

Wright, Ellison, Blackface Minstrelsy and Empty Signifiers

Both the theatre masturbation scene in Richard Wright's *Native Son* of 1940, and, the battle royal scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* of 1952, work to introduce the audience to aspects of the blackface minstrel show found throughout both novels, respectively. Both scenes illustrate what Laura Mulvey refers to as the "pale gaze" and attempt to mask latent white male homoerotic desire for, or related to, sexualized black male bodies. Each scene elides the minstrel show's use of blackface white male actors in the furtherance of concealing the homoeroticism so blatant within the depiction of the scenes. Ultimately, Wright and Ellison are complicit in the continued use of blackness in the latter twentieth century as an empty signifier in American literature, and by extension American culture, adding to an already confused understanding of black American manhood.

The blackface minstrelsy show was a variety show in which minstrels, or performers, sang, danced, told jokes and performed comic skits, predominantly in northern cities of the United States, like New York - from approximately the middle of the nineteenth century through the first quarter of the twentieth century. The action of the show took place on stage, "configured...as a semicircle of four or five or sometimes more white male performers made up with facial blackening" (Lott 5). White participants attended the minstrelsy show to "enjoy the sports and pastimes of the Sable Race of the South" (138). The performer in blackface was thought to be the authentic, real, representation of a black man or woman as understood by the white American man who portrayed the character on stage and the crowds that applauded the performance. Jim Crow and the Northern Dandy became the most recognizable icons of what

Eric Lott terms the “genuine Negro fun” of the nineteenth and twentieth century American public; “Jim Crow monopolized public attention” (3). Even Mark Twain and his mother attended a minstrelsy show in St. Louis, Missouri; they were attracted, it seems, to the show’s wide acclaim regarding the portrayal of authentic “nigger life.”¹ And while, at least according to Eric Lott, the minstrelsy show “arose from a white obsession with black male bodies,” their real materiality (3), Ralph Ellison, nonetheless, suggested: “despite their billings as images of reality, these Negroes of fiction were counterfeits. They were projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which the white American prepared himself emotionally to perform a social role” (qtd. in Lott 3). Lott posits, in *Love and Theft*, that the minstrelsy show was “an encapsulation of the affective order of things in a society that racially ranked human beings” (6).

The minstrelsy show was divided into three parts: 1) the song section, emphasizing black wit and japey, 2) the *olio*, consisting of malapropistic “stump speeches,” and 3) the narrative skit (12). According to Sean Wilentz in *Chants Democratic*, the “minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed – minstrelsy’s mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation” of what was considered black life (Wilentz 216). From the start it “appeared that a sort of general illicitness was one of organized minstrelsy’s main objectives” (Lott 138). Advertisements for minstrel shows highlighted “objectionable features” of black life, such as the “masturbation fantasy” scene, promised not to be depicted before “genteel” white audiences - yet, nonetheless part of the underlying attraction for the audience (138). Lott claims that “because of the power of the black penis in white American psychic life, the pleasure minstrelsy’s largely white and male audiences

¹ According to Lott in *Love and Theft*, Twain was first introduced to blackface minstrelsy shows in the early 1840s. After taking in the realism of black life offered by shows in New York, New York and Hannibal, Missouri, Twain was said to eventually arrange an outing for himself and his mother in St. Louis, Missouri sometime in the 1840s. The two either witnessed the Virginia Minstrels or the minstrels of New York’s Mechanic’s Hall. Lott discusses the situation on pages 30, and 246-252.

derived from their investment in blackness always carried the threat of castration” (9). The minstrel show depended on “at the very least black male sexual misdemeanor” – an “unusual set of racial and sexual fantasies” (138).

Blackface minstrelsy shows “relied first and foremost on the objectification of black characters in comic set pieces, repartee and physical burlesque” (140). The emphasis was on “spectacle”; the shows were “ingenious in coming up with ways to fetishize the black male body in spectacle” (140). Black bodies were to be “looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; black bodies were screens on which audience fantasy could rest” (140). Blackness provided the “inspiration as well as the occasion” to define whiteness at a time in the history of America when whiteness was in question, particularly for working class white groups like the Irish (141). (My “adopted mom,” “Dottie” M., a staunch IRA supporter until cancer stole her life, laughed to the point of peeing on herself when I discussed this finding with her.) The minstrelsy show functioned to convert blackness into “a beloved and reassuring fetish” which helped to “secured the position of white spectators as superior, controlling figures” (141). Blackface minstrelsy was less a sign of white supremacy, than a sign of “panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure” regarding the conceptions of white and black identity in America. Moreover, “minstrelsy...was based on a libidinal economy” which “promised the undoing of white male sexual sanctity” (147).

