“YOU BETTER WATCH OUT . . .”: WHITE MYTHS AND MATRICES OF OPPRESSION
IN INVISIBLE MAN

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“YOU BETTER WATCH OUT . . .”: WHITE MYTHS AND MATRICES OF OPPRESSION IN *INVISIBLE MAN*

The following faculty members have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content, and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts with a major in English.

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You’re the nigger, baby, not me.

James Baldwin, *Take This Hammer*, 1963
In his 1952 work *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon argues that “[a] man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by this language” and that “[a]ll colonized people [. . .] position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture” (2). Considered a foundational study of the psychosocial ramifications of marginalization upon the minority psyche, *Black Skin, White Masks* emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, providing a scathing counterpoint to the celebratory narrative of the Allied forces. Touting their recent victory against the Axis powers as a death knell to injustice, nations like France and the United States ignored the marginal populations within their own borders who continued to face discrimination that, in many ways, mirrored that which their governments had publicly condemned and sought to eradicate abroad. It is this atmosphere of hypocrisy which prompted Fanon to study what he termed “the so-called dependency complex of the colonized,” and which, across the globe, on St. Nicholas Avenue in New York City, prompted Ralph Ellison to fictionalize a similar but distinctly American complex in his novel *Invisible Man*. The simultaneous publication of these works embodies the countermonumental zeitgeist brewing among minority thinkers amidst the jubilation of post-War white society. Notably, Ellison’s fictional narrative encapsulates Fanon’s perspective on language and positionality in that his African American protagonist comes to realize that he is forced to exist in relation to whiteness because of his engagement with the very language he speaks. Once the Invisible Man realizes the bind in which the English language has placed him, he can begin to confront and deconstruct the destructive white myths and stereotypes which underpin that language.
Examining the role of myths in modern society, Roland Barthes notes that, although they have the sinister capacity to “reach everything [and] corrupt everything,” myths are primarily instructive (132). As he claims,

Myth has in fact a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us . . . [m]yth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact (143).

The foremost myths in *Invisible Man*, of course, are those of the hypersexual black rapist and the sexually pure white woman, myths that become, in Ellison’s novel, anything but natural and justified. While these myths figure prominently throughout the novel, Ellison interrogates their social implications most pointedly—and unexpectedly—by filtering them through the lens of the seemingly “innocent” figure of Santa Claus, whose symbolic presence in a racialized “rape” scene—in which the invisible man scrawls the phrase “Sybil, you were raped by Santa Claus surprise” on his white companion’s belly (522)—masks a host of complex, interwoven discourses on race and gender in mid-twentieth century America. In invoking the figure of Santa Clause, the Invisible Man attributes the sexual abuse of white women not to himself—the black man—but to white men, who possess power and privilege over both white women and African Americans.¹ Earlier in the text, Ellison describes Mr. Norton, a white trustee of the African

¹Robyn Wiegman discusses this moment briefly in a chapter devoted to Bigger Thomas’ and the Invisible Man’s interactions with white women in *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*. She notes, in line with my own analysis, that “in the novel’s later relocation of the tensions of masculine sameness and racial difference at the sole site of white female bodies, Ellison’s Santa Claus scene simply inverts the Battle Royale’s nexus of race and gender, as well as its critique of the dynamics of the rape mythos, thereby establishing the mutual exclusion of—and indeed contestation between—blacks and women” (106). While my reading of the Santa scene comes to a similar conclusion, I focus on the specific connotations and implications of the message itself (and its evocation of the Santa figure) where Wiegman looks at the basic racial dynamics of the scene more broadly and ignores the message as a
American college the Invisible Man temporarily attends, as “a small silken-haired, white-suited St. Nicholas, seen through misty eyes,” with “a face pink like St. Nicholas” (107; 37).

Sardonically deemed “a trustee of consciousness” (89) by a prophetic black veteran, Norton, like Santa, is a white man entrusted with the collective consciousness of young minds, but their association links him to Santa’s would-be “rape” of Sybil and reconfigures both white men as deceptive despoilers of white femininity. By filtering his social commentary of Norton, a representative of white masculinity, through the palatable lens of the Santa myth, Ellison exposes the mutual oppression between the invisible man and Sybil, or more generally, black men and white women. Further, Ellison’s depictions of taboo encounters between black men and white women ultimately function as highly nuanced, subversive discourses on black womanhood, in part because the conspicuous invisibility of black women in these scenes grants them a kind of hypervisibility not unlike that of the novel’s protagonist. Thus, although critics have often dismissed Ellison’s female characters as purely symbolic and lacking meaningful development\(^2\), I believe that a closer examination of the ways in which they construct and reconstruct masculine identity throughout the text can redeem the women of *Invisible Man*, revealing them not only as full-fledged individuals in their own right but also as the essential building blocks of both individual and national identity.

\(^2\) The most prominent scholars who make this argument are Carolyn Sylvander—who claims that the lack of development among Ellison’s female characters leads her to conclude that their presence was an “unconscious rather than conscious decision” on Ellison’s part—and Ann Stanford. Claudia Tate notably departs from this criticism in “Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” in which she characterizes Ellison’s female characters as stereotypical but crucial “guides” (similar to Underground Railroad “conductors) who gradually direct the Invisible Man toward enlightenment through their respective revelations. Madison Elkins also challenges Sylvander’s and Stanford’s readings, arguing that the Invisible Man’s misogynistic perspective—through which we read the novel and his characters—is a deliberate narratological device which enables readers (through their criticism of the protagonist) to more fully recognize the intersectionality to which the Invisible Man himself is blind.
While the absurdity of the Santa scene may confound immediate interpretation for readers, the invisible man instantly praises it as “a lecture of the woman question” Sybil’s husband has never considered (523). The woman question, of course, refers to the longstanding debate over the legal rights of women—a debate to which the invisible man finds himself unprecedentedly close following his demotion from a coveted position in the communistic Brotherhood as an up-and-coming speaker on race issues in Harlem. Just as the connection between Santa Claus and the question of female suffrage eludes readers, the connection between racial equality and women’s rights initially eludes the invisible man. Significantly, his inability to reconcile the two movements and his reluctance to speak on “a subject which elsewhere in our society [he would] have found taboo” (408) recalls the post-Civil War split between abolitionists and women’s rights activists solidified at the 1869 meeting of the American Equal Rights Association. Intensified by the debate over whether to push forward with a joint-agenda for voting rights for both women and African American men or to accept the limited rights offered exclusively to the latter by the 15th amendment, the splintering of the movements created a lasting perception of minority men’s and white women’s victimization as mutually exclusive and incompatible—a perception which formed a nearly insurmountable gulf between the two groups which persists even in the twenty-first century. Prior to this rift, women’s rights groups had utilized the metaphor of slavery to advance their own political agendas, frequently comparing the institution of marriage to that of slavery and likening the socioeconomic domination of husbands to the proprietorship of masters. Although somewhat misguided in its appropriation of a uniquely

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3 This tension was the subject of public debate as recently as February of 2015, when actress Patricia Arquette came under fire for advocating for the elimination of the wage gap by stating, “It’s time for all the women in America and all the men that love women, and all the gay people, and all the people of color that we’ve all fought for to fight for us now”—a comment which many critics read as both discounting the intersectional nature of inequity (separating the “us” of “women” from lesbian women and women of color and thus viewing the issue of wage inequality as that of white women alone) and implying that the inequalities “previously” faced by LGBT and minority communities no longer exist.
black experience, this metaphor created a space for productive discourse between black men and white women whose respective liberation depended upon the reformation of white patriarchy. In fact, Ellison employs this metaphor himself in the prologue of *Invisible Man*: as the invisible man recounts in a drug-induced haze,

> beneath the swiftness of the hot tempo there was a slower tempo and a cave and I entered it and looked around and heard an old woman singing a spiritual as full of Weltshmerz as flamenco, and beneath that lay a still lower level on which I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother’s as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body, and below that I found a lower level and a more rapid tempo and I heard someone shout: ‘Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the ‘Blackness of Blackness’ (9).

