved in the conditions of mere nature ....” (99). Since René Descartes’ (1596-1650) famous assertion of 1644, “I think, therefore I am” (6), Western epistemology had celebrated human reason and self-consciousness as the constitutive momentum of manhood, believing the mind to precede the material existence of the body. Hegel’s opinion on ‘the black continent,’ however, invokes blacks as passive, beast-like dwellers of the present, incapable of spiritual sublimation, and thus confined to the instinctive existence of the body. This judgment adverts to the model of the Great Chain of Being, that archaic relic of the unenlightened Middle Ages which reemerged as a racially based delineation in the context of seventeenth and eighteenth-century classificatory science (Lovejoy 61; Wiegman, *American* 29).

In the Christian conception of the universe, the Great Chain of Being denoted a God-given hierarchical order in which every being, from inanimate matter to celestial creatures, held a fixed position and function. Consisting of six major categories, the Chain ranked minerals, plants, animals, humans, celestial beings, and finally, God, “the Absolute Being” (Ibid. 59), in ascending order which reflected their degree of “perfection” (Lovejoy 58). Being premised on the dualism of body and soul (Ibid. 80), the Chain was largely consistent with the Cartesian split of body and mind since both traditions privileged the sublime and spiritual over the baseness and triviality of the corporeal. Mankind was thought to occupy a unique position on the Chain of Being: Although still belonging to the *genus corporum*, the bodily or material form of life, humans were believed to have a soul with spiritual powers such as reason, love, and imagination, linking them to the heavenly class (Ibid. 79). According to the philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274), man marked the “boundary line of things corporeal and incorporeal” (qtd. in Lovejoy 79). In the context of racial classification in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Western intellectuals drew on the Great Chain of Being to craft arguments for “the African’s cosmic subordinacy by positioning him as intervening between [man and ape]” (Wiegman, *American* 29).

By employing a vocabulary of animalism, corporeality, raw nature, and uncontrolled sexuality, Hume, Kant, and Hegel join in the relegation of blacks to the status of subhuman beings, devoid of reason and legitimacy – no matter if by the Christian or the humanist standard. The repeated assertions that blacks had no history, culture, or civility, all of which were crucial to the Enlightenment conception of manhood, figured the black man as the animalistic Other in the Western imagination. And since blacks occupied a lower place of minor value in the order of the world, “discriminatory and authoritative forms of political control [we]re considered appropriate” (Bhabha 119).

Whether by the logic of scientific investigation, the Great Chain of Being, or philosophical reasoning, race became a convenient category of classification which furnished a rationale for the authority of white people over blacks. At the same time, its construction and deployment in European philosophical discourse displays the relationship between discursive and physical violence, or, in Spivak's terms, the "complicity" of European hegemonic texts with "the axiomatics of imperialism" (37). By projecting blacks like beasts, Hume, Kant, and Hegel implicitly legitimize the systems of colonialism and slavery, which literally treated blacks as if they really were no human beings.

Hegel's text renders the relationship between discursive and physical violence particularly evident. Pointing out to his European readers that the black savage is so different that it is hardly possible to "comprehend" him, he gives his European readers concrete advice as to how to deal with the African, namely by laying aside any kind of empathy or feeling – just as if not treating a human being at all. At the same time, despite his assertion of the black man's Otherness, he is in the very process of writing a narrative of "the natural man" which betrays the kind of colonialist familiarity and authorial control with which the European colonizers produced the black native as "a social reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 101), thereby confining him to eternal objecthood under the system of white authority.

#### **2.4. Race and 'manhood' in the American context**

The European discourse about race also attained prominence in the American context, where the economic growth of the fledgling plantation industry depended on the continuation of slavery. The United States of America had liberated itself from British colonial rule through the "Declaration of Independence" (1776), an Enlightenment document which founded the new nation on the idea of natural human rights. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), who would afterwards become the third President of the United States, had drafted the famous lines: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (Jefferson, *Declaration*). A slaveholder himself, Jefferson's invocation of "all men" was not intended to have any bearing on the lives of black slaves, however. Despite its apparent promise of universality, the concept of 'manhood' and the attendant conferral of natural rights was highly restrictive and narrowly defined human subjectivity in terms of the implied racially 'unmarked' white referent. At the same time, the sexist



exclusivity of the very debate (“man,” “mankind,” “manhood”) “demonstrated [its] ideological alliance with patriarchal practices” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 47). Given that the (patri-)Age of Enlightenment did not illuminate the pitch-blackness of women’s rights, the debate over ‘manhood’ was in fact a debate over/of ‘masculinity,’ which premised the concepts of humanity and citizenship on the possession of the phallus. Implying a racially white and masculine gendered referent, the Enlightenment debate over *manhood*<sup>10</sup> reproduced patriarchal privilege by conflating the Other race with the Other gender in their joined exclusion from the privileged ranks of *human* subjectivity.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), Jefferson justified slavery by employing the same essentialist and dehumanizing discourses about race as his European peers Hume, Kant, and Hegel. Pointing to black people’s physical differences like skin color, stature, or hair (Jefferson, *Notes* 98), he proclaims that “the difference [between the white and the black race] is fixed in nature” (*Notes* 97). Jefferson’s portrayal confines black people’s existence to a range of racist commonplaces, such as their irrational sense of amusement, their bad smell, their musicality, or their animalistic sexual desire (Ibid. 98 f.). In all of these descriptions, the corporeal eclipses the mental, leading Jefferson to declare that black people’s “existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection” (Ibid. 98). In a time when reason was deemed the primary source for legitimacy and authority, when citizenry was constituted “through the value system of disembodied abstraction” (Wiegman, *Lynching* 455), and when sensation was considered an animalistic or feminine trait, this verdict irrevocably disqualified blacks from the privileged ranks of ‘*manhood*’ and thus impeded their “insertion into the larger body of national identity” (Ibid.). Maintaining that “the blacks ... are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (Jefferson, *Notes* 102), Jefferson justifies the systematic enslavement and exploitation of blacks: “This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people” (Jefferson, *Notes* 103).

Jefferson’s assertion explicates the tight relationship between the construction of racial alterity and the maintenance of politico-economic power informing the racist regimes of slavery and colonialism. Proving black people’s Otherness by means of ocularcentric evidence – the different-looking black body – Eurocentric discourse weaved its construction of racial difference around the categories of gender and sexuality to forestall blacks from the rights and privileges reserved to the enlightened white *mankind*. Particularly the black male

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<sup>10</sup> The spelling ‘*manhood*’ will be employed in the following to render visible the double bind of ‘humanity’ and ‘masculinity’ in patriarchal discourse.

was refused the prerogatives which distinguished the white masculine gender in patriarchal culture, thereby symbolically aligning him with the powerlessness characteristic of the feminine. The reduction of the black man to his corporeality and, in particular, to his hyperbolic penis and sexuality further distances him from the possession of rational power, guiding intelligence, and political faculty which the phallus signifies (Goux 49), and which, simultaneously, the white “narrator” of Enlightenment discourse ascribes to himself.

### 3. Black Corporeality and the Scopic Regime of Racism

As the preceding discussion of Enlightenment discourses has shown, the idea of racial difference crucially hinged on the discourse of corporeality since classical racism dehumanized black people by defining them as “having bodies but not minds” (Mercer and Julien 137). Blackness was historically constructed as an “overembodied” or corporealized identity confining its bearer to the discredited life of the material body, banishing him (or her) to the margins of the arenas of cultural production and political representation (Burgett 28). However, the meaning of black peoples’ reduction to the corporeal became nowhere as tangible as under the system of slavery which degraded blacks to the status of “a piece of property, a beast of burden, a chattel personal” (Garrison viii). As Arthur Flannigan Saint-Aubin points out,

[t]here was a time when the black male was a non-person, when his body was not his own possession, a time when his subjectivity, his self-representation, and his representation by others emerged from this non-possession. At the same time, however, he *was* his body; that is, he was recognized and valorized for his physicality. (1061)

Saint-Aubin formulates one of the elemental traumas of the African American experience: Not only were black individuals objectified, valued, and commercialized like items in a capitalist market system, but they were further dispossessed of their own corporeality (or body value), which resulted in a paradoxical situation of non-identity: the black slave both *was* and *was not* his body.

Twentieth-century psychoanalytic theory has accounted for the fundamental impact of the corporeal on the experience of self. Beginning with the black slave’s predicament of having to craft a corporeal ego from a body which is disappropriated, dislocated, and disfigured, the subsequent analysis traces the black male’s alienating self-perception (as experienced by W.E.B. Du Bois or Frantz Fanon) back to the dilemma of inhabiting a black body in the scopic regime of racism. Drawing on feminist film theory, the present chapter sets out to explore how racist domination is effected within the field of vision by subjecting the black male body to a status of high visibility, either by framing it as public spectacle or by submitting it to a system of penological surveillance.

### 3.1. The corporeal ego

Under the system of chattel slavery, the “captive [black] body” (Spillers 68) metonymically expressed the alienation and non-identity characterizing black people’s condition as slaves: The black body was the site upon which slavery’s “circuit of displacements and deferrals” (Cunningham 137) was borne out materially and symbolically. The black body was geographically uprooted and transferred over the Middle Passage and the auction block. This physical relocation recreated itself discursively when whites bid upon or renamed the black body (Cunningham 136 f.). Given that “[t]he dynamics of naming and valuation remain grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation,” (Spillers 68), both mechanisms of displacement robbed black individuals of their identity, depriving them of the capacity to control (or *own*) their bodies.

While the wounded and branded black flesh visibly signified the slave’s dispossession of himself, his incapacity to protect his body from the onslaught of the white overseers and masters, the captive, displaced, and violated black body also symbolized the black individual’s psychological dislocation. The physically ‘broken’ body represented the slave’s psychological breakdown before the undefeatable force of the ‘Negro-breaker’. In his *Narrative* (1845), Frederick Douglass evokes the destructive impact of bodily violence on the psyche of black slaves when he describes his own condition as being “broken in body, soul, and spirit” (38).

Beginning with Sigmund Freud, twentieth-century psychoanalysis systematically investigated the intricate relationship between the body and the psyche. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923) Freud claims that the “experience of ‘self’ is circumscribed by and derived from the body” (Silverman, *Threshold* 9) – both from its visual image as well as from corporeal sensations. Freud claims that the ego is “first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface” (26). In an explanatory footnote added to his 1927 English translation of *The Ego and the Id*, he goes on to argue that “the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body ....” (Ibid.).

Elaborating on Freud’s notion of the corporeal ego, Jacques Lacan introduces the concept of the ‘mirror stage’ in 1936 to explain the formation of subjectivity as an effect of the child’s recognition and identification with the specular image of its body in a mirror (*Mirror* 1-7). Unlike Freud who stresses the significance of the sensual experience of the body, Lacan relies

exclusively on the visual to explain the process of subject formation, conceiving of the ‘self’ as “the representation of a corporeal representation” (Silverman, *Threshold* 10).<sup>11</sup>

While Frederick Douglass’ crushed ego arises from the corporeal sensation of “the gory lash [on] his naked back” (3), W.E.B. Du Bois’ fragmented sense of self, or “double-consciousness,” is caused by the impossibility of identifying with the deidealizing ‘mirror image’ (to use a Lacanian metaphor), both visual and discursive, reflected back to blacks by the racist society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century United States. Representations of African-Americans spanned a constellation of stereotypically demeaning images portraying blacks as “devoid of reason, simian or satanic in appearance, and slothful, lustful, or lascivious in nature” (Gates, *Preface* 12). Apart from debasing blackness as such, these depictions imposed the particularity of white corporeality as a universal ideal, confronting blacks with an “ego-ideal” premised on unapproachable white bodily norms (Silverman, *Threshold* 29). Being thus confronted with two frames of reference, one being an unrealizable ideal, the other being an un-ideal reality, Du Bois described black people’s difficulty in developing a wholesome identity in 1903 as follows:

[T]his American world ... yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (8)

According to Du Bois, African Americans’ alienating self-perception through the (discursive and visual) misrepresentations and stereotypes mirrored back to them by the white racist society results in a psychological fragmentation or “two-ness” (8) which he invokes in terms of looming corporeal disintegration: “two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Ibid.).

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), the Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon further researches into the psychic predicament of the black male subject obliged to craft a sense of self from the racist society’s demeaning representations that “provid[e] neither idealization nor pleasure, and which [are] inimical to the formation of a ‘coherent’ identity” (Silverman, *Threshold* 27). According to Fanon, the Western world lets the black man become visible only as the ultimate “symbol of Evil and Ugliness” (180):

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<sup>11</sup> Many others, like Jean Laplanche, Paul Schilder, or Henri Wallon have made important contributions to the definition of the bodily ego. For an overview see Silverman, *Threshold* 9-37.

The torturer is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black – whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or moral dirtiness. It would be astonishing ... to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin.... [W]hether concretely or symbolically, the black man stands for the bad side of the character.... Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone's reputation; and on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light. (Ibid. 189)

Facing these demeaning representations of black bodies, the “Negro is forever in combat with his own image” (Fanon 194). Fanon echoes Du Bois’ double-consciousness when he describes the crisis of having “to experience his being through others” (109): “In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness” (110). Just like Du Bois, Fanon attributes the black man’s split self-perception to the impossibility of aligning his dark body with either one of the two visual frames (110), namely the unachievable norm of whiteness and the irrefutable fact of his blackness.

Despite his struggle to prevent identification with the negative ‘imago’ of blackness, Fanon is eventually ‘interpellated’ into negritude under the gaze of a white child: “‘Look, a Negro!’ ... ‘Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!’” (112). In a kind of mirror stage experience, he becomes aware of his dark body and involuntarily identifies with the intolerable fact of his blackness:

I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships.... Then, assailed at various points, [my] corporeal schema crumbled.... I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? (112)

Fanon’s recognition that he is seen as and reduced to the horrid stereotypes of blackness destroys his previously more optimistic self-perception and casts him into a crisis of identity – an agony which he evokes in terms of corporeal disintegration. Fanon’s violent description is a paradigmatic example of what Lacan has conceptualized as the fantasy of the “body in bits and pieces” (Lacan, *Reflections* 13), that is the sensation of corporeal fragmentation as a result of the psychic trauma of being unable to “indefinitely sustain an identification with ideality” (Silverman, *Threshold* 20). Being subjected to the look of white racism, Fanon experiences his body as “black and as bloodied simultaneously, conflating identity with injury” (Kim 4).