Blackface minstrelsy also “attested to the importance accorded certain strategic body zones. Fat lips, gaping mouth, sucks on sugarcane; big heels, huge noses, enormous bustles: here was a ...view of sexuality, a pornotopia” (142). The show’s focus on black body parts and “its theatrical dream work, condensed and displaced fears imagined in the black body that could be neither forgotten nor fully acknowledged” (147). Wilentz claims that “whites got satisfaction in

supposing the racial Other enjoys in ways unavailable to them – through erotic food, strange and noisy music, or an unremitting sexual appetite” (Wilentz 253). Lott adds that

collective white male violence toward black women in minstrelsy not only tamed an evidently too powerful object of interest [black feminine bodies], but also contributed to a *masculinist* enforcement of white male power over the black male bodies to whom the women were supposed to have belonged. The beehive man blinding black women [a recurring theme in the blackface minstrel show] certainly attested to the power of the black penis in American psychic life. Yet it was still puzzling that black women were so often castrated, although women were often allegorical stand-ins for white men whose erotic looking was undone by the black men they portrayed as objects of their gaze. No doubt this racial undoing, this phallic competition and imagined homosexual threat [represented] the fear underlying the minstrel show. (150)

Lott goes on to suggest that this collective white male violence towards black women

underscored “minstrelsy’s need to figure black male sexual power and white male supremacy at one and the same time” (153). Additionally, the cross-dressing by white men, dressed as black women, afforded the white men an opportunity to insinuate sexual intimacy between themselves as black women, and, black men: something not afforded when the men perform the social role of white men in America.

Lastly, and yet a most important aspect, spectatorship in the minstrelsy show “was bound up with surveillance” (Wilentz qtd. in Lott 157). Moreover, Mulvey suggests that the “pale gaze” was paramount regarding the attraction which the show held for its audience members. She describes the “pale gaze” as “a ferocious investment in demystifying and domesticating black power in white fantasy by projecting vulgar black types as spectacular objects of white men’s looking. This looking always took place in relation to an objectified and sexualized black body, and was often conjoined to a sense of terror” (qtd. in Lott 153).

In addition to the specific scenes referenced in *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*, the overall structure, presentation and layout of the respective novels mirror the arrangement of the blackface minstrelsy show. Both novels adhere to a sort of opening song, followed by an *olio*, then a narrative skit structure. Wright’s offering, for example, is divided into three books: Fear,

Flight, and Fate. Book One, or Fate, could be understood as the song section of the novel/minstrel production, lamenting the blues of Bigger Thomas. In Book One, the audience is made aware of the oppression Bigger feels at the hands of his family, society, and his own gang. A Naturalistic panorama of sorts. In Book Two, Flight, the audience is provided some semblance of explanations, or at least a variety of excuses, for Bigger's criminal actions: all could be understood as ludicrous, out of bounds in a modern society. One could argue that Book Two is the one section where Bigger speaks in his own words, delivering his own polemics for the killing of Bessie, for example. Lastly, Book Three, Flight, could be understood to represent the narrative skit: delivered in a rather verbose fashion, ironically, by the white lawyer, Boris Max; on behalf of the black boy, Bigger Thomas; in opposition to the white District Attorney, Buckley. Overall, the novel could be understood to adhere to a macrostructure mimicking the blackface minstrelsy show's arrangement, exemplified on the microstructural level by specific scenes - such as the Regal theatre masturbation scene.

In Book One of the 1993 Harper Perennial edition of Wright's *Native Son*, a previously deleted masturbation scene has been restored to the original 1940's edition. In the scene, the audience learns that the novel's protagonist, Bigger Thomas, along with his friend, Jack, share an unusual "pastime" at the "Regal" theatre, located at "Forty-Seventh Street and South Parkway" (Wright 32). As they prepare to watch the movies offered in the theatre, interspersed with a commercial featuring the feminine wiles of the attractive and white Mary Dalton, Bigger and Jack "polish [their] nightsticks": that is, they masturbate in the theatre (32). Although the two boys mention their black girlfriends, like "Bessie" and "old Clara," the sexual attention is eventually diverted towards the Dalton girl (33). Upon seeing Mary and her "legs strained upward" on the movie screen of the theatre, Bigger expresses that Mary sure is "a hot-looking

number, all right” (33). The scene could almost be interpreted as the harmless activities of sexually curious young American men, until the audience is alerted to the idea that the white, male dominated power structure of Chicago, represented by Buckley, has been conducting surveillance on Bigger and Jack while they masturbate within the confines of the Regal theatre.

