Ralph Ellison’s Melville Masks

From the first page of *Invisible Man*, which opens with an epigraph from “Benito Cereno,” Ellison overtly inscribes his abiding fascination with Herman Melville. Throughout both of his novels and in several essays and interviews, Ellison includes dozens of hardly less subtle allusions to *Moby-Dick*, “Benito Cereno,” and *The Confidence-Man*. At least part of Ellison’s motivation derives from the prestige that Melville had acquired by the time of Ellison’s own emergence as a novelist in the early 1950s. During this moment, Ellison understood that allusions to and readings of Melville would garner a powerful audience and lend authority to his creative and critical output. In this sense, Ellison’s use of Melville resembles how C.L.R. James wrote a book about *Moby-Dick* while imprisoned on Ellis Island to capture a broad audience and perform his loyalty to American values. As it did for James, the hypercanonicity of Melville’s work in the wake of the “Melville Revival” offered Ellison unique access to cultural power. This access allowed Ellison to show that African Americans are integral to what he called “the tradition of American literature” and to carve out a space for himself within “that very powerful literary tradition,” as Ellison put it in an essay not coincidentally titled “On Initiation Rites and Power” (525). Embracing a white canon may seem like a counterintuitive means of exposing the importance of African Americans to American culture. But Ellison was well aware of this irony, and he actually used allusions to Melville’s writings to interrogate precisely this sort of strategic power negotiation, particularly in the manuscripts of his unfinished second novel.

Melville’s notable presence in the second novel project has gone unexamined—not surprising, since it is buried in only recently published manuscript pages—but Ellison’s earlier allusions to white American writers have stirred a rich conversation about the racial politics of canonicity. This conversation

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1. James was arrested in 1952 under the McCarran Act (also known as the Subversive Activities Control Act) and imprisoned on Ellis Island. While awaiting deportation, he wrote *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live In*, took out a loan to self-publish it, and mailed copies to several prominent critics and every member of the U.S. Congress. James and Ellison discussed Melville together in the 1940s when they were both living in New York (See Wright 163-164).

2. I borrow the term “hypercanonical” from Jonathan Arac, who uses it to describe a text or author who “monopolize[s] curricular and critical attention” and becomes identified “not just with a nation, but with the goodness of the nation” (*Idol and Target* 133, 14).

3. Thanks to the herculean efforts of Adam Bradley and John Callahan, a large portion of the second novel was published in 2010 as *Three Days Before the Shooting*. The Melville allusions that I refer to here—and discuss extensively below—were not included in *Juneteenth*, a much smaller sampling of the second novel that Callahan published in 1999.
figures Ellison as a democratic “joker” who affirms the canon only to repudiate the racially exclusionary hermeneutic practices of postwar Americanists. Alan Nadel, for example, presents Ellison as a “trickster critic” who deploys allusions to writers like Melville, Emerson, and Twain to “revise the interpretive assumptions that structured the canon” (62). These allusions, Nadel argues, are designed to appeal to the racial prejudices of postwar Americanists, but they also create a subversive racial “subtext” that “critiques and alters the tradition in which they function” (147). Similarly, John Wright argues that Ellison’s commitment to canonical white writers represents neither opportunism nor “simple accommodationism,” but instead is the result of Ellison’s “concept of cultural synthesis as a subversive strategy of empowerment” (22).

Nadel and Wright build on Houston Baker’s argument that Ellison donned a “Western critical mask,” which allowed him to infuse white American literature “with the captivating sound of flattened thirds and sevenths” – to modulate the canonical standards into a dissonant, jazz-inflected key by emphasizing racial prejudice and slavery (199). What all these critics share is a sense that Ellison theorized and practiced a strategic public identity that empowered him to appropriate and “blacken” white American literature. For these critics, Ellison’s canon-based criticism is the work of a pioneer theorist of the subversive, democratic power of strategic racial performativity.

This is by and large a compelling account of what Ellison was doing with Melville in *Invisible Man* and throughout his critical essays. Ellison repeatedly alludes to the racial masquerades of Babo and the confidence-man as he explores “invisibility” as an empowering strategy “to take advantage of the white man’s psychological blind spot” (Ellison, *Essays* 344). In *Invisible Man*, Babo and the confidence man, both protean tricksters who manipulate stereotypical assumptions about blackness, become models for negotiating and subverting the power dynamics of American racism. Ellison also wrote several essays about Melville, Twain and other white authors that praise and affirm the American canon, while at the same time eloquently criticizing the racial negligence of postwar Americanists. In so doing, they exemplify the practice of the “trickster critic,” who, in Ellison’s words, “simultaneously cooperates and resists, says yes and says no” (“Initiation” 496).

Yet this subtle simultaneity of acceptance and rejection was lost on the prominent literary critics and radical black intellectuals who were reading and reviewing Ellison’s work in the 1960s and 70s. These groups repudiated or ignored the racial dimensions of Ellison’s writing about Melville. Both understood him, the former with praise and the latter with condemnation, as an uncritical advocate of a white American canon – as cooperating and saying yes rather than resisting and saying no. During this same period, Ellison

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4 My quotations around “joker” allude to work by Ross Posnock, who elaborates and advocates for what he calls Ellison’s politics of “the joker.” This Ellisonian “joker,” Posnock writes, “achieves identity through improvised pastiche” and “playful acts of assemblage.” By assembling multiple identities and “insisting on the primacy of the performative as the unstable grounds of identity,” Posnock believes that Ellison “liberates the cosmopolitan energies of democracy” (“Joking” 1,5,7; Color 206).
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labored at his apparently unfinishable second novel, a text that in many ways resonates with Ellison’s unfortunate public reception as it takes up problems of cultural and racial boundary-crossing, strategic performativity, and political misrecognition. I argue that these manuscripts gravely question the political efficacy of the “guerilla action,” as Ellison once called it, of his earlier work (“The World,” 169).

Indeed, the second novel – especially its plethora of Melville allusions – erodes any stable distinction between strategically subverting and unintentionally strengthening a hegemonic discourse. The novel’s protagonist, Bliss, attempts to practice a mode of ideological engagement that closely corresponds to Ellison’s idea of “saying yes, saying no.” A black church community raises Bliss, but he grows up to pass as white and eventually becomes a race-baiting U.S. senator who calls himself “Adam Sunraider.” As Sunraider, Bliss self-consciously appeals to the racism of the American electorate during the 1950s to establish and maintain his power. All the while, he tells himself that he is working to subvert the racism of his constituents: “Extend their visions until they disgust themselves,” he tells himself (Three Days 392). But no one else seems to get his joke. Sunraider is embraced by the racists he aims to undermine and hated and feared by the African Americans he aims to help, one of whom eventually guns him down on the Senate floor.