By merging this imagery of the enslaved white woman and the enlightened black (male) preacher with that of an “old woman singing a spiritual” who views freedom with ambivalence due to a nonconsensual sexual relationship with her late master which resulted in several children, Ellison masterfully sets the stage for the larger theme of intersectional oppression which undergirds the novel.

Despite the popularity and efficacy of the slavery metaphor, southern white women came to realize that their agenda could succeed only through clear dissociation from racial others. This realization prompted a powerful shift in the discourse surrounding suffrage: where white women had originally framed their right to vote as a defense of basic civil liberties, they now framed this right as a defense of white supremacy. Exploring constructions of white womanhood throughout

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4 While the institution of slavery takes many forms—including white and Jewish enslavement—I read Ellison’s allusion to the ivory slave girl in the context of American slavery, largely due to his evocation of color rather than other qualities which might factor into alternate systems of enslavement.
the nineteenth century, particularly in relation to the missionary work of early suffragettes, Louise Newman contends that

> even before white women drew on evolutionist ideas to assert their own significance to civilizing missions, white women invoked their racial similarity with (white) men when they insisted on their inherent capacity to vote and their inherent right to the franchise—racial similarity taking precedence over any sexual difference (58).

Thus, the issue of women’s rights grew markedly racialized, solidifying the division between racial and gender equality movements and giving rise to an insidious culture of racialized (and often sexualized) mob violence which Fitzhugh Brundage terms “communal repressive justice” (28). It is this insidious brand of justice which, in spite of Ellison’s insistence that he deliberately avoided “dragging in” the “old rite of lynching” in his depictions of interracial relations throughout the novel, haunts much of the cross-racial discourse throughout *Invisible Man* (Territory 62). While Ellison’s claim may hold accurate in the most overt sense—in that literal lynchings are absent from the text—lynch culture clearly informs the invisible man’s psychological, social, and physical interactions with every white woman he meets, and as such, merits an extensive discussion here. In *Lynching in the New South*, Fitzhugh Brundage describes lynching as a practice which

> [b]oth symbolized the social cohesion of white southerners and acted as a vehicle for bringing about that solidarity. Lynchings, rife as they were with symbolic

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5 It should be noted that the specter of nineteenth-century lynch culture continues to haunt American society well into the 21st century, as evidenced by a 2015 incident in which members of the SAE fraternity at the University of Oklahoma were caught on videotape chanting “There will never be a nigger in SAE; you can hang him from a tree but he will never sign with me.”
representations, were like a text that white southerners read to themselves about themselves. [In lynchings] participants in mobs not only enacted a ritual that affirmed their racial beliefs but also embodied their commitment to such values as white male dominance, personal honor, and the etiquette of chivalry. An endlessly repetitive ritual, performed again and again, year after year, lynchings celebrated and renewed fixed white southern social values and traditions (17).

According to a 2015 study by the Equal Justice Initiative, an estimated 3,959 lynchings of black people occurred in the United States between 1877 and 1950 (4). Although the press tended to sensationalize lynchings motivated by rape accusations more frequently than those motivated by any other crime, only twenty-five percent of all lynchings actually bore any relation to rape allegations whatsoever (EJI 10). Despite this statistical reality, however, the myth of the hypersexual black rapist intent on despoiling white femininity and wreaking havoc on “civilized” white society persisted due to the inflammatory rhetoric of white men and women who, respectively, sought to maintain and gain social power through the systemic predation of their black counterparts.

Ellison plays on this notion of white predation and the neurosis it induces in black men in *Invisible Man* through his depiction of the unbearable anxiety his protagonist experiences upon standing in close proximity to a white woman on a train. The scene, although brief, exposes the extent of the invisible man’s internalization of lynch culture and sets the stage for his future, more overtly sexual interactions with his anonymous conquest and Sybil. Shuffling onto the subway for the first time after arriving in Harlem, the invisible man finds himself horrorstruck at the proximity of a “huge woman in black who shook her head and smiled while [he] stared with horror at a large mole that arose out of the oily whiteness of her skin like a black mountain
sweeping out of a rainwet plain” (158). His fear that their closeness may result in a scream on the woman’s part—a fear so strong that he must shut his eyes and “hold desperately to [his] lapel”—exposes the neurosis of a developing mind in the age of Jim Crow. While the invisible man feels no attraction to the woman whatsoever, he remains terrified that she will accuse him of sexual misconduct, anticipating perhaps his later claim that it is the secret desire of white women rather than the insatiable depravity of black men that leads white women to “scream when [rape] . . . is farthest from possibility” (520). Indeed, it is the woman’s aesthetic repulsiveness rather than beauty which paralyzes the invisible man. It is not until his eyes meet the large black mole emerging from her white skin that true fear sets in, and this fear—elicited by a simple image—exposes the extent to which the invisible man has internalized the notion of blackness as a contaminant to homogenous white society. Further, the specifically “oily” whiteness of the woman’s skin evokes disgust in that it denotes impurity and thus challenges the association of whiteness with purity, much as a later description of women with “spoiled cream complexions” poses a similar challenge and destabilizes conventional racial taxonomies (251).

The palpable anxiety which characterizes this passage recalls Fanon’s assertion that “[i]n the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his bodily schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person. All around the body reigns an atmosphere of certain uncertainty” (90). The “certain uncertainty” to which Fanon alludes, of course, refers to the black man’s knowledge that he can never fully predict how his presence or actions will be interpreted by whites whose identities are destabilized by the very appearance of the other. The invisible man’s hyperawareness of the direction of the gaze and the placement of his hands while in the vicinity of a white woman provides readers a glimpse into the psychological legacy of lynching which leads black men to view themselves through the
prism of the threatened white gaze and, as a result, conceive of their bodies as weapons. The invisible man’s determination to control the interaction to the furthest extent possible also raises the question of culpability: the white woman on the train seems to take no notice of him, yet he fears that she may scream regardless of his behavior. This awareness of the irrelevance of his own action (or, for that matter, hers) in the face of white perception reflects Ellison’s claim that

[i]It is the creative function of myth to protect the individual from the irrational, and since it is here in the realm of the irrational that, impervious to science, the stereotype grows, we see that the Negro stereotype is really an image of the unorganized, irrational forces of American life, forces through which, by projecting them in forms of images of an easily dominated minority, the white individual seeks to be at home in the vast unknown world of America. Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man. (Shadow 41)

Thus, the invisible man’s anxiety here reveals his double consciousness of himself as both man and myth. Most significantly, though, his fear of the white woman’s capacity to falsely accuse him reflects an acute view of white womanhood which, unlike that espoused by white men, perceives them not as unyieldingly pure symbols of chastity, but as fallible human beings capable of fear, folly, and caprice.

