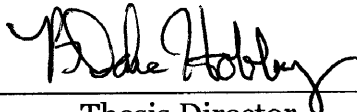


**Raising Ritual to the Level of Art:  
Recovering African American Culture in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man***

Senior Paper

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In the introduction to *Invisible Man* Ralph Ellison says: “What is commonly assumed to be past history is actually as much a part of the living present as William Faulkner insisted. Furtive, implacable and tricky, it inspires both the observer and the scene observed, artifacts, manners and atmosphere and it speaks even when no one wills to listen” (Ellison xvi). In *Invisible Man*, Ellison explores African American culture as it has evolved under white oppression. Rather than assimilate, black culture has evolved through re-invention, syncretism, and clever satire. Ellison breaks down traditions to show the fragmented African American consciousness and then reconstructs the pieces in an attempt to define the African American identity. In an attempt to dispel cultural myths and define black cultural identity, in *Invisible Man* Ellison draws from folklore, songs, and stereotypes, all the while refiguring the representations he employs. By focusing on four major scenes in the novel—“The Battle Royal,” Trueblood’s dream, the narrator’s encounter with a Sambo bank, and Tod Clifton’s performance with a Sambo puppet—this paper illuminates Ellison’s refiguring process, the way he integrates and alters cultural materials to both recover black traditions and challenge the way race is represented in American society.

Through the “Battle Royal” Ellison satirizes white co-opting of African American musical traditions, shows the conflicting roles placed upon African Americans, and illustrates how these sociological conflicts drive the evolution of African music. On his deathbed, the narrator’s grandfather passes down his way of coping with a white world. Advising his grandson to cope with a hostile white society by playing a prescribed role, he teaches him to subvert the dominant paradigm. His advice recalls themes of animal trickster fables, tragic themes that also define the blues. In the “Battle Royal,” the naked dancer symbolizes white parody, cultural assimilation, and the reinforcement of

stereotypes. The musical themes of the riot and the boxing match address the evolution of African music. Ellison then satirizes Booker T. Washington's philosophy, a philosophy that informed the individualism of the blues. Finally, the narrator's dream brings together Ellison's themes regarding the recovery of African American culture.

Significantly, the "Battle Royal" is preceded by the grandfather's advice: "Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open," (*Invisible Man* 16). This advice is reminiscent of African American "trickster" tales. These tales often depict Bre'r Rabbit in a power struggle with other animals, capitalizing on the faults of his enemies. These same assaults can be seen as undermining, as Levine argues, "deeply ingrained and culturally sanctioned values" (Levine 104). Here, the grandfather suggests passive obedience as a form of subversion and rebellion. Similarly, in a popular trickster tale, Bre'r Rabbit devises a clever scheme to cross a swamp. He bets Alligator that there are more rabbits in the world than alligators. Proudful Alligator lines up all the alligators from one side of the swamp to the other. Rabbit then hops across the alligator's backs to the other side of the swamp. Alligator, furious from being fooled, bites off the end of Bre'r Rabbit's tail (Levine 375).

On the surface, this story is etiological, a whimsical explanation for an occurrence in nature: why rabbits have short tails. It also represents the shifting power struggle between races. Rabbit, a symbol of the African American, outsmarts Alligator, a symbol of his white oppressor. While Bre'r Rabbit comes out on the other side of the swamp, he must live with the humiliation of having a shortened tail, a constant reminder of Alligator's dominance. Crossing to the "other side of the swamp" symbolizes the appearance of social progress, while the shortened tail symbolizes the illusion of

progress. Similarly, the grandfather's speech in *Invisible Man* recognizes this contradictory reality, the paradox that passive "yesses" and "grins" can also represent death and destruction. Both Bre'r Rabbit and the grandfather aim for social progress, but by different means. Bre'r Rabbit's method is trickery, which creates the illusion of progress and ends ultimately in self-sacrifice. The grandfather's method is also trickery deceitfully masked as passivity. The narrator of *Invisible Man* is confused by his advice: "It became a constant puzzle which remained unanswered in the back of my mind" (Ellison 16). However, the grandfather's words leave an impression. After the boxing match in the "Battle Royal," the narrator gives a speech he has prepared for graduation. In his speech, he argues humility is the secret to progress but confesses to the reader, "Not that I believed this—how could I—remembering my grandfather's advice" (Ellison 17). This advice, recalling the paradoxical themes of trickster tales, resurfaces as a cultural moral in the "Battle Royal" and echoes the tragedy of the blues.