Despite the avowed commitment to racial equality that lies behind his racist performances as Sunraider, Bliss ultimately becomes indistinguishable from the racist discourse he desperately tries to subvert. His too-subtle strategy of cultural critique betrays his own democratic intentions. As Ellison imagines the African Americans who are hurt and horrified by Bliss, this ostensibly democratic joker transforms from a subversively ironic Babo figure into to an exploitative, destructive, and delusional “mammy-made Ahab,” as one character calls Bliss. The second novel project thus marks a stark departure from the protean politics of invisibility in Invisible Man.

This departure takes the shape of a deep skepticism toward the political hope in racial hybridity and performativity expressed by critics like Posnock, Nadel, Wright, and Baker. The momentous number of pages and drafts that Ellison devoted to Bliss shows that he remained deeply attached to and compelled by the democratic possibilities of the racial “joker.” But the second novel also explores the darker possibilities of this alluring figure: the

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[^5]: The structure of my argument about Bliss is in part inspired by W.J.T. Mitchell’s reading of Spike Lee’s controversial film Bamboozled. This film follows a frustrated African American television writer who proposes a minstrel show to satirize the racism of American television viewers. When the minstrel show becomes a hit, the writer abandons his original satirical intentions, outrages African Americans, and is eventually murdered by a black member of his own staff. As Mitchell compellingly paraphrases the film, “satire descends into tragedy” (229). As it does so, he argues, “the movie thoroughly deconstructs” the writer’s “satirical alibi” because “it shows the satirist destroyed by the very weapons of stereotype and caricature that he has unleashed” (302). Bliss is not exactly a satirist, but he does unleash obscenely racist rhetoric with the intention of sabotaging that rhetoric’s power, and like Bamboozled’s protagonist, he is destroyed by the very weapons he attempts to deploy.
possibility of failing to be understood, and of becoming just as deranged and devastating as Captain Ahab. Ellison’s career-spanning relationship with Melville, I argue, betrays a messier, darker account of Ellison’s complex relationship with the politics of “saying yes and saying no” than Ellisonians have yet provided. I want to suggest the second novel reveals an Ellison who is more challenging and perhaps more valuable to contemporary Americanists, who, as one critic has aptly argued, tend to place “all hopes for cultural resistance” in “the idea of multiple or hybridized identities” (Fluck 78-79).

The Politics of Invisibility

Wright refers to Ellison’s stylized intellectual positioning as a result of his “Melvillean ironic temper,” and Invisible Man substantiates the accuracy of Wright’s phrase with its many allusions to Melville’s shrewdest tricksters – Babo and the confidence man (190). Ellison uses Melville’s tricksters to describe characters and images that embody the performativity of racial identity and exemplify the subversive power that such performativity can bring. Learning from these figures, the narrator ultimately embraces his “invisibility,” not only as a necessary condition of living in a culture so laden with racist stereotypes that “people refuse to see me,” but as an “advantageous” “political instrument” (Invisible Man 3, 491). Using this instrument, the narrator becomes what Hortense Spillers calls “a figure of subversion,” who can “undermine, systematically, all vestiges of the established order that has driven him underground” (Spillers 80).

Invisible Man’s epigraph borrows a line from Benito Cereno that calls attention to the figure of Babo and his haunting power over the white characters in the story: “‘You are saved,’ cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained; ‘you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?’ The answer to the question, which Ellison elides in the epigraph, is “the negro,” referring to Babo, who has concealed a slave revolt from Delano by wearing the mask of a humble, deferent, and docile servant of the supposed captain of

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6 Several critics have written about thematic parallels in Melville’s work and Invisible Man, variously noting shared investments in “confusions of illusion and reality” (Omans), images of lightness and darkness (Schultz), literature and democracy (Gray), con games (Leblanc), and inter-textual allusiveness (Arac). But these comparative accounts leave one with the impression that Invisible Man’s parallels with Melville fiction are almost incidental. They do not explore the depth of Ellison’s fascination with Melville and Melville scholarship. One exception to this comparative trend is Alan Nadel’s insight that Invisible Man uses allusions to Melville to criticize the racism of postwar American literary studies, an insight that I discuss at length below.

7 The most prominent Melville scholars of Ellison’s time tended to interpret Babo as “evil” or as a “monster,” and the same critics read The Confidence Man as an expression of Melville’s descent into depression and nihilism (see Matthiessen 508; Arvin 240, 251). Ellison’s early embrace of these characters whom his contemporaries seemed to fear anticipates the work of contemporary scholars such as Geoffrey Sanborn and Jennifer Greiman, who celebrate Babo and the confidence man as modeling strategic and theatrical identities which productively challenge racial essentialism.
the slave vessel, Benito Cereno. Babo surreptitiously controls Delano’s every movement by studiously affirming his belief that “there is something in the negro which, in a particular way, fits him for avocations about one’s person.” (716). When Delano gets uneasy about the behavior of the other “slaves” or begins to worry that Cereno is acting suspiciously, Babo reassures Delano by tending to his “master”:

Sometimes the negro gave his master his arm, or took his handkerchief out of his pocket for him; performing those and similar offices with that affectionate zeal [...] which has gained for the negro the repute of being the most pleasing body servant in the world. (680)

The climax of Babo’s performance comes after another “slave” strikes a white sailor with impunity - Babo shrewdly responds to Delano’s consternation by inviting him to watch Cereno be shaven. When Delano sees “the colored servant, napkin on arm, so debonair about his master, in a business so familiar as that of shaving, too, all his old weakness for negroes returned” (717).

Ellison links Bledsoe, the cynical president of his fictionalized Tuskegee College, to Babo through their shared capability to establish power over the white people around them by performing the humble offices of a bodily attendant. The narrator of Invisible Man recalls that Bledsoe “was the only one of us I knew — except perhaps a barber or a nursemaid — who could touch a white man with impunity” (112, my emphasis). Bledsoe makes a career out of performing a servile, humble identity for the college’s white trustees, who share many of Delano’s expectations for black identity. This paradoxical power becomes clear to the novel’s narrator as he watches Bledsoe manipulate the trustees while they are on stage during a chapel service: “The honored guests moved silently upon the platform, herded to high carved chairs by Dr. Bledsoe with the decorum of a portly head waiter” (112). Rotund, humbly dressed, and smiling, Bledsoe directs the movement of the trustees just as a shepherd herds a flock of sheep. From a “posture of humility and meekness,” Bledsoe can “exercise a powerful magic” over the trustees in much the same way that Babo exercises power over Delano (112-113).