In her 2009 book *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*, Crystal Feimster traces the divergent paths of Ida B. Wells and Rebecca Felton in their mutual quests for anti-rape legislation and women’s rights. A white supremacist and the first woman to serve in the U.S. Senate, Felton’s blame for the prevalence of rape oscillated between white men—whom she condemned as cowardly and base for their failure to effectively protect white
women while simultaneously engaging in interracial affairs which “made mulattoes as common as blackberries”—and black men—whom she vilified as rapists and beasts (29). Significantly, although the dominant characterization of white womanhood was that of chaste helplessness threatened by the onslaught of insatiable blackness—immortalized most notably in *The Birth of a Nation*, a 1915 film adapted from Thomas Dixon Jr.’s trilogy of novels-turned-play *The Clansman*—white women were often not only spectators, but active participants in public lynchings. According to Feimster,

By the late 1880s southerners, white and black, began to realize that the practice of lynching invested white women, regardless of class and status, with enormous social and political power. Whether they merely identified their assailant in the presence of the mob or fired bullets into his hanging body, white women seized the opportunity to express a new, powerful image of southern womanhood. They articulated their concerns about sexual violence, claimed their right to protection, and exercised their racial and gender power. [. . .] Lynching, of course, saved a woman from having to submit to questions about her sexual past. It assured a white woman who may have lied that she would never have to answer to contradictory evidence, and it guaranteed a guilty verdict. [. . .] Far from cowering at the thought of facing their alleged assailants, other women participated directly in their torture, execution, and mutilation. (145-6)

As white periodicals took pains to downplay the participation of white women in lynchings in order to maintain the symbiotic myths of the helpless white woman and the savage black man, black activists saw the opportunity to dispel the stereotype of the latter by undermining its antithesis. In her 1894 pamphlet *A Red Record*, Ida B. Wells observed that, while the particulars
of interracial sexual relations were of little concern to white men intent on preserving their social power over both black and white women and black men under the guise of a chivalric code, relations between white women and black men were consensual more often than not. “It is certain,” Wells argued, “that lynching mobs have not only refused to give the Negro a chance to defend himself, but have killed their victim with a full knowledge that the relationship of the alleged assailant with the woman who accused him, was voluntary and clandestine” (108). In the context of *Invisible Man*, this claim is pertinent in that all of the protagonist’s sexual encounters with white women are either consensual or initiated by the woman and that this fact does little to assuage his fears of white retribution.

Perhaps more destructive even than their overt participation in lynchings was the silence of white women not particularly aligned with supremacist ideology. This silence was at last openly addressed by the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), whose members “understood that white women’s silent complicity was a crucial factor in the power of lynching narratives, and thus they devoted the bulk of their efforts over their twelve-year history to debunking the idea that lynching provided a necessary or desired defense against rape by black men” (Markovitz 17). Through his presentation of white women as silent, anonymous, or incapacitated throughout the novel, Ellison explores this notion of silent complicity with regard to its impact on both white women and their black counterparts. The invisible man’s final encounter with Sybil, then, functions as the figurative climax of a series of sexualized interactions with white women throughout the novel, including his observation of the “magnificent blonde” at the Battle Royal and his dream-like tryst with an attendee of his lectures, both of which hint at the intersectionality of oppression which his interaction with Sybil overtly exposes.
Unsurprisingly, Ellison takes great pains to describe the invisible man’s first close encounter with a white woman. Initially describing her as “magnificent,” Ellison gradually dismantles this image to reveal a hauntingly grotesque figure (not unlike the white woman he later sees on the New York bus) whose hopes, dreams, and innate human value appear almost as invisible as those of his protagonist. As the invisible man recounts, the most notable aspect of the blonde’s appearance at the Battle Royal is that she is “stark naked” and bears a “small American flag tattooed upon her belly” (19). He continues his recollection in-depth, noting that “[t]he hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll, the face heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask, the eyes hollow and smeared a cool blue, the color of a baboon’s butt [. . .] Her breasts were firm and round as the domes of East Indian temples [. . .]” (19). The broader fact of the woman’s presence and her treatment at the hands of white men during her performance more obviously gestures toward lynch culture and the extent to which white women and black men struggle to construct identity under patriarchal control, but even the most minute details of her appearance support such a reading. Perhaps most significantly, the invisible man resists the white men’s bait through a sort of unconscious dehumanization, linguistically unsexing the blonde even as she stands before him as a naked sexual object. Rather than describing her hair, her eyes, and her skin, for instance, the invisible man speaks of the hair, the eyes, and the skin, switching to a definite article only when referring to her breasts and nipples.

The magnificent blonde has been the subject of more analysis than any other female figure in the novel, and her status as a marginal figure within the dominant sphere of white society has often been noted due to her abuse at the hands of the white men who terrorize the Invisible Man. What has not been noted about her, however—to my knowledge—is the way in which her physical descriptions align her with the institution of slavery and, by extension, the black experience. It is my aim, then, to bolster earlier critical readings of the blonde with these more specific observations. For more on the magnificent blonde, see Madison Elkin’s “The Blindness of an Invisible Man: An Exploration of Ellison’s Female Characters”, Christopher Shinn’s “Masquerade, Magic, and Carnival in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man”, John F. Callahan’s “Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Casebook”, Carolyn Sylvander’s “Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man and Female Stereotypes”, Ann Stanford’s “He speaks for whom?: Inscription and Reinscription of Women in Invisible Man and The Salt Eaters”.

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The invisible man’s descriptions also connect him to the blonde transculturally through his equation of her body with the lexicon of the black experience. The American flag tattoo, for instance, symbolically brands the blonde as the property of a white male governing body, echoing the literal branding of slaves at the hands of their masters. The powder and rouge which the invisible man refers to as an “abstract mask” recalls the veil of double consciousness immortalized by W. E. B. Du Bois, while the association of her hair color with a circus doll evokes the captivity and exhibitionism of 19th century traveling shows which marketed minorities as spectacles and freaks. Ellison disrupts the initial image of the woman as beautiful even further through his description of her eyeshadow as “the color of a baboon’s butt”—a phrase which at once provokes disgust due to its mention of an excretory orifice and racism due to its evocation of the popular stereotype of blacks as primates. Although the invisible man does not consciously associate with the woman at first, he eventually recognizes her as a fellow, if not equal, victim: “They caught her just as she reached a door, raised her from the floor, and tossed her as college boys are tossed at a hazing, and above her red, fixed-smiling lips I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys” (20).

Significantly, the white men present at the Battle Royal bait the invisible man linguistically as well as sexually once he has acknowledged the commonality of his plight with that of the blonde’s. As he gives his speech on social responsibility, the white men pretend not to have heard his full statement, mockingly jeering, “What’s that word you say, boy?” until he at last slips and responds, “Social equality” to the indignation (and perverse titillation) of the crowd (31). In the context of the Reconstruction-era south, this slippage is, of course, a potentially fatal
mistake due to the widespread interpretation of social equality as byword for sexual equality. According to Feimster,

Southern whites in many ways had always been cautious regarding interactions between black men and white women, but in the postwar context these concerns began to take on new meanings and acquire a sense of urgency as whites imagined ‘social equality’ as tantamount to forced sexual relations between black men and white women [. . .] The sexualized language of ‘social equality’ resonated with most southern white men and women, regardless of class, because it squared with their ideas about white supremacy and traditional gender roles” (51).

This anxiety around social/sexual equality surfaces again in the Trueblood episode, in which the white community seemingly rewards a black sharecropper for his incestuous encounter with his young daughter. This positive response can perhaps be read as a reflection of a latent desire on the part of whites to commit the taboo act themselves—as suggested by romanticized obsession Mr. Norton, the “trustee of consciousness,” has with his deceased daughter. Describing her to the invisible man during their drive, Norton muses that

She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. *I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood.* Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again . . . She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. A delicate flower of this world that bloomed in the liquid light of the moo. A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical
maiden, gracious and queenly. *I found it difficult to believe her my own . . .* (42, emphasis mine).