Yet, it is neither coincidence nor just a matter of finding a compelling metaphor that Fanon expresses his psychological alienation in terms of castration, speaking of an “amputation, an excision” meted out to his objectified body. Apart from evoking the ‘deprived’ or ‘circumcised’ sense of self “of all black men who confront the ‘look’ of white racism and find themselves crushed by its weight, reduced to the status of objects.” (Kim 4 f.), Fanon deliberately recalls the legacy of emasculation faced by black males in racist societies; not just the concrete threat of lynching and castration, but equally the socio-political emasculation of living in a phallogentric order which denies black men the achievement of the “heteronormative phallus’ usual association with privileged social agency” (Steward 522). By employing the metaphor of castration, Fanon establishes an analogy between the black male and the female as “bearer[s] of the bleeding wound” (Mulvey 14), which suggests that he attributes his amputated ego not only to the fact of his blackness, but also to the fact of his ‘lack’ of masculinity. Being, “like woman, ... not allowed ... into the ‘House of Phallus,’ the phallic fraternity” (Saint-Aubin 1063), black males living in racist societies experience themselves in terms of a castrated masculinity.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the black male’s predicament is twofold since he can neither craft a wholesome racial identity nor a healthy gender identity from his black body.

### 3.2. The gaze and the screen

Jacques Lacan’s account of the mirror stage already stressed the significance of external representation for the formation of subjectivity. However, it was not until his *Seminar XI* (1964) that he fully elaborated on the impact of visual representation for the constitution of self. For Lacan the subject comes into being under the “gaze” of the Other:

[I]n the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am [turned into] a picture.... What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. (*Four* 106)

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<sup>12</sup> Black feminist and gay scholarship has sharply denounced the predication of black masculinity on the normative model of white patriarchal manhood, as it implies a black male racial identity based on the continuation and fortification of sexist and homophobic discriminatory practices. See for example: bell hooks. “Reconstructing Black Masculinity.” *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992. 87-113; ---. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. New York: Routledge, 2004; Wallace, Michele. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. 1978. New York: Verso, 1999. 1-87; Blount and Cunningham; Byrd, Rudolph P., and Beverly Guy Sheftall (ed). *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001.

For Lacan, the gaze is not a concrete look but a symbolic, “unapprehensible” (Ibid. 83) agency within the field of vision through which every individual is socially ratified by means of being subjected to representation. While the gaze refers to the abstract confirmation of self within the field of vision – or, as Silverman puts it: “‘to be’ is ... ‘to be seen’” (Threshold 133) – the “screen” refers to the concrete reproduction of the subject as a representation, that is, the discernable visual image of the subject which fails to be more than a “semblance” of its actual being (Lacan, *Four* 107).

According to Silverman, the screen fulfills an ideological function in its intervention between the gaze and the subject (Threshold 136). Being a “culturally generated ... repertoire of images through which subjects are ... differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age, and nationality” (Silverman, *Male* 150), the screen mediates the ways in which each subject can/must become visible within the particular visual regime of any given social order. According to Silverman, the images constituting the screen are normative and articulate a society’s “authoritative vision” (Threshold 136), that is, they reflect the evaluative attitudes and prejudices, the innermost fantasies and fears rooted within the psyche of the dominant cultural order (Ibid. 223). Insisting thus on the fundamental “constructedness of the images through which the subject assumes a visual identity” (Threshold 19), Silverman debunks how cultural hegemony, and marginality, are (re-)produced within the field of vision.

### 3.3. The black man under the racist gaze

The theory of the gaze and the screen sheds some light on the predicament expressed by Du Bois and Fanon who fail to derive a visual identity under a cultural gaze which subjects them to the ‘screen of blackness,’ that is to the repertoire of demeaning stereotypes depicting “black male identity not ... *as it is*, but *as it is prejudicially seen*” (Wallace 21). Given that the screen reproduces the dominant order’s authoritative vision, the black man is inescapably bound to be perceived in terms of the normative images of racism, as the writer Charles Johnson describes: “I am *seen*. But, as a black, seen as stained body, as physicality, basically opaque to others ....” (229). And Frantz Fanon grieves that “I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave ... of my own appearance.” (116). Invoking the concrete enslavement of Africans on the basis of their black skin, he describes his psychological captivity within the narrow framework of racist inscriptions which reduce his individuality to “the image of the biological-sexual-sensual-genital-nigger” (202). Both black men express the predicament of not being able to transcend the “rigid and limited grid of representations” which lets them



become publicly visible only as “certain *idées fixes*” (Mercer 176) of the dominant racist order.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, the racist gaze renders black individuals both invisible as human subjects and *too* visible in their guise of demeaning stereotype (Hsu 115).

Frantz Fanon pursues the problem of racial (in)visibility to the domain of gender and sexuality when he observes that, on the screen, “the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis.” (170). Not only does he address the plight of having his personality obscured by the all-pervading, overly visible stereotypes of black manhood, of which the mythically large penis is the most persistent and most fatal one; Rather, by associating the black male’s hyperbolic virility with his hyperbolic visibility, he unravels the intricate relationship between the economies of power and pleasure informing the scopic regime of racism. As Homi Bhabha points out, the everyday “scenes” of colonial societies emphasize the visible, the “seen,” as they treat the black body as both “the site of fantasy and desire and ... the sight of subjectification and power (108).

Since the 1970s, feminist film theory has critically investigated the differential distribution of visibility, and conversely, the inequitable possession of the privilege (and pleasure) to look, within the domain of representation. In her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey interrogates the ways in which classical cinema has structured ways of looking in patriarchal culture. According to Mulvey, Hollywood movies of the 1950s and 1960s reproduced and sustained the phallogocentric order by coding woman as passive eroticized ‘spectacle’ displayed for the scopophilic look possessed and controlled by the masculinist spectator (both on the movie screen and in the theater ranks). Mulvey argues that the cinematic looking relations replicate the phallogocentric split “between active/male and passive/female” (Ibid. 19) by encoding the female body as the subordinated ‘bearer’ of the masculinist process of meaning ‘making’: “The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.... Woman ... holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.” (Ibid.). While Mulvey was critical of the Lacanian predication of sexual difference on the presence/absence of the Phallus and the consequential definition of the female subject as ‘lack’ (Stanton 22), she preferred to frame the question of male privilege in terms of being or not entitled to look, and conversely, being or not coded as ‘spectacle’.

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the dominant images of black masculinity in American film see: Donald Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Film*. New York: Viking Press, 1973.

The mechanisms by which the female body is ratified as the Other within the scopic regime of sexual difference bear semblance to the workings by which racial alterity is signified within the scopic regime of racism. It is under the white gaze – “‘Dirty nigger!’ Or simply, ‘Look, a Negro!’” (Fanon 109) – that the black subject is registered as the racial Other within the field of vision; The scene/seen not only suggests an intrinsic similarity between the black male’s racial and woman’s sexual alterity, however, but codifies both as “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 19), and thus, as essentially feminine. At the same time, the black male’s hyperbolic visibility/virility blurs the boundaries between racial looking and the scopophilic enjoyment of the black body as eroticized spectacle, which further aligns it with the female gender. It is in this sense as well that the castrating white gaze to which Frantz Fanon subjected marks him as “the other-as-(b)lack” (Edelman 46).

### 3.4. The black body as spectacle

The fundamental connection between vision and power has already been discussed previously with regard to the ocularcentric construction of the concept of race and the differential distribution of the right to empirically *observe* bodies. The economy of public spectacle further corroborates white patriarchal power structures by splitting the field of vision, along the axes of gender and race, into ‘seer’ and ‘seen’. Since slaves were first put on view on the auction block, black bodies have commonly been displayed for public consumption and scopophilic enjoyment in American mainstream culture, and arguably continue to do so.<sup>14</sup>

The exhibition of black male bodies as spectacle became an institutionalized element of American racist culture. There were three major types of spectacle, each staging black manhood in a way that catered to different “sexual and racist fantasies of white men” (Kim 10): The spectacle of public torture, as in lynching and castration, showed black bodies in pain; The spectacle of minstrelsy and racial burlesque framed the black body as ridiculous and entertaining; Ultimately, both forms contain unmistakable elements of erotic spectacle, given, for example, the (partial or complete) nakedness of the lynching victims, or the constant suggestion of miscegenation informing the plots of the minstrel show (Lott 57). Either form of spectacularization of the black male body testified to white people’s simultaneous obsession with and dread of the black male (Lott 3), while constituting an important device for whites to assert their power over black bodies – either through the direct elision of scopic power with

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<sup>14</sup> In his discussion of recent portrayals of black athletes and ‘gangsta rappers’ in news coverage, Maurice Wallace argues that black males continue to be ‘framed’ as public spectacle (chapter 1: “Of Dangers Seen and Unseen”).

physical violence as in the event of lynching; through the “comic catharsis” (Ellison, *Shadow* 49) of racist lampoon by which the phallic potentiality of black males was disavowed, as in blackface performances; Or, eventually, through the implication of effeminateness and sexual subjugation, as in the case of erotic looking.

### 3.5. Race as a panoptic regime

Both empirical *observation* and the-black-body-as-spectacle transform “the economy of visibility into the exercise of power” (Foucault, *Discipline* 187), which is why they are intrinsically related to a third mode of looking, namely the disciplinary surveillance of black bodies. All three scopic modes establish power and control over blacks by rendering them overly visible against the invisibility from the implied spectator:

Disciplinary power ... is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them. It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being able always to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection (Foucault, *Discipline* 187).

The logic of compulsory visibility as a technique of disciplinary surveillance is literalized in Jeremy Bentham’s eighteenth-century prison design – the ‘Panopticon’ – an architectural form consisting of “many cages ... in which each [inmate] is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (Foucault, *Discipline* 200) to the prison guard looking from an elevated vantage point. Resting upon the bipolar distribution of vision and visibility, the system of panoptic surveillance defers power and agency from the bodies constantly exposed and overlooked, while conferring it upon the onlooker who stays himself invisible.

The very notion of ‘race’ has historically relied on the panoptic logic of conferring upon black bodies a ‘compulsory visibility,’ no matter if through empiricist *observation*, the (eroticized) spectacularization, or the concrete supervision of blacks under the eyes of the white overseers or the members of the Ku Klux Klan who turned the American landscape quite literally into a panoptic space (Wiegman, *American* 38 f.).

The scene/seen of lynching and castration illustrates that the lines between these different scopic modes are quite fluid: As a spectacle of virility/visibility, lynching and castration combined penology with pleasure, and surveillance with scopophilia. The logic of lynching as public torture itself hinged on the ocularcentric principle of marking the victim (Wiegman,

*American* 37 f.). As Foucault observes, “the condemned man published his crime and the justice that had been meted out to him by bearing them physically on his body” (Discipline 43). Being, by definition, an event of disciplinary control, the spectacle of lynching and castration castigated the black transgressor both through the act of torture itself as well as through his visible exposure to the hostile white spectators – an anonymous crowd whose single members, or spectators, remained invisible. Apart from subjecting the lynching victim to the disciplining effect of compulsory visibility, the ritualistic performance of the event, the fixed ingredients, and the character of social *fiesta* had a universal character which worked to subject *all* black males to a compulsory visibility, framing them as other potential digressers. Particularly when lynch photography and detailed descriptions of the tortures inflicted began to be mass produced and circulated throughout the country (Wiegman, *American* 39), lynching unfurled its full potential as a panoptic regime, as it constantly reminded all black men that they were under close surveillance by the omnipresent yet invisible white public.

# II.

**Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man***

#### 4. Invisible Black Men: Between Emasculation and Hypermasculinity

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is a novel about black male identity. As a representative of his race, the young unnamed African American protagonist (to whom will be referred henceforth as 'IM') embarks on a quest for self-fulfillment and political empowerment in the segregated United States of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Realizing that he is unable to transcend the normative images of the racist screen through which white Americans uniformly apprehend him, he eventually succumbs to the notion of being an invisible man:

[I]t is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of ... their *inner* eyes ... with which they look ... upon reality. (Ellison, *Invisible* 3)<sup>1</sup>

Just like Du Bois and Fanon, IM describes the predicament of being prejudicially seen by the dominant social order as a racial or sexual 'type'. Given that IM is unable to recognize himself as and identify with the distorting 'mirror' images the white society has of him, the Lacanian process of subject formation fails to endow him with a unified sense of self. While both Du Bois and Fanon evoke the psychic dilemma of the black male in a racist society through a metaphorical vocabulary of bodily fragmentation, Ellison's trope of invisibility carries the fantasy of corporeal disintegration to an extreme: Being no more than a "disembodied voice" (Brandt 120), IM has totally disintegrated and is always on the verge of complete nonbeing, which is why he "often doubt[s] if [he] really exist[s]" (4).

While the economy of invisibility and its subversive potential will be further investigated in chapter five, the present analysis focuses on the construction of 'invisible' black male identities in Ellison's novel. Other than the self-consciously invisible narrator speaking in the novel's frame, the invisible identities discussed in this chapter all pertain to the narrative level of the tale, and refer to those black male characters whose subjectivity is circumscribed by racist discourse, letting them become visible only as ephemeral projections of the dominant white order's suppressed racial/racist and sexual fantasies or phobias, such as racial domination through bodily violence or derision; interracial sex; rape; homoeroticism; or incest.

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<sup>1</sup> All subsequent page numbers refer to this edition if not specified otherwise.

#### 4.1. The Battle Royal and the taboo of miscegenation

The young protagonist's trajectory begins with him undergoing a violent and humiliating experience which initiates him into the inferior place assigned to him by the white racist society (Harris 76). Having been invited to deliver his graduation speech before the town's leading white citizens, IM is put through a debasing spectacle first, the Battle Royal, which turns his "great success" (17) into "an object lesson in humiliation, a sexual torture and castration rite" (Wright J. 261). Contrary to the "dignity" with which he imagines himself "as a potential Booker T. Washington" (18) orating for the uplift of the black race, IM is forced to participate in a demeaning show staged for the amusement of the "town's big shots" (17) for whom the event constitutes a ritualistic assertion of their racial supremacy.

Contrary to the intellectual task of delivering a speech for which he has originally come to the smoker, IM finds himself implicated in an ordeal which negates his rational capacities, inscribing him instead into the discourse of 'corporealized,' and particularly, sexualized black masculinity. Against the respectability of "uniforms pressed, shoes shined, minds laced up" (36) through which IM and the other students of the black college are drilled to represent and promote the uplift of the race, the black boys' fist fight before the important white men is designed to reinvest the dichotomy between whites as sophisticates, and blacks as primitives. The Battle Royal draws a picture of the black boys as brainless, physically strong brutes who help to negate their mental capacities as they literally seek to knock each other out. As the boys are made to unclothe and put on fighting trunks and boxing gloves, their "bare upper bodies [are] touching and shining with anticipatory sweat" (18), which suggests that the spectacle about to begin hinges on both the baseness and the eroticism of the corporeal.