Invisible Man’s two most explicit allusions to The Confidence-Man are figures that in some sense symbolize Bledsoe’s Babo-esque identity: the “very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed” “Jolly Nigger Coin Bank” and the “confidencing son of a bitch,” Bliss Proteus Rinehart (480). When the narrator discovers the bank while staying in Mary Rambo’s boarding house, he is disgusted by it and furious that Mary would allow such an artifact of racism into her rooms. In an exchange of letters about The Confidence-Man with Albert Murray, Ellison reveals that “the bank image in Invisible was suggested by the figure of the Black Guinea. That son of a bitch with his mouth full of pennies” (79). Here Ellison cites a scene in Melville’s novel in which the confidence man, calling himself “Der Black Guinea,” appears as a “grotesque negro cripple” who begs for coins (Melville, Confidence 10). The Black Guinea “would pause, throwing back his head and opening his mouth [...] when, making a space before him, people would have a bout at a sort of pitch penny
game, the cripple’s mouth being at once target and purse” (11). The coin bank found by *Invisible Man*’s narrator physically materializes the obscenely degrading stereotype performed by Melville’s confidence man.

The narrator first notices the coin bank as other residents in the house pound the pipes in the rooms to protest Mary’s frugal use of the heating furnace (312). Enraged by what he calls their “cottonpatch ways,” the narrator protests their protest by smashing the iron bank against the pipes in his room. Eventually he shatters the bank only to discover that he cannot get rid of this image of blackness that he hates, even after he has destroyed it. The minstrel coin bank remains in the narrator’s briefcase, and he eventually realizes that even within the Brotherhood – Ellison’s allegorization of the American left, from abolitionism to the American Communist Party – he cannot escape the degrading stereotypes of blackness that it represents (312-325).

The narrator learns that he can ironically perform racist stereotypes to subvert their power only after he discovers Bliss Proteus Rinehart, who like Melville’s confidence man tactically transforms his appearance to establish “confidence” with various audiences. In an interview a few years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison claims that Rinehart is a “descendent of Melville’s ‘Confidence Man’” because he “is living a very stylized life” and “can act out many roles” (*Conversations* 75-76). Rinehart is simultaneously a pimp, lover, gambler, numbers runner, and evangelical preacher at a storefront church. Rinehart opens the narrator’s mind to the instability of the surfaces and depths of one’s identity – between one’s “rind and heart” (*Invisible Man* 490). “What is real anyway?” Rinehart causes him to wonder. “He was a broad man, a man of many parts who got around. Rine the runner and Rine the Gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the reverend. [...] The world in which we live is without boundaries” (490, my emphasis).

After his initial enthusiasm, the narrator momentarily resists Rinehart’s “multiple personalities” and repudiates the fluidity of his identity as a retreat into cynicism. But he returns to Rinehart’s political “possibilities” in the Epilogue, and presents Rinehart’s “many parts” as a “political instrument” for achieving democratic equality. *Invisible Man* dismisses the stable, authentic personal identity that he has sought for most of the novel:

> I’ve come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships therein. Now I know that men are different and all life is divided and that only in division is there true health. (*Invisible Man* 567)

At this point, Rinehart’s self-division–his “multiple personalities”–becomes an appealing model for political subjectivity: “whence all this passion toward conformity?–diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you’ll have no tyrant states” (567, my emphasis). Rather than opposing “conformity” to an ostensibly Emersonian “self-reliant” individual, Ellison opposes it to “diversity” – not of the socio-political community, but of the self. The performance of “many parts” becomes an effective mode of political resistance for those who are rendered “invisible” by a society’s prejudices: “The negro’s masking,” Ellison writes elsewhere, represents “a profound rejection
of the image created to usurp his identity” (“Change” 109). By theatricalizing – “yessing” – a racist culture’s assumptions and expectations, one practices what Ellison calls “a sort of jujitsu of the spirit,” “a denial and rejection through agreement” (“Change” 110).

_Invisible Man_ presents the strategic racialized performativity “suggested by” Babo and the confidence man as an effective means “to collaborate with [a racist society’s] destruction of its own values” – to “agree ‘em to death and destruction,” as the narrator’s grandfather puts it (Conversations 76, _Invisible Man_ 16). Indeed, Melville’s tricksters seem inextricable from Ellison’s effort to theorize a democratic politics of “invisibility.” Rinehart’s “multiplicity in ceaseless motion,” according to Kevil Bell, “embodies” this politics by “undermining every certitude, destabilizing every authority, concealing the “truth” of his character by performing its proliferation in public” (31, original emphasis). Bell – like Posnock and the others I cite in my introduction – leaves his account of Ellison’s “joking” at praising him as a pioneer theorist of the subversive trickster. But following Ellison’s abiding relationship with Melville into the 1960s and 70s reveals the limitations and partiality of this optimistic version of Ellison’s politics of invisibility. For Ellison’s Melvillean critical mask and the tricksters of his second novel undermine the binaries that Bell describes between the truth of one’s character and its performances, between destabilization and authority – binaries without which the subversive power of the trickster becomes practically indistinguishable from complicity with power.

**Ellison’s “Western Critical Mask”**

Between the mid 1950s and the 70s, Ellison developed a highly intellectual and stylized academic identity that largely depended on his loyalty to and knowledge of Melville, Twain, and other white authors of the postwar American canon. In many ways Ellison’s “Western Critical Mask” exemplifies _Invisible Man’s_ paradoxical synthesis of collaboration with and destruction of racism. Ellison says yes to the white canon only to repudiate the racially negligent reading practices of postwar critics.

The link between Ellison’s literary critical performances and “confidencing” becomes explicit in a letter to his close friend Albert Murray. Murray asked Ellison about his time at Princeton University in 1953, where he was listening to talks by Edmund Wilson and lecturing on American literature to luminaries such as R.W.B Lewis, Alfred Kazin, R.P Blackmur, and Saul Bellow (Rampersad 268, 279). “They’ve got the old rabbit back in the patch, wearing a black robe and trying to outdo ole Barbee,” Ellison writes in response, comparing himself to the trickster rabbit of black folklore and to Reverend Homer A. Barbee from _Invisible Man_, who theatrically recounts the founding mythic narrative of Bledsoe’s college to elicit students’ devotion to the school (Trading Twelves 39). Ellison signed the letter “Rhine,” suggesting that the academic identity he performed at Princeton was in some sense
inspired by the “confidencing son of a bitch.” Several times throughout his letters with Murray, Ellison refers to the intellectual setting of the university as “my old briar patch” – a setting, he writes, that demanded “briarpatch cunning” (131, 116).