Norton’s obsession with the notion of purity and his inability to accept his relationship with his daughter as a strictly paternal one smacks of incest, but perhaps even more unsettling is his claim that his interest in the edification of African Americans or, as he puts it, “first-hand organizing of human life,” is “a monument to her memory” (43). In connecting Norton’s potential incest to his white savior complex, Ellison reinforces Walter Benn Michaels’ claim that in modernist texts, “miscegenation, the breaking down of difference, becomes the privileged sex crime [. . .] and incest, the insistence on identity, becomes its privileged form of sexual expression” (78). On a practical level, the white community seems to reward Trueblood for displacing his subconscious desire for white women—conveyed by his dream in which a white woman in a “nightgown of soft white silky stuff and nothin’ else” emerges from an all-white room and attempts to seduce him (57)—onto the black body of his daughter, thereby eliminating the potential threat he poses to white society, instead tainting his own familial and racial sphere. Thus, in rewarding Trueblood’s incest, whites uphold patriarchal white values which demand racial purity and oppose social equality on the basis of potential sexual relations.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the invisible man’s affair with an anonymous white woman in the Communist Party occurs in an atmosphere which advocates extensively for social and sexual equality. Although the woman (intriguingly anonymous like the protagonist, perhaps due to the Party’s emphasis on communal rather than individual identity) does not figure prominently in the narrative, her presence merits examination not only because of her role as the invisible man’s first taboo sexual partner, but also because of her broader illumination of the role of women in the American Communist Party. In her 2002 book *Red Feminism: American*
Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation, Kate Weigand explores the role of communist women in feminist discourses throughout the history of the American Communist Party. As she states, “ideas, activists and traditions that emanated from the Communist movement of the forties and fifties continued to shape the direction of the new women's movement of the 1960s and later” (154). Women, who, along with black men, began to be actively recruited by the American Communist Party in the early 1940s, were instrumental to the party, comprising over 40% of its membership by 1948 and using their newfound political voices to examine the role of men in the subordination of marginal groups through both legal barriers and stereotypical narratives (80).

Ellison reflects this and other aspects of the expansive egalitarian agenda of the Communist Party through both the invisible man’s affair with the anonymous woman and her husband’s response, or rather, lack of response to the affair. Following his dalliance with the anonymous woman, the invisible man recalls, “I heard the sound and looked up to see the man looking straight at me from where he stood in the dim light of the hall, looking in with neither interest nor surprise. His face expressionless, his eyes staring (417). The absence of anger—or any response at all—in the husband’s discovery of a black man in bed with his wife perplexes the invisible man to no end, but is perhaps comprehensible in the context of communist ideology. While conventional patriarchy transposes capitalistic views of ownership onto women and engenders proprietary relationships between husbands and wives, the Brotherhood rejects the concept of singular ownership and thus the anonymous woman’s husband does not view her as solely his property, but rather views her as the possession of the community as a whole—a view which, in its supreme patriarchy, undermines the egalitarian agenda of the party. Further, because of the egalitarian aims of the movement, white women are not viewed as “chaste, pure,
asexual, good mothers, and exemplars of femininity” as Jesse Daniels argues they are within white supremacist ideology (56). By extension, relationships between white women and black men were not met with scorn and derision within the Party; in fact, according to Weigand,

[t]he Communist Party’s particular stance on race and gender issues in the 1930s put black women in a difficult position . . . Beginning early in the 1930s it was common for African American women Communists to complain that routine relationships between black men and white women in CP circles made it difficult for them to find black partners and that white men’s tendency to avoid them at social and political events made it impossible for them to form interracial relationships of their own. In Harlem in 1934 black women grew so resentful of this pattern that they finally asked their section’s leaders to ban interracial marriages in the Party’s ranks.\(^7\) (99).

This aversion to interracial marriage on the part of black women suggests that the Communist Party’s idealistic prioritization of class inequity over racism and sexism, although well-intentioned, exacerbated rather than mitigated divisions between social groups.

Despite black women’s misgivings, the American Communist Party continued to not only accept but encourage interracial relations, a fact which perhaps accounts for the anonymous woman’s husband lack of racialized ire upon discovering her infidelity. The invisible man’s reaction both during and after the encounter, however, reveals his continuing inability to view the world outside the context of lynch culture. As he waits in the apartment of the anonymous

\(^7\) In response to this request, the Party assigned Harlem leader Albert Berry (a black man married to a white woman himself) to spearhead programs which involved “educational discussions about black women’s triply oppressed status and made an effort to teach dancing to white male Communists so that they would be less embarrassed to ask black women to dance at CP affairs” (Weigand 100).
woman he thinks of “male servants summoned to wash the mistress’s back; chauffeurs sharing
the master’s wives; Pullman porters invited into the drawing room of rich wives headed for
Reno,” attempting all the while to convince himself that such allusions are misplaced in the
world of the Brotherhood (416). Despite the fact that he is in the north, surrounded by members
of a party claiming to desire equality, the invisible man attributes his affair to a test orchestrated
by men rather than an act of pleasure desired by a woman. As he recalls,

I walked in a sweat of agony. Why did they have to mix their women into
everything? Between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they
placed a woman: socially, politically, economically. Why, goddamit, why did
they insist upon confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle, debasing both
us and them—all human motives? (418).

Rather than viewing the sexual encounter as a moment of equalization in which primal sexual
desire supersedes racial anxieties, the invisible man continues to distance himself from women,
taking the incredibly sexist position that female sexuality is the inherent property of men and that
the expression of this sexuality necessarily derives from the orders of men. Thus, for all of his
lush descriptions of his attraction to the anonymous woman as inherent and instinctive—a
natural, inevitable response to a woman whom he claims “glows as though consciously acting a
symbolic role of life and feminine fertility”—sex remains, for the invisible man, an inescapably
political act and, significantly, it is with this view that he sets forth on his seduction of Sybil
(409).

From its inception, the invisible man’s interaction with Sybil marks a deliberate shift in
his perception of interracial relations. While his behavior during previous encounters with white
women has ranged from active avoidance to passive surrender, the invisible man’s behavior
toward Sybil is that of an active seducer. Notably, although he has no intention of raping Sybil, his intent to seduce her could be considered an equally detestable crime in the eyes of white men. As Michel Foucault argues in *The Use of Pleasure*, classical sexual paradigms viewed seduction as a more serious crime than rape due to the view that “the rapist violated only the woman’s body, while the seducer violated the husband’s authority,” effectively threatening the entire hierarchal structure of the domestic sphere” (146). This perceived threat to domestic hierarchy is multiplied tenfold in a racialized context: while the image of the black rapist may frighten white men, it is the image of the black seducer which truly threatens their power, as the white patriarchal social order is predicated on control over both blacks and white women through divisive propaganda. Thus, the willing alliance of a white woman with a black man not only undercuts white male supremacy in terms of sexual viability, but also in terms of his status as intermediary between the two groups.