Notwithstanding the prefix of corporeality, IM continues to identify himself as an intellectual: Whereas the other boys are just "tough" (18) and apparently without any mental depth, IM is brooding over his speech and the meaning of his grandfather's deathbed advice that he is to "overcome [the white men in power] with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction ... till they vomit or bust wide open" (16). In spite of his feeling of intellectual superiority over the other boys (18), however, the white men unheedingly "crowd" them all together "into the servants' elevator" (Ibid.).

Then the boys are "rushed" to the ballroom (18) and "pushed" (19) into the spotlight of the boxing ring, where they are unexpectedly faced with "a magnificent blonde – stark naked" (Ibid.). Under the "hostile ... [and] amused" looks of the white men (19), the boys confront a dilemma steeped in history: The racist prohibition against the interracial sexual encounter

between a black man and a white woman; the regime of panoptic surveillance through which the black male's abidance by the taboo is controlled; and the omnipresent threat of lynching and castration as its ultimate device of enforcement. Having fully internalized "the reality of black men being killed for looking at white women" (Saint-Aubin 1062), IM is instantaneously overcome by "a wave of irrational guilt and fear" (19) upon seeing the naked stripper. Remembering the "forgotten stories" (416) of black males "caught in a guilty stance" (Ibid.), he undergoes a strong visceral reaction: "I almost wet my pants.... My teeth chattered, my skin turned to goose flesh, my knees knocked." (19). Yet, he is so attracted that he "look[s] in spite of [him]self," asserting that "[h]ad the price of looking been blindness, I would have looked." (19). The other boys are equally torn between "the ideological and the biological" (416): While one of them is so overpowered by the situation that he faints (20), the others stand before the naked woman "with lowered heads, trembling" (19), "plead[ing] to go home" (20), as their erections visibly protrude from their shorts (Ibid.). The image of Tatlock, the largest and strongest of the group (20; 24), standing with his boxing gloves lowered, unsuccessfully trying to hide his erect penis (20), emblemizes how the representational logic of the Battle Royal merges the paradigms of the hypermasculine and the emasculated black male, treating the black phallus as "a symbol of unconstrained force that white men contradictorily envy and seek to destroy" (Baker 230); Simultaneously, it epitomizes how racism relies on the economy of sexual control to impress upon the black boys their racial disempowerment as a "symbolic castration" (Steward 524). The reading of the Battle Royal as a castration ritual is further supported by the fact that the triangular set-up – the black boys and the white men in scopic contest over the white woman's body – grotesquely enacts the folk motive of the black male lusting for the tabooed white woman ("Oh Lord, will I ever? ... As long as there's life there's hope"), and the white male intervening by reminding him of his certain death through lynching ("No, Nigger, never! ... As long as there's trees, there's rope"). The fact that some of the white men threaten the boys if they look at the naked stripper "and others if [they] d[o] not" (19 f.) shows that the Battle Royal subscribes to the shared economies of power and pleasure, panopticism and scopophilia, positioning the white males simultaneously as "censors and voyeurs" (Wilcox 993).

The near-miscegenation staged during the Battle Royal as well as the white men's ambiguous stance as censors and voyeurs is a central theme of the novel which resurfaces in Jim Trueblood's incestuous dream and in IM's encounter with an unnamed woman from the Brotherhood who wants to "discuss ... ideology" (411). Just as during the Battle Royal, the



black men involuntarily blunder into a forbidden situation with an almost naked white woman and want to get away, but cannot. In his nightmarish encounter with the “white lady” in “a big white bedroom”(57), Trueblood knows that he “got no business in there” (Ibid.) but, trying “to git out, ... [he can’t] find the door” (Ibid.). IM is equally trapped with the rich white woman from the Brotherhood whose husband is not (yet) home, making IM wish to be “free ... [to] get the hell out of here” (414). IM expresses the universality of his dilemma, linking it to Trueblood and his earlier self during the Battle Royal:

[I]n the mirrored instant I saw myself standing between her eager form and a huge white bed, ... caught in a guilty stance ...; and behind the bed another mirror which now like a surge of the sea tossed our images back and forth, back and forth, furiously multiplying the time and the place and the circumstance .... (416)

By inscribing himself into the archetypal narrative of the black male who is allegedly ‘guilty’ of having broken the taboo of miscegenation, he is aware of the inevitable fate awaiting him: “I was lost” (Ibid.).

The threat of lynching and castration overshadows the entire novel and betrays the deep-seated fear and anguish experienced by its black male characters. Trueblood has internalized the trauma to such an extent that it haunts him in his dreams, while IM’s subconscious equally blurs the line between reality and hallucination during his encounter with the unnamed woman from the Brotherhood: When the telephone rings, IM confounds it with the door bell, and frantically begins to fantasize about being caught out by the woman’s husband (415). In a dream-like, almost surreal passage during which IM is unsure “whether [he] [i]s awake or dreaming” (417), the woman’s husband, Hubert, eventually really comes home and finds the two asleep in the bed. Opening his eyes, IM discovers the man “looking straight at me from where he stood in the dim light of the hall, looking in with neither interest nor surprise.” (Ibid.). The unreal projection of the noiselessly watching white man – both a panoptic ‘overseer’ and a voyeur – who wishes IM goodnight with “a short dry laugh” (Ibid.) echoes Mr. Broadnax’ composed reaction upon finding Trueblood with the forbidden white woman, saying: ““They just niggahs, leave ‘em do it.”” (58). Apart from asserting their panoptic power over the black men, the white men equally betray their voyeuristic interest in watching how ‘niggahs do it’. More importantly, however, the white men’s lack of surprise upon finding IM and Trueblood with the tabooed white women nightmarishly attests the black men the inescapability with which they are bound to end up acting out the ‘miscegenation plot.’ Although both IM and Trueblood had struggled hard to remove themselves from the forbidden scenes, the white men’s knowledgeable composure suggests that both had

inevitably been doomed to play the part assigned to them. Realizing his immersion into the script of the rape mythos, IM sees the sleeping white woman and decides not to wake her up because “it was as though she’d never been awake and if she should awaken now, she’d scream, shriek.” (417). Dressing in the darkness and slipping out of the house like a thief in the night, he expects “the man, men, crowds – to halt [him]” (418). Trueblood’s getaway is equally fraught with the implication of lynching, as he synaesthetically evokes the castrating cut as a “red mist of anguish before [his] eyes” (58).

The parallel between the Battle Royal and the rape mythos is further suggested by the typification of both the naked stripper and the black boys: Having an American flag tattooed next to her vagina (19), the blonde is “branded” as the emblematic American woman (Wilcox 993). The flag inscribes her into the (white male) American history of discovery, marking her body, and particularly her sex(uality), as ‘claimed territory’ prohibited to the black male. The black boys equally embody the “stereotypically constructed differences” (Hsu 115) of the rape mythos, as they oscillate between the figures of the phallic black rapist and the emasculated Uncle Tom who “know[s] [his] place at all times” (31): Given the deliberate staging of the historical taboo of miscegenation as well as the near nakedness of the black bodies (which facilitates racist ascriptions such as primitivism, bestiality, and sexuality), the boys are framed as hypermasculine sexual predators, on the one hand, while the Battle Royal ‘cuts off’ the black boys’ sexual potency by subjecting them to the watchful and voyeuristic gaze of the white spectators, on the other. As Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien have argued with regard to the “exaggerated centrality of the black man’s ‘monstrous’ phallus” in Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs, such as *Man in a Polyester Suit*,<sup>2</sup> “the threatening phobic object is ‘contained’” through the fact that it is no more than a representation (134). By explicitly staging the dreadful black hypermasculinity, the Battle Royal equally returns “the white male viewer ... to his safe place of identification and mastery” (Ibid.), although allowing him “to indulge in that commonplace white fixation with black male sexuality as something ‘dangerous,’ something Other” (Ibid.). In this regard, the very principle of the Battle Royal rests on the oscillation between phallic investiture and phallic disavowal, letting the black boys become ‘visible’ as hypermasculine and emasculated at the same time.

When the stripper begins to dance in “slow sensuous movement[s]” (19) to the “insinuating low-registered moaning of the clarinet” (20), IM cannot help letting his “eyes brush slowly over her body” (19), sharing for a brief moment in the prohibited scopophilic

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Mapplethorpe. *The Black Book*. München: Schirmer/Mosel, 1986.

enjoyment of the white female body. Trying to ward off the erotic impact of “the pearly perspiration glistening like dew around the pink and erected buds of her nipples” (19), IM uses a strategy of “objectifying and dehumanizing” the dancer (Saunders 9), describing her as a “circus kewpie doll” (19) whose face forms “an abstract mask, the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon’s butt” (Ibid.). Yet, like the other boys, IM is aroused in spite of himself. Angry that he cannot avoid reacting as foretold by the racist script of the black man’s stereotypical lust for the white woman, he “desire[s] to spit upon her” (19) in order to defile the “image which exposes his powerlessness” (Saunders 9):

I wanted at one and the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor, or go to her and cover her from my eyes and the eyes of the others with my body; to feel the soft thighs, to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her, to hide from her, and yet to stroke where below the small American flag tattooed upon her belly her thighs formed a capital V. (19)

IM’s antithetical responses to the white woman show that he is torn between seeing her as “an object of sexual desire, a sexual threat, or a fellow victim” (Steward 524). While his first impulse is to run off and remove himself from the prohibited and highly perilous scene, his second impulse to “cover” the naked woman with his body ambivalently fuses his own desire to sexually possess her with his compassionate wish to protect her from the scopophilic consumption by the white men (Kim 52).

However, by participating in the scopophilic looking himself, IM’s identificatory bond with the woman is severed as he begins to grasp his own status as erotic spectacle for the white men: Just like the naked stripper, whose pearly perspiration is reminiscent of the boys’ shining upper bodies, IM realizes that he is acting out a similarly debasing role, and that “both of them have to offer up their bodies for the visual enjoyment of white men” (Kim 53). When the white men transgress the border of mere looking and start to sink “their beefy fingers ... into [her] soft flesh” (20), IM recognizes in the nude dancer’s eyes a “terror and disgust ... almost like [his] own” (Ibid.). According to Daniel Kim, IM’s disturbing understanding that she “is a symbolization of his own experience of humiliation” (53) provokes his misogynistic reactions towards her, letting him “desire to spit upon her, ... [to] destroy her, ... and [to] murder her” (19). Comprehending that he is, like the stripper, the white man’s “property, ... sexual commodity, ... servant, ..., and ... an innately inferior being” (Clarke 135 f.), IM becomes aware that the woman’s anatomical ‘lack’ where her thighs form a capital ‘V’ “mirrors back to him his own” castration (Kim 53).

While Kim's reading of the black boys' castration focuses primarily on their 'lack' of bodily control against the "unrestricted ability ... [with which white men] make the bodies of other men bend to their desires" (53), emasculation is further effected within the field of vision. The white men's entertainment from the staging of the emasculating miscegenation scene crucially involves the visual pleasure of watching the eroticized bodies of both the stripper and the boys. The display of the half-naked black boys alongside the naked dancer codifies both as "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 19), thereby suggesting an intrinsic sameness between the racial and the sexual Other, as opposed to the sameness of the white male who possesses the privilege to look at both. Just like the naked blonde, the black males' flesh is reduced to "a visual surface charged and burdened with the task of servicing a white male desire to look and, more importantly, assert mastery and power over the looked-at" (Mercer and Julien 145). The scopic relationship between the spectator and the spectacle, active and passive, self and Other, is laid out in the bifurcated spatial distribution of the ballroom as well: The ropes of the portable boxing ring mark a clear-cut barrier dividing the field of vision, along the conflated borders of race and gender, into the illuminated 'stage' where the spectacle takes place, and the relatively darker ranks from where the spectators watch, figuring the Other as (b)lack.

While the scopic set-up of the Battle Royal ratifies the black boys as effeminate spectacularity *lacking* the privilege to look, the naked woman is equally imbued with markers of ethnic difference which "signal [her] ... affinity with descendants of black Africans" (Wilcox 993). IM describes how she begins "to dance, a slow sensuous movement; the smoke of a hundred cigars clinging to her like the thinnest of *veils*. She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in *veils* (emphases added)" (19). The twofold mention of the 'veil' resonates with W.E.B. Du Bois' famous turn-of-the-century description of the black man as "a sort of seventh son, born with a veil" (8) – the veil having ever since been a distinctly African American trope expressing the predicament of non-identity (or "double-consciousness") faced by black people in the segregated and racist American society. The white stripper's "sensuous" (19) dancing and her mask-like face (Ibid.) furthermore resemble Tod Clifton's Sambo doll, another racist icon rooted in the African American history of slavery, which moves in "infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face" (431). As Johnnie Wilcox argues, "the blonde woman's distinguishing features span a racial and ethnic continuum ... [that] typ[e] [her] as an African primitive" (993). Her grotesquely painted face is reminiscent of a "baboon's butt" (19), which alludes to

continental Africa, primitivism, as well as to the African American trickster identity (whose primary embodiment is the signifying monkey) (Wilcox 993).

The deliberate parallels between the naked dancer and the black boys suggests that both share a common plight as “fetish objects of powerful white men” (Ibid. 998), and that both are rendered ‘invisible’ as human beings in their overly visible exposedness as spectacle – be it racial or sexual. Just like the naked dancer whose “humanity seems to disappear as her body submits to the voyeuristic gaze that renders her a pornographic sex object” (Eversley 176), the (b)lack boys’ subjectivity first appears through and is circumscribed by the eyes of the white racists watching the spectacle (Ibid.).

Apart from staging racial supremacy and sexual control, however, the smoker affords the white men with an opportunity to indulge a number of otherwise repressed primal impulses (Kim 49). By positioning the black male bodies “as the erotic objects of the white homosocial gaze” (Steward 524), the white men’s enjoyment during the “erection spectacle” (Ibid.) carries strong homoerotic overtones. The sucking on “black cigars” (17) during the voyeuristic consumption of the half-naked aroused black boys “establishes a highly eroticized dynamic between the white men and the black boys” (Steward 524). As Jeffrey Leak argues, the battle royal enables the white men “to exercise/exorcise their homosexual desires with each other and ... with a select few young black men” (41) – a suggestion which becomes even more explicit during IM’s encounter with the young gay Emerson, as will be analyzed in further detail later on. Ultimately, therefore, the white male spectators’ gratification from the Battle Royal ensues from the entwined economies of racism, sexism, scopophilia, and homoerotic pleasure, treating the black boys’ bodies, and particularly their erect yet ‘castrated’ penises, as sites and sights of “subjectification and power” as well as “fantasy and desire” (Bhabha 108).