In Book Three, the audience learns that the District Attorney seeking to punish Bigger for Mary’s death is aware “of that dirty trick [Bigger and Jack] pulled off in the Regal theatre,” along with a long list of other crimes and misdemeanors committed by Bigger and his fellow gang members (354). Along with Bigger, the audience learns that powerful white men, like Buckley and the theatre manager, have been surveilling Bigger while he masturbates; the authorities are also aware of the apparent “plan to rob Old Man Blum’s store” (354). This revelation takes place after Buckley has accused Bigger of multiple sexual transgressions toward white women in Chicago, namely “Mrs. Clinton’s sister” and “Miss Ashton,” in addition to the rape and murder of a woman on “University Avenue” (354). Collectively, the scenes mimic the blackface minstrelsy show’s projection of an unremitting sexual appetite onto a black male body, Bigger, and underscore the relevance of the pale gaze, exemplified by the surveillance Bigger found himself under while performing the sexual act. The scenes differ from the blackface minstrelsy in that white male performers in blackface have been removed, substituted in favor of actual black performers. The white male becomes solely a spectator of black life and culture, no longer really an integral performer of such. Bigger could represent the screen across which white sexual fantasies regarding black males are painted and projected. Any homoerotic attraction on the part of the white men toward the attractions offered by Bigger’s actions can be glossed over by the presence of actual white women in the scenes. The persecution of Bigger by the white, male, phallogentric Chicago power structure could be interpreted to reflect “the extraordinary

energy of white male misogyny, perhaps even contempt for white women intermittently repressed through white men's protection of white women from savage black manhood" (Lott 147). In *Native Son*, the white male can enjoy the pale gaze while not having to actively participate with that which he may be gazing upon; in this manner, any homoerotic intimacy hinted at by white men dressing as women to be ravished by a brute like Bigger could be avoided.

Ultimately, by capturing and confining, and, eventually killing Bigger, the white male power structure has "figured black sexual power and white male supremacy at one and the same time." The very psychic preoccupation with the black America male penis on the part of white Americans males is reinforced by the pleasure with which Buckley and the modern discourses of media present in the novel celebrate and exploit the nature of Bigger's crimes. Consider, for example, the underlying tone of enthusiastic fervor found in the newspaper reports of Bigger's crimes and more importantly the physical descriptions of Bigger found in the newspaper articles.

Bigger is described in photographic terms and via the printed word in newspapers, such as the *Tribune*, depicted in *Native Son*. The modern media discourses represented by the *Tribune* function to fetishize Bigger's black body; he is described as "a beast," "untouched by modern civilization," "exceedingly black" reminding one of a "jungle" animal (Wright 322-323). Along with the description of the black and white photography of the era, Bigger is represented as an object with "haunched shoulders," "arms...long and dangling to his knees," possessing "abnormal physical strength" (323). In a word, Bigger Thomas represents pure minstrel spectacle. Through celebration and exploitation, highlighted by the *Tribune's* fascination with Bigger's black body, the white, phallogocentric power structure of Chicago deems the inherent "homosexual threat," the "fear" underlying black racial performance, impotent.

Bigger is not only figuratively on stage performing the black identity of the blackface minstrelsy show, when surveilled at the Regal theatre, Bigger is literally in an institution dedicated to the performing of roles while on stage. Bigger's temporal relationship to the audience as a performer in a theatre is very similar to the temporal relationship of the blackface minstrel and his audience in the presentation of minstrelsy.

Like Wright's *Native Son*, Ellison's *Invisible Man* also mimics the arrangement of the blackface minstrelsy show on both a macrostructural level and a microstructural level. Macrostructurally speaking, the song, *olio* and narrative skit of the minstrel show could be understood to be represented by the novel's opening prologue, body of the narrative, and last few pages centered on page 568, respectively.

The opening chapter of *Invisible Man*, entitled simply *Prologue*, contains, between pages nine and twelve, a section with the rhythm and tone of what could best be described as song. Reflecting wit and humor, the "song" seemingly describes the original creation of "Blackness" (Ellison 9). As Ellison's narrator moves through the novel, he continuously uses what turns out to be malapropisms in his speeches. Unlike the performer in the minstrelsy show, the words are not misused because of the supposed ignorance of the narrator, but the words are misused due to the constraining influences of a society over which the narrator has no control. In the battle royal scene originally mentioned for example, during the narrator's speech he *mistakenly* utters the phrase "social equality" as opposed to "social responsibility" (31). From the perspective of the narrator, the notion of social equality between whites and blacks is not ludicrous at all; however, for the white men present, the big shots of the narrator's town, social equality is a ludicrous ideal. Ellison's narrator is continuously caught in situations where his speeches are ill-received. Lastly, the narrator himself finally participates in some semblance of his own narrative skit by

page 568 when he suggests that he had “run enough.” By the last few pages of the novel, the narrator finally found a way to stop the “Nigger-boy” from running (24).