Ellison’s arguments about Melville, nation, and democracy were integral to his “cunning” appeal to the postwar literary academy. As Paul Lauter has argued, in the decades leading up the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952, “Melville climbs the canon” and becomes an icon of national identity in American literary studies—a “characteristic” representative of “American genius,” or in Richard Chase’s phrase, “the grandest expression of the American imagination” (Lauter 6, Chase 91). Throughout a series of essays, lectures, and university courses during the fifties and sixties, Ellison affirmed Melville’s hypercanonical status and utilized several other tropes of exceptionalist critical discourse – a white canon centered on “classic” nineteenth-century literature, an emphasis on national identity, and a preoccupation with what F.O. Matthiessen called “the possibilities of democracy” (xv). Yet even as he collaborated with postwar Americanists, Ellison eloquently criticized these critics for overlooking the importance of race and slavery to the American literary imagination.

For this critical project, Melville presented Ellison with a particularly viable “symbol of authority,” to borrow a term from Ellison’s close friend Kenneth Burke (Burke 169). On the one hand, Melville’s writing presents multiple black characters, characters who self-consciously perform versions of blackness, and a sustained attention to the social and political dynamics of interracial relationships. And on the other hand, decades before Ellison began his effort to “blacken” Melville, the “Melville revivers” had praised his work for its unsettling, illicit (albeit nonracial) “blackness.” Raymond Weaver claimed in the first pages of the first Melville biography that “Melville sinned blackly against the orthodoxy of his time” (18). A few years later Lewis Mumford claimed that Melville “plunged into the cold black depths of the spirit” and “questioned the foundations upon which their [Americans’] vast superstructure of comfort and complacency was erected” (Herman Melville xv). Weaver and Mumford’s language of blackness alludes to Melville’s praise for Hawthorne’s writing, which most Melvilleans interpret as a comment on Melville’s own aesthetic. “It is that blackness in Hawthorne,” Melville writes, “that so fixes and fascinates me” – “a blackness ten times black” (“Hawthorne” 1158-59). None these articulations of Melville’s black aesthetic made explicitly racial claims, but perhaps they speak to why Ellison would have been drawn to Melville as a site for critical contestation. For Melville offered Ellison the opportunity to engage a critical discourse on literary “blackness” and enrich it by integrating political valences of slavery, racial exploitation, and the failures of American democracy.

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8 As Adam Bradley has documented, Ellison’s spellings of Rinehart are inconsistent, oscillating between “Rine,” “Rhine,” “Rinehart,” “Rhinehart,” “Rineheart,” and “Rhineheart” (130).
Ellison began his integrative critical project with *Invisible Man*, which directly engaged American literary studies through allusions not only to Melville, but also to Melvilleans like Mumford. As Nadel has shown, Ellison’s most obvious critical target is Mumford’s “study of American literature and culture” *The Golden Day* (1926), the title chapter of which culminates in a reading of Melville’s fiction. Mumford’s “Golden Day” names the “climax” of American literary expression that occurred just before the Civil War, and as evidence of this exceptional moment, Mumford presents Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville – the very same writers who fifteen years later would constitute Matthiessen’s widely influential “American Renaissance” (43). Nadel writes that

*Golden Day* is an appropriate target for Ellison [...] not because it was the most significant book of its type but because it was one of the earliest and most typical: one that represents a typical whitewashing of American history. (94)

In *Invisible Man*, “the Golden Day” is the name of a bar that sits just off the campus of Ellison’s fictionalization of Tuskegee. The narrator brings Norton, the white, northern college trustee, to this bar after visiting Trueblood. Ellison populates this “Golden Day” with angry, disillusioned, and highly articulate black World War I veterans who, when they returned to the U.S., were denied access to the professional careers for which they were trained during the war. In Ellison’s “Golden Day,” black voices confront Norton’s ignorance of the discrimination and exploitation faced by blacks with precisely the kind of professional education that his money funds, and they scrutinize the inefficacy of his benign liberalism. For Ellison, the “Golden Day” thus becomes a site where black characters confront white ignorance about the failures of American democracy. “The Golden Day had once been painted white,” Ellison writes; “now its paint was flaking away with the years, the scratch of a finger being enough to send it showering down” (*Invisible*, 197).

Ellison dedicated many of his essays to scraping white paint off of American literature and calling attention to the exclusionary reading practices of Americanists. Ellison’s 1959 essay “Society, Morality, and the Novel” represents his most forthright criticism of the hermeneutics of whitewashing. By applying “the bright pure light of their methods,” Ellison argues, Americanists have obscured the most democratically valuable concerns of nineteenth-century American fiction – namely, racism and slavery (“Society” 698). Ignoring these issues, he writes, “reduces the annoying elements to a minimum” and blunts “the moral intention of American prose fiction by way of making it easier for the reader” (724).

The “moral cutting edge” of American fiction that critics suppress, in Ellison’s account, is its representation of African Americans as “the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan” (“Twentieth” 85). Despite

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*Ellison rarely names the critics who he thinks have corrupted the American canon, but the title of his essay “Society, Morality, and the Novel” alludes to Lionel Trilling’s “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” (published in 1950 as a chapter of *The Liberal Imagination*), which argues that “American writers of genius have not turned their minds to society” and points to the metaphysical flights of Melville as an example.*
their inept twentieth-century interpreters, according to Ellison, nineteenth
century writers – Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Crane, and especially
Twain and Melville – used black characters to mark the failures of American
democracy. The exception to Ellison’s claim about the suppression of race
in twentieth-century literary discourse is William Faulkner, who Ellison ar-
égues “brings us as close to the moral implications of the Negro as Twain or
Melville” (“Twentieth” 98). Ellison argues that “the novel is a moral instru-
ment, possessing for us an integrative function,” because in its best manifes-
tations, it brings white and black Americans together and depicts them in
the unfolding drama of American democracy. By ignoring race, Ellison ar-
gues, American critics “evade as much of [the novel’s] moral truth as possible”
(original emphasis; “Society” 718).

Ellison often speaks in “sweeping generalities” about American literature,
as one interviewer put it, but in an essay about legal discrimination Ellison
uses “Bartleby the Scrivener” and Benito Cereno to perform a concrete example
of integrative criticism (Conversations 224). Ellison argues that legislative and
judiciary racism dates back to the nation’s foundation, when the Founding
Fathers “committed the sin of racial pride” and “designated one section of
the American people to be the sacrificial victims for the benefit of the rest”
(“Perspective” 781). African Americans thus become “the exception” to de-
mocracy in America (“Perspective” 777). But because of this exceptional sta-
tus, Ellison writes, “the Black American was endowed linguistically with an
ambivalent power – ‘the power of the negative’” (“Perspective” 782). Ellison
argues (as he does on many occasions) that African Americans represent a
stinging nettle in the side of American democracy, a negation of its claims
of “liberty and justice for all”: “He became a keeper of the nation’s sense of
democratic achievement, and the human scale by which would be measured
its painfully slow advance toward true equality” (“Perspective” 782).