#### **4.2. The black body in pain**

The fighting episode of the Battle Royal is one of the scenes which most outspokenly stages the racism of the white male characters in *Invisible Man*. It is designed to satisfy the white men’s sadistic desires without compromising their identities as respectable citizens, which is why, instead of inflicting pain to the black bodies themselves, the white men voyeuristically enjoy how the boys injure each other. The staging of the fight draws on various registers from slavery times, disclosing the white men’s suppressed nostalgia for the spectacles of public torture – beginning with the scene of the auction block to public whippings and brandings –

through which the society of the antebellum South not only ritualistically asserted its hierarchical relations of race (Wiegman, *American* 39), but literally marked black bodies as white men's property.

While the boys are still "crying and in hysteria" (21) from their traumatic experience of being 'caught' with a naked white woman, they are "stopped and ordered to get [back] into the ring. There was nothing to do but what we were told" (Ibid.). The grammatical form of the passive linguistically renders the boys' powerlessness as they are blindfolded by the white men. Given the unequal distribution of vision and blindness, invisibility and compulsory visibility, the scopic set-up of the boxing fight analogically draws on further dichotomies, such as male and female, active and passive, power and powerlessness, figuring the black boys as intrinsically emasculated. Furthermore, it coalesces the regimes of public spectacle and panoptic surveillance, as the boys are not only exposed to, but rendered defenceless by, the threatening "faceless gaze" (Foucault, *Discipline* 214): When IM tries to remove his blindfold, he is instantaneously apprehended and admonished: "Oh, no you don't, black bastard! Leave that alone!" (22).

The battle's immediate adjacency to the miscegenation scenario suggestively inscribes the forthcoming spectacle of pain into the paradigm of lynching and castration, which further invests the overtones of panoptic control. Feeling as if trapped "in a dark room filled with poisonous cottonmouths" (21), the boys stand blindfolded and trembling before the angry 'mob' of white men whose accumulated sexual and racist strains after the staged provocation erupt into deadly hostility: "'Let me at that big nigger!' ... 'those black sonsabitches!' ... 'I want to get at that ginger-colored nigger. Tear him limb from limb!'" (21). IM is surprised to recognize among the men "yelling insistently for the Battle Royal to begin" (21) the "familiar" voice of the school superintendent (Ibid.), which suggests that, in the intimacy of the ballroom, the most 'reputable' white citizens let drop their masks of civility and openly indulge their suppressed racial hatred. The blindfolds artificially recreate the panoptic anonymity of the lynching scenario in which the individual members of the mob become a "homogenized, known-but-never-individuated power" (Wiegman, *American* 39). Given the impossibility of the reciprocal gaze, 'respectable' white citizens like the school superintendent find in the Battle Royal a context in which they can performatively assume their long-lost identities as 'massas' or hooded night riders without compromising their identities as philanthropists.

Having created an atmosphere of overt racial hatred, the white men put the boys into a state of "blind terror" (21) before pitting them against each other, telling them respectively: "I

want you to ... give it to [that boy over there] right in the belly. If you don't get him, I'm going to get you." (Ibid.). Not only does this threat break up any kind of solidarity or empathy between the boys, but it epitomizes one of the fundamental doctrines of white power and racial control – “Use a nigger to catch a nigger” (558) – which IM sees through only at the very end of his trajectory. Just as Ras the Exhorter and himself have been marionettes of powerful white men pulling the strings, the boys at the Battle Royal are equally manipulated into fighting each other instead of uniting under their common plight. Although *Invisible Man* is not generally “a novel grounded in social realism” (Ward 173), the boxing episode, and particularly IM's and Tatlock's climactic duel for “the winner's prize” (24), symptomatically depicts black people's alienation from each other as an effect of the dehumanizing pressure of racism. Facing each other “with hate ... and aglow with a feverish terror from what had happened to us all” (Ibid.), IM and Tatlock epitomize black males' solitary – instead of solidary – struggle against the radical determinism of race; The scene equally exemplifies the boys' strain to survive economically (Tatlock is after the evening's prize) and to advance professionally (IM is desperate to deliver his speech since “only these men could judge truly my ability” (25)) in a world in which black people's rise and fall depends on the benevolence of white men alone: While Jim Trueblood is “better off than ... ever ... before” (67) since the “big white folks” come to hear and write down his incest story (53), Tod Clifton and IM “plunge out of history” (447) after they stop ‘samboing’ for Brother Jack. It is for these existential reasons that the boys (including IM who deems himself superior to the baseness of boxing) begin to fight “hysterically” (23), obediently inflicting pain to each other as demanded by the white men:

A glove smacked against my head.... Blows pounded me from all sides while I struck out as best I could.... Everybody fought everybody else. It was complete anarchy. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked. (22 f.)

Reduced to animals fighting for the survival of the fittest, the boys enact the racist vision of blacks as brutish savages stuck in a pre-cognitive state of existence in which corporeal instincts dominate over any rational principle. When the white men begin to bet money on who will come out as the winner (25), they not only inscribe the battle into the register of animal fights (which was a common sport and form of entertainment in the South), but recreate the material relations of the slave auction by literally valuating the black bodies for their physicality.

Experiencing an “identificatory thrill” (Kim 50) from watching the spectacle of pain, the white men spur the boys on to fight harder: “Slug him, black boy! Knock his guts out! ... Uppercut him!” (23). IM observes that “[t]he harder we fought, the more threatening the men became” (24), some getting so carried away that they want to take the battle beyond mere punching – “Kill him! Kill that big boy!” (23) – which suggests that the men indulge the fight as an *ersatz* action for their own suppressed feelings and primal impulses. Watching the boys inflict pain to each other as “they themselves wish to do” (Kim 50), the white men receive a sadistic gratification which matches the master’s “pleasure in whipping a slave” (Douglass 3). IM offers a visceral account of the brutality of the spectacle:

My saliva became like hot bitter glue. A glove connected with my head, filling my mouth with warm blood.... I could not tell if the moisture I felt upon my body was sweat or blood. A blow landed hard against the nape of my neck. I felt myself going over, my head hitting the floor.... Blows landed below the belt and in the kidney.... [A] boy violently punching the air ... scream[ed] in pain as he smashed his hand against a ring post ... a sneaker-clad foot shot into his groin. (22-24)

The physical violence instigated by the white men, the exposure of the naked flesh, and the repeated references to blood associate the spectacle with innumerable accounts of cruelties inflicted to black slaves, such as the whipping of Aunt Hester in Frederick Douglass’ slave narrative: Hiding in the dark and afraid that “it w[ill] be [his] turn next” (5), the young Douglass passes “the blood-stained gate ... to the hell of slavery” (4) when he watches how his aunt is “stripped ... from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked ... [until] she [stands] fair for [the master’s] infernal purpose” (Ibid.), who whips her mercilessly until “the warm red blood ... [comes] dripping to the floor” (Ibid. 5). Given that Hester is castigated for having been with Lloyd’s Ned when the master “desired her (presence) (brackets added)” (Ibid. 4), the “infernal purpose” carries a strong subtext of rape, impressing upon the young slave “the primacy of the phallic over the feminine” (Wallace 91). By subjecting the half-naked black boys to a similar ritual of exposure and physical suffering, the Battle Royal equally relies on the economies of voyeurism, sadism, and subjugation to “enact a patriarchal discourse of masculine ‘desire’” (Julien and Mercer 8), casting it as a primal scene through which the boys are initiated into both the historical legacy of slavery and their intrinsic emasculation.

Emasculation is furthermore achieved through the mode of ridicule: “Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity. I stumbled about like a baby or a drunken man.... like [a] drunken dancer weaving to the rapid drum-like thuds of blows.” (22 f.). The



similes of the toddler and the rummy – both lacking bodily control and phallic potency – contradict the idea of virility *per se*, constructing instead a vision of the black male as an innocuous and ridiculous figure. The allusion to the “drunken dancer” subtly invokes the samboesque naked blonde, which not only reinforces the notion of emasculation, but underwrites the battle with elements of the minstrel show. Degraded as they are, the boys

grop[e] about like blind, cautious crabs crouching to protect their mid-sections, their heads pulled in short against their shoulders, their arms stretched nervously before them, with their fists testing the smoke-filled air like the knobbed feelers of hypersensitive snails. (23)

While the comedy of this scene counterbalances the dire naturalism of the Battle Royal, it subscribes nonetheless to the former logic of simultaneous investiture in and disavowal of black masculinity: Like Tatlock’s fearfully hidden erection, the blindfolded boxers oxymoronically offer the white men an image of black masculinity as intimidating yet infantile, aggressive yet amusing, phallic yet foppish.

The merging of the paradigms of public torture and racial burlesque becomes even more explicit in the subsequent episode when the boys are made to collect their (fake) pay from an electrified rug (the gold pieces later turn out to be “brass pocket tokens advertising a certain make of automobile” (32), which revisits the intricate relationships between capitalism and racism, economic need and self-degradation or prostitution). After the white men have abreacted their suppressed racist fantasies, the atmosphere becomes more relaxed and “[e]veryone seem[s] friendly” (26). With the removal of the boys’ blindfolds, the white men’s veneer of respectability is restored and the *divertissement* takes on a socially more acceptable form. From the start, the episode is inscribed into the register of blackface comedy given that a white man “confidentially” calls IM “Sambo” (26), which is an “abject and grotesque figure” (Wilcox 998) from antebellum minstrel shows, an icon of racial docility which remained popular in white American mainstream culture through the 1950s (Brandt 312). Embodying the material relations of slavery, the Sambo character represents a whole array of “musically gifted, yet mentally retarded” stereotypes of black manhood, such as ‘Uncle Tom’ or ‘Jim Crow’ (Brandt 314), “submissive ... entertainer[s] ... robbed of both [their] subjectivity and ... masculinity” (Ibid. 312). At the beginning of the 1830s, Thomas D. Rice’s dramatic sketch about a slow-witted ‘plantation darky’ named Jim Crow marked the debut of the blackface show as a popular form of entertainment for the white American mainstream:

... I’m going to sing a little song,  
My name’s Jim Crow.

Weel about and turn about  
 And do jis so,  
 Eb'ry time I weel about  
 And jump Jim Crow. (qtd. in Lott 23)

The grotesque dancing with its clear sexual overtones emerged as an axiomatic convention of minstrel entertainment, betraying white people's "obsession with black (male) bodies ..., [which] it ruthlessly disavowed ... through ridicule and racist lampoon" (Lott 3).

In his street-corner 'Sambo show,' Tod Clifton expertly tailors his sales strategies to white people's ambivalent demands on the black male body: On the one hand, he makes the "joy spreader" (433) move in such a way that the white crowd halts, watching with "fascinated eyes" the "loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion ... as though [the Sambo doll] received a perverse pleasure from its motions" (431). The sexual ambiguity and the implied (hyper)masculinity of his "entertainer" (Ibid.) are further corroborated when Clifton announces his "joy boy" (432) to white males as a present to give to their "girl friend[s]" who will "love you, loove you" (431); On the other hand, being aware of white people's fascination with and fear of black male sexuality (for which the implied miscegenation is just a shorthand), Clifton dexterously counterbalances the erotic connotations of the grinning paper doll with the derisive power of exaggeration, making the doll shake so grotesquely that it seems to perform "a degrading act in public" over which the crowd "chuckles" in comic relief (Ibid.).

Clifton's Sambo is furthermore a docile happy-go-lucky, a born servant whose loose-jointed movements literally look like a genuflection, while his sheepish happiness caters to white people's paternalistic vision of slavery:

*He'll make you laugh, he'll make you sigh, si-igh.*  
*He'll make you want to dance, and dance— ...*  
*He'll keep you entertained. He'll make you weep ...*  
*Tears from laughing.*  
*[H]e'll kill your depression,*  
*And your dispossession, he lives upon the sunshines of your lordly smile. (431 f.)*

Through the light-hearted demonstration, Clifton arouses in the white spectators the nostalgia for slavery times when black men could literally be bought and treated like the grotesque cardboard doll as objects of oppression. Under the veneer of mainstream entertainment, the comedy of Clifton's show truly appeals to a range of sadistic desires informing both minstrelsy and slavery, which is further explicated when Clifton invites his white spectators to

apply violence to the doll: “... *Shake him, stretch him by the neck ... Shake him, shake him, you cannot break him ...*” (431 f.). Tragically, as IM fails to realize, the Sambo doll epitomizes Tod Clifton’s and his own status within the Brotherhood, which manipulates the black men to the extent that they become “black caricatures dangl[ing] on a string” pulled by powerful white leaders (Smith 105).

Clifton’s simultaneous investiture in and disavowal of black masculinity; the dialectic flickering of comedy and violence; as well as the continuous assertion of white people’s racial superiority circumscribe the logic by which the white men are entertained during the last part of the Battle Royal, the money grab. As the boys scramble over the electrified rug, they involuntarily offer the white men a Sambo show “comprised of hideous facial expressions and grotesque physical contortions” (Wilcox 999) which resemble Thomas Rice’s jumping Jim Crow:

... a surprised shriek ... I tried frantically to remove my hand but could not let go. A hot violent force tore through my body, shaking me like a wet rat.... The hair bristled up on my head as I shook myself free. My muscles jumped, my nerves jangled, writhed. ... Suddenly I saw a boy lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal, and dropped, his wet back landing flush upon the charged rug, heard him yell and saw him literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching .... (27)

Apart from reinvesting – by means of the continued allusion to the naked blonde – the notion of emasculation, the scenario blatantly debunks the sadistic desires informing minstrel entertainment, which is ultimately always dedicated to glorifying the material relations of slavery “as amusing, right, and natural” (Lott 3) while disavowing any moral responsibility through dismissive laughter. Having been made to sambo for the entertainment of the white ‘big shots,’ IM is “limp as a dish rag,” his “back fe[eling] as though it ha[s] been beaten with wires” (29). IM suggestively projects himself as having been whipped with the dreaded cowskin, thus attributing his loss of phallic potency, his ‘limpness,’ to the cruel history of slavery.