The "Battle Royal" begins when ten African American boys are forced to watch a naked white woman's sensual dance. The experience is humiliating, and they do not know whether to watch or hide: gazing upon a naked, white woman is considered a high offense, yet their performance demands that they watch. Ellison, here, points out the contrasting roles white men place on African Americans: on one hand, they are meant to conform to societal values; on the other hand, they have been forced to perform against those values. The woman's face heavily powdered and roughed, "as though to form an abstract mask, and the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon's butt," are images reminiscent of traditional African ceremonial masks (*Invisible Man* 19). This mask, worn by a woman (a symbol of objectification), makes the dance even more of a mockery to African culture. She is objectified, both as a woman and a symbol

of African heritage. Those watching are in shame not only for watching a naked, white woman, but looking at their culture transformed into the object of lustful entertainment.

The dancer also represents cultural assimilation, signified in the small American flag tattooed upon her belly (*Invisible Man*, 19). The narrator is torn between running from the room or assimilating to mockery of his culture: “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 others with my body” (*Invisible Man*, 19). He continues to express his conflicted desires, confessing he both wants to “caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her” (*Invisible Man* 19). He does not know whether lust after this westernized parody, compromising his heritage, or to completely destroy the parody along with his heritage. Ellison does not deny the possibility for cultural exchange. After all, Ellison says, “Culture is exchange” (qtd in Wes 40). Ellison notes the difference between the evolution of folk tradition and the commercialization of African American culture; evolution reflects experience while commercialization stereotypes it (qtd in West 42).

After a riot ensues, the dancer is rushed out by “some of the more sober ones” (Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 21). It is important to notice that the boys have no part in this. The supposed authorities on cultural preservation deem when the lustful riot has gone too far. The irony is that white men preserve only a parody of African American culture, of which the oppressed culture is ashamed. Through their “sober” deed, the white men reinforce prejudice.

The boys are then blindfolded and each told, “See that boy over there? I want you to run across at the bell and give it to him right in the belly. If you don’t get him, I’m going to get you” (*Invisible Man* 21). Thus, in the aftermath of cultural humiliation, the

boys are pitted against each other. All their rage is directed blindly towards one another for the entertainment of their white oppressors. Addressing the boxing match, Ralph Ellison says, "People rationalize what they shun or are incapable of dealing with; these superstitions and their rationalizations become ritual forms, and it is one of the functions of the artist to recognize them and raise them to the level of art" (*Shadow and Act* 174). Through the fight, Ellison draws similarities between sociological conflict and the evolution of music, raising ritual to the level art.

Ellison shows the underlying sociological constructions of African American music. A clarinet plays to the dancer's sensuous movements, a likely commentary on the evolution of New Orleans jazz and the adoption of Napoleonic marching band instruments (Jones 94). This western instrument is contrasted to the parody of African tribal dance. The boxing match carries a the rhythm of a tribal drum circle: "I could see the black, sweat-washed forms weaving in the smoky-blue atmosphere like drunken dancers weaving to the rapid drum like thuds of blows" (*Invisible Man* 23). The scene builds in the improvisational spirit of African- American music. One white spectator even shouts, "Get going black boy, mix it up!" as if calling for an improvised solo (*Invisible Man* 22).

Much has been written on Ellison's jazz aesthetic, but little has been said about its deep ties to early African music. One historian remarked on similar spontaneity of African slave music:

Instantly the crowd took it up, moulding a melody out of half-formed familiar phrases based upon a spiritual tune, hummed here and there among the crowd. A distinct melodic outline became more and more prominent, shaping itself around the central theme of the words, "Git

right-sodger!” Scraps of other words and tunes were flung into the medley of sound by individual singers from time to time, but the general trend was carried on by a deep undercurrent, which appeared to be stronger than the mind of the individual present, for it bore the mass of improvised harmony and rhythms into the most effective climax of incremental repetition that I have ever heard. I felt as if some conscious plan or purpose were carrying us along, call it mob-mind, communal composition, or what you will (qtd in Levine 27).