The invisible man’s intended seduction of Sybil, of course, fails miserably due to her internalization of white mythology surrounding the black man as both sexual deviant and sexual object. Etymologically, however, Sybil is the perfect choice for the invisible man’s revelatory taboo encounter. Given her status as the final white woman with whom the invisible man interacts, Sybil’s name—the collective name of classical prophetesses and a reference, no doubt, to Eliot’s epigram to *The Wasteland*—appears both apt and ironic. Sybil’s perverse fantasy—notably revealed in a state of altered consciousness not unlike that of the oracles for which she is named—definitively exposes the common victimization which the invisible man struggles to discern in his earlier encounters with white women. Sybil’s collective identity is further affirmed

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8 The epigram translates to “For once I saw with my own eyes the Cumean Sybil hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her, ‘Sybil, what do you want?’ she answered, ‘I want to die’.” Ellison refers to *The Wasteland* and its influence on his writing in multiple interviews and, as such, his choice of name for Sybil can hardly be a coincidence. The Cumean Sybil’s request to die mirrors the Ellisonian Sybil’s request to be raped—particularly in light of the Renaissance view of orgasm as a “little death.”
through visual cues which connect her to both the magnificent blonde ("blue, eye-shadowed eyes") and the repulsive woman on the train ("oily nails"). Ironically, however, while her fantasy elucidates the intersectionality of race and gender for the invisible man, Sybil herself remains largely ignorant of her position despite her brief recognition that she and the invisible man are "kind of alike" (520). In fact, Sybil has so internalized the white myth of the hypersexual black man that her only sense of her own oppression emerges in the language of sexual attention rather than economic or social opportunity: as she puts it, "George talks a lot about women’s rights, but what does he know about what a woman needs? Him with his forty minutes of brag and ten of bustle. Oh, you have no idea what you’re doing for me" (521). Sybil’s disinterest in the politics of the party shatters the invisible man’s illusions of social equality. While he naively expects to have the upper hand in his seduction of Sybil, he is instead shaken back into the reality of his position by her internalization of racist stereotypes. In fact, it is Sybil’s obvious indoctrination by patriarchal white society—in whose power she does not share despite her engagement with its propaganda—that awakens the invisible man to their shared oppression.

Described by the invisible man as "a leathery old girl” soon to be a “biddy, stout, with a little double chin and a three-ply girdle,” Sybil reads more as a pitiable caricature than an object of sexual desire. Her unblinking conviction that the invisible man will view her as a natural target for rape recalls the stereotypical perception of the white female body as inherently desirable to black men regardless of the individual woman’s actual appearance. Sybil’s confession that she has wanted to be raped ever since first hearing about it as a young girl parallels Fanon’s discussion of white women’s internalization of the sexually insatiable black rapist. Recounting the anecdote of a prostitute who claimed that the mere thought of intercourse with a black man drove her to orgasm, Fanon notes that,
For the majority of Whites the black man represents the (uneducated) sexual instinct. He embodies genital power out of reach of morals and taboos. As for white women, reasoning by induction, they invariably see the black man at the intangible gate leading to the realm of mystic rites and orgies, bacchanals and hallucinating sexual sensations. If we penetrate the labyrinth farther, we discover that when a woman lives the fantasy of rape by a black man, it is a kind of fulfilment of a personal dream or an intimate wish. Accomplishing the phenomenon of turning around upon the subject’s own self, it is the woman who rapes herself (154-6).

Ellison parallels this hypothesis through the invisible man’s suggestion that, for white women, engaging in taboo sexuality may, in some ways, be a form of obedience rather than defiance: “But why be surprised, when that’s all they hear all their lives. When it’s made into a great power and they’re taught to worship all types of power? With all the warnings against it, some are bound to want to try it out for themselves” (520). In the invisible man’s estimation, white women who desire the hyperbolized sexual power of the black man are merely adhering to the values of a patriarchal system constructed on the basis of male power and female vulnerability. Thus, even in the throes of taboo, white women remain entrapped in sexist ideology.

Indeed, far from her rebellious intent, Sybil’s conception of sexuality is mired in the flawed logic of racism and sexism. Even in her description of her friend’s rape, Sybil can only revel in her vicarious experience of what ought to be (regardless of the assailant’s race) a traumatic event. Furthermore, her description of the event reiterates the tendency of white women (as well as both black and white men) to overlook the experience of black women, blaming them for their victimization in response to a presumption that they are inherently
hypersexual and lascivious. In response to the invisible man’s inquiry as to the specific details of
the rape, Sybil replies

Well . . . he called her a filthy name [. . .] Oh, he was a brute, huge, with white
teeth, what they call a ‘buck.’ And he said, ‘Bitch, drop your drawers,’ and then
he did it. She’s such a lovely girl, too, really delicate with a complexion like
strawberries and cream. You can’t imagine anyone calling her a name like that”
(518).

Sybil’s equation of her friend’s conventional Western beauty with unassailable virtue implicitly
posits that there are women—presumably black women—whom one could imagine being called
a bitch. This moment, particularly within the larger context of Sybil’s fantasy—in which she is
racialized by her own deviant sexuality and positions herself in the stereotypical role of a black
woman whose sexual exploitation is perceived as the result not of a power imbalance but of
“asking for it”—provides readers a glimpse into the silent discourse on black womanhood in
which Ellison engages through his more overt examination of white women.

Sybil’s adornment of blackness during the Santa scene recalls the racial doubling of the
preface’s black and white slave women, the former of whose simultaneous identity as concubine
and matriarch reveals her as a composite of the novel’s individual black women, much in the
same way that Sybil serves as a composite of the novel’s individual white women. While Ellison
does not generally focus on his black female figures as extensively as he does the magnificent
blonde or Sybil—at least in terms of their aesthetic appearance—he does offer various vignettes
of black womanhood through the Trueblood women, the prostitutes at the Golden Day, Mary
Rambo, the elderly woman of the eviction, and Rinehart’s girl. By examining these images of
black femininity—specifically in terms of both their sexuality and white stereotypes of it—we can more clearly interpret Sybil as a symbol of intersectional oppression.

The first black women readers encounter are the Trueblood women and the outspoken prostitutes at the Golden Day. These women, although featured only briefly, reveal the simultaneous exploitation and empowerment inherent in the sexuality of black women. The Trueblood women, in particular, embody opposing visions of black femininity which, taken in conjunction, complicate conventionally dichotomous depictions of black women which position them as either hypersexual “Jezebels” or asexual “Mammys”. While Trueblood’s daughter, Matty Lou, is a passive victim of sexual violation, his wife, Kate, performs the role of the “angry black woman” through her violent punishment of her husband, who describes her anger as an othering force which causes her to begin “talkin’ the unknown tongue, like a wild woman” and “foam[ing] at the mouth” like an animal (61).

As the bestial depiction of Kate suggests, the Truebloods are not presented as wholly sympathetic figures. It is key to recall, however, that they are initially presented as a strong domestic unit—a presentation which exposes their eventual disgrace as the direct product of victimization rather than an innate and essential property. Leading up to his account of the incest, Trueblood describes what is, by all accounts, a conventional familial dynamic: he worries about financial status and his ability (or inability) to provide for his wife and children; Matty Lou is in the midst of her first romantic relationship—a prospect which concerns her father, but seemingly no more or less than it would many fathers; the family enjoys a close-knit relationship in spite of their poverty (55). This initial portrait, reflected upon in the aftermath of Trueblood’s tale, reveals the debilitating impact of not only the Trueblood women’s sexual violation but also, more broadly, the devastating effects of social inequity. We must recognize, however, that while
Jim Trueblood also suffers from marginalization at the hands of whites, his problems (primarily financial in nature) may be mitigated by the support of white community member; his wife and daughter, on the other hand, are granted no such respite. Ellison, in fact, demands that we focalize the dual marginalization of the women whose story is relayed to us only through the filter of their patriarch. The grotesque image of the pregnant mother and daughter calls us to privilege the silent narratives of Kate and Matty Lou over the “white-approved” retelling spun by Jim Trueblood and exposes the precariousness of their situation: subject to sexual violation at the hands of both their black patriarch and the white men who reward him for the act—or, more accurately, for satiating their voyeuristic desires by reliving the incident in erotic detail—the Trueblood women epitomize the dual marginalization of black femininity.