This connection is further corroborated when IM is tortured with electric currency in the factory hospital. Locked into a glass box, his “head ... encircled by a piece of cold metal like the iron cap worn by the occupant of an electric chair” (233), IM is turned into a guinea pig for the white doctors to experiment with different treatments. After a discussion ensues among them whether or not to use castration (236), which to IM sounds “like a discussion of history” (Ibid.), they decide to “apply pressure in the proper degrees to the major centers of

nerve control” (Ibid.) in order to “produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife” (Ibid.). Turning on the current, the white doctors mercilessly watch IM’s excruciating pain: “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). While the white doctors sadistically enjoy the black man’s painful contortions, laughing them off as a Sambo show – “‘Look, he’s dancing,’ ... ‘They really do have rhythm ... Get hot, boy! Get hot!’” (Ibid.) – the antithetical connection of ‘dance’ and ‘blood’ renews the critique of minstrel entertainment as an inherently cruel practice. Simultaneously, the electrocution elicits from IM’s subconscious forgotten memories of his southern past as a plantation slave, “wad[ing] in a brook before breakfast ... chew[ing] on sugar cane ... first s[eeing] the hounds chasing black men in stripes and chains” (234), thus embedding the pain inflicted to IM’s black body in the broader framework of suffering inflicted to blacks during their three-hundred-year-long history of enslavement (237). IM emerges from the treatment “feeling deflated. All .... limbs seemed amputated” (238), which connects the symbolic castration at the hands of the racist doctors to the emasculating history of slavery.

#### 4.3. Homoerotic desire

Daniel Kim (41-82) has persuasively analyzed the subtext of interracial/racist homoeroticism in *Invisible Man*, arguing that in the novel “the optics of white male racial vision are fundamentally shaped by homoerotic impulses” (47). Not only does the ritualistic subordination of the young black men during the Battle Royal afford the white men with the possibility of “gratify[ing] an erotic desire that is essentially homosexual” (Ibid. 64), but white male’s philanthropic interest in black males is equally underwritten by “the libidinal impulses of gay men” (Ibid. 60).

This tendency becomes most obvious during IM’s encounter with the gay young Emerson whose benevolence towards the young black man is underwritten by “impure” motives (186). Despite his apparent concern for IM’s professional circumstances, Emerson is not genuinely interested in the young black man, but is “thinking only of [him]self” (187), seeing in the black male an object of sexual desire. Although he remarks upon IM’s brilliant academic performance (182), the “strange interest in his eyes” (180) dismisses the black boy’s intellectual performance, focusing instead admiringly on the latter’s athletic physique (182 f.). Emerson’s hardly ambiguous offer to “throw off the mask of custom and manners that

insulate man from man, and converse in naked honesty and frankness.” (186) most clearly reveals that he sees in the black man an object of desire to alleviate his (homo)sexual “frustration” (Ibid.) of being “a thwarted ...” (Ibid.).

Being in a position to (financially) help IM, Emerson’s knowledgeable assertion, “I know ... fellows like you.” (187), suggests that he regularly sponsors needy black boys to obtain their sexual favors (the theme of black males’ prostituting themselves to white males being implied from the beginning of the novel, given that the Battle Royal is for both the stripper and the black boys “a night’s work” (18) after which they are requested to “get dressed, ... get [the] money ... [and] leave” (29)); Emerson’s declaration moreover indicates that he does not perceive the young black man as an individual, but remains deeply entrenched in stereotyped vision, comparing IM to the only black males he knows: Jazz musicians and the runaway slave Jim from Mark Twain’s classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) (188) – both being examples of black ‘public figures’ whose subjectivity and ‘visibility’ are circumscribed by their function to entertain the white American mainstream. When Emerson further affirms that “With us it’s still Jim and Huck Finn.... I’m afraid my father considers *me* one of the unspeakables ... I’m Huckleberry, you see ....” (187 f.), he chooses a model for their relationship which elides his homoerotic interest in IM with the fantasy of racial superiority: As Ralph Ellison argues, Twain’s portrayal of the ignorant and superstitious ‘Nigger Jim’ fits the black male “into the outlines of the minstrel tradition” (*Change* 50), casting him as a “black-faced figure of white fun” (Ibid.). Contrary to Jim’s “‘boyish’ naiveté” (Ibid.), Huck’s “street-sparrow sophistication seem[s] more adult” (Ibid.), which lays out a clear hierarchy of authority within their friendship. Emerson’s vision of IM as Jim is thus underwritten by the racist and colonialist discourses of infantilization and ridicule through which he contains the black male’s phallic agency while visualizing himself in a position of superiority over his black “friend” (189).

However, on a metatextual level, the recourse to Huck and Jim further recapitulates Emerson’s homosexual interest in the black man, as it deliberately adverts to Leslie Fiedler’s famous essay “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey!” (1948) which was published just four years prior to *Invisible Man*. Fiedler controversially contends that the thematic of interracial homoeroticism is central to a range of American boys’ books, arguing that, in Twain’s classic, “the tenderness of Huck’s repeated loss and refinding of Jim ... celebrate[s] ... the mutual love of *a white man and a colored*.” (29). Being one of the first critics to remark upon the intertwined dynamics of race, gender, and sexuality, Fiedler establishes a link between the “shackling clichés” about “the white man’s sexual envy of the Negro male,

the ambivalent horror of miscegenation,” and the “physical attraction” between the white male and the black (30). Seeing himself as a modern version of Huck Finn, Emerson thus tries to invite ‘the Nigger (J)IM’ to the “Club Calamus” (another reference to the erotic love between men taken from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*). As Daniel Kim argues, the nightclub represents “a latter-day equivalent of Huck and Jim’s raft” (59) upon which “the fugitive slave and the no-account boy l[ie] side by side ... borne by the endless river toward an impossible escape...” (Fiedler 28). Being the son of a tyrannical, homophobic father, the young Emerson immerses himself into a parallel world of narrative and literature (apart from Huck and Jim, the scene contains allusions to Oscar Wilde and Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (180)) to imaginatively indulge or find tutelage for his tabooed sexual preferences, which he suggestively lives out at the Club Calamus where he has “rendevous [with] writers, artists and all kinds of celebrities” (185).

Longing for unlicensed arenas of (homo)sexual fulfillment, Emerson seamlessly conflates the erotic with the exotic, which explains his fetishistic predilection for *colorful*, exotic things displayed in his office:

Beyond the door it was like a museum. I had entered a large reception room decorated with cool tropical colors. One wall was almost covered by a huge colored map ... [with] narrow red silk ribbons .... There were paintings, bronzes, tapestries, all beautifully arranged.... a teakwood chair with cushions of emerald-green silk .... a beautiful dwarf tree ... a jade ash tray.... a lighted case of Chinese design which held delicate-looking statues of horses and birds, small vases and bowls, each set upon a carved wooden base .... I looked toward the window to see an eruption of color .... It was an aviary of tropical birds .... (180 f.)

Emerson sees in the well-built young black man a specimen of the exotic/erotic Other which he wants to possess as both an object of sexual pleasure and a trophy to add to his “museum” as an icon of his power. The caged tropical birds whose “colors flar[e] ... like an unfurled oriental fan” (181) ominously symbolize how IM’s ‘exotic’ *color* renders him an object of Emerson’s erotic longing for the sexual type of the Oriental. Simultaneously, the birds recall the nude blonde from the Battle Royal who resembled a “fair bird-girl” (19), equally ‘caged’ in the portable boxing ring for the scopophilic enjoyment of rich white men. As a “large bird beg[ins] a song,” IM’s attention is drawn to the “throbbing of its bright blue, red and yellow throat” (181), the colors of which reiterate the looks of the naked dancer whose “hair was yellow ... the face ... rouged ... the eyes ... smeared a cool blue” (19). Just as the objectified woman mirrored back to IM his own status as “the ‘feminine’ object of an erotic, white male

visual pleasure” (Kim 60), the “harsh cry from the cage” (182) and the birds’ desperate attempts to break through “the bamboo bars” (Ibid.) equally signify to IM that his acceptance of the rich white man’s self-interested offer to help ultimately means to become like the exotic ‘bird’ in Emerson’s collection: deprived of his subjectivity and agency, and solely existing to gratify the white man’s desires, of whatever kind they be.

Given that Emerson’s “museum” (180) is immediately juxtaposed with IM’s “unpleasant” college museum (181), the gay white man’s interest in the black man exceed the domain of (homo)sexuality, but is intricately interwoven with colonial fantasies of domination and power. In stark contrast to Emerson’s beautiful office, IM’s college museum displays

a few cracked relics from slavery times: an iron pot, an ancient bell, a set of ankle-irons and links of chain, a primitive loom, a spinning wheel, a gourd for drinking, an ugly ebony African god that seemed to sneer ..., a leather whip with copper brads, a branding iron with the double letter MM .... (181)

Not only do the contrasting descriptions undermine Emerson’s eager assertion that they are “both frustrated” (187), but the concrete display of IM’s past in the college museum implies that Emerson’s “museum” (180) of exotic beauty and abundance equally offers a glimpse into bygone times, suggesting that the wealth of the white man’s “importing firm” (180) is rooted in the history of colonialism. IM’s naïve and awed declaration that “[t]hese [white] folks are the Kings of the Earth!” (181) ironically turns out to be a literal truth which causally connects to his own history of servitude, and thus unravels the subconscious fantasies of colonial “power, ... domination, ... [and] hegemony” (Said 5) informing Emerson’s interest in the exotic Other. Offering IM, in apparent philanthropy, employment as his “valet” (192), Emerson proposes to rearticulate the historically unequal distribution of power between white men and black men in terms of employer and employee. Simultaneously, the offer to become the gay man’s valet ambiguously suggests that IM work not only as a domestic servant, but also as the “hired companion of [the gay man’s] bedroom and closet” (Kim 59). While this allusion reverts once again to the theme of prostitution, it furthermore collapses the distinction between relations of sex and relations of power, suggesting that Emerson’s fascination with the exotic/erotic black Other “rehearse[s] scenarios of desire in a way which traces the cultural legacies of slavery, empire and imperialism” (Mercer and Julien 133). However, IM is highly suspicious of Emerson’s “hip-swinging stride” (180), asking the latter squarely: “What kind of man are you, anyway?” (189). Unlike his usual submissive genuflection before influential white men, (J)IM rejects Emerson’s invitation to the raft/Club Calamus as well as

the offer to work for him (192) in remarkably explicit terms, thus candidly refusing to leave the ‘sivilized’ world of heterosexuality.

#### 4.4. Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are-possible

Apart from the encounter with the young homosexual Emerson or the Battle Royal, the two miscegenation scenes with Sybil and the unnamed woman from the Brotherhood, as well as the Trueblood episode, provide further examples of the “eroticizing Othering” (Julien and Mercer 8) through which the black male is rendered invisible as an individual. When, during his encounter with Sybil, IM self-consciously realizes that to her he is only a kind of “Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are-possible” (517), he sums up in a nutshell how white figures throughout the novel – both men and women – utilize the black male as a corporeal screen onto which they project their own repressed sexual fantasies about social taboos like interracial sex, homoeroticism, incest, or rape.

Complaining that her “[l]ife is so terribly empty” (412), the unnamed white woman from the Brotherhood who invites IM to discuss ideology displaces her desire for an analeptic (sexual) experience to “mak[e] life worth living again” (Ibid.) onto the political movement, fully committing to its ideology which she finds “so vital and alive that one ... should at least make the try” (Ibid.). Given the erotic overtones of the nightly rendezvous between IM and the woman – the “possibility of a heightened communication” (411), “her gown trailing sensuously over the oriental carpet” (412), her “nearly closed eyes” as she degustates the wine (Ibid.) – her fascination with the Brotherhood and her willingness to break new grounds (“one ... should at least ... try”) carries a strong subtext of interracial sexual desire. While IM is seriously dedicated to his work as a spokesperson for the movement, the woman increasingly conflates the Brotherhood with its black male representative: “[Y]ou convey the great throbbing vitality of the movement.” (413). Having internalized the stereotype of the hypersexual black brute, her praise for IM’s qualities as an orator reflect her sexualized perception of him: “I must confess that you also make me afraid. ... It’s so powerful, so — so *primitive*! ... Yes, *primitive*; ... [A]t times you have tom-toms beating in your voice.” Remotely echoing Emerson’s fantasy to become Huck and make his escape from sexual ‘sivilization’ with the ‘Nigger (J)IM,’ the woman’s invocation of ostensibly ‘primitive,’ pre-cultural forms of life (represented by the African drums) equally betrays her longing for the fulfillment of sexual pleasures that lie beyond the socially acceptable. Becoming even more explicit about her sexual desire for the black man, she describes the impact of IM’s speeches



on her in a suggestive vocabulary of penetration: “I mean *forceful*, powerful. ... [I]t has so much naked power that it goes straight through one. I tremble just to think of such vitality.” (413).

The ambiguity of the woman’s trembling as an expression of both fear and ecstasy with regard to the primitivist sexual proclivity of the black male foreshadows Sybil’s secret fantasy of being raped by a “big black bruiser” (522). Like the unnamed woman of the Brotherhood, she is a “misunderstood married woman” (516) who is “tired of living the way [she] do[es]” (521). Describing herself as “a nymphomaniac” (519), she feels sexually unfulfilled within the insipid life of marital respectability:

A woman like me has to develop an iron discipline. (519) ... George ... does [not] know ... what a woman needs ... with his forty minutes of brag and ten of bustle. (521) ... That ole Georgie porgie wouldn’t know a nymphomaniac if she got right into bed with him! (524)

Seeking alleviation for her sexual frustration, Sybil dreams up “little dramas” around black male public figures like the boxer Joe Louis and the singer Paul Robeson (516), exploiting IM as a surrogate for the men of her desire:

[A]lthough I had neither the stature nor the temperament for either role, I was expected either to sing “Old Man River” and just keep rolling along, or to do fancy tricks with my muscles. ... [I]t became quite a contest, with me trying to keep the two of us in touch with reality and with her casting me in fantasies in which I was Brother Taboo-with-whom-all-things-are-possible. (516 f.)