Williams uses similar language to describe traditional slave music as Ellison does the riot. Williams, for instance, describes “a deep undercurrent” carrying the music. That undercurrent in *Invisible Man* is portrayed as a sea of people carrying the dancer: “She seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some gray and threatening sea” (Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 19). As the dancer attempts to escape, she is tossed back into the crowd by the undercurrent. In another similar scene, the boys team up in into groups of three or four to fight, creating an improvised harmony or unity and then turn on each other, representing the “words and tunes flung into the melody by individual singers” (Levine 27). The narrator dodges blows in the spirit of the Mile’s Davis “Don’t play what’s there, play what’s not there.” The narrator describes his musical restraint, “I moved carefully, avoiding blows, although too many to attract attention” (Ellison 23). Ellison, thus, allows the undercurrent to carry the song, retaining a communal composition. Ellison allows surreal experience to reflect African American music, exposing the music’s underlying sociological conflict.

Finally, Tatlock and the narrator are the only two boys left in the ring (Ellison 24). Here Ellison addresses a conflict that arises throughout the novel: the conflict

between the individual and the African American community. The narrator and Tatlock have conflicting intentions:

“Fake like I knocked you out, you can have the prize.”

“I’ll break your behind,” he [Tatlock] whispered hoarsely.

“For *them*.”

“For *me*, sonofabitch!” (Ellison 24)

The narrator demands that Tatlock fake a fall. He understands that there is no competition; the battle represents an undermining of cultural dignity. The narrator instinctively knows that there is no prize, but that they are participating in a charade, a social ritual. For Tatlock, the illusion of competition is all he sees.

This individual-communal conflict can also be seen as a conflict between African American “hollers” and “spirituals” and the prevailing genre of blues that arose at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) explains, “The whole concept of the solo, of a man singing and playing by himself, was relatively unknown in West African music” (Jones 66). Levine points out Booker T. Washington’s influence on black consciousness. Washington’s message was one of individual progress in society. As Levine argues, “If blues signaled the rise of a more personalized, individual-oriented ethos among Negroes at the turn of the century, did it also testify to the decline of that sense of communality which was so characteristic of both the structure and content of nineteenth century songs?” (Levine 223). Ellison also questions the consequences of giving up community for individual achievement, of giving up the work song for the blues.

The fighters receive no reward. The boys scramble for fake gold coins scattered on an electric rug (*Invisible Man* 29). Ellison, creates a metaphor of slavery using language



such as “my back felt as though it had been beaten with wires” (*Invisible Man* 29). Here, Ellison compares the electric rug to the feeling being whipped. The narrator also says, “It seemed like a whole century would pass before I would roll free, a century in which I was seared through the deepest levels” (*Invisible Man* 28). One boy convulses on the rug, “beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor,” a possible allusion to slave branding, but also an artful expression (*Invisible Man* 28).

In the narrator’s closing speech, Ellison satirizes Washington’s “cast your bucket where you are” philosophy, which deeply informed the blues and represented the shifting individualistic African American consciousness. He begins, “We of the younger generation extol the wisdom of that great leader and educator who first spoke these flaming words of wisdom: ‘A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal; “Water, water; we die of thirst!” The answer from the friendly vessel came back; “Cast down your bucket where you are”’ (*Invisible Man* 29). The cruel irony of the situation is that his intoxicated audience laughs and ridicules him through the speech’s entirety. Ironically, the narrator’s literal thirst from the “Battle Royal” is never quenched.

In his speech, the narrator says, “social equality” in place of “social responsibility.” There is lingering silence, then uproar: “The laughter hung like smoke in the sudden stillness. Sounds of displeasure filled the room” (*Invisible Man* 31). Responsibility implies following the demands of superiors, where equality denies hierarchical structure. After complying to the demands and correcting his rhetorical “slip up,” his inattentive audience roars with applause and the narrator is surprised to receive his scholarship to the state college for Negroes (*Invisible Man* 32). That night, the narrator dreams he is at a circus with his grandfather, where his grandfather refuses

to laugh at the clowns, representations of black-face minstrel comedy. His grandfather tells him to open his briefcase where he finds an envelope: "Inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly" (*Invisible Man* 33). The final letter says: "To Whom it May Concern. Keep This Nigger Boy Running" (Ellison 33). The scholarship, like the "reward" for the battle royal and Bre'r Rabbit's social progress, is merely an illusion. This theme of running continually arises in African American blues songs:

Just let me tell you how this world is fixed:

Satan has got it so full of tricks,

You can go from place to place,

Everybody's runnin down the colored race (qtd from Levine 161).