Ellison reads Benito Cereno and “Bartleby” as dramatizing this “power of
the negative” possessed by the “exceptions” to American democracy. Both
texts, he argues, center on a socially and economically established white
character – “a representative of law and thus of order” – who benefits from
America’s selectively applied democracy. The narrator of “Bartleby,” he
writes, is “a Wall Street lawyer who, for all his good will, is as impercep-
tive in grasping the basic connotation as Captain Delano of Benito Cereno is
unable to grasp the human complexity of the Africans who believed, like
himself, so much in freedom that they would kill for it” (“Perspective” 775).
The “basic connotation” that both characters (and their twentieth century
interpreters) miss is that their beneficent democratic ideals are shattered by
the characters who confront them during the story.

Ellison argues that Melville endows Bartleby with the same “power of
the negative” possessed by African Americans, and that he functions in the
story in the same symbolic order that blacks do in American political culture
– as an “exception” to an otherwise functionally democratic and progressive
state. “In reading the story,” Ellison writes,
one has the sensation of watching a man walking backward past every boundary of human order and desire saying “I prefer not to, I prefer not to,” until at last he fades from sight and we are left with only the faint sound of his voice hanging thinly in the air, still saying no. Bartleby’s last remaining force, the force which at the very last he is asked to give up, is the power of the negative. (776)

But “Bartleby is never forced or persuaded or cajoled to agree” (776). He maintains his “obstinate negativism,” and in Ellison’s reading, he effectively challenges the structure of a society that would abuse and imprison him in the same way that, Ellison argues, African Americans negate the efficacy of American democracy. Bartleby, according to Ellison, becomes symbolic of the resilient, haunting, and sobering voices of repudiation that African Americans bring to American political discourse.

As his emphasis on national identity, “possibilities of democracy,” and white canonical male authors demonstrates, Ellison’s literary criticism to a significant degree ingratiates the exceptionalism of postwar Americanists. And Ellison’s appeal to their literary and national values won him their favor. As Wright aptly argued, white literary critics embraced Ellison “as a quiet counterpoint to the discordant literature of Black Power,” and they “evaded Ellison’s attack on racist ideology” (16, 17). R.W.B. Lewis, Ellison’s close personal friend, epitomized the literary academy’s relationship with Ellison in a 1964 essay on Ellison’s literary criticism. Lewis argued that Ellison’s work surpassed the writings of other black authors because it moved beyond the idea of the black artist as a “wounded warrior,” obsessed with the “struggle for racial justice.” Not coincidently, Lewis also praised Ellison for writing about and working within the tradition of white canonical authors like Emerson, Melville, Twain, and Faulkner (46). But, Lewis notes, Ellison establishes his relationship with these canonical authors in the “beguilingly specialized terms” of race – terms that Lewis repudiates. “I am not quite convinced,” Lewis writes, “that slavery and the Negro were as central to the imagination of Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Mark Twain as Ellison makes out” (47). Celebrating Ellison’s writing as a repudiation of black radicalism and an endorsement of the white cannon, Lewis embraces the most conservative dimensions of Ellison’s work without taking seriously his integrative arguments about race and democracy.

The sharp edge of Ellison’s cultural criticism was also disregarded and misunderstood by participants in the Black Arts Movement, who repeatedly identified Ellison as a traitor to the cause of racial equality. Throughout the sixties, many black radicals began to castigate Ellison for his allegiance to cultural institutions traditionally controlled by whites. In an essay called “Philistinism and the Negro Writer,” Amiri Baraka claimed that the white institution of academia had “silenced” Ellison, and consigned him to “fidgeting away in some college” (Anger 53). In 1970, Black World, a major journal of the Black Arts Movement, dedicated an entire issue to berating Ellison, in which Ernest Kaiser called him “an Establishment writer, an Uncle Tom, an attacker of the sociological formulations of the Black freedom movement.”
Later in the same issue, Clifford Mason wrote that “what might have been an instructive allusion to white writers in the 60s is Tomism in the 70s” (quoted in Bradley 57).

Ellison reveals his frustration with how his work was understood by both white and black intellectuals in an early-seventies letter to Irving Howe, with whom Ellison had sparred years before over the obligations of black writers to produce “protest art” – an exchange that led to Ellison’s acclaimed essay, “The World and the Jug” (1964-65). In the letter, Ellison appears exasperated – almost despairing – about living in a moment “when our best minds fail to trace the connections between the black community and the white, historically, morally, and culturally.” Drawing out such connections is precisely what writing about Melville had allowed Ellison to do, but he appears deeply frustrated that no one would take his work seriously. “Denounced by young black militants” and surrounded by white critics like Lewis who “have given up completely on the task of critical evaluation of efforts at art – or thought – coming from anyone who is not white,” Ellison felt “isolated” and worried that nothing he could write “would do any good.” “What does one do,” he asks, “now that the culture of the U.S. is referred to so glibly as ‘white culture’ and ‘black culture’?” In such a racially divided world, the work of integrative criticism becomes impossible (50/11).

Jackson argues that by the mid seventies Ellison “seemed to embrace” his conservative academic identity, and judging by Ellison’s numerous lectures and course syllabi on white canonical authors and his belittling attacks on the Black Arts Movement, Jackson seems right (“Integration” 174). But at this same moment Ellison was struggling to finish a novel about a psychologically troubled, delusional, and destructive character who also attempts to deploy a racist discourse strategically, yet ultimately becomes indistinguishable from it. The manuscripts of his second novel seem written by a more self-critical Ellison than Jackson describes – an Ellison who doubts the efficacy of his own “invisible” mode of cultural criticism.