By means of comic exaggeration and the juxtaposition of fantasy and reality, the Sybil episode constitutes the novel’s most decided dismantling of white people’s clichéd, often completely absurd, perception of black men. Like the woman from the Brotherhood, Sybil conceives of IM as an embodiment of sexual license onto which she projects the “thoughts and dreams” she has “never give[n] into” (519). Having grown up listening to whispered stories about black brutes raping white women, Sybil has “wanted it to happen to [her]” ever since she was “a very little girl” (518), asking IM to rape her like a “big black bruiser” (522). Fading out the reality that for IM it is a “revolting” (517) idea which “drain[s] the starch out of [him]” (Ibid.), Sybil completely immerses herself into the fantastic vision of IM as a “buck” (518), requesting him to “talk rough to [her]” and “threaten to kill [her]” if she does not give in (Ibid.). Against IM’s discouraging assertion that he is “not like that” and that, on the contrary, he “feel[s] a tender, protective passion” for her (Ibid.), Sybil insists pointing to his ostensible racial predetermination to be a rapist: ““But ... it’ll be easy for *you*”” (Ibid.). In

a moment of critical reflection, the narrator (who seems to be the knowledgeable narrator from the hole rather than the experiencing IM) deconstructs white women's eroticized vision of black men as the logical result of the very system of phallocentrism underwriting white men's system of patriarchal control over women:

But why be surprised, when that's what they [white women] hear all their lives. When it's [the black man's sexuality] made into a great power and they're taught to worship all types of power? With all the warnings against it, some are bound to want to try it for themselves. .... Maybe a great number secretly want it; maybe that's why they scream when it's farthest from possibility— (520)

Having dismantled the myth of the hypersexual black male as an illusory image created by white men and craved for by white women, IM has to position himself as a black man – either as the rapist he is believed and requested to be, or, if he refuses to, as lacking in phallic potential. Revisiting IM's emasculating sameness with the naked dancer during the Battle Royal, Sybil puts the finger on IM's dreaded identification with the phallic lack characteristic of the feminine: “[Y]ou're not like other men. We're kind of alike.” (Ibid.).

Placing IM before the choice of raping Sybil in order to refute her castrating dictum, Ellison engages in a long debate over how to redress the legacy of black males' symbolic and factual emasculation in the pre-Civil Rights society of the United States. Since Frederick Douglass' paradigmatic wrestle with his overseer, Mr. Covey, to “contes[t] his ‘feminisation’ as a man by slavery and asser[t] his prerogatives as a masculine subject” (Carroll 146), key texts in the African American genealogy have subscribed to a construction of ‘manhood’ and ‘citizenship’ underwritten by a patriarchal definition of masculinity (Ibid. 146 f.). Particularly during the rise of Black nationalism in the course of the 1960s, the “discourse of black resistance [increasingly] equated freedom with manhood; [and inversely] the economic and material domination of black men with castration, emasculation” (bell hooks 58), leading to a politics of self-assertion which “shared the patriarchal belief that revolutionary struggle was really about the erect phallus” (Ibid.). One of the most extreme examples of this politics of asserting *manhood* was the Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), in which he sanctioned the serial rape of white women as “an insurrectionary act” through which black men could reclaim their manhood by “defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, ... defiling his women ...” (14).

While *Soul on Ice* would not be written until over fifteen years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison particularly engaged with and revised Richard Wright's naturalistic credo as exemplified in his novel *Native Son* (1940): Being caught in a deterministic

environment, Wright's protagonist Bigger Thomas succumbs to the dehumanizing effects of racist discourse and "assert[s] his manhood" through two murders which are "closely akin to rapes" (Waniek 11):

In all his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him.... [N]ever had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight.... [H]e had committed murder twice and had created a new world for himself. (Wright R. 225 f.).

Just like Eldridge Cleaver, Richard Wright positions the black male in such a way that he is "incapable of asserting [his] 'manhood' against racism except by replicating phallocratic violence against women" (JanMohamed, *Sexuality* 108): "The knowledge that he had killed a white girl they loved and regarded as their symbol of beauty made him feel the equal of them, like a man who ... had now evened the score" (Wright R. 155). However, Bigger's ostensible entrance into the symbolic realm of the phallus is fraught with the fact that he is "rehearsing the racist construction of [his] own subjectivity (JanMohamed, *Sexuality* 110). Ellison's *Invisible Man* decidedly rejects the notion of phallocentric empowerment through the embrace of "the pathologised identity which a racist discourse has prepared for him" (Carroll 147), which is why IM refuses to commit the paradigmatic rape of the white woman.

Giving up his delusions that he is capable of transcending the white society's stereotyped conception of him (520), IM self-consciously realizes during his encounter with Sybil that she sees him as "an entertainer" (521) – a conclusion which harkens back to Tod Clifton's Sambo dolls, and by extension, to the castration symbolized by the naked blonde; However, despite the apparent promise of phallic self-assertion, by raping the white woman IM would ascertain white people's stereotyped image of him as a brutish black beast, so that, far from being "a testament to his masculinity" (Steward 529), the Sybil rape would "effectively emasculat[e] [him] as a sexual individual by total absorption into the white myth" (Radford 230). As Douglas Steward therefore argues, IM's perceived choice between "being socially castrated like a woman [if he does not rape Sybil]... and (2) adhering to the stereotype of the brutishly virile black male" really is no choice since he is "castrated either way" (532). Rejecting the "hetero- and phallocentric logic of agency that has so far subtended the novel" (Ibid. 527), IM self-consciously engages in a sort of minstrel performance in which he retains the manipulative agency of a trickster: Making Sybil drunk, he assumes the mask of the "domesticated rapist" (521), altering his speech ("I rapes real good when I'm drunk" (521)), becoming "annoyed enough to slap her" (522), and pretending to ignore her name (523). While she drunkenly encourages him as if they were engaging in the sexual act, "Hurry,

boo'ful, hurry," (523), IM *literarily*, instead of literally, rapes her (Steward 529) with a "small, 'purplish' phallus" (Ibid. 530), writing with a lipstick onto Sybil's belly:

SYBIL, YOU WERE RAPED

BY

SANTA CLAUS

SURPRISE

Like Tod Clifton whose Sambo show constitutes a cynical self-caricature, IM acquiesces to the demands the white woman places on him by tragically assuming an identity as "Santa Claus" (522) – like Sambo, another impossible fantasy figure, an always merry "joy spreader" lacking subjectivity and existing for the sole purpose of servicing white people's desires. Signifying on the racist discourse of the black male's hyperbolic penis, IM "repeat[s] and simultaneously revers[es]" (Gates, *Blackness* 286) the received image of phallogocentric agency by perpetrating the 'rape' with a highly effeminate, if not draggy, *ersatz* phallus which parodies his supposed masculinity "as a lipstick masquerade" (Steward 531). Through the bizarre written testament of his 'agency' on Sybil's belly, IM begins to resemanticize the concept of black manhood as deriving "not from the phallus but from his interventions in discourse, his symbolic action" (Ibid. 532). The re-writing of the concept of rape thus foreshadows his final embrace of castration in order to stake out his primary field of agency within the realm of discursivity and representation (Ibid. 532).

The Trueblood episode equally prefigures the potential of narrative agency as a means for the black male to overcome the stereotyped ascriptions placed on him by the racist society. Although whites see Trueblood prejudicially – as a singer of "primitive spirituals" (47) who is invited as an unusual event for special white guests visiting the school; and as a specimen of black people's incestuous sexuality (53) – Trueblood is nonetheless the most authentic black character of the novel who literally narrates himself into being as a complex human subject. Preceding IM in his understanding "that he can control the meaning of his life if he converts his experiences into narrative, thus determining what construction should be placed on them" (Smith 111), Trueblood converts his incestuous experience into a complex story with which he "replaces the reductive, derogatory vision" (Smith 114) of the "rambunctiously sexual, lyrical and sin-adoring 'darky' ... [so] dear to the hearts of white America" (Baker 241).

When IM drives Mr. Norton around, the white millionaire self-absorbedly begins to rhapsodize about his deceased daughter:

A girl, my daughter ... a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dreams of a poet .... Her beauty was a well-spring of purest

water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again ... She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. (42)

The compulsive invocation of 'purity' and the repeated assertion that he "could never believe her to be [his] own flesh and blood" (Ibid.) reveal that Norton's rapture for his daughter is of a highly impure nature, which is further suggested by his symbolic language of scopic and oral consumption ("to look upon her is to drink ...").

Upon approaching the slave quarters, the Northern philanthropist and college donor is thrilled to see, for the first time, the remains of slavery, asking IM to continue in the same direction: "I've never seen this section before. It's new territory for me." (46). Not only does his unfamiliarity with the true face of slavery debunk his hypocritical involvement with blacks; But, given Norton's repressed fantasy of incest, his excitement to explore the unfamiliar area where the poor black-belt people live is underwritten by a desire to discover unknown and unlicensed 'areas' of sexuality. Upon seeing Jim Trueblood's log cabin – an architectural hint that it is where the Other dwells – he gives IM the "excited command" (46) to stop the car. Singing the "earthy harmonies" (47) from slavery times, making unsophisticated "crude, high, plaintive animal sounds" (Ibid.), Trueblood represents for the white millionaire an embodiment of the archetypal black Other who confirms not only the white man's preconceptions about the prolific sexuality of blacks ("I understand that your people– Never mind!" (49)), but even surpasses his "wildest dreams" when he learns that Trueblood "took both his wife and his daughter" (50), impregnating both. Given his own incestuous fantasies, Norton wildly overreacts when he hears that the black peasant could indulge such a "monstrous thing" (49) without suffering any harm: sounding "as though he were in great pain" (50), the serene elderly man reddens (49) and speaks "with something like horror" (50), he "crie[s]" (50), "blurt[s]" (51), and "shout[s]" (Ibid.), then "almost r[uns]" (50) to talk to Jim Trueblood:

"You have survived .... But is it true ... ?' – '*Suh?*' ... – 'You did and are unharmed! ... You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!' – 'No suh! I feels all right.' – ... You feel no inner turmoil, no need to cast out the offending eye?' – '*Suh?*' – 'Answer me!' – 'I'm all right, suh'." (51)

The hysterical and unintelligible exclamations suggest that Norton is not actually communicating with the black man, but is engaged in an inner dispute, weighing the pleasure of the prohibited act against the doubts and concern which have dissuaded him from indulging it himself. Looking at the black man with "something like envy and indignation" (51), Norton is torn between identification and abjection, wanting to compromise neither the gratification

of hearing Trueblood's story as an *ersatz* for his own incestuous fantasies nor the safe retreat back into his social identity as a civilized white man. Like the young Emerson who self-interestedly offers IM a job, therefore, Norton masks his selfish interest in Trueblood under a veneer of philanthropy, sponsoring him with a hundred-dollar bill (which he asks the peasant to spend on toys for his (incestuous) children (69)).

Trueblood, who has recited his story already to a lot of "big white folks" (53), begins to "talk willingly ..., with a kind of satisfaction and no trace of hesitancy or shame" (Ibid.). Having "thoroughly rehearsed his tale and ... [having] carefully refined his knowledge of his audience" (Baker 225), he assumes the stance of "the narrator par excellence" (Smith 111), "clear[ing] his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times" (53 f.). Like IM's grandfather, the poor sharecropper from the slave quarters is an experienced trickster who has long understood how to manipulate whites by seemingly fulfilling their expectations, while retaining the agency to "keep up the good fight" (16). Being aware that "no matter how biggity a nigguh gits, the white folks can always cut [you] down" (53), Trueblood self-consciously assumes an expressive (minstrel) mask through which he "sells" his narrative product (Baker 240 ff.), framing it so as "to fit [the rich white folks'] market demands" (Ibid. 241). It is by "merchandiz[ing] an image of himself" (Ibid. 240) that he secures the family's economic subsistence, things being "pretty good" (53) since "curious" whites from all over the State come to listen to his story" (52 f.).

In vernacular (the apparent simplicity of which suggests the account's intrinsic honesty), Trueblood begins to tell the white millionaire "how it started" (53) – the cold which forces the family to sleep together (Ibid.), and the bizarre miscegenation dream during which he perpetrates the actual incest – evoking visual, olfactory, and aural images to create the atmosphere of the evening when he had intercourse with Matty Lou (Smith 111):

It was black dark and I heard one of the kids whimper in his sleep and the last few sticks of kindlin' crackin' and settlin' in the stove and the smell of the fat meat seemed to git cold and still in the air just like meat grease when it gits set in a cold plate of molasses.

... I was worryin' 'bout my family, how they was goin' to eat and all ... (54)

Being half awake, half dozing, Trueblood revisits past times with an earlier lover in Mississippi, guiding his listeners through the chain of associative patterns of his thoughts (quail hunting, river boats, ripe water melons, etc. (54 ff.)), producing a sensation of nostalgic comfort through which he "self-consciously creat[es] the impression ... that the atmosphere of the evening was largely responsible for the act of incest" (Smith 113). Trueblood

manipulates his listeners by building up (sexual) tension through an extensive use of sensual images and synaesthesia:

... a wagonful of watermelons, and you see one of them young juicy melons split wide open a-layin' all spread out and cool and sweet on top of the striped green ones like it's waitin' just for you, so you can see how red and ripe and juicy it is and all the shiny black seeds it's got and all. (55 f.)

Not only do the attributes of the 'young' yet 'ripe' fruit foreshadow Trueblood's realization that his daughter is "a woman now" whom he knows to have had sex (56 f.); but the sensual connotations of the metaphor are further elicited when Trueblood associates the 'redness' and 'juiciness' of the melon with "a gal in a red dress ... plump and juicy" (56) who clearly represents the object of his sexual desire, as she – by implication – carries in her his "shiny black seeds" (the 'shininess' being an ambiguous allusion both to the derogatory name for blacks, as well as to Shine, the African American trickster figure). Then Trueblood dozes off into the miscegenation dream during which he unconsciously perpetrates the incestuous act as a sort of *ersatz* for the taboo of miscegenation: Dreaming that he runs from the forbidden white woman, Trueblood makes his escape through a ticking grandfather clock. In terms suggestive of penetration, he forces open a "door" with "kinda crinkly stuff like steel wool on the facing," entering a "dark tunnel" (58):

[I]t's hot and dark in there. ... I starts to runnin', tryin' to git out. I runs and runs till I should be tired but ain't tired but feelin' more rested as I runs, and runnin' so good it's like flyin' and I'm flyin' and sailin' and floatin' right up over the town. Only I'm still in the *tunnel*. (58 f.)

Given the evocative rendition of the incest by means of the allegorical dream, Trueblood not only evades the problematic of having to describe in explicit language how he breaks the taboo and thus defiles his own daughter; but he is further manipulates his desiring white listener into reliving the incestuous penetration and indulging its pleasure. Through the apt use of accumulative figures of speech, such as polysyndeton and alliteration ("feelin'," "flyin'," "floatin'"), the black narrator linguistically replicates the accelerating rhythm of the sexual act itself, so that Norton's eventual devastation (he is "drained of color," and looks "ghostly" (68), asking IM for a "stimulant" (69) suggests an orgasmic limpness.