The narrator of *Invisible Man* continually tries and fails to acquire the sorts of tools of power associated with direct political forms of discourse that are articulated in phallicentric terms as he confronts those very phallocentric representations and strategies as illusions of male agency. According to Douglas Stewart, the novel's frequent recourse to castration imagery suggests the novel's refusal to privilege supposedly normal male heterosexual representations in literature (Stewart 524). Perhaps, in response to the male-dominated post World War I and II intellectual scene in 1950s America focused on liberal humanist voluntarism, for example, *Invisible Man* posits questions that should be explored further in the novel's critiques of agency and the phallus (Stewart 522).

In a very elucidating analysis of the battle royal scene, Daniel Y. Kim has furthered feminist analysis of *Invisible Man* presented by critics such as Claudia Tate, arguing in “Invisible Desires: Homoerotic Racism and Its Homophobic Critique in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*” that the novel also underwrites a “latent homophobic logic” (321). Kim extends feminist critiques of Ellison's representations of women to include a critique of the narrator's identifications with women and the novel's representation of homosexuality. More explicitly, Kim offers a detailed examination of the first chapter's battle royal, in which the white patriarchs of the narrator's town stage an erotic spectacle where the black boys, including the narrator, act as “a kind of human scrim” across which the patriarchs view a naked blonde (314). The scene mimics, on the microstructural level, the same arrangement of the blackface minstrel show as the novel does on the macrostructural level. If one allows for the *Prologue* and Chapter One to function as an introductory whole to the novel, then the arrangement of the song, the olio and the narrative skit

become more easily discernible. Moreover, the homoerotic nature of the scene becomes more easily discernible.

Once again, the section found between pages nine and twelve serve as the song – in the same manner that the section functioned as the song section for the novel as a whole. The narrator’s first speech – the “Booker T. Washington speech” – represents one of the first instances of unintentional malapropism use in the novel (Ellison 17). And finally, the narrative skit that sets the whole novel in motion concludes the first completion of the minstrel act with the words, “To whom it may concern: keep this Nigger-boy Running” (33).

Like Bigger in *Native Son*, Ellison’s narrator finds himself on stage, literally, at the mercy of the homoerotic, white male gaze. As Michel Fabre and Kim both suggest, Ellison’s description of the “black cigars” (Ellison 17) on which the white men suck establishes a highly eroticized dynamic between the white men and the black boys, who have visible erections.² This erection spectacle operates to position the black boys as the erotic objects of the white homosocial gaze, or pale gaze as Mulvey calls it, while simultaneously excluding them from the advantage that homosociality confers on the white men. The spectacle offered by the battle royal works to figure black male sexuality and white male supremacy at one and the same time.

The battle royal scene is especially important because it evokes disempowerment as castration, according to Stewart. Like Bigger is castrated figuratively – consider his inability to even consider having had sex with Mrs. Clinton’s sister or Miss Ashton in the presence on Buckley – so too is the narrator of *Invisible Man*. Although the narrator believes that he has arrived before the town’s big shots to deliver a speech and believes in the speech he will deliver, the humiliating sexual events of the erection spectacle and the battle royal violently denigrate the

² Fabre discusses this idea in “Looking at the Naked Blond-Closely (or Scrutinizing Ellison’s Writing) found on page 121 in *Delta*; Kim, page 323 in “Invisible Desires” found in *Novel*.

liberal humanist portrayal of empowerment through education and rational yet humble speaking; the battle royal destroys the narrator's internalization of the message codified by Booker T. Washington, at least according to Stewart. And, while the narrator continuously learns that he cannot succeed, with any agency, in America as a Booker T. Washington type, the narrator continues to fantasize about a Washington-type idealized black identity throughout his ritual debasement represented by the battle royal. Rather than empowerment, it has been suggested that the narrator finds symbolic castration, both as a speaking subject and as a black male body reflective of the treatment received as a result of and during the battle royal. According to the understanding of Lacanian theory explicated in Mulvey's essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," man is positioned as the bearer of the objectifying look - white men in particular (Stewart 527). Moreover, the terror associated with the pleasure offered by the minstrelsy show is also reinforced. This is represented by the actions of the town patriarchs who make seemingly contradictory demands on the black boys. Ellison writes "some threatened [the black boys] if [they] looked" at the blonde female "and others if [the black boys] did not" look (Ellison 19-20). Psychically split, Ellison presents the narrator as unsure whether the woman is an object of sexual desire, a sexual threat, or a fellow victim (Stewart 525). If we allow the logic of blackface minstrelsy to take hold, then the blonde woman could represent all three ideas.