The Invisibility of Politics

The unfinished second novel reveals that Ellison’s interests in Melville and the politics of invisibility persisted throughout his career, but it also betrays grave doubts regarding *Invisible Man*’s Rinehartean conclusion and Ellison’s Rinehart-inspired “Western critical mask.” If *Invisible Man* concludes with what Jackson calls “the permanent acceptance of and critical engagement with Rinehart,” Ellison’s second novel picks up where his first one left off – with another “confidence man” named Bliss, who is much more fully fleshed

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10 Citations of material from the Ellison papers at The Library of Congress – such as this letter to Howe – list the box and folder in which the cited documents can be found.
11 On several occasions Ellison demeans black radicalism. He accuses its adherents of “rejecting intellectual discipline” and subscribing to irrational mystifications of black identity that Ellison refers to as “blood magic and blood thinking” (“Indivisible” 370; “Little Man” 509).
out than his predecessor. In the immensity of pages Ellison dedicated to Bliss, one witnesses his transition from a theatrical young preacher into a “confidence man,” his emergence as a powerful “race-baiting” politician, and the hurt and outrage he brings to African Americans. In many ways, Bliss faces similar problems of misrecognition to those Ellison faced as a literary critic. As a senator who wears the racist mask of Adam Sunraider with the intention of entering the U.S. political system and subverting its racial injustices, Bliss in many ways practices an exaggerated version of Ellison’s own shrewd exceptionalism and canon-based literary criticism.

The effusive manuscript of Ellison’s second novel seems pulled in conflicting directions concerning the political possibilities and implications of Bliss. He is characterized both as a shrewd advocate of racial equality and as an Ahabian, self-obsessed demagogue who unleashes his American audience’s deep-seated racism. Several characters, including Bliss himself, espouse an Ellisonian optimism about the subversive potential of cultural hybridity and skilled theatricality. While Bliss’s public political identity is obscenely racist, he privately articulates beliefs about democracy and racial justice that mirror Ellison’s arguments about the brokenness and hypocrisy of a “democratic” society that excludes segments of its population from the political community. But as the manuscripts tell the stories of dozens of black characters who are hurt and enraged by Bliss, the Ahabian portrait overwhelms more sympathetic characterizations. The subversive Babo-esque trickster disappears beneath the domineering public persona of Adam Sunraider– a first name that alludes to Ahab’s intense hatred (“he piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down”) and a last that echoes the delusional cosmic arrogance (“I’ d strike the sun if it insulted me”) that leads him to chase Moby Dick (Melville, Moby-Dick 184, 164).

Trained from his youth by a powerful black minister – an office that Ellison describes as “manipulator of eloquence and emotions” – Bliss achieves a level of “eloquence” and rhetorical power that evokes Ahab’s demagogical authority over the crew of the Pequod (“Work in Progress”). Reverend Alonzo Hickman, a jazz man turned man of God, teaches Bliss the art of audience manipulation as he trains him to be a part of a grotesque evangelical performance. Hickman would have Bliss carried down the center aisle in a coffin, and at a pre-determined moment, Bliss would burst out of the coffin, shout Christ’s words from the cross – “Lord, Lord, Why has thou forsaken me?” – and then co-preach an antiphonal sermon with Hickman (Three Days

Bradley presents conclusive archival evidence that the second novel’s “Bliss” represents a direct continuation of Invisible Man’s Bliss Proteus Rinehart (125).

Michael Szalay has recently argued that Bliss’s “commodification” of his identity as Adam Sunraider represents a betrayal of the “precapitalist wholeness” and the “prelapsarian moment of community in which Bliss lives happily within Hickman’s congregation” (799, 810). But this strict dichotomy between Hickman and Bliss romanticizes Bliss’s childhood with Hickman, which was fraught with racial, sexual, and financial anxieties. It also inaccurately describes the relationship between Bliss and Hickman, since Bliss first learns the practice of self-commodification from Hickman’s highly theatrical evangelical sermons.
After Bliss reaches the height of his power as Sunraider, Hickman worries that he had unknowingly instructed Bliss in the art of “eloquence” during these powerfully effective sermonic performances. Anxiously, he wonders “whether I was conducting a con game or simply taking part and leading a mysterious prayer” (413).

In adolescence, Bliss runs away from Hickman’s congregation and begins passing as white, but he continues using his training in eloquence and theatricality to manipulate the people around him. Indeed, he becomes a remarkably self-reflective master of deception and confidence games. Ellison on several occasions recounts Bliss’s thoughts about his life as a confidence man, which often evoke cinematic imagery as a model for his performances. “Scenes dictate masks, and masks scenes,” he says; Bliss believes he can that play any “scene” to his advantage if only he performs the right part (399). When the “scene” shifts, he shifts his identity along with it to maximize his power. After leaving Hickman, Bliss’s life becomes a sequence of brief, spottily narrated “scenes” in which he cons a series of mostly black audiences by posing as an evangelical preacher, a Hollywood movie-maker, and a salesman of skin-whitener and hair-straightener. Bliss’s life as a “confidence man” culminates in his identity as Senator Sunraider, who, like Ahab, is a demagogical master of inflammatory rhetoric. If Ahab “play[s] round” the “savage-ness” of his crew to exhort them in the hunt for the white whale, Sunraider manipulates the deep-seated racism of his constituents to gain and maintain his power (Melville, Moby-Dick 212).

But despite Sunraider’s racist rhetoric, Hickman maintains political hope in Bliss. When Bliss was a child, Hickman had expressed a prophetic democratic hope in the young boy’s prodigious rhetorical power – a power that Hickman believes results from Bliss’s cultural hybridity. Hickman echoes Ellison’s own defense of “cultural appropriation” and creative racial cross-pollination in essays such as “The Little Man at Cheehaw Station” (515). In this essay, Ellison celebrates the hybridized identity of a figure he calls the “American joker”: “His garments were, literally and figuratively, of many colors and cultures, his racial identity interwoven of many strands” (511). An Ellisonian faith in the democratic possibilities of Bliss’s hybridity – his white skin paired with his upbringing in black culture – leads Hickman to bring up the child in love and dedication in the hope that properly raised and trained, the child’s color and features, his inner substance and his appearance would make it possible for him to enter into the wider affairs of the nation and work toward the betterment of his people and the moral health of the nation. (140/3)

Hickman believes Bliss’s “mixture of blackness and whiteness” has endowed that child with a command of the Word which was so inspiring that we came to accept him as the living token and key to that world of togetherness for which our forefathers had hoped and prayed. (526)

Unless otherwise noted, all parenthetical page citations in this section refer to Bradley and Callahan’s Three Days Before the Shooting (2010).
“Because of his power and grace with the God-given word,” Hickman continues, “we imagined him as a means of breaking the slavery-forged chains which still bind our country” (528). Bliss’s “command of the Word” on one level obviously refers to his mastery of the Bible and his ability to use scripture effectively in his sermons. But it also refers to his power to deploy language itself – a power that Hickman believes is based in Bliss’s “mixture” of racial identities. Even after Bliss has transformed into Sunraider, Hickman holds out hope that his cross-cultural experience and powerful command of language will allow him to “speak for our condition from inside the only acceptable mask” and “embody our spirit in the councils of our enemies” (413).