Waking up, Trueblood finds himself on top of his daughter, "looking [her] straight in [the] face" (59). Figuring that "if I don't move it maybe ain't no sin, 'cause it happened when I was asleep" (Ibid.), he nonetheless has to "git [him]self out of the fix" (Ibid.) before "the ole lady will see [him] ... [which] would be *worse* than sin." (Ibid.). Facing the tragicomic dilemma of

“having to move *without* movin’” (Ibid.), he realizes that the only solution to his problem would be castration, although he quickly dismisses the thought upon remembering the “young boar pigs [gelded] in the fall” (60), truthfully admitting to his listeners that “that was too much to pay to keep from sinnin’” (Ibid.). Having fully absorbed the rich white listener through an alternation of sensuality and comedy, Trueblood has him set-up for the incestuous climax. Admitting that “the very thought of the fix I’m in puts the iron back in me” (60), he offers himself up as the alter ego through which Norton can live out and satisfy his repressed desire for his own daughter. After a rather comic struggle between father and daughter – she pushing him away while he pushes her down; then himself trying to pull away while she holds him tight (60) – Trueblood begins to capitalize on the pleasure of the forbidden act, “conceiv[ing] of himself in the throes of his incestuous ecstasies” (Baker 235)

She didn’t want me to go then – and to tell the honest-to-God truth I found out that I didn’t want to go neither. I guess I felt then ... just ‘bout like that fellow did down in Birmingham. That one what locked hisself in his house and shot at them police until they set fire to the house and burned him up. I was lost. The more wringlin’ and twistin’ we done tryin’ to git away, the more we wanted to stay. So like that fellow, I stayed, I had to fight it on out to the end. He mighta died, but I suspects now that he got a heapa satisfaction before he went. I *know* there ain’t nothin’ like what I went through. (60)

Although having “been sorry since” (Ibid.), Trueblood openly admits the satisfaction of the prohibited scene, projecting it as a pleasure worth dying for. As a matter of fact, he really almost pays with his life, as his wife wakes up and nearly kills him with an axe. Although the “raw and moist” gash on the farmer’s right cheek (51) is a kind of castration wound (Baker 234) after having indulged the “heapa satisfaction” of breaking the taboo, Trueblood reframes it, by means of his narrative intervention, as a testament to his manliness rather than to his emasculation: Harkening back to his earlier definition of manhood as responsibility – “[t]hem boss quails is like a good man, what he got to do he *do*.” (55) – he willingly submits to his physical castigation by Kate (Smith 114) and “fight[s] it on out to the end” (60). Resorting to “the blues’ affirmation of human identity in the face of dehumanizing circumstances” (Baker 237), Trueblood eventually emancipates himself from what has happened and asserts his identity as a man:

All I know is I *ends up* singin’ the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain’t never been sang before, and while I’m singin’ them blues I makes up my mind that I ain’t nobody but myself and ain’t nothin’ I can do but let whatever is gonna happen,



happen.... ‘I cain’t leave you,’ I says. ‘I’m a man and man don’t leave his family.’ – ...  
 ‘Naw you ain’t no man. No man’d do what you did.’ – ‘I’m still a man,’ I says. (66)

The peasant’s confident assertion of his manhood and his identity in spite of what has happened rests on a lookout on life firmly rooted in folk culture, and particularly, in the healing power of the blues. In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison defines the blues as a genuinely African American way of coming to terms with the tragedies of life:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (*Blues* 78 f.)

Through his blues-inflected narrative, Trueblood overcomes his “personal catastrophe” and reaffirms himself as a black man who transcends the expectations and normative images the racist society places on him. Possessing the verbal prowess of the vernacular and blues artist, Trueblood not only narrates himself into being as a complex human subject, but creates his own model of manhood, which is not premised on phallic agency, but on responsibility, self-knowledge, authenticity, and narrative agency.

## 5. Transcending Invisibility

Jim Trueblood has a firm sense of who he is from embracing his cultural roots and the particularity of his history and life story (including the painful truth of his incest). Unlike the invisible man who has “lost [his] sense of direction” (258), the peasant is completely at home in the world, “cover[ing] the yard with a familiarity that would have allowed him to walk in the blackest darkness with the same certainty” (50). The Trueblood episode shows that IM’s invisibility is not just a matter of others misperceiving him or refusing to recognize his humanity, but equally of his own “difficulty in seeing *himself*” (Ellison, *Introduction* xiii). Having gone through a range of degrading situations in order to please white men in power, IM eventually arrives at the conclusion that

I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. (15) ... I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own.... So after years of trying to adopt the opinion of others I finally rebelled. (573) ...

I am nobody but myself. (15)

Literally repeating Jim Trueblood’s words of self-recognition (“I makes up my mind that I ain’t nobody but myself” (66)), the experienced IM speaking from the underground realizes that identity is necessarily preceded by the acceptance and espousal of his particular historico-cultural heritage (which is inevitably rooted in the painful history of slavery). Admitting that “at one time [he has] been ashamed” of his grandparents for having been slaves, IM retrospectively feels only ashamed of himself for having blindly striven after ideals and lifestyles which denied and dismissed his roots (15). As Klara Szymańko argues, for Ellison’s invisible protagonist, the achievement of identity is first and foremost a question of self-discovery and self-understanding (Szymańko 25), which is why, in the course of his trajectory, he frees himself of the false illusions which kept him “running” in the dark (568).

The present chapter analyzes how Ellison deconstructs the stereotypical preconceptions about black manhood displayed throughout the novel by juxtaposing the naïve, experiencing protagonist with the self-conscious narrator speaking from the prologue and epilogue. Beginning with IM’s castration dream as a pivotal moment for his achievement of self-consciousness, the following analysis will focus on the meaning of narrational intervention as the dominant strategy through which the protagonist asserts himself as an agent, an actor, and a subject (Beavers 190).

### 5.1. Castration and the critique of phallocentrism

Already during the hospital episode when IM is subjected to the torture with electric current, he is on the verge of grasping the intricate relationship between castration, the history of slavery, and identity: Being completely oblivious of who he is and where he comes from after the emasculating treatment (which has made him relive scenes from the plantation) (239 ff.), it first dawns on him that “the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.” (243) – which further resonates with Jim Trueblood’s sense of identity as a result of his self-liberating discovery that he “ain’t nobody but [him]self”. The hospital scene foreshadows IM’s final castration fantasy during which he frees himself of the false illusions about who he is, inducing him to self-consciously embrace the plight of being an invisible man.

Having been chased underground by Ras the Exhorter and the schemes of the Brotherhood, IM has to “light [his] way out” of the darkness (567) by burning the contents of the briefcase he earned as a “badge of office” (32) after his humiliating speech at the smoker. Lighting up the signs of white people’s power to “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running” (33) – his high-school diploma, Tod Clifton’s paper doll, the slip upon which Brother Jack wrote his Brotherhood name, and the deceptive anonymous letter which he now realizes to have equally been written by his supposed friend and mentor Jack (568) – he comprehends that he has been a marionette of white men who “could ... name [him] and set [him] running with one and the same stroke of the pen” (Ibid.). After some time of reflection, IM inwardly emancipates himself from his disillusionment and decides to look forward: “That’s enough, don’t kill yourself. You’ve run enough, you’re through with them at last.” (Ibid.). In a state of “neither ... dreaming nor ... waking” (568), he envisions his situation through a surreal castration fantasy which literalizes the figurative social castration to which he had been subjected all the time. Seeing himself as “the prisoner” of the group of white men who have “run [him]” (569), he defies their order to “return to them” (Ibid.) and pays the prize of castration for openly turning against them:

[T]hey came forward with a knife, holding me; and I felt the bright red pain and they took the two bloody blobs and cast them over the bridge .... ‘Now you’re free of illusions,’ Jack said, pointing to my seed wasting upon the air. ‘How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?’ And I looked up through a pain so intense now that the air seemed to roar with the clanging of metal, hearing, HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE FREE OF ILLUSION ... (569)

Harkening back to the opening question of Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, "How does it feel to be a problem?" (7), the castration scene inscribes itself into the paradigmatic moment of self-discovery when "the revelation first bursts upon" (Ibid.) the young Du Bois "that I was different from the others ..., shut out from their world by a vast veil" (Ibid. 7 f.). When the white men visit the castrating cut on IM's body, they literalize his intrinsic difference from their position of phallic power by symbolically aligning his racial alterity with the Otherness of the feminine gender. IM's castration dream exemplifies the Lacanian fantasy of the body in bits and pieces, given that the corporeal dis-memberment constitutes a phantasmagoric displacement of the protagonist's psychic trauma of being unable to sustain his illusory identification with models of (patriarchal) manhood and power the white racist order denies him.

However, the equation of IM's wrong self-image, his 'illusion,' with the primary signifiers of power in patriarchal culture, the testes, the castration scene revisits in explicit fashion the critique of phallocentrism initiated during the Trueblood and the Sybil episodes. Whereas in Ellison's short story "The Birthmark" (1940) the sight of the lynched and castrated "Willie between the white men's legs" (17) settles the black narrator's powerlessness vis-à-vis the white man's phallic capacity to bereave black males of their manhood and their lives, the castration in *Invisible Man* is "not ... the destruction of his manhood, [but] its creation" (Schor 97): The castration "cuts away the source of every nonidentity he has ever been .... It destroys the illusory power of those who, in providing his roles, denied his manhood" (Ibid.). Although he feels pain and emptiness (569) after being robbed of his illusions/testes, IM embraces his 'lack' and gains an uncanny victory over his torturers, as he emerges from the castration with a new clairvoyance and fearlessness (570) which permit him to challenge the white men's definition of history:

[T]here hang not only my generations wasting upon the water ... [b]ut your sun ... [a]nd your moon ... [y]our world ... that drip-drop upon the water you hear is all the history you've made, all you're going to make. Now laugh, you scientists. Let's hear you laugh! (570)

By deliberately addressing the white men as "scientists," IM places the castration incident within the broader history of Western colonialism, whose system of exploitation and enslavement was premised on black people's ostensible lack of scientific, and thus rational, achievement. Contesting the Eurocentric understanding that Africa is "no historical part of the world [for] it has no movement or development to exhibit" (Hegel 99), the unnamed black protagonist (who speaks as a representative of all black people) insists that he partakes in the

universal human history, being the white man's "sun ..., moon ..., world." By invoking these cosmic images, all of which stand for cyclical movement, IM signifies on the Western conception of history as teleological progress, debunking it instead as no more than an eternally repeated yet evanescent "drip-drop upon the water" – which recaptures IM's ironic remark from the prologue that the world does not move "like an arrow, but a boomerang" (6). By recasting the stereotypical castration of the black male not as the protagonist's defeat, but his victory, Ellison's novel explicitly rejects "the phallus' usual presumption of authority and agency" (Steward 522).

## 5.2. The 'contestatory' force of the vernacular subject

Just like Jim Trueblood who contests the meaning of his incest by means of his story, the Invisible Man crafts a counter-narrative to the 'dominant fiction' of the castrated and subdued black male, recreating himself as a "racially authentic ... [and] wholly virile" figure "speak[ing] back from the racial margins" (Kim 38). According to vernacular theories of African American interpretation, most notably the theory of Signifyin(g) by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the authenticity and agency of the racial and masculine subject emerges from its embrace of vernacular forms of cultural expression (Kim 37), on the one hand, and from its resilient determination to seize authorial control over the received meaning of the cultural hegemony, on the other.

After his blind journey during which he denied his cultural roots, the Invisible Man speaking in the prologue and epilogue has wholeheartedly embraced his African American heritage. Identifying himself as Jack-the-Bear (6), a trickster figure in the African American folk tradition (Sundquist 121), and listening to how Louis Armstrong makes "poetry out of being invisible" (8), IM describes his own invisibility in terms of an improvised jazz riff on Armstrong's music: "Invisibility ... gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind.... That's what you hear vaguely in Louis' music. " (Ibid.). In his introduction to *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison describes – with regard to jazz – the power of black cultural expression to overcome the constraints of race:

[T]he freedom [of jazz musicians] [lies] within ... the limitations of their social background.... Whatever others thought or felt, this was their own powerful statement, ... their vision.... Behind each [jazz] artist there stands ... a mode of humanizing reality and of evoking a feeling of being at home in the world .... (xiii f.)

Folklore's capacity to produce a sensation of homeliness in the alienating and hostile white world is a central theme of Ellison's novel. Not only does the vernacular character *per se*, Jim Trueblood, walk his yard with an ease that betrays a profound sense of being at home in the world, but IM equally finds comfort from his haunted meander of non-identity through the affirmative power of folk culture. Roaming the streets of Harlem after his release from hospital, he has "no friends and desire[s] none" (258). IM nihilistically "believe[s] in nothing" and has still not found out who he is (259) and what it all means (262). His sense of estrangement from the (white) world is even heightened when he strolls down a street with racist icons displayed in shop windows – a "black statue of a nude Nubian slave grinn[ing] ... from beneath a turban of gold;" "switches of wiry false hair;" "ointments ... to produce the miracle of whitening black skin" (262). Experiencing a vague longing "for home" (260), he feels shut out from the world by the snowflakes which fall from the sky forming "a curtain, a veil" (262).

IM's lack of identity and homeliness is remedied when he encounters an old man selling baked "Car'lina" yams (263) from an "odd-looking wagon" (262). In a Proustian moment of involuntary memory, the odor of the yams transports IM back to the days of his youth, summoning up the forgotten memories which are at the root of his alienation:

... a stab of swift nostalgia. ... [D]eeply inhaling, remembering, my mind surging back, back. At home we'd bake them in the hot coals of the fireplace, had carried them cold to school for lunch; munched them secretly, squeezing the sweet pulp from the soft peel as we hid from the teacher behind the largest book, the *World's Geography*. Yes, and we'd loved them candied, or baked in a cobbler, deep-fat fried in a pocket of dough, or roasted with pork and glazed with the well-browned fat; had chewed them raw—yams and years ago. (262 f.)