Ellison describes the blues as "the closest approach to tragedy that we have in American art forms" (qtd. in *Speaking For You* 323). However, Ellison realizes that "folk tradition cannot be an end in itself" (Kent 103). Ellison is not satisfied with the resolution of the blues; that "Everybody's runnin' down the colored race." Through Trueblood's dream he explores where this chase is *leading*. Ellison understands how "whiteness and blackness are mutually defining and mutually inclusive" (Whitaker 327).

#### Trueblood's Dream:

Trueblood's dream satirizes a segregationist attitude and shows the inevitability of cultural exchange. The name "True-blood" itself is ironic; he rapes his daughter, ensuring that her baby has his biological blood. The Trueblood episode satirizes segregationist philosophy and cultural purity. The attempt to draw lines between cultures, the avoidance of cultural exchange, is futile. Trueblood's dream recalls themes of the Ballad of John Henry: sexual euphemism and the man vs. the machine. Trueblood's dream addresses mutual racial influence, how white and black cultures

inevitably merge. The machine seemingly defeats both Trueblood and John Henry.

However, both characters live on in the form of art, preserved in song.

The narrator chauffeurs Norton, a white founder of his university, through the countryside and absentmindedly drives him past Trueblood's cabin, a decision for which he is later scolded by Bledsoe, the African American school administrator. Norton demands they stop at Trueblood's cabin. The narrator's resentment for Trueblood's backward country ways is obvious from the start: "We [the students at his university] were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies they sang, but since the visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet" (*Invisible Man* 47). Leroi Jones accounts such attitudes to the development of an African American middle class and says, "Some black churches began to use as much of the white church music as they could" (Jones 58). Jones says, similarly to the narrator's school church services, that his church has to "import" more traditional gospel groups (Jones 58). What was once a participatory tradition is now a spectacle: "By discarding of the religious attitude for the "enlightened concepts of the Renaissance also created the schism between what was art and what was life. It was, and is, inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, and the artifact, and a man's life and his worship to the gods" (Jones 29). When a line between art and experience is drawn, it alienates participants from their culture. Ellison attempts to reconcile this division.

In Trueblood's dream, he is climbing a hill to a butcher's home to purchase some fatback. This is for his sustenance, but is also a sexual euphemism often used in blues and work songs. Trueblood, then, is on a quest for both nourishment and sexual conquest. Again, the lines of race are murky: in the dream, he symbolically rapes a white

woman, while in actuality he rapes his daughter. Ellison seems to suggest the murky racial divide.

Time is a continual theme of Trueblood's dream. The woman stands in a grandfather clock, symbolically imprisoned by time, her screams muted behind the glass. This image could represent the cycle of racism; it imprisons both the oppressor and the oppressed. It also represents how the past is just as much a part of the living present. Trueblood tries to escape his history, but the clock progressively moves faster. A door *within* the clock is Trueblood's only escape from this cycle: "I wants to run, but the only door I see is the one in the clock she's standin' in" (*Invisible Man* 58). The woman tries to keep Trueblood from the door, from escaping his racial constructed role. The more Trueblood struggles to escape and the more the woman struggles to stop him, the faster time moves. Their resistance only accelerates time. The woman grabs Trueblood around the neck to prevent him from reaching the door, muting his protests. Trueblood throws the woman on the bed and she seems to "sink outa sight" until the woman bursts into a flock of doves (*Invisible Man* 58). In a struggle to keep Trueblood out of the clock their blood is symbolically mixed.