If the Truebloods expose the extent to which black women lack sexual agency in a white supremacist patriarchal society, the prostitutes at the Golden Day provide an optimistic loophole through which black women may escape oppression: in embracing the stereotype of their hypersexuality for economic advancement, the women of the Golden Day engage in a subversive empowerment. Because of their familiarity with white men’s baser proclivities, the women of the Golden Day see beyond Norton’s respectable façade and immediately—and ostentatiously—turn their emasculating attention to his genitalia, which prompts a deconstruction of his masculinity which is at once humorous and ruthless in its voracity. In response to a woman named Edna’s profession of fondness for Norton, her companion replies, “Shucks, me I’d kill an old man like that” to which Edna responds, “Kill him nothing . . . Girl, don’t you know that all these rich ole white men got monkey glands and billy goat balls? These old bastards don’t never

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9 Reveling in the retelling of the Trueblood dream/reality, the white men’s response to the story evokes Eric Lott’s discussion of minstrel culture during the Reconstruction period, which reflected a warring sensibility among whites, who created and attended minstrel shows that arose from a simultaneous repulsion/fascination toward black culture. Trueblood, notably, seems to exploit this ambivalence for his own financial gain as he plays on whites’ mingled fear and curiosity in his storytelling.
git enough. They want to have the whole world . . . That ole white man right there might have him a coupla jackass balls! (88). This depiction of Norton at once dehumanizes, infantilizes, and racializes him, deconstructing his former identity as an influential trustee who determines the fates of others and rendering him a vulnerable patient whose identity is constructed by his so-called inferiors. Most interestingly, Norton is assigned the animalistic hypersexuality and immaturity traditionally reserved for depictions of black men and women through the women’s descriptions of him as an insatiable beast fixated on sexual gratification and as an “ole baby” dependent upon their care (which in turn figures them as mammies nurturing a white child).

Lest Edna’s racialized critique of Norton be mistaken for an individual condemnation, she quickly sets her sights on white masculinity more broadly. In asserting that white men “don’t never git enough” and “want to have the whole world,” Edna implicitly connects white male sexuality to the notions of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny, thus expanding her critique of white masculinity to a larger critique of the nation in which the expansionist policies of the past have left behind a traumatic legacy of exploitation, both in terms of the literal rape of minority women and the symbolic rape of enslavement, land theft, and genocide. Ultimately, through their supposedly crass sexualized discourse, the prostitutes of the Golden Day interrogate salient social discourses on race, gender, and sexuality that range from the microcosmic level of the individual to the macrocosmic level of the nation.

In contrast to the Jezebel figures of the Golden Day, the invisible man’s landlady and caretaker Mary Rambo embodies the popular Mammy stereotype.10 Ellison first alludes to this through his Hattie McDaniels-esque description of her as a “big dark woman” with a “husky-

10 Shanna Greene Benjamin and Madison Elkins explore Mary’s characterization at length in their respective articles “There’s Something About Mary: Female Wisdom and the Folk Presence in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man” and “The Blindness of an Invisible Man: An Exploration of Ellison’s Female Characters”. 
voiced contralto (251). The mammy identity is further implied through her observation that, although the invisible man is as black as her, he is “white as a sheet” due to his illness—an observation which recalls the classic image of the black mammy caring for the white child. Mary, however, departs from this traditional depiction in that she ultimately nourishes blackness rather than whiteness, both directly through food and indirectly through motivation, going so far as to insist that the invisible man become “a credit to the race” (255). Although this is clearly a positive mode of encouragement, we are driven—via the somewhat irritated narration of the Invisible Man—to perceive Mary’s insistence on his actualization as an invasive trait which links her to white figures such as Norton and Sybil—both of whom seek to construct his identity in accordance with their own world views.

Despite his agitation with Mary’s determination to transform him into a representative of the race, we ultimately see the Invisible Man driven to actualization by the similarly symbolic, if less overtly maternal figure of the elderly woman of the eviction scene. Despite their possession of manumissions, the elderly couple’s social status remains precarious as they are deemed disposable the instant they can no longer fulfill their economic obligations. The invisible man indirectly presents this social disposability as an intersectional issue through his interjection of a constructed memory while gazing upon the couple’s objects strewn across the street:

And why did I, standing in the crowd, see like a vision my mother hanging wash on a cold windy day, so cold that the warm clothes froze even before the vapor thinned and hung stiff on the line, and her hands white and raw in the skirt-swirling wind and her gray head bare to the darkened sky—why were they causing me discomfort so far beyond their intrinsic meaning as objects? And why
did I see them now, as behind a veil that threatened to life, stirred by the cold wind in the narrow street? (273).

While the veil allusion clearly has its basis in the Du Boisian context of African American cultural studies, the remainder of the “memory” is vague, particularly in its evocation of “white hands,” which positions a white matriarch in the role of the evicted elderly woman, requiring readers to view the oppression of black and white women as related and based specifically within the framework of disposability as marginal members of a patriarchal society.

Ellison continues this implicit discourse on intersectionality through his final depiction of black femininity within the novel, which comes in the form of one of the mysterious Rinehart’s female companions who, intriguingly, anticipates the Santa message through her choice of perfume:

A cab rolled up to discharge a passenger and I was about to take it when the woman came up the stairs and stopped before me, smiling. Now what, I thought, seeing her standing there, smiling in her tight-fitting summer dress; a large young woman who reeked with Christmas Night perfume who now came close . . . I wanted to laugh. The scent of Christmas Night was enfolding me now and I saw her face draw closer, her eyes widening (483).

This olfactory cue seems to inform the invisible man’s interaction with Sybil as his recognition of her impurity materializes in an association with the Christmas figure of Santa, implicitly exposing the racialized Sybil as a mirror of Rinehart’s girl and gesturing at the mutual oppression experienced by white and black womanhood under unique but interrelated patriarchal constraints.
If we read Sybil’s fantasy as a racializing excision from the conventions of white womanhood, we can read the “rape” scene as a racial reversal wherein the invisible man’s refusal to participate in the defilement of a woman enables him—at least according to supremacist definitions—to occupy the “ethically superior” sphere of whiteness. Having situated himself within this privileged sphere, the invisible man goes on to mock whiteness in his reply to Sybil’s request for another rape: “‘Any time,’ I said. ‘How about every Thursday at nine?’” (525). This facetious response satirizes whites’ expectations of black deviance, imbuing the act of rape with the air of an appointment and presenting it not as a spontaneous act of uncontrollable impulse, but instead as a mundane act of business scheduled by whites. Depicting racialized rape in this manner, Ellison exposes the complicity of whites in their own so-called terrorization, anticipating James Baldwin’s famous assertion that “white people invented the nigger” as a projection of their own fears, insecurities, and depravities (*Take This Hammer*). Indeed, Sybil’s expectation that the invisible man possesses an insatiable libido and deviant sexual proclivities has nothing to do with the invisible man whatsoever, but rather reflects her own self-prescribed nymphomania.

As alluded to above, the invisible man exhibits no desire for a sexual relationship with Sybil—nonconsensual or otherwise—and thus, the rape fantasy never comes to fruition. The invisible man does experience something of a climax, however, through his inscription of the Santa message, which fills him with excitement and causes him to “tremble” as he writes it. Notably, the odd mixture of titillation and fear the invisible man describes during this act (a direct parallel to the sensations experienced by the white male hosts of the Battle Royal) is not unlike the confused sensibility of a lynch mob. In fact, Fitzhugh Brundage’s definition of lynching as a text read to oneself about oneself becomes particularly salient in regard to the
Santa message, in that it is a text that the invisible man intends Sybil to read to herself about herself. Thus, the message can be viewed as a symbolic lynching designed to foster mutual identification between the invisible man and Sybil.