Through the African American soul food, IM remembers the sensation of belonging and of having a home from his childhood days in the South when he was not "worry[ing] about who saw [him] or about what was proper" (264), but when he wholeheartedly just "loved" his culture. Tasting the yams lets IM re-connect with a community ("we") and identify with the collective experience of African American everyday life, which remedies his solitude and anonymity. Like Trueblood's account of bygone times, IM's memories are saturated with sensual and synaesthetic impressions ("squeezing the sweet pulp from the soft peel") through which he evokes the delight and splendor of folk culture. Invigorated by his remembrances, IM is overcome with a sudden hunger (263) – a clear vital sign against the general feeling of sickness plaguing his body – and eats a yam. Not only is he overcome with "a surge of

homesickness” so strong that he can hardly manage to keep his control (264), but equally by “an intense feeling of freedom—simply because I was eating while walking along the street” (Ibid.). Similar to the jazz artist who “humanizes reality” and possesses the world in spite of racism and socio-economic hardship, IM appropriates and reclaims the alienating Harlem street as a space of African American cultural inscription by means of walking and eating his yam in public. In analogy to Jim Trueblood’s rise of consciousness after ‘singing himself some blues,’ IM’s consumption of the yam lets him become aware of how others have underwritten his life with a meaning which is inimical to his cultural identity and which he now has the clairvoyance to reject: “What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked.” (264). Divorcing himself from the restrictive models of a proper black identity, IM resolves that, “I am what I am!” (266), and enthusiastically relishes the taste of the yams, placing them playfully at the very heart of his identity: “They’re my birthmark. ... I yam what I am!” (Ibid.). Other than the lynched Willie from Ellison’s 1940 short story whose American birthmark was castration (Jackson 233), IM emphatically chooses his birthmark and by extension, his identity. His “idiosyncratic self-stylization” (Bell 167), “I yam what I am,” recaptures the opening announcement, “I am an invisible man” (3), fleshing out the novel’s core concern with defining and redefining the meaning of being invisible. Apart from symbolizing his rootedness in folk culture, therefore, IM’s humorous pun on the introductory self-authentication erodes its intrinsic nihilism by stressing the “creative force of the [invisible] speaker” (Tracy 133). Similar to the “tropological revision” (Gates, *Signifying* xxv) of the castration scenario as a “beginning” which is in “[t]he end” (571), Ellison signifies on the concept of invisibility by impregnating it with the contestatory force of the vernacular subject, letting the invisible man emerge as a

masculine figure who speaks back from the racial margins ... repeat[ing] parodically and subversively the languages that constitute the center .... He is defined by a violent and aggressive capacity to incorporate, appropriate, and mangle whatever linguistic materials enter into his verbal domain. (Kim 38)

The self-conscious narrator speaking from his black hole manipulates and appropriates the received meaning with which the dominant order cements his racial inferiority – beginning with his own name. Tired of being “called one thing and then another while no one really wishe[s] to hear what [he] call[s] [him]self” (573), the invisible man rejects the “suffocating cultural labels” (Benston 156) – Nigger, Sambo, Black Bruiser – which have been placed on him by others, choosing instead his own name. Since Adam’s branding of the animals, the

topos of naming is connoted with the prerogative of claiming dominion over the world (D. Gibson 98). Given that “[a] man’s name is ... the verbal sign of his whole identity, his being-in-the-world as a distinct person,” slave owners systematically changed the name of new slaves in order to subdue them (Patterson 54 f.). Conversely, the process of self-naming is a genuine expression of autonomy through which many freedmen asserted their liberty from their former masters, or recreated themselves as the personas they wished to be (Booker T. Washington is a prominent example of the latter). By assigning IM a new name and thus bereaving him of his old identity, the Brotherhood subjects him to a slave-like non-identity which aims at robbing him of his agency. IM quickly realizes that his new name eclipses his old self: “[T]hey believe that to call a thing by name is to make it so. And yet I am what they think I am ...” (379). Given that to be named means to be “the narrated, not the narrator” (Benston 160), IM has to free himself from the old documents stipulating his heteronomous identities/names. Only when he has “[e]mpirically *unnamed*” himself by burning the contents of his briefcase, IM “places himself beyond representation, outside the archival language of history, denying the applicability of words’ tropical function of his *yet-unfolding* experience” (Ibid. 164).

Having self-ironically renamed himself by choosing as his identity the place racism assigns him, IM decidedly “subverts the meaning of being invisible” (Szymański 34). Being aware of the subversive potential of being unseen, IM asserts his agency by rebelling against the society which has made him an outcast. In the vein of the sly underdog from African American trickster stories, IM “carr[ies] on a fight against them without their realizing” (5), living rent-free (Ibid.) and draining off power from Monopolated Light & Power. As a revenge because they have “tak[en] so much of [his] money before [he] learned to protect [him]self” (7), IM now “sabotage[s]” the company (Ibid.) by wiring his hole with 1,369 light bulbs of the “more-expensive-to-operate kind” (Ibid.), letting the company lose “a hell lot of free current ... somewhere [in] the jungle of Harlem” (5).

Yet, IM’s primary field of agency lies within the verbal and consists of creating a counter-discourse which is both subversive and recognizably black. After smoking a reefer, IM hallucinates that he listens to a sermon on the “*Blackness of Blackness*” (9), which reproduces the call-and-response pattern characteristic of black Gospel. However, the ‘Text of Blackness’ is full of self-evident truisms and outright contradictions, leading the concept of ‘blackness’ *ad absurdum*: “Now black is ... an’ black ain’t ... Black will make you ... or black will un-make you.” (9 f.). Deconstructing “the supposedly natural relation between the symbol and the symbolized” (Gates, *Blackness* 315), IM’s parody is a profound critique of the notion of racial



essentialism which he debunks as a linguistic construct devoid of any primordial sense or essence.

Ellison further constructs a counter-discourse to the rape mythos by reconfiguring the traditional triangle underlying it: Instead of the primitive black bruiser and the pure white woman, the miscegenation scenarios throughout the novel display a chiasmic reversal of sexual conduct: the notorious black rapist is unable to deliver (520) while the ostensibly virginal, sexually passive white woman is either a stripper or “[l]ies] aggressively receptive” (522). By challenging the verity of the stereotypical sexual roles of the black man and the white woman, Ellison erodes the validity of the entire rape mythos, debunking it as a cheap excuse for illegal mob activity. The critique of the saga of the brutish black rapist is further corroborated when the boys are depicted to grope about like “hypersensitive snails” during the boxing episode. Not only does this depiction illustrate the boys’ degradedness and vulnerability as an effect of the gruesome spectacle of violence, but it parodies the racist notion of the hypermasculine black beast, juxtaposing the innocuous snails further with the “grunting” (22) of the white males. Through the continued deployment of similes and verbs which associate the rich white men, and not the black characters, with the instinctive and corporeal existence of animals, Ellison’s narrator thus subtly reframes the immaculate image of the important white man as well, revealing them to be the true uncivilized brutes. The genteel occasion of the smoker can hardly hide the fact that the white men’s amusement primarily derives from primitive lusts and longings which basically correspond to sex, violence, and alcohol. Although the intrinsic baseness of the event is supposed to remain cloaked by the fact that it is a purely voyeuristic spectacle (Kim 49), the rich white men’s façade of civilization and sophistication crumbles under the weight of their basic instincts. Upon seeing the naked woman, a “certain merchant” with “diamond studs in a shirtfront” (20) begins to behave like an animal performing a bizarre mating ritual:

[He] followed her hungrily, his lips loose and drooling ... [H]e ran his hand through the thin hair of his bald head and, with his arms upheld, his posture clumsy like that of an intoxicated panda, wound his belly in a slow and obscene grind. This creature was completely hypnotized.” (20)

While “[s]ome of the more sober” men (21) behave adequately and just watch the spectacle, others are completely out of control: “[T]he men began to reach out to her.... as they gave chase, slipping and sliding over the polished floor. It was mad. Chairs went crashing, drinks were spilt, as they ran laughing and howling after her.” (20). Reduced to their sexual instincts, the “town’s leading citizens” are completely oblivious of social rules or constraints,

transgressing the boundary between the (still) ‘civilized’ act of mere looking and the ‘uncivilized’ demeanor of publicly touching, which not only reverses the racist notion of white sexuality as ‘civilized’ and blacks’ as ‘uncivilized,’ but further dismantles the construction of black people’s sexuality as a displacement of white people’s own repressed sexual desires.

The white men’s lack of civilization becomes even more evident during the boxing episode, when the prospect of watching black bodies in pain equally arouses repressed primal impulses in the white men. Someone called Jackson gets so worked up at the mere thought of witnessing the spectacle of pain that he can hardly be kept from performing the battering himself (21). The scene is highly comic, given that it is narrated from the point of view of the blindfolded IM who naively describes the sounds and voices he can hear. Jackson goes so berserk that another man fails to hold him back and desperately calls for help: “No, Jackson, no! ... Here, somebody, help me hold Jack.” (Ibid.). Then IM overhears how a “struggle” ensues (evidently to hold back Jackson); how “[c]hairs [a]re being kicked about”; and how voices are “grunting as with a terrific effort” (22), until someone urges for the battle to begin “before Jackson kills himself a coon!” (Ibid.). Feigning innocence and naivety, IM’s apparently objective observations are of course highly evaluative and aim at dismantling the white men’s moral double standards and their baseness hidden under their mask of civility. Although the experiencing IM is subjected to the cruel and humiliating schemes of the white racists, the knowledgeable narrator asserts his subjectivity and agency by signifying to the reader that the truly dehumanized “creature[s]” (20) are the white males. Just like the vernacular hero and trickster Trueblood, IM “overturn[s] the authority of those who mislead him” by means of claiming authorial control over his narrative (Smith 116). Having appropriated and redefined the events he was forced to undergo, the Invisible Man from the prologue and epilogue uses his literary talent “to subvert his subordinate relation to figures of authority [and] to expand the overly restrictive conceptions of identity that others impose on him” (Ibid. 90).

Don't you know who I am? I'm an *individual*!

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Barack Obama *Dreams from My Father*

Having dumped the icons of his 'invisible life' – Mary's broken Sambo bank, his Brotherhood identification, the anonymous letter, Clifton's doll (540) – into his briefcase, IM fails to get rid of it on several occasions as the briefcase sticks to him like the "leg chain" (561) with which Brother Tarp, a former slave, was kept from running away. IM's incapacity to free himself of the icons which symbolize his own enslavement recaptures the predicament of

every African American male who walks down any street in America [and] carries with him the hidden heritage of [the] negative cultural and psychological legacy, the burden of being perceived through what the critic Barbara Johnson calls a stereotype – "an already-read text" – the already-read text of debasedness and animality. (Gates, *Preface* 13)

*Invisible Man* is an emphatic interrogation and critique of the long-standing myths and stereotypes which have subtended black masculinity since the age of Enlightenment. In the course of his trajectory, IM is continually confronted with the demeaning preconceptions whites have of black males – ranging from the phallic black rapist to the effeminate Uncle Tom; from the jolly entertainer to the bestial brute; from the genuflecting orator to the beautiful Oriental – which rehearse scenarios of power and pleasure deeply embedded in the histories of colonialism and slavery. Speaking from the hole, an out-of-time, out-of-space place, Ellison's nameless protagonist is a mouthpiece for *all* black males faced with the historical plight of being imprisoned within the narrow confines of racial/racist stereotype.

Rejecting "the naturalist credo that people were merely pawns caught in a deterministic universe" (Lane 65), however, Ellison has his protagonist set fire to the icons of his symbolic and psychological enslavement, thereby signalling his refusal to continue to carry the false ascriptions and identities placed upon him by the larger society. Having "light[ed] [his] way out" of the darkness (567), IM gains the vision and freedom necessary to start to "creat[e] his own reality" (Lane 65) as a complex human individual. Like Jim Trueblood who reclaims the sovereignty of interpretation by narrating his incest experience, IM equally resorts to narration in order to relinquish the truths generated by the dominant social order (Smith 110). Speaking from the margin of society, IM asserts his agency by signifying on and redefining the received

meaning of the center, thereby creating a counter-discourse which “contest[s] th[e] dominant reality and the network of assumptions that supports it” (Gates, *Thirteen* 238). Through his ironic self-authentication as an Invisible Man, IM emphatically deconstructs the notion of racial essentialism, projecting himself as literally beyond the categories of race and gender. His chosen identity as an Invisible Man not only debunks the ocularcentric construction of the concept of race, but furthermore undermines the system of panoptic control with which whites historically asserted their power over blacks.

By destabilizing the signs of race and gender, Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* makes an important contribution to the debate over black manhood, as it draws critical attention to the fact that identities are cultural constructs which are subject to constant renegotiation. The optimistic and often comic tone with which Ellison’s vernacular hero manipulates his reality in order to assert his individuality against the destructive impact of race certainly was a positive vantage point for many black males to embark on the way towards the Obama generation.

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die vorliegende Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Konstruktion schwarzer Männlichkeit in Ralph Ellison's Roman *Invisible Man* (1952). Wie sein Titel bereits andeutet, behandelt der Roman die problematische Sichtbarkeit schwarzer Männer in der von Rassismus und Segregation geprägten Gesellschaft der Vereinigten Staaten vor der Bürgerrechtsbewegung, in welcher „der Neger“ einerseits einen Zustand politischer und ökonomischer Unsichtbarkeit fristet, während er andererseits in der kollektiven Wahrnehmung als Stereotyp, etwa als brutaler Vergewaltiger, unterwürfiger Onkel Tom, oder als komischer Belustiger, übermäßig sichtbar ist – was erneut dazu führt, dass sein Wesen und seine Individualität unsichtbar bleiben.

Der erste Teil der vorliegenden Arbeit erörtert, wie westliche Diskurse seit der Aufklärung essentialistische Vorstellungen von Rasse und Geschlecht strategisch miteinander verquickt haben, um den schwarzen Mann in den europäischen und amerikanischen Machthierarchien auf einen Platz der Dominierung und Abhängigkeit zu verweisen. Weiterhin ist das Bestreben nach Herrschaft eng verknüpft mit Zuschreibungsmechanismen, durch welche die dominante Ordnung „das Andere“ zur Projektionsfläche ihrer eigenen verborgenen Ängste und Phantasien im Bezug auf Rasse, Geschlecht und Sexualität macht, wie es unter Anderem der Mythos des schwarzen Vergewaltigers sowie die daraus resultierende ambivalente Doppelrolle des schwarzen Mannes als „hypersexuell“ und gelyncht/kastriert belegt.

Der zweite Teil der Arbeit untersucht Ralph Ellison's Umgang mit den tradierten Wahrnehmungen und Modellen schwarzer Männlichkeit. Durch die in Rahmen und Handlung unterteilte Struktur unterscheidet der Roman von Beginn an zwischen zwei Bewusstseinssebenen des Protagonisten, durch welche die stereotypen Modelle schwarzer Männlichkeit, welche immer zwischen übermäßiger Maskulinität und Verweiblichung oszillieren, unterwandert werden. Als Gegenentwurf propagiert der im Prolog und Epilog sprechende erfahrene Erzähler ein Modell schwarzer Männlichkeit, welches Rasse und Geschlecht ganz transzendiert und stattdessen auf narrativer Handlungsfähigkeit, etwa durch die Umdeutung überlieferter Paradigma, beruht.