The man vs. machine themes of the "Ballad of John Henry" resonate through the remaining dream sequence. Trueblood runs for the clock and struggles with door covered in "steel wool." Trueblood finds himself running through a hot, dark tunnel filled with mechanical rumbling (echoing "Keep that Nigger Boy Running"). The mechanical language continues: "It's like the power plant they got up to the school. It's burnin' hot..." (*Invisible Man* 59). Trueblood is scalded: "Then all at once I was right up with it and it burst like a great big electric light in my eyes up with it and it burst like a great big electric light in my eyes and scalded me all over" (*Invisible Man* 59). These

themes recall the “Ballad of John Henry.” The ballad is about a railroad laborer who is confident that no machine can replace him: “Steam is only steam, but I’m John Henry and I’m a natural man” (Courlander 384). He dies of exhaustion in his race against the machine (Courlander 384). The machine defeats both Trueblood and the narrator, echoing blues tragedy.

The scene closes with Trueblood’s children singing a song with symbolic meaning: “Lissen to the younguns,” he [Trueblood] said in embarrassment, “Playin’ London Bridge’s Fallin’ Down” (*Invisible Man* 68). This song, too, has a dual meaning. Trueblood is embarrassed because his children have adopted a British song, assimilating to a white tradition. Simultaneously, that British tradition is “falling down.” That is, it has broken apart and become something new, filtered through African American experience. This idea relates to African syncretism to white cultural traditions. According to Jones, “One of the very reasons Christianity proved so popular was that it was the religion according to older Biblical tradition, of oppressed people. The struggles of the Jews and their long-sought “Promised Land” proved a strong analogy for the black slaves” (Jones 39). Christianity thus assumes the same traditions and characteristics of African religion: “Spirit possession of African religion was embodied in the Christian “holy spirit” (Jones 41): “‘Gettin’ the spirit,’ ‘getting’ religion,’ or ‘getting’ happy’ were indispensable features of the early American Negro” (Jones 41). The Christian revival movement ended up not converting African religion to Christian ritual but “by converting itself to an African ritual” (Jones 42).

Trueblood’s dream represents this cultural syncretism, the inevitable influence of white and black traditions on one another. Ellison satirizes cultural segregation: In Trueblood’s effort to escape, he symbolically rapes phantom white woman who is his

daughter. He is seemingly defeated by social machinery within the endless tunnel. However, like John Henry, he becomes a tragic hero of the blues. His children's re-adaptation of "London Bridge is Falling Down" implies a destruction, but also implies a reconstruction, a celebration of his defeat. Adapting a British song is not the end of culture, but a new beginning.

### The Blackface Minstrel Show

African syncretism evolved out of necessity, stemming from cultural oppression and the continual need to re-invent cultural traditions. White America's attitude to African culture, however, evolved from an attitude of resistance to, to parody, to appropriation. This attitude is perhaps best embodied in the minstrel show, a form of entertainment that thrived in the nineteenth and into the mid-twentieth century. This section addresses the history of black face minstrel shows in relation to two scenes in *Invisible Man*: the destruction of the "Sambo" bank and Tod Clifton's Sambo puppet performance. It will address the symbolism of the narrator's failed attempts to discard of Sambo's broken pieces and Tod Clifton's piecing together of the broken pieces.

Thomas Dartmouth Rice, an African American performer more commonly known by his character, "Jim Crow," founded the minstrel tradition (Conway 90). In his comical musical numbers he portrayed a Kentucky cornfield worker, dancing and singing to the accompaniment of a fiddle (Conway 91). While Rice preserved songs and dances of rural African American culture, he also set up the tradition of commercialization and imitation. Soon, minstrel performances began to diverge of from their diverse folk roots and represent fixed stereotypes. As Conway says, "Sentimental material and fixed stereotypes began to replace the diverse black frontier types that appeared in early minstrelsy. By 1855, for example, comic skits began to replace

plantation finales, and the caricatures of blacks were confined primarily to the two stereotypes of Jim Crow and Zip Coon—the “contented slaves and unhappy free Negroes” (Conway 114). Ellison understands this history and that “archetype easily becomes stereotype” (Bigsby 173).