In filtering his foray into interracial discourse through the absurdist lens of Santa Claus, the invisible man exploits the dark sexual and economic implications of a common myth to defamiliarize white audiences (both internal and external to the text) with their own cultural identity. Where the presence of Santa should elicit sentiments of mirth and protection, Ellison’s Santa, through the act of rape, threatens both sexual and economic security. Notably, St. Nicholas of Myra—the inspiration for the Santa Claus myth whom historians claim to have lived around 4 B.C.—was primarily lauded as a protector of female chastity as a result of his financial donations to young girls forced into prostitution by poverty. Thus, the figure of Santa has, from its incarnation, occupied the tenuous intersection of sexuality and commerce. The surveillance culture surrounding Santa—evoked most prominently in the lyrics to “Santa Claus is Coming to Town”—implicitly corresponds to lynch culture in that punishment (or, in the case of the song, a lack of reward) is meted out based upon constant, intrusive surveillance.

Indeed, to be indoctrinated into the cult of commercialized Christmas in America is to view Santa Claus as the benevolent white benefactor whose constant surveillance and eventual infiltration of the domestic space may not only be justified by his gifts, but must in fact be earned by adherence to a singular, ascribed set of moral values. As the song goes, Santa “sees you when you’re sleeping, knows when you’re awake, [and] knows when you’ve been bad or good” (Coots and Gillespie). While obviously intended as incentive for the positive behavioral modification of children, this same sort of surveillance forms the basis of southern lynch culture: in the presence of the omniscient white gaze, a misplaced grin or whistle can prove a death warrant. Michel
In positioning Santa as Sybil’s rapist, Ellison condemns the intrusive nature of the white gaze and suggests that, through their invasive policing of white women’s bodies, it is white men rather than black men who most grievously violate white femininity. Further, Sybil’s inability to admit her desire and her choice to instead disguise it as criminality even within the confines of a private domestic space reveal the extent of her own internalization of lynch culture and affirm Foucault’s notion that “surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action” (6).
Santa’s ties to capitalism also link racialized and gendered disenfranchisement in that the acquisition of gifts posited as a justification for Santa’s usurpation of the home mirrors the economic security provided by husbands or masters posited as justification for the disempowerment of women and minorities. Thus, while the figure of Santa is largely—as Barthes claims all myths are—depoliticized, he is inherently and inescapably a political construction. In his conventional guise, one can read Santa as engaging in a sort of “reverse colonialism” marked by his infiltration of the domestic space for benevolent distribution rather than malevolent acquisition. To present Santa as a rapist and despoiler of white female chastity, then, is to reposition him in the traditional role of colonizer—a ravaging domestic invader of idealized spaces. While Sybil undoubtedly fails to grasp the significance of this concept, the invisible man clearly intends it as a means through which to elucidate the intersectionality of their marginalization. Notably, the dynamic between the invisible man and Sybil positions Sybil as a child to whom the true (or untrue) nature of Santa Claus must be revealed. In exposing the benevolent Santa as a rapist, the invisible man attempts to initiate Sybil into an enlightened adulthood in which, like a child discovering that his or her presents come from a familial rather than mythical source and that these presents must be earned through unquestioned obedience, she must recognize that her privileged but tenuous position depends upon her obedience to white patriarchy.

Ellison further characterizes Sybil as a child through her gradual linguistic decline throughout the scene—a decline which reinforces the comparable lack of agency white women experience under white male domination that Ellison depicts through the literal voicelessness and anonymity of the magnificent blonde and the woman on the train. Notably, Sybil begins the scene with her full linguistic faculties, but by the time she has exposed herself as a pawn of white
patriarchal society through her perpetuation of racist stereotypes, she is reduced to deluded half-phrases and childish revisions such as “Booful”. By inverting Santa’s role of benefactor to that of despoiler, Ellison translates his infiltration of the domestic space into the desecration of the ultimate symbol of American domesticity—the white female body—and, in doing so, exposes a defining cultural myth as a destructive patriarchal narrative which—by placing white males in the position of Santa and marginal groups in the position of malleable children—implicitly encourages marginal groups to comply to white male dictates in exchange for economic security.

Even detached from the specific symbolism of the Santa allusion, the invisible man’s encounter with Sybil illuminates the interconnections between the oft-divided spheres of race and gender. According to Judith Butler,

> the symbolic—that register of regulatory ideality—is also and always a racial industry . . . [thus, we must] rethink the scenes of reproduction and, hence, of sexing practices not only as ones through which a heterosexual imperative is inculcated, but as one through which boundaries of racial distinction are secured as well as contested (18).

Sybil’s rape fantasy functions as a prime testing ground for these boundaries in that it initially aims to secure racial distinctions through the fulfillment of stereotype, but ultimately contests both racial and gender distinctions. As noted earlier, Sybil’s rape fantasy functions as a mode of racialization in that it strips her of the chaste purity associated with white womanhood; more significantly, however, the fantasy emerges at the site of intersections between race and gender where “cross-gendered behavior [becomes] a sign of unstable racial identity” (DiPiero 118). In this light, Sybil’s aggressive (attempted) initiation of a sexual encounter with a man—black or otherwise—destabilizes her socially-ascribed gender identity and thus calls into question other
socially ascribed modes of identification such as race and class. Significantly, this destabilization is not confined to Sybil, but extends to her husband George and white masculinity more broadly.

If we note the invisible man’s eagerness for Sybil’s husband to stumble upon the Santa message and experience confusion and enlightenment in response, we begin to read the message as an active challenge to white masculinity. After all, the black phallus is primarily threatening to white hegemony in terms of its broader potential for cognitive penetration, i.e.; the disruption of the white values systems which white women symbolize enacted through the act of interracial intercourse. Indeed, while he does not engage in actual intercourse with her, the invisible man literally and symbolically marks Sybil’s body, effectively othering it and destabilizing a host of factors central to the formation and maintenance of white male identity in the process. This act of marking, enacted through the Santa message, functions simultaneously as an accusation and a call to action. According to George Yancy, this sort of direct marking—with the intent to enlighten—becomes crucial because whiteness is too frequently viewed as a “default setting” rather than a social construction. As he argues in his 2012 book “Look, a White!”

[b]y marking whiteness, black people can locate whiteness as a specific historical and ideological configuration, revealing it as ‘an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity.’ The act of marking whiteness, then, is itself an act of historicizing whiteness, an act of situating whiteness within the context of material forces and raced interest-laden values that reinforce whiteness as a site of privilege and hegemony. Marking whiteness is about exposing the ways in which whites have created a form of ‘humanism’ that obfuscates their hegemonic efforts to treat their experiences as universal and representative (7).
Marking the white body—and the invisible man’s marking of Sybil’s body more specifically—then, functions as a form of reciprocation in that the black body is constantly viewed through the prism of white markings, as illustrated through Sybil’s references to black male bodies as “bruisers,” “bucks,” and “brutes” (518). Although white bodies are conventionally viewed as comparatively “unmarked,” they are at least implicitly marked in that their identity derives from negation of the other. As Thomas DiPiero notes in his 2002 book *White Men Aren’t*, white masculinity is an inherently unstable category as it is dependent upon not only the existence of an other, but the explicit approval of that other; consequently, this creates a lactified double consciousness which DiPiero refers to as “the Master and the Hysteric” in which white men seek “implicit confirmation of their identities from the very men whom they [determine to be less male than they” (187). Although Ellison does not provide this level of insight into George specifically, he does depict this mindset early in the novel through Norton, who, despite his superior social status and admiration of Emerson’s doctrine of self-reliance, insists that he is wholly “dependent” upon the invisible man to learn his fate (45). As Norton explains,

> [A]s you develop you must remember that I am dependent upon you to learn my fate. Through you and your fellow students I become, let us say, three hundred teachers, seven hundred trained mechanics, eight hundred skilled farmers, and so on. That way I can observe in terms of living personalities to what extent my money, my time and my hopes have been fruitfully invested. I also construct a living memorial to my daughter? Understand? I can see the fruits produced by the land that your great Founder has transformed from barren clay to fertile soil (45).