Privately, Bliss adheres to the same democratic hopes as Hickman. He articulates Ellisonian arguments about how American democracy has failed through its exclusion of blacks and expresses his desire to “destroy” this unfair system from the inside. In notes for the novel, Ellison imagines Bliss saying to himself, “Those who believe in democracy but insist on excluding the Negro really don’t understand that this is the very foundation of the democratic ideal. Reject this foundation, and you reject the very essence of democracy” (140/2). Bliss’s claim echoes Ellison’s often-stated argument that the health of American democracy depends on “the inclusion, not assimilation, of the black man” as an equal member of the political community (“What” 586, original emphasis). “The senator understands the democratic ideal better than those who ascribe to liberalism,” Ellison writes; “He also understands the weakness done [to] the system through the failure to accept it in its entirety, and he discussed techniques for destroying it” (140/2).

Bliss’s technique for destroying the flawed American political system closely resembles Invisible Man’s “jujitsu of the spirit,” or “denial and rejection through agreement” (“Change” 110). At one point in the manuscripts, Bliss asks himself, “HOW THE HELL DO YOU GET LOVE INTO POLITICS OR COMPASSION INTO HISTORY?” His paradoxical answer: “strike back hard in angry collaboration” (392). Ellison calls this “the strategy of a guerrilla fighter transposed to the world of politics” (Juneteenth 361). “Extend their vision until they disgust themselves, until they gag,” Bliss tells himself; “Stretch out their nerves, amplify their voices, extend their grasp until history is rolled into a pall” (392). In his own self-conception, Bliss fights for racial equality by “yessing” in “angry collaboration.” This mode of attacking a racist social structure deeply resonates with how Ellison – in interviews about Invisible Man – describes what the narrator learns from his grandfather and Rinehart: “to collaborate with its destruction of its own values” (Conversations 76).

But Bliss’s racist identity as Sunraider ultimately gets away from him, takes on a life of its own, and eclipses the commitment to racial equality that inspired Bliss’s entry into politics. Bliss performs racism purely for its power to ingratiate his audience, but his spectacular rhetoric slips out of his control – a slippage that destabilizes the boundary between ironic performance and complicit embrace. This slippage comes into focus as several voices from black communities exploited by Bliss recount the destructive effects of his
racialized con games. Two of the most expressive of these voices are a savant named Cliofus and an “aspiring intellectual” named Walker Millsap, who both explicitly compare Bliss to Ahab. Both of these characters are accorded significant authority within the novel, the former as a voice of black “community conscience” and the latter as an educated, thoughtful writer, who frequently draws on an intensive knowledge of history and literature in his study of racial identities in America (860). Cliofus and Millsap embarrass and undermine Hickman and Bliss’s Ellisonian hopes in the democratic confidence man. Rather than love or compassion, these characters (among others) show that Bliss in reality brings vitriol, fear, and hatred into racial politics in the U.S. His “angry collaboration,” in their accounts, collapses into mere collaboration, and Bliss becomes indistinguishable from the racism that he attempts to sabotage.

In a difficult, nightmarish segment of the manuscripts, Cliofus suggests that Bliss’s race-baiting rhetoric is a degrading exploitation of African Americans by figuring Bliss as an “Ahab” who kills and showcases a “black whale” (880). Cliofus is called the “unblinking eye of community conscience” for a group of African Americans in Oklahoma City (Ellison’s hometown) who were particularly damaged by one of Bliss’s pre-Sunraider scams and who kept track of him after he became a senator (860). Bliss’s scam involved preying on the black community’s desire for equality by claiming to be a director and soliciting donations for a dubious “Hollywood movie” that would star African American actors. Bliss also seduced a beautiful young woman under false pretenses, and just before killing herself she gave birth to his son, who would grow up to be the man who shoots Sunraider. Cliofus’s name (evoking the muse of history) entails that he understands and bears responsibility for mediating the community’s traumatic past, even though he often expresses their history in opaque, hardly intelligible, yet entertaining parables. Cliofus works as a storyteller and toast-giver at a bar, where the audience seems to have heard his story about “Ahab” many times. One character tellingly describes Cliofus as an “oracle,” who “mixes what really happened with tales he’s been told, books he’s read, and stories he makes up” in order to communicate the community’s history (848). Cliofus’s synthesis of community history with fictional narrative manifests itself in his Melvillean rendering of Bliss as an Ahab who brandishes an embalmed, bedecked black whale to entertain his audiences.

When asked to describe Bliss, Cliofus launches into an arcane, disturbing story about going on a field trip with his kindergarten class to “see the great whale” (879). After walking “way down in the bowels of downtown,” they find the whale, and the children are appalled. “He was rubbery and black and it took three flat cars to support him,” Cliofus remembers. As Miss Kindly, his teacher, tries to give the children a lesson about the difference between fish and mammals, Cliofus and his peers fixate upon the horrific “black whale,” “full of embalming fluid” and surrounded by “light bulbs suspended above him from head to tail, and […] two big red ones which stuck
out of the sockets where his eyes had been.” Cliofus also remembers that the whale had several “rope-dangling harpoons stuck in his hump [that] trembled whenever a truck rolled past” (880).

This parodic synthesis of Bliss and Ahab becomes more transparent as the children lose interest in Miss Kindly’s biology lesson, and “a little old white man” appears and “comes hobbling toward us on a short wooden leg” (882). This “Ahab” figure demands “a nickel apiece just for looking at the whale” and a dime more for the story of how he killed it. Miss Kindly pays the man, and he “swears that after he harpooned the whale from his boat and got dragged through foaming seas for two hundred miles and a quarter, the whale jumped salty, knocked a hole in his boat and bit off his leg.” To keep the kids’ attention, “Ahab” “pulls a switch to make the whale’s red eyes flash” and “gives a twist to some kind of valve,” and the whale starts “spouting” water as “Ahab” laughs and shouts, “Thar she blows!” (883).