The increased popularity of black face minstrel shows caused confusion around cultural origins. The African banjo, for instance, a common minstrel instrument, is now “an emblem of white mountain folk” (Conway 160). A popular myth even suggests that 5-string banjo was *invented* by Joel Sweeney, a white minstrel performer, mid-nineteenth century (Conway 160). In 1845 a reviewer questioned this severing of cultural origins, “[Do the Negro poets] not set the fashion, and give the laws to public taste? Let one of them, in the swamps of Carolina, compose a new song, and it no sooner reaches the ear of a white amateur, than it is written down, amended (that is, almost spoilt), printed, and then put upon a course of rapid distribution... Meanwhile, the poor author digs away with his hoe, utterly ignorant of his greatness” (Kinnard 85). Thus, black tradition was severed from its cultural origins, while minstrel performers capitalized on black experiential songs.

In the introduction to *Invisible Man*, Ellison recalls the shock of seeing a minstrel show advertisement in the process of writing the novel. Ellison says, “The poster reminded me of the tenacity which a nation’s moral evasions can take on when given the trappings of racial stereotypes, and the ease with which its deepest experience of tragedy could be converted into blackface farce” (Ellison, *Invisible Man*, xvi). The blackface minstrel performer, “Sambo,” is a symbol that makes an appearance several times in *Invisible Man*, transforming from a symbol of disgrace, to a re-invention of cultural celebration. The first appearance of “Sambo” occurs in the middle of the night at Mary’s

apartment. With his shoe heel, the outraged narrator bangs the pipes to silence his noisy neighbors. He notices the “Sambo” bank staring up at him from the floor (*Invisible Man* 319):

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

The “very black” in Ellison’s description of “Sambo” refers to the charcoal paint used by white and black minstrel performers alike. The exaggerated red lips and wide mouth were also common portrayals. The narrator associates these caricatures with over a century of mockery. At first, the narrator’s reaction is blind hate: “For a second I stopped, feeling hate charging within me, then dashed over and grabbed it, suddenly as enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around” (*Invisible Man* 319). The narrator’s hate is directed to Mary, not the symbol itself, but the preserver of the symbol. However, his attitude turns to sympathy when he realizes “Sambo’s” expression changes in his clenched hand: “In my hand its expression seemed more of a strangulation than a grin. It was choking, filled to the throat with coins (*Invisible Man* 319). The bank symbolizes loss of cultural dignity in the name of profit. That profit is self-destructive to society, even to the white minstrel performer. Although filled to the throat with coins, the “Sambo” bank has a tag on his shirt that says “FEED ME” (*Invisible Man* 321). “Sambo,”



unconscious that he is choking on his own greed, begs for more.

Musical themes resonate in the continuing scene. The pipe percussion escalates, and the narrator's hatred of the stereotype is directed towards his neighbors: "Get rid of your cottonpatch ways! Act civilized!" (*Invisible Man* 320). The narrator, in his rage, crumbles Sambo's iron head, creating a drum roll of coins: "Coins flew over the room like crickets, ringing rattling against the floor, rolling" (Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 320). Mary complains as any respectable parent would to her child's disruptive music: "Just listen to 'em! Just listen to 'em!...Why don't folks act according to what they know?" (*Invisible Man* 320). The musical themes continue: "The knocking had gone beyond mere protest over heatlessness now, they had fallen into ragged rumba rhythm:

Knock!

Knock-knock

Knock-knock!

Knock!

Knock-knock

Knock-knock! (*Invisible Man* 320).

Jones says, "The most apparent survivals of African music in Afro-American music are its rhythms: not only the seeming emphasis in the African music on rhythm" (Jones 25). Traditional African music had complex polyrhythm, which allowed musicians to communicate with one another. Thus, traditional drums were outlawed during slavery and this sense of rhythm was applied to other instruments: the Irish fiddle, the guitar and, the more "civilized" drums of Napoleonic marching bands, and the washboard.

Rhythm is always indicative of African American culture and set it apart. Ellison

says, “Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one’s origin are so quickly lost, one of the chief values of living with music lies in its power to give us orientation in time” (Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 198). The fractured pieces of “Sambo” doll are symbolic of the fractured pieces of African American culture. African American minstrelsy had been adopted and exploited by the whites until it was no longer relevant to the African American experience and had to be reinvented. This trend can be seen in the evolution of African work songs to field “hollers” and spirituals, field “hollers” and spirituals to the blues, the blues to jazz, and jazz to bebop. LeRoi Jones discusses this liminal space that African American music and culture has always been forced to occupy:

There was always a border beyond which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. There was always a possible limitation to any dilution or excession of cultural or spiritual references. The Negro could not ever become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the white man’s culture. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no man’s land, that provided the logic and beauty in his music. (Jones 80)

The narrator of *Invisible Man* attempts to discard of “Sambo’s” broken pieces, his fractured cultural identity. Ellison cleverly melds black and white imagery to show the futility of denying history: “The night’s snowfall was already being churned to muck by the passing cars” (*Invisible Man* 327). Ellison juxtaposes the African American perception of blackness, relating an African American joke (“I’m so black, I can’t be seen in the dark”), to the Western mythological symbols of black and white: “evil and

goodness, ignorance and knowledge” (qtd. from *Shadow and Act*, 173). When the narrator attempts to discard the pieces in a residential trashcan, an outraged woman opens her door and screams, “Oh, no you don’t, oh no you don’t!” (*Invisible Man* 327). She stereotypes the narrator as a “Jim Crow:” “We keep our place clean and respectable and we don’t want you field niggers coming up from the South and ruining things!” (*Invisible Man* 328). At the next crosswalk, the narrator lets the package fall into the trampled snow (*Invisible Man* 329). A stranger runs him down and asks the narrator if he dropped something. The narrator denies this entirely only escalating the stranger’s assumptions. The stranger assumes that the narrator is making a “pigeon drop,” that he is a dope peddler, and that he is running from a detective. He says, “You young New York Negroes is a blip! I swear you is!” (*Invisible Man* 330). He assumes the narrator is a New Yorker, not a southerner. In an effort to discard of his fractured southern culture, to shed his stereotype, the narrator reinforces the opposite stereotype. The narrator is no longer perceived as “Jim Crow,” the contented southern slave, but “Zip Coon,” the discontented free man who must resort to a life of crime.

As the narrator becomes more involved with the Brotherhood, more symbols of his African heritage emerge: Brother Tarp’s chain gang link, the broken minstrel doll which the narrator tries to discard, and, finally, Tod Clifton’s ultimate re-defining of the minstrel puppet (Kent 103). These are analogous to the Broken pieces of the “Sambo” bank. “Sambo” makes his next appearance in the form of a puppet. Todd Clifton, a disillusioned member of the Brotherhood, pulls the strings of a Sambo Doll on a busy Harlem street. In doing so, he transcends the stereotype, performing “a dance that was completely detached from the black, mask-like face” (Ellison *Invisible Man* 431). The puppet’s dance is grossly exaggerated, mocking the white minstrel performances. He

dances “with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public, dancing as though it received a perverse pleasure from its motions” (*Invisible Man* 431). This parody of a parody was a common trait of black minstrel performers, as Jones describes, “In one sense the colored minstrel was poking fun at himself, and in another and probably more profound sense he was poking fun of the white man” (Jones 85). Jones gives the example of the cakewalk, a minstrel caricature of white customs. Ironically, white minstrel performers imitated the dance, thus parodying themselves (Jones 87).

Todd Clifton is able to take the shattered pieces of minstrel performance and rearrange them into something new. Similarly, in *On Bird, Bird Watching, and Jazz*, Ellison describes how Charlie Parker was able to become the “mocking bird” of jazz, taking on many voices: “[He] rebopped bebops-- by mocking mimicry of other jazzmen’s styles, and by interpolations of motifs from extraneous melodies, all of which added up to a dazzling display of wit, satire, burlesque and pathos” (223). Tod Clifton embodies Charlie Parker’s celebration of heritage. He symbolically pulls the strings on the “Sambo” puppet in his performance on a Harlem Street. Originally a symbol of African American mockery, the symbol takes on a new form: a parody of a parody.

While Clifton pulls the strings of “Sambo,” taking on many voices, Ellison pulls the strings of his characters (Benston 6). He establishes the theme of the blues through the “Battle Royal,” but is unsatisfied with the tragic resolution. He then explores Trueblood’s dream and how racial tension inevitably leads to cultural hybridity. In the narrator’s shattering of the Sambo bank he asks what is to be done the shattered pieces of African American identity. He answers this in Tod Clifton’s performance, rearranging the pieces of the Sambo doll, redefining a symbol, raising social ritual to the level of art,

and recovering African American culture.

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