On one level, the blonde woman is an object of sexual desire, but not for the black boys – not directly anyhow. The blonde woman is a catalyst for the erection of the black boys: the erection of the black male body is a spectacle to be gazed upon by the white town patriarchs. She is also a sexual threat, for she represents the possibility of the penis-less body, the castrated body, as the resultant or consequence for any sexual transgressions the boys are found guilty of in front of the patriarchs. The boys have already been threatened with violence by the white men

if they, the boys, do not battle one another with enough enthusiasm. One can only imagine what the consequences would be if they displayed any desire for a blonde white woman with an American tattoo brandished on her abdominal area. And, ultimately, the blonde woman is also a fellow victim of the male, phallogentric power structure represented by the white patriarchs. It is not surprising then that the narrator desires at once “to caress her and destroy her” and sees “the terror and disgust in her eyes almost like [his] own terror” (Ellison 19- 20). Remarking on this simultaneous attraction, revulsion, and identification, Kim argues that the “misogyny of the narrator's response” to the woman, when he wants to kill her, “is produced by his awareness of how the woman’s castration mirrors his own” (Kim 316); the blonde woman is disempowered of any sense of agency in the same manner as the black boys. Kim concludes that this episode confirms the novel’s general, but usually latent, premise that “white men seek to subordinate black men because that subordination enables them to use the black male body to gratify an erotic desire that is essentially homosexual” (324). According to Stewart, just as feminists such as Marilyn Frye and Luce Irigaray have attacked male homosexuality as the secret libidinal motive of phallogentrism, so does Ellison’s work appear to impugn it as a libidinal motive of racism (Stewart 523).

The narrator of *Invisible Man* continuously attempts to resist his cultural inscription – that written onto him by society as a black male - but again and again he fails to access the kind of political, personal agency he has sought throughout the novel. He resists his grandfather’s advice, Mr. Bledsoe’s admonishment, the Brotherhood’s guidance and Sybil’s attempts at sexual misdirection, for example. It could be argued that all of the scenes within *Invisible Man*, but most poignantly the battle royal scene, are the most spectacular instances of “Ellison’s exploration of the symbolic castration that the invidious cultural network of sexualized racism

enacts on the black male body” (523). Scenes found within *Invisible Man* - such as the battle royal, Sybil and sexuality, and the selling of Sambo dolls - function in the furtherance of continuing some of the very aspects of the minstrelsy show so detested by the black Americans whom the shows offended and attempted to constrain to white ideas of blackness. Trapped in a perceived choice between being socially castrated like a woman or a homosexual or adhering to the stereotype of the brutishly virile black male, the narrator of *Invisible Man* chooses to mime the stereotype, only to find that there really is no choice; he is castrated either way; his identity is meaningless: he is an empty signifier.

While the idea of *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* containing scenes that continue to propel notions associated with the blackface minstrelsy show of America’s past is certainly open to wide criticism and debate, the idea that the performers of blackface minstrelsy shows and the authors Wright and Ellison seemingly understand racial identity, particularly blackness, as an empty, meaningless signifier should be open to less criticism and debate.

Wright’s protagonist Bigger is a signifier. Ellison’s narrator is a signifier. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “signifiers organize the very conceptualization of our world” (Colebroke 248). Signifiers are “examples of the ways in which life is expressed or differentiated” (249). Signifiers for Deleuze and Guattari are meaningless, in themselves: “there is such diversity in the forms of expression, such a mixture of these forms, that it is impossible to attach any particular privilege to the form of the signifier” (Deleuze and Guattari 111). Phallogocentric signifiers should not be privileged any more than other signifiers for example. Signifiers are empty, until they are not. As signifiers of blackness, both Bigger and Ellison’s narrator are empty until written and read by the societies of which they are a part, for example.

“In Deleuze and Guattari’s opinion, identity” is “an empty effect.” “Our identity is an objective illusion” (Massumi 47). Any identity attached to Bigger Thomas or the narrator of *Invisible Man* or the characters of a minstrelsy show is “an empty effect,” an “objective illusion.” “Identification is arbitrary in the sense that there is no natural connection between a body and its category, but necessary in the sense that society nevertheless demands that the link be made” (Massumi 91). The audience of the minstrelsy show, whether in actual American history or the literary constructs of Wright and Ellison, seemingly deem it necessary that certain links regarding black bodies “be shaped to the demands of desire” of “white spectators...superior, controlling figures.”

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