Cliofus’s “Ahab” has converted the black whale into a spectacle by replacing its eyes and inner organs with grotesque adornments to attract and amuse a crowd – an apt allegory for Bliss’s degradation of black identity. An embalmed whale adorned by lights and equipped with glowing eyes and a switch-activated spout: this, Cliofus provocatively suggests, is what Bliss makes out of African Americans in order to entertain his audiences and sustain his power.15

Ellison further elaborates Bliss’s kinship with Ahab and in Millsap’s long letter to Hickman, who had hired Millsap to find and keep track of Bliss just before he emerged as Sunraider. Full of philosophical, literary, and obscure historical references, this almost comically intellectual letter details Bliss’s relationship with a Babo-esque trickster named Sippy – a “confidence man” who “trained” Bliss (693). Skilled in performance and rhetoric, Bliss, Millsap writes, was “made to order for Sippy’s ultimately subversive plan” (698). Like Babo, Sippy “can manipulate the stereotype role thrust upon him” to achieve “power”: Babo’s performative “debonair” behavior “about his master” becomes Sippy’s “ironic, debonair respect” for white people, which he performs as he “operates behind the mask of a genial but not too intelligent butler, waiter, bellhop, chauffeur, or yardman” (687, 694). Millsap writes that Sippy’s performances of servility undermine the power of his white audiences without their even knowing it. He can “lure them into a serene quicksand of black-and-white illusion and leave them as naked as fledgling jaybirds while strutting like the king who wore no clothes” – a reversal of power resonant with Babo’s manipulation of Delano (686). Millsap believes that Sippy’s equalizing “hustle” has powerful democratic implications. The

15 Although he does not mention Cliofus, Szalay insightfully argues that Three Days Before the Shooting is a text deeply concerned with “whose political interests fantasies of blackness were mobilized” to serve (796). Szalay maintains that Bliss represents Ellison’s figuration of “hip” Democrats such as John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, who attempted to garner support by subtly aligning themselves with what Szalay calls “black style” (798-799). Szalay’s argument sketches a compelling political context for Cliofus’s Ahabian portrayal of Bliss as having subdued, captured, and commodified a “black whale” – symbolizing his relationship with African American culture.
power it affords Sippy is his only chance at “a fair share of American democracy,” and its shrewd reversal of black-and-white power dynamics ironizes America’s claim to “freedom and justice for all” by exposing “the difference between reality and an as-yet unfleshed ideal” (695).

But as Millsap’s “little saga” continues, Bliss eventually abandons Sippy after receiving “a free-wheeling Ph.D’s instruction” in con games (698). Soon after, he becomes what Millsap refers to as “a young mammy-made Ahab” (685). Not knowing that Hickman had raised Bliss, Millsap speculates that Bliss had been “some kind of poor orphan of a white boy who, as a child, had passed through the loving hands of some Negro nursemaid or cook who treated him as one of her own” (684). Such a child usually at some point “adopt[s] attitudes more in keeping with its acclaimed racial superiority,” but Bliss, Millsap thinks, failed to sever his connection to his black mammy, and he thus still longs for the love and community of his childhood and suppresses guilt for abandoning them (686). Bliss’s incomplete severance from his black caretaker has created what Millsap calls “an unmistakable air of defiant loneliness” – a self-perpetuated refusal of all human attachment that resembles Ahab’s self-imposed isolation from both his crew and his wife and child ashore. Millsap implicitly compares Ahab’s severed limb to Bliss’s severed relationship with the black community that raised him: both losses render unhealing psychic wounds that lead to obsession, exploitation, and self-destruction.

“Mammy-made Ahab” is also a phrase that fuses Bliss’s powerful “mixture of blackness and whiteness” and the destructive ends to which Bliss puts this mixture. In the context of the letter, “mammy-made” clearly refers to Millsap’s vaguely psychoanalytic theory about Bliss’s upbringing. But Ellison uses the phrase elsewhere to indicate, as John Kevin Young writes, “a transgression or mixture of ostensibly pure racial categories” (174). Young points to Ellison’s 1952 letter to Murray, in which he calls himself a “mammy-made novelist” because he published the Prologue to *Invisible Man* in *The Partisan Review* – a journal edited, written, and read predominately by white intellectuals (Ellison, “Before Publication” 32). As Jackson points out, before this Ellison had published his fiction mostly in journals with a small black readership, and he “wanted more prestige”: “What he needed,” writes Jackson, “was publicity and the imprimatur of high art” (433-34). The phrase “mammy-made novelist,” Young argues, is how Ellison “acknowledges the impure roots of his novel’s public appearance” (174).

With this in mind, “mammy-made Ahab” takes on deeper resonances that speak to the complex layers of Ellison’s interest in Melville: his presentation of his work to white audiences, his fervid commitment to mixtures of racial categories, and his hope in the democratic power of the racial “joker.” In Millsap’s account, Bliss’s “mixture of blackness and whiteness” and his resulting theatrical power renders not a democratic savior, as Hickman hopes, but “a monster with two heads inhabiting a single body” (685).
Millsap’s account of Bliss in many ways recapitulates Ellison’s own complicated attitudes toward the politics of invisibility. His “little saga” of Bliss’s transformation from a democratic confidence man into a “mammy-made Ahab” reflects the stark differences between Ellison’s representations of racial performativity in *Invisible Man* and in the unfinished second novel. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison expresses hope in Bliss Proteus Rinehart’s “multiple parts” as the basis for subversive, democratizing performances. But when Ellison attempted to practice something like Rinehart’s democratic performativity with his “Western Critical Mask,” his ostensibly subversive ingratiating of the postwar academy backfired: it allowed Ellison to be deracialized and treated as a white-canon-building cultural conservative by both liberal academics and radical intellectuals. In the second novel, Rinehart’s more fully fleshed-out counterpart, Bliss, aspires to use such performativity in the service of democratic, anti-racist ends, but he ends up perpetrating the very racist system he set out to undermine, and he is ultimately destroyed by the offspring of his own deceptive power.

Winfried Fluck has argued that political hope in “performance or performativity” and “flexible, multiple identities” represents “the new mantra in Cultural and American studies” (78, 79). I want to conclude by suggesting that Ellison’s fraught relationship with the democratic confidence man – a relationship that culminates in his fractured and skeptical portrait of Bliss – challenges us to reconsider this “mantra,” which remains fashionable in contemporary Ellison scholarship and in critical and cultural theory more broadly. This political hope resembles the faith that Hickman and his congregation invest in Bliss’s racial hybridity and skilled theatricality – only to be left, in Hickman’s words, “puzzled by the wreck of our dreaming” (527). Ellison’s struggle to communicate from behind his “Western critical mask” and his conflicted representations of Bliss antagonize any stable distinction between performatively sabotaging and destructively affirming a hegemonic discourse. Without this distinction, the subversive potential of the democratic trickster threatens to mutate into the manipulative and destructive Ahabian power of Sunraider. Ellison’s writing about Bliss thus suggests that while strategic performativity may be a valuable and pragmatic means of acquiring power, it should not be thought of as inherently liberatory or even subversive. For such performativity may betray the oppositional democratic desires of those who practice it, and it may also, as it does for Bliss, lead to blinding fantasies of political efficacy.

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