In his estimation, Norton’s success as a white man is entirely contingent upon the actions and implicit approval of black men. Moreover, his compulsion to multiply himself by “becoming”
hundreds of black men presents the racializing and queering of white masculinity as empowering rather than degrading—a presentation reinforced by Norton’s comparison of himself to the fixed, fecund image of the (black) Founder.

The invisible man further challenges white masculinity by flaunting Sybil’s supposed desecration. As DiPiero asserts,

[one of the principal strategies in the creation of difference [between black and white men] focused on spotlighting the white woman as a pivot around which male difference could maneuver. The white woman thus stood both as the racial source from which issued either uncontaminated white children or racial mongrels; and, more important, as the more complex guarantor of the integrity of the white male, the object that he alone could possess […] (192).

In claiming that Sybil has been raped by Santa Claus, of course, the invisible man complicates this construction of difference: if Sybil is raped by a white man she may still bear “uncontaminated white children” and thus uphold white masculinity as it exists in opposition to racial others, but her husband’s lack of paternal agency would mark him as a cuckold and thus emasculate him on the level of gender—a form of cross-gendered behavior that racializes him and destabilizes his perceived identity as both white and a man (DiPiero 192).

Although Sybil never fully grasps the nature of her own oppression, she becomes a literally inescapable symbol of intersectionality for the invisible man. In fact, his descriptions of Sybil following the “rape” scene reconstruct her as a conglomerate of both white and black figures throughout the novel: as previously noted, her physical appearance mirrors those of the various white women with whom the invisible man interacts, but Ellison also produces a clever
doubling between Sybil and the racist coin bank from Mary’s apartment through the invisible man’s inability to rid himself of either undesirable presence. Recounting Sybil’s persistent shadowing of him following multiple attempts to lose her, the invisible man writes,

Then near 110th Street I saw her again. She was waiting beneath a street lamp, waving. I wasn’t surprised; I had become fatalistic. I came up slowly, hearing her laugh. She was ahead of me and beginning to run, barefoot, loosely, as in a dream. Running. Unsteadily but swift and me surprised and unable to catch up, lead-legged, seeing her ahead and calling, ‘Sybil, Sybil!’ running lead-legged along the park side (530).

Even when the invisible man finally manages to evade Sybil’s persistent physical presence, he remains haunted by its symbolic implications, and his final mention of her cements her alignment with the traumatic omnipresence of black oppression in America. Recounting a macabre discovery in a store during the Harlem riots, the invisible man notes,

Ahead of me the body hung, white, naked, and horribly feminine from a lamppost. I felt myself spin around with horror and it was as though I had turned some nightmarish somersault. I whirled, still moving by reflect, back-tracking and stopped and now there was another and another, seven—all hanging before a gutted storefront . . . They were mannequins—‘Dummies!’ I said aloud. Hairless, bald, and sterilely feminine. And I recalled the boys in the blonde wigs, expecting the relief of laughter, but suddenly was more devastated by the humor than by the horror . . . What if one, even one is real—is . . . Sybil? (556).
Sybil’s reconfiguration as a figurative lynch victim here aligns her with both black men and women, exposing her precarious position in a patriarchal society in which not even the ideal of hegemonic purity is safe from the lynch mob. This “lynching” evokes a multitude of sociocultural connotations: on one hand, it seems the inevitable conclusion to Sybil’s inversion of the black rapist/white victim narrative in which, by enacting her private taboo desires in a public setting, she assumes the identity of the stereotypical black man and incites mob violence—supported by a bystander’s claim that the violence of the riots began when a “[drunken] white woman set it off by trying to take a black gal’s man (541). On the other hand, in positioning Sybil as a lynch victim, Ellison also disrupts the “masculine construct of collective memory and African American identity . . . which allows us to forget the female fruit hanging from Southern trees, fending off unwanted advances, and organizing to ‘uplift the race’ (Brown 111). Thus, Sybil (by way of the tellingly faceless, colorless mannequins) stands in for the female lynch victims often overlooked in binary discussions of race which frame lynching as a crime enacted exclusively by white men against black men, neglecting the lynchings of white men and black women almost entirely. Reading Sybil as the collective white woman, the assumed black man, and the aspiring black woman, we can read her figurative lynching as a physical manifestation of the intersectional oppression of these groups.

Immediately prior to the riots which drive him underground, the invisible man observes that the street lights have gone out on St. Nicholas Avenue (535). Read in the context of the conventional equation of light with knowledge or awareness, this suggests that, above ground, at least, the invisible man’s dream of cross-cultural understanding is far from fruition: connected

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11 In “Masquerade, Magic, and Carnival in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man,” Christopher Shinn also reads Sybil’s pseudo-lynching as a meaningful inversion of conventional racial dynamics, but attributes the significance of the moment to its exemplification of Sybil’s status—along with the magnificent blonde and Matty Lou Trueblood—as a “carnival muse” within the text whose didactic presence at once confirms and disrupts the Invisible Man’s conceptual framework of racial and sexual identity.
directly to the “rape” scene by the nominal nod to Santa, the image of the extinguished streetlights comes to signify the futility of the invisible man’s attempt to connect to Sybil and, by extension, white society. While Sybil may squander her opportunity for enlightenment, the invisible man goes on to relish his: his prefatory claim that he is narrating his story from a “warm hole” filled with 1,369 stolen lights from the less-than-subtly named Monopolated Light & Power, reveals him as an autonomous figure free to bask in enlightenment and actualization underground even as he leaves white society to persist in its benighted existence. (6-7). What initially appears to be a futile interaction with Sybil, then, ultimately enables the invisible man to both recognize and disengage from the destructive mythologies of white society.

Through the Santa message—in which the defilement of white womanhood, so long blamed on the black man, is attributed to a white man charged with their protection—the invisible man, in an anticipation of Baldwin’s 1963 film Take This Hammer, gives the white man his problem back and, in doing so, reinforces Fanon’s claim that actualization in the face of racism requires a “restructuring of the world” (63). For Ellison’s invisible man, this restructuring begins and ends with white womanhood: from the magnificent blonde of the Battle Royal to the dazed and bemused Sybil of the novel’s final act, Ellison takes the utmost symbol of white supremacy and exposes it as not inherently pure and homogenous, but rather as a strategically exalted mirror of its less privileged black brothers and sisters. Thus, in racializing the white woman, Ellison dismantles the destructive white mythologies on which the racist and sexist hierarchies of American society pivot and speaks, on the lower frequencies, to the inextricably-bound victims of white supremacy and patriarchy in the land of the free.

12 As John Heise notes in Urban Underworlds, the number of lights Ellison provides is far from arbitrary: when cross-referenced with Harlem dream books, 1,369 is revealed as a code for the word “shit”. I discuss this, and the novel’s use of excremental imagery more broadly, in a separate project entitled “Blueprints, Man’: Waste, Renewal, and Cultural Reclamation in Invisible Man”.

38
Baldwin, James. *Take this Hammer*, 1963. Film.


